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How to find work experience

Work experience is a great opportunity to learn about a job or an area of work. You'll use skills that you might not even know you have, and develop new skills that will help you work better with other people now and in the future.

Finding your own work placement can be a good experience. It means you have more choice and control over where you go, and it's a chance to show off your organisational skills. It's ok if you don't have any ideas about what you want to do yet – here's how you can get started.

Remember that there are people who can help you at every stage. They might be:

- the school careers adviser
- your family
- your teacher

If you already know what kind of job you want to do

You may already know what career you're interested in – if that's the case, good for you! The best thing to do is to look for work experience that's related to the job you want to do, or in the same sector or industry as your chosen career.

Here are some examples:

- If you know you want to be a chef, you could try to find a placement in a restaurant or canteen.
- If you're interested in a career in medicine, you could try to find a placement in a hospital or GP surgery.
- If you like travel, you could look for a placement with a travel agent or tour company.
- If you think a career in finance would suit you, you could try to get a placement in an accounts office or at a bank.

If you don't know what kind of job you want to do yet

Don't panic if you're not sure what career you want to go into just yet – lots of people aren't! Start by thinking about what subjects you are interested in.

Here are some examples of how different subjects can help with different jobs:

- English – newspapers, magazines, publishing, writing, libraries, teaching
- Maths – accountancy, banking, engineering, computer programming, finance
- Geography – green charities, local borough town planning, environmental sciences
- Science – vets, pharmacies, zoos, laboratory work, hospitals, teaching
- Photography – local, news, fashion, portrait and nature photography, processing film.

If you're really stuck

If you really can't think of an area of work you want to find a placement in, or decide which subject you like best, try asking yourself these questions:

- What am I good at?
- What are my interests and hobbies?
- What jobs have I seen other people do that I think look interesting?

Or, you could just go for something different, or for a job that you know little about. Work experience is all about giving you an insight into the world of work. It doesn't have to be in a career that you would choose in the future. Talk to your family, friends, teachers and careers adviser for some ideas.

Now that you have some ideas

Jot down your thoughts and:

- make a list of the top 10 placements you would like
- imagine the kinds of things you might do on your placement
- try to be realistic
- remember that you won't be given a lot of responsibility
- ask yourself if the placement is realistic for someone your age
- expect to do some repetitive and easy tasks

Start your search

Now you've got a list of the type of placements you want, it's time to find one! Remember that you won't be the only pupil looking for a work placement – not in your year group at school or in your local area either.

Here's our step-by-step guide to finding companies and organisations you can ask for work experience:

- Step 1 If someone in your family works somewhere interesting, you can ask them if they'll contact their human resources department for you.
- Step 2 Ask neighbours and family friends if their work would consider you for a work placement.
- Step 3 If you already know of an organisation that interests you, do a web search for their contact details.
- Step 4 Find employers in your local area by looking on www.yell.com or www.thomsonlocal.com. Just type in your postcode and the kind of company you're looking for.
- Step 5 You can also check in a phone book such as Thomson Local or the Yellow Pages.
- Step 6 Read job adverts in the local newspaper to find employers in your area.
- Step 7 Think of companies you pass by when you are on your way to school or out shopping. Many pupils think of shops and local hairdressers as good placements, so there may be lots of you trying to go to the same place. Try to think of some different companies too.
- Step 8 Be willing to travel to other areas, as long as it's not too far or expensive to get there. This will give you more choice and open up other opportunities.

Get in touch

Once you have a list of companies, the next step is to contact them.

- If the company is small and in the local area you could drop in and speak to them.
- Larger companies may require a letter and CV. You will need to ring up the company and ask who organises work experience. Some larger companies put this information on their website. Once you have the name of the person you should speak to, you will need to phone them to introduce yourself.

Make the call

Lots of young people find it a bit scary to call an employer. Even some adults get nervous phoning companies. The more you do it, the easier it will be – you'll soon wonder what you were worried about. Here are some tips that might help:

- Think about what you want to say before you make the call.
- Write it down on a piece of paper and keep it in front of you.
- Have a pen and paper ready to take down any names or notes.
- Take a deep breath and relax before dialling the number.
- Always be polite and try to speak clearly.
- Start by introducing yourself – give your name, say which school you go to and explain that you're looking for work experience.
- Be prepared to say why you are interested in a placement with that employer.
- Say what interests you about that company or the kind of work they do.
- Don't be discouraged by employers saying no – it's nothing personal.
- Keep trying other employers – don't give up.
- If you're really nervous, you could ask a parent or teacher to be with you when you make the first phone call.
- Practice makes perfect!