

Chapter 13

Critical thinking for your future career and employability

Learning outcomes

- To know how to apply critical thinking to your own professional and career development
- To be able to apply critical thinking skills to the process of applying for jobs
- To recognise the value of critical thinking to employers
- To understand how to articulate your critical thinking abilities to employers
- To think critically about your own performance, to help with future job applications

Critical thinking for professional life

Critical thinking skills are highly valued in the workplace, nationally and internationally, and can make the essential difference to the development of your career and success in the job market.

That means it is well worth putting time aside to bring a critically analytical and reflective approach to your consideration of the world of work and your place within it. You can apply your critical abilities to key questions such as:

- Am I considering the issues that I should in order to further my longer-term life, career or work-related aims?
- What will my career pathway look like?
- What kind of jobs should I apply for?
- Are my job applications as good as they could be?
- What am I learning from my experiences of applying for jobs that will help me in the future?



Thinking critically about your life and career planning

The criticality of work decisions

Most people need to refresh their job-hunting and application skills when looking for work, as trends in the labour market change over time. It is also useful to step back from time to time and think critically about your life and work decisions 'in the round', as you, too, may have changed.

The decisions you make about work will, for many years, affect almost all of your waking life:

- how each day is spent and where;
- the kinds of people you get to meet;
- the conversations you will have;
- the life opportunities that open or close;
- what you wear, eat, see, hear, and feel;
- how much time you have for yourself;
- your health, well-being and happiness.

That is why it is worth giving time to thinking through how your decisions about work and your career will affect other aspects of your life – and the role that you want work to play in your life.

What matters to me most?

Considering what you want from life in general terms might seem rather abstract, especially if you need a job soon and feel you have few choices. However, you can improve your short-term decision-making by thinking critically about what you want from life in the longer term, the roadmap to achieving it, and how your current decisions could help or hinder in achieving your goals.

Ultimately, decisions about your career path will be particular to you, your circumstances and your considerations of such issues as family, friends, relationships, lifestyle, working life and so on. For example, if being creative, or engaging in sport, community work or politics are important to you, then check that jobs you apply for are compatible with furthering those ambitions. If you will have

family responsibilities, will you be able to meet these in jobs that require long days, irregular hours or business trips abroad?

Understand the commitment



Whilst a particular job may suit you in the short term, it is unwise to commit to a career until you research what it really means on a day-by-day basis. There isn't much point becoming excited about a job that sounds prestigious, or has a good salary, if you loathe the people, working hours, tasks and commitments that come with it.



Reflection: Lifestyle and values?

- What do you value most in how you spend time? What kinds of jobs would enable that?
- In which sorts of jobs are you most likely to meet and work with the kinds of people you like?
- What other values are essential to you that should inform your career decisions?

Thinking critically about your life and career planning

What is my next step?

This is an important first question. Many graduates take a year or more experimenting with jobs, locations and life-styles. Some take a gap year to travel, develop their creative practice, or work as interns or volunteers. Such an approach can be helpful if you don't have a clear idea yet about what you really want to do.

However, even if you have a fixed idea about how your future career will pan out, it is still useful to pause and reflect critically about your future. Is that career route still best for you? Is it still feasible? Does it inspire you? If your reasoning supports your hypothesis about your career, and there is evidence to back that up, that is good to know. If your critical reflection demonstrates some uncertainties, then it can be useful to explore these before committing further time and expense.



Reflection: Next steps?

- What are the options open to you for how you spend the first year after graduating?
- Are you more interested in getting straight into a graduate career route? Or taking a break before following a career route? Or developing your own business? Or engaging in further study?

If you are not sure of the impact of such choices on your career development, speak to a careers adviser at your university or college. They will be able to help you to explore your options.

Ultimate role

If you do have a clear idea about the kind of job or role that you wish to achieve at the peak of your career, then that can be helpful in giving a sense of direction. In this case, speak to a careers adviser at your university about the routes that you can take that are most likely to make that a reality.



Reflection: Plan towards ideal job roles

- What kind of profession or senior role would you like to aim for?
- What qualifications would you need for this? How long do these take to achieve?
- What kinds of interim jobs and roles would take you to where you want to be? How long would it be expected that you would spend in each?
- What kind of timeframe is needed to achieve your goals?

Which sector and profession?

If you have studied for a qualification that leads into a particular professional area, you may wish to continue on that track. However, if this feels an unwelcome obligation, apply your thinking skills to analysing the job market for other jobs that reward the attributes you have developed.

