Initiative

Initiative is a combination of self-belief and self-motivation. Taking initiative involves careful consideration and trust in your own judgement. You need to take a risk, act without the influence or encouragement of others, and be willing to take responsibility for the outcome. It requires courage and a readiness to get started and act on opportunities.

Using initiative is a valuable skill in the workplace as it reduces the need for input from colleagues and managers and promotes a culture of trust and responsibility. Taking initiative shows that you can spot opportunities, bring new ideas and have the courage and confidence to act without being prompted by others. “Self-starters” who can use their initiative are highly sought after in the workplace.

Of course, it’s equally important to know when not to take the initiative and to seek clarification and approval. This could be when dealing with large amounts of money, or tricky issues connected to healthcare or important client accounts or employee/customer data. Knowing when it is not appropriate to take the initiative is as important as the initiative itself.

How can I develop initiative on my course?

- Your degree will provide lots of opportunities to use your initiative, from simply reading beyond the set texts to finding new approaches to group or individual projects to going above and beyond the remit in an assignment
- If you find a topic hard, take responsibility for the situation and approach academic staff and/or CeDAS for support
- Take the initiative in presentations by looking for innovative ways to get your message across, for example using interactive tech tools or games
- Use your initiative when researching by proactively looking for additional accurate and reliable sources of information
- Help make group work more efficient by using your initiative and suggesting a better way for the group to communicate using an online forum or Whatsapp group, or suggesting a format for the meetings where every group member gets a chance to contribute, for example

How can I develop initiative outside my course?

- Look for ways to use your degree knowledge outside of your core academic work, for example by using your tech or video production skills to support a local charity, setting up a Twitter account to follow key figures in a topic related to
your studies, or offering to support new students in your department as a Peer Guide.

- Take a position of responsibility within a student club/society, and think of a project, event or campaign that might help the club engage with students, get noticed and/or make a positive impact.

- Take the initiative at your part-time job and ask for ways you could upgrade your duties for a short time. For example, you could ask if you could shadow a manager from head office for a day or take extra responsibilities that allow you to use Excel, deal with clients or write a report, for example. In any job, see if you can suggest ways to help things run more efficiently and/or profitably.

- Extend your knowledge of the working world with a virtual internship or online short course.

- Say “yes” to opportunities that are available at university, like student media, volunteering, Enactus and sports, as well as community organisations and activities outside of university. See if you can think of any initiatives that will help your club or society succeed and grow.

- Learn more about job options using the LinkedIn alumni page. You can connect with former students and ask questions about their career paths, routes into their field of work, and work shadowing – this is known as informational interviewing.

How do people use their initiative in the workplace?

Royal Holloway graduates have used initiative as:

- A Financial Crime Analyst seeking out further information and data to spot money-laundering and fraud.
- A Features Editor commissioning innovative content to maximise social media impact.
- A Teacher adapting lessons at short notice to help engage pupils.
- A Procurement Executive making recommendations to managers to help reduce external supplier costs.
- A Library Officer proposing and creating a new section for the library.

How will employers assess my initiative skills?

If a role you are applying for requires initiative the job description might state they are looking for someone who is a problem-solver, who seeks out opportunities, is self-driven, or an innovative/creative thinker. Make sure you can demonstrate these skills on your CV.

You may be asked specific questions on an application form or in an interview which are designed to assess your skills in this area. Examples of questions that could be asked include:

- Tell me about a time when you spotted an opportunity to suggest a change. How did you put this forward and what was the outcome?
- Give me an example of when your initiative and quick thinking stopped a problem escalating
- When have you had to use your initiative to cope with a change in circumstances?

If you’d like to get some help with structuring your answers for application forms or interviews, visit the CVs and interviews section of the Careers Moodle.

ShortListMe, Graduates First and eCareersGrad are available on the Moodle page to help you practice interview skills, case studies and psychometric tests.

For more ideas on how you can ‘sell’ your skills on your CV then please watch our VIDEO CV workshop series, Part 3: Selling your 'Skills' on your CV (panopto.com)

If you are applying for a graduate scheme and are invited to an assessment centre, you may be assessed on your ability to question, problem-solve and think creatively. You might be given a business case study to analyse or a group activity to complete. If you’d like to practice a group activity keep an eye out for the Assessment Centre workshops that run during the Autumn and Spring terms. These will be available to book via The Careers Portal.

You can make an appointment to speak with one of our Careers Consultants via the Careers Portal where we can give feedback on your CV or application or help you to prepare for interviews and assessments, as well as help you think about your career options.