



How to Complete an Application Form

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Introduction

A whole book on application forms? Why?

Is there really that much to say about them? Are they not just one of those chores you have to do in order to get where you want to in your career?

I have heard University students expressing resentment at application forms. They are time consuming. The times when they need to be completed frequently coincide with deadlines to complete course work assignments and dissertations. And, very understandably, it's the applications that all too often have to slip.

One cynic said that the sole purpose of application forms was to dissuade people from applying, thus giving the recruitment department an easy life. Wrong of course but there is a germ of truth there. Modern application systems are designed to give would-be applicants a real sense of whether they would be suited to the job by their qualifications or skills. In this way, inappropriate applications are discouraged. But recruitment staff actually love seeing a strong field of well-qualified applicants.

There is one prime purpose for this extensive study of application forms: it is to improve the quality of the applications that you make.

Careers advisers know that many application forms are filled in very badly. They know this because they talk to employers about the forms that are sent in by applicants. It is clear from employer comments that there is a great deal of wasted or misdirected effort going in to the completion of forms.

Why do people complete forms so poorly?

Here are some possible explanations which may ring some bells with you.

- You just do not get it. You do not understand what the questions on the form are getting at.
- You rush it. You are under other more immediate pressures. This is particularly true of final year undergraduates who see a lot of application deadlines approaching just as their coursework is getting heavy.
- You just hate doing it. You find it stressful. So you do the thing and despatch it without a second look — just to get rid of it.
- You have lost the knack. It's years since you last filled in a form. You have been in a job for a period and you are out of the habit of presenting yourself in this way.

We hope that this book will help you to understand and analyse application procedures and then to create strong persuasive applications that do you justice.

It is not the purpose of the book to help people fill in forms to get jobs for which they are not qualified or suitable. Even if we could accomplish such a thing it would simply not be right, would it?

Section One

Who needs forms?

Key points

Application forms:

- *are used in public and private sectors*
- *enable consistent and transparent selection standards*
- *focus on information that is relevant to the employer*

Before we look at your problems in filling in forms, let us think about the problem of the selectors, the people reading the forms.

It should help you gain an insight into how they think and act.

We will look at two contrasting kinds of organisations and see the similarities in the way that they design and use application forms.

A The blue-chip graduate recruiter

Employer A is an international professional business. It recruits several hundred trainees each year. It has a number of strong competitors in all of its markets and all of its areas of professional expertise. To survive and thrive it needs to ensure that its intake of staff has the intellectual skills and personal qualities to deliver its core business as well as the creativity to respond to a very turbulent and unpredictable economic environment. The people it takes on this year will not be fully operational until they are trained and professionally qualified two or three years hence.

They need to ensure that they are getting a share of the right people on the job market. They fear

that if they do not get them, then their competitors will. Equally, they need to ensure that they do not get the wrong people — those without the ability, application or motivation to reach the standards they require. Poor selection decisions will cost them money and could lose them business.

B The charity

Organisation B is a charity. It allocates one scholarship for a Masters student each year. The scholarship covers fees and a living allowance. The money was donated by a benefactor who had been concerned that talented researchers in social science might be impeded from developing their career because they could not afford to continue their studies. The benefactor especially wanted to support an understanding of issues around racial inequality.

The organisation has a tiny but precious resource at its disposal. It needs to ensure that access to this resource is opened up as widely as possible in the community. It needs to act equitably but it needs to take into account its own and the benefactor's commitment to those who are poor and those from an ethnic minority. It also wants the resource to be used effectively by someone who could really do something to help these groups.

Worlds apart in many ways, Employer A and Organisation B have the same problem. They have at their disposal opportunities that are likely to be highly prized by a lot of people. They are going to offer them publicly and they are going to evaluate and judge those who come forward to bid for them.

Clear and objective selection criteria

A variety of factors — some legal, some commercial, some professional — have been pushing organisations like those just described to be absolutely clear about the description of the opportunities they offer and the criteria that will help them make their selection.

Some of these criteria are likely to be about educational achievement. Some will be about experience. Factual, checkable things.

Others are more difficult to pin down: attitude, motivation, commitment, creativity, team skills, problem-solving ability, etc.

These are the kinds of things that often make the difference between an outstanding applicant and a so-so applicant, but how can the recruiter or selector find these things out?

Particularly, how can they find these things out in a way that is both fair and effective if the number of applicants is so large that they have no chance of meeting them all and studying them in depth? Organisation B is going to get scores of applicants. Employer A is going to get thousands.

Also, they have to do this to a strict deadline and with finite resources.

The role of the form becomes clear. A and B are going to select those people most likely to do the task effectively, so the form needs to be designed to give an indication of who those candidates are likely to be. Let us take two criteria: educational achievement and motivation

Education

Employer A might say:
“Let us look very closely at their academic progression. Our professional training is rigorous and experience tells us that those with a continuous record of high academic achievement have a much higher chance of completing it. So let us put under detailed

scrutiny the academic record. Let us look at grades and progression throughout their career.”

Organisation B might say:

“We too are interested in academic progression. However, the groups we work with do not typically have an easy time in education. What we are looking for is determination to pursue education against the odds: a pattern of working throughout the period of education, a determination to pick up education through such things as access programmes or night school. We are also specific about the degree background — it needs to demonstrate skills in social science research. So something of the course content would be important for us to know.”

Motivation

Employer A might say

“We provide business services to business clients. So it is not unreasonable to seek someone who is interested in business problems. So why don't we set them a short business case study to see if they come up with some sensible ideas. Their success in tackling this might give an insight into their motivation to work in a business context.”

Organisation B might say

“A commitment to equal opportunity is at the core of this work and of this bursary. Let us ask a question about how they have demonstrated such a commitment in their career to date. We might well take the view that actual ‘behaviour’ or ‘activity’ in promoting equality scores higher than a statement of agreement in principle to equal opportunity.”

