



Careers support

An RCN guide for health care assistants
and assistant practitioners





Case study

Nicky Coote started her career in 2003 as an HCA in general practice before moving to a smoking cessation role in 2011. The role has provided lots of development opportunities and she has become a trainer for the Royal Society of Public Health and been approached to speak at RSPH conferences. The public health web site PHORCaST have also asked if she will be interviewed for their feature on public health workers.



Whilst working as an HCA Nicky took every opportunity to take on new responsibilities and trained in areas such as spirometry, Dopplar, administration of flu jabs and vitamin B12.

She says: “If there’s an opportunity, ask to be put forward for it. Don’t assume your managers will do it for you. Be self-motivated, but be careful not to overstretch yourself. Don’t be put off by thinking that you’re ‘just an HCA’, as you are a valuable member of the health care family.”

On preparing for interviews, Nicky advises, “Interviews can be nerve wracking, but make sure you are familiar with the role you are going for and the expectations of you. Research the organisation to give yourself the best shot. Remember that if you’ve got what they are looking for, they are likely to take you.”



“I have always found the RCN Careers Service helpful. The staff are knowledgeable and pragmatic, and advised me on what I could and couldn’t do when expanding my practice. In the future it’s my aspiration to get on a degree course.”

Nicky’s tips for success

- Never be complacent about your learning, take every opportunity to develop and complete courses.
- Practice reflective learning, getting clinical supervision where you can.
- Be adaptable, confident and focused.
- Enjoy what you are doing because you are helping people who really need your skills.



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Introduction

Whether you're applying for your first job, or moving to a more senior position, the RCN is here to help you get that perfect role.

Where to look for jobs

Job titles for HCAs can vary. When searching for jobs, try using the following terms:

- nursing assistant
- health care assistant
- health care support worker
- care assistant
- support worker
- nursing auxiliary
- assistant practitioner
- clinical support worker

Vacancies are typically advertised in local newspapers and at Job Centre Plus (England and Wales) and Job Centres (Scotland and Northern Ireland). Alternatively, you can look online:

NHS jobs in England and Wales	www.jobs.nhs.uk You can also sign up to receive email alerts for jobs that fit your search criteria.
NHS jobs in Scotland	www.jobs.scot.nhs.uk
Northern Ireland	www.hsrecruit.com
Local and worldwide jobs	RCN members can find these through RCN Bulletin and on www.rcnbulletinjobs.co.uk

Who employs HCAs and APs?

The NHS is the biggest employer of health care assistants (HCAs) and assistant practitioners (APs), with diverse and varied opportunities. In acute hospitals HCAs and APs work in A&E, midwifery, critical care, medical, surgical and specialist wards and clinics. In the community, they work in people's homes, in GP practices or with specialist teams such as health visitors, school nurses or in the prison service.

HCAs and APs are also employed in private hospitals, residential care/nursing homes and hospices, and with the armed forces. Temporary opportunities are available through hospital banks and private agencies. Many nurse recruitment agencies also advertise jobs on their website and through regional local offices.



Completing application forms

HCA and AP jobs can be highly sought after, particularly in the NHS, so you need to make sure that you take time, care and attention when completing application forms. Many employers will offer the opportunity to gain vocational qualifications in care or a specialist area. This can lead to secondment to a foundation degree, with career progression to an assistant practitioner or senior care assistant role.

Some may offer progression to a pre-registration nursing, allied health profession or operating department practitioner qualification. Whichever level of education is offered as part of the job, you'll need to demonstrate that you're a safe bet for the employer's investment.

Always start an application by looking closely at the job description and person specification. If you are not provided with this information, contact the employer directly and try to find out what they are looking for in an ideal candidate. You can then check that you meet the requirements of the post and think about how you will demonstrate this on your application form.

If you are completing a paper application form, write it out in pencil first and then go over it in black ink.

Standard sections on application forms

Personal information

Make sure that you only give details that you are happy to share. For example, you may not wish to give your work number if you are not happy to be contacted there.



Monitoring information

This section asks for information relating to equality, covering areas such as age, race, religion, gender, sexuality and disability.

