

THE JOB APPLICATIONS COLD WAR

An escalating weapons race between applicants and Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS)

DISCLAIMER:

This document details my job search and application experiences in the IT fields, especially applications programming. It may not precisely apply to other career paths, but the broad outlines remain true.

ESCALATING WEAPONS RACE BETWEEN APPLICANTS AND ATSS

IN THE BEGINNING THERE WERE *KEYWORDS*

And ATSS relied on them.

Naturally, applicants started putting in especially useful keywords into their project descriptions.

- o *Advantage: Applicants.*

ATSS STARTED *COUNTING* THE NUMBER OF TIMES KEYWORDS APPEARED IN A RESUME

And they weeded out applicants who'd randomly dropped keywords into their project descriptions with the expectation of gaming the system.

But ingenious minds figured that out and put keyword repetitions in hidden and non-printable text. Resume reviewers of the human persuasion were fooled, and the ATSS gamed.

- o *Advantage: Applicants*

AND THEN ATSS TRIED *DISCOUNTING* HIDDEN KEYWORDS

Wherever there were hidden keywords, ATSS retaliated by discounting them.

But humans gamed the ATSS again, adding keywords in each project description, regardless of relevance.

- o *Advantage: Applicants, again*

ATSS LOOKED FOR *KEYPHRASES*

And applicants countered by adding keyphrases to their project descriptions and wherever else they could.

- o *Advantage: Applicants, yet again*

ATSS USED A *WEIGHTED APPROACH* TO RANKING KEYWORDS AND KEYPHRASES

Weighting keywords & keyphrases by where they occurred in the document (close to the top of the document for paragraphs was more weighted; with lists, within the first two or three bullet points in descending ranking; in terms of tables, closer to the left hand columns of the table and closer to the top row of the tables).

And so applicants followed, putting keywords and keyphrases as close to the top of the document as possible as well as in their project descriptions.

- o *Advantage: Applicants, again*

ATSS ADDED *WEIGHTED PROJECT RANKING* TO *WEIGHTED KEYWORD AND KEYPHRASE RANKING*

ATSS amped up the weapons race by using a weighted ranking of keywords/keyphrases by their projects' position in the list of projects within a resume. Older projects didn't receive as many points per keyword/keyphrase.

- o *Advantage: ATS. Finally!*

Being that humans are generic problem solvers with competencies honed by evolution and experience, applicants reacted by repeating keywords all over the place, for resumes that went into an ATS. But they also kept a resume version that was far more human-readable, without all the unnecessary repetition of keywords and keyphrases.

- o *Advantage: Back to applicants*

ATSS COUNTERED BY REQUIRING RECRUITERS AND INTERVIEWERS *ONLY USE RESUMES STORED WITHIN*

Applicants upped the ante by crafting resumes that balanced repetition of keywords for ATSS with human readability.

- o *Advantage: Applicants, barely*

ATSS *COMBINED WEIGHTED PROJECT, KEYWORD AND KEYPHRASE RANKING WITH PLACEMENT*

ATSS checked the keywords' and keyphrases' appearances not just within a project's placement in the document, but also the placement of the keywords and keyphrases within project descriptions. The keywords and keyphrases occurring in the first few lines of a project description were weighted higher than those occurring in the 3rd and lower lines.

Applicants adjusted by putting in as many repetitions as wouldn't turn off a human reviewer but also worked to repeat enough times for an ATS to possibly put them into the top of a stack to be viewed by a recruiter

- o *Advantage: Back to ATS, for now.*

This is as far as my knowledge goes. This was 2017-2018. No doubt other events have occurred in the meantime that have advanced this weapons race further.