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Land the Tech Job You Love

LAND the TECH JOB
YOU LOVE

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Applying for the Job

Applying for the job is often your first contact with the company. You're going from outside observer to active participant in the process. How you apply, what you send, and every interaction you have with every person along the way is evidence showing those you hope to work for what kind of work you do and what you'll be like to work with. Make it your best.

This process cannot be done by rote, where you send out Yet Another Résumé to Yet Another Company. First, mass-mailed résumés have a stink about them that hiring managers can smell. The odor of mass-produced generic blather is a turnoff for anyone who wants to get an enthusiastic employee who will fit with the team. Second, putting your personality and specifics about how you view a given opportunity forces you to consider carefully whether this job is one for you. If you can't come up with two paragraphs in a cover letter that explains why you are a good match for this job at this company, then you probably shouldn't be applying.

There aren't 100 jobs that are a good fit.

Applying for a job is not a game of numbers. Spraying your résumé across the Internet in the hopes of getting a nibble just doesn't work, because for every job you send off a bland, uninteresting cover letter to, there are 100 other dopes doing the same thing.

Don't apply for every job you see that might fit. Instead, focus on the ones that matter, and put everything you can into them.

6.1 Customize Your Résumé

You have a great basic résumé, but that's only the first step. Now you customize it.

The résumé is the workhorse of your application package. As I emphasized back in Chapter 3, *Résumé Content: Getting the Words Down*, on page 53, every résumé you send must be created with the specifics of the company and position for which you're applying. Bring out the parts of your background that will help the hiring manager most.

Take a copy of your stock résumé and see it through the eyes of the hiring manager for the job for which you're applying. Think about what on your résumé will be most important to the manager and to the company and how they can use you in their business. You're going to take these words and make them bold to draw attention to them in the initial scanning of your résumé, as explained in Section 4.4, *Create an Effective Summary*, on page 87.

Start by checking the job requirements. Say you have a job ad looking for ASP.NET and SQL Server experience, so those are your first two callout words. In the "Summary" section of your résumé, make those two strings, "ASP.NET" and "SQL Server," and only those two strings, bold. Chances are they're already bolded if you're starting with a stock résumé.

Find other words and concepts in your résumé that correspond to what the company is looking for. You'll probably have words and phrases to emphasize that are not explicitly stated in the ad. If they're looking for a senior project manager, then highlight your many years of experience. If the company is in the financial industry, then drawing attention to jobs you've had in the financial or related industries is appropriate.

This is where researching the company before applying pays off. If you find out, say, that the company takes on mostly government contracts and you have experience in that area in your past, then bold it in your résumé. You'll have an edge over other applicants.

Highlight key words, but don't overwhelm.

Be judicious in how much bolding you do. Making too many words bold diminishes the effectiveness, like highlighting entire paragraphs of textbooks instead of key words or sentences. You want the reader's eye drawn to the bold words as the most important ones on the page.

Anywhere you've quantified your value in the résumé, such as in bullets for a given position, you have an excellent candidate for bolding. Don't bold the entire bullet, just the juiciest part. The reader will read the rest for the context. Phrases like these are great to call attention to:

- Introduced test-driven development that **reduced defects by 27%** per KLOC
- **Saved $19,200** in two years by converting servers to Linux
- Redesigned website led to **43% more traffic** and **18% higher clickthrough** in the first six months

As you select these items to highlight, make sure that you can discuss them in an interview or a phone screen, because they'll likely be top questions for the interviewer. "You say you saved $19,200 by converting to Linux. Is that just licensing costs or total cost of ownership? How did you measure those costs?" Maybe it was your boss who came up with that figure to trumpet in the company newsletter, but you'd better to be able to discuss it more intelligently than "I dunno, that's what my boss said."

Don't be afraid to add or remove content from your résumé. Build up the jobs that most closely relate to the position or that help you best tell the story of how you'll help the company and whittle away at the jobs that don't. There's no rule that all sections of your résumé must contain equal numbers of bullets or the same amount of space on the page.

However you juggle the words, you should probably have two to four words or phrases in your summary that are bold because they directly relate to the job. If not, there's a disconnect. Either you're not qualified for this job because the important parts of the job aren't worthy of placing in your summary, or you haven't organized the résumé well. Modify the résumé, or reconsider the job.

6.2 Create a Cover Letter

Rule #1 for cover letters: "Write one." Many people ask, "Do I have to send a cover letter if they don't ask for one?" I can only answer with, "Only if you want a better chance of getting the job."

The cover letter introduces yourself to the reader and tells her things that might not be on the résumé or highlights those that are. A cover letter is personalized. That's not to say that you shouldn't personalize the résumé, but the cover letter is more conversational and allows you to stretch out some more than a résumé.

The reader of your cover letter should be convinced that you are interested in the job. The hiring manager reads more than enough form letters all day from mass-mailers who are just looking for any old job.

Your job in a cover letter is to introduce yourself to the hiring manager and give some context for you and your résumé. The cover letter should do the following:

- Explain where you found out about the job
- Explain what you bring to the company and how it fits with what you're looking for
- Show that you have researched the company
- Tell about any contacts with people you may have at the company
- Show that you care enough about this job to send a personal letter and show that you want not just *any*, but *this* job

Here's how not to do a cover letter, an example I received while looking for a programmer:

```
Dear Prospective Employer,

Your Advertisement on jobs.perl.com for a

    Sr. Prog. for library book wholesaler

caught my attention. I would like to apply. I am confident that
I can perform the job effectively. My background and career
goal, seem to match the job requirements well.
```

This letter tells plenty about the author, none of it good:

- He's indiscriminate, throwing his résumé out to anyone where he finds an ad. He's probably desperate.
- He's careless. "Sr. Prog. for library book wholesaler" was the title of the job posting, not the name of the position. The actual website was jobs.perl.org, not jobs.perl.com. Plus, there are errors in English mechanics.
- He doesn't care about the quality of his work sending out such an obvious form letter. He didn't even try to disguise it, expanding the text of the web-scraped job description.
- He can't honestly suggest that he can "perform the job effectively" without knowing anything about what the job entails.

