



Getting it down on paper

The importance of letter writing for young people's employability

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About iCeGS

iCeGS is a research centre at the University of Derby with expertise in career and career development. The Centre conducts research, provides consultancy to the career sector, offers a range of training and delivers a number of accredited learning programmes up to and including doctoral level.

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<http://www.royalmail.com/>

Acknowledgements

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Foreword

Stephen Agar, Managing Director, Consumer and Network Access, Royal Mail

In 500 BC, Persian Queen Atossa was the first recorded person to write a handwritten letter. Since then, the medium has been used throughout the centuries to mark significant historical moments from Siegfried Sassoon's letter to the military leadership during the First World War to Martin Luther King Jr's writing to his fellow clergymen while jailed in Birmingham, Alabama. The cultural significance of letter writing cannot be understated. It has continued throughout centuries and transcends society.

Letters sent by the postal system have always been a cost effective way to swap gossip or share memories with friends and family. However, they have also played a critical role in the business community: allowing companies to pass on important information and intelligence, agree partnerships and contacts and allow organisations to manage their activities across the world. The internet has made some of these business communications instantaneous, but as this research shows it has not replaced letter writing all together.

The media has been quick to hail the death of the letter. Some young people could be forgiven for thinking that they can conduct themselves purely online. However, the employers who responded to this survey were clear that this was not the case. Letter writing still matters for business and being able to write letters remains as a key employability skill.

At the Royal Mail we were keen to fund this research because we believe that letters continue to be vital to UK plc. The research shows that this was right and that letter writing continues to be a valued skill in the workplace. Young people see the value in letter writing and recognize that it is likely to be important as they enter the world of work. Cover letters continue to be the gold standard by which employers assess a potential candidate's writing and letter writing skills. The study also shows a mismatch between young peoples' perceptions of their skills and employers confidence in these skills.

The practice of letter writing has a place in the home, in the curriculum and in the workplace. Writing well is important regardless of medium and knowing the rules of letter writing will lead to effective communication that transcends any medium. The study reflects its importance and I am happy to have the honour of introducing this piece of work.

Executive summary

This report sets out the findings from exploratory research conducted by the International Centre for Guidance Studies (iCeGS) on young people's letter writing and letter writing skills.

In recent years there has been some concern that young people's writing skills have declined. This raises the question as to whether the growth of multi-media alternatives to writing and hyper-informal forms of writing [e.g. txt spk ;-)] have resulted in a generation who are unable to write letters and other more formal pieces of extended writing. In addition professional communication is evolving and becoming increasingly diverse. However this research finds that both employers and young people continue to value letter writing as a key form of business communication.

The research employed a mixed methods approach that included: (1) a survey of young people; (2) a survey of employers; and (3) stakeholder interviews.

Key findings

The research found that letter writing continues to be an important way to communicate professionally.

Young people believed that letter writing was important both in general and for their engagement in the world of work. In general young people thought that they were good at letter writing.

Employers also reported that letter writing was important. They believed that good letter writing was important to their business and discriminated based on cover letters when hiring. However, employers had some concerns about the letter writing skills of young people.

Recommendations

In the light of the findings of this research the authors make a number of recommendations for young people, employers and educators.

Young people should	Employers should	Educators should
1. Develop their letter writing skills	4. Signal the importance of letter writing	7. Develop letter writing as part of developing literacy
2. Seek feedback on their letter writing	5. Discuss letter writing with new hires	8. Facilitate work-related learning
3. Engage in work experience	6. Provide development opportunities for existing staff	

An additional recommendation would be to recognise the need for further research on letter writing, particularly in relation to current practice in the teaching of letter writing in the education system.

1. Introduction

The proper definition of a man is an animal that writes letters.
Lewis Carroll

There have been numerous attempts to identify the key skills and capabilities that young people need to make successful transitions to the workplace.¹ A common feature of all of these frameworks is the importance of communication skills in general and written communication skills in particular.

The importance of writing and communication skills is particularly concerning as the United Kingdom has lower literacy rates among young people (16-24) than other developed countries (OECD, 2013). Research has also found that employers have reported frustration with the lack of literacy skills of young people and that young people often fail to see the relevance of writing to employment (Clark, 2013; UKCES, 2014). But, what about the writing of letters? Is this a dying art-form which has little utility in the wired world? In the explosion of new forms of communication (email, Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn) is there still a place for the careful crafting of formal letters?

We began this research with no clear idea of the answers to these questions. The research grew out of questions that the Royal Mail had posed to us about the capability of young people in the writing of letters and the value that employers placed on this capability. There was little or no research that answered either of these questions and so we determined to undertake a study with young people and employers to provide an evidence base for discussions about the place of letter writing in the contemporary labour market.

This report sets out the findings of our research. It suggests that employers continue to value letter writing as a key employability skill, that they hope and expect that the young people they employ, especially graduates, will be able to write good quality letters and that they are often disappointed with the letter writing capability of their younger employees. Perhaps more surprisingly young people also value letter writing and perceive it to be an important skill for work. Furthermore, despite employers concerns, young people typically believe that they are competent letter writers and report that they regularly write letters. The report will explore these findings in more depth before

¹ A useful synthesis of these employability skills frameworks is offered by the University of Kent at <http://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/sk/top-ten-skills.htm>.

making a number of recommendations about the way in which letter writing could be handled more effectively within the education and employment system.

Letter writing in context

Letter writing was introduced to the United Kingdom, along with a rudimentary postal system by the Romans in around 55 BC (Beale, 2005). Letters have become a vital part of our heritage and are frequently analysed in order to help researchers to understand the past. As a result vast numbers of historical letters have been preserved and studied.

In the past letter writing was not just an instrumental mode of communication, but also a popular pastime in which many people invested a lot of their time. At its most popular letter writing became a form of popular culture with the public eager to consume letters for entertainment in the form of both collections of real letters and fictional “epistolary” novels such as Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* which comprised largely or wholly of letters (Gilroy and Verhoeven, 2000).

However, the late 19th and early 20th century resulted in changes in the centrality of letter writing to popular culture. The growth of mass print culture, the telephone, the radio, the television and ultimately mobile phones, texting and the internet all offered challenges to letters. At each stage there were naysayers who predicted the imminent demise of letter writing. However, letters continued to be developed and adapted for a range of purposes, for example during the 20th century, business letters emerged as a way in which individuals, businesses and organisations could formalise various aspect of communication. Nickerson & De Groot (2008) argue that while electronic communication now dominates in business, truly formal and official communications continue to be conducted by letter. The physical nature of letters means that they provide a permanent record of business communications in a way that intangible and ephemeral modes of communication like email and the telephone do not. This meant that they offered an ideal format for the making and breaking of agreements and provided individuals with evidence that could be used to clarify what had been agreed and ultimately used in law when necessary.

Xu (2012) outlines the continued importance of the English business letter to international trade. The business letter continues to be a key component of ‘doing business’ and communicating in many sectors. Being able to express yourself flexibly in this mode is important and in some areas is central to professional practice and status. For example one clinical social work professional commented on LinkedIn in response to our survey invitation.

Templates are great but I am constantly writing about specific individualised concerns to honourable judges, drug treatment facility staff, attorneys, other mental health professionals, housing authorities, physicians/psychiatrist and more. I spend more time proof reading to make certain no errors exist because the correspondence reflects on me and credibility is established initially through letter writing skills as well as the knowledge of the topic.

This specific use of letters as a formal mode of business and professional communication forms the focus of this study. Throughout the twentieth century the formal business letter became increasingly codified with the existence of a common set of rules designed to help the writer to express themselves in a clear and acceptable way (Jenkins and Hinds, 1987). A person trained in business letter writing can reduce the amount of unintended or ambiguous meanings that may possibly be read from the text making communication seamless and universally understood. Conversely the existence of this set of rules means that those who do not understand the rules are easily identifiable and disadvantaged.

