

# The 2009 Online Recruitment Student User Survey



# Introduction and overview



In May 2009, GTI Recruiting Solutions conducted a survey of over 1,300 students and graduates who used online application tracking systems (ATSs) during the current recruitment season. A comprehensive series of questions was asked, exploring their attitudes and first-hand experience of the process, together with their views about the future development of these systems.

This survey has produced a “snapshot” of the current situation. Respondents were self-selected from known users of TARGETjobs.co.uk, the largest graduate career portal in the UK. Replies indicate that the respondents had used many ATSs in their search for a job or placement. A broad spectrum of replies was achieved, from a range of academic institutions, subjects of study, nationalities, first languages and experiences of modern technology.

Students were asked to elaborate on their answers to most questions and many of them did so, some in considerable detail. Their replies are of great significance and value to all those recruiters who are interested in developing even more efficient methods of recruitment. Inevitably, experiences and opinions vary amongst students applying through the same, or similar, systems but the over-riding message to recruiters is clear – as with paper applications, it is vital to know who you want, why/how you want them, and for what purpose. Only when these questions are answered can systems be designed that produce good matches between applicants and employers.

GTI Recruiting Solutions intends to maintain this annual survey to track the development of online systems and to ensure that the highest possible standards are achieved.

## Key facts about the survey

- Users of Targetjobs.co.uk were invited by email to complete a simple and quick-to-answer, seven-page online questionnaire. The questionnaire was available for ten days in May 2009.
- There were 1,368 responses. Of these, 677 (50%) were completed in full, but 1027 provided partial responses and this research report is based on that data set, ie not all respondents answered every question.
- Most students had made between 1 and 10 online applications.

Number of applications made	Online	%
None	94	9.8
1	68	7.1
2 to 5	297	30.9
6 to 10	231	24.1
11 to 20	154	16.0
21 to 50	81	8.4
51 to 100	24	2.5
Over 100	11	1.1

- The survey produced responses from students and graduates from within the UK and abroad, and having a range of first languages. Over 73% stated that English was their first language.

# Section 1

## What users really think



*Users' views of online application systems in the 2008/2009 recruitment season:*

*"By online application system, I also mean applying via email, because it is much faster, cheaper and easier – for me and the company as well – to apply online. But just having a system is not enough. The processes behind it have to work, otherwise the system is worth nothing."*

### What helped and what didn't

To be successful, ATSs need to encourage applications from the right people: those students and graduates that an individual organisation has decided it wants to attract. Having encouraged the right applicants, an ATS needs to keep their interest by offering a relatively painless experience.

The survey asked users about their own experiences with ATSs, asking for the five factors that helped them to complete and submit their own online applications, as well as the five factors that hindered them.

#### Factors that helped applications:

Ranked	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	Overall
Ability to save and return/complete the application over multiple sessions	533	192	102	63	47	937
Ability to complete the application sections in any order	62	280	193	160	150	845
Ability to track the progress of an application	200	193	161	143	141	838
Use of a password to return to the system	56	108	184	223	204	775
Ability to return to the system and change contact details after submission	39	85	164	207	242	737
Ease of use/intuitiveness	112	135	171	166	128	712

#### Factors that hindered applications:

Ranked	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	Overall
Form length	204	155	106	73	54	592
Website navigation – finding the link	92	99	131	87	82	491
System speed	114	70	82	87	120	473
Assessment questionnaires, e.g. questions around competencies such as leadership	99	100	105	89	62	455
Unable to save details	99	107	82	72	71	431
Logging in difficult	41	88	66	98	80	373
Online testing required before starting the application	50	53	73	64	54	294
Unable to submit application after completion	43	66	42	59	63	273
The system crashed	55	51	48	50	52	256
Downloading extra software required	44	38	47	50	57	236
Unable to view full screen	12	21	39	30	36	138
Agreeing to company's terms and conditions	14	15	18	33	41	121

## What were the overall positive aspects of ATSSs?

In the survey, a large proportion of students mentioned the following four positive aspects:

- Speed
- Convenience/cost-effectiveness
- Fairness
- Presentation

Here is a selection of the observations made by respondents to the survey:

