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1. Presenting your CV

Until recently, most job applications were made by post, and many still are. In addition to a CV, therefore, you will need matching personalised stationery for your covering letter.

It is usually safe to assume that employers requiring postal applications are rather more traditional than the mainstream, and this passage makes that assumption.

Your letter should be brief and formal. A hand-written letter is perfectly acceptable, provided your hand is neat and legible, so if you do not have access to a computer, work over a ruled pad so that the lines show through. If your handwriting is untidy or difficult to read, your letter should be typed or printed. Spelling and grammar should be carefully checked, as you cannot afford a single error. Address your letter personally if you know the name, by title or department if you do not. If there is a job reference shown in the ad, use it at the head of your letter and on the envelope. Don't forget to date your letter.

Divide your letter into short paragraphs, each dealing with a single subject. The following is an effective and generally useful structure:

Paragraph 1: State the position you are applying for and the publication or place where you saw it advertised.

Paragraph 2: Refer to enclosures (your CV and any testimonials or copy certificates if you have a particular reason for including them) and briefly highlight your principal qualification for the post.

Paragraph 3: If you require a few days' notice of an interview, say so here, stating the amount of time you need. This will assist the employer in scheduling interviews, and will not put you at a disadvantage.

Paragraph 4: Thank your correspondent for considering your application, and state with confidence that you look forward to hearing from him (i.e. not that you simply hope to hear).

This very simple type of letter is suitable for most job applications, because selection from the CV is usual. Sometimes, though, the letter itself is used for selection, the CV then becoming a mere background, reference document.

Selection by letter is usually signalled by wording in the ad such as: 'Please apply in writing, stating the reasons why you should be considered for this post' or '... giving your principal qualifications for this position', or even '... outlining what strengths you would bring to this post'. For such an application, the letter must present your case in full, and you must work from the employer's information when compiling it. This type of letter is an example of targeting, and CV Services will be pleased to undertake the work if you wish.

Forms of Address

Letters sent simply to a firm or to a department should be addressed 'Dear Sirs', whereas those sent to a title (e.g. 'The Production Manager' or 'The Human Resources Manager') may be addressed either 'Dear Sir' or 'Dear Sir or Madam', as seems appropriate. If neither seems suitable, you can avoid the problem of political correctness altogether by addressing your letter to the company, then

adding, below the address, 'For the attention of the Personnel Officer' or whatever title applies, usually underlined. Sign off 'Yours sincerely' if you have addressed your letter by name, or 'Yours faithfully' if you have addressed it impersonally.

Do not try to use the covering letter to supplement or vary the information in your CV. Employers will not normally consider letters during the screening process, so if your CV is less than ideal for an application, get it changed. If you are considering more than one type of job, you may need two or more versions of your CV.

Many employers now accept applications by email or via their website, and much time and expense can be saved by applying on-line. It is important to be sure, though, that you are using a website link or an email address intended specifically for recruitment. A general or inappropriate email address or link is unlikely to result in your application being considered, and it will almost certainly be better to use post.

Once you have the right link or email address, it is simply a matter of pasting the text of your letter into the email, or into the space provided in the case of a website link. Use the job reference as your subject, or the job title for the post if you do not have a reference, then attach your CV. At time of writing, the best choice of electronic file format for your CV is a pdf file, readable by Adobe Acrobat reader, which can be downloaded free from the web and is therefore almost universally available.

Perhaps the principal advantage of applying via the Internet is the opportunity it affords for making applications during your search for vacancies, and since no stamp is necessary, it may even be worthwhile sending your CV in speculatively when there is no advertised vacancy. Certainly it can do no harm to let employers know that you are available.

2. The application form

Application forms standardise applications at the expense of presentation, and cannot be expected to do the same job as a good CV. The problem is that certain employers recruit by application form only, and will usually not read a CV if you send one.

