

What You Don't Know About Resume Screening Software Could Be Sabotaging Your Job Search

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Ten years ago, only large recruitment firms and big-budgeted corporations could afford to use resume screening software as part of their talent acquisition process. Job seekers who were applying to small-to-mid-sized companies were immune from the vagaries of these tools.

With the proliferation of the 'software as service' delivery model, this no longer holds true. Even fairly small companies can afford to adopt some kind of [resume](#) extraction, screening and management software, either directly or through a full-service hiring solutions firm such as Staffback Inc. This means that job seekers have to be much more savvy about the technology if they want to ensure that their resume gets noticed.

How Resume Screening Software Works

First of all, lets get the 'Optical Character Recognition' issues off the table. There are only a few companies who still scan paper versions of resumes, so if you are holding on to concerns about using italics, underlining, bolding and colour in your resume, you can let them go.

Today's resume management tools are substantially more sophisticated than the OCR versions of old, and have the capacity to neatly handle a wide range of text-based formats and content. They typically include a module that extracts data from resumes, and an HR or talent management system that uses the extracted data to evaluate and rank qualified candidates.

The resume extraction tool uses advanced algorithms to scan your resume, identify text information, and categorize it using the rules of standard resume formatting. Data such as your name, address, telephone number, education, professional experience, years with each job, and keywords will be extracted and fed into an HR database such as Oracle, PeopleSoft, or SAP, or into a candidate tracking system such as Hire Desk.

The talent management database is the foundation tool for the candidate evaluation and qualification process, not your actual resume. Based on the criteria identified by the recruiter or hiring manager, each candidate that makes it into the talent management database is ranked in terms of how closely they match the parameters of the job. Factors that will go into this ranking include where the candidate lives, their years of experience, and most importantly, the appearance of specific keywords – the more keywords, the better the ranking.

In older versions of extraction and talent management tools, the keyword match had to be exact, and many candidates were inadvertently screened out because of spelling variations (AS400 versus AS/400, for example). Moreover, the software was fairly simplistic in its parsing capabilities – the keyword was either present or not present, there was no ability to judge the context in which the word was used. This meant that unqualified candidates were able to trick the system by loading their resume with keywords. Today's advanced tools, such as Talent Technology's Resume Mirror and HireDesk, have the capacity to parse and interpret meaning from entire sentences and phrases, which allows hiring managers to conduct contextual and parametric candidate searches.

Soon after the job is posted and applications begin to roll in, the hiring manager will generate a report with a list of applicants who meet a minimum ranking – the more applicants there are for a job, the more restrictive the hiring manager can be in setting the threshold for qualification. The report may contain small excerpts such as the summary from your original resume, but your actual resume may not get looked at in its entirety unless it makes it to the top of the ranking pool.

The Resumator, a new software suite launched early in 2009, cuts across the grain in this regard. Designed to meet the hiring needs of small to mid-sized companies, Resumator's built-in logic mimics the way that [resumes](#) are read in real life, and the software has the ability to display the resume in its entirety. But it still uses data parsing and keyword recognition logic to identify qualified candidates.

What Job Seekers Can Do to Maximize Their Success with Resume Screening Software

Before I start this section, I want to state for the record that I am not an advocate of trying to beat the system. If you are applying for positions for which you are patently unqualified, I believe that you are doing a disservice both to your own job search strategy and to the people who are managing the hiring process. In fact it is largely because unqualified candidates keep applying in great numbers that companies of all sizes have been forced to resort to resume screening software.

Now, that being said, there are specific measures that qualified candidates should take to ensure that their resume gets scanned properly and makes it to the top of the candidate pool.

