

UNIVERSITY OF  
Southampton

A man with short dark hair, a beard, and black-rimmed glasses is smiling warmly. He is wearing a dark grey suit jacket, a light blue dress shirt, and a dark tie. He is looking towards a woman whose back is to the camera. She has long dark hair and is wearing a light blue business shirt. They appear to be in a professional setting, possibly an interview or a meeting. The background is slightly blurred, showing what might be a window or a wall with a yellow light fixture.

MAKING  
THE RIGHT  
IMPRESSION

INTERVIEWS AND ASSESSMENT CENTRES

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A photograph of three business professionals sitting on a bench in a bright, modern office setting. They are all dressed in business attire. The man on the left is wearing a dark blue suit and a red tie, looking down at a tablet. The woman in the middle is wearing a light blue blazer and light-colored trousers, also looking at a tablet. The man on the right is wearing a dark suit and a dark tie, looking at a tablet. They appear to be in a collaborative meeting or discussion.

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# INTRODUCTION

**Congratulations! You have submitted a successful initial application and have been invited to the next stage of the recruitment process. So, what happens now?**

Whilst being an exciting time, being invited for an interview or assessment centre can sometimes seem a little daunting. This guide is designed to help you with the next stage of the process and provide you with an idea of what to expect, how to prepare and how to make sure you perform to the best of your ability.

This stage of the recruitment process can take a variety of different formats, each of which is designed to assess your suitability for the role and company. Don't forget, this is also your chance to check out the organisation and get a feel for whether they are the right fit for you.

## Interviews

There are many different types of interview undertaken by recruiters, including face-to-face, telephone and more recently, video. Interviews typically last for between 45 minutes and 1 hour and may involve one or more interviewers representing the recruiting organisation. Interviews may form part of a longer assessment centre and are designed to help the employer understand you, your values and your experiences in greater depth.

## Assessment centres

These are common practice amongst graduate recruiters and consist of a variety of activities spread over a longer timeframe, from half a day to a couple of days. Activities generally include a combination of individual and group tasks and each one is designed to assess a particular set of skills relevant to the role you have applied for.

## Support

The Careers and Employability Service offers a range of ways to help you prepare, including workshops and our Drop-in Service where you can talk to one of our advisers. We work closely with a variety of local and national organisations, some of whom offer mock interviews on campus for students. See page 19 for further details of the support available to you.

# WHAT IS BEING ASSESSED?

**Interviews and assessment centres are a way for you to get to know the employer and vice versa. They will be looking for certain things on the day to see if you could do the job and if you would be a good team fit. The organisation wants you to do well, they would not have shortlisted you if they did not believe you had the potential to succeed.**

## Ability

Can you do the job? They will have read your application and know your qualifications, but they will want to be given more in-depth examples of your skills and previous experience. Be prepared to discuss your application further and consider additional examples you could give that differ from those in your application.

## Willingness

Do you want to do the job and what is your specific motivation for applying? Be positive and demonstrate your interest and knowledge of the role and organisation to convey your competence and willingness to do the job.

## Team fit

Are you a good fit for the team? Be prepared to demonstrate how you work with others in a team setting. Smile, relax and above all be yourself. Allow the interviewers to see your professional personality and how you interact with others in the workplace.

## Unique selling points

What makes you stand out from the crowd? Have you engaged with the organisation previously? Do you have skills and experiences that other candidates do not have? If so, tell the interviewers about them. Be confident, no candidate will have exactly the same experiences as you so use this to your advantage.

## What should you assess?

It is also an opportunity for you to find out more about the organisation and assess whether or not you want to work for them. Be prepared to ask questions and make the most of opportunities such as a tour of the premises or networking with current staff or recent graduates.





# DO YOUR RESEARCH

**It is essential that you undertake thorough research prior to your interview or assessment centre. Focus your research to ensure that you are fully prepared and give yourself the best chance to make the right impression with your prospective employer.**

You should already have done some research when completing your initial application, so the research you carry out for your interview is aimed at enhancing your existing knowledge and allowing you to demonstrate this at interview. It is important that you understand the organisation you are applying to but also have a thorough understanding of the role and what you can offer.

## The organisation and sector

- Get a better understanding of the products or services the organisation offers and understand their place in the sector.
- Identify any competitors and establish what they offer in comparison to the company you are applying to.
- Familiarise yourself with the company's culture and ethos. What is their mission statement and how can you show that you are able to match their values?
- Find out about any notable achievements or awards the company has received or is working towards.
- Some larger organisations have dedicated websites or sections for graduate recruitment. Look out for any additional information you can find here such as graduate profiles and case studies.
- Look at the company structure so that you can identify key management personnel and their roles within the organisation and consider how your role fits within this.
- Understand the history of the company as this can help you get a better understanding of their future.

## Where to look

- Corporate websites – In particular the 'About us' and 'News' sections.
- Social media – LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook.
- Trade and specialist publications – Focus on trade organisations and professional bodies.
- General press – Search for recent news articles on both local and national websites.
- Competitor websites.
- Search online for any tips provided by previous candidates applying for the same role as you. Great places to look include [www.glassdoor.co.uk](http://www.glassdoor.co.uk) and [www.ratemyplacement.co.uk](http://www.ratemyplacement.co.uk).

## The role

- Re-read the job description and person specification. Highlight the key skills and competencies that they are looking for and consider what examples you could use from your own experience to evidence these.
- Review the application you submitted as you are likely to be asked to expand on some of your answers. The questions you answered at the application stage may also give you an indication of the employer's priorities for the role and what you may be asked at interview.

