



Preparing for assessment centres

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Assessment centres

If you have reached this stage in the application process, then congratulations! The assessment centre is often the last stage in a company's recruitment process. Employers are not in the habit of inviting a candidate to assessment centres unless they think they can do the job. You have got this far, so take confidence from that. Be confident in your abilities but also be prepared to sell yourself.

What can you expect at an assessment centre?

Assessment centres are usually between half a day and two full days (which would usually include an overnight stay). The assessments can take place either virtually (using platforms such as Microsoft Teams) or face to face.

They can include any of the following types of activity, in any order:

- Interview
- Group Exercise / Discussion
- Role Play
- Psychometric / Aptitude / Personality Test
- Written Exercise / Report
- Presentation (by candidate and / or employer)
- Social Event
- In-tray Exercise / Case Study

It is crucial you study the letter / email inviting you to an assessment centre to see if there are any aspects of the process you may be able to prepare for in advance e.g., a presentation / psychometric test.

There could be any number of participants at an assessment centre (usually between 6 and 25). Those attending often make the mistake of feeling they are in direct competition with each other whereas employers are simply looking for candidates to reach a set standard.

Interview

The same rules apply to interviews as part of an assessment centre as they do for any other interview. If you prepare well enough, you should have the confidence to perform at your best on the day.

Try to think of questions you might be asked and draft possible answers to them. You can use the STAR method to help you prepare for interviews, details of which can be found in our Preparing for Interviews booklet. Do your research on what is happening in the sector / industry and do your homework on the company beyond their website by using resources such as:

LinkedIn / Twitter / Facebook / Instagram and company blogs. Pay attention to any presentation that company representatives make as their information will come in useful during the process.

Group exercise

Group exercises can take different forms. The task you may be asked to complete could be a leaderless task, a leadership exercise, a group discussion, or a scenario related to the job. You may be assigned different roles within a group. In this part of the process, the assessors are looking for participation, contribution, and your ability to demonstrate reasoned arguments, effective communication, listening skills, negotiation, and co-operation. You may be marked against competencies such as 'working with others', 'problem solving' and 'communication'

- Get a good grasp of the information but do not waste time on small details
- Decide on your priorities
- Be assertive but also prepared to compromise
- Work with the group
- Make positive contributions and encourage contributions from others
- Keep your cool and keep a sense of humour
- Keep an eye on the time.

In terms of group exercises, participants should focus on quality rather than quantity and you should be conscious of talking too much during a group discussion without attempting to involve and ask the opinions of other participants.

Another common mistake in group activities is that participants often have no idea of time. It pays to keep a check and to ensure that the group stays focused on completing it within the time allotted.

Those who are task focused, bring others into the discussion, and clarify other people's ideas generally do well in group discussions / tasks.

Role play

This can be a popular method of assessment for sales and customer service roles but could be used for any type of job where you might be expected to take on a role similar to the job on offer. The main advice for role-playing exercises is even though you are in a role, try to behave in a natural manner and take part as fully as possible even if what you are doing may seem pointless and / or extremely testing.

Psychometric / aptitude / personality test

Even though you may have completed and passed some tests at an earlier stage of the recruitment process, you may well be asked to complete more. These may be an aptitude, or a personality assessment.

Aptitude tests will test your ability in numerical, verbal, logical reasoning, and other abilities. These tests are timed and are often designed so that finishing all the questions is difficult. Remember the tests are just one part of the assessment process and they give the assessors an added dimension to the information already supplied via the application form and other contact with the applicants. As with all aptitude tests the following points should be kept in mind:

- Pay careful attention to the instructions
- If you do not understand anything, ask
- Work quickly and accurately
- Avoid getting stuck on one question
- Calculators may not be allowed, so get used to working without one

Personality questionnaires, or more accurately, inventories, seek to define the type of person you are underneath, e.g., how you relate to people or how you might react in a certain situation. Unlike aptitude tests there are no right or wrong answers. The best policy is to answer the questions as honestly as possible and do not try to second-guess what you think an organisation is looking for. Additionally, do not over think the answers. Although such questionnaires are not timed, you would be expected to finish in a reasonable time, though you could be asked to complete these in advance of the assessment centre.

