

**THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.**

**NATIONAL  
BUSINESS  
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**COVER LETTERS**

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for Writing Letters That Will  
Help You Get the Job You Want**

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**Taunee Besson**



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# Foreword

**E**ver hear the story about the job hunter who spent many hours creating and polishing his resume, only to send it out to potential employers with an almost illegible handwritten note attached? The note read, “I will be graduating soon, so I’m enclosing my resume in case you have any openings.” Needless to say, the response was underwhelming.

I’ve learned a lot about effective job hunting since I made that ghastly mistake. But there’s no reason for prospective candidates of any age or experience level to torpedo their chances for success in this way. A well-written (and typed) cover letter, followed by a concise thank-you note after each interview, separates the hordes of unsuccessful applicants from the few who generate job offers. That’s a fact, according to survey after survey. Fortunately, learning how to create powerful job-search correspondence isn’t a difficult exercise, as the 10 informative chapters in this book demonstrate.

Unlike the writers of most career-guidance material, author Taunee Besson thoroughly researched her subject matter before sitting down to write. While working solely from experience would have produced lots of good information, Taunee interviewed other career counselors around the country, as well as human resources professionals and hiring managers. She asked what they wanted to see in a well-written cover letter and requested examples of the best

correspondence they've received through the years (much of which is included in these pages). She also studied other cover-letter advice books on the market to determine what was missing—namely, a complete analysis of what works, what doesn't and why.

The *National Business Employment Weekly's Guide to Cover Letters and Other Job-Search Correspondence* thoroughly addresses these issues. And once you've developed a solid understanding of how to write spirited letters and thank-you notes, don't forget to review Taunee's other book in the *National Business Employment Weekly* series, which focuses on writing great resumes. It provides an equally effective approach to creating resumes that will help you rise to the top of the job-hunting crowd.

TONY LEE

Editor

*National Business Employment Weekly*

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# Acknowledgments

**M**any people have been very helpful in putting together this book. While I cannot name them all, I would like to thank Tony Lee and Perri Capell of the *National Business Employment Weekly* for choosing me to write the book, editing it and helping to solicit sample letters from readers.

I also want to recognize Jane Smith of Options Career and Resource Center in Houston, Stephanie Ureate of Experience Unlimited in San Francisco, Linda Davidson of Crossroads Transition Management Services in Dallas, Arden Showalter at Southern Methodist University, Kevin Collins at the University of Pittsburgh and Karen Andrews at Kennesaw State College for their help in gathering cover letter examples from their clients and students.

David Westberry, Jean McClain Marshall, C. Robert Morrison, Valerie Freeman, David Lord, Jim Carraway, Chris Ryan, Mac Davis, Fred Asher, Dorothy Gallo and Tom Potraza all deserve kudos for offering their perspectives on the internal workings of executive search firms, college placement centers and corporate job-listing systems.

Of course, my own clients and newsletter readers deserve a tremendous thank-you for allowing me to use their successful cover letters and showing uncommon understanding when I needed to concentrate on the book instead of on

## **x     Acknowledgments**

them. Richard Bolles has my gratitude for cultivating my healthy disrespect for run-of-the-mill resumes and inspiring my adaptation of his transferable skills exercise, which is no longer available. And thanks again to Tom Cheney for his wonderfully funny cartoons and Robert Half, the creator of Resumania.

Last, but not least, I must acknowledge the support of my family and friends who saw little of me while I was writing this book. While they've always been sympathetic to my need to spend lots of time with my clients and community, this past year has demanded a level of forbearance verging on saintliness.

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# About the Author



**T**aunee Besson is president of Career Dimensions, a Dallas consulting firm that helps individuals and companies with issues such as career change, career pathing, small-business strategies, spouse relocation/employment and outplacement. She is an award-winning columnist for the *National Business Employment Weekly*, a frequent speaker and guest author, and a Fellow of the Outplacement Institute. Ms. Besson has taught courses at numerous Dallas-area colleges and is an active community volunteer.



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# Introduction

*“There’s only one thing I hate more than writing a resume, and that’s writing a cover letter.”*

*“I have a good idea of what a resume should include, but I’m totally clueless about what to say in a cover letter.”*

*“Everyone asks me for a resume. No one says anything about a cover letter. Why should I even bother with one?”*

*“Did I send a thank-you note after my interview? Uh . . . no. Am I supposed to do that? Isn’t that kind of goody-goody?”*

*“How should I follow up after sending a resume or interviewing for a position? On the one hand, I don’t want to be a nudge. But I don’t want to be a Milquetoast either. What do employers want from me anyway?”*

If resumes are the fair-haired children in the world of job-search correspondence, cover and follow-up letters are the neglected stepchildren. For every job

## 2 Introduction

seeker who lavishes hours of attention on creating a perfect resume, three others dash off a mediocre cover letter, while five or ten neglect to send follow-up correspondence altogether. If they only knew the real truth: *Cover letters and thank-you notes play a bigger role in attracting employers' attention and convincing them to hire candidates than do most resumes.*

## **Cover Letters Deserve Respect**

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Hiring authorities expect you to put a lot of time and effort into a resume. That's why a good resume keeps you in the game, but having one is standard operating procedure for most job seekers these days. A truly memorable cover letter, on the other hand, stands out from the crowd. Employers know that candidates personally write each cover letter individually (unless they're unforgivably lazy). Consequently, interviewers view your letter as your best attempt to grab their attention and differentiate yourself from the hundreds of other candidates competing for the same position.

