

Optimizing Your Resume for Scanning and Tracking Systems

Just as online job search technology has made it easier for job seekers to identify jobs, employers use technology to help them search for qualified applicants. Being aware of advances in recruiting technology and knowing how these systems work is very important in crafting a resume. Here are the basics with some helpful suggestions.

What is an Applicant Tracking System (ATS)?

It's estimated that over 50% of companies use applicant tracking systems. The ATS helps the employer sort, organize, store and maintain records of applicants. The objective of the ATS is to reduce the time and cost of identifying suitable candidates and to add efficiency. Imagine a large company receiving hundreds of resumes daily and the effort needed to handle those.

By using sophisticated screening and sorting programs, the ATS helps put the resume records into the right buckets. These programs use a variety of filters and screeners, sometimes called "contextual parsers", to help sort and categorize resumes. They analyze the resume, identify keywords and word sequences, and extract the information needed to make a logical decision. They sometimes combine many elements of the resume to create a profile without human intervention.

But human accuracy is greater than any filtering and parsing programs, and a human will hopefully be reading your resume... IF it got into the right bucket. The primary goal of writing the resume should be to satisfy the human reader, but a human will not even see it unless it gets categorized correctly for consideration.

Filters – The first stage gatekeeper

Like the ATS, resume databases such as monster.com, CareerBuilder or Optimal Resume typically ask applicants to fill out an initial screen of information such as:

1. Location/contact info (address to determine commutable distance)
2. Career level (student, entry, experienced, manager, executive)
3. Education level (high school, certification, vocational, degrees though doctorate)
4. Occupational area (accounting, engineering, legal, sales, etc.)
5. Industry (or industry segment)

If this initial info screen is not provided, the ATS will work to identify the information using the logic built into it. Also captured may be information on things like language proficiency, salary level, GPA, and employment status. It's obviously important to provide all of the information requested except perhaps salary level as that is best left for a later time. Leaving information out will cause the filter to overlook your resume.

Filtered resumes are presented in order of relevance, with the most recently submitted ones on top. The freshness of your resume is critical to getting to the top of the list. If the system allows you to make changes to your resume, change it often (maybe every 2-4 weeks) to increase your ranking and visibility.

Keywords – The words and phrases used to find you

The employer will enter a keyword or a string of keywords that apply to the job being recruited for, and these coupled with the filters will produce a field of “hits”, much like the list you get when doing a search on google. Keywords are not action words (aka action verbs) and are almost always nouns. They usually refer to things like:

1. A technical skill, job terminology or specialization
2. Title, type of position, role or department
3. A certification, tool used, specific experience

Here is an actual example of keywords that recruiters entered into a major job board 3,004 times in 12/2010:

(‘occupational therapist’ or ‘certified occupational therapist’ or ‘cota’ or ‘physical therapist’ or ‘speech language pathologist’ or ‘speech-language pathologist’)

Note the variations in the title, including hyphens and acronym. So, to be assured that your resume record will be included, it makes sense to include different title variations that you are after on your resume. If you have never had that title you could add it to a headline or use it in your profile as the target job desired.

The employer may use more complex Boolean strings or algebraic logic to more closely zero in on the exact applicant. This example was used 1,486 times in 12/2010:

(‘registered nurse’ or ‘r.n.’) and (‘flu vaccination’ or ‘h1n1’ or ‘flu shot vaccination’)

With the combination of “and” and “or” operators, the employer will both receive hits of registered nurses (or R.N.’s) that also have flu vaccination exposure listed on the resume. A registered nurse that did not put flu vaccination or h1n1 or flu shot vaccination on their resume would not have been included! It’s frequently the combination of keywords including title, skill or tools used that matter the most.

Most keywords used are for a technical or specialized skill

The vast majority of keywords that employers search on are for some specialized or technical skill requirement. The Skills section of your resume is the most important when it comes to ATS keyword screening. Two or three column tables are recommended to conserve space. Spelling them out, abbreviating and using acronyms on the same line is smart given that it is difficult to predict the exact search term used. The more technical your profession, the more important keywords are.

Consider two skills sections on your resume such as: Technical Skills, Computer Skills, Skills Summary, Skills/Strengths, Related Skills, Skills and Competencies, Special Skills, Skills and Abilities, Other Key Skills, or any other section that helps detail your specific skills. A Keyword Summary section is not recommended because it’s perceived by recruiters to be manipulative.

The key to identifying keywords = job descriptions

Review job descriptions, job postings and advertisements for jobs you are seeking and make a list of the skills required. Look for terms, jargon and buzz words that are industry and job specific. Having multiple columns of these words will help you to focus on the ones that are the most important.

One program helpful in isolating important keywords is [Wordle](#). This program generates a “word cloud” from text and gives prominence to words that appear more frequently. It also drops unnecessary words and helps by presenting the result visually. Here is an example of a word cloud for a [Registered Nurse](#) and here is one for an [Accountant](#) position listing. Note that you can easily change the settings in Wordle such as the number of words, font and format.

Avoiding the black hole

These ATS systems don't like special situations thrown at them. Here are some general tips to ensure your resume uploads and is scanned without a hitch:

1. Stick to standard or system fonts such as Arial, Georgia, Impact, Courier, Lucinda, Palatino, Tahoma, Trebuchet, Verdana, Sans Serif (these are Optimal Resume selected fonts)
2. Use .RTF or .DOC file types which are the most generic. Avoid PDF, DOCX, WPD, WPS or HTML.
3. Special characters used for bullets like arrows can cause problems. Standard bullets are fine.
4. Graphics of any kind, or JPG, PNG, BMP images should not be used.
5. Borders, shading or symbols should be avoided.
6. Do not use hidden keywords or words with small text colored white so it does not appear to a reader.