

Playing Résumé Roulette

By Richard H. Beatty, Author of "The Ultimate Job Search"

Considering the hundreds (if not thousands) of candidates applying for a single Internet job posting, how does the average job seeker compete and ensure an employer sees their résumé?

You need to know both the game and the right cards to play, if you are going to beat the odds and stand a chance of winning at 'résumé roulette.'

As most seasoned job seekers know, a high percentage of employers no longer manually process résumés but instead rely on applicant-tracking systems (or some form of résumé-screening software) to do initial résumé screening for them. By loading a number of specific words or phrases, known as "keywords," into the system, the employer's software package then electronically scans each résumé in search of these same preloaded terms, and may even "score" the application based upon the number of times the desired keywords appear in each applicant's résumé.

Repetitive use of these important keywords will often cause the software to select a given résumé for employer review over thousands of others submitted. Those lucky enough to choose the right keywords will have their résumés rise to the top of the stack, while those lacking the magical terms will quickly sink to the bottom. Choose the right words, and you're a winner; choose the wrong words, and you're dead in the water!

So, what is a job seeker to do? How does one win in this hit-or-miss game of 'résumé roulette?' Is it possible to win? Is it even worthwhile playing?

The answer is yes! You can't afford not to play, if you are going to wage a successful job-search campaign.

Review of several recent surveys suggests that Internet job postings are now the No. 1 source for landing a job, accounting for an estimated 33 percent of the market. This is followed by networking/employee referral standing at about 25 percent, and headhunters at about 12 percent. So, the Internet needs to be a key component of your overall job-search strategy.

So how can one win at this game of 'résumé roulette?' Here are some tips from my new book, "The Ultimate Job Search," that you can use to stack the deck in your favor:

Study Employment Ads

Start by searching job sites for your desired position. Print out several of the resultant job listings and lay them side-by-side on your kitchen table. With a highlighter in hand, read through each of these ads and highlight all nouns and noun phrases which represent the key qualifications (skills and competencies) being sought by the employer. (Note: These are all potential keywords.)

Once this process is completed, list the same highlighted nouns and noun phrases contained in each job posting on a separate sheet of paper. Then, as these same skill areas are repeated from ad to ad, simply place a checkmark behind that keyword.

Now review your list. Obviously, those keywords having the greatest number of checkmarks are the skills and competencies most employers are seeking when filling your target position. You might consider these a sort of "universal set" of keywords that most employers consider important to job success. Thus, you will want to be sure to incorporate these important terms repeatedly throughout your résumé document. This will substantially improve your résumé's odds of being selected for further consideration by the employer.

Job Descriptions

A similar analysis can be conducted using job descriptions. In order to gather a sampling of appropriate job descriptions, simply conduct an Internet search by inserting both your target job title and the words "job description" in the search box of any major search engine.

By highlighting important keywords and tabulating the results contained in these job descriptions, as you have done with Internet job postings, you will have identified a universal set of keywords that needs to be skillfully incorporated into your résumé. It may also be a good idea to compare this list with those previously identified through Internet job-posting analysis, as a means of further prioritizing your keyword list.

Intelligent use of keywords in your résumé can help take the guesswork out of 'résumé roulette.' It's no longer just a hit-or-miss proposition.