

***The Employment E-Series***

# **The Great Graduate Job Handbook**

**Summer 2007 Edition**

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## **Dedication**

**This book is dedicated to the student who is looking to get his or her first job. Good luck!**

**It is also dedicated to those selfless individuals who support their offspring through University and beyond; namely parents.**

**Many thanks to Mum and Dad for all their support and encouragement over the years. It was, and still is, very much appreciated.**

## Preface

Welcome to the “Getting a Great Graduate Job Handbook”. The information contained in this handbook is laid out in an informal, but clear and concise manner that the reader should hopefully find both interesting and easy to absorb.

The second person style, using “you”, has been deliberately adopted to create a more immediate impression and impact. This is the style a trainer would choose to make a session more involving and relevant to the attendee and hence it has been selected here.

To help the casual or speed reader, this book contains:

**Golden hints.** These are hints and tips that really help you shine above the rest. They are highlighted in golden boxes like the one below:

- Follow the golden hints and really add shine to your job applications and interviews.

**General Guidelines.** These are numerous sections that offer general guidelines. These sections are highlighted in green:

- Stick to the green guidelines to get the job you want.

**Stops.** A stop is used to highlight the, often unexpected, exceptions and difficulties an individual may encounter. These are written in red text.

**STOP: Pay attention to these so that you stay on the right track.**

## Introduction

Hello! First off, congratulations on deciding to read this e-book. The chances of you succeeding in your job applications are already greatly improved.

Why? Well, even if you ignored the rest of this book, you are still in a much stronger position than some students, as you are aware that you need to do something to get a job and you know that a job isn't just going to fall into your lap.

Many students, including myself years ago, believe that having a good degree, pretty much guarantees you a good job. While this may have been the case in the 60's and 70's, it is certainly not true today.

Employers are looking for a "total package" from their applicants rather than just a degree. Their expectations are high and they are often frustrated by the lack of suitable candidates. Major businesses are dependent on "new blood" coming in and they do want to employ people, however they often find it difficult to find individuals who will fit the bill.

This e-book will show you:

- The Myths around Graduate Job Hunting
- What Employers are Looking For
- How to Apply for Jobs
- The Basic Theory on the Key Skills Employers are Looking For
- How to Succeed at Assessment Centres
- Interviewing Techniques
- Other Options to Employment
- A Glimpse of What Lies Beyond University

## 1. What is the Real Scene?

There are almost as many ideas about the graduate employment scene as there are students. Everyone has a different idea on the best way to get a job and what the real scene is like.

The below questions are based on extensive research done with academic institutions and graduate employers. Take the test and then find out how they see it:

**Answer True, False or Maybe.**

T/F/M

1. There are plenty of graduate jobs.
2. Most graduates move on to something.
3. There is a lot of competition for graduate jobs.
4. Graduates are better off than those who aren't
5. A good degree will get me a good job.
6. A graduate is a born manager.
7. It's the piece of paper that counts.
8. I should apply for as many jobs as I can.
9. A year travelling will help.
10. A year doing temp work will help my application

**The answers are on the following pages.**

**1. There are plenty of graduate jobs. FALSE**

There are around 240 000 graduates a year with only 20 000 graduate jobs being available. This means that there are 12 graduates for every job.

The job guides give the impression that there are lots of jobs (20 000 is a big number after all), but the number of graduates is staggering.

OK, some graduates take a year off or do further study, but this effect is cancelled out by those returning to the job market who took their year out last year.

**2. Most graduates move on to something. TRUE**

This is true; as Government statistics will show. However, the figures do not distinguish between working as a waitress or as a graduate trainee manager. So, extreme care should be taken when interpreting them.

**3. There is a lot of competition for jobs. FALSE**

This goes against the statistics given in point 1, but it is true. Employers each year struggle to fill their graduate vacancies.

A typical example comes from one of the major high street banks who had 100 graduate openings. They received over 3 000 applications, but ultimately filled only 67 of the available positions.

**Why?** Only 67 of the candidates were considered suitable and, like other graduate employers, this bank would not take on someone that they didn't think was up to the job.

This is actually good news for graduates, as if you do develop the required skills then the market is wide open to you!

**4. Graduates are better off than those who aren't. FALSE**

This is not necessarily true. I know a significant number of people who did not attend University and who, ten years on, are still out-performing their graduate friends.

**5. A good degree will get me a good job. FALSE**

This is actually one of the most perpetuated lies in modern society. Unfortunately, it is put forth from parents, family members, schools, colleges, Universities and the Government.

Employers want people who can add value to the company by doing a professional job. Unfortunately, in many cases, a degree only shows that someone can cram a lot of information into their head the day before an exam. A great many companies complain about the number of graduates who have a degree, but cannot actually “do” what they have been trained in.

For example, engineering companies are amazed by the number of engineering graduates who can't answer basic questions and can't come up with common sense solutions to problems like, how could you measure the level of liquid in a tank?

Employers want graduates who can “do”. In all cases, this would involve being able to communicate and work with other people in your company as well as being able to perform the job you are trained in.

**6. A graduate is a born manager. FALSE**

Managers require many skills that are missing from graduates. Unfortunately, many grads think that they have the necessary skills to manage. This is due to the misguided fact that many of them believe that all it involves is telling people what to do.

In fact, many grads trying out this approach have caused

considerable upset with fellow staff members.

Management requires people skills that are developed over the course of an individual's working life and the ability to effectively manage has little connection to a degree.

**7. It's the piece of paper that counts. FALSE**

A degree allows you to apply for graduate jobs and shows that you have some knowledge in that area; and that is all!

It opens the door to graduate jobs in your specialist field, as well as general graduate positions, such as being a supermarket manager.

**STOP: A degree opens the door to graduate jobs but this is as far as it takes you!**

Employers are looking for someone who can add value to their business. In other words, they need to make the company more money than they cost it. This means that the employee has to deliver the goods and perform effectively, which is in sharp contrast to just knowing the theory.

**8. I should apply for as many jobs as I can. FALSE**

This thinking is based on the lottery principle, i.e. the more tickets I buy then the more likely I am to win.

I've known many graduates take the attitude "I've applied for 100 jobs, so I'm sure to get one". Unfortunately, this is not the case.

- In applications, it is the QUALITY, not the QUANTITY that counts!

The hardest part in the application process is getting an interview.

Many companies have to whittle down 5000-plus applications to just 100 interviews. This means that your application has to beat 49 others for you to just get an interview!

As you can see sending out a bulk of applications is not going to get you through the first round. You need to spend time doing research on the role and the company and putting some thought into the application form and covering letter.

**9. A year travelling will help. MAYBE**

The answer to this one is entirely dependent on what you did on your year-off and how your employer views it.

A year travelling can show that you have experienced different cultures and that you may have matured along the way. It can also show initiative as well as planning and organisation skills.

On the other hand, it may indicate that you were simply avoiding work and will leave the company to go travelling again as soon as possible.

Different employers view travel in different ways, however if you do a year abroad you should capitalise on it by being prepared to talk about the experience and what you gained from it, though don't take the photos to the interview!

**10. A year doing temp work will help. FALSE**

This should be in the Maybe category, but I have yet to see it work so I have put it under FALSE.

It is FALSE for one reason and one reason only. People who do temp work usually get stuck in a rut.

Employers see work as beneficial and with temp work you have

shown that you can get up on time, work through the day and that you have acquired an understanding of business.

However, once you have started in the 9-5 routine in a job that you don't really like, it is actually quite difficult to build up the motivation to apply for a different job.

The time then stretches out and you soon become convinced that you are stuck doing temp work and when you make this decision then you really are stuck!

If you do temp work, make sure that you find time each week to look for and apply for jobs. You should also set yourself a goal of getting a stable job within a certain time limit which should be no longer than 6 months.

## 2. What do Employers REALLY, REALLY WANT!

OK, so we have had a look at a number of the myths behind graduate recruitment.

We have seen that there are 12 graduates for every graduate job, yet employers find it difficult to recruit.

### So What Do Employers Actually Want?

We surveyed numerous top companies and found that they all looked for similar qualities in their candidates. They all considered the below skills to be essential:

- Communication skills; both oral and written.
- Team Working
- Basic Business Understanding

However, they found these to be lacking in 90% of candidates, with team working being cited as the weakest skill.

The fourth thing missing, in some cases, was an actual ability to do what they had studied. This was most prevalent in science and engineering graduates. Many employers in these areas felt that the vast majority of candidates couldn't apply what they had studied during their degree.

A key golden rule is:

- Employers will leave a position empty rather than fill it with someone who cannot do the job properly!

## It's Not A Competition!

OK, so from the above it may seem like there is a lot of competition with there being 12 graduates for every job. However, the golden rule above shows why employers still find it difficult to recruit suitable graduates!

