WHAT
EMPLOYERS
WANT

Guide for young people looking for work

NIACE The National Voice for Lifelong Learning
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
This guide has been written by NIACE. NIACE is the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education. We run programmes that help people of all ages and backgrounds to learn things that are useful to them. Learning benefits people in lots of ways – it helps them to get a job and to do well at work; it helps them to develop skills that are important in everyday life; it helps them to support their families and to contribute to the economy and to their local community. We fight for all adults to have opportunities throughout their lives to take part in and benefit from learning.

Who is this guide for?

This short guide is for unemployed young people, aged 16–25, who are looking for employment. This might be a full- or part-time job, an Apprenticeship, an internship or any other type of work.

How can it help me?

During the last few years, unemployment among young people has reached record high levels. There have been lots of reports in the media that suggest that employers find it hard to recruit young people into jobs, as they often don’t have the skills, qualities and experience that they – the employers – are looking for. These reports are often unclear and contradictory and leave unemployed young people feeling confused about what employers are actually looking for.

This guide provides clear information and insights into what employers want. It will help you to understand what skills, qualities and experience employers consider to be most important when they are recruiting a young person.
All of the information in this guide comes directly from interviews with employers. The interviews were conducted by three groups of young people in England, Scotland and Wales. The young people received training and support to carry out the interviews.

We hope the information contained in this guide will help you to gain employment and to progress at work.
1. What do employers THINK about young people?

The vast majority of employers who took part in an interview were really positive about young people. Overall, they spoke about young people as being ‘enthusiastic’, ‘eager’, ‘keen’ and ‘willing to learn’.

Employers don’t expect young people to be fully developed and skilled employees – they recognise that young people need time and opportunities to learn and grow. In fact, most employers welcome the opportunity to ‘shape’ young people. As one employer said:

‘We’re looking for young people who are enthusiastic and keen to learn. Young people who we can shape and grow into our business. We want young people who are eager to find out about the business, about how we work and our culture. We want young people who we can train and develop to make a long-term contribution to the company.’

Another said:

‘I never look at a young person and say no. Young people have a lot to offer. We like to give them a chance to prove themselves and do well. They often surprise you with what they have to offer!’
2. What are employers LOOKING FOR in a young person?

Businesses recruit staff because they need them – because there is a job that needs to be done and because it needs to be done well. Employers want to recruit young people who can contribute to making their businesses successful and profitable. While employers don’t expect young people to know everything or to be fully skilled, they do want to recruit young people who are able to show that they have developed some important skills and that they are keen to learn. When recruiting a young person, the following are the most important skills, attributes and qualities that employers said they are looking for.

EVERY SINGLE employer who was interviewed highlighted the importance of a young person having a ‘positive attitude’ – employers want young people to be ‘sparky’; they want them to show enthusiasm, commitment and energy:

‘I like to see a young person with spark and personality. Somebody who is determined and tries to do their best everyday.’

‘A positive attitude towards past experience is really important – if something went wrong, what lessons did they learn? How have they picked themselves up and moved forward?’

‘My message to young people would be to be positive, try hard and do your best.’

Young people can show they have a positive attitude by being committed, working hard and being keen to learn and work. One employer gave the example of a young person who started work as a junior, worked hard, showed commitment and took every opportunity to learn and train. This young person has now progressed to Head of Finance within the business. Employers also said:
‘They need to prove that they have worked hard to get the experience or qualifications needed, even if they haven’t done well at school. And if they have come straight from school they need to show a passion for learning the job and the will to take up training.’

‘Positive attitude, willingness to get stuck in and work hard is extremely important.’

Employers also highly value ‘soft skills’, which they consider to be the foundations of a good employee. These are the basic personal skills that enable young people to ‘get on well at work’. These skills are often described as ‘transferable’, which means they can be used in lots of different types of jobs. So what are soft skills? Here are some examples that employers gave us:

Communication skills – being able to communicate clearly and well with colleagues and customers. This involves listening effectively and responding to questions, as well as talking and communicating clearly in other ways. It can involve giving instructions and taking feedback. One employer said:

‘Good communication is crucial. Young people need to make good eye contact, be polite, talk clearly and have the ability to ask and answer questions fully. Being a ‘people person’ is really positive – not too quiet, but interested in other people – good at listening and understanding what people are telling them.’

‘In this business customer service is everything. Young people need to be polite and welcoming, they need to listen to what customers are asking them and they need to respond clearly.’
Problem-solving skills – as an employee it’s really important to not give up when faced with a problem. Businesses need people who can find solutions to problems. Here’s an example:

‘Last week one of our apprentices worked late to photocopy papers that were needed for an important meeting the next morning. The photocopier got jammed. He tried to fix it but couldn’t, so he went to the company next door, who we share facilities with, he explained the problem and asked to use their photocopier. He also arranged for an engineer to fix our copier the next day. This saved us lots of time and ensured that we had the papers we needed.’

‘The ability to approach problems with creativity and a ‘can-do’ attitude is important. A young person who can sort things out, be logical and creative will go a long way.’