### Speed

- *Save the hassle of having to mail forms through post, which might arrive late, or not arrive at all*
- *It is a quick and easy way for me to search*
- *Wastes time – emailing a CV and covering letter is faster and doesn't require re-submitting all the information in a different form*
- *It removes the added hassle of sending things through the post, which raises questions like "Have they received it?", "Have I sent it to the right address?"*

### Convenience and cost-effectiveness

- *So you can apply 24-7*
- *It is much quicker and easier than applying by post, and it allows you to upload supporting documents too*
- *It is faster and cheaper than normal applications by mail*
- *It's easier to amend your application when online, whereas by hand you have to get another form if you want to re-phrase something late on in the application*
- *1) Ease of use 2) Ability to save 3) Ability to complete the form in any place, without having to carry the form with you*
- *So I can easily access them from anywhere in the world*
- *It's easier to find it, you can do it from home which is more convenient. You can do it at anytime of the day*
- *Ease of use and accessibility. It made applying for multiple internships easier, especially when the system allowed you to "save and return"*
- *Because it gives an option to come back to it and modify, update and correct all the details. No pressure when applying. It offers flexibility – timewise*
- *I am not in a financial situation to make multiple postal applications. Applying online saves me time and money. It's also quicker so I can make more speculative applications in a shorter period of time. I am revising but I need a job. I don't have the time to spend hours and hours filling in long, in-depth forms*
- *1) Purely because the majority of companies ask similar questions, so answering them becomes a lot quicker. Since answers can easily be edited to suit the requirements of the stated question. 2) Also you do receive confirmation of the sent application*

## **Fairness**

- *Online application forms make it much easier to tailor your application towards the company in question. Often it is difficult to gauge the importance of various criteria to a company and online application forms tend to be appropriately leading*
- *Even though I don't like online applications it makes it easier to fit applying for jobs in around all the other things we have to do, and it also means we as graduates have a bigger range of jobs to apply to as we don't have to ask for application forms*
- *Less bias*
- *Many companies still obtain graduates/vacation work through company employee referrals, sometimes the best chances are through those who you know.*
- *It seems to be an indication if they are still taking applications, which is good to know*
- *I think having a standardised application process is the fairest way to assess candidates, as the position I applied for was open to graduates from very diverse backgrounds. I felt the online application system helped to level the playing field in this regard*

## **Presentation**

- *Easier than paper. And my handwriting is bad!*
- *I think a potential employer can get a better feel for the applicant if handwritten and this means there's less of a time limit to fill out certain sections*
- *Simply because the paper applications take time to get feedback and you can't change your mistakes*
- *Nowadays this is the easiest way for someone to communicate and obviously IT skills are a necessity in jobs. Therefore, an online application is the logical choice and easier also for the employer*
- *It assisted me in understanding exactly which aspect of my personal development and competencies to include as aspects of my application, that were specific to the job*

## **What were the overall negative aspects of ATs?**

The range of negative aspects given were much less than the positive. This is in stark contrast to the similar surveys GTI previously conducted. Objections related more to the content of the application form, ie its length, complexity and options included that didn't match the candidate's experience. Having said that, it is surprising that this section of the questionnaire was still very well populated by responses to our question related to potential hindrances. This suggests that many systems in use continue to prove problematic in some very basic ways.

The one other consistent theme expressed was that applications were being judged in isolation and that the successful candidate was getting through based upon their writing skills as opposed to personality. It suggests that many of those who responded in this way were not getting through to any face-to-face contact with potential employers.

## Section 2

# Users' views of particular online systems



### *The good, the bad and the ugly*

Users were asked their views of the systems they had experienced; to name the best and worst, and why. As in the answers to other survey questions, a wide range of experiences were described. Rather surprisingly, some of the same sites were mentioned as “best” and “worst”, as well as somewhere in between.

Those most regularly rated as having the best or second-to-best ATS were:

Deloitte (got the most mentions)	Ernst & Young	Procter & Gamble
NHS (in various guises)	KPMG	IBM
PwC	Marks & Spencer	Boots
Barclays	Civil Service	RBS
Sainsburys	Allen & Overy	Lloyds TSB

In assessing specific user experiences we focused our survey questions on locating the ATS link on the website and the service experienced having made an application.

