

## The top 10 skills that'll get you a job when you graduate



With so many graduates now on the market, employers will look for evidence of skills and work experience, which will make you stand out from the crowd. Start gathering them now or work on what you've got so you are ready to impress recruiters.

Graduate employers place a lot of emphasis on finding candidates with the right skills and competencies for their organisations. Depending on the career sector and profession you choose to work in, there could be very specific skills, abilities and knowledge needed to do the job. However, complementing these are general competences and behaviours that are essential for successful working. These are often overlooked by candidates, but they are the things recruitment professionals want to see evidence of.

## The top ten skills graduate recruiters want

### TASK 1: Match the headings with the paragraphs:

**Ability to work under pressure**

**Negotiation and persuasion**

**Commercial awareness (or business acumen)**

**Organisation**

**Communication**

**Perseverance and motivation**

**Confidence**

**Problem solving**

**Leadership**

**Teamwork**

1. \_\_\_\_\_: This is about knowing how a business or industry works and what makes a company tick. Showing that you have an understanding of what the organisation wants to achieve through its products and services, and how it competes in its marketplace.
2. \_\_\_\_\_: This covers verbal and written communication, and listening. It's about being clear, concise and focused; being able to tailor your message for the audience and listening to the views of others.
3. \_\_\_\_\_: You'll need to prove that you're a team player but also have the ability to manage and delegate to others and take on responsibility. It's about building positive working relationships that help everyone to achieve goals and business objectives.
4. \_\_\_\_\_: This is about being able to put forward your way, but also being able to understand where the other person is coming from so that you can both get what you want or need and feel positive about it.
5. \_\_\_\_\_: You need to display an ability to take a logical and analytical approach to solving problems and resolving issues. It's also good to show that you can approach problems from different angles.

6. \_\_\_\_\_: You may not be a manager straight away, but graduates need to show potential to motivate teams and other colleagues that may work for them. It's about assigning and delegating tasks well, setting deadlines and leading by good example.

7. \_\_\_\_\_: This is about showing that you can prioritise, work efficiently and productively, and manage your time well. It's also good to be able to show employers how you decide what is important to focus on and get done, and how you go about meeting deadlines.

8. \_\_\_\_\_: Employers want people to have a bit of get-up-and-go. Working life presents many challenges and you need to show employers that you're the kind of person who will find a way through, even when the going gets tough... and stay cheerful-ish.

9. \_\_\_\_\_: This is about keeping calm in a crisis and not becoming too overwhelmed or stressed.

10. \_\_\_\_\_: In the workplace you need to strike the balance of being confident in yourself but not arrogant, but also have confidence in your colleagues and the company you work for.

## Employer buzzwords and words of action

There are certain words which are key to catching an employer's interest. Mention them in your CV and at interviews and see how impressed they are with your business-speak (but don't go overboard or you'll sound daft).

### **TASK 2: Write the English translations:**

- i \_\_\_\_\_ - inicjatywa
- d \_\_\_\_\_ - dynamiczny
- t \_\_\_ p \_\_\_\_\_ - osoba umiejąca pracować w zespole
- p \_\_\_\_\_ - aktywny, czynny, pełen inicjatywy
- s \_\_\_-m \_\_\_\_\_ - mający silną motywację wewnętrzną

You can also talk in terms of actions that you achieve through your skills by using good, strong verbs in applications and interviews:

### **TASK 3: Complete the definitions and examples with the following words:**

SOURCE (of definitions and examples): [dictionary.cambridge.org](http://dictionary.cambridge.org)

