

Chapter 13

What do employers really want?



Learning outcomes

This chapter offers opportunities to:

- ✓ understand what is meant by employability
- ✓ develop insights into employers' needs and interests that will help you when applying for jobs
- ✓ identify the skills and attributes that employers value
- ✓ think through how skills that you have acquired as a student translate into the skills needed in the workplace
- ✓ consider whether you want to work for yourself or another employer.

Balanced consideration

It is natural, when looking for a job and reading job advertisements, to look at how each role would suit us. Matching the job to our own needs is, of course, important, at least where there is some choice, and this is addressed in Chapter 14.

However, you are more likely to be successful if employers feel that you are mainly interested in them and understand their business. Think about each potential job from the employer's perspective. Aim to balance your own interests with the business needs of the prospective employer.



Understanding employers

This chapter helps you to understand employers so that you are better placed to take on board their needs. It provides guidance on:

- ★ What is meant by 'the labour market'
- ★ Generic attributes, such as work-readiness, that employers say they want
- ★ The skills and other attributes most in demand by employers
- ★ Continuities over time in what employers say they want from graduate appointments.

Translate your skills

You will have developed a wealth of skills through your course of study. That is a bonus, but is not necessarily sufficient in itself. Your job applications will be more powerful if you can articulate your skills in ways that make sense in terms of the workplace. This chapter helps you to look at your skills from an employment perspective.

Yourself as employer

There is an alternative to working for someone else. It is worth considering whether you would prefer to run your own business, either now or at some time in the future. This is an exciting option and many new businesses and start-ups have been formed by students and new graduates. You will have a chance to consider some of the pros and cons of this option.

What is 'employability'?

Employability

Employability is a concurrence of:

- ★ capability
- ★ preparedness for employment
- ★ and the relevance of these to the current job market.

The term can be used:

- 1 in general terms, to mean that you have the abilities needed to gain a job and keep it, or
- 2 in a narrower sense, with reference to your readiness for a particular range of roles, such as graduate jobs, or specialist posts in a given field, or
- 3 in relative terms, to indicate how strong your chances are of gaining a job compared with the competition.

Capability

In this context, your *capability* is the sum of your skills, knowledge, experience, habits, understandings, attitudes, qualities and personal attributes. These are relevant to gaining a job, keeping it, and making it work for you.

Preparedness

Preparedness is the outcome of the time, thought and practice you have put into developing and nurturing your capability from the perspective of future employment and for the appointments process itself. It includes your readiness, and ability, to make use of the opportunities that present themselves and/or to create opportunities for yourself.

Employability capabilities

For students, developing skills for employability involves the following.

- 1 **Career development** Being proactive and self-directing in gaining a portfolio of qualifications, attributes, experiences, networks and contacts that either enable you to pursue a given career path, or open up a range of future career opportunities.
- 2 **Labour market awareness** Knowing what kinds of work are likely to be available, and being able to match your strengths, qualities and interests to these.
- 3 **Articulation** Being able to recognise, evidence and demonstrate your strengths to employers during job application processes.
- 4 **Self-awareness** Developing insight so that you are able to recognise your own strengths and preferences, as well as the significance of these, when making choices and decisions that have an impact on your career path.
- 5 **Self-management** Building the perseverance, resilience, confidence, beliefs, motivation and attitudes needed to manage the demands of applying for work, responding constructively to setbacks, and presenting yourself at your best.

Reflection

Employability capabilities

- ★ Which of these capabilities are strengths for you already?
- ★ Which do you need to investigate further?



Put yourself in employers' shoes

The employer's WIIFT

You are much more likely to impress an employer if you come across as having the business's interests in mind. Bright and Earl (2007) recommend that when applying for jobs, candidates should always keep in mind 'an employer's WIIFT'. WIIFT stands for 'What's In It For Them?'

- ★ **Use the information available** If the employer has provided background information and a job description, look at this in detail.
- ★ **Investigate** Find out about the company, such as from its website, Companies House, LinkedIn, or their presence on social media.
- ★ **Use common sense and empathy** Give some thought to why the employer is likely to be advertising for this post. What do they really need done? What would make life easier for them in looking for the right candidate?

Minimum effort, minimum cost

When employers advertise a new post, clearly they have work that needs to be done. Naturally, they want to get that work done with minimum costs, training and lost time. They will want someone up to speed with the job as soon as possible in order to avoid additional work for existing staff and to reduce any delays or disruption to clients and other stakeholders.

Generally, that means they look for applicants who, as far as possible:

- ★ already have the skills, knowledge, experience, qualities, and desired behaviours outlined in the person specification for the job
- ★ demonstrate a good understanding of the role and the business
- ★ inspire confidence that they can get on with the job straightaway, with minimum direction, supervision and training
- ★ share the values of the business.

Do employers all want the same things?

Every employer is different. The requirements of the first few employers you contact might not be the

same as those of the next. Just because you were not a match for one employer it does not mean that you won't be exactly what the next employer is looking for. If one employer was impressed by your course or your skills, these might not be relevant to the next. Such differences mean it is essential to investigate the requirements of:

- ★ the occupational sector
- ★ individual employers
- ★ each job.

