Résumés: "Halt! Who Goes There?"

How to get your résumé past the applicant tracking system.

Once upon a time, all résumés were read only by humans. Using set criteria, or personal preferences, these individuals decided which résumés were interview worthy. Today, most large companies, and many smaller ones, rely on technology to scan, sift, compile, and file high-volume job applications. Using applicant tracking system (ATS) software, they can reduce data entry time and errors, as well as search, rank, and screen a candidate's fit with impartial algorithmic efficiency. For them, an ATS saves HR time and money. However, these robotic gatekeepers aren't perfect and can reject even the most qualified candidates. To Pass Go and get your résumé to the human decision makers, you need to understand how the ATS works and optimize your résumé accordingly.

Keywords are key to the ATS

ATS software scans and electronically processes résumés by converting the content into searchable data, then sorting it into categories—contact info, work experience, skills, education, etc. Employers can then use keywords to search the database for qualified candidates. The process is not unlike Googling a topic. The ATS also ranks candidates as a "best fit" based upon the frequency of employer-specified keywords used, *i.e.,* the more job ad-relevant keywords and phrases in a résumé, the higher it will rank—and the better its owner's chances of making it to an interview. Be aware: today's increasingly sophisticated programs and natural language processing can now detect and decipher keyword context as it relates to the open position. Trying to boost your résumé ranking by "stuffing" keywords in tiny point sizes or hiding white colored text within your résumé content will only get your file flagged or kicked out.

The Goldilocks factor

As automated and powerful as an ATS is at analyzing and managing data, it isn't without flaws. It can have limitations and be downright picky. In fact, if certain factors aren't "ju-u-u-st right" with a résumé, some ATS software won't parse it properly and will simply reject the file—trashing even the most qualified job seeker's chances at an interview. To avoid your résumé from becoming a casualty before
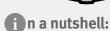
it even reaches human eyes, know what the electronic gatekeeper is asking for. And give it that.

Résumé format: Keep it simple and text based; no images, logos, fancy fonts, tinted text, separate text boxes, charts, or infographics; colors can also be an obstacle. Bullet items—it's easier for both the ATS and human eyes to scan. Under Work Experience, list company names *first*, followed by job title, and employment dates. There is still debate as to which format is best, Word or PDF. So, follow instructions, or check with the employer first. If you have a more "custom" résumé, prepare a plain ATS-friendly version, as well.

Keywords: Keywords in your résumé are your ATS pass and password. Research multiple sources—the job posting, the company website, company and employee social media profiles—to identify critical keywords and phrases. Paste the posting itself into Wordle or other tag cloud generators to identify primary keywords. Use industry lingo, both full phrases and acronyms. Since an ATS scores résumés based upon frequency of essential keywords, include as many top relevant keywords and their variations as possible throughout your file. Ex: for Programmer: software, Web design, SEO, search engine optimization, Cold Fusion, app, data engineering, code development, IT, iOS. And, since each job description is different, tailor your résumé and its keywords to that specific posting.

Must dos: Stick to standard section headers like Qualifications, Work Experience, Education, and Skills that won't confuse the ATS. To boost your ranking, focus on Industry-specific terminology like "sales manager" and "leadership" instead of soft skills like "team player" and "hard working."

Finally, proofread, proofread, proofread! Both ATS and human gatekeepers alike will reject résumés with typos and errors.

In a nutshell:

To determine if the ATS is your friend or foe:

- **Don't confuse the software; keep things simple, straight-forward, and substantive**

- **Don't waste résumé real estate; identify and include only top-tier job-relevant keywords and phrases**

- **Don't try to fool the software when creating keyword density**

- **Use standard industry terms**

- **Tailor your résumé content and keywords to each job posting**

- **Proofread! Both ATS and humans hate typos**

Don't let the ATS trolls get your goat. Know what it takes to get the green light and cross the bridge. After all, it doesn't matter how qualified you are if no recruiter sees your résumé.