Already it is clear to see how the form might work for both A and B. By asking targeted questions about education and motivation they are able to break the applicants into four groups:

1. Those with the wrong educational achievement and poor motivation
2. Those with the wrong educational achievement and high motivation
3. Those with the right educational achievement and poor motivation
4. Those with the right educational achievement and high motivation

Group 4 are the ones the recruiters are going to be most interested in.

This is only helpful up to a point. Is it not the case that everybody who applies is going to have the right education and motivation? Why else apply? If this kind of crude sifting still leaves too many people in group 4 then the selector can introduce a scoring mechanism to further refine the selection.

Scoring the answers

A-level scores, degree classification, degree relevance, part-time study — all can be given a score. The same thing can be done with the business case answers or the equal opportunity involvement. Once you start giving scores or marks, you can begin to rank the applicants. Those with the right educational qualifications can vary. You could say that a 2:1 will score better than a 2:2. For Organisation B, a Social Research BSc degree would score better than a Humanities BA degree. So your group 4 can be subdivided and you can invite those who are the top scorers to the next stage of the selection process — an interview or a selection day.

So there you have it. The form enables the organisation to do a "rough edit" of the applicants. It allows them to evaluate applicants according to criteria that are transparent and that are relevant to the position. It allows them to differentiate between the relative strengths of people who apply.

Fair recruitment and equal opportunities

Transparency and relevance are crucial because organisations need to demonstrate that their selection methods do not unlawfully discriminate between applicants. If a selection criterion discriminates against an applicant because of their gender, ethnic origin or a disability, that is unlawful. Any applicant who feels that certain criteria do unlawfully discriminate should raise the matter with the employer and, if not satisfied, notify the relevant authority to seek redress or to resolve the issue.

Many organisations will ask applicants to indicate whether they are part of any social groups that are widely acknowledged to suffer from unfair discrimination. This is a process called Equal Opportunities Monitoring. Identifying your gender and ethnic origin or disclosing whether you have a disability can make some people uncomfortable. The truth is that the collection of this data is essential as organisations seek to establish the extent to which they are, or are not, recruiting in a way that is fair to all parts of the community. Typically this information is removed before the form is considered and assessed.

Section Two

What employers want

Key points

- Use your previous experience to demonstrate relevant skills
- Research the organisation's culture and priorities
- Describe your actions and their outcomes

The University of London Careers Service conducted some research among employers about application forms and the results corroborate what we have said thus far.

"Application forms give us much more information than a CV and cover letter. In effect it's an on-line assessment tool."

(Meera Billmorja, UBS Warburg)

Application forms enable employers to compare like with like, providing a structure for all candidates' answers. CVs, on the other hand, are often poorly put together and vary so much in content that they are hard, and time-consuming, for employers to compare. In addition to this some students are much better at blowing their own trumpets than others, and a cleverly put together CV can hide a multitude of sins that would be exposed on an application form. Some employers, such as John Lewis, use a standard scoring system for application forms and can therefore compare forms against a pass mark, rather than directly against each other. They believe that this makes for a fairer system.

By structuring their application forms carefully, companies ensure that *"we get the information from candidates which we need to assess their suitability"* (Maia Lawson, Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer)

In particular, application forms are often competency based, asking candidates to give examples of situations when they have demonstrated certain attributes, thus ensuring

that the recruiter gains the type and level of information that they require.

The use of application forms helps employers to deter the casual applicant who isn't really that interested in the job. Such a person may be prepared to send off a CV which they already have to hand, but not to take the time over an application form. Apparently though, this doesn't deter the most determined serial applicant; some simply send in their CV and write on the application form "see CV"! However complicated the application form may seem and however time-consuming to complete, if you're serious about the job, you must fill it in!

"We are recruiting for a demanding profession, and if candidates won't take the time to fill out an application form, it suggests that they are not sufficiently motivated to work in the firm."

(Maia Lawson, Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer)

How to impress — employers' top tips

The top ten skills required by employers have been identified by recent research

- Team working
- Creativity
- Communication
- Leadership
- Problem-solving
- IT skills
- Self-organisation
- Relevant work experience
- Negotiation Skills
- Specific/technical job related skills

So employers are looking for candidates whose application forms show evidence of these kinds of skills.

Concrete examples

“Too many people generalise in their answers — specific examples are needed. Candidates often assume that recruiters will take it for granted that previous experience has demanded certain skills, but it’s down to the candidate to illustrate how what they have done demonstrates particular competencies.”

(Joan Pearmain, DfES,
Fast-Track Teaching Scheme)

“Don’t just list your previous employers — explain what you did and what you learned.”

(Meera Bilmoria, UBS Warburg)

Focus on ‘doing’

“When giving an example, you should concentrate mainly on what you did, and give the background as succinctly as possible.”

(Charlotte Brooks, John Lewis)

In other words don’t get bogged down in long descriptions of the situation. What employers want to know is what action you as an individual took. The recruiter wants to see the word ‘I’ in application forms rather than ‘we’.

Focus on ‘I’

“You should talk specifically about what ‘I did’ and ‘how I did it’”.

(Joan Pearmain, DfES,
Fast-Track Teaching Scheme)

Business awareness

Commercial awareness is another key skill that recruiters are looking for.

“We are not expecting candidates to have an in-depth knowledge of the stock markets but they should have a knowledge of current affairs and the general economic climate as well as an idea of how they relate to the business world.”

(Christina Kerr, PricewaterhouseCoopers)

Customer awareness

Mike Wilson of BT encourages graduates to be more innovative when analysing their experiences. BT is a customer-oriented organisation and therefore customer service is a key competency for them. *“You may have never worked in a shop or a bar but what about presenting essays and projects to tutors — they are your customers too.”*

Finding the examples

“Think carefully before formulating your answers to the open-ended questions. Have you given evidence to show your full capabilities? Have you thought about the best possible examples of your achievements? Think about work, university, extracurricular activities, hobbies and interests.”

(Meera Bilmoria, UBS Warburg)

Make sure that you consider the full range of activities you’ve taken part in and draw your examples from a range of places:

“We’re looking for graduates who, apart from strong academics, also have a life beyond studying!”

