

Introduction

What are skills?

Let's begin with a quiz. Here are phrases from “adverts” for three different jobs. What are the jobs?

- Ideal candidate must have stamina, be creative, able to hit targets, consistently enthuse and work closely with colleagues, solve problems, and take a proactive approach to competition.
- Ideal candidate must have stamina, be creative, able to meet targets, consistently enthuse and work closely with colleagues, solve problems, and take a proactive approach to competition.
- Ideal candidate must have stamina, be creative, able to meet targets, consistently enthuse and work closely with colleagues, solve problems, and take a proactive approach to competition.

No, this is not a printing mistake. The three jobs are: Captain of a football team; Manager of the Queen Vic pub, Chief Executive Office of Microsoft. What we are getting at is that each of these very different jobs requires its own set of skills and attitudes but these can all be described by the same labels.

As our example shows, an apparently simple ability (communication for example) dissolves on closer examination. The nature and depth of competence required changes for different occupations. What a bureaucrat means by communication is clearly not the same as an advertising art director, IT proficiency for a software consultant is vastly different to that for a solicitor's personal assistant.

A further complication is that many employers refer to qualities like motivation, energy, initiative or honesty as skills. These are more in the nature of character attributes than skills but equally need to be developed and demonstrated. Understanding exactly what recruiters mean by skills in a given context is vital.

Why are skills important?

For some time there has been a growing trend for graduate employers to emphasise the need for a strong set of skills or “competencies” in their new recruits. Gone are the days when employers could afford to take on a very raw graduate and spend a couple of years training them up. Graduates are now expected to “hit the ground running” when they start work.

“You’ll be mixing with clients and colleagues at the highest levels, so you’ll need the personal impact, communications skills and persuasive ability to be credible from day one ... “

(from 1998 Dresdner Kleinwort Benson recruitment brochure)

Recruiters examine applications for evidence of skills; these will also be checked out at interviews and assessment centres. Graduates must therefore know how to identify and provide the evidence of their skills. This is often a case of teasing out the transferability of a skill learned in one context to its application in another. Any graduate can point to their academic achievements as evidence of a general intellectual capability, so employers are interested in additional abilities. These can be generic such as communication skills, or specific such as possession

of a particular language or an HGV licence.

Recent years have also seen the advent of a new set of responsibilities, namely career management and personal development. As the world of work changes graduates are less likely than ever before to obtain a “job for life”, and employers are consequently often less concerned with guiding an employee’s long term career path. Graduates must therefore acquire an ability to assess their own continuing needs both in terms of marketability (keeping professional skills up to date) and personal satisfaction (matching their interests to market opportunity). They must be willing and able to participate in the “Lifelong Learning” culture that is evolving.

All of which means students and graduates need to be able to analyse, develop and record their constantly evolving skills profile. This is itself a skill, and one that is vital not just when applying for jobs but in choosing a career.

The University of London Careers Service has produced this book to help graduates understand what it is that employers are seeking, how to show they meet the criteria, and to contribute towards the development of career management tools. You should also refer to complementary texts on methods of career choice, on completing application forms and on career management for the full picture. A few suggestions are made in the Further Reading section.

This book comprises a self contained text interspersed with some thought provoking exercises for you to work through. There are also a number of charts to complete. This book offers a structure to work with in assessing and developing your skills. It should remain a useful framework for further reflection at later stages of your career. We hope our

suggestions help you use time effectively during your degree course so as to enhance your employability *and* personal development.

Making the most of work experience

At several points in this book we refer to the value of work experience. It may be useful to include a few guidelines on how to get the maximum benefit from your vacation (or other) jobs in terms of developing your skills. You should try to do the following:

- get the most highly skilled and highly paid work you can. Although you can make a lot of even the most apparently mundane placement*
- negotiate with your employer to ensure you get regular feedback on your performance, so that you can identify areas needing attention as well as achievements. A formal end of placement review might be useful too – your employer may be able to help define what you have gained during the placement*
- take any opportunities for training (formal or informal); if possible get a commitment from your employer that training will be given as part of the placement. If this leads to some formal certification, so much the better*
- “network” – put yourself about, make contacts, make a name for yourself. If you will be remembered (for the right reasons!), this will be useful if you subsequently apply for a permanent position with the same employer, or one of its customers or suppliers*
- keep a log of the tasks you do, the contributions you made, responsibilities taken, etc.*
- bear in mind any long-term professional requirements; some postgraduate courses and some careers require you to have had relevant experience before starting the course or job. This could affect your choice of placement.*

Making the most of work experience (continued)

Activity

“Of the work experience you have listed, which did you like the best and what did you learn from it?”
(from 1998 GlaxoWellcome application form)

Try answering this question now, focusing on the skills you have acquired or improved in a particular job. As you read through the rest of this book compare your answer with our suggestions as to what it is possible to gain. At the end, come back to your answer and review whether you have drawn attention to *all* the benefits which you could have.

