

Are you even ready?

Employers now seem to want it all from graduates – education plus communication plus people skills from day one, says **David Williams**



Are employers ever satisfied? Presented with the best-educated workforce in history, they still complain that graduates lack essential skills, with the most important being communication and people management.

"There are issues concerning communication and people skills generally," admits Brian Fitzgerald, director of human resources development for engineering conglomerate Atkins. "We take on about 220 graduates a year, and although some of our applicants may have superb engineering skills, where they fall down is on the ability to work out the broader consequences of an action and to communicate what's important to the people affected."

"The ability to write a report, to communicate your ideas on paper, is a key skill for example. People fail because they are not holistic enough."

However, rather than bemoaning the lack of talent, organisations such as Atkins and E.ON UK are using new techniques to target the development opportunities they offer, at least to those graduates lucky enough to get through the recruitment stage.

Both organisations are putting their graduate employees through an event which is in

effect a second assessment centre — one that is geared to developing participants rather than recruiting them. "We call these events development centres, and although they might superficially look like assessment centres, the focus is very different," says Francesca Buck, managing consultant for business psychologist Kaisen Consulting which runs these events.

"They are not about how the participants compare and about passing or failing them, but about finding ways to help people reach their potential by showing them how they can play to their strengths and develop any areas of potential weakness."

Using a combination of psychological profiling, work-sample exercises and psychometric measures which will be familiar to anyone who has ever been through an assessment centre, these development events aim to give graduates a real depth of understanding about who they are, what motivates them and where their natural strengths and weaknesses lie.

"The assessment is quite rigorous," continues Brian. "Among a number of activities, we do something called a 360 degree assessment in which the graduate assesses his or her skills and then asks a number of colleagues (senior, junior and peers) to do the same. The results show the

graduate exactly how their skills are perceived, and on the basis of this and other assessments we agree a development plan to move them forward."

"The very act of engaging in such depth with our graduates is having a profound and positive effect on our retention rates."

Of course, you can only benefit from such development opportunities once you're in, so is it possible to do developmental DIY in order to make yourself more employable? For Francesca, the answer is yes, but only as long as you think about it in the right way.

"Lots of the advice you see for graduates is how to dress up your skills so you can get your graduate job," she says. "But for me, the best advice is not about how to present yourself but how to develop yourself."

"For example, if you recognise that you are not a particularly assertive person, you would benefit from putting yourself in situations where you need to be assertive, or if you are weak at giving presentations, you could join societies that give you practice at this."

"Actually going out and developing these skills is much better than trying to find examples just to get through the interview."

dwill.dwil@virgin.net

'Weak spots turned out to be strengths'

Rob Webb, above, has a BSc in building surveying from Kingston University. His employer, Atkins, sent him to a development centre.

"I must admit I was a bit sceptical at first about the whole idea. I have been with Atkins for four years, am just about to take my chartered status, and beforehand I felt quite self-aware in terms of my strengths and weaknesses. However, my manager urged me to go."

"The development centre took place over a day and involved role-plays, psychometric tests and one-to-one interviews. We also looked at the results of a 360-degree review in which colleagues had fed back their own assessment of my skills."

"Not only was it stimulating to be able to talk openly about the way I worked, I also learned that being self-aware is a bit different to being able to see how others see me, and I found that some of the areas in which I thought I needed to improve were in fact areas of strength for me."

"All in all it was a very positive day and I am still committed to the action plan that we developed from it."

'Now I understand my personality better'

Gareth Eveleigh, left, has a BSc in business administration from Cardiff University. He says: "I was a bit apprehensive before I went. I had of course been through an assessment centre in order to join the E.ON UK graduate programme a few months before, and the Kaisen-run development centre sounded very similar."

"I was just a little concerned it was yet another round of assessment but when I actually got there I was quite pleased with what I found. Nobody likes assessments of course, but otherwise it was a very positive experience."

"The whole process was geared towards my self-development. It helped me understand some of the things about my own personality that I have never really thought about before. For example, it showed me how much I thrive in quite a loosely structured environment. I like plenty of excitement and am not afraid of change."

"This is just one of the things I learned about myself, but it will help me guide my career towards situations in which I can channel what drives me in the most constructive way."

