

 **SAGE Study Skills**

Seven Steps to a Successful Career

A Guide to Employability

Lucinda Becker & Felicity Becker

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SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
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SAGE Publications Inc.
2455 Teller Road
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SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B 1/1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road
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SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

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Editorial assistant: Delayna Spencer
Production editor: Tom Bedford
Copyeditor: Audrey Scriven
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Step Two: Making your skills work for you

Read this section now if:

- You are unsure what skills are.
- You do not know what skills you have.
- You would like to gain more skills but do not know where to start.
- You do not know how to sell your skills effectively.
- You are uncertain about how to handle it if you do not have the skills that a prospective employer wants.

2.1 Introduction: why does it matter?

It is simple, really. If you do not know what skills you have, you cannot expect a prospective employer to be able to recognise these. Equally, if you do not know what skills your future employer wants, you will struggle to tailor your CV and interview to match these.

2.2 My skills base

What is a skill?

A skill is defined in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* as ‘expertness, practised ability, facility in doing something, dexterity, tact’. Maybe you are still wondering about what skills you should be looking for in yourself. If this is the



case then ask yourself this: ‘What am I good at doing?’ Once you know what you are good at doing, you can start weeding out the skills that are not relevant to work, such as ‘making a very good tissue paper fairy for the children’ or ‘playing computer games’ (unless you are going into a craft job or wanting to test new computer games).

Careful!

We are asking you here to define and promote the skills you have, rather than just things you have done. That is, you need to identify what you are *good* at doing. We are all capable of cleaning a bathroom, for example, but would you say it is just something you have to do, or are you so good at it that you would class it as a skill to promote to an employer?

How does it differ from my experience?

Your experience should demonstrate that you have used a skill or set of skills effectively.

Remember!

A ‘skill’ is something that you can do; ‘experience’ is something that you have been through. Your experience should demonstrate the skills that you claim to have.

How recently should I have used a skill?

The more recently, the better, as this shows that you have up-to-date skills and that you are not out of practice with them. However, if you have not used a skill for a number of years, you may need to retrain or do a refresher course. Some skills are transferable, such as task management, and so you may not have used these in the workplace in years but you could have evidence of using them in your personal life.

Remember!

Although we would urge you to foreground skills that are current, if a skill is vital to a role and is something that you never really lose (such as telephone work), put it on your CV even if the example you offer to prove that skill is from many years ago.

When you itemise skills on your CV in this way you are not going to be offering dates, so the selection team will not know immediately that this is a skill you acquired some time ago.

How do I pull the skills out of a situation?

Reflection is important to find out more about yourself in preparation for applying for a new career opportunity. Think objectively about the skills you have used in a situation and consider if these are likely to be useful for the role you are targeting. Sometimes we can salvage useful skills from bad situations. For example, if your post has been made redundant, the way in which you handled it could prove that you cope with stress and pressure by remaining calm; you may have also demonstrated self-motivation and initiative by going on training courses before you left your position. You might think that these are your personal qualities, and they are, but your skills in putting them into play could be making a database of career contacts or developing new skills on the courses you attended. (Complete Exercise #6 at the back of the book to start compiling a list of your skills.)

How do I pull the skills out of a qualification?

Think about the skills you used to complete the qualification. For example, your degree or college course demanded that you plan, write and review lengthy essays. The skills that this demonstrates are excellent planning skills, namely the ability to write in formal English and useful reflective skills to improve on your own work.

Remember!

By going back to the course description, you could find a list or details about what the course was going to 'give you'. These are sometimes called the learning outcomes, and could provide a useful starting point in your skills analysis.

Are there any skills that I should ignore?

Yes. Any skills that are not relevant to the position for which you are applying, you can safely ignore for the time being. If they become pertinent at a later stage then you can bring them out. For example, you may not include these

on your CV because you do not believe them to be relevant to the job; however, during your interview, if you see an opportunity to raise the fact that you have an additional skill, you will naturally do so.

Remember!

