

# Chicago Tribune

TOOLKIT

## Cover yourself: Include a letter with that resume

By Rebecca Theim  
Special to the Tribune

In today's rapid-fire job market, where many initial contacts are made via e-mail or through online job sites, are cover letters still necessary?

Absolutely, career experts say.

"Never, ever just send a resume unless you've already had a conversation with someone about the job and you're simply following up with the requested resume," said Denise Bindelglass, managing director for the newly opened Chicago office of Milwaukee-headquartered Capital H Inc., a human resource services provider. "It smacks of laziness, as if someone's trying to save themselves 30 minutes by not writing a cover letter."

Bindelglass, a former human resources and recruitment executive with Redwood Partners, Playboy Enterprises and KPMG, said Capital H recently advertised for senior-level HR professionals, a sales director and administrative staff. The firm received more than 500 applications for each position and "resumes that came in without a cover letter didn't even get opened."

As for the letter's content, it should absolutely be typo-free, direct and to the point, "with as many bullet points as possible, as opposed to paragraphs," she advised. "You want it easy on the eyes and quick to read."

Cover letters should contain relevant information not in your resume, including information specific to the job for which you are applying, eye-catching highlights (such as "increased sales by 10 percent") and salary history if requested, Bindelglass advised.

Although candidates must do all they can to stand out in today's talent-laden job pool, Bindelglass advises against "over the top" letters that use unconventional language or eclectic assertions to catch a recruiter's eye. "While I love creative writing and I've seen some great cover letters, candidates run a risk when they do that," she said. "You really don't know the personality of the person reading it, so it's better to err on the side of caution and be as business-like as possible."

While many job seekers applying for jobs using e-mail attach their resume in a separate document, it's acceptable to simply include the cover letter in an e-mail greeting and not as a second attachment, Bindelglass said.

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# Home in on new life, job out of town

By Rebecca Theim  
Special to the Tribune

You've had it with Chicago and a new life in a faraway location – maybe Miami, Los Angeles or Atlanta – suddenly seems to beckon. But how do you go about checking out career possibilities in your new dream locale?

"In whatever city you're in right now, tell people there that you're thinking about moving," advised Cincinnati-based career consultant Andrea Kay, author of *Greener Pastures: How to Find a Job in Another Place* (Griffin Trade Paperback, \$12.95). "Maybe someone you know has a cousin there, or their company does business there. If you start in your own city, among your own friends and colleagues, eventually, inevitably . . . you're going to make contacts in the new city."

Other out-of-town networking possibilities are your university's alumni association and professional organizations of which you're a member, she said.

Armed with a list of contacts you cull from your conversations and professional affiliations, plan a two-week trip to the city of your dreams. "As you meet that initial round of people, they're going to refer you to more people who are going to refer you to even more people," Kay said.

Bejan Douraghy, president of Artisan|etalent, a Chicago-headquartered agency that places creative professionals in permanent and temporary positions, suggests that job seekers also tap their relationships with recruiters.

"If we've worked with someone before and they contact us looking for information about another city, we're happy to share what we know, either about specific companies they've already identified or organizations they haven't thought about, but may want to try to talk to," said Douraghy, whose company also operates offices in New York and Los Angeles.

"Especially in a job market as tough as this one, who you know can be as important as what you know, so maintain the professional relationships you've developed," added Douraghy.

Once you've made the rounds of your new contacts and have zeroed in on companies that specifically interest you, review their annual reports, Kay advises.

From those, you can learn about the company's product or services, how its management presents itself and what the company's values are.

While it's still possible you'll land your relocation-providing dream job through a headhunter, newspaper or Internet posting, Kay said, "The most direct route to discover a new job, whether it's local or 2,000 miles away, is through people."

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## You can still negotiate in tough job market

By Rebecca Theim  
Special to the Tribune

You made it through a tough selection and interview process for the job you want, and the company has extended an offer that's not quite what you hoped it would be. In this glutted job market, how far can you push the envelope in getting what you think you are worth?

Farther than most people think, according to compensation and negotiation experts.

"It's really hard to be pushy when you know there are 10 people standing in line for that job, but there's generally negotiation room in every offer," said Bill Coleman, senior vice president of compensation for online salary data service Salary.com. "Companies are willing to push the numbers if you're the right person. A lot more is possible in this market than most people think."

