



How to complete **application forms**

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Welcome

Welcome to this edition of *How to complete application forms*.

Our careers consultants have pooled their collective wisdom and sought advice from key employers to produce this guide.

The booklet is organised into accessible sections for you to focus on particular aspects of the application process, but reading it through entirely before you start your applications may save you time and effort in the long run. We hope you find it useful.

Finally, don't forget that LSE Careers offers application form seminars throughout the year as well as face-to-face appointments. Just go to the careers website for up to date information: **lse.ac.uk/careers**

On behalf of LSE Careers I wish you every success.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jenny'.

Jenny Blakesley
Director, LSE Careers

Before you start

Why employers use application forms

Application forms allow recruiters to ask all candidates the same questions, making them as fair and objective as possible. They also offer you the opportunity to expand upon who you are and what you have done to demonstrate you fulfil the three Cs which all employers look for:

- the competencies to do the job
 - the skills, qualities or attributes
- the commitment to do the job
 - the energy, drive or enthusiasm
- the cultural fit to work within the organisation
 - a shared belief in the values pursued by the organisation.

Typically CVs restrict you to telling prospective employers about selected highlights from your career. Application forms offer you the scope, with open-ended questions and personal statements, to make the best first impression you can.

“Explicitly refer to the role profile whenever you can, making direct comparisons between your past experiences and exactly what the role is requiring. In doing this you are making the recruiter’s job a lot easier. Try to avoid jargon and overuse of adjectives. We often see grand sentences full of adjectives and enthusiasm without actually saying a great deal about the candidate! In short, keep it relevant.”

British Council

Make time to apply

No matter how outstanding your qualifications and experiences, failing to set aside adequate time to research, draft and proof your application form will leave an employer with doubts about your motivation and commitment to join their organisation.

Just as there are no hard and fast rules about how much time you should set aside to write an essay, the amount of time needed to complete each application form will vary. But the basic principle remains – don’t leave your application until the last minute!

Read the instructions

Application forms are a simple way for employers to test your ability to accurately follow instructions and write concisely. Before you start writing check to see whether the organisation you are applying to has provided any specific instructions on how to complete the application form and make sure you follow them, otherwise your application will stand out for the wrong reasons.

Top tip

The **Back to basics** section of this booklet (page 24) covers some of the questions we get asked the most at LSE Careers about the more technical aspects of completing an application form. For example, “There isn’t enough room on the form! What should I do?” or “Should I type directly into the form or cut and paste from another draft document first?”

What employers are looking for

Most applicants find it relatively easy to complete their personal details and qualifications but lose inspiration when they are asked to write about themselves in more depth. Often this is because they don't know enough about the organisation, the job or their own skills to begin constructing an answer.

Research the organisation

Researching what the employer does, what they have to offer and what competencies they are looking for involves more than simply reading the recruitment literature.

Visiting the organisation's website and reading their annual report are good places to start to find out more about:

- the organisation's structure and culture
- their current projects, campaigns, products or clients
- their long-term strategies.

Find out whether the organisation has received any media coverage recently in either the national or trade press.

Top tip

Ask LSE Careers if you need help finding suitable websites, newspapers and magazines to help with your research.

Investigate the organisation's main competitors. Also consider developments within the sector, for example changes in the law or the merger of two competitors and the potential impact on the organisation.

Attending employer presentations, careers fairs and open days will provide you with opportunities to network with current employees. Speak to alumni through LinkedIn and the LSE Alumni Mentoring Network as well. Try to find out more about their day-to-day work, training and promotion opportunities within the organisation and typical career development.

Talk to employees from different divisions of the same organisation, as well as from their competitors, to see how their job roles and career paths may differ. This will help to ensure you are applying to the organisation or specific division that best matches your skills, motivations and future plans.

"Have a look at the company website and social media including LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Find out about any events, including virtual events such as live chats, you can attend to ask questions and find out more about the company. If you meet someone from the company you are interested in and they give you their business card, make sure you use that connection and email them to ask questions and keep in touch."

KPMG

Understand the job

Most organisations will provide you with a job description, which will give you a basic outline of the tasks you will be expected to undertake. Some organisations will also provide a person specification to explicitly identify the skills you will need to complete these tasks.

Use this information to check that you meet their essential criteria for qualifications and experience. This will help ensure that you are targeting jobs at the right level. If the organisation asks for a postgraduate qualification in economics, do you have one? If not, is there a more appropriate entry-point into this organisation for you?

Top tip

Use the job description and person specification as checklists to self-assess your application. Have you provided clear examples to demonstrate you have all the relevant competencies mentioned in them?

Identify your skills

Your research so far into the organisation and job you are applying for should give you a clear idea about the competencies required by the employer. Now you need to be equally clear about the competencies you have to offer. Do they match?

Remember: successfully completing an application form requires you to do more than simply list your achievements. In order to persuade an employer that you are the ideal candidate, you need to prove it with specific evidence.

You can find lots of useful self-assessment tools in the “Career planning and job hunting” section of our website such as Career Builder. Career Builder is an interactive tool which helps you navigate the career planning process and find the most appropriate information and resources for whatever stage you are at.

lse.ac.uk/careerbuilder

Conduct a skills audit

Below is an example of how a simple skills audit might look but remember this table is not an exhaustive list of skills or examples!

The skills required by this organisation are...	Examples demonstrating these skills could include...
Communication skills including: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• verbal skills• non-verbal/body language• written skills• presentation skills• adapting style to the needs of the audience• listening skills.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• writing essays, dissertations or articles for the <i>Beaver</i>• speaking to clients and preparing reports at work• networking at careers events• involvement in mentoring.
Teamwork including: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• building relationships• supporting others• negotiation skills• setting aims and achieving shared objectives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• volunteering projects• being a member of a sports team or student society• undertaking group projects as part of your degree or at work.