Now compare that atrocity to this positive example I made up:

```
Dear Mr. Lester,

My colleague Richard Dice referred me to the job recently
posted on jobs.perl.org.  I believe that I can help Elsinore
Brewery with my skills, including:

* Four years of database app development, including...

* Three years Perl experience, including two CPAN modules
    (http://...) that extend the DBI database layer by...

* A BS in computer science from the University of Illinois.

I'm also a bit of an amateur zymurgist and have brewed beer in
my basement for the past five years.

I look forward for a chance to meet with you to discuss
your needs and how I can help you and Elsinore Brewery.

Sincerely,
Bob McKenzie
```

Note how this letter hits all the good points of a cover letter:

- Introduces the writer to the reader and establishes a connection to a mutual friend

- Shows that the writer is familiar with the company and is interested in this specific job

- Summarizes his work experience, perhaps even repeating the summary from the résumé, to explain the key benefits of hiring him

Don't get too tricky in your cover letter. It's good to make a personal connection, but without giving up too much information (refer to Chapter 10, *Too Much Information*, on page 198). Consider that the cover letter is going to color how you're perceived from that point forward. It is your introduction to the company.

Take a look at this excerpt from a cover letter I received. The candidate didn't have a strong programming background, so he explained other parts of his varied background that might bring value to the position:

Consider how you'll be remembered.

> I am much more than a programmer. In my long and varied work history, I have performed such jobs as knife salesman, manager of a hardware store, a neurological lab assistant who was responsible for extracting retinas from bovine eyes, flower delivery driver, and retirement home activities director, all of which make me a well-rounded candidate.

It might be a decent strategy. He's showing he has a wide variety of experiences in his background. But when you read that, what sticks in your mind?

> "I am much more than a programmer. In my long and varied work history, I have performed such jobs as knife salesman, manager of a hardware store, **a neurological lab assistant who was responsible for extracting retinas from bovine eyes**, and...blah blah blah...." Holy cow, this guy was a *cow eye sucker!*.

How do you get past that? From that point on, it's all I could think about. If I actually hired him, he'd forever be known as the cow eye sucker guy.

Your cover letter must keep your benefit to the company at the forefront. It may be appropriate to mention what your goals are, but that must be kept secondary to what the company needs. I've seen too many cover letters like this:

> I saw your ad for a Windows system administrator in the *Herald* this weekend, and I knew I had to respond. I've been looking for a Windows admin position near Poughkeepsie, and this job sounds perfect for me.

There's nothing wrong with discussing what attracted you to the job in the cover letter, so long as it is discussed as of secondary importance to what the company is looking for. In the previous case, the writer is most concerned with how easy his commute would be, with no mention of the benefits to the company. Mentioning the commute is fine, so long as it as at the end of the cover letter, after the company's needs have been discussed.

6.3   Put the Package Together

What you send as you apply for a job will vary, but the overriding rule is "Follow all directions exactly." When the job ad says, "Please send a cover letter and résumé in Word format to...," then by golly you send a cover letter and résumé in Word format. Don't substitute a PDF for Word or put it all in plain text because you think that's what makes more sense. The company specified Word for a reason, and their reason trumps any you might have.

If the ad doesn't specify how you should apply, assume this:

- You'll send a cover letter in a plain-text email, with the name of the position in the Subject field.
- Your résumé attached to the email as a file attachment in either Microsoft Word or PDF format, with your name in the filename, such as bob-smith-resume.pdf.

Name file attachments to make life easier for the recipient.

File naming is important because it helps the résumé weeder keep track of the attachments. It may be meaningful to you on your machine to have a file called resume.pdf, but consider the recipient who has a dozen files all named resume.pdf.

Most important, if you don't do exactly what an ad tells you to do, the employer will know, and what they'll know is "This person is unable to fulfill his first task as assigned." Don't screw it up.

There's one exception to following the ad's instructions, and that's in sending a salary history: don't do it.

6.4 Never Tell Anyone Your Salary History

Somewhere along the line, you may be asked what you were making at your last job. Don't give out that information. When a company is asking for your salary history, they're looking to make an easy decision based on the information, and it is never to your advantage.

Say you're applying for a job where most of the other sysadmins are getting paid $70,000/year. If they company knows you're making $80,000 now, chances are you'll be out of the running immediately. If they know you make $60,000, the hiring manager may think, "This guy will probably take $65,000 and be happy with it, and we can save $5,000." You'll wind up making less than you're worth. Then, when you find out you're under-paid, you leave the company unhappy. Nobody wins.

Don't feel guilty at declining a request for salary history. You are under no obligation to do so. Sometimes an employer will say "We have to have an idea what to pay you," but that's just crap. Here are some reasons why:

- The value to the company of work to be done by you cannot be determined by what someone else paid you.
- Previous salary is a terrible indicator of potential future value.
- Your previous compensation might not have been all salary.
- You could have been underpaid or overpaid at your last job.
- Your reasons for wanting a change in pay are your own business.
- Giving out salary history makes it tempting to lie to make some more money.

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