

A Fair Assessment

To some, the prospect of spending a day with a potential employer having all aspects of their character assessed and recorded is as appealing as having a root canal done. But the objective, accurate employee profile they provide has seen Assessment Centres become a frequently utilised recruitment methodology

Very simply, this type of selection process is the most accurate method of predicting the job performance of an applicant. But there is no reason to fear the Assessment Centre process. Indeed, it presents advantages to you, the applicant, as well as the employer. Initially, you will get a better chance to familiarise yourself with the employing organisation. You should also have enhanced confidence in your potential new employer, assessment centres are very expensive to run and it is indicative of their commitment to getting things right that they are holding the centre at all. Also, bear in mind that the employing organisation is itself on show and they want to make a favourable impression on you. Overall, Assessment Centres are usually much less daunting than you expect and very often applicants really enjoy themselves.

The assessment itself will consist of a number of different exercises, probably a structured interview, and some psychometric tests. There are different types of interview and test, however here are some of the more common exercises that you are likely to encounter.

Presentations. You either have presentation skills or you don't, so if there is a presentation required then this guide can't help you with the delivery. Again, however, there are some common mistakes that you can

prevent. If you're given a time limit, and you probably will be, stick to it. You will be marked down for finishing too early or going on too long. Everyone should rehearse, however if you are not used to doing presentations, rehearsing is essential. If you are given a free choice of subject choose carefully. Ask others if your chosen subject is interesting and unless specifically asked to do so, avoid work-related subjects. A day in the life of a store manager is sure to send your audience to sleep (the preparations for your wedding are also not likely to impress). Humour always goes down well but be careful and make sure it has wide appeal.

Group Discussion Exercise. Typically you will be given a problem which you are asked to solve. Firstly on your own, and then through a discussion with your fellow group members. You must come to an agreement on the answer. Often you are asked to rank a list of actions in a set priority. What the assessors are most likely to be looking for is your ability to influence others, your team working skills and your interpersonal skills. This guide cannot give you any of those, but if you bear in mind the following points you may avoid some obvious mistakes. Don't bully other group members. If someone says something daft don't show your frustration. Don't talk over other group members, ask politely to intervene. Encourage quieter members of the

group for their opinion. It should be your goal to bring others around to your opinion, but don't be afraid to concede where you can see others have a valid point. Offer to be scribe and if there is a flip chart in the room write the various points on that. It will give you control. Suggest that someone watch the time.

In-Tray Exercises. These are usually a package of business-related memos and paperwork that you are asked to prioritise. There is little advice that can be given as these vary considerably. The main point is to make sure you allocate your time properly. Read through all the information quickly once and then pull out the obvious priorities.

Leadership Exercises. These usually involve getting a task performed with you organising the group. Again, it is difficult to predict what may be included as these tasks vary considerably. Always check what skills you have available in the team, listen as well as speak, treat every member of your group with courtesy and look after the weaker members of your group.

All these exercises are designed to highlight your competencies. Since the '90s 'competencies' have been the buzz word of HR functions, yet different companies have differing views on what competencies are and

which ones to use. Typical competencies are: Influence. This is important for all sales jobs and roles involving negotiation, for example buying. It is usually measured during group discussion exercises and presentations, however can also be assessed during the interview.

Interpersonal. This is important in most jobs but especially relevant in HR, most management positions and any role involving negotiation. This will be measured in the group discussion and also during the interview. Many assessments measure this throughout the course of the day, perhaps at lunch. Beware, you are on show from the moment you arrive.

Team Working. This is often over used but certainly relevant when people are expected to produce results working as a team. As you would expect, it is measured in the group discussion exercise.

Communication. This is vital in any role

that requires training others and will include written communication, presentation skills and the ability to impart information. It is measured during your presentation, interview and through any written exercises. Your application letter and CV may also be judged.

Leadership. This is a common one for all management roles and will be measured in group discussions and task performance exercises. There will also be some judgements made from the personality tests.

Time Management. Managers must have first class skills in this area and it will be measured by your performance during in-tray exercises.

Organisational skills. Almost all jobs require a degree of organisational ability, however it may be left off the list if other competencies are deemed more important. Of course this is just a sample of the more commonly used

competencies. Well run Assessment Centres are not usually looking for more than six competencies, although it has been known for some employers to try to assess 15–20. This is unrealistic and usually means the employer hasn't quite grasped the purpose of assessment, or has not adequately prioritised the competencies required.

In summary, the key to getting through the Assessment Centre is probably the same as any other selection process. Be prepared, be enthusiastic and be happy!!! Make it look as though you are enjoying yourself. You probably will.

Regardless of the outcome of the Assessment Centre make sure you ask for feedback. This will give you an invaluable insight into how you project yourself and thus provides a means to improve your chances in future assessments.

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ASSESSMENT CENTRE TIPS

1. Turn up! This seems obvious but recruitment consultants and employers complain bitterly about no shows and last minute cancellations. Don't commit to an Assessment Centre unless you are serious about going. Cancelling an interview at the last minute is one thing - the interviewer can always re-arrange their diary. An Assessment Centre cannot be cancelled and a lot of resource will have been committed. If you have to cancel make sure you give a week's notice minimum. Any less than that will damage your reputation. Not turning up at all is unforgivable and you may seriously damage your career, especially if your place was attained through a recruitment consultancy or agency. Most of these businesses have computerised databases and will black list you indefinitely. Common excuses like "I have been called in to work" or "my Area Manager/Director is visiting" will not cut any ice. All of us can get a guaranteed day off if we need to. The cost to your employer of your place on an Assessment Centre is likely to be in the region of £500 to £800 - this is wasted on a last minute cancellation.

2. Prepare properly. If you are joining a retail company then go and have a look at some stores (at least two) and don't rely on memory. You will almost certainly be asked what you thought of the store and if the company is a plc then get hold of a company report. You will not be expected to understand all the financial minutiae but it will give you an idea of how the company sees itself. Also try using the Internet. If you have computer access then this will give you vital information and prove that you are computer literate. Another useful tip is to check the share price. You can only do this on quoted companies but any serious newspaper will give you a listing.

3. Get an early night. If it's a morning start then make sure you get an early night the day before. You may be in a classroom type environment and if you are tired it will show.

4. Give yourself enough time to get there. If you are not sure how long it will take then either rehearse the journey or give yourself enough time to arrive 45 minutes early. Do not go into reception until 15 minutes before your appointed time. Your assessors may not be ready for you and may not like the intrusion.

5. Dress appropriately. You will need to understand the culture of the business holding the centre to work out appropriate dress, however, smart/formal will rarely offend. You could also call the company beforehand and ask for some guidance.

6. Don't smoke. Unless you really have to, avoid smoking and then only if it is made clear to you that this is permissible. Don't have a frantic last minute ciggy before you go in, you will have bad breath and smelly clothes as you arrive.

7. Once you arrive do try to make an effort to get on with people around you. This includes the receptionist, the caterers, the assessors and especially the other applicants. In most jobs teamwork, interpersonal skills, and the ability to get on with colleagues are critical. These are competencies that will be assessed.

8. Listen carefully to all the instructions for various exercises. If you don't understand something, do ask. Frequently you will be briefed on safety procedures. Don't look bored, even if you are. Show your enthusiasm for the day and the company.

9. Think of some intelligent questions before you go. There will probably be a question and answer session.

10. Say "Thank You." At the end of the Assessment Centre thank the Assessment Centre Manager for the day and tell them you enjoyed it. Flattery always helps.