

10 tips for landing your first job

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Job hunting is rarely fun and it's especially tough when you've got no track record to point at. Close to a million young people in the UK are currently not in education, employment or training and every half-decent vacancy seems to pull in a crowd of applicants.

That's the bad news. The good news is that most of those applicants are doing the bare minimum, which means a little effort in the right places goes a surprisingly long way. Whether you're after a Saturday shift or your first full-time role, here are ten things that genuinely improve your odds: five for getting hired and five for the bit nobody warns you about - your first few weeks in the job.

1. Chase skills, not job titles

Nobody's first job is glamorous and it doesn't need to be. What matters is what the job teaches you, because transferable skills outlast any role. Dealing with an awkward customer at the till, keeping your head through a slammed lunch rush, turning up on time every day for six months: these are exactly the things employers look for later, just wearing an apron instead of a suit.

Communication is the big one. Almost every senior role comes down to understanding what someone wants and delivering it and you can practise that anywhere - behind a bar, on a shop floor, stacking shelves. There's also a simple truth worth knowing: it's easier to get a job when you've already got one. Any job on your CV tells the next employer you can hold one down. So don't overthink the first move. Get in, learn and build from there.

2. Make AI work for you and STILL sound like YOU

AI tools are genuinely useful for job hunting, if you use them properly. Paste the job advert and the company's website into a chatbot and ask what this employer seems to care about most. Use the answer to decide which of your experiences to lead with. Before an interview, ask it to fire likely questions at you for that role and industry, then practise answering out loud.

The trap is lazy AI: typing "write me a cover letter" and sending whatever comes out. Recruiters read hundreds of those and they all sound the same - polished, generic and nothing like a real person your age. Used well, AI does the opposite: it takes your rough notes and your real story and helps you say them clearly, in your own voice. That difference is a skill in itself and it's one worth learning - or borrowing. More on that in tip four.

3. Walk in and introduce yourself

For small and independent businesses - cafés, shops, pubs, salons, garages - the person doing the hiring is usually standing behind the counter. A short, friendly visit can do more than any online form. Ask if the manager's around, say you're looking for work, ask a question or two about the place and leave a printed CV. That's it. Two minutes of mild awkwardness and your name now has a face attached.

It works even where nothing's advertised. Plenty of small employers never post vacancies; they hire whoever asked at the right moment. And the visit tells you things too. Standing in a place for a few minutes, watching how the staff talk to each other, will teach you more about whether you'd actually want to work there than any job description ever will.

4. Write a cover letter that sounds like a person

A proper cover letter is a signal all by itself these days: it says you bothered, while everyone else was firing off one-click applications. Keep it short - half a page is plenty - and make it specific. Why this company rather than any company? What would you actually bring?

Don't apologise for lacking experience, because youth is a selling point if you frame it right. Fresh eyes, energy, no bad habits to unlearn and a genuine willingness to be taught: plenty of employers would take that over a jaded veteran. School projects, sport, volunteering, looking after siblings - it all counts. The aim isn't to sound corporate. It's to sound like someone they'd be happy to spend a shift with.

And if writing isn't your strong suit, get help with the flourish. That's not cheating and it's definitely not lying - it's the same as asking a teacher to look over your personal statement. The facts and the personality stay yours; the polish just makes them easier to read. It's exactly what our cover letter service here at FIRSTJOBZ does: we take who you are and what you're about and turn it into a page a busy manager can't skim past. Because the more human you sound on paper, the better your chances of bagging an interview for the job you actually want.

5. Use the free help - most people don't

There's a surprising amount of free support aimed at getting young people into work and most of it goes unused simply because nobody knows it exists. The King's Trust runs free courses for 16 to 30-year-olds, including work placements, confidence-building programmes and short sessions on CVs and interviews. Youth Employment UK offers free online skills courses and careers guidance and the government publishes solid advice on building experience. Local charities, libraries and councils often run their own schemes too.

None of this costs anything except an evening of your time and a completed course does double duty: you learn something useful and you get a line on your CV proving you're the sort of person who goes and learns things. That's a story worth being able to tell in an interview.

Getting hired is half the battle. The other half is the first month, when everyone around you is quietly forming an opinion. Here's how to make it a good one.

6. Be a sponge before you make waves

Your first couple of weeks have one job: absorb everything. Watch how things actually get done - who covers for whom, how the rota really works, what the manager notices and what they let slide. Every workplace runs on unwritten rules that nobody will ever explain out loud and the people who settle in fastest are the ones who spot them early.

Resist the urge to suggest improvements in week one, even if you can see ten things you'd change. You might be right, but you don't yet know why things are the way they are and new-starter suggestions land very differently once you've shown you can do the job. Listen first, earn a bit of credibility, then speak up. The ideas will still be there in a month.

7. Ask the "obvious" questions early

Here's a window that closes fast: in your first weeks you can ask absolutely anything and nobody blinks, because you're new. Ask the same question three months in and it gets awkward. So front-load your questions. How does the till work? What do I do if a customer wants a refund? Who do I ring if I'm ill? Small stuff, asked early, prevents the big embarrassing mistake later.

If you're worried about pestering people, keep a running list on your phone and ask in batches at a quiet moment. And when someone explains something, actually listen rather than nodding along while secretly lost. Pretending to know things is the most expensive habit a new starter can have. It always gets found out, usually at the worst possible time.

8. Write everything down

Memory feels reliable right up until the moment it isn't. Door codes, people's names, how to close down the coffee machine, the three things your manager asked for this morning: get them out of your head and into your phone or a small notebook the moment you hear them.

This does two things. First, it means you only need telling once, which people quietly appreciate more than almost anything else. Second, it's visible. Someone who writes instructions down looks like someone who cares about getting things right, because that's exactly what it is. Months later those notes become your own private manual for the job and if you're ever asked to train the next new starter, you'll look organised beyond your years.

9. Bring a fix, not just a problem

At some point you'll spot something wrong. You're out of stock, the card machine's down, a delivery hasn't turned up. The instinct is to report it and wait. Better: think one step past the problem before you open your mouth. "We're out of oat milk - I've checked the back, want me to ring the other branch?" lands completely differently from "we're out of oat milk."

Your suggestion doesn't have to be right. Half the time your manager will have a better fix and that's fine; the point is that you tried. Do this consistently and you get a reputation as someone who makes problems smaller rather than louder, which is rarer than it should be and gets noticed sooner than you'd think.

10. Take feedback well and ask for the useful kind

Sooner or later someone will tell you you've done something wrong and your first instinct will be to explain yourself. Sit on that instinct. Say thanks, take a breath and decide later how much of it to use. Reacting defensively teaches people to stop giving you feedback, which sounds pleasant and is actually how you stop improving.

Then go one better: ask for it before it's offered and make the question specific. "Was that okay?" invites a polite "yeah, fine". "What should I do differently next time I handle a return?" gets you something you can actually use. People who ask questions like that get talked about, in the good way, because it's what improvement genuinely looks like - and managers remember the ones doing it at seventeen.

None of this requires talent, connections or luck. It just takes a bit of deliberateness at a stage when most people are winging it. And remember: every manager, every director, every intimidatingly competent person you'll ever work with once stood exactly where you are now, wondering how the till works. Start somewhere. The rest compounds.