

Thanks but no thanks: How to safely reject job candidates

The current employment situation is tough, meaning there is intense competition for relatively few jobs. You're probably rejecting more applicants now than usual.



How you handle the rejections can mean the difference between an applicant with a positive impression of your organization and one whose feelings are hurt—and who might decide to sue you.

Rejecting interviewees

Send a well-crafted rejection letter to candidates who were interviewed. It assures them that they were seriously considered and it keeps you from having to verbally explain, in detail, why you rejected them.

Give a neutral, nonspecific reason for the rejection. No law requires you to tell applicants why they weren't hired.

Sample language to consider:

Thank you for your interest in our organization. We have reviewed your background and experience, and although your qualifications are excellent, we have decided another candidate more closely fits the position's requirements at this time.

It was a pleasure meeting you during your interview. We wish you the best of luck in your job search.

If you believe that the applicant could qualify for other positions in your company, you may encourage him to apply again in the future. (But don't encourage him unless you truly want him to do so!)

Try to personalize the rejection letter. Use the candidate's name and the position title, and refer to something you discussed during his interview.

Never provide inaccurate, misleading or conflicting reasons for an applicant's rejection. They'll come back to haunt you. Judges and juries often look askance at employers that do this, viewing it as pretext for discrimination.

Immediate 'no's'

For applicants who never even make it to the interview stage, consider sending out a form letter or email,

thanking them for applying and stating that “other candidates more closely fit the position’s requirements.” For résumés/applications that arrive unsolicited, have a form letter or email ready stating that no appropriate positions are available at this time.

Internal candidates deserve more

While a rejection letter or email is best for external candidates, internal candidates are another story.

It is actually in everyone’s best interest to be more open with them. Providing an explanation gives them something positive on which to focus—what they can do to be in a better position to attain a future promotion opportunity.

If employees feel they can’t move up in your organization, they will look for advancement opportunities elsewhere. Here are some tips for an in-house rejection letter:

- Provide a reason that is actionable—something they can do to become a stronger candidate the next time they apply for an internal opening.
- Explain the objective, job-related factors that influenced the hiring decision.
- Explain any subjective reasons that were a major factor—for example, that their supervisor didn’t think they were ready to handle more responsibility. *Reason:* If the applicant later challenges the decision in court and you only bring up subjective reasons then, it might appear as though you made up the reasons after the fact.
- Offer a few nuggets of advice that will help make them more valuable to your organization.