



a students guide to starting your career with an SME



Association of
Higher Education
Careers Services

AHECS is the Association for Higher Education Careers Services across the 26 Universities and Institutes of Technology in Ireland north and south who support 180,000 students studying in the higher education sector —

60,000 of whom are preparing for graduation

AHECS Labour Market Task Group

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Overview

SMEs are companies with less than 250 employees, ranging from small start-ups to larger, well established companies. They account for over 99% of the total number of enterprises in Ireland, employ close to 70% of working adults, and generate over half of the total turnover in the business economy in Ireland. You can find SMEs in all sectors of the economy, including software, construction, marketing, advertising, arts, music, media and publishing. With such a wide range of opportunities on offer, SMEs are a great option to consider when you are searching for career options after you graduate.

Every year in Ireland over 60,000 new graduates leave third level education ready to enter the workforce. Of those, 45,000 have an undergraduate degree, and a further 19,000 have a masters' degree. Many graduates focus their attention on the highly publicised graduate training programmes offered by large Irish companies and by many multinationals, making those roles highly competitive. Vacancies in smaller organisations can be less visible, because SMEs don't recruit the same volume of graduates as larger organisations, and may spread their recruitment over the calendar year, unlike larger organisations who may recruit at a specific time in the year. Therefore, you could be at an advantage if you widen your search beyond the obvious graduate options. Jobs at SMEs offer different and varied opportunities and should be on your radar as you embark on your graduate job search.

Pros of working for an SME

SMEs offer a wide range of advantages to graduate jobseekers which can make them very attractive as employers. The upsides of going to work at an SME can include:

Quick turnaround

The hiring timeline will usually be shorter to that of larger companies

Interviews

Interview processes tend to be less onerous and intimidating – no assessment centres or endless rounds of interviews

Flexibility

Smaller companies can offer a flexible structure with opportunities for you to get involved and take responsibility for a variety of projects and functional areas in the business

Company culture

SMEs can provide a small, friendly working environment, and SMEs, including start-ups, offer the best company culture

Location

SMEs can be found all over Ireland, giving you greater freedom to search for a job in the area where you would like to live

Management access

Management can be more accessible in smaller, less hierarchical companies

Responsibility

You will likely be given a lot of responsibility early on in your career

Visibility

When you are successful in a small company, your achievements are more easily visible to your colleagues and to senior management



Less focus on grades

SME employers tend to be less concerned with degree grades or content and more focused on hiring someone enthusiastic who is ready to work hard than someone who has the best qualification, whereas many graduate programmes only take people with excellent academic grades

Constant opportunity

Jobs are advertised all year as needs arise in individual businesses, so there is plenty of time to find a job after you complete your studies

Possible drawbacks of working for an SME

There are a few things which can make working for an SME more challenging than working for a large and established company with a graduate programme. These include:

- There is likely to be no established graduate training pathway
- Less obvious career progression pathway
- Information may be as easily available about what it's like to work there
- Lower starting salaries than established graduate programmes in large companies
- Brand may have less prestige than better-known employers
- Fewer in-house training options
- Can be a career path with higher risk as smaller companies can be more vulnerable in a changing economy
- Vacancies can be harder to find, as they have smaller budget to advertise
- You may be the only recent graduate and/or the youngest person in the company
- With smaller staffing numbers, you may be required to work longer hours to help the company meet a deadline

What you have to offer SMEs

Graduates generally have a lot to offer SME employers, but as with any job search, it's your job to make it clear to any prospective employer how you can add value to their business. Here are just some of the things that you can offer an SME employer:

- You can fill existing or future skills gaps, for example bringing language skills or social media know-how to the business
- You can help them to build a talent pipeline for longer term business growth
- You might be able to bring specific knowledge from your studies and internship experience
- You are likely to be enthusiastic and highly motivated to make a positive impact on the business
- You have a fresh pair of eyes and innovative perspectives
- You won't bring ingrained bad habits established at a previous workplace
- You will be eager to make a positive impact on the business



How to decide if an SME is right for you

When you weigh up your job options, you need to think about what type of organisation would best suit you. If you're wondering if an SME is the right option for you, the first thing you should do is research the company. Spend time on their website and on their social media channels to try to get an insight into the company's work and their culture. If you get to interview stage, there are a few questions you can ask to help you decide if it would be the right place for you. Consider asking your interviewers questions such as:

- What are the training opportunities available in this role?
- How much responsibility would I have in this role?
- How would you measure success in this position?
- What is the culture of the company?
- What progression could there be within the company for someone starting in this role?
- How do you see the company developing over the next three to five years?

Where to find SME Vacancies

Your Careers Service Jobs Board

The careers service in your university, IT or college is where most employers will advertise graduate vacancies. Keep an eye on this jobs board, or sign up for alerts to hear about new opportunities as they arise.

Your Network

Many jobs are never advertised, and even those that are advertised can often be given to someone known to the company in advance. Your network can be your key to breaking into an industry. If you know what type of work you'd like to do, talk to friends and family and ask them if they have any contacts you could speak to in order to find out more about the sector. Expand your own network by identifying professional associations or other groups, such as meetups, that are linked to your career interest, sign up and get involved. The more people you know in your target sector, the more likely you are to hear about upcoming opportunities, and someone in your network might even recommend you for a role.

SME Graduate Programmes

Ibec Global Graduates

Paid 12, 18 or 24 month graduate programmes for Sales & Marketing, IT, Finance and HR Graduates with an internationally focused companies and a DIT accredited Postgraduate qualification.

<http://ibecglobalgraduates.ie/graduates>

InterTradeIreland

Roles for STEM graduates, with a focus on supporting the company to create and develop technologically innovative and commercially viable products and services across Ireland. A Postgraduate Diploma in Business and Management is offered as part of this programme.

www.intertradeireland.com

Gradub

Graduate jobs with Irish-based SMEs, with opportunities both in Ireland and overseas, across all disciplines and sectors. www.gradhub.ie

General Jobs Board

There are a wealth of opportunities posted by SMEs on general jobs boards such as:

www.gradireland.com

www.irishjobs.ie

www.jobs.ie

www.indeed.ie

www.linkedin.com

www.glassdoor.ie

www.jobbio.com



Northern Ireland Job boards that are different to above:

www.nijobs.com

Indeed.co.uk

www.glassdoor.co.uk

Sector Specific Jobs Boards

Many sectors have their own jobs boards, so it's a good idea to do some research and find out where jobs in your area of interest might be advertised. Examples of sector specific job boards include:

Chartered Accountancy

www.charteredaccountants.ie/Prospective-Students/Training-Vacancies/Vacancies

Jobs in the Creative Sector

www.creativecareers.ie

Voluntary Arts Ireland

www.voluntaryarts.org

Jobs in the Community Sector

www.activelink.ie

Marketing Institute of Ireland

www.mii.ie

Public Relations Institute of Ireland

www.prii.ie

Techlife Ireland

www.techlifeireland.com



Northern Ireland Ireland Sector Specific Job Boards that are different to above:

Jobs in the Creative Sector

<http://creativeskillset.org>

Jobs in Community Sector

<https://www.communityni.org>

Chartered Institute of Marketing

regions.cim.co.uk/Ireland/home

Public Relations Institute

<https://www.cipr.co.uk>

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