



Succeeding at Assessment Centres

What is an assessment centre?

Assessment centres are selection events where an employer will ask you, and other applicants, to complete a number of tasks. These are to assess your abilities across a number of areas. Such events may take place at the employer's premises or another venue e.g. hotel. They might be half a day, a day or longer.

Why do employers use assessment centres?

Employers feel that they can obtain a much broader picture of what you are like if they assess you over a longer period, doing a variety of tasks.

What do employers look for?

They will usually have a set of competencies which they will assess you against. However some common skills which employers look for include:

- **Communication skills** - are you articulate, persuade, listen, clarify and discuss a point of view or negotiate?
- **Analytical or problem-solving ability** – can you identify critical elements of a problem or issue and propose a solution using reasoned argument?
- **Ability to work on your own initiative** - are you able to put forward original suggestions and work independently?
- **Team working** – can you work effectively with, and listen to others, whilst still putting forward your own points, in order to help the team reach a common goal.
- **Ability to work under pressure** – can you cope with challenging situations?

Tips - dos and don'ts

Do

- Find out as much as you can about the company and the job beforehand.
- Make sure you know exactly what will be involved at the assessment centre.
- Remember that you are being assessed on your ability across all tasks so don't despair if you feel that one task doesn't go as well.
- Check the dress code to make sure that you present yourself appropriately.
- Make an effort to mix with the selectors and other candidates.
- Remember that you are being assessed even during social activities such as breaks and lunch.

Don't

- Drink too much alcohol or make jokes (although you can laugh at the selectors' jokes!).
- Assume you are in direct competition with all the candidates. The recruiter will be looking at how each individual fits their requirements.

What kind of tasks will I be asked to do?

You may be asked to complete a range of tasks such as: In-tray or E-tray exercises, case studies, a letter-writing exercise, group tasks, psychometric tests, a presentation or an interview. Some examples follow:

In-tray or E-tray exercises

This type of task is designed to assess your ability to prioritise and organise your time under pressure. You will be given a series of items in random order, e.g. reports, letters, memos and phone messages. These will be presented to you in the form of Emails (E-tray exercise) or paperwork (In-tray exercise).

Within a specified time limit you might be asked to:

- Indicate how you would tackle each task
- Put them in order of priority.
- Decide which item needs immediate action and which can be deferred, delegated and postponed.

Ensure you check the written information for dates, and to whom it is directed. Often this influences your decisions as much as the content of the material. Also ensure you are able to justify your decisions.

An example e-tray exercise, devised with KPMG, can be found in the University of Edinburgh careers service website at: www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/careers/using-careers-service/cvs-apps-interviews/assess/types-exercise/in-tray

Case Studies

You may be:

- Asked to assess and solve a problem relevant to the organisation and type of work you are seeking.
- Given a range of information e.g. official reports, memos, statistical tables, letters and newspaper cuttings.
- Given the option of interviewing key members of the organisation already familiar with the issue.
- Asked to assess the material, clarify the problem, consider proposed actions and select what you consider the most appropriate solution.

Asked to write a report summarising the situation, laying out the alternatives, and outlining your preferred solution giving reasons e.g. you may be asked to assess the pros and cons of setting up a new branch of the company in another country, making an arrangement with an existing company in that country or doing neither.

Time allowed for case studies varies but it is likely that you will not have time to read everything thoroughly. So, read through everything quickly and draw out the essential points.

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Time allowed for case studies varies but it is likely that you will not have time to read everything thoroughly. So, read through everything quickly and draw out the essential points. Try and get an overall view and understanding of the information and then make a judgement on what is most relevant.

You need to make decisions and justify them. There may not be one correct answer to a business problem. Your task is to provide a logical well thought out solution. You will be judged on how well you analyse the problem and whether you can effectively argue your case.

Many major consultancies use case studies in their selection processes, and include examples on their websites. Also see http://delicious.com/City_Careers/CaseStudies for more information on case studies.