Look at it this way. The average starting salary for a graduate is around £15 000. Given the costs of recruitment, National Insurance, tax, expenses, training etc, **it costs an employer about £30 000 per annum to employ a new graduate.**

**STOP: Any new graduate has to generate at least £30 000 per year of additional profit for it to make sense for the employer to take them on.**

This can be seen as the benchmark, i.e. does this person have the skills and ability to make us more than £30 000 a year? Employers know what skills and what additional on-the-job training you will need to meet this target.

Simply put, if the employer thinks you can do the job, i.e. hit the benchmark, then they will employ you, if not they won't. So, even if you are better than all the other candidates, you may still not get the job.

Employers will leave vacancies unfilled rather than take on someone they think can't do the job

Equally, if several candidates hit the benchmark then they are likely to take them all on, even if it means going over their recruitment target. This is because not many candidates come along who can meet their requirements.

## 3. Getting Ready to Hunt

### *What Do I Want To Do?*

The first thing to decide is what you want to do in your working life. This will take up about a third of your waking hours for the next 40 years or so, so it is important that you get it right.

This doesn't mean that you will be stuck with the first job you get, however, the more right you get it the first time the less time you waste.

There are numerous resources at your Careers Service which will help you narrow down your selection.

However, here are two simple exercises that will help:

#### **1 The Get Out of Bed Test**

It's 7am on a Monday morning in the middle of November. Your room is cold and you are warm in bed. You were up till 1 last night having a couple of drinks with friends, which you can still feel the effects of.

The simple question is what job would get you out of your comfortable bed?

Money is, oddly enough, a poor motivator and you should look at the above question, discounting the money factor.

We are looking for what job fires you up enough to get you out of bed. What are you passionate enough about to get you going?

- Money is a poor motivator. So what job would make you want to get out of bed early in the morning?

## 2 Pleasure Moments

The second exercise suits those with a more scientific approach.

Plot your work happiness level versus month for the past year (exclude holidays). Look at the extremes:

During the highs, what were you doing? Why did you enjoy it?

During the lows, what were you doing and why did you hate it so much?

This should give you an idea of the types of tasks that you enjoy and the ones you like to avoid. For example, you really enjoyed planning and organising the summer ball, but completely hated library research. These facts might help you decide to be a project manager.

- It is difficult to decide what job you want to do before you've actually done it. *However, you should be able to identify which activities you enjoy and these should indicate suitable roles!*

### ***Mind the Skills Gap!***

Once you have decided what you want to do, then you should research the role and find out what knowledge, skills, attitude and experience are required.

Then list the skills that you have, counting only the ones where you have practically demonstrated the skill. This will give you two lists to compare and the difference between the two is your "skills gap".

**STOP: These missing skills and experiences are the things that you should be working to fill now!**

Say, for example, you research a role and you make the below list of

the skills required:

- Project Management
- People Management
- Time Management
- Planning
- Great Communication Skills
- Team Working Skills

You then tick off the skills that you have **demonstrated** and start working to demonstrate the ones you are missing.

- ***It is vital that you only count those skills that you have demonstrated and have proof of.*** Employers are only interested in those skills that you have demonstrated and not the ones you just say that you are good at!

Equally important is attitude. So, you examine the role and find out that ideally the person would be:

- Persistent
- Approachable
- A good leader
- Motivated and be a good motivator
- Supportive
- Disciplined

Are you these things? Have you demonstrated these attributes? Again, if you haven't put yourself in a position where you can demonstrate these attitudes.

### 3. Essential Skills

As mentioned earlier, employers do bemoan the lack of:

- Communication Skills
- Team Working Skills

Presentations and team work are covered later on, as they appear most in assessment centres.

However, a quick look at an SAF (Standard Application Form) shows that employers are also interested in:

- Planning and Organisation
- Problem Solving and Creative Thinking

*Note: This is not all the skills they are looking for, but they are important in most graduate jobs.*

There are many books on these subjects that outline them fully. However as it is highly unlikely that you will get round to reading them, here is a brief overview which will put you ahead of the competition.

#### ***Planning and Organisation***

There are plenty of books available on organising and planning that explain the subject in full, however I will discuss an essential element that covers a number of the basics. *Note: there will be a future e-book covering this area.*

An important project basic is a Terms of Reference (ToR). A ToR is a document that sets out the project and how it will run from the outset. ToRs are used by virtually all companies and across all industry sectors and they are the first step for any project.

Here is a typical template for a ToR:

## **Background**

This should give the background to the problem you are trying to solve or the thing you are looking to organise. Keep it short and relevant, don't ramble on.

## **Objectives**

Here is where you state the objective of the project. This should be as quantitative as possible, e.g. the Summer ball is to raise £5 000 for charity or the new marketing campaign will increase new customers by 10%.

## **Scope**

What is the scope of the project, i.e. what is included and, more importantly, what is excluded? Many projects fail as the scope gets out of hand, e.g. the requirements for the new accounting system go from automating invoices to doing everything including making the tea.

## **Constraints**

You need to indicate all the constraints (major and minor) in this section. Time and money are always a constraint and they should be mentioned along with the effect they have on the project.

For example, we have a budget of £500 for the marketing of the event. This is a clear constraint and rules out things such as radio advertising.

There may be other constraints, like we all have to work during the day and can only do this project in our spare time.

## **Assumptions**

Here you need to list all the assumptions that you have made involving the project. Many projects fail as an assumption has been made at the start that is not true.

For example, you may assume that your customer has set aside enough time to work with you or that they will attend all meetings. These type of assumptions need to be outlined here.

Some assumptions may have to be changed into “the rules” that need to be followed for a successful project.

## **Roles and Responsibilities**

In this section, you should outline the role of everyone in the team and what their specific responsibilities are.

This is a vital part of the planning and organisation activity. You need to clearly outline who is in the team, what role they are to play and what exactly their responsibilities and deliverables are.

This should also include their position as a team player (e.g. selling ball tickets) and their role in the team e.g. chairperson; see the team working chapter for a description of the various team roles.

## **Timescales**

This section should include when the project is due to be delivered and key milestones that must be met for this to happen. It is important that you plan out all the steps, put dates on when they need to be done by and add in some contingency.

It is vital that you set realistic timescales and include some contingency in your plans for unexpected setbacks. So for example if the report needs to be delivered by 9<sup>th</sup> June, you should aim to have it completed and reviewed by 2<sup>nd</sup> June. This gives you a “spare week” just in case something goes wrong.

Clearly, the longer the project, the greater the required contingency, e.g. for a project lasting a week a contingency time of a day would be more than enough. However, for a three month project you would probably want a contingency factor of about a week.

The timescales you set should also outline key milestones, which the group can periodically review so that they know the project is on track.

An 8-week project should have weekly milestones that the group review at their weekly meeting.

For example the group has to produce a written business case. They could set the following milestones.

Week 1	Options generated
Week 2	Options investigated and one picked
Week 3	Market research completed
Week 4	Business idea and plan for business case fully outlined
Week 5	Financial data organised and sections assigned to people
Week 6	1 <sup>st</sup> rough draft of report produced and reviewed
Week 7	2 <sup>nd</sup> draft of report produced and reviewed leaving a week of contingency
Week 8	Submit reviewed report

*Note: you should distinguish between dependent and independent activities. For example, you cannot write the marketing section of a report until the market research is done on the other hand, provided you have all the data, your team can write the product and financial data sections at the same time.*

## **Deliverables**

This is a statement of what you plan to deliver, e.g. a new marketing campaign, a summer ball, a new web site etc. This should be specific and tell the customer or other team members exactly what they are going to get.

- It is important to be as specific as possible about the deliverables so that you can manage expectations.

It is vital that you manage project expectations. For example, you are planning to Summer Ball with a 3-course meal, a band and a disco afterwards.

If you don't manage expectations you will be amazed how rapidly this gets ramped up into a ball with a casino, funfair, comedy acts etc. Then, when you do delivered what was originally planned, everyone is disappointed.

### **Business Case**

This should be the final section and is vital to all planning and organisation activities. It should contain a brief statement of the costs associated with the project (in terms of both time and money) and the benefits expected to arise from it.

For example, a new web site will cost £1,000 and 3 days of your time to manage the project and finalise the text for it. Ideally, you should put a cost on your time, e.g. £200 per day.

So, the total cost of the web site is £1 600.

This section should then outline the benefits that can be obtained from the web site. For example, it is expected that the web site will attract two new customers a week with an average spend of £100 per customer.

This means that the web site should generate an extra £200 per week. Say you make 50% profit on each sale then the web site will generate £100 per week profit and will have paid for itself within 16 weeks.

Even if it only attracts one new customer per week, it has still paid for itself in 32 weeks and is still a reasonably good bet.

In any business case, it is always better to be pessimistic about the costs and be conservative about the benefits.

A business case is vital as it will tell you if the project is worth doing or not. In many cases, the benefits do not justify the costs and the project is stopped. So it is important you have at least a vague idea of the costs and benefits before even starting a ToR.

If we go back to our example of the Summer Ball then if you think you might sell 300 tickets maximum and you need to sell 250 to break-even then it is highly debateable whether it is worthwhile. Given these figures, it is likely that you will only sell 200 tickets and make a loss.