Using this book

First, it is important to be clear that this book is intended to be *developmental*. We give fairly comprehensive coverage to the range of skills and give many examples. If you don't have an equally wide range of items for each of the categories, don't worry – it merely shows you where work may need to be done and we make some suggestions about this. If you do have gaps in your skills profile, the earlier you can identify these, the more chance you have to make use of the opportunities to acquire new skills during your time at university!

We have grouped skills into commonly used areas of competency. For each of these groups there are three sections of analysis:

- *definition* – in order to make clear the range of skills within the groups, we give examples of what they mean in practice. These examples are briefly given a context showing why they are valued by employers.
- *evidence* – we go on to show ways in which you can show that you possess the skills, that is the kinds of evidence employers look for when recruiting graduates
- *development* – after that we give some suggestions as to how you might develop skills.

Understanding what skills are and why employers look for them

When looking at the definitions think about why each type of skill may be desirable. Bear in mind that not all the examples are relevant to every job and organisation! However, employers do not ask for sets of skills for frivolous reasons. Particularly if they are a

major graduate recruiter, they have usually worked through a lengthy process of developing a “person specification” to match each job description. This person specification will list those skills and attributes that have been identified as essential or desirable in order to do the job properly. Applicants will be matched against this profile during the selection process.

At first sight some of the requirements may not have an obvious connection with the job you are applying for, but remember the employer is also trying to establish your *potential* for development in their business.

The kind of evidence for these skills which employers find acceptable

What do recruiters accept as proof that candidates have the desired skills and attributes? Our examples are drawn from interviews and discussions with recruiters, from recent application form questions, and employers’ recruitment literature. They are necessarily impersonal and not all will be applicable to everyone.

It is important to make your evidence lively and individual, after all you have to set yourself apart from other candidates. So try to emphasise the unusual and interesting; select the most relevant and telling items; don’t just give a catalogue. Explain in clear, punchy terms what it is you have to offer.

Don't forget that you can use achievements and activities from all areas of your life, not just at university, so long as they are relevant to the job/employer and you explain what you gained from them.

To help prepare for future applications, it is no bad thing to conduct a proper assessment of how your skills stand now. Grids are provided at the end of this book in which you can note your experience. This should help build up a clear idea of what you have to offer. If you identify any weak areas – and it is a rare person who would not – we give some pointers on how to address them. Do not be dispirited if you can't put much against all headings: few people match the all-singing, all-dancing ideal!

Methods of acquiring skills

Many ways to develop skills follow self-evidently from what is said in the sections defining and giving evidence. So do the things that employers see as demonstrating the right skills and attributes. Make the most of what is available during your course: e.g. teaching methods/learning experiences, students societies, sports, specific knowledge and intellectual abilities applicable more widely, vacation and part-time work, supplementary courses, etc. You may be able to take advantage of existing coaching or mentoring schemes. An example, for ethnic minority students, is the Windsor Fellowship. In part such schemes are designed to help students and graduates develop skills and self-reliance through access to the experience of successful predecessors.

Using the *Skills Audit Chart* and the *Action Planning Chart* at the end of the book (in which you can list those areas of skills you have and/or need to improve), work through the categories noting down your intended action. Be realistic but challenging about what – and how soon – you can expect results. Do set yourself a specific time limit for achievement and preferably a quantified level of achievement, as without these there is a tendency to slack and a

difficulty in measuring improvement. Being able to see you have met targets and deadlines is an important motivating factor.

Taking stock – doing a skills audit

This will involve using the sections below together with further reflection, to produce a full audit (list with analysis) of current skills. You will find there is a need for repeat reviews with changes in the labour market and the availability of vacancies. The suggested model is equally applicable for these future audits, so the work you do now will provide a basis for continuing reflection. The *Skills Audit Cycle* diagram on page 11 illustrates the cycle of review and action.

There is a lot of detail in this book. You will probably find it best to work through is small, manageable portions. The text is divided up to facilitate this. You could, for instance choose to work through one skill area each week during a term. You might also find it useful to have a friend or relative go through the topics with you to help assess your true level of competence and to tease out the key points.

We strongly suggest you make notes on each area as you go. This will not only aid your evaluation but will help tie down the concrete points you will need to make when translating a skills audit into a job application. When you have finished reading the main text, go back through your notes on each of the categories that follow – and in the *Skills Audit Chart* at the end of this book write down any areas where you can immediately see you are less strong or need to develop new skills.

The *Action Planning Chart* (at the back of the book) gives you a format for bringing together the various individual areas for improvement and working out

your next steps. By assigning an “employability priority” to each item and a timescale (based on the amount of work involved in developing a new ability and the feasibility of carrying this out) you can work out how best to tackle an ongoing programme of skills development.

Ongoing strategies for building up a record of achievement

It is recommended that you maintain a skills and achievements record. Just as professional artists have a portfolio of work to show to prospective clients, graduates can keep some kind of folder of evidence. You need not show it directly to employers, but draw on it for evidence when completing applications and preparing for interviews. You will also find it invaluable when taking stock of your career and your skills profile during periodic self-audits. This portfolio could include, e.g.

