

Law School

Cover Letters and Resumes: Critical Tools for Alternative Career Searches



By Susan Gainen

Moving from traditional practice to an alternative career is a complicated process that requires research, networking, and accepting that not everyone is a fan of lawyers. Cover letters and resumes that tell your story are critical tools that can help or hurt your search.

Best Resumes

Resumes are retrospective. They tell your employment history and success when they are crafted with language that makes you accessible to a prospective employer. When poorly drafted and larded with irrelevant information, they can spell doom. Some guidelines:

- Keep jargon to a minimum. Spell out acronyms. Anything that distracts a reader from understanding what you did (“What the heck is ‘ACRUM’?”) can mark the end of your candidacy.
- Employ meaningful specifics (how many people did you supervise? How much money did you save or earn? What unique problem-solving processes did you develop and implement?)
- Give enough detail to spark interest. Do not cover page after page with dense text.
- Use the correct format for the industry to which you are applying. (Education first or last? Chronological or reverse chronological?) Check with a career services professional or a professional organization’s website.

- Use one font (with bold and italic), and leave some white space. Long paragraphs of gray text are off-putting.

Best Cover Letters

The best cover letters are door openers. If they show that you understand the job for which you are applying, know some of the problems in the business and industry (two different things), and have recommendations for solutions, employers will want to talk to you.

– A letter that worked

When I applied to be a career services director after 10 years of sales, a year of law practice, and six years as a headhunter for lawyers, the essence of my cover letter, mass-mailed to 120 deans was:

Dear Dean [name spelled correctly]:

In case it is not clear why a lawyer, car sales person, and headhunter for lawyers ought to be your Director of Placement (as it was called then), here are the four constituencies of the office, some of their problems, and some of my recommendations.

The letter had two sentences about me and almost two pages about law schools and law school culture. Because law schools have the same constituencies, and to a greater or lesser degree, the same problems, I did not have to show that I knew what each dean had for breakfast.

– Another letter that worked

After a frustrating year-long attempt to switch from Big Case Litigator to director of non-profit development, the candidate dropped her singularly ineffective “pick me, I’m a lawyer” letter, and substituted:

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Dear Non-profit President:

I have served on several boards, worked on finance committees, and chaired two capital campaigns. I have always been deeply committed to [your stuff], demonstrated by my membership in [significant organizations]. I would like to be considered as a candidate for your open Director of Development position.

[Her second and third paragraphs contained a succinct description of the differences between the roles of staff and that of board members in fundraising, and the challenges of managing on-going fund-raising and capital campaigns in a stressed economy.]

[Last paragraph] In addition to my board service, I am a practicing attorney who has demonstrated commitment to public service by (short list of pro bono projects). I hope to be able to harness my knowledge of board service, my commitment to [your stuff] and the technical skills that I bring as a lawyer in service of [name of organization].

Leading with “Pick me, I’m a lawyer” distracted employers from her relevant experience, commitment to their work, and her transferrable skills. Three weeks after her re-write, she had job offers.

– First things first

Before firing up a word processor to create cover letters and resumes for an alternative career search, law students and grads must:

- **Decide to conduct an alternative career search.** Unless you like to write resumes for sport or someone has called you out of the blue to apply for a particular job, making a firm decision to change jobs will ignite your search. If you are waffling, your search may never get off the ground, and its lack of motion and action will haunt you.
- **Understand why you want to pursue an alternative path.** It will be the first question that everyone asks, so you will need a compelling and coherent narrative as an elevator speech.
- **Understand why you want to make a change.** Carving out a new career path is neither for the faint of heart nor for those who are unwilling or unable to focus. Students without traditional law experience with which to compare, must explain why, after law school, an alternate path makes sense. Experienced attorneys must answer whether they are running toward something or running away?¹ If you hate your colleagues, changing employers and doing the same job will do the trick. If your primary life problem is in your personal relationships, a new job may exacerbate the problem or serve as an excuse to avoid it.

- **Decide what jobs or industries interest you.** This requires research. “Wishin’ and hopin’ and thinkin’ and prayin’” was on the juke box in my junior high, it is not a strategy for sparking inspiration. Begin to do substantive internet and face-to-face research so that you know what specific jobs require.

Don’t forget to ask about:

- **Credentials and training.** Does this new job require more training or can you get by with serious self-study, apprenticeships, or volunteer internships?
- **Compensation ranges and systems.** What are the salary ranges? How are people paid (salary, commission, draw-against-commission)? Can you realistically expect to be paid more because you have a JD and, perhaps, some legal experience?
- **Warts-and-all reality check about what living in the job really means.** If you are leaving law practice because you found that big case litigation felt like writing the 100-year term paper in a room all by yourself, applying for a research or policy position in which you must spend weeks at a time in a remote library may bring you to the third level of hell. There is no point in applying for a fantasy job. When reality crashes all around you, you will deeply regret doing half-hearted research.
- **How work gets done.** Collaboration? Isolation? Command-and-control? Close supervision? Fierce independence? Don’t forget to ask.
- **Characteristics of people who succeed.** Don’t be bamboozled by glittering generalities like “entrepreneurial spirit.” Ask for meaningful specific information that will demonstrate images of success in this industry and at this employer.
- **What failure looks like.** You know by now that every job isn’t right for every person. Typical interview questions will not extract information about failures and outliers. Ask for clear descriptions of what failure looks like.²

Consider requirements against your experience

- What skills do you have that are transferrable to this new work?³ How can you explain them to a prospective employer? Chief among lawyers’ attraction is a set of communication and analytical skills that begin to be honed during first year with IRAC. Law-trained people can take a metaphorical bushel basket of facts, create a coherent narrative, and spot critical issues. Learn to explain that skill in ways that will show its value to prospective employers.
- What training do you need? How willing are you to get it on your own dime and on your own time?

Explore professional development paths and protocols.

- Many successful career changers have found their footing after attending conferences. They watched professionals in action, listened to programs that addressed hot topics, and felt welcomed (or not) by strangers who might later become colleagues.
- If public and private law practice hierarchy is driving you toward an alternative path, make no moves without a clear understanding of the layers of authority and the levers of power in a new industry.

– **Along the way**

- Tell everyone you know that you are looking for a job. The more specific that you can be about the details (industry, title, etc.), the easier it will be for people to help you. Asking for “a job, any job,” makes it hard for your personal and professional contacts to help you.
- Follow the news. You can create job leads by contacting people and organizations in the news. Don’t be the last to know when your dream job is legislated out of existence.
- Remember that lawyers are not every employer’s universal favorite hire. Sometimes it is because they lack understanding of lawyers’ roles. One of my friends worked for a financial institution’s CEO who asked “Why must we have “A-level compliance? Isn’t C-level compliance good enough?” Sometimes it is because they have worked with arrogant and obstinate lawyers who talked down to everyone and failed to explain anything. Part of every alternative career job search requires assuring prospective employers that you are not a jerk.

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¹ <http://www.passthebaton.biz/2012/10/one-consideration-before-beginning-job.html>

² <http://www.passthebaton.biz/2012/10/one-consideration-before-beginning-job.html>; <http://www.passthebaton.biz/2010/07/what-does-it-take-to-fail-going-to-work.html>

³ <http://tessaarmstrong.blogspot.com/2011/06/how-transferrable-skills-help-lawyers.html>