
Getting Hired

*Advice on how to approach your first job interview after graduating
as a software developer in the UK*

By Stuart Herbert

Editions

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Foreword

It is a real pleasure for me to see this book come to light. Stuart and I have had numerous discussions over the last few years about the subject matter it addresses. Whether that be via Twitter, over drinks at a conference or elsewhere, the result is often the same – wishing digital engineers knew how to impress their potential employers. Stuart has to be given the utmost credit, for turning those thoughts and musings into the text you see before you.

If you're looking for your first job as a software engineer, you would do very well to adhere to the advice presented.

Certainly, if you turned up to one of my interviews having done this level of homework I would be pleasantly surprised, and no doubt after collecting my gaping-jaw from the table, assuming your technical skills were also suitable, you'd likely be offered a post. For me, as an employer for the last thirteen years or so, just being technically good is not enough. The best digital engineers also have a well rounded set of professional and interpersonal skills that are needed to engage with clients and colleagues alike. The interview process is the first opportunity you have to prove you have those skills to your employer.

Whilst this e-book is pitched at those software developers approaching their first job interview after graduation, there is more than enough material in the book for those who have more experience, potentially a lot more, but who perhaps have not found interviews, and the whole application process, to be an easy one. I have been in the position of interviewer on many occasions throughout my own career both in IT related roles and in my former career within the NHS. If I had always seen candidates that had absorbed the approaches embodied in this text, it would have been a much harder experience to choose between them.

In my experience, the reality is that the vast majority of candidates who apply for job roles are ill-prepared and therefore fail to present themselves in the best light, even to the point of actively hurting their chances of employment. Taking into account, even some of, the advice given in this e-book will certainly help you to stand out in the increasingly competitive job market.

I would like to take this opportunity to wish you, the reader, great success in your job hunting.

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Preface

A Weekend Away At Gregynog

Every year, the [Aberystwyth University's Department of Computer Science](#) organises an away weekend for its 2nd year students at the atmospheric [University of Wales Conference Centre](#), better known as Gregynog Hall. The purpose of this away weekend is to help students prepare for the task of finding a year-long placement in industry by the following summer.

The Department's staff are joined by an invited group of Visiting Industrialists (all highly experienced interviewers and recruiting managers), who volunteer their time to give something back to our industry. I've been volunteering since 2009. It's always both a privilege to do so and one of the most rewarding weekends in the calendar.

What do we do with the students?

The Visiting Industrialists run mock interview sessions, using our experience to give the students what we hope is helpful advice to follow to land a job. Some of the advice we give is technical: what the recruitment process is, and what the students need to do at each step of the process to make it through to the next step. Some of it is contextual: the state of the job market, and the expectations of employers today. The rest of it is personalised: showing each student in turn their individual strengths and weaknesses as we see them.

Every student goes away with actions that they can take before they apply for real jobs.

There are common themes that crop up each year - pitfalls to avoid, improvements to make, and additional actions to take. Many of these aren't unique to undergraduates. I'm involved with recruitment where I work, and the majority of candidates of *all* levels of experience appear to need the same advice!

You'll find this advice in this short e-book, along with additional background information about recruitment from an employer's point of view. It should take you about an hour to read end-to-end.

I hope you find it useful.

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Introduction

Who Is This Book For?

The advice in this e-book is aimed at computer science and software engineering undergraduates looking to join the computing industry in the United Kingdom, either for an industrial placement year or after graduation.

You might also find this advice useful if you're looking for your next move inside our industry.

Please remember that this book is exactly that: advice. *You're joining an industry where you're expected to think for a living.* That goes doubly so when you're trying to land a job in the first place.

It's A Challenging Time To Be Graduating

You are job-hunting during the worst economic downturn in living memory, and possibly the worst economic downturn for over 100 years. You probably know that already. You probably also know that here in the United Kingdom, the computing industry has no shortage of vacancies that it can't fill. It feels like *everyone* is hiring right now, all across the country. Global tech giants such as Google, Facebook, Microsoft and Amazon are turning to the UK to find more engineers, creating even more vacancies that you can apply for.

It should be easy to land a job after you graduate, right?

Look around at your fellow computing students. Less than half of them are going to find jobs in the computing industry within six months of graduating. More of them will be unemployed than the graduates from *any* of the other subjects taught on campus. This pattern will be repeated up and down the land.

[According to the UK's Higher Education Careers Service Unit](#) (PDF), 8.6% of Summer 2011's graduates were unemployed six months after graduating. Amongst computer science and IT graduates, that figure is 13.9%. Across all of the different groups of graduates, *Computer Science and IT graduates are the most likely to be unemployed 6 months after graduation.* Only 47.3% of those with jobs are working in the computing industry. The figures for Summer 2010's graduates were little better.

There are lots of vacancies in the computing industry, and yet graduates in relevant fields aren't filling them. Employers are becoming more and more discerning in who they hire, and knowing how to sell yourself to an employer is more important than ever if you want to get a job in computing today.

Many Candidates Don't Do The Basics

You could be exactly what an employer is looking for, but if the employer can't tell your application apart from all the other ones that he has received, then he'll never know - and he'll probably never hire you. *You have to make an employer want to hire you.*

Fortunately, it isn't rocket science. There are many things that you can do to catch an employer's eye. Some of them are simple, and they're about making sure you get the basics right when you make your application. Some of them are more involved, and they're about making sure you've got the basic skills that an employer is looking for.

The good news is that most of the other candidates that you're competing against are currently *not* doing these things either. I'm not just talking about your fellow graduates; I see applications all the time from people with five years or more of experience who are also making these mistakes.

How This Book Can Help You

This e-book will hopefully show you how to put yourself across to a prospective employer in a way that makes it easy for them to spot what you have to offer them, to increase your chances of successfully finding a job in the United Kingdom's computing industry.

Recruitment processes vary from employer to employer. I'll take you through the most likely steps that you need to get through. I'll explain the process from the employer's perspective first, and then from your point of view as someone applying for a job. A better understanding of what the recruitment process is, and why, will help you avoid the common pitfalls along the way.

The second part of the book is more about you, about what you need to do to be prepared for when you join the industry, either during an industrial placement year or when you graduate and leave academia. Ours is a multi-disciplined industry where things change rapidly, so to help you prepare, I've finished off the book with some lists of the fundamental skills that industry expects you to have before you start your first job.

The Recruitment Process

In the first part of this e-book, I'm going to explain the most common steps of the recruitment process, showing you the employer's thinking at each step, and what you need to do when you're applying for a job.

Panning For Gold

Employers in the computing industry are panning for gold. They have work that needs doing, and they are sifting through the applications that they have received to find the right person to do it. To find that person, they'll end up looking at a lot of applications from people who clearly aren't suitable for the role, and plenty of applications from people who may or may not be what they're looking for. If they're lucky, they'll strike gold and find someone who is perfect for the role. It can take a long time, and several attempts, before they find the person they are looking for.

Every employer has a process that they follow, and each step of that process helps the employer filter out anyone who should not make it to the next step. It also helps them to identify which candidates are worth looking at further. Sometimes this process is well-defined, and sometimes it is best described as ad-hoc, but from firm to firm it tends to follow similar lines.

Whenever you apply for a role, always have a look to see if the employer has posted details about his recruitment process detailed on his website. If he hasn't, always ask at the first available opportunity to find out what the process will be. This will help you prepare as thoroughly as possible.

The Commonly-Used Steps Of Recruitment

Although every employer handles recruitment in his own fashion, recruitment normally follows some variation of:

1. Write a job description.
2. Advertise the job.
3. Receive applications from candidates.
4. CV sift.
5. Interview(s) and assessment(s).
6. Make a job offer.
7. Monitor the new starter during their probation period.

Let's get into the first of these: the job description.

The Job Description

When they are looking to recruit new members of staff, most firms will first create a written description of the job. The effort of creating a written description helps the firm figure out what the job role will be, and the finished description is normally used to write both the job advert and the contract of employment.

Employers may call it the *job specification*, or *job spec* for short.

Key Details In A Job Description

The job description clearly sets out important details such as:

- What the job is called
- How many hours a week the job is for
- Where the job is based
- What travel requirements there are
- Which department and / or team the job exists within
- The name of the line manager - the person who will be the official boss of the successful applicant
- The specific duties of the job
- The personal characteristics that applicants need to have
- The education / qualifications that applicants need to have
- The remuneration for this role (salary and any bonuses)

There may also be additional details, such as staff benefits, pension contributions, probation period, and more. If they are specific to the role (senior roles often come with unique details), then they may be set out in the job description. But, more normally, they are to be found in the Employees' Handbook.

What The Job Description Is Used For

The job description is the basis for much of the recruitment process:

- Job adverts are written using the details in the job description.
- Applications are reviewed against the job description to see if the candidate meets the job requirements.
- Interviews and assessments are used to drill down into detail, and work out whether the candidate really does meet the job requirements or not.
- Contracts of employment normally re-use the information from the job description.

Make Sure You Get A Copy

Before you apply for any job, anywhere, always get hold of a copy of the job description. You need it for writing your covering letter and for tailoring your CV. You also need it to make sure there are no surprises in it.

Many employers post the job description in the careers section of their own website, and that's always the first place that you should look. If you can't find it, email or telephone the employer to ask for a copy; they should send one out to you. If an employer cannot or will not provide you with a copy of the job description when you ask for it, then that should set alarm bells off in your head. It's a perfectly reasonable request for you to make, and one that any good employer will be expecting and happy to help with.

If you're applying through a [recruitment agency](#) and the agency provides you with a copy of the job description, go and get one from the employer as well. You cannot be sure that the agency has the latest version of the job description.

The agency may be reluctant to tell you who the employer is, which can make getting the latest job description difficult. My advice is that you should always know who an employer is before you apply for a job; never make a blind application. If the agency insists on not telling you, a quick Google search will normally turn up several other agencies advertising the exact same role. There's nothing stopping you from applying through a different recruitment agency instead. (You can find more information about recruitment agencies later in the book).

The Job Advert

Employers use job adverts for one purpose alone: to get people to apply for the vacancy on offer. Adverts vary widely, and there are few norms to expect.

What Goes Into A Job Advert

Sometimes, an employer will simply use the job description as the job advert, but this doesn't happen all of the time.

- He might create an eye-catching advert instead, because job descriptions are very dull.
- Adverts are sometimes charged by the word, or by the space they take up; the job description might be too long to fit or be affordable.
- If the advert has been placed by a recruitment agency, they may have written their own advert for the role.

The amount of detail in a job advert can vary widely as a result. Each advert, however, will always contain these key pieces of information:

- how to apply for the role (or how to find out more details), and
- any closing date for applications.

Where To Find Job Adverts

In the old days, employers advertised their roles in local and national newspapers. Some employers (local and national government and their agencies, and firms of all sizes) still do this, but the majority of employers advertise exclusively on the Internet these days.

Many technology firms (but not all!) will have a 'jobs' or 'careers' section on their own website. This is a great place to look if you know which firms you want to apply for. Even if you can't find any vacancies on the website, you'll probably find a general 'careers@' type email address where you can email to make enquiries.

Technology vacancies are normally advertised on internet job boards too - and you can search these through Google. For example, a search for 'big data job Reading' will turn up jobs in Big Data in Reading, Berkshire both on company websites and across the internet job boards.

From an employer's point of view, the most difficult part of recruitment is getting a job advert in front of the kind of people that the employer wishes to recruit. Publishing an advert takes up precious time, costs money (often hundreds of pounds per advert), and has no guarantee of success. These are the main reasons why many firms use recruitment agencies, and most of the adverts you'll come across on internet job boards have been written by agencies rather than by employers.

Advice About Salaries Stated In Job Adverts

An advert might say 'competitive salary', or it might say 'up to XX', where XX is the annual salary amount. You can't take these at face value.

Salaries are always one of the trickiest subjects in recruitment, and that includes any mention of them in job adverts, because employee salaries are normally one of the major costs in a firm. As a general rule, employers need to pay their staff as little as they can get away with, in order to keep operating costs under control. Recruitment agencies, on the other hand, normally charge the employer a fee that is based on a percentage of an employee's starting salary; it is in their interest to drive starting salaries up as high as possible.