Tips for skills auditing

- Avoid relying too heavily on examples from a single job or activity
- Identify transferable skills, ie, skills that can be taken from one job, activity or sector to another
- Think broadly about the skills you have developed through:
 - academic study
 - previous employment
 - volunteering
 - travelling
 - student societies
 - other extra-curricular activities
- Think about which examples are the most interesting, relevant and illustrative of your abilities to the employer.

The skills required by this organisation are...	Examples demonstrating these skills could include...
Leadership and decision-making including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • managing conflict • delegation • sensitivity to others' needs • taking responsibility. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • being on the committee of a student society • making career management decisions in your personal life • project management at work • mentoring.
Problem-solving including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identifying or anticipating problems/areas for improvement • being flexible when faced with challenges • using logical or lateral thinking to find solutions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • resolving customer complaints • modifying methodology used in a research project or dissertation • designing a simple database to more effectively manage client contacts for a charity, society or small business.
Organisation and planning including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • time and resource management • handling pressure • prioritising activities • meeting deadlines. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • planning an overseas trip • organising an event • managing a project during studies or work • balancing your study and a part-time job.
IT skills including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • using software packages in a variety of contexts • using the internet and email. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Word, Outlook • PowerPoint • analysing data using SPSS, Excel or Stata • Dreamweaver, FrontPage.
Creativity including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • innovative ideas • making improvements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • raising money for charity in an unusual way • improving your productivity/motivation, eg, starting a study support group with friends.
Numeracy including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • descriptive statistical skills • inferential statistical skills • budgeting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identifying patterns in data for academic projects • practical experience on an internship • handling stock or cash at work.

The skills required by this organisation are...	Examples demonstrating these skills could include...
Commercial awareness including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • having an understanding of the marketplace and competitors • being able to predict future trends • identifying new opportunities • effectively promoting products/services • thinking strategically beyond the boundaries of immediate team. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not simply reading the FT, Times etc but being able to analyse current affairs and relate them to the particular organisation or role • involvement in entrepreneurship ventures, eg, LSE Generate competitions and awards lse.ac.uk/Generate • assisting customers and closing sales in a part-time retail job.
Personal qualities including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reliability • self-motivation • proactivity • adaptability/flexibility. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • demonstrating a “can do” attitude and not being easily deterred or demoralised • standing in for a sick colleague at a meeting.

Conduct a values audit

This is in order to examine what really motivates you and whether the organisation and job you are applying for is a good match. The table below is an example of how a simple values audit could look.

Things that motivate me are...	What does the job/organisation offer?
Learning new things and variation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in-house training courses? • opportunities for secondments?
Sociable working environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • open-plan working environment? • coaching and mentoring networks?
Working on written projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • report writing for senior management and media? • opportunity to contribute to professional journals and in-house publications? • responsibility for departmental website?
Time off to pursue outside interests/spend time with family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 25 days annual leave? • flexible working hours? • typical working week of 35 hours?

"It's really important for an employer to hear that a candidate identifies with the organisation's values, that they understand the responsibility the role demands, and that they are committed and inspired to take that role on."

Teach First

Plan and draft

There are quite simply no shortcuts to completing an application form – only ways to manage the time you spend on them more effectively.

Don't be tempted to copy answers you have used on previous applications and certainly don't send in a CV instead. This suggests to an employer that you lack commitment and enthusiasm for the job. A well-researched, planned and drafted application is better than a hundred rushed applications.

Tips for planning and drafting:

- Set time aside for each application form – if necessary, incorporate this time into your diary or study timetable in order that you don't miss the deadline!
- Use a photocopy or print out of the application form to make rough planning notes and then to draft your responses
- Give yourself a break between drafting and reviewing your answers. You will be refreshed when reviewing your application and find it easier to spot any errors or omissions
- When reviewing your answers think about what you have learnt from this booklet about the content, language and structure of a successful answer – visit the **Application checklist** section (page 26).

Overall have you successfully demonstrated that you have the competencies, commitment and cultural fit?

Language

You are being invited to write in your own words so your ability to write concisely and coherently is being assessed.

The way you write about your experiences is nearly as important as the activities themselves. Write confidently about your achievements using professional, proactive and positive language.

However, avoid using jargon that cannot be clearly understood and if you use any abbreviations you should explain them.

What is professional, proactive and positive language?

This means using language that gives the reader the impression that you make things happen and that you are in control. It highlights the fact that you have analysed the competencies required and your own experiences, and identified a match.

Examples that can be used to evidence various competencies include:

Leadership:

coordinated • implemented • established • managed • led • directed • supervised • delegated • coached • allocated

Communication:

trained • negotiated • influenced • consulted • presented • persuaded • interacted • advised • addressed

Research:

analysed • investigated • determined • experimented • surveyed • solved • synthesised

Organisation:

streamlined • scheduled • encouraged • expanded • resolved • budgeted • (re)organised • prepared • administered • distributed • formulated

Interpersonal:

collaborated • facilitated • mediated • consulted

Taking initiative:

initiated • created • designed • established • launched • set up • conceived • implemented

Achievements:

promoted • launched • developed • redefined • simplified • persevered • enhanced • accelerated • improved • completed • produced • secured • increased • doubled

Don't over complicate what you are saying by trying to use too many of these type of words – use them carefully and in the correct context to demonstrate that you have what it takes. Avoid words like “basic”, “just”, “adequate” or “limited”, as they can create a negative overall impression.