Do they all want experience?

- ★ Some employers recruit only people with previous work experience and practical expertise in the field.
- ★ Others are keen to recruit recent graduates that they can train into the culture of the organisation. They look for candidates who could learn quickly on the job and meet their essential criteria. Some offer training or graduate schemes; others do not.
- ★ Some employers prefer to focus on attitude, values or behaviours.

You should be able to tell which approach an employer will take by looking at their website and reading the material provided about the job.



What employers want: large employers and SMEs

Research the labour market

The jobs available in the labour market at any given time vary depending on such factors as location, the economy, demand for specialist skills and changes in technology. Whichever job sectors you prefer, it is wise to check on recent changes in demand and expected future patterns. Some useful starting places are:

- ★ **Global trends** – reports from the OECD (2017); the International Labour Organization (ILO) and Eurostats
- ★ **National reviews** of graduate vacancies and starting salaries for your country, profession or type of institution – such as the British Chambers of Commerce or the Australian Labour market information portal
- ★ **Graduate reports and surveys** such as High Fliers' (annually).
- ★ **Recruiting companies** – prospects.ac.uk; 80000hours.org or graduate-jobs.com/jobs
- ★ **Jobs by location or sector** in your country – such as milkround.com/

What do graduates do?

According to Greaves (2019a, b), patterns of graduate employment changed significantly between 2012–13 and 2017. In 2017, 29% more UK students progressed to further study. The proportion entering professional jobs rose from 66% to 74%. Around 70% of graduates went to work for large employers, especially in public sector jobs such as the NHS. Most found work through employer websites and recruitment agencies rather than through social media or personal contacts. Growth areas for graduate employment, including at Masters level, were in engineering, computing, legal and creative.

Popular employers

Large multinational companies are popular with graduates worldwide. You can keep track of which employers graduates most want to work for through surveys such as:

- ★ Top 50 Graduate Employers: (June 2020) graduate-jobs.com/scheme/top50

- ★ *The Times* top 100 graduate employers top100graduateemployers.com/
- ★ The UK 300: the most popular graduate employers for 2019/20 targetjobs.co.uk/uk300
- ★ 2020 Top 100 most popular graduate employers, Australia top100grademployers.com.au/

As there will be a high volume of applicants for jobs with such companies, make sure your application is likely to be competitive for the field.

SMEs

Most businesses are small or medium enterprises (SMEs). In the UK, there were almost 6 million SMEs in 2019, more than 40,000 of which had over 50 employees (DBEIS, 2019). There are many good opportunities for graduates with SMEs; around 15% are in professional, scientific and technical areas. SMEs vary a great deal, not least because there are so many, so it can be hard to find generic information about them. Check sector skills councils, professional organisations and trade magazines for information about SMEs in particular occupational areas.

The ideal SME employee needs to be adaptable, creative, open, proactive and able to multi-role (mukundkrishna.com, 2018). Miller (2014) identified top attributes of SME employees as:

- 1 Bringing a 'can do' attitude and willingness to work beyond the core job description
- 2 Welcoming new opportunities and looking for opportunities to develop their role
- 3 Holding ambitions for the company such as seeking entrepreneurial opportunities for it
- 4 Working well in small teams
- 5 Being innovative, coming up with new ideas and ways of doing things better.

Activity

Which characteristics?

Browse job adverts for SMEs in occupations that interest you: check the attributes wanted.



Most wanted characteristics

Based on a survey of over 200 employers, large and small, Pennington et al. (2013) found employers gave their highest ratings to the following four, out of eleven possible, items:

- (a) Interest in role
- (b) Organisational fit
- (c) Skills
- (d) Work experience.

These findings are not untypical of various surveys of employers. However, each employer will weight such characteristics differently so it is important to research them individually.

Work placements

Over four-fifths of top graduate employers offer paid work experience or internship schemes for students and recent graduates. Increasingly, employers use student placements to decide who to recruit into entry-level positions, often offering these during the second year of study (High Fliers, 2019). In 2018–19, over one-third of such employers reported that they were unlikely to offer jobs to graduates without any work experience.

Such experience gives a head start in gaining work with a company. However, it may also be reassuring to note that if you didn't get a placement with your first choice of employer, the large majority of their job opportunities do not go to those who have worked for them already.

Evidence of career planning

Employers value students' extra-curricular activities. They expect students to have firm career ideas by their final year and evidence of career planning, yet say students don't take these aspects seriously (Pennington et al., 2013). Most employers are not aware of schemes such as the Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR).

Degree classification?

Uffindell et al. (2020) found that students thought employers placed highest value on applicants having a degree classification of 2.1 or above. Employers themselves rated this only as sixth highest (of eight factors given). Similarly, Pennington et al. (2013) found both large companies and SMEs rated a good degree only as fifth in importance of 11 selection criteria.

That extra 'edge'?

