

Technical Affairs

By Mike Aamodt, Associate Editor

Considerations in Rejecting Applicants

I was recently discussing with a client the OFCCP's new definition of an Internet applicant when our discussion shifted to the topic of rejection letters. As with many organizations, the client included a statement in their rejection letters that they would keep the applicants' résumés on file should appropriate jobs become available. Though such an expression might be comforting to applicants, it greatly complicates the record keeping obligations associated with potential OFCCP audits or EEOC investigations.

When determining the potential adverse impact of a selection system (the topic of the next Technical Affairs column), it is important to be able to identify the applicant pool for a given job. This is normally done by assigning a requisition code for each opening and then closing the requisition once a hire is made. Most organizations also have rules that résumés and applications must have an expiration date (e.g., good for 30 days), after which, applicants would need to submit a new application to be considered for future openings.

Rejection letters stating that a résumé will be kept on file and considered for future openings complicate matters, because they imply that the applicant does not need to apply for future jobs and will be considered an applicant for all future openings. As a result, every rejected applicant for a position would technically need to be considered in the adverse impact calculations for future jobs even though the applicant did not directly apply for the job. So, the moral of the story is that rejection letters should not contain a promise to keep the résumé on file!

Should Rejection Letters Be Sent?

An interesting question regarding rejection letters is, "Should an organization even bother to send them?" The answer is probably yes. Rejected applicants should be treated well and with respect, because they are potential customers and potential applicants for other positions that might become available in the organization (Koprowski, 2004; Waung & Brice, 2003). In fact, Aamodt and Peggans (1988) found that applicants who were rejected "properly" were more likely to continue to be a customer at the organization and to apply for future job openings.

A good example of this was provided in a letter to the editor of *HR Magazine* by HR professional Jim Reitz who was treated poorly on two different occasions when applying for a job with an employment agency. When he got a job as a human resource manager with a large company, one of the first things he did was contact the employment agency to notify them that they would not be doing business with his new company due to the way in which he was treated as an applicant. Reitz pointed out that his new company spent over a million dollars on temporary help, although the employment agency would get none of it.

Though it is a good idea to formally reject applicants, there may be times when an organization does not want to reject an applicant out of fear that the applicant will be upset and not apply for future openings. For example, suppose that a recruiter uses her network to contact five sales professionals and persuades them to apply for an opening at her company. Four of the five are excellent candidates, but there is only one current opening. If the recruiter sent rejection letters to the other three highly qualified candidates, would it result in them not being interested in future openings should she contact them in the future? In such a situation, a special rejection letter tailored to the three might be appropriate.

Although most HR professionals would probably agree that sending rejection letters is a good idea, it is not commonly done (Brice & Waung, 1995).

What is a Properly Written Letter of Rejection?

What is the best way to reject an applicant? The most interesting rejection letter I have seen came from Circuit City about 20 years ago. At the bottom of the letter was a sentence stating that you could take the rejection letter to any Circuit City store within the next 30 days and get a 10% discount. Imagine the clerk calling for assistance over the store intercom— "We have a rejected applicant on Register 4; could a manager please come and approve the discount?"

I remember getting a rejection letter from a graduate school back in 1978 stating that they had 400 people apply

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and that my application lacked the quality to get past the department secretary! They did wish me success in my career.

Clearly, the above two examples are not best practices. So, what is? Aamodt and Peggans (1988) found that rejection letters differ to the extent that they contain the following types of responses:

- A personally addressed and signed letter.
- The company's appreciation to the applicant for applying for a position with the company.
- A compliment about the applicant's qualifications.
- A comment about the high qualifications possessed by the other applicants.
- Information about the individual who was actually hired.
- A wish of good luck in future endeavors.
- A promise to keep the applicant's résumé on file.

Though research has not clearly identified the best way to write a rejection letter, the following guidelines are probably a good place to start.