It is recommended that you practice psychometric tests as much as possible if you know they will form part of your assessment centre. You can access practice tests via Graduate First: <https://www.graduatesfirst.com/university-career-services/salford> (university username and password required)

Written exercise / report

If written communication is important for the job, you may be asked to produce a piece of written work, such as:

- A summary of one or many documents
- A short report
- A business letter, e.g., a letter responding to a complaint
- An explanation of complex issues in lay person's terms
- Justification of a decision you made in a previous exercise

Here are some ideas to help:

- Structure the time you are given.
- Try to keep your writing legible if you cannot submit your work electronically.
- Provide an opening paragraph and summary at the end if appropriate.
- Keep your work concise and do not waffle.
- Be prepared to present your report verbally without just reading it.

Presentation

This is an aspect of the assessment centre you may (understandably) feel nervous about. Giving presentations can be a nerve-wracking experience. The length of time you are given to prepare for the presentation can vary from several days before the assessment centre, to a short preparation period on the day. The duration of the actual presentation may also vary, usually ranging from 2 to 10 minutes. You may wish to include something that makes your presentation stand out: an object, story or even a piece of music if you have advance warning.

You may want to contact Careers & Enterprise to book an appointment with one of the Careers Advisers to discuss presentations in more detail and deliver a 'mock' presentation.

Here are some tips to help you prepare and reduce your anxiety:

- Give your presentation a structure: a beginning, middle and end.
- Think about how much time you have and edit accordingly.
- Practice in front of friends or a Careers Adviser
- If you use visual aids, make sure they look good.
- If you talk quickly, try to slow down.
- Look at your audience.
- Keep to the allocated time.

In-tray exercise / case study

The in-tray exercise is designed to test your ability to absorb complex material quickly, to prioritise and to make decisions. The conclusions you reach are not expected to be perfect, but you may be asked to justify them. Be prepared to develop logical arguments to defend the decisions you make.

The case study has some similarities to the in-tray exercise in that it is timed, and the information you receive would appear to be more than you can assimilate in the time available. The papers you receive will relate to a situation and you are asked to prepare a brief report making recommendations on the action to be taken.

Again, your ability to think clearly and to present a reasoned and logical argument will be tested.

Social event

If you attend an assessment centre, there may be a more informal part at some point in the proceedings – more common during face-to-face assessments. It may or may not be part of the selection process and this would normally be stated at some point during the day. Either way, it is a chance to talk to current employees in a more informal setting and will help you decide if the company and the role being applied for is right for you. Remember: even if it is not officially part of the assessment, you are being assessed most of the time.

Top tips and hints from employers

1. Commercial awareness and career focus are especially important. Other skills that assessors will be looking for are likely to include leadership, team working, analytical skills, problem solving, communication and motivation.
2. Participate fully in all exercises. The whole assessment centre is considered when making a decision about you. Many employers will be sympathetic if you perform less well in one task so do not lose all hope if one element goes badly!
3. Wear a watch (and use it for timed activities)
4. Try to relax and enjoy yourself but concentrate on the tasks so that you can do your best but do not assume you know what assessors are looking for
5. Do not be put off by assessors (chances are you will soon forget they are there)
6. Be positive, enthusiastic and above all be yourself!

The decision

You should be informed within a few days of the company's decision. You may automatically be offered feedback on your performance but, if not, ask for it. You may find the feedback positive and encouraging even if you have not been selected to go to the next stage. Even if some of the feedback is negative and / or constructive you can learn from this to perform better next time.

Further help

You can speak to a Careers Adviser on a one-to-one basis if you need any further preparing for an assessment centre. You can [book an appointment](#) here. You can also book onto one of our [workshops](#) on Preparing for Assessment Centres and Psychometric tests. Make sure to look through our other workshops, as they are all designed to support and develop your professional skills!

If you would like to practice your interview skills as part of your preparation for an upcoming Assessment Centre, we highly recommend heading to [Shortlist.Me](#) to practice with bespoke mock interviews!