

Job Applications – Mistakes You Don't Want to Make

Q. I am a solo practitioner, and I recently ran an ad in the Bar Bulletin looking for a contract attorney. I received numerous responses, all but one of which fell into one or more of the following categories: 1) applicant assumed I was male (which I am not) and addressed the cover letter as "Dear Sir;" 2) cover letter contained numerous grammatical and spelling errors; 3) cover letter was "canned" and failed to address any of the criteria I had expressly stated in the ad; or 4) attached resume was not in Word format, and I could not even open it without first converting it. Only one applicant discussed the criteria outlined in the ad and explained how he was qualified. Even though he is a recent law school grad and hasn't even been sworn in yet, he is the only applicant I will be interviewing. Given the current economy, I was surprised that the attorneys who responded to my ad did not take extra care in preparing their resumes and cover letters. Wouldn't you think attorneys could at least use spell check?

A. I am probably as surprised as you! In dispensing advice on career searches, I have never used this column to discuss the basics. I assumed attorneys were, at least for the most part, careful wordsmiths who took pride in their writing.

Fortunately, most of the resumes that I see are well crafted and free of typographical errors. But your experience shows that many attorneys are still in need of help with job-search fundamentals.

First, and foremost, know what type of position you are seeking. What are your skills, talents and motivations? Until you know yourself and what you are looking for, you can't even begin drafting a resume or cover letter. If you do, you are wasting your time and that of any potential employer. Sometimes I hear the comment, "I guess in this market, I just need to take whatever I can get." Ironically, the more difficult the market, the more focused you must be. You must be able to articulate what you want and why you should be hired. You can't do this, if you are using a shotgun approach.

Once you know what you are looking for, you will want to draft a resume that reflects relevant accomplishments to illustrate your qualifications. A litany of where you went to law school and where you worked is not sufficient. An employer wants to see examples of specific experiences and relevant successes.

Now that you have prepared your resume, have at least two people review it. And if you make even minor changes, always ask at least one person to proofread it before you send it. Spell check can't find most grammatical errors. After toiling over your resume for hours, you are not in any position to find the mistakes.

The cover letter is your chance to connect the dots between your resume and the requirements of a particular job. Once you know the "formula" for good cover letters, they are actually quite easy to prepare. A cover letter need not be longer than four paragraphs, if it is well written.

The first paragraph opens with a statement of your enthusiasm for the position. The second sentence of the cover letter states very briefly why you are applying: "As my resume will attest, I have the qualifications you are seeking. . . ."

In the second paragraph, you describe those relevant qualifications: "Your ad states that you are looking for someone with experience in estate planning and probate. Not only did I take all of the estate planning classes offered in law school, I also spent the past summer working for an attorney whose practice was concentrated in estates and probate. . . ."

A follow-up paragraph addresses any other qualifications, including personal traits, if stated: "Addressing your required personal traits, colleagues frequently describe me as open and approachable."

In closing, you will want to reiterate your interest and thank the employer for considering your application: "Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to hearing from you. I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss ways in which I could help you in meeting the needs of your clients."

As you can see, a "canned" cover letter cannot adequately convey your interest or qualifications. Each cover letter must be carefully crafted and addressed to the appropriate person. If you know the name of the person you are writing, check and double check the spelling of the name and the address. The Attorney Directory at www.wsba.org can help. In responding to a blind ad, your salutation should read, "Dear Sir or Madam." Do not assume the gender of someone you have not met.

Unless you enjoy collecting unemployment and using your spare time to write a novel, you will want to follow these basic guidelines every time you apply for a job!

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