

Maximising Your Job Application - a practical workbook



About AHEAD

AHEAD is an independent non-profit organisation working to create inclusive environments in education and employment for people with disabilities.

The main focus of our work is in further education and training, higher education and graduate employment.

AHEAD provides information to main stakeholders including; students and graduates with disabilities, educators, guidance counsellors and employers on disability issues in education and employment.

About GetAHEAD

GetAHEAD is an initiative of AHEAD that started in 2005. We have a database of students and graduates with disabilities currently making the transition between education and full-time employment.

At the heart of the programme, GetAHEAD works to up-skill students and graduates with disabilities in getting them ready for the workplace.

This includes publications like this workbook, facilitating employability skills events and providing training and sharing job-seeking related information on our website including our GetAHEAD Blog.

www.ahead.ie/getahead



An Roinn Coimirce Sóisialaí
Department of Social Protection



Maximising Your Job Application - a practical workbook

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Introduction

Application forms are becoming increasingly popular among employers as a means to recruit people for interviews. When you are preparing an application form for an employer it is important to put time, effort and care into it. Just like a CV, this is your chance to make a strong first impression and secure an interview.

Application forms are used by employers for a number of reasons such as:

1. It shows you have taken the time to consider the role as you have completed an application form rather than just submitting a CV.
2. It shows employers you have paid attention to detail to what is in the application form by answering exactly what is asked of you in each section.
3. It helps employers do a fairer assessment across all applicants by obtaining the same information from all candidates

If you don't know how to complete or you have not completed the application form correctly, unfortunately your application may be screened out, even if you may be a very good candidate for the role.

This workbook aims to provide you with some general tips, a suggested approach on how to structure your answers, competency examples where you can practice yourself either by printing out the worksheets or downloading this editable PDF.

General Tips – Preparation Matters!

Accessibility

It is important to be aware that some application forms and any accompanying information may be inaccessible for people with disabilities. Particularly for those who use assistive technology, such as screen-readers or software to assist with spelling and grammar. They may not be compatible or work well, especially online application forms.

If you do use assistive technology, take this into consideration and allow yourself more time to complete the form. You may also think about emailing the employer to ask for an accessible version of the form, if there is a contact email available.

Accompanying Material

Most application forms will have accompanying materials or documents such as an information booklet containing detailed information about the role, competencies, information about the recruitment and shortlisting process as well as the terms and conditions of the employment itself. Many information booklets also include some tips on how to complete the application form!

Ensure you download all of the accompanying material associated with the role you are applying for and read it thoroughly before starting to complete the application form.

Dedicate Time

Before you begin, research the employer you are applying to and have your CV to hand for referencing purposes when inputting the information required on the application form. Filling out one application form should take as much time and care as writing your CV does; therefore you should set aside and dedicate time to filling out your form with detail.

The good news is, if you continue reading and complete this workbook, filling in application forms will become easier and you may need less time to dedicate going forward.

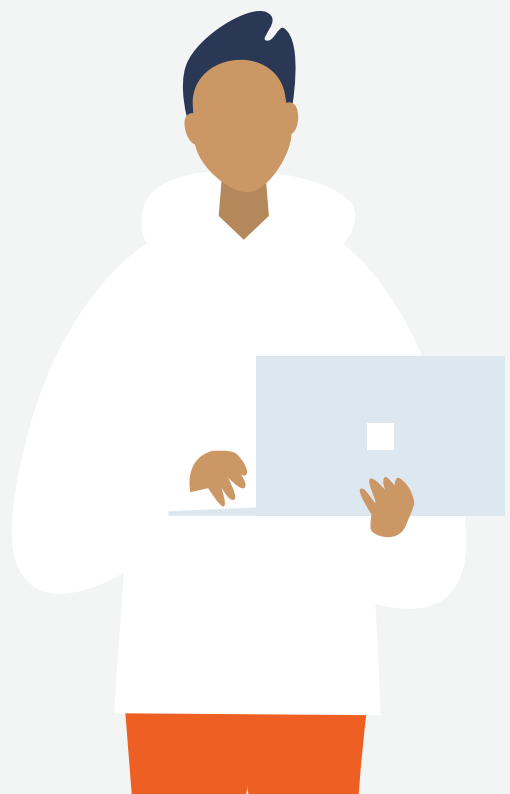
Application Formatting

Some application forms will have standard formatting applied or will tell you what specific font and font size they want you to use. If they don't have standard formatting applied or information about a particular type of formatting, it is good to be consistent throughout the document.