- copies of important project work
- copies of student magazine articles written
- notes of non-academic courses attended (such as Insight into Management)
- certificates (e.g. life saving, first aid, keyboard skills, as well as exams)
- copies of presentation slides (representative samples)
- vacation work (or other) Job Descriptions
- notes of club and/or committee activities, .
- testimonials
- summaries of projects or events with which you have been involved (e.g. the terms of reference of a group, notes on planning done, details of who and what was involved, summary of outcome)

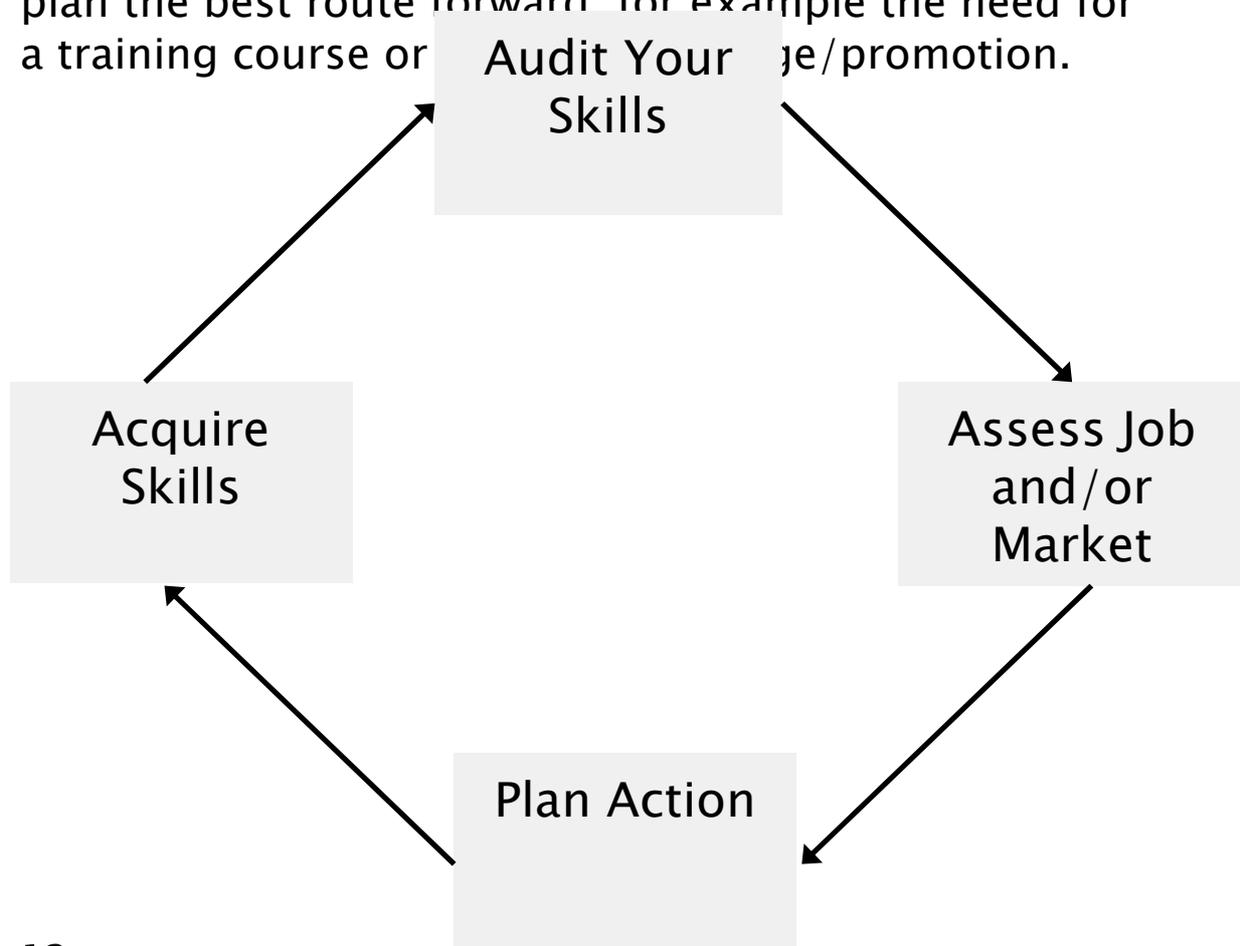
Skills audit cycle

The skills audit cycle is an iterative process. The diagram below illustrates the cycle of stages you need to go through when deciding which skills need to be improved or acquired.

The cycle of review can be undertaken by yourself alone, or as part of a professional development process with help from, for example, your supervisor. However it is undergone, the process should happen regularly, helping you take stock whether you are evaluating the skills you need for a particular task or actively assessing job market requirements.

You can be at different stages of the cycle depending on the skill being analysed.

Understanding the level of skill you have will help you plan the best route forward, for example the need for a training course or



Communications

What are these skills?

