

SHOP SMARTER FOR THE JOB YOU WANT

There are five great ways to shop smarter. They will help you look at your job shopping in a new light and discover promising work opportunities in places that most people never think of exploring. Take a good look at these five ideas and see how they can help you.

STEP 1

DO YOUR RESEARCH

Find a couple of people working in roles you'd love and ask them the following information interview questions.

This is invaluable to help you decide if you're looking at the right field. It will provide you with new contacts and evidence of your commitment for use in your covering letter, CV and interviews.

Information interview questions

- > What do you do on a typical day in your job?
- > How did you find this job?
- > What special knowledge, skills or experience did you have or need?
- > Has the work changed recently due to technology, competition etc?
- > Is there a demand for people in this role?
- > What do you like least/most about your job?
- > What opportunities are there for advancement?
- > What parts of this job do you find most satisfying? Most challenging?
- > What personal abilities are needed to succeed?
- > What special advice would you give anyone?
- > What training do companies offer new entrants?
- > What are the professional journals and organisations?
- > Looking at my background what other areas should I research before making a final decision?
- > Can you suggest any other people who love the job they're in...? When I call him/her, may I use your name?
- > Is there anything else I ought to know?

STEP 2

FIND THE BEST PLACES TO SHOP

You'll have more chance of finding job vacancies if you're looking in the right places. You'll do this if you know how employers go about filling their vacancies. As the diagram overleaf shows, it's the very opposite of the way most people go about applying for jobs.

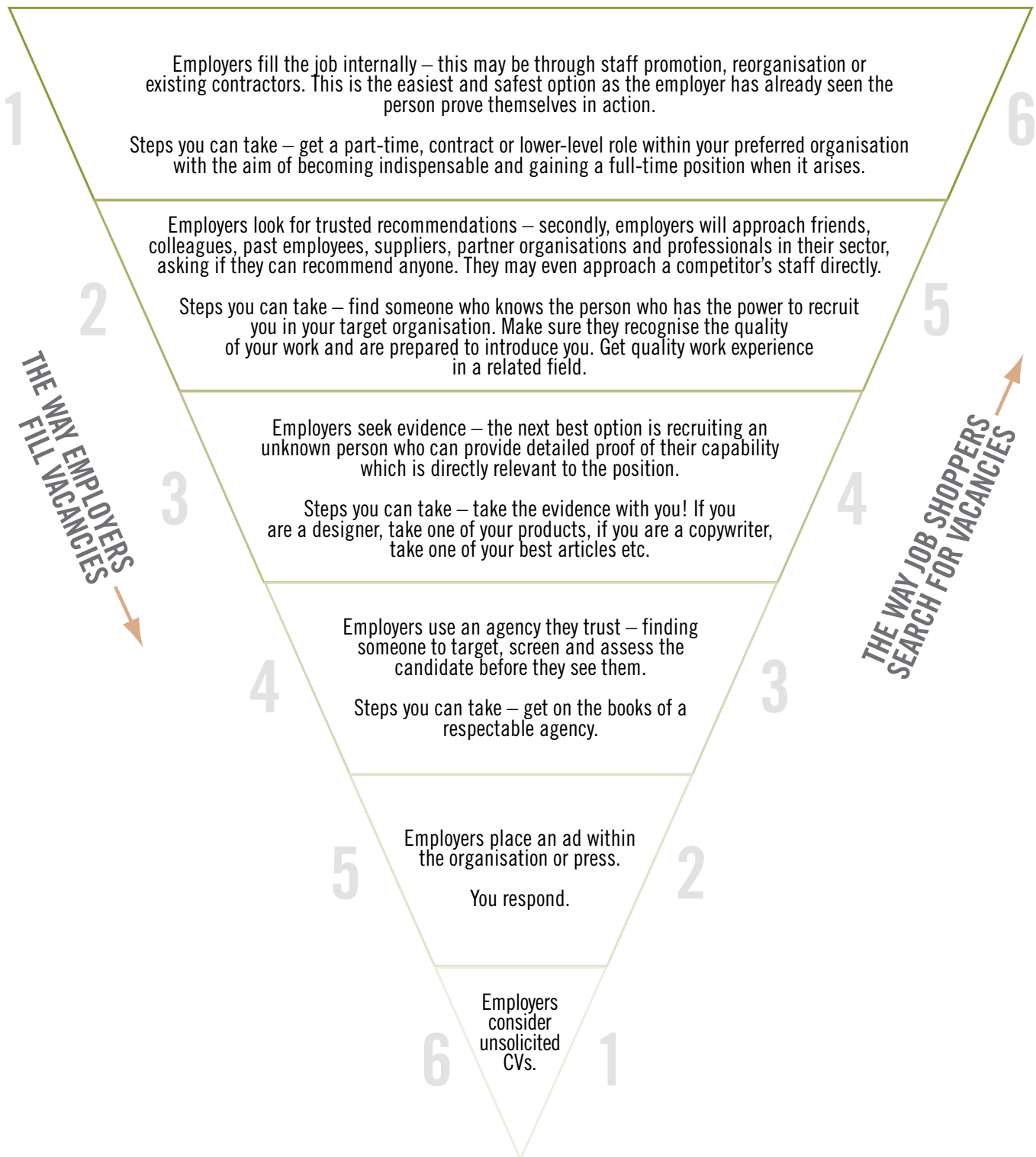
Save your energy for networking with family, friends and wider contacts and building on your work placement/experiences.

