

Job Applications: Notes From A Prospective Employer

...who is tired, busy and has a hundred other applications to assess before 11am..

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Let's Be Brief

Prospective employers will get to see dozens of applications and portfolios all year round. There are some very basic things you can consider when putting your application together to ensure that it gets the attention it deserves and not deleted before its time.

Fail to consider these points and you are really not helping your case

The Basics

The following are just generally good common-sense points, but are so often overlooked that they just become an instant measuring tool to enable a potential employer to whittle down a tiringly large pile of applications.

BASIC POINT 1.

KNOW WHO YOU ARE WRITING TO... If I work for a consultancy that does electronic goods, I probably don't want to see architectural projects or fashion (unless somehow relevant). Research my company. The minimum is to look at my website so you know what, who and where we are. A little bit of effort will give you a directed approach to the company and one that will stand out.

BASIC POINT 2.

READ THE ADVERTISEMENT... Very basic, if the advert says PDF portfolio, don't send JPG. If it says who to address it to, don't address it to someone else. Often there will be hidden agendas behind what is written so read between the lines - try to think what really is being asked and answer them with your portfolio and cover letter. If there are straight questions in the advert, it goes without saying... make sure you answer them!

BASIC POINT 3.

LENGTH OF EMAIL, COVER LETTER, CV... 1 paragraph is too short - 1 page is too long. From point 2 above, highlight the main 2 (or 3) points you think the advertisement is discussing and reply with short relevant points regarding your own skills. Think what the recipient might want to hear but be honest with how you direct it back to your skill set. Keep it concise and relevant and don't brown nose. Lastly don't directly tell the prospective employer that they will benefit from employing you!

BASIC POINT 4.

ATTACHMENTS GET READ... URL's don't get followed unless the reader wants to find out more. Instead, consider that they are busy, have got a tonne of portfolios to view and all they will give you is one double click to an attachment to grab their attention (1 file, one double click). Therefore do not send portfolios in multiple files, ZIP/RAR files or anything else to make their job harder. Remember that attachments get saved and even printed, websites are not conducive to this.

BASIC POINT 5

SIZE MATTERS... Never ever hit send to an email without checking the combined size of email and attachments. 1MB is a fair limit for 'cold-call' emails and 2-3MB for when a contact is established or otherwise stated in an advert. 3MB and above is for the brave or for those situations where the recipient has specifically requested otherwise.

BASIC POINT 6

KNOWING WHEN ENOUGH IS ENOUGH... Remember that large companies will probably receive many applications and will have complicated internal processes to deal with all these applications - processes that will take time. You might not get a reply at all to your application or indeed one within what you feel is a fair turn around.

Following up with the company by calling or re-emailing might vex them a little, or annoy them considerably and can be a dangerous game to play. Some adverts/automated responses will specifically tell you not to call – best to adhere to these instructions. Done well, a follow up call can pay off however.

For those applications where there is no note about following up, wait for 2 weeks and then make the decision. At this point you might try calling the employer and quizzing the company secretary/receptionist as to how applications are going and whether your email was received. These people are your link to the company and you can get information from them without going direct to Human Resources... but for everyone of you that calls to do this, so will 10 others, so be a bit nice and understanding to them. They have jobs too and likely that answering the phone to you every half hour for updates isn't one of them.

SUCCESS

One successful tactic I've experienced as an employer was from a prospective intern. As a company we had conducted video conference interviews with all the final selection candidates. I had mentioned to this candidate, as with the others, that the following Monday we would be meeting internally to discuss who we would offer the available internship positions to.

When I opened my email that Monday morning, there was a simple and short email from the applicant directing me to his online portfolio where he had added some new personal work he had completed over the weekend. The email noted that he hoped that it would 'help you make your decision'. Of course, it didn't hurt that they were great sketches, but he lifted himself from the reserve position and we offered him an internship that afternoon.

Think Like Me

ABOUT ME THE READER... Try to understand the position of the person you are writing to: I'm offering a position in my company. It is an established company and we have built a framework and design process that we work by. I am looking for great skilled people that I know can join directly into my team. I have never met you and all I have at this stage is your CV, cover letter and your big opportunity to talk - a 'portfolio'.

Questions I will be asking myself as I read the cover letter:

- How long is this going to take?
- Has this person actually read the job description?
- Has this been written to me, or to a cut and paste name list?

Questions I will be asking myself as I view the CV:

- What level of education are you currently at?
- What did/are you studying?
- Where did/are you studying?
- What relevant experience do you have?
- What software do you use?
- What do you do in your free time?

Questions I will be asking myself as I view the portfolio:

- How does this person work?
- Can they fit with my company?
- How do they develop their designs?
- Can they provide material that I can direct?
- Can they take direction?
- What is their main skill?
- How can I use them in my design team?

Your Portfolio Speaks

Your portfolio is your first level of interview... one where you are not present and can not answer my questions. It still remains as your opportunity to speak to me with what you show and what detail you afford.

PROCESS... design is a process not just a pretty picture, so show me the process and not just the pretty picture. Do not worry if you can't sketch very well, demonstrate your ability to think, be creative and develop form. Give me a case study for 2 or 3 dissimilar projects demonstrating your process.

SKILL... modeling a man or car in Lego does not constitute a 'skill'. Modeling something you have sketched and making the CAD look like the original design is a skill. Note what software you used and how long it took you – for me pretty pictures are nice but time is money.

NAME THAT TUNE... people have names, projects have titles; random projects dotted about with no detail as to why you are including them is not a good idea. Was it a group project? Be honest with your involvement. What was the brief? Make all this relevant to me and your skill set.

CAN'T SKETCH? Is that really life drawing at the back of your portfolio....? If you are not a sketch or rendering guru, don't try to be one in your portfolio. The sketch guru will ALWAYS get the job before you if the employer is looking for that. Know your abilities and instead demonstrate awesome levels of creativity, or CAD modeling, or rendering, or research methods, or making tea.... something you are good at!

UNIVERSITY SAID... It's lovely and all that you did some tutorials in CAD class / metal workshop, but this is not really a skill and you are using valuable space/time to tell me very little about you but that you did the same as 100 other people in your year group. If you show a sketch process culminating in a CAD or physical model that LOOKS like your sketches then I will understand that you have appreciation for form and you can design what you see in your mind. Now your portfolio is starting to score points.

UNIVERSITY SAID 2... following on from the above point, expect that when you apply for a position, x others from your exact course, year group, friend set will apply for the same job. Now multiply that by x institutions... there are a lot of the 'same' projects for the viewer to wade through. Applicants that are from one University but have different portfolio contents from their classmates stand out like sore thumbs... good sore thumbs. No words are nicer to read to an interviewer than 'personal project'. Just make sure it's a good one.

REWIND... We naturally hide our poorer work towards the back of a portfolio. View your portfolio backwards, last page first. Are you happy that this is now the front page? No? Well chances are I'll think the same and some when I get there. Either make it better or remove it and focus attention to another project where you can add value.

Help Me to Help You

By this point you've either got the job or you haven't. I personally try to reply to all applicants with some constructive feedback concerning their unsuccessful applications if I have time. It's only fair and I would expect the same in return.

There is a lot you can do as an applicant to help me make my decision. Unfortunately most applicants are not helping themselves and the resulting decision is not positive.

I hope that this document can help some of you see a little further into the mind of an employer and you can tailor your application accordingly. For me, I hope it means I get to see more pleasurable portfolios and less frustrating applications.

Thanks.