

## The StepStone Guide to Job Applications

### THE ART OF APPLYING FOR A JOB

- What to include in your online and e-mail applications
- How to create a CV
- The importance of a cover letter and how to write it
- Tips for your job interview



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# INTRODUCTION



## In need of a fulfilling new job?

Well, so are many other people around you.

## Then why should you believe you stand a chance?

Because StepStone has received a lot of feedback from recruiters about job applicants over the years and we've decided to share it with you!

## You're within an inch of becoming the most desirable candidate!

Competition in the job market is tough. Having the right qualifications won't be enough to make you stand out as you won't be the only person with those attributes.

To sway the odds in your favour, it's worth learning the ins and outs of the application process. StepStone's application experts will help you make the case that YOU are the ideal candidate for the job.

This guide is divided into four sections:

- what to include in your online and e-mail applications
- how to create a CV
- the importance of a cover letter and how to write it
- tips for your job interview

There's no need to go through the whole guide. Each section works on its own, so just pick the topics you haven't yet mastered.

But of course, simply reading this guide won't get you where you want to be. That will depend on you putting our advice into practice and tailoring it to your profile and needs.

Share this guide with people you care about, it could really do them a favour!

# 1

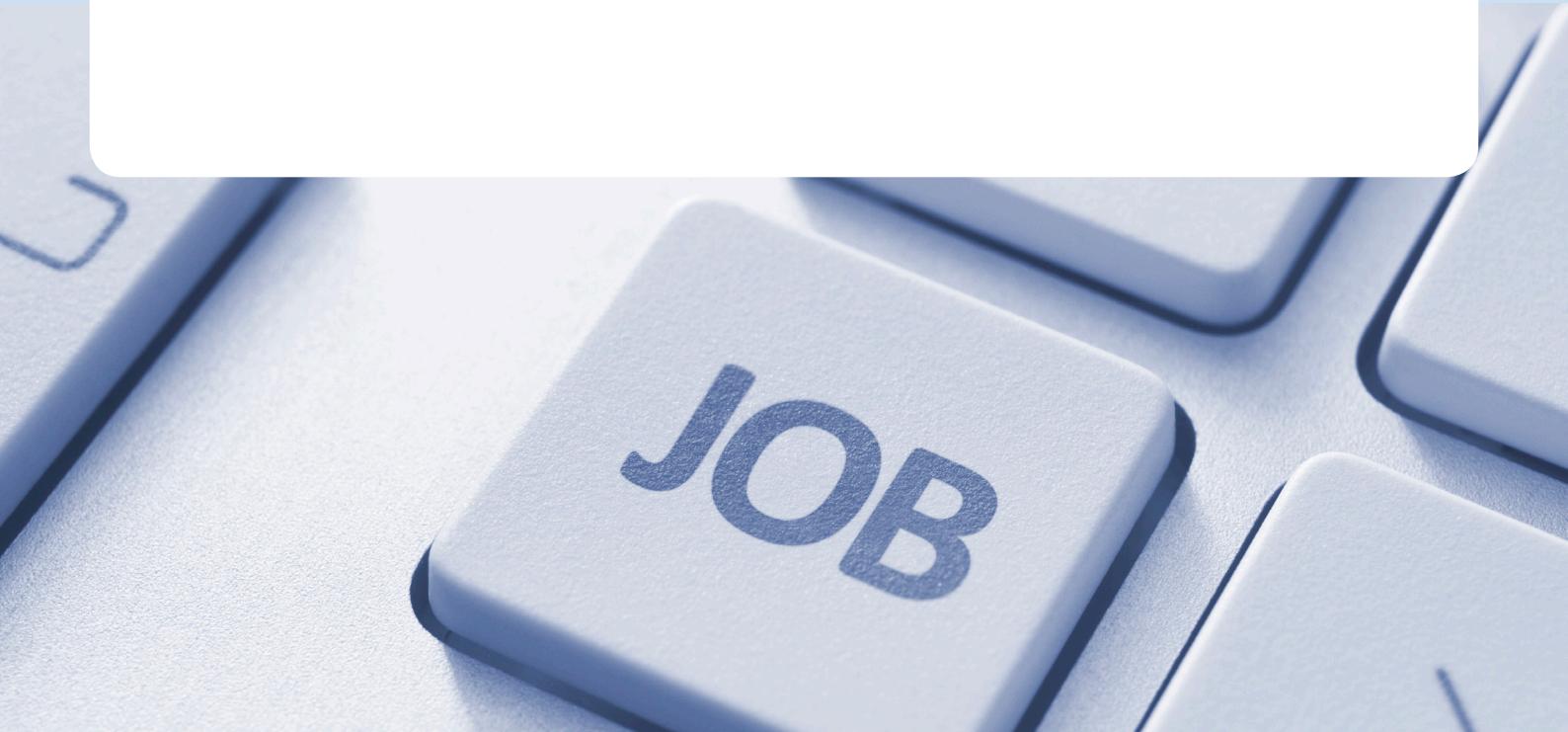
## ONLINE AND E-MAIL APPLICATIONS

Employers prefer online job applications. This fact was revealed by a StepStone survey<sup>1</sup> that showed that more than 80% of employers announce their vacancies online. They mostly do so on their own websites or through job sites like StepStone. Nearly 70% of recruiters indicate a preference for receiving job applications by e-mail, with 20% asking applicants to complete an online application form.

- Applying by e-mail or through a job site**
- Applying via an online form**

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<sup>1</sup> StepStone survey of employers and job applicants, on recruitment and application practice in 2010-2011, undertaken in eight European countries





## 1. ONLINE AND E-MAIL APPLICATIONS

### Applying by e-mail or through a job site

When you apply for a job by e-mail, it's important that all your communications are as professional as they would be if you were sending a printed CV and cover letter.

Some companies prefer you to apply via the job site, where they ask you to answer a few introductory questions and attach any application documents.

These are the items you should include with this type of application:

- A **cover letter** — tailor it as far as possible to the job you're applying for. Anyone using a standard letter runs the risk of being seen as uninterested or unmotivated.
- A **CV**, with or without a photo — we recommend you adapt your CV to the job you're applying for.
- **Copies of diplomas or certificates** — just 18% of applicants include copies of these with their applications, but about 40% of recruiters find them useful. So we suggest you try, whenever possible, to include them with your application.

### Applying via an online form

You might be asked to fill in an online application form.

In these cases you might not need to send your CV and cover letter, as their content may be included in the form you submit online. Some companies find it more convenient to use this type of application to make it easier to record all the candidates' data.

The main difference here lies in the fact that you will have to stick to the options offered to you by the system. For example, if you don't find the name of your degree in the pre-defined list of qualifications, you should select the option that is the closest. Alternatively, you could select "Other" if it is offered, but you then run the risk of not being included in an automatic selection.

# 2

## YOUR CV

The ideal CV does not exist. Some people start their CV with their education and training, others with their experience, and others a mixture of both.

The chronological CV is the most classic approach, listing education and professional experience in reverse chronological order. This presentation is the best if your work experience and your most recent education and training are the most relevant to the position for which you are applying.

But if you want a career change, you may decide to draw more attention to your knowledge and skills. This way, candidates who have no experience in the area in which they want to work can demonstrate that they are still suitable for the job. Begin your CV with specific knowledge or projects on which you have worked. Freelancers can, for example, use this form of resumé to emphasise their most relevant projects. People who have 'holes' in their CV often opt for this approach as well.

Check this section for tips on how to write your CV and what to include in it in order to draw the recruiter's attention.

- ✓ **Tips for an effective CV**
- ✓ **How to give your CV that little extra**
- ✓ **That fatal mistake on your CV you wish you hadn't made**
- ✓ **Don't get caught in a lie**
- ✓ **Tips for a perfect layout**
- ✓ **Include a photo or not?**
- ✓ **Put your CV online**
- ✓ **There's nothing like a good example**



### Tips for an effective CV

Once you've decided which type of CV you want to write, make sure you stick to a few guidelines, listed below. They might seem obvious at first sight but are so easy to forget that it's worth taking a look through them.

#### No missing information

Recruiters hope to find answers to all of their questions while browsing your CV. So it's up to you to put forward all the key attributes relating to you and the job role in question. Experience, education, leisure interests, ... specify anything that will convince recruiters of your qualities. You can of course mention the area in which you want to work.