**achieve complete coordinate delegate deliver identify lead organize present promote  
report resolve**

- \_\_\_\_\_ - to achieve or do something that you have promised to do, or that people expect you to do  
e.g. The company failed to \_\_\_\_\_ the high quality service that we expect.
- \_\_\_\_\_ - to be in control of a group, country, or situation  
e.g. to \_\_\_\_\_ a discussion
- \_\_\_\_\_ - to describe a recent event or situation, especially on television, radio, or in a newspaper  
e.g. She \_\_\_\_\_ed that the situation had changed dramatically.
- \_\_\_\_\_ - to find a particular thing or all the things of a particular group  
e.g. You need to \_\_\_\_\_ your priorities.
- \_\_\_\_\_ - to finish doing or making something  
e.g. The palace took 15 years to \_\_\_\_\_.
- \_\_\_\_\_ - to give a particular job, duty, right, etc. to someone else so that they do it for you  
e.g. The board then said each could \_\_\_\_\_ someone to act in his place.
- \_\_\_\_\_ - to give people information in a formal way  
e.g. He \_\_\_\_\_ed the report to his colleagues.
- \_\_\_\_\_ - to give someone a more important job in the same organization  
e.g. She's just been \_\_\_\_\_d to manager.
- \_\_\_\_\_ - to make different people or things work together effectively, or to organize all the different parts of an activity  
e.g. My manager is \_\_\_\_\_ing the new project.
- \_\_\_\_\_ - to plan or arrange something  
e.g. to \_\_\_\_\_ a meeting/wedding
- \_\_\_\_\_ - to solve or end a problem or difficulty  
e.g. an attempt to \_\_\_\_\_ the dispute
- \_\_\_\_\_ - to succeed in doing something good, usually by working hard  
e.g. I've been working all day but I feel I've \_\_\_\_\_d nothing.

## Top tips for developing the skills employers want

- Make the most of university life and extra-curricular activities to develop your general skills.
- Plan early to get relevant work experience and voluntary work which will give you transferables that will make you work ready: have something lined up for each vacation, and get ready for formal placement and internship applications at the beginning of your second year.
- Religiously record the skills you gain and work experience activities you do so that you can pull out good examples on applications and in interviews.
- Network! Use family, friends and contacts to get work experience and to find out more about career areas that interest you.
- Visit your university's careers service: find out whether it runs any employability skills sessions; sign up for relevant courses and workshops; get help from a careers adviser to write a CV that really showcases your competences and abilities.
- Take advantage of careers fairs and employer presentations: talk direct to recruiters to find out what they look for.
- Always do your homework before applying for jobs. Employer research will help you identify the skills and competences a particular organisation places most emphasis on. In turn, you can tailor your application so that it stands out.

**TASK 4: Work in groups of 6. Each person will have 10 minutes to get acquainted with their extract and prepare a summary to present to the other members of the group. The summary should not be longer than 90 seconds. Then, take it in turns to retell what you have read.**

# 1. Commercial awareness: it's how the industry fits together

<https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/skills-and-competencies/300944-commercial-awareness-its-how-the-industry-fits-together>

Graduates with good commercial awareness are aware of business trends and the impact on their chosen industry and the employers they have applied to.

Different employers have their own interpretation of what commercial awareness means for them and in their sector.

Commercial awareness is prized by graduate recruiters across the board, in career sectors ranging from law to engineering. It is to the world of business what night-vision goggles are to midnight assaults: with it, you can operate on a professional level, but without it you won't know what is going on, and your chances of survival are slim.

If you haven't had the chance to develop commercial awareness through your studies, there is plenty you can do to brush up your skills in this area for yourself.

Different employers will have their own interpretation of what commercial awareness means for them and in their sector. For some, it will mean reading the Financial Times every day; for others, it will mean having a grasp of the importance of cost-effectiveness and the need for efficiency.

Generally speaking, employers will expect at least the following:

- An understanding of their business. Familiarity with the end product, and a grasp of the activities of the organisation and the role applied for.
- An understanding of the marketplace. Major competitors and how they differ from each other.

A really impressive candidate might also:

- **Have an understanding of how the major players in this particular market are performing at present.** In some sectors, such as engineering, strong applicants will be aware of who is dealing with who, and which companies have won important contracts.
- **Be able to speculate intelligently about the future.** You'll need to keep up with general news to be able to do this. If there is a major catastrophe somewhere in the world, a good candidate will have some idea of how that could affect developments in the business. They might even have some inkling about how they would plan for completely unexpected events.
- **Have an understanding of the past which helps them to predict future trends.** It's particularly useful to be aware of any typical cyclical patterns, such as how wider economic conditions tend to affect a particular industry. On a smaller scale, it could be helpful to be aware of the cycle of the financial year and the effect it can have. For example, clients such as local councils might attempt to spend any remaining budget for road-building or maintenance before the end of the financial year, making this a busy time for civil engineers and construction contractors who specialise in this kind of work.