People sometimes assume that, just because you are good at something, you must be naturally talented in that area and must also enjoy using that skill. One of us once spent a laborious summer learning how to make ploughman's lunches in a busy pub. It turned out that she is an excellent ploughman's lunch maker – but she never wants to see one again, for the rest of her life.

2.3 Identifying my skills

What if I have no skills?

We can say with 100% certainty that you do have skills and have just not identified them yet.

What is a skills inventory?

This is the same in principle as the experience inventory we worked through with you in Step One (see page 20 and Exercise #3 at the back of the book). It is a way of identifying and recording all of your relevant skills – that is, those skills that you are best at and would like to use in the future. So, this is a time to itemise both your skills and the evidence to prove you have these, but it is also time to abandon any mention of skills that you no longer wish to use.

A skills inventory, like its experience counterpart, is a wide-ranging document that encompasses all of the skills you are happy to offer an organisation. At this stage, try not to have a particular career area or job role in mind; just list your skills so that you have the fullest possible inventory, and then later we will help you narrow these down as you focus on a role.

How do I create my skills inventory?

This is going to take time, but it will be worth it when you can look at a huge list of skills and realise that you will be a valuable asset to an organisation, so go to Exercise #7 to get started on creating your skills inventory.

Who can help me?

It would be ideal if you could find at least three people to help you in this task and then take a three-step approach as detailed below.

Success checklist

- ✓ Ask a supporter to talk you through your situations and the skills involved and then ask that person to jot these down or type them into your table as you go. It is surprising to find how many more skills you can pull out from a situation if someone is prompting you.
- ✓ Once you have made an initial list, ask someone to talk you through each of the situations you have used, making sure that you have pulled out all possible skills and examples of benefits.
- ✓ When you are fairly sure that you have captured everything you need for now (knowing that you will probably return to this again in the future to add to it), ask a third supporter to have a final peruse of the document. This person has two goals: to check that you have not left out any situations or skills, and to help you decide which of your examples of benefits is the most impressive or most useful to you in terms of a 'multi-purpose war story' at interview.

Must I have a certificate/qualification to prove my skills?

No – some of your skills will be certificated because you took a course in them, but others will simply be proved by a convincing example.

What if I have too many skills?

You will have – we all do. Once you have worked up a skills inventory (see page 44) you will probably be astounded at the range of skills you possess. That is why we know that the last stage of the exercises above – grouping your skills and highlighting the best examples of benefits – is so vital. That way you have a manageable amount of material to make a convincing sales pitch for yourself.

What if I am uncertain about a skill?

Do nothing until you are sure that you will need to use this skill regularly in the position you are targeting. Then ask yourself why you are uncertain – is it because you do not like using the skill, or because you are not especially adept at it? If the former, you will need to be wary – make sure that the skill does not make up a large proportion of the requirements of the job before you

go ahead. As we have said already, you need to take control and move on from those skills that you find least rewarding.

2.4 Boosting my skills

Which skills should I focus on boosting?

It makes sense to be as analytical as possible here, because you will not want to spend time brushing up on a skill that you do not especially need, or where you are already able to display more than enough competence. (To start focusing on which of your skills need boosting, complete Exercise #8 at the back of the book.)

Careful!

In those areas where there is a gap between your skill level and the role requirements, take a moment to consider. Do not rush off and sign up for a training course instantly! If there is a huge gap this might give you cause for concern, but moderate gaps are to be expected and you may well be able to make up for a skills gap with other assets you have that you can highlight in your interview, or it might be that the employer is already intending to offer training in a skill area to the successful candidate.

How can I gain more skills quickly?

Take opportunities that arise to develop old skills and gain new skills. These opportunities could come in the form of formal training courses or volunteer placements. You might be wary of volunteering as it is unpaid but we recommend that you see it as an opportunity to develop skills. Use a spiderweb chart to target your search for upskilling opportunities. This will ensure that you find the process rewarding and beneficial in your search for a job (www.kent.ac.uk/careers/sk/skillsmenu.htm is a useful website for looking at all of your skills and giving you information about how to boost them; it is from Kent University and so focuses on students but is still helpful to others).

