

THE EMPLOYMENT APPLICATION: MORE THAN A FORMALITY

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With a tightening economy, those employers fortunate enough to be hiring can't afford to make bad hiring decisions. Among other problems, bad hires can result in high turnover, low production, workplace disruption, abuse of benefits and creation of legal risks.

Many bad hires can be avoided by simply taking the time to carefully review an employment application before the interview process even begins. Many applicants who will be problem employees if hired provide clues on the application that they are a problem waiting to happen. When the employment application is treated as nothing more than a "formality," these indicators often are missed, and bad hires made.

The following are potential "red flags" that you should watch for, which may disqualify the applicant from further consideration prior to the interview, or at least prompt a number of questions to be asked during the interview.

Start With a Good Application. The answers are only as good as the questions. If possible, use an application tailored to your company or at least to your industry. Generic, short form applications may not seek the information needed for an informed decision. Employers who are concerned that the application is too long or tedious may be looking for trouble.

Legibility and Neatness. The ability to provide legible responses on the application should be a threshold requirement for most jobs. Since many job positions require

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the ability to communicate and document in writing, someone who lacks the basic ability to write in a manner than can be read and understood by others may not be a qualified applicant. If the applicant is merely sloppy because he or she did not care enough to write more neatly, that applicant may not be a good hire for that reason alone.

Completeness. An absolute minimum requirement/skill for employment should be the ability to follow instructions and pay attention to details. One of the first indications of an applicant's ability or inability to meet these most basic requirements is the manner in which the applicant completes (or fails to complete) the employment application. After all, the instructions on an application are relatively simple and straightforward, such as the one that states that the application must be fully completed. Sloppiness, carelessness, and inability or unwillingness to follow instructions when completing an application often foreshadow these same traits in job performance.

Scratch-Outs. An application with several answers scratched out or otherwise changed may suggest sloppiness, but also should raise concerns about the truthfulness of the information provided. For example, scratching out original answers on the job history section may indicate the applicant changed the information to make his or her timeline fit together without exposing gaps, disclosing certain employers, or other potentially negative information.

Signatures. The failure to sign the application, or at-will and arbitration statement, may be a simple oversight, or it may be deliberate. An oversight suggests carelessness or lack of attention to detail. The deliberate failure to sign may indicate the applicant is not who the applicant says he or she is, or may indicate the person does not want to be bound by the agreement and releases set forth in the application. That unwillingness to accept standard policies may suggest someone who will be non-compliant in other areas. If interviewed, the applicant should be questioned about this significant "oversight."

Missing Information. The amount or nature of the missing information is key. Is the applicant merely careless, or is he or she trying to avoid disclosing certain information? Missing information could be the failure to provide a maiden name, or disclose a former address or a former employer, or reveal criminal convictions. Each question on an application

is intended to have relevance to the hiring process, and each question should be answered. If the failure to provide the information alone initially does not disqualify the applicant, applicants should be required to provide the missing information on the application and explain why he or she initially omitted it. (Don't fill in the information yourself – employers should never write on the application.)

Gaps in Employment History. Applicants with gaps of employment in excess of one-month intervals should raise concerns. Unfortunately, many hiring managers ignore this potential red flag. While there are legitimate reasons for some gaps, even legitimate reasons should raise concerns about stability if there appears to be a history or pattern. Applicants who fail to disclose reasons for gaps on the application may be attempting to conceal them or be careless in completing the application.

Frequent Job Changes. An applicant who changes jobs frequently suggests a lack of stability or may indicate an employee who had problems at previous employers. While the applicant's overall job history should be taken into account, an applicant who frequently moves from job to job should not be expected to be a long term employee.

Telephone Numbers and Addresses. Applicants who provide post office boxes instead of a residence address may be covering up information or hiding from someone. Likewise, someone who provides an 800-number or someone else's telephone number for a contact number may not be the best candidate. If interviewed, applicants should be questioned about why they have no residence address or telephone of their own.

Criminal Record. Applicants who fail to respond to questions about criminal convictions often are concealing facts that could be detrimental to their efforts to land a job. If interviewed, applicants should be required to complete this portion of the application and be questioned about why it was not completed initially. Applicants who reveal a criminal record on an application may be considered more trustworthy than ones who conceal the information, but the inquiry should not stop there. Do not be afraid to ask tough questions about the criminal history. If criminal background checks are completed, be sure to compare those results with the information provided by the applicant.

Reasons for Termination. Focus on reasons provided by applicants for leaving prior employment. Applicants terminated for performance problems or rule violations should prompt probing questions into the background facts. Applicants who provide “stock” answers for leaving such as “better opportunity,” “wanted advancement,” “needed a change” and the like should be asked to explain exactly what those phrases mean in the context of this applicant’s employment history. Many times those answers do not match the reality of the job that followed. For example, going to a job that pays less generally does not qualify as “better opportunity.”

Victim-like Responses. An indication that an applicant may be a problem, if hired, is “victim-like” responses to questions. For example, providing “disagreed with a policy” or “didn’t get along with my supervisor” or “personality conflict” or “didn’t like working conditions” or “needed a change” or “wasn’t promoted” as reasons for leaving prior employers may suggest that the applicant is unwilling to accept responsibility and willing to blame others. This applicant likely will bring those traits to the new workplace. If you interview such applicants, require them to fully explain each such response.

Résumés. Accepting a résumé in lieu of an application puts you at risk. Résumés generally do not include negative information about the applicant and are intended to cast the applicant in the best light possible. Applications purposefully seek negative information. Using a résumé as a pre-screening tool is acceptable, but the application process should be completed as well so that you have all the necessary information before making a job offer. “See résumé” responses to questions on the application should not be accepted.

The key to making a good hiring decision is to consider all these factors in context and as a whole. Generally, when there are concerns about an applicant’s “fit” with the company, those concerns are justified. Employers do not want to be in the position later of saying “I knew I should not have hired him/her.”