

Tune Up Your Cover Letters

By Chip Hartman,
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For those of you in transition, mind if I ask a personal question? How's your interview "hit rate" these days? Are you getting the interviews you're shooting for or are you temporarily spinning your wheels? If your career transition engine is stuck in sluggish mode or perhaps stalled out completely, it might be time for a cover letter tune-up, available on the ETP Network from Career Transition Technician and Master Connector Rod Colón.

This article focuses on one special type of cover letter, the Executive Summary.

1. Overview

The perfect pairing of an effective cover letter with an equally effective resume is one of the primary objectives for individuals in transition. Each of these documents separately can make or break the overall perception created by a candidate's paperwork submission, so it makes sense that an intentionally tight integration of the two dramatically raises the odds of getting called back for an interview.

Cover letters do more than just announce an individual's interest in a particular position. Their true value lies in providing a clear rationale, or "case", for an individual's suitability relating to the advertised position's core requirements.

An Executive Summary is a special kind of cover letter. It stands apart from traditional cover letters because it prominently display a two-column chart correlating a specific position's top requirements with the candidate's top qualifications, point-by-point (as shown below).

POSITION REQUIREMENTS	MY QUALIFICATIONS
Position Requirement # 1	Candidate Qualification # 1
Position Requirement # 2	Candidate Qualification # 2
Position Requirement # 3, etc...	Candidate Qualification # 3, etc...

Executive Summaries become powerful adjuncts to targeted resumes (or "Relevant Resumes") when they provide a strong, compelling case for a candidate's qualifications. Developing effective Executive Summaries is challenging because they require a special blend of clarity and cut-to-the-chase, no-nonsense writing in order to convince weary screeners that a particular candidate is someone who not only stands out from the pack, but does so with distinction and is thus worthy of additional consideration.

Point of Clarification: Outside of the ETP Network, Executive Summaries are often referred to as "T"-Letters."

2. Why Bother With An Executive Summary?

Resumes alone will not get you a job, at least not in and of themselves. If you want a job, you need an interview first. A great deal of career transition research has shown that more people get advanced to the interview stage when they present an exceptionally well-written Executive Summary as part of their submission paperwork. And why not? By providing a dynamic, powerful Executive Summary, a candidate has just eliminated a great deal of the filtering, probing, and detective work that screeners must typically perform to isolate the perfect individual for a company's advertised positions.

A well-crafted Executive Summary allows you to make your case for the position you seek. More importantly, it gives you the chance to build a compelling case for your unique suitability, a case so strong that it can't possibly be ignored or discounted by a hiring manager. As we'll see very shortly, you can spend time crafting a "passable" or "average" Executive Summary, or you can step up to the higher standards the ETP Network establishes for its members as CEOs of ME, Inc. by aggressively producing a powerful and polished Executive Summary. The choice is yours.

3. Executive Summaries are Part of the "ABCs of the Job Search"

Following the principles laid out in Rod Colón's ABCs of the Job Search, we know that there are seven (7) key steps in the ETP Network approach to job searching:

1. Identify the products or services (skills) that you provide to the marketplace.
2. Use indeed.com as a market demand locator to see if your skills are in demand in your location.
3. Apply the 70% Rule: When reviewing an opening, you need to be at least a 70% match to optimize the process.
4. Build your case: Develop an **Executive Summary and a Relevant Resume** tailored for the specific position in which you're interested.
5. Leverage the Warm/Trusted Network: Seek advocates who can help you to connect to hiring managers. Don't forget to find the "WIFM" (What's In It For Me?) within each advocate.
6. Use the Advanced Search area on LinkedIn to support your search for viable advocates. Remember: Level 2 and 3 connections remain "in play" because you will network **TO** them through your Level 1 connection.
7. Repeat the above steps until you have five (5) offers simultaneously. CEOs of ME, Inc. never settle for having just one client.

If you use the "ABCs" procedure above, please remember a key point: It is essential to fully understand the top four (4) core requirements within the advertised position. Only then can you build an effective Executive Summary, and only then can you evolve an effective Relevant Resume from it.

Here's another key point: The Executive Summary and the Relevant Resume work in tandem to differentiate you from your competition, but if the language within each doesn't adequately mirror the other, it's the interviewer who will spot the discrepancies first, a condition that will undoubtedly put you in the breakdown lane.

4. Basic Structure of an Executive Summary

In the simplified example of an Executive Summary shown below, the core structure consists of: 1) an appropriate header and introduction, 2) a "T" display block (side by side comparison block), and 3) a suitable closing.