Tips for language:

- Beware of simply mirroring the same language as in the recruitment literature and the organisation's website
- Write in a simple and direct way using short sentences
- Check the language you have used by getting feedback from a careers consultant or a professional currently working in your chosen field
- Show evidence of having dissected and analysed the different requirements.

“Remember to use positive action words which demonstrate your competencies and the impact you had.”

Maddie Smith, LSE Careers Consultant

“It's very easy to miss errors in your own work, particularly if you're filling in a lot of forms so ask a friend or family member to check them for you. Also, think about how you demonstrate what skills you have gained through your experience and whether you can draw these out more. For example it may be implicit that captaining a sports team shows teamwork and leadership, but make this explicit where the form allows. Your experience and positions of responsibility are evidence of your skillset, so don't forget to reference the relevant skills.”

Morgan Stanley

Types of questions and how to answer them

Application form questions typically fall into a few distinct types. Over the next few pages we will look at some of the more common types, along with suggestions for how you should approach your answer.

Competency-based questions

Competency-based questions are used by a wide variety of organisations from different sectors. In this section you will learn:

- what competency questions are
- how and why employers use them
- what techniques you can adopt to improve the quality of your answers.

What is a competency question?

Competency questions focus on your skills or personal qualities.

Typical competencies include “teamwork”, “motivation”, “leadership”, “commercial awareness” and “creativity”.

When you see a question that starts with *“Tell me about a time when...”* or *“Give me an example of....”* then it is a sure sign that you are being asked to demonstrate a particular competency.

“Competency questions are designed to give you the best opportunity to sell yourself. Use examples from work, volunteering or extra-curricular activities to demonstrate how your skills and experiences are relevant to an organisation. Make sure your examples relate to the assessment criteria and that you refer to actions you specifically did, using ‘I’ rather than ‘we’ to show your potential as an individual.”

Sainsbury's

Top tip

Use the model skills audit in the **Before you start** section (page 4) to identify the particular competencies an employer is looking for and how you have demonstrated these requirements throughout your life.

How do employers use them?

These types of questions are based on the theory that how you have behaved in the past will predict how you behave in the future. Subsequently employers see this type of question as a robust and fair way of assessing applicants on their current abilities and potential to fulfil the role they are recruiting for.

They will often assess your application against:

- **Competency frameworks**, which list the key competencies they expect their staff to have
- **Behavioural indicators**, which specify in detail the different levels of performance they expect at each competency.

Your first experience of competency-based assessments is likely to be on an application form but you can also expect to come across this type of question in interviews. Later, when you are employed by an organisation, competencies will continue to be used in your appraisals, as a tool to manage performance and personal development.

"Structure is important: you will be one of many that are applying, ensure you articulate your message concisely and with purpose throughout the application process."

Laura-Jane Silverman, LSE Careers Consultant

Answering competency questions

There are a number of straightforward strategies you can use to increase your chances of successfully answering competency questions:

- **Draw on all areas of your life**

Over the course of an application form use examples of achievements from across your academic study, work and extra-curricular activities to create the impression of a well-rounded, balanced individual.

- **Be precise and give one example**

In most cases questions are phrased along the lines of "*Tell me about a time when...*" or "*Give me an example of...*" Here the employer is looking for you to give detailed evidence of a particular competency by giving one precise example of how you have demonstrated that skill, rather than a variety of different examples.

- **Quantify**

Throughout your answer, try to quantify what you did and the outcome where you can. This will help the employer to understand your contribution and assess your impact.

- **Break down the competency**

Show a thoughtful understanding of what the competency means. For example, if it is a question about teamwork, does your answer show that you have a good understanding of what it means to work successfully in a team? Have you shown that you co-operated with others, listened to their concerns, compromised where necessary, encouraged, supported and negotiated?

- **Use a clear structure**

In order to get the right emphasis in your answer, use the following structure (STAR):

Area to cover	What to include	How much emphasis on this area?
Situation	Brief background Give a brief introduction to the event so the reader knows the context.	10 per cent
Task	What did you have to do? Specify what you had to do.	10 per cent
Action	What did you do? Give plenty of detail about what you did, how you did it and what skills you used.	70 per cent
Result	What was the outcome? What happened in the end? Be specific and quantify where applicable.	10 per cent

As you can see, the emphasis is on what you actually did and how this relates to your ability in a particular competency.

"Applying the STAR (Situation, Task, Action, Result) framework when crafting answers to scenario questions will ensure you form a concise yet comprehensive response, highlighting your positive input to the successful outcome of your chosen scenario."

Unilever

Common mistakes in competency answers



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POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

Application form

Before completing please read the notes at the back of the form.

Application for the post of: Graduate Trainee

Ref. no. LSEMC1

Teamwork and Interpersonal Skills

Tell us about a time when you worked in a team. What was your role and what did you achieve? (200 words)

My last part-time role was at The London Events Company. This is a small specialist events organisation that provides catering for a number of high profile events such as concerts at Olympia and Earls Court, horse racing at Royal Ascot and the PGA tour at Wentworth. The company has experienced growth of over 20% year on year for the past 5 years and is considered a market leader in its sector. I worked in a dynamic team and although my role was as a catering assistant I was also exposed to other parts of the business such as the HR and marketing teams. My team worked extremely effectively together. Serving a variety of customers allowed me to develop my interpersonal skills. Liaising with fellow team members improved my communication skills to a great degree. I also was tasked with completing our annual customer feedback survey further honing my communication skills. I feel I have successfully balanced work and study whilst completing this part-time job.