As a result, sometimes 'competitive salary' actually means 'disappointing salary', and 'up to XX' turns out to be an inflated figure that you can't actually get if you get the job. Don't wait until you reach the job offer stage to find out if this is the case; always contact the employer to double-check the salary on offer before applying. Keep a record of their answer in case you reach the job offer stage.

You'll find advice on what size of salary to aim for later in this book.

Pro-Rata Salaries

Adverts for part-time roles will normally say 'up to XX pro-rata'. If they do, XX is the annual salary that a full-time employee would earn, and the salary for the part-time role will be the equivalent hourly rate.

For example, if the full-time role (assuming 40 hours a week) has a £20,000 salary, but the part-time role is only 20 hours a week, then the pro-rata salary would be £10,000.

How To Meet Employers

As well as advertising roles online, some employers will go out and attend tech conferences and meet-ups, both to spread the word that they're hiring, and on the chance that they will meet people that they would like to hire. If you're looking for a job, it's a good idea to start going along to these events. They are great opportunities to find out more about a job before you apply, and if you impress an employer, he'll remember you when he receives your application and possibly bump you up towards the front of the interview list.

If you get the chance to speak at one of these events, you should take it. There might be an employer in the audience who is looking for someone who knows about the topic that you talk about; and even if there isn't, most employers will value this experience if they find it on your CV.

Types Of Vacancies

Employers normally advertise two kinds of vacancies: permanent roles, and contract roles. The key difference is that people in permanent roles are company employees, whilst people in contract roles are normally self-employed.

Permanent Roles

Permanent roles are traditional salaried positions, and they (at least in theory) grant the employee the maximum employment rights and protection. The majority of British institutions are geared up for permanent employees: it is easier to rent somewhere to live, to obtain credit, to get a mortgage and so on if you are in a permanent role. The majority of vacancies are permanent roles.

Contract Roles

Contract roles are fixed-term positions, paying either an hourly or a date rate. You have to run your own company (or be part of an umbrella company), and you submit timesheets to the firm where the position is. Invoices normally go to the recruitment agency. The recruitment agency pays your company for your services, and you draw salary, expenses and dividends from your company.

It used to be the case that contracting was something you could only move into later in your career, but shortages of skilled programmers and an increase in the number of startups (especially in London) have made it possible to do contract work earlier in your career.

Other Vacancy Types

Other roles you might come across include:

- *freelancing*: people in these roles are self-employed, but they are hired on a project-by-project basis. Freelancing is a great way to get a lot of variety of work, but you do have to be able to constantly bring in new work.
- *temporary roles*: people in these roles are company employees, but their employment ends on a specified date. Industrial placements are one example of a temporary role.
- *interns*: people in these roles are not company employees, nor are they self-employed. Interns are effectively visitors, who are shadowing company staff to gain additional experience. Interns are normally unpaid, which makes them a controversial type of role, especially if they do actual work for the company during their time with the company.

The Role Of Recruitment Agencies

At this point, it's worth me spending a moment to explain what recruiting agencies are, how they work, and how they get paid.

What Is A Recruitment Agency?

Recruitment agencies are outside firms who go and find candidates for employers.

Do not confuse recruitment agencies with employment agencies. The main difference lies in who ends up being your employer.

- If you get a job through a recruitment agency, you become an employee of the employer.
- If you get a job through an employment agency, you become an employee of the employment agency.

There are employment agencies out there who provide IT support people to firms, but professional engineering roles are normally found through recruitment agencies.

Why Do Employers Use Recruitment Agencies?

Recruiting people takes a huge amount of time, and for many firms it is a real struggle to find enough time to do it well. Recruitment is also very much a numbers game: an employer often has to look at a lot of applications before he finds the right person for the role. That might sound a bit horrible and impersonal, and it is, but it's also how it is.

Recruitment agencies fill a specific need. Employers need the right people to apply for their jobs, but often they don't have the time to go and find these people themselves. They use recruitment agencies to do this for them, so that the employer can spend more of their time interviewing applicants.

Agencies are a major and important part of recruiting for the computing industry in the UK. You will probably find at least one of your first three jobs in the industry through a recruitment agency.

How Do They Work?

Agencies get lists of vacancies from employers, and then they place adverts on internet job boards, and sometimes in other places too. They are also always on the lookout for new CVs being uploaded to the internet job boards.

If you've ever spent time looking through an internet job board at the current vacancies, you will probably have noticed that very few adverts mention the name of the company that is hiring. The

reason for this is that the agencies are worried about not getting paid: if you saw a job that you liked, and you applied directly to the firm, then the recruitment agency wouldn't get its fee.

Some agencies will take the CV that you give them and send the employer an edited version. (This, by the way, is the main reason why many internet job boards only accept CVs in Microsoft Word format). The agency may simply put your CV into their branded template, and some may remove your personal details to prevent the employer trying to approach you directly to avoid paying the agency. (There is often no love lost between employers and agencies!)

No reputable agency will change the contents of your CV without your permission.

Are Agencies For You?

Should you use a recruitment agency at all?

If you know which employers you want to work for, and if they accept direct applications, then there's no reason to apply through a recruitment agency. There's no benefit in doing so, and with no middle-man for all communication to pass through, you might find that you prefer always dealing with the employer directly.

The better recruiting agencies can be a great help in getting hired, especially later in your career when you're chasing more senior jobs. They're able to chase a tardy employer in a way that a direct applicant often can't get away with, and if they've worked with an employer successfully in the past, they can have a good feel for what the employer is looking for.

It has to be said, though, that many employers merely tolerate recruiting agencies. Staff turnover inside recruiting agencies can be very high, making it difficult for the employer to build up a successful long-term relationship with the agency. Without that partnership, employers often feel that recruiting agencies don't understand their requirements well enough, and employers are often not very good at working with agencies to improve matters. Recruiting agencies also charge substantial fees to employers, and employers often begrudge this, rightly or wrongly.

However, if recruitment agencies weren't useful and performing a necessary role, there wouldn't be so many of them.

Picking A Recruitment Agency

As in all walks of life, there are good agencies and there are bad agencies, and it can be difficult even for industry veterans to tell them apart at first. I recommend checking to make sure that the agency is a member of [The Recruitment & Employment Confederation](#) - the industry's only recognised trade body for recruiting agencies. You should also use Google to find out what other people have recently said about the agency. If you're not happy with what you find, there are usually other agencies out there advertising the same role or similar ones.

The one exception to the rule is when an agency has an exclusive contract with an employer. In this situation, the employer has decided to use a single agency for all recruitment, and all applications *have* to be submitted via that agency. If this is the case, you should be able to confirm this from the employer's website, or by telephoning the employer.

From an employer's point of view, employers generally do not like agencies who send them unsolicited or inappropriate applications (known as 'wallpapering CVs'). Once an agency has done

this with your CV, it can be very difficult for you to get those employers to look at your CV, because the employer hasn't agreed payment terms with the agency, and doesn't want the hassle of an aggressive agency trying to invoice for money that the employer hasn't agreed to pay.

My advice is to deal with any agency on an advert-by-advert basis, keeping track of which firms you have applied to through which agency. Always ask the agency if they are a 'preferred supplier' for the employer you are applying to (and ask them via email to make sure you've got a record of their answer).

If the agency is a preferred supplier, that means that they have already agreed payment terms with the employer, and the employer will consider your application. You should also phone or email the employer directly to check that the agency is indeed a preferred supplier before you apply, just in case the agency is not being honest with you.

If the agency is not a preferred supplier, then one of three things usually happens:

1. The employer and agency agree payment terms, and the employer will consider your application.
2. The employer considers your application anyway, but does not agree to pay anything to the agency.
3. The employer decides that dealing with the agency is too much hassle, and will not consider your application.

You've no way of knowing what will happen in this situation, as it can often come down to a personality clash as much as financial terms. You're better off avoiding this situation if you can, and avoiding any agency you ever catch lying about their preferred supplier status.

How Do They Get Paid?

Recruitment agencies get paid by the employer for every candidate they put forward who successfully gets a job with the employer. Some agencies get paid on a fixed-fee basis, and some agencies get paid a fee based on your starting salary.

You don't have to pay them at all, and *you should never use any recruitment agency who asks you for any payment.*

Contracting Through An Agency

The role of recruitment agencies in contract placements is a little different. Here, the agency normally gets a percentage (known as the agency's rate) of the money that the employer's firm pays for your services. This is normally done by the firm paying the agency, and by you sending invoices to the agency; i.e. you don't bill the firm directly. It's always worth finding out what the agency's rate is, just to make sure that you don't get ripped off at all.

It used to be almost unheard of for someone to go contracting early in their career, but this is slowly changing. For now, advice about contracting is beyond the scope of this book, but if the industry changes in the future, I'll do my best to provide advice in a future edition.

Before You Apply For A Job

You've seen an advert for a job, and decided to apply. Before you submit your CV, there's a few things that I advise you to do to increase your chances of surviving the CV sift and getting invited to an interview.

Start by answering a few questions, to make sure that you're not wasting your time applying for this job.

Is There A Closing Date For Applications?

There's no point in going to all the trouble of preparing an application if you've missed the deadline. Check the job advert just to make sure that applications are still open. If there is no deadline date on the advert, it's always a good idea to give the employer a quick phone call just to check that they haven't already filled the vacancy. No employer is going to object to you asking, and that phone call is an opportunity for you to ask any questions you can think of to help you write a better application.

Plus, employers tend to remember people who have been in touch about a vacancy, which can help you get through the CV sift stage.

Where Is The Job?

The job advert will normally say where the job is based. This might be a different location to where the employer's head office is, so always check and make sure that you're clear on this vital piece of information before applying for any job.

If you're applying to a software agency or consultancy, the job may involve travel. You might be asked to travel to their customers' sites, and you might be asked to work from their customers' offices some or all of the time.

Do You Want To Live In That Part Of The Country?

The job that you are applying for may be in a different part of the country to where you currently live. It's a good idea to at least give some thought to whether or not you'd be happy moving there before you apply for the job. This is especially true if you're looking to move into London for the first time, which is unlike anywhere else in the country.

If you're applying for several jobs in the same area, it might be worth taking a day trip to that area to get a feel for the place. Or maybe you're already going to be passing through or near there on your way back from another interview, and can divert to have a quick look?

Even if you land your dream job, doing interesting work with great people every day, you'll struggle to enjoy your work if you don't like where you end up living. Make sure you're happy about living near your prospective employer before you apply. It can be hard to move jobs early in your career.

How Are You Going To Get To And From Your Workplace?

Daily travel to and from work is an important consideration, especially if you cannot afford to live in walking distance of where you will be working. Commuting takes time out of your day, and is a daily drain on your money. You need to make sure you're happy with how long the commute is likely to take, and that you can afford the travel costs involved.

Public transport is pretty good in this country, but it doesn't go everywhere and it's quite common for bus and train services to run infrequently or not at all by late evening during the week. Public transport on a Sunday can be non-existent. During rush hours, trains and tubes can be standing-room only or even too overcrowded to get onto a train at all. You can buy weekly, monthly or annual season tickets for trains, and some employers run loan schemes to help you with the cost of an annual season ticket. The cost of train tickets is set to rise faster than inflation (and faster than most wage rises) for the foreseeable future.

Driving has the advantage that you can go where you want, when you want, but many major roads and city centres are too congested to cope with rush hour traffic, and it can be expensive and difficult to find somewhere to park if your employer doesn't have their own car park. Rush hour normally starts well before 8am, thanks to the "school rush", and normally lasts until after 9am. Many city centres have either banned parking on the street, or only allow short-term parking of up to 2 hours before you have to move your car. Insurance and fuel costs are high, and you also have to think about depreciation costs - saving money each month to pay for future repairs or to replace your car when it dies.

