Avoiding the Pitfalls of Online Job Applications

Ever wonder who actually looks at and evaluates your online resume submittal? Why you don’t get a response for every application? What matters to internal recruiters and/or hiring managers on your resume? Or how you get to the top of the pile for consideration? Having spent the last five years inside Human Resources at some of the most innovative and top-rated companies, I am ready to share some behind-the-scenes insights into the interesting, confusing and convoluted process that is hiring in corporate America today.

Finding that next step in your career is a very different process today than it was even 10 years ago. The Internet brought about a new dawn and a lot of heightened expectations for job seekers and companies alike in how much simpler, more efficient and more effective the hiring process should become. However, what actually happened was quite the opposite. The Internet created a HUGE amount of noise and inefficiency in the process. Candidates could access and apply to jobs much faster and more easily, which led to a gargantuan increase in the number of applicants pouring into companies. Companies, whose Human Resources departments are typically understaffed, undervalued, and often modestly skilled in recruiting and in their knowledge of the technical disciplines within their industry, became completely overwhelmed at the burden of sifting through and processing all applications for each role and were simply unable to keep up.

This phenomenon has created the great “black hole” of a corporate database that candidates have become supremely weary of, even to the point of giving up on directly applying to online job postings. The truth of the matter is the following:

**1) Online resume submittals DO work:** Networking and getting your resume into a company through a former colleague, alumnus or top-tier recruiter is probably the best way, but companies do hire applicants from job postings and do so more often than you think. In my HR recruiting days, *we hired about half of our new employees from online job applications*, and they were all very strong, quality hires. Just sending in your resume and stopping there is NOT a great approach; again, you should be contacting other people you know at the company and having them put in a good word for you. But – surprise, surprise – an online application will work more often than you think, even if you don’t hear back from a lot of your resume submittals. Keep the faith, be smart and targeted in where and what you send your resume to and you will find pay dirt eventually.
2) **Following up to a resume submittal in a thoughtful way WILL make an impact**: Human Resources often has a generic hr@corporatename.com or recruiting@corporatename.com listed on their job postings. In addition to applying on the company website, send a thoughtful, targeted email that serves as your short cover letter and attach your resume. *You would be amazed how few people do this and how it will make HR take notice* and take a closer look at your resume. Especially if it was a great email from a qualified candidate, I would tag that person as a top-rated resume and make sure the hiring manager took an in-depth look at them for the job. Another approach is sending in a cover letter and copy of your resume to Human Resources or the hiring manager.

3) **How to get past the Black-Hole of the Corporate Database**: No magic, one-size fits all panacea here. But, a few key pieces of advice that will greatly increase your chances of being seen and help you digest the times you don’t hear back.

   a) **Strategic, Effective “Cold-Networking”**: Most people I know have pretty awful networks. They may have a modest amount of LinkedIn connections, but most of their relationships within that network are at best surface level which means they are hard to leverage. Developing what I call the “cold-networking” skill does not happen overnight and most people hate the idea of calling or emailing a person they barely know or don’t know to ask for help. But you would be surprised how a well-crafted outreach to an alumnus, former colleague, or even just someone who worked, at some point in time, at a prior employer (even if you never met them or knew them) WILL WORK and can create a potential relationship you can immediately leverage to get you in the door somewhere.

   I almost never turn down a request from an alumnus who reaches out and is looking for advice or a way into a company I know very well and find most other people will usually do the same. If you, like many people I know, have a limited network at some of the target companies you want to work at, “cold-networking”, where you don’t know the person but have some small, common background connection, is tough but can make a game-changing type difference. (Tune into an upcoming blog for more on how to become a “cold-networking” expert.) For now, start reaching out to folks via LinkedIn and by dialing them up through their company’s employee directory. It’s like learning to walk: you’ll fall a lot in the beginning but you’ll eventually get the hang of it. We’d all be much better off as adults if we had the resilience and curiosity of a child.
b) Understand that Companies Today Hire Specialists, Not Athletes: Corporations today are all about results NOW, which means they will look to limit training employees out of the gate wherever possible to minimize the risk you can and will produce the results they want immediately. KEYWORDS on your resume which match the job description or requirements of the position are extremely important and you should tailor your experience and insert applicable keywords where possible. But you need to go beyond keywords and make your resume stand out. Think of it this way: how has your work product been different than any other qualified person who could have been hired to do your job? If your resume does not answer that question well, if it does not spell out your accomplishments and instead reads instead like a laundry list of job responsibilities, you are going to the bottom of the pile no matter how many great keywords are in there. Don’t just tell me what you did; tell me what IMPACT you had and what RESULTS, OUTCOMES, or ACCOLADES occurred due to your day-in, day-out efforts.

Your resume is your personal brand and while you should not re-write it for every job application, tweaking your introduction or profile section (do not use an “objective” to start your resume!!) to speak to a specific job is a great idea. Think of it as a mini-cover letter, the more tailored this profile or summary section is, the better off you are. You should also look at re-ordering bullet points as you apply to different jobs, shifting some less relevant experience down within each role on your resume and moving the most relevant experience to the top. People focus on what they see first, so put what matters most to this job and this company’s needs at the top of each job listed on your resume.

c) Embrace Forrest Gump-esque Serendipity: There is a lot of serendipity and dumb luck that goes into the hiring process. Don’t try to figure it all out or expect companies to tell you every time why you weren’t right for the job, it just won’t happen. I once staffed a job where we got five stellar applicants in the first 48 hours of posting the role online. Over a hundred people eventually applied, but we focused on those first five superstars. Had one of those folks applied one or two days earlier, they may have made it into real consideration, but we decided to focus on those first five candidates in order to be efficient. For better or worse, it’s the reality of what behind-the-scenes factors can sometimes lead companies to overlook your resume.
Overall, the job application process is a winding, unpredictable road with a lot of factors out of your control. Work the phones, become a Zen Master at “cold-networking”, follow up applications with thoughtful, well-crafted emails, and muster some resilience because it’s not easy. You will fail more than you win and you will often not hear anything back. But if you use the tactics described above, you greatly increase your chances of being seen, evaluated and, hopefully, pulled into the interview process.