

## E-Application Etiquette

*By John L. Sullivan and Sue Curry Jansen* | AUGUST 31, 2005

Electronic job applications are becoming increasingly common, posing new challenges for both candidates and search committees. As professors in the technologically intensive field of communication, we were eager to take advantage of the convenience and immediacy of e-applications in a recent faculty search.

We envisioned higher application yields, better qualified applicants, and streamlined communication between the search committee and the candidates.

To our chagrin, however, we discovered that, in form and sometimes in content, e-applications suffered by comparison with paper ones. Moreover, the electronic ones produced a number of unanticipated problems for the committee.

Because job announcements are so widely circulated today -- thanks to the Internet and disciplinary-based listservs -- the number of potential applicants for every opening has increased sharply. That is both a boon to, and the bane of, academic searches. Because candidates may have hundreds of employment openings at their fingertips, they may be tempted to spread their credentials as widely as possible, applying to openings for which they are only minimally qualified. With just a few mouse clicks, candidates can now apply for 50 or 100 positions at a time, overwhelming search committees.

Admissions officers have faced the overapplication problem for a long time, which is one reason why many colleges require at least a nominal application fee. That is, of course, an unrealistic solution to the job-application glut. Instead, candidates must take it upon themselves to prevent the worst abuses of e-applications. Based upon our own experiences, we have a few suggestions to help Ph.D.'s navigate this new electronic landscape.

### To Apply or Not to Apply?

That's a good question, but one that the candidate, and not the search committee, should answer. Before even receiving an application, we have received e-mail messages from potential candidates asking us: "Should I apply for your position?"

In our experience, the applicants who send such e-mails typically either lack the requisite academic credentials or are otherwise ill-suited to the position being advertised. Instead of putting their best foot forward in the regular application process, the candidate has already created extra work for the search committee, which must, for legal reasons, carefully craft a written response to someone who may not even become a candidate.

Make an informed choice about applying for particular positions: If the position seems like a stretch for you, it probably is. Anyway, who wants to face the depressing prospect of receiving hundreds of rejection letters?

### Too Much Information

Once a thoughtful decision has been made to apply, be equally thoughtful in determining what supporting materials will build the strongest case for your candidacy. The portfolio of a conscientious job candidate includes a large array of supporting materials, such as a current CV, a research prospectus, a statement of teaching philosophy, sample publications, syllabi, a list of references, and so on.

In academe, more is usually better. In a fiercely competitive job market, it's easy to see why applicants assume that submitting more materials may improve their chances. To grab the attention of search-committee members as they wade through that first fateful review of applications, the candidate may well be tempted to put all his or her chips on the table immediately.

As veterans of several search committees, we strongly caution you against that.

We have observed that many candidates, with so many files so readily available with so few keystrokes, yield to the temptation to send too much too soon. We urge candidates, especially electronic applicants, to send only what is specified in the job announcement. Good search committees know exactly which materials they need to complete an initial review of applications. Trust their judgment.

Some candidates direct search-committee members to their Web sites for more materials. That approach has the virtue of limiting information overflow, but there are pitfalls here as well. When job announcements ask for a writing sample, candidates shouldn't simply respond: "See my Web site."

That response immediately creates more work for already overworked (and potentially grumpy) search-committee members. Additionally, when directing others to a personal Web site, make sure that it is clean, organized, and easily navigable. If candidates direct potential employers to a homepage with lots of personal information (such as which mental-health medications the candidate has been taking -- a true story), that strategy can clearly backfire.

#### Don't Neglect the Cover Letter

The cover letter is crucial, since it is the place where a candidate can organize and selectively reference a larger cache of materials, while simultaneously demonstrating good communication skills and command of academic etiquette. To forgo the carefully crafted and precisely targeted letter can be a lethal error; and it is an error to which electronic applicants seem especially prone, perhaps because formal letters feel artificial or stodgy in cyberspace.

Don't make that mistake. A CV, accompanied only by a few lines of explanation via e-mail, is an incomplete application.

#### Keep It Professional

E-mail is a quasi-anonymous medium, so candidates may feel that appearances don't matter. That is another classic mistake. For example, candidates should pay attention to the e-mail addresses that they use for submitting important application materials. Regardless of the quality of the submitted materials, it's inappropriate to send applications from e-mail account names like "hotmama57."

Our general recommendation here is one made repeatedly by job-search manuals and employment counselors, but worth repeating in the context of e-applications: From the first communication with members of the search committee to the last, candidates are always being evaluated. Whether in person or in cyberspace, appearances matter.

Other patterns in paperless applications that deviate from traditional decorum include:

- A tendency toward informality, sometimes even premature familiarity.
- A presumption that, as with other forms of e-mail, the exchange will be ongoing.
- A tendency to ignore the aesthetics of the submission.
- A habit of soliciting, too frequently, reports on the progress of the search.

In a few extreme cases, after the search was complete and all candidates had been sent diplomatic letters of rejection, we received e-mails demanding that we defend our decisions. Remember, another position for which you are a better fit may well open up at your institution of choice in the future.

In all e-mail communications, applicants should use the proper voice and tone and avoid excess familiarity and antagonizing language. If in doubt, err on the side of formality.

Electronic communications offer many potential benefits for job seekers and search committees alike. Based upon our recent experience, however, we are, for the time being, retreating from the brave new world of electronic applications and soliciting paper applications for the search we are undertaking this year. Even in the computer age, the pen is often mightier than the byte.

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