

COVER LETTERS

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As more and more companies ask job seekers to apply for employment consideration via the Internet, it is not surprising to hear job seekers ask if the cover letter is necessary or expected any longer. We asked our recruiting peers to tell us what they like and dislike about the cover letters they often receive with applicants' resumes. It comes as no surprise that there are opinions ranging from love to hate, and from "I read every one of them," to "I don't bother reading them because there is never anything of value in them."

In the past, (before the Internet), many recruiters admitted that, upon receipt of a hard-copy resume submitted with a cover letter, the first thing they did was remove the cover letter so they could get to the resume. The rationale they offered for this practice was that they almost always found it easier to find the important information on the resume because it usually offered headings or logically delineated sections. Cover letters, on the other hand, were much harder to read because they were usually written in free form and provided a very brief summary of the information contained in the resume.

Today, whether applying online or via "snail mail," the cover letter continues to be a controversial tool. Clearly, recruiters are still in one camp or the other. They either value it, or they debunk it. For those recruiters who claim to still read most cover letters, here are the things they find beneficial:

- Many recruiters depend upon the cover letter to identify the recruitment source and the specific job for which the applicant is applying. Without it, it can be very difficult to discern the specific job interest the applicant wishes to pursue.
- Sometimes applicants will include their salary histories or expectations, location preferences, or other pertinent job requirements in the cover letter, thus allowing the reader to determine the appropriateness for further consideration.
- Some recruiters value the cover letter as an indicator of the applicant's writing abilities. Typographical errors and bad grammar are often used as immediate disqualifiers, being viewed as a lack of attention to important details.

The best cover letters are those that tell the reader what he or she wants to hear. That is: a succinct indication of the job applied for, the source of referral, and a straightforward delineation of the requirements and qualifications presented in corresponding columns on a single page, usually addressing the four or five most critical requirements. This approach makes it easier for the person who has to read hundreds of resumes and cover letters to quickly sort the few hits from the many misses.

My advice to job seekers in today's job market is to decide whether or not you have any valuable information to convey that has no logical place in your resume. If you choose to include a cover letter with such information, it should be uniquely tailored to the job and the employer—never a standard, "one-size-fits-all" cover letter. And, if the employer you are interested in has a website that asks you to respond to a number of prequalifying questions, such as salary expectations, location preferences, availability, etc., you might find your cover letter is redundant and, as such, useless.

When applying online, you can either embed your cover letter in the email followed by your resume, or attach both documents separately. The advantage of embedding them together is that it almost forces the reader to see the cover letter. However, if it is not carefully crafted to grab the attention and interest of the reader, it could cause the reader to forego reading your resume altogether. When applying directly into a company's resume database, you will often be asked to upload (or copy and paste) your resume and cover letter into two separate fields. When asked to do so, you can craft your cover letter to the specific position for which you are applying.

Finally, please understand that cover letters today serve neither as an expected courtesy nor as a letter of transmittal. If your cover letter does not add value—does not sell your candidacy for the position in a very clear and direct manner—you should not bother to include it.