Optimizing Your Resume for an Applicant Tracking System

Applicant tracking systems (ATS) are the computer programs used by organizations to manage the high volume of applications they receive. The ATS will read your resume, then rank and score your qualifications against the job descriptions. Only those applicants who receive high scores will get a call for an interview.

Job seekers can increase the chances of their resume getting through an applicant tracking system by following these do's and don'ts:

1. Never send your resume as a PDF
Applicant tracking systems lack a standard way to structure PDF documents, so they are easily misread. Unless the company has specifically requested a pdf, use a standard Word document and save it in .doc format.

2. Do not include tables or graphics
Applicant tracking systems cannot read graphics and they misread tables (reading them up and down instead left to right). Do not use borders, lines, symbols or shading. Bullet points are fine.

3. Feel free to submit a longer resume
Although two pages are optimal, the length of your resume does not matter to an ATS. It will scan your resume regardless of length. Submitting a longer resume (three or four pages) allows you to include more relevant experience, keywords and phrases and could increase your chances of ranking higher in the system.

4. Customize each resume
For the specific position being sought, use language from the job description. "One-size-fits-all" does not work with ATS. Incorporate relevant, targeted keywords and phrases for the position being sought. Be specific i.e., "Adobe Photoshop" instead of "image-editing software".

5. Call your work experience, "Work Experience"
Sometimes job seekers refer to their work experience on their resume as their "Professional Experience" or "Career Achievements" (or some other variation on that theme). People get very creative on their resume because they think it will help them stand out, but in fact it hurts them. Often the software will completely skip over your work experience because you did not label it as such.

6. Use keywords and phrases in context
Incorporate them into descriptive achievement-oriented bullet points. Do not just include them as a list of skills or competencies.

7. Don't start your work experience with dates
To ensure applicant tracking systems read and import your work experience properly, always start with your employer's name, followed by your title, followed by the dates you held that title. Each can run on its own line. Applicant tracking systems look for company names first.

8. Edit carefully
The applicant tracking system will not recognize misspelled words, and if your resume survives the ATS screen, it will be reviewed by human beings next, so it must be error-free.

MAKE SURE YOUR OPTIMIZED RESUME:

- Does not include any special characters or accented words
- Includes no punctuation in your name, such as (), / -
- Uses simply formatted text of a reasonable size (11 point font or above)
- Contains only your name on the top line, with no degrees or certifications after it
- Includes standard fonts (Arial, Georgia, Tahoma, Calibri and Verdana are safe choices)
- Does not contain complex formatting (condensed or expanded text) – that is, do not use extra spaces between letters, because the ATS cannot "read" it
- Contains proper capitalization and punctuation. Both of these can affect how information is parsed and assigned with the ATS database.
- Uses the full, spelled-out version of terms in addition to abbreviations and acronyms i.e., Certified Public Accountant (CPA)

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