

## Assessment Centre Guide

The purpose of the selection process is to identify the appropriate person to fill the vacancy.

Employers will be looking for someone who has the skills, abilities and personal qualities to do the job well.

During the selection process a variety of assessment methods can be used in the selection of candidates for a job.

These assessment methods almost always feature an application form/CV and an interview, but can also include other methods such as assessment centres, discussions, presentations and psychometric tests.

Selection methods are seeking to gather evidence that a candidate will be successful in the job by having the appropriate:

- Social Skills
- Intellectual Ability
- Attitudes

*Social Skills* - The social role each candidate takes or tries to take, includes the candidate's sensitivity to others, tact, aggressiveness, hostility, friendliness, withdrawal, reaction when contradicted or criticised. It also involves the extent to which others listen to the person, ignore or shout down the individual, the way the person tries to influence others and the amount of respect the individual engenders.

*Intellectual Skills* – The quality and quantity of the individual's contribution in terms of clarity of thought, ability to express ideas logically and forcibly, ability to apply both knowledge and experience in the discussion and flexibility of thinking.

*Attitudes* – These are provoked in discussion but are much more difficult to detect in interview. The 'fair minded', the 'staunch authoritarian', the 'one problem one solution person', all come to the surface at some time or another during an assessment centre day.

The best attitude to have at an assessment centre is to be open minded, to assess all sides of an issue and to present an argument in a logical frame which makes sense to the group as a whole.

### **There are three components to an Assessment:**

- The centre
- You (the candidate)
- The exercise & the assessors

Applicants who have succeeded at the initial stages of the selection process e.g. application form, are invited to attend an assessment centre for further observation and analysis.

Employers want to test interpersonal and teamwork skills by assessing how you relate with 5-8 other candidates for the job.

The candidates are usually observed whilst conducting exercises designed to show social, intellectual skills and attitudes. These exercises are carried out in the presence of trained observers.

The assessment may take between one and two days, although if the Armed forces or Guards have invited you, it could last longer.

### **Key skills that employers usually look for include:**

- adaptability
- analytical thinking
- commercial awareness
- communication
- creativity
- decision-making
- leadership
- negotiation
- organisation
- persuasion
- planning
- teamwork
- time management

### **There are three parts to the structure of an Assessment Centre**

1. Group activities
2. Individual work
3. Interviews: panel/one-to-one

#### **1. Group activities**

Examine individuals response in a group situation. Candidates are given a topic or case study to discuss or a puzzle to solve in the group. The group may be leaderless or a chairperson may be nominated.

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## **Tips for effective group work**

- Participate actively in the group
- Listen to what others have to say
- ‘You can’t be assessed if you can’t be heard’ – try to speak clearly
- Contribute early, even a few words
- Be friendly and co-operative but defend your point of view
- Never try to win by putting others down

It’s the quality of the contribution that’s important, not the quantity.

The group exercise is used to see your communication and problem-solving skills in action, and to ensure that you can work effectively in a team. You need to support the group in completing the task that has been set, whether that involves discussing a particular issue, constructing something from bits of stationery or analysing a complex business case study and presenting your findings. The best way to impress the employers is to show yourself as a good team player – flexible, full of ideas but willing to listen to and help expand the ideas of others.

### **The ice-breaker**

Organisations use ice-breakers to help you relax and to help the group to gel. Sometimes they are practical and involve the completion of a task within a tight deadline, or they might be more intellectual. Everyone is expected to play a part and share information. For example, you might be asked to build a tower from straws, paper and pins. If you are asked to make something, try to make sure the group doesn't spend too much time discussing and designing and run out of time for construction.

### **The group case study exercise**

In this type of exercise the group is given a set period of time to work together to respond to a case study brief, often a set of documents based on a real-life business situation. The group may be invited to present its findings as part of the exercise.

The case study scenario is likely to present the sort of challenges that you would encounter on the job and gives the assessors a chance to see how you would perform.

### **The discussion group**

A discussion group involves the group members sitting round in a circle and being given a topic or topics to discuss. The nature of the topics can vary but usually they involve an issue of current importance to students or something that's been in the news recently. You are not usually given time to prepare so it's not a bad idea to read a quality newspaper in the weeks before the assessment centre. At the end of the discussion each candidate may be invited to comment briefly in turn on one of the group's conclusions, so it's vital to listen as well as to speak up.

## 2. Individual work/exercises

Measure individual's abilities, skills and personal traits through a number of different exercises

- Self-description questions
- Role plays
- Peer-ratings
- Drafting tests
- Case studies
- Social events
- Presentations
- Psychometric tests
- Interviews

### Presentations

The presentation is, without doubt, the chief cause of anxiety for most candidates attending a graduate assessment centre. It might be a solo effort or you might join others in a group presentation; either way you'll need to be prepared.

