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RESUME

## Your Job Application's Journey

Knowing what recruiters and hiring managers do with your resume at every step of the application will let you set expectations about if and when you will receive a response.

By Kevin Fogarty

Job seekers often complain that potential employers more closely resemble black holes than functioning companies. Submitted resumes – even those addressed to specific managers and hand carried by contacts on the inside – often get no response.

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ILLUSTRATION: Chip Buchanan



### Illuminating Recruiting's 'Black Hole'

By Matthew Rothenberg, Editor-in-Chief, TheLadders.com

OVER THE PAST COUPLE months, I've been offering tactical support to a friend who's working hard to find a full-time job. Along the way, I've been using all the tricks TheLadders editorial team has gleaned to communicate value to potential employers and to stay ahead of the process. After all, we know a lot about how recruiters and hiring man-

agers navigate a crowded field of candidates, how resumes get handled and how your next employer identifies that one perfect match from a short list of finalists.

However, the fact remains that the process is still obscure to most job seekers; all too often, qualified candidates do find themselves facing a

"black hole" that offers them no new information about the position for which they've gone out.

I'm going to give my friend Kevin Fogarty's piece on the phenomenon. In this package, Kevin talks with recruiters about the stages of a candidacy; the reasons you may not be receive-

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What did you think of this package? Got a story of your own to tell? Have ideas for future coverage? Please write Editor-in-Chief Matthew Rothenberg at [matthewr@theladders.com](mailto:matthewr@theladders.com).

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Even after several stages of screening and in-person interviews, thank-you notes and inquiries, job seekers often find themselves in a dead zone where all communication ceases, despite their best efforts and best-laid plans.



*Earle*

What happened?

“The black hole is alive and well, and that’s really a shame,” said **David A. Earle, lead researcher at Staffing.org**, an analyst company that measures recruiting trends. “We’ve taken a fairly strident position that corporations that don’t change their way of doing things in this Internet-centric environment will start to encounter

candidates that know they’re being treated well at Place A and badly at Place B, and that knowledge will start showing up in those companies’ recruiting.”

But a better understanding of the application process can help illuminate the black hole and help job seekers prepare for lack of response and abrupt replies they’re likely to encounter during the job search.

### ‘Odds are you’ll never know what happened’

Why aren’t recruiters more responsive? The No. One reason is the sheer volume of candidates, said Lindsay Olson, a partner and recruiter at **Paradigm Staffing**, a recruiting company that specializes in marketing and PR positions.

“We’re getting so many resumes these days and so many people will apply for a job that they’re not qualified for that it’s a big stretch for HR people or recruiters to get back in touch with every single person,” Olson said. “It’s unrealistic of a candidate to expect that. But very few companies even try; it’s not hard to set up an automated response that gives people some

idea of what to expect from the process, but almost nobody does it.”

That refusal is a special kind of arrogance on the part of hiring companies, said Sally Haver, senior vice president of business development at **The Ayers Group/Career Partners International**, a recruiting company that specializes in career transitions and outplacement.



*Haver*

“What should you expect when you apply for a job? Neglect,” she said. “There are all kinds of things that happen behind the scenes, from someone being out sick to someone else realizing they didn’t do their due diligence to find an internal candidate to people on the inside lobbying for someone they’re championing. If you are passed over during all that, odds are you’ll never know what happened.”

Unexpected kinks in the process notwithstanding, every application goes through certain steps and an expected timeline. That doesn’t mean the process won’t get short-circuited, side-tracked or altered along the way, but understanding the typical flow of a job application can help an expectant applicant adjust his expectations.

### 1. Resume goes in ...

Whether you’re responding to an ad on TheLadders, a special-purpose job site, or working with a contact at the company who can hand-deliver your resume to the hiring manager, your resume and cover letter are going to be screened by someone. More often than not, it’s a third-party recruiter who gets paid only when a hire is made, and might not get hired again

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ing feedback about the status of your application; and some rules of thumb about when to push, when to wait and when to move on.