Keen candidates look for clues as to what might give them an 'edge' over others. Although every job is different, some useful starting places are:

- 1 Understanding how recent advances in technology, Artificial Intelligence or social media could advantage your chosen field in the next few years
- 2 Demonstrable comfort in changing to new processes, systems and ways of working
- 3 Surprising employers by your in-depth research and knowledge of their company
- 4 Being able to get across clearly to employers how your own skills and experiences are relevant to them
- 5 Having a compelling personal 'back story' – if you have one, use it.

Educational institution?

Overall, 74% of employers state that their decisions to offer jobs are not influenced by a graduate's institution. This was more pronounced for large companies (91%) compared with only 64% of SMEs. Because of costs, many employers target a small number of institutions with relevant courses or in their geographical area (Pennington et al., 2013).

Mobility and flexibility

Employers seek graduates prepared to be mobile to take up work, and in moving between sectors and job roles early on in their career. Docherty and Fernandez (2014) note that this may come as a surprise to graduates and HE providers, for whom advice has emphasised a focus on developing skills and experience in a particular subject or sector of employment.

Also, as up to 95% of students say they search for jobs in or near the capital or largest city (Uffindell et al., 2020), then looking for work in other regions opens up broader opportunities.

What employers want: work-readiness

What is work-readiness?

Employers say they want students to be work-ready. Having any work, whether paid or voluntary, part-time or full-time, helps to develop an understanding of what this entails. 'Work-readiness' is hard to define precisely, but includes the following attributes.

1 Attitude

Employers want to take on new staff who identify with the needs of their business. Generally, employers are more likely to employ you if you can show that you:

- ★ **bring a 'can-do' attitude**, undertaking reasonable tasks when asked (rather than when you feel like it or finding excuses not to)
- ★ **take pride in your work**, going the extra mile when needed and being professional in all you do
- ★ **use time effectively**, being punctual for work and meetings, and getting work done efficiently
- ★ **spend work time on task**, remaining focused on your job rather than texting and phoning family and friends, browsing the Internet for personal use, running personal errands, sorting out relationship issues, day-dreaming, writing your novel, playing computer games, taking long breaks, etc.
- ★ **are generally helpful and flexible**, taking on additional paid hours or changing work hours, or working in a new location, if needed.

2 Professionalism

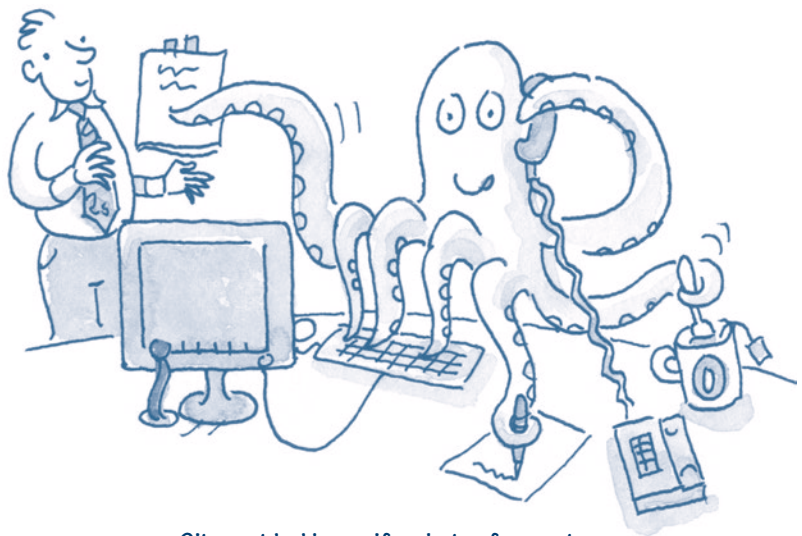
In a professional role This means having the abilities and skills to undertake the specialist work associated with the role, to the required professional standards and adhering to relevant codes of practice.

In general For any role, this is about the way you approach your work at all times. It involves setting out to produce work of a consistently high standard, with attention to such things as accuracy, precision, timeliness, punctuality, courtesy, sensitivity, and respect for the dignity, safety and well-being of others.

3 A 'safe pair of hands'

Employers value staff who they can depend on to:

- ★ get the job done as they would want
- ★ make sensible, workable decisions, suitable to the context
- ★ meet deadlines and other given requirements
- ★ avoid reckless, unprofessional, risky or unwanted behaviours.



Olive prided herself on being four pairs of safe hands for her employer

4 'Customer service' approach

Employers tend to prefer staff who are able and willing to 'put the customer first', even when this might be inconvenient or difficult. The same is true if the 'customer' is a client, student, patient or member of the public making an enquiry. Attitude and professionalism matter.

5 Initiative

Using your initiative in the workplace means:

- ★ **working independently** – getting on with your job with minimum direction
- ★ **being resourceful** – using imagination and inventiveness to address a problem or issue in a practical way
- ★ **being proactive** – taking action or asking how you can help, rather than waiting to be asked or told
- ★ **looking for improvements and alternatives** – thinking beyond the immediate task to consider how the overall outcome or process could be improved, and then taking your idea forward through the correct channels for the organisation
- ★ **knowing when to act** – developing a fine sense of when it is appropriate for you to come up with your own ideas and ways of getting things done, and when it is more important to follow protocols exactly
- ★ **seizing opportunity** – being able to spot occasions for advancing the business interests in the moment, often in a small but appropriate way, and getting on with it.

