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RESUME READINESS:
Writing the Cover Letter

Most people have had to write a resume or two during the course of their careers. It is a task most of us dread. Even though we promise ourselves that we will keep our resumes current, we often fall into a state of blissful denial and let months (and often years) pass before we find reason enough to update an out-dated resume. Once we have racked our brains for the first and last names of past supervisors, rummaged through phone books and old business cards for addresses and phone numbers, and creatively elaborated the responsibilities of past job duties, we finally command our computers to "print" on our crisp bond paper the perfect resume. Feeling like we have mastered the task, we now need only to scan the ads, mail off the resumes, and await the interview calls. Unfortunately, it is almost never that easy.

Instead, we find numerous employment ads that give us little information or are written in the spare-a-line-save-a-buck newspaper ad code. What's more, the employers who place these ads are more and more frequently requesting cover letters to be included with a resume. If you haven't already discovered this; it can be a challenge writing a letter for a "blind" employment ad for a position about which you know very little.

Let's say you see an ad that reads:

> **Technician -** 25 yr old Seattle Geotech Engr firm has pos. for tech in new div. 5+ yrs exp in soils, conc., msnry, asph. Min. A.S. deg. req., NICET cert. Lv. I. Sal. equal to exp. Send resume and cover letter to: HR, PO Bx 123, Seattle, WA 98000.

Should you forgo the cover letter? Never. Should you forgo applying at all? That's a choice you have to make. The truth of the matter is, that if an employer asks for a cover letter, you have to assume that they really are expecting to get one. A number of employers have told our recruiters that if they ask for a cover letter and a resume arrives without one - they "round" file it (throw it away). It tells them that either the applicant does not pay attention to instructions or simply does not care, and neither of those people are types they want to employ. So, if you are paralyzed by the idea of sending a cover letter, and you are unable to find someone else who can help you, you can submit just your resume but don't expect great results.

If you decide to forge ahead and write the letter, you are wise and brave. You have a cryptic ad that lacks the pertinent information necessary to write an effective cover letter. The ad doesn't tell you much about the job or the new division, and nothing about the firm, but you want to work in Seattle and you know you meet the basic requirements. The next steps are really up to you. Either you can opt to take a stab at a pretty good, general cover letter, or you can do some detective work and see if you can learn more. Without a company name, additional research will be tough. If you have been in your field for long, and/or you are a capable networker, you may be able to learn what geotechnical firm in Seattle is adding a new division, or you may be successful in finding out which geotechnical firms in Seattle are 25 years old and then work from that list to learn who is adding a new division. Once you think you've got the name of firm pinned-down, try to learn more about them:

- What are their specialties and how do they relate to your expertise?
- What are they currently working on and how might you be able to contribute to those projects?
- What is the new division (or new market, etc.) and how can you fit into it?
- Who are their clients and do you have any positive history with any of them?
- What other unique characteristics of this firm factor in to your professional and personal background?

These are the points on which you need to capitalize in your cover letter. Employers like employment candidates who have done their "homework" and know something about their firm and their clients. Those are the resumes that stand apart from the rest - ones in which the individual has expressed herself clearly and can identify where and how she will be an asset to the firm and her division. But, don't include specifics about the firm unless you are sure you have established who they are. You don't want to guess that it is XYZ Company and talk about them in your cover letter when it is really to ABC, Inc. that you are applying.

A clearly and concisely written cover letter is as important as its contents. It doesn't matter what you think you can offer a firm if you can't express those ideas in a manner in which the hiring authority can understand them. Three to four short paragraphs is almost always sufficient. Do not ramble on about your work overseas in Kuwait if you are applying for work with a firm which has one office in one city and only handles local projects. While they may be impressed when they notice it on your resume, it is not a key point to illustrate in your cover letter. Elaborate only on the similarities between your work experience in Kuwait and what you know about their opening.

A cover letter draws from your experience outlined in your resume, but only focuses on those experiences which are key to the hiring firm and the employment opening to which you are applying. If, for example, you were applying to the sample ad above, and you had worked in a new geotechnical division for a past employer where you had to help manage and develop new clients, it may be wise to point out how you could contribute those same skills to this new firm. After reading your cover letter which describes how you were able to become an integral part of a new division for a previous employer, you can bet that the hiring authority will look for that information on your resume. Your cover letter just hooked the fish. Your resume has to reel them in. Your interview has to bag them.

Sample Cover Letter

January 1, 1997

Human Resources Manager
P.O. Box 123
Seattle, WA 98000

Dear Human Resources Manager:

In response to your advertisement for a NICET I technician, I submit my resume for your consideration.

I have been working in this field for over four years. For the past two years I have been working on the new Interstate 90 roadway improvements. This work has permitted me many opportunities to present solutions to the Department of Transportation and a number of senior consulting engineers.

In addition, I have been involved with our new marketing division developing better methods for client management and development.

I am enthusiastic about the opportunity to expand my skills and offer your firm my technical expertise and solid work ethic.

I look forward to the opportunity to speak with you directly about my skills and experience and how they can be applied to meet the needs of your firm.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Chris Cross

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