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Writing job adverts that find the right people

A practical guide for business owners hiring without an in-house HR team

Most job adverts are written for the person posting them, not the person reading them. They list what the business needs. They describe the company at length. They set out requirements as if writing a procurement brief.

The result is an advert that either attracts too many of the wrong people or not enough of the right ones.

This guide gives you the structure to write a job advert that is honest and specific, and gives candidates enough to decide whether the role could serve what they are looking for. That is not a soft goal. It is one of the most effective ways to reduce early leavers and improve the quality of who makes it to interview.

> **Where this comes from.** Occupational psychology research into meaningful work and person-organisation fit, alongside practical experience writing and reviewing job adverts for small and growing businesses. Section 3 covers the legal position on advert wording, checked against the Equality Act 2010 and Equality and Human Rights Commission guidance in September 2026.

1. Before you write anything

The quality of your job advert is limited by the quality of your thinking about the role. Before opening a blank document, answer these questions.

Ask the job holder, or someone who does similar work

If the role already exists in your business, ask the person doing it. If it is a new role, find the closest equivalent. The answers to these questions are more useful than any job description template.

- What is the primary goal of this role? Be specific. Not "support the team" but "generate 30 qualified leads per month" or "keep client satisfaction scores above 85%".
- What does a typical week look like? What takes up most of the time?
- What makes someone genuinely good at this? Skills, yes, but also how they think and what they care about.
- What is the hardest part of the job? Do not leave this out. Candidates who are surprised by the hard parts leave early.
- Who does this person work with, and how?
- What advice would you give someone considering this role?

Know what purpose alignment looks like for this role

Research in occupational psychology consistently shows that people with a genuine sense of purpose experience less burnout, withdraw less and stay longer. The practical implication for hiring is not that you need to create a purposeful environment. It is that you need to find people whose purpose can be served by the work you are offering.

- What kind of impact does this role have? On clients, customers, the team, the business?
- What type of person would find this work genuinely meaningful, not just tolerable?
- Is the day-to-day reality of this role consistent with the sense of purpose you want to attract?

> If the honest answer to the last question is no, sort the role design before writing the advert. A purpose-led advert for a hollow role will attract committed people and burn them out faster.

2. The anatomy of a job advert

Every section below should be included, in roughly this order. Each one has a job to do. If a section is missing or vague, it creates a gap the candidate fills with assumptions, and assumptions attract mismatches.

2.1 The opening: what this role is for

This is the first thing a candidate reads. It decides whether they keep going.

Do not open with the company history, the headcount or a list of ping-pong tables. Open with the role. The opening answers one question: what is the purpose of this job? One to three sentences, direct and specific.

> *Example for an Operations Manager: "You will own the day-to-day running of the business so the founder can focus on growth. In the first six months, that means getting the core processes documented, understood and followed. After that, it means owning them and improving them."*

Address the candidate directly. Use "you" and "your" throughout, not "the successful candidate" or "applicants will be required to".

2.2 Day to day: what the job actually looks like

This is the section most adverts either skip or get wrong. Candidates do not only want to know what the role is responsible for in theory. They want to know what a Tuesday looks like.

Be specific. Name the tools, the meetings, the rhythms and the types of decision this person will be making regularly.

- "On a typical day you will..."
- "Most of your time will go on..."
- "You will be in regular contact with..."
- "You will use [tools or systems] to..."

If the role does not have a fixed rhythm yet because it is a new hire, say so. That is useful information, not a gap to hide.

2.3 What success looks like

Do not leave this implicit. Tell candidates exactly what good performance looks like in this role, and over what timeframe. After their settling-in or probation period, and name it (three months, six months), you would expect this person to:

- Specific output or outcome number one
- Specific output or outcome number two
- Specific output or outcome number three

This section does two things: it attracts candidates who are motivated by clear targets, and it filters out those who are not. Both are useful.

A note on probation, from January 2027. Under the Employment Rights Act 2025 the qualifying period for ordinary unfair dismissal drops from two years to six months on 1 January 2027. Probation is a contractual arrangement, not a statutory one, and there is no statutory light-touch procedure. So write a probation period into the advert and the contract that gives you a documented decision point comfortably before six months' service, and put the criteria in the advert so the candidate knows what they are being measured against.

