2.3 Insider Guide to Startup Cover Letters

Welcome

The tech space is an exciting sector of the economy, and one where job opportunities are numerous. But working here requires particular skill sets and a careful approach to applying.

Wakefield Media was created for those who are interested in the unique experiences of emerging, young companies. We uncover their jobs, products, and personalities through daily editorial and the largest tech startup hiring series in the country, known as Uncubed: a spectacle that is one part job fair, three rings circus.

We’ve surveyed our friends at some of the most well-known startups and tech companies out there—including Tumblr, Spotify, Stack Exchange, Behance, Meetup, and Microsoft—to dial in on the advice you’ll need to join one of their teams.

This document is part of an ongoing series. In this section, we'll take a look at how to put your best foot forward with your cover letter. So sit back, relax, and enjoy the beginning of the rest of your career.

Introduction

Laid-back tech companies are thought to spend more hours each week in office ping-pong tournaments than board meetings. We’ll plead the fifth here. But it’s this same desire to challenge “business as usual” that may leave you wondering if these organizations follow the standard rules of the job application.

Is there room among the ergonomic chairs, T-shirt-clad employees, and occasional pet roaming the office for the résumé and cover letter of yesteryear?

In short: yes, you’ll almost always still need both. This surprises many.

With the tips that follow, distilled from our survey of startups and larger tech companies, you can maximize your shot at a job with one of these fine institutions.
Your Cover Letter

Like Batman and Robin or fish and chips, the latter half of the résumé-cover letter duo has long been the less heralded. But for startups in particular, it has proven to be a surprisingly effective tool.

Many job applicants are tempted to dismiss it entirely, especially when applying to tech companies with lax environments, thinking, "What good will a formal cover letter do in getting me a job at the next Facebook?"

As it turns out, a strong cover letter offers you a greater opportunity to flag down a recruiter’s attention than you might expect. Tumblr’s Director of Recruiting, Sean McDermott, says that he’ll “look twice” at any candidate who submits a cover letter, noting that it can sometimes be the contents of this one item that qualify a candidate for the position or company. Meetup’s Team Development Lead, Erin Dertouzos, echoes the sentiment:

“You might not quite have the experience we’re looking for, but a really phenomenal cover letter will get you a phone call... Not submitting a cover letter is doing yourself a huge disservice.”

At a large tech company like Microsoft, however, their online application process won’t let you submit a cover letter. This makes sense given the volume of applicants the company receives and how established their brand is. “Recruiters [here] know what they’re looking for,” adds Andy Gottlieb, a Staffing Consultant at Microsoft.

Realizing that the cover letter is a potentially powerful offering on your part, let’s dive into the dos and don’ts of an effective one for startups:

**Do:**

I. Deeply connect with the startup’s brand.

   • Large companies often take it for granted that you know whom they are and what they do. Startups, on the other hand, don’t have this luxury. With limited positions, payrolls, and time, they need to be certain that applicants are the right cultural fit and familiar with their brand and its mission. So if you’re applying to Tumblr or Spotify, for example, tell them how you use their service and the role it plays in your life.

   • Jeanine Wade, Spotify’s U.S. Business Recruiting Team Lead, elaborates that even if your past experience doesn’t portray a direct connection to the company, there are ways to accomplish this by switching from professional to personal. If you are, in fact, applying to Spotify, but your background is in finance, you could note the last three or five concerts you attended to demonstrate your passion for music.
II. Show the company you really know them.

- Tumblr’s McDermott explains that they want people who are truly focused on Tumblr and not applying to every job out there. Prove to the recruiter that you are genuinely passionate about working for their company by noting any product features you would add or change and demonstrating how your skill set fits directly into the company’s future.

- Dertouzos recommends exploring Meetup’s website to get a thorough understanding of the company. Not only will you avoid a mistake that many make (referring to Meetup as a dating website), but you’ll learn that a cover letter featuring business jargon and a focus on profits will prove to be a cultural mismatch.

III. Connect your previous experiences to the company’s culture and structure.

- If your only recent work experience was at an international publishing company, you’ll want to explain what makes this experience relevant to why you’re applying to a fifty-person startup. Did you work on a small team that might have felt like a startup environment, or did you learn more about the type of company that you want to work at moving forward?

IV. Highlight your side projects if you lack full-time experience in the field.

- These can include writing code, designing websites, producing mock marketing campaigns, or participating in hackathons. Anything that demonstrates the relevant skills you possess is fair game.

V. Tell your story.

- Alex Krug, Vice President at Behance, stresses the importance of telling a story with your cover letter:

“I see where you went to school; I see the experience you’ve had; but tell me a story about how these dots [on your résumé] all come together.”

If you’ve had diverse work, internship, or extracurricular experiences, why is that? Is there a common theme they all share? Demonstrate how these have prepared you for the role you’re applying to or for the multidisciplinary tasks common of work at startups.
• When telling your story, Krug recommends that you showcase what you’re passionate about and how you’ve pursued it:

“When we’ve always hired based on past initiative as an indicator for future success [...] Whatever you were passionate about, if you involved yourself in a leadership role, we think that translates to how people acclimate themselves at companies.”

So whether your story has followed a linear path or taken some detours along the way, explain your motivations and accomplishments at each step to demonstrate your character and aptitude.

Don’t:

• Use a cut-and-paste cover letter that blandly says you’re smart, accomplished, and want a job at the company. This won’t help you stand out and casts you in a negative light.

• Address your résumé “Dear Sir/Madam” or “To Whom It May Concern.” If, after endless searching, you’re still unsure to whom your cover letter should be addressed, go with “To the [startup X] recruiting team” and then make the rest of your cover letter highly personalized according to the “Dos” above.

• Be too casual. Yes, startups do know their way around a ping-pong table, but it’s a turnoff for recruiters when applicants stray from being professional.

• Forget to spell-check. As is the case with any company, you’re toast if you make a spelling error.

Finally, a caveat: the weight placed upon a cover letter DOES vary by skill set. Software developers and designers, as well as the recruiters who evaluate them, are increasingly using GitHub, Stack Overflow, and online portfolios like Behance as complements to the résumé. So while a well-written cover letter is an excellent opportunity for you to connect with the startup you’re applying to, it’s slightly less critical for candidates in these fields. For everyone else, though, “it’s a must,” says Alison Sperling at Stack Exchange.