Beat the Robots: How to Get Your Resume Past the System and Into Human Hands

by Regina Borsellino 9/2023

Does job searching sometimes feel like you're flinging resumes and cover letters into a black hole? You may be wondering if your applications are being read at all.

Perhaps you've heard that computerized resume scanners reject applications before they even make it into human hands. And yes—at many companies that receive a high volume of applications, that's true.

The internet has completely transformed the job searching landscape. Long gone are the days when you'd "pound the pavement" or "go in and ask to speak to a manager" for all but the smallest local businesses. Instead, you apply online—which is a double-edged sword for everyone involved. Because you don't have to physically fill out and deliver an application or send out resumes and cover letters via snail mail anymore, you can apply to a lot more jobs. But so can *everybody*. This means that an open position can easily get far more applications than companies have the resources to read.

Just ask Muse Career Coach Yolanda M. Owens, Founder of CareerSensei Consulting, who has more than 20 years of recruiting experience in a range of industries, including healthcare, tech, and financial services. When she was a corporate recruiter, she would post a job opening and get back, she says, "over 300 applications for an entry-level position within a week." She was generally recruiting for between 15 and 20 roles at a time, meaning that she might have 6,000 applicants to track at once!

So hiring managers and recruiters like Owens frequently use an applicant tracking system (ATS)—software that helps them organize job applications and ensure none fall through the cracks. If you've applied to a job any time since 2008, your application has probably passed through an ATS. Over 98% of Fortune 500 companies use an ATS of some kind, according to research conducted by Jobscan. Any time you apply for a job through an online form or portal, your application is almost certainly going into an ATS.

But an ATS does more than just track applications—it can also act as a filter, parsing every resume submitted and forwarding only the most relevant, qualified job seekers to a hiring manager or recruiter. That's the resume-scanning technology you've probably heard about.

Luckily, getting past the ATS is a lot easier than you might think. Follow these dos and don'ts to create an ATS-friendly resume that'll sail right through—and impress the hiring manager, too.

1. Do Apply Only to Roles You're Qualified For

ATSs get a bad rap as the "robots" standing between you and your new job, and when you hear that Owens read only 25% of the applications she received for most postings, it might reinforce that impression.

But the reason she looked at such a small percentage of applications? Most candidates were not qualified for the job she was filling. And some were completely irrelevant. "If I'm looking at an entry-level [accounting] position and seeing someone who is a dentist or a VP," Owens says, it's totally fair for the ATS to discard those.

So first and foremost, make sure you're truly qualified for the roles you're applying to. This doesn't mean you have to hit every single job qualification or apply to a job only if you have the traditional background for it. Owens says she was always "trying to cast a wide net and not exclude too many factors to pass up a candidate who might not be traditional"— career changers looking for an entry point into a new field, for example, or folks who had impressive transferable skills. But if you don't have the *core* skills needed to perform a job, you're better off not wasting your time or a recruiter's.

2. Don't Apply to Tons of Jobs at the Same Company

An applicant tracking system also allows recruiters to see all the roles you've applied to at their company. Owens often noticed the same person applying to every single opening the company or one of its departments had. When you do this, a recruiter can't tell what you're actually interested in or if you're self-aware about your abilities.

If a company has two very similar roles open, absolutely apply to both. Or if you have a wide range of skills and interests and would be equally happy in two very different roles, then you *can* apply to both, though you should definitely target each resume you submit to the specific job.

But you generally shouldn't be applying to both an entry-level position *and* a director-level position, or a sales position *and* a video-editing position. And you definitely shouldn't be applying to every opening a company has. That just shows you haven't taken the time to consider what the right role for you is—and a recruiter isn't likely to take the time to do it for you.

3. Do Include the Right Keywords

At its core, what any applicant tracking system is programmed to do when it "reads" a resume is the same as what a person would do: It's scanning for key pieces of information to find out whether or not you're a match for a job opening. "ATS algorithms aren't that different from the human algorithms, we're all kind of skimming for the same things," says Jon Shields, Marketing Manager at Jobscan. So when it comes to writing a resume that can make it past an ATS, you want to make sure that key information is there and that it's easy to find.