For the NHS, and some other jobs, if you consider yourself to have a disability, you can request that you are guaranteed an interview if you demonstrate that you meet all the minimum criteria listed in the person specification. This can be helpful in getting you shortlisted. If this scheme applies, it will be stated on the application form.

For NHS jobs, information provided in the 'personal information' and 'monitoring information' sections of the application form should not normally be seen by the short-listing panel. The decision on whether to select you for interview will be based on the information you provide in the 'application for employment' section.

Qualifications and employment history

Start with details of your most recent qualification and job and work backwards chronologically. Fill in all of the requested information, giving a brief summary of your job responsibilities and duties where asked. You can expand on this information in the 'supporting information' section of the form.

Additional information

The ‘supporting information’ section of the form, where you are required to give more detail about why you are applying for the job and why you should be appointed, requires careful thought, preparation and attention to detail. Go through the job description and person specification thoroughly and make sure that you provide evidence to show how you meet all the requirements of the post.

If you are completing a paper application form, try to provide a typed statement on a separate piece of A4 paper stapled to the form. If this is not possible, make sure your handwriting is as neat as possible.

RCN members can obtain advice on how to present information within supporting statements from the RCN Careers Service online at www.rcn.org.uk/careers and by calling **0345 772 6100**.

References

Employers will usually wish to approach two referees who can comment on a period covering the last three years of your employment/training. They will expect the referee to have a position of authority (preferably with line management responsibility for you) and be able to comment on your work experience, competence, personal qualities and suitability for the post.

If you are a student you can provide details of a lecturer, but the employer will still want to contact your most recent employer if applicable. If you have not been in employment for a considerable length of time, you should still try to contact your most recent employer for a reference, but if it is not possible to find an employer referee, RCN members can seek advice from the RCN Careers Service, on **0345 772 6100**.

Declarations

Make sure you sign the form, if it is paper, or tick any relevant boxes for online forms, and that you read any declarations carefully.

Health assessment form

You will usually be asked to complete a health questionnaire. This should be sent to the occupational health department (if you have one) and will remain confidential to that service. If you have declared any issues related to your health you may be called for an interview with an occupational health nurse, who will check that your and others’ health and safety will not be compromised by the role to which you have applied.

Some common mistakes

These may seem obvious, but happen frequently, at all job levels.

Copying and pasting irrelevant information from one application to another

For example, you may be using information from a previous application, but

inadvertently transport: ‘I am applying for a job on Preston ward... as I really enjoy working with older people...’ when in fact you are applying for a job in a children’s outpatients department.

Using out-of-date terminology

Words such as ‘geriatrics’ instead of ‘older people’, or ‘handicapped people’ instead of ‘people with disabilities’. Make sure you use the terminology used by the employer.

Grammatical errors

If this is not your strong point, or English is not your first language, ask someone whose opinion you trust to proofread the form before submission. Always use spellcheck.



Not doing what is asked

If you are asked to complete a form in black ink, or to provide your most recent job first, make sure that you do!

Making your supporting statement too short or too long

Have you covered all the areas mentioned in the person specification for the job in a way that is easy for the employer to tick off their checklist for the ideal candidate? Is the information succinct? Make sure the employer does not have to wade through reams of information to get to the relevant points.

Not providing concrete examples of your experience

For example, instead of writing ‘I am a good communicator’, back up this statement with a concrete example of how you have used your communication skills effectively (see sample supporting statement on page 8).

Submitting the form close to the closing deadline

Often employers will close the vacancy once they receive a certain number of forms, so try to send the application well before the initial deadline.

Pressing the ‘send’ button before you have completed the application

If you are not confident with computers ask someone to help you so that you don’t lose vital information or press the ‘send’ button before you are happy with the end result.

Not explaining gaps

Make sure you explain gaps in employment, or a short career history. Evidence can include unpaid work such as voluntary work, caring for a sick relative or relevant skills obtained through leisure interests.



Case study

Supporting statement for an Assistant Practitioner, band 4 position on a surgical ear, nose and throat ward



I am applying for a band 4 position on Lewis Ward as I am very keen to progress in surgical nursing, having been employed on this ward for three years as a senior health care assistant. I believe I meet the requirements listed on the person specification as follows:



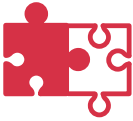
Qualifications

I am currently working towards the Care certificate and I have been fortunate to benefit from the trust's excellent development programme. This has enabled me to gain an NVQ/QCF level 3 in care and secondment to complete a foundation degree at Cresswell University, where I have gained excellent results in all assignments. I have recently completed the A1 assessors course and have assessed health care assistant colleagues completing their NVQ/QCF level 2 competencies.



