

## **Frequently Asked Questions: Understanding Applicant Tracking Systems**

### **Q: How can I tell if a company uses applicant tracking system software?**

As I type this, more than one-fourth of all hiring companies use applicant tracking systems (ATS) to manage the influx of resumes and job applicants, and that number is growing. There are many types of ATS software programs. Companies with more than 100 employees are more likely to utilize ATS, as are certain industries such as healthcare, the government, and technology sectors. Whenever you formally apply for a job, you can assume that an ATS may be part of the company's screening process. Just to be safe, it's a good idea to submit an ATS-optimized resume.

### **Q: What is an ATS-Optimized Resume?**

An ATS-optimized resume is formatted to be easily imported and read by ATS. Currently there is no industry standard in place and ATS settings vary. The general formatting guidelines are:

- Avoid using charts, graphs, logos, and other images
- Avoid special formatting (e.g. "fancy font, borders, bold and italicized text)
- Use keyboard characters only (e.g. \*, >, ~, -) when separating information
- Save the file in .DOC or .TXT formats (avoid uploading PDF, RTF, and JPG files)
- Include specific job/industry relevant keywords

### **Q: If asked to upload or copy-and-paste my resume, which should I do?**

If given a choice, go with uploading an ATS-optimized MS Word file. More than likely larger companies will be using the most up-to-date ATS programs—they keep the document formatting intact. If you're applying to a small or mid-size company, copy-and-paste an ATS-friendly text file directly into the application form.

### **Q: How do I know which keywords will pass the ATS screening?**

When in doubt, review the original job posting and/or any similar postings for jobs you're targeting. The job posting will usually include specific keywords that should also appear in your resume. You can also refer to online resources like the Occupational [Outlook Handbook](#) and [O\\*Net](#).

### **Q: Does resume length matter?**

No. When resumes are screened through ATS software, the computer file doesn't generally recognize pages. It recognizes characters. Some ATS programs can identify character lengths; but that only happens when the resume has been copied-and-pasted into an online form; and **IF** it happens, the form

will show a character limit (e.g. "Submissions are limited to 20,000 characters."). You'll rarely encounter an application form with character limits.

**Q: How can I avoid ATS screening?**

If you follow a company's online application process, there's not much you can do to avoid a potential ATS screening. It's an automated process more and more companies are integrating into their hiring process.

**The only way to completely avoid ATS is by placing your resume directly into the hands of the hiring manager, recruiter, or company owner in charge of making direct hiring decisions.** It's the only way to ensure securing an interview without ATS.

Despite the growing use of ATS software by companies nationwide, at the end of the day **people hire people**. According to research, approximately 75-percent of open job positions are never formally posted or advertised, and only 5-percent of candidates are hired job postings. Networking and getting your resume into the right person's hands is the best way to land an interview.