

step enterprise manages work placement programmes including those funded by various organisations.

Think big... choose small!

The student & graduate guide to working in small businesses

	<p>graddtobusiness</p> 	
		
		<p>For further help and information please contact step enterprise on www.stepenterprise.co.uk or 0115 977 5030</p>



realising futures



creating opportunities





4. Finance Your Business

Some business ideas need little more than determination, self-belief and a PC to get going – others require substantially more in terms of resources and finance. If you require external finance to help get you started, there are a few options available:

Grants

Grant aid may be available depending on the geographical location of your business, and the industry sector it serves – though it's not a good idea to expect or rely on grants, as this can sometimes reduce the urgency of proactive development of your business. Your local Business Link may be able to help, or check out:

www.princes-trust.org.uk.

Loans

Your first stop for a loan may be friends or relatives, but within your region there'll be support or enterprise agencies that may be able to offer loans at a more competitive rate than the banks. You can also try applying through the DTI for the Small Firms Loan Guarantee Scheme.

Venture Capital (VC)

Unlike the above sources, bringing Venture Capital into your business means giving up a share in your business in return for investment – a fact which you need to consider carefully as you'll no longer be in sole control of your business.

If you're looking into finance for your business, try to explore as many options as possible. Try also to involve your bank – as the more they understand your business and your hunger for success, the more likely they are to support you if troubled times arise.

5. Enjoy Your Business

At the end of the day, running your own business is about giving yourself the opportunity to live the life you want and achieve financial security for your future. It will of course mean a lot of hard work, but the same rewards can't really be achieved on any other career path.

If you're interested in exploring the idea further, look into some of the support organisations mentioned in this guide, or speak with your university's careers service or Enterprise Centre – it could be the most important decision you ever make!

This guide has been produced by step enterprise to provide real information about the opportunities open to you in the SME sector – as an undergraduate on work experience, as a graduate starting your career, or as a potential business owner.

Contents

- 03 Why work experience?
- 05 Starting small
- 06 Making sense of SMEs
- 07 Why no info?
- 08 Small options
- 09 Work placements
- Making the most of it
- 10
 1. Think long-term
 2. Think about your skills
 3. Think smart
- 11
 4. Think business
 5. Think small
- 12
 6. Think connected
 7. Think back
- 13 Ready for action
- Small realities
- 14 What SMEs want
- 15 Roles in SMEs
- 16 What are SMEs like?
 - 17 1. Start-up
 - 18 2. Terrible twos
 - 19 3. Mature business
- 20 Approaching SMEs
- 21 Starting up
- 22 The buzz!
- 23 Getting started





Why work experience?

At a time when more and more students are graduating every year – and entering an increasingly competitive job market – having a degree may simply not be enough to secure the job you want.

One of the best ways to gain an advantage is to secure work experience. Many students choose a placement through large blue-chip schemes – which are often very competitive, with only handfuls of undergraduates securing places. But an increasing number of students are now realising the potential of a new kind of graduate employer altogether – the SME (small and medium sized enterprise). Step enterprise work placement programmes offer a range of exciting opportunities in SMEs, allowing students across the UK to gain a breadth of experience in a wide range of industry sectors.

This guide explains the realities of working in an SME. Whether you're looking for a work placement or a full-time graduate position, the opportunities and challenges of a small business could change the course of your career – and might even inspire you to set up a business of your own!



“Matching the most enterprising graduate talent with forward thinking companies has helped produce outstanding results.”

Fiona Smith,
gradtobusiness Project Manager

2. Get Legal

You need to think about the legal status within which you plan to develop your business ideas. The most common choice for new start-ups is between:

Sole Trader

Generally less hassle, but higher risk. This option means there is one clear owner who is personally liable for any business debts.

Partnership

Generally chosen where there is more than one partner with equal interests in the business. Partners again have ‘unlimited liability’ and all partners can be held accountable for the actions of the others – so make sure you choose your partners carefully!

