Tips for Applying Online

We all hate the online application. It seems like a repeat of the resume and can be time consuming. Then once you've submitted an application, it seems to disappear into a black hole, without any employer response. In today's world of work, however, the online application is a necessary evil. Even if you have done your networking effectively, companies often require that you complete an application online. That electronic application, and with it the Applicant Tracking System (ATS), is becoming more popular with mid-sized and, especially, large companies. Our advice is to make the best of it, working with the required system so that your resume can eventually be seen by a real person. Below are a few tips to help get through the process. (If any of our tips go beyond your computer expertise, ask for staff help.)

NOTE: Refer to our other tip sheets for writing an effective resume and powerful cover letter.

1. **Have Your Resume & Cover Letter Tailored and Prepared for the Job Opening**
   Before you begin the online application, be sure to have your targeted resume and cover letter prepared in the format that the employer wants to see. Read any instructions carefully to know what formats (ie: Word document or PDF) are accepted by their system. It may be that you will need to copy and paste your information into their online forms in addition to upload. This is much easier if you have done the work ahead of time.

2. **Know Your Employment History**
   Online applications often ask for specific dates and information. They require dates of schooling or employment, sometimes to the day. They ask for employer addresses and phone numbers. They ask for reference addresses and contact information. These aren't easy to remember. Some, in fact, may no longer exist. Create a master "employment history" document for your reference as you are completing an application. This way you do not have to recreate it from memory each time, and can refer to when necessary.

3. **Work with, not against, the Applicant Tracking System (ATS)**
   Getting past a live resume reader is one thing. Getting past the computerized ATS is something altogether different. The ATS, used by many medium to large companies, filters resumes before a live person reads them. The ATS will rank resumes that fit better than others. Here are tips to work with, not against the system:
   - Include as many key words from the job description as you can in your letter, resume and application. Key words could be based on skills, experience, location, education or even former employers.
   - Consider having a specific ATS resume that is sent initially. After your ATS resume gets through to the live reader, send your preferred, formatted resume to HR or the hiring manager.
   - An ATS resume:
     - **Does:** use only text without special characters; has one simple, standard font; has clear, organized sections; is in a single column; has everything on its own line without columns; has contact information at the top without a header; is left justified; and can be any length.
     - **Does not:** use tables or images; use headers or footers; have colors; add special characters (consider using asterisks instead of bullets); use abbreviations or acronyms only
   - Follow best practices when formatting work history information: start with the employer's name and location, followed by your title, then the dates you held that title.
   - Some ATS systems will rank candidates higher if a key word is used more than once. Be careful, though, not to unnecessarily stuff your resume with one or two specific words.
   - Use the exact wording that is used in the job description, including verb tense.
   - ATS machines often look for hard, concrete skills over soft skills, unless specified in the description.
   - If you submitted a resume previously, consider changing it to meet any new job requirements.
   - Submit a Microsoft Word document rather than a PDF, unless requested.
   - Label your resume sections more generically, such as "Contact Information", "Summary", "Work Experience", and "Education".
   - Research the company and include qualifications that other current employees might have on their profiles.

   Try JobScan.co to optimize your resume to a job description. Upload your resume and a corresponding job posting. The website algorithms will suggest how well the two documents match. (Note this has a limited free service and has a cost for more advanced or robust usage.)

4. **Be Specific with Key Dates and Information**

    If an application asks for the dates of employment or schooling, be as specific as possible. This is especially true for civil service jobs with the county, state or federal governments. Do not leave anything for interpretation. The hiring manager or scanner may assume the worst, and that is never to your benefit.

5. **Read the Instructions Carefully**

    Part of an online application is seeing if an applicant can read and follow directions. Every application will be slightly different. Include each document they request, in the format they specify. In some cases, you will need to copy and paste your resume into their form. Some might ask for separate documents. Others may allow only one document to be uploaded. In this case you may want to combine your documents into one.

6. **Proofread Everything Before Hitting the Submit Button**

    You have proofed your resume and cover letter thoroughly. Don't sabotage your application with mistakes in the application. Take your time to proof every word throughout on the application so that you catch typos or grammatical errors before hitting the submit button. If you need to, also ask a friend or family member to proof it.

7. **Print and Save Your Application for Later**

    You want to remember what you said to the hiring manager when you get the call for an interview. As an organized job seeker, you have kept a file (either paper or electronic) of all your targeted resumes with their corresponding job announcements. Include a copy of your online applications for each organization so that you can refer back to it in the next phase of the process.

8. **Let Any Inside Contacts Know When Your Application Has Been Submitted**

    Many times, even though you may have helpful network contacts inside a company, you will have to complete an online application as well. Be sure to let your contact in the company know that you have submitted the application so he or she can speak with HR or a hiring manager to be on the lookout for your information.

9. **Follow Up**

    Over half of hiring managers in an April 2017 survey said they do not consider candidates who fail to follow up after submitting an application. About 2 days after you have applied, make a follow up call or send an email. This will get your name in front of HR or the hiring manager, giving him or her reason to revisit your application. You will need to do some research on whom to call or email—or simply call the front desk to ask. Government entities usually have a point of contact listed.

10. **Manage Your Online Brand and Reputation**

    Hiring managers can find you online. Be sure your LinkedIn profile is up-to-date and shows your personality. It should match, but not mirror, your resume, and make you stand out from the crowd. Include those same key words in your LinkedIn profile as well so recruiters can find you. Clean up your Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and other profiles. Don't include events, posts or photos that could be detrimental to your applications. Additionally, don't let others tag you in their profiles if it will shine a bad light on you. Online profiles tell a story of who you are and how you might fit with a company. Make sure it's the story you want to tell.

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