Persistence is important, but when it’s overtaken by frustration, it’s probably time to focus on other opportu-

nities. “What should you expect when you apply for a job? Neglect,” Sally Haver, senior vice president of business development at recruiting firm **The Ayers Group/Career Partners International**, told Kevin. “There are all kinds of things that happen behind the scenes, from someone being out

sick to someone else realizing they didn’t do their due diligence to find an internal candidate to people on the inside lobbying for someone they’re championing. If you are passed over during all that, odds are you’ll never know what happened.” ■

for presenting any but the absolutely most appropriate candidates – and not too many of them, Olson said.

“We might present three to the client, and we decide on those by sifting through resumes, doing initial interviews and asking extra questions about topics the client might want more information about than the resume says,” she said. “We try to get some kind of response out within 48 hours, at least acknowledging that we got your resume. Most companies don’t even do that.”

Next, most companies feed the resumes into an Applicant Tracking System database, Earle said, then use search keywords to match

candidates to the job description and build a list of suitable candidates to interview. At this point, someone inside the company is finally looking at your resume; to get any further, your credentials must make a good impression the moment an HR screener or hiring manager sees them, Haver said.

“People have no attention spans; they have no time to read, so if you think you’re a good fit, list all their requirements down the left side of the paper and all the experiences you have that answer each one on the right side,” Haver said. “Show them how you match up on each point, and make it really short – less than one page.”

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—Sally Haver,  
The Ayers Group/  
Career Partners  
International

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## What if Companies Treated Job Applicants Like Customers?

Customer-management software has the potential to change the way companies treat job candidates, keeping them informed and engaged at each step in the process. So why doesn't anyone use it?

By Kevin Fogarty

WHEN A CUSTOMER picks up the phone to call the help desk at Hewlett-Packard, several things happen that let HP deliver the appropriate answer to the caller.

Software called a Customer Relationship Management system displays the customer's profile to the operator who can see, for instance, that the caller works for a company that just purchased a \$1.5 million data-storage solution or that he's just bought a \$150 laptop for his son in college. The CRM system lets HP route the call to the right assistance and provide the appropriate level of support. It also lets the company know when the customer might be ready for an upgrade or more products. It is a cornerstone of modern customer service and sales.

The experience for job applicants at most U.S. companies is nearly 180 degrees from this level of customer service. Job seekers call it the resume “black hole”: They submit their resumes

and never hear back from the company. They call and write e-mails repeatedly but get no response. They may even progress through the process to several rounds of interviews, only to be left in the dark when the company decides not to hire them.

So why is that customers are treated so well and applicants, so poorly?

The technology is there, but the incentive is not, said several recruiters and software experts who spoke to TheLadders. Few companies see happy applicants as a business imperative and can't justify the expense of adding CRM capabilities to the process.

### ATS to CRM

Recruiters and hiring managers are halfway there, said **David A. Earle**, lead researcher at **Staffing.org**, an analyst firm that measures recruiting trends, practices and sourcing. Most companies already use an Applicant

Tracking System (ATS) to manage and track job candidates. An ATS provides a profile of candidates, copies of their resumes and cover letters; references; and their experience with the company — interviews, jobs applied for and more. It will also match candidates to certain job openings.

CRM capabilities would extend the ATS to set engagement standards, such as deadlines to respond to applicants, alerts when a job has been filled or the applicant is disqualified so a recruiter can send a response, and automatic suggestions for future job openings.

“Merging CRM with applicant tracking systems lets you approach staffing in the same way you would a sales territory,” Earle said. “It lets you lay out your brand and presence and become like flypaper for candidates who touch the system – which improves the quality of hiring

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## Job Prep for TheLadders Members

After you press Submit on TheLadders site, your resume is on its way, but you're not done yet. There are steps you must take to improve the odds your application will result in a job.

By John Hazard

**T**HE JOB POSTING read like a perfect match for your skills. You fixed the summary on your resume to make it an even better fit. And you pressed Submit. Now the application is out sight, and the process is mostly out of your hands. Or is it?

Even after you've submitted your application, there are steps you can take to increase your chances of landing an interview.

### 1. Check the original job posting and your resume.

Once submitted, your resume will be scanned and stored by an Applicant Tracking System (ATS), a software program that will categorize and store your resume for retrieval by a recruiter. The ATS will decide whether or not the recruiter sees your resume based on how close a match it is to the original job posting. Make sure your resume is a match. If not, you can fix the resume and resubmit, but keep in mind the ATS will alert the recruiter to multiple copies; don't change too much, and never lie.