Many employers offer flexitime working these days, and it's a good idea to use that to travel off-peak and so avoid the rush hours as much as possible.

Work Out Your Minimum Salary

Historically, the cost of living in the UK has always varied from region to region. Generally speaking, costs are lower in the north and in Wales, higher in the south, and highest of all in and around London. The global credit crunch has made this much worse, driving up living costs and housing costs much faster than wages have increased.

You need to make sure that you can afford to live where the job is, on the salary that the employer is offering. You cannot assume that the employer is offering a high enough wage.

Some employers sadly either don't care about the living standards of their employees or can't afford to offer a reasonable wage for the local area, even in the computing industry. For others, it will have been many years since the employer earned a salary as low as what he is offering for the role, and so he may mistakenly believe that the salary is high enough for the local area. Plus the employer's living costs may be much lower, because he might be buying a house whereas you will have to rent a room or property, and because he might not have any debts to pay each month.

You can look on websites like RightMove.co.uk or MousePrice.com to see what monthly rental costs are like in an area. Be wary of the cheapest places to rent: they are normally cheap because they are in poor condition or in unsafe neighbourhoods. You can check crime statistics online on [the Police's](http://thePolice's)

[website](#). Your health and happiness can suffer if you're living somewhere nasty, and street muggings, property damage and burglaries can be a problem too in deprived areas in larger cities.

Rental properties come in three flavours: unfurnished, part-furnished, and fully-furnished. If you decide to rent a property that is not fully-furnished, you will have to provide your own furniture. This can be a substantial one-off cost, and you'll probably want most of the furniture before you start your new job. You might have to take out a bank loan to pay for this.

Don't forget that you will have to pay council tax, gas and electric bills, water rates, and telephone line rental and broadband charges too. You may not have paid some or all of these bills whilst a student. Some rental properties (especially if you're renting a room in a house) include these bills, but most do not. Collectively, they can cost two hundred pounds a month or more. As with transport costs, many of these bills are rising faster than annual wage rises.

You'll also have to pay income tax, national insurance contributions, and pension contributions from your salary. These are deducted by your employer every time you are paid, and your employer is responsible for making sure that these are paid to the tax man and the pension scheme. HMRC has a tax calculator online that you can use to work out what these deductions will be. It's easy to forget to include them in your minimum salary calculation if you've never had a paid job before.

There's one more thing to consider about your target starting salary. It's much easier to join a company on the right salary than it is to get a big pay increase once you're working for the company. You may not get your first pay rise for over a year; it's a good idea to plan your budget with that in mind. It's much easier to move jobs after your first year, and moving in order to get a pay-rise is very common in the industry.

Get The Job Description

Before you can apply, you also need to get a copy of the job description, [as discussed earlier in this book](#). Make sure you get it from the employer if possible. If you get a copy from a recruitment agency, always ask them to confirm that they have an up-to-date copy.

You need the job description to help you write your covering letter and to help you tailor your CV before you submit it.

Applying By Doing

Before I talk about covering letters and CVs in detail, I want to quickly mention that there's another way that you can go about applying for a job. It isn't an option that you can try with every employer, but it is one that can propel you to the front of the interview list if you can pull it off. It works especially well with those employers who are selling a product or hosted service.

The idea is simple: do something interesting with their product or service. Something that makes it better, stronger. Something that is relevant to the job that the employer is advertising. And then tell them about what you've done. If they like it, there is a chance that they'll want to interview you, completely bypassing the dreaded CV sift stage.

Make The Employer Want To Hire You

The more savvy employers are monitoring social media - especially Twitter, which is the easiest to monitor - for what people are saying about them, and to learn how customers are using their products and services. If you have something interesting to tell them - such as a demo that uses their products or services - then you can use social media to tell the employer all about your demo. If you have built a demo that shows them how you might be suitable for the job they are hiring for, then they might just want to hire you for the job.

I can't overstate how huge an advantage that gives you. It turns everything on its head.

Instead of you having to convince the employer to pick you out of a pile of CVs, mentally they have switched positions. Now, *they* are courting *you*. They will probably want to interview you as quickly as possible. Be prepared for this, and make sure that you are available for interview at very short notice. Their interest may cool very quickly if you're not.

The trade-off with this technique is that you will probably have a harder interview, because you've raised the employer's expectations of you. As long as you've got the breadth and depth of skills to back it up, you'll be fine.

It might not seem very fair, deliberately trying to leapfrog over everyone else stuck in the dreaded CV sift, but don't worry about that. You're all competing for the same vacancy, and this technique still demands that you have the skills that the employer is looking for. You're just selling yourself to the employer in a different way.

Finally, a word of advice. Don't cheat. Don't get someone else to build the demo for you. You *will* get found out during the interview.

What To Build?

Take your inspiration from the job description. In there is the clue that you need. If it isn't obvious, try going for a walk, or sleeping on it first.

If you're going to create a demo, make sure the demo uses the key technologies listed in the job description. The best demos always show how those key technologies can be combined with the employer's products and services. Or maybe the employer has an open-source project that you can contribute to?

If that is difficult (perhaps the employer doesn't open-source their work, and doesn't give out free trials), then build a mockup of some kind that shows off what you imagine could be done if you did have access to the employer's products and services. You're limited only by your imagination, your skills, and the time you invest into this approach.

How much time should you spend on making your demo? My advice is to keep an eye not on the clock, but on how much you're enjoying building the demo. If you're having fun, then spending a whole weekend on the demo is time well-spent. However, if you're not enjoying it, you probably won't enjoy the job that you're applying for either, and perhaps you should stop right there and look for another job to apply for.

How To Sell It

Before you contact the employer, there are four key things to do:

1. First of all, your demo needs to be hosted somewhere online, so that the employer can look at it when it suits him. If you don't have anywhere to host your demo, rent a cheap VPS somewhere and use that to host your demo. Virtual servers running Linux can be rented on a month-to-month basis, so that you're not tied into a long-term commitment.
2. Secondly, make sure your demo is robust. Ask your friends to try it out, and to see if they can break it at all. Fix every bug they tell you about, address every problem. This approach is high-stakes. You're telling the employer, "look at how good I am," so the employer expects your demo to be pretty good. Any problems with it, and your chance of an interview will be gone.
3. Thirdly, make sure it is complete. A small demo that works well is normally better than an ambitious demo that overreaches. Employers like people who can finish things! If part of your demo doesn't quite hang right, don't be reluctant to strip it out.
4. Finally, create a write-up about the demo, covering what technologies you've used, why, and how it works under the bonnet. *Tell this as a story, with a beginning, a middle and an end.* This narrative allows you to guide the employer through your demo and your thinking. Make sure this narrative is very easy to find from your demo.

Now, you're ready.

- Find the employer's main Twitter account. It will probably be run by his marketing people, especially in larger firms. Look around to see if the employer has a second Twitter account that's run by his engineers (some firms do, some firms don't). If there is such an account, that's the one you really want to target.

- Tweet about the demo you've built, and copy the employer in by mentioning his Twitter account at the end of the tweet.
- Strike up a conversation with anyone who replies to your tweet. The employer's engineers or managers may contact you from their own Twitter accounts, rather than from the employer's official Twitter account. You might also get contacted by customers of the employer, and possibly even by rival firms.

Then it's down to you and the quality of what you've put online. The best advice that I can give you here is to simply be yourself, and to keep an open mind. Even if the employer you've targeted doesn't bite, you might just catch the eye of someone else, and find yourself with a completely new opportunity that you hadn't anticipated when you started.

Writing Your Covering Letter

When you apply for a job, you normally send two documents to the employer:

- a covering letter (covered in this chapter)
- a CV ([covered in the next chapter](#))

Some employers also ask candidates to complete a questionnaire. This will have questions about the role that you have applied for, to help the employer better understand how suitable you are for the role.

You might be asked to fill out an application form as well, but it's rare in our industry to be asked to provide an application form *instead* of a CV.

What Is A Covering Letter?

A covering letter is a letter from you to the employer. It is your sales pitch to the employer, explaining to the employer exactly why you are the right person for the job. You should create a brand new covering letter for each job that you apply for, because no two jobs are ever identical.

A CV, on the other hand, is a record of your career and employment to date. It is both a summary and a list, and it is the nature of a CV to be very terse. It's extremely hard to get across your strengths for a role in a CV, although as you'll see in the next chapter, there *are* things that you can do to help. CVs are there to tell employers what you have done. That isn't the same as telling an employer what you can do.

Do I Always Need To Submit A Covering Letter?

Yes. Your covering letter is just as important as your CV at this stage.

CVs can be very dry to read, and it can be very difficult to tell two candidates apart just by reading their CVs. If the employer has read an interesting covering letter first, then they'll be paying closer attention to the accompanying CV. They'll also be reading the CV in a more positive manner. Psychologists call this the halo effect, and it is a very powerful tool to use.

If the employer doesn't explicitly ask you for a covering letter, submit one anyway. You don't want to give up the opportunity to get through to the interview stage simply because you weren't asked for a covering letter. It also shows an employer that you're willing to make an effort, which always catches an employer's eye!

If you're submitting online, and there's only space to submit your CV, just put your covering letter as the first page of your CV and upload the combined document. Make sure that the fonts and other styles match first though; poor presentation might mean that your efforts go into the bin unread.

If the employer gives you no opportunity to submit a CV, that's more problematic, and you'll have to be more creative. Maybe you'll be able to point the employer at your [online portfolio](#)? If so, make sure your portfolio includes your covering letter. There's normally some way to put a covering letter *somewhere* for the employer to read it.

Finally, be aware that some employers (and I'm one of them) *expect* all applications to include a covering letter, and will bin any application that doesn't include one. That might seem harsh, but it's a great way for an employer to filter out anyone who doesn't pay enough attention to detail, hasn't read the job advert closely enough, and so missed the paragraph stating that all applications must include a covering letter. Attention to detail is very important in our industry.

How Do I Plan My Covering Letter?

As a general rule, you've got one side of A4 (two at the very most) to sell yourself effectively. Before you start writing the letter, you need to plan what you're going to say, and what order to say things in.

Take the job description and a highlighter pen. Use the pen to highlight everything that the employer is looking for. Don't highlight the whole thing! Pick out the key words that are in the job description, and highlight those. Turn the highlighted words into a list. Each item on your list is a requirement for the job. These are the things that you need to talk about in your letter.

For each requirement in the list that you've made, think about why you meet that requirement. You need to come up with a brief example of why you do. For the more important requirements, it helps to have two examples that you can share with the employer. Put these examples down into a separate list - this is the list of your strengths.

If you don't meet a requirement, all is not necessarily lost. Maybe you've done something similar that you can mention instead? Or maybe it's something that you've come across and seen, but not necessarily done yourself? These are examples that you can use too. It's perfectly acceptable to be creative here, as long as you don't exaggerate or lie.

Finally, take the list of requirements and the list of your strengths. Re-order the lists so that the most important requirements that you are strongest at meeting are at the top of the list. This is the order that you're going to use when you write your covering letter. You want to put your strongest arguments about the employer's most important requirements first to give yourself the best possible chance of making it through to interview.

At this point, it's always a good idea to take a break, and review the lists that you've drawn up: the list of requirements and the list of your strengths for this role. Are there any other examples that you can add to your list of strengths, examples that you didn't think of first time round perhaps?

Am I Suitable For The Role?

When you have finished compiling the lists, it's time to look at how well you match the job's requirements. These lists do not lie. When an employer reads your finished covering letter, they will reconstruct these lists from the letter, and use them to decide whether you make it through the CV sift or not.

If you've got good examples for the most important requirements, then you've got a chance of making it through to interview. On the other hand, if you've struggled to come up with examples, then your

chances are slim, and you need to decide whether it's worth spending further time on this application, or whether you'd be better off applying elsewhere instead.

Be honest with yourself, without being too hard on yourself.

If you decide that you don't match the job requirements enough, but it is the kind of job that you'd love to have, then use this as a positive. You've now got new information: a list of requirements that you need to be able to satisfy in the future. Use that information. Make that list your new TODO list, and seek out things that you can go and do to gain the skills and / or experience that you need to successfully apply for a job like this in the future.

