

Graduate Work Skills

This document outlines a range of skills which employers would expect from graduate applicants and gives some hints as to how these skills might be assessed through the application process.

Analytical skills

These skills relate to the ability to identify and articulate complex issues or concepts, evaluate solutions and reach a sound conclusion. This could include:

- Seeking out relevant information
- Evaluating information effectively, identifying key concepts
- Consider various ways of assessing the issue or topic
- Reaching a logical conclusion or recommendation

How do employers assess these skills?

At application/interview stage, you could be asked questions such as:

- Describe a time when you had to analyse a complex problem and generate a solution.
- Tell me about an occasion where you evaluated data - what strategies did you use to reach a conclusion?
- Describe a situation where you needed to collect information to assess the feasibility or validity of an idea. How did you go about this?

Analysis is closely associated with problem solving and employers who use assessment centres often include exercises which involve an element of both these skills. This could be working in a group to solve a practical problem or evaluating a particular scenario to make recommendations for action.

Commercial awareness

This involves an understanding of the wider environment in which a company operates and the ability to view situations from a business perspective. Although the term is often associated with the private sector, it is equally applicable to all sectors, as every organisation must reflect on how it can best manage resources whilst offering a high standard of service to clients.

Commercial awareness might involve:

- Developing knowledge of your chosen sector
- Understanding how workplaces and organisations are structured

- Appreciating the need for all organisations to respond creatively to market conditions and expectations
- Understanding the impact of financial and resource constraints on decision making

How do employers assess these skills?

At application/interview stage, you could be asked questions such as:

- What are the main issues currently facing the sector?
- In what way might government legislation onimpact this organisation?
- Who do you think are this organisation's main competitors and how can we stand out from them?
- How do you keep up to date with developments in our sector

For employers who use assessment centres, commercial awareness could be assessed through either individual or group exercises where you are given specific scenarios in which you need to make decisions around spending or investment priorities.

IT skills, information and digital literacy

These skills relate to the ability to identify information sources, use IT effectively to process or present information and to understand how to use a variety of media including social media within a business context. This could involve:

- Gathering, analysing and arranging information in a logical way
- Quickly adapting to new technologies
- Familiarity with commonly used packages particularly MS Office, as well as more specialist software relevant to your chosen sector, eg SAGE, Photoshop, SPSS
- Developing competence in the use of a variety of social media technologies, eg blogs, internet forums and social networking sites

How are these skills assessed by employers?

Within the application process you may be asked to outline your IT skills and depending on the job sector you are applying for there may be very specific questions at interview to test your technical expertise and explore ways in which you have used technology to achieve your goals. Similarly there may be practical tests which involve the use of technology, eg delivering a Powerpoint presentation, writing a report using Word, managing an e-tray exercise in Outlook or entering data onto an Excel spreadsheet.

Leadership

This relates to the ability to motivate, encourage and manage others. This could include:

- Motivating and supporting others to get the best from them
- Identifying individual's strengths and weaknesses and planning work accordingly
- Accepting responsibility for decision making and problem solving
- Being flexible and able to respond to new situations
- Thinking in a strategic way: identifying team goals and considering how best these might be achieved.

How do employers assess these skills?

At application/interview stage, you could be asked questions such as:

- How would you describe your leadership style?
- Describe a situation in which you lead a team. How did you ensure you achieved your goals?
- What do you do to make sure all members of a team are involved?
- Outline an occasion in which you experienced conflict within a team – how did you deal with this?

For employers who use assessment centres, it is likely that some form of group activity will be included. This may take the form of a group task where you are asked to work with others to achieve a specific outcome, or you could be asked to take part in a group discussion. In either case, the employer will be assessing your ability to contribute, to take responsibility and to influence others.

Persuading and influencing skills

These skills relate to the ability to express your point of view clearly, to engage others in your ideas and to win them over. This could include:

- Expressing your ideas in a reasoned way
- Dealing positively with objections to your point of view
- Being assertive, challenging others in a non-aggressive way
- Negotiating and compromising to gain the agreement of others

How do employers assess these skills?

These skills could be viewed as aspects of both communication and teamwork skills as so would be assessed through similar types of questions and activities. At application/interview stage, you could be asked questions such as:

- Describe a situation in which you influenced others and persuaded them to your point of view.
- Tell me about a time when you suggested a new idea at work – how did you present it and what was the outcome?
- How would you go about persuading a sceptical team member that your ideas would add value to a project?