One of the ways the ATS narrows an applicant pool is by searching for specific keywords. It's like a Google search on a much smaller scale.

The recruiter or hiring manager can decide which keywords to search for—usually whatever skills, qualifications, experience, or qualities are most important for performing the job. For entry-level roles, that might mean certain majors, whereas for a tech position, it might be certain coding languages.

So if you want to make it past the ATS, you'll need to include those important keywords on your resume. Hint: Look for the hard skills that come up more than once in a posting and are mentioned near the top of the requirements and job duties. Hard skills include types of software, methodologies, spoken languages, and other abilities that are easier to quantify. (The most important keyword could even be the job title itself!)

Depending on your industry, certain degrees and certifications might also be important keywords. Particularly in fields like nursing and teaching where state licenses are necessary, employers are going to want to know at a glance that you're legally allowed to do the job you're applying for.

If you're having trouble identifying the important keywords in a job description as you craft an ATS-friendly resume, there are tools online (like Jobscan, Resume Worded's Targeted Resume or SkillSyncer) that can help you.

Note: In some cases, an ATS scanning for keywords will only recognize and count exact matches. So if you have the correct experience, but you wrote it using language that's different than what the system is looking for, you might not come up as one of the most qualified applicants. For example, if you write that you're an "LSW" but the ATS is checking for "Licensed Social Worker," it might drop your resume. (To be safe, write out the full name, then put the abbreviation in parentheses.) Or if you wrote that you're "an Excel expert," but the ATS is searching for someone who has "experience with spreadsheets," your resume might never get to the hiring manager. When in doubt, match your phrasing to what's in the job description, as that's likely to be what the ATS is looking for.

4. Do Put Your Keywords in Context

Applicant tracking systems can recognize that a key skill or experience is present. But interpreting the strength and value of that experience is still for people to do. And humans want to see *how* you used your skills.

It's obvious to a recruiter when you've just worked in a keyword because it was in the posting, without tying it to a specific personal achievement—and it doesn't win you any points. "Instead of focusing on regurgitating a job description, focus on your accomplishments," Owens says.

Plus, remember that you won't be the only one adding those important keywords to your resume. "If [you're] all using the same job descriptions and the same buzzwords, what's going to make

you stand out from the crowd?" Owens asks. Answer: your accomplishments, which are unique to *you*.

When describing your current and past positions, "ensure your bullet points are actually achievements, and use numbers and metrics to highlight them," says Rohan Mahtani, Founder of Resume Worded. Instead of just telling recruiters and hiring managers that you have a skill, this will show them how you've used it and what the results were.

5. Don't Try to Trick the ATS

ATSs have brought up a whole new host of problems with applicants "trying to cheat the system," Owens says. You might have come across advice about how to tweak your resume to fool an applicant tracking system—by pasting keywords in white, pasting the entire job description in white, repeating the keywords as many times as possible, or adding a section labeled "keywords" where you stick various words from the job description.

Don't do any of this!

Any tricks that have to do with pasting keywords in white will immediately be discovered because the ATS will display all text in the same color on the other end. So even if this gets your application flagged to a human recruiter, they'll see that you added the full text of the job description or just wrote "sales sales sales sales" somewhere and move onto the next candidate as quickly as they can. Not only are you failing to prove you're qualified for the job, but you're also showing that you'll cheat to get ahead!

If you were considering adding a "keyword" section, remember that it lacks any context. If you can't also speak to your experience with the skill, it probably doesn't belong on your resume, and if this is true of one of the main keywords, this isn't the job for you. What you *can* do, however, is include a keyword-rich resume summary or profile—*not* an objective statement—that concisely puts your skills in context at the top of your document.

You also want to be careful you're not just stuffing your resume full of keywords. "You can use a keyword as much as you like so long as it's used in [the] correct context that makes it relevant to the job description," says Nick Francioso, an Army veteran who mentors other veterans during career transitions and the founder of resume optimization tool SkillSyncer. But if you just cram in random keywords all over the place, you might make it past a resume scanner only to irritate a recruiter or hiring manager with a resume full of nonsense.

