

Guide to...

Assessment Centres

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Introduction

Congratulations! You've submitted a successful application and have been invited to an assessment centre. But what is an assessment centre?

The term 'assessment centre' refers to a range of different activities designed to objectively assess whether you are the right candidate for the job. Assessment centres are often used as a final stage of a graduate selection process. In a typical assessment centre you are likely to be one of a group of other candidates being assessed at the same time.

Types of activities

Each assessment centre will be different and comprise of a range of activities that individual employers use to assess your suitability for a particular position, by observing you undertaking activities that are relevant to the role you are applying for. Typical assessment centre activities might include:

- Presentations by the employer and by candidates
- Interviews
- Role play and simulation
- In-tray or e-tray exercise
- Group exercises/tasks
- Individual test e.g. psychometric tests
- Social events

It's important to remember that you are being assessed against the company criteria not against other candidates and so you need to focus on your own performance rather than trying to compete with others. Activities are not designed to 'catch you out', although they will test your skills and strengths.

How do these fit together?

In terms of recruitment processes, some employers might decide to put candidates through a number of selection activities spread out over a period of time e.g. you may be asked to complete psychometric tests when submitting your application, you may then be invited to take part in a telephone interview a week later, and then if successful you may be invited to meet with the employer for a panel interview as the last stage of selection.

An assessment centre tends to group activities within a short space of time, hosting them over a one day (or in some cases two or three day) period. This arrangement is a more traditional assessment centre format. At this type of assessment centre you may be invited to the employers headquarters for the day and asked to complete, for example, psychometric tests, a one to one interview, group exercises, and a presentation. You will also be observed during social 'downtime' e.g. at lunch or during breaks between assessment activities. Typically, larger organisations tend to offer these one to three day assessment centre models as part of their formal placement and graduate recruitment processes.

Example assessment day

Assessment centres vary dramatically in length, style and content, but an example assessment day might be:

- **09.00** - Arrival and introduction
- **09.15** - Employer presentation and group ice-breaker exercise
- **10.00** - Psychometric tests
- **11.30** - Individual task: In-tray exercise
- **12.45** - Lunch
- **13.45** - Group exercise: Case study
- **14.45** - Assessment interviews
- **16.15** - Individual presentations
- **17.15** - Evaluation
- **17.30** - Finish

Real employer examples

The following examples of assessment centre structures come from Assessment Centre HQ (<https://www.assessmentcentrehq.com/>).

- IBM: www.assessmentcentrehq.com/ibm-assessment-centre
- BDO UK LLP: www.assessmentcentrehq.com/bdo-assessment-centre
- PWC: www.assessmentcentrehq.com/pwc-assessment-centre
- KPMG: www.assessmentcentrehq.com/kpmg-assessment-centre
- Teach First: www.assessmentcentrehq.com/teach-first-assessment-centre
- RAF: www.assessmentcentrehq.com/raf-aptitude-test
- MI5: www.assessmentcentrehq.com/mi5-assessment-centre/
- Network Rail: www.assessmentcentrehq.com/network-rail-assessment-centre
- Ernst & Young: www.assessmentcentrehq.com/ey-assessment-centre
- Civil Service Fast Stream: www.assessmentcentrehq.com/civil-service-fast-stream-assessment-centre

Who's involved in assessment centres?

At assessment centre you'll usually be joined by other candidates (the number can vary considerably). Remember, you are being measured against the criteria of the role or organisation not against other candidates. It's important to take time to get to know other group members and to demonstrate that you can work with new people.

There will also be a number of different representatives from the organisation present in each activity. They may include members of the Human Resources team, members of the senior management team, including your potential line manager, and current employees taking part in the organisations graduate or placement scheme. These representatives will be observing you, and making notes about your behaviour, from the moment you enter the building. They will use the information they record to discuss your performance and to make decisions about your suitability for the role or scheme.

On the following pages we will explore different types of activities.

Presentations

The Employer: Employers are likely to deliver a presentation to introduce themselves and the agenda for the day at the start of an assessment centre. Listen carefully to instructions and try to remember the names of the people who are introduced to you. Remember, although this might be the official start of the day, you will have been observed from the moment you signed in at reception.

You: You may be asked to develop and deliver a presentation as part of an assessment centre. Some employers may tell you the topic in advance to enable you to prepare, some may ask you to choose your own topic or you may be given a subject on the day and have very little time to prepare for it.

Some top tips for preparing and delivering an effective presentation at assessment centre:

Preparation:

- Find out what format the presentation should be, what technology and materials will be available to you and how long you will have.
- Try and find out who the audience will be.
- Follow instructions carefully i.e. are you being asked to use PowerPoint or other visual aids?
- Consider what your preferred presentation style is – this will support your confidence on the day.
- Practise your presentation – lots! Remember to get support with this; practise in front of a friend, family member, or by accessing the careers service so that you get used to articulating your thoughts aloud and refine your language ready for the big day.

