

Five star cover letters: Intern

This example is provided by the human resources department at Microsoft. The letter won its author a highly coveted technical internship.

The situation

Kathleen Campbell, a recruiter at Microsoft, reads *hundreds* of resumes. There's no shortage of candidates who want to work at one of the world's leading technology companies. Microsoft offers a number of 12-month internships each year in offices around Australia. The internships are designed for people who have just graduated and they are in business as well as technical roles. Competition is fierce, with hundreds of CVs received by the Microsoft recruitment team each week.

Here's what Kathleen Campbell says grabs her attention in cover letters from graduates.

- Not too short, not too long.
- Use bullet points, but not excessively.
- State why you chose this opportunity AND this employer.
 - Spell check and align your letter.
 - Provide all contact details including email.
- State your interests and achievements that set you apart from all other applicants eg university awards, sporting interests etc.
 - Presentation: it should look interesting.
 - Don't exaggerate your experience.
 - State your availability.
- Check your letter and attachment for viruses.

The 5-star letter

Here's the letter by Isabelle Coverdale which won her an interview — and the job! "This is a great letter. It's well written, highlights current projects and degree background and best of all, includes her technical skills. Isabelle also showed her motivation when she mentions what an invaluable experience she believes this would be," comments Kathleen.

Dear Sir/Madam

I wish to apply for the position of Technology Specialist Intern as advertised [publication] on [date]. I believe I would enjoy the challenge and the opportunity to learn provided by this position. I also recognise the invaluable experience that would be gained working with the largest name in the industry.

I am currently completing my Bachelor of Engineering (Electronics)/Bachelor of Information Technology (Computer Science) degrees at [university]. Over the past two years in particular, I have achieved an average Grade Point of 4.96 (on a 7 point ascending scale) in subjects completed. I have attained academic excellence in subjects involving large professional-style projects, communications, management and business skills.

My involvement in the operation of EESEC, the largest single-campus student society in Queensland, has strengthened my leadership, teamwork, problem-solving and decision-making abilities and has enabled me to acquire expertise in all facets of successful business administration. I believe that these factors, along with my broad information technology and engineering knowledge base, my extensive experience with the Microsoft suite of products and my personal skills such as initiative, creativity, adaptability and a willingness to learn will enable me to excel in the role of a Microsoft Intern.

Please find attached my resume and academic transcript. I would appreciate the opportunity of an interview and I can be contacted at the above addresses, on my home phone [telephone number] or via a

message left on my paging service [number].

Yours faithfully

Isabelle Coverdale

Job Title: Programmer/developer

Ability to learn new skills

Q: What courses did you find easiest/hardest at school?

A: Use this question to find out the type of learning the candidate has excelled at in the past. Was it more theory-based, or more quantitative in nature? Compare the candidate's response to the types of things he or she will need to learn for the position being applied for. Do the two match up?

Q: How long did it take you to get up to speed in your last job?

A: Candidates will generally say it took them very little time to get up to speed. Press the candidate by asking him or her what steps were taken to quicken the learning process. A good response will show the candidate went out of his or her way to learn the skills necessary to excel in the job.

Q: In which type of working environment do you learn best?

A: This question will help you learn which type of atmosphere the candidate thrives in. Compare his or her response to your company's environment. Will the candidate be comfortable and able to learn new skills in the job he or she is applying for? Take note of how much the candidate's previous learning took place in structured environments versus how much took place in more informal environments.

Q: What skill areas do you think you need to improve on?

A: Use this question to find out how aware the candidate is of his or her own abilities. A good response will show that the candidate has identified specific areas where he or she would like to improve his or her performance. Follow up by asking the candidate what he or she thinks would be the best way to improve those skills.

Ability to meet responsibilities independently

Q: What are some of the biggest responsibilities you've had in the past?

A: Use this question to find out how much responsibility the candidate has taken on in the past. Press the candidate to find out the specific types of responsibilities with which he or she was entrusted. Find out whom he or she reported to and how frequently. Compare the responsibilities the candidate describes with those he or she will have in the position being applied for. How similar is the reporting structure in your company to the one that the candidate is used to?

Q: Describe a time when you had to figure out a difficult problem on your own. How did you go about it?

A: This question will help you assess the candidate's ability to work independently on unfamiliar projects. A good response will show that the candidate used available resources to deliver the best solution possible. Focus on the end result. Ask the candidate how happy he or she was with it. Top candidates will show that they are able to create something out of nothing and are good at keeping a project moving forward even when supervision is lacking.

Q: How do you keep yourself motivated?