Experience

I have worked in acute health care for the last ten years, holding positions on both medical and surgical wards. I have extensive experience in head and neck and frequently accept delegated responsibilities from senior colleagues. For example, on each shift I am allocated a group of up to six patients, where I am responsible for pre-surgery preparation or providing post operative care. I monitor and record vital signs, reporting adverse findings to senior colleagues. I also prioritise a busy workload, delegating to health care assistants where required, and ensure that I communicate effectively with anxious or distressed relatives.



Practical and intellectual skills

I have been assessed as competent to perform clinical procedures such as minor dressings, tracheostomy care, venepuncture and female catheterisation, and have extensive experience in these areas. I am also experienced in delivering mouth care, monitoring infusion rates and providing discharge advice.

I enjoy working in a team and contribute actively to team handovers and meetings. For example, I recently suggested that we rearrange our stock cupboard, having assessed that it was a health risk to staff. I was given responsibility for this, which has received positive feedback from colleagues. I am able to present information clearly in writing and to record patient progress using the PAS computer system.

I am able to establish good relationships with patients and endeavour to provide emotional support to those coming to terms with facial disfigurement. I liaise regularly with the hospital counsellor and ensure that both patients and relatives are referred to appropriate support services. I understand the audit cycle and have attended study days on this topic. I have actively participated in recording data for the ward's audit of post operative mouth care.



Disposition/attitude

I am a highly motivated and enthusiastic team player who is passionate about delivering high-quality care. I believe that colleagues would describe me as conscientious, courteous and punctual. I aim to respect and value the rights of a diverse range of colleagues, patients and relatives.

Writing your CV

Why write a CV?

There are several reasons why you may need to write a Curriculum Vitae (CV).

- Small or medium-sized employers may not have a formal application form and may ask you to ‘apply in writing’.
- To contact a range of employers seeking job opportunities – this is called a ‘speculative CV’.
- Some employers may request you to submit a CV along with their application form.

Preparing to write a CV

Start by making a list of your work experience and posts held, beginning with the most recent. For each post held, list the date of employment, name and location of employer, job title, your responsibilities and your main achievements, such as gaining vocational qualifications or promotion.

You can also include unpaid activities, such as voluntary work, helping out at school events or tasks undertaken when caring for a relative with a long-term illness.

Next, gather together all your educational certificates and make a list, working backwards chronologically, of the courses you have undertaken and qualifications gained, including names of the educational establishments or course providers and the dates when the course was undertaken.

Basic guidelines

Format

There is no one perfect format for a CV. Ideally it should be logical, clear and concise and should ensure maximum attention is given to your strengths.



Personal details

Include your name, address, preferred contact telephone number and email address.

Opening statement

Provide a couple of sentences that summarise your career history, personal qualities and career aspirations. If you have a lot of experience, either paid or unpaid, you can include two or three achievements in the statement.

Experience

Begin with your most recent post and list dates, position(s) held and the name of your employer. Include three or four of the responsibilities held in most recent posts, and two or three examples of duties relevant to the position for which you are applying. Your most recent position should have the most detailed information.

Qualifications

Provide details of your qualifications and education to date, starting with the most recent.

Personal

You may want to include extra information, such as your interests, but do so in general terms and only if they are relevant to the job. You may also include that you hold a driving licence.

Explain gaps in paid employment – for example, taking a career break to raise a family.

General tips

- Try to use ‘action’ words, such as the following:

identified	assessed	organised	implemented
produced	achieved	performed	co-ordinated
improved	completed	supervised	delivered

- Use numbers to create an impact. For example, ‘organised care for a group of seven patients on a daily basis’.
- Try not to exceed two A4 pages. If you have a lot of experience, simply summarise any positions held more than ten years ago. If you have attended a lot of short study days, select the most important ones relevant to your target audience, and summarise the others – for example, ‘More than 20 in-house study days attended, covering areas such as diabetic foot care, safer patient handling, basic life support, palliative care and infection control’.
- Avoid the use of too many font styles. Fancy typefaces and borders are not needed.
- Avoid the use of abbreviations that will not be recognised easily.
- Inclusion of contact details for referees is optional, unless requested to do so.
- Enclose a covering letter which highlights the main points of your CV and how they relate to the post for which you are applying.