When the employers who participated in this study discussed the inadequacies of their younger members of staff's letter writing, it was usually the failure to understand these formal rules of business letter writing and other more formal types of communication that they were referring to rather than concerns about basic literacy. As one former school teacher stated, *"the ability to be able to write professionally is really important. They [young people] can write in their school books, but they associate technology with texting and they bring this into emails."* As will be seen this raises important questions about whose role it is to teach young people the rules of letter writing and other forms of business communication.

The fact that young people do not necessarily understand the conventions of letter writing does not mean that they are stupid or unable to write. They are far more likely to have spent time honing their ability to express themselves through social media than through letters. Some of these skills are transferable, but there are also important differences. A former teacher that was interviewed as part of this project stated that she saw an increase in her students using abbreviated terms (text-speak) as well as an increase in communication on texts and social media. She worried that students now believe this communication to be the norm. Another stakeholder suggested, *"I see young people using text language when they email me. It is an inappropriate style of writing. They write as if they are texting."*

As forms of communications develop and evolve it is important not to dismiss the value of these new methods. Another professional working with employers and young people suggested that employers may have a lot to learn from students who become used to communicating with as little text as possible. As businesses expand their presence on and engagement with the internet they are likely to need to get better at expressing themselves in a wide range of forms.

In this report we resist the temptation to see concerns over letter writing as either a straightforward battle between the generations or a question of whether writing letters is a better way to communicate than posting content on Facebook. For all of those who are currently in work, the range of ways in which you can communicate continues to increase. While on one level this makes communication easier than in the past on another level it multiplies the challenges associated with appropriate business communications.

The authors of this report sit opposite each other in an open plan office and constantly make decisions about how best to communicate. At various times and in various contexts we have employed letters, written memos and notes, email, text, Facebook, Whatsapp and even occasionally conversations to talk to each other. Navigating this maze of communication methods with their attendant levels of formality, detail and potential for miscommunication is a skilled job, albeit one which we often undertake unconsciously. The challenge for young people is to quickly assimilate these rules about different communication modes to allow them to communicate effectively in a business environment.

2. About the study

This research used a mixed methods approach to (1) understand the context and importance of letter writing as a communication tool for business and (2) to understand young people's attitudes toward letter writing. Surveys of both young people and employers were conducted in order to help address the research aims. In addition stakeholder interviews were arranged in order to explore emerging issues in writing skills and letter writing skills.

Survey of young people

A panel survey was commissioned from OnePoll² in December 2014 to investigate:

- young peoples' perceptions of their letter writing skills;
- whether young people were taught to write letters;
- the frequency with which young people write letters;
- whether young people believe cover letters are important to securing employment;
- whether young people believe that writing letters is an important aspect of the jobs they are interested in; and
- the frequency and adoption of informal, online communication among young people including whether they use informal speech in formal communication.

The survey had a total of 18 questions. Four questions were demographic questions. Six questions were based on a 5-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." This scaling was used to measure attitudes toward letter writing. Four questions were 'yes' or 'no' questions which captured whether respondents knew how to write two types of letters (general and formal), whether they had been taught to write a letter and whether they thought that letter writing was difficult. Three questions gauged the frequency of using letter writing and social media for communication as well as whether respondents were ever criticised for writing in "text speak".

There were 2000 responses to the survey. Sixty-six percent (66%) of respondents were females while 34% were males. Twenty-three percent (23%) of respondents were aged 16-18, 23% were 19-20, 25% of respondents were 21-22 and 28% of respondents were 23-24 years of age. The largest proportion of respondents (47%) were in full time education while 41% were employed or had an apprenticeship. Approximately 9% of respondents were unemployed and 3% of respondents classified themselves as 'other'. Most respondents (74%) were white British, 8% were Asian or Asian British (this includes Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnicities), 8% classified themselves as white other and 5% were Black or Black British (including African and Caribbean

² OnePoll is a market research company based in the United Kingdom and the United States. For more information see <http://www.onepoll.com>.

ethnicity). Approximately 1% of respondents were Chinese and 4% classified themselves as other.

Employer survey

An employer survey was created in order to investigate:

- the importance of letter writing to business;
- perceptions of young people's letter writing skills; and
- whether young people have the skills needed write letters on behalf of businesses and organisations.

Data from the employer survey were collected from December 2014 to March 2015 using convenience sampling. The survey was sent electronically to employers using databases held by the University of Derby. The email was then followed up with a telephone call in order to increase response rates. The employer survey was also sent around to strategic groups on LinkedIn such as "human resources professionals" among others. Participation in the survey was incentivised with the chance to win a £50 gift voucher for Amazon.

Thirty-one (31) survey items were constructed using both open-ended and close-ended questions. The survey included demographic questions, 10 five-point Likert scale questions and two open-ended questions. The quantitative data were analysed in SPSS and the qualitative data were imported and analysed in Nvivo.

Two hundred and thirty four (234) employers engaged with the survey. Most respondents (87%) were based in England. Table 1 lists the percentages of respondents by country.

Table 1: In which country are you based? (n=213)

	Count	Percentage
England	186	87%
Scotland	6	3%
Northern Ireland	1	1%
Wales	5	2%
Other UK	10	5%
Not based in the UK	5	2%

The largest proportion of respondents (48%) worked for large organisations with 251 or more employees. Twenty-two percent (22%) of respondents worked for organisations with 51-250 employees. Nineteen percent (19%) worked in organisations with 10 or fewer employees and 11% of respondents worked in organisations with 11 – 50 employees.

The respondents represented a broad range of 12 sectors including education, service industries and human health and social work. Table 2 displays the percentages of employers from their reported sector. Respondents worked in a range of different roles

including Senior HR Partner, Managing Director, Consultant, Economic Regeneration Officer and Policy manager among others.

Table 2: Which sector best describes your organisation? (n=154)

	Count	Percentage
Education	47	36%
Other service activities	32	16%
Human health and social work	19	12%
Professional, scientific and technical activities	18	12%
Public administration or defence	11	6%
Manufacturing	6	3%
Administration and support services	3	2%
Construction	3	2%
Transportation and storage	3	2%
Real estate	1	1%
Arts, entertainment and recreation	1	1%

Limitations of the data

The survey responses for the survey of young people were drawn from a panel and should not be considered as representative of the population of young people age 16 – 24 in the United Kingdom. However the ONS (2014) reported that 42% of young people were in full time education, 40% were employed and 18% of young people aged 16-24 were not in education employment or training therefore the population of young people broadly aligns with the survey returns.

Due to the sampling methodology of the employer survey the responses should not be considered representative of the population of businesses and organisations within the United Kingdom. In fact some sectors were disproportionately represented i.e. the education sector. In addition we noted a relatively high rate of attrition (66%) with the respondents of the employer survey. The attrition rate indicates the percentage of respondents who do not complete the entirety of the survey. Despite these limitations the insights gained from the survey offer interesting and meaningful perspectives on the current state of letter writing in businesses and organisations.

Stakeholder interviews

Stakeholder interviews were conducted with individuals in education, employer representative bodies and intermediary organisations that work to link education with employment. Seven interviews took place in December 2014 and January 2015. The interviews were semi-structured and based on six broad questions but discussions varied according to stakeholder expertise:

- In general, what are the most challenging skills deficits faced by business today?
- Are there skills deficits in writing? Does this pose a significant challenge to business?
- How important is letter writing to business?
- Are covering letters still an important aspect of the application process? Please

provide further examples.

- Do you find that young people have trouble with formal writing? Are they more likely to use short hand or text speak (e.g. lol ;)) when writing formally?
- Are schools doing a good job teaching writing and letter writing skills?