A: Top candidates will be able to identify several internal motivating factors that help them through difficult times. Good examples include competitiveness, pride, and a general desire to do things well. Press the candidate to identify instances when the motivating factors he or she describes led to success.

Q: Tell me about a time when you felt you didn't meet your responsibilities.

A: Most candidates will be taken aback by this question. Press the candidate to describe an experience, at work or elsewhere, when he or she didn't meet his or her end of the bargain. Ask the candidate what he or she learned from the experience. A good response will show that the candidate takes responsibilities seriously and is upset when he or she fails to deliver what was promised.

Attention to detail

Q: Describe a project you worked on that required very close attention to detail.

A: Look for hard evidence of the candidate's ability to keep track of details. A good response will detail the different information that the candidate was required to stay on top of and will show how he or she managed to keep track of it all.

Q: How do you stay organized?

A: Someone who pays attention to details generally has an established way of keeping track of things. A good response will show that the candidate has a system for staying on top of things and makes staying organized a major part of his or her work.

Q: Can you provide some examples of instances when you've discovered errors in your work or someone else's?

A: Look for concrete examples of the candidate noticing things that slipped by others. A good response will show that the candidate has a tendency to check and double-check things.

Q: How do you know if a project you are working on is going well?

A: A good response will show that the candidate does not rely just on his or her own gut feeling of how things are going. Rather, the applicant will have specific, measurable milestones that allow him or her to track his or her own progress and that of the entire project.

Creativity

Q: What type of working environment makes you creative?

A: Use this question to find out if the candidate will be comfortable working in a creative position in your company. Does the environment he or she describes match your own company's environment? Get a feel for the type of people that bring out creativity in the candidate. Compare those people to your present team.

Q: What is the most innovative thing you have done in your previous job?

A: Use this question to assess how innovative the candidate is based on the example(s) he or she provides. Does the candidate's level of innovation meet the requirements of the position for which he or she is applying?

Q: What types of changes did you implement at your last job?

A: This question lets you assess how much of an impact the candidate had on the last department he or she worked in. Note the kinds of changes the applicant implemented. How would such changes go over in the department the candidate is applying to?

Q: How do you encourage creativity in coworkers?

A: A good response will detail several methods the candidate has used in the past to generate good ideas or creative thinking within a group. Press the candidate on how successful his or her methods were. How well would the candidate's methods work in your company?

Internet experience

Q: How long have you been using the Internet?

A: Use this question to get an idea of the amount of time the candidate spends online. How long has he or she been online? What does the candidate spend time online doing? If you're concerned about the candidate's lack of formal Internet experience, pay attention to see if he or she has a grasp of the medium based on personal use.

Q: Tell me about some websites that you like and dislike. Why do you like or dislike them?

A: A good response will show that the candidate understands what makes an effective website and can be articulate about his or her online preferences. Follow up by asking how the candidate might apply some of the things he or she likes about other sites to your website. Press the applicant to explain why he or she thinks certain things don't work online. See how well the candidate understands the user's experience online and how well he or she can apply that understanding to your business.

Q: Tell me what you think of our website.

A: Try to get a sense of how much time the candidate has spent looking at your website. A good response will show the candidate has done considerable research and formed opinions about your site. Ask the candidate what he or she likes or dislikes about the site. Ask if he or she has any specific suggestions about how to improve your site. If the candidate is applying for a position that deals directly with an area of your site, make sure he or she can provide ideas and suggestions for it. See if the candidate

possesses an understanding of the Web that is at least intelligent, and that at best will upgrade your company's Web presence.

Q: What gets you really excited about the Internet?

A: A good response will show that the candidate has a passion for the Internet and its potential. Look for specific technologies or applications that excite the candidate. Press the candidate to describe an instance when an experience online made him or her want to get involved with the Internet, or with an aspect of Internet work that was new to the applicant.

Problem-solving ability

Q: Describe some recent decisions you've made which carried more than the usual element of risk.

A: Different candidates will be comfortable with different levels of risk. Use this question to understand how averse to risk the candidate is. Follow up by proposing a risky business decision and ask the candidate what would be his or her approach to solving the problem. A good response will show that the candidate would take the time to consider carefully all possible actions before making a decision.

Q: Tell me about a time when a problem was not solved the way you would have liked.

A: This question can help you gauge the candidate's ability to deal with problems. Probe the candidate about the method in which the problem was solved and why he or she was dissatisfied with the result. Ask him or her what lessons were learned from the experience. A good response will show that the candidate learned from the experience and will apply what he or she learned to problems encountered in the future.