### **What makes a good system easy to find?**

The following phrases appear in the description of “best” systems used by respondents. This is, in effect, a checklist of good practice when designing a job microsite:

- *Very easy. Under the Graduate section for each employer, such as IBM and Fujitsu*
- *It stated on the top of the page: job vacancies*
- *Clear well set out pages with obvious titles, nothing cryptic*
- *Deloitte and Lloyds TSB was very straight forward in where to find summer vacation scheme applications forms*
- *Sites that took you directly to the graduate recruitment section*
- *Good navigational system with clear questions*
- *Clear tabs on site*
- *Apply Now button*
- *Bank of England – one system for all job applicants*
- *Clear signing*
- *Good undergraduate career website.*

Many organisations' ATSs received accolades such as brilliant, it all worked, a friendly and welcoming site. Regrettably, the responses for “worst” site indicate the extent to which a bad site can cause irritation and alienation. The following phrases would serve as a good reminder when considering whether an ATS is easy-to-find and easy-to-use:

- *Navigating from original Google search*
- *Wasn't easy to find. Had to phone for them to tell me where to go to apply as it wasn't clear at all online*
- *Trying to navigate through the site to it*
- *Site not maintained well*
- *Buttons (such as “submit”) were placed off-screen and it was necessary to scroll to the side to find them*
- *For the position I was applying for at Debenhams, I had to first have a long search for my position from this list and then location and so on*

- Mercer had many sites, and the internships were not easily distinguishable from the graduate jobs
- The website led me in circles for a while until it told me there was no online application
- On the Proctor and Gamble website I had to find the vacancies, then search through all of them to see which one I was eligible for
- Shell: kept going round in circles, the hyperlinks would go to the previous page

## Getting support through the application process

We asked our respondents about their experiences of the technical support behind the ATS they used. Of the 1027 respondents citing actual systems, 257 said that they had experienced difficulties. The general themes on the actions taken were:

- Tried again
- Phoned the company
- Asked a friend
- Gave up
- Contacted the technical support address.

Where support had been requested it was supplied:

Immediately	6.4%
24 hours	11.4%
1 working day	10.8%
2 working days	8.0%
Over 3 working days	4.2%
Over 5 working days	5.5%
No technical issues experienced	56.5%

What was surprising was how many of the respondents said they had never had an answer to their support query, apart from an initial email thanking them for their submission!

## Processing the application

We asked the specific question of how quickly an application was acknowledged by those systems named by the respondent. They could choose more than one answer:

- 65.5% had experienced immediate acknowledgement
- 42% within 24 hours
- 20.4% after a day
- 11.4% after 2 days
- 13.8% after a week
- 10.6% after 2 weeks
- 12% not at all [including applicants to several household name companies].

We also asked how long it took for companies to respond to an application, either to reject it or to invite the respondent to the next stage:

- 11.8% had experience of an immediate next step
- 13.9% within 24 hours
- 12.2% after a day
- 17.4% after 2 days
- 42.1% after a week
- 40.7% after 2 weeks

## Section 3

# Towards the next generation of online systems



*What features would users like to see? Some practical recommendations:*

*"I think if someone has gone to the trouble of completing an application they deserve a response, even if it's a "thanks but no thanks""*

Users were asked, "If you were developing the next generation online recruitment system what is the one key feature you would incorporate, and why?". Inevitably replies included some points that had been made in other contexts, but some new ideas were proposed.

It is clear that everyone now sees ATSs as here to stay, but the volume of quite detailed responses suggest they could still be greatly improved. We were surprised by the volume of respondents still asking for systems that do not crash. We had assumed that the industry had now moved beyond this point. Equally frequent was a recommendation that application forms were short, simple and pooled in some way to shorten the process of application.

Respondents' recommendations and ideas fell into three main areas: technical, content and process.