Limited Private Company

Lots of paperwork but lower risk, and usually taken as a later option following one of the above. As a legal entity in its own right, a limited company must have at least one shareholder, at least one director and a company secretary. The main advantage is that liability is limited; but directors often have to give personal guarantees against any borrowing.

3. Protect Your Ideas

If your business idea is based on a spark of creative genius, you need to consider your Intellectual Property Rights, which allow you to ‘own’ and protect your ideas, and also to earn money by licensing the use of your ideas by other people. The four main types of IP are:

Patents

For new and improved products and processes that are capable of industrial application.

Copyright

For literary and artistic material, music, films, sound recordings and broadcasts – including software and multimedia.

Trademarks

For goods and services – to allow one trader to differentiate from another.

Design

For the unique elements of product design - in particular the lines, contours, colours, textures and materials.

For further information on IP, you can visit

www.intellectual-property.gov.uk



Starting small

Every year around half a million students graduate from higher education and join the race for a job. Most have high expectations of finding a challenging, highly paid role within a vibrant and progressive organisation – and rightly so – it's your reward for years of hard work.

The Set-Up

Once you have a plan to go by, there are a few steps you'll need to take to get things moving:

1. Seek advice

No matter what stage of business development you're at, you need to surround yourself with as much good advice as possible. Try starting at your university, and then consider a few other options:

Business Link

Free information and support is available centrally through www.businesslink.gov.uk and your local Business Link Operator may also be able to provide you with a dedicated Business Advisor and signpost you to other help available in your region.

Existing entrepreneurs and business owners

Try reading autobiographies and books by people who have already achieved their dream. 'The Beermat Entrepreneur' by Mike Southon and Chris West might appeal, or Branson's classic 'Losing my Virginity' might give you the crucial burst of confidence you need to get cracking! If your university has any links with local networking organisations, try to get involved and meet with some real entrepreneurs who are happy to pass on their knowledge and experience.

Shell LiveWIRE

A global initiative to support and encourage 16 - 30 years olds to start their own businesses by providing mentor support and the potential to win their high profile start-up competition. Visit www.shell-livewire.com for further information.

In creating this guide, we spoke to a number of successful business owners, who were really keen to share the realities of being your own boss – both the best bits and the worst bits:

There's no office politics.



The self-employed typically earn more than their employed counterparts for similar work.



If you don't want to work one morning, you don't have to, just take a day off, no need for 'sickies'



Potential partners swoon when you say you run your own successful company.



There's no office banter.



You may be forced to work long hours alone for little money in the early stages.



You only get paid when you've actually done the work, plus it has to be exactly right.



You never have time to meet potential partners anyway!



Unfortunately most graduates are looking to find this ideal job in all the same places, with thousands of graduates applying every year to the many high profile blue-chip graduate schemes available. But big changes are underway. There has been a massive drop in the number of graduate positions within these big companies, whereas an estimated 2 million jobs will be created in the SME sector over the next 10 years – making it your business to find out more. Finding work experience through programmes delivered by step enterprise is an effective way to discover the numerous opportunities out there.

“Working in a real environment has prepared me for the future graduate career I want to have.”

Dwayne Codling,
Work Placement with British Rema





Making sense of SMEs

The term 'SME' is becoming increasingly common in careers publications and graduate recruitment circles. It actually has several definitions, but the most commonly used has been developed by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) to cover the following categories:

Micro business : 0-9 employees

Small business : 10-49 employees

Medium business : 50-249 employees

These definitions help people classify and quantify chunks of data, but they don't actually give us a great deal of useful information – a shame since micro and small businesses account for more than 99% of all businesses in the UK!

In more useful terms, the SME sector covers virtually all industry types and is increasingly recognised as a source of major innovation and entrepreneurial excellence. SMEs can provide a motivating and challenging environment in which to gain work experience or start your career, and can offer a fantastic insight into what business is all about.

According to recent government reports, SMEs are playing an increasingly important role in the graduate labour market, and policies are being introduced to help SMEs harness the skills and knowledge of these graduates.

“Katherine’s work has given us a vision and mission moving forward. Having professional literature has given us an edge over the competition in the local vicinity.”