The saving grace is the big empty box – often a whole page – bearing a legend such as 'additional information in support of your application', or some such wording. This field must be taken very seriously, since it is the only part of the form that gives any real information about the candidate himself, as opposed to the posts he has held. And of course, this is yet another targeting job. If your CV would have been suitable, you should be able to get away with adapting front-page information from the CV for use on the form (particularly a profile of the professional kind and your career summary or progression section, if your CV has them). Otherwise, you must once again work from the employer's information, or you can ask CV Services for help by calling 0800 783 5973.

3. Taking the initiative

Responses to advertising are not the only possible means of generating interviews. The alternative is known as speculative mailing, and consists of writing to employers cold. It may seem an odd notion at first sight to write asking for a job when you don't even know if there is one, but experience shows that this kind of jobsearch is highly effective, provided you get it right. You must have the right CV, by which I mean that targeting, for this purpose particularly, is essential. You must have an appropriately worded letter incorporating a good hook, and you must have a carefully compiled list: only firms who employ the kind of professional described in your CV should be approached. If you intend to approach others, your CV should be retargeted for the purpose. If these criteria are met and the letters are properly addressed, you can confidently expect a positive return rate of between one and ten per cent, depending upon market conditions. It is often possible to get one interview per

week by this method.

Once again, the Internet simplifies this process for you, making it quicker, easier and cheaper to make multiple speculative applications, simply on the basis that the employer is one you would like to work for. It takes very little of your time, and some vacancies will just happen to occur.

The importance of a name

Cold mailings always work better if they are personally addressed. They can also be followed up more easily by telephone, as you will know who to ask for. Directories and trade publications (available in your main public library) will give you sources of information when compiling your list, though there may not be enough detail for an application, and even when there is, the information may not be up to date. A great deal can be discovered, though, by telephoning employers before writing.

Telephone technique

Telephoning commercial companies and other organisations has become a problematical task over recent years, thanks to automated call-handling systems, premium telephone numbers and depressing 'hold' music. In most instances, though, you can speak to a human, and often the quickest way to achieve that is by pressing no keypad buttons at all.

If you allow the telephonist to know why you are calling, you will almost certainly find yourself put through to the personnel department so, unless you have good reason for believing that the personnel department makes the recruitment decision, you will need to keep that information to yourself. The trick is to ask for the name of the relevant manager by title, then confirm that the title itself is right. For instance, if you are after a job in accounts, you should ask for the name of the accounts manager. Once you have a name, you can ask for the title to be confirmed. The officer concerned may effectively be the accounts manager, but the title may be company secretary; and if it's the accounts manager's job you're after, you'll need to know whether to address yourself to the financial director, company secretary or chief accountant. The first of these is the one to quote initially, as it is the most generic of function and specific of status, and therefore the most likely to be recognised.

Whose name do you need?

You should address your application to the manager who would be your boss if you got the job, rather than the personnel manager, who may just file it if there is no currently published vacancy. Things are different, though, in certain labour-intensive industries, where the HR department may make the recruitment decision.

Handling the telephonist

Remember that telephonists see their job primarily as putting people through, and once they have a title they are apt to carry out that job without warning, so always start by saying: 'I have to write to your accounts manager (or production director, or whatever). Can you give me his name, please?' This approach will give you the best possible chance of not finding yourself speaking to the official in question. While you're there, it's a good idea to check the address and post code. Your source information may be inaccurate, out of date or incomplete.

The octopus

If you make a lot of calls of this kind, you will eventually find yourself talking to an octopus: the

sort of person who is only happy once a stranglehold has been established, and who will refuse you all information until you've answered a string of questions, such as who you are, where you're calling from, what it's about and what you want the information for. There is only one way to deal with an octopus, and that is to hang up. For this reason you should never give your name at the beginning, and you should always withhold your number (dial 141 before the code). That way you can phone again next day, at a different time, of course. Even octopuses have to go to lunch some time.

The Internet again

Once again, the Internet can simplify this task enormously. If your target employer has a well organised website, you should have no difficulty finding the right link. Many large, national or international employers even have a web application service transmitting applications to operating managers in the correct division and the appropriate part of the country.