#### A clear structure

It should be easy for recruiters to find the information they're looking for. So the structure of your CV is as important as its content. If recruiters can't get the information they want at a glance, your chances of getting a positive response will reduce. So use a clear structure with paragraphs and relevant titles.

#### An attractive layout

Try to use a pleasant layout which encourages reading. This may take a little longer, but it is important if you want your CV to stand out. Later in the guide we will give you some tips on how to improve your CV layout.

#### Important information at the top of your CV

The expression "save the best for last" doesn't apply to a CV! Your work experience, qualifications and other relevant training should catch the eye. Don't bury them at the end of your CV: specify them clearly at the start. When it comes to your experience, it is useful to give an overview of the tasks you performed (which preferably have relate to the job for which you are applying).

#### Include relevant information only

When a recruiter browses your CV, their aim is of course to get to know you, but they don't need to know everything. If you have taken a large number of courses, there's no point listing them all. Just include the most relevant ones for the job role you seek. It is also not necessary to mention your school.

#### In an unsolicited application, indicate the type of job you're looking for clearly

Do you know exactly what you want? Say it! Indicate in your CV the type of work you are looking for. Recruiters will then take this into account. This applies especially when you make an unsolicited application or when you apply for a position you have never worked in before.

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### ... Tips for an effective CV

#### Visible contact information

As you certainly want to be invited as soon as possible for an interview, make your contact data clearly visible at the top of your CV, so that recruiters can find it quickly. You can even put them in the header so that they automatically appear on all pages.

#### Language skills

Do not forget to mention your language skills as the ability to speak another language may be a requirement of some jobs.

#### Concise but complete

Recruiters generally have little time, so limit yourself to two pages, no more. It's unlikely a much longer CV would be read in full. Avoid leaving gaps in your employment history because there will doubtless be some questions later. You were unemployed at some point? Just say so.

#### A proper name for your CV file

Make sure you don't give your CV an incomprehensible filename, such as: FG74PLNT\_30002\_KJ.pdf — try to use a filename along these lines: Curriculum Vitae\_Vanessa Hall.pdf. This will be much clearer to recruiters when they're saving and opening your files. And if you decide to include the name of the company in the filename, just make sure it's the right one.



### How to give your CV that little extra

We've seen the basic rules for writing a CV. If you follow them, your CV will be complete and of good quality. But it's not always wise to apply the same rules every time. So how can you give your CV that little extra that the others do not have?

Here are a few ideas, but try giving free rein to your own imagination.

#### Give your CV an original look

An original CV is probably not appropriate for a job in finance, but can be an asset when you apply for a creative job. There's the story of a guy who sent the company he wanted to work for a shoe with a note attached that said: "to get my foot in the door." This kind of original CV can work really well as it stands out from the rest of the batch.

However this does not mean you should overdo it — sometimes it's better to stay more factual. First think of a concept for your CV and use this as a base to shape it. And choose something that suits you: your CV may reflect a part of your personality. Try to find a balance and make sure all of the content is readable.

#### Use an appropriate structure

It is sometimes useful to slightly modify the structure of your CV. For instance, if you have worked for many years but have held several positions in different sectors you can classify your experience by function. Imagine you have some experience in the areas of administration and sales, and also as a marketing manager. If you are applying for a sales position, then it's your experience in sales which will be the most relevant. So it would make sense to group all your sales experience so that your employer can immediately see your experience in this area.

#### Content — a key factor

Even if you give free rein to your creativity with regards to the layout and structure of your CV, your CV must however still be clear and readable. You will not succeed if you use complex sentence constructions or unnecessarily formal words. So avoid using sentences such as "from 2007 to the present day, I have been an employee at Company X in Brussels." The phrase "from 2007 to the present day" can be replaced by "since 2007" "and instead of "being an employee" you just "work" for a company in Brussels. It is difficult to avoid all jargon when writing a CV, but try not to use it too much. If your last job was for example "corporate communication, marketing and press officer Benelux", cite briefly the responsibilities that you were assigned.

#### Give a personal touch to your CV

Even if you're not a designer, you can give your CV a personal touch. Do not you just list your skills — for example, avoid "knowledge of MS Office" and "flexible" but rather say that you are an enthusiastic person who enjoys working within a team and who doesn't give up easily under stressful situations. If you are passionate about wine, sports, movies, books, etc, do not hesitate to mention it in your CV. But only if such information is relevant in the context of the role or if your hobbies tell the recruiter something about your personality. You can also add a photo to your CV. Later in this guide, you'll find some tips on what kind of picture you should include.



## That fatal mistake on your CV you wish you hadn't made

Are you only rarely invited to an interview and wonder why? It could simply be because you've made one of the following mistakes in your application. So it may be time to examine your CV closely to ensure you haven't made the sort of mistakes that can be your downfall. Here are some of the things to avoid.

### Jokey e-mail address

wonderwoman@gmail.com or flying\_tomato@hotmail.com don't read well in your contact details. You should also avoid sending your CV from this type of e-mail address. In any case, there is a good chance that your e-mail would get blocked by the recipient's spam filter.

### Irrelevant information

Avoid giving information that is of little or no interest. You can mention your hobbies without going into detail, so, if you are passionate about movies, don't start listing your favourite directors. Ditto regarding your work experience. Your summer job at the bakery is not very important if you are applying for a position as an engineer. And there is no need to mention your exam results unless you are applying for a job as a scientific collaborator and have graduated with honours in the relevant branch related to the function.

### Friends as references

If you mention references, rely on someone you know in a professional context — and ask that person first if you can include them on your CV.

### Your reason for leaving

The question about why you left (or want to leave) your previous employer will probably arise during your interview. It is not necessary to include this information in your CV. But do prepare yourself to answer this question and make sure you have a better reason than "my company car was not big enough".

### Strange fonts or symbols

A CV is not the right place to try unusual fonts or original symbols. It will often be perceived as a lack of maturity and it is possible that the recipient will not even manage to read your CV if their computer can't recognise the font you use. Keep it simple unless you are applying for a creative job for which you must stand out. Whatever happens, it is important that your CV is always clear.

### Overly complicated words

HR people might not be aware of the technical jargon related to your job: limiting your use of it will make your CV a much more enjoyable read.

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### ... That fatal mistake on your CV you wish you hadn't made

#### Lies

Never lie in your CV. The truth will always come out. Recruiters are experts who can determine at the interview if you have lied in your CV. There's more on this in the next section.

#### Disorder

Not one HR manager will make the effort to consult a CV as long as your arm that doesn't have a chronological or other logical order. Be sure to have a structure, keep it brief, and limit yourself to the information that will be decisive in the first phase.

#### Holiday photo

You can include a photo of yourself, but it goes without saying that it shouldn't be a picture of you wearing your most alluring beach attire!



## Don't get caught in a lie

Many applicants think it's ok to exaggerate in their application. Lying about soft skills or areas of responsibility in previous jobs is, in fact, pretty popular.

Who could check it? The probability of being caught lying is quite low. However, when foreign language skills, user skills, and stays abroad are exaggerated, the risk of the lie being exposed is pretty high. Language skills can be checked during a job interview, for example.

HR professionals also have a trained eye for fibbers. People with nervous facial expressions and uncertain gestures at a job interview decrease their chances of getting the job. And missing experience or inadequate knowledge will be exposed in the workplace anyway.

For employers, lying in the CV is far from a trivial offence. If your lie is exposed, you could be dismissed — even years after you were hired.

It's especially precarious when higher education or work certificates are forged. The veracity of such certificates can usually be checked by phone. You are liable to prosecution when forging documents.

Don't want to be caught in a lie? Then our advice is never to tell a lie. Lies are always found out in the end.



## Tips for a perfect layout

You should know by now what to include in your CV. And if you still have doubts, just go back over the previous sections.

In addition to the content, the format of your CV is also important. A clear layout will appeal to employers and make them want to read your CV and will also make it easy for them to find the information they're looking for. Here are the **10 golden rules for a perfect CV layout**:

### 1 Keep to two pages maximum

Your CV shouldn't be longer than two pages, otherwise the recruiter will never read it through to the end. If you do not have much experience, don't try to make your CV longer by adding useless information. You have many things to mention? Then try to select the most important information.