Finally ...

Get at least two people to proofread your CV for errors, and use a spellcheck. Ask for constructive feedback on whether the CV is easy to read and if it makes an impact.

See www.rcn.org.uk/careers for CV hints and tips and if you would like feedback on your CV, make an appointment with the Careers Service by contacting 0345 772 6100.

Preparing for an assessment centre

Increasingly, organisations use more than an interview to assess a job applicant's suitability for a post. An assessment centre consists of one or more activities to enable the selection panel to decide who best meets the requirements of the job.

Attending an assessment centre can be a daunting prospect, but as long as you prepare beforehand, you can gain a much better insight into your strengths and development needs. If you perform less well in one area you may be able to make up points in another area. Employers that use this form of selection have often invested a great deal of money and resources to ensure that they provide a fair selection process. Such employers will often provide written feedback with analysis of your scores and rationale for the marks given. Others will provide face-to-face feedback before you leave.

Techniques

Here are some of the more commonly used assessment techniques:

Tests of numeracy and literacy skills

Numeracy tests often include simple calculations. Literacy tests may include a written comprehension of a text, where candidates are tested on their ability to understand and summarise information and write clearly.



Group discussion about a topic

You may be given a topic to discuss. Often employers are testing communication skills, checking that you listen to, and interact well with others, as well as contribute to the task. Success depends on contributing enough, without dominating and interrupting the discussion. It is helpful to stay positive throughout and to reflect on what has been discussed periodically.

Role play exercises

You may be asked to re enact the role of an HCA when interacting with a patient or client. One of the assessors will usually play the role of a patient or client who is presenting with a problem. You should behave as you normally would in a caring role.

Psychometric tests

Psychometric tests are structured assessment methods. They may include a test of your personality. Employers may be keen to look for certain values or attitudes which are necessary to providing compassionate, dignified care.

What the assessor is looking for

Communication

The ideal candidate is able to demonstrate knowledge clearly and concisely, does not interrupt others, listens attentively, demonstrates positive body language and good eye contact, contributes ideas and facilitates the contribution of others.

Values

Employers are seeking recruits who care about patients, show empathy towards others and care passionately about dignified health care.

Adaptability

Employers seek recruits who demonstrate enthusiasm, determination and the ability to deal with new situations.

What to expect

You may meet the other candidates and undertake joint activities with them, although some centres will focus more on individual exercises. An assessment centre may be used as an initial screening exercise, prior to progression to interview. Or you may need to pass a certain element, such as a numeracy test, before you can progress further.

Scoring schemes

You will usually be rated on your performance in each of the component sections of the assessment. Employers will select the candidate(s) with the highest overall score(s). Some tests may have a right or wrong answer. In other tests, employers will mark according to a scale against specific criteria (see below).

Sample scoring scheme for rating performance in a group discussion about a patient communication issue:

Scoring

1	Development needed
2	Fairly competent
3	Competent
4	Very Competent

Assessment centres can last from a couple of hours to a day, with breaks between activities.

Criteria

- **Adaptability:** demonstrates team work potential; enthusiasm and determination and the ability to make suggestions.
- **Compassion:** shows passion for providing a high-quality and caring service to patients and their relatives.

Before an assessment centre

You will be assessed against the criteria outlined in the job description and person specification, so it is important that you know these documents inside out.

- Read the guidance notes carefully. Make sure you take spare stationery, etc. if asked to bring these.
- Visit the employer's website so you know as much about the organisation as possible.
- Reflect on your own style and its impact on potential group activities. If you are naturally very talkative, remind yourself that you may need to focus more on listening. If you are very quiet, remember that you will need to speak up to make an impact on the assessors.
- Reflect on your 'best self': think of a time when you have worked really well in a team or when your contribution was valued by colleagues or patients. Think about the skills you used in that situation and the behaviours you displayed.
- If you have a disability that may affect your performance in any activities, make sure you let the employer know beforehand.
- Plan your outfit and make sure you look clean, smart and professional.
- Make sure you plan your journey and how long it will take, allowing for delays.
- Get plenty of rest the day before as it will be quite tiring.