For employers who use assessment centres, group tasks are commonly used to assess ability to influence.

Planning and Organisation

These skills relate to the ability to plan tasks or activities and carry them out effectively. This could include:

- Setting objectives and priorities which are achievable
- Being able to work effectively under pressure

- Managing your time and resources to meet deadlines

How do employers assess these skills?

At application/interview stage, you could be asked questions such as:

- Tell me about a time when you have had to plan and organise a project or task.
- How do you monitor the progress of a project?
- How do you go about prioritising your workload?
- Tell me about a situation when you worked under pressure to a particularly tight deadline. How did you ensure that you completed the task on schedule?

At assessment centres, a typical example of an activity designed to assess organisational skills is the e-tray exercise. Candidates are given a series of documents, and on the basis of the content they must make decisions about how to respond eg which activities should be given priority, which can wait for a response, or which could be delegated. It may also involve drafting emails to colleagues or clients.

Problem solving skills

These skills relate to the ability to identify key elements of a problem and using logical steps to overcome this. This could include:

- Identifying the nature of a problem
- Being aware of resources available to you
- Devising a logical sequence of actions in dealing with a problem
- Generating, evaluating and implementing solutions
- Demonstrating flexibility in the event of unforeseen obstacles

How do employers assess these skills?

At application/interview stage, you could be asked questions such as:

- Tell me about a situation where you had to solve a problem or make a decision that required careful thought. How did you go about this?
- Describe a time when you demonstrated creativity in solving a difficult problem.
- Outline a situation where you dealt effectively with a difficult customer.

At assessment centres, problem solving skills may well be assessed through team activities in which the group is asked to achieve a specific goal. As well as looking for the ability to generate possible solutions, they would also expect candidates to be flexible and resilient, i.e. to respond positively to setbacks.

Teamwork

This relates to the ability to work effectively within a group and to identify team roles including your own. This could include:

- Working collaboratively towards a common objective
- Listening to the opinions of others and helping them to develop their ideas

- Accepting criticism and being able to give positive feedback to others
- Contributing your ideas to the group
- Negotiating with others to reach a compromise where needed
- Recognising your own strengths and the strengths of others in relation to the skills and knowledge which each individual can bring to the task

How do employers assess these skills?

At application/interview stage, you could be asked questions such as:

- Describe a situation in which you contributed significantly to a team project
- What role do you usually play in a team?
- What do you do to make sure all members of a team are involved?
- Outline an occasion in which you experienced conflict within a team – how did you deal with this?

Assessment centres commonly include some form of group activity: this may be a group task where you are asked to work with others to achieve a specific outcome, or you could be asked to take part in a group discussion. In either case, the employer will be assessing your ability to contribute as well as the way in which you interact with others.

Written and spoken communication skills

These skills relate to the ability to express yourself clearly in writing and in speech. This could include:

- Gathering, analysing and arranging information in a logical way
- Being able to clarify and summarise what others are communicating
- Developing a point of view and expressing this logically to a variety of audiences
- Give a presentation to a group

How do employers assess these skills?

Your ability to express yourself in writing will be assessed at application stage, whilst verbal communication will be assessed during the interview. You could be asked questions such as:

- Describe a situation in which you influenced others and persuaded them to your point of view.
- How would you deal with a customer who was not happy with the service you provided?
- Describe a situation where you had to explain something complex to a colleague or a client. What problems did you encounter and how did you deal with them?
- Outline an occasion in which you experienced conflict with a colleague – how did you deal with this?

Within assessment centres, many of the tasks will have a focus on communication skills and might include delivering a presentation, producing a brief report or composing a series of emails.

This document has outlined the range of skills which employers typically expect of their graduate applicants. To assess these on both application forms and in interviews, competency questions are often used. These typically begin with:

Tell me about a time when...

Describe a situation where...

Here the employer is looking for a specific example from your experience which highlights how you have demonstrated the skill in focus. The STAR framework is recommended as a way of handling these types of questions and you can find out more on the article "[How to answer competency-based interview questions](#)" on the Target Jobs website.

To find out more about typical assessment centre activities refer to the "[Graduate's Guide to Assessment Centres](#)" on the Target website.

If you need further help with identifying or building your skills, you can book an appointment on [mycareer](#), or use some of the [self-assessment tools](#) on the careers portal.