Karen Lamb,
Managing Director, Ultimate Salon

Getting started

The Idea

If you don't have a burning idea in your head right now but are still drawn to the idea of running your own business, don't despair.

- Consider what skills and interests you have, and what personal strengths you've shown in your studies, your hobbies or your previous jobs...
- Look for gaps in a commercial setting where there's a need for these skills, interests or related ideas, and where you can add something extra to what's already available...
- If nothing springs to mind, try looking around for products or services that are delivered really badly; can you think of a better way?
- Don't chuck any ideas out straightaway; no matter how off-the-wall they may seem, they may well lead to the golden idea!

If ideas don't come easily to you on your own, try speaking with course mates or friends with whom you share common skills or interests. If you choose this route, be sure to read the section about Intellectual Property (IP) later in this guide.

Once you have an idea that you believe is unique – then you're ready to take the next step and create your business plan.

The Plan

Not all successful businesses are based on detailed plans. Many brilliant ideas are wholly opportunistic or are based on taking big risks that happen to work out. That said, few support bodies would ever recommend this route, and writing a business plan can help you:

- Clarify and articulate your business idea
- Assess your exact resource requirements and spot any potential problems
- Set targets and objectives against which to measure your success

There is an endless stream of advice and information about how to write a business plan, so you need to find the version that works best for you. Most banks provide templates that you simply fill in, and help is also available from www.businesslink.gov.uk





The buzz!

Running your own successful business could be the most exciting and rewarding experience you'll ever have. It offers massive opportunities, not just for financial success, but also to really control your own future!

Being your own boss is also by far the best way to find out what business is really all about, and is likely to be the only way to make a living doing the things in life you enjoy the most.

More and more universities are now providing the space and support for students to explore the possibility of business start-up, and some even offer incubator units from which you can actually start trading. There are also lots of regional initiatives to support you in starting a business, as well as national organisations such as Shell LiveWIRE and The Prince's Trust, which offer support and mentors to young people who want to be their own boss. While you're still at university, you can also get really useful experience through programmes delivered through step enterprise, which can place you in a start-up business for work experience projects that'll give you a real taste of the issues facing young businesses and owner-managers.

This final section explores a few other aspects you might like to consider to help get you started.

“The opportunity for students and graduates to deliver specific work based projects opens up access to new ideas and thinking.”

Mike Jewitt,
Director of Business Link Leicester

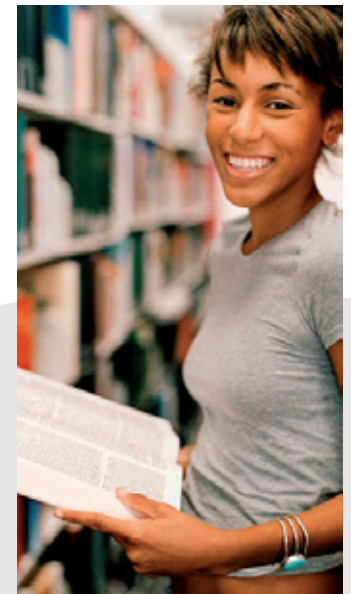
Why no info?

SMEs have never been traditional graduate employers. Although employment levels in SMEs are increasing, there are still many barriers to the effective communication between graduates and small businesses – meaning you may not be receiving valuable information that could help you to plan your career.

The main problem is that smaller businesses simply don't have the time or money to develop structured recruitment and graduate training schemes. Unlike the larger blue-chip companies, SMEs traditionally have no links with universities, and aren't targeted by the glossy graduate recruitment publications. They don't always have the resources to seek the exposure within the graduate market that larger organisations can afford, making it difficult for careers services to promote career opportunities in small businesses in their region.

This is more the case in micro businesses, where the benefits of being employed often depend on the charisma of the owner-manager. This is virtually impossible to convey to graduates through channels created for big businesses – such as the Milkround – although careers services in most universities are now trying to find new ways of connecting graduates and undergraduates with SMEs in their regions. As more government policies are established to provide funding to help SMEs employ graduates, you can also expect more regional support organisations to further strengthen links between universities and local businesses – through communication channels and networking opportunities.