Conversely, if you want to work in a particular sector and your degree doesn't seem to lead to the obvious careers in that field, there may well be many other good jobs in that sector that need your skills. Most businesses, whether in finance, arts, care or engineering, need a range of skills: technical, management, IT, creative, marketing and so on. Around half of graduate jobs are open to graduates irrespective of degree subject.

Activity



Labour market research

Find out:

- The best websites for jobs that interest you.
- The number of those jobs available, where they are located, and typical starting salaries.
- What skills and attributes are needed for these jobs.

Self-evaluation: Thinking critically about your career path

It can be a challenge to know where to start thinking about a career pathway, whether or not you already have a job. Everyone has a different starting place. You may also feel quite differently about your career options as you progress through your course or once you try out a new job in a particular field. Self-evaluations can provide a useful starting point.

Critically evaluating statements, giving thought to your responses, can draw attention to aspects you might have overlooked in the past. Reflecting about your ratings can assist you in drawing

conclusions about your career path and actions you should take.

The following self-evaluation provides a starting place for such critical reflection, enabling you to analyse your own career awareness in terms of key components.



- Read each statement below.
- Rate yourself on a scale from 0–4 where 0 is 'not true at all' and 4 is 'very true'.
- Jot down your thoughts as you go – such as actions you can take, things to investigate, or matters you could follow up further with a careers expert.

A	Career and lifestyle choices	Rating ☹ 0 1 2 3 4 ☺	Your thoughts and observations on your ratings
1	I have thought through, in detail, what kind of job would best suit me.		
2	I have a good sense of the professional path that I want to follow.		
3	I have a good sense of the kind of life and lifestyle I want, and jobs that fit with that.		
4	I am aware of the kind of demands that go with the jobs that interest me.		
5	I have a good sense of the kinds of jobs available that match what I am looking for.		
6	I am clear about the full range of job choices open to any graduate.		
7	I am clear about the jobs open to graduates only with my kind of degree.		
8	I am clear whether I prefer to work for an employer or have my own business.		

B	Qualifications	Rating ☹ 0 1 2 3 4 ☺	Your thoughts and observations on your ratings
1	I am clear what qualifications are required for the kind of career I want.		
2	I am currently studying the right course for the kinds of jobs or career I want.		
3	I am aware of any further qualifications I may need to study for to reach my goal.		
4	I am aware of the requirements of professional bodies that are relevant for careers that interest me.		

Self-evaluation: Thinking critically about your career path

C	Experience of employment	Rating ☹ 0 1 2 3 4 ☺	Your thoughts and observations on your ratings
1	I am aware that I am more likely to get a job interview if I have had a job before.		
2	I am aware that I am more likely to get a job interview if I am in work already.		
3	I have a good track record of work experience already.		
4	I have gained a good understanding of the demands of the 'real life' workplace.		
5	I have experience of work relevant to the career or jobs that interest me.		

D	Skills	Rating ☹ 0 1 2 3 4 ☺	Your thoughts and observations on your ratings
1	I have a good portfolio of skills and experience to draw upon.		
2	I am clear how to articulate my current skills in ways that resonate with employers.		
3	I am aware of the skills that employers are looking for in areas that interest me.		
4	I have strong written communication skills.		
5	I have addressed any weaknesses I had in my use of grammar and punctuation.		
6	I have the skills necessary to run my own business.		

E	Experience of applying for work	Rating ☹ 0 1 2 3 4 ☺	Your thoughts and observations on your ratings
1	I know where to look for jobs that interest me.		
2	I have had success in applying for jobs.		
3	I have learnt good lessons from the process of applying for jobs.		
4	I know how to make a sensible selection of jobs to apply for.		
5	I know how to make a strong written application.		
6	I know how to do well at assessment centres.		
7	I know how to do well at interview.		

Thinking critically about your career: Taking action



One important dimension of thinking critically about your career is acknowledging the power of your own actions – or ‘agency’. This will affect your options and the outcomes of your career. That is especially so at key moments such as when at university, at graduation, or at a cross-roads in your professional life. Use the table below to identify, with a ✓, the actions you consider would be useful for you at this time.

