

How to Beat the Dreaded Applicant Tracking System

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Learn workarounds that can bypass the ATS and increase your odds of getting an interview



As a professional recruiter, the complaint I most hear from job searchers is they can't get past automated applicant tracking systems — even if they are highly qualified for the position.

Let's look at why this is and what you can do to increase your odds of getting an interview and landing that new job!

Applicant tracking systems (ATS) started as a way to accept and store résumé submissions, plus track where candidates were in the job application process.

ATS started as PC-based and then moved online as the web evolved. For decades, an ATS was a benevolent tool to track someone through the job hiring process. However, the growth of mobile changed *everything*.

Suddenly applicants could apply for a job with a swipe of a finger. Apply, apply, apply! Or worse: you could set up a profile in online job sites so that anytime a job was posted that mentioned writing, the job board would submit you automatically.

In the "old days," companies might get 10 or 20 applications for a posted job. Now, companies get *hundreds* of applications, most of whom aren't qualified for the job. For example, I have posted a job requiring 5+ years of Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA) experience and receive applications from résumé writers and forklift drivers. They aren't even *reading* the job postings. Madness!

To counter the flood of non-qualified candidates, companies starting using artificial intelligence to automatically weed out those non-qualified candidates. I've heard that only 2 to 5 percent of applications are ever seen by a real person.

While that sounds great in theory, the problem is that ATS are also rejecting well qualified candidates.

So what's a job applicant to do?

Stop applying for jobs through an ATS! And if you absolutely *must* apply for the job, learn how to beat the ATS at its own game.

Let's look at some person-to-person options first.

Expand Your STC Connections

The best way to beat an applicant tracking system it is to not use one at all. It's a *bazillion* times more effective to apply for a job using a personal connection in your network, or via a professional recruiter.

As Alyssa Fox noted in her article, "Unearthing Hidden Networking Gems," (page 8) start expanding your network now, *before* you need a new job.

Your STC connections are probably your most valuable. We meet in chapter meetings and conferences (in-person and virtually). The upside of having virtual meetings over the past two years is that now we can go to *any* STC community meeting. Even if you haven't met in person, these are people with whom you have an existing professional relationship.

I know several people who landed new jobs recently via their STC connections. Those same people reported receiving zero interviews (zero!) when applying for jobs via an ATS.

Note: I know many STC members who haven't joined a local chapter or special interest group. You are missing a valuable opportunity to expand your professional network. Join (and volunteer) in chapters and SIGs to make connections, learn new skills, and make yourself more valuable to prospective employers.

Use Your Professional Network

Another action you can take is to network outside of STC meetings, with people at who might need your services. You can build your professional network in places such as C++ user group meetings, ASP.NET Meetups, and so on. There are also social media groups on LinkedIn, Slack,

and other platforms. Don't just join these groups, *participate*. More on this in a bit.

Let your network know you're looking, and monitor your network to see who's hiring. Industry groups are also places where people post jobs.

Ask for a Referral

Many companies pay their employees a bonus for referring a candidate who gets hired. (It's faster and cheaper than posting these jobs online.) My personal opinion: Don't hesitate to ask someone to pass on your résumé to the hiring manager — they may get a bonus for referring you!

If there is an opening for a senior technical writer at XYZ company, check if you know someone there and ask them to pass your résumé on. Even if you don't know someone at a target company, remember they may get a bonus for finding you. So find a technical writer there on LinkedIn and ask if they will submit you. Or even better, see if the documentation manager at XYZ is on LinkedIn and ask if you can send them your résumé.

Finally, 99% of HR recruiters are on LinkedIn. So if you can't find someone you know, or a writer, or a manager at XYZ, you can almost always find a recruiter there and ask them if you can send them your résumé. They may say "Sure!" or they may say to apply for the job via their website and they'll keep an eye out for your application.

You're still applying for the job via an ATS, but at least you have a human looking for your application and can move your application out of the non-qualified folder if it gets routed there.

