Assessment Centres

What are they?

Despite the continued popularity of the interview as a means of selecting applicants for jobs, a number of studies have suggested that it is not always a reliable selection tool. As a result, some employers, particularly those recruiting for graduate training positions or who hire lots of graduates, have devised alternative assessment procedures. They bundle these activities together and run them in what are called selection or assessment centres. The assessment centres are usually run either on employer’s premises or in local hotels and typically last for a half or a full day (however in some cases they might last for two or even three days). The longer time allows employers to find out more about the candidates through a series of exercises.

What kind of exercises?

The most common activities used are interviews, presentations and group exercises. However, if you’re not told in advance what sort of activities to expect you can try to work it out. The clues are in the job description and person specification. Each exercise is designed to assess candidates against specific competencies. What sort of person are they looking for? If they want numerate applicants - expect a test to measure this. If you need to display self-confidence in the job, they may ask you to give a presentation in order to assess this or to undertake a role play exercise to see how you respond in certain situations relevant to the role.
Discussion groups

These are commonly used and designed to find out how well you communicate in a group, usually of four to eight people. One or more assessors watch the group interact. The format most frequently used is a leaderless discussion group. A leader is not appointed as the assessors want to see the different roles members of the group naturally take, for example: leader, ideas person, timekeeper, diplomat etc. Typically you are given a case study or topic to discuss or problem to solve within a time limit. Sometimes you are given the information in advance but usually not. In order to replicate the workplace, the recruiter may offer additional information relating to the scenario during the exercise itself to see how candidates respond to changing information and/or priorities.

Alternative approaches include a group where each member is assigned a role to play, or there may be a practical team exercise (for example the group may be asked to build something with restricted materials and teams may be in competition with one another).

Whatever form they take there are a number of things you can do to improve your chances of doing well. First of all, it is important that you say something early on, as the longer you leave it the harder it can be to make a contribution. If a candidate doesn't join in the discussion it is difficult for the assessor’s to make any positive judgements about them.

Second, if you feel shut out of the discussion at any stage - you can come back in fairly easily either by complimenting someone on a view or an opinion which they've expressed or by asking them to clarify something they've said. But avoid interrupting other participants as employers may mark you down.

If one person is dominating the discussion it may be helpful to summarise the situation at convenient opportunities. Acting as time-keeper is another way to stay involved. You will be marked positively for these kinds of contributions because they are seen as moving the group along in a supportive way.
Third, if you are leading the discussion you should aim to: introduce the topic; set down any guidelines such as encouraging only one person to speak at a time; establish and get agreement on how the group is to approach the task, curtail overbearing contributors if you can whilst involving those on the edge of the discussion. Finally, steer the group towards a point where you can make a short summary of the discussion. Be aware of the time because you need to complete the task in the time allowed.

**Personality and aptitude tests**

Personality tests are designed to measure different aspects of your character to help assess your suitability for the role you are applying for. They are not usually timed. It is best to answer these as honestly as you can and try not to give the answers which you think the employer wants you to give.

Aptitude tests have a different purpose. They are used to measure your ability in relevant areas for the job role such as numerical, verbal or abstract reasoning. For example, how good are you at working with figures, can you recognise patterns, are you good at reasoning with words, and so on. They are nearly always timed and multiple choice. It is fairly rare for employers to administer aptitude tests at assessment centres but sometimes they do so to validate the results which a candidate achieved earlier in the process when completing tests online. Some recruiters use situational judgement tests which assess how you respond to a range of different scenarios, usually related to the role you have applied to. For more details please see our ‘Psychometric Tests’ information leaflet.

**Written tests**

It is easy to see why so many recruiters want their applicants to be good at writing. Whether it’s a report, an email, a memo or an article for publication, it is important to express your thoughts clearly and accurately. The format varies but the three commonest are:-
**Drafting a letter**

A typical version of this test requires that you respond to a letter of complaint from someone - it could be a colleague or a customer. Although the detailed circumstances will vary, there are some general guidelines which might help you. Make sure you convince the recipient that you have understood their problem. Consider whether an apology is required or whether an explanation would be enough. Avoid responding aggressively; try instead to be both polite and tactful.