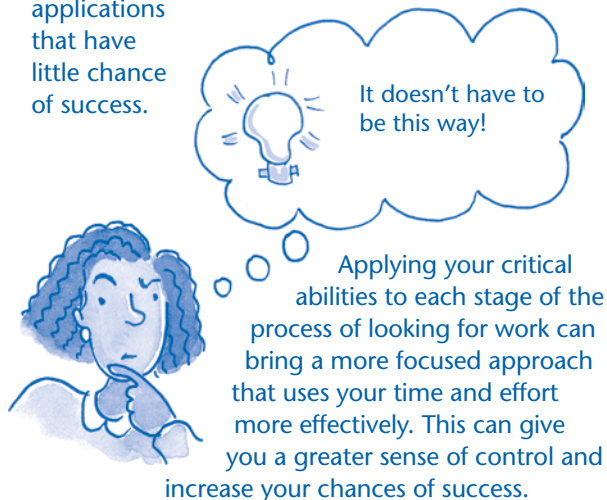
Careers Preparation ‘To Do’ list	Top priorities from my Careers Preparation ‘To Do’ list
☐ See a Careers Adviser at my college or university. ☐ Use a specialist text to assist my career development in more depth. See page 228. ☐ Check that I have the right qualifications for the career path I want to follow. ☐ Browse job websites to get a sense of the jobs that are available and what attributes are requested. ☐ Find out more about what employers say about graduate skills. See page 219–23. ☐ Gain any work experience (if I haven’t had a job recently). ☐ Gain work experience in a relevant field. ☐ See if there are jobs available on campus. ☐ Find out more about setting up a business of my own. ☐ Find out how to grow and develop my current business. ☐ See if there is an enterprise module that I could study as part of my course. ☐ Find out about prizes and schemes for promoting enterprise where I am studying. If in employment now ☐ Make more effective use of the staff appraisal or review scheme where I work now. ☐ Consider going for promotion in my workplace. ☐ Speak to my employer about opportunities for development in my workplace. ☐ Make better use of my employer’s training schemes. ☐ Express an interest in work that would widen my experience, outside of my usual job. ☐ Look for ways of showing initiative and taking on responsibility.	1. 2. 3. 4. 5. Others (list here)

Applying critical thinking when looking for a job

It may be that you find, apply for, and gain the ideal job with your first application. That would be great, but it isn't usually the case, especially if you are ambitious about the kinds of jobs you go for.



Typically at the point where you are applying for a job, there are many pressures at play. These might be life changes, a need to earn a living or gain a higher income, pressure to prove yourself to others, move home and so on. At such times, it is all too easy to get caught up in the process, applying for many jobs, using time and energy on applications that have little chance of success.



Failed applications can deplete your motivation and even undermine your sense of self-worth.



Apply your critical thinking abilities

- Evaluate your best job options on the basis of the evidence, selecting the right job vacancies on which to spend your time.
- Use the clues: examine the 'person specification' and other employer information closely to identify what the employer is looking for; use that information in order to make a strong application.
- Read critically: interpret the person specification sensibly, in the context of other information provided about the level of responsibility that goes with the role.
- Select the best evidence about your own attributes to match the person specification.
- Check that you have demonstrated why you should be considered for the job, based on the person specification.

More detail about what this means, in practice, is provided on the next page. If you have already made job applications, consider whether you used your critical faculties to best effect at each stage of the process.

Critical consideration of the 'best fit' jobs for you

What am I looking for?

Before launching into job applications, consider critically what is essential to you in the job you will accept. Just as when you conduct information searches for academic study, you are more likely to find what you want if you know what you are looking for.



Reflection: The right kind of job?

- Jot down your answers in response to the questions opposite. Which factors matter most to you?
- Consider what your answers suggest about the kind of job that would work for you.

What kind of job best suits me?

- *Working for myself or for others.* Am I more suited to running my own business? Do I want to work for a large organisation? A small company? The private, voluntary or public sector?
- *Type of job.* Am I looking for a graduate job that makes use of my degree? Or a starter job to develop experience, expertise and skills? A part-time job to bring in money whilst I pursue my studies? Promotion in my current profession?
- *Roles and sectors.* What kind of roles am I aiming at this time around? What wouldn't I consider? Are there any work sectors that I prefer – or would not consider?
- *Geographically.* Where would I be prepared to work – and where not? How much travel or commuting am I prepared to accept?
- *Financially.* What salary am I aiming for? What is realistic? What is the lowest salary I will accept?
- *Work culture.* What kind of work environment am I looking for? What workplace values are important to me – or would I find unacceptable? How far do things such as driving up profits, customer service, professionalism, teamwork, or social responsibility matter to me? Excite me? Drive me to do better?
- *Lifestyle.* What kinds of hours am I prepared to work? Am I prepared to work evenings? Weekends? To commute daily? Do I want to travel in my work?

Use time effectively before applying

Apply close critical reading skills to all the information available about a job you are considering. Look at the 'evidence' in full, and reflectively, before deciding whether to apply. More information about this is provided on page 219.

Before applying

Before spending time on an application, consider whether you can say 'yes' truthfully to all of the following.