6 Understand how organisations work

Although it is unlikely that you will need to answer direct questions about how businesses operate, employers will look to see your general commercial and business awareness. They will notice if you don't seem to understand the basics.

- (a) Browse employers' websites and financial reports online to get a feel for how businesses are run and the kinds of things that concern them.
- (b) Become familiar with concepts such as
 - ★ 'end-users', shareholders, stakeholders
 - ★ vision, mission, strategy and business plans
 - ★ company values
 - ★ financial sustainability, profit and loss
 - ★ company performance, performance indicators, targets
 - ★ staff appraisal, performance management.
- (f) The checklists 'Make effective use of your experience of work' (pages 339–41) provide a structured way of thinking through such issues.

7 Understanding 'time = money'

'Time is money' is a well-known adage in business. Broadly speaking, employers have a range of costs such as salaries, pensions, accommodation, maintenance, insurance, utilities and investment, all of which they have to cover even if they have less money coming in because of time wasted. When taking on new staff, employers look for people who can use time efficiently.

8 Commercial/business sense

Increasingly, employers are asking for 'business acumen' or commercial understanding, especially for graduate jobs and management or team leader roles. They look for interest in the kind of issues relevant to their business. This might be such matters as market pressures, the impact of economic changes; customer demographics; likely new competition or opportunities overseas; logistics; technological changes or recent innovations and their impact. If you are interested in the company, then you should be able to give sensible answers based on research, thought, and common sense. You can build your commercial awareness for the kinds of business that interest you by:

- ★ taking optional modules in business, enterprise or entrepreneurship
- ★ reading trade or professional magazines
- ★ taking a relevant work-placement or internship
- ★ browsing questions and answers on LinkedIn
- ★ using news apps
- ★ asking your Careers Service for relevant resources.

Want to know more?



Law and Broader (2017) *Law: Commercial Awareness: What It Means and How to Ace It!*

What employers want: specialists or generalists?

Subject specialism needed?

Almost all employers have graduate jobs open to students of any degree subject. This is true even in sectors that may appear specialist, such as finance, management, accounting, HR, law, marketing, communications and advertising – especially for those who achieve a good degree classification or GPA.

Some roles do require a particular degree subject and specialist knowledge and expertise. That is especially the case for professional and technical roles such as in medicine and health, engineering and languages.

Even when a specialism is required, this is used as an initial filter to cut down the field of applicants. After that, employers look at all the other attributes a candidate might bring. For specialist roles, an applicant with the right specialist degree, a rounded portfolio and who meets the person specification will have a good chance of being short-listed.

Rounded applicants

Not all employers value subject specialisation. Increasingly, and especially in the international labour market, employers like graduates who can draw flexibly across a range of disciplines and experiences. This position was articulated in the report *An Avalanche is Coming*:

The trend in the academy towards specialisation, which is at least a century old, continues unabated, but citizens of the world now cry out for synthesis – synthesis now provided largely outside of the academy by organisations such as OECD. (Barber et al., 2013, p. 17)

There is a growing interest in employees who demonstrate soft skills, a breadth of knowledge and experiences, who can connect these up and contextualise them (Glazer, 2019). Steve Jobs, founder of Apple, wrote that, for the field of design and technology, it was essential for employees to be able to draw on as wide a range of experiences as possible (Beahm, 2011). Like many innovators, he saw the value of a broad education rather than a narrow focus on a particular specialism alone.

Ability to innovate and integrate skills

Employers look for people who demonstrate that they can come up with soundly based ideas and then carry these through. Shell (2014), for example, stated:

We're looking for people with the intellectual, analytical and creative ability to learn quickly, identify issues and propose solutions. Can you reach informed conclusions through broad thinking? Can you work with incomplete or conflicting data and take well-calculated risks?

Shell stated on its website (2020) that it wants candidates who show drive, resilience and self-confidence, and are good at working in teams, communicating and respecting others. You might like to consider how you would develop and demonstrate such qualities.

Broad approach to development

Typically, employers will be interested in your broad personal development. That is why universities and colleges encourage students to take part in activities outside of the formal curriculum and to start to build their CV as early as possible.

Reflection



Being a strong generalist

If a job that interests you required good generic abilities, how you would demonstrate that you could draw on a wide range of experiences?

What could you do to broaden your knowledge, expertise base and abilities further to better match the descriptions outlined above?

What employers want: how does this change?

It is reasonable to wonder whether skills you are developing now will still be relevant in a few years' time. A comparison across the decades suggests that similar skills remain valued over time, although their relative importance varies a little, and new skills and attributes become added to the list.

Activity

Changes in demand?



Compare the skills that occur in the 1998 CVCP Report with those identified in reports below and by Miller's (2014) on page 306. Note:

- ★ which skills needs remain constant
- ★ additional skills that have appeared recently
- ★ where your own strengths and gaps lie with respect to these.