# TYPES OF INTERVIEW

**There are a variety of different types of interview that you may encounter during the recruitment process. Below are some of the most popular formats and advice about what to expect.**

## Telephone interviews

Employers generally use telephone interviews when they have received many applications for a position. Typically, first round interviews consist of telephone interviews. Make sure you use a positive tone of voice to demonstrate your enthusiasm and create a good first impression.

- Be prepared for unscheduled calls; remain friendly but professional when answering calls to unknown numbers.
- If using a mobile phone, ensure it has a full battery and strong signal. Keep your charger nearby.
- If you have a personal voicemail make sure that it is professional and clear.
- Avoid temptation during your phone interview; do not eat, smoke or have any background noises as telephones can amplify these sounds.
- Tell your housemates or family that you have an interview at a specific time. Being interrupted in the middle of an interview may give the impression that you have not adequately planned the situation. Avoid public spaces where noise is unpredictable.
- Some people like to dress formally for telephone interviews as a reminder to remain professional and create an impact.
- Prepare some notes in advance. However, don't be tempted to read out answers to prepared questions as your voice will sound different when you are reading and interviewers will be able to tell.

## Face-to-face interviews

Face-to-face interviews are still the most common form of interview. Remember to highlight your strengths all the way through and maintain a positive attitude throughout.

- Look back over your application and the job description. Can you anticipate any questions the interviewers may ask you? Do you have other examples to use?
- If you have been told who your interviewer will be, carry out some research via LinkedIn to find out about their background, responsibilities and areas of interest.
- Think about your body language and your appearance (see pages 11 & 15). You want to come across as professional and friendly.
- You may have a one-to-one interview or a panel interview, consisting of a chairperson, potential line-manager, specialist or HR representative, for instance.

## Video interviews

Video interviewing is becoming increasingly popular with graduate employers. It can increase efficiency in the recruitment process and allow employers to identify the best candidates from a large pool of applicants. They generally fit into two categories - live and recorded.

**Live video interviews** - These are most typically conducted using software such as FaceTime and Skype and involve a live connection between you and the recruiter.

**Recorded interviews** - Recruiters use specialised platforms such as Sonru and Spark Hire, which ask the applicant to record answers to pre-set questions that appear on the screen. Candidates are given a set amount of thinking time before they record their response, which is also subject to a time limit. Recordings are then reviewed by the employer.

**Artificial intelligence** - Some recruiters are starting to move towards using artificial intelligence to assess video interview performance. Software such as HireVue is being used by large graduate recruiters and analyses your video interview, looking at areas including body language, tone of voice and key words. The software's algorithm indicates to the recruiter the top candidates who they can then spend time reviewing in more detail.

### Preparation

You should prepare as you would for any other interview, ensuring that you have researched the organisation, fully understand the role to which you are applying and can clearly demonstrate your relevant skills and experience (see page 5).

- Prepare your environment - Ensure you are set up in a quiet room with a strong internet connection and good lighting. If necessary, remove anything distracting that can be seen during the interview such as posters, logos or anything that you wouldn't want the employer to see.
- Make sure that your Skype name and email are professional.
- Check your tech - Download the software you will need to use in advance and check that it works on your device. You may wish to practise using the programme so that you are familiar with it and can identify any issues you may need to address beforehand.
- To boost your confidence, you may want to practise recording yourself. Pay particular attention to the tone and pace of your voice, and ensure you are maintaining good eye contact with the camera and using open body language.
- Look out for practice questions and any tips or advice that the employer may provide ahead of the interview.
- Ensure that you take the time to carefully read and understand the instructions. Some recorded interviews may give you the chance to re-record your answer whereas others may only allow one attempt.
- Dress smartly from head to toe, you will feel more confident and not have to worry about employers seeing your pyjama bottoms!

## **In addition to different interview formats, you may also encounter styles of interviews aligned with the sector you wish to enter. These have different features.**

### **Technical interviews**

If you are applying for a position in certain industries, for example Engineering, IT or Law, you may encounter a technical interview. These interviews test your knowledge, understanding and ability to apply the specific technical skills required for the role. Alongside specialist questions, you may even be asked to complete a task to demonstrate your abilities.

- Know your subject – Brush up on your knowledge of the specialist area. This could mean reviewing useful course materials or conducting additional research. You are likely to be asked information about your course and how it relates to the job role. Make sure you focus on the topics that relate to the employer's area of work.
- Be prepared to talk about projects you have worked on – Give a brief summary of the focus of your project, challenges you faced, how you overcame them and what the results were. Ensure that you articulate what you learnt from the project which supported your technical or wider professional development. Be prepared to answer questions as employers could use your examples to probe further for technical understanding. Some employers suggest bringing a portfolio where individual and group project evidence can be included to support your verbal explanation.
- Prepare examples of relevant work experience - Employers are also interested in seeing how you have practically applied the skills you have learned. Consider any work experience you have that can evidence your technical ability.
- Demonstrate your passion – Don't forget to show your enthusiasm for that subject area. Consider why you are interested in working in that industry and why you chose to study your degree course.
- If you don't know the answer, don't be tempted to rush in and guess. Employers may not always expect you to have the correct answer but are often more interested in your thought processes and how you approach a problem. Be logical and don't be afraid to ask probing questions to help inform your answer.

#### **Example questions:**

- Identify the critical points along a buried pipe running down a hill. (Civil Engineering)
- Write a C program to compare two linked lists. (IT)
- How is a merger/acquisition structured? (Law)

### **Portfolio interviews**

For some sectors, such as Engineering or the Creative Arts, a portfolio of your work may be required. These come in many different formats including print, web and multimedia and provide the interviewer with evidence of your skills. At interview, you need to be prepared to talk about the work you are presenting and, where appropriate, your influences.