Keep in contact with previous employers too and create positive relationships with both current and past colleagues.



JOB SHOPPING

SEE IT FROM THE EMPLOYER'S PERSPECTIVE



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STEP 3

KNOW WHAT EMPLOYERS WANT

What do employers want from you? Below is a summary of the skills and qualities they're after. You should use this information from the Association of Graduate Recruiters as a checklist when applying for jobs.

PEOPLE SKILLS

TEAMWORKING	Supportive, facilitator, organised, co-ordinator, deliverer, imaginative, delegator, open-minded
LEADERSHIP	Dynamic, motivator, team-builder, confidence booster, energetic, capable, outward-looking, accountable, visionary
INTERPERSONAL SKILLS	Listener, adviser, counsellor, politically aware, initiator, professional, co-operative, constructive, assertive
CUSTOMER ORIENTATION	Welcoming, friendly, caring, approachable, constructive, accommodating, tactful, diplomatic, tolerant
ORAL COMMUNICATION	Educator, trainer, communicator, presenter, promoter, influencer, humorous, empathetic, telephone skills
FOREIGN LANGUAGE	Specific language skills, cultural awareness, international experience, written and oral expertise, sensitivity

SELF-RELIANCE SKILLS

SELF-AWARENESS/CONFIDENCE	Purposeful, focused, reflective, perceptive, honest, self-belief, objective, realistic, balanced
SELF-PROMOTION SKILLS	Positive, persuasive, pleasant, proactive, persistent, ambitious, opportunistic, promoter
INITIATIVE AND PROACTIVITY	Resourceful, energetic, drive, flexible, self-starter, self-reliant, initiative, self-disciplined
NETWORKING SKILLS	Initiator, trustful, personable, relationship-builder, persistent developer, resourceful, respected
WILLING TO LEARN	Motivated, adaptable, enthusiastic, active, keen learner, inquisitive, continual improver
ACTION PLANNING	Decision-maker, planner, organised, negotiator, responsive, evaluator, forward thinker, target-driven, able to prioritise

GENERALIST SKILLS

PROBLEM-SOLVING	Achiever, successful, results-orientated, project management, creative, practical, logical, astute, agile mind
IT/COMPUTER LITERACY	IT skills, software packages, common sense, task-orientated, progressive, specific, office skills, keyboard skills
FLEXIBILITY	Multi-disciplinary, flexible, versatile, multi-skilled, willing, obliging, mobile, adaptable
NUMERACY SKILLS	Accurate, logical, problem-solver, detailed, methodical, consistent, quick thinker, analytical, thorough
BUSINESS ACUMEN	Competitive, entrepreneurial, enterprising, commercial, foresight, budgeter, risk taker, effective written communication
COMMITMENT	Dedicated, trustworthy, conscientious, reliable, loyal, punctual, knowledgeable, experienced

SPECIALIST SKILLS

COMPANY-SPECIFIC SKILLS	Specialist knowledge, eg. product or market knowledge; specialist skills, eg. IT packages; unique language skills, eg. Chinese; specialist interpersonal skills, eg. public speaker
TECHNICAL SKILLS	Professional, sector-based or functional skills, eg. journalism, research, aerospace engineering, tax accounting, counselling, creative design, economist, human resources, sales, marketing
UNDERSTANDING COMMERCIAL GOALS OF COMPANY	Specialist understanding of an organisation's goals, priorities and future direction (combination of self-reliance, business acumen and people skills)

JOB SHOPPING

STEP 4

CHECK YOUR CV

If you have worked hard on researching the jobs market and understanding the skills employers in your field are looking for, it will be a lot easier to put your CV together. The following checklist has been developed to help you:

1. MAKE YOURSELF STAND OUT

You have about 30 seconds to grab the employer's attention so your CV has to promote you as powerfully as possible. It must be targeted to your kind of work and – ideally – customised to each job you're after. Keep your CV up to date and ready for use. There's no set format but make sure you stand out from the rest. Take time and write several drafts if necessary.

2. LOOK AT YOUR SKILLS

Start your CV by listing your prime skills. Link them to the job and explain how you have used them in particular situations.

Include lots of details plus any evidence that demonstrates those skills. Keep this list separately too – it's your skills portfolio. Keep reviewing and improving it right through your career.