1998 TMP Research

Research by TMP Worldwide Research found the top five skills valued by employers were: (1) oral communication (2) teamworking (3) listening (4) written communication, (5) problem-solving.

1998 CVCP Report

In 1998, the Committee of University Vice-Chancellors (CVCP) commissioned research by Coopers and Lybrand to identify 'employability skills' for graduates. This report outlined four categories of graduate attributes. These are still in demand today.

1 Traditional intellectual skills

The ability to: evaluate evidence critically; argue logically; apply theory to practice; model problems qualitatively and quantitatively; challenge taken-for-granted assumptions.

2 Core or key skills

Communication; application of number; working with others; information and communications technology; improving one's own performance.

3 Personal attributes

Self-reliance; adaptability; flexibility; 'nous'; creativity.

4 Knowledge about how organisations work

Business acumen; commercial sense.

2009 CBI report

The 2009 CBI report, *Future Fit*, showed the skills identified in 1998 were still needed. New skills in demand included cultural awareness, self-management, a 'can do' approach and business and customer awareness.

2011 Lowden report

This report of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and 22 leading employer organisations such as the CBI, the Association of Graduate Recruiters, and the Council for Industry in Higher Education (CIHE) identified the top attributes most sought in graduate employees as:

- ★ teamworking
- ★ self-management
- ★ literacy and numeracy skills relevant to the post.
- ★ problem-solving
- ★ knowledge of the business

WEF (2016)

According to the World Economic Forum (WEF), as well as the skills traditionally in demand, the future workforce would need social and emotional skills. Its list of sixteen '21st century skills' included cultural and civic literacy, collaboration, leadership, social awareness and critical thinking as well as creativity, persistence, curiosity, initiative and adaptability.

LinkedIn 2020

Anderson (2020) looked at the soft skills most in demand and least in supply on LinkedIn. Emotional Intelligence was new to the list and most in demand, with creativity, persuasion, collaboration and adaptability also featuring in the top five.

Bright Network Report 2020

Bright Network asked employers to rate the importance they placed on eight attributes when recruiting graduates. Communications topped the list followed by passion for the business, problem-solving, resilience, commercial awareness, a good degree, teamwork, leadership and organisation/ team management (Uffindell et al., 2020).

What employers value

Employers value graduates

Each year, employers invest time and money in visiting HEIs to talk to students about job opportunities in their businesses, in creating placements, internships and graduate training schemes, advertising for graduates, setting up assessment centres for graduate recruitment, and interviewing students and new graduates. All this indicates that employers value graduates.

Leadership and management

Employers usually want graduates who can step up quickly into managerial and leadership roles. That is why they are keen to see evidence of skills covered in this book:

- ★ **'Academic'/intellectual skills** – strategic thinking, making good decisions, exercising good judgement, analysing information, finding solutions, bringing a creative or innovative approach.
- ★ **People/inter-personal skills** – managing relationships in the workplace, teamwork, communicating clearly, inspiring, encouraging and supporting others to get things done well and efficiently, understanding customers, clients and competitors.
- ★ **Task-management/operational skills** – organisational skills, managing projects, setting goals, developing systems and processes, monitoring performance, using resources efficiently, managing money, all with attention to detail.
- ★ **Self-management/intra-personal skills** – the ability to manage your own needs, emotions, motivation and development so that you are able to work well under pressure and focus on your responsibilities.

Skills for particular jobs

Advertisements usually list the most important features of the job, including skills requirements. Browsing through the job advertisements associated with career areas that interest you will help you form a picture of the relevant skills for you to develop.

Activity



Job advertisements

Find at least 20 advertisements for jobs in career areas that interest you. To find these, you can look in locations such as the Careers Service vacancy bulletin, national newspapers, professional publications that advertise jobs, and leading websites for graduate recruiters (see pages 381–2).

- ★ For the kind of jobs that interest you, which skills and attributes are mentioned most often?
- ★ How strong are your own skills in these areas?

On the companion site, there is a wide range of templates to record your competences and examples of experience – ready for when you need them. See pages xi and 374.

Articulating skills clearly

Although employers and job adverts may use the same words as HEIs when speaking of skills, the terminology often means something different in a work context. Employers do value the skills developed by a university or college education, but do not always understand or value examples of these drawn from academic contexts. They like to see examples of those skills being used in work and 'real-life' contexts.

Pages 313–19 can help you to break your skills down into some of their component parts, and to identify how these might be articulated in ways that make more sense to employers.

Translating academic skills for the workplace

Do employers value academic skills?

Although employers tend to consider that having a degree indicates that a job applicant is bright and intelligent, many underestimate the skills and attributes gained through academic study. They might be sceptical about time spent in study rather than work – or just uncertain or unclear about the kinds of skills students gain. It can take some thought to find ways of presenting the value of your academic skills in ways that appear relevant to their business.

Which academic skills?

Most businesses could benefit from workplace application of academic skills such as:

- ★ Research skills
- ★ Information management
- ★ Synthesising ideas and/or information
- ★ Writing up and presenting reports
- ★ Critical reflection on practice
- ★ Analysis, criticism and evaluation.