The web site is another good example as there is a chance that it will attract no new business, in which case it is a waste of time and money.

Both of these risks can be offset by asking potential customers what they want from the Ball or the web site. So if, 350 people say they are interested in attending the ball then you know that you are safe to go ahead.

### **Final Thoughts**

There are many aspects to planning and organisation and these will be covered fully in a later e-book. However, if you apply the above to your projects then you will do considerably better.

### ***Problem Solving and Creative Thinking***

There are numerous business tools that can help with problem solving. The key one that you should familiarise yourself with is SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats).

This and other problem solving and creative techniques will be covered in future e-books.

## ***4. Applying Yourself***

### ***When to Apply***

There are two schools of thought on job applications:

1. Take part in the milk round and start applying in the October of your final year at University.
2. Concentrate on your degree and start applying after your exams in June.

The view on the second option is easy to see, after all you did go to University to get a good degree and this should be your priority. However, I would highly recommend making time in your final year so that you can start applying in the October.

- Make time and start applying for jobs in the October of your final year!

There are numerous reasons for this:

1. The vast majority of jobs are offered in this period.
2. Having a job offer, actually takes a lot of the pressure off. You can go into your exams knowing that you have a job in your pocket.
3. You apply in this period with estimated grades. So, if they ask for a 2.1 minimum, you can estimate that you will get this. If you leave your application until after your exams and you get a 2.2, then you can find yourself in difficulty.

## ***Preparing to Apply***

OK, so you have now decided what you want to do and have done your best to fill in the skills gap.

The next step before digging into Prospects or wandering around the Careers Centre and becoming over-whelmed in the wealth of jobs is to answer the two questions below:

1. Where do I want to work?
2. Which industry or companies would I most like to work in?

## ***Where Do I Want to Work?***

This is a fairly straightforward question. You may not have any particular preference, but you should note down any areas where you don't want to work and those that you would love to work in.

It may be possible to find an OK job that involves working in New York for six months, which you love the idea of. On the other hand, if your dream job involves spending a year at Sellafield then you may think twice.

The majority of graduates work in and around London. This has numerous pros and cons.

The main drawbacks are the cost of living there and the time spent getting anywhere. London is expensive, in terms of both rented accommodation and travel.

It can take a long time to get into and out of the City Centre. Getting from West to East London can take well over an hour and when you add in travelling to and from the tube station, it becomes prohibitive.

One of my friends, who moved to London, had to work for two years before she was as well off as when she had been a student. So you should consider the additional cost associated with living there.

I would recommend looking for a starter job in one of the other major cities such as Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool etc. With 2 years experience under your belt, you should be able to negotiate a well-paid job in London, so that you can afford to live there comfortably; if that's what you want to do.

### ***Which Industry/ Company do I want to work in?***

A very useful way of narrowing down the huge selection of jobs is to decide which industry or industries you want to work in.

The job of say, an accountant, is pretty much the same company to company. However, the experience is made different by the nature of the industry that you are working in. For example, there is a wide difference between being an accountant at a major airline, and an accountant for a small firm of solicitors.

This is where your interests play a role in selecting the company that you want to work in. If you like travel, then clearly airlines and major travel agents would be a good starting point. If you like glamour, then a PR company could be a great for you.

- When choosing the industry sector to work in, try and follow your interests as much as possible!

### ***Next Steps***

OK, you have now narrowed down the industries and the places you want to work in. The next step is to find jobs to apply for.

There are plenty of places to look for graduate jobs (Prospects, the Careers Service etc.) and the steps you have taken here should narrow down your selection to a manageable level.

You should look to apply for around 10 jobs to start with. As you

receive rejection letters, you should make new applications so that you always have 10 jobs “on the boil”.

- Always have 10 applications open. If you are rejected by one, then apply for another.

This means that most of the effort goes in at the start to get out the initial 10, then as the year goes on you should just be making the odd application to keep your 10 applications “alive”.

This approach works well, however it does involve keeping an eye on the job market and not resting on your laurels.

## 4. Applications

### *The Recruitment Process*

OK, let's start the application section with a few notes on the recruitment process that we mentioned in the first section.

If you think of the recruitment process as a filter then you won't go far wrong. Let's take a major company who has 10 positions on its graduate scheme. Their application figures are likely to go something like this:

Requests for an Application Form	7 000
Applications Submitted	5 000
Invited to the 1 <sup>st</sup> Assessment Centre	100
Invited to Final Interview	30
Offers Made	12
Recruited	10

*Note: a company will probably make more than 10 job offers, as they may have candidates reject them.*

As you can see the hardest step to get through is the application. If you get invited to interview then your chances of getting the job have gone from 1 in 500 to 1 in 10 in the above example.

- It is vital that you get your application right!

So how do firms filter 5 000 applicants down to just 100! Different companies have different procedures, however the below shows how many businesses typically filter applications:

Any applications with the below features are immediately "thrown

out”:

- Illegible applications (i.e. poor handwriting, or a tiny print font)
- Incorrectly completed (e.g. missing answers)
- Wrong degree or wrong degree classification
- Wrong Institution (some employers only consider candidates from certain academic institutions)
- Poor English or spelling mistakes

**STOP: Do not bother applying for jobs when you don't have the right degree classification as they will not look at the rest of your application, regardless of how good it is.**

Some people get round this situation by not giving a classification or saying that they achieved a second (if they got a 2.2 rather than the required 2.1). This may or may not work.

The above is a coarse filter but it will get rid of a number of applications.

Some companies also use software that scans your application looking for certain words (e.g. enthusiastic, motivated etc.). It is therefore important that you try to figure out these words (they are usually mentioned in the job advert) and include them in your application somehow.

If your application has got this far, they will then look at your skills and how you have completed their questions. At this point the matter becomes more subjective, however if you have followed the points so far you have the best chance of succeeding.

**STOP: Once again, you have to get the application right!!!**

***Applying***

There are whole books on the subject of writing the perfect CV or application form. CV writing is an art form, however if you apply the below points you should be fine. The key thing to bear in mind when putting pen to paper is the purpose of a CV.

- The purpose of a CV or application form is to get an interview!

A CV will not get you a job, it will only get you an interview. Therefore, you shouldn't give away everything in your application.

What you are trying to do with a CV or application form is:

1. Sell yourself **and**
2. Show that you would be suited to the role **and** the company.

## ***Sell Yourself***

You want to sell yourself as a “complete package” as opposed to just being another graduate. This includes showing all the relevant skills that you have developed from University, work experience, clubs, hobbies, interests as well as school and College activities, for example the Young Enterprise scheme.

As mentioned above, you shouldn't give everything away in your CV. You are far better going over a significant number of points briefly rather than concentrating on just a few.

The below questions should help in deciding how to best sell yourself:

- What qualifications do you have (academic and non-academic)?
- What projects/ team work did you do at University/ College?
- At College and School did you have any additional responsibilities, e.g. being on the student council?
- What work experience do you have? How can you make this relevant to graduate work? For example if you were a customer service assistant at a retail store this could show good communication skills.
- What skills have you demonstrated (e.g. organisation skills through arranging the summer ball)?
- What hobbies and interests do you have that show an ability that employers would be interested in? Playing football for a local team once a week shows that you have commitment and a “well-rounded” personality.
- Do you do things outside of study at University (e.g. social secretary for the hockey club etc.)?
- When have you shown leadership skills? How?
- When have you had to deal with a difficult problem and how did you solve it?

If you don't think that you have enough examples of the above, and most graduates don't, then now is the time to fix this. Get involved with other projects, get on the Committee of a University club, help organise the next student night out. **DO something!!!**

There are many things that you can do that show the skills you have to employers without them having to take a lot of time.

For example, organising a wine tasting for charity with a few mates, needn't take long and yet it shows team working, organisation and planning and could also demonstrate problem solving if you are involved with how to promote the event and get people there. It also

shows care for others and, obviously, it helps the charity of your choice.

- **Get busy doing something TODAY!**

### ***Suited to the Role and the Company***

This requires a thorough study of the job advert and the company offering the job (the company web site should provide the information that you require).

Look for key words in the advert and use them in your application. For example, they say that they are looking for a committed team player. You should say in your CV that “I am a committed team player” and give an example of this.

Take what you have got from the selling yourself section and mould it so that it matches the role you are applying for. This will mean leaving some things out while amplifying other points. Often the trick to the best application is careful editing, so that you can get as much in as possible that is relevant and cut out any deadwood. A good tip is:

- **Have someone else review your CV or application before sending it!**

The reviewer should be able to point up things that you have forgotten or omitted as well as highlight spelling and grammar errors.

## CVs

CVs are less common in graduate employment, with major companies having their own application form and most others using Standard Application Forms (SAFs).