Time management – employers want their staff to arrive on time for work, or even be a few minutes early. In addition, they value reliability and flexibility – this involves doing what you say you’re going to do and responding to what your employer needs you to do. Sometimes this means juggling tasks, planning your time and prioritising:

‘If a young person arrives a few minutes early and works a few minutes late on occasions it shows me that they’re keen.’

‘At peak times we are really busy, it’s important for staff to be able to decide what to do first. We need to ensure that everything gets done, but, for example, a young person needs to know that they should prioritise serving a customer who is standing at the counter, over sending an e-mail.’
Teamwork skills – being an employee always involves working with other people. Businesses rely on staff to work well together to achieve their goals. Good team players are friendly, open, helpful and honest. They support each other, while also knowing what their individual role is:

‘Young people need to be good team players. They need to be able to get on with their colleagues, give and accept help.’

‘They need to be able to work within the team. We have a strong culture of working together.’

Working well under pressure – the world of work is often really busy. There are deadlines to meet and you need to do your job well. On occasions there may be lots of different tasks to juggle. Employers want people who don’t panic, but who can work quickly and get the job done to a high standard. One employer said:

‘Sometimes it can be stressful, especially when the technology goes wrong and people are complaining. I need staff who are able to cope with the pressure, work well together to sort out problems and get the job done to a high standard.’

These are the main soft skills that employers said are important when they are recruiting a young person. However, you may be aware of other soft skills which you think are important, or they may be described a little differently. For example, in other research the following soft skills have been identified:

- The ability to make decisions that are well informed. Employers don’t want their staff to be indecisive, but they also don’t want them to make snap decisions that are likely to be bad for their business.
As a young person who is fairly new to the world of work, you’re unlikely to be managing staff straight away. However, most employers value people who show **leadership skills** and initiative – people who can make suggestions and get on with things without being told to do so. They also value people who show some of the qualities associated with being a good leader, such as encouraging and motivating other staff.

**Self management** involves being able to plan your time and organise yourself well so that you do your job efficiently.

So, in addition to ‘soft skills’, which are the personal skills that employers consider important, employers also said that they value ‘**hard skills**’. Hard skills are specific skills that you can learn. As a young person looking for work, there are thousands of different jobs that you could apply for, all of which may require different combinations of hard skills.

Examples of hard skills include being able to:

- fit a plug socket
- speak Spanish
- write a computer programme
- operate a fork lift truck
- measure a patient’s blood pressure.

From this short list you will see that most hard skills are not needed for most jobs. However, employers said that there are three hard skills that they particularly value and that are important in most jobs:
Literacy skills – most jobs involve reading, writing and communicating. Not all employers will expect high level literacy skills – it will probably depend on the type of job they are recruiting for. However, employers consistently say that it is essential for young people to be able to read, write and communicate well enough for them to do their job effectively:

‘Working in the cafe does not involve lots of reading or writing, but my staff do need to be able to write menus on the board clearly and they need to be able to spell well. It doesn’t look professional if our menus contain lots of spelling mistakes.’

‘Good literacy skills are essential. We regularly write to clients, either by letter or e-mail. It’s important that the information is accurate, correct and communicated professionally. Excellent spelling and grammar is highly preferred.’

Numeracy skills – just like literacy, most jobs involve working with numbers to some extent. This might include dealing with money, counting stock, using a calculator or spreadsheet, measuring medication or working out timetables. Most jobs won’t require you to be a mathematician, but basic skills and confidence in using numbers are considered important by employers:

‘Young people need to be numerate. We don’t expect them to be able to solve complicated equations or anything like that, but they do need to be able to undertake simple maths tasks, such as addition and subtraction, working out percentages and proportions.’

‘Decent maths skills are essential. Our employees need to be able to count, particularly when operating the cash register and ordering stock.’
IT and digital skills – being able to use information and communications technology is now essential for most people, both at work and personally. The jobs that young people apply for require different types and levels of IT and digital skills. Just like literacy and numeracy, the employers that we interviewed consistently emphasised the importance of young people having good IT skills:

‘Keeping up to date with developments in ICT and digital technology is vital to the success of our business. Technology changes at a fast pace. All employees need to be open to change and able to adapt to new technology.’

‘The young people that we employ use ICT as part of their everyday lives. One of our Apprentices has set up a Facebook page and Twitter account for the business. Skilled use of ICT is an important attribute that many young people have and that employers value.’

Good literacy, numeracy and IT skills are vital for young people, not just in their job roles but also in looking for work and applying for jobs and in enabling them to lead full and active lives.
3. How important are QUALIFICATIONS and EXPERIENCE to employers?

Employers said that the qualifications and experience they are looking for depends very much on the post they are seeking to fill. Qualifications are valued by employers as they are a guide to the hard skills and the ability that a young person has in a specific area. However, as has been outlined earlier in this guide, employers also place very high value on a young person’s attitude and their soft skills – which cannot be measured by qualifications alone. One employer said:

‘Although qualifications are important, they are not the deciding factor in whether a young person gets a job.’

Another employer spoke about how important it is for young people to boost their qualifications:

‘Many of the young people that we employ didn’t leave school with good GCSEs, but they have completed qualifications or short courses once they left school to improve on this. Doing short courses and signing up for government training programmes shows me that the young person wants to develop good skills and that they are committed to getting a job. This is important.’

