

Assessment Centres

Careers & Employability Service

www.mmu.ac.uk/careers/guides



**Manchester
Metropolitan
University**

Assessment Centres

If you have reached this stage in the application process well done! The Assessment Centre is often the last stage in a company's recruitment process and although they can seem daunting, if you know how to handle them you can actually almost enjoy them. Companies are not in the habit of inviting candidates to Assessment Centres if they are not capable of doing the job. Someone believes in you so build on that.

This guide provides useful hints and tips to help you to know what to expect from an Assessment Centre, how to avoid those potential pitfalls and how to prepare and perform effectively.

What can you expect at an Assessment Centre?

Assessment Centres can be anything from half a day to 2 full days including an overnight stay, and will usually consist of between 6 - 25 candidates who are involved in a variety of exercises.

They can include any of the following types of activity (in any order):

- ◆ Interview
- ◆ Group Exercise
- ◆ Role Play
- ◆ Psychometric/Aptitude Test
- ◆ Personality Questionnaires
- ◆ Written Exercise/Report
- ◆ Presentations (by candidate)
- ◆ Social Event
- ◆ In-tray Exercise/Case Study

Let the organisation know before the Assessment Centre if you have any special requirements e.g. if you have dyslexia or English is not your first language, so can make any necessary adjustments to their selection process.

It is a good idea to study the letter inviting you to interview to see if there are any aspects of the event you may be able to prepare for in advance e.g. a presentation.

Each company will have its own set of criteria based on the job description and will seek evidence of these during the different parts of the Assessment Centre. Some companies are very open about what they are looking for and may even have a list on their web site.

Please see the career guide How To Sell Your Skills for some examples of the types of skills companies look for.

How do I benefit?

Assessment Centres are the most reliable way of predicting your potential, as they give a number of assessors a chance to see you over a longer period of time, and in different situations than is possible with a single interview. It is more representative of the actual environment in which you may be working and the situations you will encounter. They also allow you to demonstrate

your strengths in a variety of exercises, which means that if you think you have performed badly in one exercise, you may have the opportunity to compensate for it later on. In addition they are usually held on Company premises, so you will get a feel for the atmosphere and work culture of the organization.

It's not a competition!

You will usually be assessed against a specific set of competencies, rather than against the other candidates, so rather than wasting your energy trying to compete against them, make sure you demonstrate the qualities the assessors are looking for.

Psychometric/Aptitude Test

You can usually expect two types – aptitude tests and personality questionnaires.

Aptitude tests will test your ability in numerical, verbal, logical reasoning and sometimes in spatial and diagrammatic reasoning. You can prepare for these tests by sitting practice tests - please read our career guide Psychometric Tests for more information.

Personality Questionnaires

Personality questionnaires seek to define the type of person you are underneath e.g. how you relate to people, or how you might react in a certain situation. Unlike aptitude tests there are no right or wrong answers. The best policy is to answer the questions as honestly as possible and don't try to second-guess what you think an organisation is looking for. Additionally, don't over-think the answer. Although such questionnaires are not timed, you would be expected to finish in a reasonable time.

Written Exercise/Report

If written communication is important for the job you may be asked to produce a piece of written work such as:

- ◆ A summary of one or many documents
- ◆ A short report
- ◆ A business letter e.g. a letter of complaint
- ◆ An explanation of complex issues in layman's terms
- ◆ Justification of a decision you made in a previous exercise

Here are some ideas to help:

- ◆ Structure the time you are given
- ◆ Try to keep your writing legible
- ◆ Provide an opening paragraph and summary at the end if appropriate
- ◆ Keep your work concise and don't waffle
- ◆ Be prepared to present your report verbally without just reading it

In-tray exercise

The sound of these words probably makes you think of a cramped office with an overflowing, never-ending in-tray and a phone which is constantly ringing.

You've hit the nail on the head! Learn to manage the work effectively, and you have survived.

In this type of business simulation exercise you are given a range of memos, messages, reports and correspondence, together with information on the organisation. You will be asked to make decisions on each item, including drafting replies, delegating and recommending action to supervisors.

This exercise assesses your problem analysis and judgement skills, together with your communication and resilience. It is a good way to see who can get a grip of the main issues under time pressure.

Make sure you manage your time effectively - read though all the documents quickly at first then prioritise the most the important information. Try a practice at: <http://www.assessmentday.co.uk/in-tray-exercise.htm>

Social Event

There will probably be a more informal event at some point in the proceedings. It may or may not be part of the selection process and this would normally be stated at some point during the day. Either way, make the most of this opportunity to meet other candidates, employees and assessors and to find out more about their own experiences in the organisation. For more help on how to small talk see Assessment Centre Social Etiquette Guide. **Remember** that even if it is not officially part of the assessment you are always being watched and judged.

Role Play

It's not what you think! Role plays are another businesses simulation exercise where you are given a particular brief and assigned a role to be maintained throughout the exercise. This is usually a 1 on 1 exercise, where the assessor also assumes a role. In some organisations actors are used while the assessor observes. This can be a popular method of assessment for sales and customer service roles but could be used for any type of job where you might be expected to take on a role similar to the job on offer.

For example, if you are applying to HR, you may be asked to simulate a review meeting with a poor performer and to decide whether you should take disciplinary action.

Assessors are watching the way you analyse the situation in order to get to the bottom of the issue. They also assess the way you express your ideas, whether you develop a relationship with the other person, and the extent to which you are able to influence them.