3. FIND OUT WHAT THEY NEED

After steps one and two you have a good idea of what employers are looking for. Now find out as much as you can from the company itself and its website as well as from business journals, the agency or anyone you know with contacts (competitors, clients, suppliers). Note any qualifications or specific skills or experience the employer wants.

If a qualification is important (eg. in the medical profession), it will usually say so. But unless this is an essential, don't be put off. You could still be stronger than another applicant.

4. SHOW WHY YOU'RE RIGHT FOR THE JOB

Make sure you show how your skills match what the employer wants.

Compare the job description with your skills portfolio and ask yourself:

- > What key features of my CV will make me really stand out?
- > What would this employer be trying to find in my CV?
- > What format or style will make most impact?

5. MAKE IT EYE-CATCHING

You need visual impact to be marketable so choose good quality A4 paper and envelopes and keep it to two pages at the most.

Use a sensible type-size of 10-12 point, ensure headings are consistent in size and avoid fancy typefaces. Use bold text and/or capital letters to highlight key information.

6. STRUCTURE IT CLEARLY

Key sections should include:

- > Personal details – keep them simple and brief
- > Personal profile – a powerful businesslike statement in the third-person
- > Summarise exactly what you offer this employer in three or four lines
- > Key skills – ideally grouped under headings in the order listed in the job advert
- > Employment history – highlight major achievements in each role and avoid puzzling gaps
- > Professional qualifications – include qualifying dates and any necessary explanation
- > Education and qualifications – highlight the level if relevant
- > Hobbies and interests/achievements – this gives employers a real flavour of who you are so include sports and leisure interests plus any voluntary work
- > References supplied on request – usually your current and previous employer

7. MAKE EVERY WORD COUNT!

Your CV can create a vital first impression and win you that all-important interview. So your words need to make the right impact and help you stand out.

- > Spend time – don't expect your first draft to be a winner
- > Make it flow – ensure there are no gaps or repetition
- > Don't ramble – you can go into more detail at the interview
- > Check spelling – just one error could land your application in the bin!
- > Be positive

8. ADD A COVERING LETTER

You can send your CV by post, by hand or electronically but in all cases it needs a covering letter to create an immediate first impression.

This is also a second chance to sell you beyond the CV itself. Refer to the role advertised to show this is a unique application directed personally to a named individual (not Sir or Madam).

Remember to call and check your application has been received safely – this will put your mind at rest and make contact with the employer.

9. GET FEEDBACK

If you gained an interview, your hard work has paid off and your preparations will make the interview much easier. If not, the next step is to get feedback for your next application.

Don't be afraid to call the company – the effort will pay off.

Looking at the feedback, ask yourself if there are areas that you can improve or any gaps that you can fill. Start thinking of ways you can fill any gaps or try a different format next time.

10. STAY MOTIVATED

Remember that rejection is an inevitable part of the journey to finding your ideal job.

Don't give up – and be realistic. There are many reasons for not getting an interview. It may not be your CV – just an overwhelming response to the advert.

Ask yourself honestly what could have been done differently. Keep trying and learn from the experience. In time this process will become second nature to you.

JOBSHOPPING

STEP 5

HAVE YOUR ANSWERS READY

Here are some of the most frequently asked interview questions to practice your answers to:

'Tell me about yourself'

Employers are looking for a quick snapshot of you (both your background and your personality) and how well you sell yourself and your capabilities. Don't ramble on.

'Why did you apply for the job?'

This looks at your levels of motivation and commitment. Make sure you research thoroughly what the job entails. State the benefits you feel you will gain and reinforce the benefits you can offer. Say why you want this job – not why you are leaving your present one.

'Tell me what you do in your spare time?'

This has a double purpose. To make sure that you have a fully-rounded personality – and ensure your hobbies won't interfere with your job. Go over your outside interests quickly, highlighting any job relevance and outlining the skills you have developed through them.

'When have you been involved in teams?'

Employers want a team player – so give examples of your role within teams (eg. creative, promoter, developer, organiser, producer, inspector, maintainer, adviser). Underline what you learned and how it has made you more effective in a team. Link your answers directly to the job you're after – check if they're looking for a creative, resourceful team member, a detail-orientated person who will see tasks through or a positive team leader.

'What are your main strengths and weaknesses?'

This revolves around self-awareness. Again, link your strengths to the particular job. Employers want someone who knows what they are good at and where they need to improve. Everybody has weaknesses but employers want to know what you are doing to improve. Choose positive weaknesses and turn them into strengths, eg. 'I'm a bit of a perfectionist, – but that's good for quality'. 'My financial skills aren't as sharp as I'd like – but I'm attending a bookkeeping night class.'

'Why should we employ you?'

