Effective Motivation Letters

Stephen Fischer,
Career Counselor
EPFL Career Center (RLC)
The motivation letter

- The motivation letter is complementary to the CV.

- Not a “cover letter,” but the place to express your motivation for working with a specific employer.

- Do not use standard, one-size-fits-all letters.

- **Half of all recruiters** in a recent survey stated that the letter was as **important as the CV.**¹

¹Source: Chiumento CV Survey 2006
How to express your motivation?

- Carefully choose your vocabulary.
- Explain what motivates you to join the company and to take the position offered.
- Show that you understand the position, the company (or business unit / dept.) and the industry in which you will be operating.
- Elaborate on what you intend to do once in the job.
The motivation letter

Suggested structure

- **Introduction (“Me”)**
  Briefly describe 2-3 reasons why you are applying for the position / to the Company

- **Body (“You”)**
  - **The Company/ Business Unit / Service**
    Show what makes the company (or industry in which it is active*) interesting to work for, and explain why you are motivated to join them. Be specific!
  - **The position:**
    Show that you understand what the job is about (focus on *responsibilities* in the job ad, not *requirements*). Highlight your willingness to do the job well.

- **Conclusion (“Us”)**
  Elaborate on what you will bring to the company once you are hired (think beyond soft skills). Imagine yourself in the position and describe what you intend to do in the first six months.

* If you don’t know who the final employer is
The motivation letter

Don’t be guilty of any of these!

- **Using a run-of-the-mill approach**
  - Rehashing your CV. You are sending it anyway
  - Using platitudes ("The attached CV will tell you more about my experience, skills and qualifications"). You can’t afford to waste space!

- **Reversing roles**
  - Placing more focus on your interests than on employer’s needs
  - Giving impression that you want to take control of the recruitment process

- **Sounding insincere or artificial**
  - Using flattery towards the employer
  - Using too many self-serving statements
  - Using condescending style or obfuscating sentences, often to state the obvious "Never in the history of industrial automation has the pace been faster, the competition stiffer, or the economic factors more complex."

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Letter formats

Many options, but most differ from other languages...

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The motivation letter

Example: Graduate Trainee Program

- Choice of words shows motivation
  - “...immediately triggered my interest”
  - “…most appealing”
  - “…is extremely motivating”

- Statements supported by facts
  - “...strong interest in business"
  - “…recognized leader”
  - “…most of my projects were business-oriented"
  - “…well-above the industry norm”

- Candidate is willing to contribute
  - “My analytical and reasoning skills should allow me to contribute...”
  - “…I will bring focus and enthusiasm...”
  - “…my hope is to obtain a full-time position...”

Marc Menace, Director
Trainee Programme
DEF Trading
10 cours des Bastions
1205 Geneva

25 Rue de la Paix
1001 Lausanne
2 April 2015

Dear Mr. Menace,

I had the great pleasure of speaking to your HR Manager during EPFL’s annual Career Fair in Oct. 2014, and her description of your 12-month trainee programme immediately triggered my interest. The structure and the hands-on approach to project work are extremely appealing.

While an engineer by education, I also have a strong interest in several business-related fields such as logistics and trading. In fact, most of the projects I have undertaken in my last two years of study were business-oriented.

The prospect of gaining first-hand experience and trading skills with a recognized leader such as DEF is extremely motivating, and I see it as an ideal way to start a professional career. With your focus on providing your clients with sophisticated modelling and historical perspectives both, you manage to maintain portfolio return levels well above the industry norm. My analytical and reasoning skills should allow me to contribute positively, and I would bring focus and enthusiasm to the tasks.

Ultimately, my hope would be to obtain a full-time position at your company, so you can be assured of my level of commitment.

I would welcome the opportunity of discussing this exciting opportunity with you in person, and am sending you a copy of my CV for your consideration.

Sincerely yours,

Alberta Einstein

Alberta Einstein
Four golden rules

“Average is not enough” Your motivation letter has to be unique and tuned to the company and job you are applying for. A motivation letter is a personal letter, so use your own style to show who you are.

“Stick to the point” Employers want to know why you want to work for them, so don’t use complex sentences or long poetic phrases. Be as concrete as possible.

“Don’t let your motivation letter and your CV “echo” The motivation letter should be complementary to your CV and show that you have researched the sector, the company and the job.

“Don’t exaggerate” Do not mention new items in your motivation letter (work or education or other skills) which are not listed on your CV!

(from EUMOVE: How to write a motivation letter_July2010)
Practice makes perfect!

Show motivation, not reiteration!

Do not "retell your CV;" let the recruiter read the actual one. Use the letter to show you are serious: 55-60% of the text should be about the company, department, unit or role you are seeking. For spontaneous offers, use sector trends, media mentions, and/or research-related insights to anchor your arguments.

Use any personal “hook” available to open the letter (“At your recent presentation at EPFL, I was quite pleased to hear about...” or, “At last October’s Forum at EPFL, your colleague Melissa Strathberg mentioned that ABB was developing a new unit in circular energy storage design...” or, “In last week’s The Economist, the focus of the “Science and Technology” section was entirely on new wave-based refractors in cell-level research...” etc.)

Dare to propose innovative or original solutions and/or improvements in the “Us” section, and describe what you would contribute. If you’re not yet comfortable with this, however, a more traditional closing is acceptable: “I am taking the liberty of sending you a copy of my CV, and I would be very pleased to discuss this exciting opportunity with you in person.”
Participate in workshops

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Contact us: cc@epfl.ch