Be Visible

The best way to get a job is to be so visible that companies *ask you* to work for them. Earlier I mentioned joining industry-related groups on LinkedIn, Slack, or even Facebook to expand your network. Do that, but also *contribute*. Share interesting articles or blog postings that are helpful to the others in the profession. Answer people's questions. Offer to help. *Be visible*.

Speak at chapter meetings and at conferences. Start an industry-related blog or podcast. Volunteer at the chapter, SIG, or international level. I know someone who wanted to transition from environmental engineering into technical writing, so she volunteered to be the newsletter editor for her STC chapter. Someone read one of

the newsletters on the chapter website and liked it so much they offered her a job.

Make it easy for people to find you!

Beating the ATS

There are websites and complete books on how to beat an ATS, so I'm going to cover the basics. (But by now you've decided you're not applying for jobs through an ATS anymore, right?)

An ATS compares your résumé to the job description and job requirements, and then ranks how well it thinks you match. So the strategy for getting past the ATS is to have your résumé contain as many words and phrases as possible from the job posting. It's job-search SEO.

I have said for years that a résumé is just a vehicle that shows that you match what the reader looking for, and that is especially true when the reader is an ATS.

Your only objective is to give the ATS what it needs to rank you as a very good match.

The title at the top of your résumé and in your previous job **must** match the job title exactly. If the job is a senior information engineer, by golly you're a senior information engineer. If you get the interview, feel free to give them a revised résumé with your actual job titles. But at this point, your only objective is to give the ATS what it needs to rank you as a very good match.

Here's a real-life example to show how insidious an ATS can be. A friend of mine was a UI/UX Designer applying for a UI/UX Designer job. There are websites where you can copy and paste the job for which you want to apply in one window and paste your résumé in another, and the website will show how well an ATS will grade you as a matches.

She did this and kept getting scored low (not a match). Finally, she figured out why: the job title was "UI/UX Designer," but her title in her résumé was "UX/UI Designer" (reversed). That simple transposition — easily read by a human as a

match — was enough for the ATS to think she wasn't a UI/UX Designer.

It's really that bad! (Which is why I advocate to not apply for jobs through an ATS.)

But if you absolutely must apply for a job via an ATS, do an internet search for "Is my résumé ATS friendly?" and test your résumé against the job description like my friend did.

Note: I'm not a huge fan of ZipRecruiter, but they have such an evaluation tool, which is probably really useful if you're applying for a job via ZipRecruiter!

You've Done That

While it is important to show your experience match the job title *using their wording*, you must also include key phrases from the job description and job requirements.

So what do you do if you haven't done or don't have one or more of the requirements? Tell a truthful statement. For example, if you've used RoboHelp and the job required Madcap Flare, you can say "Five years' experience with RoboHelp, similar to Madcap Flare." That way, if the ATS is looking for Madcap Flare, it'll find it.

More ATS Limitations

Another interesting (annoying!) aspect is that an ATS can't parse long sentences, so keep verbs and objects in close proximity.

For example, if the requirement is "Experience writing training materials," your résumé should say, "Experience writing training materials," not "Wrote a variety of content for end users and stakeholders including installation guides, user manuals, standing operating procedures, and training materials." An AI would never parse that. First, "Wrote" doesn't match "Experience with." Second, the verb (wrote) and the direct object (training materials) are too far apart.

Most times, an ATS can't parse tables or text boxes, and they certainly can't read icons and graphics. If your résumé uses graphics as titles and headings, the ATS won't read them. Many ATS cannot read the headers and footers in MS Word either.

Most times, an ATS can't parse design elements, headers, or footers in a résumé. Have a simple version in Notepad to copy and paste into the system, and save the visually appealing résumé for the interview.

You really have to go back to the days when we were writing résumés in Notepad in plain ASCII text. Keep the nice version of your résumé for the interview. (Or upload both versions to the ATS if it offers that option.)

A résumé is just a vehicle that shows you match what the readers are looking for. In this case, the reader is an ATS, and the ATS is overly aggressive in rejecting résumés.

The solution? Stop applying for jobs via an ATS. Get personal referrals from your network or from a stranger who already works there.

And if all else fails, format your résumé to beat the ATS at its own game. ■



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