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Editor-in-Chief, CMS Notes

No doubt I'm not the only member of the CMS to receive a steady stream of emails in the same genre as the following:

Dear Professor:

I am just about to graduate with a master's degree in computer science from Utopia National University, where I also obtained my B.Sc. I achieved an average GPA of 3.8 in my undergraduate courses. I have high hopes to work with you on a Ph.D. at your university.

...

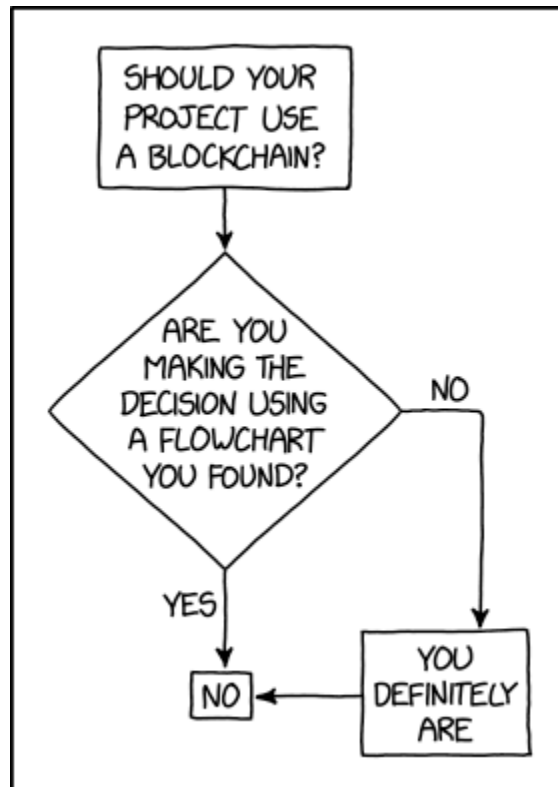
My master's thesis was on "Cloud Computing Paradigms for Blockchain Technology in the Design of Smart Cat Toys." I have had summer jobs with a variety of companies. I feel that my software skills will be an excellent fit for your research team. I would very much appreciate the opportunity to work under your supervision to obtain my doctorate.

I attach a resume to this email, summarizing my educational accomplishments and teaching experience. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or would like to read my thesis. I am available at any time for an interview.

Thank you in advance,

(etc)

Before you think you've found the perfect holiday present for Fluffy, I must confess that smart cat toys are as far from my field of expertise as cloud computing. As for blockchain, I think Randall Munroe's xkcd comic probably has it right in most cases:



<https://imgs.xkcd.com/comics/blockchain.png>

—especially the mouseover text. In short, I'm about as far from a potential supervisor for this young person as you could get without going to (say) the classics department. (My lack of research funding would be the cherry on the sundae, were there a sundae.)

But suppose that my correspondent had written a master's thesis not impossibly far from one of the obscure topics in geometry, number theory, or category theory with which I occupy myself between classes; and suppose that I had enough funding to support a student (rarely the case even when I did have a research grant). Would this over-the-transom application persuade me?

Probably not: even with a chance hit, it still bears the marks of a shotgun application. It's hard to make a persuasive case that your work is a good fit to somebody else's project while not mentioning the project! I'd advise potential graduate students searching for a supervisor to carefully research the people doing good work in their area of interest, and send personalized emails making their case in detail for working with that particular supervisor. Nobody likes a spammer.