Do's and Don'ts of Writing Successful Application Forms...

DO:
1. **Use the job spec (person specification/selection criteria) as your guide.** It’s there for a reason, and tells you exactly what skills and experience the employer is looking for in their “ideal” applicant. Look at both the essential and the desirable criteria where these are available and try to provide evidence for everything the employer wants. You can draw upon experience from university, part-time or voluntary work and all of your extra-curricular activities/hobbies.
2. **Follow all instructions carefully.** Read the form carefully from start to finish and follow any specific instructions including word counts, which you must never go over. Writing succinctly is a skill – try deleting any unnecessary words or phrases which don’t add anything extra.
3. **Pay close attention to detail.** This is expected by ALL employers, so check the final form for ‘typos’, misspellings and poor grammar. These are a BIG turnoff which can result in all your hard work being destined for the bin!
4. **Research the company thoroughly.** You need to understand the organisation, what they do and the qualifications, experience and personal qualities they want. Without this research it’s impossible to explain how you can contribute, and you will also sound more motivated.
5. **Research the role & sector thoroughly.** Unless you have a clear idea of both you can’t tailor your application. Also, why would you apply for something you know very little about?
6. **Sound motivated & enthusiastic.** You need to be asking yourself why THIS company and THIS role and have some convincing arguments. Employers want to employ someone who wants to work for them! Obvious, really!
7. **Tailor your skills to the role.** You may not necessarily have relevant work experience but you are likely to have lots of relevant transferable skills. See ‘Skills and Attributes – what are employers looking for’ Hot Tips sheet.
8. **Keep a copy.** When it comes to the interview stage, it is immeasurably useful to remember what you have told the employer!
9. **Follow the CAR (or STAR) method.** See over for providing evidence for competency based questions using these techniques.
10. **Ask someone to read over your form.** If English isn’t your first language ask an English friend to look at your form for grammatical and spelling errors. It’s good to do this anyway as you may not pick up on mistakes after you have looked at it for the 50th time! We cannot provide a proof-reading service (i.e. spelling and grammar) at Careers but we do provide professional guidance on structure and content to help you market yourself in the most effective way.
DON'T:

1. **Leave whole sections empty.** The recruiter wants information in a structured way and expects all sections to be completed. If you are not sure about the content of any section check with a Careers Consultant.

2. **Don't do the application in one sitting.** Avoid application fatigue as you will start to get sloppy and make mistakes. It’s better to be fresh each time you tackle it as they can be difficult and will require your full attention.

3. **Copy and paste large sections from other application forms.** You might want to copy some small sections but they must be tailored, and remember every employer has slightly different requirements, which may be in a very different context. It is not unusual for students to leave in a previous employer’s name – DISASTER!

4. **Say ‘See my CV’.** Always follow the instructions exactly, and never ever take this short cut. If they wanted a CV they would have asked for one in the first place!

5. **Be too wordy.** It’s a fine art to get the balance of providing enough detail without being too verbose. You need to give employers a focused flavour of your relevant experience without overloading the form with lots of unnecessary words and phrases. Remember employers may be reading through 100s of applications!

Please note: **application forms with a CV upload option:** On occasion you may be given the option to upload your CV. Despite this the recruiter will usually be focussing mainly on the contents of your application form, in particular the personal statement section, so focus on this as your CV is only the secondary supporting information in this instance.

**Competency-based questions**

Firstly - what are they? The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) define competencies as “… the behaviours (and technical attributes where appropriate) that individuals must have or acquire to perform effectively at work”. Usually such questions begin with ‘Describe a time when you …’ or ‘Give an example of …’ and ask for examples of specific skills such as teamwork, leadership, communication, etc. Thus, ‘describe a time when you have had to resolve a difficult problem’ or ‘give an example of when you have had to use leadership skills’.

**How to demonstrate your skills using the CAR technique**

- **CONTEXT:** Briefly explain the context of your example so the scenario makes sense to the employer.
- **ACTION:** What specific actions did you take? Use the word ‘I’ where possible.
- **RESULT:** What was the final result of your actions?

**An example of demonstrating good communication skills…**

**Context** ‘I work as a Student Ambassador at Oxford Brookes University guiding groups of prospective students, and I was asked to guide a very rowdy group of sixth formers around campus.’

**Action** ‘I worked hard to develop a rapport with the students by being firm, but friendly. When a boy was rude I addressed this immediately and used humour to win respect from the rest of the group.’

**Result** ‘I had a captive audience and everyone listened. The teacher thanked me, apologised for their behaviour & said I managed the situation & group extremely well.’

**STAR (Situation Task Action Result)** is another useful acronym to describe your skills. For more detailed information on using STAR see our Hot Tips: STAR – improve the way you describe your skills.