4. Interview strategy

It is imperative to know what your strategy is before you arrive at the interview, and the time to thrash it out is during the compilation of your CV. The depth implicit in CV Services consultation techniques can be invaluable in helping you work out your interview strategy, and this applies also to subsequent updating and retargeting.

What reassures an employer more than any other single consideration is a steady progression throughout the candidate's career, and the existence of such a progression makes for a positive interview. Conversely, an interrupted progression will give rise to problems at the interview. For example, you may have left a job for non-career reasons, such as an unreasonable boss or unsocial working hours. These reasons are easy enough to understand, but they are impossible to present in a positive light, so some other way of looking at things has to be found. People seldom leave for a single reason, and you must look at all your motivations, singling out the positive ones and presenting those.

You must obtain all possible advantage from positive points, especially the more esoteric ones, such as your own motivations and attitudes. Why do you want this job? What will you bring to it? What reason can the employer have for believing you will do it well? These are all interview questions, but they are CV questions, too, which means that they should be thought out in advance as part of the targeting process. This is strategy, and without it you are at a huge disadvantage.

The concept of a general CV is misguided. It assumes that a single document can be made to have the same impact upon the mind of any employer, regardless of individual requirements, whereas a successful CV works by considering the employer's requirements above all, rather than disregarding them. Neither can an effective interview strategy be worked out independently of the CV.

Whilst the CV is the principal basis for the interview, there are two others: the employer and the post. Quite apart from the obvious need to look at these carefully to be sure you will be happy in the job, these elements can also be used to help present you in a positive light, and the best possible way to use your information is by asking intelligent questions. Where does the information come from? You do your homework. It will be worth the effort; if you know the answers before you ask the questions, it is much easier to appear intelligent.

Look up the employer in *Kompass* (available in the business section of your local main library and on the web as www.kompass.com). The entry will tell you all the company's activities, turnover, number of employees, branch addresses and many other interesting snippets of information, right down to the directors' names and the company's liability status (Ltd or plc). Check the trade publications and the company's web page (access to the web is also normally available in main libraries). The information these yield can lead to valuable exchanges at the interview. A good impression is more readily made by demonstrating your insight, rather than

simply airing your knowledge, and this is much easier to achieve if you have the requisite information.

The wealth of information to be found on the Web can be invaluable for this purpose, too. Most employers tell the world what they believe in and how they see themselves, giving candidates the opportunity to arrive at the interview fully informed simply by printing out and studying all relevant parts of their website (not just the recruitment section).

If you are applying for the type of job you have already done yourself or seen done by others at close quarters, familiarity will help, but it's a good idea to spend some time analysing what you did and why, or what your colleague did, then turn the information around to apply to the new post. The best question you will ever be asked at an interview will go something like: 'Why should I give you this job?' or 'What strengths do you believe you can bring to this post?' Many candidates find this kind of question difficult to answer, but that is because they haven't thought it through; and look at it from the employer's point of view: if you can't tell him why he should employ you, how can you expect him to know? You simply must have a good answer to this question, and that answer comes as much from a knowledge of the employer's requirements as from self-knowledge. The lesson is clear: read the ad carefully, think about what it says. Give some thought, too, to your own prior knowledge of such jobs, especially in terms of what is important to the employer. If further information is offered, make sure you have it. A job description and a person specification taken collectively will often tell you everything you need to know.

Such questions will always be easier to answer if you have relevant information from your own record, so write it down: each achievement and all experience should be recorded for your own future reference in as much detail as possible. If such detail is not officially available, there is no reason why it cannot be obtained informally. For example, if you talk to colleagues in accounts or stats about their work, interesting nuggets of information are bound to crop up, and some of them may be pure gold. You may even be able to acquire performance figures, though they should always be used with caution. Even if the information is about the firm's, department's or division's performance rather than your own, it can still be used, presenting you as a member of a successful team and suggesting that you are willing to accord credit to others. Team players are much sought after, and this kind of presentation can be the most successful of all.

To summarise, job hunting is a matter of common sense, planning and application. If you give enough thought and preparation to each stage and follow up with persistence, you're bound to succeed.

Happy hunting!

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