Letter-writing exercise

Here is an example of a possible scenario:

'a manager of the company has been omitted (intentionally) from the guest list of a prestigious public relations event. They are deeply offended and have written a letter of complaint. How would you respond?'

Your task is to draft a letter of reply to this manager (30 minutes). In your written work, whether a report or a letter, consider your readers. Not only will assessors be judging you on the coverage, clarity and conciseness of your work, but also on your ability to show tact and sensitivity.

Group Task

This can take various forms such as:

- Leaderless discussion - a group of up to eight candidates discusses one or more topics ranging from current affairs to a controversial statement. No roles are set for participants and observers will assess which informal roles emerge amongst the group as well as each individual's contribution to the discussion.
- Sometimes the selectors ask the group to carry out an activity rather than discuss a topic. This can be a case-study or simulation of a work situation e.g. an industrial relations dispute or marketing scenario. This may involve role-play where each participant is asked to assume specific roles in a realistic work situation and work together to solve a problem.
- A variation on the above where participants are given a case-study and are asked to make a presentation of their proposals to the selectors. They then argue the case under questioning, possibly from a functional manager. Sometimes this is an individual exercise.
- A practical activity such as designing, costing and then making a model out of lego or other objects.
- In all team working exercises it is important to take time to think through strategies and how best to opti-

mise the skills and experience in the group before jumping in to the task. Sometimes dividing the group to do different tasks is the most time efficient way to get the exercise completed. Often the simplest things get forgotten e.g. nominating a timekeeper. However silly the exercise may seem it is important that you enter into the spirit of it and engage in the process fully.

- If you know you are naturally quiet, you will have to make a real effort to participate fully. Equally, if you know you naturally take the lead, watch yourself to ensure that you are not too domineering.

Psychometric Tests

- You may be required to complete aptitude tests such as verbal, numerical and diagrammatic tests. Some employers also use personality tests. www.city.ac.uk/careers/students/career-planning/personality-tests.html

Presentation

- As part of the selection process you may be given a limited amount of time to deliver a short presentation to the assessors and perhaps other candidates.
- You may be asked to discuss your presentation with the selectors afterwards particularly if it is a business case.
- Make sure that you prepare a self-introduction prior to the assessment day as you will usually need to introduce yourself at the start of the presentation.
- If you are nervous about doing presentations, take every opportunity to practice doing them during your course or informally in front of friends.
- Read the career guide on *Making Presentations* at www.city.ac.uk/careers/students/career-guides.html

Interview

- Usually as part of an assessment centre you will have an interview, either with one recruiter or a panel.
- If you have already had an interview with the organisation, interviews at this stage may be much more in-depth and, in some work areas, more technical.
- Ensure that you prepare thoroughly and read our career guide on *Preparing for an Interview* at www.city.ac.uk/careers/students/career-guides.html

Feedback

- Make sure that you obtain feedback about your performance at an assessment centre. If you reach this stage of the selection process most employers will usually provide this.
- If you have not been successful do not be discouraged! Remember you did very well to reach this stage. Try to receive any feedback positively and to use it as a chance to evaluate how you can improve your performance next time.
- Remember as well that an assessment centre is an opportunity for you to find out if an employer is suitable for you. If you did not feel comfortable at the selection day, it may be that the employer was not right for you in any case.

Useful websites

<http://www.city.ac.uk/careers/for-students-and-recent-graduates/career-guides>

http://www.prospects.ac.uk/interview_tests.html

www.targetjobs.co.uk

http://delicious.com/City_Careers/AssessmentCentres

http://careers.deloitte.com/united-kingdom/students/country_custom1.aspx?CountryContentID=12416 - e tray exercise and example test questions

Support from the Career and Skills

Development Service

Some of our relevant services are listed here, but full details including booking procedures, are on our website.

www.city.ac.uk/careers

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