However, if the advert does not request a company application or SAF then you should send a CV. Below are some simple rules for CVs:

- They should be two pages long
- Use good English with no spelling mistakes
- Don't use a font smaller than Arial 10 and preferably stick to Arial 11 or 12.
- They should concentrate on your skills and where you have demonstrated them
- Don't waste too much space with personal details, try and fit them into the smallest space possible. They are the last thing that employers look for, but they do need to be on the front page.
- As a rule I would start with personal details (including if you have a driver's license), career objective, education and then key skills. The second page should then be devoted to work experience, positions of responsibility (e.g. secretary of the Rugby club, student council etc) and conclude with references.
- Education wise, cover your degree and A-levels fully. However, reduce your GCSEs to the one line, e.g. GCSEs Maths(A), English Language (A), 8 other GCSEs at C or above.

The reason for this last point is that employers vet on your degree classification and those who have a C or above in Maths and English Language.

To be fair, while they may be interested in some of your other GCSEs (e.g. Computing, French etc.), it takes too much space to list everything else that you have done. The exception is clearly if the advert says you must have a GCSE in a certain subject.

## ***Standard Application Forms***

Standard application forms are used by many companies. They are often easier on the applicant than a CV as they are longer than 2 pages and ask for the type of things that companies are interested in.

A recommendation is to do a CV for yourself first, then complete an SAF. This will make it easier when completing company application forms as most of the key information, you will have noted down on your CV already.

We covered the essential skills employers ask for in an earlier section. Hopefully, you will have worked on these and be able to complete them on your SAF.

## ***Company Application Forms***

Most major companies have their own application forms and these tend to be large and complex.

Why does a company ask you the question “If there is one thing in the World you could change what would it be and why”?

Is this some type of advanced psychological test in which they will fathom the very depths of your soul? Probably not.

These questions are largely included to reduce the number of applications they get. Major companies often use their application form as a way of filtering candidates. They are aware that many graduates apply for every job under the sun, so reducing them down to just those who really want the job can save them time.

Major companies often get 5 000-plus applications for their graduate scheme that may only have ten vacancies. Clearly, they need to keep the number of applicants down to those who are serious about the role.

Can you imagine what would happen if Cadbury's accepted CVs for their graduate scheme? The chance is that 50% of the graduate population would apply for the role.

Let's be honest, you are only going to spend a weekend completing an application form for a job that you really want.

So, how do you answer the questions and complete the form? Again it is a matter of giving the question some consideration and reading the job advert and company literature again. Ask yourself what is the company looking for?

Your answer will be looked at if you get through to the second filter in the application stage. While there won't be a perfect answer they are looking for, they will want to see something sensible that reflects their requirements or the company values.

The remainder of the form should be completed in a similar way to the SAF and CV.

### ***Covering Letters***

It is always polite to include a covering letter. Many major companies will probably ignore it and put your application through the system, but it is worth including anyway. It is more a point of politeness than anything else for major companies. Clearly if they specifically tell you to just return the application then do not include a letter.

For smaller companies, where you apply with a CV, it is a vital part of the application. It is the ideal opportunity for you to expand on the things that you have mentioned in your CV. These things should cover the exact points that the company have mentioned in their advert. A covering letter is your opportunity to amplify on your key points.

## ***Practice Makes Perfect***

I can guarantee that as soon as you put an application in the post that you will think of things that you should have mentioned. No matter how careful you are, this always seems to be the case. This is why you should apply for a few “bottom of the list” jobs to start with.

These should still be jobs that you would like and you should put in all the required care and attention, otherwise you won’t get the benefit of doing the exercise. However, they should not be the two or three “dream jobs” that you have on your list.

After a couple of applications, you will have honed your CV or application form to perfection. It is at this point you go to work on your dream jobs.

## ***Final Thoughts***

The application stage is, statistically, the most difficult part of the recruitment process. Therefore, it does require time and effort to produce an application that will get you an interview.

Applying for 10 jobs properly will get you considerably further than applying for a 100 jobs in a slapdash manner.

If you follow the above points, you are far more likely to be invited to interview and get the opportunity to show them that you are the candidate that they have been looking for.

## 5. Assessment Centres

When your application proves successful the next step is, usually, to attend an assessment centre.

Assessment centres are very common with blue-chip companies. Often, they will have two of them. In this case, the first one, will, typically, be a half day long. It will largely involve tests and, possibly, a team exercise.

This first assessment centre is essentially an extension of the application filter system discussed above, i.e. it is designed to cut down the number of applicants with the minimum effort. Many people can complete standards assessment tests (see below) with only one person invigilating and the papers can then be quickly and easily marked by computer.

The first centre may also involve a team playing exercise, as 12 candidates can be assessed at once in this type of exercise with only 1 or 2 people needing to observe.

This first assessment centre will cut down the applicants to the number that the company really want to focus on.

The final assessment centre will be more intense than the first and is often run over 2 days. It is likely to include presentations, role playing and a formal interview. Assessment of these activities takes valuable time and resource, hence the company will only invite a limited number of applicants to this stage.

If a company has 10 positions, they will probably invite 30 candidates or so to the final assessment centre. However, if they had 100 positions I expect they would only invite about 150-200 people (not 300).

**STOP: Smaller companies will probably not have an assessment centre, but their recruitment process is likely to involve**

**some of the below, so this section is still worth reading.**

Assessment centres exist purely to show the skills the applicant actually possesses and can effectively use.

Many companies in the past have been disappointed to find that the applicant did not have the skills that they said they had. An assessment centre deals with this problem by getting the graduates to show their skills.

Assessment centres are not as daunting as you might think. Follow the below points and you will do far better:

### ***General Rules***

- Be polite and respectful at all times, even at the end of the day, when you may be more relaxed. This includes avoiding expressions and jokes that might be considered offensive.
- Do not criticise other applicants.
- Be friendly to other applicants.
- Adopt a friendly and cheerful attitude over the period.
- Dress as you would for an interview.
- If there is a free bar, don't go overboard. It is fine to have a few drinks, but remember the assessment continues the next day. It is very unlikely that the company will monitor your number of drinks, but they will monitor your behaviour (if not that night, then certainly the next day). It is very difficult to perform well with a hangover, so do be careful.

### ***IQ and Other Tests***

IQ and business intelligence tests are very common at assessment centres. They are a quick filtering device where high standards can rapidly cut down the number of candidates.

A frequent question is, “If I just miss on one test and do well on everything else can I still get through”?

Good question! If you are a point below the IQ score and have impressed them elsewhere you may still be considered. This largely depends on the number and quality of candidates. If they have seen 300 people for 10 jobs, then they will be stricter on these rules than if they had seen 100 people for the same 10 jobs.

The best option is to make sure that you exceed all their criteria. This can be done, by covering the theory and then practising.

For example, most business tests ask you to calculate percentages, read graphs, work out ratios etc. If you are not fully familiar with these then pick up a GCSE Maths book and give them a quick review.

You can also get a book of tests to practice on from the library and it is worth spending an hour or so doing a few of them so that you are familiar with them and are confident that you can do them.

IQ tests are also worth practicing. You will probably find that there is a type of question that you struggle with, for example which shape in the sequence comes next. I suggest that you ask someone who has no problem with these types of questions, how they arrived at the answer.

If you run through a number of these questions with them, you’ll pick up the “thought process” that goes along with figuring them out and should be able to apply it yourself.

## ***Personality Tests***

***A common question is can you cheat personality tests. My reply, invariably, is why would you want to?***

Say for example the company is looking for a methodical programmer

and you are an outgoing, enthusiastic extrovert who likes people and hates details. You could try and fake your profile to get the job, but of course you would hate the role!

I would view personality tests as a two-way street. If you do not meet their profile requirements, then you would probably hate the job anyway.

However, there is something that you should be aware of. People act differently in different situations. For example, you behave differently with your parents, than you do with your mates, or at least I hope so.

People often behave differently in one group to another. In one group, they may be the leader; in another they take a more “back-seat” role. This is the case even in the world of work; for example your team leader will work differently with you than he does with senior management.

It is a good idea to determine the type of person that they are looking for, then if that fits one of the “personas” that you are happy with then always answer the questions from that point of view. Don’t mix how you behave with your parents, with how you behave with your partner!

### ***Written Reports***

There is a very good chance that you will have to do a written exercise. These generally consist of you having to write a concise report that recommends an action based on the piles of data that you are given.

In essence, they are looking for you to demonstrate two skills here; being able to:

1. Rapidly sort out the relevant details from a mass of data.
2. Produce a well-laid out business report that covers the pertinent facts and makes a convincing recommendation.

It is important that you approach a business report in a different way to University assignments.

- In a University assignment, you are looking to show what you know.
- In a business report, you want to create action.

Anyone who reads your business report needs to have the facts clearly presented along with the options and your final recommendation and the business case for implementing it.

In short, a business case shows that a project will, broadly, create more money than it costs. This can be in terms of money saved or money generated.

For example, the business case for a new marketing campaign is that it will generate more income from new customers than it costs. On the other hand a business case for being H&S compliant is to avoid getting shut down, which would be very costly!

A simple template for a business report is:

**The Business Situation.** This should be a brief summary of the actual situation or problem you are addressing. It may also include some of the relevant background.

