DO'S AND DON'TS

APPLYING TO THE UN

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APPLYING TO THE UNITED NATIONS

Many development professionals have the United Nations on their employer wish list. For those looking to gain an edge in the recruitment process, what better way than to hear from those who will decide whether your application will make it past the U.N.'s rigorous screening process?

This is why we've put together this guide featuring recruiter insights from various top U.N. organizations and agencies, including UNICEF, UNEP, IOM, UNHCR, UN Women, and many more. Learn first-hand what you should do before applying to any U.N. role, as well as the top mistakes to avoid.



DO: USE KEYWORDS WISELY

To advance to the assessment phase, where you may be contacted for a job interview, **candidates must pass a two-stage screening system,** explains Edwin Onyach, an administrative assistant with UNEP.

"The first screening happens when the applicant applies. An artificial intelligence tool screens the application to see whether the applicant meets the minimum requirements. The second stage of screening is done by the hiring manager," Onyach says.

To ensure your application passes the first screening hurdle, it's critical to **include "relevant keywords and descriptions used in the job description,"** says Sajid Ali, UNICEF's deputy director of human resources. Hiring managers will also be on the lookout for these during manual screenings.

#PROTIP

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"You need to say what and why you fit the job. Identify the keywords in the vacancy announcement and relate to them. You should make it easy for the recruiter to read your application and gain insight into the relevance of your experience."

Lykke Andersen
Head of talent acquisition and people programs, UNDP

DON'T: BLOW OFF YOUR COVER LETTER

U.N. agencies get flooded with applications, so you need to clearly demonstrate the added value you bring, says Skender Nushi, UNHCR's former chief of talent development and performance, now with UNICEF.

"The generic pool of candidates tends to focus on the tasks rather than the achievements. … **You want to have an engaging storyline**," he says. The cover letter is an opportunity to do this and increase your chances of advancing past the screening stage.

"We're looking for individuals who share our passion to help build a more resilient, sustainable, and inclusive future," says Satomi Ogata-Knutsen, HR specialist for talent outreach with UNOPS. "To demonstrate this, **my advice is to use the cover letter**, which is not mandatory but highly recommended."



3 mistakes to avoid when writing your next cover letter

DO: READ THE JOB DESCRIPTION CAREFULLY

This seems like a no-brainer, but recruiter after recruiter continues to tell us how many applicants fail to read the job description properly. In fact, it is **the biggest mistake applicants make**, says Eva Maria Jansen, human resource officer at the U.N. Secretariat.

Ask yourself these three questions:



WHERE IS THE JOB LOCATED?

As obvious as it may be, a recurring issue is that people "don't look at the location," says Jansen. HR will go through the entire application process and make the job offer, and only then will some recipients realize where the job is based — turning down the role as a result.



DO I HAVE THE RIGHT SKILLS?

Something "that is unique to the U.N. system is that the U.N. Secretariat has generic job profiles and titles," says Monica Otemba, administrative officer with UNEP. "Even with the same job title, they are different roles … and require very different skill sets," she says.



DO I HAVE THE REQUIRED EXPERIENCE?

There's a difference between desired and required qualifications. "If it says we need five years of relevant work experience and the person has four years and 11 months, the software will screen that person out because it's not five years," says Jansen.

Find your fit by understanding UN job categories

DON'T: MISUNDERSTAND LANGUAGE REQUIREMENTS

There are two common mistakes applicants make relating to languages. First, many native English speakers don't include English as one of their languages in the application form.

Jansen advises that all applicants need to fill out their fluency in all four areas of speaking, understanding, writing, and reading. **The system screens for languages**, and if English isn't there, the application will automatically be disqualified.

Second, **applicants are often too modest** about their level of English and will select "confident" instead of "fluent" from the drop-down menu, which also results in them being screened out, she says.

#PROTIP
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"We lose out on a lot of really good people because they are just too humble."