Choose a clear, easy to read font, such as Arial, Calibri or Verdana, and apply a minimum font size of 12 and use this format for all of your responses on the application form. This shows the employer you have attention to detail and makes it very easy to read and follow.

Make Note of the Deadline

There is no advantage to submitting your application form more than a day or two in advance of the deadline. Regardless of how far in advance a form is submitted, the employer will consider all application forms submitted on time on an equal basis. However, it is vital that you submit your application before the specified deadline and allow yourself additional time to factor in internet connectivity issues.



The Application Basics

Personal Details

Most application forms will start by asking you to complete basic details such as your name, address, and contact email and telephone number. Ensure that you put a contact number and email that you regularly check and use a personal email address rather than a college email.

Educational Qualifications

In this section, we will look at education qualifications. Some application forms want you to list all of your educational history and some may only want you to list your most relevant or most recent educational history. Follow the instructions clearly and only complete what is asked of you.

NFQ Levels

You might be asked to specify a NFQ level for your educational qualification. The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is a 10-level system used to describe qualifications in the Irish education and training system. The NFQ shows how General Education Awards, Further Education and Training and Higher Education Awards are mapped against the 10 levels of the framework.

If you obtained your qualification outside of Ireland, you can get search the NARIC Ireland Foreign Qualifications Database to see which level compares to your qualification.

Further information about the NFQ can be found at www.qqi.ie.

Professional Memberships

Sometimes a question might ask you to list professional memberships. Professional memberships refers to an organisation or a body that you are a member or affiliated to according to your qualification or profession.

For example, ACCA – Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, Bar of Ireland, Institute of Public Administration, Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland etc. You should list your current professional memberships in chronological order.

The Main Element – Competency Questions

It is common in application forms to include questions that look at key competencies required for the role. This is often an indication of what you may expect to be asked if you are shortlisted for interview.

Often they will explain how they want you to answer the questions and may give you information or resources on how to complete this section. Don't forget to check any accompanying material also!

Make sure you understand what the employer is looking for and engage with all parts of the question.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

Not Adhering to the Word Count

Employers will indicate the length of response they require. It is important to be as concise and clear as possible, and to meet their expectations for the word count.

Some employers use word count ranges, for example, write 200-250 words. In this case, you are required to write more than 200 words, but no more than 250 words. If you do not follow this level of instruction, this can indicate you have a lack of attention to detail.

Others might give a general figure, for example, 'up to 300 words'. If this is the case, you should aim to write at most 15% less than but no more than the specified figure.

Giving Irrelevant Answers

You need to stay on topic in all of your answers and ensure the example you are using is relevant to the question or competency. For example, if you are asked about time management and you discuss about communicating effectively, this will show that either you did not understand the question, or you chose to ignore what was required of you.

Being Critical of Previous Employers or Colleagues

It is natural to experience challenges in life and work. Recruiters want to know how you handle things going poorly, as at some point you will face challenges in your work if they hire you. It's important for them to see you have resilience, take initiative and have grace under pressure. That said, when talking about a challenging time in work, keep the company you worked for and relevant people in the story anonymous. Be sure to focus your energy on explain how you addressed the situation, rather than on the faults and shortcomings of others.



The STAR Technique

The STAR technique is a way to present your answers and examples in a way that appeals to recruiters. This technique allows you to tell a story in a clear, coherent and consistent manner. This predictability of layout is helpful as many employers are aware of this technique and it allows the content of your story stand out more than the delivery.



S = Situation

Give a brief outline of the background information the interviewer requires to understand the context of what you are about to tell them.



T = Task

Explain what the objective, situation or problem was that needed to be addressed and your initial role or responsibilities in this task.



A = Action

This is the most critical point of your answer! Describe what you did in that situation and how you approached it. Be clear about the actions you personally took and how you contributed or helped to achieve the objectives. How did you decide on the best course of action? Were you proactive about confronting the problem? If so, that shows initiative.