2.4 About you: attributes first, experience second

Most adverts list experience requirements first and bury character attributes at the end, or miss them entirely. Reverse this. Start with what kind of person succeeds in this role. Then list the experience requirements, separating essential from desirable.

Attributes, and lead with these

What do people who do this job well have in common? Describe them in plain terms.

> *"You are the kind of person who reads a situation quickly and gives a straight answer, even when it is not the one someone wants to hear. You are calm under pressure and you do not need a lot of structure to stay organised."*

Values

Name two or three values that matter in this role and describe what they look like in practice. This is different from listing company values. It is about what the person brings to the work.

> *"You believe the best outcomes come from being honest about what you do not know as well as what you do. You take your commitments seriously and let people know early when something is not going to plan."*

Experience: essential against desirable

Keep essential requirements short. Only include what someone genuinely cannot do the job without. Everything else is desirable. There are two reasons, and one of them is legal.

The first is that a long essential list shrinks your applicant pool before anyone has been assessed. The often-quoted figure that men apply at 60% of the requirements and women at 100% comes from an unpublished internal report and has never been tested properly, so do not rely on the numbers. What has been surveyed is the reason people give for not applying, and the most common one is not confidence. It is believing they would not get through the screening because they did not meet the

stated criteria. Which means the criteria you write are doing the filtering, whether you intend them to or not.

The second reason is in section 3.

2.5 What is in it for them

Include the salary. Adverts without a salary range attract more applications from mismatched candidates and fewer from candidates who are already employed and not willing to waste time finding out.

Be specific about benefits. "Flexible working" means nothing. "Core hours 10am to 4pm, location flexible" means something.

- Salary range or fixed salary
- Holiday, in days, and whether that is plus or including bank holidays
- Working pattern and location specifics
- Any structured development or learning support
- Anything genuinely distinctive about working here

> "Competitive salary" is not a benefit. It is a placeholder. If you are not ready to publish a number, be honest about why rather than vague. There is no law yet requiring pay in adverts, though the Government consulted on pay transparency during 2026, so this may not stay optional.

2.6 About the company: brief, honest and last

Keep this short. One paragraph. Name what the business does, how big it is and what stage it is at. Candidates want context, not a brand story.

Do not lead with the company. The candidate is deciding whether this role is right for them. The company comes after that decision, not before it.

2.7 Equal opportunities statement

Include a brief statement confirming you are an equal opportunities employer and that you welcome applications from people of all backgrounds.

> **To be accurate about this:** no law requires a job advert to carry an equal opportunities statement. What the law requires is that you do not discriminate, and a statement is not a defence if the rest of the advert or the process does. Include one anyway. It signals something to candidates, and a written commitment you actually follow is the kind of evidence that helps if a decision is ever questioned.

If your business is actively trying to reach underrepresented groups, name them specifically. Vague diversity language does less than specific outreach. Section 3 explains what you may and may not say when you do that.

3. Language and the law

Two things are going on in the words you choose. One is who feels invited to apply. The other is whether the advert is lawful. They are related, and most advert guides only cover the first.

3.1 What the law actually says about adverts

Section 39 of the Equality Act 2010 makes it unlawful to discriminate in the arrangements you make for deciding who to offer a job. The advert is one of those arrangements. Two practical consequences follow.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission can act on a discriminatory advert even where nobody has applied and nobody has been identified as disadvantaged. And an applicant who is turned down can point to the advert as evidence that the decision was discriminatory. So the advert carries risk on its own, before you have met anyone.

Wording that restricts the job to one group

The nine protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. Wording that points at any of them narrows the advert unlawfully unless an exception applies.

- **Age.** "Recent graduate", "young and energetic", "mature and experienced", "digital native". Also a fixed number of years' experience as an essential, which can disadvantage younger applicants.
- **Sex.** Gendered job titles: salesman, handyman, waitress. Use the neutral form.
- **Race and nationality.** "Native English speaker" points at national origin. If the job needs a standard of English, describe the standard the job needs.
- **Disability.** "Must be able to lift 25kg" or "must hold a driving licence" where the task could be done another way, or is a small part of the job.