A word of caution: This sample has been included only to demonstrate the layout, or format, of a generic Executive Summary. The bullet points in the "T" display block below are included only to show illustrative formatting, not appropriate examples.

Mr. David S. Jones
Workplace Industrials
775 Central Ave.
Anywhere, PA, 14522

Jennifer T. Smith
225 Main Street
Anytown, NJ, 08822
Tel (908)555-5555

Dear Mr. Jones:

I am interested in the position of Administrative Assistant listed in the Eastern PA Gazette on January 31, 2008. I believe my skills and qualifications are an exact match for the stated requirements for this position.

POSITION REQUIREMENTS	MY QUALIFICATIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Detail oriented, experienced administrative assistant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Four years administrative assistant experience with responsibility for numerous detailed reports
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assist customer relations manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assisted customer relations manager for two years
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Corporate experience with major clients a must 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regularly served purchasing agents at Fortune 500 companies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PC software knowledge a plus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hands-on experience with Microsoft Office

Enclosed is my resume for your review and consideration. I believe I am an excellent candidate for this position and look forward to meeting with you to discuss it in greater detail.

Very truly yours,

Jennifer T. Smith

5. Decision Time: Passable or Powerful?

If your goal is to develop an "average", or "passable" Executive Summary, then the preceding example, if properly tweaked for the specifics of the position you seek, might be sufficient to accomplish that. Theoretically, you've just reached your goal of creating an Executive Summary and you've done it with minimal effort on your part.

But doing so would invite enormous problems. In the first place, an Executive Summary that demonstrates weak linkages between the qualification and requirement bullets speaks volumes about your inability to grasp the reason for including the document in your paperwork in the first place.

There's another price you pay for taking shortcuts to a minimal-effort Executive Summary. Other candidates for the same position, evidently hungrier for it than you, are prepared to pull out all the stops in creating their Executive Summaries in order to attain the highest possible placement and visibility of their submission packages. They will diligently toil over them, aggressively seek advice on writing them, and perhaps rewrite them several times before they're satisfied with the results. These are individuals with extraordinary mental toughness who are, in a sense, prepared to run the Marine Corps basic training obstacle course backward during a raging hurricane just to attain the coveted "top-spot-in-the-pile" on the interviewer's desk.

At this point, it's wise to consider the **Principle of All or Nothing** when deciding to write an Executive Summary: ***If you've made the decision to write an Executive Summary for your next job submission, make sure you commit to writing a powerful one. Writing anything less will be a waste of time.***

6. Developing a Powerful Executive Summary Takes Time and Patience

It's very important to understand that there's a huge difference between a "passable" Executive Summary and one that truly showcases your qualifications so powerfully that an interviewer sits there looking at it – and you – totally agog. Here are some guidelines to keep in mind to help you develop this kind of Executive Summary:

- Before starting out to write your Executive Summary, make sure you've completed Step #3 of the "ABCs of the Job Search" (Apply the 70% Rule). Why? Because you need to ensure that you are a good fit for the position in order to build a strong case and offer solid evidence in your qualification bullets.
- If you're not sure how close you come to the 70% Rule, try the following:
 - Electronically copy and paste the target job ad into a temporary file that can be viewed in your favorite word processor;
 - Make sure your word processor has the ability to "highlight" blocks of text in different colors;

- o Highlight in green all those requirements you're sure you can meet (no questions asked). Highlight in yellow those for which you may not be a "dead on" match, but come fairly close. Highlight in red those for which you are not a match at all.
- o Now reduce the magnification of the document and visually scan the color distribution. You can then easily estimate if the amount of green plus yellow shading comes close to 70%.
- Since this will be a tool used by the interviewer to narrow the field of qualified candidates, clarity and brevity work powerfully to your advantage. A clumsily-worded or verbose Executive Summary will turn off an interviewer just as much as sloppy appearance. Bottom line: Time invested in finessing the words is time extremely well-spent.
- On the left hand side of the "T", list about 4 to 7 core skills required for the position.
 - o When reviewing the job description, read it as if you are the author/manager of the job description - do not review it from your point of view; assume the manager's point of view.
 - o If you are not familiar with many of the terms in the job description, do not waste your time; move on to the next opening.
 - o List no less than 4 and no more than 7 core skills required and put them in priority order starting with the most important one first.
- For each specific job requirement listed on the left side of the "T" display block, supply a companion bullet point that absolutely nails your qualifications for that requirement - and there cannot be one speck of ambiguity about its truthfulness or relevance. Each "qualification bullet" you list needs to address:
 1. What did you do (i.e., what was the accomplishment)?
 2. Where did you do it (i.e., with what company or companies)?
 3. What was the impact (i.e., relevance, measure of success, etc...)?

