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**Want Your Letter to Stand Out? Here's a Tip: Write It Yourself**

**By DAVID KOEPEL**

What makes a cover letter stand out from the hundreds that can inundate a hiring manager for even the lowest-paying entry-level positions? Some say a compelling first paragraph or an original way of expressing an idea can cut through the clutter.

But four recent applicants for a receptionist position at a Manhattan photography studio were noticed for an entirely different reason. All four, who live in different parts of New York City, used identical language in a portion of their e-mailed cover letters, said Mary Catanzaro, the employee who reviewed and screened the applications.

"What my résumé does not reveal is my professional demeanor and appearance," all four wrote. "In a business environment these qualities are of the utmost importance in dealing with clients as well as co-workers. In me, you'll discover a reliable, detail-oriented and extremely hard-working associate, one who will serve as a model to encourage other staff members to demonstrate a high standard of professionalism."

The applicants apparently lifted the passage from the Microsoft Office Web site's template gallery ("Secretary cover letter"), a tactic that has become increasingly common in an age when thousands of cover letters, résumés and thank-you notes are readily available to download or cut and paste.

Specialists agree that the abundance of job information available online makes it possible for people to conduct more informed job searches. But it is also more likely that employers will receive similar or nearly identical résumés and cover letters copied from easily accessible Web sites. Résumés downloaded from online templates and sent to employers often show up with similar or identical layouts, formats, fonts, headings and objectives.

Some sites promote a casual attitude toward the practice of lifting words, phrases or whole passages. "Take out the guesswork and easily get great ideas from these top-notch samples," reads one online advertisement, which offered 50 sample cover letters customers could use to steal phrases and words for their own cover letters.

How serious an offense is this? Some are not sure it should be considered an offense at all. "It's something of a gray area," said Randall S. Hansen, a marketing professor at Stetson University in DeLand, Fla., and founder of Quintessential Careers, an online job-search information site. "If it were a student assignment I would say that it's plagiarism. As an employer, I would think this is a lazy individual and question the ethics of taking someone else's work."

Mr. Hansen says that in a world of high-profile business scandals, employers are far more sensitive to character and may wonder if the person lifting passages from a generic online letter could be a future employee stealing office supplies. But he also understands that a society that has come to view the Internet as a free library may wonder why "they should have to reinvent the wheel" with the vast amount of job material available.

Some job seekers see no difference between taking passages from online sites and hiring a résumé consultant to write the documents for them.

Daphne Jean Baptiste, a Queens resident who is looking for a customer service or administrative assistant position, said that in the past she had used portions of online résumés or cover letters if they were "worded better" than her own.

But she says that potential employers are more responsive to personalized résumés and cover letters specially tailored to each position.

Ms. Catanzaro, 35, the photography studio assistant who reviewed the identically worded cover letters, said none of the applicants were turned down for interviews because of perceived ethical transgressions.

"If it had been a job for a copywriter, I might have held it against them," she said. "But I don't know how important it is for a receptionist to have an original cover letter."

Elizabeth Kiss, director of the Kenan Center for Ethics at Duke University in Durham, N.C., agreed that for a promising entry-level candidate, appropriating online material might be considered an error of ignorance.

But if the same thing happened with a more experienced job seeker, she would consider it a deal-breaker. While not as egregious as falsifying a résumé, she said it was dishonest - "passing someone else's words off as their own."

Ms. Kiss also sees a similarity between copying cover letter and résumé material and hiring professional résumé services, a practice that is widely accepted and even considered a smart career move by many job seekers and employers.

While she finds nothing unethical about helping a job seeker put together a résumé, she says that hiring someone to write the document blurs the line between what is and is not original work.

Mr. Hansen, who in addition to his jobs Web site offers an online writing service called Quintessential Résumés and Cover Letters, said, "It's possible to create a flawless document and a false image."

"When hiring a résumé consultant, my advice is consider credentials and testimonials. I've seen people pay a lot of money and get an inferior product. Above all, buyer beware."

That has not been a problem for Mark Shelley, 41, a vice president for sales support at Harcourt Achieve, an educational publisher in Austin, Tex., who has stuck with the same résumé service since he graduated from college in 1988. Mr. Shelley, an English major, said he was not good at assessing his own skills or writing business cover letters.

"It's very difficult as an individual to be objective about your own career," he said. "To have a skilled outsider look at your work from an objective point of view is helpful."

John Challenger, chief executive of Challenger, Gray & Christmas, an outplacement firm based in Chicago, said the typical job searcher focused too much attention on résumé and cover letters. He says he has found that "wordsmithing" cover letters to match every ad is a not a good use of time and that résumés do not always open doors.

The reality, he says, is that many cover letters go unread and that résumés are often put into large databases and eliminated if they do not contain certain words or phrases. He encourages job seekers to network, respond to job ads and even try phoning potential employers directly.

Still, most employees will use résumés and cover letters as their introduction to future employers. And specialists say that sample résumés and cover letters can be useful to inspire ideas for individualized documents.

The University of Texas career services Web site offers a clear warning to students and alumni about copying material.

"Please do not copy the letters verbatim," it said. "Copying these letters could have a negative impact if your classmates use the same letter to the same organization. This has happened. So don't let it happen to you."