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Workforce Series #3

Include Cover Letter With Your Resume

By Carolyn Clague, Ed.D., Associate Professor, Extension Youth Development / 4-H Specialist

What is a Cover Letter?

When you send your resume to potential employers, always include a cover letter. It is vital in today's job market. A cover letter is a one page letter that describes your goals, personality, qualifications, and interest in the job you are applying for. The cover letter is the first impression you make on an employer. It should be well-written and excite enough interest in you that the employer will read your resume and invite you for an interview. Writing an effective cover letter takes time, thought, and effort—all highly worthwhile.

Four Basic Parts—Four Paragraphs

Most job-seeking cover letters have four basic parts: the identification, statement, selection, and request. Each of these parts is written as a separate paragraph.

Identification: The first paragraph should state why you are writing. You should identify the position you seek to fill. Refer specifically to how you learned of the opening, whether it is from a business associate, classified ad, or the employment agency.

Statement: This paragraph relates your skills and abilities to the specific position for which you are applying. If the employer is seeking experience or a particular type of education, clearly state all information that shows you meet the requirements. Give specific examples of what you have done and how it makes you qualified for the position.

Selection: In the third paragraph, state your reasons for selection of this employer. Communicate why you want to work for them. This will demonstrate that you took the time to research the company and have thought about how your skills and interests fit with their needs.

Request: The fourth paragraph should clearly state what you want your prospective employer to do or consider for you: provide you with guidance or information regarding a particular position or consider making an appointment for an interview.

Make sure the letter contains all necessary contact information, including phone number, address or e-mail address where you can be easily reached.

The Cover Letter Must be Personalized

The cover letter allows you to emphasize how your training and experience most closely fit the position for which you are applying. Highlight those attributes that are most appropriate for that particular position. Design the letter to fit the specific needs of the organization and the job for which you are applying.

It is important to rewrite or customize your cover letter for each potential employer. Never send a photocopy or a form cover letter. You want your prospective employer to see you as a person who has given time and effort to personalizing your cover letter. Don't assume that the employer can see from your resume why you would be the right person for the position; you need to point out what makes you qualified.

Three Types of Cover Letters

There are three basic types of cover letters. They should all be accompanied by your resume, but each one is trying to do a different job and must be written accordingly. To whom you are writing and why you are writing will dictate which of the three types you will send.

The response cover letter: used when you know there is a specific job opening. Keep your letter brief and highlight the qualifications that make you a good candidate for the job. Communicate why you are interested in the job and why the employer should be interested in you. The employer needs an individual with specific skills and you should briefly explain how you can meet those needs.

The blind cover letter: used when you are not aware of an opening, but you want the employer to know you are seeking employment. In other words, this type of letter is used when you are sure of what you want to do, but you are not sure who is looking for someone to do it.

This letter is sent to employers who have not advertised an opening, but who do employ people with skills and training similar to yours. Resources such as the Internet, networking, information interviews, and Chamber of Commerce are ways to gather information. You can also refer to the yellow pages in the telephone directory and look up companies in the field(s) you are considering.

Make a phone call to the employer you are interested in and ask the receptionist for the name and title of the person to receive your cover letter. The letter should describe your general personal goals, briefly communicate why you are seeking employment, and state your desire to meet with the employer for further discussion of your qualifications. Stressing your reasons for interest in the employer is especially important in this type of letter.

The request for assistance cover letter: used when you would like an employer to provide you with guidance or information. This letter asks for assistance in your search for suitable employment. The employer may be willing to offer valuable advice on how to further your job search.

Tips for Success

First of all, be positive about the position you desire and other positions you have held.

Mail your reply to a want ad within three days of its appearance in the newspaper. Using a business-like font, type or print your cover letter on 8 1/2" x 11" paper the same color as your resume, preferably white or off-white. Proofread your cover letter carefully. Date and sign the letter. If you have access to a computer, make a copy of your cover letter and save that file as a template for future cover letters.

Check for the employer's presence on the Internet as a way of gathering a variety of information such as job descriptions, locations of regional offices, contact names and addresses of Human Resources personnel and/or Department Heads, background information on products, and future prospects.

Volunteer activities can be described in the cover letter, if you don't have relevant work experience, or if they are extensive and relevant to the position. Focus on how the

skills developed have enriched you personally and made you more productive or valuable in the workplace.

Go Electronic

If the job advertisement requests that you send your resume via fax or electronically over the Internet, then send your resume and cover letter in the format requested. Convert them to a text version that can be read on any computer. It may seem repetitious, but it is a good practice to follow up with a printed copy in the mail. It can be tricky to maintain some semblance of readable formatting when converting to a text version. It might be a good idea to refer to a website such as [www.rileyguide.com] or other information for guidance on how to do this.

Mistakes to Avoid

Do not photocopy your cover letter. Do not mail a resume without a cover letter. Do not use business stationery from present or past employment situations.

Do not use generic greetings such as "Dear Friend," "Hello," "To Whom It May Concern," and "Dear Sir/Madam,". Whenever possible, use the employer's last name. A general rule is you use the person's first name only when you have been personally introduced and have already referred to that person by first name in conversation. It is better to be more formal unless you know the person really well. In either event, a colon, not a comma, should follow the person's name such as "Dear Ms. Watson:" not "Dear Sharon,".

Do not state your education unless it is related to the specific job for which you are applying; your education is stated in your resume. Do not mention salary, fringe benefits, vacation time, etc. Wait for the job offer to negotiate your employment.

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