At the assessment centre

- Be positive and enthusiastic, but don't act. Try not to see the other candidates as competitors.
- Assume that you are being assessed at all times.
- Have good eye contact with the people you meet and smile when appropriate.
- Make sure you read all the information relevant to each activity and listen carefully to any instructions. If there is anything you are not clear about, ask one of the facilitators.
- Take opportunities to have a break and take refreshments, where offered, as these will help keep up your stamina throughout the assessment.



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Before the interview

- Eat something – this will help settle your nerves.
- Have one last look at your interview paperwork, but don't try to cram.
- Leave plenty of time to get there.
- When you arrive, don't be embarrassed to ask for a glass of water or the opportunity to freshen up.
- Take deep breaths to help control adrenaline.
- Employ logic to beat nervous thoughts; any interview question should be treated exactly as you would treat a job situation, because that's exactly what the job represents.
- And remember... this is also your opportunity to confirm that you want to work for the organisation.

When people are nervous, they breathe more shallowly, which starves the brain of vital oxygen. To help you relax, follow this simple deep breathing technique a few minutes before the interview:



Stand up, if you can.



Inhale slowly, trying to fill your lungs completely. Try to do this naturally, without taking a great deal of forced effort.



After a count of three, slowly exhale through your mouth.



Do not overdo it so you hyperventilate. Take the time to do this exercise gently for three or four minutes.

During the interview:

✓ Do:

- ✓ Smile when you walk in
- ✓ Shake hands with the panel
- ✓ Take your time to get comfortable
- ✓ Ask if you don't understand a question
- ✓ Keep good eye contact
- ✓ Smile – shows friendliness and openness
- ✓ Nod – shows you're paying attention
- ✓ Make eye contact – shows sincerity and confidence, but don't stare!
- ✓ Sit well back in your chair to look more relaxed and comfortable
- ✓ Hold your head up to avoid mumbling into your chest
- ✓ Begin your answer by looking at the person who asked the question, then direct it at the entire panel
- ✓ Try to spread your eye contact evenly towards each member of the panel
- ✓ Ask questions at the end

✗ Don't:

- ✗ Rush your answers
- ✗ Cross your arms – makes you look guarded
- ✗ Hunch your shoulders
- ✗ Fumble with jewellery or fidget



Sample interview questions

- Why do you want the job?
- What skills and experience would you bring to the role?
- Tell us about a recent situation where you were required to use your own initiative.
- How do you cope with pressure/stress?
- What makes a good team player?
- How would you deal with a relative of a patient who was aggressive and verbally abusive?
- What would you do if a patient told you he wanted to make a complaint about the nursing care at your workplace?
- What are your strengths?
- What are your weaknesses/development needs?
- How do you keep up to date on your skills and knowledge?
- What do you understand by the term ‘diversity’?

Coping with difficult interview questions

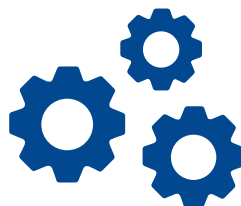
Question: Please give an example of a work situation that didn’t work out very well.

To avoid dwelling on weaknesses, focus on the past rather than the present and finish with what you learnt from the experience. For example, what would you do if you were the first person to:

- find a patient who had fallen out of bed
- be approached by a patient who wanted to make a complaint
- find a patient in cardiac arrest.

The interview panel will want to know that you have common sense, and that patient safety and wellbeing is your priority. For many scenario situations there is a process that involves:

- assessment of the situation
- taking appropriate action
- following procedures and guidelines
- appropriate communication
- record keeping
- evaluating and learning from the situation.



Another approach is to prepare examples from your experience which back up responses to questions. Use the STAR technique to help you provide as much detail as possible. Start by describing the:

- **S**ituation, then state the
- **T**arget you were trying to achieve, then the
- **A**ctions you took and finally, give the
- **R**esult.