## **Commercial awareness examples**

The good news is that your commercial awareness won't be tested too early in the game. In your application and covering letter it's enough to write a bit about why you like the company and what it

does, and why you want to work for them. Make sure these are genuinely unique reasons though. For example, John Lewis being owned by its employees is pretty special.

However, by the time you get through to the next round, you need to be on the ball. If you're going to an interview you need to know about all the services their company provides. You will also need to know their main competitors, and be able to throw out some figures about how they compare (be certain these are correct).

## How do I phrase it in job applications?

**Do say:** 'I noticed a couple of different people talking about the same phenomenon, so I checked it out. It seemed new and relevant, so I managed to persuade the people behind it to give a talk for my society.' – For top marks you should not just be observing new trends, but acting on what you see as well. Early adopters are prized more and more these days, so being one could set you apart.

**Don't say:** 'I read the Financial Times.' – Anyone can buy a newspaper. You'd have to be pretty spectacular to turn that into a career. Instead you should think about how it has developed your knowledge base and what other sources you are using to cross-reference that data. Think about trends you have noticed, and why they are relevant to the sector you want to go into.

## How to develop commercial awareness

There is no quick fix. Any practical, hands-on business experience will help, however, whether it's through work experience or an internship, extracurricular activities or a part-time job.

You will need to follow industry news – try setting up **email alerts** on specific search terms. You could also try **subscribing** to journals and industry magazines and following relevant Twitter feeds. Candidates who make a concerted effort to gain commercial awareness for the year or so before applying for jobs should be in a strong position.

## **2. Communication: the skill that sustains information flow**

<https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/skills-and-competencies/300752-communication-the-skill-that-sustains-information-flow>

The effective exchange of information is essential in business. Good communication is two-way, and graduate job hunters need to show they can listen as well as speak out.

Communication is really more of a package than an individual skill.

If you think that all graduates have good communication skills, think again. A recent survey by the NUS and the CBI, a leading employers' organisation, suggested that nearly a fifth of graduate recruiters were not satisfied with graduates' basic use of English.

You need to be able to express yourself concisely, but you also need to be a good listener and good at asking questions. Communication is really more of a package than an individual skill:

- Presentation skills are important
- As is being able to phrase important questions
- Not saying too much is more important than you might think
- Understanding your audience and tailoring what you say is particularly important for graduate job hunters

### **Communication skills examples**

Your ability to communicate well will be one of the most noticeable things about you during the application process. This is why getting it right is so important. For example:

- Your application needs to be well written, easy to understand and tailored to the recruiter in question. Make sure you proofread properly too; 'Muphry's law' states that spelling or grammar mistakes will happen just when you are explaining how great you are at spelling and grammar.
- At interviews you should be confident, smile and make eye contact. Shake hands and remember names (there are techniques for this). Remember that a lot of communication is non-verbal – this is one of the reasons why most application process involve face-to-face interviews at some point or other.
- If other tasks are involved, like presentations, or group activities, be aware that your communication skills may still be under assessment. Think about who your audience is and how you will be interacting with them. Ask relevant questions and give honest responses.

If you're looking to show employers that you have communication skills then the first thing to do is to figure out just which kind they want. Different employers will emphasise different aspects, and some might surprise you.

If you have ever received marks for a presentation then this could be a useful piece of evidence. Another way to show you can communicate is to explain the times when it has been useful to you.

### **How do I phrase it on a job application?**

**Do say:** 'This particular situation had arisen and by using these particular communication skills in this

way I was able to resolve it.’ – Good communication is often involved in teamwork and problem solving. Demonstrating that you have successfully used communication skills in the real world will be a big boost to this particular part of your application. Having multiple different examples for each skill is a bonus.

**Don’t say:** ‘I’m a good communicator.’ – Job applications are less about claiming to have a skill and more about proving that you have it. Not giving full answers, or avoiding the point, is going to count against you here even more than it could elsewhere.