Eva Maria Jansen
Human resource officer, U.N. Secretariat

DO: MAKE THE RIGHT CONNECTIONS

"A lot of people think, 'Well, I've put an application in, and I'll leave that to the recruitment gods.' But there's actually quite an **important component of active networking** so that people are aware of what you do and what your reputation is, and so that we are actually looking for your application rather than leaving it to chance," says Michael Emery, director for human resources management at IOM.

How networking can strengthen your UN candidacy:



REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

According to Emery, knowing people's perceptions is very important "because it's going to impact on reference checks." Plus, the more positive interactions you have with those in the sector, the more likely it is that you'll get recommended for a position.



GAINING CROSS-CULTURAL CONTEXT

"What's appropriate in some national contexts is very inappropriate in the multilateral sector," Emery says. For example, in many cultures, bestowing gifts is a time-honored part of doing business, but it is not accepted in the multilateral sector.



HIDDEN JOB OPPORTUNITIES

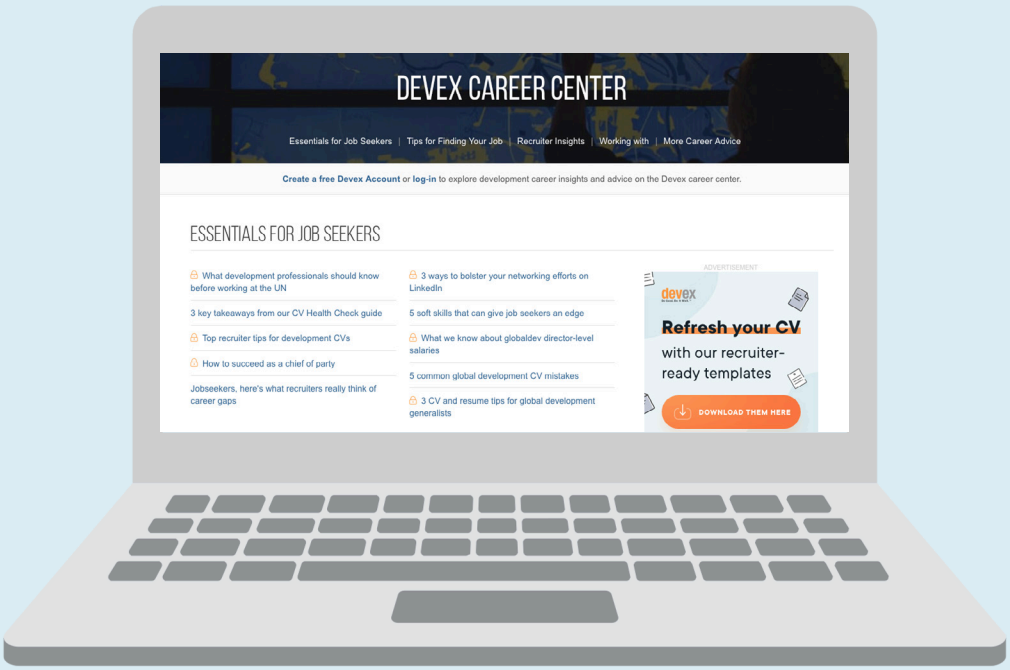
While UN staff positions are typically posted publicly, many consulting roles are not, as recruiters need to move quickly to fill short-term roles. These opportunities are often discovered through word of mouth, says Loksan Harley, a veteran consultant with IOM.

DON'T: GIVE UP AFTER ONE TRY

Given how many applications recruiters receive for U.N. roles, chances are that you won't land a role with your very first job application. If working for the U.N. is your dream, you'll need to be persistent and **open to gaining new skills** and experience that may be missing before you ultimately succeed.

"We need people who are passionate. Don't give up, and keep applying. **A lot of us who are in the organization have applied several times** and gained experience elsewhere and [then] come back. So keep going," says Stephan Grieb, UNHCR's deputy director of human resources.





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