Assessment Centres

With thanks to GE (General Electric) for the sponsorship of this guide
Assessment Centres

The majority of larger organisations and increasing numbers of medium sized companies use assessment centres as the final stage of recruitment of graduates on to graduate schemes and students on to placement schemes. This guide will take you through the various tasks included in assessment centres and provide further information resources to help you prepare effectively.

Lasting from half a day to three days, assessment centres involve individual and group exercises to assess skills and competencies that are hard to judge from interviews alone. These include:

- Interpersonal skills such as teamwork, leadership, social awareness, listening and public speaking.
- Problem solving, analytical skills, prioritising, decision making, planning, working under pressure and commercial awareness.

You will find information on each of these skills in the Developing Employability Skills section of the PCC website: http://www.brunel.ac.uk/services/pcc/students/make-yourself-employable/developing-skills

Being invited to an assessment centre means the employer already knows that you have many of the qualities they require and you've got a good chance of a job offer. You will be assessed against how you personally do, not in competition with the other candidates there. One assessment centre can result in several job offers if the candidates are good, or none if no-one impresses. Working together as a team is likely to benefit everyone.

On the day, focus on each task in turn. Most people do better in some than others. Don’t dwell on any that don’t go well and move on to the next. Offers will be based on your all-round performance. If a task doesn’t go well, as long as it doesn’t reveal a weakness for a key competency in the job an offer may still be made.

Having reached the assessment centre stage of a recruitment process, preparation is often the key to continued success. Understanding the tasks involved and what creates a positive performance will allow you to perform to your strengths.

Your research should also involve a deeper understanding of the role, the company and an informed opinion of what interests you in the opportunity.
Preparation
Effective preparation can help you display the ‘best you’ but don’t try to completely change your personality and behaviour. It’s very hard to do and would you really want a job where you had to put on an act all the time? Be yourself. Useful preparation includes:

- Reminding yourself of the employers’ selection criteria.
- Informing yourself about the company and its business sector.
- Updating yourself on topical, industry news articles or current affairs.
- Preparing thoroughly for known tasks.
- If you have a disability that has led to you being provided with additional time during your studies for course work or exams you may want to notify the employer of that ahead of the assessment centre so that you can receive additional time for any assessed exercises. This decision of disclosure is purely your choice but additional time may help you give the fullest account of your abilities on the day. For more information see the Declaring a Disability section of the PCC website or talk it through with your Careers Consultant: http://www.brunel.ac.uk/services/pcc/students/finding-a-job/declaring-a-disability

You may also be asked to attend an interview as part of an assessment day. See the Interview Skills guide to help you to prepare for this.

Group tasks
Assessment centres generally include a variety of group activities to see how well you interact with others, the role you play in a team and how you tackle specific tasks. These include leaderless activities, chaired discussions, business games and other work related scenarios. Examples include practical exercises such as building a Lego tower, case studies such as a new product launch and role plays where individuals have a specific management role. Helpful behaviour includes:

- Assessing the task and deciding on strategy and planning.
- Ensuring that all team members are making useful contributions.
- Making best use of expertise and resources.
- Contributing new ideas, presenting arguments, listening, negotiating and co-operating.
- Focusing on key issues in the brief.

Written exercises and psychometric tests
These are typically presented as an individual activity with reading time included at the start. They may also include psychometric, numerical, logical reasoning or technical tests.

Written exercises
These test skills such as your ability to absorb copious and complex information, judgement, political awareness, prioritising, decision making and business communication. A good deal of attention will also be paid to the quality of your spelling and grammar in what you produce. Examples include:

- Drafting letters and reports e.g. answering a complaint from a member of your team or producing a summary from given data for a board meeting.
- Writing a business case e.g. for a new system or setting up a branch office.

Psychometric tests
Fewer employers now use tests at this stage. They tend to be used as the first stage in the application process or after you’ve submitted your application but before the assessment centre. If you do encounter them at the assessment centre stage they may even be the same style of test you did beforehand in the recruitment process. Tackle them with the same professional attitude you adopted the first time.

The resources in the Psychometric Tests section of the PCC website including practice tests, will help you to prepare for this: http://www.brunel.ac.uk/services/pcc/students/interviews-and-assessment-centres/psychometric-tests

In-tray exercises
In-tray exercises assess your ability to handle administrative tasks by simulating either a typical paper ‘In-Tray’ or an electronic ‘e-Tray’ Inbox such as Microsoft Outlook. Often timed, typical tasks include:
“Read everything before you start to prioritise and respond, as you may find something important towards the end that you might overlook if you don’t read everything first…”

- Prioritising in order of importance a range of materials including memos, letters, phone messages and emails.
- Providing written notes explaining your reasoning for the order in which you placed them.
- Writing responses to any emails or memos using appropriate business language.
- Coping with additional emails or extra papers that arrive midway through the test.