- Be organised - Ensure that information is carefully ordered and clear to understand. You may also want to consider the size of your portfolio and how you will transport it to and from the interview.
- Be prepared – Talking about your work is something that you need to practise, so think about each item in your portfolio and what you might say.
- Be selective – Employers are not likely to spend very long looking at your portfolio. Focus on quality and not quantity and include work you are really proud of – partly because they are likely to impress the employer, but also because these are the projects you're most likely to be able to talk about with passion.
- Be relevant - Keep the job specification in mind when organising your portfolio and do some research to ensure that it both reflects your talents and is in a style relevant to the organisation you are approaching.

### **Academic interviews**

Interviews for academic roles are likely to take place in front of a panel and may have a presentation component, depending on the type of role you've applied for. If it is for a research role, often called a 'Post Doc', you will need to show a range of academic publications and demonstrate that your research interests fit with the group or department you are applying to. If it is a teaching role, then being able to evidence teaching experience and qualifications will prove beneficial.

- Be proactive about the panel - Try to find out the names of the panel in advance so that you can research them and their academic work accordingly.
- Be knowledgeable - It is desirable to have good knowledge of the department. Read their website, prospectus or talk to existing employees. Ask questions about the aims of the department regarding research and teaching.
- Be innovative - Demonstrate how your research fits in with the strategic development of the department and wider institution.

### **Interview presentations**

If your interview has a presentation component, you may be given the topic in advance of the interview, or it could be given to you on the day. The purpose of a presentation is to assess your public-speaking abilities and test your knowledge. You will typically be asked to present for 5-10 minutes, with some time afterwards for the panel to ask questions.

- Be structured - Make sure your presentation is easy to follow. Have a clear introduction, selection of main points and a conclusion.
- Be aware of body language - It can be difficult to build rapport in a short time but your body language can say a lot – smiling, making eye contact and good posture will convey confidence. Make sure you are not making excessive use of notes.
- Be clear and concise - You may have limited time, but this doesn't mean that you have to speed through your points. Speak clearly, concisely and try to use accessible language as opposed to jargon.

# INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

**Interviewers ask a variety of questions to gauge whether you will be a positive addition to their organisation. The following are the most common types of questions you are likely to encounter.**

## Generic interview questions

These questions usually come first in the interview to help you feel at ease and to provide a better understanding of why you have applied for the role. Conveying your knowledge and enthusiasm about the position will be essential.

Examples include:

- Tell me about yourself.
- What do you know about our company?

*Tip: Try to keep some structure to your answers and focus on including information that is relevant for the job. The recruiter doesn't need to hear your entire life story, just the parts of most interest.*

## Strength-based interview questions

These questions encourage you to demonstrate your skills and unique selling points.

Examples include:

- What can you bring to the role?
- What has been your biggest achievement?

*Tip: If asked, don't be afraid to talk about your weaknesses. Use this as an opportunity to reflect on your personal development and demonstrate how you have overcome challenges.*

## Situational or competency-based interview questions

These questions focus on your skills and experiences. The examples you provide should be aligned to the requirements outlined in the job specification. 'Describe a time when...' or 'Give an example of...' are typical openings for competency-based questions.

Examples include:

- Give an example of when you have displayed initiative.
- Tell me about a time when you led a team to success.

*Tip: An effective way to answer this type of question is to use the STAR method. This provides a framework which can help give structure to your answer. Learn more about STAR on page 9.*

## Specialist or technical interview questions

If you have applied for a specialist job, in Law or Engineering for example, you may be asked questions related to the specialism.

Examples include:

- What impact do you think the Legal Services Act will have on city firms?
- What are the main disadvantages of off-shore wind farms?

*Tip: Familiarise yourself with any areas of knowledge relevant to your chosen sector and position. Re-visit the job description and person specification to check for any specific requirements. See more advice on technical interviews on page 7.*

## Unusual questions

Some employers design seemingly unusual questions that test your logic, reasoning and/or moral values. These questions are used to assess how you perform under pressure and how you solve problems.

Examples include:

- How many basketballs could you fit in this room?
- Describe the colour yellow to somebody who is blind.

*Tip: If you get one of these questions, try to embrace the fun aspect of it. Think about your answer logically and explain your reasoning; there is no wrong answer.*

## Questions for the interviewers

Most interviewers will give you the opportunity to ask questions at the end of the interview. This is your chance to find out specific information about the role and the organisation, as well as demonstrate your interest and enthusiasm. Take care not to ask questions you could have easily found the answer to.

- What are the key priorities for this role within the first 3-6 months?
- What training opportunities are available?
- What do you like most about working for this company?



# STRUCTURE YOUR ANSWERS

Ensuring you effectively structure answers to interview questions not only allows you to present your skills and experience clearly, it also helps you pace yourself when answering and gives you a bit of thinking time. It is important that you evidence your skills, aptitude, knowledge and experience in relation to the question being asked as it allows the employer to understand how well suited you are for the role.

Where appropriate, you could consider using the STAR technique to structure your answers.

## STAR technique

The STAR technique is a useful framework for answering competency and strength-based questions. This can be used throughout the application process to help you structure answers to both written and verbal questions. It is broken down into the following components:

- **Situation** Provide a brief description of the situation in order to set the scene.
- **Task** What was the task that you had to undertake? When, where and with whom?

- **Action** This is the main part of the answer and the most important. Outline the actions you took to deal with the situation, focusing on your individual contribution.
- **Result** Conclude your answer with the outcomes of the situation. Did you achieve your original goal? What skills did you develop?