If you decide to continue with your application, it's time to turn these lists into a covering letter.

Key Things In Your Covering Letter

There's a single guiding principle behind everything that you put into your covering letter: you're trying to make it as easy as possible for the employer to see why they should interview you.

- Make sure that your name and contact details are on the covering letter. Your covering letter may get separated from your CV, and if an employer likes what he reads but doesn't know who to contact to interview, he can't interview you.
- Make sure it's clear what role you have applied for. The employer may be recruiting for multiple roles, and you want to make sure that you're considered for the correct role.
- Make sure you front-load the letter with your explanations of why you meet the key requirements of the role. The most important requirements might merit a whole paragraph each, with the remaining requirements relegated to a sentence each afterwards.
- If you have any other relevant strengths to mention (conference speaker, book author, and so on), make sure that you add these to the covering letter too.

The Importance Of Spelling And Grammar

A covering letter is a letter - it is prose, not a collection of lists like a CV. It is normally written in professional conversational English. If you had the employer in front of you, imagine what you would say to them, and write that down. Avoid the sort of language you'd use in the pub, and for goodness' sake avoid slang and text speak!

The employer is going to be looking at the arguments you make in your letter, and he will also be looking at the quality of your English. A letter that is full of spelling mistakes will go straight in the bin. There's just no excuse for a badly-spelled letter these days, as every word processor and text editor includes a spell checker. Bad spelling tells an employer that you're either too lazy or too stupid to use a spell checker, and no employer chooses to hire lazy or stupid people.

If you're dyslexic, the employer will only learn that if you tell him in the letter. If you do tell him, tell him at the start of the letter, so that he can understand that he needs to pay less attention to your spelling (employers aren't allowed to discriminate on the grounds of disability).

Dyslexic or not, it's always a good idea to ask someone else to check your spelling before you send off the covering letter. Just make sure that you ask someone who can spell!

If English is not your first language, it's a good idea to ask a native English speaker to proof-read your letter before you send it. Employers are quite tolerant of letters written in somewhat broken English, but you need to make sure that the arguments you've made in your letter do come through clearly to anyone who reads it.

Grammar matters too, but not as much as spelling. Employers today are somewhat resigned to the fact that many young people don't seem to know how to use apostrophes correctly, nor (for example) the difference between *their* and *they're*. A letter that contains a few mistakes might be acceptable, but a letter that is littered with such mistakes could well go in the bin. It all depends on the employer's feelings about such things.

Avoid The Worst Mistakes Of All

Most candidates never take the trouble to write a covering letter at all, even when the job advert asks them to include one with their application. Don't make this mistake yourself.

Many applicants use their covering letter to tell the employer how much they want the job, and why having the job would be good for them. So many applicants do this that I'm assuming that this is common advice from some book, blog, or careers advisor. My advice is to never do this. When an employer reads one of these letters, all he sees is someone saying 'me, me, me,' the entire time. The employer wants to know why you're the best candidate for the job. Anything else just comes across that maybe you're too self-centred for your own good.

Many applicants haven't written many covering letters (or letters of any kind!), and it shows, especially in failing to address the job's key requirements at the top of the letter. The best way to avoid this mistake is to practice. Your university will have a Careers Service, and it will offer you opportunities to practice your letter writing. Get in as much practice as you can. Only through practice will you get better.

Tailoring Your CV

When you apply for a job, you normally send two documents to the employer:

- a covering letter ([covered in the previous chapter](#)), and
- a CV (covered in this chapter).

The CV that you submit with any application is a version of your master CV, tailored for the role that you're applying for.

What Is A CV?

'CV' is short for *curriculum vitae*. It is a Latin expression that (according to Wikipedia) roughly means *course of [my] life*.

A CV is a record of your career and employment to date. It is a summary, and it is written as a list. It is the nature of a CV to be very terse. It's extremely hard to get across your strengths for a role in a CV, although in this chapter I'll show you that there are things that you can do to help. CVs are there mostly to tell employers what you have done. That isn't the same as telling an employer what you can do.

A covering letter, on the other hand, is a letter from you to the employer, to tell the employer exactly why you are the right person for the job. You should always include a covering letter with your CV when you apply for a job. Together, they can be a powerful tool to persuade an employer that he should interview you for a role.

If you don't have one already, the first thing that you need to do is to create your master CV.

Start With Your Master CV

Your master CV is the CV that you're going to maintain throughout your career.

I started mine nearly 20 years ago, and I'm constantly updating it as my career progresses. It contains everything I've ever done: each role I've held, each project that I've worked on, each skill that I've used, each industry award that my work has won. It also contains my education details. My master CV is a complete record. Nothing *ever* gets deleted from it.

If you're just starting out in your career, then at first your master CV will be quite short. You should take that as a big hint that you need to be doing much more than just your university course if you are to compete in the job market! As you do more, your CV will grow naturally, giving you more experience to show an employer as you move from role to role in the industry.

Never worry about your master CV being too long. You never include your master CV in a job application, so there is no problem with your master CV growing to a dozen or more pages as your career progresses. It is your tailored CV that you send to any employer.

Tailor Your CV For Each Role

Whenever you apply for a role, make a copy of your master CV. Tailor this copy for the role, by editing it down to the things that matter for the role. If you've already written your covering letter, then the process of planning your covering letter has left you with a list of the things that the employer is looking for. Take that list, and use it to guide you in tailoring your CV.

Make sure that your current name and contact details are at the front of the CV. Don't assume that the employer can find these details from your covering letter; covering letter and CV may get separated.

A CV normally runs in reverse chronological order; newest stuff at the top, older stuff further down. But when you tailor your CV for a role, sometimes the newest stuff isn't the most relevant, and you need to mention the older stuff first. A good way to do that is to add a 'Summary' section at the top that mentions your most relevant experience.

For every computing job that you've had to date (such as your industrial placement year), your master CV will have list of the skills that you used during each job. On your tailored CV, edit the list of skills, and move the skills that are most relevant to the role you are applying for to the front of the list.

If you've had jobs to date which weren't in the computing industry, you should include a summary of them on your tailored CV. Make sure to highlight any transferable skills from those jobs, especially where you've held any positions of responsibility. Employers normally prefer people who can demonstrate that they don't need managing from one minute to the next.

Don't forget that any computer societies or open-source projects that you've been involved in might be very relevant to your prospective employer. They should already be on your master CV, but it's easy to forget to add them. Make sure they go onto your tailored CV too.

Your tailored CV should be as long as it needs to be, and no longer. If you have a lot of relevant experience to include in your tailored CV, then it doesn't matter if your tailored CV is more than two pages long. Most employers prefer a complete CV over one that has been artificially crammed into two pages. It's much more important that your covering letter fits inside two pages.

Professional Presentation

The very first thing that an employer will notice is the presentation of your CV: how you have laid it out, the size and type of font that you have used, and how you have used colour. Your choices here can put an employer in a positive frame of mind before he starts reading. Equally, terrible choices can result in your CV going in the bin without being read.

Microsoft Word and competing packages come with CV templates that you can create your CV from. You should use one of these templates unless you happen to be a talented and experienced document designer. These templates are tried and trusted, and they avoid all of the layout mistakes that you might otherwise make.

Funky fonts are a bad idea. The Comic Sans font is a terrible idea. Fonts that imitate handwriting are too. You're creating a professional document. It needs to use fonts that are considered acceptable in such documents.

Employers expect you to use one of the standard sans-serif fonts such as Arial or Helvetica, or one of the standard serif fonts such as Times New Roman. These are fonts that are installed on every computer in the world. Don't underestimate how horrible a document can look if you decide to use a font that the employer doesn't have on his computer.

Font size is important too. A general rule is to use 10pt or 12pt fonts for your paragraphs. Anything smaller than 10pt can be very hard to read, and anything larger than 12pt makes it look like you don't have enough content to fill the page.

You may have been asked to use double-line spacing for the documents you've submitted during your university course. This isn't common practice outside academia, so it's a good idea to use normal or 1.5 line spacing at the most.

Use as little colour as possible. Black and white might be boring, but not everyone has colour printers in their office, and most colours don't survive being photocopied. It would be a shame for an otherwise excellent CV to end up in the bin because the employer couldn't make out what you'd written.

If you are submitting a printed copy of your CV, consider use 100 GSM paper. Standard printer and photocopier paper is 80 GSM, and often doesn't feel nice in the hand. 100 GSM paper is a little heavier, and often has a slightly fibrous feel that is more enjoyable to touch. It also isn't as glossy as 80 GSM paper, which makes it look better too.

Personal Details

Make sure that your name and contact details (email address and/or telephone number) are at the very top of your CV. Your CV may get separated from your covering letter; you cannot rely on an employer having both to hand when he reviews your application. If you don't provide your details, then the employer has no way of getting in touch if he wishes to interview you.

It's routine for recruitment agencies to remove contact details from CVs before forwarding them on to employers, to prevent employers trying to cut out the middleman. Don't use that as an excuse to leave your details off yourself; one day you might be applying directly for a role and forget to put the details back on!

Things Employers Don't Want To See

When you're just starting out into the industry, your CV can look awfully thin. Even so, a thin CV is much better than some of the things that people do to try and pad out their CV and fill up all that empty paper.

Never ever lie on your CV. You might get away with it, and even get the job, but if the employer ever finds out that you've lied on your CV, you will probably get the sack. Perhaps the best example of this in recent times is Scott Thompson, former CEO of internet giant Yahoo! He was found to have lied about his qualifications on his CV, and was very publicly fired from his job as a result.

Make sure that there are no chronological gaps on your CV. When an employer is reading a CV, and he sees a period of time that there's no information about, he normally doesn't like this. He'll be wondering what you did during this time period. Were you unemployed? Were you in jail? Why is there a gap? If you make it through to interview, he will ask you about any gaps. However, he is more likely to simply bin your CV and move on to the next applicant.

Be careful at calling yourself an expert in any subject. As a rough guide, an expert is someone who has written a definitive book on a subject, or who has presented a relevant talk at a conference, or who has made an important and relevant contribution to a major open-source project. The pitfall here is that most people at the start of their careers suffer from *meta-ignorance*; they don't realise how much more there is to know about a subject. You *can* be an expert at a young age, but if you put that down on your CV, then your CV *must* make it clear why you are an expert.

Don't list skills in the summary of your CV unless they also appear elsewhere in your CV. An employer wants to know what you've done with each skill that you state that you have, where you did it, and when. If an employer cannot find this information on your CV, he's normally left to conclude that you're overstating your skills to say the least.

Don't list all of your university modules and their scores. Most employers will have studied at a different university, if they have a degree at all. Your course module names won't mean much to them, and you'd be surprised at just how hard it is for an employer to find out the details about each module from the Internet. The chances are that the employer simply won't bother looking as a result. Equally, unless you've got great scores, you don't want to list the individual scores for each module.

The Internet, email, the Windows desktop and Microsoft Office don't need to appear on your CV. Employers expect you to know what the Internet is, and how to use email and Microsoft Office on a Windows PC. These are considered basic skills these days that everyone will have. If you have any additional skills over and above general word-processing (e.g. log file analysis using pivot tables) then these are worth mentioning.

Don't waste a lot of space on your A level results. In the computing industry, it's widely expected that your A levels are mainly a stepping stone to getting into university. If you have a degree, most employers won't care about your A level results at all. The main exception is if you're applying for research-heavy post or some other role where very strong maths skills are required. My advice is to simply list your A level subjects and scores on a single line. There's no need to omit them completely.

You probably don't need to mention your GCSE results at all. As with A levels, GCSEs are seen mostly as a stepping stone to further education. If you do mention them, my advice is to simply say something like '10 GCSEs, 7 A* and 3 As' or something like that.

Finally, more and more employers will bin a CV that contains no computing experience outside of what you've studied at school and at university. It's very difficult for a university course alone to bring you up to the minimum standard that you need to hold down even a junior programmer's job these days, and many university courses teach research subjects that are difficult to apply in your average firm. Even practical courses specifically geared for industry aren't enough, because through your course alone you simply won't have clocked up enough programming hours.