R = Result

State the result or outcome of what happened and whether it added value or benefitted the team, the organisation or project. If you have any quantitative data that is relevant, it would be helpful to mention this also.

STAR in Action

Below are two examples of the STAR technique in action.

Example 1

Describe a time where you kept yourself **organised** in no more than 300 words.

Note, the key competency this question is asking is **organisational skills**.

S

In my final year in college, I had a year-long project to complete while maintaining engagement in lectures and completing continuous assessments. I had tried in previous years, tried to stick to strict, rigid timetables however, I found this did not work for me.

T

I needed to improve on my ability to organise my workloads and establish priorities according to deadlines. I needed to create a plan that I could implement to keep me on track with all of my academic commitments.

A

I approached learning supports services within my college and discussed strategies on organisation. I started using Microsoft Planner to keep track of all of my assignments and their due dates. I found being able to switch between the different layout views was helpful to organised by module, due date or importance. I set myself internal deadlines as checklist items within Planner. Having the smaller steps and weekly goals for each task or project, made me able to engage with the work steadily through the year.

I also initially had the checklists set to hide my completed items, however realised I was not recognising my own productivity which impacted on my motivation. I changed the settings so I can see how many things I have to do and how many I have completed. This massively improved my morale, and assisted in keeping me on track to complete work ahead of deadlines.

R

Using Planner was a game-changer for during my studies. I was able stay on top of my studies and improve my results from an average 2.1 to a 1.1 in my degree. Overall, I learned a new way to prioritise, engage with and complete my work as it helped me stay organised but also enhancing my self-efficacy.

The total word count comes up to 289, which is slightly lower than 300 words as per the allowance stated earlier in this workbook. More importantly, it does not exceed 300 words!

Example 2

Tell me about a time where you had to **deliver a presentation** in 200-250 words.

Note, the key competency this question is asking is **presentation and communication skills**.

S

In a previous role, an influx of new staff members were to join my team. Usually, team members received written material explaining ongoing projects. This often took a long time for new members to fully understand projects. So, an additional presentation outlining projects was added to induction.

T

I was assigned the task of putting together a PowerPoint presentation of current projects on my team and deliver the presentation to the new staff members.

A

I collaborated with team members to ensure I had all information, then pulled together a PowerPoint. Before delivering the presentation, I timed the presentation to ensure I kept within my 20-minute allotted time.

I started the presentation by introducing myself and gave an outline of what would be covered. While going through project outlines I made sure to limit my use of jargon or acronym's, or explained them if necessary. This greatly aided keeping the audience attention and comprehension.

By keeping slides to the point and verbally checking in the audience remained engaged throughout. I allowed time for questions at the end, creating great discussion, breaking the ice and encouraging communication between new and existing staff.

R

The presentation was well received and feedback indicated new staff members had a better understanding ongoing projects. New team members were also quicker to ask questions about projects as they were given a specific opportunity in which to ask. From this experience, I improved my confidence in delivering presentations and felt the message was communicated effectively and efficiently.

Note here, the total word count is 247, which is within the range allocated.

Try the STAR Technique

Below is a list of common competencies that you might find useful when filling in application forms. Note, this list is not exhaustive, but it may help you practice when using this workbook:

- Teamwork
- Problem Solving
- Administration
- IT Skills
- Leadership
- Communication
- Time Management
- Customer Service
- Delivering Results
- People Management

On the next 3 pages there is space for you to practice up to four competencies from the list above or perhaps you may want to have your own competencies that are not listed.

List the name of the competency and include the word count at the bottom, this will help you in future applications where you can simply copy and paste!

If you want to continue practicing, you can download more copies of this workbook on our website and save them.