### 2 Use clear headings

Put your headings and sub-headings in bold or in a bigger font. This will help recruiters quickly understand the structure of your CV and find the specific information they are looking for. You can also put some keywords in bold inside the text so that they stand out better. However do not overdo it.

### 3 Use indents and bullets

For a better structure you can also use indents and bullets — they will make your CV lighter and clearer but again, don't overdo it.

### 4 Choose a legible font

The content of your CV is essential and you must do everything so that the recruiter can read it without difficulty. So, use the same font in your CV and cover letter to stay coherent. Preferably choose font size 12 for the text (headlines can be larger): this is the perfect size and also the most commonly used. And choose a standard font available on all computers otherwise the recruiter may literally be unable to read your CV.

### 5 Make your contact details visible

Put your name and address in the header at the top of the page so that they are immediately noticeable and are displayed automatically on all pages. The recruiter will be able to contact you more easily for a first interview.

### 6 Keep a sober design

Do not use too many different colours in your text — preferably stick to black. Applying for a creative function? Then you can dare to use colours and an original design.

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### ... Tips for a perfect layout

#### 7 Print on white paper

If for any reason you need to print your CV use ordinary white paper. Applying for a job is a serious matter, so coloured paper is not recommended.

#### 8 Use wide margins

Set wide margins and use the same margins on each page. But do not overdo it as too much empty space on your CV will show the interviewer that there is not much content.

#### 9 Be consistent

The key is to be consistent, both in terms of the content and the format of your CV. Print your CV before sending it, and check that you have used the same structure, titles and font throughout.

#### 10 Do not exaggerate

This is the golden rule to apply to each of these tips. Do not exaggerate by using too many bullet points, too many bold words, too many upper-case letters ... Use common sense and make sure that your CV is nice and neat, and that the recruiter can find all the key information, such as your education and experience.



## Include a photo or not?

"Is it really necessary?" That's the first question you should ask yourself when you think about attaching a photo to your CV. While some job offers demand it explicitly, others leave it up to you.

A StepStone survey revealed that about 45% of recruiters don't think there's any need for a photo on a CV. If you do choose to send one however — to make your CV stand out, for example — here are our five golden rules to help you choose the right picture.

### Don't use a holiday or other informal photo

A photo of you on the beach in your best swimming costume will perhaps make the recruiter smile, but is not really the best way to make a good impression. Remember that you are trying to find a job, and your future employer is looking for someone professional. It's better to use a passport-style photo, taken against a neutral background.

### Prefer a neutral photo

The impact of including a photo on your CV can be huge, even if it is only an ID picture. The person who sees it will automatically form an opinion of you. Your hair, clothes, jewellery and even your glasses can unintentionally reveal information about your personality, and at best can give a false impression. You should therefore opt for a neutral picture, avoiding extravagant or eccentric clothing and jewellery.

### Look professional

Your photo must show the recruiter that you are professional, the same way you would at the face-to-face interview. Make sure you look the same on the picture and at the interview. If you're going to wear a suit at the interview, use a photo of you in a suit, or at least a smart shirt.

### Dare to smile

A neutral photo and professional look do not mean you have to seem boring and overly serious. It's recommended that you smile at the interview, and the same applies to your CV picture. The logic is simple: with a spontaneous smile, you show your best side. You'll look much nicer and the recruiter will see in you someone warm and human.

### Do not forget your profile pictures on the internet

Remember that employers often browse the internet to find additional info about candidates. So pay careful attention to the photos you put on social networks such as Facebook and Twitter — and especially on LinkedIn, which is seen primarily as a tool for professional networking. If you post a photo on your profile, follow the same rules as for the photo on your CV. Remember too that some recruiters will take a look at your Facebook profile, even if you use this platform only for private purposes. You may want to check the privacy settings of your account ... and watch out for silly pictures!

We hope the above tips will help you choose the right photo. In any case, photo or not, it's the content of your CV that prevails.



### Put your CV online

#### Why should you create an online CV?

What is the best way to find the job of your dreams in the shortest time possible? Search every job site and visit every recruitment agency every day? It is obviously important to know what's happening in the job market but do not forget there's a hidden side that shouldn't be underestimated: companies themselves are looking for new employees.

And not all jobs are published upfront before a company start searching — some prefer to stay anonymous for example.

To find the one person in a million employers don't just wait until they receive applications. They search CV databases.

For you to be considered, these recruiters must be able to find you. So put your CV online and never miss a job opportunity! StepStone offers you this possibility.

#### Here are some tips for creating your online CV at StepStone

- First create an account on the site and fill in your personal data correctly, making sure there are no mistakes. Specify an e-mail address that you check regularly.
- Give your CV a name. This is the first piece of information recruiters will see when browsing the CV database.
- Describe yourself in one line to specify what you want and attract the attention of recruiters. Are you looking for a sales manager function? Here is an example of a one-line description: 'results-oriented sales manager'.
- Be as specific as possible about your work preferences in order to avoid being contacted for jobs that do not interest you.
- Recruiters looking for candidates in our CV database can also orient their search based on knowledge grids. You do not have to mention all your skills but, by doing so, you increase your chances of being found.
- You currently work for a company or would like to prevent a specific company being aware of your job search? You can easily prevent them from seeing your CV on StepStone. Simply exclude them and you can put your CV online without fear!
- Give enough information about your work experience. And if you have a lot of experience under your belt, give more attention to the most relevant skills for the type of job you are looking for today.
- One last piece of advice. Update your CV regularly. Inform recruiters about the latest software you have discovered, the skill you've acquired most recently, or even the latest training course that has enriched your knowledge. Updating your CV regularly is a good idea, as the most recently updated CVs automatically appear at the top of the list when recruiters search our database.

## There's nothing like a good example

Now that you have all the information you need to create a compelling CV, it's time to bring it to life. Here's an example that might help you. It is a classic CV that uses the chronological way of presenting information. Do not hesitate to show a little more creativity if relevant for the position.

**CURRICULUM VITAE**

**Chris Luton**  
Hannover Street, 12  
12345 London  
United Kingdom  
0011 - 123.45678  
Chris\_Luton@hotmail.com  
22/01/1986



**Professional experience**

Since August 2001

HR & Training manager at B & C Insurance, London  
Areas of expertise:

- Development of training content and production of related documents
- Conception and implementation of training programmes and workshops for executives and employees
- Advising managers and employees on issues relating to human resource development
- Educational support for people preparing seminars and e-learning software
- Working with HR managers at European level
- Design and implementation of new HRD/OD instruments

January 1987 – July 2001

HR & Training manager at DN plc, London  
Areas of expertise:

- Development of human resources and management tools
- Implementation of assessment centres
- Potential analysis

**Education**

July 1979

University of Ghent - Certificate in Human Resource Management

April 1981 – October 1986

Business administration studies at the Birmingham University

**Other qualifications**

- Fluent in English and Dutch
- Very good knowledge of SAP
- Seminar: "Business oriented conversation" - 2009
- Seminar: "International presentation skills" - 2008



## Putting your online reputation to work

Have you ever Googled yourself to see what results come up?

A good online reputation is becoming more and more important as employers increasingly use internet searches as part of the hiring process. These searches let them gather information about candidates that might not come out during the job interview, for example. So it's more important than ever to take control of how you're perceived online, and avoid jeopardising your chances of being hired.

StepStone has put together some tips on managing your online reputation that will help you protect your digital identity — and get it working for you.

### 1 Check on a regular basis what's being said about you

Don't forget to also check the images that come up when you type your name into Google. You'll be able to see who's tagged you on Facebook with an open profile, for example. And if you don't want to miss anything that gets referenced on Google, you can set up Google Alerts for free.

### 2 Be careful what you say on social media

Use good judgment and common sense when managing your social media profiles. If you just can't help posting certain type of photos or comments, make sure they're visible to a private audience only. And don't say anything online that you wouldn't say face to face.

### 3 Beef up your privacy settings

If you mention references, rely on someone you know in a professional context — and ask that person first if you can include them on your CV.

### 4 Protect access to your account

Use a safe password and don't share it with anyone. And before accepting a contact request, make sure it's from someone you know.

### 5 Register your name

To protect your name, start by registering with the main social networks. This will prevent anyone else using your personal details in an inappropriate way.