(Christina Kerr, PricewaterhouseCoopers)

Jenni Catchpole from Hammond Suddard Edge suggests applicants show their form to a friend or tutor who may be able to suggest an appropriate example that the candidate themselves hadn’t thought of, for instance *“a club activity which would demonstrate a certain skill gained”*.

Varying the examples

Charlotte Brooks from John Lewis advises that candidates don’t give the same example to illustrate more than one answer as this may suggest that your experiences are limited. Remember, as Mike Wilson of BT points out, *“There is no such thing as a bad experience.”*

Do you really want to work for us?

Employers are also looking for targeted, well-researched applications from people who genuinely want to work for their company in particular and who could realistically do the job — they are wary of serial applicants!

Don't ever apply in haste. Make sure you research the company, your own skills and what you want to do. Don't be swayed into a career that sounds glamorous without finding out if it's really for you.

(Christina Kerr, PricewaterhouseCoopers)

"Research the firm you're applying to. This will ensure that firstly, you are applying to the correct area/division and secondly, that you are using the correct terminology for that specific firm."

(Karen Champion, Morgan Stanley)

Fitting the company culture

Make sure that you devote time to finding out about the company and whether you would fit in there. It's not in either the company's or the candidate's interest to hire someone unsuitable for the job. Most employer websites contain sections on "Who we are" and about "Our people". Some even include self-assessment questionnaires to help candidates work out whether they are suitable.

Parroting the employers' phrases

Be careful though that you don't just recite back phrases from the company brochures and websites in your application form — recruiters will recognise their own prose straight away, and

your words won't have the ring of truth about them. It's important that you are yourself in your application form, and any exaggeration of the truth is likely to come out at interview when recruiters will often ask more in-depth questions about what you have written.

Plain English

Maia Lawson from Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer warns that applicants to the legal profession sometimes feel it appropriate to use long complicated phrases in a misguided attempt to sound legal. Unfortunately, this comes across as false. Clear, well-written prose is much preferred. This advice is equally true of all business areas.

Timing

From a practical viewpoint it's important that you submit your application as early as is compatible with submitting a well-researched, well-written form. Many recruiters start to review applications from the moment they are received and won't necessarily wait until the final deadline. Nikki Williams, from Allen and Overy warns that *"If you wait for too long all the places may have been filled."*

Given the number of applications which companies receive they are all basically looking for people who stand out. They want applicants with a personality and character which comes through in the application form. Karen Champion from Morgan Stanley echoes this: *"This is your first opportunity to sell yourself — try and make your application stand out from the crowd."*

Section Three

The formats of forms

Key points

- *Paper forms are gradually losing ground to web versions*
- *Whatever the format, pay close attention to each section of the form*
- *An application form is a “legal” document with rules about disclosure*
- *The skills of application form writing can be applied to other areas*

Paper versions

An application form might be a couple of typed sheets asking you to record in set spaces or boxes factual information about yourself. It might take the form of a glossy brochure. Such forms, common in graduate recruitment, characteristically contain a series of questions about your skills. It is these questions that cause most applicants the most trouble, and which we will deal with at some length later.

Web versions

There is one issue that presents itself increasingly often: the electronic format or internet application form. More and more organisations are using the internet as a fast, efficient and effective way of dealing with applications.

The graduate application form (on-line)

More and more recruiters are either supplementing or replacing their printed literature and application forms with electronic versions on their websites. This not only saves them money (printed material is expensive to produce and time-consuming to process!), it also

enables them to build in extra elements to the on-line application.

You might find that, as well as the usual questions, there is a test section of “competency” or “aptitude” questions. These may be scored automatically or by a person and are designed to screen out candidates without the essential skills. If you have thoroughly prepared your application you will know what skills you have and what the recruiter requires, which should help to deal with them.

Do you need to change the way you fill in a form just because it is on-line? In many ways, the answer is No — apart from obvious practical considerations such as using a computer not a pen! The main points to remember are:

- Some questions may be in the form of tick boxes, drop down lists of possible categories, multiple choice tests, etc., to facilitate automatic processing and scoring.
- Wherever possible it is useful to print off a copy of the form so that you can work out answers to the traditional-style questions at leisure — and show your draft answers to a careers adviser!
- Draft your answers in a word processing package for convenient editing, then cut and paste into the on-line form when you’re ready. It is advisable to save your text as ‘plain text’ first and remember that you may lose any formatting you have used.
- Don’t forget to print off the finished form for reference.

Recruiters who use on-line forms suggest the following *dos* and *don’ts* for applicants:

- Do answer all the questions, there are no “unnecessary” ones: it may be sufficient to put “not applicable” but don’t leave a blank.

- Don't submit the form more than once or in a partially completed state.
- Don't use too many "power-words" or fashionable phrases in the text areas of a form; it is much better to make your comments personal and flowing than full of trendy terms.
- Do use the space and your wording to demonstrate your communication skills in the way you address the questions.
- Don't waffle on just because a text box scrolls on and on. The space available (unlike on a paper form) is NOT indicative of the amount you should write. Concise answers are better.
- Do draft answers on a word processor where you can spell check and grammar check them. Cut and paste finished product into the on-line form, but remember the point made earlier about potential loss of formatting.
- Don't copy and paste answers with the wrong company names or other inappropriate information! This is all too easily done.
- Consider using some formatting in text boxes. Bullet points may not be possible but you can use extra line spaces, for example. Make it easy to read.
- Do explain what you did in, say, your work experience — not just a list of positions but the skills learned, your achievements, etc., just like you would in a paper form.
- Remember an on-line form is not a reason to spend less time on your application. Give it the time it deserves.

The future is on-line

It seems very clear that on-line applications will soon become the norm for graduate and professional jobs. Here are some reasons why employers are keen on them.

