Is the Cover Letter an Outdated Practice?

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The role of a cover letter is to introduce the applicant to the recruiter and build an instant rapport. It also is a method to quickly highlight the best reasons why you feel you are best suited for the job opening. Looking at the cover letter from these angles, it looks like a good idea. However, the trend of today says otherwise.

A quick survey by leading online recruiting agencies showed that less than 3% of recruiters are even aware about cover letters; while 90% of offline recruiters avoided the cover letter even if they saw it.

Why is the Importance of the Cover Letter Minimized?

Let us take another look at the role of the cover letter vis-à-vis the requirements of a recruiter. The cover letter is meant to "announce" or "highlight" the merits of the applicant and is an attempt to forge a bond with the recruiter preconditioning him to interpret the CV/resume as most suitable for the job vacancy. However, most recruiters fail to read the resume because:

1. There is No Time - In realty, recruiters do not have enough time to go through a cover letter and then again through the resume/CV. So, to save time they focus of the CV/resume and try to match as quickly as possible the qualifications/experience/skills with the requirements for the job specifications. The applicants with the best perceived match are shortlisted for interview.
2. Online Applications - Most recruiters today advertise for online applications, which more often than not come with pre-formatted application forms. Even if they are not, they would shift through the applications with the help of specific keywords, which would draw out the best matched (according to the keywords) CV/resumes. The cover letters would neither be keyword optimized, nor indexed in such a search.
3. Computerization of Applications Received - Those who prefer hard copies of applications still use computers to analyze the applications received. In this case, data entry operators would be trained to shift through the CV/resume and fill in pre-formatted applications forms. These could be easily searched for the best candidates/contenders for the job through job-specific, requirement-specific keywords. Once again, there is no scope for the resume to be read.

Experts therefore advise applicants not to bother about a cover letter unless it is explicitly asked for. It would be best to instead focus on customizing your resume/CV so it looks like you are the best possible matched candidate for the said job.