

Ace Your Online Job Application (and Avoid Scams)

By David Taylor, MSN, RN, CNOR

Applying for jobs online is now the norm, but clicking "submit" without practicing due diligence can do more harm than good. To stand out from the crowd and protect yourself from scams, you need to know what to include, what to leave out, and how to ensure your personal information remains secure throughout the process. Here's how to navigate online job applications like a pro.

What to include

Start by providing the basics. Your full legal name, professional email address and current phone number are essential. Be sure your email address reflects a professional tone; something simple like your first and last name is ideal (firstname.lastname@email.com). If relevant to your field, also consider including a link to your LinkedIn profile to showcase your experience and skills.

Next, include a detailed section on your education and training. List your degrees, certifications and any relevant coursework or licenses that apply to the position you are seeking. Follow this with a strong work history section that includes job titles, facility/organization names, locations, dates of employment, and a few bullet points that highlight your accomplishments using quantifiable metrics whenever possible. For online applications, it is also essential that your resume includes keywords from the job description, especially those related to required skills and qualifications. This helps you get past Applicant Tracking System (ATS) filters and shows hiring managers that you paid attention to their needs.

Keep your documents concise, relevant, and error-free. Proofread multiple times and consider using tools like Grammarly or asking a trusted colleague or peer to review your materials. Last but not least, always include a tailored cover letter that speaks directly to the role for which you are applying. This is your opportunity to explain why you're a great fit for the position and demonstrate genuine interest in the organization. Finally, be prepared to submit professional references and any supplemental documents requested by the employer (i.e., certification copies).

What not to include

Knowing what to leave out of your application is just as important as what to include. Avoid adding personal details such as your age, gender, marital status, religious affiliation, or photos. Not only are these irrelevant to your qualifications, but they could also expose you to unconscious bias or discrimination. Also, never include negative details about past employers or roles (and never speak negatively about previous employers during in-person interviews).

One of the most common mistakes is sharing sensitive personal information. Never include your Social Security number, driver's license number, or bank account information during the application stage. These should be shared only after you have accepted a legitimate job offer—and only through secure channels. Legitimate employers will not ask for your banking details or Social Security number during the initial stages of an application.

Also, avoid listing salary history or expectations unless specifically requested in the job posting. This information can be used to screen candidates unfairly and may limit your negotiating power later. Further, do not use flashy resume templates that may confuse the ATS. Instead, use a clean, simple format with standard fonts and clearly labeled sections. Finally, never lie or exaggerate on your resume. Background checks can easily uncover discrepancies, and dishonesty can cost you the job.

Watch for job posting red flags

With the increase in remote hiring and digital applications, job scams are on the rise. Always be cautious with job postings that seem too good to be true, especially those that offer high pay for minimal effort. Use reputable job platforms and take steps to keep your personal data safe.

Be on alert if asked for financial information or personal data before a formal interview. Before applying, verify the organization's legitimacy. Visit their official website, check for professional contact information, and look them up on LinkedIn or business directories. If something feels off (e.g., the job description is vague or contains typos), trust your instincts and do more research before proceeding.

Final thoughts

Submitting online job applications does not have to be risky or overwhelming. By providing accurate information, omitting unnecessary or sensitive details, and staying aware of potential scams, you can apply confidently and safely. Always tailor your materials for each opportunity, maintain professionalism throughout, and trust your gut when something does not seem right. Your next job could be just one smart, secure application away.