

The Cover Letter

The Cover letter for a resume is often regarded as a mere formality and is not given the importance it deserves. Most job seekers would prefer to skip it and just send their resume alone to prospective employer. Others would invariably send an announcement cover letter stating the obvious i.e. “ Please find enclosed my resume...” Such cover letters would definitely be a waste. Is a cover letter then, really necessary?

A cover letter with the resume is resume is essential to improve your chance of selection If you are sending your resume to an employer, you should always ensure that a cover letter goes along with it.

Q. Why is this cover letter so important?

The cover letter is the first thing that the recruiter reads when short-listing resumes. It is much shorter than a resume and, if well written in content and presentation, could grab the attention of the person sifting through the possibly large volumes of resumes that have arrived for a particular position. This is particularly so in the case of advertised vacancies where as many as 50 to 100 resumes could arrive for the position every day. With these volumes, you can expect ruthlessness in the screening process. In fact, a clerk who may not even be aware of the details of the advertised position would probably do the first level of screening and may be working on a preliminary checklist provided to him. Over 50% resumes may be removed at this stage and may not even reach the next level in the screening process. A good cover letter would definitely help at this stage in at least sounding different and standing out from the crowd. It could improve your chance of being selected for an interview!

Q. What then, should your cover letter contain?

Your cover letter should highlight the value you offer to meet the employer needs the cover letter is an opportunity for you to respond to the needs of the prospective employer. You need to go beyond your resume and its details of your past experience. And highlight how you can help your new organization in achieving its goals. How your skills and experience together can meet the expectation that accompany the new job profile. You can claim the value that you offer to the organization in your cover letter. The detailed evidence to back up your claims will be provided by your resume.

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Remember that your cover letter is meant to motivate the organization to take some action in your favor i.e. either short-list you as a probable interviewee and inform you about the interview date, or at least accept your call when you telephone to follow up on your resume. This can only happen if your cover letter contains a clear reason/benefit why the organization should hire you, similar to highlighting the Unique Selling Proposition in an advertisement for a consumer brand.

Try and customize your cover letters for different employers

A common practice is to send the same cover letter for different employers through a mass mail exercise, where just the employer name is change. This may be so because it is easier and quicker to finalize one cover letter whereas customized cover letter for different employers would require a lot more effort. You may even reduce the number of companies you send your resume to if you need to customize each cover letter. Here, there is a definite trade-off between customization and volumes.

In the case of mass mailing a generic over letter, you have the definite advantage of sending your resume to a higher number of prospective employers, which increases your probability of getting some job. However on the down side your cover letter and resume may not stand out from the competition because you have had to keep the content general in order to satisfy different organizations.

When you prepare different cover letters for different employers, you will need to think along the following lines to customize the letter i.e. you need to think about the organization and the industry its in, its customers and clients, your job profile if you were to get recruited by them, and who your strengths, abilities, traits could help contribute significantly to the organization. Just highlighting your basic skills could help you get short-listed, but you need to stand out above the clutter. You also need to differentiate yourself Vis a Vis your competition and let that come through in the letter. That would be the difference a customized cover letter would make. There will be parts of the letter that you could use an as standard section in all your letters and that, to some extent, would save you time and effort, it is advisable to change the rest of the letter to suit the specific needs of each of your prospective employers. This should give the employer a clear reason why they will be better off after recruiting you!

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The cover letter should be short with a conversational style instead of a stiff tone how long should the cover letter be? What should be the tone and style of language used?

The answer to the first question is that the cover letter should be short as the reader may only give it a quick skim through given the pile of resumes that he may have to go through.

It should have not more than 2-3 paragraphs of 5-7 lines each. The sentences should not be too long nor should they be in point form like in a checklist. You can highlight a certain sentence by using italics or bold whichever you prefer.

Regarding the second question of the tone and style of language used in the letter, it is preferable to use a conversational and easy flowing friendly tone, instead of a formal and stiff business like approach to the letter. Do not use ornate and longwinded words or thoughts. Keep your claims specific and not vague. Avoid overloading your letter with too many adjectives.

A common part of certain resumes and cover letters is a host of adjectives like- “Committed, dedicated, motivated individual with excellent communication skills, efficient, reliable with outstanding interpersonal skills, keen mind with excellent problem-solving and analytical skills...”

Phew! Please avoid such long clichéd self-praise in your cover letter. This example may be an exaggeration, but the point that needs to be made is this-stick to a few credible claims with a brief substantiation. A host of adjectives such as the ones above cannot make your resume stand out, but instead might receive a response such as “Oh no! Not one of those again! “ Now that is definitely not what you wanted!

Avoid servile language like- “ I humbly submit my resume to your esteemed organization...”