6. Do Choose the Right File Type

In the great resume file-type debate, there are only two real contenders: docx vs .pdf. While PDFs are best at keeping your format intact overall, the .docx format is the most accurately parsed by ATSs. So if you want to get past the ATS, use a .docx file. But also follow directions (if the listing asks for a certain file type, give it to them!) and take the posting's word for it (if a posting says a PDF is OK, then it's OK).

And if you're considering using an online resume builder, first check what file type it spits out—Mahtani cautions that some online resume builders will generate your resume as an image (.jpg or .png, for example).

Pro tip: If you don't have Microsoft Word or another program that can convert your resume to .docx or .pdf, you can use Google Docs to create your resume, then download it in either format for free.

7. Do Make Your Resume Easy to Scan (by Robots *and* Humans)

In addition to making sure that your resume has the right content for an applicant tracking system, you also need to make sure the ATS can make sense of that information and deliver it to the person on the other end in a readable form.

Fortunately, ATS-friendly resume formatting is very similar to recruiter-friendly resume formatting. Like a human, the ATS will read from left to right and top to bottom, so keep that in mind as you format. For example, your name and contact information should all be at the top, and your work history should start with your most recent or current position. There should be "no surprises about where info is supposed to be," Shields says.

Among the three common [resume formats](#) you can choose from—[chronological](#), [combination](#), and [functional](#)—ATSs are programmed to prefer the first two. Recruiters also prefer chronological and combination formats (starting to notice a theme?). "For me, it's more about storytelling to demonstrate a person's professional progression," Owens says. That story is harder to see with a functional resume, which can confuse applicant tracking systems, too. Without a clear work history to draw from, the software doesn't know how to sort different sections of text.

"Ultimately recruiters just want to find the info they're looking for as quickly as possible," Shields says. So making a resume ATS friendly will actually help your resume be more readable to recruiters as well.

8. Don't Include Fancy Formatting

It may pain you to hear this, but you likely need to get rid of that expensive resume template or heavily designed custom resume. "**If you speak to experienced hiring managers [and] recruiters, they'll tell you that creative [or] fancy resumes are not only harder for [an] ATS to read, but also harder for them to read!**" says Mahtani.

In order to scan your resume for relevant keywords most ATSs will convert the document to a text-only file. So at best, any fancy formatting will be lost. At worst, the ATS won't be able to pull out the important information and so a person may never lay eyes on your nice designs—or read about the experience and skills that actually qualify you for the job.

When designing a resume to go through an ATS, avoid:

- **Tables**
- **Text boxes**
- **Logos**
- **Images:** In the U.S., your resume should never include your photo.
- **Graphics, graphs, or other visuals**
- **Columns:** Since ATSs are programmed to read left to right, some will read columns straight across rather than reading column one top to bottom and then starting column two at the top.
- **Headers and footers:** Information in the header and footer sometimes gets dropped by the ATS completely. Make sure all text is within the document body.
- **Uncommon section headings:** Stick to conventional labels like "Education," "Work Experience," and "Technical Skills," so the ATS knows how to sort your information. This is not the place to get creative with something like "Where I've Made an Impact."
- **Hyperlinks on important words:** Some systems will display only the URL and drop the words you linked from, so don't link from anything important (like your job title or an accomplishment). Instead, paste in the URL itself or link out from a word like "website" or "portfolio."
- **Less common fonts:** Stick to a universal font like Arial, Helvetica, Times New Roman, Garamond, Georgia, or Cambria. Avoid fonts you need to download, which the ATS may have trouble parsing.