Taking the time to painstakingly craft the precise words that capture the What/Where/Impact described above gives the interviewer a chance to sense some genuine excitement about you as the most qualified candidate, especially if each of your subsequent bullet points are given the same polished treatment.

- The intended visual effect of the Executive Summary is NOT to present the candidate to the interviewer as an item-for-item "match" on the listed requirements; it's to present the candidate to the interviewer as an item-for-item PERFECT MATCH on the listed requirements, the ONLY POSSIBLE MATCH on the listed requirements, the MATCH THAT WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE FOR THE COMPANY TO IGNORE on the listed requirements. If your bullet points truly convey this "dead on" "impossible to beat" perfect pairing of requirement with qualification, the only possible

course of action you've now given the interviewer is to recommend YOU as the SELECTED candidate.

- Completing an effective "T" display block is without a doubt the single most challenging part of writing a powerful Executive Summary. But the document isn't complete until you develop an effective introduction and a conclusion, placed before and after the "T", respectively. Many individuals who have written effective Executive Summaries suggest writing the introduction and conclusion only after the "T" display block has been developed satisfactorily.
- One final quality check – observe the **Principle of Perfect Pairing** in two different ways:
 - Within the Executive Summary itself, make sure each of your qualification bullets is perfectly matched with each of the job ad's requirement bullets; and
 - Make sure your completed Executive Summary constitutes a perfect match with the Relevant Resume and that the language in one strongly reinforces the language in the other.

7. Why Powerful Executive Summaries Make Such A Difference

Powerful Executive Summaries get results for the following reasons:

- They condense the most important aspect of a candidate's submission – his or her suitability for the particular position – into one tightly worded, high-impact document. Most interviewers depend on their ability to scan large volumes of information quickly to extract relevant information. With a streamlined yet powerful Executive Summary, they can generally tell at a glance whether the candidate is worthy of an interview – PLUS – their job has just been made a lot easier.
- The very act of supplying a Powerful Executive Summary conveys the message, "Look, I am taking the time to lay out a compelling case for my candidacy using your very own criteria ... how can you logically deny me the opportunity for an interview?" The Powerful Executive Summary makes the statement, "This is how I powerfully differentiate myself from my competitors."
- Powerful Executive Summaries leave no "wobble room" for faking, fudging, or stretching the truth. A candidate either "has the goods or doesn't have the goods."

8. Why Some Executive Summaries Fail

According to Rod Colón, who has reviewed thousands of Executive Summaries, the most common failure "hot spots" are as follows:

- The candidate has not reviewed the original job description carefully enough, i.e., there is a faulty perception of what the position requires right from the start;
- The candidate has attached too much significance to the advertised position's responsibilities and not enough significance to the advertised position's required skills;
- As a direct result of the hot spot cited above, the entire left side of the T-display block (the position requirements) automatically becomes faulty, which then means that the qualification bullets will be viewed as being inadequate, lacking coherence, or just plain invalid;
- If the Executive Summary and Relevant Resume don't adequately mirror each other's content, i.e., if there are statements or key points included in one that are out of phase with the other, the interviewer may become confused, frustrated, or skeptical.

9. Adding The Personal Touch

Powerful Executive Summaries can make a huge difference. Ready for one more tip that lies outside the boundaries of crafting the document itself? Use the personal touch. ETP Network member Sandy Ferrer recently did this in an unusual way by referring to her Executive Summary as a "cheat sheet." It was a bold and gutsy step, but Sandy trusted her instincts. The screener smiled and mentioned that he was impressed with her candor. She was called back for a follow-up interview the following week.

In Conclusion

If you're serious about securing every possible advantage in pursuing a particular job opportunity, consider spending the extra time it will take to craft a well-written Executive Summary. You can't reasonably expect to walk into an interview wearing brightly lit neon signs advertising your qualities, assets, and suitability for the position. Thankfully, you don't need to. Your Powerful Executive Summary will do it for you.

If you're not an ETP Network member but have been inspired by this article and would like to know more about "next steps", please contact Rod Colón at rod@etpnetwork.com. Special thanks to Rod and Sandy Ferrer for assistance in preparing this article.

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