It is hard to escape communication – speaking and writing clearly, listening and reading accurately, negotiating or persuading. Employers regard these skills as important because almost all jobs require you to communicate in some form, for example:

- explaining things to people (customers or colleagues, in writing or speech) maybe explaining complex ideas to a lay audience
- discussing problems with colleagues
- listening accurately when people tell you things (e.g. instructions or sales orders)
- listening to others for clues to their behaviour and motives, an important part of building relationships
- writing reports and letters
- reading, understand and perhaps summarise business English and complicated documents and reports
- persuading other people to see your point of view
- using well structured arguments
- also specialised communication such as sign interpreting for a deaf client or associate.

What is the evidence for them?

You can make a lot of the things you do everyday in the course of your academic and leisure activities. Oral and written communication/presentation skills are assessed as part of your degree. You can draw attention to the following, for example:

- Written: essays and reports for course work, articles for student publications, memos and letters in part-time or vac work; Think about the different styles of

writing (creative, formal, factual, etc.) needed for various purposes

- Oral: taking part in tutorials, seminars, presenting papers, participating in Hall, Departmental or Union committees, speaking at club or society meetings; including responding to the views of others and getting your own ideas across
- Presentations: including not just the oral presentation but the preparation of materials and use of technical aids such as overhead projector (OHP) or computer
- Negotiation and persuasion can also be seen as a part of communication and is covered in some of the above, e.g. writing memos, committee work.

How do you acquire or develop them?

Here are a few suggestions of activities you can use to enhance skills:

In your academic life:

- try speaking up in seminars
- take opportunities for making formal presentations with technical aids
- practise writing
- practise reading and note-taking

During work experience concentrate on:

- explaining things to e.g. customers
- actively listening to others to understand their needs
- persuading e.g. in sales jobs

Through leisure activities:

- speak up at club meetings, volunteer for committee posts such as secretary
- join college schemes e.g. the East London Tutoring Scheme or voluntary teaching work.

Practice activities

*“At the heart of being an effective tax adviser lies our relationship with our clients. The success of the relationship determines the effectiveness of the advice”
(from 1998 KPMG recruitment brochure)*

What skills does this statement suggest are needed beyond technical ability/knowledge?

“Outline a situation where you had to persuade others to follow a course of action. How did you achieve this?” (from 1998 Ranks Hovis McDougall application form)

What skills do you need to point to in answering this question?

Numeracy

What are these skills?

By this we mean making calculations, understanding ideas expressed numerically, extracting conclusions from raw data and an ability to manipulate numerical data, i.e. reasoning as well as number-crunching. This can be at a very basic level or a highly technical affair. Most jobs involve some element of numeracy, for example:

- handling cash
- calculating VAT on orders or payments
- completing accounts forms or working out if a purchase can be afforded
- summarising information in charts and tables
- making decisions based on numerical or financial information
- analysing statistics in surveys
- navigational calculations for a ship or aircraft
- analysing results of clinical trials or laboratory experiments.

What is the evidence for them?

Your degree may self-evidently give you proof of numeracy, if you studied Maths or Engineering for example, and most scientific courses provide numeracy adequate in all but specialist jobs. Sometimes you need to spell out the value of your course, however. For instance, not all employers (especially those new to graduate recruitment) may realise that e.g. Geography, Sociology or Psychology degrees have a significant numerical component. Nowadays even traditional arts subjects like History use analysis of statistical and economic data as an everyday tool.

Apart from the obvious GCSE or degree certificates in

relevant subjects, other ways you can prove an ability to use numbers in the real world include:

- handling cash, balancing till receipts, and making monetary calculations in part-time work (e.g. in sales or bar jobs), in the role of a club officer, or in a family business
- generating spreadsheets for data interpretation or using maths or scientific analysis packages on course work
- basic accounting – processing invoices, book-keeping or accounts software in vac work
- working in a betting shop (or perhaps a keen gambler's interest in odds!).

How do you acquire or develop them?

Clearly you should do the things listed under evidence, but here are just a few additional suggestions:

- work through a basic mathematical textbook such as *Countdown to Mathematics*
- look at tables and graphs of numerical (or financial) data in e.g. newspapers, journals and annual reports: think about what information can be derived from them; practise making calculations using the data
- take all opportunities to use numerical skills in everyday situations and don't always use a calculator – it can be beneficial (for instance when doing numerical tests in selection) to be able to estimate calculations or work them out in your head. Try mentally adding up your supermarket bill before the checkout!
- make the most of opportunities to use software packages for analysis.

Practice activities

Your local public library should have a selection of basic maths books. Spend a few hours refreshing your ability to deal with the concepts and with manipulation of everyday business data. For a start make sure you are happy about how to

- derive information from graphs and plot data into graphical form
- display certain information in the clearest way (e.g. pie chart, linear graph, bar chart)
- calculate percentages, percentage changes
- handle fractions
- extract information from tables of numerical data

Information technology (IT)

What are these skills?

Software packages are part of everyday working life: modern business relies on IT for communications and efficient processing of data. You will certainly encounter word-processing, e-mail and Internet browsers and quite possibly more specialist software such as photo-editing packages. You may have to operate in varied “environments” such as mainframe or PC networks or on a laptop computer, and with (for instance) Macintosh, Windows or VAX operating systems.