You may also see the STAR technique presented as CAR - in this format Situation and Task are combined into Context.



# DURING THE INTERVIEW

**An interview can be a nerve-wracking experience. You may feel as though you need to provide the perfect answer to every question without a moment of hesitation. This is not true, and you are likely to feel the strain much more if you put yourself under pressure to perform. Here are some tips to help you be at your best.**

## Stress management

It is perfectly natural to feel nervous before an interview, however, the suggestions below can help you feel more prepared.

- If your nerves stem from a previous interview that did not go according to plan, take some time to reflect on what you could do to improve, such as slowing the pace of your voice or providing more information in your examples.
- Come to our Drop-in Service for interview advice or see if there are any employer mock interviews coming up so you can practise. See more information on page 19.
- On the day, focusing on your breathing may help to lessen anxiety, enabling you to think a little more clearly.

For more information about relaxation techniques take a look at the handout featured on our webpage:

[www.southampton.ac.uk/interviews](http://www.southampton.ac.uk/interviews)

## What if you don't hear or understand the question?

There is no harm in asking the interviewer to repeat the question if you do not hear them the first time. Similarly, if you do not understand a question, ask them to repeat or re-word the question rather than trying to answer something you are not sure about.

If you are partly through your answer and have forgotten the question, just check with the employer to see if you have fully answered their question or if they would like further details.

## What if you don't know the answer?

Whilst not knowing an answer can be frustrating in an interview situation, it is not the end of the world. Give yourself time to think about the question. Don't launch into an answer that may lack structure and effective content. If you still find you cannot articulate an answer, it is reasonable to request that you return to the question later on in the interview.

## Handling inappropriate questions

There are a number of questions that, by law, interviewers are not allowed to ask. These include questions referring to disabilities and physical appearance, sexuality, gender, race and ethnicity, marital status, family planning and childcare, or any previous convictions.

Examples of inappropriate questions include:

- Where were you born?
- Do you have a disability?
- What childcare arrangements do you have in place?
- What is your sexual orientation?

You do not have to answer these questions, but if you decide to respond keep it brief and general. For example you might say "there's nothing that would interfere with my ability to do the job."

# BODY LANGUAGE

**Whether consciously or not, we all pick up on signals from each other which help us to form an impression of a person from the moment we meet. Research suggests that around 55% of communication is through our body language alone which means that in an interview, it's important to think about what your whole body is saying, not just your words!**

**Below are some tips to help you make the best impression on your interviewer.**

## Head and face

- Making eye contact with the interviewers can help you to establish rapport, gauge the interviewers' reaction to what you are saying and make you seem confident. If you have a panel interview look at the entire panel in turn, starting with the person asking the question.
- Occasional nodding can show that you are engaged with what the interviewer is saying. However, try not to nod excessively.
- Facial expressions are important. Try to make sure that your facial expressions reflect your tone and what you are saying.
- Tone of voice can also have an effect on your interview and nerves. Try to talk clearly and maintain your natural tone and speed of talking. This is particularly important for telephone interviews.

## Body

- Good posture displays poise and engagement with the interview situation. Sit upright and try not to slouch.
- Try not to cross your arms as it can look commanding, aggressive or defensive. At an interview you want to look approachable. Try and keep your arms at your sides, on your lap or placed in front of you on the table. This will also discourage fidgeting or fiddling with hair, nails, or items in front of you. Some subtle hand movements can be helpful for conversation.
- Your handshake can say a lot about you. Aim for a firm but not bone-crushing handshake.
- Subtly mirror the interviewer's body language and vocal cadence. If they are resting with their hands on the table, mirror this. If they are talking excitedly about a topic, match their enthusiasm.

## Other ways to build good rapport and make a good impression at your interview are to:

- Stay positive. Always remember that the interviewers want to meet you and find out more about you.
- Stay calm by taking slow, deep breaths and don't forget to smile. These simple steps can make you seem confident and approachable.

 **Find out more:**  
For more tips about body language and making a good impression go to:  
<https://tinyurl.com/graduate-body-language>

# ASSESSMENT CENTRE ACTIVITIES



**An assessment centre will be made up of a series of different activities and tasks, each designed to assess certain skills and characteristics that are critical to the role you are applying for. A relatively small proportion of applicants go through to the assessment centre stage, so if you get here you have already done really well.**

## Group activities

Assessment centres often have one or more group activity components. There are a number of skills being evaluated including team-working, leadership, communication and problem-solving. You are not being assessed on whether you dominate group tasks, or if you 'win'; it is your interpersonal skills and contribution to tasks that are most important. Keep these things in mind throughout:

- Listen to instructions carefully and ensure you refer back to the brief to stay on track.
- Take note of the time in which you have to complete the activity and keep an eye on this throughout.
- Agree on objectives of the task and prioritise accordingly.
- If you are usually a quiet person, do your best to speak up as you cannot be assessed if you don't say anything. If you are outgoing, try not to dominate the discussion.
- Do not interrupt others to get your point across. Do not let others interrupt you.
- Keep your contributions concise – you will be up against the clock and your point is more likely to be understood if you are clear and succinct.
- Try to include all members of the group – addressing them by name if possible.
- Some employers like to throw in last minute changes to activities to see how you react to unexpected situations. Keep a calm head and reassess your task and what needs to be achieved in the new timeframe.