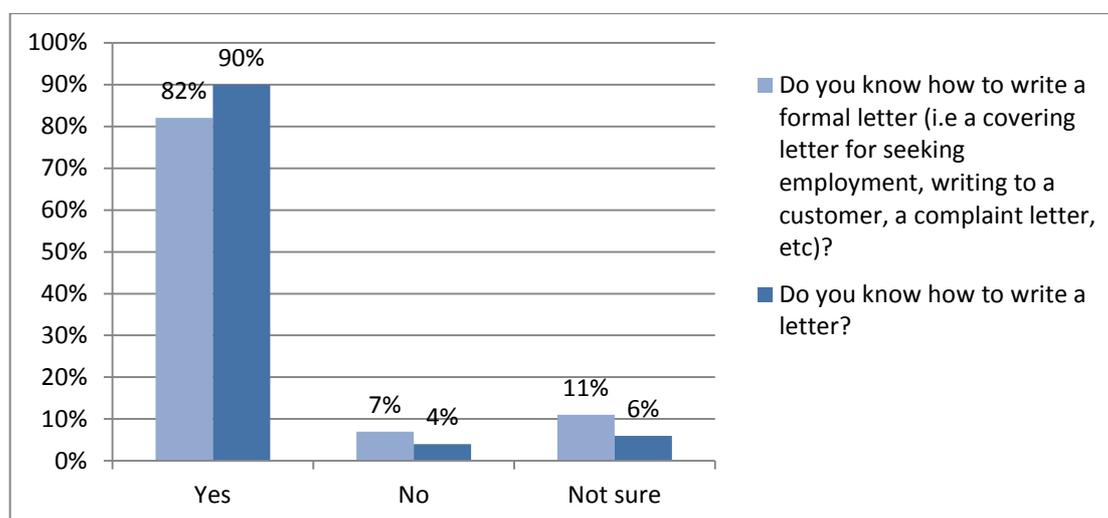
3. Young people's attitudes to letter writing

A key question that we sought to answer through this research was what are young people's attitudes to letter writing? Much commentary on the communication habits of young people emphasises their (over and mis-) use of digital communications. Headlines like "No you can't listen while you are texting" (*Daily Mail*, 19 October, 2014), "Texting naked pictures is normal, say half of British teenagers" (*Daily Mirror*, 20th August 2014) and "The new 30-a-day habit: Teenage texting on the rise" (*Daily Telegraph*, 23rd October, 2012), all create a picture of a generation that is utterly reliant on their smartphones for communication. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) found that by 2012 in excess of 99% of young people (16-24) used mobile phones and by 2014 80% of this age group were using a computer every day. However as this section will show this does not necessarily mean that young people only communicate online, nor that they do not value letter writing.

Confidence about letter writing

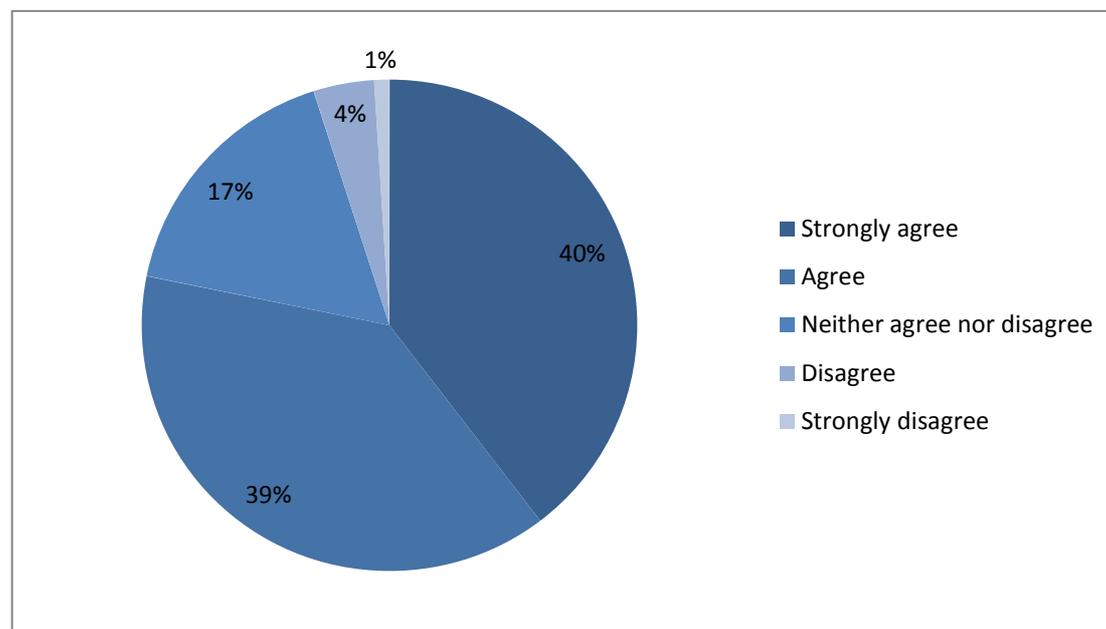
In general young people were confident about their ability to write letters. The overwhelming majority (90%) reported that they knew how to write a letter, with slightly fewer saying (82%) that they knew how to write a formal business letter (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Knowledge of letter writing. (n=2000)



Over three-quarters (76%) of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they were good letter writers (see figure 2) and over half (53%) enjoyed writing letters. A little less than one third (32%) found letter writing difficult.

Figure 2: I am a good letter writer. (n=2000)

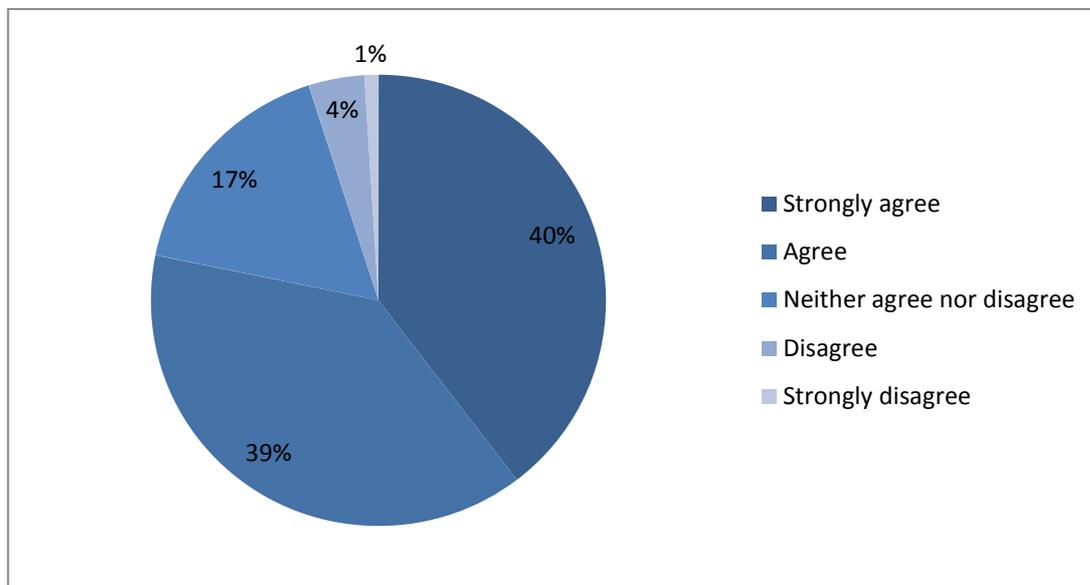


The survey suggests that young people generally rate their ability to write letters highly. As the next section will show, this confidence is not necessarily supported by the responses that we received from employers. However, the survey of young people also suggested that in addition to believing that they were skilled in letter writing, young people also believed that letter writing skills are important for work and life.

How important are letters to young people?