- ☐ Do I really know enough about this job?
- ☐ Is this really the kind of work I am looking for?
- ☐ Does it suit my minimum requirements?
- ☐ Can I see myself in this job role?
- ☐ Am I eligible for this job: do I meet the person specification?
- ☐ Could I really do the work required?
- ☐ At interview, would I be able to sound convincing that I want, and can do, this work?
- ☐ Would I really accept the job if offered it?
- ☐ Will I learn much through this application?
- ☐ Is it worth spending time on this application?

Use the clues: Information provided by employers

Get into the employer mindset

When putting together your application, first put yourself in the employer's shoes. Deploy your critical thinking skills to consider:

- What kind of person do they want to employ?
- What will they expect of the successful job candidate once employed?
- How will they use their own critical abilities to select the job candidates they want?
- How would a busy employer go about 'weeding out' the least suitable job applicants in order to spend more time considering those applicants that look like a good match to what they need?
- What does all this tell you about what to include and emphasise in your application?

What the employer wants: The clues

Employers are busy people. They don't want to waste their own time nor that of applicants. They make information available so that potential applicants can select themselves in, or out, of the application process. They expect applicants to look very carefully and critically at:

- the job advertisement;
- the job description;
- the person specification;
- background information.

Typically, an employer will want to see that you:

- are capable of finding the information available;
- understand what it means;
- can interpret it in the light of the job role;
- use information effectively and consistently.

Job advertisement

The brief detail in the initial advertisement can signal such things as:

- the reason why the job has arisen now;
- the aims of the organization;
- the level of seniority associated with the role;
- the scale and scope of the job;
- the personal attributes and characteristics that are most important to the role.

Job description (JD)

This tells you what the successful job applicant will have to do. Read it critically to decide whether:

- this is the right level of job for you now – or too senior or junior than would be suitable for you at this point;
- you would be able to 'hit the ground running' from day one and deliver on all, or almost all, of the substantial responsibilities. Employers don't, usually, want to hear that someone could do the job if they were trained to do it. They prefer someone who is 'job-ready'.

Person specification (PS)

The person 'spec' is where you need to focus the most when writing your application as this usually constitutes the list of criteria that employers use to select candidates. Deploy your critical reading skills to analyse exactly what is meant by each of these in the context of this job.

- Do you meet all items designated as 'essential'? If you can make a sensible case about how you meet all of these, you have a reasonable chance of progressing to the next round of the process. Ultimately, the candidate that best meets these attributes will get the job.
- Consider carefully how you meet any attributes designated as 'desirable'. These are generally used to decide between candidates when many applicants meet the 'essential' criteria.

Clues in the 'background material'

- *The application pack*: what message does it convey about the company and the role?
- *The employer's website*: what can you find out about company values, mission, structure, strategies, plans, financial reports?
- *Public information*: there may be useful information about the employer on the internet, such as social network sites, and that held by government bodies or the Charity Commission.

Where do job applicants go wrong?

Understanding where others go wrong can provide a useful steer on where to apply your powers of critical analysis when applying for a job yourself.

1. Not using the evidence available



- a) They don't seem to have read the material provided and thought critically about what is needed for the particular role.
- b) They contact employers for information already available in the pack or on the website.
- c) At interview, they ask questions for which they could have found out the answers themselves.
- d) Their application or answers reveal they have misunderstood what the job is really about.

2. Not following instructions!



- a) They don't follow, exactly, the instructions about how to complete the application forms.
- b) They either don't send documents required, or provide documents that are not needed.
- c) They submit applications after the deadline.
- d) They don't arrive in good time at assessment centres or for interviews.
- e) They don't answer, in a precise way, the questions asked at interview.

3. Taking 'short-cuts' unhelpful to me as the employer



- a) They go about things in ways that inconvenience the employer, adding to the time it takes them to process the application.
- b) They refer the employer to a CV, additional document, or an earlier paragraph, rather than providing information in the location requested.

- c) They ask employers to make special arrangements such as changing interview dates or using Skype, rather than changing personal arrangements.
- d) They merge responses to several aspects of the person specification into one answer. This can make it harder for the selectors to allocate points, either because items get overlooked or because of the way information is presented on the employer's recruitment system.

4. Making empty statements



- a) They paraphrase the person specification as a statement of fact without providing examples. For example, if the employer asks for 'excellent people skills', they write such things as: 'My people skills are excellent' or 'I am told I have good people skills' or 'I have always had to use good people skills in my work.' That doesn't provide the evidence needed.
- b) They make broad statements about the world, their beliefs, or values, in response to questions that call for 'good knowledge and understanding' of the sector or job – rather than giving examples of how they would have developed this through experience at work.