There has been research about types of personalities found in groups, and it may be useful to review these:

**<http://www.belbin.com/about/belbin-team-roles/>**

## Group discussions

A common aspect of group tasks is being provided with a topic to discuss. Debate and negotiation are at the centre of discussions. You will be expected to reach a group consensus and then formulate a plan or proposal to address the topic. For example:

- General topic - 'The voting age should be lowered to 16'.
- Work-related topic or problem - 'Profits have fallen. What actions could be taken to improve performance in the next quarter?'

## Role play

Some group activities may require you to take on a role play scenario where each of you may have an individual briefing and instructions or roles. Again, you will be expected to debate and negotiate with each other in order to come to a consensus. For instance:

'Your group is in a jungle after a plane crash and there is only one rescue helicopter coming with limited seats. Each group member is assigned a different character and a belonging which might be of use to the group. Discuss as a group who will go in the helicopter and who should remain behind and why.'

This type of activity is an ideal opportunity to practise your negotiating and compromising skills.

## Group presentations

Some assessment centres may have a group presentation component. If so, it will be important to:

- Address the aims and objectives of the presentation.
- Agree presentation structure, timings and format based on resources you have been given.
- Delegate tasks, ensuring that every member of the group has an opportunity to contribute.
- Discuss issues throughout and ensure that all group members are clear about their role in producing and delivering the presentation.

See further advice on giving presentations on page 7.

## Case study exercises

For some roles, you could be presented with hypothetical documents such as company reports. You may be asked to make and present business decisions or suggest recommendations based on the information you have been given. These are often group exercises and time limited. It is typical to have preparation time, followed by a presentation with questions at the end.

- Practise your presentation skills.
- Ensure your commercial awareness is up to date by researching the company and sector.

### Group interviews

There may be a group interview incorporated into the assessment centre. Preparing for this kind of interview requires the same preparation as other face-to-face interviews. Make sure you have good knowledge of:

- The role, organisation and sector. Refer to research you should have carried out prior to interview.
- Skills required for the position, with examples for each.
- Key strengths and weaknesses.
- Ensure you take opportunities to contribute to the discussion, you can only be marked on your participation.

### Psychometric tests

Another aspect of assessment centres may be individual tests to assess your suitability for the role/organisation. Psychometric tests are an accurate way of measuring your specific capabilities and are often timed. Some employers may have asked you to complete tests prior to your interview or assessment centre, however, you may be asked to complete these again on the day.

They are split into the following three areas: Ability Tests, Situational Judgement Tests and Personality Assessments.

#### Ability tests

**Numerical tests** assess your ability to work with numbers in an accurate manner.

- Prepare for numerical tests by doing basic revision and practising your maths.
- These tests generally focus on percentages, ratios, costs, sales, rates and trends.

**Verbal reasoning tests** require you to read a short passage of text then answer several questions based on the information given.

- Forget all previous knowledge and assumptions about the topic. Answer the questions only using information that you have been given.
- Practise by reading broadsheet newspapers, choosing a paragraph of information and analysing the content to extract key information.

**Diagrammatic reasoning tests** are designed to measure your logical reasoning; they usually consist of multiple-choice questions such as finding the next sequence in a pattern or rules of a flowchart. Diagrammatic reasoning tests are also similar to logical and abstract assessments.

- Completing diagrammatic and word puzzles can help to get you used to these tests.
- Use online resources to practise diagrammatic tests to get used to this format and practise your approach.

#### Situational judgement tests

These tests are based on realistic, hypothetical scenarios to see if your responses align with other employees at the company. You will be given a situation and must rank various options in the order that you would deal with them.

- Answer honestly.
- Research the company and their values, this will help you make informed, appropriate decisions. For example, if an organisation prides itself on great customer service, you should consider selecting answers which prioritise the customer.
- Be prepared to discuss your answers and explain your reasoning behind the decisions you make.

### Personality assessments

These assessments evaluate individual behaviour, attitudes or opinions, as well as motivation, values and interests. They are used by the employer to assess your suitability for the role or workplace in terms of personality and working style.

- Be yourself – Answer questions honestly or you may risk being offered a role that would not suit you.
- Consider the role which you are applying for – Be mindful of the qualities that would be desirable in the ideal candidate for the position.

### Other assessment centre activities

#### In-tray exercises

In-tray exercises typically ask you to play the role of a member of staff on a busy day. You are then given tasks to complete during the test. These might be around the organisation, answering emails or phone calls and other work related duties. You will be assessed on how effectively you manage and prioritise these tasks.

- Think about the urgency of the task against the importance.
- Consider tasks that can be done quickly that will help you complete other tasks more efficiently.

#### Technical tasks

Depending on the type of job you are applying for you may be asked to do a technical task. This could involve a piece of equipment or machinery that you would be using on a regular basis or constructing something in a limited amount of time.

- Look back over the job description to notice equipment, machinery or computer programs the organisation uses.
- Revise this equipment so if you do encounter a technical test you are prepared.

#### Written exercises

Written exercises are common in assessment centres. They often include writing reports, an email to a client or a list of instructions to assess your written communication skills.

- Focus on your spelling, grammar and tone.
- Manage your time appropriately to allow you enough time to plan and complete the exercise. Allow time to proof read your work.
- Communicate clearly and make sure you emphasise the important information.

#### Individual role play

Individual role play exercises are commonly used for customer facing roles to assess your customer service, communication and confidence interacting with people. The activity could be a role play phone call with a customer placing an order over the phone and the assessors listening in.

- Research the role fully before the interview, this will make it easier to assume the role and get into character.
- Remember your time keeping and other key skills the assessors may be looking for.
- Be yourself, let your professional personality come through in your role play.



