

TIPS FOR PREPARING JOB APPLICATIONS IN THE CIVIL SOCIETY SECTOR

These notes are by no means an exhaustive list of things to think about when putting together a job application in the social justice sector. Unfortunately they also won't guarantee you a job. But hopefully they will help you to submit a stronger application and improve your chances. Good luck!

General tips

- Do your homework about the organisation – by looking at their website or speaking to people who have worked there. This will enable you to tailor your application. This is very important to convince a prospective employer that you want to work at their organisation *in particular*. No-one is interested in applicants who are just spamming the world with their CVs hoping something will stick.
- Follow the application instructions. This sounds simple but if you don't include all the documents requested in the advert you risk sending a message about a lack of professionalism and inability to follow instructions.
- Be aware that prospective employers may look at your social media accounts including Facebook, twitter and Instagram.

What civil society employers are looking for

- The most important thing is to show evidence of a commitment to social justice. If you don't have internships or involvement in relevant student societies to show this, it is also OK to just express an interest in social justice work. As long as the interest is genuine – fake declarations of interest in human rights can be spotted a mile away.
- The second thing that a prospective civil society employer is looking for is an understanding of the context in which law is situated i.e. the political, economic and social realities of South Africa. This means that while marks are important, they are not the main consideration. Your prospective employer wants to get a sense of whether you understand the world in which you will be working.
- Thirdly, the public interest legal sector is currently facing a crisis of transformation. There are many discussions going on currently in the sector about diversity and transformation issues, and many initiatives currently being implemented. This means that a commitment to transforming the sector, particularly along racial and gender lines, will likely form a key part of any recruitment decisions going forward.
- Lastly, in civil society you need to demonstrate your knowledge of the Constitution. This is important in all job applications in the legal field, but particularly so in the social justice sector.

Cover letters

- Pay attention to who you address the letter to. It is always best to use the person's name if you have it. If you don't, never assume that the recipient is male by writing 'Dear Sir'. Rather include both – 'Dear Madam / Sir'. Better still, address the letter to the Director of the organisation (whose name you should know from spending time on their website).
- Good cover letters convey your hunger for the work and allow the reader a glimpse of who you are. Don't be afraid to weave your personal story into a cover letter if you are comfortable doing so.
- Give the prospective employer a glimpse of work, activities or student organisations that you have been part of.

- All prospective employers want to know why you are interested in their organisation rather than a similar one down the road. Here is where you can use the homework that you have done on the organisation.
- Always conduct a spell check on your cover letter, make sure that it is properly formatted and get someone else to proofread it for grammatical errors. You really don't want to give an unprofessional first impression.

CVs

- **Length:** If you are applying for a job in South Africa, as a rule of thumb aim for a max of a 3-4 page CV. Be aware that some other jurisdictions have different formats (e.g. in the US they use a 1 pg resume) so always make sure you know what is expected if applying outside SA.
- **What to include:**
 - Your university degrees (don't include a list of courses – this is in your academic transcript)
 - Work experience (like internships, vac work, volunteer work)
 - Leadership positions
 - Involvement in students organisations (e.g. SLSJ or BLA)
 - Interests (this gives an interviewer something more light-hearted to ask you in an interview)
 - Make sure to include only the most relevant information, which is usually the most recent (for example try to avoid including lots of detail about your high school career because prospective employers will be more interested in your university career)
 - Avoid the generic 'cut and paste paragraph' off the internet about your career goals
- **Format:**
 - It is very important to be consistent throughout your CV about font type, font size and spacing
 - Avoid flowery borders
 - Organise your CV in reverse chronological order i.e. with the most recent events at the top. For example start with your postgrad degree (if you have one), then move to your undergrad degree, then high school
 - Do not insert selfies and pictures on your CV

Writing sample

- A writing sample is a piece of writing that you have done – not a sample of your handwriting.
- If you are asked for a writing sample, choose an essay in which you have done well. If possible, try to submit something that you think will be of relevance to the organisation to which you are applying. For example, if you are applying to a gender rights organisation, try submitting a good gendered analysis that you have done rather than something on insolvency (unless it has a gendered perspective).
- Make sure that you submit a piece of work that you have written yourself (be aware that the interviewer will ask questions).

References

- A bland generic reference from someone who clearly doesn't know you well at all can sometimes do more harm than good. It is therefore very important to cultivate a relationship with at least one, but preferably two lecturers, that you can ask for a reference, and that will know you personally by the time you ask.
- Try to avoid listing friends or family members as your references. Lecturers, former employers, or office bearers in a student society in which you were involved, are preferable.

Good luck with the job search!