5. Vagueness about details



- a) They omit detail that would enable employers to know they really meet all essential criteria.
- b) They refer to what 'we ...' or 'the team ...' achieved in such a way that the employer can't gain a sense of their personal contribution.
- c) They omit detail that would enable the employer to gain a sufficient sense of the level of seniority and personal responsibility for achievements.

6. Stating one thing; demonstrating the opposite

- a) They claim good communication skills but do not communicate convincingly that they are a good match for the post.
- b) They state they have good communication skills or good 'attention to detail', but their application is poorly phrased, contains errors, or doesn't appear well proof-read. This undermines their credibility and can be taken as evidence that they don't meet the criterion.



7. Lack of attention to detail

- a) They do not address every aspect of the person specification (so lose points).
- b) They omit information requested, such as dates, salaries, qualifications, references, etc.
- c) They submit an incomplete work history – leaving gaps open to the employer's imagination.
- d) They make silly mistakes such as spelling errors, or getting the company name wrong.



8. Appearing more interested in themselves than the employer

- a) They describe their skills and qualities without making it clear to the employer how these are relevant for the job for which they are applying.
- b) They talk about longer-term ambitions which are not manifestly in the interest of the business.
- c) They appear to be over-interested in holiday entitlements and benefits, asking about this when information is already provided.
- d) They apply for a full-time job whilst having their own business as well – so it isn't clear about their commitment to the job.
- e) They appear more concerned about getting a job than in this particular employer and role.



- f) They state, in interview, that they didn't have time to make a good application and/or to research an aspect of the company.
- g) They appear to criticise the employer, such as by saying that it was hard to find information on their website.
- h) They appear insensitive to, or ignorant of, the nature of the business and the demands it would make of employees.

9. Not applying for suitable jobs

- a) They apply for jobs that are manifestly well above their current grade.
- b) They apply for jobs where the salary is much higher than they are paid in their current role (usually an indication of a senior post requiring significant experience).
- c) They assume that a job that requires skills and job-based experience is one that they could do simply because they care about the area or have life experience.
- d) They apply for jobs that don't really interest them, so that they don't really sound convincing about wanting the job.



10. Not tailoring applications/responses

- a) They recycle information that they have used on a previous application, without adapting this sufficiently to suit each application.
- b) They submit applications that contain details that were clearly written for a different job application.
- c) They simply send in a standard CV and hope that that will suffice.
- d) They write brief answers on application forms and assume that the employer will use the CV to fill in any gaps.
- e) They provide incomplete information in interviews, assuming the employer will refer back to the application documentation (which they rarely do).



Where job applicants go wrong: Examples

Using the errors outlined on pages 220–1 as a guide, identify where each of the candidates below is going wrong. There may be more than one error in each case. What advice would you give them? When you have thought critically about these, see pages 301–2.

Example 1: Serina

It is April, and Serina is applying for a teaching post in a primary school. She will graduate this year with the relevant qualifications. The advert says that interested candidates can attend an open evening to be held on April 20th. The start date for the new job is given as August 14th. Serina and her friends have already booked a holiday overseas for three weeks in September. She contacts the employer to enquire:

- *Will the school consider newly qualified teachers?*
- *Is it possible to visit the school before applying – such as one weekend?*
- *If she gets the job, could she delay starting in the post until October?*

Example 2: Arno

Arno is a recent graduate in Sports Journalism. He has struggled to find a job that suits his circumstances so is widening his net. He applies for a post as deputy-director of student services at a university. The person specification asks for 'significant experience' in managing a service budget, and leading one or more student services, such as Counselling, Disability, Financial Advice, Accommodation, or International Office. Although he hasn't the exact experience requested, he writes a detailed application arguing that:

- *He is a recent student so has a good understanding of what students need.*
- *He ran a student Judo Society so has experience of leading and inspiring others.*
- *He managed the Judo Society budget (£500).*
- *He worked part-time over the summer in the International Office at his university.*

Example 3: Kim

Kim is a final year business management student, and keen to find a job. He has written dozens of applications. One is to Kiaru Holdings for a graduate internship. The fifth item in the person specification asks for 'Ability to work independently and as a member of a team.' Kim's response to this section is:

I am told I am easy to get on with and I enjoy working with others. As a student, I have undertaken several projects that called for good team working. I am an avid sports player and a keen member of several societies such as the Radio Society. I believe I would be able to transfer these skills easily for the role at Kairu Holdings and be a good team member.