#### Find out more:

For free practice tests and further information on psychometric tests and assessment centres go to:  
[www.southampton.ac.uk/psychometrics](http://www.southampton.ac.uk/psychometrics)  
[www.southampton.ac.uk/assessmentcentres](http://www.southampton.ac.uk/assessmentcentres)



# ASSESSMENT CENTRES OUT OF HOURS

**Depending on the length of the assessment centre, meals and accommodation may be included. This can mean interacting with your assessors and other candidates in a more relaxed environment.**

Whilst the informal activities such as meals and refreshments aren't directly assessed, the way you act will be noticed by the assessors. Here are some tips on how to make a good impression.

- Listen and co-operate - Demonstrate your listening skills through body language and helping to facilitate conversations. This can make you and the others around you feel more relaxed.
- Be yourself - Let your natural personality show rather than trying to be someone you think the employer wants to hire. It's impossible and tiring to keep up a facade, the assessors will see through it and you may risk being placed in a job that doesn't suit you.
- Network - During breaks and meals, ensure that you talk to a variety of people to show off your social and communication skills.
- Approach people - This can be intimidating but remember that at an assessment centre no one knows each other. Make eye contact, shake their hand and say their name aloud to help you remember them.
- Leaving groups - Moving on from a group can be tricky, you need to do this politely. Indicate that your drink is empty or you would like to get some food, close with "it was nice speaking to you", smile and leave.
- Talking points - Read up on current affairs, global news and information around the industry you are being interviewed for. This will help you join in with topical conversations or make small talk.
- Alcohol and evening meals - If you don't know how to eat it, avoid it! Table manners are important and poor etiquette can give a bad impression to assessors and other candidates. If you decide to have an alcoholic drink, stick to only a small amount. It is a professional environment, not a night out.
- Expenses - As a candidate, you should never be asked to pay to attend an assessment centre, however, there may be costs involved such as travel or accommodation if staying overnight. Some employers will offer to reimburse part or all of these expenses but make sure you check with the organisation before booking anything.



# DRESS CODE AND ETIQUETTE

**At an interview you want to appear confident and professional so make sure your outfit and general conduct reflects this. You should be clean, well-groomed and in clothes that make you feel comfortable. Check the interview invitation letter carefully, particularly if you will be socialising or going out for a meal with the interviewers. Employers need to visualise you in your desired role, and you want to show you both fit in and stand out from other candidates.**

## Dress code

### The outfit

- Wear a professional outfit that suits the industry you are applying to. If in doubt wear a suit, or smart dress or skirt. Keep it tailored, clean and make sure it is ironed. It is a good idea to get your outfit ready the night before.

### Colours

- Choose tones that suit you but are also professional. If you want to add colour think about a coloured tie, shirt or top.

### Fit

- Avoid wearing ill-fitting clothes as they can make you look untidy. For women, go for a moderate neckline rather than low-cut. For men, wear a button-up shirt and tie, and avoid short-sleeved shirts and novelty ties or socks.

### Shoes

- Ensure they are clean, smart and professional. Make sure you can comfortably walk in the shoes as the interview may include an office tour; stay away from excessively high heels, trainers or flip flops.

### Creative industries

- These can be less rigid in dress codes than other industries, which can give you a little more freedom with what to wear. Make sure you research the corporate culture of the organisation and choose your outfit according to this.

## Keep it simple

- The interviewers want to focus on you not your outfit. If you wear make-up, opt for a natural look, avoid excessive jewellery, and keep your hair neat and tidy. If you are prone to playing with your hair, wear it back. Avoid wearing overpowering aftershave or perfume.

## Personal belongings

- If you choose to bring a bag make sure it looks professional. Also, think about what is inside your bag. If you are bringing your CV, notepad, pens or paper, make sure that everything looks presentable.

## Interview etiquette

- Be professional in all interactions you have with the employer, whether this is via email, telephone or in person. From the moment you begin communicating, the employer is starting to form an impression of you, so ensure you use appropriate language and respond to communication in a timely manner.
- Your interview begins from the moment you arrive. Reception staff are often asked for feedback on candidates so make sure that you are polite, professional and enthusiastic from the outset.
- Aim to arrive at your interview 10 minutes early and make sure you leave yourself plenty of time to get there in case of any problems.
- Ensure that your mobile phone is switched off. Even if your phone is on silent it can be a distraction.
- If you smoke try to avoid doing so before your interview. After the interview make sure you are out of sight of the building before you start smoking.

# DISCLOSING A DISABILITY

**It's your choice if and when to disclose your disability, specific learning difficulty or long-term health condition to a future employer.**

Before the interview or assessment centre you could research or request information about the organisation's equal opportunities policies and support. This can help you decide if you wish to disclose to the organisation and whether they will be the best fit for you.

Think about the activities you will be required to complete during the assessment process. For example, if there will be a lot of material to read in a case study exercise would you benefit from additional time?

You can make a positive statement about your disability by:

- Focusing on your strengths, skills and experience. Consider which skills can be transferred to the workplace, for example, increased awareness of differing individual needs or communication skills developed through organising your support worker.
- Not assuming that an employer will view your disability in a negative way.
- Promoting and demonstrating your resourcefulness and coping strategies.
- Emphasising the different perspective you can offer the organisation.

If you decide to disclose we have some useful examples on our website of how to talk about the strengths and skills you have developed as a result of your disability. A list of prohibited questions are also discussed on page 10 of this guide.