Tips for success
- Read everything before you start to prioritise and respond, as you may find something important towards the end that you might overlook if you don’t read everything first.
- When replying to emails look carefully at who it has come from – adapt your tone and language appropriately – e.g. friendly banter to the Chief Executive is probably not appropriate!
- There often isn’t a right or wrong answer – clarity of thought and clear explanation of your reasons are what the assessors are looking for.
- Try to balance urgency with importance – try to assess what is immediate, what can wait and what can be delegated.
- Look out for any deadlines within emails/memos and make sure you meet them.

In-tray test examples
- A very challenging e-Tray exercise is available from the Civil Service Fast Stream site: http://faststream.civilservice.gov.uk/How-do-I-apply/Example-e-Tray-Excercise/
- Deloitte UK has a sample ‘e-tray’ exercise and psychometric test examples, together with brief information on competencies: http://careers.deloitte.com/united-kingdom/students/country_custom1.aspx?CountryContentID=12416
- PricewaterhouseCoopers simplified in-tray challenges give an overview of what you might encounter in a real test: http://www.pwc.co.uk/careers/student/interactive/interactive-challenges.jhtml

Presentations and role plays

Employers increasingly use presentations as one part of the recruitment process. They are used to check how you communicate to an audience, how well you prepare for a task, your ability to think on your feet and, most importantly, how well you can maintain interest. If the job requires an element of public speaking it is even more important that you succeed in this task. You may be asked to prepare a presentation in advance or, be warned, you may be given a topic on the day. It is normal to feel nervous – appreciate that adrenalin can be used effectively.

Whilst studying, take any opportunity to give a presentation. Talking to prospective students at open days, being a student representative, talking at committee meetings and feeding back to your course or getting involved in societies and activities are all ways for you to develop your public speaking skills.
So what do you need to know?

A good presentation requires preparation and planning. You should be clear about:

- Who your audience is.
- What you are expected to talk about (the brief).
- Where you will be giving the presentation.
- What facilities you have available (OHP, computer, projector, flip chart).
- How long you have to speak – possibly only 5, 10 or 15 minutes.
- What memories you want to leave your listener with.

It is your responsibility to be audible, speak clearly and include relevant content information. Your audience will give up if they can’t hear or understand you.

Practice is very important

It will help you to get the timing right – remember that if you over run you may be cut off in mid sentence. Practice will make you sound more natural and get the words right – remember that you are not reading words but using words to communicate.

A good presentation will do four things – inform, entertain, touch the emotions and inspire action. Look for ways to do all four.

The Process

The following format will help you organise your presentation:

- Outline what you propose to cover.
- Give the body of the presentation.
- Include any facts or statistics.
- Summarise and conclude.
- Invite questions from the audience.

How to keep your audience interested

- Vary the pace of the presentation and the tone of your voice. Speak clearly and use silence to emphasize points. Maintain eye contact (with the whole group rather than one person alone).
- Use visuals to illustrate your points (OHP, PowerPoint) but don’t rely on long and complicated slides to ensure your audience don’t suffer from PowerPoint fatigue.
- Use clear, descriptive language and analogies to illustrate your points – but be brief and don’t get distracted.
- Use pictures, graphs or charts to prove a point but make sure they are not too over complicated for your audience.
- A handout with miniature slides and room for notes can be a nice addition.
- Avoid too many gesticulations and don’t fiddle with keys in your pocket, a pen or your jewellery.

Take a deep breath. Relax!

- Don’t huddle over a desk or table - stand up tall, move around. Remember, how you say something is as important as what you have to say.
- Try to strive for the 5 C’s. You should look and sound confident, credible, competent, convincing, and comfortable.

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...Watch the Assessment Centre DVD in PCC or streamed from our website for a simulated presentation...”
“The more presentations you do the better you will become so take every opportunity to practice...

...Take advice and ask for feedback, adapting what you learn to suit your personal style...

...Remain professional throughout. Recruiters are bound to be interested in how you use the networking opportunity.”

- Keep eye contact
- Use note cards instead of a completely scripted speech so that you can look up and make eye contact with your audience.
- Always avoid the urge to read a presentation.
- One tip is to try and look at someone at the back of the audience and then shift your gaze to the front, middle and back again.
- When using visual aids such as a board or flip chart, don’t turn your back to the audience and don’t get between the screen and the projector.