Requirements you cannot justify

A requirement that applies to everyone but disadvantages a group is indirect discrimination unless you can objectively justify it as a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim. A degree as an essential for a role that does not need degree-level thinking is the common example. So is a long unbroken employment history, which disadvantages people who have taken time out to care for someone.

This is the second reason to keep the essential list short. Every essential you cannot justify is both a smaller applicant pool and an exposure.

The two exceptions

An **occupational requirement** under Schedule 9 of the Equality Act lets you require a protected characteristic where it is genuinely necessary for the role and proportionate. It is narrow, it has to be justified role by role and it is not a general licence to specify who you want.

Positive action under section 158 lets you encourage applications from a group that is underrepresented or disadvantaged. "We particularly welcome applications from..." is lawful. What is not lawful is choosing a candidate because of a protected characteristic, other than the narrow tie-break in section 159 where two candidates are equally qualified. Encouraging is allowed. Selecting is not.

If you are unsure about a specific line, the Equality and Human Rights Commission publishes guidance on discriminatory adverts, and it is written for employers rather than lawyers. And you can send the line to us.

3.2 Gender-coded language

Job adverts contain language patterns that attract more male or more female applicants, independent of the role itself. This is not about political correctness. It affects the size and composition of your applicant pool before you have assessed a single person.

Gaucher, Friesen and Kay (2011), published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, found that adverts containing words associated with masculine stereotypes (compete, dominate, challenge, driven, ambitious) appealed less to women, even where the role itself was gender-neutral. Words associated with feminine stereotypes (collaborative, supportive, committed, understand, connect) had no equivalent deterrent effect on men.

The practical implication: masculine-coded language narrows your applicant pool without improving it.

A free tool that checks this in two minutes

The Gender Decoder was built to identify masculine-coded and feminine-coded language in job adverts, using the Gaucher, Friesen and Kay word lists. Paste your advert in and it flags the words pulling your language in either direction.

gender-decoder.katmatfield.com

It is a free third-party tool with no connection to us. Run your advert through it before posting. The output is specific enough to act on.

3.3 Other language checks

- Avoid jargon and acronyms that only insiders recognise. They exclude qualified people from outside your sector.
- Keep sentences short and direct.
- Read it aloud. If you would not say it to someone in a coffee queue, rewrite it.

4. Application questions

Application questions are the gap between a CV and an interview. Used well, they surface values, purpose alignment and how someone thinks. Used poorly, they are a box-ticking exercise that tells you nothing.

When to include them

- The role requires specific values or ways of working that are not visible from a CV
- You want candidates to self-select based on honesty about their experience or working style
- You are expecting a high volume of applications, see section 5

Keep questions to a maximum of three per application. More than that and completion rates drop and the quality of answers falls.

One thing not to ask. Questions about health or disability before you make an offer are unlawful under section 60 of the Equality Act 2010, with narrow exceptions. That includes sickness absence records. Ask about reasonable adjustments for the interview itself, which is allowed and useful, and leave health questions until after the offer.

Questions that work

The most useful application questions are ones a candidate cannot answer with a rehearsed response. They ask for specifics, not positions.

Purpose and motivation

- What kind of work do you find most meaningful, and why? Give a specific example.
- What would need to be true about a role for you to still be in it three years from now?
- What are you looking for in your next role that you have not had in a previous one?

Values and working style

- Tell us about a time you disagreed with a decision made at work. What did you do?
- Describe a situation where you had to deliver difficult news to someone. How did you handle it?
- What does a good working relationship with a manager look like to you?

Role-specific judgement

- A client calls you at 4pm on a Friday with a problem that needs resolving before Monday. What do you do?
- You have three tasks with the same deadline and not enough time to do all three to the standard you want. How do you decide?
- What is something you have learned in the last six months that has changed how you work?

Honest signals

- What are you not good at, and how do you manage around it?
- What would your last manager say is the most useful and the most frustrating thing about working with you?

Those last two tell you a lot. Candidates who give thoughtful, specific answers are more self-aware and usually easier to manage. Candidates who give only positives are worth probing at interview.

5. The friction principle

Not every role needs the same application process. The right amount of effort to ask of a candidate depends on how many applications you expect and how important fit is next to speed.