Design:

- If you have a free choice of topic choose a subject you know well - you will be asked questions about your presentation and potentially why you selected this topic.
- Consider how you'll keep the audience's attention and ensure you pitch the content appropriately.
- Think about your key messages. What core ideas or messages do you want the audience to receive? Consider keeping things simple and strong.
- Your presentation should have a clear introduction, a main point or message and a conclusion.
- Be brief with slides or visual aids: focus on using bullet points and key words or phrases.
- Enhance any slides used with pictures, photos, graphs and screen-grabs as appropriate.
- Avoid trying to cover too much content. Be clear and concise to keep to a strict time line.
- If you are thinking of having some audience participation, remember to prepare and bring any materials that you will need to use.
- Do you want to create audience handouts and when will you distribute them?

Delivery:

- Think about your body language and be aware of your nerves. How you deliver your presentation is as important as what you say. Although you may be nervous, try to smile, maintain good posture, speak clearly, keep good eye contact and try to relate to each person individually.
- Pace yourself. Introduce yourself and your presentation confidently.
- Avoid reading from a script, instead use prompt cards with key wording to glance at if needed.

- It's worth developing some relaxation techniques that work for you so that you can draw on these if you start to feel anxious. If you are really struggling with nerves, then don't be afraid to ask to stop for a few moments whilst you gather your thoughts.
- Try and end your presentation confidently, especially if you have run out of time. Take control and end it with a purpose rather than stopping suddenly when you run out of things to say. Try to make a brief and clear conclusion and don't forget to invite questions.

Some additional resources to help you in delivering an effective presentation:

- www.assessmentcentrehq.com/assessment-centre-exercises/giving-a-presentation/ - How To Deliver A Killer Presentation from Assessment Centre HQ
- <https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/assessment-centres/275423-deliver-a-presentation-thats-worthy-of-a-graduate-job> - Target Hobs Deliver a Presentation Worthy of a Graduate Job
- <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips/interview-tests-and-exercises> - Prospects Interview Tests & Exercises

Interviews

As part of an assessment centre you may have an individual or group interview. Interviews are a core part of an organisation's recruitment strategy and not only give interviewers the chance to assess your suitability for the role, but also give you the opportunity to showcase your skills, experience, knowledge and personality and assess whether the organisation and role are a good match for you. Take a look at our **'Guide to Preparing for Interviews'** and **'Guide to Using the STAR Approach'** and these resources to help you in your preparation:

- <https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/interview-techniques> - Interview Techniques from TargetJobs
- <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips> - Prospects Interview Tips
- <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips/competency-based-interviews> - Prospects Competency Based Interviews

Role play and simulation

You may be asked to take part in a role-playing exercise which simulates a professional work place scenario. You will usually be given a briefing pack or verbal instructions and be asked to play a particular part. You might have to act out a role with other candidates or with the assessors. This may be one-to-one or as part of a group. The assessors are looking for your individual contribution as well as your communication and influencing skills. Examples are available in the following resource:

- <https://www.assessmentday.co.uk/assessmentcentre/role-play-exercise.html> - Assessment Day Role Play Exercises

In-tray and e-tray

In-tray or e-tray exercises are tasks which simulate a 'typical' day or situation from the workplace. They are designed to examine your communication, organisational ability, problem-solving, planning, time management and decision making skills. You are usually given a time limit and after the task you may be asked to explain your approach and reasoning.

For example, you might be given an in-tray or e-tray (such as an email account inbox) full of reports, telephone messages and meeting requests. You might then be provided with information about the structure of the organisation and your place within it. You will then need to make decisions, prioritise your workload, draft replies, delegate tasks and recommend actions. Each exercise is designed to test how you handle complex information within a limited time. It allows you to show that you can analyse facts, prioritise information and clients and make effective decisions under pressure.

Tips for tackling an in-tray / e-tray exercise:

- Read the instructions carefully and thoroughly and try to stay calm
- Keep a note of the time to ensure you pace yourself correctly
- Read all the background information you might be given about the organisation, the staff and your role (if provided)
- Scan through all items in the in-tray or email inbox to get an overview of everything that you need to consider, and if it's helpful make brief notes
- Prioritise according to what is most important and most urgent. Decide what can be delegated, forwarded or delayed
- Identify key issues and any action that must be taken – detailing how, by whom and to any timescales and deadlines
- Highlight any possible resource restraints, conflicts between tasks, or implications for the organisation

Remember: there is often no right or wrong answer – this is about giving a logical and rational explanation for your decisions.