Overall, where a young person has a positive and ‘sparky’ attitude to work and good soft skills, employers believe that qualifications improve their employability as they show that the young person has hard skills in a particular area.

Almost all of the employers who took part in an interview emphasised the importance of young people gaining experience. Some employers specifically mentioned the importance of work experience:
‘It’s really important that young people get work experience. They need to understand what the world of work is like and what is expected of them as an employee.’

‘Work experience enables young people to develop links with employers, to build networks and really understand what they need to do to be a good employee.’

But most of the employers said that it is not just about work experience; that all different types of experience are valuable:

‘Voluntary work is a really good way for young people to gain experience and develop new skills. They get to meet people from different walks of life, broaden their horizons and practice their ‘soft skills’.

‘Young people gain experience in all sorts of ways – hobbies, volunteering, work placements, part-time jobs, supporting friends, caring for siblings, maintaining their mum’s garden, socialising on Facebook! All of these things build young people’s experience and give them valuable transferable skills – it’s important that young people are able to reflect on this and really think about the skills and experience they are developing and how this can benefit an employer.’
Overall, employers said that when they are recruiting a young person they are looking for:

- A positive attitude.
- ‘Soft skills’ – which are transferable to different jobs.
- ‘Hard skills’ – many hard skills are specific to particular jobs, but employers place particularly high value on literacy, numeracy and IT skills, which are considered important for almost all jobs.
- Qualifications – even though employers recognise that not all the qualities they are looking for can be measured through qualifications, they are valued by employers.
- Experience – a range of different types of experience, particularly work experience and volunteering.

This quote, from one employer, really sums up what employers are looking for when they recruit a young person:

‘I’m looking for a young person with a positive attitude. Somebody who is interested in the business, who wants to learn and shows commitment. If they have formal qualifications that’s great, but if they don’t I’d like to see what effort they have made to improve their skills – for example, have they been on short courses, have they done any volunteering, have they done any part-time jobs or unpaid work experience? If a young person can show me that they’ve done these things and that they’re keen, hard working and that they’ve tried hard to improve themselves, that’s important.’
Follow this advice from employers to improve your employment chances:

- **Show interest and enthusiasm** for the company and job:

  ‘As an employer I want to see that a young person is keen. They need to show interest and enthusiasm – a passion for the job/company.’

  ‘They need to be excited about the industry and the position – this shows me that it means something to them.’

- **Prepare good applications**:

  ‘Make sure online applications are completed fully. References would be good.’

  ‘Research the job role, what is expected and research the company – match your skills to the job you are applying for.’

  ‘Making a CV look good and spelt well is key and adding contact details is vital! A good covering letter is also important. Make sure the CV has been changed for the job you are applying for.’

  ‘Having a good CV which isn’t too repetitive and which is changed to suit the job is important, as is an application form completed well showing skills and experience.’
‘Being interested enough to prepare properly for applications and interviews is crucial. Make sure you follow instructions when applying – automatic rejection if applications are not completed properly. And take time with applications – spelling, neatness, appearance are all important.’

‘Make it easy for employers to look at your CV and know what you’re about.’

• **Prepare well for an interview and sell yourself effectively:**

‘Please turn up for an interview on time, be dressed well, showing an enthusiasm and an interest in the company. Young people need to show that they have researched the company and the job. They need to be able to sell themselves in an interview, answer questions fully and also not rush answers.’

‘Be well presented and prepared with questions for the interview.’

‘Think of some examples of experience to answer common interview questions and have some questions of your own.’

‘Think about positive achievements, list them before interview and even consider taking in notes so you can refer to them when answering questions. Practice answering common questions before your interviews. Have some thoughtful questions of your own to ask about the organisation – and not ones that you could easily answer with the information you can find online.’
Young people need the ability to sell themselves. They need to demonstrate what they can provide to the company – look at skills and experience gained previously in school, college, projects completed, hobbies, voluntary work and work experience – some can be transferred into the workplace, use these examples during your interview if they can be related to the job.

They need to be able to communicate to me that they have the skills and attitude that we’re looking for. They also need to prove that they are going to be hard-working, committed, reliable, willing to learn. Examples of what they have done and why this job is important to them are really useful.

Be positive:

Stay positive and let your personality, sense of humour, and willingness to learn show that you are the best person for the job.

Take every opportunity to gain experience:

Build relationships with employers, either through work experience or volunteering.

Even though it is easy to view work experience and volunteering as doing something for nothing, the long-term benefits are much greater than they might first appear – experience, training, references, networking – grasp every opportunity!

Recognise opportunities – even unpaid ones – and take them.
We hope you have found this guide useful. Please tell us what you think about it – email nicola.aylward@niace.org.uk

For further information and support on looking for work:

If you live in England, visit:
https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk

If you live in Wales, visit:
www.careerswales.com

If you live in Scotland, visit:
www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk

NIACE will launch a new website early in 2015 called ‘What Employers Want’. This will be available at www.niace.org.uk/whatemployerswant
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