### Recommendations for technical improvements for the next generation

- Align with new technologies now in use:
  - *Support for all browsers*
  - *Standardisation of testing*
  - *I would make a document converter so if you're uploading a CV or cover letter, you don't have to ensure it is a .doc file. More and more people are turning to other office suites these days, and it would make the uploading process easier*
- Have the application form assist in the completion process:
  - *Save multiple drafts. Full word processing features to save copy/paste*
  - *The application software should have a built-in spell checker just like Word. Most people write their answers on Microsoft Word before copy and pasting it over to the application. This would just save time*
  - *All online application systems should allow you to see all the questions to enable proper planning and allow leaving and returning to the form via a password before submission*
- Provide options for communicating your message as a candidate:
  - *A live messenger system where the applicant could talk to someone in the recruitment office via a messenger style chat room*
  - *Not the most feasible idea, but live help would be useful*
- Provide reminders to help the busy applicant:
  - *Being able to save the details of the job and the application details to the desktop, to save having to trawl through the net to find a job that may no longer be listed and to know EXACTLY what you put in the application*
  - *Retaining the ability to save and go back to edit applications. A lot of conference abstract submission websites like Hermes are very advanced and relatively simple to use. The key feature I think is not to have too many fill-in boxes and generic questions, like "describe a situation when you demonstrated leadership skills or had to compromise or worked well in a team," etc*
  - *On the application form a time of how long you have been editing the application, for instance if the timer says over a week you might think, "I need to get this sent off now I've spent too long on it". This could be combined with a timer indicating when the submission date is*

## Recommendations on content for the next generation

- Make the form easier to follow, understand and complete:
  - *Tabbed, grouped sections of questions that can be saved individually – makes the form seem less long and easier to complete*
  - *Make flash versions and ask some independent company that specialises in formulating and making questionnaires to design them as some are so boring and long winded it just puts you off*
  - *Ability to upload a pre-existing CV in a variety of different formats and have the system parse it for relevant information*
- Provide clues as to how an application will be perceived by the recruiter:
  - *CV template highlighting particular area of interest to employer*
  - *The ability to view the application as the employers will see it*
- Greater use of testing in weeding out applications:
  - *More integrated aptitude tests to help employers get a more accurate picture of the candidates they are accepting or rejecting. It is a waste of everyone's time to require all candidates to complete a lengthy form describing and illustrating every competency HR could think of, when it could be clear that some candidates' applications will not even be read owing to low grades, or that an articulate candidate with excellent communication skills cannot complete basic analysis tasks*
  - *Timed online assessments for every company – great way of cutting down the number of individuals who make it to the next stage*
- Although there is always a counter-view:
  - *"there are no wrong answers" quizzes or personality tests that obviously are used to weed out candidates*
- Greater scope to "express" yourself:
  - *Ability to record your job application on video or upload a video about yourself because a picture paints 1000 words and we live in the video generation*
  - *Space for a "personal statement", as you would find in most paper applications*
  - *Problem-solving, to show intuitive and thinking rather than recital*
  - *Maybe an example of a common day scenario within the company, so you could display what you think you would do but also so you could see whether this job was for you*

## Recommendations on process for the next generation

- One of the consistent themes was the lack of information coming back to the applicant as a result of making their application:
  - *Automatic response to acknowledge acceptance of application so applicant knows it has arrived*
  - *Tracking of applications; this would allow confirmation of progress*
  - *I would like to know when the application has been read so that I can fully track its progress*
- A very easy and practical suggestion:
  - *I would include details of the application process and how long it took firms typically to reply at each stage*
- Not sure whether this one would fly:
  - *I would like to see how many people applied for the job*
- Generally there was demand for more information:
  - *Social-networking interface for pre-application and post-application help/feedback*

## Section 4

# Conclusion and recommendations



The *GTI Online Recruitment Student User Survey* highlights that systems are now generally recognised as the mainstream way of making an application and that applicants are now quite skilled in their use. It is in the interests of both candidates and recruiters that these systems are as effective as possible, but the feedback we received suggests that there is still variable quality in the systems being used.

It is important to accept that, human nature being what it is, a system which is praised by the majority might not be liked by everyone. Thus, there is irreconcilable conflict between an employer who insists on including several open-ended questions and applicants who cannot see the point of such questions and are not prepared to spend time on them. The issue on which there is no dispute, however, is that any system, technological or paper-based, must have clear objectives, be technically efficient, properly tested, and fair and welcoming to all prospective applicants.

