

Starting a professional career in industry: Matching market needs and self-presentation in application documents

by Dr. Monika Clausen

My motivation and experience

As a trainer and coach, I meet a great variety of people. Some are looking into the industrial labor market for the first time, others already have many years of experience and want or have to make their next move. Whatever their experience, education, or professional orientation, today everybody faces many challenges in finding a job. Difficulties arise from none to too much or irrelevant working experience, age, a lack of training or further education, or hands-on experience. The causes of trouble are many, and even people who look like the perfect match for a job often get no feedback on applications and are not invited for interviews. In this article, I am going to shed light on some common stumbling blocks people face when they move from academia to industry.

Starting questions

In our competitive world, a successful applicant should know that an application is much more than a good CV. Success is helped by in-depth thinking prior to planning job applications. I encourage people to reflect on trends in society such as impacts of migration, the current situation in the labor market, for instance off-shoring where particular jobs are carried out, the professional development being targeted, differentiating between a job that requires your expert knowledge and a function that requires managerial skills, the added value to the future employer, such as their potential contribution in five years from now, and finally self-presentation in the document, for instance clear positioning as a problem solver. In a world of fast changes and global competition, it is necessary to thoroughly link your own goals with commercial perspectives and to take changes in the social environment into account.

Here's a tip from my classroom training. Before starting the application process, ask yourself a few questions: What do I know about my labor market and my competitors? What effect will my decision have on my mid-term career? What competences do I have to offer, and how do I deliver my sales arguments? What do I know about the working style or recruitment processes of HR?

Trend in society

A glance at our society shows that trends in the labor market are closely linked to economic, social, and demographic changes. Our working world is increasingly influenced by globalization, ever greater technological and procedural complexity, a constant demand for personal skill development, insecurity, and fundamental shifts in working styles and values. These shifts surface in new forms of employment, such as limited-term contracts, enormous technological progress, a high demand for adaptability and specialization due to, for instance, constant re-organizations and changing technological or other demands, and a constant concern with employability seen, for instance, in further training. Job profiles which

were in vogue can disappear within a decade or move to countries with lower labor costs. Due to instability in companies, job profiles change constantly, and the human resource planning processes are very volatile.

Here are some questions from my classroom training: Which news items affect life in my home country today? What is the demographic situation like? What kind of ideas does society have about people of my age?

Labor market

The “war for talents” that companies fight takes place in the global labor market. In particular the large international companies, who actually represent only a fraction of potential employers, have a dominant presence in media which strongly influences public perception. These companies draw an excessive number of applicants worldwide, resulting in unmanageable number of applicants and opaque selection processes. The great majority of job hunters search primarily for vacancies with market leaders. Of around 330,000 Swiss companies, approximately 1% belong to the group of the large global players attracting tens of thousands of applicants. Of course, those companies have sky-high expectations of applicants. Competition is enormous. On the other side, mid-size companies, approximately 6% of all enterprises, employing 27% of the Swiss workforce, are neglected. Frequently people don’t know any of these companies by name, what their products or businesses are, and sometimes even companies that should be known, such as suppliers for lab materials, are not borne in mind. When the further 93% of small-size enterprises that employ 45% of the Swiss workforce are considered, it is clear that the vast majority of job chances are overlooked. This lack of awareness of labor market structure (which by the way is very similar in most countries) not only has an unfavorable effect on application activities; it also leads to lots of frustration.

When they focus on market leaders, applicants face obstacles like a demand for a high level of expertise in a particular field, a need for certificates proving formal training for methodical skills, application via black-box on-line tools, and a no-feedback-culture. When applicants move to the market of small and medium enterprises, SMEs, they often don’t consider that these companies, simply because of their size, have different requirements: they need people with broader skill sets, they have different ways of searching for employees, and their job profiles are of a different nature. In particular, small companies have less demand for high-level expertise but rather search for people who can manage diverse job assignments.

Here are some questions from my classroom training: What kind of mid-size companies do I know? How different are the job profiles from those of a global player? What impact does this have on my application documents?

Mystic hidden labor market

Until the turn of the last century, only one out of four open positions were publically announced. Up to 75% of all open jobs were not visible to applicants. This must have changed with the advent of the internet, but many vacancies are still hidden. People suppose that today every second vacancy is not made public. Companies have different reasons for doing so: the fear of too many applications,

the need for many different people presented in with the same job ad like for consulting companies, the constant searching for super profiles, or human resource process issues. Having access to these positions leads to applications in a less competitive environment.