In addition to information and guidance about SMEs, many universities these days provide advice to students interested in different career paths altogether – that of starting new businesses. Services and practical support for students considering running their own business are often available through 'Enterprise Centres', or specific enterprise programmes, sometimes operating through careers services and sometimes existing as separate units. Several universities also run competitions through which you can win funding to take your ideas forward, or even offer 'incubator' spaces in which you can actually start trading.



Small options

The next three sections of this guide explore different ways in which you can get involved with SMEs: through work experience as an undergraduate, by getting a full-time job once you graduate, or by taking the plunge and starting up your own business.

These options carry a range of opportunities to develop new skills, enjoy new challenges, and make a really strong impact on the success of a real business. And as SMEs begin to realise the benefits of employing undergraduates and graduates, the opportunities to get involved are increasing all the time. All you have to do is start small – but think big.



Starting up

Although relatively small numbers of graduates become self-employed each year, it's a growing trend – one supported by The National Council for Graduate Entrepreneurship, which was launched by Gordon Brown on 13 September 2004¹. According to the 2004/05 Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey, the volume of graduates working for themselves was 3.2%, which has risen from previous years.

If you have an idea that you think could earn a fortune, or the freedom of being your own boss really appeals to you, this section explores some of the issues you could face if you decide to start your own business.

¹Myths about graduate recruitment cited at www.prospects.ac.uk



“Work placements are an excellent opportunity for students/graduates to gain valuable experience before setting up their own business.”

Paul Rice
Innovation Placement Programme Project Manager



Approaching SMEs

If you're considering approaching SMEs for employment or for a work placement while still at university, there are a number of options available. For work experience, you can apply for a place on an established programme delivered by step enterprise, or speak with your Placement Officer or Careers Advisor at university, amongst other options.

If you're applying for full-time positions, here are a few tips you might like to consider:

- **Don't send blanket emails, and always find out the name of the person recruiting.**
- **Don't expect an automatic response; use your initiative and follow up.**
- **Always fully prepare for interviews and research the company.**
- **Don't be afraid to follow up interviews with a letter thanking the company for their time and outlining your key skills for the position.**
- **Be enthusiastic – your skills may get you an interview but your personality will get you the job!**

If you're reaching the end of your time at university and are interested in career opportunities in SMEs, try to arrange some work experience before you graduate. In general, a small business needs new recruits to hit the ground running as fast as possible, and to have a quick impact on the productivity of the business. Evidence of relevant work experience is a good indication that you're more likely to achieve this, and thus will make a good investment for your employer.

“Working on the project at Tailor Made was a fantastic experience. It gave me a self confidence I could never have gained as part of my course.”

David Hewett, Crowned UK's 'Most Enterprising Student 2005'



Work placements

Your first opportunity to start small will probably be through work experience, either on one of our work placement programmes or a placement organised by yourself or your university. This is the best way to see how you operate in a work environment, and develop experience and evidence for the kind of skills employers will be looking for when you graduate.

Work experience in an SME can be very different to work experience in a larger company – you are more likely to form part of a team working towards a central business goal, rather than a set of departmental objectives. And generally the smaller the business, the greater the impact of your work – and the more likely you'll see direct results.



Making the most of it

A lack of experience and relevant skills in employees is the biggest problem facing today's employers. Whatever type of work experience you undertake, it's important to make the most of it – after all, you may not get another chance. Your future employers will be impressed by an ability to provide examples of the skills you've developed through practical experience – which is a real chance to show you have abilities beyond those taught in the lecture hall.

Before you start a work placement – even before you decide what kind would suit you best – it's essential you think ahead about what you really want to achieve.

By planning your goals, recording your experiences and reviewing your progress, you should achieve a greater knowledge of yourself and the way you operate in a work environment – plus a new array of skills, and the ability to articulate these to future employers.

This section provides a few tips to help you make the most of your work experience, to ensure you achieve these results.



