Victor-Andreas Marz

Live Your Dreams:

Avoid the Young Applicants' Common Mistakes

picture by Daquella manera

After having received good feedback from the mini-series "Live your Dreams", which focused broadly on the student's planned preparation to enter the work-force, I was asked to continue writing for Ampersand on more in-depth topics. In the past six articles, we have discussed the importance of having a plan or strategy for your transition from being a student to a young professional, the timelines, the requirements to gain practical experience early, and so on. Now, and in the coming articles, we will concentrate on the practicality of actually applying for a job, preparing for an interview, visiting the potential employer for an interview and assessing the job offer.

Today's article will focus on the perfect preparation regarding the application for a graduate job. We will discuss the components of a Curriculum Vitae (CV) and a

cover letter (CL), because there are many mistakes young students make. We will concentrate on how to identify and avoid them in your future job applications.
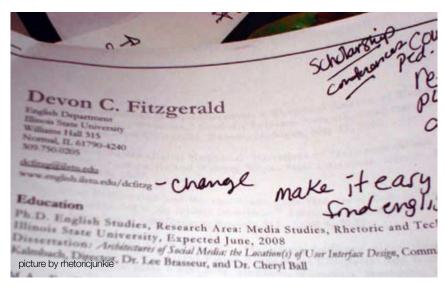
From my personal experience, I have noticed that there are mainly five categories of common mistakes that can kill an application on reception:

• **Misreading / interpreting the job description** – misunderstanding what a job entails and what minimum qualifications an applicant must provide in order to have a realistic chance of scoring the job

• **Misusing the language** – lack of required formal language, spelling and grammatical errors

• **Misapplication of format** – using

the wrong format in the CV and / or CL

• **Exaggeration of skills and experience** – a very common mistake of young students that don't posses certain skills, and therefore they exaggerate the ones they have or even make up skills on their CV or in their CL

• **Lack of adaptation of an application towards a job** – every CV and CL needs to be slightly, if not extensively, adapted towards a potential job opportunity

Having listed the most common mistakes you can make when you start applying for jobs, let's look how to avoid them and make your application a successful one. The first point is all about reading with understanding through a job description for a position you would potentially apply for. It relates a bit back to my previous article "How to read a job description". Make sure that you identify the applicant's minimum qualification criteria from the job description. Read through the job description two or even three times if you're inexperienced in reading them. While reading through those, make yourself notes, of what it is exactly the employer is after, regarding skills and qualifications required. If you don't understand a criteria or taxonomy (i.e. acronyms) it's unlikely you fulfill the minimum qualification required. It's usually a firm sign to move to the next job description and stop wasting your time applying for that job. Whilst understanding the job description, also make sure that you will not
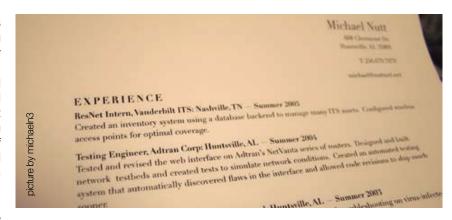
picture by rhetoricjunkie

over- or under-interpret the requirements posted. Applying for a job for which you are over- or under-qualified will most likely result in a negative response and consequently in wasted time, which you could have used to apply for a job better suited for your skill's profile. In many cases, it will take a few good applications until you feel comfortable with the interpretation of job descriptions – so make sure you read as many as possible and start gathering experience early.

The second most common mistake is the misuse of language, i.e. utilizing colloquial language ("I won this *freakin'* awesome Business Consulting award"), acronyms ("I won a prestigious *BC* award"), making spelling mistakes ("I won a *prestigeous* Business Consutling *Awart*") or grammar mistakes ("I *winned* a prestigious Business Consulting Award"). If you are writing an application for a business position, make sure you use business language and don't make any mistakes. It helps to have your application read through by a friend (that is, hopefully, good in proof-reading) before sending it off to a potential employer. Little mistakes can make your application a failure, so make sure that you don't make any.

The next common mistake is the lack of format, or incorrect format, in your application which can also lead to a negative response. There are two points I would like to make here: firstly, make sure you cover and include all essential points for an application from a content perspective - in Germany, for example, you are required to include a photo of yourself in your CV, however, the US employers are not expecting one and could react negatively if you include a photo. Get to know the respective rules for a given country and sometimes the employer; secondly, let's talk about the graphical representation - try to make your application look professional and well presented. After all, this is the first impression a potential employer has of a candidate; unformatted and chaotic looking CVs and CLs will end up in the bin. Look up the "rules of a good layout" on the Internet, if you don't know how it's supposed to look like. Simple things, like not to use too many different font types, having your text passages

picture by michaeln3

and bullet point listings aligned, will do the trick. As a rule of thumb, remember this: "the simpler to read, the better".

The fourth common mistake is one, I ask you to please never make. Exaggerating, overestimating or even lying about your skills and qualifications will get you no-where! If a job requirement sounds similar to "experienced user of Microsoft Excel" and you honestly have used Excel once or twice only to put together basic tables, but think you can learn it if you have to, please move on to the next job opportunity or take an Excel course before applying. You will most likely be discovered during the job interview, in a practical test, or worst case once you've commenced work, you'll be fired after a short term employment and there is nothing worse to explain to a next employer, than why you have had to leave your previous employer. I know how hard it is to find a job that suits your profile, especially when you're inexperienced and don't possess many basic skills required for a job you would like to score. Be honest with yourself when matching your skills to a potential job. Try to bring out your strong sides that you have as a student, i.e. communication skills, attitude, willingness to work hard, being a team player, etc. Also think of how to prove those, provide examples and illustrations when you write your CV/CL.

Last but not least, I would like to tell you about the need to adapt each CV and CL for a job you apply for. This takes time and effort but is absolutely necessary. Rather than applying for countless jobs with the same CV and CL, try to select a few jobs that match your exact requirements and

qualifications and adapt your CV and CL to match these jobs. When you write you CL, for example, try to make the reader connect with you. Provide illustrations and examples that will make him/ her identify him-/herself with your person, your goals, attitudes etc. In the CV try to focus on the experience and skills/ qualifications you posses, that are vital and fully relevant to a particular job. You might even decide to leave out skills/ experiences gained that are absolutely not relevant to a job you are applying for now. Tailor your CV to impress, make it easy to read and don't waste your reader's time with non-essentials. After all, you want to convince him or her, and not bore. Again follow the rule that simpler is better. In this case stay focused onto the point you want to make.

Not listed above in the bullet points but definitely of relevance, is the continuous learning you get from writing CVs and CLs. Try to receive feedback from every single (successful, or not) application you make. What "was good about it", "what wasn't" and "what could have been better" are the three questions you should ask the reader of your application. Be aware though, that many big companies have a policy of not giving any feedback. Try your luck anyway; it helped me improve my CVs and CLs over time.

In the next issue of Ampersand we will discuss the topic of how to prepare for a job interview. I hope this article will help you in writing your CV and CLs in the future. You will be able to find all articles on my personal webpage *http://www.victor-marz.com*.

About the Author: Victor-Andreas Marz is a graduate of the School of Business - National-Louis University in Nowy Sacz (Bachelor of Business Administration, 2004) and Monash University in Melbourne (Master of International Business, 2005). He grew up in Germany, went to High School in the United States of America, lived in and traveled Europe, Asia and America. Today he's a Value Engineer working for SAP Australia and is based in Melbourne, Australia. Contact information can be found on his personal homepage: *http://www.victor-marz.com*.