

‘Thanks, but no thanks’: The fine art of writing legally smart rejection letters



THANKS BUT NO THANKS

Among the many casualties of the Great Recession—along with Lehman Brothers and your irrational exuberance about the stock market—was that great stalwart of HR paperwork, the applicant rejection letter.

With a glut of applications for every single job, some employers simply gave up on notifying all those unsuccessful candidates. It saved those companies time and maybe a few bucks. But companies that gave the silent treatment also took a PR hit just at the time when social media was exploding.

That why the first rule of rejection letters is simple: Just do it. Surveys show that the number one thing people hate about the job-search process is when they don't hear back after an interview.

Rejection letters don't need to be personally crafted. In fact, only 4.4% of employers say they send individual feedback to applicants, according to a survey by the Talent Board.

Best bet: Don't try to personalize. Personalized feedback could spark legal trouble if writers divulge the wrong (or too much) reasoning for the rejection.

The goal: Draft simple, well-written canned rejection letters that avoid legal triggers and actually boost company goodwill. Here are seven tips, some of which slay long-held myths about rejection letters:

1. Don't say anything about the experience and qualifications of other candidates, either individually or as a group. Don't say you decided to hire another person who is more qualified or that you received applications from several more-qualified candidates.

Reason: "A lawyer for a rejected employee who files a legal complaint may ask for the applications of the employee who was hired and the top candidates," says employment lawyer Louis DiLorenzo, of Bond, Schoeneck & King, in New York City.

2. Don't say, "We will keep your résumé on file should a suitable opening occur in the future."

If you later discard or misplace the résumé and hire someone with inferior qualifications, you could be vulnerable to legal action.

3. Don't suggest the candidate apply for future jobs, and don't recommend specific openings.

Reason: It could give the impression that you believe the applicant is qualified for at least one other job in the organization. Candidates who receive repeated rejections for different jobs from the same company could become frustrated enough to strike back legally.

4. Do make the letter short and direct, but gracious and polite. It's OK to use a form letter, but personalize it by inserting the applicant's name.

5. Do thank the person for applying for the position. Then get straight to the point. Wish the candidate good luck in the future, and thank the person for taking an interest in the organization. Sign the letter "sincerely" or "best wishes." Include your name and job title.

6. Don't use phrases such as "I'm sorry" or "unfortunately." They feed the rejected candidate's negative feelings.

7. Do write the letter soon after making a hiring decision. Unnecessarily dragging out the wait for several weeks or months builds resentment toward the organization.

Final tip: Remember that applicants are also customers. The Talent Board survey found that, on average, 8% of job candidates have enough bad feelings about the applicant experience that it affects their relationship as a customer of that company.

Do the math: If a large retailer hires 5,000 people each year and receives 100 résumés per job, that equals about 495,000 rejected candidates. If 8% of those people leave with negative feelings, the company could lose about 40,000 current or potential customers -- a loss that could be easily avoided with a simple letter/email campaign.

A Simple, Safe Rejection Letter

PRE-INTERVIEW

Dear (name),

Thank you for sending your résumé in response to our advertisement for ____ (job) _____. We are unable to offer you an interview at this time.

We appreciate your interest in our company and wish you much success in your future endeavors.

Sincerely,

POST INTERVIEW

Dear (name),

It was a pleasure meeting with you to discuss your interest in the ____ (job) _____. We appreciate your time and patience during the interview process. We had several highly qualified candidates for the position and have offered the position to another candidate.

We thank you for your interest in the company and wish you much success in your future endeavors.

Sincerely,