**The Key Facts.** This could be as simple as a set of bullet points. It should include the objective of the project and key related facts.

**Options.** This should given an outline of the various realistic options

considered. Remember doing nothing is always an option and you should highlight the outcome of doing nothing as this can be very compelling; especially if it is something like “doing nothing would mean we are forced to close down in 6 months”.

**Recommendation.** This clearly outlines the recommendation, and if possible should include a business case for it. If the solution generates money then a simple Return on Investment case can be included. For example, this solution will have paid for itself in 6 months and thereafter generate £100 000 per annum.

### ***Role Play***

This is becoming more common at Assessment Centres. It essentially consists of being given a lot of information, sorting it through and then being asked to act in a given role.

This can include role playing within a team, e.g. you are given a brief to come up with a solution between you, or on an individual basis, e.g. you play a consultant and the interviewer plays a client. *Note: the team situation is covered later on.*

It is difficult to give advice on these exercises as the type of role play varies considerably from company to company. However, here are some general guidelines:

- Don't get bogged down in the detail. Often you will be given a huge pack of information to absorb in 10 minutes. Read it rapidly and pull out the relevant details. Ignore sections marked historical background etc.
- Do get into the role. Try and make it real.
- Base your arguments on the data given. Don't invent data to suit your solution.
- Apply a known business approach, for example doing a SWOT analysis on a situation can greatly increase your credibility.
- Give a business case for your solution, i.e. how much it will cost versus how much it generates or saves.

### ***Final Thoughts***

The best way to succeed at an assessment centre is to:

1. Have experience in the areas being tested, e.g. team working, doing business tests etc.
2. Have a reasonable understanding of business and the basic techniques it employs, e.g. SWOT analysis

Both of the above can be easily acquired with a little research and application.

## 6. Presenting Yourself

It is about 90% likely that you will be asked to present at an assessment centre. Presentation skills are vital in any professional business role and an employer wants to check that you have these, at least at a basic level.

You can make it a lot easier on yourself by following the below points. The worst thing you can do is ignore a presentation until you have to do it. A number of students I have worked with adopted the strategy, that as they didn't like the idea of presentations, the best thing to do was to ignore it and then just try and "wing it" on the day.

This strategy will always let you down and you are far better off tackling the subject head on. It is far better to follow the below steps and give great presentations rather than sell yourself short.

### **Purpose**

The first thing you need to decide is; what is your purpose in presenting. What is the end result you are looking for?

The first step in preparing any presentation is to write down exactly what you want to achieve. This should be a concise statement of what you want get out of all the hassle and stress of giving the presentation. The statement may only be a sentence long, but you still need to decide on it and write it down.

At an assessment centre your purpose is clearly to get a job, but this may not be the purpose of your presentation. Often you are asked to present on a topic or situation. This makes it somewhat easier than being given your own choice.

If you are asked to prepare a presentation on the subject of your choice, then you need to consider the below:

- What are the company looking for?

- What type of role is it I'm applying for?
- What can I talk about that best displays my abilities?

Some general rules for subject matter are:

- Choose a topic you are comfortable with
- Choose a subject area that is likely to impress.
- Don't pick something that is esoteric, difficult to understand or "off-beat". For example, I wouldn't advise doing a presentation on quantum mechanics, "Doctor Who" or the migratory patterns of geese.

This last rule leads us into the second step, which is to write down what you want the audience to get out of your presentation.

Why are the audience there? Why are they giving up their valuable time to listen to you?

Many presentations fail as the presenter has not considered the needs of their audience.

- The most important thing in a presentation is the audience. If you look after them and pander to their needs, while achieving your own objectives, then you will not go far wrong.

## ***Points***

What are the key points of your presentation? If the audience takes away nothing else, what are the key things you want them to remember?

Possibly, the most important question is "How many points can I make"? I often ask the following question of my students; how many points can you make in one minute? The answers usually vary from

5 to 60 points. The actual answer is 1.

People may hear what you say, but it takes a few repetitions for it to sink in. It usually takes at least 3 repetitions of the same point for people to really grasp it.

Hence, the only way to get your message home is to keep repeating it!

The golden rule on points is this:

- It is far better to make 3 good points that everyone remembers than 30 points that everyone forgets!

The trick is to give the audience the same point in a different way, until they really get it! The below table gives a rough guideline to points per minute:

Time (mins)	No. of Points
1-2	1
3- 5	1-2
5-10	2-3
10-15	4-5
15-20	5-6
20-30	6-8

It may seem that this doesn't give you much to say, however you need to make your point, back it up with the detail and then repeat it.

## **Structure**

The structure is often the thing that makes the difference between a great presentation and a so-so one.

The main problem with presenters is the fact that they know far more about the subject than their audience. This is actually a major drawback!

More often than not the presenter uses acronyms the audience doesn't understand and goes off on tangents that no one else can follow, while the audience feels like it has to smile and nod.

**STOP: Even some University and college lecturers have been known to fall into this area!**

In all truthfulness, you almost certainly have experienced this. Think how this lack of structure made you feel and how do you think the presentation could have been better?

- It is the responsibility of the speaker to make himself understood. It is the presenter's job to get the message across, it is not up to the audience to try and work out what he is talking about.

The presentation needs to have a good structure that is simple for everyone to follow. It should be straightforward and logical.

There should be gaps between the points covered in the body, so that the audience is aware that one point has been ended and another one started. This can be done simply by saying "We have now discussed point x and are going on to point y".

While going through a point, stick to it and don't go off on tangents. Tangents mainly come about due to a lack of preparation. More often than not the presenter has started on one point and then realised there is something more important that he should have covered so he starts into this with no transition and the audience, robbed of its map, gets lost.

A standard structure for a 20 minute presentation with 5 points is:

- Intro 4 mins
- Body 14 mins consisting of 5 points; about 3 minutes a piece with a clear separation between the points.
- End 2 mins

## ***The Body***

Oddly enough, the body is the least important part of the presentation, but it is the thing you should start work on first. Often, while working on the body you will realise how you need to change things and why certain ideas won't work.

- Get the body right and the opening and end will follow logically from it.

The skeleton of the body consists of the key points that you decided on in the above section. You then add on the meat, which is the detail.

There is one additional thing that you need to include in the body of a long presentation (i.e. 20 minutes or longer). That is a wake up call!

A wake-up call is something that does what it says on the box. It wakes the audience up!

In the middle of a reasonably lengthy presentation, the audience will drift. The inevitable thoughts about what they have to do later that day, the argument they had with the boss, what they fancy for tea that evening etc. all start to crowd in.

You need to snap their attention back to your presentation. There are many, many ways to do this. It can be particularly effective if you do something memorable.

One of my colleagues once gave everyone a banana at the half way point. This woke people up and everyone remembered his presentation from the others they had seen that day.

The key note is do something unexpected, but not ridiculous or too over the top. For example, a video clip may work, but avoid laser lights and indoor fireworks as this may be considered inappropriate. Note: I have seen this done by a University group.

- In presentations of 20 minutes or longer you need to have an effective wake-up call!

## ***The Opening***

The opening is vital. If you don't get the audience's attention at the start then you are unlikely to get it at all.

Once you have decided on the body of your piece then you should be able to prepare the opening.

There are five steps to a successful opening:

### **1. Grab their Attention**

At the very start you need to grab the audience's attention. There are many ways you can do this.

- Give them an arresting fact.
- Tell a joke.
- Tell a story.
- Use a video or sound clip
- Ask them to do something physical, e.g. get up and find out what three people's favourite food is.

## **2. Tell them what they are going to get out of it.**

OK, you have their attention, now you need to ensure that they keep on giving it to you.

This is the point to tell them what they are going to get out of your presentation. For example, by the end of this presentation you will know how to save your company £300 000 a year.

## **3. Let them know who you are.**

If you didn't include it in the introduction, now is the point where you introduce yourself. This should include your name, role and background. It can also be a good point, if the group is small, to get the audience to introduce themselves.

## **4. Give them the reasons to believe you.**

Why are you qualified to speak on this subject? What do you know about this subject? What experience do you have? In a College project this may be as simple as "For the last 8 weeks, we have been looking into this".

## **5. Outline where you are going.**

You now need to give the audience a map for your presentation. This should include exactly how long the presentation is going to be, if questions should be left to the end and if there are any scheduled breaks.

This is also where you outline the main points, i.e. "in this presentations we are going to discuss x, y and z."

- *Follow the above steps and you will have started off on the right foot.*

## ***The Conclusion***

The conclusion needs to have impact. It is the last thing your audience will hear and what they will remember the most.

A great ending can rescue a mediocre presentation so have something special prepared.

The first key point is to signal that you are closing. People's attention will have lagged during the presentation, however it always picks up if they know you are going to close. People like to at least give the impression that they have listened to you and they know that they may be expected to ask intelligent questions.

You can alert them to the end by simply by saying something along the lines of "we're going to be ending soon", or "in review we have covered..." or something of the sort.