You might find it helpful to break key academic skills into their component sub-skills, as in the self-evaluation opposite – to show such how sub-skills could be applied to a workplace.

What employers say

More than anything, I value critical, analytic thinkers. I need to know staff can handle complex information, make sense of it for themselves, and present it in ways that make sense to me and my company. I need them to do the thinking, and be able to explain to me clearly why they are recommending a course of action. (CEO of a UK national charity)

We look for people who combine academic excellence with common sense. (Recruitment brochure; Travers Smith LLP)

How are your academic skills relevant?

I can ☒

- ☐ Undertake advanced searches for information
- ☐ Find relevant material at speed
- ☐ Make good judgements about which material is most relevant
- ☐ Synthesise information from multiple sources quickly to find what they have in common and where they differ
- ☐ Summarise relevant material succinctly
- ☐ Synthesise material to arrive at a new solution, position or approach
- ☐ Identify strengths and weaknesses of a case or position accurately
- ☐ Analyse numerical data to identify trends
- ☐ Analyse evidence well in order to derive accurate conclusions
- ☐ Make sensible judgements, using a range of data/information
- ☐ Undertake complex, multi-level tasks with little supervision
- ☐ Apply knowledge in order to solve problems
- ☐ Translate complex material into everyday language so that it can be understood by diverse audiences
- ☐ Communicate a well-evidenced argument in writing
- ☐ Communicate a well-evidenced argument at an informal meeting
- ☐ Identify relevant material to prepare management briefings
- ☐ Communicate a well-evidenced argument as a formal presentation, such as to funders and clients
- ☐ Reflect on my own work, identifying for myself how I can make improvements

Writing skills for the workplace

The value of academic writing skills

For most courses in higher education, writing tasks play an important part. Depending on the kind of tasks that you undertook for your course, it is likely that you will have developed written communication skills that are highly relevant to the workplace.

Writing skills – for work and study

Ideally, by your final year, you should be able to write accurately, at speed, to deadlines, selecting the most salient points, structuring these and clarifying their significance, drafting copy and proof-reading it, to produce a fluent, well-styled, relevant piece of writing for specific purposes and audiences. If you have developed such writing skills, then you are likely to do well in your studies. Such skills are real assets in employment. Conversely, if your written skills are weak, then it is worth fine-tuning them.

Note that, even if this is not specified, it will probably be assumed that you have perfect grammar, spelling and punctuation, and that all aspects of your application will be well proof-read and error-free.

What employers say

Communication, both written and verbal, is really important and I look for people who have an energy and spark about them. (Danella Bagnall, Vehicle Architecture Planning Director, Jaguar Land Rover)

If I see silly mistakes in an application, even in a covering email, I bin it. I am not going to have time to correct their work if I appoint them. (Managing Director, SME)

Make opportunities

Experience of writing for audiences outside of your academic studies enhances your CV. Businesses, charities and community projects may appreciate help with producing materials such as the following:

- ★ **Summaries** of press clippings, position papers, government documents, research papers, and information about funding proposals
- ★ **Informational literature** such as posters, leaflets, web-materials, articles in a trade magazine or community newspaper
- ★ **Promotional materials** such as fliers, webpages
- ★ **Social media writing** such as for a special interest community, twitter feeds in a professional context, team or manager's blog, Facebook or LinkedIn pages
- ★ **Staff literature** such as compiling or updating manuals, the staff handbook, a website, or policy documents.

There may be good opportunities in your institution, workplace, place of worship, a student society or for a local community group. Some starting places would be:

- ★ Student Union
- ★ Careers and Employability Services
- ★ Chaplaincy and student mentoring services
- ★ Volunteering Services on campus or in the local community
- ★ Community centres
- ★ Enterprise and Innovation Centres.

Reflection

Written communication



- ★ How could you gain experience of adapting and developing your writing skills for work and non-academic contexts?
- ★ Complete an evaluation of your writing skills for the workplace on page 315.

You might also find it useful to complete the written communication competence sheet provided on the companion site.

Communication skills for the workplace

Activity

Writing skills in context



Employers frequently rate communication skills at the top of their list of preferred graduate attributes (see pages 311, 316 and 321), so they are well worth developing.

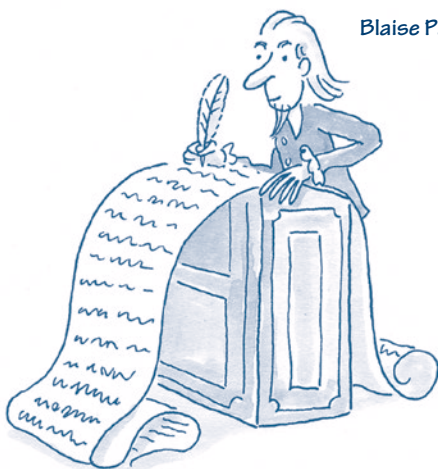
- 1 Take at least seven different pieces of literature or information written for the public. These could include company websites, newsletters, podcasts, public information leaflets or posters, advertisements, trade magazines, factual information provided by banks, building societies or company marketing. Browse through these, comparing the writing style with that used in higher education.

