

# SUCCESSFUL JOB-HUNTING

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*Applying for a new job is a difficult and stressful process. This article highlights the key points for success with application forms, curricula vitae and interviews*



*Job interview: an opportunity to market yourself, so that you stand out from the other candidates*

**J**ob hunting is never an easy task, but understanding that the process of securing a new job is about self-marketing will help. When you apply for a new job, you are effectively selling your knowledge, skills and experience to an employer and you have to package yourself almost as if you were an advertiser seeking to make your product stand out from all the other products on a supermarket shelf. The tools you have at your disposal are the application form, the curriculum vitae (CV) and the interview. Package yourself well using these tools and you might even begin to enjoy job hunting.

## APPLICATION FORMS

Completing application forms is certainly no joy and, unfortunately, they still remain a favourite with employers. If you want to beat off the competition from all the other candidates you have to invest the time in order to submit a quality application. It might even be worth photocopying the application form so that you can draft your answers before submitting the real thing.

Always check the date by which an application form has to be returned and then manage your time so that you can

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collect information relevant to your application. Analyse how best your skills and experience match the requirements for the job. Set your own submission deadline for the application of at least four days before the official deadline.

Many organisations now supply a “person specification” with the application pack and this will give you a good indication about the type of person an employer wants to fill the post. Make sure that you fully understand the responsibilities and requirements of the job so that you can present your skills, experience and abilities in the best light.

The most difficult part of any application form to complete, but the most important, is the large box or question that invites you to give supporting or additional information. This box gives you the chance to sell yourself and highlight your achievements. In other words, what makes you different from the other candidates who also have a good degree and, perhaps, a couple of years’ experience? What have you achieved that is of particular relevance to the post you are applying for? Why should an employer select you rather than someone else for an interview? How have you made an impression in your current post?

It does not come naturally to most of us to boast about our achievements but, when you are applying for a post, you have to forget any inhibitions about self-promotion. You simply have to accept that you are entering a competition and, in order to

win, you have to convince your audience, ie, the employer, why you are a cut above the rest.

Make good use of the additional information/supporting statement section to sell your strengths. Think in terms of examples and evidence when describing them. In other words, do not just say that you are a good problem solver, illustrate just how good you are at problem solving by referring to specific examples of how you solved a problem within your current or previous posts. For example, you may have solved a communication problem within your department by creating a monthly newsletter. Alternatively, you might consider research to be one of your strengths, so give an example of your contributions to published research or give an example of how research you conducted led to improved quality of service or treatment for patients.

**Tips to remember** When you receive an application form, either photocopy it or use a blank sheet of paper to practise your answers. It may even be worth asking someone else to check over your answers before you fill in the final version of the form. You should ensure that you:

- Answer all the questions. Never leave a section blank
- Emphasise your strengths, highlight achievements and support these with examples

- Never lie about any aspect of your qualifications or experience
- Follow instructions for completing the form, eg, use black ink, type qualifications with most recently achieved first
- Keep a copy of the application form to remind yourself of what you have written
- Always send a covering letter along with your application form.

**Online application forms** Follow the same guidelines if you are completing an online application form. Do not be tempted to complete the online form without first writing a draft. Read and follow instructions carefully, however, before submitting your form.

### — CURRICULUM VITAE (CV)

The most popular CV format, which is also the one preferred by the majority of employers, is the reverse chronological CV. This format is easy to follow and has the advantage of presenting your most recent (and probably most relevant) experience or qualifications first. The basic structure is as follows:

- Personal details — name, address, phone number, date of birth. Rather than heading the page Curriculum vitae, which does not really need saying, it is now standard practice to head a CV with your name.
- Personal profile/summary statement — this section is optional. However, it is a means of summarising your skills/experience and giving employers an overview of what you have achieved.
- Qualifications and education — keep this relevant and in date order with your most recent academic achievements first. Always work backward in time.
- Employment experience — start with your most recent experience and again work backwards. List your major responsibilities and achievements within each post that you have held. Try to use strong adjectives to describe your achievements, eg, produced, created, developed, increased, managed etc.
- Other information — use this section to list any professional qualification such as MRPharmS or membership of associations. You could also list any relevant continuing professional development (CPD) or staff development courses or activities in this section.
- Leisure interests and other activities — only include these if they are relevant to the post or if your leisure activities illustrate some aspect of your character

that is relevant to the post. For example, if you are captain of some successful local sports team, it demonstrates that you have good leadership qualities.

- Always use good quality paper for your CV and try to limit it to two pages, at the most three pages.
- Language — try to use positive language and make evaluative rather than just descriptive statements. In other words do not just say that you worked in liaison with community pharmacists but say you worked effectively or productively with community pharmacists. Give the employer an indication about your ability to judge and assess your own work effectiveness.
- Presentation and style — aim for a professional style and avoid fancy fonts.
- Either include names of referees in your CV or include a statement to indicate that references are available on request.