### 6 Make the most of your social media profiles and activity

Use the social media platforms you're registered on to showcase your skills and achievements, share your professional interests, and write articles. For example, you could create an infographic CV, upload a video CV to YouTube, or even post your latest video work on Vimeo.

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### ... Putting your online reputation to work

#### 7 Clean up your online reputation

If you discover some information about yourself that you want to remove, check whether you can delete it yourself. Otherwise, ask the person responsible for it to untag you, or contact the owner of the website. If you don't get a response, or your request is refused, try setting up some more social media accounts, to get them higher up in the Google ranking than the unwanted information. There are also specialist agencies — e-reputation cleaners — that can be useful to call on if you can't do your own clean-up on the web.

#### 8 Set up your own website or blog

Creating your own website or blog is another way of burying "the bad" by promoting "the good". On top of that, with your own website or blog, you'll have the ideal platform on which to highlight your skills and talent, and come across as even more professional.

# 3

## YOUR COVER LETTER

Fewer and fewer people looking for a new job attach a cover letter to their application, and many people ask us if this letter is still required. The answer is indisputable: OF COURSE!

In this section you will find some very good reasons for and advice about cover letters.

- ✓ **Why should you include a cover letter?**
- ✓ **Get started with your letter**
- ✓ **Checklist for an effective cover letter**
- ✓ **Provide targeted expertise**
- ✓ **The most common mistakes we see in cover letters**
- ✓ **Format of your cover letter**
- ✓ **Cover letter example**



### 3. YOUR COVER LETTER

## Why should you include a cover letter?

When we speak of cover letter, we generally mean the letter you send by e-mail, not by post, which is no longer common.

We recommend that you put the content of that letter directly in the body of your e-mail so that the recruiter doesn't need to open an extra file. When applying via an application form however, you might not have the choice but to attach your cover letter to your application.

A good cover letter is the key to success. Generally, companies struggle to find new employees who meet their requirements — even these days. This is the perfect opportunity to set yourself apart from other candidates and increase your chances of finding the job of your dreams!

- Your cover letter allows you to put yourself forward, to differentiate yourself from other candidates whose CV is comparable to yours and who apply for the same job. You can incorporate arguments that show what makes YOU the ideal candidate for the job. On a CV you can't go into details, you have to stick to the facts — but your cover letter lets you explain why the company should hire you.
- Your letter can include more information about your experience, education and personality, and why you are the best candidate for the job. Analyse your CV with a critical eye and ask yourself if everything is clear. A few doubts? Then go into more detail on those points in your letter.
- You can also take the opportunity to pique the interest of the recruiter. If you can make the recruiter curious about you, then it's because you wrote the letter well. That doesn't mean you should be mysterious, but stating, for example, that you have some ideas you would like to put into practice when in the job might arouse recruiters' curiosity and make them keen to see what you have to offer to the company.
- And last but not least ... companies really expect you to send them a cover letter! They want to learn more about the candidates and find out whether they are right for the job. And if a recruiter is hesitant after reading your CV, your cover letter might convince them to invite you for an interview.

So take the time to write a cover letter — it really is worth the effort!



## 3. YOUR COVER LETTER

### Get started with your letter

The most difficult task is to start your letter. But the first paragraph is also the most important one as its role is to encourage the recruiter to read on. That's why we've dedicated a section to how to start your letter in the most efficient way.

"I am interested to see that you are looking for a management assistant. I started my training in office communication, and subsequently completed a secretarial college degree with the emphasis on (...)"

Candidates who apply for a job often start their letter in a similar way. Although it is a concrete and direct introduction, it isn't really catchy. Remember that a recruiter often receives dozens or even hundreds of cover letters. Standing out in your first paragraph is therefore essential!

Here are a few ideas for you to start your letter:

#### Describe what you thought when reading the job offer

The job offer always makes you think or at least arouses your interest, otherwise you wouldn't apply. Think carefully about what you thought when you saw the ad for the first time and mention it in your opening sentence: "When I read your description of the job on offer at StepStone, my first thought was: here is the ideal job for me. I'll try to explain why in this letter."

#### Choose an introductory sentence in connection with the business

Consider the company for which you are applying. Is it a creative advertising agency? Or a more formal firm? Start your letter with a sentence that matches the values of the company.

Be careful: your objective is to be taken seriously without seeming to be presumptuous. Think about how you would react to your introductory sentence if you were in the recruiter's shoes.

#### Highlight your interests and abilities straight away

In the opening sentence of your letter, mention your strengths and how they match with the company. For example: "Since I started law school, I have always wanted to advise companies on legal matters. A job as a lawyer in your company would therefore match my profile perfectly."

#### Talk about current events

Relevant news is important for all businesses. Think of a topical issue or a current theme in relation to the position for which you are applying. For example: "Children are increasingly affected by obesity. As a dietitian, I would like to contribute to the fight against this scourge. That is why I am very interested in the post of Children's Dietician at your organisation."

Now that you've made a good start to your cover letter, take a look at our next chapter that gives a checklist for an effective letter.

## Checklist for an effective cover letter

You now have the first paragraph of your cover letter. Now it's time to write the rest of it.

We hope this checklist will help you avoid leaving out any important information.

### Your CV

The CV is a summary of facts: your education, experience and other elements important to your career. You can mention certain elements from your CV in your cover letter but you should then take the opportunity to develop them a little. You can for example explain your thesis or the tasks that you were in charge of in a given company. But do not do so if these explanations are not relevant to the job in question.

### Write down what the company wants to read

Stick to facts that are important to the reader. As already mentioned above, do not mention in your letter experience or education that are not relevant to the position for which you are applying. For example, if you are applying for a position that requires a thorough knowledge of English, do not describe your great command of Dutch instead. But do mention all the languages you know in your CV.

### Give good arguments

Mention clearly in your cover letter the position for which you are applying and explain why you would like to have the job. If you are, for example, particularly interested in the business of the company, do not hesitate to mention it. You have some experience in a similar job or have gained relevant knowledge thanks to a traineeship? These are all arguments that can play in your favour.

### Give examples

Examples are always very effective. Some experience in the organising events is required for the job? Then give an example of an event that you helped organise in the past, possibly briefly explaining the tasks that you were assigned, the number of participants and so on.

### Show who you are

Your letter is an opportunity to say a little more about yourself. If you are applying for a commercial job, for example, you can write that you are very focused on achieving sales results and want to contribute to the development of the company. Try to show what differentiates you from other candidates who have the same qualifications as you.

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#### ... Checklist for an effective cover letter

##### Use a proper name for your file

Same rule as for your CV. If you're going to attach your cover letter to your application, avoid giving your letter a name that's impossible to understand. Instead, name it Cover Letter\_ Chris Luton for example. And if you decide to mention the name of the company in the name, make sure it's the right one.

In the next chapters you'll find actual examples of cover letter content to help you understand the above principles.

## Provide targeted expertise

In the cover letter, it is important to convey your strengths and to deliberately arouse interest in order to make it to the interview. Here are some examples of the hurdles you have to overcome.

### Hurdle 1: the introduction

We have seen in an earlier chapter how to get started with your letter. It is the hardest part of your letter and many people begin their cover letter with indisputable facts. In order to put yourself forward as an applicant immediately, you could instead start with your most important personal characteristics for example. The cover letter is the key to your application: it's your opportunity to quickly convince the recruiter of your suitability and market yourself as best you can.

#### Avoid



"Dear Sir or Madam,

*I'm interested to see that you are looking for a software engineer. I started my training in office communication, and subsequently completed a computer college degree with the emphasis on (...)"*

You should try to begin your letter in a different way as a list of your (former) occupations is already available in your CV and it's not necessary to repeat them here. It's better to start the letter immediately with your strengths. Use your current tasks and competencies as a basis:

#### Recommended



"Dear Mr. Smith,

*As a senior development engineer, I am in charge of developing software components for electronic systems, from requirements gathering through to building prototypes."*

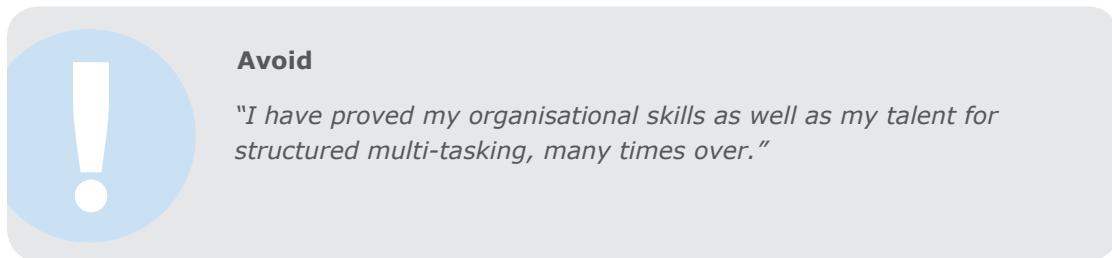
This sentence brings in many qualities: leadership, project management, interdisciplinary tasks, organisational skills, and a responsible and structured way of working.