If an employer doesn't like your cover letter, she may automatically dismiss your resume. But if your opening words capture her interest, she'll comb your resume to corroborate her initial reaction. The old cliché about the first 60 seconds of the interview being the most important holds true for job-search correspondence as well. First impressions are lasting, even irrevocable.

A cover letter is a perfect vehicle for telling a potential employer why you're specifically interested in his company and job opening. While your resume may provide compelling reasons for a manager to interview you, it says nothing about your desire to find out more about him, the available position and the organization. Employers favor candidates who are genuinely enthusiastic about meeting them. Wouldn't you?

When someone uses your name in conversation, it probably gives you a lift. Employers are no different. Taking the time to address your cover letter to a specific person will generate the same response, especially if you had to dig to find his name. Your resume can't do this for you. Only your cover letter can create an initial spark of rapport between you and a potential manager.

Your cover letter also demonstrates that you're actively involved in your own job search. Resumes can't tell employers that you'll be calling them to schedule an appointment, but cover letters can and should.

Final impressions are important, too, especially when the competition for a position is keen. Hiring managers are just like the rest of us. They like genuine compliments. They appreciate candidates who appreciate them. Taking the time to thank them for a networking or employment interview isn't only polite, it's a

strategic job-search technique. When there are two or three equally qualified candidates, but only one writes a thank-you note, whom do you suppose will receive the offer?

Follow-up correspondence can enhance your job-search efforts by giving you a chance to ask for the job, keeping your name in front of the employer, solidifying your relationship with networking contacts and confirming your understanding of the available position. As with many of life's pivotal moments, a little extra effort can mean the difference between your landing the job of your dreams . . . or not.

## **The Mission of This Book**

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The primary goal of this book is to provide the tools for gathering information and writing tailored cover letters guaranteed to grab a potential employer's attention. Producing a product worthy of your reader's interest requires knowing why you want to work for him and why he should bring you on board. Identifying what motivates both of you requires soul searching and research.

Like the *National Business Employment Weekly Resumes* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1994), this book offers a process-oriented approach for identifying the interests of job seekers and their potential employers. By the time you're finished reading, you should know how to gather salient information about yourself, job openings and organizations, and distill it into customized, concise letters destined to knock the socks off recruiters and employers. If you can do this by the end of Chapter 10, this book has fulfilled its mission.

## **Nuts and Bolts**

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**Chapter 1** The first chapter provides a quiz on cover letters and follow-up techniques to test your acumen on writing job-search correspondence that gets results. Don't be too hard on yourself if you miss a few questions. The business world promotes many job-search myths that can confuse the savviest job seekers. After all, if you had all the answers, you wouldn't be reading this book.

**Chapter 2** This chapter offers basic tips on writing an outstanding cover letter, starting with illustrations of the typical formats. It then shows you how to construct each section of your letter—from the heading to enclosures. Combining serious advice with comic relief, it ends with do's and don'ts and some hilarious excerpts from Robert Half's "Resumania" column in the *National Business Employment Weekly*.



## 4 Introduction

**Chapter 3** This chapter offers an accomplishments history and a comprehensive transferable skills exercise to help you determine which skills to include in cover letters. It also offers tips on coaching references to corroborate your skills and sell your achievements.

**Chapters 4 through 7** Each of these chapters explains how to gather information about employers and openings, then write targeted cover letters that address four common job-search situations: mounting a direct-mail campaign, answering classified ads, working with search firms and other job brokers, and networking with contacts to uncover positions in the hidden job market. The four chapters explain how employers view these approaches and how to capture their attention with each strategy. There is also a variety of cover-letter examples from real people.

**Chapter 8** Formal and informal grapevines within companies are an important but sadly neglected source of job openings. Chapter 8 suggests that before looking outside your corporation for greener pastures, you should survey opportunities in your own backyard by networking and using job-posting systems to find openings that match your skills and interests. It also provides pointers on how to write a cover letter and/or application for a job you really want *without losing your seniority and benefits*.

**Chapter 9** Many job seekers aren't aware that there are alternatives to traditional cover letters that accompany resumes. To provide other options, Chapter 9 defines and explains how to write market and broadcast letters. These approaches are somewhat unusual, but can achieve some dazzling results when properly used. Here again, letters from real people are included.

**Chapter 10** To complete the text, Chapter 10 offers a host of follow-up letters for a variety of job-search purposes. Thank-you notes, acceptance and rejection letters, landing announcements, and so on are all intrinsic to a carefully planned job-search campaign. Be sure to read this chapter if you aren't familiar with how to use them to your advantage.

## A Note from the Author

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Approximately two weeks after I finished the *National Business Employment Weekly Resumes*, I received a call from Tony Lee, editor of the *National Business Employment Weekly*. Fearing a major rewrite or some other unexpected catastrophe with the book, I picked up the phone. . . .

Tony was in a good mood. In fact, he sounded downright mischievous. "You won't believe what I'm going to ask you," he said, his voice brimming with a secret he couldn't wait to reveal. "John Wiley [the publisher] and the *National*