

Why nobody calls when you apply for a job

By [Rick Newman](#) April 28, 2014 10:22 AM [The Exchange](http://finance.yahoo.com/blogs/the-exchange/why-nobody-calls-when-you-apply-for-a-job-180120754.html)
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In this Wednesday, Dec. 12 2012 photo, Taneshia Wright, of Manhattan, fills out a job application during a job fair in New York. Economists forecast that employers added 155,000 jobs in December, according to a survey by FactSet. That would be slightly higher than November's 148,000. The unemployment rate is projected to remain at 7.7 percent. (AP Photo/Mary Altaffer)

Trisha Zulic, a hiring recruiter based in San Diego, got an email from a job applicant recently with a single word in the subject line: "Management." The email itself included only four words: "Attached is my resume." Zulic was trying to fill management jobs at four different companies, so she emailed back and asked which position the applicant was applying for. The response she got: "Any company. Management."

At that point, she moved on to the next candidate. "He didn't even know what job he was applying for," Zulic says. "I didn't even look at his resume."

As the economy recovers and hiring picks up, one vexing problem remains: People who have been out of work for more than a few months still find it extremely difficult to get a job. Financial stress on the jobless has intensified this year, as federal benefits for the long-term unemployed expired. The Senate passed a bill to reinstate those benefits, but so far the House of Representatives has kept it on ice. More than 4.5 million Americans count as long-term unemployed, and millions more have given up even looking for a job, though some are tiptoeing back into the market as they hear about hiring picking up.

"Apply for what you're qualified for"

People applying for job after job might easily imagine cold-hearted hiring managers simply tossing piles of resumes into the trash, without even giving them a look. Yet applicants such as Mr. Management compound the problems created by a flood of resumes, a scarcity of jobs and overworked recruiters doing more with less, like everybody else. "Applicants are actually causing the problem by applying for everything," says Zulic, director of human relations for outsourcing firm Efficient Edge. "Apply for what you're qualified for, not what you're not qualified for."

From a job-seeker's perspective, it's rational to apply for every job available. Yet one of the biggest complaints is firing off hundreds of resumes and rarely, if ever, hearing

back from employers. Sarah Dennis is a graphic designer based in Albuquerque who estimates she's applied for more than 200 jobs during the past two years, including retail jobs and other positions that don't require any of her specialized skills. Most of the time she hears nothing — not even a confirmation that her application arrived. Of six or seven interviews, none has led to a job. "Usually they say, 'We'll get back to you in two or three days,' but then you hear absolutely nothing," Dennis says. "It's very, very frustrating." If there's a flaw on Dennis's resume or her approach to job-hunting, nobody has told her.

Some job applicants attempt a kind of sorcery to raise the odds their resume will get a look, highlighting certain keywords or arranging sentence structure in a way they think will get more attention. That may actually be shrewd. Some employers use software to search for keywords in resumes and ease the burden on harried recruiters who don't have time to read thousands of resumes for every position. Even when there's no software involved, Zulic says she'll put hundreds of resumes in one folder on her computer, then manually search for relevant keywords such as "C++" (a programming language), "five years' experience," "electrician" and, yes, even "management."

Still, many applicants make basic mistakes that help explain why they never hear back from employers. Some people apply by email with a resume attached but no message in the email, hoping that will force the recruiter to open the attachment. Bad idea: That just adds to the recruiter's workload, making a blowoff more likely. A crisp, four- or five-sentence email explaining what you're looking for, by contrast, will make it easier for the recruiter to know what you're after.

Recruiters also advise people to send resumes in .pdf format, which can be secured in read-only mode. Many people send Word or Excel documents, which can be inadvertently distorted and even tampered with if, say, somebody processing the resume wants a friend to get the job and is venal enough to sabotage other people's resumes.

A [new survey](#) from the Society for Human Resource Management found that, on average, it takes less than five minutes for a decision to be made on whether a candidate's resume is strong enough to push a candidate to the next level in the hiring process. Among other notable points in the survey: When asked what could give a candidate an edge against the competition, 66% of employers said they prefer chronological resumes (with education and experience in reverse order), 43% want to see resumes in bulleted format and 43% prefer resumes to be tailored to a specific industry.

A real turn-off

Many applicants also reveal the stress they're under after months or years of job-hunting, which can promptly turn

off a potential employer. “There’s desperation out there, and plenty of it,” says Paul Belliveau, managing director at Avance HCM Advisors, a strategic human-relations firm. “Some people may be so frustrated or discombobulated they say the wrong things, especially if lucky enough to get an interview.”

With competition for jobs still fierce, finding a way to stand out from other job-seekers is more important than ever. One 10-year-old girl, whose father has been looking for a job for three years, even found a way to [pass her dad’s resume to Michelle Obama](#) during a recent White House question-and-answer session for kids.

Most people probably can’t get in touch with the First Lady, so a little extra creativity is required. Zulic came across one applicant for a marketing job who had posted a [three-minute YouTube video](#) highlighting some of her prior work, along with her future ambitions. She got the job, beating out hundreds of others. Such video resumes will probably become more common, but for now, a well-made video seems sure to get a recruiter’s attention.

With so many applications arriving online, a human touch can be another way to gain an advantage. Andrea Johnston of Grand Rapids lost her job as an operations manager at a hotel last summer, when the company relocated. Her next job as the office manager for a dentist ended when the dentist’s wife decided to take over the job. Over the next several months, Johnston sent out more than 600 resumes, being careful to avoid many common traps. “I wasn’t applying for everything,” Johnston says. “I figured a lot of resumes went through software, so I’d cater them to the job that was available.” For her efforts, she got a grand total of one phone call in return — and no interviews.

Then she attended a local career fair, where she applied for an opening for an executive assistant and got a call the next day that led to a temporary job. More surprising than the quick response was that she had sent in an online application for a similar job at the same company just a few weeks earlier — and heard nothing.

Johnston now hopes being at the new company will help her get to know people and gain an inside track on any full-time jobs that open up. Such insider connections can yield a key edge, especially with so many faceless applicants piling into email queues.

Those without a building pass can still do a bit better than sending resumes to a blind email address. Belliveau suggests doing phone work or other sleuthing to get in touch with at least one person involved in hiring at the target company, then persuading that “initial plant” to give you a few more contacts who might provide info on the status of your application or other openings.

It can also help to use LinkedIn or other social networks to identify people who work in human resources at the company you’re interested in, then finding a pretext to start a conversation with them. “Smart applicants usually find some compelling reason to engage whoever they’re contacting,” Belliveau says. “You can frame it by saying you want somebody’s valued opinion.” The fact is, you do, because that person may be able to help you figure out how to get hired once and for all.

Rick Newman’s latest book is [Rebounders: How Winners Pivot From Setback To Success](#). Follow him on Twitter: [@rickjnewman](#).