- www.assessmentcentrehq.com/assessment-centre-exercises/e-tray-exercise/ - How to pass an E-Tray exercise from Assessment Centre HQ
- www.assessmentday.co.uk/in-tray-exercise.htm - Example In-Tray exercise from Assessment Day
- www.assessmentday.co.uk/e-tray-exercise.htm - Example E-Tray exercise from Assessment Day
- <https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/assessment-centres/275463-what-are-in-tray-exercises> - Target Jobs: What are in-tray exercises
- <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips/interview-tests-and-exercises> - Prospects In-tray Exercise advice

Written exercises

Some employers may ask you to write an essay or letter on a topic of your choice or one given by them. Others may give you a document to review and improve. Here the selectors are testing how you express yourself, your spelling and grammar and whether you can communicate professionally and effectively.

- <https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/assessment-centres/344910-written-exercises-at-assessment-centres-showcase-your-professionalism> - Written exercises article from TargetJobs

Group exercises

Employers use group activities to assess your interpersonal communication skills and ability to work with others. You may be asked to complete a practical task, complete a case study or take part in a discussion. Throughout the exercise you will be observed; you will be assessed on your ability to work in a team and

the type of leadership style you use. Throughout group exercises the employer will make a note of how you negotiate with your peers and how you communicate your thoughts and ideas.

Practical tasks and discussions:

As a group you may be asked to:

- Use equipment or materials to make something, for example, a bridge, using only dried spaghetti and marshmallows. The assessors are usually most interested in how the group interacts during the task, how they communicate, problem solve and cooperate rather than in the outcome of the task;
- Take part in a leaderless discussion;
- Take part in a role-playing exercise which simulates a professional scenario (usually you will be given a briefing pack and be asked to play a particular part).

Case Studies and exercises:

Case studies and business simulation tasks are designed to examine skills such as communication, organisational ability, problem solving, data analysis, planning, time management and decision making. There is usually a time limit on these exercises. After the task you may be asked to justify your actions.

For case study exercises, you will typically be given a set of documents relating to a hypothetical or real life situation. You are likely to be asked to analyse it and to give brief verbal or written report of your recommendations. You may be asked to complete the case study individually or as part of a group. Tips for tackling a case study:

- Practice with sample case studies in advance and brush up on your numeracy skills.
- Research the organisation, its markets and keep up to date with current affairs.
- Read the instructions you are given carefully and thoroughly.
- Read any background information you are given about the organisation, the staff and your hypothetical role.
- Focus on key points, and make brief notes. This will help you to get a feel for what is important.
- Scan through all items to get an overall view of everything that will need to be considered.
- Keep a note of the time to ensure you pace yourself; work as quickly and as accurately as you can.
- When presenting your conclusions be as clear as possible and don't be afraid to disagree with the selector, or explain different views from other candidates.

Remember: **good team working is about working together co-operatively to achieve a common goal.**

You can demonstrate leadership within the team by:

- showing that you are listening carefully and hearing what is being said;
- taking the initiative;
- facilitating others to speak;
- reflecting on what has been discussed and summarising periodically if necessary;
- staying positive and motivated throughout.

10 Top tips:

- Read through and/or listen carefully to all the information you are given and make notes if allowed.
- Decide objectives and priorities. Agree on roles and tasks, make a plan and follow it.
- Be assertive and persuasive, but also diplomatic – be conscious of the tone of what you say.
- Make sure the group keeps to time: help to steer group discussion back on track when needed
- Keep calm, and use your sense of humour where appropriate.
- Find a balance between advancing your own ideas and helping the group to complete the task.
- Actively listen to what everyone has to say, using nods, smiles and eye contact. Try to get the best contribution from everyone and do not assume that quiet members have nothing to contribute.
- Be inclusive.
- If a group member is dominating the conversation then try to support the participation of others.
- Be conscious of your own style and its impact on the group. If you are naturally very chatty maybe you need to focus more on listening. If you are very quiet remember that you need to speak up to make an impact on the assessors.

Here are some resources to help you find out more:

- www.assessmentcentrehq.com/assessment-centre-exercises/group-exercise-tips-and-advice/ - Group Exercises: 5 Steps To Success from Assessment Centre HQ
- <https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/assessment-centres/275425-group-exercises-what-to-expect> - Group exercises: what to expect from TargetJobs
- www.assessmentday.co.uk/group-exercise.htm - Group exercise example from Assessment Day

Psychometric & personality tests

Psychometric Tests

Psychometric tests are designed to assess your aptitude and ability. They are usually computer based, time limited and multiple choice. You may be asked to complete these tests as part of your application before being invited to an assessment centre and/or asked to repeat these tests as part of an assessment day. Psychometric tests might include:

- Verbal tests
- Numerical tests
- Spatial reasoning
- Subject/job-specific tests
- Personality questionnaires
- Strengths based tests

To get the best out of these tests:

- Contact the organisation to ask for information about the types of test you'll complete;
- Try as many practice exercises as possible;
- Work as quickly and as accurately as you can;
- If you get stuck on a question, move on and come back to it later if you have time (although be aware that often you cannot go backwards in an online test);
- You must often make a sacrifice between speed and accuracy - recruiters may deduct marks for incorrect answers.