What to look for:

Make sure your resume mentions every qualification as listed in the job posting and use the same language as the post itself. For example, if it says "B.A.," don't say "Degree in Economics."

- Make sure your resume uses the keywords associated with your industry and position.
- Don't submit files, images and graphics that could confuse the ATS software.

- [Click here to read more about how to optimize your resume for ATS software.](#)

### 2. Have your phone on and ready to answer or leave a clear voice-mail message.

Recruiters advise job seekers that answering the phone is the best option, and you should make every effort to do so.

### 3. Have a copy of the resume and cover letter you submitted.

If you changed information based on which positions you applied to, be prepared to reference the same resume version that the recruiter received.

### 4. Remember the companies to which you applied.

Don't be caught off guard when a recruiter or hiring manager calls, and be prepared to talk about the company, the industry and the position.

### 5. Follow up with the recruiter.

Your cover letter should let the recruiter know that you will be calling within a week to follow up on the position. You should use the Contact Recruiter function on TheLadders or contact the recruiter directly.

### 6. Keep applying to the company.

Another job may be a better match for your career, or it might receive fewer applicants. (The ATS software will track all your submissions by name and contact info, so don't try to apply using contradictory career info or credentials.)

### 7. Be aware about what is happening at the company.

There are forces at work greater than your application that can affect the company's fortunes and alter the availability of the position for which you applied. Follow the situation at the company and the market and be prepared to apply again or hear from the recruiter if the situation changes.

### 8. Are you applying to the right jobs?

In this employers' market, missing even one minor qualification can disqualify you. Be certain your resume mentions every qualification on the job postings, or find jobs that you can match on your resume.

### 9. Is the industry right for you?

Recruiters generally prefer to hire candidates with industry experience. If you are trying to switch industries, there are steps you should take to improve your chances. [Click here to read more.](#)

### 10. How do I find success?

Read our Success Story profiles to find job seekers in your industry, in your state and in your shoes who used techniques you hadn't considered or tried one you were afraid to use.

Follow our Success Story tab on **TheLadders Career Advice** to browse dozens of success stories until you find one similar to your own story. Or use the Search Career Advice function to find stories that can serve as an example to your industry or situation. ■

**“You might be the leading candidate when you hang up but not later on.”**

—Lindsay Olson,  
Paradigm Staffing

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### 2. You've been picked

If you are one of the lucky ones to get a screening call, expect it to last about half an hour, be reasonably pleasant and leave you with very little idea whether you will progress to the next stage.

Recruiters are looking for how well a candidate communicates, how she comes across on the phone, and whether she'll be a good match in personality and work expectations for the hiring manager. It's a judgment call for the recruiter, Olson said.

“Even if you look like a very good candidate, that person is probably in the middle of screening a lot of candidates, so you might be the leading candidate when you hang up

but not later on,” Olson said. “You should ask at the end of that conversation, ‘What's the next step?’ and they might tell you they'll send your name on to the client. But recruiters could have a lot of reasons for saying it but not doing it.”

Among those reasons: Better candidates might crop up, the recruiter might be trying to avoid giving a candidate bad news, or the hiring company might change the criteria for the job.

Ask at the end of the interview whether you'll be passed on to the next step, but don't expect always to know whether it will actually

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by more effectively selecting among the available candidates.”

So far there are very few companies either willing or interested in the cost and complexity of enhancing their hiring with CRM, Earle admitted, although Staffing.org and other research entities promote it as the next major improvement in hiring.

It would certainly address the major weakness of electronic hiring processes by giving both recruiters and human-resources professionals the tools to find the right candidates for the right jobs, said **Lindsay Olson, a partner and recruiter at Paradigm Staffing**, a recruiting company that specializes in marketing and PR positions.

HR managers and recruiters don't have the time to invest in follow-up alerts, let alone more high-touch approaches, no matter how effective they might be in the long run, she said. And automation of the process has hurt more than it has helped, Earle said.

“Computerization was supposed to have solved a lot of problems in the hiring market, but what it did was actually create a whole other set of problems because the number of candidates is vastly greater, but the ability to parse that information effectively is not,” Earle said. “Tens of millions of applications create

a sea of information, but the picture doesn't become clearer when you need it to; it remains just a sea of information, which leaves companies just as frustrated as candidates.”

