

Application Forms

Application forms are a bug bear for everybody, from the poor applicant who has to trawl through all the guidance to the poor interviewer who has to read the same thing over and over and over again. As an experienced manager in a large organisation I have the unenviable task of frequently participating in the recruitment process for my own staff and supporting others in their recruitment. Below I am going to outline some simple steps that could ease the process for everyone involved...

Firstly, lets start with a question – who do you think the application form is there to help? Is it:

- a) The applicant so that they can demonstrate why they are suitable for the advertised position
- b) The person doing the recruitment or
- c) None of the above?

The answer, obviously, is a mixture of A and B, but it may be a surprise to some that from the point of view of the employer it is definitely more b than a.

In these times of increasing unemployment, recruiters are being bombarded with many applications for every job. One recent round of recruitment for a middle ranking post that I was involved in resulted in 70 applications in a two week window.

That's 70 applications each of which had 10 sections over anything between a minimum of 8 pages to a mind blowing maximum of 20 pages. To do justice to each application takes a minimum of 15 minutes per application to long list. That's at least 2 working days to long list the applications – comparing what's been written on the form to the person specification you lovingly wrote, and, depending on how many are to be interviewed, at least half a day to short list. Usually the process involves at least two (more often 3) managers – so in this case that's 7.5 working days for the organisation to get to a point where it can begin to think about the interviews!

So perhaps it's not surprising that we respond best to those who make our job easier. How can you do this?

First things first, if we've gone to the trouble of writing a person specification and job description the applicant needs to have read it – and show that in their form.

This does not mean attaching or pasting in your CV. If we wanted CVs for applications then we would ask for them. The application form has been designed for a purpose to make sure we get all the information that we need and that we take into account all the factors that we need to regarding diversity, experience, qualifications and legal requirements. By attaching your CV what you are saying to us is that you don't have the time or the inclination to do what we expect – not a great first impression!

Every industry has a different standard way of recruiting, from application forms, to invites for CV submissions, to head hunting. Your application should match the way that the recruiter is asking for it.

Once you have read the person specification, show us! The section of the form that strikes terror into all of us is the 'supporting statement'. But it shouldn't – we've told you what we are looking for in a successful candidate and the job we want you to do; the supporting statement is your chance to tell us how you match our requirements. Don't be afraid to be blatant in setting it out – tell us which point of the specification you are responding to (if you want to do it in the same order as the person specification is written, that's not a problem), make your layout clear.

However, be clear what we want is more than a statement that you meet the specifications – don't just say 'I have the ability to write clearly and concisely and have experience of writing reports' or 'I am able to analyse complex data from different sources'; give evidence. Tell us what reports you have written, where did they get presented and most importantly did something change as a result? What we need is something that justifies us calling you for interview so it needs to answer our requirements and show us how you have achieved things in the past.

In the section that asks you to tell us what your current job entails and your previous jobs – be concise. You don't need to include as much detail as in the supporting statement; bullet points of your major responsibilities and tasks will be fine. Quite often applications duplicate information from one section to another when really we only want to read it once, and it's easier for us if we don't have to flip between sections when looking for your evidence.

Timelines are important. We do look to see that what your saying makes sense, that jobs don't overlap that there isn't a black hole of 2 years in your employment history. There may be good reasons for this, but you need to let us know.

Presentation can be a major bug bear, we need punctuation to be able to read your application. If you've cut and paste it from some other document (e.g. if you've written it in word to spell check it and then copied it in) make sure the punctuation and spaces haven't been corrupted. It is a good idea to spell check, we want to know that you've put time and effort into the application.

Behind all of this, remember that the application is your chance to sell yourself and demonstrate how you are suitable for the job. We want to employ you – that is why we are advertising. Most of us have done this many times ourselves and know how difficult and soul sapping it can be. We want to hear about the best bits of you from the application form – just make it a little easier for us.

Prepare your winning CV and covering letter with the help of Words Worth Reading - <http://www.wordsworthreading.co.uk/cgi-bin/cvapp.pl> and climb the employment ladder now!