## Reasonable adjustments

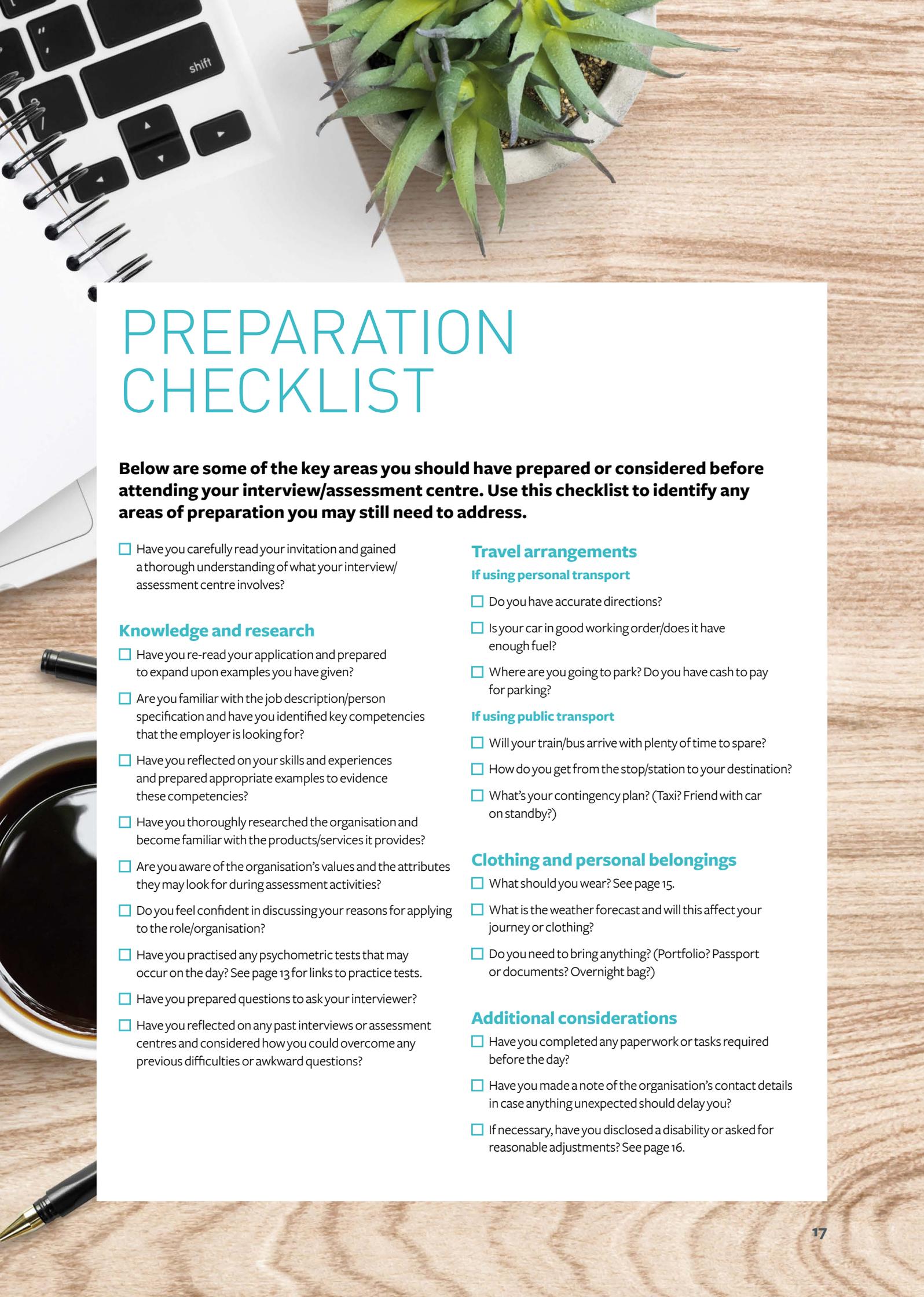
If you would like to request reasonable adjustments for an interview or assessment centre, aim to let the organisation know as soon as possible. Employers only have a duty to make reasonable adjustments for you if they know you have a disability and what is needed. You are the best person to know what support you need so consider what adjustments you would like to request, for example, tests in an alternative format or an adjusted interview room. Bear in mind that even if you disclose, the people interviewing you may not know the details; they may only know that adjustments have been made.

Disclosing at an interview or after you accept the job may make it easier to get information about support schemes. Employers suggest early disclosure so they can offer appropriate support throughout and take advantage of funding to help make any adjustments. However, it is always up to you if and when you wish to disclose your disability.

Some jobs involve 'fitness to practice' and some may require you to complete a health form after the job offer, both of which involve confidential disclosure to health professionals. The purpose is to ensure there is no risk to yourself and others, and where appropriate, to allow the employer to make reasonable adjustments.



 **Find out more:**  
[www.southampton.ac.uk/  
careers/disclosing](http://www.southampton.ac.uk/careers/disclosing)



# PREPARATION CHECKLIST

**Below are some of the key areas you should have prepared or considered before attending your interview/assessment centre. Use this checklist to identify any areas of preparation you may still need to address.**

- Have you carefully read your invitation and gained a thorough understanding of what your interview/assessment centre involves?

## Knowledge and research

- Have you re-read your application and prepared to expand upon examples you have given?
- Are you familiar with the job description/person specification and have you identified key competencies that the employer is looking for?
- Have you reflected on your skills and experiences and prepared appropriate examples to evidence these competencies?
- Have you thoroughly researched the organisation and become familiar with the products/services it provides?
- Are you aware of the organisation's values and the attributes they may look for during assessment activities?
- Do you feel confident in discussing your reasons for applying to the role/organisation?
- Have you practised any psychometric tests that may occur on the day? See page 13 for links to practice tests.
- Have you prepared questions to ask your interviewer?
- Have you reflected on any past interviews or assessment centres and considered how you could overcome any previous difficulties or awkward questions?

