

Assessment centres



Assessment centres consist of a set of activities over a day or half day, designed to see how you deal with work related situations. There is usually an interview and a selection of the exercises covered here. You may also be asked to do one of these exercises as part of an interview, rather than a full assessment centre.

the
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Presentations

You might be given a topic a few days or weeks in advance, and be asked to prepare a presentation on it. You might also be given a topic on the day, and allotted a short time to prepare. Usually you will be told how long your presentation should be. Subjects vary, but some common themes include challenges facing the organisation or sector, selling a product or service or talking about an aspect of your experience. If you are applying for a role in academic research, you are commonly asked to present on your research so far and how it relates to the institution.

What employers are looking for

- > Communication skills: Employers are testing your ability to tailor your message to an audience and communicate effectively in person. They'll be looking for how well you connect through eye contact and body language, and use appropriate professional language.
- > Confidence: Employers are looking for candidates who can present themselves professionally and confidently. Would you represent the organisation well to a client? They will usually ask you some questions at the end, and want to see that you can respond calmly and constructively when your ideas are challenged.
- > Content: Presentations test your ability to structure your thinking and convey a message clearly. They're also a chance to demonstrate your understanding of the sector and organisation you're applying to. Employers will also be assessing how well you've followed the instructions you were given, and taken into account any information they've provided.

Preparation

- > Structure your presentation clearly. There should be a clear introduction, a few key points, and a conclusion which ties all of your points together.
- > The most common mistake in presentations is trying to fit too much content in. Trying to cover too many points, or including too much detail, will make your presentation less clear and you may struggle to keep to time.
- > Pose questions or use practical examples and anecdotes to illustrate your points.
- > Know your audience. Pitch your message to their level of understanding and their interests.

On the day

- > Noting key points on index cards or a sheet of paper can stop your mind from going blank. However, looking down at your notes too much will stop you from connecting with your audience.
- > Engage your audience by making eye contact, smiling and showing enthusiasm.
- > Make sure you are always facing your audience, don't turn your back and start reading your slides.
- > Remember the audience is on your side and wants to hear what you have to say.

REMEMBER

Your performance overall will be what matters, so don't worry if you feel you didn't do your best at a particular task. Remember that you are being assessed against a set of competencies and not against the other candidates so rather than trying to compete against them, make sure that you demonstrate the qualities the organisation is seeking.

In-tray/e-tray exercises

You'll have to deal with an inbox of email messages in a limited amount of time. Messages will often be a mixture of requests, internal memos and notes about phone messages. You will have to choose a response to each one, and you might be asked to rank them in order of priority.

What employers are looking for

- > Prioritising: They'll be looking for your choices here to reflect their priorities as an organisation, and the key responsibilities of the role you're applying for.
- > Decision making: Employers want to see that you can make sensible decisions which best serve the interests of the organisation.
- > Time management: These exercises are usually very time pressured and test your ability to use your time effectively and complete the task.

Preparation

- > Prepare yourself by taking a practice e-tray exercise. These are available through your college's careers centre website, or by searching 'e-tray exercise' on www.careerstagged.co.uk

On the day

- > Read the instructions carefully and quickly look through all the information you are given.
- > Make sure you have a way of easily monitoring the time you have left, and check the time frequently.
- > Don't spend too much time on any one email or decision.
- > Identify the important issues, paying attention to any contradictions, key details such as dates, and anything involving a manager or client.
- > Don't get distracted by items which seem urgent but in reality could wait.
- > Consider which tasks might be delegated.
- > Be ready for the unexpected – an urgent request could arrive during the activity which could change things!

Written exercises or tests

Employers sometimes create their own bespoke written exercises or tests. These exercises are usually tailored to the organisation and the job you are applying for. They often try to replicate tasks similar to what you'd do in the real job. Reading the job description or advertisement closely will help you identify what the employer will be testing in a written exercise. Common exercises might include drafting an email to a customer, sorting and drawing conclusions from data in Excel, or proofreading a piece of text to identify errors.

Because these exercises are all different, none of the candidates will know exactly what to expect. Reading the other sections of this information sheet will help you identify what employers will be looking for and how you can do well. If you suspect they may be testing a specific skill such as using Excel or a programming language, you can do some practice with an online tutorial beforehand.

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Case studies

In this exercise you are given a range of information (often including articles, graphs, and reports) and asked to summarise your recommendations based on the facts. Case studies can be done verbally in an interview format, or as a written exercise.

What employers are looking for

- > Analytical skills: They are testing your ability to take on information, identify key issues, and think through potential solutions under time pressure.
- > Confidence: Employers want to see that you are able to state your point of view clearly and confidently, and remain calm if questioned or challenged.
- > Communication skills: You need to demonstrate that you can make your points articulately and use professional language. This doesn't necessarily mean that you need to know lots of industry jargon, but use a formal, professional tone.

Preparation

- > Many people find case studies daunting, but don't panic. There is usually no 'right answer' - it is about making logical conclusions using clear, well-reasoned arguments.
- > Some employers have examples on their websites. Search for 'case interviews' in Careers Tagged (www.careerstagged.co.uk) to find sample case studies and advice on how to address them.
- > You can work through example cases by giving yourself a time limit to read them, make notes about key points, and present your response to a friend or family member. Websites such as preplounge.com allow you to practice case studies with other students using video chat.

On the day

- > Decide quickly which information is useful and relevant to the task and which can be discarded. Watch out for contradictions.
- > Identify the key issues in the case, and ensure you address them.
- > Make sure you answer the question and don't stray from the brief.
- > It's fine to acknowledge other points of view, but avoid sitting on the fence.

Notes

Group exercises

A group of candidates, usually four to eight, have a mock meeting or complete a task together. If it is a discussion or meeting, you may be given a case study to read through before. Sometimes candidates will be given different roles such as a marketing director, HR director or finance director. These are likely to have conflicting agendas. The group is usually expected to reach a unanimous decision, or complete the task, by the end of the allocated time.

What employers are looking for

- > Teamwork skills: being able to work effectively as part of a team is important in most jobs. You can show your teamwork skills by listening well, showing an understanding of others' ideas and what they can contribute, and making an effort to include quieter group members by asking them for their views.
- > Diplomacy: knowing when to stand your ground and when to compromise.
- > Adaptability: your ability to recognise when a plan of action isn't working and change tactics.

Preparation

- > There's not a lot you can do to actually practise for group exercises. The best you can do is be aware of what employers are looking for. You could also reflect on yourself and how you tend to behave in group situations, and identify things you might need to work on.
- > Your careers centre may have a video of an assessment centre so that you can watch a group exercise, with commentary from the employer about what they were looking for and how different candidates performed.

On the day

- > Speak clearly and make regular, considered, well-articulated contributions. Assessors can only mark you on what you say, so if you don't contribute much, it will be hard to score well.
- > Show that you're actively listening and thinking about what others have said by responding, developing an idea, or referring back to earlier comments.
- > Ensure everyone is involved, for example by asking the quieter members of the group for their opinions.
- > Help to organise the group. You could suggest a plan for how you will use the time and ensure you complete the task, and assign roles such as timekeeper and note-taker.
- > Pay attention to your body language – try to seem engaged and positive.
- > Avoid dominating the discussion or getting off the topic.

Notes