- ★ What are the characteristics of such writing?
- ★ What writing skills would it take to produce them?

- 2 Collect literature from occupational sectors or professional areas that interest you. Browse these, comparing their writing styles with that you use for your course: how do they differ? How might you need to adapt your style to suit what employers need?

*I have made this letter longer only because
I have not had time to make it shorter.*

Blaise Pascal (1655)



Where do your writing skills lie?

I can ☒

- ☐ Spell, punctuate and use grammar correctly, proof-reading carefully for these aspects (For a graduate job, these should be excellent in all your written communication)
- ☐ Write clearly, making it easy for the reader to grasp the point
- ☐ Write with fluency, structuring my writing well so that it carries the reader through easily from one point to the next
- ☐ Produce good writing at speed, to deadlines
- ☐ Adapt my writing style to the needs of the task and to different audiences
- ☐ Communicate well with diverse audiences
- ☐ Summarise documents accurately, such as for briefing papers for management teams
- ☐ Use language precisely
- ☐ Present a strong, clear, reasoned argument
- ☐ Write balanced evaluations (and I am able to differentiate evaluation from description)
- ☐ Draft formal letters
- ☐ Draft or fine-tune papers for committees
- ☐ Take down and write up succinct, accurate minutes of meetings
- ☐ Produce web-based text, suitable for different audiences
- ☐ Write promotional material
- ☐ Write guides, handbooks or other informational literature for particular audiences
- ☐ Write concisely to a given brief
- ☐ Assist with writing a company blog
- ☐ Write social media posts suitable for business needs

Oral communication skills for the workplace

Good oral communication skills are real assets in the workplace. For most jobs, such skills are required continually in day-to-day work, whereas written communications may be used less frequently.

Evidencing your oral skills

Students often cite 'presenting a seminar paper' as an example of 'oral communication'. Leading a seminar is a valuable experience and does develop public speaking skills. However, formal presentations are not typical of everyday working life.

It is probable, at work, that you will need oral skills for meetings, formal and informal, to contribute as a team member to discussions, or to explain matters to clients, customers and colleagues. Employers will be interested to hear about how you have communicated with different kinds of people, fielded difficult questions or contributed to discussions in workshops, projects, online or in work contexts.

What employers say

I need my front line staff to be able to provide clear, accurate information to the public. They need to respond quickly to what they are hearing, adapting the message to suit the customer. Team leaders and managers must excel at communication in order to resolve difficult situations quickly and effectively. (General Manager, call centre for large, international utility company)

Reflection

Oral communication skills



- ★ Which oral communication skills do you have that will be useful in work contexts?
- ★ Of the skills above, which do you need to find out more about and/or develop?

You might also find it useful to complete the oral communication competence sheet provided on the companion site.

Where do your oral communication skills lie?

I can ☒

- ☐ Convey information accurately and clearly
- ☐ Give clear directions and instructions
- ☐ Speak confidently with colleagues
- ☐ Communicate well with colleagues at different levels within the organisation
- ☐ Make useful contributions to meetings
- ☐ Take turns when speaking, leaving gaps for others to contribute
- ☐ Get to the point quickly
- ☐ Present the essential information concisely
- ☐ Listen attentively to others, taking on board what they are saying
- ☐ Represent corporate views accurately through what I say
- ☐ Negotiate my own position and that of my team or organisation
- ☐ Offer verbal criticism constructively as and when appropriate
- ☐ Adapt my verbal communication style to suit different audiences and situations
- ☐ Communicate well with particular audiences, such as children, patients, trade unions, customers
- ☐ Make customers and clients feel their views are respected
- ☐ Inspire confidence through what I say

People skills for the workplace

Skills in a team context

At university, because you are working towards a qualification that is awarded on an individual basis, you are judged primarily on your individual effort. In the workplace, whilst individual input is still valued, the team and wider company goals are usually more important points of reference.

When employers refer to creativity, communication, problem-solving or any other skills, they tend to assume that you understand that it isn't just about whether you shine at these things alone. They want to know how well you can apply skills and draw on your knowledge and experience when working with colleagues, clients and other people – and to encourage and bring out such skills in others, too.

They will also be looking to see that you understand that your development of such skills is not just about your personal satisfaction, but has relevance and adds value to the work of the team and the organisation.

What employers say

I need to feel confident that every member of my staff exhibits my charity's values in all of their interactions with our children and young people, their parents and carers and with their colleagues too. Valuing diversity and respect for all is at the heart of our work and I want to be able to see that through things such as taking the time to listen to what children and young people want, advocating on others' behalf and making sure that everyone who has contact with my organisation is treated in the way they would like to be treated themselves. The tougher the task, the more I need to know that they can stay connected with what really matters to us. (CEO, charity for disabled children and young people)

Where do your skills lie?