Since on-line application forms are typed, they are always legible. Employers can also limit the length of candidates' answers by imposing restrictions on the space available, whereas in hand-written application forms, candidates will sometimes write incredibly small or add many additional extension sheets — this is just too

much for an employer to look through! Some employers, like UBS Warburg, insist that all candidates apply on line; they find that this saves "a huge amount of time and resources from an employer perspective, which means we are able to respond to the candidate in a more timely way. In addition, it also offers the candidate a number of facilities which they would not get from a paper based application form, for example updating contact information at any time and being able to view the status of the application" (Meera Bilmoria, UBS Warburg). On-line applications speed up the whole process for the recruiter, and help to free up companies to move away from the old recruitment timetables to ongoing recruitment.

The use of on-line application forms also hints at the skills and work methods that graduates are expected to use. BT now only accepts on-line applications. Mike Wilson, Manager — Graduate Attraction, points out that their core business is communications and IT, so they expect their employees to be computer literate.

The graduate application form: section by section

Most readers of this book will be concerned about the graduate application form. You pick one up from your Careers Office or you ring the company to have one sent to you.

It arrives with a brochure and other explanatory information.

Read it. All of it. Absorb it.

Photocopy the form.

Practise filling in the form on the photocopy. Even write out the tedious bits about the name of school, exam subjects, exam level, grade. Why? Because it is really easy to make mistakes on the form. Crossings out look messy and can create a very poor impression of you. Get it right for when you transfer the correct information to the form itself. It is tedious, but pays dividends.

Forms vary but typically they would include the following:

- Personal details
- Education
- Work experience
- Competency questions / scenarios / case studies (dealt with in Sections Four and Five)
- Other information including computer literacy, language skills

What follows is some very detailed advice on elements of the form.

Personal details

No-one could get these wrong could they? Well they could. People have a tendency to switch their brain off on these 'easy bits'.

Name

If you prefer to use your second or third forename you can show this by underlining your preferred name.

Title

Many applicants forget or refuse to indicate whether they are Mr, Ms, Miss, Mrs or Dr. There is no sexist intent in asking for titles, but selectors simply wish to address their response in the way that they perceive as polite.

Address

If you are giving different addresses for term time and vacation, do give the dates when you will be at each. You do not want to miss an interview because your invitation is lying unopened at the wrong address.

Phone number

If you are not using your mobile number make sure that you have a sound and reliable message taking system whether it is co-residents, an answer-phone or telephone company answering service.

E-mail

Problems can occur if you give an e-mail address that you rarely check. This sometimes happens

with college e-mail addresses. Put an e-mail address that you use regularly.

Date of birth

Check that you have given the correct year. A common error is to write in the current year.

Nationality

Write what it says on your passport. It is important to state this — not least if you are an international applicant for whom work permit restrictions may apply.

Education

Secondary education

Address

It is not normally necessary to put the address of your school.

Examinations

It is important that you give all the information requested in the form. Information about failures or re-sits is sometimes specifically requested and so must be given. Remember that exam records are checkable and if omissions or inaccuracies are identified, a job offer could be withdrawn. Applicants often fear that giving information about a bad examination result might harm their chances of acceptance. This is a particular concern for those whose poor performance might have stemmed from some extraneous factor such as an illness or other crisis in the family. This is no excuse for falsifying information. However, many forms will provide a section for 'other information', and this would be an ideal place to refer to the factors which affected your performance adversely.

Vocational, international or other qualifications

The design of most forms facilitates the listing of exams in the common English and Scottish academic subject formats. There is no simple solution for the recording of GNVQ, Leaving Certificate, Baccalaureate, Abitur or other single, multi-subject qualifications. If guidance is not available in the notes that accompany the form, then it is perfectly acceptable to contact the company for guidance.

Lost certificates

Mature applicants are sometimes in the position of having no accurate memory or record of secondary qualifications. This can occur too when applicants have migrated and have no contact with their previous country of residence. Seek advice from the employer.

Higher education

University

Give the full name of your University and not its abbreviated form. Again, it is not necessary to include the address, unless requested.

Degree

Give the full name of your degree or diploma course. For European students with different titles to their Higher Education, e.g. Vordiplom, Laurea, DEUG, put the original titles in. Do not give your opinion of their equivalent UK title. Similarly do not try to put the score into UK equivalents of 2:1, 2:2, etc., unless specifically requested to do so.

Predicted grades

If asked for an expected result (i.e. not yet obtained) do not put a question mark but a realistic assessment that will be supported in an academic reference.

List of subjects studied

Employers sometimes ask for a list of subjects studied and for end of year results. However, many do not give enough space to list all subjects. So you will need to be selective. If in doubt it is usually wise to give more space to final year courses. Your selection could also take into account the relevance of courses from an employer's point of view — highlight the important ones.

Results

It is usually sufficient to give an overall result for a year, such as 2:1 or 2:2. Given that there is no uniformity between percentages and final classification in different academic institutions, it is usually not helpful to give percentages.

Dissertation

If asked to give details of a special project or dissertation tailor the amount of information you give. If there is a strong link between the project

and the job applied for, detailed description could be vital. If not it may be more sensible to focus on the skills you developed in completing the project.

Postgraduate qualifications

The same basic rules apply as for degree and diploma courses. Once again the degree of detail you offer depends on its relevance to the job applied for.

Scholarships, awards and prizes

If listing an award indicate what the award was for. The "John Smith" prize, for instance, could be for the top chemistry student or best army cadet.

Work experience

Weighting

It is not necessary to give equal weight and space to each of your jobs. Expand on the relevant, contract on the less relevant. But if relevant experience is lacking note the following.

"Non-relevant" experience

Relevant work experience is easy to market, but do not undervalue other experience. Even basic jobs can develop essential skills that are common to all employment sectors.

Voluntary work

This can be just as useful and relevant too. The key question is what skills did the work develop in you and what did you achieve. The fact you were not paid does not invalidate it.

Job titles

These can be uninformative. Do not assume that readers will understand what "Researcher" or "Administrative Assistant" entails. You will need to spell it out in terms of skills used. Where possible, highlight the relevant or 'higher-level' skills such as those involving management, organisation or evaluation.