In this day and age of opportunity, there really is no excuse for submitting a CV that contains no outside computing experience at all. You need to be doing way more than just your coursework if you want to be ready to join the computing industry after you graduate. I'll expand on this a lot more in Part 2 of this book.

What About Interests and Hobbies?

It's the done thing to include a short section listing your interests and hobbies. Don't leave it out, and keep it brief.

You may have personal interests that are relevant to your prospective employer. Positions of responsibility (e.g. martial arts instructor, scout leader, and so on) are worth making prominent on the page. Do they make a difference between getting an interview and not? I can't say for certain either way, but they certainly can't harm your application.

Unusual hobbies are worth including too. For example, earlier this year, I received a CV that listed 'experimental baking' in the hobbies section. I've no idea what 'experimental baking' is, but it caught my eye, and it made me go back and re-read the CV a second time. It told me that there was something different about that application, that he or she was an individual.

What About References?

Some job adverts will state how many references are required. If it is not mentioned, then most employers expect you to provide two references. One will normally be your last employer. The other is normally another previous employer, or a character reference (such as your university tutor).

When it comes to including references on your CV, you can do one of two things:

- You can provide full contact details for each referee on your CV, or
- You can simply state 'References available on request.'

It's quite common to go with the second option, and later on in your career it's definitely a good thing to do. Why? Well, most employers will not contact your referees without asking you first, but some employers will. It can be a bit awkward if this happens before you've left your current job, especially if you don't get the job that you've applied for.

If you do include contact details for your referees, make sure that the details are accurate. Most job offers are subject to satisfactory references. If you've provided out-of-date contact details, then the employer may ask you to correct them, but often the employer won't realise that the contact details are wrong. This can cost you a job that you've got in the bag.

Applications Received

Once an employer receives an application from a candidate, he needs to start processing it.

Who Reads Your Application First?

Some employers have a HR person or team to look after the applications that have been received. (HR is Human Resources. These are the professionals who look after employment and staffing at many firms). In other firms, especially smaller ones, one of the company directors may run recruitment, or each Head of Department may be responsible for his or her own recruitment efforts. They may or may not be assisted by an admin person.

You cannot assume that the first person who looks at your application is a technical person, i.e. someone who will understand what you mean when you say that you've used Git or Subversion.

How Long Can It Take To Read Your Application?

There can sometimes be lengthy delays between a firm receiving an application for a job, and the firm starting to process the application. Given how desperate firms are for staff, that might seem daft, but there are some good reasons why.

- There may be a closing date for applications; if so, the firm might be waiting until the deadline has passed before it starts processing applications.
- The director or manager who will be looking at applications may be away (on holiday, unwell, or an unexpected absence such as a funeral).
- The director or manager is too busy with their normal duties to fit in any recruitment activity right now. (This is happens a lot!)

There's also always the possibility that they simply hate doing recruitment work, and are doing their best to put it off as long as they can. This is quite common in our industry, where people would rather be coding than doing anything else!

If there's a long and unexpected delay, all you can do is chase the firm (or the agency that you have applied through) for feedback and an update on the status of your application - and use the time to apply somewhere else in case they never get back to you.

What Do They Do With Your Application?

The first thing they normally do with your application is put it into the right pile of CVs, so that it gets looked at by the appropriate person or team. To do that, they need to figure out which vacancy you've applied for.

At the time of writing, despite the global economic climate, many computing firms are expanding. They probably have several vacancies open at any one time, and even in smaller firms different piles of CVs might get looked at by different managers or directors.

If they can't figure out which job you've applied for, they might:

- put you into the wrong pile of CVs by mistake (quite likely), or
- put you into a 'general enquiries'-type pile to look at (unlikely), or
- contact you to find out which job you've applied for (very unlikely)

... but there's also a good chance that they'll just bin your CV and move on to the next one.

Once a CV has been added to a pile, it normally goes next into the dreaded CV sift.

The CV Sift

This Is Where Applications Go To Die

The first stage of assessing an application is often the CV sift. This is where someone reads the CVs that have been received for a vacancy, and decides which applications are worth considering further ... and which ones to bin.

It is incredibly difficult to get past the CV sift, but if you do, you become a person that the employer is interested in getting to know better.

Who Does The CV Sift?

It varies from employer to employer.

In smaller firms, the CV sift might be done by the recruiting manager or a company director, perhaps with help from his team leaders or senior technical staff. In larger firms, the employer may have a HR team who will do the first CV sift so that the company's technical staff don't waste time reading CVs that don't demonstrate the job requirements.

You can't assume that the person who screens your CV is able to understand all (or any!) of the technical terms that you put in your CV. They may be simply searching your CV and covering for the keywords in the job description. You need to make sure that the key words from the job description are easy to find in your application.

Does Every CV Get Read?

Not always, no.

If an employer has found enough candidates to interview, he'll probably stop reading the remaining CVs at that point. Sure, he might find better candidates further down the CV pile, but he can't be sure of that. He might come back to the remaining CVs if none of those candidates get hired, but that doesn't always happen.

Later on in your career, when you're applying for senior roles, this is much less of an issue, but during your first years in the industry when you've got lots of competition, it can happen a lot. All you can do is to do your best to make sure your CV gets through the sift if it gets read.

You've Got A Minute To Catch Their Eye

Whether it's a pile of CVs to be processed in one go, or a drip-drip-drip feed of CVs coming in every day, a firm normally ends up looking at tens of CVs for a single vacancy. There often isn't a lot of time to dedicate to a single CV to make a decision one way or the other, and things tend to blur very quickly for someone who is reading CVs one after another.

You can assume that you have their initial attention for no more than one minute before they get distracted or they lose the will to live. If they haven't found anything that they're looking for inside that minute, your application will probably get binned. It's your job to make sure that you catch their eye quickly, so that they keep on reading.

The best way to catch their eye is to show how good a fit you are for the role that you've applied for. The best place to do this is in your covering letter.

How CVs Are Assessed

CVs are assessed against the requirements listed in the job description. In some firms, this assessment may be strictly scored, with points awarded for each requirement that the candidate meets. In others, it might be done more informally, with the employer trying to get a feel for how good a fit you'll be for the job, and how much you'll be able to do from day one.

The more requirements a candidate meets, the more likely it is that the candidate will make it through to the next stage.

Some employers are also trying to assess the potential of the candidate, especially where the candidate scores low against the requirements in the job requirement. Sometimes a candidate can get through the CV sift because they have other experience which shows that they might be able to learn the job quickly enough to be worth hiring. Ours is a rapidly changing industry, and many employers are looking for people who have the potential to keep up with the rate of change.

That said, there's usually a baseline set of skills required, and if an employer can't find those on the CV or covering letter, the application normally gets binned.

Why CVs Get Binned

CVs are also assessed for reasons to reject the application. The employer has two main motives here.

The remaining stages of the recruitment process are expensive (they take up a lot of time), and employers can't afford to waste too much time interviewing candidates that they don't feel will be successful. If there's any doubt, the employer might use a telephone interview or send out an online assessment to gain more information, but he's just as likely to bin the application and move on to the next one.

The employer is also thinking of his existing workforce. He has worked hard to recruit the people who already work there, and he doesn't want to employ anyone who isn't up to the standards that have already been set. Hiring people who aren't good enough is one surefire way to convince good people to resign and find jobs elsewhere.

Employers will be looking at the effort that you've put into your application, and at your wider stated skills and experience, and using that to build up a picture in their head of who they think that you are.

Most of the time, that picture doesn't tell them anything one way or the other (this is where your covering letter can make all the difference!), but if the picture they build isn't a positive one, your CV will probably get binned.

Employers aren't just looking at who they think you are. They are also comparing you to *bad hires* (people they've hired in the past who didn't work out). Some of the requirements you'll find in the job description's "About You" section will be intended to avoid repeated hiring mistakes; the rest will be characteristics and behaviours that the employer feels make a positive contribution to his firm.

To protect you against unfair discrimination, there are many things that employers in the United Kingdom aren't allowed to take into account when considering an application, and the list changes from time to time (normally to add additional protection to employees). If you believe that you have been illegally discriminated against, you should consider taking professional legal advice on whether you have a case that you can bring against the employer.

Interviews And Assessments

If you get through the CV sift, the employer will then be looking to interview you and assess whether you can walk the talk. More and more employers today are moving away from the traditional interview, and are using a combination of online programming tests, on-site assessment days, and multiple interviews.

Preparing For Interview And Assessment

Before any interview or assessment, make sure that you're fully up-to-date with the company's products and services. Go over the company's website, and make notes about what products and services they offer. If the employer offers any sort of free trial, make sure that you've signed up for it and spent some time exploring it. Find their Twitter account and their Facebook page, and see what recent announcements they have made. Use Google to see what others are saying about the employer.

Some employers will ask you interview questions to find out what you've learned about the firm, partly to see if you've made the effort, and partly to see how well you've understood what you have researched. Employers can take a very dim view if you can't answer these questions, so be prepared. Telling the employer that you don't think such questions are relevant is one of the quickest ways to bring an interview to a premature end.

Some employers will base their hands-on technical assessment around their products and services, and many will base it on the technical skills and key technologies listed in the job description. An assessment day is already stressful enough; if you're also learning new things at the same time, that's both added stress and time taken away from completing whatever tasks the employer sets you. Make sure that you've prepared in advance by brushing up on the skills listed in the job description.

There are some firms (normally the larger tech giants) who will deliberately use assessments and interview questions that are impossible to prepare for. Good luck with those!

Online Assessments

Some employers will ask you to complete an online assessment. This might be a programming test. It might be a psychological test.

To prepare for these, make sure that you've set aside sufficient time to complete them, and that you have somewhere quiet to work, with a reliable broadband connection!) If the employer's deadline for completing the test seems unreasonable, or if it's one you know you cannot meet, it's perfectly alright to discuss this with the employer first. Some employers will reschedule the test to accommodate you.

There may be a practice question that you can do first, to help you get used to being tested, and to become familiar with the online testing system that the employer is using. If the employer doesn't explicitly tell you about this, always remember to ask about it.

The assessment may be timed; once you start the assessment, you might have to complete the entire assessment in one go. Always check for this, and make sure you've set aside enough time before you start. The employer may not allow you a second go if you run out of time.

Telephone Interviews

It is becoming more common for employers to conduct a telephone interview before inviting candidates on-site for a full formal interview. Telephone interviews are very convenient for all involved, allowing employers to talk to more candidates than they can reasonably invite for on-site interview, and saving candidates the time and cost involved with travelling to the employer's office.

If you are invited to telephone interview, make sure you are happy with the date and time that the interview is scheduled for. Many employers understand that it can be difficult for candidates to fit an interview in during the day, and will happily agree to interview you on an evening if you ask them to. You can ask for a weekend telephone interview too, but not every employer will accommodate this.

Some employers (especially firms with international offices) may ask to interview you over Skype. Most will ask you for a telephone number to call. If you ask the employer to call your mobile phone, make sure that you're going to have good reception at the time that the interview is scheduled for, and (if you use one) that your hands-free kit isn't faulty or crackly at all.

How long should a telephone interview be? Some employers will schedule a fixed-length call, and others will leave the duration open-ended. Always ask in advance, so that you can make sure that you don't have to leave the telephone interview early.

What will the employer ask? Some employers will have a standard set of questions that they ask every candidate, whilst other employers will focus more on things in your covering letter and CV that have caught their eye. It's normally fine for you to ask questions too; prepare some in advance. It can look very bad if you have no questions to ask.

At the start of the telephone interview, always make sure that your interviewer is interviewing you for the right job. Mistakes do happen, so check. Experienced interviewers will normally start the interview by checking these sort of details (who you are, which role you've applied for, and so on), but if they don't, there's nothing wrong with you asking the employer to confirm the details. It's much better than being interviewed for the wrong role.

