

The Death of the Covering Letter (And What Replaces It?)



For the past two years, clients have consistently asked us about our attitude toward Artificial Intelligence (AI). They want to know how we use it, and what we think of candidates using it to write their covering letters.

In 2026, the pool of active jobseekers for senior roles has grown significantly, resulting in much larger candidate fields, especially for high-profile brands. Simultaneously, AI offers applicants an effortless way to generate flawless covering letters, drastically cutting down application times.

But does a frictionless application really enhance your chances of success? Can AI truly help you secure a competitive advantage for a leadership role?

The answer is both yes and no.

The Trap of Flawless Communication

Six months ago, our team learned a valuable lesson about AI.

We were preparing a recruitment proposal for a highly coveted client organisation. Following our usual approach, we thoroughly researched their challenges, mapped out concept candidates and set out a compelling strategy.

The final draft was strong. Yet there was something missing.

We decided to use AI to reformat the proposal, keeping our original information but shifting the presentation style. The result looked brilliant. We proudly sent it off – and we won the work.

Five minutes into the initial briefing, I felt a strange disconnect. It was as if we were communicating with this organisation for the very first time.

That moment taught us an essential truth: when we read material prepared by another human being, we pick up on dozens of subtle cues that reveal character, communication style and attitude.

Writing shapes how others perceive us; reading forms our view of them. When AI communicates, even when processing our original thoughts, it strips away that unique character.

This is precisely why an AI-formulated cover letter is so easy to spot. It is simply too flawless. Too polished. Too perfect.

The giveaways are consistent:

- American English spellings paired with a British English CV.
- An overabundance of long dashes.
- Identical, recycled phraseology, mechanically tailored to a client's published materials.

While using AI during a job search is tempting, we advise using it strictly for research, market intelligence, and organisational due diligence. Do not use it to draft your letter. We need to hear from you.

Critically, the process of writing a covering letter forces you to inhabit the hiring organisation's mindset. What are their challenges? How do they operate? What unique qualities do you bring to the table?

Without this deep and often quite personal immersion, it is incredibly difficult to sound convincing during an interview, especially when questions demand immediate, role-specific insights.

Over-relying on AI doesn't boost your chances; it undermines them.

Spotting the Algorithm

To test this, our team ran an experiment. We fed anonymised supporting statements from a recent executive campaign into an AI tool and asked it to determine if AI had been used to write them.

The technology looked for specific algorithmic signifiers:

- An unnatural level of consistency in polish and tone.
- An overly formulaic structure.
- A high density of abstract leadership buzzwords.
- Rigidly controlled, rhetorically balanced sentences.

The tool easily distinguished between letters that were entirely AI-generated and those that had simply been edited or polished by technology.

It defined the purely human-written letters as possessing a "natural personal voice."

We all use AI differently. I use it lightly when structuring articles like this one. While I am happy to generate my own content, it helps me ensure our insights reach you in the right format.

But when candidates over-use AI in the hope of writing something sensational, they ultimately short-change themselves.

The Future of Leadership Selection

AI experts frequently debate the future existential threats of technology. However, we can rest assured that humanity will never be replaced when it comes to emotional intelligence, conscious self-awareness and lived physical experience. By definition, AI cannot replicate any of these qualities.

For as long as humans are required to lead other humans, technological capability must be matched by a deeply human-centred approach. We have to identify who we are and what we stand for. That is the very heart of modern leadership.

In short, recruiters and employers need to know who you are as a person. If you submit a sterile, AI-generated statement, it may even force recruiters or hiring organisations to read between the lines, making your application vulnerable to misinterpretation and bias.

We will likely see the industry phase out traditional covering letters and supporting statements altogether. The future perhaps points toward highly structured CVs combined with rigorous, upfront due diligence. This will inevitably be followed by deeper, increasingly insight-led selection methods designed to uncover the real person behind the paperwork.

Some firms have suggested replacing covering letters with two-minute video pitches. While touted as an “AI-proof” alternative, the logistics are flawed.

Just a couple of weeks ago, our team reviewed a field of 190 applicants. Reviewing video pitches for that cohort alone would equate to over six hours of continuous viewing time for my team and for our client. In an era where hiring organisations are time- and cash-strapped, this approach doesn’t scale.

Guarding the Human Element

Ultimately, AI is highlighting the critical importance of the subtle, human elements of selection when it comes to leadership roles:

- Non-verbal communication in an interview setting.
- The genuine passion and veracity in a candidate’s voice.
- Authentic leadership presence, energy, and atmosphere.

These are the elements that reveal what someone will really be like to work with, how they handle pressure, and whether they can be trusted. For this reason, a purely AI-led screening process will never be suitable for selecting organisational leaders, no matter how efficient or technologically advanced we want to be.

So, executive search firms will need stay ahead of technological trends while keeping their selection methods rooted in the core human elements of leadership. As our recent Modern Leaders report highlighted, leadership remains an increasingly personal and emotional pursuit.

It is equally tempting for hiring organisations to try and use AI to identify winning candidates, cutting out costly search fees in the process. However, relying on algorithms without a deep, human assessment of a candidate’s management capabilities is a dangerous pitfall. Beware.

Effective recruitment – particularly to leadership roles – requires time and deliberate effort, regardless of the technology involved.

Our approach to first-stage interviews has already been evolving for several years. To adapt to a virtual world, we shifted away from purely competency-based questions toward deeply personal, scenario-based lines of enquiry. Today, we are taking this a step further to gain richer insights into a candidate’s true potential.

How you apply for a role, and how you think about the organisation you want to join, matters. No AI can do that thinking for you. While technology can undoubtedly improve our ability to analyse complex issues and make data-driven judgments, your greatest asset will always be your authentic self.

In the search for enduring modern leaders, maintaining that human balance is non-negotiable.