Excluding specialist IT jobs, in a general business context you might need to:

- be competent to specific levels in specific software
- write letters and reports, produce mail merges
- produce and analyse spreadsheets of basic statistical or financial information
- enter details in and extract information through reports or queries from a database
- produce presentations (for use on computer or as overhead project sheets)
- communicate by e-mail
- search the Internet for business information
- control or monitor equipment and / or processes by computer
- design products e.g. CAD (Computer Aided Design)
- prepare text and graphics for publication.

What is the evidence for them?

Nowadays most degree courses give students an opportunity to use IT, either directly as part of course activities or just for typing essays. Most institutions also provide students with e-mail and Internet access. All

these can be cited as evidence of some familiarity, but remember to be specific: merely typing a few essays and letters is not evidence of the same proficiency as doing mail-merges or embedding Excel charts in a Word document. Other experience to which you can refer might be:

- library catalogue searching software including CD-ROMs and on-line databases, Internet searches and browsing, college e-mail
- word-processing for essays, desk top publishing (DTP) and/or photo/drawing packages for society magazines
- spreadsheets for data interpretation on course work, maths or science analysis packages, accounts software in vac work
- specific programming languages used for course work or during vacation work e.g. C++, PASCAL, BASIC
- communications and networking.

Note the different types of hardware and operating systems you have used – e.g. Macintosh, VAX, Windows 3.1 /Windows NT – and whether networked or stand alone. Always make it clear to what level you are proficient.

How do you acquire or develop them?

Take advantage of all the facilities at your college: most have extensive computer centres and terminals in “cluster rooms”, libraries, halls of residence, etc. These will give you an opportunity to explore software for which there is likely to be technical backup in the institution. Use software to help prepare (and give) presentations if possible and word-process your assignments.

Some colleges run free or discounted IT courses for students. Or try looking in directories such as *Floodlight* as well as local and national press for details. General

word processing (often combined with secretarial) training is available from many commercial and FE colleges. Self-teaching packages based on videos and/or CD-ROMs or floppy disks can be bought, as can self-help books. Local authority run adult education courses are another option. There will also be retraining under government schemes such as New Deal.

Student union societies are likely to have computers: if you work for a society or as an officer in the union, make the most of the chance to familiarise yourself with the software. Explore as many functions as you can and try to see ways to apply them to your activity. This will stand in you good stead for any career.

Working with others

What are these skills?

Nearly all jobs involve dealing with other people in some form, individually or in groups, even if this only means taking instructions from and getting on with your boss! You are likely to be faced with some or all of the following:

- working in a team – forming relationships at all levels; motivating & supporting other team members
- influencing people without being domineering or aggressive
- dealing with the general public – answering queries or providing a service
- dealing with clients or customers – persuading, informing, listening
- being in charge of other people
- negotiating, persuading or selling
- needing to share ideas, information and abilities/experience and pooling these towards common goals
- anticipating and responding objectively to other people's priorities, needs, behaviour and feelings (sensitivity).

What is the evidence for them?

Within the normal range of academic and social activity at college you can get a strong base of experience in interpersonal skills.

In your academic life:

- many courses require you to do group projects or to collaborate in some way, even if only in discussion at seminars: how did you perform in these situations?
- mention any group work, including ways in which you

helped the group to function, how conflict or disagreement was resolved, or how all members were encouraged to participate actively

In work experience:

- you might have had to carry out group tasks, so explain what part you played, including any leading roles
- you may have been given responsibility for the work of others in which case you have demonstrated skills in motivation, setting and monitoring progress towards objectives, conveying instructions and responding to suggestions
- note the size and composition of the teams in which you participated as well as their objectives and what you did to facilitate them
- perhaps you have many years of informal work within the family or community; this can be evidence for interpersonal ability – and potentially many other skills too

From your leisure activities

- belonging to clubs and societies shows you can relate to other people and pursue your own interests or aims in a social/group setting, and this most probably involves skills of compromise, negotiation, etc.
- if you held society committee posts, show how you motivated other members, drew them into debate, summarised discussion and helped to reach consensus decisions
- you may be able to point to voluntary teaching or social/community activities to show the broad range of people you have dealt with successfully.

How do you acquire or develop them?

Capitalise on the range of everyday activities at college. Everyone has social interests that can give experience in

interpersonal skills, and judicious taking of opportunities can supplement this. For instance:

- actively belong to clubs and societies
- hold society committee posts
- take a positive part in group projects
- voluntary teaching or social/community activities such as working in an hostel or on telephone helplines
- part-time & vacation jobs often have an in-built team element; use this in a thinking way (e.g. watch how the manager motivates the team).

Practice activities

“From your personal experience, describe a situation in which you built and/or maintained an effective team. Describe what you did and include the key development stages ... “ (from 1998 HM Prison Service application form)

What skills are involved in team building?

Organising and taking responsibility

What are these skills?