Emphasis is too much on The London Events Company and not enough on the candidate

Mentions skills but provides little evidence to back them up

Overall the language is vague and at 314 words, this answer is too long. The candidate hasn't really answered the question

Common mistakes in competency answers continued

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Application form

Before completing please read the notes at the back of the form.

Application for the post of: Ref. no.

Flexibility

Describe a time when you had to adapt to a change in order to achieve a better outcome

I worked as an intern in the marketing division of a large marketing company. The company has been very successful over the past 3 years and has grown at an average rate of 37% per year. The company has been developing its online marketing operations and has been increasing its share of this market.

I was initially told that I was going to be working for the group marketing director – the group marketing director has been in position for two years and won “Marketing Professional of the Year” last year. Unfortunately I was assigned to a graduate trainee and wasn’t able to become involved in senior level negotiations. However I was able to complete an overhaul of the company’s client database – which was very satisfying.

Provides too much background information about the company they worked for and not enough about their individual actions

The candidate sounds extremely negative about their experience

Vague description of the task. Fails to go into any detail about how they adapted to the change or the overall result

Top tip

Read the **Before you start** section (page 7 and 8) to find out more about the type of language to use to sell yourself on an application form.

Examples of competency questions and answers



Application form

Before completing please read the notes at the back of the form.

Application for the post of: Graduate Trainee Ref. no. LSEMC1

Teamwork and interpersonal skills

Tell us about a time when you worked in a team. What was your role and what did you achieve? (250 words)

Since last summer I have worked part-time alongside my academic studies as a catering assistant for The London Events Company. I work in a team of four, headed up by an events manager. Recently the team was tasked with completing our annual customer feedback survey.

I attended a team meeting prior to one shift where we divided tasks according to our experience and skills. Given my academic background in methodology I offered to design the survey. I set about this by first reading around best practice in survey design and seeking advice from some academic contacts in my department. I drafted an initial survey and shared this with the team via a presentation in our weekly meeting. I sought feedback from the team and ensured all of the team's comments and amendments were pooled into the final survey. My role was then to proof read the final draft, correcting any errors and checking back with other team members to ensure accuracy. The other members of the team were responsible for collecting the survey responses. I then offered to analyse and extrapolate trends around customer satisfaction once the data had been collected.

The annual customer feedback survey was completed two days ahead of schedule and was considered successful by the management team. Customer satisfaction was found to have risen by 10% on the previous year.

Provides lots of detail on what they actually did and you can see this candidate working well in a team

The outcome is precise and quantified

Here the emphasis is on a specific time when this candidate worked in a team – successfully providing one precise example to demonstrate this competency

Examples of competency questions and answers continued



Application form

Before completing please read the notes at the back of the form.

Application for the post of: Marketing Officer

Ref. no. LSEMC2

Flexibility

Describe a time when you had to adapt to a change in order to achieve a better outcome

During my internship with Company Z, I was initially asked to collect and analyse information to help the company adjust its marketing strategy to target individuals for graduate programmes. As I was nearing completion of the task the MD asked me to develop my analysis by researching the experienced hire market as well. There was only one week left on my placement but I was determined to succeed.

I set up several internal meetings to learn more as well as external meetings with Organisation Y consultants to understand the requirements from a range of perspectives. I collated the results and followed up on the information given.

These interviews were a significant part of my final internship presentation, which was attended by the MD, the Head of Recruitment and the Head of Operations. My internship report now forms the basis of an ongoing project to target experienced hire candidates in the company.

Language is clear,
proactive and positive

The candidate clearly
explains the task, how
the task changed,
how they responded
to solve the issue,
and concludes by
illustrating the results
of their work

Demonstrates
determination,
initiative and an
ability to build
successful working
relationships

Motivational questions

What is a motivational question?

Motivational questions enable employers to find out more about whether you can and will do the job, and whether you will fit successfully into their organisation.

In order to do this, they may ask questions which probe your understanding of the role, organisation or industry and your career objectives.

Employers also want to be reassured that you have thought through why you want to work for their organisation and why the role interests you.

Typical questions might include:

- Why do you want to work for KPMG/Boots/United Nations etc?
- What differentiates us from our competitors?
- How and why have you reached the decision to apply for this career discipline?
- Where do you see yourself in x years' time?
- What are the major challenges facing the retail/telecommunications/automotive industry/city firms in the next five years?

Motivational questions can also be used to assess whether you have the energy, drive and enthusiasm to actually do the job.

Finding a candidate who is genuinely enthusiastic about joining their organisation is important to recruiters.

"Motivation" may even be identified in the job description or personal specification as a required competency. To assess that you have these qualities employers may ask you to give details of your main extra-curricular activities and interests to date. What have you contributed and what have you got out of them?

“Tailoring your application is key. We often see great candidates who have completely failed to research our organisation. Try not to get too caught up understanding absolutely everything the organisation does though. Focus instead on key strategic documents like the organisation’s corporate plan, strategy or annual report. The objectives, values and targets of the organisation are more important than memorising loads of data.”

British Council

Answering motivational questions

- **Show that you have done in-depth research**

The **Before you start** section (page 2) provides advice on the best resources to use when researching the job, organisation and sector. The research you do will really help you refine your choice of job/ employer and help you to respond well to application form and interview questions.

Top tip

If you have met an employee at an LSE event mention this to show that you are committed to learning more about the organisation. Don’t just rely on the organisation’s website and recruitment brochures!

