

Civilization magazine, December 1999

Gallic-graphy

***La graphologie* retains currency, thwarts job seekers**

In the European business world, the cult status of American methods continues to grow. Language schools promise to teach "Wall Street English," employers offer stock options, and the untranslated buzzwords seem to stream straight from the pages of *Fast Company*. But manifestations of the French people's stubborn-and largely quixotic-holdout against American culture persist. Case in point: their persistent use of handwriting analysis in the hiring process.

French job seekers routinely submit handwritten cover letters, which they can expect to have scrutinized by graphologists-whose critiques, while not always final, carry considerable weight in hiring decisions. But you won't find much Stateside support for handwriting analysis in the recruitment process; beleaguered American graphologists seem stuck with a reputation that tags them as the phrenologists of the human resources world.

Then again, the French have always steadfastly defended their own inventions, and the origins of *la graphologie* can be traced to a 19th-century French monastery. In 1871, priest and teacher Jean-Hippolyte Michon founded what would become the *Societe Francaise de Graphologie*, and the society's members have consistently included laureates of the famously nationalistic *Academie Francaise*. Though recruiters throughout Europe use the method, conservative estimates indicate that around 80 percent of French companies use graphologists, who tend to work solo or as part of small firms. The French government has hired teams of graphologists to help cashiered people reorient their careers, and the unemployed themselves often consult graphologists to help with their job searches.

Generally, only a handful of the most promising applicants are analyzed, at a cost of between \$100 and \$250 per candidate. But Christian Rabet, human resources director for the Group Batigere property managers, says some firms use graphologists for initial triage. "You send them a stack of, say, 50 letters, and for 100 francs [\$16] per candidate, they say 'yes,' 'no,' or 'wait list,'" he explains. "Personally, I don't like to give up so much control, so we have more extensive analyses done after we've eliminated people through first interviews."

To the graphologist, the sample is less a written text than an image: What matters is the way letters are arranged in relationship to each other and the page. "We always ask to examine the original sample, because from the angle of the pen and depth of the imprint you can detect the candidate's energy and libido," explains Parisian graphologist Sophie Derisbourg, employing the vaguely Freudian jargon common to the field.

Predictably, a phalanx of consultants has sprung up, promising to teach job seekers to hack the system and secure jobs by altering their scrawls. Drawing himself to the full height of Gallic disdain, Yves Derisbourg, Sophie's husband, calls such experts the true charlatans. "We train for five years," he says, referring to the profession's lengthy certification process. 'And while someone might alter their handwriting for the first sentence or two, the subconscious takes over quickly,' Then again, there are other ways to beat the system. One French engineer, unemployed and repeatedly stymied, simply asked his wife to write all his cover letters. Shortly thereafter, his phone started ringing.

Marc Spiegler