The end should:

- Repeat your key points
- Re-state your conclusion
- Give a final parting sentence that sums everything up or leaves the audience with something to remember the presentation by
- Thank the audience for their time and ask for any questions

Golden rules for endings are:

- Don't run off stage as soon as you have finished
- Have a positive ending, don't just trail off
- Do ask for questions

The end is important and it should be the last thing you work on, but also the thing you devote the most time and attention to.

## **Nerves**

Nerves affect everyone! Even professional speakers get nerves. Many speakers consider slight nerves to be a good thing, as they believe that they add energy to the presentation and help them maintain focus.

My experience is that if people get too relaxed about presenting they stop putting the needed preparation time in and this is reflected by poor presentations. Actually, this “laid-back” attitude affects a large number of people.

A survey of blue-chip companies showed that they considered 80% of business presentations to be poor. However, a recent review of businesses showed that 90% of business people thought they gave a good presentation.

Why the discrepancy? Simple; the majority of business people who thought they could present well, only meant that they were not nervous about doing presentations, spoke loud enough to be heard and didn't jingle the keys in their pocket.

They lacked all the major points we have covered and, therefore, failed. The main thing they didn't do was to properly prepare, which should include finding out something about how to present!

## **Control**

The secret to a great presentation, and managing your nerves, is control:

- This means control over yourself, the environment and the audience.

First is control of yourself, this is achieved through PRACTICE. This way you know exactly what you are going to say and when you are going to say it.

This can be done by going through the presentation in your head, when you're in the shower or on the way to the assessment centre. Ideally, though you would also have at least one run through with a real audience using the props, slides etc that you are planning to use.

Control over yourself also means showing up early for the presentation. There is nothing worse than a presentation where the speaker turns up late and flustered!

If you are just doing a presentation, then aim to get there at least half an hour early as this gives you time to do the next important step, which is take control of the environment.

By taking control of the environment, you can reduce your nerves and increase your confidence. So what is meant by "take control of your environment"?

This simply means removing any potential problems from your path. Before you start the presentation, you should take the following steps:

### **Check the Room**

- First off, is the room too hot or too cold? If so, then you need to fix it.
- Is it sufficiently light or, in the case of a PowerPoint presentation, sufficiently dark?
- Are there enough seats for people to sit on?
- Are the seats arranged so that everyone can see you and the screen or board?
- Do you have everything you need (e.g. projector, flip-chart, pens for whiteboard etc.)?

### **Check Everything Technical**

If you are using PowerPoint, then you should check that your computer is working and the presentation is OK. You should always bring a back up of the presentation on a memory stick and preferably have a back-up laptop in case your computer crashes.

Next ask, “Is the projector working and can I connect my computer up to it”? I have seen a number of presentations where the presenter spends the first five minutes trying to get their presentation up on the screen.

Just in case the projector fails and there is no replacement you should take several printed sets of your slides, which you can distribute to the audience.

### **Check Everything Non-Technical**

This includes checking everything else. Key things are:

- Are the markers OK or have they all dried out?
- Are the markers the right colour? Light colours (such as yellow) are invisible to people at the back. Choose dominant colours like red, blue and green.
- Does the flipchart have the right amount of clean sheets on it? I have often seen people flip the first blank sheet to find that the rest of the pad has already been used.
- Are you using whiteboard markers on the whiteboard? Flip chart markers cause havoc with whiteboards.
- Is there an eraser for the whiteboard?
- Do I have all my props and are they easily accessible?

### **Seating**

Seating is an important factor and you can use it to your advantage.

The lay out of seats influences the audience greatly. Let me explain how:

### ***Seating in Rows***

This layout basically says “be quiet and listen to me”. It is very formal and gives a “lecture-like” feel to the proceedings. This is a recommended layout for your first presentations as people tend to be more restrained in this kind of layout.

### ***Seating in a U-shape***

Seating in a U with you at the top of it, says “talk to me and each other, let’s make this a conversation”. This is great for presentations where you want a lot of interaction. It is not recommended if you are nervous or new to presentations.

### ***Random Patterns***

Show lack of organization and it is difficult to predict how people will react.

### ***Final Thoughts***

The above is a very brief overview of presentations. A future e-book will be issued on this subject that will cover the area in full.

However, if you apply the above points and follow the process outlined, your presentations will improve remarkably.

## 7. Team Working Basics

Team working is of paramount importance and is one of the things that employers say that graduates consistently lack.

Any company is a team. Sometimes there may be some in-fighting, as there often is between two footballers on the same side, but ultimately it is how the company works as a team that determines its success or failure.

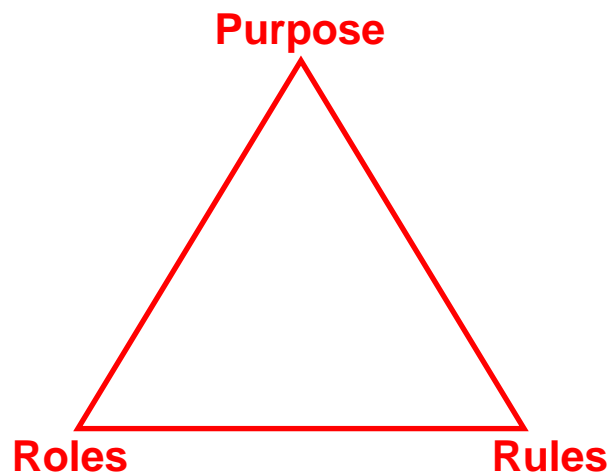
The more opportunity you get to work in a team the better. However, experience alone may not help. For example, you could be given the opportunity to fix a smashed computer, but without some training you are unlikely to get far.

This is an obvious example, however people assume that working in teams is natural and that if people get practice at it then they will become good at it. Unfortunately, this is not true.

So, here are some team working basics that should make it easier for you to be successful in your team working experiences:

### ***The Top Team Triangle***

In any team, there is an important triangle:



Any team to be successful has to have all of the above in place. A team with this organisation will always beat one without it.

Consider the example of a football team:

**Purpose:** To score as many goals as possible, while preventing the opposition from scoring

**Roles:** Manager, coach, goalkeeper, defenders, mid-fielders, strikers etc.

**Rules:** As given for football.

It is easy to see that if your team followed the above then it could beat any side, even of star players, that didn't. For example 12 of your mates are up against all-star players who don't follow the above.

You would win as, in the above example, their goalkeeper decides not to turn up for the match (breaks the rules), the manager and striker swap roles half way through (no fixed roles), their main defender decides he wants to spend the match chatting to his girlfriend (different purpose) etc.

These are important points so let's have a look at them individually.

## **Purpose**

This is simply what is the team trying to achieve. This may seem obvious to you, but you may get a surprising response if you ask others in your group.

You may think that you are doing it to get the best result for your project sponsor, another team member may see it as a way of getting a good grade, another might think of it as an easy, slacking option and yet another may view it as a good CV filer.

At your very first meeting you should decide; what is the purpose of your team and get everyone to agree on it. Once you have this then you can move towards a common ground. Without it, your team is probably doomed.

- Decide on the purpose of your team and get everyone to agree on it.

## Roles

Everyone in a team needs to have a role and different roles suit different people. The below sections outline five roles, that every team needs, along with a set of characteristics.

### *The Chairperson*

Role	Characteristics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Makes sure everyone is heard at the meetings and that everyone reaches agreement on the way forward</li> <li>➤ Backs-up the other roles as required</li> <li>➤ Supports and motivates the group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Facilitating</li> <li>➤ Listening</li> <li>➤ Impartial</li> <li>➤ Supportive</li> <li>➤ Desire to help others</li> </ul>

### *The Good Cop*

Role	Characteristics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Ensures that everyone follows the rules</li> <li>➤ Supports people in following them</li> <li>➤ Ensures fairness across the group</li> <li>➤ Helps people deal with their difficulties</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Friendly</li> <li>➤ Understanding</li> <li>➤ Fair</li> <li>➤ Assertive</li> <li>➤ People Driven</li> </ul>

### *The Driving Force*

Role	Characteristics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Drives the work forward</li> <li>➤ Ensures that the plan is followed</li> <li>➤ “Cracks the whip”</li> <li>➤ Refers all problems to “The Good Cop”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Assertive</li> <li>➤ Hard working</li> <li>➤ Critical</li> <li>➤ Task driven</li> </ul>

### *The Planner*

Role	Characteristics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Inspects the resources available and outlines the restrictions to the team (e.g. we only have £x to spend)</li> <li>➤ Drives the formation of plans.</li> <li>➤ Reviews all work done so that it is of the highest quality</li> <li>➤ Dots the “i”s and crosses the “t”s</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Analytical</li> <li>➤ Accurate</li> <li>➤ Possibly quiet</li> <li>➤ Cares for the details</li> <li>➤ Finishes the job</li> </ul>

### ***The Talker***

Role	Characteristics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Talks to and works with people outside of the group</li> <li>➤ Performs all public roles, i.e. doing surveys, phones people, heads up presentations etc.</li> <li>➤ Manages External Relationships</li> <li>➤ Produces Minutes of Meetings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Extrovert</li> <li>➤ Persuasive</li> <li>➤ Good people person</li> <li>➤ Relationship driven</li> </ul>

If your team is lacking one or more of the above roles, it is likely to fail.