Competency Name

S

T

A

R

Word Count

Competency Name

S

T

A

R

Word Count

Competency Name

S

T

A

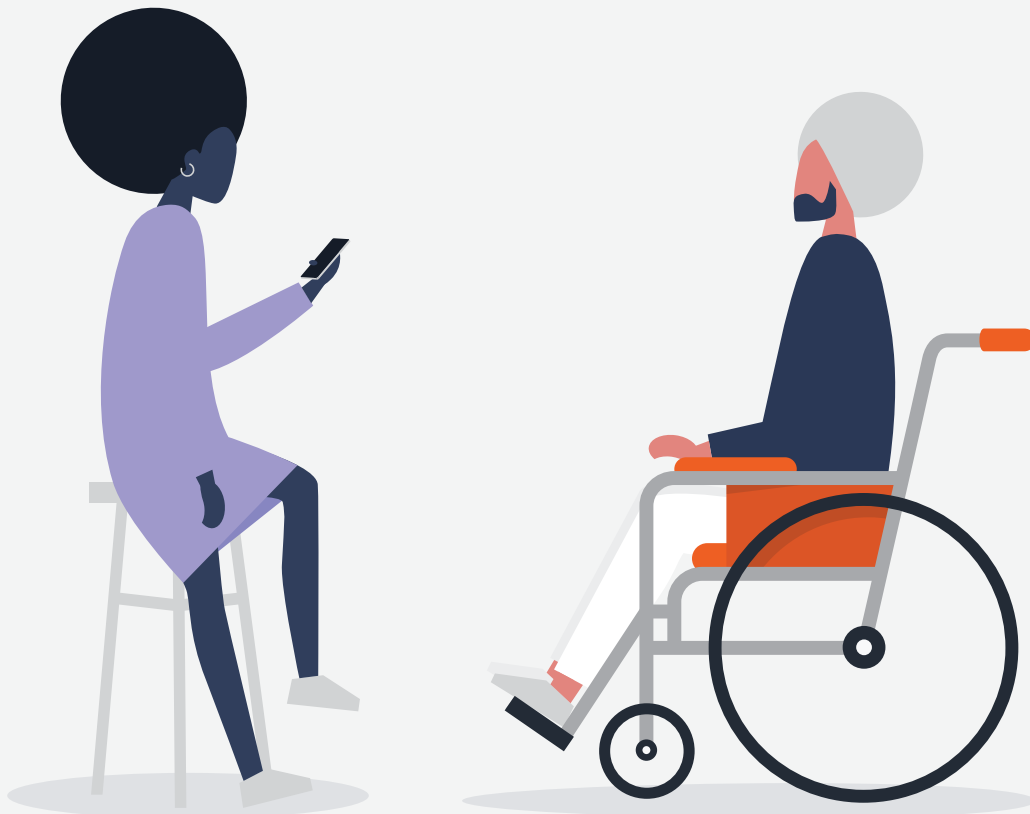
R

Word Count

Checklist

Before you hit submit on that application, check this list to ensure you have not forgotten anything:

- ☒ My application form is neatly presented and consistent
- ☒ I have read all accompanying material and information
- ☒ I have checked my contact details are correct
- ☒ I have listed the correct NFQ level for my educational qualifications
- ☒ I have followed the STAR technique in long-form answer questions
- ☒ I have respected the word count in all questions
- ☒ My content is well considered and relevant
- ☒ I have completed all aspects of the application form
- ☒ I have downloaded and saved a copy of my application form for future reference



Useful Information and Resources

Below you will find some useful information and resources on the AHEAD website.

WAMWorks Database

The Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) is a work placement programme, which aims to promote access to the labour market for graduates with disabilities and build the capacity of employers to integrate disability into the mainstream workplace.

The WAMworks database is a collection of students and graduates with disabilities who are interested in being notified of GetAHEAD workshops and opportunities available through The WAM Programme.

To register on the database you must;

- have a disability, specific learning difficulty or mental health difficulty,
- be a current student or graduate,
- be available and ready to undertake full time work,
- have a minimum NFQ Level 6 qualification.

For more information or to register on the database, visit: www.ahead.ie/wamworks

Think Twice Workshops

GetAHEAD run a series of Think Twice workshops exclusively offered to those registered on our WAMWorks Database. Think Twice workshops are exclusively offered to students and graduates on our WAMworks database. The workshops aim to boost employability and focus on practical and soft skills that employers look for.

Topics for Think Twice workshops include;

- Preparing for Interview
- Disclosing A Disability
- Reasonable Accommodation and AT
- Resilience at Work

Learn more about upcoming workshops at; www.ahead.ie/thinktwiceworkshops



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