Taking a course, working in the voluntary sector or finding other opportunities to boost your skills base will offer you more than just additional selling points on your CV. It will also keep your motivation and energy levels high and help keep you focused on the career goal ahead of you – it is a win-win situation.

What skills development opportunities should I look out for?

You should look out for training courses run at your place of work or study, alongside e-learning courses, workshops and courses run by your local colleges,

and volunteer placements. You will find that some courses are funded for adults and so it is worthwhile checking with your local college to find out what is available as it might not be as expensive as you think.

It is sometimes worth going for a slightly different role within an organisation you are targeting, one that more closely matches your current skills base, as there may be an opportunity to change roles at a later date and you will have had a chance to prove and develop your skills. As we mentioned earlier, having a connection to an organisation is of huge benefit when going for a job.

Learning a new language is a very good use of your time and money as the careers marketplace has become global. Many companies have contacts across the world and to have even a basic understanding of another language will help you build a rapport with these colleagues and clients.

2.5 Selling my skills

How will my skills help my CV profile?

Your skills are an essential part of your CV as this is the section that really helps your prospective employer to appreciate the benefits of employing you. Your CV is a chance to show off your skills, experience, qualities and qualifications. At this point, modesty is not a virtue but a hindrance to successfully selling yourself. Make sure that you give examples of when you have used your skills and in your interview refer to those skills when explaining how well-suited you are for the role.

Top tip

If you list your skills near the beginning of your CV, with brief evidence to prove that you actually have the skill (and perhaps the personal quality to excel in that skill), any potential employer will be impressed by your sales pitch even before perusing the detail that comes later on the CV.

How can social media help my skills base?

At the most practical, day-to-day level, most regular social media users are being given an opportunity to market themselves effectively, and that means highlighting your skills base in any situation where you are aware that an employer might be browsing. We talk in Step Five about cleaning up your personal brand on social media (see page 101), but this is a chance to showcase your skills if you sign up to the social media platforms (such as LinkedIn™) that specialise in professional networking.

However, social media can do more than just promote skills you already have, they are also helping you develop skills in networking, articulating your ideas and showing an ability to develop your understanding of particular issues in society. These are all useful skills and your social media activity can form the basis of war stories (see page 20) at interview that your interviewer is likely to relate to easily.

Remember!

LinkedIn complements and does not mirror your CV and so your profile should be more personal and engaging.

How can I prove myself online?

We are living in a time when our online presence can have a huge impact upon achieving a good career for ourselves. If you are applying for a role in management and your potential employers search for you online, they will not be impressed if all they can find is a selection of photos on Facebook or other social media showing you drunk or behaving in an irresponsible way. You should do an online search of yourself and see what comes up. Once you know what is already out there, you can either remove or add information to boost your professional online profile. We mention this here, but in Step Five (see page 99) we will go into more detail with you about how to create an effective 'personal brand' both in person and online.

Remember!

An organisation that uses the internet and professional networking or social media sites is more likely to search for you online than those organisations that have a limited online presence. The former types of organisations will be more impressed and put more stock in your professional online presence than the latter.

How assertive should I be in selling my skills?

You should be assertive as this is your opportunity to show off your skills to potential employers. Remember that there is a difference between being assertive and being arrogant or aggressive. We recommend that you remain positive in the language you use when talking about your skills and always

tie this back into the role you are applying for if possible. For example, ‘I have excellent time management skills as proven when I was doing two jobs and an evening course and I never missed a deadline. I believe that this would benefit me in this new job role as I understand that there will be time pressures and deadlines to which I will need to work.’

How can my skills help me in an interview?

Not only should you refer to your skills and the benefits of these to the organisation in your interview, you should also demonstrate these during the interview. Let us show you how ...