1. THINK long-term

Students are often so preoccupied with the practical considerations of starting their placement. (How do I get there? What do I wear? How much will I get paid?) they fail to consider what they really want to get out of it. If your work experience is with a small business, clarify any potential formality or behavioural matters prior to starting work. This will then give you the time to prepare in other ways, and allow you to get stuck straight into your role once you start.

2. THINK about your skills

Many skills surveys cite communication skills, customer handling, team working and problem solving skills – as well as specific task-focused or ‘hard’ skills – as principal areas of deficiency in UK businesses. A work experience placement in a smaller business will generally involve more multi-tasking and more opportunities to demonstrate initiative and enterprise, with tangible results that provide evidence of these skills for future employers. Most university careers services provide learning assessment schemes to identify where your current strengths and weaknesses lie in terms of these desirable ‘employability skills.’

3. THINK smart

Once you’ve identified the key skills you’d like to improve, set yourself SMART goals, and write them down so you have a checklist to refer back to at the end of your placement. SMART stands for:

Specific
Measurable
Achievable
Realistic
Time-bound



3. Mature business:

Age: 5+ years (usually much later!)

Type: SME

Employees: 1-249 persons

The People

A business will survive to maturity only if it develops a strong team, and an effective structure to ensure good and sustainable management of this team and the work it produces. A business could be departmentalised or retain a flat structure and, more often than not, the original owner-manager will reside at the top of this structure, with increasingly less day-to-day involvement in the operational side of the company. In business terms, this is the point at which he or she may begin to realise their ‘exit strategy’. This means that they’ve built the business to a stage at which it now operates to a sustainable standard without their day-to-day involvement, so that they can remove themselves from the business, yet still retain financial security through dividends and/or salary through an executive role. In the owner-manager’s place could be a solid management team, made

up of long-standing company members having worked their way up, or new graduate management talent.

Undergraduate/Graduate Roles

A mature business is one considered to have structures in place to ensure efficient operations and clear decision-making processes. It has relative market stability and clear management structures, with or without the direct involvement of the owner manager. Graduate roles could either be subject to specific departments, or involve a management overview – making the situation more comparable to traditional graduate roles.

The reality, however, is that few SMEs ever reach this stage, and those that do often take many years. You will generally find that the owner-manager is still actively involved in the business – sometimes more than he or she wants to be after years of hard work. Often the larger SMEs in the traditional industries, which have been around for many years, have developed operational and behavioural habits that restrict the progress of the business and ensure that a fully mature state can never be reached. It’s at this stage that the injection of an intelligent and fresh way of thinking can make a big difference, and really turn attitudes around. It’s this kind of business that benefits most – through undergraduates on work placements such as programmes delivered through step enterprise– or through recruiting ambitious graduates from various other channels (step enterprise recruitment, local universities).

2. Terrible twos:

Age: 2-4 years
Type: micro-small business
Employees: 1-25 persons

The People

Businesses surviving the 'start-up' phase have generally reached a degree of understanding about how they need to be managed.

'The Terrible Twos' is a phrase that some SMEs use to describe the problems that revolve around achieving the growth plans often set at this stage.

Growing generally involves employing more people, finding bigger premises, serving more clients, and expanding reputations and support networks. To assist in this, many businesses look to external support from specialists in finance, marketing or wherever help is needed. The business may also need a cash injection to fund its growth plans. This could mean additional shareholders, bank finance, or introducing Venture Capitalists to the business.

All of this means that the owner-manager must begin to remove him/herself from the day-to-day running of the business – as the time needed to grow a dynamic business is far greater than that needed to operate a functioning business. The owner-manager at this stage begins to work on the business, rather than in it, leaving obvious skills gaps that need to be filled.

Undergraduate/Graduate Roles

This could be a time when the strength of a graduate/undergraduate employee could really come into play, to help the owner-manager systemise procedures before he or she sets to work on developing the business, or to provide particular skills required to reach specific stages of development.