Lots of jobs

It is not necessary to list every temporary contract and casual job you have ever done. Where appropriate group them together using phrases like "A range of temporary assignments in catering and retail".

Skills

In application forms the skills section is usually linked to the key selection criteria (see Section Four). However occasionally you are asked to state additional skills such as language or computer skills. Try to be as specific as you are able to be. If you are fluent in a language, does your fluency extend to speech, reading and writing? Which computer packages are you familiar with? Is it familiarity or proficiency?

Activities and interests

You should see this as another opportunity for an employer to see how you manage your own life. Evidence of strong commitments and enthusiasms tends to be positive in the eyes of employers, whereas evidence of sporadic unfocused activity tends to be negative.

It is certainly the case that if your spare time activities relate to your chosen occupation then this is valuable corroboration of your stated intention. Someone interested in investment banking may invest real or notional money in the stock market and keep a close check on the progress of their investments. This would be useful corroborative evidence. But you can overdo it.

Sometimes an interest will have absolutely nothing to do with your serious career intentions. The whole point may be that it is a complete contrast and allows you to "switch off". This is also valuable evidence for an employer. Stress management in the form of music, dance, theatre, sport is worth mentioning. However you should take care to show that your engagement with it is serious and sustained.

So if cooking is your interest then just to say cooking is not sufficient. Particularly if you make a speciality of Mediterranean, fish or Oriental cuisine, are a devotee of Elizabeth David and organise your student house into buying food and preparing a dinner party once a month! Do you get the idea? You need to say how you develop your interest.

Health

Declarations about health should be honest. Some people feel that disclosure of some conditions may prejudice their chances of being seriously considered for a job. However, if you are asked questions about conditions you have suffered from or treatment you are undergoing, then you need to be up-front. Remember that you sign the application form as a true account of yourself and your experience. The things you say about yourself are likely to be probed at a later point in the selection process and claims made in applications are increasingly subject to checks. But there are grey areas. For instance, is depression a medical condition? If you are undergoing counselling for any reason, must that be declared? Filling in an application form for a job or course does not negate your entitlement to privacy. If you are unsure about what to disclose then seek advice from a professional like a Careers Adviser or Doctor.

Criminal convictions

The Rehabilitation of Offenders Act of 1974 is in place to ensure that ex-offenders who have served prison or community sentences and who have not re-offended for a period of time since their conviction, do not suffer discrimination in applications. Applicants are not legally required to disclose convictions that have become "spent". Again it is sensible to seek advice from an impartial professional since there are a number of posts and professions which are exempted from the Act. These include jobs involving children and other vulnerable people. Many jobs in the administration of justice, banking and financial services like chartered accountancy are also exempted.

Other application forms

Graduate application forms are thought to be the most sophisticated and searching forms that most people will come across. However, it would be wrong to assume that such forms are encountered only in the interlude between a degree and an entry level job.

The fact is that applications and the skills of writing them are a life-long requirement. Many casual jobs will require a basic application form. Access to grants, bursaries, professional training courses, PhDs, MBAs all will require you to present your education, skills and experience for scrutiny. The next three sections will attempt to help you develop the skills of "presenting your case". We will not be taking a simple "this is how you do it" or "follow this formula" approach. Instead we will try to give a sense of how you might develop your analytical and verbal skills to make persuasive applications.

Application writing as a key skill

The skilled writer of application forms is able to do two things:

1. Analyse and understand the links between their own experience and the requirements of the opportunities they seek.
2. Present an account of themselves in a way that is professional and credible both in terms of linguistic style and accuracy.

These are essential skills for getting and changing jobs, but they are also skills widely required in commercial and professional life. Those who pitch for business of any kind or who write bids for funding from public authorities, such as the Lottery Commission or the European Union, need application writing skills.

Section Four

Those difficult questions

Key points

- *Achievements in your personal life can be strong evidence of your potential*
- *Find out what competencies really matter to the employer*
- *Employers value clarity and authenticity*

You're at a party and this rather attractive person asks you, "What's the most amazing thing you have ever done?" You decide **not** to tell them about the time you lashed your best friend to a lamppost on their 21st birthday and, instead, tell them about the time you climbed the highest peak in Africa. This gets a good conversation going and so you ask them, "Okay, what's the toughest spot you have ever been in?" They tell you about the time when they were working in a restaurant and had to call the police to deal with a violent customer. *You both fall in love, end of story.*

These kinds of questions, interesting and fun to answer in a social context, can seem worse than a tooth extraction when you are filling in an application form.

Questions like this, for example,

"Give an example of when you generated a better way of doing something that led to improved results,"

are asked by employers because they need to know more about you than your academic grades and subjects. They need to know whether your combination of skills and motivations match what they need in their new recruits. These "competencies" are considered alongside academic results when considering applications. If an employer has adopted a "Competency-Based" approach to recruitment it can often mean that they have analysed not just the key

skills needed from graduates on entry but also what they will need in more senior roles as well.

Competencies are taken very seriously by employers. As well as graduate recruitment, many organisations use them to work out what staff training is needed, who might be suited to particular projects and even to help measure whether staff have met performance criteria.

The good news is that, because competencies are so important to employers, they are usually up front about what kind they are looking for. They will usually provide a comprehensive list of them and definitions of what they mean by, for example, "thinking skills" or "task management". Check the company application packs or web sites. Where they don't provide this information explicitly try and find out the kind of skills you think you will need in the role you are applying for.

What skills do you have?

Every area of your life can provide evidence of your skills and potential. Your academic life, of course, but don't forget your leisure activities, work experience, travel, voluntary activities and even your role in your family. Under these various categories brainstorm what you have done and then consider what skills you used and learned. Be explicit about you actually did. Don't make the mistake of thinking that employers are looking for an endless catalogue of brilliant achievements. Thoughtful analysis and reflection on a range of things including things that didn't go so well is what's needed. For example, being part of a winning sports team is great but being captain of a team that is getting outplayed every week could also say a lot about your determination and leadership.

What is the employer looking for?