For example:

Situation: I was allocated to a bay where two neighbouring patients, who had both been on the ward for several days, started arguing about one person's belongings taking up too much space. The discussion was becoming quite heated and I noticed that other patients and relatives looked anxious.

Target: I wanted to diffuse the tension which was building.

Action: I therefore approached them both and suggested calmly that they should come and discuss the matter in a quieter area of the ward. I invited them to sit down and gave each the opportunity to express their grievances.

Result: The outcome was that one agreed to keep his belongings closer to his bed and the other apologised for 'flying off the handle' and explained that he was having a 'bad day' as he'd been told that he would be in hospital for longer than expected. I therefore asked him if he would like to discuss his care with the ward sister.

Question: What are your weaknesses/development needs?

- Think about ways of turning a negative into a positive.
- For example, 'In the past, I have had a tendency to try to take on too much, but I have dealt with this by learning how to delegate responsibilities, prioritising by writing lists and planning my day in advance. I have also attended a time management course.'
- Remember you will be new to the job, so you can discuss possible weaknesses in terms of the support that will help you to adapt to the new job, such as a good induction programme, or a short course on skill development, such as venepuncture, if applicable.

Question: What do you understand by the term 'diversity at work'?

Try to avoid saying 'treating everybody in the same way' as this can appear oversimplistic. This question is usually about equality of access to services and treating colleagues with equal support and respect. You will also need to describe how you are self aware, and that your own background, upbringing and culture may affect your

interactions with those who are different to you. Try to read the organisation's equal opportunities or diversity statement if there is one.

Questions to ask at interview

At the end of a job interview, a good interviewer will offer you the opportunity to ask questions. Having completed the interview, your first temptation may be to say that you don't have any questions and leave as soon as you can. However, remember that an interview is a two-way process and you need to know whether this is the job for you.

Questions that may help you to find out more about the organisation and also impress the employer include:

What do you offer in terms of continuing professional development?

This will show your commitment to learning. The answer you receive will also help you decide if you are being employed merely as 'a pair of hands' or whether the employer will help you to advance and obtain useful qualifications.

How would you describe the work culture?

The employer is committed to issues such as work-life balance. You may also glean information about the team dynamics and whether you will be working in a positive environment. This question can demonstrate your keenness and help you to find out whether you will be seen as someone who would contribute in a positive way.

Are there any significant issues that the organisation will face over the coming months?

This shows your ability to see your role in the context of the bigger picture. You can also find out how your role may be affected by forthcoming changes or projects.

Types of assessment used by the interview panel

To ensure fairness, many interview panels use a points-based system to score the quality and detail of your response to each question. They will then add up the scores for each applicant and award the job to the person with the most points. If you follow the tips given within this guide, you will maximise your ability to gain a high score.

Interviewers may use other forms of assessment, including paper-based tests that cover basic numeracy and literacy. The RCN Learning Zone (www.rcn.org.uk/learningzone) includes a useful section for RCN members on how to improve your numeracy skills.

Skills for Health have also developed a literacy and numeracy tool, which can be accessed from the Skills for Health website (www.skillsforhealth.org.uk).

After the interview

If you are unsuccessful:

- Reflect on your performance, write down what worked and what didn't. List the questions with which you had most difficulty. How would you respond next time?
- Contact a member of the interview panel and ask for constructive feedback on your performance.
- If you believe that discrimination has occurred, contact your RCN representative.



If you are successful:

- Wait for confirmation in writing before resigning from your current post.
- Make sure you are sent a contract and details of the terms and conditions.
- Clarify any concerns before accepting the job in writing.





Careers Service from the RCN

Good luck!

RCN members can obtain further guidance, advice or feedback on getting the perfect job by calling the RCN Careers Advice Service on **0345 772 6100**.



There is further careers information on our website, including further useful weblinks. www.rcn.org.uk/careers





Taking your first steps as an HCA?

The RCN is here to support you with First Steps — a free, interactive training resource designed to equip you with the knowledge you need to succeed in your new role.

It includes:

- ✓ printable competence checklists
- ✓ a reflective diary
- ✓ an assessment quiz
- ✓ a downloadable certificate.

Take a look at www.rcn.org.uk/firststeps



HCA's • HCSW's • AP's

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