Imagine a team full of “Driving Forces”. That team would spend all its time arguing and going nowhere. On the other hand a team consisting of entirely planners would use all its time planning and equally getting nowhere.

**STOP: It is noted here that, in my experience with graduates, the key role missing is “The Planner”. Many teams fail or under-perform due to a lack of adequate planning and resources.**

On many occasions, I have seen a team with a problem set off at full speed and hit a brick wall. The planner exists to steer the team in the right direction. She considers constraints, such as time and money, and enforces them. She will stop the team taking too long or putting forward expensive solutions that cannot be executed.

On another, related, note, it is important to appreciate that a weakness in one situation may be a strength in another and vice versa.

For example, someone who likes to “crack the whip”, who is opinionated and doesn't work well with others would be a liability in most situations. However, they would be excellent in a role which requires getting things done regardless of others. Some sales companies have this attitude, if you aren't on target, then you're out.

It would be difficult for a “people person” to fire someone who was off-target due to a family crisis, or severe illness etc. However, a “non-people person” would have no such problem.

This may seem harsh but, ultimately, it is the way some companies survive.

## Rules

Any team needs to set some rules and, equally, have a way of handling people who break them. Every business has a set of policies and rules and a way of dealing with people who break them. For example, late attendance and not delivering work on time are frowned upon by all companies.

Typically, a business will give you two verbal warnings, then three written warnings. After the third written warning either you will be summoned before a review board or simply sacked.

You need to establish team rules early on. Again the main problem is the assumption that everyone will follow the same rules as you.

A sample set of rules is given below:

- Attend all meetings; if you cannot attend for any reason then let someone know as soon as possible.
- Be on time for every team meeting and appointment.
- Deliver your work on time and to the required standard. *If it is going to be late then inform the team as soon as possible along with a plan of how you are going to catch up.*

## **Getting the Job Done**

One final note before we leave team working basics:

- **IT IS NOT ENOUGH JUST TO DO YOUR OWN JOB, YOU MUST MAKE SURE THAT OTHERS DO THEIRS!**

The main reason many students don't like team work is that they allow other people to get away with doing nothing and therefore they end up doing all the work themselves.

**STOP: Don't let someone get away with doing nothing!**

Jump on them as soon as they start to turn up late or don't do the work requested that week. If you let it go, it will get worse.

If someone lets you down by not doing something then you and your other team members need to get busy filling the gap they have left behind. I have seen hard-working teams get poor grades as someone let them down and they blamed the person.

Unfortunately, blaming doesn't work in University or life. If you had a major contract to complete a piece of work, your customer is not going to be interested in the fact that it didn't get done as Dave didn't "do his bit"! If someone doesn't do the work, make it clear that they did not do it, but make sure it gets done. You cannot present a report or give a presentation with a section of it missing.

## 8. Teams at Assessment Centres

The previous section gave you some pointers for improving your team working experiences in life and at College. This section looks at some hints and tips for team exercises at assessment centres.

Many assessment centres set team exercises. In fact, next to presentations and standard tests they are the most popular assessment activity.

You will, probably, be given a management role playing situation. For example you will be all assigned as managers in a company who have to come up with the best solution to a problem.

You will be given a thick brief on the problem, background and additional information. More often than not, everyone will be given different pieces of key information, so that no one person or one part of the group can solve the problem on their own. In other words, everyone needs to be included for a successful outcome.

You are usually given 10 minutes to read the information then 50 minutes or so to discuss the situation and generate the best solution.

The best way to succeed in this activity is to have had plenty of team working experience and have tried out the points covered in the previous chapter.

*Note: there are many other team playing exercises, e.g. build the highest tower you can out of Lego etc.*

Below are some guidelines for handling team playing at an assessment centre:

- Decide what role they are looking for you to take and adopt it during the exercise.
- Do not let yourself be put up as a scribe. Avoid this by nominating someone else, if necessary.
- Do be the first to speak. Take control and put some structure on the group.
- Let others speak and listen to what they have to say. If you agree say so, if you don't say why you disagree.
- Make sure your points and arguments are rational. Don't make up things just to suit your case.
- Don't get into heated arguments.
- If an argument starts, then try to be the mediator and resolve the situation.
- Be aware of the time and make others aware of it. Use the lack of time as a reason to prevent things getting bogged down.
- Don't let one person hog all the conversation.
- Do drive things to get them completed in the time given.
- Listen to other people's ideas and don't just focus on your own.
- Realise that the solution you have been given may not be the best one for the group and act accordingly.
- If someone is quiet within the group, then prompt them to join the conversation.
- Push for the team to achieve the best result, as a team.

## 9. The Final Interview

Any job you apply for will involve an interview and there are a number of simple steps that you can follow to ensure that it goes well.

### *Preparation*

#### **Review The Job**

The first thing to do in preparing is to review the job. Have a look again at the advert and follow this up with a general internet search on what the role entails.

Think again about what the company are looking for and how you can best show that you are matched to the job in the interview. If they mentioned that they are looking for someone with an analytical approach, think of times where you have demonstrated such and be prepared to talk about them.

- The night before the interview, review the role once again and decide how you can best show that you are matched to the job

#### **Review the Company**

In many ways, this is more important than reviewing the job. This is where you can impress employers, with a little bit of effort.

You should find out as much as you can about the company and what it is currently doing. Their website is likely to give you all the information you need for this.

Pay particular attention to the below areas:

- Company background
- Current Share value (including any recent ups and downs)
- Any recent company news stories
- What they sell (get specific rather than general details)
- Who they sell it to (who are their main customers?)
- What new markets are they looking to move into?
- Any new company initiatives

A good tip is to:

- Print these items off and review them on your way to the interview.

## **Review your Application**

The final thing to do is to review your CV or application form. The interviewer will use this to guide the questioning and he will ask you to expand on a number of points.

Make sure that you know your application backwards; particularly those points that you really want to expand on. You need to have a good idea what these are and how you will slant them towards the job.

The purpose of an application is to get an interview. If it has got you this far, then you must have hit some of the right notes, at least.

The interview is your opportunity to amplify these points and introduce new compelling arguments to employ you.

- The purpose of an interview is to get a job offer, so you need to sell yourself and your potential.

Below are some of the key employer concerns that you need to handle well in the interview.

The best way to deal with them is to give examples where you have demonstrated them. For example, an exemplary attendance record from an old employer would help with a number of points.

- Is this person going to be on time for work? Are they reliable?
- Is this person going to present a professional image?
- Does this person realise that they need to develop or do they think they know it all already?
- Are they going to produce? Is this person going to do something useful? *It is surprising how many graduates don't.*
- Will they fit in with their team?
- Will they benefit the company more than they cost it?

## **On The Day**

### **Appearance Does Count**

The saying goes that “You don’t get a second chance to make a first impression”. How you look and act is how you make your first impression, so make sure you get it right.

Many graduates neglect their appearance and language at an interview and damage their chances. This isn’t to say that they swear

(though a small number do), but many graduates use language that is too informal, which gives the impression that they are still a student and not yet ready to become a professional.

The below is a set of guidelines for making a good impression.

- Wear good quality, smart business clothes. This is essentially suit and tie for gents and smart, professional outfits for the ladies.
- Polish your shoes. A number of graduates let themselves down by wearing a designer suit with dirty, scuffed or unpolished shoes.
- Clip and clean your fingernails.
- Get a haircut a few days before and style your hair appropriately.
- Be well-groomed (e.g. properly shaved).
- Do have a firm handshake.
- Act professionally.

### **Help the Interviewer**

The interviewer is likely to be as nervous as you are. Research has shown that interviewing someone can be a nerve wracking experience. You should look to make it as easy as possible for this person to confidently offer you a job.

This is done by taking the pressure off the interviewer by telling them what they want to know in your answers.

Short or one-word answers really make life difficult for the interviewer. They want to extract the information they need to make a decision from you and you can choose to be co-operative or not.

The more you give them the easier it is for them you make a decision

on whether to offer you the job or not. If you don't give them the information they need, then they will be forced to reject you.

## Don't Lie

In an interview, bending the truth is acceptable and is, to a slight degree, expected, but out-and-out lying is a definite mistake. For example, you could say you were the Captain of the University football team. You may have only done this a few times when the regular Captain was absent, but you could possibly get away with this.

On the other hand, if you have never played for the University team then such a lie should be avoided.

I have seen interviewees tie themselves in knots with "fibs" on their application form. It seems invariable that if you said you have had an experience when you haven't, that your interviewer knows all about that topic.

For example, you say that you were involved in a major company project that you weren't. The interviewer asks you how the project was managed and what you learned from the experience and you rapidly become unstuck.

- You may get away with stretching the truth, but out-and-out lies must be avoided!

