A Guide to Assessment Centres

What is an Assessment Centre?
Assessment Centres are designed to help organisations select the best candidates for roles by testing their suitability using a variety of exercises and activities.

How long do they last?
Usually anything from ½ day to 2 days – occasionally longer.

Where are they held?
Commonly held either on employers’ premises or in a hotel.

When are they held?
Usually after the first round of interviews and before final selection but they can be used as an initial selection process.

Why are they used?
Many employers consider assessment centres to be one of the most effective selection methods as they are designed to see what you can do, rather than what you say you can do, in a variety of situations. Each exercise is designed to assess a clearly defined set of competencies e.g. technical knowledge, leadership, creativity, flexibility and so on (the competencies used will vary with each job). You are measured on these competencies and not against the other candidates.

What do I wear?
Check the dress code in any details the employer has sent you. You’ll certainly need a smart suit for the interview and unless companies specifically tell you to bring something informal, assume you need to wear smart office wear. If in doubt ring the employer beforehand.

What will happen?
The employer should tell you what to expect and what will be involved. If you are not clear, ring the employer for clarification. Typically, an assessment centre will include some (or all!) of the following:

- Information sessions
- Psychometric tests
- Group discussions
- Team exercises
- Case studies
- Interviews
- In-tray / e-tray exercises
- Presentation
- Socialising

The activities selected will be used to test the skills, knowledge and behaviours considered necessary for the role.
Information sessions:
To inform you about the organisation and the roles available. You may be able to ask questions at this point so have some prepared.

Psychometric Tests:
Psychometric tests comprise:

- **Ability/Aptitude tests** taken under exam conditions and designed to measure thinking and reasoning skills such as numerical, verbal and diagrammatic reasoning.

- **Personality inventories** used to assess what you are like as a person and how you might react in different situations. Not usually timed, with no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers.

Reports are generated by the test which will give the assessor an idea of your profile which can then be used, together with the outcome of other selection exercises/tests, to measure your suitability against the criteria for the role. The most important thing to remember when completing a test is to answer the questions honestly, not in the way you think you should.

Group Exercises:
These are likely to be the most closely observed part of the assessment centre. They are organised to assess how candidates behave in groups and how they interact with others. You may be given a group task to perform in a set time or given a controversial topic to discuss. It is difficult to prepare for this type of exercise but you should be aware that the assessors will be looking for candidates who can listen to others as well as contribute ideas.

Case Studies:
In groups or individually, you might be given information about a situation which you will need to assimilate and form an opinion on. You could be asked some questions about what you would do. Alternatively, you may be asked to write a recommendation in a report. Either way, you are being tested on your ability to analyse information, come up with solutions, exercise your judgement and express yourself. Business case study interviews are increasingly being used by consulting and finance firms in particular, where you may be asked to analyse a hypothetical business problem – McKinsey have produced a useful guide available on [www.mckinsey.com/en/Careers/Apply/Interview_tips/Practice_case_studies.aspx](http://www.mckinsey.com/en/Careers/Apply/Interview_tips/Practice_case_studies.aspx)

Interviews:
At the Assessment Centre stage you are likely to encounter some probing into the weaker areas which emerged at first interview, if you had one. This one is likely to be more in-depth and could be more focused on the particular role rather than the generalities of the graduate recruitment scheme. Don’t assume the interviewer is familiar with what you said in any earlier interviews. If this is your first or second interview with the company make sure you do your preparation and use some of the resources suggested in this leaflet.

In-tray / e-tray exercises:
An individual exercise which may be on a computer or on paper. Whichever it is, you will be given a scenario such as you are the new manager of a unit and this is your in-tray when you arrive. It will contain a pile of letters, memo’s, emails, faxes, messages and reports to deal with. You must make a decision about each item, prioritising it, drafting replies, delegating tasks and recommending actions. You may find new items are added as the exercise progresses. You are being tested on how you handle complex information within a limited time. This is an opportunity to demonstrate your planning, decision-making and communication skills.

Presentations:
You may be asked to give a short talk to other candidates and/or the selectors. Sometimes you prepare it in advance of the interview, other times it will be prepared on the day. It might be related to another exercise. If you lack confidence in giving presentations then look out for
sessions run by employers on campus to help you improve your presentation skills. Check out www.exeter.ac.uk/employability/events for more information.

Socialising:
Usually events where you meet the other candidates, the selectors and recent graduate recruits in an informal setting. You may be asked to stay for a meal or even overnight at your assessment centre. Although it might be stated that social activities will form no part of your interview – beware! Inappropriate behaviour will almost certainly be reported back to the selectors. Be polite to everyone you meet and maintain your interest at all times – use these occasions to assess the organisation, the culture, the long term prospects and day to day work.

What are the selectors looking for?
Employers are looking for those candidates who can show evidence of the range of skills and qualities that they are seeking. These will vary according to the job and the employer but will probably include:

- Communication
- Listening skills
- Self confidence
- Time management
- Decision making
- Ability to work in a team
- Problem solving
- Interpersonal skills
- Self motivation
- Leadership and taking responsibility

Remember that the selectors will be assessing you against their criteria and not against each other.

Tips on preparing for an Assessment Centre

Beforehand……..

- Research: use the resources available at the end of this leaflet to help you become more familiar with Assessment Centres themselves.
- Make sure you read all you can about the company, particularly information on the web, company brochures, latest news stories/developments etc.
- Familiarise yourself with the job profile and the competency framework. Identify your strengths and supporting evidence of those particularly relevant to the area you have applied to.
- Undertake practice psychometric tests.
- Practice any areas of weakness you suspect you have in the range of likely aptitude tests e.g basic arithmetic, percentages, graphs and charts etc.
- Prepare a few good questions to ask at any informal social events or any Q & A sessions. Make sure the questions you ask are insightful and do not ask obvious things which can be easily ascertained from the company website and other publicity material.
- Make travel plans and allow for possible delays and get a good night’s sleep beforehand as Assessment Centres are extremely tiring, both mentally and physically.

On the day……..

- Listen carefully to all instructions.
- If in doubt, ask for clarification.
- Don’t lose concentration – try to remain focused on the task in hand and the objective.
- Give everything your best shot – get fully involved in group activities, be assertive and persuasive but diplomatic too.
You don’t have to be good at everything – the exercises are devised to give a range of opportunities to show your strengths.

Show that you are listening to what others say, by smiling, nodding and eye contact.

Acknowledge and build on any good points made by other group members as well as arguing your own case.

Try and forget about the assessors.

Friendly conversation with other candidates will help you relax – all of you may be successful at this particular Assessment Centre or none of you!

Be yourself, give it 100% and above all try to enjoy it!

Further resources

Download the various resources on ‘Assessment Centres’
www.exeter.ac.uk/employability/cvs/assessmentcentres/ including a useful DVD offering a “fly on the wall” insight into an Assessment Centre – this is also available to view in the Information Room at Reed Mews

Download or view the resources on ‘Interviews’ on
www.exeter.ac.uk/employability/cvs/interviews/


www.prospects.ac.uk – practice in-tray and e-tray exercises and group exercises plus useful advice on interviews, psychometric testing and presentations.

Practice online psychometric tests are available through Employability and Graduate Development – visit Reed Mews or phone us to register for this service. Reference materials on psychometric tests also available to look at in Reed Mews or take-away on a short-loan basis. ‘Introduction to Psychometric Testing’ skills sessions are also held regularly during term time – www.exeter.ac.uk/employability/events.