

Graduate recruitment

Most businesses would like to benefit from an influx of talent, enthusiasm and fresh ideas. The challenge is to achieve it at an acceptable cost. One option is to employ a recent graduate.

This briefing is primarily aimed at smaller businesses. It covers:

- The pros and cons of employing a recent graduate.
- Deciding on the sort of graduate you want, and coming up with an offer.
- Recruiting a graduate.
- Retaining your graduate.

1 Considerations

Recent graduates have much to offer, but may be more demanding than other employees.

1.1 They are **bright** and keen to do well.

- They are likely to be ambitious and willing to work hard in order to prove themselves.
- The fact that you have offered them their first job will buy a certain amount of loyalty.

1.2 Graduates starting their first job are less likely to have ingrained **bad working habits**.

- They have no pre-conceived ideas about what can and cannot be done.
- You will be able to train them your way.

But they will need to be initiated into the disciplines of the workplace.

1.3 Graduates should not be thought of as a source of cheap labour. They are likely to be **high maintenance** in many ways.

- They will want a competitive salary.
- They expect to be given a high degree of responsibility early on.
- They will be looking for fully mapped out training and career programmes.
- Once trained, they might leave.

2 What sort of graduate?

Consider what qualifications, skills and experience you want your graduate to possess.

2.1 Decide whether you want a **generalist** or a **specialist**.

- Unless you need a vocational qualification, consider recruiting graduates from a range of subject areas. Any degree is training in how to think.

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- Most university courses include continuous assessment, so most students will have a good idea of their eventual grades by the time they start applying for jobs.

2.2 Decide whether you want **specific skills**, such as languages, advanced computing skills or a driving licence.

- If such skills are important, include them in the 'person specification' at the start of the recruiting process.

2.3 If **commercial awareness** is important, that should also be included in the 'person specification'.

- Some graduates take work placement experience as part of their degree.
- Others will have worked in industry, services or commerce, on a part-time basis or during holidays, to help finance their education.

3 Coming up with an offer

As a growing number of graduates are choosing to join small businesses, you will have to compete with other smaller firms, as well as large graduate recruiters, to attract good graduates.

Aim to come up with a set of benefits which will make a job in your business appealing.

3.1 Be clear about what you have to offer. Work out both a 'job specification' and a 'person specification' before you start recruiting.

- Decide who the graduate will be working for, and what exactly they will be doing.
- Think about the sort of training and career opportunities you will be able to provide.
- You do not have to have a 'Graduate Programme' as most graduates are looking for a job first and a career second.
- Offer a competitive salary. Benchmark your graduate salaries by contacting the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (020 8612 6200 or www.cipd.co.uk) for comparative information. Average graduate salaries typically start from around £20k but can be higher or lower depending on the sector and location of the business.
- Do not oversell the job. Be realistic about what you can offer.
- Be aware that discrimination on the basis of age is now illegal. Avoid discriminatory requirements (such as an age limit).

3.2 Remember, as a small business, your main

selling points are related to the excitement of working in a small team and having an influence on the business' success.

- In a smaller business it is possible to gain real responsibility early on.
- You can offer the graduate the prospect of becoming a key team worker.
- Working directly with the directors is also a potentially exciting prospect.

Future career prospects, training opportunities, the location, the commute and its associated costs will all affect how desirable the position on offer is.

Describe your offer in terms of a flying start to a career that steadily progresses. If you can, give information about the organisation of your business, or a business plan.

3.3 Working for a smaller business offers the chance to **experience** how the different aspects of a business work — an unlikely prospect within a large company.

- A smaller business can give a graduate the chance of early responsibility in several different roles.
- There may be the chance to get involved in exciting new projects.

In recruitment, persistence pays off. Some graduates will be interested in your job offer, others will not.

4 Finding your graduate

There are more than 160 universities and higher education institutions in the UK. Focus your efforts, to avoid wasting time and money.

4.1 Target the university or institution of choice.

- If you want specialist degrees, go to the UCAS website (www.ucas.ac.uk) and research the degree courses to identify a suitable university or institution.
- Do not base your choice on unresearched beliefs, such as your own experience. They may be out of date.
- Make yourself known as soon as possible to the careers service at your chosen universities or institutions. Get your name entered onto their databases, so that your details are circulated to potential recruits.

4.2 Do not ignore your **local universities**. Get to know the careers advisers and even individual tutors if you can.

- You may find students who, although they

originate from further afield, have settled in the area and would like to stay there.

5 Meeting candidates

Careers fairs, the milk round and employer presentations at universities and higher education institutions are good ways to make contact with prospective graduate employees. But these can be time consuming and costly and should only really be undertaken if you can afford to do it well and on a consistent basis.

Offering work experience

Universities and colleges allow undergraduates, particularly those on vocational courses, to take time out to gain work experience, usually for the whole of their penultimate year of study. Many students pick up a 'taste' of work experience whilst at university as they need to work during term time and the holidays to fund their studies.

