Assessment Centres

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The majority of larger organisations and increasing numbers of medium sized companies use assessment centres as the final stage of recruitment of placement students, interns or graduates. 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.
- Other skills and knowledge such as problem solving, analytical skills, prioritising, decision making, planning, working under pressure and commercial awareness.

You can find information on these skills on the 'What employers want' page of the Professional Development Centre (PDC) website: www.brunel.ac.uk/services/pdc/careers-advice/finding-a-job/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 nobody 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 - just move on to the next. Offers will be based on your all-round performance. An offer may still be made if a task doesn’t go well – as long as it doesn’t reveal a weakness for a key competency.

Having reached the assessment centre stage of the 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 reflect a deeper understanding of the role, the company and an informed opinion of what interests you about the job.

**Preparation**

Effective preparation can help you display the ‘best you’ but don’t try to completely change your personality and behaviour. Be yourself!

Useful preparation includes:

- Reminding yourself of the employers’ selection criteria and required competencies.
- 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 and have been given additional time during your studies for coursework or exams you may want to advise the employer before you attend the assessment centre so that you can receive additional time for any assessed exercises. This decision to disclose is purely your choice but additional time may help you give the best account of your abilities on the day. For more information see:

- My Plus Students’ Club – Article on assessment centres (registration required).

or talk it through with your Careers Consultant or Placement/Internship Adviser.
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 use of expertise and resources.
- Contributing new ideas, presenting arguments, listening, negotiating and co-operating.

Written exercises

These test skills such as your ability to absorb complex information, judgement, political awareness, prioritising, decision making and business communication. Attention will also be paid to the quality of your spelling and grammar. 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. If you do encounter them at the assessment centre stage they may even be the same type of test you did earlier in the recruitment process. Tackle them with the same professional attitude you adopted the first time. Use the resources - including practice tests - in the Psychometric Tests section of the PDC website to help you prepare: www.brunel.ac.uk/services/pdc/careers/advice/finding-a-job/applying-for-a-job/assessments/focus-on-psychometric-testing

E-tray and in-tray exercises

These exercises assess your ability to handle administrative tasks by simulating either a paper ‘In-tray’ or an ‘e-tray’ computer based simulation of an email inbox such as Outlook. Typical tasks may involve:

- 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.

- 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.

E-tray and In-tray examples:

• Civil Service Fast Stream: [www.cubiksonline.com/Cubiks/Etray3/Instructions/ShowInstructionsForEtray](www.cubiksonline.com/Cubiks/Etray3/Instructions/ShowInstructionsForEtray)
• Assessment Day: [www.assessmentday.co.uk/e-tray-exercise.htm](www.assessmentday.co.uk/e-tray-exercise.htm) Information and a free practice test
• Job Test Prep: [www.jobtestprep.co.uk/free-in-tray-exercise](www.jobtestprep.co.uk/free-in-tray-exercise) Free In-tray exercise example with explanations for each question and a final score report

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
• 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 you may be given a topic on the day. It is normal to feel nervous – appreciate that adrenalin can be used effectively.

While 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 skills.

A good presentation requires preparation and planning. 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 (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.

Speak clearly and audibly and include relevant content. Your audience will give up if they can’t hear or understand you. Practice will help you to get the timing right as, if you over-run, you may be cut off in mid-sentence. Practice will make you sound more natural – remember that you’re using words to communicate information not just reading them. 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

- 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.
- 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 (PowerPoint, Prezi, flip chart) but don’t rely on long and complicated slides or graphs, turn your back to the audience or get between the screen and the projector.
- Use clear, descriptive language and analogies to illustrate your points – but be brief and don’t get distracted.
- A handout can be a useful addition, but remember to give it out at the end so your audience doesn’t get distracted from looking at you during your presentation.
- Avoid too many gestures and don’t fiddle with keys, 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 Cs. You should look and sound confident, credible, competent, convincing, and comfortable.
- Use cards instead of a completely scripted speech so that you can look up and make eye contact with your audience.
- 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.
- Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse.

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 ‘At the Assessment Centre’ for a simulated presentation (as part of an assessment centre): [www.brunel.ac.uk/services/pdc/secure-resources](http://www.brunel.ac.uk/services/pdc/secure-resources).

**Role plays**

You may be presented with a scenario typical of the job, e.g. an angry customer or marketing a new product 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**

These 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. 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**

- [WikiJob](http://www.wikijob.co.uk/wiki/case-study) includes some case study interview questions: [www.wikijob.co.uk/wiki/case-study](http://www.wikijob.co.uk/wiki/case-study)
• **McKinsey** have online sample case studies: [www.mckinsey.com/careers/join_us/interview_prep](http://www.mckinsey.com/careers/join_us/interview_prep)
• **TARGETjobs** Tips on how to prepare for a case study exercise: [https://targetjobs.co.uk/career-sectors/consulting/advice/306745-impress-your-interviewers-the-case-study](https://targetjobs.co.uk/career-sectors/consulting/advice/306745-impress-your-interviewers-the-case-study)

**Social activities**

Some assessment centres will involve an overnight stay or include breaks in activities for you to meet staff - from new graduate trainees 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 so remain professional throughout. Recruiters will be interested in how you use the networking opportunity and whether you have real motivation for the job and organisation. It may seem obvious but don’t overindulge if alcohol is offered.

**Resources**

You can find more information about assessment centre activities at:

• **Prospects**: [www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips/assessment-centres](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips/assessment-centres)
• **TARGETjobs**: [https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/assessment-centres](https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/assessment-centres)