**Case study/Analysis exercise**

This test involves analysing a lot of information from various sources (eg, company reports, market research data, internal memos, news articles) before presenting a reasonable solution to a problem. There aren't necessarily any right or wrong answers. The assessors are mainly interested in knowing whether you have understood the issues and whether your proposals are well thought out. Whilst the written part of this exercise can be minimal, it is still important to present your recommendations clearly and logically.

**E-tray exercise**

You may be asked to play the role of a manager, for example, who has returned from holiday to find a lot of work waiting to be dealt with. You have to separate the urgent tasks from the non-urgent and the important from the unimportant.

The key to doing well is to skim all the papers very quickly at first. After your initial skimming, attempt an early prioritisation of papers.

The written summary of your recommendations is, once again, fairly brief, but should nevertheless be clear, logical and concise. You must take care to leave enough time to write your summary.
Presentations and role plays

Employers include this kind of exercise in order to measure your clarity of expression, your time-keeping, your self-confidence and your ability to structure your material. Typically candidates are allowed five or ten minutes for delivery.

You're often told in advance what you will be required to talk about. It could be on a prescribed topic or a subject of your choice, perhaps a leisure interest, a university project or it could be related to the job you're applying for. It can be helpful to write out the key points on a series of numbered index cards. If you use PowerPoint keep the content of each slide to brief points.

Try to practise your talk in advance if you can. Get a friend to listen and tell you how you are coming across. Work hard to fit the talk into the time you've been allowed.

Remember to project your voice so everyone can hear and try to make eye contact with each person in the room at some stage during your talk.

Role plays are sometimes used if the position requires an assessment of how a candidate might respond in certain situations which may occur in the job itself. Actors may be used for this activity or more likely members of the recruiting organisation or selection panel. Examples of possible scenarios might include dealing with a dissatisfied customer for a role in retail or an under-performing member of staff for a job in management. Dealing with a role play activity may require an element of thinking on your feet but it’s important to keep calm, listen carefully and to try and address the problem in a positive and professional manner.

Interviews

Although you are likely to have already had an interview before being invited to the assessment centre, it is equally likely that you will be interviewed again as part of the longer assessment process. There may even be several interviews. The Employability and Careers Centre leaflet titled ‘The Job Interview’ should help you to prepare effectively for these.
Meal and refreshment breaks

There may be times during the selection process when you may dine or have refreshment breaks with some of the recruiter’s staff and other candidates. Although it is a good thing to use these opportunities to relax and catch your breath, it is also important to actively engage in conversation and to retain an air of confidence and composure. It is quite possible that your social skills will be observed during these times. This can be a great opportunity to find out about the organisation from the people who work there and your interest is viewed very positively by the assessors.

Final tips

Although you will be trying to perform well at every stage throughout the assessment process, it is quite possible that some activities may go less well than others. The important thing to know is that candidates are seldom rejected on the basis of just one exercise. If you focus and concentrate on doing well in the remaining exercises, there is no reason why you shouldn’t still get through. You may even get extra marks for demonstrating that you are able to remain calm under pressure.

Finally, assessment centres are not ‘competitions’. You will be assessed against the key skills required for the job and it is very unlikely that there will be a quota for the number of job offers made at each assessment centre. Concentrate on engaging positively with all the activities and this will help to ensure that you do the best you can.

To see an assessment centre in action visit the video available on our website: www.surrey.ac.uk/careers/ (Go to ‘Quick Links’ and select ‘Careers Videos’). Look out for our assessment centre talks and workshops, details of which will be advertised on our website: www.surrey.ac.uk/careers (Click on ‘What’s on’). The website www.assessmentday.co.uk/ has some free materials including a useful guide (but please note that some of their products involve a cost).