Action	Skill demonstrated
Arrive early	Time keeping
Smile at the interviewer(s) and shake their hand	Confident with good communication skills
Answering questions clearly and making eye contact with the interviewer(s)	Excellent communication skills and active listening skills
Using their names and referring to the research you have done about the organisation	Well-prepared with useful research skills A good memory and understanding of the organisation

What if I do not have all of the skills they want?

As mentioned earlier, sometimes you will not have all of the skills, qualifications or experience that an organisation wants. However, do not be discouraged. During the interview focus mainly on the skills that you do have, the skills they have not asked for but that you think will be useful to the role, and then explain that you are in the process of developing the skills you do not yet have, or talk about your willingness to learn.

Remember!

It is not always the case that the person or team with whom you will be working will have been solely responsible for the advert, job description and person specification that have been issued. Indeed, the person who will actually be managing you may have had very little to do with that side of the process. That is why it makes sense to stress the positives – the people who compiled the advert and paperwork might not have realised the potential importance of a skill you have but which they have not mentioned; if you have a great skill that you are sure would be useful in the role, shout about it!

2.6 Managing the process

A career is so much more than a series of job titles – it forms the pattern of your life. A lawyer is paid to be articulate and patient in stressful situations, but so too is an advocate for social rights, and a bartender with a difficult customer. The point is that your job will have you using a series of skills, which rely on your skills base, your education and training and your personal qualities, and that could well be what matters to you most in the final analysis, because that is how you will actually be spending your days.

If, for even a short while, you can focus on what you would like to be doing, rather than always looking at the job title and what you will be called, you have a better chance of achieving a fulfilling career. It will also help you to be open-minded. There are so many careers out there, hundreds of which you will never have heard mentioned, but if you are clear about your skills base then you can begin to explore the careers market more fully and to better purpose.

The thing about skills is that we are developing these all the time. A minor example of this happened just this morning as one of us was making up a new document. She realised, for the first time ever, that she could create her own bullet points from images she had on her computer, rather than using the standard bullet points. Immediately she imagined how much more effective her handouts could be in future, but she also indulged in a moment's fantasy: if she were producing sales documents in-house for an estate agent, she would produce really effective house particulars, with little houses as bullet points, and if she were an administrator she could produce minutes of meetings that would catch everyone's attention ...

She stopped there, but you can see how each skill leads on to new career ideas, and we are adding to our skills inventory (see page 44) all the time. For that reason alone, do not abandon doing this once this step is complete – continue to manage the process by updating your skills inventory regularly and allowing new skills to lead you, in prospect at least, into new areas of activity.

Further reading

As part of managing the process, you may find it useful to do further research using the following recommended websites.

2.2 My skills base

What skills do I need and how do I boost them?

www.jobs.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips/1337/what-are-employers-looking-for-skills-and-qualifications – This webpage focuses on the skills employers are looking for and the rest of the site will be useful to you in your search for a suitable career.

2.3 Identifying my skills

A skills inventory:

www.kent.ac.uk/careers/sk/skillsinventory.html – We have included this website earlier in the book as it really is very useful, particularly for students looking to enter the career market. This page helps you create your skills inventory.

2.4 Boosting my skills

Finding out where I need to boost my skills:

www.outcomesstar.org.uk – this explains what the Outcomes Star is and helps you create one for yourself. This is a useful and well-used tool to work out which skills you have already and which ones you need to develop.

Finding ways to boost my skills:

www.kent.ac.uk/careers/sk/skillsmenu.htm – This webpage focuses on the skills you have or will need to enter your new career.

2.5 Selling my skills

Soft skills looked for by employers and how to include them on your CV:

<https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk/aboutus/newsarticles/Pages/Spotlight-SoftSkills.aspx> – This website lists and explains the soft skills that employers might be looking for in their employees. Soft skills include things such as communication, decision-making and time management skills.

www.businessnewsdaily.com/2135-job-skills-resume.html – This is an article looking at how to make your CV stand out from all of the others received by an employer.

www.interview-skills.co.uk/competency-based-interviews-STAR.aspx – The STAR (situation, task, action, result) system is a good model of communication in interviews. This website gives you more information about it.