All academic, leisure and work activities involve some kind of planning and organisation. However, a hallmark of many graduate jobs is the autonomy you will be given – that is, you will probably not be closely supervised and must take charge of your own work (and maybe that of others too). Potential employers will expect you to show you are ready for this and possess skills which allow you to:

- take responsibility for a project
- set objectives
- plan resources and activities towards a goal
- anticipate and therefore avoid difficulties
- juggle several projects simultaneously
- use time effectively to meet deadlines and be able to prioritise (“time management”)
- cope when things go wrong
- see the big picture but also have an eye for detail.

What is the evidence for them?

Be specific and draw attention to real achievements: any graduate can claim that they have organised time by balancing their academic studies with leisure activities, but how effectively did you do this? Did you get through by staying up until 4am to complete an essay or had you planned the work so as to finish before the deadline and with time to spare for review and relaxation? You can probably use some of the following to show your talents:

- how you plan work for any projects undertaken
- when other people are involved, how you organise work to fit in with them too
- how you organise time between classes

- in vacation or part-time jobs, what responsibilities you have been given (e.g. cashing up in a shop, supervising the activities of other staff)
- what responsibility for whole or part of an event such as the Summer Ball or Rag Week or even a surprise family party you have had
- how you plan and arrange your own holiday/travel abroad
- if you organise the paying of rent and bills in a shared flat
- perhaps you have brought up children while studying part-time, or before going to university as a mature student. These demonstrate strong organising skills and the ability to take responsibility.

How do you acquire or develop them?

Some particular activities you could do are:

In academic life

- plan projects or assignments, anticipate what might go wrong and generate possible solutions
- look for ways to use time more efficiently
- be a student rep on an academic study board or departmental board

In your work experience

- volunteer to take responsibility for some aspect of the work and/or become involved in planning effective ways to do it

In leisure activities

- get involved with planning and organising an event especially if you have to co-ordinate your own tasks and those of other people
- try your hand at financial responsibility e.g. raising money for charities.

Practice activities

Think about the following questions, and note down which skills the employer is trying to discover. What can you demonstrate in answering?

“Describe any projects you have undertaken, the duration of your involvement and your role in them ... “ (from 1998 Logica application form)

“What approach have you adopted to manage the conflicting demands on your time at university?” (from 1998 Ranks Hovis McDougall application form)

Problem solving

What are these skills?

They encompass finding solutions to problems when you get stuck, thinking logically or laterally, and using ingenuity to remove or get around difficulties. The precise skills or techniques of problem solving can vary considerably between different jobs. You are likely to have to apply them to various working situations, whether of a technical or general business nature. You might have to do any of the following:

- use your degree subject expertise in practical ways or “technical” contexts
- diagnose and rectify faults in procedures, systems or equipment
- adapt to changes in your business sector
- use a logical or methodical approach
- think of new or improved ways to do your job
- use creativity or lateral thinking to devise new solutions
- deal with unknown factors in a situation.

What is the evidence for them?

These skills come into a variety of everyday situations as well as more specific contexts. Think about how you coped with a difficult topic or period on your course, in vacation work, or in a club activity. Note how you reacted when something went wrong and how you gathered and assessed information about options and solutions.

Examples of problem solving could include:

- academic and intellectual challenges on your course
- helping to resolve difficulties between flatmates
- doing crosswords or other “intellectual” puzzles
- showing a logical approach to tackling a difficulty
- overcoming unexpected obstacles during foreign travel.

How do you acquire or develop them?

- think of new ways to tackle an academic assignment or explore different aspects
- in vacation or part-time jobs, look for ways things could be done more efficiently
- during leisure activities, try coming up with ideas to revitalise a stagnating club, or take-up mind-stretching activities
- read books on, or take courses in, thinking processes/strategies
- there is considerable overlap with organising skills so any activity – e.g. organising a big party – will develop the ability to foresee, avoid and solve problems.

Practice activities

We need people with analytical reasoning and a breadth of vision, seeing the longer term relations of a problem even under short-term pressure ...(from a discussion with a recruiter)

How would you prove you have these abilities?

There are a large number of books available about thinking techniques, problem solving, etc. (one or two are mentioned in the suggested reading section). You may find it time well spent to read one of these

Business or commercial awareness

What are these skills?

This can cover a wide range of qualities. It might involve general factors such as understanding what are the priorities of commercial firms (e.g. maximising profitability or market share, competition, image or PR) or awareness of current economic and political issues affecting businesses or public authorities. It might be more technical such as understanding profit and loss figures or the relationship between profitability and employment. The following possibilities have been mentioned in employers' brochures or research interviews.

- knowledge about the company you applied to and its market(s) / environment
- competition – awareness of the role of market forces in driving business decisions
- strategic thinking – clarity of vision in knowing where to go and how to get there
- customer focus – understanding the needs and concerns of the customer and focusing on what the market wants
- innovative approach – continually seeking and encouraging alternative and fresh courses
- creativity – bringing insights and original ideas together with practical application
- analysis – breaking problems down into manageable components and solving them
- conceptualising – identifying and connecting underlying assumptions and patterns.

