

University of Surrey

Careers Service

<http://www.surrey.ac.uk/careers>

Speculative Applications

What is a speculative application?

When you write to an employer you would like to work for, without being sure they have a vacancy, then you are making what is commonly called a speculative application.

What should I send them and what should I say?

It is usual to send a copy of your curriculum vitae (CV) and a covering letter. Examples of both of these can be found in another leaflet in this series called "Writing Your CV." You print them out and post them or send your details by email.

It is essential that the covering letter, or your email message, includes evidence of your suitability for the position(s) in which you are interested. Particular skills, work experience, your degree and details about your Professional Training, leisure interests etc. are all worth mentioning if they are relevant to your application. Research the employer as much as you can to help you decide what is most important to them and choose your best examples. At the very least you should read their website or entry in a careers directory. Good research means you can prove a genuine interest in the organisation by showing that you understand what they do and what they need.

You will need to indicate the sort of work you would like to do so you should have a department or role in mind. However, you can be quite general to keep your options open, e.g. "an initial post in marketing." It is also a good idea to mention if you would be interested in any part-time or temporary vacancies in the absence of full-time posts. They are a good method of getting started and building your experience and contacts, before moving on to a more secure or desirable position.

Is it worth doing?

Definitely! In previous years many Surrey graduates have obtained their employment this way. You may wonder why it is such a successful method of job-hunting. There are several reasons. First, some employers, for example advertising agencies, publishing houses and some investment banks are so popular that they don't bother to advertise their vacancies because they know they will receive enough speculative applications anyway. Second, employers have been known to create an opening for a good applicant even though they weren't planning to recruit someone. Third, if you have missed seeing an advertisement for a job, but have applied speculatively anyway, then you can be considered for the vacancy together with the other 'official' applicants.

How do I find out contact details of employers?

If you know the kind of work you'd like to do, you can obtain a list of employers who typically recruit in that area by looking in a careers directory such as Prospects or GET (free from the Careers Service) or online at www.prospects.ac.uk and <http://targetjobs.co.uk>. There are lots of other more specialist directories which you may find helpful and you will find suggestions of these in the Occupational Profiles at www.prospects.ac.uk/links/occupations. Kompass, www.kompass.co.uk, gives basic address information on thousands of companies.

If you have a specific company in mind, use a search engine like www.google.co.uk. Alternatively, use www.yahoo.co.uk which lists companies by type. Yellow Pages phone directories are also useful, on-line at www.yell.com or from a library.

Who exactly should I write to?

Always try to find out the name of the person you need to contact, by phoning or checking the web site, then address your letter or email directly to them. Many firms will use a generic email address, like 'info@...' or 'hr@...', so don't worry too much if you cannot get a name. If you are making applications of a general nature, say for chartered accountancy training or management training programmes, you can send your letter to the Graduate Recruitment Manager, if you know they have one, or to the HR Manager. If, on the other hand, you are interested in more specialised work such as research or employment in a specific department within the organisation, it is worth trying to identify the name of the department or team's manager.

Will I get a reply?

Don't be surprised if some of your letters aren't even acknowledged. If there are no vacancies at the time you write, the employer might prefer to save time and money by ignoring your letter altogether. Please try not to take this personally. It happens to everyone. Fortunately, some employers do respond, usually within a week or two, even if it is only to say they will keep your letter on file. This kind of response is usually genuine and you should add the company to your follow-up list.

How many applications should I make?

There is no fixed limit. Statistically speaking, the more you make the greater will be your chances of generating a positive response. You do need to bear in mind the level of competition. If you are applying for very popular roles or companies, you should be prepared to make a lot of approaches. A few of your contacts will lead either to a request that you complete an application form or an invitation to come along for an interview.

However, you need to focus on quality rather than quantity! A small number of carefully targeted, well-researched approaches are likely to give you a better result than sending out hundreds of photocopies of your CV and a vague covering letter.

Is it worth following up my initial enquiry?

Yes! If the employer doesn't respond to your first letter or their reply is otherwise negative, a follow-up letter two or three months later can work. It differentiates you from the crowd, demonstrates your continuing interest in that employer and keeps your name "live" should any vacancies arise.

If you are confident on the telephone, you can add a sentence at the end of your letter in which you say something like, "I hope you don't mind if I ring in a few days time in order to talk over my application with you," then make sure you call.

Plan the main messages you want to communicate and be sure to review what you said in your original application before contacting the employer a second time. Is there anything more you can add?

Both of these techniques leave the employer with positive thoughts about you and that is precisely the impression you want to create. Even if your follow-up doesn't win you a job straight away, keeping in touch with employers is a great way to expand your network and gain useful information and suggestions to improve your chances.

Keeping track of contacts

Make sure that you keep records of all the approaches you make, either by filing a copy of all your letters or perhaps by keeping a log. You can even make a note in your diary or set a reminder when it's time to follow up. When you are successful in getting an interview, you will want to know exactly what you wrote in your application and who you have dealt with in the organisation, so keep a copy at hand.

What if they don't take speculative applications?

Employers sometimes state in advertisements that they do not want to receive speculative applications. Some will be serious and others may simply want to put off the faint-hearted to cut the number of unsuitable applications. As you can't know what they are honestly thinking, you have nothing to lose by writing anyway. You could prove you've done your homework by acknowledging their wishes not to receive speculative applications, but add that your interest in their activities was so considerable that you wanted to write anyway.

How else can I improve my chances?

One of the best things about making speculative applications is that you get to choose exactly what you say, when and to whom. You decide which highlights to focus on from your experiences and how much detail to include. The style and presentation is up to you, too. In many ways, this is easier than completing an application form where the employer sets the rules. The problem with this approach is that the responsibility is wholly yours as well.

The good news is that a careful, thoughtful approach will get results. Here's a checklist of things that will help you make the most of speculative applications.

- Clear idea of target job or sector (even if you're exploring more than one path)
- Good understanding of what the job involves
- A networking plan to track contacts and information sources
- Copies of all correspondence
- Accurate records of your actions
- A diary system to plan follow up activities
- Examples of past experiences which prove your skills and abilities

For more suggestions of proactive approaches that put you in control of the job hunt, read "What Color is Your Parachute?" by Richard N Bolles (available in the careers information room).

Any final tips?

Writing lots of speculative letters can seem both exhausting and frustrating, especially when they don't all bring results. The important thing is to keep going and maintain a professional, methodical attitude. The speculative approach has worked for many - there is every reason to believe it will work for you too.