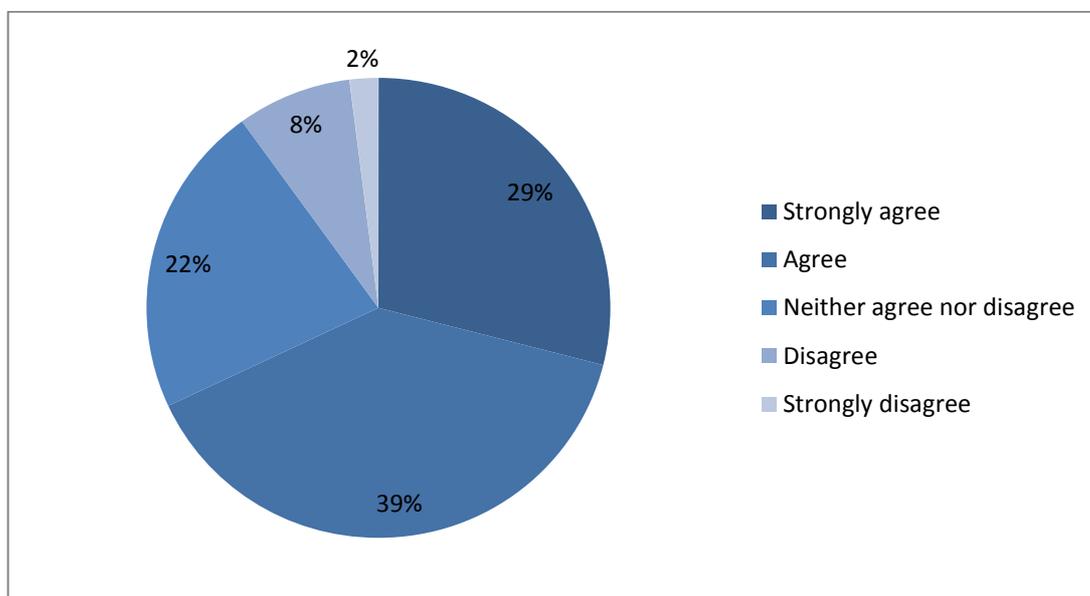
Most respondents reported that writing letters was relevant to modern life, although around a third (33%) indicated that they believed that “writing letters is a thing of the past”. Most young people in this survey believed that writing letters was particularly important in the context of securing employment and performing well in the workplace. More than three-quarters (79%) believed that cover letters was important to securing employment (see figure 3).

Figure 3: A good covering letter is important to securing employment. (n=2000)



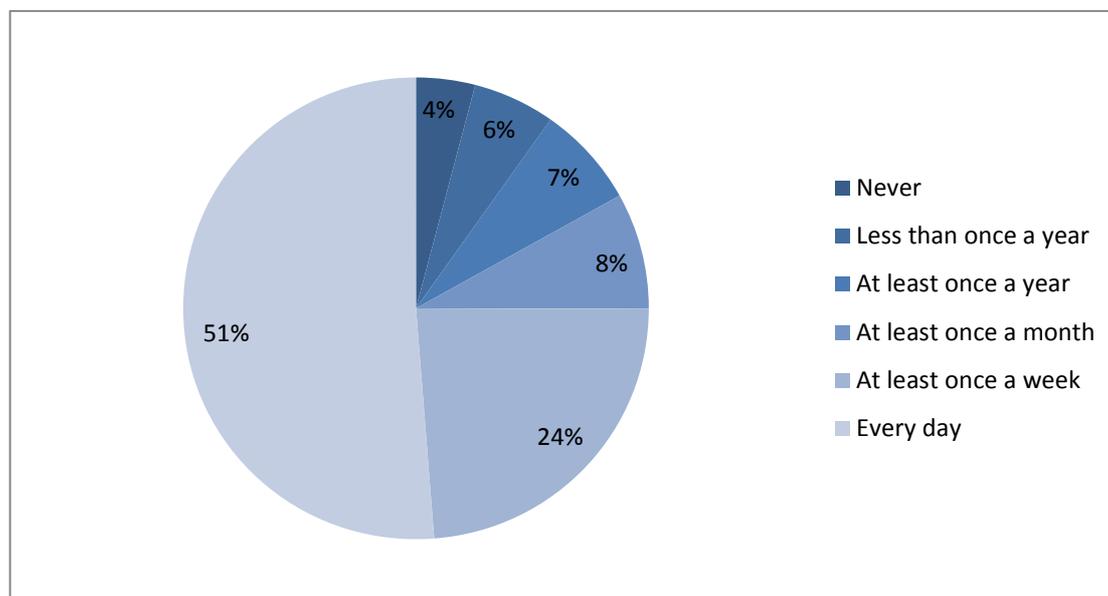
A clear majority (68%) thought that letter writing was an important aspect of many jobs (see figure 4). A similar number (67%) believed that letter writing was important for the jobs that they were interested in.

Figure 4: Letter writing is an important part of many jobs. (n=2000)



These questions therefore provide useful information about the attitudes and beliefs of young people about letter writing. However, the survey was also able to provide some information about how young people actually communicate. Unsurprisingly participants in the survey reported using social media a lot to communicate with friends (See figure 5).

Figure 5: How often do you write to friends on social media? (n=2000)

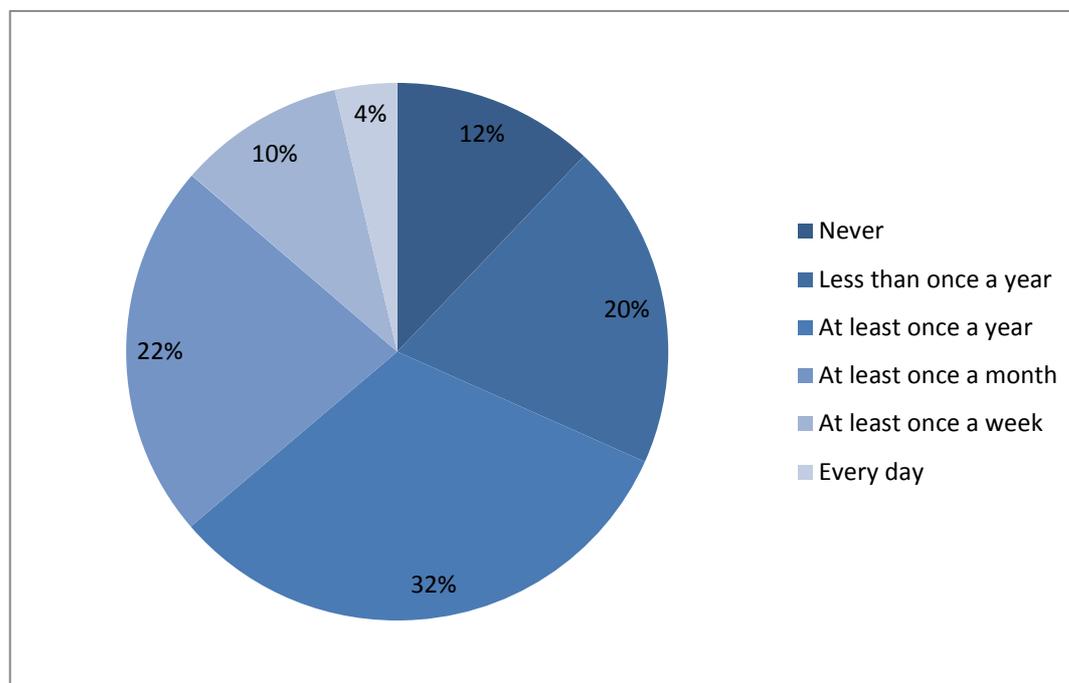


The majority of respondents were using social media every day and three quarters were using it at least once a week. According to the ONS (2014) nearly 80% of young people aged 16 – 24 used a computer every day. This is a marked increase from 2006 where 63% of young people reported daily computer usage. The ONS also reported that 91% of those that use the computer daily tend to use it to engage with social media. However, it is also worth noticing that 17% of respondents are using social media very infrequently or not at all.

This high level of use of electronic communication is not without its problems. A little less than half of respondents (42%) reported that they have been criticised for the use of “text speak” in formal writing. A small minority (6%) reported that this kind of criticism was a daily occurrence for them. Much of the criticism of the use of text speak is about young people’s attempt to transfer the conventions of one form of communication into another format. Knowing the rules of formal communication is important and it is clear that young people are regularly reprimanded for not knowing or not observing these rules. Again this is an issue that was also raised by the employers and one which we will return to in the next section.

In comparison to the use of social media, young people engaged in letter writing far less frequently. What is interesting to note however is that those that did not engage with social media also tended to engage less with letter writing as well, suggesting that social media use and letter writing may not be in tension. It is possible that those who are better, or at least more enthusiastic, communicators are able to express themselves in a range of genres.

