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Ghosts in the machine

These days, it is increasingly common to find that you can use the Internet to apply for a job or a grant. This might be convenient, but is it likely to be successful? For some who recently applied for research funding from the European Union (EU), the answer seems to be a resounding 'no'. After last month's closing date for the latest round of Marie Curie Fellowships, which fund postdocs to train in a foreign country, dozens of applicants complained about an apparent online glitch.

One French hopeful, who wants to remain anonymous in the hope that the EU will give her a second chance, spent weeks piecing together her online application, clicking the 'save' icon each time she updated it. Not seeing any obvious 'submit' icon on the web page, she thought that the final click on 'save' equated to submission. She waited to receive e-mail confirmation and, when she didn't, called Brussels, where she learned that several others had called with the same complaint.

The incident serves as a cautionary tale for a larger issue. Most pharmaceutical and large biotech companies feature similar human-resources websites that include online applications. Although they are designed for ease of use, the user-friendliness lies mostly on the surface. Applications through these recruitment sites are routinely scanned electronically for key words such as 'medicinal chemistry' or 'bioinformatics', the lack of which disqualifies the application just as easily as not clicking on 'submit'.

Anyone applying online for a grant or a job in any sector would do well to remember the importance of personal contact — people who hire and fund scientists are more reliable than machines. And, for the sake of the Marie Curie hopefuls whose applications got lost in the ether, perhaps the EU will also remember the importance of the human touch.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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