- **Translate your research into successful answers**

Don’t answer the questions in a predictable and formulaic way. For example, don’t say *“I want to work for your organisation because of the enlightening and informative talk last month at LSE that demonstrated your friendly and open culture.”*

Instead it sounds much better to say: *“I want to work for Company X because of your two recent acquisitions in mainland China, where I will be able to utilise my knowledge of both the culture and language, as explained by John Watts at the LSE presentation last month.”*

Top tip

Use the values audit in the **Before you start** section (page 6) to identify what motivates you and how this matches the job, organisation and sector.

- **Provide individual, original answers**

When demonstrating your levels of energy, drive and enthusiasm, think about what motivates you and how you cope with difficulties and obstacles.

If you are asked to give an example use one precise example that is relevant to the question being asked. This could be an example drawn from any area of your life – from a travel experience, an extra-curricular event or a project at work.

Common mistakes in motivational question and answer

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Application form

Before completing please read the notes at the back of the form.

Application for the post of: Trainee Management Consultant Ref. no. LSEMC3

Career choice

Why have you chosen a career in consulting?

I have proven my commitment to a career in consulting by completing a project with a local charity working with ex-offenders. I worked as part of a small team and had regular contact with staff from a partner charity. I was asked to come up with a set of recommendations to develop the charity and enjoyed implementing some of the suggestions.

I have always wanted to be a consultant because I find the opportunity to travel and the variety of the work appealing. I would like to learn new things and meet lots of different people. I recently completed a short course in management which has taught me some of the complex business concepts required for a career in consultancy. I would like to use this knowledge and my interest in technology to improve the efficiency of companies and provide them with the best solutions. I am keen to gain experience of the diverse activities that make up this type of large consulting project.

The candidate describes their experience in very broad terms

The candidate talks about having commercial awareness but this sounds too generic

Fails to give specific reasons how this experience led them to want to become a consultant

This could be said of many different careers and isn't specific enough

Example of motivational question and answer



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Application form

Before completing please read the notes at the back of the form.

Application for the post of: Trainee Management Consultant Ref. no. LSEMC3

Career choice

Why have you chosen a career in consulting?

I am very keen to pursue a career in management consulting. The wide range of projects, strong client interaction and great mix of quantitative and qualitative analysis are only a few of the reasons why this area appeals to me. LSE Management Consultants has especially captured my attention with its strength in the private equity business and its innovative approach to business growth through being the only company to accept equity in the company as a payment method. LSE Management Consultants enjoys an excellent reputation in the market and recent press coverage confirms a very sound financial base. I believe this implies everyday tasks that are diverse, challenging, and according to the press coverage, high prosperous.

During my internship with Consultants Y, I worked on a project that involved developing a regression model for a pharmaceutical company launching a new product. I particularly enjoyed successfully applying my quantitative skills in a real-life business scenario. At the other end of the spectrum, I also take pleasure and succeed in collaborating with others and communicating new ideas. Alongside my full-time studies I recently volunteered to work on a consultancy project with a local homelessness charity. The charity was considering taking over another organisation working in the same field and I was required to carry out the due-diligence necessary to make a series of recommendations around whether the charity should take this forward. There was a large amount of financial data to analyse and I was required to communicate professionally and efficiently to source the correct information from the director of the partner organisation. This culminated in a report for the charity trustees.

Overall, I believe the combination of my specialist technical skills, excellent communication skills and analytical approach would make me a valuable asset to the company.

Identifies why consulting and why consulting at this particular company – they have clearly done their research by identifying precise information about the company's business practices

The candidate also uses an example from their volunteering experience to demonstrate transferable skills such as their ability to analyse information and communicate their findings

Gives the employer very specific examples of some of the key competencies required for the role and shows a proven ability and enthusiasm for this type of work

Personal statements

The personal statement does not have to be daunting providing you adhere to some simple principles with respect to: content, structure and language. In fact, it affords you an excellent opportunity to demonstrate your unique qualifications, skills and experience without the format restrictions of the rest of the application.

What is the purpose of personal statements?

- Personal statements help organisations to find out more about you and your suitability for a particular role
- They provide you with the opportunity to present your motivation, work experience, extra-curricular activities, skills and qualifications in the best possible light
- They provide scope for you to distinguish yourself from the other applicants and to emphasise the connections between the requirements of this job and the benefits you offer.

Completing a personal statement

Before you begin

Follow the same principles mentioned in the **Before you start** section (page 2) and throughout this booklet: research, research, research!

Using the job description and the person specification as your guide, try to visualise the employer's ideal candidate for the role and then ensure your answers demonstrate that you are that candidate!

Structure

As with any formal writing exercise, structure is crucial. Here are some things to consider:

- Read the opening question carefully and ensure you have identified everything it is asking you, for example:

Please use the following space to give us any information supporting your application, tell us why you have decided to apply for this position and provide evidence of any educational, employment and extra-curricular activities which demonstrate that you have relevant skills for the role

1

2a

2b

The diagram shows a rectangular box containing a prompt. Three callout boxes with numbers 1, 2a, and 2b point to specific parts of the text. Callout 1 points to the entire prompt. Callout 2a points to the phrase 'tell us why you have decided to apply for this position'. Callout 2b points to the phrase 'provide evidence of any educational, employment and extra-curricular activities which demonstrate that you have relevant skills for the role'.

Here it is important to address all the areas in the question:

- 1 Motivations – use the **Motivational questions** section (page 15) to tackle this style of question.
- 2 Competencies – this question is asking you to
 - a provide the best examples from all your experiences, and
 - b ensure that they are targeted to demonstrate how you meet the needs of this particular role.