Here are some elements you *can* use without tripping up an ATS:

- **Bold**
- **Italics**
- **Underline:** But stick to using underlines in headings and for URLs, Shields says. In general, people have been trained to see any underline within sentences as links.
- **Colors:** Just know that the ATS will return all text in the same color, so make sure your color choices aren't vital to understanding the text of your resume.
- **Bullets:** Bullets are an important component of any resume, but stick to the standard circle- or square-shaped ones. Anything else could get messy.
- Still not convinced that you should ditch your fancy resume? To show how formatting can trip up an ATS, we created a resume with many of the "forbidden" design elements— including columns, separate text boxes for the job seeker's name and contact information, a table, icons, and text in the header—and used it to apply to a job at The Muse. The resume contains all the keywords found in the job posting, and since Victoria Harris is a fictional person, she hits every single requirement, making her an ideal candidate for the job.

VICTORIA HARRIS

19 First St,
New York, NY

Sales Background and Experience

Sales Development Representative | June 2018 - Present
Honeysuckle Tech Company, New York, NY

- Research companies and generate 50+ leads a month using LinkedIn Sales Navigator
- Approach potential customers through cold calling, emailing, and social engagement
- Manage, qualify, and track leads using Apollo.io
- Test, measure, and improve outreach strategy using Salesforce Analytics Cloud and Salesforce Sales Cloud
- Flip 20+ leads to warm leads per month, set initial sales meetings with account executives
- Collaborated with team of account executives and marketing strategists to help refine initial prospecting message, leading to a 20% increase in number of new clients YoY
- Exceed personal lead generation and initial sales meeting goals by up to 50% each quarter

Sales Associate | January 2015 - May 2018
Tom's Hardware Store, Ithaca, NY

- Proposed, tested, and helped implement popular customer loyalty program resulting in 200 signups in 3 months
- Named "Tom's Hardware Store Sales Associate of the Year 2017" (out of 30 employees) for number of sales and outstanding customer service

Contact Information:

vcharris@email.com | (555)111-3333 | linkedin.com/in/vcharris

Education

Ithaca College, Ithaca, NY
Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Communications
Awarded: May 2018

Technical Skills

Salesforce Analytics Cloud	Salesforce Sales Cloud
LinkedIn Sales Navigator	Apollo.io
Chorus	ZoomInfo
G Suite	Microsoft Office

Volunteer Work

Sept 2017 - May 2018
Children's Healthcare Foundation, Ithaca, NY

⇒ Reached out to and booked prospective vendors for fundraising events, resulting in donated supplies and services worth $20,000
⇒ Engaged with donors at fundraising events, leading to $5,500 in donations
⇒ Called and emailed past donors to bring in repeat donations totaling $8,200

Here's what the resume looks like after it's been run through an ATS:

Experience

Sales Development Representative
June 2018

Education

Sales Cloud
Apollo.io
May 2018 to May 2018 (1 month)

- Research companies and generate 50+ leads a   Communications
month using LinkedIn Sales Navigator Awarded: May 2018

- Approach potential customers through cold calling,
emailing, and social engagement

- Manage, qualify, and track leads using Apollo.io

- Test, measure, and improve outreach strategy using   Technical Skills
Salesforce Analytics Cloud and Salesforce Sales
Cloud   Salesforce   Salesforce

- Flip 20+ leads to warm leads per month, set initial   Analytics Cloud   Sales Cloud
sales meetings with account executives

- Collaborated with team of account executives and   LinkedIn Sales
Apollo.io
marketing strategists to help refine initial prospecting   Navigator

You'll immediately notice that the columns have been smashed together. Victoria's current position is still first, which is good, but what comes next is an indecipherable jumble: "Education

Sales Cloud Apollo.io." Then, the ATS has combined the start date of her current job with her graduation date and interpreted that she's been in her current position for just one month instead of over a year.

When you finally get to her bullet points, they've also been destroyed. Her fourth bullet, for example, now ends with: "Salesforce Analytics Cloud and Salesforce Sales Cloud Salesforce Salesforce." Victoria *wasn't* keyword stuffing, but it sure looks like she was.

Yes, this feels like a lot. But the main thing to take away when it comes to creating an ATS-friendly resume is that "it will help even if you're not going through an ATS," Shields says. At the end of the day, what an ATS is looking for in a resume is not that different from what a person is scanning for—so if you make a resume that beats the ATS, chances are it'll impress a whole lot of humans, too.