Hopefully, you'll be doing a lot of talking in your telephone interview. You might want to have a drink in easy reach to stop your throat drying out.

On-site Interviews And Assessments

You might be invited to the employer's office for a formal interview. Increasingly, employers are asking candidates to come on-site for a whole day or two for a technical assessment. This may include one or more formal interviews on the same day, or the employer may ask the final shortlist of candidates back for a further formal interview.

Many employers allow candidates to bring along books and other helpful resources to an on-site assessment. It's a good idea to confirm this with an employer in advance, and if it is allowed, take full advantage of it. Some employers do insist on "closed book"-type assessments, but most employers understand that these type of assessments may not be a fair judge of what you can do.

Unless agreed in advance with the employer, you should always dress smartly for any on-site interview. That means suit, shirt and matching tie. Make sure that your shirt is ironed, and that your shoes are clean. Shower, wash your hair, and clean your teeth. Use deodorant. Consider shaving if you don't wear a full beard or moustache. You might benefit from a haircut too if your hair is getting untidy.

A scruffy and smelly appearance might not cost you the job, but it will probably make a negative impression. You always want to make a positive first impression, as this sets the scene for how the employer thinks during the rest of your interview and assessment.

If you have any special needs, make sure that they are discussed with the employer before you travel to interview. Tell the employer about any disability that affects travel or your interview. The employer is not allowed to discriminate on the grounds of disability, but he will struggle to make any necessary arrangements if he isn't warned in advance.

Some employers will provide lunch if you're going to be there the whole day. If you have any dietary requirements, you need to tell the employer about them in advance. Make sure that you take cash with you in case you have to buy your own food; don't assume that everywhere will take credit or debit cards.

Travelling For Interview And Assessment

Make sure that you know where your interview will be, and how you will get there. Being late for an interview makes a terrible first impression, and if the employer is interviewing several candidates on the same day, he may not be able to reschedule your interview for later the same day.

If you are travelling by public transport, you need to allow time for any train and / or bus changes that you need to make. You should consider arriving on an earlier train; that way, if your train is delayed at all, there's still a good chance of making your interview on time.

If you are driving to the employer's office, always ask in advance about parking arrangements. Some employers will have parking at their office, but you may have to park in a public car park or on the street. Don't forget to allow extra time for traffic jams, and for getting lost en route. If you're relying on a sat nav or on your smartphone's turn-by-turn navigation, always ask the employer for the best postcode to use.

If you are travelling a long way, you might need to travel the day before and stay in a hotel overnight. An interview is a stressful experience as it is. It is difficult to perform at your very best if you're tired from an unusually early start and a long journey.

If you are travelling on the day, and you realise that you are going to be late, make sure that you contact the employer to let him know that you're going to be late. It's simply good manners (something the employer will appreciate). However, be prepared for awkward questions asking why you didn't manage to arrive on time.

Some employers will assist with your travel expenses, and may be willing to help with booking hotels and train tickets in advance, so that you don't have to find the money for these yourself. Always ask

the employer in advance about this. If you turn up on the day and ask for your expenses to be reimbursed without prior agreement, you might get a nasty shock!

What To Take To Every Interview

When you go to an on-site interview, always make sure that you take the following with you:

- two printouts of your covering letter,
- two printouts of your latest CV,
- a printout of the job description that you have, and
- a list of prepared questions to ask.

One copy of the covering letter and CV is for you, the other one is for the employer. It gives you a chance to correct any mistakes on your CV, and to show the employer any new information that has been added since you applied for the job. It's also a good way of dealing with the situation where a recruitment agency has edited your CV before sending it on to the employer without anyone losing any face.

It's always a good idea to take your copy of the job description with you. The employer may have updated the job description since you applied. Equally, your interviewer may not have their own copy of the job description with them. Being able to hand the employer a copy of the job description is a simple but effective way to demonstrate that you've done some preparation for the interview.

During your interview, you will probably forget many of the questions that you need to ask the employer. Write them down in advance, and take the list in with you. It will help you remember to ask all of your questions, and many employers appreciate a candidate who is prepared in this way.

During The Interview Or Assessment

The best advice that I can give you is to remind you that you are there on merit. Have some confidence in your own skills and experience to date. It will calm you down and help you think more clearly. Your interviewer will spot your confidence and react well to it. Don't be over-confident or belligerent; few employers value arrogance in their workforce.

Your interviewer may greet you with a handshake, but he may not. If he does, make sure that you make eye contact, and don't try and crush his hand. If he doesn't offer to shake your hand, don't take it personally. Not everyone is comfortable with human contact.

If you're wearing a suit, remember to unbutton your jacket before you sit down. It's normally okay to remove your jacket if you prefer, but do resist any temptation to loosen your tie until you've left the premises and are on your way back home.

When it comes to what you will be asked, interview formats and questions vary widely from employer to employer.

Many employers will ask you to talk about the contents of your CV, and may ask specific questions about what you've written. Be prepared to explain and defend everything that you've put in your CV and covering letter. An employer will be looking for further details, and how deep your understanding is. If an employer catches you out with outright lies on your CV, don't be surprised if he ends the interview there and then.

If you're asked a question that you don't know the answer to, it is perfectly alright to say that you don't know. Trying to bluster your way through answering a question is often the worst thing that you can do. Your interviewer will pick this up, and he will see through your bull. If you say that you don't know, he may then ask you to attempt to answer the question anyways. He'll be looking to see how well you do solving a problem from first principles if he does, and how you might go about researching an answer using online resources such as Google and Stack Overflow.

Your behaviour is very important during an interview. Always sit up straight - never slouch. No matter how uncomfortable it is, keep eye contact with your interviewer. Don't stare off into space or address all of your answers to the desk. Speak clearly, avoid mumbling. Mind your language, and avoid swearing. If there is any disagreement between yourself and the interviewer, be polite about it. Don't get angry, and don't get defensive. And if you're struggling to think, take a moment to compose yourself, perhaps by taking a sip of water.

During the interview, you may be asked about what sort of salary you're looking for. Be prepared for this question in case it comes up. The employer may go further and make you a job offer there and then, but this is quite unusual. The employer will probably want time afterwards to think about your interview before he makes up his mind. He may have other interviews to complete first.

Remember that you're being assessed all the time, from the moment you arrive to the moment that you leave.

At The End Of The Interview Or Assessment

Once the interview is over, it's always a good idea to ask the employer two things:

- How long will it be before they can give you feedback?
- If you've been successful, what will the next stage be?

If you have any deadlines of your own (perhaps you already have a job offer from another employer), it's a good idea to let your interviewer know at the end of your interview. This can motivate an employer to move quickly to hire you. Don't lie about a job offer that you don't have though; you might find that your interviewer knows the other employer.

The Job Offer

At the end of the interview process, if you've been successful, you will get a job offer from the employer.

Verbal Offers

Your first job offer might be what is known as a 'verbal' job offer. This is where the employer calls you (or emails you) and asks you whether you will take the job. Employers use verbal job offers for two reasons.

1. First of all, the employer wants to fill the vacancy as quickly as possible. If you verbally accept the job offer, he can then stop any on-going recruiting for the role.
2. Secondly, it does take time to put together the paperwork for a written job offer. Many employers do not want to go to this trouble if you're not going to accept the job.

If you receive a verbal job offer, and you want the job, you should accept the offer so that the employer then gets started on the paperwork. Make sure that you're happy with the offered salary first. Be prepared and willing to haggle with the employer to get the salary that you're after before you accept.

When you accept a verbal job offer:

- always make it clear that you're agreeing subject to seeing the final paperwork, and
- always ask the employer when you can expect to receive the written job offer.

Legally, a verbal agreement is enough to secure a job. However, it can be difficult for you to prove that an agreement exists unless you have some evidence (for example an email containing the verbal job offer). That's why, regardless of the law, it's always safest to assume that *until you have a written job offer, you don't have a job*.

It doesn't happen often, but sometimes the employer will change their mind or withdraw the job offer for another reason. You may need to seek out professional advice in this case, as you may be entitled to payment in lieu of notice from the employer.

Written Job Offer

After a verbal agreement, an employer will normally provide you with a written job offer before you start your role. This might simply be a letter confirming the verbal offer, or it might be the complete contract of employment for you to sign and return.

Only sign and return your job offer when you are happy with the terms of your employment. Once you return it, there is a binding contract between both parties.

Written Statement Of Employment Particulars

In England and Wales, the law currently states that an employer must provide you with a [Written Statement of Employment Particulars](#) (PDF) within two months of you starting your new job (i.e. up to two months after you have started the job). In some circumstances, the employer has to provide you with the written statement sooner.

All good employers in our industry will include this written statement along with their written job offer. When you verbally accept a job, most employers will understand if you say that you're accepting the job subject to reviewing the terms of your employment before you start.

The written statement will state:

- the business name of the employer
- the employee's name
- the job that is being offered
- the date that your employment will start
- the location of the job
- any additional locations that you will be required to work at
- your starting annual salary
- when your salary will be paid
- the hours that you are required to work
- if you will be required to work Sundays, nights, or overtime
- your annual holiday allowance
- any additional employment benefits (bonuses, health cover, that sort of thing)
- the length of any probation period (covered in [the next chapter](#))
- how long your notice period will be
- any collective agreements in place with unions (very rare!)
- information on the company pension scheme
- the company's grievance procedure, and who you should take your grievances too
- how to complain about how a grievance is handled
- how to complain about a disciplinary or a dismissal

There may also be many additional clauses, covering topics that I haven't listed here.

This written statement may all be in one document, but many employers split it into two documents:

- your personal terms of employment, containing terms that are unique to yourself, and
- an Employees' Handbook, containing the terms that apply to every employee in the company.

Always read the terms of your employment thoroughly, and ask questions about anything that you do not understand or that you don't feel is clear. If there are terms that you are not happy about, always discuss them with the employer. Many employers are happy to negotiate, provided that the changes you ask for are reasonable.

If this is your first job, then you might not know what all of these things are. Below is some further information which might help you.

Your Working Hours

The job offer should state how many hours you are expected to work each week. It should also state what time you are expected to start work, and how long any breaks (such as lunch) will be.

Many jobs involve a 35, 37.5 or 40 hour working week, starting at 9am, with an hour's break for lunch. The 35 hours normally do not include your lunch break.

Many employers offer flexitime too. Flexitime is normally broken up into two segments: core hours (the times during the day when an employee must be at work), and the hours of the day when the employee can choose to be in the office. You still have to do your contracted hours by the end of each week. Flexitime is often offered as an optional benefit, so that the employer can withdraw it if an employee abuses it with poor timekeeping or if the employer sometimes needs to schedule meetings during the optional hours.

The Working Time Directive

The Working Time Directive is a piece of employment law that originated with the EU. Under the United Kingdom's implementation of the directive, no employee can be made to work more than 48 hours a week on average without the employer's written consent.

Some employers put clauses in their job descriptions that effectively state that "you agree to opt-out of the Working Time Directive" by taking the job. If you're happy with this, then there's nothing you need to do. If you're not, you're entitled to challenge the employer about this. Many employers will remove this clause if challenged. Be wary of any employer who is comfortable asking you to sign away your rights.

Your Salary

The job offer should state how much you will be paid each year, and when you will be paid. This amount will be your gross salary. Your net salary is what goes into the bank. It is your gross salary minus income tax, national insurance and pension contributions.

Employees are normally paid monthly in arrears, at the end of the month. This means (for example) that at the end of January, you get paid 1/12 of your annual salary. This payment covers the hours that you worked for January.

Holiday Allowance

The job offer should be clear on:

- when the holiday year starts
- how many days off you get every year (these are days that you can take off when you choose)
- whether this allowance includes bank holidays or not (these are public holidays that are fixed in the calendar)

At the time of writing, the law states that a full-time employee must be offered a minimum of 20 days a year annual leave, plus the eight days a year that are bank holidays. Some employers will offer more than this, and will advertise this as one of the reasons why you should apply to them instead of a competing employer.