## 10. Alternative Options to Graduate Work

There are many alternatives to graduate work when you finish University. These primarily fall into the below categories:

### ***More Education***

Once you have got your degree then there is always the option to continue in education. This could be through a number of routes such as a Masters, a PGCE or a Ph.D. Remaining in education has a number of benefits and drawbacks.

### **Key Benefits**

The key benefits to staying in education are:

- Gives you that extra lead in terms of qualifications and, more importantly, experience on graduates
- Gives you a chance to change direction (for example a conversion degree from Physics to Electronic Engineering)
- Gives you another year to find out what you want to do and get a job
- Another year of student life with more money (many Masters and Ph.D. places attract a reasonable grant)
- Gives you something productive to do in the year
- Moves you on your career path, e.g. if you want to be a Teacher you will need to do a PGCE
- Gives you the opportunity to live somewhere different

## **Drawbacks**

The main drawbacks are:

- **Lack of cash.** While grants can be fairly generous you will clearly not be as well off as those who have gone straight off into graduate employment.
- **Losing a year.** You effectively use a year of experience on those who have graduate work, which is virtually impossible to regain.

## ***Travelling***

Many graduates take a year out and go travelling after University. This has the benefit of giving you life experience and an appreciation of different cultures. However, this trend is unlikely to continue as graduates emerge with more and more debt.

Many people now take a year off in their late twenties; when they have got money and experience behind them. After a couple of years in employment it is a lot easier to take a year off and come back into a job.

The advantages of travelling are the experience and the appreciation of different cultures. It also helps show planning and organisation skills and does you give an edge on “straight to work” graduates.

The drawbacks are clearly the cost and the loss of wages and a year of work experience.

## ***Temporary Work***

The majority of graduates who do not have a graduate job, go for temporary work. They surmise that they can get by for the year living at home and re-apply for jobs in the coming year’s milk round. They

are correct on both counts.

Unfortunately, more often than not they just never get round to applying for other jobs and rapidly get stuck in a rut.

A better idea is to look for graduate jobs that start now!!! Many small and medium size companies are looking for graduates to start throughout the year, unlike major companies who may only have an intake in September. They don't pay as well as the major companies or have the graduate development schemes, however a year or two working in them will give you valuable experience and a foot on the ladder.

- Start looking for work that starts in the near future, not 12 months "down the line".

### ***Doing Nothing***

If you haven't lined up a job, another course or travelling then you can wind up doing nothing, i.e. living at home on benefit.

This is a very dangerous course of action. It is very easy to get into the habit of going to bed late, getting up late and doing nothing during the day. Your motivation will rapidly disappear and within a short period you become unemployable. No graduate employer would take on someone who had failed to do anything productive for 6 or more months.

As mentioned above, small and medium size companies are often looking to recruit graduates throughout the year so apply to these. Also do look for temporary work and, when this is not available, it is a good idea to do voluntary work that will help you to develop your transferable skills, along with showing commitment and time keeping.

- Do whatever it takes to avoid the "I'll do it tomorrow Trap"!

## 11. Reality Bites

I do not think this book would be complete unless I included some of the surprises and the solutions to some of the situations that both myself and other graduates have encountered.

This section looks at some of the myths behind graduate work and attempts to give you a few solutions to the problems you are likely to encounter.

Let's start off with the biggest myth of all:

***In my new graduate job, I will be RICH!!!***

One of the things that hits all graduates is that they are never as well off as they thought they would be.

Let's take the example of a well-paid graduate who starts on £17 000 (not London based) and has a graduate debt of £15 000.

After tax, national insurance and pension her "take home pay" will be about £1 000 per month. So let's look at the economics:

<b>Take Home</b>	£1 000
<b>Outgoings</b>	
Rent	£250
Council Tax	£50
Gas/ Elec/ Water	£50
Mobile Phone	£50
Student Loan	£300
Insurance	£20
Travel	£50
Internet/ Cable/ TV License	£30
<b>Total Outgoings</b>	<b>£800</b>

This leaves £50 per week for food, toiletries, clothing, entertainment,

holiday fund etc. As you can see this is not much and add in any other loans and credit cards that you may have and you can see that you are going to be scraping by for a while.

The good news is that, if you're good at your job, your pay should increase quite rapidly. An extra £240 per month (or being on £21 000 per year) would make a big difference.

As a guide a single person, without excessive debt, will feel that they are well off when they earn around £30 000. However, given the mortgage situation, this figure is likely to increase.

### ***Employers lie as much as you did***

A big surprise is to discover that employers also bend the truth. You may find out that the work you are doing isn't what they described. You may find that the working abroad option that attracted you so much is not going to happen as they have dropped the scheme due to funding shortages. You may find many other shortcomings.

Employers are looking to attract good graduates, so they will, of course, make themselves look like the best employer and therefore bend the truth.

Surveys have shown that there is about a 6-month dissatisfaction period where the employer finds out that the employee is not as good as they made out and the employee finds that the job and the employer are not as great as they made out.

Unfortunately, there is not a lot you can do about this; except be aware that it may happen. In all fairness, it is often not something the employer has done deliberately. For example, company fortunes do rise and fall and it may well be the scheme that attracted you has disappeared due to an unexpected lack of money.

## ***You may end up making coffee for the first few months***

This does sometimes happen.

I've known a company where one department had a graduate doing very little for a number of months. The graduate asked for a transfer into a busier group, however he was not allowed to move as his old department felt that they might need him at some point. This sounds odd, but is quite common.

The solution is to roll with it and then roll out of it; more often than not complaining makes things worse. You need to create your own opportunities and find yourself projects to do. Get involved and be pro-active in finding yourself work.

## ***Your dream job may turn out to be a nightmare***

This can happen. Sometimes, it's just because what you thought you wanted to do isn't actually what you wanted to do. Sometimes, the job turns out to be completely different to what you expected as the needs of the employer have changed. And sometimes it just becomes so repetitive that, while it was fine to start with, you would now rather have a vigorous rub-down with a cheese grater than go to work.

If this is the case, then you should take action, not just put up with it! Either look to transfer in the company or look for a new job. Don't let it destroy you. I have seen a number of examples where people have become seriously depressed due to being in the wrong job.

## ***You may end-up working long hours***

Some graduates find themselves suddenly doing 60-plus hours a week. If this is the case then you need to review your workload and productivity, at first personally, and then with your manager.

Sometimes it is a matter of better time management (including

leaving out the personal e-mails, phone calls and internet surfing).

Sometimes it is simply a case of work overload. If this is the case, then you should ask your manager to prioritise your projects and, if possible, hand one or two of them onto someone else.

### ***You might not fit into the team***

This is a danger. Sometimes, your face just doesn't fit. However, this is not common as you might be led to believe.

Managers and HR people go to great lengths to ensure that you fit the company. While sometimes there are personality clashes, you should be aware of what, if anything, you are doing to create the problem. It is easy to blame the group, but you should look to do what you can to resolve the problem yourself.

Many times the individual is generating the problem themselves by turning up late, not completing their work on time, being rude to colleagues, not attending team meetings, never making the coffee etc.

### ***It is soooo dullllllll!!!!***

Yes, no matter how glamorous the job is, it will sometimes seem dull.

A good solution for the boring parts is to trade with your manager, for example I will do boring project A if you then give me project B which involves 3 months in San Francisco.

## 12. The Future

Ideally you should look to do 2-3 years in your first job and then move on. This is vital if you want to increase your salary and responsibility rapidly.

As a rule, employers pay the going rate for new people, but after that you are sucked into their pay scheme, which means that you rapidly fall behind the market. You can avoid this problem by moving company every few years.

If you look to move before you've done at least 12-18 months, then you will find yourself lumped in with new graduates and be placed back to square one, though the experience will clearly help with your application.

If you do like your first job and want to get a pay rise without permanently moving, a common tactic is to leave and work for another company for 6 months to a year and then go back.

When you go back, you will once again be able to negotiate the market rate. Also the vast majority of major companies will put on your file whether they would take you back in the future. By and large, provided you have done a good job (and not annoyed anyone) this is pretty much guaranteed as a firm will usually go "with the devil they know, rather than the one they don't".

## 13. Final Thoughts

The majority of students work hard to get a good degree and they can get themselves a great graduate job if they expend a little effort on preparation, the application form and the assessment process.

If you apply yourself to the application process then you can maximise on the time and money you have spent at University or College. It may seem like there is a lot to do, but look at it this way it would be a pity to waste 3 years of study and £15 000 for the lack of a few weeks work in preparing and applying.

You may be convinced that you will get a good job regardless. However, I have seen many graduates end up in low-paid jobs, they could have done after leaving school.

My recommendation is, in your final year, set aside some time for preparing and applying for jobs. Complete a CV and SAF then work on them until you are happy with both of them. Then get applying for the jobs you have identified.

There are far more graduates than jobs, however it is easy to steal a lead on the opposition by applying what we have covered here.

**Good Luck!**

**We hope you found this handbook useful.**

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