Example 4: Lizzy

Lizzy is a Social Policy student applying to Gener8, a large national energy company, based near the capital. The job advert asks candidates to submit an application form online, with a covering letter, without a CV. The person specification includes requirements for a person:

- *Educated to degree level in any subject.*
- *Excellent communication skills.*
- *Willing to travel and work flexible hours.*

In her covering letter, Lizzy's writes:

I am excited by this opportunities, especially as I have always wanted to live in the capital. I grew up in a small town but my university is in a large city and I really like city life so would be flexible about moving to the capital. I will be graduating this summer a degree at university level 2.1 in Social Policy. I would love a job with MTZ-Co. I am delighted attach my CV which outlines the skills I gained through study degree and my part-time job as a store supervisor for 18 months and a volunteer care worker 10 months.

Employer demand for critical thinking skills

A global demand

Employers all around the world are looking for graduates who are good critical thinkers – who can bring an open mind, be self-reflective, able to manipulate multiple perspectives and challenge conventional ways of thinking skills (Diamond et al., 2011).

In the UK, surveys of employers over several years indicate the ongoing demand for critical thinking skills and for associated abilities, such as problem-solving (CBI, 2009; Lowden et al., 2011).

In 2013, a major survey in the USA found that over 93 per cent of employers placed more value on the ability to think critically, solve problems and communicate effectively than they did on the degree subject. This trend is increasing in the USA. By June 2014, US job advertisements were twice as likely to require critical thinking skills as had been the case in 2009 (Korn, 2014).

In India, recruiting companies have noted gaps in the level of critical thinking abilities needed for jobs in the global workplace (Fischer, 2012).

In China, employers are looking for employees with 'soft skills' such as communications, innovation, and taking the initiative in problem-solving. The lack of such skills has been linked to gaps in critical thinking abilities (Chan et al., 2015). The importance of critical thinking is recognised in the Chinese government's flagship International Scholarship Exchange Curriculum (ISEC), which includes critical thinking as one of its eight core aspects.

What do employers mean by 'critical thinking'?

When reading job advertisements and employer descriptions of skills needs for their business, you may note that the term 'critical thinking' is applied

in different ways from one employer to the next. That means it is important to check exactly what is meant for each role.

Depending on the job role, employers may be looking for employees who can apply critical thinking in the following ways:

- Horizon-scanning with a critical eye, spotting problems and opportunities quickly, then taking the initiative in finding viable, creative solutions.
- Critical reflection of personal professional practice, generating improvements.
- Critical evaluation of communications and interactions with colleagues, clients, etc.
- Making good work-related decisions, based on a sound and speedy evaluation of a situation and information.
- Bringing a critical eye to business plans, new proposals, designs, changes in policy, etc.
- Analysing data, identifying what is significant.
- Being open to new ideas and perspectives.
- Applying systematic analytical skills to matters relevant to their business.

Whatever the role, employers tend to value employees who can think sensibly for themselves, recognising when they need to investigate an issue further or test things out. They want to feel confident that whoever they employ can be trusted to get on with things, using common sense in a critical way that is right for the business context, without having to be asked.

Such skills are associated with minds that are used to thinking about issues from varied angles, formulating and testing out ideas or hypotheses, hunting out information, and drawing on evidence in a suitably selective way to make sound decisions. In other words, they want the kind of skills that are usually developed through academic study or critically reflective professional practice.

How critical thinking skills are useful in work roles

Critical thinking skills are at the core of most graduate jobs, regardless of the field. They support a range of related skills and personal qualities, such as those listed below.

- **Problem-solving skills:** the ability to generate a range of solutions, evaluate these and apply the best one to a situation.
- **Ability to make decisions under pressure:** the more well-developed your critical thinking skills, the better you are able to make quick decisions that are grounded in an analysis of what the situation demands.
- **Better communication with others:** if you are able to make sense of what is required in a work situation, you will be in a better position to communicate this clearly to colleagues and other stakeholders such as customers, patients, funders.
- **Better empathy with others:** good critical thinking skills increase your ability to see a situation from multiple perspectives and to appreciate others' viewpoints. This is particularly valuable in roles where relationships with others are central, such as service industries, sales, nursing.



Reflection: Transferring criticality

How could you apply your critical thinking skills more systematically to help you with new situations and problems that you encounter?

- **Increased confidence:** knowing you can apply your critical thinking skills to any work situation increases your confidence in your ability to perform the role.



'When I started in my job as a communications officer, I hadn't done anything quite like that before. I was well-practised at analysing texts as a student so I decided to apply the same underlying critical skills in my work role.

A lot of the time that just means that I ask critical questions of whatever is in front of me – such as "What message are we trying to get across, here?" "Do we need to alter the way we present that for different audiences?" "The graphics look great, but do they add to, or detract from, the message we want to convey?" "What evidence have we got that people will access messages using the media we have been using?"