Key points to remember
- Identify the purpose and your objectives.
- Plan your presentation thoroughly to time and re-emphasise at least three things you want the audience to remember you by.
- Use visual aids, such as pictures and table graphs.
- Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse.

The more presentations you do the better you will become so take every opportunity to practice. Even if a presentation doesn’t go well you can always learn something from the experience to help make the next one better. Take advice and ask for feedback, adapting what you learn to suit your personal style. Be prepared to use different approaches in different circumstances and have a back-up plan in case the equipment doesn’t work.

Watch the Assessment Centre DVD in PCC or streamed from our website for a simulated presentation (as part of an assessment centre).

Role plays
You may be presented with a scenario typical of the job, e.g. an angry customer or a difficult staff member and have to handle the situation. Role plays can show your ability to think on your feet, listening, sensitivity to others and persuasiveness.

Case study exercises
They are commonly presented as a hypothetical business problem that you will be asked to analyse and make recommendations in a brief written or verbal report with an assessor. No previous experience of the business is needed and they will not be looking for management level skills but the ability to assess a large amount of information, think logically and identify a solution. They tend to be used by business consultancy organisations.

Examples of case study exercises
- Consultancy Links have case study tips and employer examples. Note that some of the employer links will duplicate those given below: http://www.consultancylinks.com/case_study_interviews.html
- Wikijob includes some case study interview questions: http://www.wikijob.co.uk/wiki/case-study
- Bain & Company (management consultancy) have an interview preparation section that includes three online practice interactive cases: http://www.joinbain.com/apply-to-bain/interview-preparation/default.asp
• Marakon (global strategy and management consultancy firm) have an interactive case study: http://www.marakon.com/cases/CaseStudy03U/CaseStudy03U.htm

• McKinsey have on-line management consultancy interactive case studies: http://www.mckinsey.com/careers/how_do_i_apply/how_to_do_well_in_the_interview.aspx

Social activities
Some assessment centres will involve an overnight stay or incorporate breaks in activities for you to meet staff, from new graduate entrants to senior managers. This will help you find out about the culture of the organisation and how you would fit in and it’s an ideal opportunity to find out what it’s really like to work for the company. You may not be formally assessed but don’t assume that. Remain professional throughout. Recruiters are bound to be interested in how you use the networking opportunity and whether you have real motivation for the job and organisation. It seems obvious but don’t over-indulge if alcohol is offered.

Advice for international students
All the information and job hunting resources available from PCC are very relevant to the UK job hunting needs of international students. Additional resources are also available on our website, targeted at introducing and explaining the recruitment process in the UK, helping students to work with PCC staff to develop a job hunting strategy that meets their specific needs: http://www.brunel.ac.uk/services/pc/students/information-for-international-students

All students are encouraged to view the wealth of online help available on the PCC website including videos which will help you familiarise yourself with and clarify job hunting processes including assessment centres and interviews. CV templates, application form help and networking information can all be really useful to understand the information required by UK employers. This information can then provide the basis for an interaction with a Careers Consultant who will provide you with one-to-one career specific advice and guidance. To view case studies and to hear top tips from international students who have found success in their job search visit our ‘workglobal’ pages: http://brunel.workglobal.org/

Feedback suggests that a lot of students benefit from gaining an insight into two key areas of assessment centres, these include; preparation for group work tasks, this can involve watching videos available on the secure zone http://www.brunel.ac.uk/services/pc/students and also discussing their own personal approach to these group activities with a careers consultant and how best to impress the selectors with their performance.

Presentations are increasingly being used as part of assessment centres and practicing these with a careers consultant can provide you with feedback to help improve your delivery and add impact to your talk.

Further Information
• Log in to the secure zone part of the PCC web site to watch the ‘At the Assessment Centre’ DVD: http://www.brunel.ac.uk/services/pc/secure-resources/_nocache

• Our workshops cover topics such as selection tests, interviews and assessment centres and feature graduate employers: http://www.brunel.ac.uk/services/pc/presentations

• Assessment Day has expert advice written by assessment centre designers and graduate employers on what to expect and how to perform well in each exercise. It also contains a free practice in-tray exercise, situational judgement tests and psychometric tests: http://www.assessmentday.co.uk/

More about the PCC…

The Placement and Careers Centre is your one-stop shop for advice, guidance and support when looking for work and planning your career. You can use our service from your first day at Brunel and for up to two years after you graduate.

**Jobs:** part-time, vacation, placement and graduate opportunities.

**Events:** recruitment, employability skills and careers uncovered.

**Advice and feedback:** CVs, applications, interviews and assessment centres.

**Guidance:** career options and postgraduate study.

**Information:** online and in our careers library.

Get started now…

**In person** 1st Floor Bannerman Centre

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