Find out as much as you can about what's required before the day. To give yourself the best chance, find out the following:

- **The subject you will be talking on:** if you have a free choice, select something you know about and can talk about confidently.
- **The length of the presentation** and whether this includes time for questions.
- **The facilities and visual aids available:** flipchart, presentation software, laptop, internet access, etc.
- **Who you will be speaking to and their level of knowledge and expertise.** This will help you pitch your talk at the right level.

Presentations at graduate assessment days can take different forms. You could be asked to prepare a five-minute presentation on the day: you may get to select a topic from a list, which could include introducing yourself, talking about a hobby, interest or achievement, or presenting on a topical industry issue or current affair. Alternatively, you may be asked to do a longer presentation that you prepare in advance. A typical subject could be your degree project, but you may be asked to work on a case study that includes a presentation element.

If you have free choice make sure you select a subject you are familiar with and take time to organise your thoughts and collect all the material together. Use simple headings on file cards. Don't try to memorise a whole 'speech' or read a carefully worded draft. You will need to have a definite introduction (where you tell them what you are going to say), a middle (where you cover 4/5 major points), and a conclusion (where you summarise what you've just said). Summarise periodically if it is a long presentation.

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Remember, practising a presentation is vital and there are no excuses not to if you are given advance notice of your subject.

### **White Board Exercise/Technical Interview**

Whiteboard coding is a standard part of technical interviews these days. Candidates focus on preparing for questions and forget to practice delivering their responses. Interviewers use whiteboard coding problems to evaluate how quickly, clearly, and concisely candidates articulate their designs. Common factors in an unsatisfactory interview performance are writing messy code, running out of space, and forgetting essential parts of the question. Keeping a few common-sense simple tips in mind can help a candidate avoid these pitfalls during an interview

- Write the question on the board, word for word. It is vital that you do this for clarity
- Write down examples
- Take time to write clearly
- Use double spaced lines
- Use the space provided efficiently

### **3. Interviews: panel/one-to-one**

Assess an individual's suitability to the job.

- To assess the traits usually associated with the job, the culture of the organisation and the people employed there already
- Not to remain silent or non-participative
- Unless you are sure the job requires a very strong, brash character steer to a 'middle ground approach' where you do not stand out too much
- The solution agreed is not viewed in isolation. The process by which the solution is reached is critically important. Interaction between individual group members and their approach to problem solving is regarded as very significant.

Recruiters want to know what unique skills you can bring to the role. Think through your work experience and the skills and interests you've developed at university and how these relate to the job and area of work.

List your achievements and activities (such as work for university societies, interests and hobbies, internships or work placements, voluntary work or casual work) and make notes on the skills you learned and how you used them, and also what you contributed to different situations.

Review your CV or application form, think of how you can expand on any examples and skills and consider some alternatives. Which examples would be the best ones to highlight for the particular job?

Graduate interviewers will expect you to show a keen interest in their organisation, so use the research you've already done to think up at least three questions to ask about the employer and three questions about the job itself. You can write these down to take into the interview as a reminder.

When you are in the interview, remember that it's fine to pause before responding to questions to gather your thoughts, and if you're unsure about a question it's also fine to ask for clarification.

### **Typical day at an assessment centre**

1. Arrival and briefing session with the assessors and perhaps the Personnel Manager
2. Group exercises (observed by a few assessors) e.g. to assess interpersonal and teamwork skills
3. Coffee
4. Work sampling exercise – to assess how well the candidate would be able to approach a task related to the job e.g. handling correspondence
5. Lunch with the manager and other candidates
6. Psychometric testing: Personality inventory and/or Aptitude Test e.g. verbal and numerical ability
7. Coffee
8. Interview: panel/one-to-one

Remember you may be under observation from the moment that you step inside the gate of the assessment centre!

### **Dos & Don'ts of Assessment Centres**

#### **Do's**

- Do practice basic skills like numeracy – without a calculator
- Do learn to estimate quickly
- Do concentrate on what you are being asked
- Do be aware of the time factor
- Do concentrate on the exercises not the impression you are making
- Do show sensitivity to other people – your reaction to others is a vital part of team working and it's one of the things assessors will be looking for
- Do listen carefully to the contributions of others in your group and develop them if you think they are constructive, don't push your point of view.
- At the interview be prepared to expand on any of the facts you have written down in the application form about your achievements, abilities and experiences
- Dress neatly and appropriately. If you're going to do a physical task you will be advised to bring suitable clothing

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- Relax, stay calm, think before you react
- Strike a balance, be neither pushy nor a shrinking violet

### **Don'ts**

- Don't set out to impress the assessors
- Don't compete against other candidates. You're being measured against a standard, not compared with anyone else
- Don't ever try to put someone down, score points against them. You and others in your group will do best if you work in a spirit of cooperation so that your positive abilities can be shown to your best advantage
- Don't try to dominate your group. Leaders lead through respect not bullying. It's your common sense, your intellect and the quality of your decisions that will get intelligent people to follow you

**(See our Psychometric Tests Factsheet for further info)**