EXPECTING HIGH VOLUME: BUILD FRICTION IN	EXPECTING LOW VOLUME: KEEP IT OPEN
Add two or three application questions that need real thought. Generic answers become obvious immediately and self-select out.	Ask for a CV and a short note. Every extra step loses candidates you would have wanted, and at low volume you cannot afford that.
Say in the advert roughly how long the application takes. People decide whether to start based on that.	Reply quickly. At low volume your competition is other employers moving faster, not other candidates.

Getting this backwards is the common mistake: a long application form for a role nobody is applying for, or a one-click apply for a role that will draw two hundred CVs you then have to read.

6. Before you publish: a final checklist

- [ ] Does the opening tell the candidate what this role is for, in three sentences or fewer?
- [ ] Have you described what a typical day or week looks like?
- [ ] Is it clear what success looks like, with specific outcomes and a timeframe?
- [ ] Have you listed attributes and values before experience requirements?
- [ ] Have you separated essential requirements from desirable ones, and can you justify every essential?
- [ ] Does the advert include a salary or a salary range?
- [ ] Have you checked the wording against section 3.1: no age, sex, race or disability wording you cannot justify?
- [ ] Have you run the text through the Gender Decoder?
- [ ] Does the advert include an equal opportunities statement?
- [ ] Is the probation period stated, with what is being measured?
- [ ] Does every sentence read as spoken, not written? Read it aloud.
- [ ] Is the application process calibrated to the volume you expect?

Appendix: job advert template

Replace the placeholder text in [brackets] with your own.
The guide sections above say what each part should contain.

JOB TITLE

[Specific and accurate. The title a candidate would recognise and search for.]

KEY DETAILS

Salary	[£XX,000 to £XX,000 a year]
Location	[Remote, office or hybrid. Be specific about days and requirements]
Contract type	[Permanent, fixed term or part time]
Hours	[Full time, or X days a week]
Reporting to	[Job title of the line manager]
Probation period	[X months, and what is being assessed. See the note in section 2.3]
Closing date	[Date, or: we will close early if we find the right person]

WHAT THIS ROLE IS FOR

[One to three sentences. What is the purpose of this job? What will this person achieve? Address the candidate directly: use "you" and "your" throughout.]

ON A TYPICAL DAY YOU WILL

- [Specific task or responsibility. Name the tools, the meetings, the outputs]
- [Specific task or responsibility]
- [Specific task or responsibility]
- [What takes up most of the time? Be honest about the ratio]

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

After your probation period, we would expect you to:

- [Specific outcome with a number or a timeframe]
- [Specific outcome]
- [Specific outcome]

ABOUT YOU

[Two to three sentences describing the kind of person who succeeds in this role. Lead with character, not credentials.]

Your values and working style

- [A value or behaviour in plain English. What does it look like in practice?]
- [A value or behaviour]

Essential experience

- [Must have. Only what someone genuinely cannot do the job without, and that you could justify if asked]
- [Must have]

Desirable experience

- [Nice to have, not a barrier to applying]
- [Nice to have]

WHAT WE OFFER

- Salary: [£XX,000, or £XX,000 to £XX,000 depending on experience]
- Holiday: [X days plus bank holidays]
- [Specific working pattern and location details]
- [Any structured development or learning support]
- [Anything genuinely distinctive about working here]

ABOUT US

[One paragraph. What the business does, how big it is, what stage it is at. Context, not a sales pitch.]

HOW TO APPLY

[What to send, where to send it and by when. If you are using application questions, list them here. Name a closing date or say you will close early if the right person applies.]

[Equal opportunities statement: confirm you are an equal opportunities employer and welcome applications from people of all backgrounds. If you are using positive action to encourage a particular group, name them and use "we particularly welcome applications from...". See section 3.1.]

[If you need any adjustments to take part in the process, tell us and we will sort it.]

About What If HR

We are an HR consultancy for owner-managed UK businesses that have employees, or are about to, and nobody whose job is HR. Contracts, hiring, difficult conversations and employment law, in plain English. One named consultant who does the work herself.

If this guide raised a question about a role you are hiring for right now, send it over. Most advert questions take one reply. If you would rather hand it across, the **Advert Clinic** is £195 + VAT and includes the written advert, a language check and up to three application questions.

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HR updates by email: **whatifhr.co.uk/newsletter**

Send us your what-ifs.

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