## **How to develop communication skills**

**Man the phones!** There will normally be a few telephone jobs available around campus. This could be anything from cold-calling alumni for donations, to taking phone calls from vulnerable students. Whatever the case, these skills will definitely stand you in good stead. Volunteering is often a good way to develop your communication skills. For example, if you’re befriending elderly people or helping children learn, this will really help your communication skills.

**Join a society.** Plenty of societies actively encourage communication skills. For example; debating societies, comedy clubs, acting groups or student radio. They might not teach you communication skills, but they are an ideal place to generate examples of your skills. If you sit on society committees or residents’ association councils, and are involved in regular meetings, so much the better.

If you’re trying to develop communication skills there will be plenty of ways to do so as part of work experience, or part-time jobs. Any situation which involves dealing with a tricky customer or actively selling things to potential buyers will help you gain communication skills. Alternative situations include interviewing people, or even convincing employers to take you on for work experience.



### **3. Teamwork skills**

<https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/skills-and-competencies/300764-teamwork-its-high-on-the-graduate-recruiters-wishlist>

Teamwork is one of the fundamental skills employers look for and it's on the graduate recruiters' high priority list. Show you can collaborate, influence and compromise.

The best way to show off any skill is to explain how you used it to get results. However, with teamwork you will have to show how you achieved a group result.

Teamwork is all about being able to operate smoothly and efficiently within a group. Doing this draws on a number of other skills:

- The ability to encourage and inspire other team members to perform better
- The ability to compromise and ignore your own ego
- Communication and other interpersonal skills such as negotiation, influence, advising and interpreting.

#### **Which graduate employers want teamwork skills?**

Teamwork is a high priority for most graduate recruiters. They may be interested in looking for individuals who can bring different strengths to teams – some graduates may be particularly good at monitoring or evaluating progress, others may urge the team on when it starts to flag, others may be great at contributing bright new ideas. But in the vast majority of graduate roles, being able to work well with colleagues is crucial.

#### **Teamwork skills examples**

When you're explaining your teamwork skills on a graduate job application form or at interview, you will need to emphasise how your personal contribution allowed the team to reach its full potential. The best way to show off any skill is to explain how you used it to get results. However, with teamwork you will have to show how you achieved a group result.

If your team managed to bring in a troublesome project ahead of schedule and under budget because of something you did, this would be an excellent example. Similarly, if you were able to outperform rival teams, or win a competition because of your actions, this would be a great example.

#### **How do I phrase it on a graduate CV?**

**Do say:** 'I helped my team to beat competing groups by encouraging a group atmosphere and supporting colleagues.' What you need to do is explain why your team was successful, and how your own personal contributions positively affected that outcome.

**Don't say:** 'I lead my team to victory by personally beating all previous sales records.' This is one of the few circumstances where you should not be emphasising your personal achievements.

#### **Where can I get it?**

You may have already gained teamwork skills without even realising it. If you haven't already got a solid

body of evidence to prove it, it's never too late to make a start. The question is: where?

**Sports clubs** are an excellent place to build up teamwork skills. Obviously, it has to be a team sport, so golf and tennis are probably out of the picture. On the plus side, it doesn't have to be at top flight level. Bonus points you competed at the Olympics, but joining a department hockey team is just as valid.

**Quiz teams** are also a good place to develop teamwork. You will frequently compromise with other team members, and sometimes back down on answers only to find that you were right. While you probably don't want to give employers the impression that you are always in the pub, most will appreciate the relevance.

However, teamwork skills can be developed in many different extracurricular activities. **Committees** of student societies, work placements and part-time jobs are all good places to develop teamwork skills. Just remember to look out for concrete examples of your contribution to the team. You could save yourself time in the long run by recording them as you go along.

## 4. Problem solving: the mark of an independent employee

<https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/skills-and-competencies/300766-problem-solving-the-mark-of-an-independent-employee>

Line managers don't like hiring graduates who will come running every time they're out of their depth. If you can step up with a solution, you'll stand a better chance.

Problem solving is a vital skill in daily life, which is why graduate employers are so keen on it.

Even when it isn't specified in the job description, many employers will look at your problem solving skills at various different stages of the application process. This could be anything from psychometric tests to group activities or one-to-one interviews.