Your holiday allowance states how many days off a year you can take. This is often referred to as annual leave. The holiday year may start on the 1st of January, but it might start from a different date, such as the start of the company's financial year. This date should be clearly stated in your job offer.

You will probably be joining the employer part-way through their holiday year. You will get a pro-rata holiday allowance to cover the time between your starting date and the start of the next holiday year.

Additional Advice

If there is anything in your written job offer that you're not sure about, you should always get additional advice before you sign your employment contract. The UK Government, the Trades Union Congress and Acas all maintain websites full of information about your rights and the law. And don't forget you can always ask your employer for clarification too.

The Probation Period

When you start a new job, it is quite normal for there to be a set probation period. This might be as short as a month, or as long as three or six months. If you have a probation period, then your written terms of employment will clearly state the length of the probation period, and any differences in your terms and conditions that apply during the probation period.

Why Do Employers Require A Probation Period?

The idea behind a probation period is to make it easier for an employer to change his mind if he thinks he's made a mistake in hiring you, where easier means the employer can dismiss you quicker, and for less cost. The better employers also make it easier for you to leave too during your probation period, in case you decide that you've taken the wrong job.

This might sound a bit daunting, but in practice it is something that normally works out just fine. After going to all the trouble of hiring you, an employer is already invested financially and emotionally in you, and wants to see you succeed and pass your probation period. At the same time, it's a good reminder to you that you can't sit back and relax, that you need to make reasonable effort every day to demonstrate that you're not a bad hire.

Your Assessment

At the start of your probation period, you might be set goals or targets that you have to meet before the end of your probation period, but that really depends on the firm you have joined, the kind of work that they do, and their approach to measuring each employee's contribution.

It's always a good idea to ask your employer to be clear on what he expects you to achieve, and when he expects you to achieve it by. Ask for regular feedback: weekly if possible, monthly at the least. A good employer will understand how important it is that you get the feedback you need to improve, and he'll respond positively to your request for it.

Failing Your Probation Period

Sometimes, the employer will decide that it just isn't working out, and he will terminate your employment. If this happens, he may ask you to work your contracted notice period. He may instead ask you to leave immediately, and he will pay you in lieu of your notice period.

The employer can also fire you during your probation period for gross misconduct or other disciplinary breaches. (He can also fire you in this way after your probation period!) If he does this, then this is different to failing your probation period, and you normally have the right to appeal using the firm's disciplinary procedures.

If you believe that you have been unfairly dismissed, then you should seek professional advice to see whether you can bring any sort of case against the employer. Unfortunately this can be quite difficult to do during your first two years of employment, as the law limits your employment rights until you've been with the same employer for two years.

If your probation period does not go well, but the employer thinks that you just need a little more time, then the employer can meet with you (provided they do so before the end of your probation period) and tell you that they wish to extend your probation period further. It is then up to you and your employer to discuss the reasons why, and negotiate the length and terms for any extension of the probation period. Once that is done, you need to decide whether to accept a longer probation period or whether to leave.

Passing Your Probation Period

Passing a probation period is very straight forward: if you are still employed by the firm on the first day after your probation period ends, then your probation period has automatically ended. This is why many employers never sit down to officially tell you that you have passed (nor put it in writing), so don't be surprised if nothing is said to you.

Your First Day At Work

Once you've accepted the job offer, you'll probably have a lot to think about, such as celebrating your success and the logistics involved if you're relocating to another part of the country. You also need to start thinking about your first day, and taking steps to make sure that you're ready for when it arrives.

Key Questions For Your Employer

It's very easy for employers to focus on the job offer, and completely overlook some of the practical things that you need to know for your first day. Make sure that you ask the employer these key questions:

- What time do you need to arrive at?
- Who you need to ask for at Reception?
- What will you be doing on your first day?

You can't assume that you should simply turn up at 9am on your first day at your new place of work. Most firms will ask you to do exactly that, but not all of them will. The person who meets you at Reception will probably be your team leader or your manager.

Preparing For Your First Day

Plan your journey to work. Your journey to work will probably be at rush hour on the morning; this might be a different experience compared to when you travelled for your interview. If you've relocated for the job, then you could well be travelling along a different route too, and an unfamiliar one at that. Make sure you know how you're going to get to your new place of work.

Plan your journey home from work. This is so easily overlooked! Is there a particular train or bus that you need to catch? What time do you need to leave the office to catch them? If you're commuting a long distance by public transport, be careful about staying too late at work or you might miss your transport home.

Plan your lunch. You'll probably be a bit nervous on your first day, and doing without lunch will just make the day more stressful than it needs to be. It's quite common for a new starter to take in a packed lunch for his first day, so that he is self-sufficient. Your colleagues may buy their lunches from local sandwich shops; this can be expensive if you do this every day, and some of these shops are too small to take payment by debit or credit card.

Buy a notepad and pen to take with you. At first, most of what you're going to do will be new to you. Even if you're very familiar with the technologies that your employer uses, there'll be a lot to learn about how your employer does things. Hopefully you'll find yourself working with friendly people who are happy to answer all of your questions, but even the friendliest of colleagues will lose

patience if they're having to repeat the same things to you over and over. That's why you need to make sure that you take lots of notes until you're familiar with everything.

On Your First Day

Don't be late. Remember, you're still on probation, and you have yet to win the employer's trust. Most employers will understand if you're slightly late on your first day (especially if you're relocated to a new town or city for the job), but you want to make a positive first impression.

Don't be surprised if you don't have a desk or computer at first. I know that they both seem to be very fundamental, but you'd be amazed at how often they get overlooked, or how hard it can be inside some firms to get the most basic things in place in time. If it happens to you, just grin and bear it.

Ask someone to show you around. You need to know where some things are, such as the stationary cupboard and the toilets. Hopefully, someone will offer to show you around the local area too, pointing out where the local shops are for lunch and snacking, and where any cash machines can be found.

Health and safety. This is something that many employers forget to tell new starters and visitors alike about, but knowing this information could save your life one day. Find out where all the fire escapes are. (In modern office buildings, fire escape doors are normally alarmed, so don't go opening any of them). Find out where the assembly point is in the event of a real fire. Find out if there are any regular fire drills or tests. Find out who the Fire Marshalls are. Find out who the First Aiders are. Find out where the first aid kit is.

*Take your notepad and pen everywhere with you, and **use them**.* The stress of your first day will impair your memory at least to some extent, and if the adrenaline is really flowing most of the day will pass in something of a blur. Write everything down that you're told about, so that you can refer to it afterwards when you need it.

Start a private journal. At the end of every day, a great way to unwind is to write out your thoughts and feelings into a private diary. This helps you realise your successes, and to unload your frustrations and anger so that you don't carry it into the office the following day. It's much healthier for your mental health than bitching about things behind people's backs.

Final Words On The Recruitment Process

Employers expect you to turn up on time, work hard, learn quickly, and deliver results to deadline. It's part attitude, and part aptitude. You'll have good days, and you'll have bad days. You'll make mistakes. Hopefully you'll have a lot of fun too.

One day, it'll be time to do it all over again, when you move on to your next job somewhere else. When that happens, hopefully you'll find this advice about the recruitment process to be just as useful.

Whether you're about to apply for your first full-time job, or whether you're about to switch jobs for the first time, the more employable you are, the greater your chances are of getting a job. Part 2 of this book contains some advice which will help you with that.

Become More Employable

All the advice that I've been given you so far has been about the recruitment process: what it is, how it works, and what you can do at each step of the way as your application is processed. None of this advice is any use to you if you're unemployable.

If you want to work in the computing industry, then it is down to you to make yourself employable. You have to put the time and effort into learning the skills that industry wants; and industry wants you to have a lot of skills from the moment you walk in the door.

Do You Have What It Takes?

Thanks to the rise of the web-based apps and mobile apps, employers today need to create and ship (or host) sophisticated software in order to be competitive. Employers are doing this using smaller teams, and delivering software to much shorter timescales. In this modern industry, you need to be multi-skilled to get things done. Without sufficient breadth of knowledge, you're not going to ship software at all, and without sufficient depth of knowledge, you're going to ship software that isn't good enough to be profitable for long enough.

Many of these skills aren't optional any more. They're fundamental. An employer can coach you in them, but many don't have the skills (nor the time) to teach them to you from scratch. There's a minimum baseline of skills that you need for your first job.

Do you have them?

Are You Putting In The Hours?

If the only computing that you do is your course work, then you aren't doing anywhere near enough.

Let's assume that you're studying for three years, and that you're at university of 30 weeks every year. If you studied for 40 hours a week, you would graduate with 3,600 hours of studying behind you. That's about the most time you could have spent studying computing on your course. You probably don't do a 40 hour week at university on average. You almost certainly don't have 40 hours of programming on your timetable every week. On top of that, some weeks are set aside for exams and exam study; we need to take those off the final total too.

By the time you graduate, if you're not doing any computing other than your course work, you may have clocked up only a few hundred hours of programming time in total. You'll have done it in lots of small blocks, which will have limited how much you learned per-hour. That's nowhere near sufficient to prepare you for your first job.

Once you get into industry, you'll spend 100-150 hours each month doing programming. Within six months, you will have easily doubled the amount of programming experience that you have. Within

two years, you'll look back at programming problems that you struggled with on your course, and wonder why you found them so hard.

Research tells us that the number of hours spent on mindful practice directly affects how good you become at something. To become very good at something, it's believed that you need around 10,000 hours of mindful practice. No matter how good your lecturers are at university, you'll only make a meaningful dent in this target if you're doing additional work outside of your course work.

Are you putting in the hours?

A Time Of Great Opportunity

You've grown up in a time of unprecedented access to computers, information, and the opportunity to exploit that.

Computers and software are part of mainstream life. Everyone wants a website. Everyone's carrying a supercomputer for a phone around in their pocket. Everyone can get online. If you're looking for projects to do, you can do freelance website development whilst you're studying. You don't have to try and run a business; you can offer to build websites and web-based applications for people in return for them writing you a recommendation to go on your website. There's no shortage of people out there who would love to have a little website, but who can't afford to pay someone to make one. If you don't have all the skills, maybe two of three of you could collaborate together. If you don't want to do websites, start making mobile apps.

Open-source software is everywhere. The web runs on servers that run Linux, an open-source operating system kernel. The most popular software stacks for web servers are completely open-source. There are hundreds of thousands of open-source projects out there. You can contribute to someone else's project, or you can start your own.

Are you taking these opportunities?

Learning From Your Peers

Not everything is happening over the Internet. More and more people are organising technology-focused meetups, hackathons and conferences to bring like-minded people together. These are great places to expand your awareness of what's out there, to dive deeper into how things are done, and to learn from people who have already solved problems you're just starting to come across.

Some of your fellow students at university are going to these events. Some of them are involved in organising them. Some of them are speaking at these events, even though they're at the start of their careers. You don't have to be an industry veteran with decades of experience and war stories to participate. All you need is something to share with your peers.

It can be hard to get to events regularly, especially if you are living and studying some distance away from where events are happening. That shouldn't stop you from making a special effort to get to one or two events, if you can.

If an employer gets an application from two people who have studied at the same university, and he sees that only one of the applicants has been speaking at events, which applicant do you think he's going to choose?

Are you broadening your knowledge by attending events?

Wider Reading

Ours is a rapidly-changing industry, with new trends, solutions and opportunities arising all the time. Your transferable skills will never go out of date, but the languages you program in, and the tools in your toolbox need to be at the cutting edge if you're going to keep up.

One of the things that surprises people when they join the computing industry is how little formal training is provided by employers. There are a few reasons for this.

- My generation of engineers is mostly self-taught, and taking responsibility for our own lifelong learning is an ingrained habit for us.
- We see what we do as a vocation, not a job; we go home at the end of the day and carry on programming.
- We find most formal training courses to be highly simplistic, teaching skills that will fade before you find them useful.

As a consequence, we're always reading as much as we can fit in, and sharing articles and stories that we enjoy via social network sites such as Twitter. When you come to interview, we don't expect you to have used everything that we use in our products and services, but we'll be disappointed if you've never heard of most of what we use.

