

Completing a Winning Application

Why An Application Form?

Most Voluntary Sector Organisations require job applicants to complete an Application Form in place of submitting a CV. This is considered best equalities recruitment practice and indicates a more transparent and scientific approach to recruitment on the part of the employer. CV's are rarely in common formats and can therefore lead to biased judgement whereas a standard application form enables employers to better compare applicants on a like-with-like basis.

A good recruitment pack, or set on-line documents, will also include clear instruction on how to complete your application to the recruiter's satisfaction but here are ten tips that should apply in every case. Some of them may seem obvious, some not so, but in our experience any one of them can make the difference between interview selection and rejection.

Read Everything

An application pack or set of download documents will usually consist of more than just the application form. The original advert, job description, person specification and some background information on the organisation in question such as a recent Annual Report where you can gain an impression of the organisations finances and recent activities will usually be included. This is to help you learn more about the context of the job and guide you in completing the application with a greater feel for organizational priorities. While the Job Description and Person Specification are clearly the most important documents, failure to read all the background materials can result in an application form that seems uninformed about the organisation as a whole that you are intending to work for. So step one is to find a quiet place to work undisturbed for at least an hour, read through all the materials carefully and make notes as you go along where you recognise your previous experience links with what the job requires. Sometimes application instructions don't cover all the issues as clearly as they might so do feel ok to ring the Human Resources staff of the Charity to ask for help if there is anything you don't understand. Being keen to understand materials sent is not a sign of weakness but instead shows attention to detail.

Research the Organisation

Read up on the company you're applying to and research the industry, sector and particular role or function you're after. Google the company's website and read around the career area so that you can appreciate the audience you will be tailoring your experience to.

Plan Your Application

Try to keep your Application Form clean and unfolded. Never write straight on the application. Photocopy the form if possible and practice on a rough copy first or an electronic copy if you're completing your application online. If you don't have access to a photocopier, use scrap paper. Only complete the real form when you are exactly sure what the best thing to say is. Use a black pen (it is easier to photocopy) and write clearly and neatly. When completing a form electronically, ensure that the typeface that you use is clear and familiar to the reader (Arial, Times New Roman, Tahoma).

Sharpen Your Material

Think 'ABC' - Accurate, Brief and Clear. Be precise, to the point and don't volunteer information that isn't asked for. People tend to say things that can then be used as evidence against them. Remember, what the recruitment panel will be doing at the short listing stage is checking you off against education, skills and work experience clearly stated in the Job Description and Person Specification. Don't add any extra bits of information. Where a particular question is not relevant to your background or experience, write 'not applicable' in the space provided otherwise it'll look like you've either forgotten or not bothered to answer it. Use the right keywords. There are clues in the advert, job description and person specification as to what the employer wants.

Specify Your Experience

Application forms are by their nature uniform documents but the personal statement is there for you to set yourself apart from the crowd and sell yourself. Your personal statement should relate directly to the specifications of the job you're applying for. It's important that you address all the points in the job specification in the order in which they appear. Imagine this being used as a checklist by the person short-listing so stay focused. Don't write a novel. The function of writing a personal statement is just to get you through the door. You are most likely to succeed in this by offering concrete evidence that you have the skills and qualities the employer is looking for. The worst thing to do is to write a personal statement that anybody could write. Bring the dry factual sections of your application to life by elaborating on key relevant points. Inject a hint of personality into your personal statement. Don't give standard responses or rehash old forms. Try and approach it afresh and think laterally. Support each person specification point with examples (If you need more space to attach a separate piece of paper - don't try and cram everything into the space provided) These qualities, skills and abilities may have been obtained in employment, education or in relevant voluntary work.

A useful format is to provide a Statement, followed by example/s and finally a reflection. For example: When addressing a criterion asking for a commitment to promoting Equal Opportunities:

'I have always tried to ensure in my personal and work life that I am sensitive and inclusive of the cultures and circumstances of other people. In 2006, I worked as a mentor/facilitator to a group of students on the Aim Higher project to encourage pupils from non-traditional backgrounds to consider applying for university. I designed projects and activities that recognised and focused on the diverse experience within the group to ensure participation. The programme was successful for the pupils and a rewarding learning experience for me, as it showed the potential and understanding that results from working with mutual respect.'

(The first sentence is the STATEMENT, the second and third sentences describe the EXAMPLE, and the last sentence is your REFLECTION.) Avoid simply repeating the words used in the job specification in your responses (e.g. 'I am committed to Equal Opportunities'). Make a personal interpretation of the criteria.

You will often be asked in a personal statement to give your 'reasons for applying for this post'. You may choose to introduce or conclude your personal statement with a summary of why you're applying for the job and what attracted you to the organisation. Use language and

phrasing that shows enthusiasm for both the role and the company. Provide a brief summary of how your set of skills matches the post advertised. Show that you've done your research on the company and highlight their strengths as an employer.

Remember Your Referees

Check with all your referees that they are happy to be contacted them before you include them on your application form. Not only is it polite but it also ensures your referee are not taken caught by surprise when approached by the organisation, they will also have time to think about your skills and be more inclined to give a considered and comprehensive appraisal of your work. This is particularly important as some Employers may make personal contact with a phone call and if your referee is caught off guard they may not do you justice. If you come from overseas or for any other reason are using an international referee, it's a good idea to confirm with them that they can provide a fax or email in English.

[Click here to download a example of a complete Voluntary Sector application form](#)

Get a Final Check

Ensure that there are no spelling mistakes or grammatical errors in your Application and that what you've written still makes sense. Check all answers carefully, making sure all dates agree, that there are no spelling mistakes and that you have answered all the questions. Read it back and ask yourself, "If this landed on my desk and I was a recruiter would I want to see this person?" If the answer is 'no', get to work on your rewrite. Keep going until you think someone would want to see you on the basis of this information. Now get someone who hasn't read it to check the form over for you once more before. By this time you'll be so familiar with what you've written you may not be able to see your own mistakes. Print a copy of your application and keep it with the job advertisement details. You'll need this later for interview preparation.

If posting your application don't try and cram your finished work into a small envelope and spoil its appearance. Use a large A4 size envelope.

Make That Deadline

Don't leave it to the very last minute. Voluntary organizations are scrupulously fair at not allowing any late Applications to be looked at, whatever the excuse you make, so if you tend to forget things, be sure to write the closing date in your diary and a note a day or two before to be absolutely sure that you don't miss it.

Use Your Copy

Your copy is not only valuable for revision when you find you have been short listed. You can re-read it on the bus or should interviews be running late. It's also perfectly acceptable to take it in with you to the interview yourself. You can refer to it anytime your mind goes blank and as most of the questions will relate directly to the Person Specification that guided your personal statement there should be plenty of examples to kick-start your response. It may also

come in handy if you need to be more precise about **your** career history or to correct any misunderstandings of the panel.

Save and File

Your Application Form is an important document. If you don't get the job you'll be able to cut and paste relevant sections to save your time on other jobs you will be applying for. Even if you are successful and get the job, you may be moving on in a year or two as many people in the Voluntary Sector do. File it away in the drawer that you keep important documents or save it in your computer documents.