On Applying for a Job

It is staggering how many people who apply for advertised positions — people with the necessary skills, abilities and qualifications — are not short-listed or called for an interview because their applications failed to demonstrate that they were an excellent candidate. Strange as it seems, by the time people are ready to get a job, most have never thought about how to actually apply for one.

The following dos and don’ts capture some of the good, the bad and the ugly we have seen in applications for staff positions at the ISS over the years. The list is not complete, but it may help you improve your job applications in general — not just for the ISS.

Think of it as an investment

Applying for a job demands time and effort. If you rush your application, chances are it won’t be tailored to their needs quite as well — it can make the difference between making the interview list, and not. An employer can spot in an instant whether the applicant has really made an effort. So if you want the job, set the time aside.

Finding the criteria

Every job has a set of selection criteria by which applicants will be sorted out. Criteria are divided into essential and desirable — typically, the essential ones are those that an applicant must have to be short-listed. If you do not have them you are probably wasting your time applying. Desirable criteria are those qualities that would help to do the job, but that you can probably pick up once you’re in the position. Desirable criteria can help sort out the shortlist candidates, though they’re not the only thing an employer is looking for.

Amazingly, a large number of job applicants do not attempt to demonstrate that they fit the criteria for the position. That’s the easiest decision an employer can make: straight to the recycling bin!

So you see an advert for a job you think sounds interesting — how do you know what the criteria are? A well-written advertisement will have all the criteria included. It may say ‘the selection criteria are …’, in which case it is obvious what to look at. If it isn’t so explicit, then there will be a section saying things like ‘The successful applicant will have …’, or ‘It is essential that …’, or ‘You must have/do …’, or ‘Desirable qualities include …’. Pick out all such key phrases; they form the selection criteria.

Some places will have a duty statement, which should list the selection criteria as well as the responsibilities and tasks that the appointee will have to do. It is worth asking for the duty statement, as it will help you write your application and give you a better idea of what the job entails.

Addressing the criteria

Once you have the selection criteria it is time to start drafting your application, and your responses to the selection criteria form the core of it. Consider each in turn and demonstrate clearly — with relevant examples from your experience — that you meet that criterion.

For example, if it says

**Must have experience with spreadsheets**

do not just say ‘I have experience with spreadsheets’ — anyone can say that and so it’s meaningless. Instead, say something like

*I use spreadsheets as the Treasurer of the Soccer Club to reconcile accounts and track spending. As well as the basic data entry I have developed a sophisticated worksheet that …*

Anyone can do data entry in a spreadsheet; not everyone can set one up to perform the calculations. Show them the depth of your experience: first, it shows you have done it; second, it shows you can think clearly; and third, your particular experience may give you an edge over someone else on the shortlist.
Address each of the criteria in turn, clearly and obviously. There are several ways of doing this. You can write a longish letter with a different selection criterion addressed in each paragraph. To be really clear, you can put a heading on the paragraph, for example:

**Ability to use a spreadsheet**

_I use spreadsheets as the Treasurer of the Soccer Club to ..._

Or you can just mention the criterion within the paragraph, for example: ‘My ability to use a spreadsheet is demonstrated by …’. This leads to a long letter, but as long as you are addressing the selection criteria in a relevant fashion this is not a problem. Some people prefer to have a short letter and include a separate sheet with the selection criteria forming headings of paragraphs. If you do it this way then make sure it is the next thing the selectors see after the cover note.

**Assume they know nothing**

It’s best to be clear and precise, and to assume that the selection panel knows nothing about you. So, for example, make sure you explain _all_ your acronyms — give the full name first then acronym in brackets:

_I have sung in the Sydney University Music Society (SUMS) since 1991. SUMS has performed ..._

If you only refer to it once, do not bother with the acronym.

The same goes for the jobs/work experience/volunteer work/clubs and societies/other activities that you mention. Explain briefly what your involvement was, what responsibilities you had, how you contributed and — importantly — how it is relevant to the job in hand. Give an indication of your level of involvement: listing memberships of five charities, six environmental groups and three sporting associations is impressive — but anyone can _join_, so if you do more than pay the fees and read the newsletter ... say so!

**Why bother?**

Why go to all this bother when most of the information is in your CV or resumé? Put it this way — if you had to choose a shortlist of five people from 100 applications, which would you rather have: someone who hands you the information you need on a plate, or someone who makes you hunt it down in their CV?

