

# Working for Small Organisations

A common misconception amongst students is that a 'graduate job' is a job on a graduate scheme. This is possibly because graduate schemes get the most coverage through graduate recruitment fairs, careers publications and employer presentations. In actual fact, a graduate job is any job which requires you to have a degree level qualification in order to carry it out effectively. It needn't be part of a graduate scheme. This widens out the job graduate market for new graduates to small-medium-sized organisations (SMEs), many of which won't run graduate schemes but will have graduate positions available. An SME is defined by The European Commission (EC) as an organisation that employs fewer than 250 staff and has a turnover of less than 50 million Euros. According to a HECSU report in 2010 in the UK there are an estimated 4.8 million SMEs, employing 23.1 million people and together accounting for 99.9% of all enterprises, You would do well to tap into them in your job hunt.

## WHAT CAN AN SME OFFER ME?

Working for a small-to-medium-sized company can offer a range of benefits potentially including:

- Less focus in the selection process on grades and more on the skills set and work experience of candidates
- a simpler, less time-consuming selection process
- vacancies arising all the year round, usually with start dates fairly soon after selection
- early opportunities for responsibility, promotion and career advancement
- a more entrepreneurial, less hierarchical work environment
- early responsibilities and use of individual initiative
- more scope for contributing your own ideas and seeing their implementation and impact, thereby increasing your feeling of personal and professional value
- the chance to become involved in a wide range of different projects, useful in helping you decide where your strengths and interests lie
- more flexibility within your job, as roles can be less rigidly defined
- more direct personal contact with senior management
- a higher profile within the company - you are not just a face in a large crowd
- camaraderie as you work closely with a small team and client group.

## WHAT ARE THE DISADVANTAGES?

Working for an SME will not suit everyone. For example, you might:

- prefer the more structured promotion prospects and enhanced salaries that larger companies can offer
- benefit from the organised framework of a graduate training scheme and the peer support from fellow graduate trainees
- find a lack of support infrastructure in a small organisation, meaning that there is no obvious person to turn to or procedure to follow if you are having difficulties at work
- be looking for the status associated with working for a well-known company that only employs graduates
- discover that working relationships in a smaller company can be somewhat limited, particularly if you are in a different age group to the majority of your colleagues
- have to initially convince employers that you are the right person for the job. Sometimes SME employers can have misconceptions about graduates - for example, that they have little commercial and business awareness and will be costly to train. It is up to you to demonstrate the benefits of your higher education and prove that you have vital employability skills, such as problem-solving, flexibility and self-motivation.

## HOW DO I ACCESS THE SME JOB MARKET?

Some SMEs offer graduate schemes, others trainee positions or entry-level roles. However, unlike large scale organisations, SMEs prefer to advertise in local, regional or specialist publications rather than in the national press. Many employers in this category use employment agencies (often specialist), job centres, existing networks and their own or professional association websites to publicise new positions.

Significantly, approximately a third of SMEs rely on speculative applications from individuals who have researched the industry and the company and apply for a position, despite there being no vacancy. Therefore, a proactive approach, in which you contact companies directly rather than waiting to respond to advertisements, is an advantage.

There are a number of ways to find out about companies in your target industry who may have vacancies or to whom you may wish to apply speculatively:

1) Use the directories of SMEs listed in the further information section of this leaflet

2) Look at the websites of some professional and trade associations in your industry. Your College Careers Service should be able to provide you with a list of these. They often have lists of members that include contact details and website addresses. These can be an excellent starting point. If you know the website address of one company in the field it is possible to use the advanced search tool on Google to find others with similar interests. See the leaflet in this series *Job Hunting* for more information on this.

3) Find out if there is a specialist publication for the career area you are interested in. Don't just look for advertised vacancies but use the vacancy pages to source company names; make a list of the ones that you might like to work for. Read the news articles - these can be another supply of company names and provide information on who is expanding, downsizing or taking on new projects.

4) Investigate any local or national schemes available which involve SMEs as partners. You can research the list of partners to investigate whether you would like to work for any of them. Two starting points are STEP and Knowledge Transfer Partnerships. The STEP programme provides project-based work placements for penultimate year students in SMEs ([www.step.org.uk](http://www.step.org.uk)) and Knowledge Transfer Partnerships is a government-funded scheme that facilitates project-management placements for high quality graduates ([www.ktponline.org.uk](http://www.ktponline.org.uk)).

#### TOP TIPS FOR SPECULATIVE APPLICATIONS

- Always send a speculative letter to a named person.
- Ensure that your covering letter and CV show that you have researched the company and that you can meet their needs.
- Make sure that, through your covering letter and CV, you have been explicit about the particular skills many SMEs require from their staff, such as flexibility and ability to handle responsibility.
- Do not presume that the employer will readily appreciate what your HE studies have involved; state some of your relevant modules and/or projects and most importantly, why that will be useful to their business.
- Some SMEs prefer to be approached in a face-to-face way so consider following up your speculative approach with not only a phone call but a visit. Recruitment for SMEs is usually less structured, and sometimes less orthodox than larger organisations, so if you can demonstrate that you can fit in with the team and hit the ground running you may well be taken on.
- Many SMEs take people on after they have completed a work placement with the company. This is sometimes a formal programme or an informal arrangement via a speculative approach. Use your summer vacation at the end of your penultimate year as a prime time to undertake such a placement.

#### FURTHER INFORMATION

- [www.careers.lon.ac.uk/jobonline](http://www.careers.lon.ac.uk/jobonline) The Careers Group, University of London vacancy site has lots of SME vacancies
- [www.business.timesonline.co.uk](http://www.business.timesonline.co.uk) Search for The Sunday Times 100 Best SMEs
- [www.fsb.org.uk](http://www.fsb.org.uk) Search the directory of the Federation of Small Businesses
- [www.companies-house.gov.uk](http://www.companies-house.gov.uk) Companies House - information on companies in the UK
- [www.yell.com](http://www.yell.com) The Yellow Pages website - a good way to find small companies in your local area
- [www.taforum.org](http://www.taforum.org) The Trade Association Forum has an online directory - note that not all professional associations are listed
- [www.prospects.ac.uk](http://www.prospects.ac.uk) Go to [Jobs & Work](#) > [Explore Job Sectors](#) > [Small to Medium-sized enterprises \(SMEs\)](#) for an overview of the sector
- [www.uksmallbusinessdirectory.co.uk](http://www.uksmallbusinessdirectory.co.uk)
- [www.britishchambers.org.uk](http://www.britishchambers.org.uk) Locate your local chamber of commerce, which will provide useful networking events.
- [www.fsmed.org](http://www.fsmed.org) Durham Business Schools Department for Executive Education and Enterprise
- [www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/wbs/research/csme/](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/wbs/research/csme/) The Centre for Small and Medium Sized Enterprises at Warwick Business School is one of the leading centres for the research, teaching and training of SMEs in the UK.
- [www.businesslink.gov.uk](http://www.businesslink.gov.uk) Business Link - for advice on how to start, run or grow a business
- Specialist business libraries eg The City Business Library, 1 Brewers Hall Garden, London, EC2V 5BX. Tel 020 7332 1812
- [www.bl.uk/bis](http://www.bl.uk/bis) British Library Business Information Service. Tel 020 7412 7454

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