A Guide to Adapting Your Resume for the Applicant Tracking System (ATS)

Many experts suggest that you keep a working resume, one that you update and change, and then one that is basically the final draft of that working resume that's individualized and targeted for each employment application as an ATS-compatible resume. When applying for jobs most companies ask you to upload your resume for review. This makes it easy for employers to receive large numbers of applicants and pre-screen them through an ATS. **However, qualified applicants can be rejected by ATSs due to resume formatting.** The following is a guide to having an ATS-friendly resume.

USE SIMPLE FORMATTING

Avoid templates, which are a combination of fields and tables and can confuse ATS systems.

Forget all style and uniqueness. With this type of resume, it needs to be as plain as possible, that's not to say that the content has to be plain, but the format does.

Stick to basic fonts such as Arial, Georgia, Impact, Lucinda, Tahoma or Trebuchet, only use black color, and font size 11-12 points. Don't mix different fonts and sizes.

Avoid underlining words; it can mess up the legibility of lower case letters such as g, j or y.

HERE'S THE TAKEAWAY - A WELL-CRAFTED, ATS-FRIENDLY RESUME IS CRITICAL TO A SUCCESSFUL JOB SEARCH.

- **Use single column, left-aligned format** (no tables, multiple columns, or text boxes).
- **Include contact information in the body of your resume**, not in the header or footer. Top line should include only your name.
- **Do not use page numbers** in the body of your resume.
  However, your resume can be as long as you need. The ATS won't penalize you for length. However, since it may also be read by a person, keeping it to two pages is smart. If you have two or more pages, put your name and pagination (i.e, Page 2/4 in a header so the ATS can't "see" it.
- **No punctuation in your name,** such as ( ) , / - . Don't list your credentials (MBA, CPA, etc.) next to your name. Include that information on a separate line.
- **Add dates on the right, immediately after text for every entry.** Include months (i.e., 06/2010 – 08/2012). Do NOT place dates on the right margin; the ATS might miss them.
- **No special characters or accented words.** The word "resume" itself is not ATS-friendly.
- **Include section headers in ALL CAPS** to make it easy for the applicant tracking system to categorize the information. Use standard headings for contact information and titles like: SUMMARY, EDUCATION/TRAINING/CERTIFICATION, RELATED EXPERIENCE, ACTIVITIES, and SKILLS.
- **Use proper and consistent capitalization and punctuation.** Both of these can affect how information is parsed and assigned within the ATS database.
- **Use full, spelled-out terms in addition to abbreviations and acronyms** such as:
  - Job Titles: Certified Public Accountant (CPA)
  - Companies and Associations:
    - International Business Machines (IBM)
    - American Cancer Society (ACS)
  - Products: Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS)
  - Brands: Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing (3M)
  - Years: 2014-2015 (never 2014-'15 or '14-'15)
- **Avoid spelling errors**, since an ATS doesn't know what you 'meant' to write.
- **Save your resume as a basic word doc (.doc) or .txt file**. While ATSs are getting better at reading PDF files, it's still safer to feed the system a Word or Text file.
- **Edit carefully:** The ATS will not recognize misspelled words. And, if your resume survives the ATS screen, it will next be reviewed by human beings so it must be error-free.

USING KEYWORDS

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. The best place to begin is to read the job description. From that job description, you can see what keywords and key phrases are emphasized. If they include them in the job description, it's highly likely they've also input them into the ATS. It will serve you well to read those job descriptions closely, and identify important competencies and skill sets. Place emphasis on these matched experiences in your resume.

It's also helpful to include both specific and general keywords in the mix. ATSs use all of these keywords in certain job functions. For example, a position as "team leader" should include job-specific buzzwords such as "coordinate", "manage", and having the general keyword "project coordinator", "project manager" would help to strengthen your resume, if applicable.

LISTING YOUR EXPERIENCE:

- When listing experience, list your job title, organization name, city, state and employment dates first. Next, if you wish, include a context statement describing the organization.
- When writing your employment history, present the information for each employer in the same order and in reverse chronological order.
- If you are working towards a certification that is a requirement for the position, do include it on the resume -- but include a phrase such as "Pursuing (name of credential)".

SKILLS

- Find a natural way to include skills throughout your resume. A simple list of skills is not sufficient. If you choose to add a skills section, be sure to include statements that document your skills. Example:

  WRONG: Excel, Access
  RIGHT: Excel - Placed 1st in regional and 6th in the state in competition for Advanced Spreadsheets

- Don't include skills you don't possess on the resume in an attempt to "trick" the applicant tracking system into selecting you. Anything on your resume needs to be substantiated in an interview, or increasingly in a skills-based test before you interview.

If you are not familiar with a certain industry's lingo, try a **Google-search** using the following search string: (*"workplace jargon" OR keywords AND (name of industry or career field name or name of major).*

OPTIMIZING

- Use the exact job title you are seeking on the resume.
- Add a professional summary with bulleted achievements and skills that relate to the job description. Make certain, also, that your listed skills match up exactly on your resume and LinkedIn profile.
- If given the choice, do upload your resume rather than cutting and pasting sections into text boxes. When it is eventually forwarded to a human, it will look much more attractive.
- At the end of the day, make sure your ATS-optimized resume is simple, straightforward, and will delight both a machine and human reader. And by all means, feel free to use a more designed version of your resume once you've landed the job interview!
- Check your email after applying for a position online. Some applicant tracking systems acknowledge submissions, but these automated responses may be diverted to your spam folder.