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Where Does Your Resume Really Go When You Apply Online?

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By [Barbara Safani](#)

We'd all like to believe that when we send our [resume](#) via a job board or a company Web site that there is someone eagerly waiting on the other side ready to read every word of it. But these days, job applicants are lucky if an actual person is reading any of it, at least on the initial screening.

As companies continue to be inundated with resumes, more and more employers are turning to applicant tracking systems (ATS) to manage the sheer volume and weed through all the applicants. What does that mean for job seekers? I spoke to [HR professionals](#), [recruiters](#), and [hiring managers](#) to find out.

Why do companies use applicant tracking systems?

In today's market, there can be thousands of applicants for one position. According to recruiter Jeff Altman, The Big Game Hunter, "ATS allows me as a recruiter to manage far greater amounts of information and track every communication I have with a job applicant so nothing is 'forgotten.'" Unisys HR Consultant Sharon Sizgorich notes that ATS offers a "consolidated view of all applicants against a job and the ability to build and track pipelines of talent. In addition, applicant tracking systems can help recruiters better manage the various stages of the interview process and comply with legal requirements for tracking applicants."

How do applicant tracking systems work?

"When searching my database for candidates to fit a particular job posting, I'll select an important keyword or phrase directly from the job description, and enter it into the ATS," says recruiter Roxanne Williams. "The ATS will then search the database and return the resulting resumes to me, and this process can be repeated numerous times with different keywords or phrases."

What document formats can applicant tracking systems scan?

According to our experts, most systems can scan text and Word formats; some cannot scan Word 2007, PowerPoints, or PDFs.

What should job seekers do in order to get their resumes noticed by the ATS?

Customize the resume for each position. Megan Pittsley, a career counselor and recruiter, advises job seekers to "extensively tweak their resume for every job and make sure you weave common keywords throughout the resume as often as possible."

Keep job titles fairly generic. Kathleen Steffey, founder and CEO of Naviga Business Services, a sales and marketing based recruitment firm, suggests avoiding using job titles that are too specific. "If you are a sales professional who is conducting new business and prospecting 99 percent of the time, just keep your title to 'Sales Professional' or 'Business Development Representative.' Stay away from titles that are too specific like National Accounts or Client Relations.

Keep resume formatting to a minimum. Dan Kilgore, principal of Riviera Advisors Inc., notes that "certain design features such as italics, bolding, and underlining can substantially increase the error rate as the system converts the data." Radical resume designs similarly are also off-limits because anything the ATS wasn't programmed to look for will not be recognized. One suggestion might be to electronically submit your resume in Word and in a standard format, and save the "pretty" one you formatted for the live interview, since most of these characteristics were made to make the human reading experience more pleasant and exciting.

Avoid functional resumes. Ashley Gouge, VP of Client Development and Implementation for Pinstripe Healthcare states that "functional resumes are very difficult for parsing technology to read" and recommends using the more traditional chronological format for optimal results.

Include full keywords and their abbreviated formats. Recruiter and BestJobHuntGuide.com owner Roxanne Williams adds, "some of the words or phrases listed on the job description can also be abbreviated; for example, Sarbanes Oxley can be abbreviated as SOX and accounts payable is often referred to as AP. Play it safe and include both versions in your resume."

While those using applicant tracking systems can point to many benefits of using

these systems, some also acknowledge the drawbacks. Amber Jolley, a staffing consultant with Whitaker Technical Services, notes: "The main drawback is that often your resume isn't seen by a 'live' person if it doesn't make it past the ATS screening process. While there are many advantages, the real downfall with ATS is that they are not able to quantify the 'intangibles' that candidates bring to the table or skills that may be equivalent or transferable enough to make their resume worth reviewing."

Barbara Safani is the owner of Career Solvers, www.careersolvers.com, and author of [Happy About My Resume: 50 Tips For Building a Better Document to Secure a Brighter Future](#) and [#JOBSEARCHtweet](#).