

IN THE JOB MARKET? TIPS FOR PRESENTING YOURSELF ON PAPER

In good economic times, people frequently want to work in the private sector because the pay can be very good. In bad economic times, people often prefer the public sector because the work may be more secure than private sector jobs. Despite this rule of thumb, the present sluggish economy has resulted in even some local government employees finding themselves in the job market.

What should you do to make a good impression when you look for a job? First impressions are critically important in a tight job market. That means you must present yourself well on paper. Over the years we have seen a lot of applications for jobs, either for positions here at VLCT or as a result of the job searches we often conduct for Vermont municipalities. A few things jump out as we review potential employees for jobs ranging from attorney to municipal manager to public works director to the occasional police chief. Here are some pointers to keep in mind.

COVER LETTER

This is the first product that your potential employer will see. The impression it makes is all-important! Your cover letter should introduce you briefly and describe your interest in the particular job for which you are applying. Be specific with respect to the job. Nothing turns off an employer faster than a sentence that tells him or her that you are applying for some other job – in some other town. It is crucial to succinctly get across to the reader what *you* can do for the employer. At this introductory point, the reader really does not care about what this job can do for you.

Would a potential employer deduce from your address that distance from the job might be an issue? You might mention your willingness to relocate, or the fact that you are in the process of relocating.

Keep the letter to one page if at all possible. Your resume will tell the rest of the story. And be sure that you are using personal letterhead paper, not the letterhead of your current employer. Grammar and spelling are very important in a cover letter. Often we cannot see our own mistakes once they are written – instead we see what we *wanted* to write. As a result, it is a good idea to ask someone else to read the letter at least for spelling and grammar if not for content. Also, be sure to use Spell Check on your computer when reviewing your letter, even though it does not catch words that are spelled correctly but misused in a sentence.

Use of e-mail to deliver cover letters and resumes is common today. However, if you are using that medium, because of either time constraints or convenience, there are some idiosyncrasies to consider. The text of your email may look quite different when it is received than it did when you carefully formatted and sent it. For example:

To Whom it may Concern:
Please consider me for the position of manager. Attached please find my resume and cover letter.

To Whom It May Concern:

:
Please consider me for the position of manager. Attached to this document please find my resume and cover letter.

As well, sometimes the attached documents don't come through those computer wires at all or they come through in some hieroglyphic that does not impress the recipient. If you must send attachments, try to send them as PDF files. This format is easily accessible to anyone using Adobe Acrobat software and will preserve the formatting that you chose. Regardless of how you send your resume electronically, make sure your name is on every single sheet of paper that the recipient will be printing out. Don't leave a potential employer sifting through a pile of resumes, trying to match up the pages!

Finally, it is always a good idea to send along a hard copy as well and to note that you are doing so in your e-mail.

RESUME

There are lots of books around that tell job seekers how to write resumes. While some of those methods are quite effective, others can confuse potential employers more than they help. Maybe because we are Yankees, we recommend putting your name, address, telephone number and e-mail address (if you have one) at the top of the resume in a not too ostentatious typeface. In the same vein, while you want your resume to stand out, you probably don't want it to do so because of its screaming pink or day-glow green color.

If you are going to put a line at the top of the resume regarding the kind of job you are seeking, make very sure, as you did in the cover letter, that the kind of job your resume says you want does in fact match the job for which you are applying.

Resumes can be too short or, at great length, tell someone more than he or she ever wanted to know about you. A potential employer does not need to see every single thing you have accomplished in your professional life. A potential employer does need to see your educational background and any degrees received. Certifications, on the other hand, can be tricky. You do want to let people know of any professional certifications that are necessary to your eligibility for a job. You probably don't need to let them know that you received a certificate of completion for that one-day time management class five years ago. Judgment is key here. What would *you* be interested in knowing about a person?

An employer needs to see your employment history arranged in chronological order, with names of organizations for which you worked, dates of employment and explanations of any gaps in employment. The best resumes we have read contain a short paragraph about the candidate's responsibilities in each of those positions. Generally you don't need to list all the jobs you held in high school unless you are a recent graduate and need to establish a record of reliable employability.

As is the case with certifications, you will need to exercise judgment in compiling a list of items such as hobbies (which some people include and some ignore) or volunteer activities. These lists can be very helpful to potential employers in giving them a picture of you as a whole person, but if everything under the sun is on the list it loses some of its utility. Providing information such as marital status, number or ages of children is entirely up to you and, of course, employers may not request such information in an interview situation.

Some recruitment advertisements request your salary requirements. If you are going to include these, it is worth investigating what similar jobs in the state pay. In the end, pay is likely to be negotiated between the hiring entity and the prospective employee. Nonetheless, if you are out of the employer's price range, it is better to establish that early in the process and save everyone a lot of pain as you try to negotiate a match that was not meant to be or end up in a job in which you are unable to make ends meet.

The best resumes we have read total between two and three pages and include name and address, type of position sought, educational background, employment history and other activities.

REFERENCES

References can be another tricky piece of a resume, particularly when considering your own current employment status. Many job applicants simply state at the end of their resume, *references available upon request*. This is fine as long as you have a list of references that you are ready to provide when the request comes and you are not surprised by it. Take the time to ask your references for their permission or at least inform them that they are on the list you are providing to potential employers so that they are not surprised when they receive a call.

A list of references need not be long. It should include people you know well outside of work (not family members) who can speak about you and your experience knowledgably or people you know in a professional capacity. Listing the U.S. Senators from Vermont is not helpful unless you actually worked for them. The list needs to contain a balance between personal or "character" references (such as someone with whom you served on a planning commission) and professional references, including a current or recent employer. A job applicant should expect that if he or she is a finalist for a job, his or her current employer will be contacted. Please note that this should not be done without your permission! For that matter, if you are a finalist and you have given permission, persons not on your list may be contacted (for instance the members of your selectboard). Generally a list of references need not include more than six people.

Clearly putting your best foot forward when introducing yourself on paper is terrifically important. Following these recommendations is no guarantee of landing the next position for which you apply. But doing so will help to demonstrate your seriousness about the job and your capacity to provide key information in a clear and succinct manner. We wish you the best of luck!

- Karen Horn, Director, VLCT Legislative and Membership Services

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