Problem solving is all about using logic, as well as imagination, to make sense of your situation and come up with an intelligent solution. It is connected to a number of other skills:

- Level headedness and resilience are important for assessing a situation, and reassessing it if you fail the first time
- You will need analytical skills, creativity and logical thinking to reach a solution
- If you're in a group you will also need good teamwork skills

### **Problem solving examples**

Whether you are putting together an application, or preparing for an interview, having examples of problem solving experience is a good idea. You will need to explain how you identified the problem, came up with a solution and implemented it. Quantifiable results are good, and obviously the more complex the situation, the more impressive a successful result is.

If you were forced to tackle the problem as part of a team, explain how your role was important in ensuring the positive solution, but also explain how your group worked together. This could be an opportunity to promote your teamwork skills as well.

If you're set a problem as part of the graduate recruitment process, you could try using the IDEAL model, described by Bransford and Stein in their book *Ideal Problem Solver*. It breaks down what you need to do to solve a problem into stages:

- **Identify** the issue
- **Define** the obstacles
- **Examine** your options
- **Act** on an agreed course of action
- **Look** at how it turns out, and whether any changes need to be made.

### **How do I phrase it on a job application?**

**Do say:** 'I had to find a solution to complex obstacle X. By carefully allocating resources Y and using innovative ideas Z I was able to overcome it.' – Use actual examples. Explain the problem, say what your resources were and what ideas you came up. Consider using the STAR model. Think about the **Situation** you faced and the **Task** you had to complete, the **Actions** you took, and the **Results** you

achieved.

**Don't say:** 'I was forced to deal with a tricky situation. Thankfully, because I am a total legend when it comes to problem solving, it wasn't too difficult for me.' – If you don't explain how you solved the problem, then the skill cannot be assessed. Discussing the nature of the problem, as well as the aptitude of the solution, is important in demonstrating problem solving abilities.

## **How to develop problem solving skills**

Problem solving is a vital skill in daily life, which is why graduate employers are so keen on it. Dealing with any of the following situations will help you gain problem solving skills without even realising it, and you may be able to use this in your graduate job applications or interviews:

- Sorting out a problem with your computer
- Resolving a dispute with a tricky landlord in order to get your deposit back
- Satisfying a difficult customer
- Finding a way round a funding shortfall in order to pay for travel or a gap year
- Turning round the finances of a struggling student society
- Organising a student society's trip overseas, overcoming unforeseen difficulties on the way.

Puzzles and games such as Sudoku and chess and can also strengthen your ability to think strategically and creatively.

## **5. Team management: prove you're a bit more than an entry-level hire**

<https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/skills-and-competencies/300842-team-management-prove-youre-a-bit-more-than-an-entry-level-hire>

Graduates are often hired as trainee managers and need to be capable of leading and taking responsibility in order to get the best from their teams.

Your first graduate job is more likely to involve learning than leadership. However, graduate employers may be on the lookout for leadership potential.

Not to be confused with ambition – leadership and team management is all about being able to direct a team to do the best that it can do. In many ways leadership is similar to teamwork. However, it also involves taking responsibility for the team and sustaining your influence.

Depending on who you talk to, there are also subtle differences between leadership and team management. Team management is more about being able to get the best out your workforce, while leadership is more about being a good example, deciding where to focus efforts and setting direction. When you are writing a response to an advertisement, think about which one you are answering.

Your first graduate job is more likely to involve learning than leadership. However, graduate employers may be on the lookout for leadership potential. Careers which may lead to early responsibility include retail or the armed forces (particularly on fast-track schemes).

The skills involved here include:

- delegation
- talent management
- emotional intelligence

### **Team leadership skills examples**

You need to prove that you have leadership skills, which can be complex. You will need an example of a time when your personal involvement has directly affected the way a group of people have worked, and positively influenced the outcome. Simply being the person in charge of a group of people is not enough, you need evidence that your presence had an impact.

However, you should make sure you answer the competency in question. This is important because leadership is so similar to teamwork. For a teamwork competency you would use terms like ‘encouraged’ and ‘supported’. However, for a leadership competency you should use more authoritative terms like ‘delegated’ and ‘directed’.

