Applicant Tracking Systems—
A Behind-the-Scenes Look

Applicant Tracking Systems: You’ve seen them before, perhaps without even realizing it. If you’ve dipped your toe into a job search anytime over the past decade, you’ve almost certainly been on the radar of an Applicant Tracking System, or ATS. Known as the workhorse of today’s hiring processes, the ATS is a multi-layered and powerful database tool that can be programmed to do everything from simply sorting candidate information to autonomously matching stored data with new postings and pinging candidates with an invitation to apply.

Although an ATS is likely working behind the scenes in more ways than you know, the online application is where most candidates first become aware of the system. In this scenario, you might click on the link to a job posting that you encountered on a favorite website. This link may lead you to an application, which will be very similar to paper applications with one important difference: Your answers are being constantly filtered through pre-programmed parameters. For instance, if you try to skip a question, the system may refuse to advance you to the next screen until you provide the data. Or the program may be matching your answers against preset norms so that only those with accepted answers are advanced to new levels of the application—a little like earning your way to the final stage of a video game.

While some job applicants say they like the efficiency of online systems, particularly when the system remembers an application and applies it to multiple openings, other candidates are not so charmed by the process. Common reactions range from discomfort about sending information into a void all the way to keyboard-pounding aggravation when the system locks up after an hour of painstaking data entry.

Luckily for physicians, and particularly those in neurology, the laws of market demand play a favorable role here. Those candidates who are more sought after—including neurologists and neurosurgeons—will find the systems to be more accommodating than lesser-skilled applicants who are competing with more people for fewer jobs. One way of putting it: When there are more applicants than jobs, the systems are set to screen out applicants. But when the applicants are in high demand, recruiters and employers do all they can to usher candidates in. In some cases, that includes jettisoning the online application altogether, in favor of the human touch.

Beth Dery, recruiter and operations manager for Rosman Search in Ohio, says her agency takes the human touch very seriously in their recruiting practices. Since the firm specializes only in neurosciences permanent placement, Dery says they favor processes that respect the candidate’s time and effort. Rather than ask the candidate to fill in boxes on a screen, Rosman recruiters invite doctors to communicate with them directly. This lets the recruiter learn about the candidate’s strengths and preferences, and other details that will help ensure a good match with an employer. That information then goes into the database to be searched by Rosman recruiters when positions come up to be filled.

The searchable database, in most cases a contact customer relation management program, is a behind-the-scenes cousin of the ATS process that is not visible to candidates. In large organizations and other companies that have invested in their systems, these programs are powerful engines that can sort and correlate data at the touch of a button, allowing internal and external recruiters to find the best matches for a position. Dery says her firm uses Salesforce.com, a multi-level, highly customizable software package. By using the features to store data not only from current candidates but also from registries of practicing physicians across the country and Canada, Rosman recruiters are able to track doctors’ specialties and research and even details such as where they or family members might be from, all in the interest of identifying individuals who would match well to particular openings.

“At Rosman, we’re entirely data driven,” Dery notes, “so our contact management system is our lifeblood. From an operational perspective, a contact system is critical. For us, it’s not just a tracking system, because it’s so much more important to capture the data.”

While recruiting firms and large employers with frequent hiring may depend heavily on their contact customer relation management programs to help them reach out
to potential candidates, smaller employers and those with only occasional openings might opt to use online applications as their primary electronic hiring process. Think, for example, about a private practice or an academic research facility looking to add just one doctor. With no access to a database of potential candidates, these employers are likely to post the opening on favored websites, then direct those interested to follow the link to their application. In those cases, Dery recommends that doctors follow the instructions to complete the form online, but don’t let themselves get entangled in it. “If you encounter a problem with an online application, try calling the employer directly and talking with the physician recruiter,” she counsels. “They don’t want to lose you; they’d rather help you than have you turn away in frustration.”

Which brings us to one last point: With electronic job search processes, as with most things in life, it helps to know someone—even if they’re just helping you navigate a tricky spot on an application. As Dery says, “The key is to have a good relationship with someone on the other end. If you have a question I would always advise you to pick up the phone and call. This really works for neurologists and neurosurgeons because they are highly sought-after.”

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF AN ELECTRONIC APPLICATION
(or: Where does the information go?)

Ever wondered what happens when your job application leaves your computer and heads out into the world? If you are sending your materials to recruiters and employers using an ATS or applicant tracking system, these are the likely stages leading to a job offer.

1. The recruiter posts an opening and provides a link to an application.
2. The applicant follows the link and completes the application. In some cases, the applicant also uploads his or her CV or other documents into the application form.
3. Upon receipt of the material, the ATS may return an email to the applicant confirming the application was received.
4. The ATS uses preprogrammed algorithms to scan for matches of key words, requested education level, physician specialty and other criteria requested by the employer. This process of sorting the applications is straightforward in concept, but can be a bit murky in practice. The system might be programmed for a simple match of key words (i.e., “Parkinson’s,” or “epilepsy”), or it can utilize a more sophisticated sorting and matching process that looks for combinations or repetitions of words and phrases and even places them in context.
5. The ATS identifies a list of qualified candidates and forwards those names or materials to the recruiter’s attention. At this point, the materials might look quite different than when they were sent out, as the ATS will have condensed and imported the information—a process which sometimes results in incomplete datasets being seen by the recruiter.
6. The recruiter reviews the candidate materials and makes a decision: Contact these individuals and begin interviews? Ask the ATS for the next level of “rejected” candidates in hopes of rounding out the list? Or even, manually search the original candidate materials on the hunch that the system made some errors? The answer will usually depend on whether the initial grouping of candidates is varied or deep enough to satisfy the requirements of a search.
7. Once the candidate list is secured, the recruiter will generally reach out to individual doctors to discuss their interest in the position. Other steps, such as background checks, are often deferred until later in the process, to be conducted on perhaps the final one or two candidates.
8. Interviews are scheduled, backgrounds are checked, and offers are made. And the information in the ATS stays there, until it is refreshed by the candidate or drawn upon by the recruiter for another search.

A WORD ABOUT SECURITY AND PRIVACY FOR ONLINE JOB SEARCH PROCESSES

No one understands better than medical professionals the need for security and privacy when dealing with data. Unfortunately, electronic systems are never 100-percent secure. When it comes to applicant tracking systems, these basic safeguards, drawn from a number of sources, will help you avert bad outcomes.
• Unless you’re convinced it’s necessary, don’t share your Social Security number or date of birth until you know you are a final candidate whose background is being checked. If an online application won’t advance without this data, close the program and contact the physician recruiter directly.

• Again, unless you’re convinced it’s necessary, feel free to withhold your home address from applicant materials, including your resume.

• Providing your email address and phone number is unavoidable if you are a serious job seeker. If you fear having your email address shared inappropriately or being bombarded by recruiters, consider establishing a separate account for the job search. Just remember to check your inbox regularly—and your spam filter for good measure—so you don’t miss important correspondence from employers.

For the most part, your data is likely to be secure and private, particularly since no employer wants to share their list of potential candidates with a competitor. But it is also likely to be “forever” in terms of electronic storage. So only provide information you’re comfortable having in a permanent record, and whenever possible download or print a copy for your own records. Remember as well that an online application is still an application: Once you sign it electronically or hit the button to certify it, you are confirming that you have provided only true information. So review everything once more before you hit the send button, to ensure that all the dates and facts were entered without error.