

How to research a prospective employer



Anthony Haynes writes: Whether you are preparing to apply for a job or simply deciding whether to do so, our experiences of working with candidates suggest that it's worth investing time in doing your homework. In particular, it's worth researching the employer so as to develop a 360 degree picture of them. Here are practical tips for doing so.

Step 1: Read the *boring* parts of the employer's website.

Most organisation's sites are customer-orientated: they emphasise what it the organisation has to offer to would-be customers or clients. But usually, tucked away somewhere, is information for or about other stakeholders. These might include:

- suppliers
- the media
- the community
- the state.

The environment too is a kind of stakeholder.

Simply finding out whether, and how far, the website provides for these stakeholders tells you something about the organisation's approach to stakeholder management.

But in addition, this information helps you to:

- assess the organisation. Organisations are only as strong as their supply chains. And an organisation's reputation depends in part on who it deals with.
- identify other possible sources of information -- for example, what can you learn about the organisation from its suppliers?

Step 2: Analyse the annual report -- the words and the numbers

Many organisations publish their annual reports on their websites (often in a 'For investors' section).

Reports can always be downloaded from Companies House: <https://www.gov.uk/get-information-about-a-company>.

Reports include both verbal and quantitative information. The amount of verbal information has tended to increase over the years as organisations attempt to spin the figures or even distract attention from them.

Obviously the chair person's statement needs therefore to be read sceptically. Yet this does make the statement worthless -- simply understanding how an organisation is attempting to present itself is useful. And, at best, the statement reveals what the organisation is enthusiastic about or proud of.

To interpret the numbers in the financial section expertly is difficult. But reading them **in**expertly can still prove valuable. You don't have to be an accountant or investment analyst to be able to make *some* sense of the data.

The BBC has published a short guide here: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/working_lunch/1491337.stm.

If you do nothing else, consider the organisation's profitability and cash situation. Is the organisation generating cash or burning it? How strong are the cash reserves in relation to the cash flow and annual profit or loss?

Also look at any available employment data: what is happening to the number of employees and their average remuneration.

Referring the annual report during an interview can make a good impression, suggesting diligence and professionalism on your part.

Step 3: Use databases

In addition to reports, there are many other published sources of data. Examples include:

- Fame -- which has an extensive database of UK and Irish companies
- Kompass -- an international database covering millions of businesses
- Orbis -- ditto.

Such databases are typically expensive to access. However, it may be possible to access them via third parties.

For example, the British Library's Business & IP Centre offers access to an unrivalled collection of information sources. These are summarised here: <http://www.bl.uk/bipc/dbandpubs/busres/index.html>. The centre also provides [short, inexpensive, courses](#) on how to access business information. (In my experience, the courses are excellent.)

If you're a member of the [Institute of Directors](#), you can use their business library and information sources (summarised [here](#)) and ask their researchers to conduct desk research on your behalf via their [information services](#). (Again from my experience, the service is excellent.)

Step 4: set up a system for acquiring information online

Monday's post in this series recommending analysis of the 'boring bits' of an employer's website. We can think of this as proactive research — you have to take the initiative by going to the website.

This kind of information can be supplemented by reactive — that is, simply reading information that comes to you, though naturally requires some initial activity in terms of setting up alerts.

The most relevant sources include Google alerts, Twitter, email newsletters, RSS, and the trade press.

[Google alerts](#) allow you to select the type of news source that you draw information from and how frequently you received it. They save you from having endlessly to search the web for news. Twitter as a source of information on employers is probably most convenient when used to set up a bespoke list, removing the need to trawl through vast numbers of miscellaneous tweets on a daily basis. Email newsletters can include subscription to organisations' press releases. RSS seems rather underused: the advantage of using it is to collect emails all in one place within clogging up your standard inbox. Most trade press magazines and periodical now provide subscriptions to e-newsletters, sometimes free of charge.

Such sources represent a classic example of pump priming: they require initial investment in time to set them up, but they make things easy for you. Overall, they can provide confidence when making an application that you are well-informed and up to date.

Step 5: investigate the employer's reputation *qua* employer

Organisations have more than one brand. The one that gets talked about most is their consumer brand — roughly, the image and reputation amongst consumers of the organisation's products and services. But organisations also have an employer brand, resting on the organisation's reputation — primarily amongst current, past, and prospective employees — specifically as an employer.

The employment brand rests on such questions as: how do they treat their staff? how well remunerated are their staff? what is the rate of staff turnover like? and what is the ethos or culture of the organisation?

It's difficult to acquire objective data on these matters. The data that is ready to hand consists merely of people's perceptions — what people say or think about an organisation, regardless of accuracy. Yet even when inaccurate — or partial or unreliable — such information has a value.

First, this is a matter of comparison between organisations: former employees may give distorted views (someone who has been fired, for example, is unlikely to say, 'Actually, I was hopeless at the job'), but are those from one organisation any more likely to be distorted than those from another?

Secondly, the sources can't be wrong — precisely because it's reputation that we're focusing on. Several former employees may report gripes that may perhaps be ill-founded: nevertheless, the gripes helped to form (indeed, themselves form part of) the reputation and hence the brand. That tells you at least how having that employer on your CV might look.

But enough of the philosophy. There are two main sources of information:

1. word of mouth, through networks;
2. websites.

The websites that I hear mentioned most in this regard are:

- Glassdoor: <http://www.glassdoor.co.uk/>
- The Job Crowd (specialising in graduate employment):
<http://www.thejobcrowd.com/employer>

If anyone would like to recommend others, I'd be interested to hear.