Your personal statement is an opportunity to introduce yourself and demonstrate your understanding of, and enthusiasm for, the role and organisation. Focus on a few skills evidencing how you have developed them and how they would benefit the role - the key is quality over quantity. Choose examples which showcase a range of experiences and interests to distinguish you from others. You should also explain how the role will benefit your future career; balancing what you will bring with what you will learn.

Wellcome Trust

What happens if there are no clues about structure in the question?

Irrespective of the format of the application, employers will still shortlist against structured criteria. You will need to describe how your skills, abilities, knowledge and experience match the job as well as your motivation. If the only question is an invitation to write a supporting statement, you must make sure you have covered all these areas. In the absence of any formal structure requirements ensure the personal statement has a clear introduction, middle section and conclusion.

Top tip

One of the safest ways to ensure you have adequately covered all the competencies from the job description and/or person specification is to use the competency headings, or other headings from the job description, to structure the statement.

What happens if there are 15 competency headings in the person specification and you only have 500 words in which to cover them?

As well as being assessed against a competency framework, you will also be assessed on your ability to analyse the different competencies, to make connections between them and to communicate your message concisely in writing. Examples of competencies that can potentially be merged include “teamwork and motivation” with “leadership” or “organising and planning” with “project management”.

Look for opportunities to group different competencies and provide examples for all the new competency headings you have established.

Content

It is important to consider the priorities for each section and to arrange the content for maximum impact. Most importantly, as with your essays, make sure you answer the question.

The introduction

Grab attention with the opening sentence to convince the employer to read on. Tone and style will vary according to the sector you are applying to but always ensure you:

- Make the first paragraph your best
- Make the employer read on by providing a clear purpose and direction at the start, signposting any structure you will follow
- Make sure your tone and style is appropriate to the sector.

The middle section

- Use detailed supporting paragraphs to make confident statements about your skills and achievements, and link them to this role
- Select evidence appropriately (including skills, experience, qualifications and motivation) to demonstrate that you are the ideal candidate – but leave something to talk about at interview!
- Quantify your successes where possible and appropriate
- Ensure all competencies in the job description have been addressed
- Use the simple model outlined in the **Competency-based questions** section (page 9) to help you structure your personal statement by putting emphasis on what you actually did and how this relates to your abilities
- Don't be afraid to use the personal pronoun "I".

The conclusion

To leave the employer with the best impression make sure you don't neglect the conclusion. Use it to:

- Make the final link between your individual profile of skills, knowledge and experience, and the job to confirm you are an excellent match for their requirements
- Promote your enthusiasm for the job and this organisation
- Bring together the different strands of your supporting paragraphs.

Biographical details

Recruiters use this section as a way of building up a picture of you and your experience so try to ensure that this part is as accurate and as full as possible.

A spelling error or a typing mistake can make the difference between being in the “yes” or “no” pile.

Common FAQs when completing your biographical details include:

Personal details (eg, name, address, contact details)

I have a term-time address and a home address, which one should I include?

If you know when you are likely to be called for an interview, then include the address where you can be contacted at that point. If you are not sure, then put two (or more) addresses down but remember to include when you can be contacted at each.

Should I put down my LSE email address or my personal one?

Put down an account you check on a regular basis but make sure that you use a professional sounding email address.

Education (higher education, secondary education; scholarships, awards and prizes)

Should I list all my module results gained as part of my degree?

This is usually made clear on the online form. If you don't have a breakdown of your results so far, try and get one from your department. If that isn't possible, just include as much information as you can. If you only have space to include a small number of your subjects, then choose the ones that are most relevant or show you in the best light!

I have overseas qualifications and they don't appear as an option on the online form. What do I do?

Recruiters make an effort to include as many different qualifications as possible. Usually there is an “other” option which you can select and then fill in the details in free text. If this isn't an option, get in touch with the Human Resources department of the organisation concerned.

I'm a mature student from overseas and I don't have an accurate record of my secondary education results

In the first instance try to contact the institution(s) you studied at to see if you can obtain copies of your certificates or a transcript of your results. If this is impossible it is best to contact the employer direct and seek their advice.

How much detail should I use to describe my scholarships and academic awards?

Always stick to a prescribed word limit, but make sure you say what the award or scholarship is for. For instance, merely writing “the D A Williams Scholarship” is meaningless; it is much better to write “the D A Williams Scholarship, awarded for academic excellence in Politics”.

I'm still awaiting my final grades, but I am asked for a predicted result. What should I write?

Don't leave it blank. Try and put down something that is optimistic but realistic, based on your grades so far or your tutor's assessment.

Work experience

How much detail should I go into when listing my work experience?

Generally, you should give the title of your experience and brief details of your achievements and responsibilities. Make sure that the job titles and descriptions that you use are easily understandable to someone not familiar with the organisation you worked for. It is important to follow any guidelines you are given on how much detail to go into in this section – if you are in any doubt, book an appointment to speak to a careers consultant at LSE Careers.

Should I include my unpaid/voluntary/‘non-relevant’ experience?

Yes. Even though some of your experience might not be in the sector you are now applying for, it is still useful in terms of the skills you have developed and giving the employer an idea of the range of different things you have been involved in.

Interests and extra-curricular activities

Should I put all my extra-curricular activities down?

This is an important section where recruiters look for evidence of what you have achieved outside of your studies and work experience. Generally, they are more impressed by significant involvement in one or two activities, rather than a superficial involvement in many. For instance, being President or Treasurer of one LSE Society would carry more weight than simply being a member of five or six different societies.

Give enough detail to show the scope of your responsibilities and achievements (or the depth of your interest if it's a hobby) without exceeding the word limit.