...

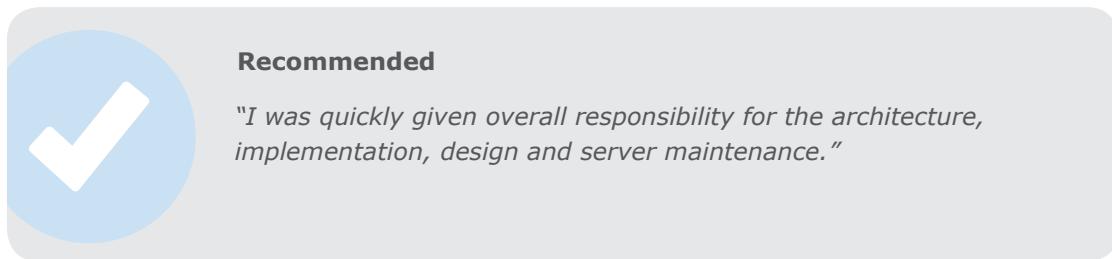
## ... Provide targeted expertise

### Hurdle 2: reference to specific responsibilities

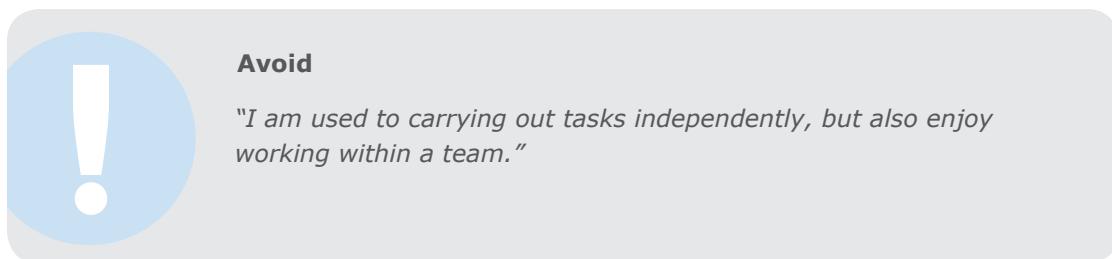
Let's assume that you're writing the next paragraph of the above-mentioned application by a software engineer. Try to avoid statements that are too general that could also work for a complete different position.



Instead try to include specific statements about your soft skills:



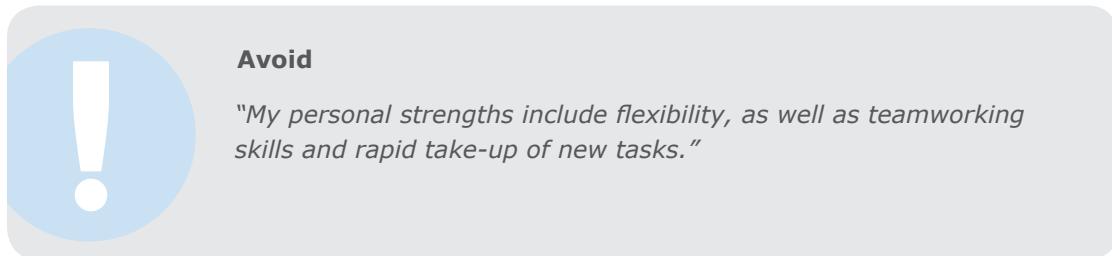
Do not let the recruiter decide what is important in the role. Do you want to continue to work mainly independently? Then state this clearly in your letter. If teamwork is particularly important to you, then say so. Don't forget what is expected in the job and what you consider to be particularly important in this position.



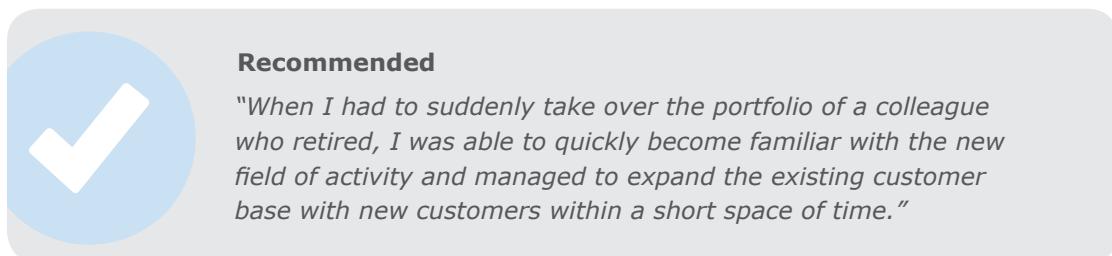
•••

#### ... Provide targeted expertise

Also avoid phrases that pretty much apply to all occupational groups. Applicants often try to include many soft skills in the cover letter and list them without a thought.



It's essential to include the soft skills the job requires but you need to back them up with facts:



#### Hurdle 3: inappropriate modesty

Avoid using conditional phrases wherever possible because they convey uncertainty. You want to achieve a professional goal and you have to be credible. It is better to mention concrete examples of professional success.



•••

## ... Provide targeted expertise

You will be especially credible if you can come up with references to confirm your statements:



**Recommended**

*"My former boss, Mr. XX, who was budget director at XX, can testify how I won back a long-lost customer through persistence and creative ideas. You can call him on xxx for confirmation."*

## Hurdle 4: reference to the company

In each cover letter you should refer to the hiring company. Of course, it is important for the recruiter to find out why you want to work at this company. The statements below are common examples of how candidates try to sneak in a reference to the organisation. But neither phrase is really meaningful. Even if you write many applications, you should take the time to obtain information about each company. How are they organised, what is the current market situation like, etc.?



**Avoid**

*"Because I can imagine a career in the finance industry and because you are currently the largest bank in Germany, I'm sending my application to you."*

*"I very much like the international image of your company."*

It's better to ask yourself why this company in particular interests you and try to provide a specific statement.



**Recommended**

*"I have read that you're planning to focus more on the younger audience by increasing your card portfolio. I have worked in the finance industry for many years and am particularly interested in how younger people manage their budgets. I had the chance to be involved in a programme about credit issues for young people and have always hoped to be able to work with that audience again."*

## The most common mistakes we see in cover letters

An error in a cover letter can be fatal. A simple spelling mistake can negatively influence the recruiter and mean you don't get invited for an interview. You should therefore make every effort to send an error-free cover letter. You will find below an overview of other common mistakes and some tips on how to avoid them.

### Addressing a female recruiter using 'Mr.' or vice versa

It may seem like an obvious error to avoid but it definitely does occur. It is therefore better to address the contact person by name instead of starting a letter or e-mail with "Dear Sir" or "Dear Madam." However, if you cannot tell from the name whether it's a man or a woman, then do not take a risk: use a general formula instead.

### Failing to mention the position for which you are applying

Companies often have a single e-mail address for all their vacancies, and recruiters usually have to deal with candidates applying for different positions, so you should indicate clearly in your cover letter the role for which you are applying — and put it in the e-mail subject line as well. If you do not do this, the recruiter will have to find this information themselves which will create confusion.

### Failing to sell yourself in your cover letter

Your CV should give an overview of your career and education while your letter will explain why you are the best candidate for the position. If you don't use your letter in this way and simply repeat the information contained in your CV, then you will miss a great opportunity. Refer to just a few elements of your CV in your cover letter and indicate why they make you the ideal candidate. Do not forget to highlight your motivation.

### Failing to include your contact information in the letter

If a recruiter finds your CV interesting, they must be able to contact you immediately. It is therefore important to include your contact information clearly in your cover letter so that the recruiter does not have to struggle to find it. You can also specify the best times to reach you.

