

# First impressions

In today's competitive jobs market, graduates need to get noticed. Simon Perks explains how to make a standout application

While the job market may be picking up, this is no time for students and recent graduates to be resting on their laurels. According to the latest figures from High Fliers Research, graduate vacancies in the UK are up 6.4% this year but applications for graduate programmes have risen by 19%, with some recruiters reporting double the usual volume of applications.

Last year, the country's top recruiters received an average of 48 applications for each graduate vacancy, and that figure is likely to be even higher in 2012. In such a competitive market, graduates need to get a recruiter's attention if they are to secure their dream job. But how can you make an application that will stand out from the crowd? Here are five top tips for success:

## 1. Focus on the basics

'You've got to get the basics right,' says Tracey Wells, assistant director of the careers service at the University of Oxford. This means making your application clear, attractive and easy to read, with bullet points where possible, rather than blocks of text. And you should check and check again to make sure your application is free of simple mistakes. 'It should go without saying that both the CV and cover letter should be well formatted, with no grammatical, typographical or spelling errors,' says Harry Kelly, chemistry recruitment manager at GlaxoSmithKline.

## 2. Tailor your application

'Employers are looking for an applicant who wants to work for them, as opposed to one of their competitors,' says Ben Carter, careers adviser at the University of Saint Andrews. 'You need to make your application specific to that employer and that role.' This means taking time to learn about what the organisation does,



A good application will help you stand out from the crowd

what the job would entail and why it is right for you. 'There's no substitute for doing the legwork,' he explains.

And the best place to demonstrate this knowledge is in the cover letter, says Kelly. 'I use cover letters to assess whether the candidate has read and understood the job description. And to determine the candidate's enthusiasm for the job, the company and, of course, for chemistry,' he adds. 'A very well crafted cover letter can really make a candidate stand out from the crowd.'

## 3. Don't say it, show it

Employers want graduates with a broad range of competencies, such as technical knowledge, business acumen, communication skills and the ability to work effectively in a team. But it's not enough simply to say that you have these skills - you need to prove it. Use concrete examples from your study, work or extra-curricular activities to give your CV the edge that employers are

looking for, says Paula Thick, graduate and student resourcing adviser at the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory. 'It can make a big difference to an employer when confronted with a large number of applications,' she explains.

## 4. Are you experienced?

'Relevant work experience is always a real advantage,' says Janice Simpson, senior careers adviser at the University of York. Whether this experience comes from paid work, work shadowing or volunteering, 'it shows that you understand what the work environment is about and that you can get on well with people,' she explains.

Martin Birchall of High Fliers Research goes one step further: 'New graduates who've not had any work experience at all during their time at university have little hope of landing a well-paid job with a leading employer, irrespective of the academic results they achieve or the university they've attended.'

## 5. Network to get work

'What can really make a difference is engaging with us,' says Rob Fryer, graduate recruitment manager at Deloitte. 'The importance of networking can't be overstated. Try to meet potential employers when they come to events on campus or make direct contact with people within the organisation.'

And don't forget the internet. 'Get digital!' says Carter. 'Create a LinkedIn profile with the details from your CV, make connections with employers and join relevant groups.' You have to get online, it appears, in order to get noticed.

It's also worth remembering that although the graduate job market is competitive, chemists are still in demand. 'Chemists have a wide range of skills,' explains Wells. Fryer agrees: 'I'd be very keen to see more chemistry graduates apply,' he says. 'They have a skill set that is very attractive to us.'

*Simon Perks is a science writer based in Bristol, UK*

## REFERENCE

*The graduate market in 2012, High Fliers Research, 2012*