Ill health, criminal convictions and extenuating circumstances

I have experienced a period of ill health. Do I have to declare it on my form?

If you have experienced a period of ill health or have an ongoing health condition or disability it is entirely your decision whether you wish to discuss it or not and you are under no legal obligation to do so. The one exception to this is epilepsy as employers need to be aware of this to ensure your safety in the workplace.

Some employers may also ask whether you have any mitigating circumstances you wish them to take into account. If your condition/illness has had an effect on your grades, length of time studying, or ability to gain as much work experience as you might have done, it may be to your advantage to answer this question with a concise and simple explanation of how you were affected during your time at university.

I have a criminal conviction. Do I need to disclose this?

It depends on how long ago the conviction was and what you are applying for. The Rehabilitation of Offenders Act (1974) protects ex-offenders from declaring a previous conviction once it has been “spent” (ie, once a certain amount of time has passed). Some professions, however, are exempt from the Act, including some jobs working with children or vulnerable people as well as some areas of government, law, banking and finance. Always seek professional advice if you are unsure.

Back to basics FAQs

Technical questions

I can't save my application form; do I need to keep a copy?

It is always a good idea to keep a copy of your application form if you can. If you can't save it, either print it out, or copy and paste your answers into Word (if you didn't draft in Word in the first place) and save them.

The application form won't print properly – it prints with bits missing. Does this mean they won't receive everything?

No, quite often forms are designed to be reviewed online but not printed, so the organisation should receive it in its entirety. However sometimes forms are designed to only accept a certain number of lines or words, so make sure you have kept to the word limit.

Should I type directly into the form or cut and paste from another draft document first?

It is always a good idea to draft your answers (particularly to the longer questions and personal statement) in Word and then cut and paste them into the form. This will allow you to check the spelling and grammar of your answers. A few online forms are timed (this will always be made clear at the start) and don't allow you to cut and paste your answers. In that case, it is still worthwhile drafting the answers first before starting to fill the form in. Most online applications don't have spell checkers.

I can't type directly into the form and my handwriting isn't very clear, what can I do?

If the form is in PDF format, then you can use certain PCs at LSE which have PDF writers that will allow you to type your answers.

I need to send my application form as an email attachment. How should I do this?

Just save the completed form and attach it to your email, giving the job that you are applying for as the title to the email. The body of the email should be a short, formal letter, which gives the area you are interested in and states that the form is attached. You don't need to give the date or your address, and avoid using a chatty email style.

Do I need to write the email like a cover letter even if I have already written a personal statement?

Rarely. If you are faced with a generic application form which does not allow you to show your strengths then you can use the body of the email as a longer covering letter. Use your common sense about this, if you have already completed an extensive form, or written a comprehensive personal statement, then you do not need to say any more.

I can't get the online application form to work properly. Is it OK to submit a CV instead?

It is best to contact the organisation and tell them you are having technical difficulties with the form. Using the wrong format in applications is the easiest way to be rejected!

Filling it in

Do I have to answer all the questions on the form?

Yes you do! The available space is a key clue to how much information they want, so stick to the space unless they specifically invite you to send additional information. Organisations like to see that you can stick to a brief, so try to give them the information they want in the format and quantity that they want.

There isn't enough room on the form! What should I do?

It is easier to write everything rather than be selective about what you write. However condensing extensive information into an easy to read summary is a key employability skill. Only attach separate pages if specifically invited to do so and even then, think about the amount of information that you are asking busy recruiters to read.

Can I get the grammar and spelling checked on my application form answers at LSE Careers?

We are always happy to advise on the content of your form and would strongly advise you to go to an applications form seminar initially. However, we will not check your grammar and spelling. Organisations use written applications as a way to check for your level of English, so they want to see that it was written by you. The LSE Language Centre can check your English for a fee.

I'm going on holiday/travelling soon. Should I state this on the form?

It is always wise to tell organisations that you are applying to if you are going to be away during the time that they may be interviewing.

Why do they include a section on Equal Opportunities monitoring? Will it count against me if I don't fill it in?

Equal Opportunities monitoring is used by organisations to ensure: good practice around diversity and recruitment, that the process is impartial, and that no particular group is being excluded unfairly. This part of your application is not seen by selectors and it won't count against you if you don't fill it in.

"Word counts or character counts should guide you on the level of detail you should give. Show your ability to write clearly and concisely but do make use of the full word count if possible. You should also structure your answer to ensure you are answering the question."

Linklaters LLP

After you have submitted

I think I've made a mistake on the form I submitted. Can I do anything about it now?

That depends on the error. If it is a simple spelling or grammatical error then probably not. You could try emailing the organisation, but that would just draw attention to your error. However if it is an error of fact (eg, you gave incorrect exam results), then you should certainly contact them.

Will it make a difference if I submit my application form early?

Some organisations don't start reviewing applications until after the deadline, others will review them on a rolling basis. You often won't know which is the case, so there may be an advantage to be gained from submitting your application early.

Should I follow up my application form with a phone call or a letter?

Probably not at this stage. Some, although not all organisations, notify you electronically. But there would be chaos if every applicant rang to check! You are more likely to annoy someone than to gain anything.

How long will I have to wait to hear back from the employer after I've submitted the form?

Again this varies and can depend upon whether the organisation waits until the deadline before reviewing applications. In most cases you should hear within a month or even two of the application deadline, but there is significant variation in this area.

I submitted my application a while ago and haven't heard anything back yet. Can I contact the organisation to chase it up?

If more than six weeks has passed since the deadline for applications, then a polite, short email saying that you are still very interested in working for the organisation, and that you look forward to hearing from them can do no harm.