Figure 6: How often do you write a letter? (n=2000)



The majority (68%) of young people reported writing a letter at least once a year and a third (36%) were writing monthly. What is more 14% were writing more than once a week, which is approximately equivalent to those (12%) who said that they never wrote a letter.

In summary then our survey indicated that most young people had a strong level of confidence in their ability as letter writers and that they believed that letter writing was an important life and career skill. However, when asked about their actual practice it is clear that they were unsurprisingly spending more time on social media than writing letters. Nonetheless, the majority of young people were still writing letters every year, with around a third writing monthly or more.

What influences young people's confidence, attitudes and practice in letter writing?

The data presented in the first part of this section suggest that there is considerable variation between young people in relation to their confidence, attitudes and practices in letter writing. Some young people were writing lots of letters while others were writing none, similarly some believed that letter writing was very important, while others thought that "letter writing is a thing of the past". Given this, it is important to explore what may influence some of these differences.

The analysis suggests that age, gender and participation in education and employment were all important variables associated with young people's confidence, attitudes and practice in letter writing.

Age

The first factor that influenced young people's confidence, attitudes and practices was age. Our sample had four age groups (16-18; 19-20; 21-22; and 23-24). As respondents increased in age they were more likely to agree with the following statements:

- I am a good letter writer
- A good covering letter is important to securing employment.
- Writing letters is an important part of many jobs.

Older respondents were also more likely to have written at least one letter in the past month than younger respondents. Conversely, 16 to 18 year olds were more likely to have been regularly criticised for using text speak than any other age group. 16 to 18 year olds were also less likely to know how to write a letter or a formal letter than any other age group.

Gender

When the data were analysed by gender, differences in letter writing attitudes and behaviours emerged. In general female respondents were more positive about letter writing than male respondents. This gender difference was observed across a number of questions.

Females (55%) were more likely to report that they enjoyed letter writing than males (49%). Females (81%) were more likely to believe that a good covering letter was important to securing employment than male respondents (75%). Females (92%) were more likely to report that they knew how to write a letter than male respondents (86%) however there were no differences in gender for those stating they knew how to write a formal letter (82% for both males and females). Males (18%) were more likely to report that they had never written a letter than females (9%).

Participation in education and employment

The data revealed some interesting differences between respondents who were in full time education or employment and those not in education employment or training (NEET). NEET respondents (64%) were less likely to believe that they were good letter writers compared to those who were employed (78%) or in education (78%) and were less likely to enjoy letter writing (48%) compared to respondents who were either employed (55%) or in full time education (53%).

NEET respondents (71%) were less likely than those in full time education (81%) or employment (79%) to think that a covering letter was important to securing employment. NEET respondents (60%) were less likely to believe that letter writing was an important aspect of many jobs than those in education (72%) or employment (67%). NEET respondents (75%) were less likely to report they knew how to write a formal letter than those in education (82%) or employment (86%) and NEET respondents (58%) were less likely to think that letter writing was important to the jobs they were interested in compared to respondents in full time education (70%) or employment

(58%).

Teaching letter writing

The next section will make the argument that employers continue to value letter writing and that they have some concerns about the ability of young people to write letters. Given this importance there is an argument that young people should learn to write letters whilst they are in the education system, particularly as they move towards employment. In addition the formal rules that accompany letter writing are transferable to a wide range of forms of formal and professional writing with which young people will engage in the professional world. The survey provides some insights about how young people learn about letter writing at present.

Most of the young people who responded to the survey reported that they had been taught how to write a letter (87%). In a multiple response question respondents that reported they were taught how to write a letter were asked to indicate where. Most were taught at school (88%). Some young people also had training at college (26%) and university (12%). Only 7% of young people were taught to write a letter at work. One careers consultant responding to a LinkedIn discussion wrote about schools and the value of teaching letter writing,

Writing skills and business correspondence writing skills used to be taught as part of some vocational business courses until some bright spark in IT thought there would be no future need with the use of technology!

As an essential personal, as well as employability skill, these skills should be taught and developed in all educational organisations and companies where staff have been identified as requiring further training. Often, many staff in schools and colleges have not had the opportunity to acquire and develop these skills, unless of course they were able to access such vocational courses as English for business, word processing and other related skills or training that have disappeared in favour of academic only learning in schools.

A large minority (38%) of young people reported being taught how to write a letter at home. One stakeholder in education discussed the value of teaching letter writing skills in the home. She stated,

There is an emphasis on the role that schools play but actually parents can play a role as well. This is the kind of area that parents probably do have experience. They may not know the core subjects or be as savvy online but they have probably had to produce a letter of application at some point and they could support their children to do well.

Another stakeholder working in a sector skills council mentioned that she and her partner have been assisting their son to write a covering letter. "My son has been recently putting his CV together and doing some covering letters. He knows what he wants to say but he struggles with the formality because he's grown up in the digital age." Many young

people starting out in the workforce have similar trouble navigating the rules of professional writing. One stakeholder working in talent management discussed how younger employees tend not to write in the appropriate tone when interacting with other professionals. She stated they have the tendency to *“go into a funny kind of English when trying to sound like researchers with odd long sentences and lots of subordinate clauses.”*

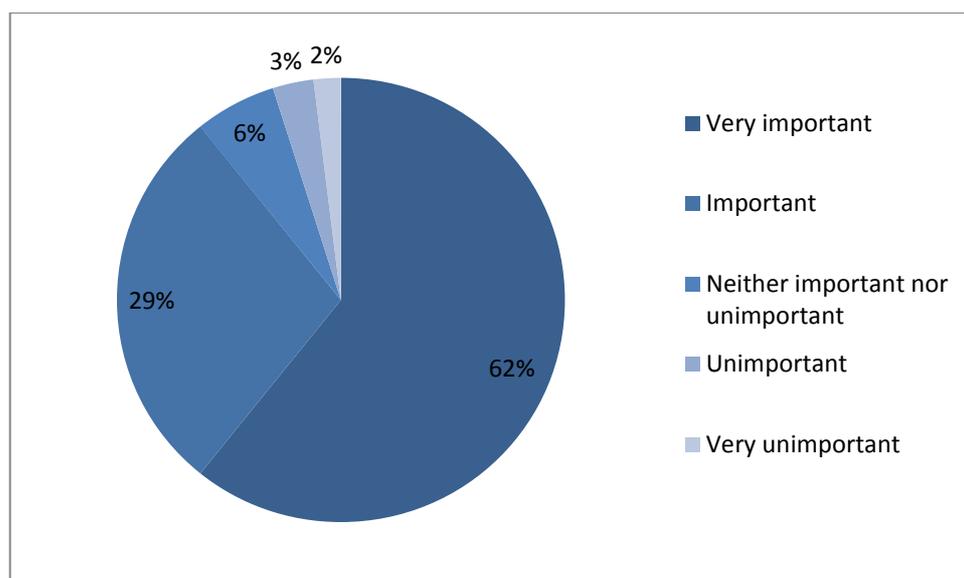
Those who have been taught how to write letters (70%) were more likely to believe that letter writing is an important part of many jobs than those who indicated that they had not been taught to write a letter (61%). Respondents who were taught how to write letters (32%) were less likely to believe that letter writing “is a thing of the past” than those who had not been taught to write a letter (38%). Those that had been taught how to write letters (37%) reported writing letters more frequently (ie. once a month or more) than those that were not taught how to write a letter (28%).

The survey therefore suggests that there are a number of positive impacts from teaching young people about letter writing. This is an area that has been under-researched in the past. Chohan (2011) evaluated a school letter writing programme in one Canadian school and found that it had positive effects on young people’s perception of themselves as good writers and on their attitudes towards letter writing. There would be value in further research and development around school-based interventions to enhance letter writing.

