

In-tray/e-tray exercises

If you're required to attend an assessment centre as part of a job application process, you're very likely to face some form of in tray exercise. These exercises enable assessors and employers to test a wide range of your skills and aptitudes in situations that closely resemble those you might face in a real workplace. Therefore, how you behave during an in tray exercise offers a more accurate and reliable indication of your characteristics and behaviours than do more abstract methods of measurement including interviews and even psychometric tests. These exercises also demonstrate how you will cope with the real-world stresses of diary management and prioritisation.

- Their popularity with recruiters makes it crucial that you're aware of how in tray exercises work and what they test. Additionally, it's important to practice them to maximise your chances of achieving your true potential.
- Most in tray exercises are designed to test a particular set of **key competencies** which the employer deems to be important. For example they might focus on your delegation skills, your readiness to share problems with others, your independence, or your affinity or aversion to procedures. It is important that you think about what competencies each employer is looking for, and to emphasise these traits when addressing their in tray exercise.

- In general, in tray exercises test your ability to:

- (a) demonstrate the level of knowledge appropriate to the job for which you're applying;
- (b) display the skills necessary for the job; and
- (c) show that your attitudes are a good fit for those specified for the role.

How do in tray exercises work?

The basic idea of in tray exercises is to place you in a realistic although simulated work situation, and to assess your workplace behaviour and attitudes in that context. So when you're given an in tray exercise, it's usual to be asked to treat it as a role-play.

You might, for instance, be told to imagine that it's your first day in your job as a stock controller, and be handed a stack of documents and tasks to prioritise and action. You might be given this role even if you're applying for a job that has nothing to do with stock control; similarly, you might be asked to imagine yourself as a teacher or a lawyer, even if you're applying for a quite different job. Another common scenario is that you've just returned from annual leave to find a pile of correspondence in your fictional in tray. E-tray exercises will usually present this information in the form of emails. The point is that the skills and attitudes being assessed will be relevant to the job you're applying for; the types of issues and problems you're asked to consider will be similar to those involved in that role.

How many in tray items will there be?

It's usual to be given between ten and thirty in tray items to work on,

in addition to a description of your role and responsibilities in the fictional

organisation. You'll also normally be given information about the organisation's aims, objectives and problems, as well as its structure; a list of key fellow employees and information about key third party organisations and relationships, as well as a calendar of future events. The best candidate will keep all of these things in their mind whilst responding to the in tray items. So there's a lot of material to get through in the time allowed!

How are in-tray exercises assessed?

- a) Your response to questions in a multiple choice format, or
- b) Your performance in an interview with an assessor in which you need to explain and justify your actions and decisions, or
- c) Sometimes, a combination of these methods.

Before you start, you should be sure to check how you will be assessed. Make a note of diary clashes, time commitments, resource constraints, appointments, interactivity between people...anything you think is important to consider in your answer. **Watch the timing of the exercise.** You will be expected to complete the task within the time constraints given.

Online or computer-based in tray exercises are referred to as e-tray exercises. The same principles apply but they are becoming more common as they can replicate email activity and the speed of communication within an organisation.

How should I approach in tray exercise?

- Identify the key issues arising from the in tray items: while you should aim to complete every task in the limited time allotted, do not lose sight of prioritising more important tasks. You'll be assessed on your ability to get things done quickly **and** on your ability to spot whether some tasks are more urgent than others. You need to work quickly and effectively.
- The best approach is to quickly read through every item in your in tray before answering any questions.

In summary:

- In tray exercises assess your ability to sort through, remember, and analyse complex information efficiently within time constraints. Also, your ability to explore and identify key issues and prioritise your work accordingly.
- You will also be assessed on how clearly and effectively you can explain your decisions and actions and identify any particular problems, or issues that arise, from the set of tasks and documents you have been given.
- Your attitude to pressure is also being assessed alongside your professionalism in the workplace. How do you organise your desk? Are you neat and systematic? Are you displaying a calm exterior whilst going through the exercise?
- Practise when you can – ideally, not just the day before an assessment centre.

Some useful resources

- Civil Service Fast Stream E-Tray Exercise:
 - <http://ex.ac.uk/gh>
- University of London: Written and E-tray Exercises:
 - <http://ex.ac.uk/gk>
- University of Kent: How to do well in In-tray and E-tray exercises:
 - <http://ex.ac.uk/gm>

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