## Travel arrangements

### If using personal transport

- Do you have accurate directions?
- Is your car in good working order/does it have enough fuel?
- Where are you going to park? Do you have cash to pay for parking?

### If using public transport

- Will your train/bus arrive with plenty of time to spare?
- How do you get from the stop/station to your destination?
- What's your contingency plan? (Taxi? Friend with car on standby?)

## Clothing and personal belongings

- What should you wear? See page 15.
- What is the weather forecast and will this affect your journey or clothing?
- Do you need to bring anything? (Portfolio? Passport or documents? Overnight bag?)

## Additional considerations

- Have you completed any paperwork or tasks required before the day?
- Have you made a note of the organisation's contact details in case anything unexpected should delay you?
- If necessary, have you disclosed a disability or asked for reasonable adjustments? See page 16.

# AFTER THE INTERVIEW OR ASSESSMENT CENTRE

## Second interviews

If you are asked back for a second interview, do not worry. This is usually a positive sign that the interviewers want to know more in-depth detail about you to make their final decision. It might be your second or third time meeting the interviewer so they will already know information about you. For your second interview you will want to:

- Give more detailed and varied answers from your first interview or assessment centre.
- Reiterate the skills you have that the organisation is looking for.
- Prepare new questions to ask the interviewers. Use this opportunity to find out more information about the company.
- Follow up after the second interview by sending a thank you email and express your continued interest in the role.

## Job offers

You have been offered the job, well done! However, there are a few things you need to think about before you relax and celebrate:

- Do you want the job?
- Does it match your values and career aspirations?
- Did the work environment feel right?
- Is there anything in the contract or terms you don't understand?
- Have you thought about your lifestyle changes, things such as housing, commuting and work schedule?

Whatever you decide to do, remember to stay friendly and positive when informing the organisation to maintain your professional reputation.

## Feedback

Whether you have been offered the job or not, you may still want to contact the organisation for feedback. This can be a good learning opportunity for you to develop your interviewing technique for the future. If you are able to get feedback, thank them for taking the time to provide you with this. Give yourself time afterwards to reflect on what the employer has told you. You may not agree with all of the feedback, but it can often show you areas to improve on.

## Accepting an offer

Once the employer has told you that they would like to hire you, if you wish to accept the job, thank them and ask to get this information in writing, including the name of the position and start date. Only accept the job offer once you have received this information. You should reply to confirm your acceptance of the job in writing to your new employer as soon as possible.

There are also a few other things you may wish to discuss:

- Start date - When are you able to start work? You may need to hand in your notice or wait for HR to process your references and contract before confirming a start date.
- Salary - How much will you be paid and when? Depending on the job the salary may be open for negotiation, you will need to negotiate this before you sign your contract.
- Contracts - When can they send the contract and do you need to supply any documents to your new employer?

If you are waiting to hear if you have been successful for a different position and are unsure whether or not to accept, bear in mind that it is not good practice to accept more than one offer at a time. Recruitment is a costly and time consuming process and recruiters will not thank you if you renege on an accepted offer. This could reflect badly on your professional reputation. Instead, clarify the date by which you need to accept and think carefully about whether or not this is the right position for you.

## Declining an offer

There are many reasons why you may wish to decline a job offer, the organisation might not be a good fit or you may have a more competitive opportunity. Whatever the reason, remember when declining an offer you should do so in a friendly and professional manner.

- Once you are sure you do not want the job, decline as soon as possible. The employer can then offer the position to another candidate. You should do this over the phone, then follow up with an email to the main point of contact.
- Thank the employer for the opportunity and their time.
- Explain in a polite manner why you do not wish to accept this position, for example:

“Unfortunately I have realised that the position is not entirely suited to me and my career aspirations...”



# CAREERS AND EMPLOYABILITY SERVICE

**We offer a wide range of support to help you prepare for interviews and assessment centres, as well as increase your employability. Take a look at some of our services below and check out our website for more information and advice.**

## **MyCareer**

MyCareer is your online careers platform allowing all University of Southampton students and graduates to easily access a range of our services.

<http://mycareer.soton.ac.uk>

## **Careers Fairs**

Our events team organise a number of careers fairs during the year, providing the opportunity to speak to employers about their application processes. See our website for details.

[www.southampton.ac.uk/careers/fairs](http://www.southampton.ac.uk/careers/fairs)

## **Drop-in Service**

Our Drop-in Service provides an opportunity for you to have a conversation with one of our advisers about anything careers related. Appointments aren't necessary, check out our website for more details and timings.

[www.southampton.ac.uk/careers/drop-in](http://www.southampton.ac.uk/careers/drop-in)

## **Events**

We organise a full programme of events throughout the year including workshops and presentations on interviews and mock assessment centres, many of which are hosted by graduate employers.

[www.southampton.ac.uk/careers/events](http://www.southampton.ac.uk/careers/events)

## **Work Experience**

Our work experience programmes range from short-term internships with the Excel Southampton Internship Programme to a placement year as part of the Year in Employment. Discover further opportunities through the Volunteering Bank and Business Innovation Programme on our website.

[www.southampton.ac.uk/careers/work-experience](http://www.southampton.ac.uk/careers/work-experience)

## **Career Mentoring**

You can gain invaluable knowledge and experience from a professional mentor especially chosen for you to support your career planning. Take a look at our website to find out more about our Career Mentoring Programme.

[www.southampton.ac.uk/careers/mentoring](http://www.southampton.ac.uk/careers/mentoring)



**Find out more:**

[www.southampton.ac.uk/careers](http://www.southampton.ac.uk/careers)

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