4. The place of letter writing in employment

Representatives of businesses who responded to the survey were clear about the importance of letter writing. The overwhelming majority of employers (90%) reported that good letter writing was important or very important to their organization (see figure 7). Only two employers reported that no one wrote letters for their organisation.

Figure 7: How important is good letter writing to your organisation? (n=200)



While in some organisations letter writing was something that is done by a small number of employees, the majority (56%) stated that 61% or more of the staff in their organisation needed to be able to write a letter. Employers outlined a large range of departments within their organisations where letter writing was important. Several frequently listed departments included human resources, finance, legal, sales, marketing, fundraising and public affairs.

Employers also listed jobs within their organisation where letter writing was particularly important. This list includes administrators, human resources professionals, legal coordinators and managers amongst others. One employer reports that in their organisation *“The majority of roles need to write letters to the public”*. Almost half (48%) of employers stated that their business or organisation actively developed the writing skills of their staff.

The business functions of letter writing

We were interested in understanding the ways in which businesses continued to use letter writing. Employers were asked an open-ended question, “Can you give an example of when a well written letter is important to your business?” One hundred and thirty one (131) respondents answered this question and several themes emerged (see table 3):

Table 3: Can you give an example of when a well written letter is important to your business? (n=131)

Themes	Frequency mentioned
Engaging stakeholders or clients	30
All aspects of business	11
Bidding for funding or business	11
HR or management issues	11
Engaging high profile individuals or politicians	8
Contractual or legal issues	6
Dealing with complaints	4

The most common reason for employers to highlight the importance of letters to their business was their role in engaging with stakeholders or clients. As one respondent put it, *“When we write to our funders and/or our clients we have to be precise and accurate in detail as well as professional in the language and grammar we use.”* Another respondent discussed how good letter writing upholds the businesses’ reputation with stakeholders.

It presents a good image of the organisation. That we are professional, courteous and efficient. It can help in negotiations with external bodies or individuals or organisations that we would like to develop a positive relationship with.

Other respondents argued that good letter writing was important in all aspects of business as an extension of their brand. Respondents discussed this as follows.

A letter accompanies every candidate we introduce to a business and as such it is vital it represents them in a positive, professional manner.

A letter also represents the brand of our business and of our clients - without a good standard of writing we would not be able to win any business, or keep the clients we have.

Letter writing was particularly important for those organisations that were communicating regularly with government and other important bodies. One respondent described the importance of this and how letters had helped them to build business critical contacts. *“We communicate with politicians and policy-makers so letters need to elicit the required response - we have had over 80 politicians visit our work as a result of letters.”*

Respondents identified the importance of letter writing to the contracts they crafted for clients and stakeholders. One employer made the following comment.

We issue contracts to 50+ organisations, clear writing of these contracts and cover letters is critical to performance management and monitoring of contract delivery. Any addendum to a contract similarly needs to be clearly worded.

Employers reported that letter writing was important and that bad letter writing could have dire consequences for their business. The consequences of a poorly written letter

for an organisation ranged from one individual questioning the competency of the organisation to widespread public ridicule. One stakeholder working in careers stated *“We all come across badly written letters from companies who evidently seem to have very little idea of presentation, use of readable fonts.”*

In order to understand the extent of this issue we asked respondents whether they could give an example of when a poorly written letter caused their business problems. Seventy-five (75) respondents answered the question. The largest proportion (35%) of respondents stated that they did not have an example of when a poorly written letter had caused them problems. The second most commonly mentioned issue was that poorly written letters had created miscommunications and misunderstandings both with clients, internal stakeholders and external stakeholders. One respondent noted,

We often use letters to pass key information on to other parties within the organisation and outside of the organisation. When information is not clear or is poorly presented this can cause confusion and problems.

Another respondent discussed the implications of writing ambiguously worded letters, by giving the example of *“a poorly written letter, which did not make the scope of an engineering project clear - leading to confusion and (nearly) to some potentially very serious financial losses.”*

Another theme that emerged from this question was the fact that poorly written letters made both the organisation and the individual writing the letter look unprofessional. One respondent noted the very public consequences her organisation faced when a letter was poorly written. *“There have been occasions recently when poorly written letters and emails were published on Twitter and provoked widespread ridicule.”* Poorly written letters have also led to a loss of business or a potential loss of business. One respondent noted *“A lack of clarity in initially communicating the terms / conditions and expectations of partners in a project led to some potential partners withdrawing their support for the project.”*

The frequency in which the themes were mentioned is listed in table 4 below.

Table 4: Can you give an example of when a poorly written letter has caused your business problems? (n=111)

Themes	Frequency mentioned
None	39
Miscommunications and misunderstandings	21
Made individual or organisation look unprofessional	8
Loss of business/potential loss of business	4
Legal issues/potential legal issues	2
Personal disappointment	1

The covering letter

Employers are clear that letter writing is an important business skill. However, letters also serve an important gatekeeping function to employment. Many employers continue

to require all applicants to provide a covering letter. This means that young people who cannot write letters will experience an additional barrier in finding work.

The requirement to apply using a CV and covering letter remains very common even in the era of LinkedIn and e-recruitment. What is more, existing research has identified that even minor errors in spelling, grammar and presentation can make the difference between successful and unsuccessful applications (Bright & Earl, 2008). Good writing skills, including the mastery of formal letter writing, are therefore critical to gaining employment.

The covering letter is an important piece of the application process. One stakeholder working to create links between young people and employers suggested,

The concept of the covering letter is still absolutely crucial. The application is a standard form while the covering letter is a way of standing out. Everyone is putting standard information on the application while the covering letters are a way to display their competencies and skills to show that they are the right person for the job.

Until recently schools were required to provide work-related learning for all students. One way in which this frequently worked was for schools to support young people to apply for work experience placements with employers. This often involved some teaching about authoring covering letters and CVs. However, the duty for schools to provide work-related learning was removed by statutory instrument in August 2012 resulting in the loss of both an opportunity to build employability skills and also the opportunity to write a letter to an employer. One stakeholder discussed this and argued that the statutory change had had a negative effect on the development of business letter writing.

Schools that take work experience seriously will get young people to write a covering letter. With the demise of the work experience they are probably doing this less.

Most employers (67%) that responded to the survey stated that they would not consider hiring someone with a poorly written covering letter. Twenty-nine percent (29%) of respondents reported that their consideration would 'depend' on other considerations and were asked to explain these. One respondent stated,

There would need to be other significant factors, such as specific skills or experiences or a lack of candidates overall, that would make employing that candidate desirable despite their cover letter. I would take a poorly written cover letter as a sign that the candidate had little interest in the role and this would play a role in my shortlisting them for interview.

The majority of respondents did not feel strongly that different levels of education predicted the quality of covering letters. The largest proportion of respondents were likely to state they "neither agree nor disagree" that covering letters were usually very

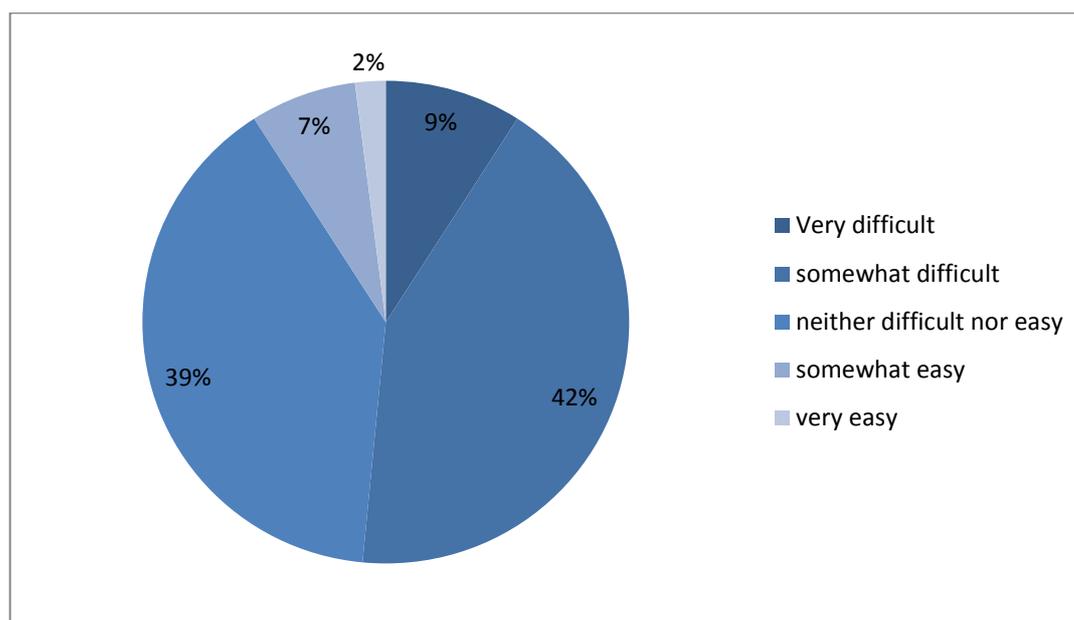
good at every education level. University graduates were an exception, with over one third (35%) of employers agreeing or strongly agreeing that their covering letters were usually very good. In comparison only 11% of employers agreed that apprentices, college leavers' and school leavers' covering letters were usually very good.

