

Assessment centres – what they are and how to do well

Assessment centres consist of a set of activities over a day or half day, designed to see how you deal with work related situations.

While an interview involves you describing how you have used your skills in the past, an assessment centre allows employers to observe you using those skills. There is usually an interview and one or more of the activities covered in this guide. The assessment centre typically lasts one to two days and is often the final stage after a series of psychometric tests and interviews.

Preparation

As with interviews, preparing by making sure you know about what the job involves and what the company does is vital.

Find out what is happening at the moment in the relevant industry and think about how that might impact what the company does. These are the types of themes that might come up during the assessment centre tasks. For example, in a group discussion you could be given a scenario and asked to come up with a risk assessment of how that scenario could impact the company. Being able to talk about what is happening in the wider business environment will only be a good thing. It will help make your arguments or decisions seem well informed.

Read through the job description and pick out the skills the recruiter is looking for, as these are the criteria that you are going to be assessed against. Look to showcase these skills and work together with the other participants rather than compete against them.

For further, related information see our *Interviews* and *Demonstrating your skills and competencies* titles.

On the day

Make sure you arrive in plenty of time, dress smartly and smile. First impressions are vital, so be friendly, positive and polite to everyone you meet, including the reception staff, and this still applies during coffee breaks.

Below are the main types of tasks you can expect to be asked to complete. There is no set format to assessment centres. You could be given only one or two of these activities and they could take place in any order. You could be given a type of task twice if it is particularly relevant to the role you are applying for. Some employers will give a full break down of the tasks you will be given when you are invited to their assessment centre, but this isn't always the case.

Regardless of the task, always make sure you follow the instructions given and take into account any details you are provided with. Remember, all participants will be given the same information as you, so even if you feel that a task is difficult or that you are given little time to prepare, the other candidates will be in the same situation!

Presentations

Presentations test your ability to communicate your ideas clearly in a structured, professional and engaging manner, and show how you would represent the organisation in front of clients. They're also a chance to demonstrate your commercial awareness, and understanding of the sector and organisation you're applying to.

You might be given a topic in advance and be asked to prepare a presentation on it, or you could be given a topic on the day.

Subjects vary, but some common themes include challenges facing the organisation or sector, selling a product or service, or talking about an aspect of your experience.

If you are applying for a role in academic research, you are commonly asked to present on your research and how it relates to the institution.

You will usually be asked some questions at the end of the presentation to see whether you can respond calmly and constructively when your ideas are challenged.

Practice makes perfect so have a few dry runs to tweak your presentation style and to ensure that you are fluent and familiar with the content.

- ✓ Use appropriate professional language that is pitched to the audience's level of understanding and their interests.
- ✓ Engage your audience by making eye contact, smiling and showing enthusiasm.
- ✓ Structure your argument by giving a clear introduction and a conclusion that summarises and ties your points together.
- ✓ Pose questions or use practical examples to illustrate your points.
- ✗ Don't try to cover too many points or fit too much content in.
- ✗ Don't go over the time limit or not take into account any information they've provided.
- ✗ Don't use text-heavy slides, or look down at your notes too much as this will stop you from connecting with your audience.

In-tray / e-tray exercises

This is a test of your prioritisation and decision making skills and shows your ability to identify urgent and important information, and connect apparently unrelated items.

You'll have to deal with an inbox of email messages in a limited amount of time, where you have to choose a response and / or rank them in order of priority.

Messages will often include items such as meeting invites, requests, complaints and reports. Be ready for the unexpected, as an urgent request could arrive during the activity, which changes the priorities in the scenario.

- ✓ Read the instructions carefully and quickly look through all the information you are given.
- ✓ Pay attention to any contradictions, anything involving a manager or client, and details such as dates (looking out for clashes and deadlines). A low priority email sent weeks ago could now be urgent.
- ✓ Choose the option that reflects their priorities as an organisation, and the key responsibilities of the role you're applying for.
- ✓ Respond tactfully and politely if you have to let someone down and delegate where you can.
- ✗ Don't respond before reading all the information as a common mistake is to respond to one item and then find conflicting information in another document.
- ✗ Don't spend too much time on one question or go over the time limit.
- ✗ Don't get distracted by items which seem urgent but in reality could wait.

Written exercises or tests

Employers often create their own written exercises which replicate situations you'd expect to encounter in the real job, so reading the job description will help to identify what the employer is likely to be testing.