- Send rejection letters to applicants. Though most organizations do not do this (Brice & Waung, 1995), failure to send a letter results in applicants feeling negatively toward an organization (Waung & Brice, 2000). Excuses about not having the funds to notify applicants are probably not justified when one considers the ill feelings that may result from not contacting applicants.
- Don't send the rejection letter immediately. The surprising results of a study by Waung and Brice (2000) suggest that applicants react more positively if there is a delay in receiving the letter. Though these findings seem to go against the thought that applicants can better manage their job searches if they know they have been rejected, it may be that being rejected too quickly makes an applicant feel as if he/she is such a loser that the organization quickly discarded them (e.g., the graduate school whose secretary rejected my application).
- Be as personable and as specific as possible in the letter. With the use of automated applicant tracking systems, it is fairly easy to individually address each letter, express the company's appreciation for applying, and perhaps explain who was hired and explain his/her qualifications. In general, "friendly" letters result in better applicant attitudes (Aamodt & Peggans, 1988;

Feinberg, Meoli-Stanton, & Gable, 1996). Of course, if you are too specific, you may have be rejecting applicants who think their qualifications are as good as those of the person selected.

- Include a statement about the individual who received the job, because it can increase applicant satisfaction with both the selection process and the organization (Aamodt & Peggans, 1988; Gilliland, Groth, Baker, Dew, Polly, & Langdon, 2001).
- Do not include the name of a contact person. Surprisingly, research shows that including such a contact decreases the probability that a person will reapply for future jobs or use the company's products (Waung & Brice, 2000).

Perhaps the most important thing to consider when writing a letter of rejection is being honest. Do not tell applicants that their résumés will be kept on file if the files for each job opening will not be used. Adair and Pollen (1985) think rejection letters treat job applicants like unwanted lovers; they either beat around the bush ("There were many qualified applicants") or stall for time ("We'll keep your résumé on file"). A study by Brice and Waung (1995) supports these ideas, as most organizations either never formally reject applicants or, when they do, they take an average of almost a month to do so.

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HR Humor

At work we have all been guilty of saying some pretty dumb things. The next time it happens, use the following “brain cramps” to show that you are in good company.

Question: If you could live forever, would you and why?

Answer: “I would not live forever, because we should not live forever, because if we were supposed to live forever, then we would live forever, but we cannot live forever, which is why I would not live forever.”

— Miss Alabama in the 1994 Miss USA contest

“Whenever I watch TV and see those poor starving kids all over the world, I can’t help but cry. I mean I’d love to be skinny like that, but not with all those flies and death and stuff.”

— Mariah Carey

“Smoking kills. If you’re killed, you’ve lost a very important part of your life.”

— Brooke Shields, during an interview to become spokesperson for federal anti-smoking campaign

“I’ve never had major knee surgery on any other part of my body.”

— Winston Bennett, former University of Kentucky basketball forward.

“Outside of the killings, Washington has one of the lowest crime rates in the country.”

— former Mayor Marion Barry, Washington, DC

“I’m not going to have some reporters pawing through our papers. We are the president.”

— Hillary Clinton commenting on the release of subpoenaed documents

“That lowdown scoundrel deserves to be kicked to death by a jackass, and I’m just the one to do it.”

— A congressional candidate in Texas

“Half this game is ninety percent mental.”

— Philadelphia Phillies’ manager, Danny Ozark

“It isn’t pollution that’s harming the environment. It’s the impurities in our air and water that are doing it.”

— Al Gore, Vice President

“I love California. I practically grew up in Phoenix.”

— Dan Quayle

“We’ve got to pause and ask ourselves: How much clean air do we need ?”

— Lee Iacocca

“The word “genius” isn’t applicable in football. A genius is a guy like Norman Einstein.”

— Joe Theismann, NFL football quarterback & sports analyst.

“We don’t necessarily discriminate. We simply exclude certain types of people.”

— Colonel Gerald Wellman, ROTC Instructor.

“If we don’t succeed, we run the risk of failure.”

— Bill Clinton

“We are ready for an unforeseen event that may or may not occur.”

— Al Gore

“Traditionally, most of Australia’s imports come from overseas.”

— Keppel Enderbery

“Your food stamps will be stopped effective March 1992 because we received notice that you passed away. You may reapply if there is a change in your circumstances.”

— Department of Social Services, Greenville, South Carolina

“If somebody has a bad heart, they can plug this jack in at night as they go to bed and it will monitor their heart throughout the night. And the next morning, when they wake up dead, there’ll be a record.”

— Mark S. Fowler, FCC Chairman—ACN