'As a nurse, everything I do requires me to observe, analyse, evaluate and take action. If a patient tells me that they are in pain, there is a whole list of things that I run through quickly in my head:

- What is the source of the pain? Is it from a known condition or injury or could it be a sign of something new?
- Is the patient showing physical signs of being in pain such as sweating or hand-wringing?
- When did they last have pain medication? What would the possible implications be of giving them a dose at this point, e.g. side effects, overdose?
- What is my patient's experience at the moment? Could I also ease their pain by spending a few minutes talking to them or suggesting another option such as meditation to help them manage the pain?'



Demonstrating critical thinking to employers

How do employers check for critical thinking skills?

If employers are interested in critical abilities, they will look at how you demonstrate these through:

- Your approach to the application process – does it reflect a critical analytical mind?
- Your awareness of how critical thinking skills are relevant to the world of work generally, and their business in particular.
- The examples you give of how you applied critical thinking in practice.
- Whether you come across as someone they would trust to think wisely about the kinds of problems and issues that will arise in the job.

Articulate strengths in relevant ways

When applying for jobs that require critical thinking:

- Think through, logically, what the job is likely to entail. What kind of day-to-day problems will you have to deal with? How would you deal with these, drawing on your critical abilities?
- Identify occasions when you have already used the kinds of critical thinking skills that will be needed in the job role – such as analysing data, writing reports, investigating issues, identifying solutions, reflecting critically on how you worked with others, etc.
- Draw parallels for yourself between ways you have applied critical thinking skills already, and the way these skills might be needed in this job. Make sure that these then come across in your application and answers at interview.
- Be as precise as you can in matching the skills you have to the work context, especially in terms of scale and complexity.

Critical thinking and empathy

For some roles, you need to apply critical thinking skills in an empathetic way. During the application process, the employer may be looking to see:

- Whether you have been able to recognise the needs of their business.

- Your understanding of their customers, clients, patients or stakeholders: how your experience or skills will be of value to them.
- Your consideration of other personnel: how your needs might impact on others.
- Difficult situations and how you would respond to the needs and feelings of others when a situation is challenging.

Criticality and forward thinking

When asking for critical thinking skills, some employers are looking for employees who:

- Are pro-active in scanning the horizon to see where opportunities and issues lie.
- Can present opportunities in a report that balances potential benefits and risks.
- Think ahead – and spot where potential problems might emerge.

Substantiate your claims

Provide evidence that demonstrates your critical abilities. A good application provides:

- at least one longer, and preferably two or three examples altogether, of when and where you have best demonstrated the attribute;
- and, if feasible, a sentence that sums up other instances to demonstrate the breadth of your abilities;
- all worded succinctly and precisely.

'In preparing an exhibition of my art work for the public, I used good critical judgement in selecting works that created the best overall effect. I wanted local people to attend so reflected that in where and how I promoted the exhibition. I provided commentary that made the work meaningful to the community. This was successful, resulting in good attendance and positive feedback.'

Critical self-evaluation of job applications: Checklist

Apply your critical thinking skills to your own job applications and performance. Use the checklists below:



- a) before submission to make sure your application is as strong as possible;
- b) during the process, to make sure you remain focused on the requirements of the employer;
- c) afterwards, whether successful or not, to help you to be even better next time.

A. Job application checklist		Done ✓
1.	I demonstrate my suitability at every stage of the application process	
a)	I am careful that skills I claim are demonstrated throughout the application process	
b)	I demonstrate good communication skills in ALL contact and writing	
c)	I have read my application carefully, rewording anything that is poorly phrased	
d)	I have checked that my online presence is suitably edited and helpful	
e)	I have updated my online profile, if relevant (such as my Linked-In account)	
2.	I demonstrate that I am interested in what the employer needs	
a)	My application conveys a general awareness of the business and job requirements	
b)	I avoid talking about longer-term ambitions that are not in the employer's interests	
c)	I don't sound keen about being 'away from work' (on holiday, homeworking, etc.)	
d)	I have clearly taken care with my application at all stages	
e)	I avoid criticisms of the employer, its processes, information, website, etc.	
3.	I have used carefully all the information made available by the employer	
a)	I have read carefully ALL the information provided by the employer or agency	
b)	I have checked the information available on the internet about the employer	
c)	I have not requested information already provided or available online	
d)	I am clear about what this job involved before making an application	
4.	I have followed the application instructions exactly as asked	
a)	I have completed ALL sections of the application forms, leaving no blanks	
b)	I am submitting ALL the documents required	
c)	I have removed anything that is not required	
d)	I am submitting my application in the method required	
e)	I will have met the required deadline for submitting my application	
5.	I avoid broad statements and 'empty' answers	
a)	I avoid simply repeating or paraphrasing the requirements in the specification	
b)	I avoid making broad generalisations about life, the world, the economy, etc.	
c)	In referring to team achievements, I make clear what my personal contribution was	