Common exercises might include drafting an email to a client, sorting and drawing conclusions from data in Excel, or proofreading a piece of text to identify errors.

Similar to in-tray exercises and case studies, these activities are a way for employers to assess your written communication, decision making, and ability to identify and respond to relevant information. See these sections of this guide for further information on how to prepare and do well.

If you suspect they may be testing a specific skill such as using Excel or a programming language, you can do some practice with an online tutorial beforehand.

- ✓ Read the instructions carefully and highlight key points. Make a quick plan to clarify your thoughts and outline your structure.
- ✓ Communicate logically, clearly and appropriately for your audience – whether a client, a manager or a fellow graduate in a professional environment.
- ✓ Allow time at the end to check your spelling and grammar.
- ✗ Don't use unnecessarily complex sentences and vocabulary. Keep your writing concise and straightforward and remember business writing is not the same as an academic essay. Ensure that any conclusions or recommendations you make are expressed unambiguously.

Case studies

A case study is a simulation of the type of business problem you are likely to encounter in the role that you are applying for.

In this exercise you will be given a range of information (often including articles, graphs, and reports) and asked to summarise your recommendations based on the facts.

Case studies can be done verbally in an interview format, or as a written exercise.

Typical questions that you might be asked to make recommendations about could include:

- Should the business invest in this product and, if so, why?
- Which market has the largest revenue potential and why?
- Which of the three proposals should be implemented and why?

Employers are looking for evidence of your analytical skills – how you take in information, identify key issues, and think through potential solutions under time pressure - while being able to communicate your findings clearly, confidently and professionally. They will also be testing your commercial awareness and understanding of the potential opportunities and risks. There is usually no 'right answer', rather the aim is to make logical conclusions using clear, well-reasoned arguments.

Some employers have examples on their websites, and your college's careers department may have additional resources. Work through example cases by giving yourself a time limit to read them, make notes about key points, and present your response to a friend or family member. Read business news stories and think about how they might impact the industry you are applying to.

- ✓ Show your judgement of the material by backing up your decision making with solid reasoning.
- ✓ Identify the information that is useful and relevant to the task and what can be discarded. Look out for contradictions.
- ✓ Prepare to be challenged on your recommendations. This doesn't mean that the interviewer disagrees with you – they may simply be testing your ability to justify your point.
- ✗ Don't use unnecessarily complicated language, but use a formal, professional tone.
- ✗ It's fine to acknowledge other points of view, but avoid sitting on the fence.
- ✗ Don't stray from the brief. Make sure you follow instructions given and answer the question.

Group exercises

A group of candidates, usually four to eight, have a mock meeting or complete a task together. If it is a discussion or meeting, you might be given a case study to read through before. The group is usually expected to reach a unanimous decision, or complete the task, by the end of the allocated time.

Sometimes candidates will be given different roles such as a marketing director, HR director or finance director. These are likely to have conflicting agendas, so part of the task will involve negotiating with and persuading others.

Employers will be looking for solutions-focused candidates who are able to look at problems from a number of viewpoints. They will want to see evidence of your ability to know when to stand your ground and when to compromise, and your ability to recognise when a plan of action isn't working and change tactics.

The best way to prepare is to be aware of what employers are looking for and be aware of your communication style and body language.

Knowing what is happening in the industry at the moment could give you useful context in which you can frame your arguments.

Your suggestions should always be mindful of the organisation's aims and their need to operate successfully and profitably, whilst also being considerate to staff and clients. Contact your careers department for details of any assessment centre events or workshops taking place.

- ✓ Speak clearly and make regular, considered, well-articulated contributions. Assessors can only mark you on what you say, so if you don't contribute much, it will be hard to score well.
- ✓ Work effectively as part of a team by listening well, showing an understanding of others' ideas by responding or referring back to earlier comments, and including quieter group members by asking for their views.
- ✓ Help to organise the group. You could suggest a plan for how you will use the time and ensure you complete the task, and assign roles such as timekeeper and note-taker.
- ✗ Avoid dominating the discussion or getting off the topic. If you can feel the group conversation is starting to drift in a less relevant direction, be the person who brings it back on track.
- ✗ Avoid talking using 'I'. Using 'we' is more inclusive language that will enable you to be viewed as a strong team player.