

The Qualities of a Good Cover Letter

For Bennett, a good cover letter gives recruiters additional and relevant insights into a candidate.

“It’s not just a rehash of their resume,” he says.

“Recruiters should be looking for candidates who can explain how their skills, knowledge and experience support their claim to the role while also showing their enthusiasm and motivation for applying.”

Many roles require effective communication skills, and Bennett says a cover letter is an opportunity to assess a candidate’s ability to communicate well. “It’s also a chance to identify candidates who have carefully read the advertisement and job description, researched the company and gained a good understanding of the role and the employer,” he adds.

The ‘No’ Argument

For Kerri O’Connor, director of recruitment company Saunders Lynn & Co, cover letters are not a crucial part of the recruitment process.

“I rarely read cover letters and just skim over them,” she says.

“For me, cover letters are a test to check if someone has basic attention to detail. And while attention to detail is important, a cover letter doesn’t tell me if the candidate can do the job or not.”

A candidate’s fit for the job is demonstrated in their resume rather than their cover letter, argues O’Connor.

“Six months’ from now, HR and recruitment professionals will go to a candidates’ resume not their cover letters,” she says.

“Their ability to do the job is contained in their resume.”

A common complaint from recruiters about cover letters is that they are bland, boring or formulaic. O’Connor says many cover letters she receives are “often vaguely addressed to Sir/Madam or to whom it may concern.”

“My name is always on the advert,” she says, “and in at least 20% of cases or more the cover letter is for a different job with another company or recruitment agency!”

The Alternative to Cover Letters

Employers can find out a lot about job seekers through professional networking platforms and through online talent communities, including SEEK Talent Search. These often provide much more detailed information than a cover letter can.

Recruiters can also look at a candidate's digital footprint via their social media profiles and feeds, personal websites and blogs.

Employers who want to tap into the potential of cover letters but don't want to lose time reading them can request that candidates include links to their online profiles on their resume or provide a high-level summary at the top of their resume about what makes them different from other applicants.

The Verdict

There's no one-size-fits-all when it comes to cover letters.

While cover letters traditionally helped determine a shortlist of applicants, with candidates now having a greater digital footprint, recruiters are only limited by their imagination when it comes to effective methods of finding their next candidate.