

Navigating the Online Application Process

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How can students best navigate HR screening programs so they can "stay in the game" and get to the interview? How important are key words? As in the traditional application process, employers are looking for students who have the skills, experience, and qualities that best match the requirements for the job opening.

"Key words can be very important in a resume," says Julie Le Sueur, Archer Daniels Midland's manager of college relations. "Most candidate contact management programs enable the recruiter to search for qualified candidates by conducting a search after typing in key words or skills needed."

Le Sueur recommends that candidates include key words when appropriate to reinforce any particular strengths or, in the case of new graduates, extensive course work.

"For example, if a new graduate has taken statistics courses and considers herself to be advanced in this knowledge, she should list this somewhere on her resume, either in a listing of key courses taken or in an objective statement at the top of the resume," Le Sueur advises.

Mike Caldwell, assistant director of career services at Hendrix College in Conway, Arkansas, previously worked in retail management for a large corporate retailer that used screening measures for applicants.

"From that experience, the best advice that I think can be given is to simply be completely honest," Caldwell says. "Of course, careful consideration can be given to key wording resumes, and other techniques may be applied. However, if a candidate is inconsistent with statements or responses she or he may be screened out."

Students, Caldwell says, should use practical judgment in putting forth a complete, detailed, and intelligently presented picture of their qualifications and transferable skills.

"The key to staying in the game [throughout the online application process] really is the same as in face-to-face recruiting," he notes.

Patricia Peterson, director of career services at the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia, says: "It is really up to the individual colleges and universities to bring HR personnel to campus to explain HR screening program processes. And it is up to the student to attend those sessions."

Following are some tips for applying online that appear in the new issue of *Job Choices* that you can share with your clients:

- Follow directions. Be careful to enter the correct data in the correct field.
- Ask for advice on completing the application from a company recruiter or an alumnus who may work at the organization.
- Tailor your application information to the position. Don't copy and paste text from your generic resume.
- Use key words, buzz words, and industry verbiage. Use the verbiage in the job ad as your model. Employers search on key words when they're looking for people to fill specific positions.

- Create a skills inventory section if the application doesn't require it. You might put this in a "comments" section.
- You should also include remarks in the "comments" section that demonstrate you have researched the company and industry.
- Include numbers and statistics that demonstrate your achievements or responsibilities. For instance, say "Counted five cash drawers daily; responsible for more than \$10,000 per 8-hour shift."
- Complete all fields—even those that aren't required.
- If the company offers an optional assessment test online, take it. (One employer recently admitted that students who don't take the "optional" assessment test are automatically screened out.)
- In some cases, you may be asked to attach your resume to or paste it into the application. Make sure your resume can hold its own in a very simple format: Fancy bullets, text, italics, and bold do not convert well in an electronic application. (Many employers scan paper resumes into their applicant systems. As a result, even if you aren't required to apply online, there's a good chance that your information will end up in the same place as if you had, so keeping your resume format simple is good advice whether or not you're applying online.)
- If possible, spell check and grammar check your application before submitting it. It's important that your application be error-free because it serves as the employer's first impression of you.
- Include a strong objective. Ask a career counselor to help you word your objective.
- Follow-up your electronic application with a personal e-mail to the recruiter. A follow-up phone call is acceptable if the job posting or ad does not say, "No phone calls."

Mike Mrozowski, recruiting coordinator for the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (which does not use an automated screening process), tells college students that the key to getting to the next step is to target. To properly target, Mrozowski explains, requires some in-depth knowledge and proper research techniques. One of the ways to get this type of inside information is to ask.

"Many students no longer attend career fairs because some employers just drive the students to their web site to apply," Mrozowski says. "I understand their frustration in that part of the process so we encourage paper resumes and rely heavily on the notes that our recruiters record on the back of the resume from their brief booth chats. However, astute job seekers can gather some great information from those employers that don't collect paper resumes."

Mrozowski says that if he were interested in an employer that told him to go online to apply, he would ask:

- What happens to the resume after I click "send?" Who reviews it and how? What format will work the best with your current system?
- What skill sets does your company/agency value the most?
- When should I follow up?
- Which department has the current openings?
- Which department is anticipating future openings?

Kelly Wuest, workforce development coordinator at the Community College of Southern Nevada's West Charleston Campus, has noticed a surge in the elimination of employment offices for major Las Vegas casinos.

One perfect example," she says, "is Wynn Las Vegas, which opened in April with employees hired totally from online applications."

While employer requirements may vary, here are some tips Wuest has for students:

- **Be specific about employment history in the application**—Students need to fill in school time in the employment section. Employers are looking for a complete work history, including gaps in employment.
- **Use appropriate key words**—Key words are extremely important and will help students get past the computer to a live person.
- **Don't depend on employers looking at a paper resume**—"I've had major [employers] admit that some managers only view the online application," Wuest notes.
- **Use your resume to highlight areas not covered in the online application**—For instance, some [employers] fail to ask about language skills, technical skills, volunteer work, and professional organization involvement.
- **Go to career services to apply online**—If students experience difficulty, career counselors are available to guide them through the system. "I have called HR managers about problems with system navigation," Wuest says. "They are happy to help me."