### Recommendations

#### For students and graduates

- ATs are not an easy option. You need to spend as much time thinking, researching and planning as you would for a paper application form.
- Take your time and think carefully about why questions are being asked.
- Take every opportunity to save your answers.
- If possible, download the form and practise your answers.
- Vote with your feet. If an employer has designed a form that does not function properly, go elsewhere (preferably after providing some constructive feedback to the organisation concerned).

#### For employers

- Test the system thoroughly before launch.
- Keep it simple.
- Make sure it can be completed in a reasonable length of time.
- Think carefully about all the issues that really annoy users – arbitrary word limits, not enough space, illogical processes.
- Ensure that users can save and return to the system.
- Allow for exceptions (mature applicants, postgraduates, those with different educational backgrounds, etc).
- If recruiting internationally, ensure the system is not country/culture specific.
- Respond promptly and sensitively to submitted forms. If there was one complaint that was most notable in the responses we received, then this was it.

## A quick checklist of what makes a good system

The following words and phrases were used by respondents in describing what they thought characterised a good system:

- ✓ User friendly
- ✓ Straightforward
- ✓ Flexible
- ✓ Simple
- ✓ Logical
- ✓ Fast
- ✓ Reliable
- ✓ Few open questions
- ✓ Clearly laid out
- ✓ Sufficient space for answers
- ✓ Quick response
- ✓ Speedy turnaround
- ✓ Good support
- ✓ Good presentation
- ✓ Precise
- ✓ Easy to navigate
- ✓ Can fill out form over several sessions
- ✓ Sensible and relevant questions
- ✓ Not too many time-consuming questions
- ✓ Personal
- ✓ No long essay questions
- ✓ Easy to download
- ✓ Ability to see/print submitted form
- ✓ Continuous communications
- ✓ Lack of technical problems
- ✓ Progress trackable

## Appendices



### Top 10 universities by response

University of Manchester  
 University of Nottingham  
 Cardiff University  
 University of Leicester  
 Aston University  
 Brunel University  
 University of Warwick  
 Coventry University  
 University of Edinburgh  
 University of London

### Overseas universities

Additionally we had responses from a very wide range of overseas respondents:

Alpen Adria University  
 American University in Dubai  
 Anna University  
 Antonio de Nebrija  
 Balti State University  
 Bandung Institute of Technology  
 Belgrade University  
 Birla Institute of Technology Mesra  
 Bocconi University  
 Ca Foscari

Copenhagen Business School  
 Dalhousie University, Canada  
 IGNOU  
 ITC, The Netherlands  
 Jordan University of Science and Technology  
 Kanpur University  
 Kungliga Tekniska Högskolan  
 Kursk State Medical University  
 Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg  
 New Jersey University  
 University of Economics, Bratislava  
 North Bengal University  
 Osun State Polytechnic Iree  
 PCBA Lahore  
 Peking University  
 Politecnico di Milano  
 Politecnico di Torino  
 Politeknik Sultan Azlan Shah  
 Pune University  
 Reims Management School  
 Rivers State University, Nigeria  
 Seville University  
 Sichuan University  
 Sup de Co La Rochelle  
 The Chinese University of Hong Kong  
 University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

Universidad Panamericana  
 Universidade de Tras Os Montes Alto Douro  
 Università degli Studi di Padova  
 Université de Marne-la-Vallée  
 Universiti Tenaga Nasional  
 University of Alicante  
 University of KwaZulu-Natal  
 University of Maiduguri, Nigeria  
 University of Malta  
 University of Prince Edward Island  
 University of Salerno, Italy  
 University of Technology, Sydney  
 University of Valladolid, Spain  
 Utrecht University  
 Vilnius Gediminas Technical University  
 Warsaw University of Technology  
 West Bengal University of Technology

### Current year

Penultimate year	36.7%
Final Year	21.6%
Graduate	28.2%
Other	13.4%
Not specified	0.1%

The 2009 Online Recruitment Student User Survey was conducted in May 2009 and compiled in June 2009.

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