### **How do I phrase it on a job application?**

**Do say:** ‘I was responsible for a team that was set a specific target. By giving certain team members particular roles and enabling them to reach their full potential we were able to achieve that target successfully.’ – Emphasising your role within the team is important.

**Don't say:** 'There was one occasion where my team had a difficult target to reach. By forcing them to work overtime we were able to make it. There were some discipline issues but I was able to root them out and fire the individual in question.' – If your employer intends to move you into a position of responsibility, they need to know you can work within their system. You don't want to come across as bullying, incompetent, or as incapable of motivating others.

## How to develop leadership skills

If you're a **section principal** in an orchestra, or a **team captain** in a sports squad, then you should know a bit about leadership. While these positions don't carry as much responsibility as the conductor or the coach respectively, they still have the opportunity to exercise some authority.

Taking an **officer role** in a student society can be a good way to gain leadership skills, particularly if you are the president. This is also true for student union council positions. Becoming a **sabbatical officer** is not only a good way to stay in uni for another year, but it really works wonders for your CV.

Positions such as team leader are possible to get through part-time and holiday work. **Volunteering** with children's groups or as an **instructor** are also good ways to gain responsibility for a group of people. Of course, you will then have to deliver, and give the group what they need.

## **6. Time management: being ahead of the game**

<https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/skills-and-competencies/300856-time-management-being-ahead-of-the-game>

Knowing when and where to direct your efforts will help you succeed in your first graduate job. Good self-management skills will enable you to handle your workload without losing control.

To manage time effectively you need to be able to prioritise and make judgements about what is urgent and what is important.

Time management is also sometimes referred to as ‘self-management’ or ‘independent working’. It is particularly important for graduate jobs because you are likely to be given greater levels of responsibility. You are more than likely to have several different tasks at once, and in order to do your job successfully you will need to be able to coordinate them.

You will need to work to several different deadlines, as well as accommodating other work that you may receive. To manage time effectively you need to be able to prioritise and make judgements about what is urgent and what is important.

### **Time management examples**

Time management is tested throughout the recruitment process. For example, no-one is expecting you to get an application in within the first twelve hours that a position is advertised. That would suggest that you haven't taken the time to reflect on and tailor your application. On the other hand, getting it in an hour before the deadline won't do you any favours either.

Similarly, if you're invited to an interview or an assessment day, being there on time is an absolute must. Your application may not be rejected out of hand if you are late, but it will be a definite mark against you unless you have mitigating circumstances.

Perhaps one of the most common ways for employers to test time management skills is with in-tray exercises. These are a test of your reaction times, but also your ability to hold your head under pressure and plan effectively. It is important that you start these exercises by figuring out what all the tasks are and when they are needed by. By putting together a list of priorities you will be able to demonstrate to assessors that even if you don't finish all the tasks, you have an effective plan in place.

Other tasks which may test your time management skills include giving presentations and team exercises. In team exercises there may be an appointed timekeeper, but if there isn't you might win bonus points for volunteering. Psychometric tests may also analyse this skill, forcing you to allocate time to answering questions or checking answers.

### **How do I phrase it on a job application?**

**Do say:** ‘I was managing several different projects at the same time. I was working to different deadlines so I had to divide my time and resources appropriately. I was able to get all of the projects in on time and was immediately given more’ – An explanation of the complexity of the situation, along with your response, is what recruiters are looking for here.

**Don't say:** ‘The pressure of maintaining a social life on top of work and home life meant that I had to

develop good time management skills.’ – No-one wants to hear about how tough you’ve got it, particularly if their schedule is tougher. They want to know about how you’re taking care of business.

## **How to develop time management skills**

The good news is that almost all undergraduate degrees involve a bit of time management. This is particularly true when exams are going on, as you will have to **juggle revision** for a number of different modules at once. This involves figuring out what needs the most attention and when it needs it. The fact that you got the grades to get into university (and hopefully graduate) should be good enough evidence.

Commitments to **part-time work** or **extracurricular activities** also call for good time management, and it's a skill you're likely to develop further through work experience or internships.