If growth is successful, the business may need to shout about this, so that Sales, Marketing and PR could appear on the agenda – perhaps for the first time. By then raising the company's profile, there could be requests from new clients or markets for work beyond the company's usual scope. All of this means that the owner-manager has less time to do what he or she had previously been doing; and there may be a need for new skills which the existing team don't have.

The introduction of a highly skilled undergraduate with enthusiasm and commitment to offer could be just the thing to ease the business through these early stages of growth.

4. THINK business

You should also try considering the way you might operate in an academic setting, and work out how your normal behaviour could be translated into the world of work.

- Do you turn up to lectures or hand in assignments on time?
- Do you keep accurate notes of your lectures?
- How do you behave in team situations or discussion groups; do you prefer solo projects?

Thinking about these issues and applying them to possible work situations could help you understand what to expect from work experience – and what the implications of your actions could be for those around you. It could also be useful, before starting any work experience, to try and shake academic terms from your vocabulary, and find out a little about the industry sector of your host business – trade terms or jargon; topical news and events – by looking at industry-specific websites and publications.

5. THINK small

As well as thinking 'business', try in particular to think 'small business'. Try asking yourself what you consider to be the main differences between working in a small business and a large organisation:

- Might I be working directly under the Managing Director?
- Might I be in direct communication with customers or suppliers?
- Might I be expected to contribute directly to the company's profits?

The smaller the business, the greater the chance that the answer to all these questions is yes – does that stimulate or scare you?



6. THINK connected

A further critical factor for all businesses – but especially for SMEs – is that of successful networking. Small businesses often work reciprocally with other small businesses around them because they don't have specific departments to deal with every business requirement. They often collaborate to meet their individual needs, and to form a more capable entity to pitch for bigger contracts. If you do get a chance to get involved in networking events as part of your placement, you should really try to attend – this is one of the best forms of preparation you can get for the real world of business.



7. THINK back

By keeping a written record of your SMART objectives and your experiences while on placement, it's easier to review how successfully you have achieved your objectives – and to then transfer this knowledge into useful evidence for future job applications. Whereas larger businesses have systems in place to record and assess your experiences, learning and development in SMEs is very much 'on the job', and there are unlikely to be set assessment criteria. So it's up to you to keep note of your achievements and experiences.

At the end of your placement, you should try to take time out to sit back and reflect on your experiences while they're still fresh in your mind. Involve your employer if possible. You should also give careful thought to how you can communicate your experiences in your CV and future job applications.

'Skills Tracker' is a useful tool developed by step enterprise for use by students on any of our work placement programmes – and it's also a useful resource for students undertaking other forms of work experience. You can find Skills Tracker at: www.skillstracker.org.uk

1. Start-up:

Age: 0-2 years
Type: micro-business
Employees: 1-9 persons

The People

A 2 year old business is still said to be at 'start-up' phase. The owner-manager is the organisation's figurehead, often having started the business single-handedly. He or she is still very much the driving force behind the business, and is often a skilled technician or expert in whatever industry the business specialises in. Often such business owners have reached the realisation, while working for someone else, that they could do things better themselves! Other reasons for starting a business include:

- **Wanting to be your own boss**
- **Financial independence**
- **Creative freedom and flexibility**
- **The chance to fully use your skills**
- **Following in family footsteps**

Owner-managers of really young businesses still have a keen sense of ownership and personal attachment, and will demand exceptional commitment from

employees. As he or she will be investing time and money in employing a graduate, they will also expect to see a return on this investment as quickly as possible, so there could be a lot to live up to.

Undergraduate/Graduate Roles

Unless a strong team and set structures have been established, the owner-manager is still central to the company's operations, and is often the main source of key business information. Having this knowledge solely within the owner-manager's head is one major reason for business failure. A significant role for a undergraduate or graduate at this stage is to systemise the business and establish information processes to capture and circulate this knowledge in a way that ensures sustainable operational processes.

The career potential open to any new undergraduate or graduate entering a successful SME at the early stages could be huge. Most owner-managers have an eye for ambition and enthusiasm, and could view you as future management material. If this is the case, promotion could be far more rapid than in any other business environment.