That is the most blatant reason; another couple are that it gives you a chance to expand on what is in your CV, and it shows you care enough about the job to put some effort into your application. In your CV you would list all the spreadsheet packages you have used, but that does not tell the selector your level of proficiency and the details they want to know about. Your spreadsheet experience might just be doing data entry, or you might have developed a multiply-linked financial spreadsheet that also sings and dances the Mambo — tell them that!

**What if you can’t address a specific criterion?**

It depends on what they ask for. Addressing the criteria in depth gives you the chance of saying something like, ‘Although I have not worked on a spreadsheet, I am highly computer literate, and with my skills in maths and ability to learn quickly I am sure I would pick up the relevant skills in a short space of time’.

For some criteria, even essential ones, this is acceptable; for some it is not. For example, if the ad says must have a degree in early 13th Century Anglo-Saxon History, then you must have that degree or, at least, some pretty compelling experience in that area. You have to use you judgement on these things.

**The cover letter**

It is vital to have a cover letter. If you just send your CV the receiver will — no doubt about it — throw it in the recycling bin. Why? Because it shows you don’t care enough to introduce yourself and explain why you have applied. It’s most often their first impression of you, so make it good.

Some essential things:

1. Ensure the recipient knows your address — put it on at the top of the letter. Make sure your name is on the front page, you can include it at the top of your address.
2. Put the date after the address, this is standard formal letter writing form.
3. Put the name and address of the person to whom you are sending it — again, this is standard. It is _essential_ that you get the title, name and position of the person to whom you are writing correct. This might seem petty, but think about how it looks if you misspell their name or use the wrong title: it
suggests you’re careless — and if one of the selection criteria is ‘meticulous attention to detail’ you have blown it before they have even read your application!

4. If the job has a reference number, it should be stated after the salutation, for example:

   Dear Sir/Madam
   Re: Job Ref A36

5. State what the letter is about in a positive way:

   I am applying for the position of blah as advertised in …

   This tells the reader immediately what the letter is about. Note the phrase ‘in a positive way’ — the above says ‘I am applying …’, not ‘I would like to apply …’ or ‘I am interested in applying …’. You’re not asking for their permission to apply, you’re applying.

6. If you’re addressing the criteria in the letter itself, this comes next. The trick is to use positive language without blowing your own trumpet. This is a fine balance, but if you can manage it you come across as competent and confident. Avoid such phrases as ‘I believe/think I fulfil the criteria …’, or ‘I am sure I …’. Instead, use ‘I fulfil the criteria’, ‘I can’, ‘I am able’. These are stronger phrases, and as long as you back them up with solid evidence, you’re not going to sound boastful.

7. After the criteria, add a short paragraph or two about any other qualities/experience/skills you think add to your ability to do the job. Again give evidence but don’t go on at length.

8. Closing the letter can be hard — finishing with a sentence about you being willing to be contacted at any time about your application, or to answer any questions, often works well.

9. After you have finished, and this may take several drafts, check it and give it to others for comment — not because you’re inexperienced, but because it’s a good idea. Even top executives do this (do you think the Prime Minister asks people to check his speeches? Actually, does he even write them?)

   It’s very hard to be objective about yourself; asking others to read your application helps to make sure you’re not over- or under-selling yourself. You don’t have to agree with everything they say — it’s your application — but they may spot things you have missed (including spelling and grammar) and ways to strengthen the evidence that you fulfil the criteria.

   Your referees, if they are willing, can be good people to ask to check it. It is a good idea to give them a copy of the advertisement and your application so that when someone rings for a reference they know what you have applied for, what you have said and can make relevant comments.

10. Before you seal the envelope to send the application, check the instructions on how to apply and make sure you that have enclosed all the copies requested, and that you have the correct address.

   Include phone, fax and email address for your referees and again double check you have got them correct. It makes it so much easier for the selectors and shows you are careful and thorough.

Your CV

This document hasn’t even touched on CVs as these are much more tricky and personal. Most schools and universities have free guidance and there are plenty of websites offering templates and hints. Remember, in the end it is your document — it represents you, gives a picture of you to others, so you must be happy with it.

One final comment

Your application needs to show the employer who you are, so don’t be afraid to show some of your personality. At the same time, you must consider the person reading it — they don’t want a friend, a comedian or an author, they want an employee. They’re looking for relevant information, not every detail you can find.

Get inside their head, find out what they want to know, and then sell yourself to them as best you can.

Good Luck!