

The Cover Letter Refuses to Die

Some hiring managers love 'em, others ignore 'em.

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Depending on whom you ask, the cover letter is either an indispensable part of a job application or a total waste of time. We spoke to five hiring managers for a recent episode of the Game Plan podcast, and each had a different take on its relative importance—as if the hiring process weren't stressful enough already.

"Cover letters are definitely dead," said Rachel Bitte, the chief people officer at Jobvite, a recruiting startup. "Recruiters just do not pay attention to them," said Bitte, who has worked in HR for more than a decade at Intuit and Apple.

Many people agree with Bitte, insisting that the cover letter has no purpose. A 2012 survey of 2,000 hiring managers and recruiters found that 90 percent ignored the cover letter. "Not only do we not usually read them, most of the time we don't even open that attachment or give cover letters a cursory glance," Ambra Benjamin, a recruiter for Facebook, among other companies, wrote on a Quora thread. "It's such a waste of time. Many companies have even stopped asking for them altogether."

It's not that hiring managers don't want to know how working as a barista totally prepared you for that social media marketing position. Mostly, they just don't have time because they're inundated with applications. Google alone receives 3 million applicants a year, for example. The average recruiter spends an astounding six seconds scanning a résumé. Reading a cover letter, so often a rote rehashing of someone's résumé or LinkedIn profile, isn't worth her time.

Applicants can chance it and skip the cover letter altogether—only 20 percent of private-sector HR professionals surveyed by the Society of Human Resource Management said that they consider it a mistake to forgo one altogether. (That number is slightly higher, 34 percent, for government jobs.)

But that other 20 percent is a passionate minority. "I'm a huge fan of really good cover letters," said Jennifer Kim, the head of people operations at Lever, another recruiting startup. She hired Lever's office manager, for example, based on her cover letter. "She didn't have the relevant skill set," said Bitte. "She wrote this really personal cover letter where she had shown she'd done the research on the company."

For others, it's a personable supplement to the unemotional résumé. "Your cover letter is your spot to show who you really are," added Michelle Broderick, the chief marketing officer at Simple, a banking app.

Prospective employees should probably play it safe and waste some time crafting a cover letter. But make sure it's specific to the company and devoid of embarrassing typos. "I've seen lots of cover letters where you can see that they're copy and pasting. You can see the company name in brackets, or even worse, they have the competitor's name in there," said Kim. "That's not one you should get wrong."