

Application Forms - A Brief Guide

The key to improving your chances of getting short-listed on the basis of your application from is being confident that you are applying for the right specialty.

This might sound obvious but if you are not sure you are applying for the right specialty (and many doctors admit they aren't sure) then you may find it difficult to convince the scorers that your application is worth taking further.

Applying for the right specialty involves:

- self-awareness of your skills and personal attributes
- clarity of what you are looking for in a future career and evidence of information or experience you have gathered about the career.
- being able to sell your personal qualities, experience and skills as appropriate for success within the specialty.

The current application form asks questions about your motivation for the specialty, research and teaching experience and core competencies listed in the person specification. At ST1 level, many of the competencies are the same, although how they are applied in practice will be different.

For example take the question:

'Describe a situation where your communication skills made a difference to patient care – what skills did you demonstrate?'

Depending on what speciality you are applying for could dictate how you answer this question. A paediatrician needs to be able to communicate with a child and adult simultaneously managing the needs of both. An obstetrician in a labour ward needs to be able to communicate with patients who are under considerable stress and must remain calm under pressure when doing so. So you should begin thinking about what communication skills you will specifically need in that specialty and draw on examples from your experience which illustrate that type of communication.

Once you have a considerable number of examples in mind, you can begin to complete an application form.

A good application form needs to be well thought through so do not attempt to complete the form at one session. The format of the application form will vary depending upon the training for which you are applying (e.g. Foundation, Specialty and GP) and you should ensure you are completing the appropriate form. The application form is designed to measure you against the essential and desirable criteria listed in the person specifications.

The following points may help when completing your form:

- Ensure you allow sufficient time to complete the application form. It would normally not be something that you can start the evening before, several hours will be needed if you are to sell your skills and experiences well.
- Ensure you are familiar with the person specification and scoring guidelines.
- Type out your answers in 'MS Word' and then check for spelling and grammar (ensure you have this set as UK English). Doing this will also enable you to check the word count and can then be cut and pasted on to the form.
- Ensure you answer the competency based questions using an approach such as the STAR model. This model can help you to structure your answers and make sure you answer the question fully. **S T A R** stands for **S**ituation, **T**ask, **A**ction and **R**esult. You should state what action you took, what you achieved and how you implemented the outcome. This is an area where candidates usually fail to score maximum marks.
- It may be very helpful to get feedback from a non-medical individual, particularly around the competency questions, as non-medical people may take part in the marking process.
- Referees – contact them well before the closing date to check that they will be willing to support your application and they may even be willing to have a look at your completed form before you submit it.

Common errors include:

Not following the instruction: if the information is required in the order 'most recent first', this is the order in which it should be presented.

- Not clearly identifying what was gained from experience
- Not giving sufficient information regarding teaching experience: target audience, duration of teaching, was this a 'one-off' or part of an on-going programme you delivered.
- Areas outside medicine. Explain this clearly - what skills you gained and how the experience produced these skills.
- Lack of substance in the Personal Statement. This is your chance to interest the assessor and to draw their attention to your skills, experience and expertise. It may help to focus your attention if you ask yourself what is the relevance of the information you are providing.
- Failure to clarify whether an MD was research-based.

Finally, there are always jobs which will attract high numbers of applications and you may need to consider being more flexible with regard to geographical location. You may also want to consider having a back-up plan – a plan B, in case you don't get a place in your chosen area. This could be applying for another related specialty or deciding that you find a locum post and re-apply next year.