

Head: Candidate Review: How to Plough Through an ATS Avalanche

Deck: Recruiters share tips on speedily handling the paralysis brought on by receiving thousands of resumes for one position.

By Lisa Vaas

How's this for too much of a good thing: In her former position as Director of Teacher Recruitment for the New York City Department of Education's 1,600 schools, Tracy Brisson and her staff on a yearly basis handled some 13,000 resumes generated from the ATS (Applicant Tracking System).

Ineffective software? Hardly. Those 13,000 resumes were the result of the ATS eliminating about 25 percent of candidates based on eligibility (i.e., whether candidates were certified) and very basic keywords. That type of performance is par for the course, said Brisson, who has since founded and is the CEO of career coaching consultancy [The Opportunities Project](#). For the NYC DoE, she was using the [Teachers Support Network](#) ATS for education. Brisson said the efficacy of the education ATS matched that of ATSes she's used for executive recruitment—namely, [SilkRoad's OpenHire](#) and [iCIMS](#).

In other words, ATSes are better than nothing, but you still get buried. If you're in a hurry—and when are you not?—it takes expert tweaking to get a manageable load of qualified prospects. We grilled recruiters to come up with a plan of attack. Read on for their tips and techniques.

Use a research-based rubric

Fortunately, Brisson's employer had the luxury of a budget that allowed for ATS customization and for Web services to connect the ATS to its in-house Human Resources systems. The department set up the ATS to further parse the 75 percent of candidates it initially delivered into "disposition" categories.

The parsing was based on a rubric that the NYC school system built to assess all resumes quickly. Brisson described it as a checklist of 10-14 things that a. reflected principals' values, b. research has found common to great teachers, and c. recruiters felt could be seen in a resume.

One example is assessment. It's important to good teaching and to principals' values, Brisson said. If an applicant neglected to mention student results for prior experience, they were cut from the top interview group.

Another rubric checklist item: Research posits that a teacher's academic achievement affects students. The school system uses it as another rubric factor to quickly slide candidates up or down in the pool, Brisson said.

The results: Before the rubric, about 80 percent of the teachers Brisson's group was recommending to principals were being hired before the first day of school, meaning that "principals were hedging because they weren't as impressed with the quality of the people we were finding," she said. After the rubric, "almost every candidate we recommended was selected by a principal 15 days before the school started."

"For an area with lots of candidates, we would never get to the lowest-rated disposition," she said.

"Based on my experience, I believe the most important thing you can do to get through resumes is to

build a research-based evaluation rubric that will save time while predicting better hires.”

Of course, as Brisson pointed out, corporate environments may not have the same access as do education systems to the scientific data needed to create a research-based rubric. After all, education is rich in student test data, which can be used to assess new hires and to further revise the rubric. But if recruitment staff take the time to survey hiring managers for values and to read business and academic literature on employee success, they too can come up with efficacious rubrics, she said, while corporations can use performance reviews and other data to continually improve their own rubrics.

Fiddling with a noncustomized ATS

On the flip side of the coin from sophisticated, research-based rubrics is the plain old tweaking recruiters do within an unmodified ATS.

Jeff Christian, founder of high-tech recruiting firm Christian & Timbers and more recently the executive search firm [CTPartners](#), said that recruiters have always had to fool the ATS into whittling down resumes to a number they can work with. “The problem is, there are so many resumes that go into the system, it’s tended to defeat the purpose,” he said. “You’d like to take 100 resumes and narrow it to three, but that’s not going to happen.”

His tips on speeding the ATS and winnowing the yield:

Eliminate the unemployed.

“Employed people are the drivers, the real doers,” Christian said. “Someone who’s unemployed [entails] higher risk. You can’t really find out what’s going on. If somebody’s unemployed, [people who give them references] want to feel helpful. They feel bad. They may be paying severance. They may [have reasons to] distort what the real story is.”

Eliminate those with too many jobs.

“Number of jobs is important,” Christian said. “I don’t want someone with more than four jobs per 10 years. The ideal is two. And I want one of the last few jobs to have some length in the job, to show that they’ve been there awhile, whether it’s two, three, four or five years, depending on how old they are.”

Eliminate those who don’t get promoted.

Christian eliminates candidates who show the same job title twice. “Why [aren’t they] moving up?” he said. “Generally speaking, you’ll find out they’re [those who only move horizontally are] not the best candidate.”

Eliminate those outside of your geography.

“If they don’t live where the job is, and there are people who do, why mess around with that?” Christian said. “Better candidates won’t move. Better people don’t have to.”