What is the evidence for them?

You could point to any of the following:

- you read the *Financial Times* and/or the business pages

of other papers, and have an interest in the financial markets

- you run your own “shadow” or “fantasy” equity investment portfolio
- you have successfully taken a commercial risk e.g. buying goods and selling them at a profit
- you raised money (how much is relevant) for a charity or club
- work experience in a commercial or customer care role
- awareness is also shown in the kinds of questions you ask at interviews – focusing on business issues not questions about salary, for instance.

How do you acquire or develop them?

Do those things given above, under the evidence list.

Variations or additions to that list could include:

- if your course does not have a business or economics component, read an introductory textbook
- try your hand at some small scale entrepreneurial activity e.g. buying goods and selling them for a profit at a car boot sale
- keep accounts and/or manage the money of a charity or society
- work experience (e.g. market research interviewing, book-keeping, waiter, shop assistant, burger chain crew member). Although these are low level examples, don't sell yourself short: you owe it to yourself to get the highest level, best paid work experience you can.

Practice activities

“...candidates should use a recent experience to demonstrate their business sense. 1. briefly describe the situation and your role in it; 2 describe what you did and the knowledge you applied; 3. state what you achieved. ...” (from 1998 BP application form)

Sketch an answer to this question. What other skills did you use in the same situation?

Take a well known company and research it in some depth using the internet, newspapers, libraries, etc. Draw up a profile.

After your research you should be able to say about the company:

- who are the main competitors
- what its main products/services are
- what are the business opportunities and challenges for next five years
- the main social or technical developments affecting this business field.

Functional skills

What are these skills?

The majority of the skills described in the previous sections are in some sense generic or “soft”. They can be learned in many ways and be transferred from one job or context to another. By functional we mean more specific or context–limited abilities, such as

- languages
- software packages
- degree–specific knowledge and skills (e.g. electronics, pharmacy)
- manual ability e.g. plumbing or driving (car or heavy goods vehicle or public service vehicle)
- typing speed; etc.

These will often be indicated in the job specifications and it will be clear that you need to acquire these. They are usually self–defining.

What is the evidence and how do you acquire or develop them?

Mostly the evidence for these should be straight–forward. Levels of competence should be specified, e.g. RSA level II typing; conversational, fluent or mother tongue in a language; NVQ levels; etc.

Acquisition follows clearly from this too. Publications such as *Floodlight* and *On Course* as well as local and national press and *Yellow Pages* contain listings or advertisements for colleges and/or courses in vocationally oriented subjects. There are dozens of language schools, computer training organisations etc. Personal recommendation is quite a good way of identifying reputable and useful courses.

You may find it best to look for training that gives you some form of certificate or professional accreditation which can be shown to potential employers. Check with relevant professional bodies if in doubt about the suitability of the options. Courses giving credit that can be transferred are especially useful as it may then be possible to count them towards other qualifications.

So you're not a "traditional" graduate?

Perhaps you feel that what has been said so far is not applicable to your situation if you are, say, a research student or a mature entrant to university? In fact the majority of this booklet does apply to your case. But here are a few additional, specific points of relevance to you.

Increase your attractiveness to employers by being aware of the skills you have. Our experience indicates non-traditional and research students tend to disregard important achievements outside their subject knowledge or be unaware how much they have to offer from their life experiences .

Research students and contract researchers

Employers look for future managers, so it is important to highlight project management and presentation skills, particularly if you are moving away from your academic specialism.

*Useful information can be found on the "Resources for postgraduate researchers" page of the Virtual Careers Library under the "by degree subject" section:
<http://www.careers.lon.ac.uk>*

Mature students

You may have valuable organisational or management experience. Don't underplay experience just because it was not at "graduate" level e.g. as foreman in charge of manual staff.

Perhaps you have time "unaccounted" for on your CV because you were technically "unemployed" but actually learning new skills e.g. managing house repairs.

Simply having the greater maturity and sense of responsibility that comes with greater life experience is a useful asset

Access students

*(i.e. those who had little or no formal educational qualifications before entering university)
The comments above for mature students are probably relevant.*

Don't forget that merely by succeeding at university you have demonstrated persistence, adaptability and a willingness to take calculated risks.

Career management

What are these skills?

There is a growing awareness that graduates will need to be able to assess their skills profile, opportunities and marketability continually. As more jobs are offered on a fixed term or freelance basis there will be periodic requirements to re-assess career choices, make changes of direction, and retrain. Repeated job hunting or job creating will be required, and this will entail developing skills in networking, self-promotion, etc. as well as developing an attitude of self-reliance / self-belief and adaptability. A commitment to lifelong learning (both formal and informal) to maintain the relevance of your skills, as well as to develop personally, will therefore be crucial.