### Failing to read the job description properly

If you refer to the content of the job in your letter, make sure you have read the description correctly and haven't misinterpreted it. Do not write, for example, that you are the ideal candidate because you enjoy teamwork if there's no reference at all to teamwork in the job offer. It may be the case that you won't need to work in a team at all, which will mean your argument is not really convincing.

### Lying about your knowledge or experience

Of course you want to make the best possible impression on the recruiter, but do not be tempted to lie! If you do not have a skill or quality that's important for the job, it is better not to mention it in your cover letter rather than lie about it. Lies will eventually be discovered anyway.

...

## ... The most common mistakes we see in cover letters

### And finally: leaving spelling mistakes in your cover letter

Do not simply read your letter through once or twice — read it ten times if necessary. Spelling mistakes leave a very bad impression — something you'll want to avoid at all costs! Use your word-processing software's automatic spelling checker but remember this can't detect all mistakes — ask someone else to proofread your letter as well.

### Things not to do in your cover letter

- Do not copy another person's letter. Customise your letter according to the company and the job you want.
- Do not lie.
- Do not simply repeat each element of your CV, but describe the relevant ones.
- Do not leave any spelling mistakes.
- Avoid vague descriptions about yourself or the work you are looking for. Recruiters might misinterpret your message. It is better to explain simply and clearly in your letter the role you are looking for and what you are good at.
- Be careful not to exaggerate or appear arrogant, but don't undersell yourself either: say honestly in your letter what you are good at.



## 3. YOUR COVER LETTER

### Format of your cover letter

If the content of your letter is critical, its format is also important.

Your application e-mail is your first contact with the company, and as you know, the first impression is the most important. So to increase your chances of getting the job, it is crucial to e-mail a nice-looking cover letter.

So:

#### Choose the right font

A cover letter must be professional, so select a plain and legible font. Do not use a font that's too big; and do not put the entire e-mail in bold or in colour. Embolden or colour some words in your cover letter to highlight them, but do certainly not overdo it.

#### Use a clear structure

Use paragraphs and structure your e-mail so that it is easy to read. Write your e-mail as you would write a 'real' letter.

#### Include a clear subject line

Use a clear subject line for your e-mail that specifies the position you are applying for. Recruiters will then find it easy to put your application in the right folder of their mailbox or store it in their application management system.

#### Always clearly indicate your contact information

As already mentioned, the hiring company must be able to contact you easily if they want to invite you for an interview or ask you questions. So make your contact details visible, both in your CV and in your cover letter. Make sure the recruiter won't have to hunt for your phone number if they want to contact you.

#### Mention your attachments in the letter

Refer in your letter to the attachments you're sending along with your e-mail. That way, if there's a problem with the sending of the e-mail, the recruiter will know that you had attached a CV and can ask you to resend it. Of course you must do everything to make sure the attachments get to the recruiter. So use a format that can be opened on any computer, and try to avoid files larger than 2MB as they might never reach the recipient.

Following these tips will help you create a clear and legible cover letter, increasing your chances of being invited for a first interview.

## Cover letter example

Now you know all the tricks for creating a good cover letter.

We've also included an example below so you see how to apply our advice in concrete terms. But remember, do not simply copy the example. You should try to tailor your letter to the company and job you're applying for.

Vanessa Hall  
Hannover Street, 56  
45322 Rotterdam  
0031 - 345.6789  
Vanessa.hall@hotmail.com

Dear Ms. Johnson,

Since I graduated in marketing, I have always wanted to specialise in social media. I am really interested in the sector and have already gained some relevant experience thanks to a traineeship in Spain. I was also offered the chance to participate in a seminar on social media which has enabled me to broaden my knowledge of the online environment.

I have seen on StepStone that you're looking for a 'Social Media coordinator'; I would really love to work for KangooMedia, especially as it has been included in the 'top ten' of Europe's most innovative social media companies.

You would like someone with a great command of English, Dutch and Spanish. I'm lucky to be fluent in both English and Dutch as I have grown up with both languages at home. Unfortunately I haven't yet completely mastered Spanish, but my understanding of it is very good.

Self-confident and creative, I am a real team player who shows good motivation. My former boss, Mr. Smith, who was marketing director at CreativeY, can testify how I won, with the help of my colleagues, a very difficult pitch thanks to persistence and creative ideas. You can call him on 0031-012.3456. for confirmation.

Friendly with an outgoing personality, I enjoy acting in my free-time.

I strongly believe that the combination of my experience, education and motivation to excel will make me a great asset to your company.

I would very much appreciate the opportunity to discuss my qualifications in an interview whenever is convenient for you.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours sincerely,  
Vanessa Hall

# 4 JOB INTERVIEW

You've made it to the interview stage, this is great news.

However, you're not done yet. You still have to convince the recruiter that you are the best candidate.

There are several things you can do in preparation for an interview that will allow your skills and experience to shine through and maximize your chances of getting the job.

In this section we give you many great tips and advice to make your job interview successful.

- ✓ **Before the face-to-face with the employer, the telephone interview**
- ✓ **Preparing for your job interview: ultimate tips and tricks**
- ✓ **How to make an unforgettable impression at your job interview**
- ✓ **How to cope with the toughest interview questions**
- ✓ **The most embarrassing candidate slip-ups**
- ✓ **Tips for the ideal interview outfit**
- ✓ **How to handle the salary issue for your new job**
- ✓ **Evaluate your job interview and prepare for the next one**
- ✓ **The art of following up on a job interview**





## Before the face-to-face with the employer, the telephone interview

Whenever you submit a job application, you need to be prepared for a call from the employer. As a rule companies used to call to make an appointment for an interview, but a full telephone interview is more and more common. For some applicants, the unannounced telephone interview is a nightmare. We explain how to optimise preparation for a telephone interview, and why a call from the prospective employer is a very good sign.

### The purpose of a phone interview today

The telephone interview is a mini interview. More and more companies consider it a key part of the application process. The advantages of telephone interviews are obvious: it saves time, effort and cost to both you and the employer. For employers the preliminary telephone interview is a simple solution to clear up important questions instantly. They will ask you why you want to work for their company; they might also ask for more information about a gap on your CV, or your salary requirements.

### How to prepare for a phone interview

The first thing you should realise is that a phone interview is a good sign — your application has been favourably received and the employer is interested in you.

The second important fact: a telephone interview can happen at any time. So make sure that for every one of your applications, you keep basic information about the company and the most important elements of the job description at the top of your mind.

And the third fact is the basic principle: a telephone interview is a mini job interview, so prepare carefully! If you come prepared with two or three meaningful questions, you come across as a motivated and interested candidate before the first face-to-face meeting.

Incidentally, if the job description requires a good knowledge of, say, English, you can certainly expect that the call will be conducted partly in that language! You should also keep some information to hand such as your salary expectations and earliest possible starting date.

### Absolute no-gos in a phone interview

You can make a poor first impression if you are difficult to reach or have a jokey message on your voice mail. The worst is if you are rude or dismissive, or interrupt the caller. You should also avoid asking what the job is about or saying you don't remember having applied because you've submitted so many applications.

...

### ... Before the face-to-face with the employer, the telephone interview

#### What if the employer's call comes at a bad time?

If the employer calls when you are at the supermarket checkout, it will be awkward to engage in a lengthy conversation. The same is true if you don't remember the job description or don't feel ready for the interview. In these cases, simply ask for the name of the company and suggest a new time to speak. HR managers understand when you propose a later date for the interview. This makes you look professional and confident.

#### Extra Tip

*To avoid unpleasant situations in your current workplace, ask for discretion during the application process and indicate the times of day when you are most easily reachable in your application.*



## Preparing for your job interview: ultimate tips and tricks

For weeks on end you've been trawling job sites on the hunt for vacancies, but you're still getting no response to the application letters you've been sending out. Until, one day, you experience deliverance in the form of a phone call: "We'd like to invite you to a job interview." But don't get carried away thinking the job's in the bag. You're probably not the only candidate who's been invited for an interview. There's only one thing you can do to help with the next stage: prepare for your job interview.

### Re-read the advert for the job you applied for

If you're actively looking for jobs, you may find you get the various vacancies confused with each other. That is why it's important to keep a note of all the vacancy ads, so you can check them over again if you're invited for an interview. That way you'll know what sort of experience will count, the skills your potential new employer expects you to have, and whether they're looking for a particular personality type.

