

HIS VIEW: Résumés, cover letters aren't rocket science

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As you know, I'm the manager of a retail store and, like most retail stores, there is never a shortage of applicants seeking work. I'm always willing to look at new blood to bolster the ranks of my team and the mechanism for consideration is simple - turn in a cover letter and résumé.

Just this week I've received more than a dozen application packets, most of which aren't even properly addressed to my store, let alone to me personally. You'd think that if you receive a business card with the manager's name you'd at least take the time to transcribe it accurately on your cover letter when you return.

I guess my definition of "simple" escapes some of the folks who want to be gainfully employed. I can be a little bit forgiving when applicants don't take the time to print their applications on decent quality paper. It is the content, after all, that is important.

But I'm not so forgiving when spelling and grammar errors stand out like a turgid zit.

Case in point - an objective listed on a résumé I received stated "I seek to gain a position to gain a position within the company." I guess I could creatively interpret that to mean I'd be hiring a go-getter who wants to advance quickly but considering the cover letter was addressed to "Dear To Whom It May Concern" I'm not holding out hope.

Bad cover letters aside, nothing trumps the résumé I received that stated the applicant's objective in all capital letters proclaiming that he would not be late for one year and, if he were, then he would pay me \$10. He went on to tell me that he doesn't drink so he won't wake up in strange places, and that if I interview him he would bring sandwiches to the interview.

It's also probably a good idea to keep your MySpace and Facebook profiles clean of pictures of you smoking a hookah and beer-ponging with your buddies - they're on the wide-open Internet for everyone to see, including potential employers.

All of these applications give me pause because many of these applicants are college students. They had to graduate from high school at some point, and their grades had to be sufficiently robust to get them into a university. So why can't they complete the simplest of tasks as writing a decent cover letter and résumé? Or better yet - why can't you dress appropriately for a job interview? A "wife beater" undershirt and torn blue jeans do not count as business casual.

I believe it all boils down to a lack of real-world teaching in our high schools. Schools are being forced to place a greater emphasis on math and science instead of the basic fundamentals of job hunting or even personal finance.

I'll be the first to agree that real-world skills should be taught at home and, as much as we like to live in a fantasy world where Junior can get a job simply because he has self esteem, it's just not the way the world works.

New Jersey is already on the right track to accomplishing this goal. This week a bill was introduced into the Legislature to require a personal finance 101 course in high school curriculums. The course will cover topics such as how to balance your checkbook, manage credit card debt and how to prepare yourself to tackle college loan debt.

The only thing I didn't see in the legislation was teaching basic job-hunting skills. But at least they're headed in the right direction, and the rest of the country would be well-advised to implement similar courses for their high schools.

If we don't, I'm afraid that employers will continue to be inundated with applications that include lines such as "I seen on your ad that you was hiring" and the predictably ensuing second-rate performance if the applicant actually is hired.

Henry D. Johnston is manager of an area retail store.