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Surviving the ATS job search challenge

Readers, I realize many of you are probably thinking, "What on Earth is an 'ATS'?" Well, as defined in Wikipedia, "An applicant tracking system (ATS) is a software application that enables the electronic handling of recruitment needs." In most cases, the ATS automatically scans, scores and sorts résumés based on given criteria such as keywords, skills, former employers, years of experience, education, schools attended and the like. The fundamental function of the ATS is to better assist with the management of applicant information and résumés. Many hiring managers and HR professionals will tell you the deluge of résumés they receive online makes using an applicant tracking system pretty much mandatory. With all that being said, how does someone seeking a job by using online job boards such as indeed.com, glassdoor.com, careerbuilder.com and other specific career-related sites beat the ATS job search challenge?

On an ATS-optimized résumé, simplicity is the key, especially for formatting.

Before I move forward to provide you with tips on how to potentially survive the applicant tracking systems, let me remind you building your circle of influence and networking with those individuals is still considered the No. 1 strategy for securing employment in today's competitive job market. Though not all companies utilize applicant tracking systems, the larger the company, the higher the probability an ATS is in use, so be prepared.

There is plenty of research on how to get past the "ATS robots," as well as hundreds of tips on how to survive the applicant tracking systems and actually have your résumé land in human hands. The sprinkling of tips shared here will get you started down the path to helping improve your chances:

• Use the basic MS Word (.doc) or a plain text (.txt) file. Avoid using a PDF file unless specifically requested, as they tend to cause problems with applicant tracking systems.

• Choose sans-serif fonts such as Arial, Verdana, Dalibri or Tahoma, as some systems have been known to reject serif fonts like Cambria or Times New Roman. Avoid using a font size smaller than 11 point, and use only black ink.

• Avoid the use of templates, headers and footers. They can easily confuse the ATS.

• In your contact information, ATS research suggests you include an address because many programs will kick out your résumé without a postal address. It's also a good idea to include locations with the work experience entries.

• Don't include tables, charts or graphics. Most applicant tracking systems either cannot read or misread these items.

• Being creative is a good thing, but on an ATS-optimized résumé, simplicity is the key, especially for formatting.

• Use bullets instead of paragraphs to describe your work and to make it easier to navigate your information.

• Avoid using unique headings. Headings should be simply described as "Work Experience," "Skills," "Education," "Qualifications" and the like.

• To ensure the ATS reads and imports your work experience properly, don't start your work experience with a date. Since an ATS looks for company names first, it's suggested you list the company name, followed by your title and the dates.

• Use keywords/competencies several times throughout your résumé that describe your skill set; just don't overdo it. Wording on job postings, as well as services like Wordle and TagCrowd, can help you determine a good combination of the important keywords to describe your background and experience.

• Proofread, proofread, proofread! Spelling mistakes can cause an ATS to terminate your document immediately because it has no idea what you're talking about.

The bottom line is to help avoid the risk of having your information get lost in the ATS shuffle, I encourage you to consider the tips discussed in this article so the chances of your résumé being in the 25 percent that make it to human eyes will be significantly improved.

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