Expectations of young people's skills

Approximately one out of five vacancies is hard to fill due to the lack of skills available within the labour market (UKCES, 2014). Data from the UKCES employer skills survey found that although the most pressing skills shortage reported was relevant technical skills for vacant positions, the lack of relevant literacy skills is another identified shortage employers face when attempting to recruit for positions.

Over half (51%) of respondents stated that it was difficult to recruit staff that can write the way they would like (see figure 8).

Figure 8: Do you find it difficult to recruit staff who can write in the way you would like them to? (n=162)



Employers were most likely to expect that university graduates (64%) were able to write a business letter. As education levels decrease so did employers expectations of letter writing ability. Only 31% of respondents expected school leavers to write a business letter. Similarly, when asked about whether young people had the letter writing skills necessary to be successful in their organisations, respondents were most likely to agree in relation to university graduates (35%) and least likely to agree in relation to school leavers (7%).

Almost half of respondents (48%) stated they would not consider dismissing a member of staff for consistently poor letter writing and 42% of respondents stated that it 'depends.' Most employers reported that the consideration to dismiss someone due to

consistently poor letter writing was dependent upon several aspects including overall performance, formal requirements of their role and ability to respond to any support or CPD structures put in place. One respondent argued that *“this would not be the main reason for dismissal but might be considered alongside other issues of performance.”* Another respondent stated, *“if this had been pointed out to them, they had received training yet still wrote poor letters then possibly.”* Many employers reported that offered support to employees who may need CPD in order to develop their writing skills. Forty-eight percent (48%) of respondents stated they actively developed the writing skills of their staff.

In conclusion, employers are clear that letter writing skills are important for both finding work (through well-written cover letters) and for performing well in employment. Almost all employers feel that letter writing skills are needed in their organisation with the majority reporting that this was the case for most roles. However, employers also reported some concerns with the letter writing skills of young people with many saying that it was difficult to recruit the skills that they need.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

We continue to adapt the way that we communicate in both in our personal and professional lives. As a result of the development of internet and mobile communications we have to become skilled in an ever increasing range of communication methods. Young people entering the world of work today spend unprecedented amounts of time online for recreation, management of their daily lives and interaction with each other. This digital literacy has many advantages, but there are dangers if it is developed at the expense of more traditional communication skills.

Despite this, formal letter writing is still an important part of business and many roles continue to demand competency in letter writing. Furthermore the skills that are utilised in letter writing are transferable to a wide range of genres of business communication. It is reasonable to believe that young people who can write clear and effective letters will also be able to write other forms of business communication in a formal and unambiguous manner.

The survey of young people suggests that many young people saw connections between letter writing and the jobs in which they are interested. They believed they were good letter writers and regularly wrote letters, albeit not with the regularity with which they used electronic modes of communication. As young people got older, they increasingly saw the importance of letter writing. However they became less likely to value letter writing if they disengaged from education and failed to engage with work.

Employers reported that they believed that letter writing was very important for a wide range of roles within their organisations. They also reported that they often found it difficult to find staff who were able to write in the way they would like. Many employers would not consider hiring a candidate that had a poorly written covering letter as a part of their application. In general employer's expectations about the quality of covering letters and writing skills tended to increase in relation to the education level of the candidate. This means that they are more likely to believe that graduates had the skills that were needed for roles that involved letter writing, but also presumably more likely to be disappointed if graduates did not in fact have these skills.

The overall conclusion of our research is that there is something of a mismatch between the attitudes of young people and of employers. While both agreed that letter writing was important for the workplace, they have very different assessments of young people's capability. Given this there may be value in increasing the focus on letter writing in the education system as well as providing young people with more opportunities to test their skills and gain feedback from employers on their performance. However, this report has not looked at the current teaching of letter writing within the education system and there would be value in further research to understand this more clearly.

Recommendations

The following section sets out some practical recommendations for young people,

employers and educators, employers and young people in the light of the findings of the report.

Recommendations for young people

Letter writing is a useful employability skill for young people to develop. As a consequence young people would be advised to devote time to developing their letter writing skills and seeking feedback on them.

- **Recommendation 1: Develop letter writing skills.** Young people should actively seek to develop their writing and literacy skills as part of their preparation for employment. As part of this they should develop their fluency in a broad range of communication tools including letter writing.
- **Recommendation 2: Seek feedback on letter writing.** Young people should seek feedback on their letter writing and communication skills. The research suggests that they may overestimate their skills in this area. They should seek feedback from parents and carers, careers advisers and teachers about their letter writing. This feedback is likely to be particularly critical during formal application processes including covering letters.
- **Recommendation 3: Engage in work experience.** There is considerable value in young people engaging in work experience and encounters with employers. Such encounters offer young people an opportunity to calibrate their skills, including their letter writing, against the needs of the workplace.

Recommendations for employers

Employers value letter writing, but often find it difficult to get the skills that they need. It is important that they communicate the importance of letter writing to young people and also recognise that this may be a skill area that still needs further development following the recruitment of new staff.

- **Recommendation 4: Signal the importance of letter writing.** Many employers engage with the education system in a wide range of ways. Such engagement offers the opportunity to signal the importance of letter writing to young people. It can also provide opportunities whereby employers can contribute to the teaching of letter writing and provide feedback on the letters of young people.
- **Recommendation 5: Discuss letter writing with new hires.** Given the importance that employers place on letter writing it would be valuable to discuss this with all new hires. In particular seeking to clarify the importance of internal and external facing letter writing and email communication to the brand and reputation of business.
- **Recommendation 6: Provide development opportunities for existing staff.** Many employers provide opportunities for their staff to develop their letter writing skills. Such opportunities offer existing staff the opportunity to develop their skills in a way which benefit both their career and their employer. It is

therefore suggested that employers consider whether offering training and CPD in letter writing would be useful.

Recommendations for educators

Although the research did not look specifically at the experience of educators, it does suggest a number of implications for educators.

- **Recommendation 7: Develop letter writing as part of developing literacy and communication skills.** Educators should recognise that letter writing continues to be an important life skill. Letter writing projects whether formal or informal should be considered as a part of a larger programme of literacy and communication initiatives in schools, colleges and universities.
- **Recommendations 8: Facilitate work-related learning.** This research has demonstrated that letter writing is an important business skill. It has also shown a mismatch between the expectations of young people and employers. It is important to provide young people with an opportunity to gain feedback on their letter writing skills directly from employers. This could easily be built into existing work-related learning activities for example through the inclusion of a covering letter and an opportunity for employers to feedback on these letters.

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Annex 1. Frequencies from young people survey

Annex 1 presents the raw data from the young people's survey.

Table A1a: Age.

	Count	Percentage
16 – 18	468	23%
19 – 20	464	23%
21 – 22	508	25%
23 - 24	560	28%

Table A1b: Gender.