What skills could add value to the company? Make brief but telling comparisons between the job description and your ability to meet their needs. State briefly what you can offer and back up anything you say with facts.

'What has been your biggest achievement?'

This reveals what motivates you and what matters to you (family, work, education or leisure?) Choose something that makes you stand out and involves positive characteristics, eg. you developed determination, strength of character.

'What have you learned from your past work experiences?'

This focuses on skills developed in previous jobs (holiday, part-time, full-time). Think about those jobs. Did you have any responsibility? Pull out the positive elements and focus on benefits to the employer.

'When did you last work under pressure or deal with conflict – and how did you cope?'

This is aimed at discovering if you can deal with problems quickly and efficiently – and confront a situation if you become frustrated. The best technique is to think of an example and explain how the situation arose – then say how you dealt with it. If asked directly if anything made you annoyed or frustrated, be truthful but avoid appearing negative.

'What is the biggest problem/dilemma you have ever faced?'

Try to choose something that will show you in a positive light. How did you get over it? What did you learn? This will not only show how you cope under stress but also your decision-making ability and strength of character.

'What other career opportunities are you looking at?'

This will illustrate how well you have researched and thought through your chosen career area. It will also show an employer how much you really want the job. If you just list a long series of unrelated career options, it will cast doubt on your motivation.

'Where would you like to be in five or ten years time?'

Again, if you have a clear idea, it will show your commitment and vision. If you do have some insight into where you are heading, think of some of the functions and responsibilities you would hope to have.

'When have you had to...?'

Employers want real-life evidence that clearly demonstrates you have particular skills. Draw up a list of key skills required for the position (found by dissecting the job ad, job description and personal specification) and highlight at least two situations or achievements that prove you have each skill. Practise talking through each example and present a concise, hard-hitting case. Avoid waffle and keep it sharp.

'What would you do in... situation?'

Situational questions are used to test your overall style and approach. Carefully prepare by listing all the roles you'll potentially undertake in the new position and think up awkward questions yourself.

'So sell me this product.'

Role-play questions really make you think on your feet. Once again, do your homework. Be prepared to demonstrate your skills in action.

'What salary do you expect?'

Work out a salary range you consider reasonable – job ads in the national and local press will give you an idea. Don't undersell (or oversell) yourself. Give a range to indicate you're prepared to negotiate.

'How competent are you at...?'

Many employers now like to assess candidates using scoring grids with a work-based framework. This makes it important to quote practical examples showing your level of competence.

'Are you pregnant/gay/etc?'

Yes it's an outrageous question – but always be on the alert for it. It may be designed to shock you and assess your reactions. It may equally reflect the fact that some employers lack formal training in interview techniques and fall back on crude stereotypes. Whatever the reason, it's vital not to lose your cool – just write it off to ignorance.

'You haven't been much of a success so far, have you?'

The aggressive approach may also throw you. The reasons could be the same but this time it is more likely to be a deliberate attempt to unnerve you. Again, keep your composure – it's probably the reaction they are looking for.

'Do you have any questions?'

Always expect this one – so prepare a list. Include a few probing questions to show you've done your research. Don't be afraid to write them down and take them to the interview with you.

WHEN TO TALK ABOUT SALARY?

Use your judgement here – never bring the subject up too soon. Your main priority is to promote yourself as the most suitable candidate in order to place you in a strong negotiating position. But be clear in your mind what you really want in terms of money as well as experience.

SEEKING FEEDBACK

At the end of the interview seek permission (in a positive way) to ask for feedback at a later date. This provides you with a valuable 'hook' for future contact and ensures you leave the door open even if you're rejected.



GET SHOPPING!

The best way to get employers to hear you is to get other people to promote you.

Third-party feedback is the most successful form of self promotion and it's the way so many jobs get filled. So when you're out there shopping for a job, the following ten top tips will help you do this.

Put a tick against all those you think you can realistically use (for future reference).

- What one step (from 1-5 on previous pages) are you going to take to promote yourself?
- Always ask an organisation for a reference before you leave (it's often hard to get an accurate one months later).
- Ask if your boss is willing to refer you or promote your ability to other departments, suppliers or distributors.
- When something goes really well for a client ask for a letter of endorsement.
- Build up a portfolio of personal references from respected people you've worked with.
- Keep a record of positive feedback and achievements across all aspects of your life.
- Share the picture you've created of your ideal job with as many positive people as possible. The more people who know what you're looking for, the luckier you'll get.
- Be crystal clear on the three things you can offer employers and use your grapevine to pass on the message. Use your family, friends, friends of family and family of friends – it's an endless network of luck.
- If you can't get relevant experience, use voluntary work as a stepping stone. Then make sure you get evidence of your contributions from one of the organisation's leaders.
- Build strong relationships with 'champions' who know and respect you and are happy to promote your strengths to others. These may include tutors, previous employers, clients and friends of parents and friends.