If you're not sure where you should start, I maintain a [recommended reading list](#) on GitHub.

Are you doing enough reading to keep up to date?

Maturing As A Person

Many employers prefer to hire graduates not because of what they've learned at university, but because several years at university gives people the time to figure out who they are, what they want, and how to be a bit more mature. Most of this happens through the passage of time and osmosis. There's something you can do to help.

Studying a martial art whilst at university can help greatly with your all-round development. Many martial arts are as much mental as physical, and they can instil a sense of calmness, quiet confidence and resilience that will help you cope better with everyday life - and with the stress of getting a job.

There will be martial art clubs at your university, and you'll probably find that there are other clubs in the local community too. Go check them out. It might be one of the most important things you ever do.

Your Online Presence

More and more employers are using the Internet to conduct background research on any applicant that they are thinking about interviewing. It's a good idea to put an effort into creating and maintaining a professional online presence that an employer can find. Such a presence is a great way to bring your CV to life, and to show the employer that you're someone who does stand out from the competition for the job.

How Employers Search

Most employers will use Google to search for you online. They'll look through the first few pages to see if anything promising turns up. If that doesn't work, they might look through your CV to see if there's anything they can add to the search to help find you. Unless they find something interesting, they'll normally give up searching after a few minutes.

What Employers Can Find

If you search for my name, Stuart Herbert, you'll see that most of the entries on the first page of results are about me, and that they all point to websites and profiles that I control. From these results, you can learn more about my professional career to date, and even see videos of me presenting at conferences. You can also see things that are on my CV, but which are easily overlooked, such as my experience as a martial arts teacher, and my passion for digital photography. Many examples of my work are just a click or two further away, allowing you to see some of my opinions and thinking, and also the consistently high quality of everything that I do.

I am lucky, in that I don't have the same name as a celebrity at all. Not everyone is as fortunate. But you can easily get around that by including your online addresses in your CV and covering letter so that the employer doesn't have to search Google in the first place.

Your Website

If you want to be easily found through Google, you need your own website or blog. You don't have to host your own website or blog. If you can, you should learn how to, but they do need regular maintenance. There are many free hosting services that you can use, such as Wordpress.com, Tumblr and Posterous to name but three.

The algorithm that Google uses to decide which results appear first is a closely-guarded secret, but there are some very straight-forward things that you can do to make yourself easier to find.

- Make sure that your name is in the URL of the website.
- Make sure that your name is in the title of your website's pages.

- Post new content on your website on a regular basis.
- Get people to link to your website.

It's a good idea to purchase your own domain name (my portfolio lives on stuartherbert.com). That allows you to build up a long-term presence online at the same place. There was a time before Wordpress, before Tumblr, before Posterous. There will probably be a time in the future when these services no longer exist too. If the URL for your portfolio or blog is under their control and not yours, then the day these services get switched off is the day that Google can no longer find you.

When it comes to content, first impressions count. That's why, on my website, the home page is very professional, and is all about my career, skills and experience. There is more personal stuff on my website too, but that's off to one side, where it will get looked at afterwards.

Just like your covering letter and your CV, your website needs to sell you to an employer.

LinkedIn

[LinkedIn](#) is the world's leading professional networking website. It's a good idea to sign up for a free account on there, and to setup your profile. If there are people you know on LinkedIn, you should add them to your LinkedIn network. If you have worked with them before, ask them to write recommendations for your profile.

Is a LinkedIn profile essential? I wouldn't say that it was. It's something that you can look on as a tool, and it is definitely something that you can grow as your career progresses. Build up your recommendations from other people, and the number of skills that other people are willing to endorse. It all adds a little more credibility to your CV.

Recruiters are always searching LinkedIn for people who might suit the vacancies that they are advertising, and plenty of people find jobs that way. You can't find a job through LinkedIn if you don't have a profile on there.

Twitter, Google+ and Facebook

Here in the United Kingdom, the three big social networks are Facebook, Twitter and Google+. Twitter (and Google+) tend to be used more for professional conversations and relationships, whilst Facebook is normally used for your personal and private life. This distinction isn't a hard and fast rule, and there's more and more overlap each year.

You tend to find professional communities favour one social network over the other. For example, I can reach out to many of the core PHP people worldwide via Twitter if I need to. As I'm writing this chapter, I'm also in a three-way conversation with one of the two co-founders of Zend Technologies (one of the companies behind PHP), the publisher of the [php|architect](#) magazine, with an international conference speaker and trainer chipping in too. (Hi Zeev, Marco and Rob!)

I've had many professional opportunities come my way over the years through social networking. I wouldn't have the job that I have today without them.

Online Source Code Repositories

There are free services online where you can host the source code for personal and open-source projects that you are working on or involved with. [GitHub](#) has emerged in recent years to be the main site for this, but there are others too.

Employers love finding your code on places like GitHub. It allows them to see what you've done, and how you've done it. They can also look at how complete your project is, and whether you've started to build a community around the projects that you have released. There are some employers who will happily accept the address of your GitHub account instead of a CV.

The Key Skills That Industry Expects

To finish this book, I want to share with you a list of the skills and knowledge that employers expect candidates to have. I've compiled this list over the last few years from talking to fellow employers both online and at industry-leading conferences. It isn't complete, but I'm confident that it's reasonably representative.

How well do you score against this list?

Client-Side Skills

- Ajax requests
- Automated testing using Selenium
- Cross-browser testing
- CSS
- HTML
- JavaScript
- Mobile development
- RESTful API requests

Network / Internet Skills

- DNS
- HTTP
- File transfer using FTP, SSH / SCP / SFTP
- Firewalls, NAT, public and private networking

Server-Side Skills

- Application frameworks implementing MVC
- Code and data caching
- Key/value datastores
- Relational database servers
- RESTful web services
- Reverse proxying using Varnish
- Scripting languages such as PHP, Python and Ruby
- Service security (XSS, XSRF, buffer overflows, encryption and so on)
- Session management

- SQL
- SSL and TLS
- Web servers such as Apache

Devop Skills

- Adding new users to a server
- Automation
- Basic server security
- Code deployment
- Filesystems
- Linux shell scripting
- Operating system installation
- Scaling horizontally
- Setting up a website
- TCP/IP networking

File And Data Formats

- JSON
- RSS and Atom
- XML
- XPath
- YAML

Development Practices & Skills

- Accessibility
- API design
- Avoiding not-invented-here syndrome
- Avoiding over and under-engineering
- Behaviour-driven development
- Binary logic
- Bitwise operations
- Building reusable code
- Code reviews
- Continuous integration
- Data structures and algorithms
- Debugging software
- Design patterns
- Evaluation of source code / code smells
- Multi-threaded programming
- Network programming

- Object-oriented programming
- Optimising software
- Parallel / multi-core programming
- Premature optimisation
- Primitive data types (strings, floats, integers)
- Prototyping
- Refactoring
- Regular expressions
- Simplicity
- Software architectures
- Source control, including branching and tagging
- Technical debt
- Test-driven development
- Tracking down memory leaks
- Unit testing
- Usability design
- User experience design

Popular Technologies

- Apache
- C#
- CentOS Linux
- Debian Linux
- Git
- Java
- JavaScript
- Memcached
- Objective C
- PHP
- Python
- RedHat Linux
- Ruby
- Scala
- Subversion

Other Skills

- Awareness of technology history
- Basic maths
- Basic PC hardware
- Business analysis, requirements, use cases, user stories, MoSCoW ratings

- Content management systems (e.g WordPress or Drupal)
- Continuous learning
- Finding solutions to problems (Googling, GitHub, Quora, Reddit, Stack Exchange)
- Good timekeeping
- Hitting deadlines
- How open source works; contributing to open source
- Project management inc Agile, Kanban
- Teamwork & collaboration

Your Next Steps

Today, this list might look somewhat daunting, if not positively overwhelming. I can assure you that after a couple of years in the computing industry, you'll look back at this list and probably spot things that are missing from it!

The only way to tick off more of the items on the list is to put the hours in. If you want to join the computing industry, then you should already be curious about technology and how it works. Now you need to invest in yourself, and in your future, by learning as many of these things as you can.

My advice is to do so through a series of small projects. A project is a great way to explore something new, because every successful project delivers something usable at the end of it. Your mind will be engaged and focused, which in turn leads to better learning. It's better if you come up with a real problem to solve with each project, to avoid doing things that are too simplistic to learn anything from.

However you learn, you need to repeat these skills over and over so that they stick.

Feedback Most Welcome

That's All, Folks!

You've reached the end of this e-book. Now the onus is on you to take my advice and make good use of it when you apply for your first (or next) job in the computing industry here in the United Kingdom. Good luck!

Tell Me Your Story

Has this book helped you? I've love to hear how.

Please write to me with your success stories, your horror stories, and your feedback on things that I need to update or additional things that we need to cover for next year's edition. You can reach me at getting-hired-book (at) stuartherbert dot com, and I look forward to hearing from you.

*Stuart Herbert
Reading, Berkshire
United Kingdom
November 2012*

About The Author

[Stuart Herbert](#) is a highly experienced software engineer and operational manager who explores his professional and personal passions through teaching, talks, and writing. His career to date includes projects and/or roles with household names including Eurostar, Hewlett-Packard, Orange, Vodafone, and the Ordnance Survey. He has written for php|architect magazine, and has spoken at PHP conferences on both sides of the Atlantic.

Stuart is currently a Senior Engineer with [DataSift](#), where he heads up quality assurance and the graduate recruitment programme.

Away from computers, Stuart's three main passions are his photography, Tai Chi and playing the guitar.

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I'm grateful to Jeremy Coates for providing the foreword to this book, and also for the many discussions we've had over the years about what we need to do to help prepare the next generation of digital engineers. This book is hopefully just the first step.

My partner-in-crime at Gregynog each year is the formidable Bryn Salisbury. Time has prevented him from being the co-author of this edition of this book, but I sincerely hope that will change for the 2nd edition, as he is the source of much of the advice in this book.

Most importantly, my thanks to my wife Kristi for all of her help and encouragement throughout this project. Although she doesn't join us at Gregynog, she's giving up those weekends too because I'm not home with her. I couldn't have done this without her.

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Production Notes

If you're curious about the technology and process used to create this book, I hope the following points go some way towards answering your questions.

Writing

This book was written in [Markdown](#) notation, using the [Sublime Text 2](#) text editor. Markdown is a very light-weight notation, allowing me to focus on the content of the book without being distracted by presentation issues at the writing stage.

The Markdown sources for this book are hosted on [GitHub](#) at github.com/stuartherbert/getting-hired/. The `toc.json` file contains all of the chapters in the right order; the CLI PHP script `tools/update-nav.php` is used to re-generate the HTML version's navigation sidebar when necessary. You're most welcome to send in pull requests to help me improve the book for future editions.

[Jekyll](#) was used to convert the Markdown sources into [the HTML version of the book](#). You can run Jekyll locally on your laptop to proof your changes as you make them.

[Twitter's Bootstrap CSS framework](#) was used as the basis for the HTML version's look and feel.

Publishing

The final [HTML version of the book](#) is published online via [GitHub Pages](#), with the conversion to HTML once again handled by [Jekyll](#).

The Markdown sources were converted into an intermediate [LibreOffice](#) document using [pandoc](#). This intermediate file was then used to create the PDF, Kindle and ePub editions that you can download from the website.

The Kindle edition was created from the LibreOffice document, using [calibre](#). The formatting was controlled by applying a pre-prepared stylesheet to the LibreOffice-format document before exporting to HTML format. Proofing was done using the Kindle app on the iPad and a physical Kindle Paperwhite device.

The ePub edition was created from the LibreOffice document using [calibre](#), using the same formatting stylesheet developed for the Kindle edition. Proofing was done using iBooks preview mode on the iPad.

The PDF edition was created by applying a different pre-prepared stylesheet to the LibreOffice-format document, and then using LibreOffice's "Save As PDF" option. There are two PDF editions, one sized for British A4 paper, and the other for US letter paper.