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EDUCATION LIFE

Job Hunting in the Digital Age

By TARA SIEGEL BERNARD APRIL 8, 2016

Like many recent college graduates, Ben Kim felt he was casting his résumé into an abyss when he clicked “apply online” for the hundredth or so time. “The most common response was nothing,” he said.

That may be because, before capturing an employer’s eye, job hunters in the digital age often have to get past a round of robots scanning their résumé for keywords.

Although the business of hiring is still largely a manual process, employers are experimenting with increasingly sophisticated technology. Some companies are setting loose automated recruiters that crawl the web for the perfect hire, based on an algorithm. Others are asking job candidates to answer their first round of interview questions via video — perhaps not a huge ask for members of the YouTube generation.

Use Keywords

Many recruiters use tracking systems to sift through virtual piles of résumés searching for specific qualifications — say, software developers fluent in a programming language — or previous jobs that illustrate leadership qualities. What does this mean for applicants?

“Make sure you are carefully reviewing the job description and aligning your experience and transferable skills based on what the organization is looking for,” said Mercy Eyadiel, associate vice president of career development and corporate

engagement at Wake Forest University. “If you don’t, you risk not showing up in the list of potential candidates for consideration,” which is often based on keyword searches. That doesn’t mean regurgitating job descriptions or being untruthful, but it does require imagination. “If they are looking for project management skills, and you ran for student government and had to run big projects,” Ms. Eyadiel said, “that counts.”

For tech jobs, be sure to list what computer hardware and software you know so it’s picked up in keyword searches. “Know the acronyms, and also spell it out,” said Paul McDonald, senior executive director at the job placement agency Robert Half.

Enterprise Holdings, the car rental company, hires thousands of new graduates each year as part of its management training program. It uses iCIMS, a type of talent acquisition software, to sort through volumes of candidates, generally 50,000 a month, and identify those who meet five or so minimum requirements, including a bachelor’s degree, satisfactory driving record and some kind of leadership position or customer service experience. Candidates who pass the screening process are then connected with a recruiter.

Stay Current

Keep your online persona up-to-date, particularly if you add new skills. Why? Some employers maintain a pool of candidates who have applied (but were rejected) for specific jobs, so that they can reach out if a more suitable position arises.

Recruiters’ software also trolls profiles on LinkedIn and other social media sites, analysts said, providing employers with updates.

Be Camera Ready

Before asking candidates to come into the office, some employers try to get to know them better. They might conduct an interview over, say, Skype, or send a company-branded link to a set of questions whose answers the candidates can record on their computer’s webcam.

Sometimes employers record applicants performing a task, like computer coding. “The way the camera is set up, the recruiter can see the candidate doing the

work,” said Claire Schooley, a principal analyst at Forrester Research who tracks recruitment-software providers.

Go Offline

Ramit Sethi, author of “I Will Teach You to Be Rich,” suggests avoiding the “apply online” black hole altogether. “It is this tired old tune that people predictably and understandably sing because they send out 500 résumés and get zero response,” said Mr. Sethi, who offers online video courses on topics like finding your dream job. “That is a very passive way of finding a job.” He recommends getting to know the company and someone inside first.

Paul D’Arcy, a senior vice president at Indeed.com, the job search site, also sees technology as the scapegoat for futile job searches. “If you have applied to 200 jobs and aren’t hearing back,” he said, “then you need to change your strategy. It could be you are looking in an area where supply and demand is so out of balance that it is not a promising field. And the other option is, you are not taking the time to personalize your communication, or your résumé isn’t clearly communicating what you bring.” Fixing one or both of those things, he said, “should change the results you are getting.”

Mr. Kim did both. He had started applying for jobs, largely in marketing, as a senior at the University of Notre Dame, and continued the job hunt from his parents’ house in Los Angeles. To earn pocket money, he worked odd jobs — as an SAT tutor, an office assistant — and tried graduate school for a semester.

But about a year after graduation, he finally found “the bottom of the ladder I wanted to climb,” software user-experience design, and overhauled his approach. He located software designers who lived nearby, went to their meet-ups and asked how they got started and what books they read. He also started freelancing, and made a short list of companies he wanted to learn more about.

A fortuitous exchange on Twitter with the head of one of those companies led to an internship, and ultimately a full-time position — two years after graduation.

His biggest lesson? “Talk to people and not to a résumé website,” he said. “You would be surprised how receptive people are when you just email them or message them on LinkedIn and just ask for help.”

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