Have they provided a list of the competencies they seek? If not, try and work out what successful applicants might need when you research into the job and the employer (you were going to research the job and the employer, weren't you?). You can use company brochures, web sites, annual reports, trade press and even talk to current employees.

By now you should have an idea of both what the employer is looking for and what you have to offer. If there isn't a reasonable match then you might consider how you could go about getting the skills you need — or look at different jobs. What is a "reasonable match"? The definition of 'reasonable' in this context is not easy. For some positions, the possession of 'most' of the skills asked for will be sufficient. For the most sought after jobs a full match is likely to be required.

On the other hand if you believe you can make a strong case for yourself then it's time to start filling in the form.

Tips

Structure

Tightly worded competency-based questions invite you to be very specific in your answers. Employers will want to see you addressing every aspect of the question with precision. Providing concrete and specific evidence about YOU. A reasonable structure might break down as follows — introduction (15%), action (70%) and conclusion (15%).

Language

Remember — keep it simple. Avoid complex sentences with numerous sub-clauses. Use

simple rather than difficult words; you aren't trying to impress with your prose style, you're just providing evidence of skills.

Content

Don't lie. If you get to an interview you will be asked about your application by professional interviewers who are used to establishing facts. It is not unknown for applicants to own up to lies simply by being asked direct questions about what they have written.

Be authentic. If you are asked about your proudest achievement write what is true for you, not what you *think* the employer would like to hear. The fact is what they would like to hear is the truth.

Leadership

People who have no formal experience of leadership — have never been a sports captain or a society chairperson — often struggle with this one. Try this method to stimulate ideas. Describe the concept in simple English; Leadership = getting people to work together, getting people to do what you want, getting people involved, getting people to trust you. You may have classed a particular incident as "helping someone to do their job better", but it actually could be used just as well under the heading "leadership".

Cramming your answer

Do not put too much into your answer. The average space on an application form is usually only enough to get across one key point about yourself in a convincing way. Trying to include too many points tends to dilute the strength of what you say.

Section Five

The application forms clinic

Here we take three application form questions and put some sample answers under the spotlight.

Question 1

Give an example of when you generated a better way of doing things that led to improved results

Answer (first attempt)

During last summer when I was working at the Beach Cafe, I noticed that the amount of custom that we received during the hours of 10am and noon was quite low. I suggested that we offer unlimited coffee and tea re-fills and reduced-price brunch meals to pensioners at that time, as they are people who would normally be seen passing the cafe in the morning. The manager of the shop did not like the idea but decided to give it a try.

The scheme was successful and our profits rose considerably. As a result I was given a salary increase for my efforts.

Employer comments

A reasonable answer and good to have used a work experience example.

"Suggested" — Sounds a bit tentative. Is she able to persuade people of her case?

There is more emphasis on the story than on the skills used. Does the applicant understand what skills are being used here?

"Profits rose considerably ... salary increase" — Good to mention the bottom line — but should give some facts.

Verdict

This applicant sounds a little bit ordinary. Put her on the reserve list in case we get desperate.

Answer (second attempt)

During last summer when I worked at the Beach Cafe, I noticed that the amount of custom that we received during the hours of 10am and noon was quite low. I decided to try to rectify this situation. Firstly, I researched the type of person in the area that would be able to come into the cafe at that time. In consultation with the chef I then devised a suitable menu for these people. I also suggested that we should offer unlimited coffee and tea refills to enhance trade further. The manager was unsure whether the scheme would work but after I had discussed it with him in detail and modified my plan after listening to his suggestions, I persuaded him to allow me to trial the scheme.

After 2 weeks our profits had risen by 35%. The manager congratulated me on the success and as a result gave me a 20% pay increase.

Employer comments

A better answer. Less story and more about skills.

"Decided" — a much stronger word than *suggested*. Liked the reference to the research carried out.

The applicant clearly understands the skills they were using and they match what we are looking for. A good range of skills being shown here: - *'researched', 'consulted', 'listened', 'persuaded'*.

"Persuaded him to allow me to trial the scheme" — Good. First the manager is unsure, then he is persuaded. Next thing you know his suggestions have been incorporated into the plan — it's suddenly become a joint project!

I like the stuff about money. The numbers make it specific. A healthy profits rise and a 20% pay increase. It sounds like they really valued the initiative.

Verdict

The applicant sounds good — let's interview.

Question 2

Tell us why you are interested in a career in the charity sector and in particular Oxfam?

Answer

There are many reasons why a career in the charity sector and Oxfam especially appeals to me.

Perhaps the first reason is the desire to be involved in something where I can make a difference to the world. Charities help marginalized and disadvantaged groups in society and it is in this area where I feel I could make an effective contribution. Oxfam has over 20,000 people working for it in over 60 programmes around the world. It is one of the most well established and admired development charities in the UK and would therefore be an excellent organisation with which to begin my career.

I have a diverse range of skills which would allow me to make an effective contribution to Oxfam. These skills include, excellent interpersonal skills, creativity, the ability to work in a team but also work independently, flexibility and enthusiasm. My degree in geography has allowed me to study many areas that are relevant to the charity sector. My dissertation looked at the causes of the conflict in Rwanda. My supervisor for this was Dr. Paul Ratcliffe, an expert in this field who has published many articles on this subject.

In summary I believe my combination of skills, commitment and relevant academic background make Oxfam and the charity sector an ideal place to start my career.

Employer comments

"first reason" — Is there a second reason? Where is it?

"something where I can make a difference to the world" — Try to define the difference you want to make. Better wording might be *"I support the aims of Oxfam because..."*

"Oxfam has over 20,000 people working for it in over 60 programmes around the world." — I know this, you don't have to tell me!

"These skills include..." — These are useful skills, but give me evidence that you have them. Make sure they are skills that I am looking for. The person specification will tell you the skills for this role.

"are relevant to the charity sector." — Oxfam is different from the rest of the charity sector, make sure you let me know that you are aware of this. Don't lump us all together!

"conflict in Rwanda" — Great!! Give me more detail though. How is it relevant? What did you learn from it?

