

The great debate: Are cover letters still relevant?

As candidate profiles, employment history and educational qualifications become more accessible through social networking sites and online profiles, have cover letters become a thing of the past?

Previously, it was inconceivable for recruiters or employers to request a candidate's resume without an accompanying cover letter. But with so much information about candidates readily available and increasing time pressures on employers, we ask two experts about whether cover letters still offer valuable information or if their formulaic nature simply adds to the load of the recruiter.

How recruiters use cover letters

As a career coach and a recruitment consultant, Simon Bennett of Glide Outplacement and Career Coaching says a cover letter acts as a professional sales proposal that can catch the recruiter's attention with a well-written summary of a candidate's professional experience.

"The more recruiters or employers know about applicants, the better they can select the right person for the role," he says.

"A well-written, targeted cover letter can provide great insights into a candidate, which could ultimately prevent employers from making an expensive hiring mistake."

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.