Candidates set the stage for successful negotiations from the moment they submit a resume to a company, said Peter Goodman, president and chief executive of career-coaching service MyJobCoach in Washington.

"The individual needs to build himself up in the eyes of the prospective employer," said Goodman, author of "Win-Win Career Negotiations: All You Need to Know About Negotiating Your Employment Agreement" (Gut Instinct Press, \$14.95). Candidates should invest time in doing research on the company and the role the position plays. During the interview, the job seeker should weave his past work experience into discussions to vividly illustrate why he can best perform the work.

"I know that many people today need to get that job, but if they focus on these nuances, it begins to communicate the value they will add to the company, which sets them up for successful negotiations," Goodman said.

Both Goodman and Coleman counsel job seekers to do their research and know what the pay range is for the job they are seeking. Those figures can be gleaned from salary surveys published by professional organizations and feedback from friendly headhunters.

For \$29.95, Salary.com offers its "Personal Salary Report," which provides customized salary information based on the job seeker's experience and education, the company's size and industry and the job's geographic location.

Job seekers should be "intelligent, but also realistic," Coleman advised. "Pay levels are coming back to normalcy after the dot-com craze, so you need to know what the job is really worth."

So, your homework proves the offer is low. What next?

Open your negotiations "with a positive statement about the company, about how excited you are about the opportunity and that you're ready to give 150 percent, but there are a few things you'd like to discuss," Goodman said. An effective tactic is to couch your conversation in terms of "personal security," underscoring what you need to "feel comfortable and excel in the position," he said.

Candidates also can consider an approach that divides the risk of additional compensation between you and the company.

For example, a sales professional could propose making the difference in salary an advance against future commissions or bonuses, Goodman said.

"There's no set answer," he added. "Candidates should remember that they're dealing with people and they shouldn't be intimidated. If you can understand where the other party is coming from, it helps you frame your points more effectively."

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## To cinch the job, prep those references

By REBECCA THEIM  
*Special to the Tribune*

There's a saying, "Resumes get you the interview, but references get you the job." So, what can a job candidate do to ensure this final step in the interview process goes well?

"When I'm recruiting an individual and do reference checks, I'm going to ask very specific questions that try to target something in a candidate's background, or learn about an assignment or project relevant to the job they're being considered for," said Chicago executive recruiter and consultant Lynn Hazan. "Those conversations can sometimes help sway salaries because a prospective employer may hear things about a candidate's skill they weren't already aware of."

Because a job finalist may have little time to forewarn a reference before calls begin, Hazan and other recruitment experts counsel candidates to keep their references informed about their job search progress.

"Often, supervisors forget," Hazan said. "So anything that a candidate can do to prep a former boss will help. Just like preparation for any other part of the interview process, if the candidate makes the effort and time to prepare their references, it generally pays off."

If candidates left on less-than-ideal terms with an old supervisor, they should be able to satisfactorily explain why a conflict existed and should offer other co-workers, superiors or peers who can vouch for the quality of their work. Those same references will come in handy if a candidate worked for a company that has a policy of not providing references beyond dates of employment. "It's not ideal, but there are ways around it," Hazan said.

If you're worried about what your references may say about you, a spate of new companies -- for fees ranging from about \$29 to \$99 -- will assume the role of a prospective employer and surreptitiously vet your references for you. But carefully select your company; complaints have been lodged against a number of them.

Jamestown, N.Y.-based MyReferences.com, the granddaddy of the reference checking firms, charges between \$60 and \$100 and takes five-to-10 days to generate a report on what references said. The company's clients are either "proactive candidates who want information to discreetly coach a reference to provide better answers, or candidates who were terminated, had bad relationships with their previous supervisor or suspect that they've been getting bad references," said managing partner Terra Dourlain.

Job candidates who previously worked for dot-com or technology companies that have substantially reduced their workforce can benefit the most by having their references checked in advance, Dourlain said. "We've found that, when companies start falling apart, the rumor mill kicks in and people assume that employees who left voluntarily were fired or were responsible for problems they had nothing to do with."

And then there's the case of a candidate's death, in the immortal words of Mark Twain, being greatly exaggerated. "We were doing a reference check for a former CFO and the HR director at his previous employer said, 'Why are you calling about this person? That person is dead,'" Dourlain recalled. "He wasn't dead; he was our client." It turned out that the former CFO's son recently had died and the HR director had erroneously assumed it was the company's former employee.