

What employers want: work readiness

What is work readiness?

Employers say they want students to be work-ready. Having any work, whether paid or voluntary, part-time or full-time, helps to develop an understanding of what this entails. 'Work readiness' is hard to define precisely, but includes the following attributes.

Attitude

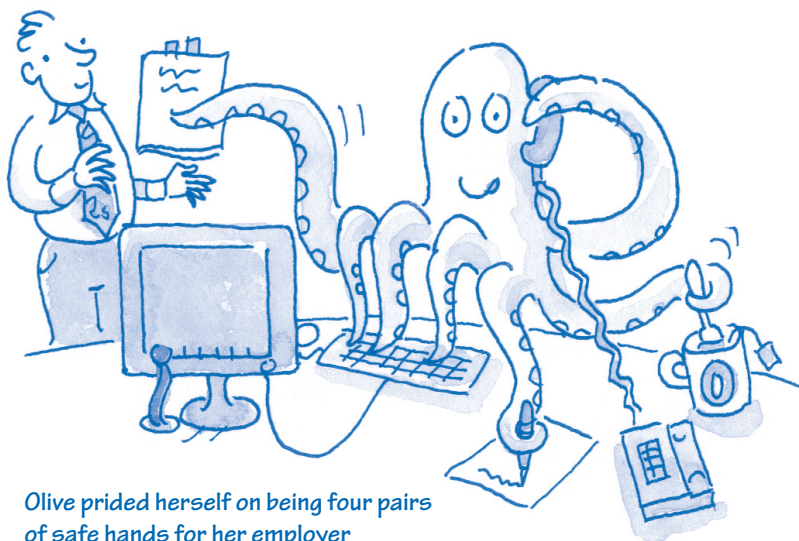
Employers want to take on new staff who identify with the needs of their business. Generally, employers are more likely to employ you if you:

- **bring a 'can-do' attitude**, undertaking reasonable tasks when asked (rather than when you feel like it or finding excuses not to)
- **take pride in your work**, going the extra mile when needed and being professional in all you do
- **use time effectively**, being punctual for work and meetings, and getting work done efficiently
- **spend work time efficiently**, remaining focused on your job rather than texting and phoning family and friends, browsing the internet for personal use, running personal errands, sorting out relationship issues, day-dreaming, writing your novel, playing computer games, taking long breaks, etc.
- **are generally helpful and flexible**, taking on additional paid hours or changing work hours, or working in a new location, if needed.

Professionalism

In a professional role: this means having the abilities and skills to undertake the specialist work associated with the role, to the required professional standards and adhering to relevant codes of practice.

In general: for any role, this is about the way you approach your work at all times. It involves setting out to produce work of a consistently high standard, with attention to such things as accuracy, precision, timeliness, punctuality, courtesy, sensitivity, and respect for the dignity, safety and well-being of others.



Olive prided herself on being four pairs of safe hands for her employer

'Customer service' approach

Employers usually want staff who are able and willing to 'put the customer first', even when this might be inconvenient or difficult. The same is true if the 'customer' is a client, student, patient or member of the public making an enquiry. There are usually protocols to follow about what to do and what to say in difficult situations. This is also a question of attitude and professionalism.

A 'safe pair of hands'

Employers value staff who they can depend on to:

- get the job done as they would want
- make sensible, workable decisions that are suitable to the context
- meet deadlines and other given requirements
- avoid reckless, unprofessional or risky or unwanted behaviours.

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Initiative

Using your initiative in the workplace means:

- **working independently** – getting on with your job with minimum direction
- **being resourceful** – using imagination and inventiveness to address a problem or issue in a practical way
- **being proactive** – rather than waiting to be asked to do something or responding to what emerges, take action or ask how you can help
- **looking for improvements and alternatives** – thinking beyond the immediate task to consider how the overall outcome or process could be improved, and then taking your idea forward through the correct channels for the organisation
- **knowing when to act** – developing a fine sense of when it is appropriate for you to come up with your own ideas and ways of getting things done, and when it is more important to follow protocols exactly
- **seizing opportunity** – being able to spot occasions for advancing the business interests in the moment, often in a small but appropriate way, and getting on with it.

Understand how organisations work

Although it is unlikely that you will need to answer direct questions about how businesses operate, employers will look to see your general commercial and business awareness. They will notice if you don't seem to understand the basics.

- (a) Browse employers' websites and financial reports on-line to get a feel for how businesses are run and the kinds of things that concern them.
- (b) Become familiar with concepts such as
 - 'end-users', shareholders, stakeholders
 - vision, mission, strategy and business plans
 - company values
 - financial sustainability; profit and loss;
 - company performance; performance indicators; targets
 - staff appraisal, performance management.
- (c) The checklists 'Make effective use of your experience of work' (pp. 280–2) provide a structured way of thinking through some of the above issues.

Understanding why 'time = money'

'Time is money' is a well-known adage in business. Broadly speaking, employers have a range of costs such as salaries, pensions, accommodation, maintenance, insurance, utilities and investment, all of which they have to cover even if they have less money coming in because of time wasted. When taking on new staff, employers will be looking for people who can use time efficiently.

Commercial/business sense

Increasingly, employers are asking for 'business acumen' or commercial understanding, especially for graduate jobs and management or team leader roles. They look for some evidence of interest in the kinds of issues relevant to their business. This might be such matters as: whether there is a good market currently for its goods; how that market might be changing; customer demographics; likely new competition or opportunities at home or overseas; costs; logistics; technological changes or recent innovations and their impact. If you are interested in the company, then you should be able to give sensible answers based on some research, some thought, and common sense.

You can build your commercial awareness for the kinds of business that interest you by:

- taking optional modules in business, enterprise or entrepreneurship
- reading trade or professional magazines
- a relevant work-placement or internship
- browsing questions and answers on LinkedIn
- talking to your Careers Service about relevant sources of information and websites.