Q: Give me three examples of the types of problems you like to solve.

A: Compare the candidate's answers to the type of problems he or she will face in the position for which he or she is applying. Then present a sample problem that the candidate likely would face on the job. Ask how he or she would approach it, and gauge whether the candidate's approach would make sense in the position for which he or she is applying.

Q: How do you approach solving a problem?

A: Use this question to get an understanding of the candidate's thought processes. How does he or she like to attack problems? Take note of the resources and time involved in the candidate's approach. Does his or her problem-solving method make a good fit with your company's culture and resources?

Project management skills

Q: How do you organize and plan for projects?

A: This question allows you to assess the candidate's approach to project management. Does he or she use a structured approach or a more informal process? Compare the candidate's style to that of your company. Would this person get along with other employees at your company?

Q: Tell me about a time when a project you were in charge of fell behind schedule. What did you do about it?

A: The best project managers identify potential problems before they occur and build time into their schedules to deal with unexpected obstacles. Listen to see how the candidate has responded to problems in the past and how effective his or her actions were in keeping the project on schedule.

Q: Tell me about a new process or idea you implemented that was difficult to bring to completion. What approach did you take to get others to go along with the process or idea?

A: Assess the candidate's team-building capabilities. What methods did he or she use to get everyone involved and excited about the project? How effective would those methods be in your company? Good responses will detail how the candidate's efforts helped drive the project to completion.

Q: Tell me about a time you prioritized a number of tasks for a project. How did you go about it?

A: Use this question to get an idea of how the candidate breaks up a large amount of work. Note the candidate's thought process in prioritizing. How did she decide which tasks needed immediate attention and which could be put off until later? A good response will demonstrate the candidate's "big picture" understanding of a project, as well as his or her ability to make knowledgeable decisions about what needs to get done on a smaller scale.

Results orientation

Q: Do you set performance standards for yourself, and, if so, how?

A: This question will help you assess the candidate's personal standards. Good responses will detail how the

candidate measures success for himself or herself. Ask for an instance when the candidate put a lot of effort into completing a project that he or she was satisfied with. Listen to gauge the candidate's sense of ownership and pride in his or her work.

Q: What have you done in your current or past position to improve your organization's key metrics?

A: This question is designed to identify candidates who take strong ownership of their work. Good answers will detail concrete examples of how the candidate has had a direct impact on his or her company's bottom line. Compare the candidate's response with what you expect from the position for which he or she is applying. The candidate's response should be confirmed through reference checks.

Q: Tell me about a time when you weren't pleased with your performance. What did you do about it?

A: This question helps you assess how well the candidate deals with failure or disappointment, and how he or she measures workplace success. Press the candidate to learn about lessons he or she has learned from times when the candidate feels he or she didn't perform well, and about any changes the candidate has made in the way he or she does things to make sure the candidate doesn't make the same mistakes moving forward.

Q: Describe a new skill you learned recently.

A: Top performers will take the initiative to learn new skills on an ongoing basis. Have the candidate explain the circumstances under which he or she learned a new skill. A good response will detail the skill learned and how it impacted his or her job performance. This question can also give insight into how quickly the candidate learns and under what circumstances he or she learns best.

Teamwork/interpersonal skills

Q: Describe a time when you had to arrive at a compromise or had to help others arrive at a compromise.

A: This question allows you to assess how the candidate views his or her role within a team. Does the candidate view himself or herself as a consensus builder? How would his or her teamwork skills work in the department for which he or she is interviewing?

Q: Give an example of an instance when you worked with someone you found it difficult to get along with. How did you handle the situation?

A: This question will help you assess how the candidate has handled difficult interpersonal relationships in the past. Good responses will show that the candidate has had experience dealing with various personality types and is comfortable with his or her ability to handle such situations. Pay close attention to the candidate's attitudes toward dealing with difficult people. Is he or she open and understanding, or easily annoyed? Looking back, how does the candidate feel today about "difficult" people from his or her past?

Q: Tell about a time when you worked with a colleague who was not completing his or her share of work. What did you do?

A: Use this question to find out how the candidate deals with an under-performing coworker. Press the candidate to name specific actions he or she took to try to improve an employee's performance. How successful were those actions? The candidate's response should be confirmed through reference checks.

Q: Describe a favorite work experience and tell me why it was satisfying.

A: Compare the experience the candidate describes to your company's own working environment. Pay close attention to how the candidate interacted with his or her coworkers in the example provided. Would the candidate have similar interactions within your company?