When I look at application forms I read them pretty quickly; I need enough information to enable me to make a decision, but not so much that I fall asleep half way through! This one is about right, though it could do with a bit more supporting evidence. One of the things it lacks is precision. There is a tendency to make general sweeping statements and not follow them through.

The question is making a distinction between the charity sector in general and Oxfam in particular. I would expect a good answer to spot this and respond to it. This one rather skirts the issue.

Finally, the candidate doesn't mention any voluntary work they may have done. This would be useful evidence in dealing with the "I want to make a difference" statement. Tell me what difference you have made so far!

Verdict

Overall, this is a competent stab at the “why do you want to work here” question. The candidate has structured it clearly, there are no spelling or grammatical errors and it’s easy to read.

Question 3

Describe how you dealt with a difficult situation that you faced. What actions did you take and what was the outcome? (100 words)

Here are two attempts by a science student to deal with this question. The problem lay in how to describe a complex situation in a very few words and give evidence of the problem solving skills required.

First attempt

I worked at an agricultural research station during my summer vacation. The grain from the field trials was harvested in bags with bar coded labels which were collected onto large wooden pallets. We had to weigh the bags as quickly as possible so the scientists could analyse the results and to release the pallets for further harvesting. We students worked as two groups of three with one permanent member of staff. She was the only one allowed to drive a forklift truck to move the pallets around the barn. Each team of three had one person to unload the bags from the pallets, one person to read the barcode and move the bags onto a balance where its weight was captured electronically and one person to store the bags in a huge storage box. In our group of three I opted to read the barcodes because I'd done this when I worked in a supermarket, and, as the smallest, I knew I would find it difficult to reach for the bags in the pallet or stack them in the storage box. However I did not find this barcode reader easy to use. Sometimes it took me several attempts to read the bar code and the other two would heap bags up on the bench, making me feel really pressurised. I was so relieved when we stopped for coffee, even though we had weighed about 120 bags in 2 hours. I told the forklift driver I was having problems with the barcode reader, and she came and showed me how to smooth the barcode

before reading it. I practised a bit before going for coffee. After that we weighed 200 bags in the 2 hours before lunch.

(287 words)

Revised version

I worked in a group of students weighing bags of harvested grain at an agricultural research station. Our goal was to record the weights quickly. My contribution was to read the bar-coded label on a bag, and move it onto a balance where its weight was captured electronically. I couldn't do this as quickly as the others in the team could supply and remove the bags. I asked a member of staff to show me her barcode-reading technique and practised during our break. This increased output by nearly 70%.

(95 words)

How did she manage to condense her answer in the second version?

What she did was to concentrate on her own actions. She has cut out descriptions of other people’s jobs as they are not relevant. But she has managed to maintain a sense that she is connected to a broader team activity. She talks about ‘our goal’ and includes 2 other references to how she relates to the team.

The real success of the second attempt is its structure. Each sentence takes the account on both decisively and succinctly — notice those two very powerful short sentences.

The situation

I worked in a group of students weighing bags of harvested grain at an agricultural research station.

The objective

Our goal was to record the weights quickly.

My role

My contribution was to read the bar-coded label on a bag, and move it onto a balance where its weight was captured electronically.

My problem

I couldn't do this as quickly as the others in the team could supply and remove the bags.

My actions

I asked a member of staff to show me her barcode-reading technique and practised during our break.

The outcome

This increased output by nearly 70%.

You will see that the second version gives a much more focussed answer to the questions

posed. What conclusions could a reader formulate from this answer? She clearly takes her obligations as a worker seriously? She wants to be efficient and not to hold back her team mates. When a problem arises she seeks help from a team member. She practises to improve her method. Productivity improves in a measurable way.

Section Six

Personal statements

Key points

- *The Person Specification or Job Description describes the ideal candidate*
- *A personal statement should show how closely you resemble that ideal candidate*
- *Your motivation to do the job should be supported by evidence of things that you have done*

Some application forms ask you to state why you are suitable for the job or course in question. They usually provide a page for this purpose. This section of the form is often referred to as a 'Personal Statement'.

They may invite you to add further pages should you require them. Sometimes however, this is explicitly forbidden so you need to check the instruction carefully.

Before beginning to write your Personal Statement you would do well to make sure you are clear about what is being asked of you. You may get a very explicit brief such as:

Please use this space to give us any information supporting your application telling us why you have chosen to apply for this career and this organisation, and offering evidence from your educational, employment and extra-curricular activities which demonstrates that you have the skills for this role.

Although this is a complex and challenging question it has the virtue of taking you step by step through what is required to furnish a convincing answer.

You need to:

- Give reasons for your interest in this career
- Give reasons for your interest in this organisation

- Give evidence that you have the skills required for the role
- Source the evidence from the named sections of your experience.

The final two points can only be answered if you know what the skills for the role are. So you need to discover them. Some organisations will provide a helpful document which lists them. This is often called the Person Specification and is a listing of the skills experience, qualifications and knowledge which have been judged in the organisation to be pre-requisite for the successful carrying out of the job. In order to get an interview you will need to demonstrate that you have them. You then can be said to "meet the selection criteria". Take a look at the sample Person Specification on page 22.

Selection criteria

It is extremely helpful to have a list of the selection criteria against which applicants will be measured. How else can you analyse your chances of success? If the details of a job do not include such a list then you need to be resourceful in discovering what these criteria are. Sometimes a job advertisement will include a reference to desirable skills and attitudes. Sometimes you may be able to find a description of the job or profession in some other source. For instance, if your application form for a Marketing Executive does not come with selection criteria then you might search in the website of the Institute of Marketing or look through Trade Magazines for similar jobs which do state selection criteria.

The important thing is that you have a framework upon which to build your answer.

What do you do if you meet some but not all of the criteria? Anecdotal evidence suggests that

some people will still apply for the job anyway, others will take a stricter view and not apply. Which is best?