### Know the business of the company you're applying to

Preparing for a job interview also involves seeking out information about the hiring company's business. At the very least, you should check out their website to find out exactly what the company does, how it's organised, who the CEO is and how the business operates. Press articles can also provide you with a lot of relevant information. You'll come over as being far more motivated at your interview if you can show that you're really interested in the company's activities.

### Check who will be conducting the job interview

Generally, you'll be told in advance who is going to be at your interview. It can be to your advantage if you check up on what the interviewer does within the company, along with anyone else you know will be there at the interview. You can find out more about who they are and what they do via Google or LinkedIn.

### Questions you might expect

Later in the guide you will see a compilation of the toughest interview questions. Recruiters often open an interview by asking you to "Tell us something about yourself" for example. So work out in advance what you want to say during the interview, how you want to structure what you have to say and the points you want to emphasise. It's also best if you're prepared in advance for any questions about your qualities and weaknesses, any gaps in your CV and your short-term and long-term ambitions.

### Prepare questions that you can ask during the interview

You often get the chance to ask questions at the end of an interview. Use this opportunity to find out more about the job itself, the company culture, and the people who might be your new colleagues or your new boss.

### Check where the interview is to be held

You'll avoid a lot of stress if you're completely clear about where you have to get to for the job interview. Also work out when you'll have to set out to be sure of getting there on time. To cover all the angles, jot down the telephone number for your contact so that you can warn them if you're delayed en route to the interview.



## How to make an unforgettable impression at your job interview

The moment you've been looking forward to so eagerly has arrived. Finally, you can set about presenting yourself at a job interview. Take these tips on board, to ensure that you make a good job of it and make an unforgettable impression.

### Take care over your appearance

For your job interview, you should wear clothes you feel comfortable in, but bear in mind the company's dress code when you're deciding what to wear. There's a section later in this guide about what to wear at interview as the way you're dressed reflects your personality, and is therefore a very important factor in helping you get the job.

### Everybody is watching you

Even before the start of the actual job interview, you'll be coming into contact with other employees at the company, such as the receptionist, an assistant or other future colleagues. And the impression you make on them is equally important. The interviewer will often ask these people for their first impressions of you, so be respectful to everyone you meet.

### Think about your body language

The recruiter won't just be listening to what you say at the interview; they'll also be noting your body language. From this they can tell whether you're nervous or uncertain, as well as whether you're being honest about specific things. So shake hands confidently with the interviewer, smile regularly and look them in the eye. You'll come across as calm, sympathetic and self-assured. Take care not to fidget in your seat or wave your arms around during the interview. Try to adopt a relaxed but controlled attitude.

### Show a positive mentality

It goes without saying that it's best for you to talk positively about yourself, but it's also smart to adopt a similar attitude towards your current and former employers. Of course you can be honest about your reasons for leaving, but try to remain positive. Being negative about previous employers won't come across as professional, and a negative attitude will leave a poor overall impression with your interviewer.

### Be honest and factual

Honesty is a must at every stage of the job application process, but it's during the job interview — more than any other time — that you run the risk of tripping yourself up if you're not being frank. This means that all of your answers to questions have to be phrased honestly and factually. And don't wander off the topic, but tell the recruiter what they want to know.

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### ... How to make an unforgettable impression at your job interview

#### Finish things off nicely

You're often given a chance, towards the end of the interview, to ask a few questions yourself. Take advantage of this opportunity to ask for more information about the job, the next stages in the application process, the company or your potential colleagues. And remember that the job interview isn't over until you've left the building, so stay polite and business-like while the recruiter shows you to the door.



### How to cope with the toughest interview questions

Nervousness during the interview can ruin your chances of getting the job you want. Don't get destabilised by tricky questions. Some of the most difficult questions are so common that it is possible to prepare 'irresistible' answers in advance.

We've gathered a list of the most common yet toughest interview questions.

#### Tell us a little about yourself

The only thing the interviewer is interested in is how well you fit the advertised position. You have to sell yourself with that in mind, so try to formulate a compelling and focused response before the interview. Don't worry if it sounds a little awkward because you've prepared it in advance. It's better than forgetting to say something important. But try to relax so it doesn't sound like you've learned your text by heart.

#### What is your dream job like?

Answer concisely and simply. Try to return the question by asking the interviewer to tell you more about the vacancy they are seeking to fill.

#### What can you bring to the company?

Make sure you mention that you bring in expertise related to the company's key business objectives. Try to identify in advance what is strategically important to the company, perhaps by reading their annual report, and how you can support them in reaching those objectives.

#### What is your expertise?

When you answer this question, it is enough to show that what you have learnt can be applied to solve the practical problems with which you may be confronted in the job. If you know what the job requires, you should be able to imagine what kind of problems you might encounter. Try to find a similar problem you have solved elsewhere and be prepared to present it. It helps the interviewer to see you as a competent employee.

#### Do your grades give a good indication of your performance in school?

Do not be fooled and try to excuse the fact that you flunked biology. Talk about your top scores and say why you were so good at those subjects. If your grades were average, be sure to mention other activities that you participated in during university time.

#### What is the biggest mistake you ever made?

To admit your mistakes will give the interview a personal touch. Just make sure you concentrate on what you have learnt from mistakes rather than on why you made them.

...

### ... How to cope with the toughest interview questions

#### What is your greatest weakness?

"I work too much" may have been the classic response in the eighties, but today's employers are looking for personal qualities. Talk about "learning opportunities" such as a gap in technical knowledge. Try to choose a deficiency that can be related directly to the job and explain what you have done to overcome the problem. Honest self-criticism with a touch of how you tackle a learning opportunity show a flexible personality.

#### Can you work under pressure?

In an interview everyone will say "yes" to that question, so if you want to make a real impression, you should add something extra. One way is to give an example of how well organised you are and point out that it makes you less vulnerable to stress.

#### Where do you see yourself in five years?

This is your chance to show ambition combined with realism and confidence. A good answer might be: "I hope I have a challenging job that allows me to develop as a person." If questions are clichés, do not be afraid to answer with clichés, but don't overdo it.

#### What are your salary requirements?

The best answer to that question is to say that you expect a salary equivalent to what you bring to the job. You should also try to make it clear that you are interested in the opportunities the job offers, rather than a high salary. Negotiating salary should be done in a later stage of the recruitment process, not in the first stages.

#### Do you have any questions?

Now is your chance to ask about the job and the company. You can take it to a more personal level and ask the interviewer why they enjoy working for the company. A good way to end the interview is to ask for the interviewer's business card and say that you probably will have a few follow-up questions. Also ask the interviewer when you will next hear from him.

Later in the guide, you will find out how to follow up on an interview to reaffirm your interest in the job.



## The most embarrassing candidate slip-ups

By managing to get a job interview you have already overcome the biggest hurdle of the application process. Now you only have to convince the recruiter that you are the ideal candidate for the job. Many qualified candidates create their documents conscientiously and prepare themselves for the job interview. But unfortunately, recruiters often meet candidates who have barely prepared themselves. Here are a few examples that keep happening during the application process.

### **The name of my interviewer? I have no idea**

How embarrassing: the candidate does not know the name of the interviewer, so the receptionist has to call everyone in the HR department to find the right person. This can be avoided very easily by taking the invitation letter with you and having a quick look at it before you enter the building.

### **I am sorry, I don't know what your company does**

Recruiters often ask questions like "What do you already know about the company?" During a job interview with the market leader in consultancy software one candidate answered: "You do the same as the company X, but they are better than you." You should also think about the job you apply for, and make sure you have an idea of what the tasks are and why you are the ideal candidate for this job.

### **I think you did a bad job there**

Recruiters often want to know your ideas and your feedback and it's fine to criticise the company but pay attention to the way you do it not to offend your interviewer. These kind of comments should be avoided.

"Well, I would create the sales documents in a completely different way, and your company logo is really ugly. I have also had a look at your company presentation on the web and it looks like you have kept the same design as you used in the 80s."

### **Did I put that in my CV?**

If your interviewer wants you to explain what you learned on your computer course, it probably means you mentioned a particular training course on your CV. Make sure you know right away what's being referred to and don't ask: "Where did you read that?"