Here are some example **practice aptitude tests** to try, along with additional resources in preparing for taking psychometric tests. (Be aware that some online aptitude tests may incur a small charge to use some of the full tests and others may continue to email you information):

- www.assessmentday.co.uk/ - Assessment Day Practice tests
- www.cubiksonline.com/cubiks/practicetests/ - Cubiks Online Assessment
- www.psychometric-success.com/ Psychometric Success
- www.savilleconsulting.com/practice-preparation-advice-for-candidates - Saville Consulting
- www.cebglobal.com/shldirect/en – SHL
- www.theopc.co.uk/practicetests/ - The Occupational Psychology Centre
- <https://www.assessmentcentrehq.com/aptitude-tests/> - Assessment Centre HQ (links to practice tests)
- <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips/psychometric-tests> – Prospects Psychometric Test advice
- <https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/psychometric-tests> – Target Jobs Psychometric Test advice

Personality Tests

Personality questionnaires give employers an indication of your personality type. They may have a time limit for completion. There are no right or wrong answers; the questionnaire is intended to give the employer a profile of your interests and your working style. Usually you will be asked a set of questions or be given a series of statements or options to choose between. You may feel that you are being presented with the same questions or options in different ways. This is to establish consistency in your responses to get a more accurate indication of your preferences.

Some guidelines for approaching personality questionnaires:

- Try out some questionnaires in advance using the links below. They may not be exactly what the selector will use but will give you practice in doing them;
- Answer each question in relaxed manner;
- Be yourself and answer honestly - avoid trying to predict what would be a good or bad response.

Practice personality questionnaire resources include (note, they may require you to create an account to access personality questionnaire results):

- www.keirsey.com/sorter/instruments2.aspx?partid=0 - Keirsey Temperament Sorter
- <https://www.metarasa.com/mmdi/questionnaire/> - Metarasa Myers Briggs Type Indicator
- <https://testyourself.psychtests.com/testid/3113> – Belbin Team Test

Social Events

Some employers will use a social event or activities to observe your behaviour. A social event might include the coffee or lunch break during the assessment centre where you meet with other candidates and employers from the organisation. It could also include being invited for an overnight stay or for a group dinner the evening before an assessment centre. While it's important to enjoy these opportunities to network it's also important to be aware that you are being assessed, so ensure you are professional and polite. Do your research on the company and have questions ready to ask of the organisation's representatives.

Assessment centre preparation

It is very important to take time to prepare and practice in order to be successful at an assessment centre. Typically you will receive details from the employer, in advance, so you know what to expect. Some actions to consider:

- Carefully read instructions you have received from the employer
- Revisit your application form, the job description and person specification for the role to identify competencies / skills the employer is looking for in candidates.
- Research the company and keep up-to-date with employer news and company webpages (e.g. annual reports; company vision and objectives; press releases; recent developments and initiatives)
- Look at the employer website for tips on how to prepare.
- Talk to other people who have attended assessment centres to ask for their advice and use online forums like Glassdoor: www.glassdoor.co.uk/index.htm
- Check the LinkedIn profiles of the employers you know will be observing you on the day.
- Practice for individual tests and hone your presentation and interview skills.

Top tips

Preparation:

- Carefully read all instructions and prepare any documentation that you might need to take with you
- Think of questions you may want to ask on the day
- Practice, practice and practice – depending on what activities you will complete
- Plan your journey to arrive in good time for the start of the assessment centre

On the day:

- Listen carefully to the instructions given to you at the start of the day
- Read information given to you in each individual activity carefully and thoroughly
- Stay focused and motivated throughout the day
- Ensure that you're polite and friendly to everyone you meet on the day

After the event:

- Reflect on your performance for each activity. What did you learn that might help in the future?
- Consider following up with a courtesy email thanking the employer for their time.
- If unsuccessful, ask for feedback so that you can learn for the next opportunity.

Further Support from Bath Spa Careers

If you would like further support from Bath Spa Careers & Employability go to bathspa.ac.uk/careers to see the ways in which you can access our service, including workshops and events, appointments and to access our extensive range of resources.

You can also contact Careers Reception on 01225 875525 or at careers@bathspa.ac.uk.

Please note that Bath Spa Careers does not endorse particular organisations.

(This guide was last updated in Summer 2019).

GET A HEAD START

We're here to help you get a great start to your career. We're open all year round, so come and visit us in the Careers Space, book an appointment, or get in touch.

Careers Space, SL.G04
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