I think that my application has been unfairly rejected; what can I do about this?

That depends on what grounds. In the first instance come and talk to a careers consultant.

Application checklist

So your application form is finally complete – now it is time to review the work you have done to see whether you have given yourself the best chance of making it to the next round of the recruitment process, and a step closer to the job you want.

Content

- ☐ Have you adequately researched yourself, the role and the sector before you started completing the form? Have you used this information to inform your answers and target your application?
- ☐ Have you used a range of examples drawn from all aspects of your life: extra-curricular, work experience and your studies?
- ☐ Have you mentioned any prizes you have won or relevant overseas experience that may help your application stand out?
- ☐ Do the examples you have selected clearly demonstrate your skills and professional goals? Do they show evidence of analysing what you did and how you did it rather than simply providing a list of experiences?
- ☐ Are your answers accurate, confident and concise? Do they adhere to any word limits that may apply?
- ☐ Have you answered all sections and addressed all the elements of the job description/person specification?

Structure

Generally

- ☐ Do your answers follow the STAR structure?
See page 10 for more explanation about how to get the right emphasis in your answer.
- ☐ Does the opening paragraph capture the reader's attention?

In particular for personal/supporting statements:

- ☐ Have you made it easy for an employer to read and make a quick judgement that you meet the requirements of the role?
eg, using competency headings to structure your statement.

Structure (continued)

- ☐ Have you concluded enthusiastically and avoided clichés?

Language

- ☐ Have you demonstrated energy, drive and enthusiasm in your answers?
- ☐ Have you avoided any unnecessary duplication and typos?
- ☐ Have you used proactive, positive, professional language?
- ☐ Have you avoided mirroring the language found in the organisation's recruitment literature?

Overall

- ☐ Have you proof-read and reviewed your application?
- ☐ Have you sought feedback from friends, family, colleagues or a careers consultant?
- ☐ Have you made your application interesting to read and distinguished yourself from other candidates?
- ☐ Overall have you successfully demonstrated that you have the three Cs – competencies, commitment and cultural fit?

Top tip

Don't get caught out copying examples from any of the resources you have used to do your research – including this booklet!

If you've read it, the employer has probably read it too and will be able to spot a generic answer very easily.

Further resources

LSE Careers website

You can find out more about application forms in the “CVs, cover letters and application forms” section on our website [lse.ac.uk/careers](https://careers.lse.ac.uk)

LSE Careers also subscribes to several specialist and exclusive careers websites which are free for you to use. These include:

- Vault: Career Insider, exclusive online careers library where you can download careers ebooks.
- Going Global, which offers employment guides to more than 40 countries and international job advertisements.

You can find these and many more resources in the “Exclusive resources” section of our website.

Only when you have gone through a number of these action points would we recommend you book a one-to-one application form appointment with a careers consultant.

Seminars

Our careers consultants run regular seminars during term-time which are full of advice on how to complete application forms and how you can best market yourself to prospective employers. You can use LSE CareerHub to search for and book seminars at careers.lse.ac.uk

One-to-one discussions

Use some of the online resources and try to attend a seminar before booking an appointment so you are well prepared and can get the most from your one-to-one discussion. You will get feedback on the structure, content and targeting of your application but we don't provide proof-reading services. If you want help with this contact the LSE Language Centre.

LSE Language Centre

Struggling with writing a good application in English? At the Language Centre you can sign up for courses to help improve your business English, find out about language exchanges with English speaking students, and get your application checked for spelling and grammar errors. Please note there is a cost attached to some services. You can find out more at lse.ac.uk/languages

LSE Life

Based on the ground floor of the Library, LSE Life runs seminars, events and drop-in sessions for a wide range of areas including careers, languages and study skills support.

Struggling with your application form?

Have you...

☐ read this booklet?

This booklet aims to give you the knowledge and skills to work independently on your application forms.

☐ investigated further resources?

The **Further resources** section of this booklet (page 27) provides a selection of resources recommended by and available from LSE Careers.

☐ attended an application form seminar?

Application form seminars run regularly throughout the year. These are one-hour lunchtime seminars run by LSE careers consultants, which we recommend attending before seeking one-to-one careers advice.

Visit the “Events” section of LSE CareerHub at **careers.lse.ac.uk** to find out where and when the next seminar will be and book your place.

☐ visited the Language Centre?

LSE Careers does not proof-read applications for spelling and grammar, therefore please do not book an appointment with a careers consultant if you want English language advice. Instead you can visit our colleagues in the Language Centre who provide proof-reading services for a fee. Find out more about this service at **lse.ac.uk/language/AdditionalServices/Proofreading.aspx**

Once you have looked at these resources, if you are still struggling with a specific question, consider booking an appointment with a careers consultant via LSE CareerHub at **careers.lse.ac.uk**



Contact details

LSE Careers is open:

Monday to Friday 9.30am – 5pm

Thursday 9.30am – 8pm

Telephone: +44 (0)20 7955 7135

Address:

LSE Careers

Floor 5, Saw Swee Hock Student Centre

1 Sheffield Street

London WC2A 2AP

Email: careers@lse.ac.uk

Website: lse.ac.uk/careers

 facebook.com/LSECareers

 [@LSECareers](https://twitter.com/LSECareers)

How to complete application forms

Edited by Viki Chinn and Sandip Samra, April 2016

The School seeks to ensure that people are treated equitably, regardless of age, disability, race, nationality, ethnic or national origin, gender, religion, sexual orientation or personal circumstances.

This brochure can be made available in alternative formats on request – please contact LSE Careers.

Design: LSE Design Unit (lse.ac.uk/designunit)