### **I don't remember the answer I read in my application manual**

Many candidates prepare themselves very conscientiously for the job interview by not only reading application guidebooks but literally learning them by heart. Remember that they can only be a guideline and interviews are not an exact science. Don't force yourself to mention these statements in the job interview only because they are said to be very beneficial. You should stand out from the crowd and give an interesting and original presentation about yourself, not a standard one.

...

### ... The most embarrassing candidate slip-ups

#### **My current boss is really annoying**

When being asked "Why did you apply for a job at our company?" or "What attracted you to the vacancy?" many candidates start by being impolite about their current company. It's ok to say that you have issues with your boss or colleagues but try to explain why. It is not always easy to explain the reasons why you don't like your job or why you left a company — after all you would not apply for the job if you were 100% happy with your current job. Try to talk as much as possible about the future, this will help you find the right words.

#### **My strengths? I don't really know...**

You have to know very well who you are and what you want to be able to convince a recruiter of. Someone who can't come up with answers to questions about professional successes, personal strengths and weaknesses or motivation will not only come across as badly prepared but also as unqualified. You have to be able to present your career fluently and in a well structured way — but this does not mean only list the facts! Prepare answers to the most current questions and practice in front of your friends or family if you feel you need it.

#### **I don't have any questions, I will find everything out when I start working here**

Candidates show interest when they ask questions about the company. Generally they will be encouraged to do so at the end of the interview. Unfortunately most people cannot think of any questions by that time. Prepare questions but do not focus too much on them. It shows your ability to listen well if you ask questions about things that came up during the interview. Your questions should also be relevant to the job. Someone who only wants to know whether there is a canteen or if overtime is a frequent requirement will definitely not leave a good impression.



### Tips for the ideal interview outfit

What should you wear at a job interview? For women, a smart suit, or something simpler? And men, should they opt for a jacket and tie? There is no golden rule on the matter but here are five tips that might help.

#### Try to find out the dress code

You can get an indication of the dress code of the company from its website or in its corporate presentation. Look, for example, at pictures of managers on the company's website. If they don't wear a suit and tie, it is not necessary for you to wear them at interview.

#### Wear something you feel good in

The most important thing is to feel good in what you wear at your job interview. Do not rush round to a friend's house to borrow something that does not suit you, just because you think you'll feel better that way. Instead, choose an outfit from your own wardrobe that you like wearing.

#### Make sure your outfit will not distract your interviewer

Recruiters prefer to have a candidate in front of them who takes care over their appearance and grooming, but ultrashort skirts or tons of aftershave will not really be appropriate. Dress carefully, but do not make a big deal about it. A plunging neckline or a flashy shirt will distract the recruiter's attention. In the end, it's what you say that counts.

#### Tailor the outfit to the job

Some jobs have a more specific dress code than others. So in most cases, a sales director will be expected to wear a suit for a job interview, while someone being interviewed for a creative job may come in less formal attire.

#### Keep your clothing neat

Whatever you wear, make sure you look neat. Stains or holes are totally prohibited. Polish your shoes before the interview and make sure your hair is neat and well groomed.

If you're in any doubt, it's better to be a bit overdressed than too casual.



## How to handle the salary issue for your new job

It is never easy to talk about money, even with your future employer. Yet it is important to address the salary issue openly when you get a new job. Here are some tips that can be useful for this kind of discussion:

- It is important to know what you're worth. If you ask too much, you will seem arrogant, but if you ask too little, you could give the impression of not having the right qualifications and not being aware of the current market situation.
- In many companies, a wage scale exists that makes it very difficult to negotiate. You will be offered a salary and will have to decide whether to respond favourably or not. If the company tells you straight away that the wage is pre-set, there's no point trying to negotiate.
- Decide beforehand how far you are willing to go in your salary negotiation. You will often be offered less than you want, so it's important you determine the minimum you would be willing to accept.
- The person conducting the interview may put forward some very valid points to justify a lower salary, but do not get destabilised — persevere if you really feel you're being offered a salary which is too low.
- At the end of the interview, ask for a cooling-off period. You can then rethink everything that was said during the interview with a clear head and make a considered decision.
- Always try to keep your composure. It is better to say calmly that the job does not interest you as the offer does not match your expectations, rather than say it after the interview. By doing so, you leave space for dialogue and you can possibly even negotiate your salary.
- If it is really impossible for your potential employer to offer you the salary you ask, try to negotiate other benefits. These can compensate a lower salary. Consider the fringe benefits that the company offers. It is not only the net salary that matters, but also the car, mobile phone, health insurance, meal vouchers and so on.
- It is not always possible for young graduates to negotiate their salary. Do not be too firm in your negotiations for a first job, but make sure that you are satisfied with what you're being offered. Your first paycheck will probably be increased once you have gained more experience.

Whatever the outcome of your salary discussion, remember that it's just a salary. There are other important aspects of work such the relationship with your boss and colleagues, and loving what you do.



## Evaluate your job interview and prepare for the next one

Now it's time to learn from mistakes by evaluating your last interview. You'll then have all the tools you need to go to the next stage feeling more self-assured and relaxed.

So that you don't forget anything, write down your impressions immediately after the interview.

These are a few of the most important elements:

- How did you feel during the conversation? Were you relaxed or stressed?
- Did you feel that you said everything that was important or did you forget anything?
- Did you find your share of speaking time appropriate or did you feel you didn't have enough time to speak?
- Did the mood change during the conversation? At what point?
- Did you feel that your interviewer liked you?
- Were there questions / situations that made you feel insecure?
- Do you think you explained your strengths and motivation clearly?
- Did you feel you needed to adapt what you said about yourself or were you able to remain true to yourself?
- Have you learned a lot about the company and your interviewer? Or do you feel you don't know much more about the working environment and job profile than you did before?
- What were the positive highlights of the interview?
- What negative aspects did you notice?

There are interviews where you only realise later that you got carried away by the relaxed atmosphere, saying things you wish you hadn't (for example, about current supervisors and colleagues). Or you might have given away quite a lot about yourself while your interviewer didn't reciprocate.

### Would that be your dream job?

Once you have processed the first interview impressions, you can deal with the company and the job:

- Do you know everything important about the job on offer and whether it would be the right job for you?
- Do you think you would fit into this company and does it match your career goals?
- What was your impression of the working practices, colleagues, the office environment?
- Are there any questions you want to clarify in a second interview?
- Are there things you should emphasise more in the second interview (special experience, soft skills, etc)?

You should prepare well for the second interview, because the job still isn't yours. A good analysis of the first interview will help you present yourself even better in the second interview. Now that you know what matters to HR and to the person who would be your direct manager, you can emphasise specific strengths again. You can also show how much this position appeals to you: for example, would you be willing to take a salary cut or have a long commute?

Once you've made it far enough through the interview process, you can also ask to meet your future colleagues if you think this will help you work out if you would integrate well into the company.

...

### **... Evaluate your job interview and prepare for the next one**

#### **Follow-up**

In the next section you'll find some tips on how to follow up on your job interview. And remember that even if you get a "no thank you", you should not be frustrated, because every interview is useful experience.



## The art of following up on a job interview

You've got through your job interview with flying colours and you're now waiting by the phone to hear from the interviewer. That's a mistake! Your work isn't over when you leave the interview. If you want to really burnish your performance, proactively following up on the meeting is the key to success.

Why should you do this?

- To make a lasting, positive impression with the interviewer and hope for a chance for a second interview
- To clearly demonstrate your interest in the job and your enthusiasm for the company
- If there are several candidates of roughly equal quality who are eligible for the same position, the one who shows the most initiative is the one most likely to get the job

### When should you follow up on a job interview?

If you've heard nothing from the company within two weeks, call or e-mail the interviewer in person. Ask whether they're still waiting for anything else from you, and when you might expect a response. Show your interest in the job, but try not to come across as being desperate.

If they tell you someone else has been appointed, try to find out the reasons. Keep in mind however, that some companies will comment very vaguely or even not at all. Sometimes they will not have any objective reasons, but just got a feeling that you wouldn't be a good fit personality-wise within the team.



**Some final pieces of advice**

- Stay clear of accusations or rudeness
- Don't let your frustration take the upper hand
- Ask politely and openly what you can improve on in the future.  
It is very positive if you show an interest in wanting to learn from your mistakes.

Whatever the outcome, make sure you learn from your mistakes to increase your chances of success for next time.

**Good luck with your application**

**The StepStone Team**