Some specific points are:

- self-awareness – the ability to assess objectively your own strengths and weaknesses, know your own best styles/methods for both learning and working
- an ability to apply skills in new contexts (transferability of skills)
- matching and creative/explorative job-hunting – balancing personal and work priorities, researching and identifying corresponding opportunities
- networking – developing contacts and maintaining supporting links with others for help, information and openings
- negotiation – reaching a “win-win” situation in discussing contracts and opportunities, matching your own attributes and selling these as benefits to potential employers
- self-confidence – underlying security and confidence to

continually adapt to changing circumstances and commitment to lifelong learning.

What is the evidence and how do you acquire or develop them?

Make use of your ongoing experiences in university and work, for example observe how others behave. How do they develop themselves, seek out and secure opportunities?

Place emphasis on working out and demonstrating how your previous experiences are transferable to new settings. There are few abilities which cannot, with a little skilful adaptation, be applied in fresh contexts.

A great many of the points made under our other headings are applicable to, or contribute to, your ability to manage your own career. For example:

- all the suggestions about developing responsibility, problem-solving creativity and organisation can apply to all your job search processes
- communications and interpersonal skills come into play when “networking”, i.e. using your contacts (business, family and friends) to help identify or create vacancies and ways into organisations
- as we said at the beginning, the processes of self-audit described in this book can be re-applied whenever required
- there are books and computer packages to help with developing career choices and giving guidance on evaluating your interests and priorities.

Practice activities

Networking. Make a list of all your relatives' jobs. How many of these are in areas you would consider working in? How many are in related areas of work/business

sectors? Have you used any of these contacts to gain an insight into real working life or to find vacancies? If not, why not?

Self-awareness. The whole of this book is about self-assessment. What would your closest friend say is your biggest skill? Ask them – did you get the answer you expected?

Personal attributes

What are these?

As mentioned in the introduction, there can be confusion between skills and personal attributes. By the latter we mean your underlying attitudes and behaviours that make you employable.

Different careers require different balances between them, but the following are widely quoted as necessary:

- self-starting/self-monitoring – you are encouraged or motivated by a job well done, you check your own progress against objectives, you are prepared to adapt to new circumstances with innovation and you have commitment
- you have a “can do” attitude
- drive and motivation – commitment, energy and ambition to achieve in a competitive world, wanting high rewards and status
- goal oriented – you show clear focus and direction and enthuse both yourself and others to set/achieve targets
- excellence – the desire to seek improvements/meet and exceed quality standards
- decisive – you take timely and appropriate action for a purpose
- maturity and balanced outlook – emotional stability and ability to respond calmly to frustration but also to be persistent and firm under pressure or adversity; you can accept critical feedback
- an awareness of, and commitment to, equality of opportunity as an integral part of everyday working life; this includes sensitivity to the issues of gender, sexual orientation, disability and multi-cultural diversity
- common sense – awareness of what is possible,

practicable and appropriate.

What is the evidence for them?

These are perhaps the most difficult “skills” to pin down of all topics covered. Much of the evidence listed under other categories can also be used here as there is plenty of overlap.

When discussing activities, make sure it is clear what your contribution was – that something happened in the way it did, or happened at all, was down to you. Just a few examples from many that could be adduced are:

- starting societies
- completing tasks
- stamina in sport or long hours in labs
- managing conflicting priorities.

How do you acquire or develop them?

In general, you can develop habits of mind that will stand you in good stead for working life, as well as being inherently useful, e.g.

- methodical approach and attention to the detail in the presentation of your course work
- reliability – completing things in the time agreed
- enthusiasm and energy – taking a positive, optimistic attitude to the current activity
- sensitivity – developing an awareness of other people's needs (practical and psychological) and behaviours, and responding to these with tolerance and empathy
- self-awareness – not just knowing your strengths and weaknesses, although that is important, but also such things as your personal learning style and when you work best (time of day for instance); what motivates you (and how you motivate yourself even when the task is dull); what your longer term career and life objectives are.

Practice activities

“You were up early for a presentation ... and now you’ve got to catch up on the photocopying” (from 1998 Dresdner Kleinwort Benson recruitment brochure)

What attribute(s) does this suggest is(are) required?

References and suggested reading

Apart from source books (marked *), this list includes examples of publications which cover various skills for work, either directly or indirectly. There are doubtless many other worthy titles, but the following have been included as being readily available and relatively cheap (and so easier for students to obtain).

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Skills audit chart

SKILL	YOUR ASSESSMENT OF LEVEL (1 HIGH, 5 LOW)	PEER ASSESSMENT OF LEVEL (1 HIGH, 5 LOW)	WHICH ASPECTS COULD I IMPROVE – in the next three months, next six months, next year?
Communications			
Numeracy			
Information technology			
Working with others			
Organising and taking responsibility			
Problem solving			
Business or commercial awareness			
Functional			
Career management			
Personal attributes			

Action planning chart

SKILL AREA	PRIORITY FOR YOUR CHOSEN EMPLOYMENT / CAREER AREA	TIMESCALE FOR COMPLETION	ACTION TO BE TAKEN
Communication s			
Numeracy			
Information technology			
Working with others			
Organising and taking responsibility			
Problem solving			
Business or commercial awareness			
Functional			
Career management			
Personal attributes			