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Adaptability and flexibility

“Adaptability - Could you do three different jobs in as many years? Could you travel around the country on your own, working from a laptop? Could you fly out to Brussels to explain policy to our European Partners? A Fast Streamer never knows what might appear on their desk. You need to be able to deal with the unexpected and that which is beyond your experience.”

- Civil Service Fast Stream recruitment literature

What do recruiters want?

Recruiters want applicants to be able to demonstrate that they can adapt to changing circumstances and environments and take on board new ideas and concepts. They want people with the personal confidence to respond positively to change and new ways of working; people who are prepared to rise to the challenge of dealing with the unfamiliar and show they can cope with the new or unexpected.

- **“a positive ‘can do’ attitude and a willingness to grasp opportunities”**

- **"We want you to demonstrate a dynamic approach"**
- **"We're after ambitious graduates who can respond with pace and energy to every issue they face..."**
- **"We are looking for graduates who have the right attitude to change..."**
- **"...respond positively to change and the challenges and opportunities it brings"**

These quotes are all taken from recent graduate job adverts. As you can see, they don't use the words '**adaptable**' or '**flexible**', but these recruiters are looking for candidates who have these qualities. They want candidates who can thrive in a culture of change and continuous improvement, and can be flexible in the way they work and think.

What makes a person adaptable / flexible?

When assessing adaptability and flexibility, recruiters may look for someone who can show:

- **Intellectual flexibility** - keeping an open mind is important. You should be able to demonstrate that you can integrate new information and draw conclusions from it, and that you can switch from the detail to the big picture.
- **Receptiveness** - particularly to change. Being able to respond with a positive attitude and a willingness to learn new ways to achieve targets and objectives is a key competency.
- **Creativity** - actively seeking out new ways of doing things and having confidence to improvise or experiment.
- **Modification of behaviour** - you are able to adjust your style of working or method of approach to meet the needs of a situation or emergency.

Some people are naturally adaptable - in fact, they thrive on change and the unexpected and alter their routines as much as they can. However, if you are the kind of person who has a 'to do' list and doesn't like it when something arises which isn't on your list, then you aren't naturally adaptable. You will, though, have learnt how to become adaptable and flexible through experience. You might even have the advantage over others as you will have used your planning and organising skills to change your behaviour. See also our section on initiative, problem solving and decision making as the skills are very similar.

Whatever your natural tendencies, you have to be able to prove to an employer that you can:

- Look for positive ways to make changes work rather than identifying why change will not work (say "**yes**" rather than "**no**" as a first instinct)
- Adapt to change and new ways of working quickly and easily
- Make suggestions for increasing the effectiveness of changes
- Show willingness to learn new methods, procedures, or techniques
- Shift your priorities in response to the demands of a situation
- Bounce back from setbacks and maintain a positive attitude

How do you prove to a recruiter you have these skills?

You won't be shortlisted for that job by stating "I can adapt to situations" or "I am flexible in the way I work", you have to **prove it by giving appropriate examples**. You can draw on situations like these to help you demonstrate your adaptability:

- Living abroad as part of an exchange programme
- Moving to this country to study

- Balancing your study commitments with part-time work
- Working or living with people of different ages and cultures
- Work experience, particularly placements and internships
- Voluntary work experience

Think of an example of when you have had to adapt to change or had to be flexible in a situation. Then use the **STAR** technique to describe it:

S	Define the Situation
T	Identify the Task
A	Describe your Action
R	Explain the Result

This technique is useful at all stages of the selection process so it is worthwhile getting to grips with it. Here's an example:

Define the SITUATION: *(where were you; what were you doing? what was the context)*

I initially applied to study Pharmacy at University, acting on my family's advice. I knew I would have to achieve high grades in my A levels, particularly Chemistry, which is not one of my best subjects. Several of my friends were applying to Brighton University and I did too. I got an offer and made plans. However, I did not get the B grade I needed in Chemistry to be accepted onto the course.

Identify the TASK: *(what was your aim? what was the problem?)*

I had to re-think my future urgently. I could take up the offer of an alternative course at Brighton, see if I could get on a Pharmacy course elsewhere or reconsider my career. Whatever I decided, I had to be flexible as I knew my options were limited.

Describe the ACTION you took: *(be clear about what you did)*

I decided that what I studied was more important than where I studied it. My favourite subject is biology and I enjoyed laboratory classes at school. After getting information from a careers advice helpline and doing some research, I decided to apply for Biomedical Sciences courses through Clearing. I drew up a shortlist of courses and arranged to visit three. I was most impressed by the course at Bradford and received an offer from them. I knew that moving to Bradford would be a challenge as my network of family and friends are all in the South.

Highlight the RESULT you achieved: *(what was the outcome of your actions, what did you achieve?)*

I was, initially, very upset having to change my plans but I'm pleased I did as I am sure I have made the right decision. Moving to Bradford was hard initially but everyone is very friendly and I have got to know people from many different cultures as Bradford is so diverse, and I have particularly enjoyed this. I am also enjoying the course a lot and getting good marks. I have already decided I want a career in biomedical research and am planning to do a placement year.

To use the STAR technique effectively, remember:

- You are the STAR of the story, so focus on your own actions, even if they were only a small part of a larger whole.
- Tell a story and capture the interest of the reader. Include relevant details but don't waffle.
- Move seamlessly from the situation, through the task, to your actions, and finally to the result.

Adapting Your Examples

The example above, for instance, could easily be altered to prove your problem-solving and decision making skills (</careers/develop-skills/problem-solving/>) and could form the basis of an example of planning and organising (</careers/develop-skills/planning/>). It is worthwhile spending time writing statements like this about all your experiences and then adapting them to match each recruiters' specific requirements.

Practical help

We run regular workshops (</careers/services/workshops/>) on employability skills, and you can book an appointment (</careers/services/appts/>) with one of our advisers to discuss how to improve your employability in relation to your career choices.



Further reading

- Why adaptability is key to success (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/connect/better-business/business-solutions/adaptability-in-the-workplace/>) from The Telegraph
- 'How Well Do You Handle Change? The Benefits of Being Adaptable' from Business.com (<http://www.business.com/entrepreneurship/how-well-do-you-handle-change-the-benefits-of-being-adaptable/>)
- Flexibility defined by TheBigChoice.com (<http://www.thebigchoice.com/work-skills/Flexibility.html>)
- The Definition of Adaptability in the Workplace (<http://woman.thenest.com/definition-adaptability-workplace-14904.html>) on The Nest

Other relevant websites with general information on skills are:

- Prospects (<https://www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/applying-for-jobs/what-skills-do-employers-want>) - features articles on skills and how to evidence them.
- TARGETjobs (<https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/skills-and-competencies/420732-be-on-top-of-the-basics-essential-skills-and-competencies>) - has details on essential skills and competencies.
- Inside Careers (<http://www.insidecareers.co.uk/>) - has advice on skills related to specific graduate professions.