What do applicants need to know about this labor market? I have identified four different structures worth reflecting on when examining hidden labor markets. The first is the tiny truly hidden labor market, whose goal it is to find executives and where all selection activities take place in networks. The second I refer to as the covered (because the jobs are openly announced, but go unnoticed by applicants) labor market of the mid-size companies, which can be tackled with a solid search strategy. At the same time I have encountered two categories on the applicants' side: a lack of awareness of the large variety of jobs one can apply for, due to not knowing about the job title and the nature of the work, and, last, the invisibility of the applicant in the labor market by using unsuitable messages in application documents.

Here's a tip from my classroom training: Do research on mid-size companies to enlarge your knowledge about potential employers. Inform yourself about existing job profiles and the nature of the work involved. Define two or three categories of jobs, referred to as job families, which have similarities in the job tasks and skills requirements, and create suitable CVs.

Application ways

Finally, where people search for jobs also needs to be discussed. People often have a reactive search modus. They use the most common platforms, such as www.monster.com, in combination with an automatic notification that they are notified when suitable new jobs are posted. This also has a negative influence on the application success rate, because most of the competitors probably use a similar strategy, thus pushing the number of applications that companies receive even higher. A positive impact on the success rate can be achieved by cautious selection of sources like the homepages of professional associations, the use of social media such as twitter to follow companies, and for some mid- and small size companies making applying spontaneously thanks to their estimated 15% annual natural turnover rate of employees. The most promising application tool of course remains active networking.

Here's a tip from my classroom training: Activate your network and use other alternatives when job-hunting. Make sure you have up-to-date information in your social media profiles. Search carefully for alternative job platforms.

Application documents

Application documents for industry jobs have completely different demands than for academia. While academia demands a resume which is often dozens of pages in size, detailing a complete inventory of all achievements organized by events, industry requires a short self-presentation conveying the fact that the applicant can do the job applied for. It has proven useful for participants to see the cover letter as a text focusing on future aspects rather than repeating the CV content and the CV as a storytelling, past-driven document. It is important to note that there is no

one guideline on how to write a perfect CV. The structure and messages depend on experience, on individual ideas about sales point and self-presentation, on the target market (by company size) and on personal activities used to impress the reader. Although there is no right version, a lot of mistakes can be made.

Here's a tip from my classroom training: Look at your application from the perspective of the labor market and human resource people.

Cover letter

The cover letter is a one-page self-introduction whose focus should be on the interests of the company, the ability to do this particular job, and providing information about the benefits that somebody brings to the company. Classically, a cover letter can be divided into 3 sections: You - I – We.

The *You* part is meant to form a link between the applicant and the company. It needs to convey knowledge about the company and why the applicant is interested in working for this particular venture. Two common errors are to make a source referral to one of the search platforms rather than to the company's homepage and to have no compliment. Of course – and this is where the points from the labor market discussion are particularly relevant – global players are less sensitive to certain faults than smaller companies. As an applicant, both in the written application and also certainly for the interview, you need to know why you want to work for this particular employer. General statements about the business, the size or its market importance convey nothing. Convince the reader that you as an applicant have thought thoroughly about this company and your contribution. An additional trap that applicants frequently fall into is the usage of indirect language. Using active language like "I am applying" conveys a straightforward interest. Save the conditionals for later and avoid self-sabotage like "I believe I am", "I hope I".

In the *I* part, people have the tendency to repeat their professional development in prose. This is a waste of space. The points that need to be addressed are that the applicant has the ability to perform the job and that the requirements are covered. This can be achieved in a short statement. More importantly, the cover letter should explain the benefits people see themselves bringing to the company. What will that contribution be? How is the company going to profit from this person in the long run? Does the applicant have an idea about trends in the field and can they, ideally, foresee potentials? What are the sales points that make the applicant stand out? Again it is important to avoid self-sabotage by using too many conditionals, such as "I would like to apply" instead of "I am applying" or "I hope to be the right candidate" instead of "I fulfill the requirements and have the skills to carry out this function". Statements about challenges and learning wishes might be appropriate for young graduates. From the PhD level onwards, people must show their added value for the company. Classic self-sabotage statements include "I am looking for a challenge and want to learn something". Companies seek people who know what contribution they have to offer. I like to say: "If you want a

challenge go bungee jumping, and if you want to learn something go to evening classes”.

The easiest way to cover the *We* part is to refer to an up-coming interview. Depending on the job ad, information about midterm goals or interest in managerial positions might need to be added.