I can ☒

- ☐ Establish rapport easily with work colleagues
- ☐ Make others feel included and respected
- ☐ Respect other people's dignity
- ☐ Respect other people's time
- ☐ Work well in a team, contributing appropriately
- ☐ Win people's trust and confidence easily
- ☐ Work collaboratively with other people
- ☐ Take on board other people's ideas
- ☐ Share well with others
- ☐ Recognise quickly what others need
- ☐ Explain things well to other people
- ☐ Deal well with difficult people
- ☐ Deal well with awkward situations
- ☐ Maintain professional boundaries
- ☐ Remain patient
- ☐ Demonstrate good customer service
- ☐ Encourage and support others to do well
- ☐ Develop or train colleagues
- ☐ Accept the leadership and authority of others
- ☐ Take the lead when appropriate

Reflection

People skills

- ★ Which people skills have you gained that will be useful in work contexts?
- ★ Of the skills above, which do you need to find out more about and/or develop?

You might also find it useful to complete the people skills competence sheets provided on the companion site.



Task-management skills for the workplace

Task-management skills

Good task-management or 'operational' skills are essential at work. Employers tend to assume that graduate employees will have developed these skills already.

Student life often involves a great deal of independent study, with most time left unscheduled. If you already manage your time well, working in a systematic way, with well-established routines, then you have a good basis on which to further develop operational skills needed in employment. If not, then start now to build such skills.

- ★ Establish a daily routine.
- ★ Develop systematic, planned approaches to larger tasks and assignments.
- ★ Fine-tune underlying functional skills in literacy, numeracy and information technology.
- ★ Find or devise projects where you can help with aspects such as management and organisation. (You may find it useful to use Cottrell, 2014.)

What employers say

As well as looking for graduates with potential, we want to recruit the technical leaders of tomorrow. These are individuals who can lead teams in designing and supporting the projects upon which we can continue to build the business. (RDS, rig design and engineering specialist)

I want someone who is going to keep a sound grip on our projects. I want to feel reassured that the projects would be well managed, that I would be given early warnings of potential risks or problems, preferably with realistic proposals for resolving these. (CEO of UK national charity)

Where do your skills lie?

I can ☒

- ☐ Manage a project from start to finish
- ☐ Identify priorities
- ☐ Find solutions to work-related issues
- ☐ Manage a budget
- ☐ Identify resource requirements
- ☐ Manage resources well
- ☐ Undertake a health and safety assessment
- ☐ Work in a systematic way on work tasks
- ☐ Map processes
- ☐ Write instructions/procedures for others
- ☐ Identify which work tasks are priorities
- ☐ Scope tasks, identifying how long they will take
- ☐ Manage my work time to meet all deadlines
- ☐ Use work time effectively, avoiding distractions
- ☐ Draw up schedules for myself and others
- ☐ Maintain organised records and files, retrieving information quickly as needed
- ☐ Identify who needs to receive which kinds of communication, by when, making sure they receive them
- ☐ Identify my own training needs
- ☐ Pick up the IT skills I need to complete a task
- ☐ Use software to present data
- ☐ Use project management software (state which)

Reflection

Task-management skills

- ★ Which task-management skills have you gained as a student, either through your course, work placements or co-curricular activities?
- ★ Of the skills above, which do you need to find out more about and/or develop?

You might also find it useful to complete the task-management competence sheets provided on the companion site.



Self-management skills for the workplace

Why is self-management valued?

Independence

It is an obvious advantage to an employer if an employee can work out quickly what is required of them at work and then just get on with the job without much guidance. If an employee is well-organised, responsible, and manages their time well, they are more productive. This saves on staff costs or opens up new opportunities for using that staff member as a resource.

Coping with change and challenge

The labour market is changing so quickly that it is a real advantage to be able to manage change and uncertainty well.

Change can be experienced as exciting, or stressful, or both. It requires you to move from known and safe terrain into the unknown. You may have to alter ingrained habits, adapt your preferred ways of working, learn new skills, adopt new working patterns, assimilate into a new team, move site and change your home or your travel plans. You may have to cope with disruption.

Employers value candidates who can demonstrate that they have encountered difficulty and challenge and managed these well, learning from experience.

What employers say

... so you won't expect to be spoon fed. You'll be eager to throw your ideas into the mix, shoulder your fair share of responsibility and prove you know how to put customers first. (Heinz, 2014)

Where do your skills lie?

I can ☒

- ☐ Take the initiative to ensure work gets done
- ☐ Motivate myself to produce high-quality work
- ☐ Maintain my motivation well even when things aren't going well
- ☐ Work out sensible solutions to problems
- ☐ Take care of my health and well-being so that I can perform well
- ☐ Cope well under pressure
- ☐ Manage stress effectively
- ☐ Respond well to challenge
- ☐ Raise difficult issues if need arises
- ☐ Ask for help when needed
- ☐ Work well independently, with little direction
- ☐ Juggle tasks flexibly to meet changing circumstances
- ☐ Be flexible in working hours and taking on new tasks to meet changing business needs
- ☐ Use direction and instruction constructively
- ☐ Balance independent working with teamwork
- ☐ Deal well with uncertainty
- ☐ Use feedback and criticism constructively
- ☐ Put my own needs aside when other people's requirements are more urgent
- ☐ Make good use of arising opportunities, to the benefit of the business
- ☐ Identify my training needs effectively and undertake professional updates and training