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Save Your Charm for the Interview

More Firms Using Online Applications To Narrow the Pool

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Are you a team player?

Do you speak German?

Can you use Excel?

What are your greatest personal strengths?

Have you ever operated a cash register?

Those are all questions that many job candidates expect during interviews. Increasingly, however, the questions are posed not by a human being, but by a computer. And the computer analyzes the answers too.

To keep from being buried under a torrent of résumés and cover letters, some companies are turning to online screening tests to match prospective employees to available jobs, and to separate the candidates they want to interview from the ones they don't. As a result, job applications for everyone from future sales clerks to aspiring executives begin not with fancy cotton paper or a phone call, but with a mouse: Applicants point and click their way through the form, then the computer gives the company's human resources department a list of those who make the cut.

But how do you charm a machine that understands only zeros and ones with your winning personality, which could make you the best customer service rep this side of the Mississippi? And where exactly do you get to show off your stellar analytical skills when you run out of room to type after 10 words?

First, career coaches say, remember that while the computer may be making the initial cuts, it doesn't get the final say. The idea with any online screening process is to narrow the field and figure out which candidates are qualified. Your goal is to show that you have the skills, experience and attitude that the company wants.

"Matching up your qualifications to what they're looking for is critical, whether you're doing it on your résumé or you're doing it on a form," said Tom Morris, president of Morris Associates Inc., a D.C. firm that offers career counseling.

To accomplish that, you should tailor your responses individually, and not regurgitate the same information for every application. Get to know the company, then emphasize those qualities that seem most relevant.

And don't forget that the online test itself can be a useful tool in figuring out whether the job you're applying for is a good match: If the questionnaire for a software company keeps coming back to your mastery of Java, and the best you can muster has something to do with your coffeemaker, then you're probably applying for the wrong job.

But for the system to work, you have to present an accurate picture of yourself. That means not underselling your abilities, because the computer can't tell when you're being modest.

"Be honest, but don't be humble. If you have the skills, indicate it," said Steven Hunt, chief scientist at Unicru Inc., an Oregon-based firm that makes online job questionnaires for dozens of companies.

At the same time, it's important not to puff yourself up or to give only the answers that you believe will get you to the next round. Don't think that because it's easy to fool a computer, you'll be able to fool your would-be boss in an interview.

"The challenge is to be real. They're not looking to pigeonhole you so much as to understand you," said **Barry Zweibel, president of Chicago-based GottaGettaCoach Inc.** "If you're only coming out as black and white or right and wrong, then you're undermining yourself."

Hiring directors may like online tests because they weed out the under-qualified candidates early, but they're certainly not universally loved among job hunters. Mary Taylor, 23, has filled out several online applications for research jobs at the Department of Education, to no avail. She's just getting started in education, so she doesn't have much experience, and she thinks that has hurt her chances of getting call-backs for interviews. To a human being, a lack of experience might be forgivable if the applicant shows promise. But to a computer programmed with rigid criteria for screening applicants, it might not be.

"It makes it tougher to get into a field," said Taylor, who is working part time at Morris Associates.

But in the rush to automate, hiring hasn't completely lost its human touch. Hunt said it's important for applicants to remember that even though online tests are increasingly the norm as a first step to a new job, they aren't the only way to get your foot in the door.

"Don't stop networking," he said. "Relationships still count for a lot."