

Maximizing Your Resume's Impact with Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS)

What is an ATS?

An Applicant Tracking System (ATS) is software organizations use to manage and streamline the hiring process. These systems help employers:

- Store and organize applications
- Filter resumes based on keywords and qualifications
- Prioritize candidates who match the job requirements
- Manage interview invitations and hiring workflows

Because many organizations receive hundreds of applications for a single posting, ATS software helps recruiters quickly identify candidates whose resumes align with the requirements of the role.

The goal for job seekers is to ensure their resume both passes through the ATS and resonates with the hiring team reviewing it.

Structuring Your Resume for ATS and Human Review

Maintain Two Versions of Your Resume

It is best practice to maintain two versions of your resume:

- A professionally formatted PDF version designed to present your experience clearly and professionally when submitting directly to recruiters, hiring managers, or networking contacts
- An unformatted Word version designed specifically for online applications submitted through Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS)

This approach allows you to benefit from a polished, visually refined resume while also ensuring that automated systems can easily parse and interpret your information when applying through online portals.

Your ATS version should be simple and cleanly formatted, without complex design elements such as:

- Text boxes
- Shapes
- Graphics or pictures
- Complex visual formatting

These elements can interfere with how ATS systems read your resume.

Three Powerful Strategies to Strengthen ATS Performance

1. Leverage LinkedIn to Identify Key Skills

LinkedIn isn't just a networking platform; it's also a powerful tool for optimizing your resume for ATS.

Use LinkedIn Job Postings

When reviewing job postings on LinkedIn, the platform often shows the skills the hiring manager or recruiter has identified as important. LinkedIn may also indicate:

- Which of these skills are already present in your profile
- Which skills may be missing



Incorporate Skills on Your Profile and Resume

If these skills accurately reflect your experience, ensure they appear in both:

- Your LinkedIn profile
- Your ATS version of your resume

This helps align your resume with what the ATS is programmed to look for.

Pro Tip: This strategy not only helps your resume pass through the ATS but also increases your visibility to recruiters who search LinkedIn for candidates with these skills.

2. Perform a Keyword Scan Using Cultivated Culture (a free website)

- Understanding and incorporating the right keywords is critical for your resume's success with ATS. Here is a step-by-step guide on how I recommend you use this website:
- Visit Cultivated Culture's Resume Scanner: Go to Cultivated Culture Resume Scanner and paste both the job posting and your ATS-optimized resume into the provided fields
- Focus on Technical Qualifications: Ignore the percentage score the site provides and don't worry about including soft skills or including technical skills multiple times. Instead, look for any technical qualifications or software skills that the job posting highlights but are currently missing from your resume
- Match Job Posting Language: Ensure that your resume uses the same terminology as the job posting (e.g., if the job posting says "Learning & Development," don't use the abbreviation "L&D")
- Quick and Efficient: This entire process should take less than 5 minutes per application and will help you ensure that your resume includes critical keywords in the language used by the employer. If it is taking you longer then you are not using the site the way I have explained above

3. Use Keywords Strategically

Applicant Tracking Systems often prioritize resumes containing keywords aligned with the job description.

Common examples include:

- Required education or certifications
- Technical skills or software
- Industry terminology
- Relevant experience

Keywords can be incorporated naturally into:

- Your Professional Profile
- Skills / Competencies section
- Education
- Professional Experience bullet points

Remember: your resume must read clearly and naturally for human reviewers who will ultimately evaluate your application.

Frequently Asked Questions:

How do I know if an organization is using an ATS?

Common indicators include:

- The application asks you to submit your resume in Word format
- You are required to copy and paste sections into text fields
- You have to create an account in order to apply for a job
- The job posting indicates the use of an ATS
- The application URL includes system names such as: Workday, Lever, BambooHR, SuccessFactors, or Greenhouse

What if my job title was unusual or not widely recognized?

If your official title is unclear, you may adjust it slightly as long as it accurately reflects the nature of the work you performed.

For example: Human Resources Generalist (People and Culture Champion)

This ensures the ATS recognizes your role while maintaining transparency.

If I held 3 positions within one company, do I have to post the company title each time?

Yes. Many ATS systems calculate years of experience by job title, so it is best to list each role separately.

Example:

Human Resources Manager
Resume Restoration, Calgary, AB
03/2018 – 12/2020

Human Resources Analyst
Resume Restoration, Calgary, AB
06/2015 – 02/2018

Final Tip: Optimizing your resume for ATS does not require extensive rewriting. A quick review of the job posting, a short keyword scan, and thoughtful alignment of language can significantly improve how your resume performs in both ATS systems and human review. Remember: the goal is not just to pass through the ATS, but to ensure your resume clearly communicates your value to the hiring team.