One word of warning, don't get so carried away with acting your role that you forget to remain focused on the brief you have been set - it is still YOU who is being assessed.

Group Exercise

As most Graduate jobs involve working with others, the majority of Assessment Centres include an element of group work.

Group exercises can take different forms. The task you may be asked to complete could be a leaderless task, a leadership exercise, a group discussion or a scenario related to the job. In this part of the process the assessors are looking for participation and contribution, the ability to present reasoned arguments, effective communication, listening skills, negotiation and co-operation.

The good thing is you don't have to be the person who shouts the loudest to perform well in a group exercise. In fact it is often the candidates who take time to reflect on the problem and involve others who come out on top.

What are assessors looking for?

Whether you are asked to complete a practical task (building a bridge out of straws and elastic bands), or are taking part in a leaderless group discussion, the assessors are looking for your ability to analyse a problem, develop creative solutions, and work well with other people. Your own contribution to the team process will normally be more important than the outcome of the exercise.

- ◆ Get a good grasp of the information but don't waste time on minute details
- ◆ Decide on your priorities
- ◆ Be assertive but don't be afraid to compromise
- ◆ Work with the group
- ◆ Make positive contributions and encourage contributions from others
- ◆ Keep your cool and use your sense of humour -but not too much!
- ◆ Keep an eye on the time.

How do I deal with the 'know- it –all'?

The worst thing to do is to try to shout over a dominant team member. Listen to what they have to say, and then suggest that other team members may have other ideas to contribute to the discussion. If that person is delaying the progress of the discussion, reiterate the agreed objectives of the group and the time remaining in order to regain the direction. Even if the chatterbox does not listen, the assessors will give you credit for trying to resolve the situation. Remain calm and positive.

Here are some tips on how to be effective in group exercises

DO

- ◆ Try to develop a relationship with the group – use their names and encourage quieter team members
- ◆ Remain calm when challenged
- ◆ Be confident to speak out tactfully and assertively if you disagree
- ◆ Provide clear and logical arguments
- ◆ Keep an eye on the time to ensure the task is completed

- ◆ Remember that the quality of what you say is more important than how often you speak!
- ◆ Try to give structure to the group discussion by setting objectives and sticking to the brief

DON'T

- ◆ Keep reiterating the same point if the group is not listening – if you feel it is important, wait for a quiet moment then raise the point again
- ◆ Be impatient or angry with other team members
- ◆ Talk over others
- ◆ Blend into the background – the assessors cannot give you credit if you don't speak!

Presentation

Presentations are the ideal way for organisations to assess your confidence, problem analysis and communication skills. They range from pre-prepared presentations where you are asked to research and prepare a talk around a particular topic, to case study presentations where you are presented with information to analyse on the day.

This is an aspect of the Assessment Centre that (understandably) you may feel nervous about. Giving presentations can be a nerve-racking experience. The length of time you are given to prepare for the presentation can vary from several days before the Assessment Centre to a short preparation period on the day. The duration of the actual presentation may also vary often ranging from 2 to 15 minutes and can be on a given subject or one of your own choice.

You may want to call into the Careers and Employability Service to talk to one of the Careers and Employability Advisers about presentations in more detail. For tips on how to reduce your anxiety and prepare get a copy of the career guide Presentation Skills to help you further.

Interview

All the same rules apply to interviews as part of an Assessment Centre as they do for any other interview.

If you prepare well enough, you will have the confidence to perform at your best on the day. Try to think of questions you might be asked and draft possible answers to them. Read a good quality newspaper and keep informed about the industry you want to enter. Do your homework on the company (beyond the graduate recruitment brochure) and pay attention to any presentation that company representatives make; their information may be more up to date than your own.

See the career guide on Interviews for more help.

The watchful eye

You are always being assessed: it is too easy to relax and “let your hair down” between exercises. During breaks between tests don’t relax as you’re still being assessed, any negative or excessive behaviour may be noted and may undermine your overall performance.

If it goes wrong...

Don’t panic! If an exercise goes horribly wrong, the assessors may ask you how you thought it went. This is your opportunity to turn the situation around. Don’t grit your teeth and say that everything went well. Admit where you and the group went wrong and how you would improve the situation next time.

The importance of feedback

Sometimes the last thing you want to do when you have not been successful is to speak to the assessors again.

In fact, they recognise the amount of time that you put into your assessment, and want to help you improve your performance.

Feedback is an invaluable part of the assessment process and may highlight small changes which could have an amazing effect on your future performance. They may say things that you don’t want to hear, but they are saying them for a reason. Be proud of their compliments, and learn from their suggestions. Only you can turn a negative experience into a positive one for next time.

Time to spread your wings

This guide is only the beginning - you’ve seen all the pitfalls, read all the tips and unearthed all the secrets.

Now it is time to put it all into practice.

See each assessment as an experience, as an opportunity to develop new skills, gain a wealth of knowledge and improve your performance.

Have confidence in your own abilities and others will have confidence in you.

Be Honest. Be positive. Be yourself.

Good luck!

Other Career Guides to help:

- ◆ Aptitude and Personality (Psychometric) Practice Tests
- ◆ Presentation Skills
- ◆ Interviews
- ◆ Assessment Centre Social Etiquette Guide
- ◆ How To Sell Your Skills

Useful Links:

<http://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/selection.htm>

http://www.prospects.ac.uk/assessment_centres.htm

<http://www.mmu.ac.uk/careers/students-and-graduates/resources/videos/>

(Contains video on assessment centres and interviews)