

Agenda: Apple appears from nowhere

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What makes students choose one employer over another? A sometimes confused, sometimes rational mix of money, power, public service and sheer adventure – judging by the [table of most popular employers](#) compiled by Trendence, the research and consultancy business.

The list is splendidly diverse. It includes prestigious public-sector organisations, led by the BBC, followed by MI5 and the National Health Service.

But the majority of the most popular organisations are private-sector companies, led by second-placed [Apple](#). The company has raced to a commanding position from virtually nowhere last year, helped by the hipness of its newly launched iPhone.

How we did it

The UK Graduate Recruitment Review is an annual study conducted among students in the second half of their studies who are about to enter the workforce, writes Meike Wacker.

It is conducted by the Trendence Institute, a Berlin-based research house that specialises in the European recruitment market.

It is the largest of its kind, covering 14,634 students from 80 universities within the UK, including all the Russell Group institutions.

A five months field phase, from October 2007 to February 2008, saw more than 14,500 students completing an anonymous online questionnaire.

Trendence contacted them through approximately 20 partner organisations.

Weighting by gender and university ensured that the data represented the British student population.

The study looks at students' preferences and priorities when it comes to selecting a first employer after graduation and examines the strategies they adopt when looking for information about potential employers.

The centrepiece of the study is the ranking of the top 100 British employers.

Respondents were able to choose 10 companies or organisations from a list of

The next two leading private-sector companies, [Microsoft](#) and [Google](#), are also in the technology business – leaving PwC, the top financial services firm, in seventh place in the overall rankings.

Is there any rational pattern in this hierarchy?

Yes and no. [Goldman Sachs](#), at ninth place, makes sense for those motivated by money – although this is clearly not its sole attraction. It is perhaps the most prestigious of the investment banks, which, together with law firms, are the top payers.

The BBC's top ranking makes sense for those interested in both power and public service, given its influential role in shaping public opinion.

But MI5's third place confirms that many graduates are more interested in adventure than power. The domestic espionage service and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office rank much higher than the Civil Service Fast Stream, at a lowly 31st.

The order is intriguing. Britain's diminished power abroad, and the immediacy of electronic communications, has reduced the importance of diplomats. MI5 has seen a resurgence of importance, but does not play a role in most of the government decisions that affect people's daily lives.

The Civil Service Fast Stream, by contrast, carries the promise of huge power to the lucky ones, and has a very well-regarded training programme as well.

Carl Gilleard, chief executive of the Association of Graduate Recruiters, notes that the top 10 employers include some, such as the NHS, that have an extensive and well-known graduate programme. But others, such as the BBC, do not. The corporation declined to answer the FT's enquiries. Since it is at the top or near it in most such surveys, it does not really need to do so.

Mr Gilleard hints at an element of the irrational in some of the choices. "Maybe a lot of graduates are bright but a bit clueless," he muses.

He concludes that there are definitely "fads". How else might one explain the sudden rise of Apple? It is a well respected

more than 100 as attractive first employers. From these 10 participants then chose their three top-attractive employers.

In addition, to creating the main ranking, the data are analysed in various ways to produce various specialist rankings and sector tables.

Some of this material is presented in this FT Special Report in the tables accompanying the various Sector Analysis articles.

This year, we highlight the Accountancy and Management Consultancy professions, the Information Technology industry, Investment Banking and Engineering.

In addition, we take a look at the different employer preferences expressed by male and female students.

company, but sceptics might argue it cannot be rational that it has almost no visibility in the 2007 survey, and then suddenly comes second in the 2008 version.

Surveying the rankings, Mr Gilleard notes with a tone of indulgence: "We are talking about young people."

MI5, at three, declined to comment on the survey, despite its reputation for greater openness in recent years about recruitment.

But the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (21) is more forthcoming. A young FCO spokesman who joined as a graduate says: "What attracted me was the opportunity to work overseas." The FCO has 261 embassies and other foreign "missions" – enabling a steady stream of overseas placements for those with *wanderlust*.

The FCO holds another charm shared by Goldman Sachs and several of the other most popular employers – it is famously hard to get into. For the ultra-competitive personalities who graduate from Britain's top universities, this exclusiveness is reason enough to join.

But there is evidence that graduate jobs in general are harder to come by. The average number of applicants per graduate

vacancy is 29, according to separate research by Trendence – an unsurprising fact in a country where about 300,000 new graduates leave the higher education system each year.

With competition so tough, even by the age of 25 one in three is in work that does not require a degree, according to research from Francis Green and Yu Zhu, economists at Kent University. This compares with one in five for men and below one in four for women in 1992.

This suggests that in future years, for many graduates their employer of choice will be the one that deigns to give them a job.

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