

Assessment centres

Many employers use a multi-stage selection process and will employ a number of different exercises to assess your suitability for a role. When several exercises take place intensively over one or more days, they are referred to as assessment centres.

What happens at assessment centres?

Employers go to considerable effort and expense to select the right candidate. Extended selection can last from one to three days and can have many elements ranging from exam-type test sessions to informal late-night drinks.

Rather than competing against fellow candidates, in most cases you are being scored against key criteria that relate to the role. It is therefore possible for all or none of the candidates at an assessment centre to be recruited.

If you are invited to an assessment centre, it means your application has already impressed the employer so try to enjoy it! It may seem daunting but it is an opportunity to get feedback on your skills and performance across different activities. It is normal to feel nervous but all the other candidates will be in a similar position.

You might encounter any of the following:

Group tasks

These vary but the following exercises are fairly common:

- A group discussion (no leader) on a given subject. You will be assessed on the quality (not necessarily the quantity!) of your contribution.
- Discussions where each participant in turn is asked to take the chair, and to bring the meeting to a conclusion. Be aware of the time factor here.
- A role-play exercise where individuals are assigned parts in a realistic work situation and have to work together to solve a problem, e.g. industrial relations, analysis of production, marketing or financial strategy.
- A joint activity. This can be anything from building towers with Lego to crossing an imaginary river with planks and oil drums.

In group exercises, bear in mind that you will be rated on your enthusiasm, cooperativeness, originality of thought, and your ability to put your ideas across persuasively. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that domineering behaviour equals leadership!

In-tray or e-tray exercises

You may be asked to do an in-tray or e-tray exercise. This involves an in-tray or electronic inbox full of documentation, emails, memos, telephone messages, reports

and correspondence and information about the organisation. You must prioritise the work, make decisions about how to proceed and recommend actions. They aim to test how you deal with information within a time limit. You may be asked to justify the decisions you've made. Be prepared for anything!

Other exercises

You may be asked to do something along these lines of writing a tactful letter in reply to a complaint from an irate customer / client / member of the public or undertaking a project, for example to produce publicity material for a company product.

Making a presentation

You may be required to give a verbal presentation to your group and the selectors. This could range from a five-minute talk on one of your interests to an analysis of a burning issue of current affairs. Applicants for jobs in research may be asked to describe their own research interests or a recent project.

If you find the prospect daunting don't be tempted to cover your embarrassment by being flippant: the selectors will be taking it seriously. Prepare well, sort out your thoughts and ideas and make notes beforehand. Present your topic with interest and enthusiasm and choose a topic you can sustain for the allocated time rather than one you think will impress the selectors. Attempt to capture your listeners' interest from the start and try for a lively delivery. If appropriate, use visual aids.

Aptitude and other tests

Online or paper tests are still used at assessment centres: they might be on verbal or numerical reasoning, or a questionnaire based around a particular workplace or sector. They are not always a pass or fail device; they are often considered as supplementary evidence alongside other results.

'Informal' social events

In some organisations, social events can be as much a part of the selection procedure as tests and interviews. Big meals, free booze, late nights and unfamiliar surroundings are not necessarily factors designed to produce sharp responses the morning after. Healthy moderation in these will help you relax and enjoy the selection process as well as keeping you sharp to face the day's activities with energy and enthusiasm. Expect that you will be observed even during social events or dinners so try to integrate as much as possible and take opportunity to strike up conversations with members of staff.

Interviews

Refer to our other resource sheets for general information about interview techniques. Here are some additional points to keep in mind:

- Some of the questions asked will be a repeat of those covered in the first interview (perhaps with more depth). Be consistent - the employer will have kept notes of that first interview. You will be expected to remember information given to you then and should be prepared to answer questions for which the answers have already been given in brochures, presentations, etc.
- It is likely that you will meet specialists from your chosen sphere of work. Your knowledge, ability, or potential to actually do the job will be under much closer scrutiny, as will your motivation towards your chosen career.
- Take the opportunity to clarify any of your doubts about the organisation: training, salary, location, etc.

Panel interviews

These should be treated just like one-to-one interviews, except that you will balance addressing the person who asked the question with keeping eye contact with other panel members. An interviewer's face and body language will often unconsciously show you when to stop, or when to amplify a point. If one member of the panel doesn't speak at all, don't worry. If another seems aggressive this may be a ploy to see how you react under pressure – just take your time and reply calmly. An individual may be asking the questions, but the whole panel will be assessing your suitability for the role.

Series of one-to-one interviews

These might be with different 'experts' e.g. a specialist in your field of work, a psychologist, HR officer, or a person from outside the organisation. Thus the interviews might cover quite different topics and be intended to highlight different aspects of your personality.

What happens afterwards?

- You could be able to claim reasonable travel expenses.
- Establish when and how you might hear the result and think about whether you would accept an offer.
- If you are successful at assessment centre some companies will invite you back for a final interview. By that stage you have a very good chance of being offered a position.
- Try to learn from your experience of an assessment centre. It is quite common to attend more than one before you get a job offer. Try to see it as part of your process of development.