A There are significant advantages for the **employer**.

- Undergraduates often inject enthusiasm into your team.
- They want wide experience, and are willing to move around to different departments and try different tasks.
- The salary cost is relatively low, since the undergraduate's priority is to gain experience.
- It is not uncommon for the placement experience to be so successful that you end up recruiting the undergraduate permanently.

B There are also substantial advantages for the **undergraduates**.

- It provides some much-needed income.
- It greatly increases the chances of obtaining a job on graduation.

C Contact your local **university careers service** for students who want experience.

- Use your usual recruitment process to find the most suitable candidate.
- Undergraduates who have benefited from the experience will usually be happy to introduce you to other potential candidates when the placement comes to an end.

5.1 **Careers fairs** offer you the chance to meet future graduates in an informal setting.

- The cost of exhibition space varies, from nothing to several hundred pounds.
- Make sure you have enough people available to answer enquiries, and plenty of information about your company.
- Get your timing right. Most graduate careers fairs take place between November and March. You should book your place by the preceding April. Summer fairs are increasingly popular. They take place around June and July.
- There are different types of fair. Many universities offer SME days (for small and medium-sized enterprises). You will be able to meet students without having to compete with the large graduate recruiters.

5.2 The **milk round** offers employers the opportunity to interview candidates on campus.

- Interview as many students as you can who meet your job requirements.
- Aim to come away with a shortlist of candidates to invite for further interviews and possibly some 'taster' work experience before you make a final decision.

5.3 Most universities also organise **employer presentations**.

- Do not rely on your company name to attract students. Be specific about what you can offer graduates.

6 Recruitment agencies

There are a number of specialist graduate recruitment companies who vary in the services they offer. Some offer a CV bureau, others offer fully interviewed graduates and others offer training for graduates as part of the package.

6.1 **Charges** range from 15 to 25 per cent of the first year's salary, depending on the company you use and the level of service required.

- Graduate recruitment agencies offer a range of services, including identifying relevant universities and courses, advertising and initial screening and selection.

6.2 **To find an agency**, look in the newspapers to see which recruitment firms are advertising for graduates. Alternatively:

- Ask the Association of Graduate Recruiters

(01926 623236 or www.agr.org.uk).

- If you have decided on the universities you intend to target, ask their careers services which agencies specialise in recruiting from the various disciplines there.
- Ask business friends which agencies they have used.

7 Advertising for candidates

Another way to find a graduate is to advertise.

7.1 Advertising on site at the universities is usually very cheap.

- All university careers services offer a range of services to employers, including notice boards and career vacancy bulletins.

7.2 There is one main **national graduate newspaper**, called *Prospects Today* (0161 277 5200), which is available on campus.

- *Prospects Today* is published weekly. It also has a good website, which gives advertisers a wide range of relevant information (www.prospects.ac.uk).

Prospects Finalist, aimed at final year students, is distributed free in universities five times a year.

7.3 Advertising on graduate specific recruitment websites is often less expensive than traditional off-line advertising. Visit www.milkround.com, www.doctorjob.com and www.graduate-jobs.com for more information.

7.4 National newspapers carry regular 'graduate appointment' features.

- The trade magazine for your industry may carry graduate recruitment advertisements.

8 Typical difficulties

While the recruitment process itself will be similar to the one you use for other employees, there can be some specific problems associated with the graduate field.

8.1 You may **leave it too late** to attract high quality candidates from this year's graduates.

- Start planning your recruitment campaign early in the academic year. By the time the exam results are announced, many good graduates will

already have accepted job offers.

8.2 You may invest time interviewing candidates who then take **jobs elsewhere**.

- Be realistic about the calibre of graduate you can expect to attract with your offer.

8.3 You may be **flooded** with applications.

- Devise a filtering process to whittle the numbers down to a manageable level. For example, be specific about the skills and qualifications required for the job.

9 Retaining your graduate

Once you have your graduate on board, it is important to keep him or her motivated and satisfied, to ensure that the effort invested in the recruitment process does not go to waste.

9.1 Offer a **mentor** — an experienced and mature person who is responsible for guiding the graduate and organising an appropriate training schedule.

9.2 Give **feedback**. Remember that graduates have come from an intense learning environment, where everything has been measured and evaluated.

- Give regular performance appraisals, with plenty of praise whenever they produce good work.

9.3 Increase the graduate's **salary** after, say, six months, subject to achieving agreed targets.

9.4 Give **responsibility** as early as you can. Make sure this responsibility is delegated deliberately, not simply by default.

- Ask your graduate to set up new projects, but be sure to monitor their progress. However confident and well qualified they are, graduates still need support and feedback.

9.5 Ensure you keep the **promises** you make.

Give careful consideration to the rest of your employees. Resist giving the graduate a grand job title or obvious preferential treatment. Minimise any potential resentment by explaining the graduate's role to the rest of your team.

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