Making applications

Graduate job application forms are designed to test candidates’ ability to think hard about themselves and their suitability for the opportunities on offer.

Effective applications are the result of careful planning and preparation. Try to avoid rushing into applying for anything and everything in the hope that one out of your many applications will be successful. If you are not sure why you really want the job then you will find it difficult to convince an employer.

The first steps are to make sure that you know what it is that the employer is looking for and that you are able to meet the requirements.

Many applications fail because candidates have not read job descriptions carefully enough or checked that they match the employers’ criteria. To avoid disappointment and wasting time, it is important to be realistic and choose the opportunities carefully.

**HINTS AND TIPS**

- Download or make a copy of the form before you start and practise on the rough draft. Get some feedback on your draft from a Careers Consultant.
- Read the form through carefully and follow any specific instructions, if they ask you to write in black ink or block capitals, do just that.
- Ensure you allow sufficient time to write a good application – it always takes longer than you think, especially if it is your first one. Keep an eye on the closing date.
- If you are completing a large number of forms, it can be tempting to cut and paste your answers from one form to another. This can sometimes cause a problem if the questions aren’t exactly the same or you leave in information that clearly relates to a different company. Be very careful if you’re tempted to do this as the employer will not be impressed! And the application form will be REJECTED no matter how good it is.
- Try to select examples from different areas of your life - leisure interests, education [including practical and projects] and work experience - to illustrate your knowledge, attributes and skills.
- Employers will not be impressed with poor spelling and punctuation. It is sometimes easy to miss typing errors if you have spent a lot of time drafting and redrafting your answers, so do ensure that you have it proof read by someone else before you send it off.
- Save a copy of the form before you send it to the employer as this will play an important part in your preparation towards the interview.

**MATCHING UP TO EMPLOYERS CRITERIA**

Find out as much as possible about the job for which you are applying. Depending on the type of job and the way the company recruits, sources of information may include the job advert, graduate recruitment section of the employer’s website, recruitment brochure, or job description. If the company uses competency based recruitment, there will generally be a list of particular skills and experiences attached to either the job advert or the application form. If the company strength-based recruitment, you may need to do some research into the company values, missions and goals to help to understand what sort of strengths the organisation is looking for in its future employees.

Investigate other sources of information to help understand the skills and strengths that the employer wants. Look at the occupations in the online careers library for more information on the career area and employer; the occupations profiles at [www.prospects.ac.uk](http://www.prospects.ac.uk) and the employer information on ‘JobsLive’, the Careers Service vacancy & events system. Websites like [www.glassdoor.co.uk](http://www.glassdoor.co.uk) and [www.ratemyplacement.co.uk](http://www.ratemyplacement.co.uk) which allow students to place reviews and information on recruitment processes about companies might also be useful.

Sum up your research into a list of skills, strengths, experience, knowledge and motivation that the employer is likely to be looking for in candidates. Try and match these to evidence in your career history. Any examples you use will need to stand up to questions at the interview.

**PROVIDING THE EVIDENCE**

Employers will often have a number of skills/strengths at the top of their agenda when recruiting for graduates, e.g. communication, team-working and decision-making.

You will have to decide where the best evidence lies in your history to demonstrate such skills/strengths. For this you will have to find the strongest examples which are more than just an opinion. Reflect on all your achievements, both at university and outside, including your course, work experience, interests, clubs, societies and travel. Ideally, you want to make it as easy as possible for the employer to see that you meet their requirements.
Go through the list of skills the employer has provided you with, or the list of strengths you have created from your research and think about what evidence you can provide to show you match this. It is useful to structure your evidence using the STAR technique.

**GAPS AND WEAKNESSES**

However, if you find nothing to support your case at all then either you are applying for the wrong job or you will need to develop the shortage skills. If you find that you are struggling for personal examples, you might find it very helpful to talk to a Careers Consultant about your concerns. They may be able to help you explain and present yourself more effectively or help you decide whether or not to apply.

**DIFFICULT QUESTIONS**

Employers will often base application form questions on the key competencies they are seeking if they are using competency based recruitment. Examples include:

- Describe a situation where you have had to influence people.
- Give an example of an occasion when you have undertaken a complex project.

If employers are using strength-based recruitment, questions are often more generic, inviting you to explain what you might enjoy, or when you’ve achieved something. They are looking for you to highlight what you feel are your key strengths. Examples include:

What has been your favourite course/project at University? What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?

Look back at what you’ve identified as strengths the employer may be interested and formulate your STAR answer to highlight one of these. Use the R in STAR not just to give a result but also a Rationale where you explain how the example highlighted your key strength.

These questions will normally have a set word or character limit; so you will have to be concise. Focus on explaining the process you went through rather than providing a long description of the situation. Explain how and why you chose a particular course of action; for example, how did you manage to persuade your work colleagues to adopt a new approach to a particular task? This will carry more weight than an answer that focuses solely on providing a lengthy description of where you were working and the issue that needed to be resolved.

Whilst some application forms will ask specific questions as outlined above, some employers will ask very open questions. For example, you may be faced with a request to ‘Supply any further information in support of your application’. There may be no word limit and it can be quite daunting to be faced by a large expanse of white space on a form. You might want to begin by outlining why you want the post and why you are keen to work for that organisation. As an example, ‘The post would enable me to develop my interest in real time systems developed through my degree course and sandwich placement...’ Move on to show that you understand the key requirements of the employer by giving concrete examples of the relevant skills and experiences that you possess. Think about the language that you use on application forms. Action verbs such as ‘achieved’, ‘analysed’, ‘improved’ and ‘planned’ can be used to describe what you have done. (See CV handout)

**ONLINE APPLICATIONS**

It is best to print off the form so that you can go away and think about it.

Online application forms are no easier than traditional paper versions and need just as much time and care to complete. You may be given a password that enables you to save the application form at any stage and return to it later. Check that this is possible and that you are not expected to complete it at one sitting.

Many online application systems do not have a spell or grammar check, or a word counter. It is always advisable to draft your answers in Word or similar; check it before transferring the final version onto the form before sending it.

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

Available from the Careers Service:

- **DVDs** - ‘Looking Good on Paper’, ‘Your Job’s Online’
- **Reference books** - including: ‘How to Complete an Application Form’ (Careers Group)
- **Careers Service events** - each year we plan talks and workshops which are designed to enhance your chances of success in the application process.
- **‘Career Choice’ publication** - produced just before each autumn term, this contains details of the skills workshops, which include CVs & Applications – also on the Careers Service website.
- **Useful websites** - the Careers Service website has a section on the application and selection process, see - [www.imperial.ac.uk/careers/applications](http://www.imperial.ac.uk/careers/applications) and Prospects – [www.prospects.ac.uk](http://www.prospects.ac.uk) (follow the links for ‘jobs and work experience’ from the front page).

For information on the disclosure of disability or specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia please see information on the Careers Service website: [www.imperial.ac.uk/careers/disclosure](http://www.imperial.ac.uk/careers/disclosure)