The current buyer's market exacerbates the problem, said Kate Lukach, director of marketing for SelectMinds, which develops software that companies use to create their own social networks. Because they have plenty of candidates to choose from, they feel no need to please the applicant.

Companies such as J.P. Morgan, IBM and Deloitte have all created social networks that resemble LinkedIn or Facebook, Lukach said, but are limited to current employees and alumni and are designed to help drive new business and new hires from former employees back to the company.

Being able to filter a sea of applicants to a pool of qualified candidates not only makes HR's job easier and cheaper, it ultimately improves the quality and speed of the hiring process, Earle said.

“We think it's going to be a key differentiating factor as the economy turns around, especially for second-, third- or fourth-tier companies that will be able to use that responsive approach to hire the most talented candidates away from the larger companies,” Earle said. ■

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—David A. Earle,  
Staffing.org

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happen, Haver said. Your best bet is to call the recruiter back a few days or a week later to touch bases.

### 3. Presentation behind closed doors

The next stage is completely out of your control, so you should try to not worry about it, Haver said.

Once the screening interviews are finished, the recruiter or internal HR manager will present the top candidates to the hiring manager or managers. Usually that will happen within a day or two of completing the screening calls. Many companies require more than one decision-maker to sign off on hires or even which candidates to interview.

Recruiters present a candidate's strengths to show where he matches the description laid out by the hiring manager and describes weak points such as the lack of proficiency in the particular software package the hiring company uses.

"With the number of candidates they have, hiring managers are incredibly picky," Haver said. "If they lay out 10 requirements, they want 10 for 10, not nine out of 10."

In most cases, it takes less than a week to get that signoff, and an indeterminate time to set up and conduct in-person interviews. If you haven't heard from the recruiter or the company within a week or two, don't count on hearing back, she said.

### 4. Audition and follow-up

From the hiring manager's perspective, the interview and immediate aftermath can be like judging a children's talent contest in a town where you know all the parents, Haver said.

"People inside are leaning on the hiring managers," she said. "It's unbelievable how much pressure some of them are getting from people who want to find a spot for their brother-in-law or friend who can't pay the mortgage and needs a job, or someone inside. Everyone's flagging their own candidate, so if

you're outside and don't have a champion, it's hard to stay at the top of the list."

Still, as with the screening interview, cover your bases. Keep in touch with the hiring manager, if possible. If not, contact the HR manager or third-party recruiter. Send a thank-you note. Phone the recruiter a few days later to see how it goes, and about once a week thereafter. Any less, and you will lose touch; any more, and you will overstay your welcome.

"It's perfectly fair to expect to know what's going on and what you can expect, but it doesn't always happen," Olson said.

If you get no response at all, either to the interview or the thank-you and follow-up notes, that's a bad sign; you should not expect to hear back about the job, Earle said. It's possible hiring managers are having trouble coordinating, but more likely they've made a decision that doesn't include you and don't want to call to confirm it, Earle said.

One word of advice from Olson: Don't go around the recruiter and call the hiring manager directly. "That's a good way to get them annoyed and wanting to not

work with you again," Olson said.

And don't call more than once a week or so to check, even if the ad is still up weeks or months after your interview.

Ads might be posted automatically to hundreds of job boards, or might go up as part of a longer-term contract with mass-market job sites, Earle said. Often the ads remain online long after the job was filled because the company's ad buy required that it be listed for 30, 60 or 90 days – far longer than it might be valid.

"I've seen companies take six months to make a decision, though," Olson said. "Not hearing doesn't necessarily mean it's gone. If they're open with you and tell you why there's a delay, go ahead and stick with it. But don't stop looking for other things." ■

“Everyone’s flagging their own candidate, so if you’re outside and don’t have a champion, it’s hard to stay at the top of the list.”

— Sally Haver

### Career Advice from TheLadders

- Resume, Meet Technology: Making Your Resume Format Machine-Friendly
- How to Work with Executive Recruiters
- Where Does Your Resume Go? How Job Listings Are Filled
- Prepare to be Quizzed: The Job Assessment