How to Make It Past the Resume Extraction Process

1. Submit your resume in a text format. A surprising number of candidates use graphics-based pdf files, which are viewed by the scanning software as nothing more than pretty pictures. Ken Winters, CEO of Staffback Inc., goes one step further. He recommends that you stick to MS Word, because its very universality means that it is least likely to cause reading and parsing problems for resume extraction software.
2. Don't use graphics at all on resumes that are being electronically submitted. Extraction tools work on the basis of text recognition, so graphics are white noise that not only don't get scanned, but can actually mess up the parsing process for the surrounding text.
3. Don't forget your address. Some candidates think that by excluding their address they won't be geographically limited, but in fact the opposite is true. One of the first screening parameters that hiring managers use is often the postal code or zip code, and if it isn't present on your resume, you fall to the bottom of the candidate pool.
4. Don't use Word's header or footer options for key data such as contact information. These are outside of the scanned areas, and won't get parsed.
5. Use conventional formatting for things like your telephone number, no spaces between the numbers, no fancy characters as separators.
6. Stick to standard layouts. While resume extraction software has greatly improved over the years in terms of the ability to recognize and parse a variety of formatting conventions, if you are too creative, the software may not parse your resume properly. Unless the response to the advertised job has been low, the recruiter or hiring manager is probably not going to take the time to fix the errors, and you will be dismissed as a P.I.T.A. candidate.
7. Use reverse chronological formatting rather than functional - it tends to parse with fewer extraction errors.

How to Stand Out in the Candidate Ranking Process

1. Tailor each resume to the specific job - one size most certainly does not fit all in today's job market. Read the job posting carefully, and look for the keywords that are used to describe the job and the qualifications. These are an indication of the company's thinking and will most likely be used to rank candidates. In fact some candidate-ranking tools will do a direct comparison of the entire job ad against the candidate's resume.
2. Learn how to read the qualifications section. Many companies that are currently in recruitment mode are looking for candidates who can cover multiple skill sets, almost to be point of being unrealistic in their expectations. When faced with a long list of qualifications, know that some of them are must haves, and many of them are nice to haves. The higher up in the list of qualifications a keyword occurs, the stronger it is weighted in importance in candidate rankings, and the more likely it is to be a must have.
3. Incorporate keywords directly into the body of your resume, so that a context is provided for the word. Keywords that cannot easily be used this way can be listed in a separate table. Be aware however, that some recruiters frown on the use of a lengthy keyword table, and regard it as an attempt by unqualified candidates to trick the system. Keep your keyword list short (10 to 12 items), relevant to the job, and accurate in terms of being a key strength you have to offer.
4. Understand the principle of resume fatigue. Keep your resume easy to scan visually when it finally does get seen by a recruiter or hiring manager, and avoid look-alike formatting that you get from off-the-shelf and online resume templates. As one recruiter I spoke to noted, "I've had virtually identical resumes come in from multiple applicants for a single job. Not a good way to stand out, and shows a distinct lack of initiative.
5. Get your resume in early. In fact the earlier you are in the submission process (provided that you are qualified), the more likely you are to become the gold standard by which the qualification threshold is set for all subsequent applicants.

A Final Word on Job Search Strategy – Advice from Industry Insiders

While knowledge of resume extraction and candidate management software can give you a leg up, motivated job seekers should not rely exclusively on electronic submission of their resume to land their next great job. The laws of the hidden job market still apply, and candidates should be using a multi-pronged job search plan that includes direct applications, networking, cold calling, and relationship building.

Ken Winters advises candidates to make use of resources such as LinkedIn to create a network of contacts and referrals. Use your network to solicit recommendations where appropriate, it's a great way of establishing credibility and letting people know that you are available for new opportunities.

Don Charlton, Founder & CEO of The Resumator describes a great job search strategy as one that uses best practices in relationship building and solution selling. A good salesman knows that there is a fine balance between being pushy and annoying, and creating positive connections. Don't be afraid to ask questions, to seek out the person who you will be making the final hiring decision. But be respectful of their time. You are offering a solution. Look, sound and most of all act like somebody who is solution-minded.

Karen Siwak, a Certified Resume Strategist, is a passionate believer in Resume Authenticity – if the words on the paper don't feel comfortable coming out of your mouth, we've missed the point of the exercise.

She uses a highly interactive partnership with her clients to create job search documents that are true to her client's voice, and has craft top caliber career transition packages for lawyers, medical professionals, corporate executives, scientists, law enforcement specialists, accountants, engineers, project managers, and administrative & operations personnel at all organizational levels.

Information about her company and her services can be found at <http://www.resumeconfidential.ca>