### — THE INTERVIEW

If you are doing a good job at selling yourself, it will not take long before you start to receive invitations to interviews. Rather than panic, be prepared. Prepare well for the interview and, even if you do not get the job in the end, you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you gave it your best shot.

You may already have all the background information you need in order to apply for the job. If you need additional information use the internet to check for latest information about the hospital or NHS trust that has invited you to an interview. Check the press releases section of websites for latest news. Also make sure you know where you are going — do not assume anything. Map out your route and manage your journey time so that you arrive between 15 and 30 minutes ahead of your interview time.

Research confirms that your appearance really does count when you are being interviewed for a post. Whether you like it or not, interviewers make judgements based on first impressions and appearances so if you need to invest in a new interview suit and/or hair cut or style, then do it.

Try to be yourself on the day and try to relax. Be aware of the kind of things that put interviewers off. For example:

- Insufficient knowledge about the post
- Lack of preparation
- Lack of confidence
- Giving inarticulate answers to questions
- Poor personal presentation
- Unfriendliness

- Negative attitude towards current or previous posts

**Anticipate questions** The selection interview is basically a process of questions and answers. Good interviewers will have prepared well and will ask you open-ended questions based on your application or CV and, possibly, some questions related to the post. For senior management posts, you may have to deliver a presentation, in which case the rule about preparation still applies. Rehearse your presentation in advance and check the timing and check that you have understood any requirements for the presentation, eg, that handouts should accompany the presentation.

Read through your application form or CV carefully. Put yourself in the interviewer's position and try to anticipate the questions you will be asked. If there are any discrepancies in your application form or CV, the interviewers will probably pick up on this. For example gaps in your chronological list of qualifications or jobs or job responsibilities that appear exaggerated. Typical questions asked at interview are:

- What particular strengths can you bring to the post?
- How would you like your role within the organisation to develop?
- Describe how you contributed to effective team working in previous posts
- Describe a problem you have encountered recently and how you overcame it
- What is your greatest career achievement to date?
- What motivates you at work?
- What do you see as your main weakness?

It is a good idea to rehearse out loud answers to questions you are likely to be asked during an interview. Get used to the sound of your own voice. Think in terms of specifics and examples when you are answering questions and if you need to pause before answering then do pause to collect your thoughts.

If you are asked to mention some of your weaknesses during an interview, stay positive. For example, being a perfectionist might be your weakness but you could make it sound positive by saying that you

#### Careers in pharmacy

Links to articles published in *Hospital Pharmacist* and the *Pharmaceutical Journal* on the subject of careers in pharmacy, can be accessed by following this link: [www.pjonline.com/noticeboard/series/careers.html](http://www.pjonline.com/noticeboard/series/careers.html)

like to be thorough and do your best with your work.

**Ask questions** Good interviewers will always give you the opportunity to ask questions. Make sure you have some. These could be questions arising from the interview discussion itself or it might be questions you prepared and noted down in advance. It is always good to ask at least one question because it indicates interest and enthusiasm. Try to make your questions open rather than closed, for example:

- Can you tell me something about the experience of the other people in the team?
- What opportunities are there for CPD or training?
- Are there opportunities to get involved in research?
- How is employee performance measured?

**Tips for success** Tips for interview success include:

- Wait until asked before you sit down. Sit up straight, but comfortably. Do not slouch
- Maintain eye contact with the interviewer

- Control any nervous mannerisms such as fidgeting or foot tapping
- Smile where appropriate
- Take deep breaths if you start to feel nervous
- Look out for and try to control signs of tension in your body, such as clenched fists or gritted teeth
- Listen carefully to the interviewer's questions and make sure you have understood the question before you answer. If in doubt ask, for the question to be repeated
- Give as much relevant information and as many specific examples of your experience and achievements as you can — but be succinct and do not waffle
- Avoid giving yes/no answers to questions, always try to expand with your answers
- Give positive answers but do not be arrogant or pushy
- Do not forget to thank your interviewers for their time as you leave.

**Review your performance** It is always a good idea to do this as soon as possible after the interview, while the details are still fresh in your mind. Do not wait to hear whether or not you have got the job first. Think

through the structure of the interview, the questions you were asked and how you answered them. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What first and lasting impression do I think I made?
- Did I do my best or is there anything I could have done better?
- Was I fully prepared?
- Which questions did I not feel confident about answering?
- Is there anything I forgot to say or ask?

#### UNSUCCESSFUL APPLICATIONS

**D**o not take it personally. Employers do not know enough about you to get personal. Learn from each interview you attend and where possible try to get feedback as to why you were unsuccessful. This will help you identify points you need to work on for your next interview.

Keep applying for jobs and your interview skills will improve. Be persistent and do not ever give up — your efforts will eventually pay off.

#### FURTHER READING

1. Grout J and Perrin S. Kickstart your career. Chichester: Wiley; 2002.