What are SMEs like?

It is impossible to describe a 'typical' SME, but there are certain factors that do affect anyone trying to set up and grow a business.

There are also certain recognised cycles that business development tends to follow, and which mark the progressing attitudes and confidence of the business owners. These will strike different businesses at different stages in their development; but there are obvious times at which the injection of undergraduate or graduate skills can be useful to an SME.

The following three snapshots are titled in terms of the average age/size of businesses at the stage described – but these can only ever be rough guides, and all SMEs of any size or age need to be judged individually.



“Research continually provides clear indications that through work placements undergraduates can make significant contributions to improving the knowledge, skills and capabilities of the UK’s SMEs.”

David McConville,
Work Placement Impact Researcher

Ready for action

Preparing yourself will help give you the confidence and assertiveness you'll need in a real business environment – to communicate effectively with your colleagues, to manage your time and work to meet deadlines, and to track down facts and information to achieve results under real time and work pressures. Essentially, work experience in an SME will equip you with desirable employability skills and a level of corporate awareness that will set you at a real advantage in the race for a job after you graduate. It's up to you to maximise this advantage, and shout about it to future employers.

The following section of this guide delves into the realities of working for an SME – either on one of our work placement programmes, or as your first step into a new or refreshed career. Whether you have the enthusiasm and commitment that could drive you to a commanding position within a small business, or you have specific technical skills that you feel could have a greater impact within a small business, this section provides a true insight into the realities of starting small.



Small realities

The relationships between undergraduates, graduates and SME owner-managers require much attention to enable each party to understand how they can benefit each other.

SME owners need to take positive action to sell the benefits of their businesses to the graduate community, and graduates still need to convince some SME employers of the benefits of recruiting straight from higher education. In order to do this, you really need to understand what working in an SME is all about.





What SMEs want

In addition to the 'soft skills' discussed earlier (and listed below), plus the technical skills demanded by specific roles, SME owner-managers are looking for far more in their graduate recruits.

Soft Skills

- **Communication skills**
- **Teamwork**
- **Planning and organising**
- **Problem solving, initiative & enterprise**
- **Adaptability**

A sample group of owner-managers questioned for this guide highlighted five key attributes:

- **Personability**
- **The ability to grasp an issue**
- **A streetwise attitude to real-life business; not just theory**
- **The ability to get to work by 8 in the morning**
- **A really hard worker**

When SME owners are asked if there are any hints for students wanting to work in their businesses, the replies can also be quite intense:

"If you send a CV, and really want the job, follow it up - I'm too busy to call everyone back."

"Be prepared to forget what you learned at uni!"

"Don't believe you're the golden child ... YOU want the job; I've got one!"

These may seem quite harsh but many SME owner-managers are looking for people who can rise to a challenge. They want your capacity to learn, and to think and act creatively; they want the levels of hard work, concentration and commitment that your degree demonstrates, but not the constraints or limits imposed by set teaching methods. Flexibility, adaptability, and quick learning are elements integral to most graduate SME roles.

Roles in SMEs

As an undergraduate on a work experience project, or a graduate in a full-time position, the likelihood is that you've been employed by an SME for one of two reasons: to bring a specific skill to the business, or to help in the strategic development of the business.

In both instances, a key difference between working in an SME and a traditional blue-chip business can be a lack of hierarchical and operational structure. You'll have to think on your feet, and you'll be working with a range of people – from the Managing Director to possible part-time partners. Whatever your role, an emphasis will be placed on how you can help develop and improve the business in the short-term, and how quickly your impact can be felt on the bottom line.

This could be quite imposing, but it can also be massively invigorating – you'll really have a chance to make a difference to the success of your company. To achieve this, and maximise the development opportunities afforded to employees of SMEs, you need to reach a holistic understanding of all the key issues affecting the business and the people within it. This means taking time out to consider the nature of 'the SME' in general terms, and questioning your current perceptions against the opportunities that could really be yours by working in an SME.

