

Assessment centres



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What is an assessment centre?

The assessment centre process usually involves a number of candidates, completing a series of group activities and job simulation exercises, as well as an individual interview and are usually assessed by multiple assessors. They are thought to be a much more effective way to select candidates than traditional interviews alone.

Assessment centres can vary in structure, but their main purpose is to create an environment in which you, along with the other candidates, have the opportunity to demonstrate your wider range of skills and competences over a longer period of time.

Typically, they are held over a full day, but it's not unusual to be invited to a shorter half day assessment. Sometimes, candidates are required to pass the morning activities at a full day assessment, to be invited back for the afternoon session. Some employers hold their assessment centres over two days, and these are likely to include an overnight stay.

What activities are typical of assessment centres?

Employers often design their own assessment centres to cover the skills and competences they are looking for. As well as an interview you could expect to do a combination of group exercises, presentations, aptitude or psychometric tests and case studies.

These give you the opportunity to demonstrate skills such as communication, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving and task management. You are also likely to have a welcome talk during which you will find out more about the employer and meet current employees. Read on to find out what potential activities may make up an assessment centre:

Group icebreakers are used to help candidates relax and get to know the group. You might be asked to introduce yourself and share an unusual fact or story. Sometimes the group may be asked to complete a problem-solving exercise. For example, you may be asked to construct something with a set of resources such as stationery, plastic cups and straws. The assessors will be looking to see that everyone is taking part and that the group is working together.

In-tray or e-tray exercises are designed to measure how effectively you manage your workload. You will be given a range of emails, reports and correspondence, together with information on the organisation. There will be a time limit to complete the task, during which you may be asked to prioritise tasks and recommend actions based on the information provided. These exercises assess competencies including analysing, decision making, planning and organising together with communication and time management.

Group Exercises can involve the group being asked to discuss a case study involving a project or topic relevant to the business. The assessors are looking for how you participate in the discussion and how you listen and understand (not necessarily agree with) the others in the group. This can include your ability to present reasoned arguments, your summarising skills and how you negotiate and co-operate with the other team members.

“Assessment centres create an environment in which you have the opportunity to demonstrate your wide range of skills.”

Role-Play exercises involve the group being given a brief based on a real-life business situation and each candidate being assigned a role to play throughout the exercise. It is likely to represent the sort of challenges that you could face in the job and gives the assessors a chance to see how you behave.

Generally, these test competencies such as:

- Oral communication - can you be understood by others and how you speak to others
- Teamwork - how co-operative you are with others
- Leadership - how you help ensure that the group achieves its objectives
- Influencing skills - how you overcome any conflicting views to reach an amicable conclusion
- Analysis skills - your understanding of the situation
- Flexibility - how you adjust to receiving new information

- Problem solving - how you respond to information in a logical and constructive way
- Time management - how you manage activities to complete the task in the allocated time

Remember to show that you are a good team player who is flexible, prepared to offer ideas and willing to listen to and work with the ideas of others.

Presentations can take different forms. You might be asked to prepare an individual presentation in advance and deliver it on the day. This could be a short introduction to yourself, talking about an achievement or interest or a longer presentation that covers something you will be expected to do in the job. Alternatively, you may be asked to present your conclusions as part of a group following the group exercises. Be prepared for questions from the panel and don't be surprised if some are quite challenging, this is often to test your ability to stay calm.

Social breaks such as a lunch or a refreshment break are likely at some point and whilst you are not being formally assessed, you may still be under observation. It is quite common for candidates to have lunch with current trainees, managers and prospective colleagues. Take the opportunity to find out more about the job and the company. When you are speaking to the people you meet, keep in mind that assessors have been known to ask for the opinions of those who have met you.

Individual interviews are common and can be either one-to-one or a panel interview. Interviewers could include the line manager, senior staff from a relevant area of business and a member of the Human Resources team. You can expect to have questions based on your knowledge of the company and sector, key competency areas, your motivation and personal attributes.

Prepare for this interview as you would for any other. Research the role, the company and the industry. All candidates would be expected to look at the company website as a minimum - so make sure you look at this thoroughly and then widen your research. Prepare some questions to ask the interviewers.

Top Tips

- Get plenty of sleep before the assessment centre, so you can be 'at your best'
- When being given instructions, do ask questions if things are not clear
- Don't be too worried if you haven't done everything to the standard you might normally, the exercises are designed to be stretching and are usually under tight time limits

- If you feel one exercise hasn't gone very well, don't be put off, just put it behind you and focus on the next one
- Assessors can only assess what they see and hear, so for group and one-to-one exercises, make sure you do and say enough to give sufficient evidence
- Rehearse your personal pitch. Having a short summary to introduce yourself will help you feel more prepared
- Use LinkedIn to follow company news and view staff profiles
- Practise assessment centre exercises and interview questions – some useful links are listed below

How can I get further support?

Further resources can be found at the following websites:

www.staffs.ac.uk/careers

www.targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/assessment-centres

www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips/assessment-centres

You can receive peer to peer career support from our Career Coaches who can be found in our Career Studio in the Student Hub, Science Centre on Leek Road. The Career Studio is open Monday-Thursday 10am-6pm and Friday 10am-4.30pm. You can also receive career support via email at careers@staffs.ac.uk.

Other leaflets in this series:

Psychometric tests

Interview advice

Graduate job

Available online at www.staffs.ac.uk or from the Career Studio