Here’s a tip from my classroom training: Take your cover letter and delete the company address and the subject line. Now show it to your colleagues and let them figure out which company and what kind of job they believe you’re applying for. If they can’t, you know what to do.

Curriculum vitae

Industry expects that the CV of the applicant shows the ability to do the job advertised. It is a document that refers to the past. The story of the applicant’s personal development should be told on two pages. In contrast to academic CVs, the information is organized by dates, which provides an easy-to-follow timeline structure. In addition, personal information, including hobbies, is expected - at levels of detail which vary greatly between different countries.

The personal data section is a listing of official information and includes contact details. Without discussing country-specific differences, it should be noted that a picture, by a professional photographer, is increasingly expected in Europe. Often applicants add a short self-descriptive marketing statement, variously called a mission, vision, or profile, about their past or their ideas about the future. I prefer these pieces of information to be part of the cover letter. If you want to include such a statement, make sure that you have created something meaningful rather than simply an imprecise summary of key words. This mission statement not only has to match the job profile you apply to but should also show the specific knowledge you are offering.

For young graduates, it is really important to link existing expertise with the requirements of the target position. Since most companies ask for working experience it is important to present the time studying at PhD level as working experience and therefore the first chapter in the CV. If the first chapter presents the applicant’s education, as is the case in an academic CV, it tells a lot about their self-perception. It creates the image of an applicant who is older but has no working experience. I encourage people to present this period of doctoral study as working time.

A suitable structure in working experience and in the later education section is to refer first to the company or educational institution, then to the function (do not call yourself a STUDENT), and last to the tasks list, giving precise information about relevant experience. This task list creates the profile. As an outcome of the profile evaluation, and depending on what their target jobs involve, people might need to write more than one CV. Comparing a job in the R&D department with one in sales or one in production, it is easy to see that different kinds of skills are needed to do the different jobs. While an R&D job requires core competences in

research and research management, the job in production focuses on quality and processes, and the sales job needs communication and marketing know-how. It is essential to match the information presented in the task list with the job content. To minimize the effort and optimize the fit, I suggest that applicants first identify the job families they are interested in and qualified for. As a second step, CVs conveying the message "I can do this job" are created. At the end of the day, the applicant might have two or three CVs presenting different job profiles. While the overall framework of the CV remains the same, the differences between the CVs arise by major adaptations in the tasks list. Using a reader-driven viewpoint is helpful in proofing the fitting to the target.

Furthermore, graduates have to reflect cautiously on all the information they present in the CV. Ask yourself whether the name of the professor, the title of the thesis, or the list of publications is really needed or can be dispensed with. The title of the thesis might well be part of the following section on education. For both sections, the same rules apply: everything that took place during a particular period has to be grouped together. For instance, the period of doctoral study covers teaching experience, internships, meetings, and papers. These two parts have to convey the fact that the applicant fulfills the requirements and can do the job. Additional information required includes a solid and complete inventory of IT and language skills, extra transferable skills courses, real-life working experience such as summer jobs, specific interests like hobbies (hiking, cinema and cooking convey nothing) and extracurricular activities. Anything that can be helpful in convincing the reader should be added. In contrast to academia, lists of papers, posters, and presentations are only likely to be helpful when applying to the R&D department. For sales jobs, all these achievements might be presented as one task, termed something like "publishing in international journals".

Here's a tip from my classroom training: Make sure that you convey the message that you are the right person for this job and the tasks that need to be done and that you have the skills required. Have more than one CV ready.

Common mistakes

When people apply to industry, they need to ensure that the documents are written for the target audience (info selection), that the cover letter has a convincing message (why this company), that the data structure is easy to follow and dates appear preferably only once (antichronological setting), that the tasks list fits the target job (company, function, and task), that information is complete (IT / languages / other classes), that the personality is visible (hobbies or USPs), that things are explained well (doctoral thesis, academic degree), that working experience is mentioned (hands-on experience), and finally that the sales points are clear (competences).

Process monitoring

Before starting the application process, think about the number of applications you want to send to be invited for an interview. This number depends greatly on the number of open positions and the number of competitors in the market. In any case, applicants need to monitor their personal success rates. If the number of applications greatly exceeds expectations, the applicant needs to carefully analyze what kind of messages the application documents convey and why the labor market is not responding. Then, a fundamental change in presentation is necessary.

Here's a tip from my classroom training: When things are not working out, make sure you realize it as early as possible and change something.