There is no hard and fast rule here. Many applicants waste their time by applying for jobs where they lack a key skill or piece of experience. It would be better if they thought about what they could do to address this deficiency before they next applied for a similar role.

On the other hand, if an applicant feels that they meet the key selection criteria so well that they compensate for one or two deficiencies then it may be worth a try. The telling factor here is likely to be the numbers of people applying for the job. If there are a lot of people applying for a job, then an employer is likely to apply the selection criteria strictly. If few apply then more flexibility is likely to be exercised. In practice, applicants eventually get a 'feel' for the market by experience.

Structuring your statement

Your statement should refer to each element within the selection criteria and explain how you fulfil it.

Some applicants might find this easier to do by listing the criteria one by one and writing notes on each. Others will prefer to write in essay style.

The point by point method could make it easier for the reader to judge at a glance that you satisfy all the criteria. An essay style answer may not demonstrate as clearly that you cover all the key points but might give a better sense of your commitment, drive and enthusiasm.

Find what method feels better for you, but in any case good answers need to refer to **things that you have done**. Aspirations to be a doctor, an investment banker, a barrister, a management consultant, a policy analyst, a marketing executive, a copy writer, an events organiser or whatever, will have started with some experience which exposed you either to that job, that profession or to the skills that are deployed

in it. Look at this personal statement for an application to a Teacher Training Course. This adopts an essay style approach, and bases the statement around three significant pieces of experience which the applicant has gone through. Each one has added to and strengthened her understanding of the profession she is seeking to enter.

Example

My interest in teaching began at a very early age, as I realised that I enjoyed being around children. However, I knew that this would not be enough, so I decided to pursue work experience. I wanted to gain a greater insight into what would be required and whether this was truly something I could succeed in as a career. I had my first classroom experience during my A levels when I volunteered to act as a classroom assistant for a GCSE Mathematics class once a week. I found it fulfilling to help students solve problems. Consequently I came to the realisation that job satisfaction is important to me and through teaching this would enable me to achieve my fullest potential.

To gain a fuller picture of teaching I have been working as a teaching assistant for Kumon Mathematics since I started my degree. I have found this to be challenging at times as I have been faced with children with a range of abilities and motivation levels. This has however helped me to discover different approaches to teaching in order to suit the needs of different children. As a teacher I believe I would enjoy and be motivated by new challenges each day no matter how hard they might be.

My decision to follow primary school teaching stemmed from working as a group leader at a summer camp. Organising activities and leading a group of children on a daily basis was extremely challenging at times and required leadership skills, communication and patience above all. Although it was quite difficult to set boundaries with the children with persistence it was satisfying to form relationships based on integrity, trust and respect.

I want to have a strong positive influence on children, shaping their lives through their education and passing on the knowledge and experiences I have been fortunate to acquire.

Rena Mehta (BSc Maths with Education,
Kings College, University of London)

Sample person specification

London Central Planning Economic Development Officer

Criteria or requirements	Method of assessment	Short-listing criteria
Qualifications and experience		
1. Educated to degree level in a relevant subject such as economics, town planning, geography OR a minimum of 2 years work experience in economic development	Application Form	Essential
2. Experience of researching and analysing data and information	Application Form / Interview	Essential
3. Experience of developing and managing a project	Application Form / Interview	Essential
Knowledge / skills / abilities		
4. Knowledge of economic development issues and ability to apply this to London's economy	Interview	
5. Ability to communicate effectively, both verbally and in writing	Application Form / Interview	Essential
6. Knowledge of funding programmes and sources	Application Form / Interview	Essential
7. Ability to work in partnership with organisations from the public, private and voluntary sectors	Interview	
8. Understanding of the needs of business and the workforce and the ability to translate this into practical assistance and/or policy development	Interview	
9. Ability to use IT for project management and presentation of information	Application Form / Interview	Essential
Equal opportunities / health and safety		
10. Awareness of Health and Safety issues in the workplace	Interview	
11. Ability to demonstrate commitment to and awareness of equal opportunities and an understanding of its relevance to economic development	Application Form / Interview	Essential

Section Seven

Final wise words on applications

- Most people do not spend enough time on completing applications. This is very good news for those people who do take their time.
- If applications TAKE time then applicants need to MAKE time. They may need to set aside special time for doing them and possibly limit the number of applications.
- One well made application is better than five bad ones.
- If you make mistakes on an application form, is an employer justified in thinking that you are likely to make mistakes in your job?
- Reading your answers out loud can often highlight grammatical errors and unnatural sounding language.
- Some applicants are advised to quote back phrases from the organisation's own literature in their applications. Our research suggests that parroting phrases and ideas is unlikely to impress.
- Just because you feel you meet the selection criteria, do not assume that you will be short-listed. Others may match the criteria even better than you.
- On-line application systems do not have spell-checks.
- If you cannot think of incidents that demonstrate the particular skills being asked for on the form, it could mean that you have not got the skills for the job.
- Alternatively, it could mean that you have not spent enough time analysing your own experience. So you need to do it. Read our sister publication *How to Analyse and Promote Your Skills for Work* for help in doing this.
- Or else it could mean that you have forgotten those key incidents. Spend time remembering past experiences. Recall the setting, the people, the conversations and the tasks. Ask people to remind you.
- Or perhaps you feel the incidents that you can call to mind are not impressive enough? Try them out on people that you know. They may be more impressed than you think.
- When completing an application form, think ahead to the interview. What questions might an employer ask? How will you deal with them? What do you want to talk about?
- Always keep a copy of your application forms. For one thing, you may be asked about what you wrote in them at interview and re-reading your form is perfect interview preparation.
- Another advantage is that when you re-read a form some time after completing it, it is often easier to assess it with objectivity. Do not be surprised if you are dissatisfied with what you wrote. Many people are. It should spur you to produce something better.
- Equally, many people are pleasantly surprised to be reminded of achievements and strengths that they had forgotten about.
- An application form is a platform of opportunity for you. It invites you to make a structured and detailed presentation about your abilities and your achievements.
- Grasp the opportunity and use it well.

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