	Count	Percentage
Female	1325	66%
Male	675	34%

Table A1c: Region.

	Count	Percentage
East Anglia	146	7%
East Midlands	188	9%
London	430	22%
North East	101	5%
North West	189	9%
Northern Ireland	37	2%
Scotland	128	6%
South East	219	11%
South West	165	8%
Wales	80	4%
West Midlands	172	9%
Yorkshire and the Humber	145	7%

Table A1d: Race/Ethnicity.

	Count	Percentage
Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi	27	1%
Asian or Asian British – Indian	56	3%
Asian or Asian British – Other	25	1%
Asian or Asian British – Pakistani	54	3%
Black or Black British – African	51	3%
Black or Black British - Caribbean	39	2%
Black or Black British - Other	15	1%
Chinese or Other Ethnic Group - Chinese	18	1%
Chinese or Other Ethnic Group - Other	4	1%
White – British	1481	74%
White – Irish	40	2%
Other	72	4%

Table A1e: To what extent do you agree with the following statements.

% stated 'agree' or 'strongly agree'	Count	Percentage
I am a good letter writer.	1527	76%
I enjoy writing letters.	1059	53%

Table A1f: To what extent do you agree with the following statements.

% stated 'agree' or 'strongly agree'	Count	Percentage
A good covering letter is important to securing employment	1578	79%
Writing letters is an important part of many jobs.	1368	68%

Table A1g: Knowledge of letter writing.

% stated yes	Count	Percentage
Do you know how to write a letter?	1802	90%
Do you know how to write a formal letter? (i.e. a covering letter for seeking employment, writing to a customer, a complaint letter, etc)	1643	82%

Table A1h: To what extent do you agree with the following statements.

% of respondents stating 'agree' or 'strongly agree'	Count	Percentage
Writing letters is important for the jobs I am interested in.	1330	67%
I believe that writing letters is a thing of the past.	662	33%

Table A1i: How often do you write a letter?*

	Count	Percentage
Never	241	12%
Less than once a year	393	20%
At least once a year	641	32%
At least once a month	452	23%
At least once a week	199	10%
Every day	74	4%

Table A1j: How often do you write to friends on digital or social media?*

	Count	Percentage
Never	82	4%
Less than once a year	114	6%
At least once a year	142	7%
At least once a month	163	8%
At least once a week	474	24%
Every day	1025	51%

Table A1k: How often do you get criticised for using text speak in formal writing?*

	Count	Percentage
Never	1166	58%
Less than once a year	204	10%
At least once a year	213	11%
At least once a month	164	8%
At least once a week	132	7%
Every day	121	6%

Table A1l: Have you ever been taught how to write a letter?

	Count	Percentage
Yes	1730	87%
No	270	14%

Table A1m: If yes, where were you taught? (tick all that apply)

	Count	Percentage
At home	659	38%
At school	1528	88%
At college	442	26%
At university	208	12%
In work	127	7%
other	35	2%

Table A1n: Which job/sector are you most interested in?*

	Count	Percentage
Finance	220	11%
Health	185	9%
Other	193	10%
Education	171	9%
Computing, Electronics	119	6%

*top 5 sectors ticked

Table A1o: Do you find writing letters difficult?

	Count	Percentage
Yes	641	32%
No	1359	68%

Annex 2. Frequencies from employer survey

The following Annex provides the raw frequencies from the employer survey.

A2a: What is the size of your organisation? (n=230)

	Count	Percentage
0 - 10 employees	44	19%
11 - 50 employees	26	11%
51 - 250 employees	50	22%
251 or more employees	110	48%

A2b: In which country are you based? (n=213)

	Count	Percentage
England	186	87%
Scotland	6	3%
Northern Ireland	1	1%
Wales	5	2%
Other UK	10	5%
Not based in the UK	5	2%

A2c: In which region of England are you based? (n=189)

	Count	Percentage
South East	24	13%
London	38	20%
North West	17	9%
East of England	15	8%
West Midlands	21	11%
South West	10	5%
Yorkshire and the Humber	10	5%
East Midlands	47	25%
North East	7	4%

A2d: How important is good letter writing to your organisation? (n=200)

	Count	Percentage
Very important	123	62%
Important	57	29%
Neither important nor unimportant	12	6%
Unimportant	5	3%
Very unimportant	3	2%

A2e: What percentage of your staff need to be able to write letter for your organisation? (n=199)

	Count	Percentage
0% - 20%	35	18%
21% - 40%	33	17%
41% - 60%	20	10%
61% - 80%	47	24%
81% - 100%	64	32%

A2f: Who writes letters in your organisation? (n=200)

	Count	Percentage
No one writes letters for the organisation.	2	1%
Some roles within some departments write letter for the organisation.	65	33%
All roles within some departments write letters for the organisation.	18	9%
Some roles within all departments write letters for the organisation.	73	37%
All roles within all departments write letters for the organisation.	42	21%

A2g: Do you hire...

% stated 'yes'	Count	Percentage
School leavers*	82	60%
College leavers**	112	78%
University graduates***	146	89%
Apprentices****	82	59%

*n=137; **n=144; ***n=164; ****n=139

A2h: Do you find it difficult to recruit staff who can write in the way you would like them to? (n=162)

	Count	Percentage
Very difficult	15	9%
Somewhat difficult	68	42%
Neither difficult nor easy	63	39%
Somewhat easy	12	7%
Very easy	4	2%

A2i: Would you consider hiring someone who applied for a role with a poorly written cover letter? (n=160)

	Count	Percentage
Yes	6	4%
No	107	67%
It depends	47	29%

A2j: University graduates' covering letters are usually very good. (n=158)

	Count	percentage
Strongly agree	4	3%
Agree	51	32%
Neither agree nor disagree	66	42%
Disagree	35	22%
Strongly disagree	2	1%

A2k: Apprentices' covering letters are usually very good. (n=151)

	Count	Percentage
Strongly agree	4	3%
Agree	12	8%
Neither agree nor disagree	99	66%
Disagree	30	20%

Strongly disagree	6	4%
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A2l: College leavers' covering letters are usually very good. (n=154)

	Count	Percentage
Strongly agree	2	1%
Agree	16	10%
Neither agree nor disagree	83	54%
Disagree	52	34%
Strongly disagree	1	1%

A2m: School leavers' covering letters are usually very good. (n=154)

	Count	Percentage
Strongly agree	2	1%
Agree	16	10%
Neither agree nor disagree	83	54%
Disagree	52	34%
Strongly disagree	1	1%

A2n: Would you expect the following to be able to write a business letter? (tick all that apply)

	Count	Percentage
School leavers	72	31%
Apprentices	82	35%
College leavers	120	51%
University graduates	149	64%

A2o: University graduates have the letter writing skills necessary to be successful in my organisation. (n=153)

	Count	Percentage
Strongly agree	8	5%
Agree	46	30%
Neither agree nor disagree	73	48%
Disagree	24	16%
Strongly disagree	2	1%

A2p: Apprentices have the letter writing skills necessary to be successful in my organisation. (n=140)

	Count	Percentage
Strongly agree	1	1%
Agree	15	11%
Neither agree nor disagree	89	64%
Disagree	30	21%
Strongly disagree	5	4%

A2q: College leavers have the letter writing skills necessary to be successful in my organisation. (n=145)

	Count	Percentage
Strongly agree	0	0
Agree	24	17%
Neither agree nor disagree	82	57%
Disagree	37	26%
Strongly disagree	2	1%

A2r: School leavers have the letter writing skill necessary to be successful in my organisation. (n=142)

	Count	Percentage
Strongly agree	0	0
Agree	10	7%
Neither agree nor disagree	76	54%
Disagree	45	32%
Strongly disagree	11	8%

A2s: Would you consider dismissing a member of staff for consistently poor letter writing? (n=147)

	Count	Percentage
Yes	14	10%
No	71	48%
It depends	62	42%

A2t: Does your organisation actively develop the writing skills of staff? (n=150)

	Count	Percentage
Yes	72	48%
No	78	52%