A. Job application checklist		Done ✓
d)	For ALL requirements, I give examples to demonstrate relevant experience/abilities	
e)	My examples of experience clarify the scale of tasks and level of seniority involved	
6.	I demonstrate throughout that I pay close attention to detail	
a)	I have provided all information requested (dates, salaries, qualifications, etc.)	
b)	My work history dates follow on exactly from each other, with any gaps explained	
c)	I have checked that essential information is accurate – such as the company name	
d)	I have checked my application carefully for errors, typos, spelling, etc.	
7.	I have focused on the person specification (PS)	
a)	I have addressed every aspect of the PS	
b)	I have taken every item in the PS seriously and in full so I don't lose points	
c)	I have treated each item in the PS separately, so it stands out from other items	
8.	My application is tailored to this particular job and employer	
a)	I indicate how my skills and experience are relevant to this particular job	
b)	I have adapted my CV and material to match this job	
c)	I have removed any information that refers to different applications	
9.	I avoid 'short-cuts' that create a poor impression	
a)	I have taken care not to contact the employer unnecessarily	
b)	I provided all information in the sections where it was requested	
c)	I have taken care not to ask the employer to look at other sections or documents	
B. Preparing for each stage of the process		Done ✓
10.	I prepare well for assessment centres' exercises and interviews	
a)	I have checked the kind of exercises that will be provided	
b)	I practise similar exercises several times so I am well prepared	
c)	I reread all employer and job information before meeting employers or agents	
d)	I prepare a list of possible questions and ideal answers, and practise these aloud	
C. Learning from the experience		True ✓
1.	I take up all offers of feedback on my performance in job applications	
2.	I take the feedback seriously, as helpful guidance for the next application	
3.	After interviews, I jot down the questions I was asked, to help prepare next time	
4.	I reflect for myself on where I could do better next time	

Summary

Critical thinking skills tend to be associated with academic life and study, as higher education develops such skills in a systematic way. However, they can be developed and used in any context. That includes within the context of employment, as skills relevant to the workplace, and as skills that help you achieve a career or a job that suits you.

It is more likely that a candidate will be successful in gaining the job if there is a genuinely good match between them and the job on offer. If a candidate hasn't really thought about themselves, their own values and interests, and the kind of work that would really fit the kind of person they are, then it is likely that this will become evident during the application process. Even if it didn't, it wouldn't be helpful to enter a career path or take on work that you can't sustain: this would affect your work record. If you appear to be unable to stick out a job for a length of time, future employers will be reluctant to employ you.

This means it is important to spend time applying your critical thinking abilities in a reflective way, making an honest appraisal of what will, or won't, work for you. It means researching the labour market and considering what kind of career path would work for you. It is unlikely that your path will work out exactly as you expected, but such planning can help to focus your time more effectively when looking for work. It can also help you to avoid costly mistakes through taking the wrong qualifications or disrupting your home circumstances for a job that won't suit you, or spoiling your continuous work history.

If you only had time to focus on one aspect of the application, that should be the Person Specification. If one is not provided, then use the job description. In general, look carefully at what kind of person the employer says they are looking for. Take every aspect of the person specification seriously, as each may accrue separate points. Avoid merging two items into one response, as you may lose points. Similarly, write the information for each point in the right place – don't refer the employer back to earlier answers, a CV, or other documents. It is likely that they won't look at anything that isn't where they expect it.

Apply your critical abilities to each stage of the application process to evaluate how well you are addressing the requirements of the employer and to appraise how you would come across. Research employers and check that your answers are relevant to them. Consider what your contact with the company, in its totality, will say about you. Will it demonstrate that you are the kind of employee who puts the business first, who can be depended upon to be available, flexible, and who takes care to get things right without being directed to do so? These are practical things that are useful to almost all employers.

Use your critical self-appraisal constructively to fine-tune your application, to prepare for assessment centres and interviews, and to manage the way you present yourself, whether in person, on paper, or online. After each stage, reflect on how you could do things better next time. Keep notes to help you with your next application. Whether you were successful in gaining the job or not, there is always something that you can learn from the experience.

Further reading

Bolles, R.N. (2016) *What colour is your parachute?* (New York, Ten Speed Press).

Cottrell, S. (2015) *Skills for Success: Personal Development and Employability*, 3rd edn (London: Palgrave).