

Assessment centres

What is an assessment centre?

These are usually half day or one full day events run by larger companies who have lots of high calibre applicants competing for the same position. They assess your suitability for the job through various tasks and activities, allowing employers to test skills that aren't necessarily accessible in a traditional interview. Usually you will be joined by six to eight other candidates. It's often the final stage of the selection process for large graduate recruiters.

Assessors are usually a mix of HR consultants and line managers and they score your actions against competency frameworks. They discuss all aspects of your performance before reaching a final decision on whether or not to hire you. All, several, one or none of the candidates could be successful.

What happens at an assessment centre?

These usually involve a combination of individual and group tasks. Some are designed to mirror your job, while others focus more on the organisation's desired competencies or behavioural characteristics. Potential assessment centre exercises include:

- case study exercises;
- group discussions;
- ice-breaker exercises;
- interviews;
- in-tray exercises;
- presentations;
- psychometric tests;
- role-play;
- social events.

How will I be assessed?

Employers don't just assess you against job competencies; they also aim to ensure that you're the right fit. Being scrutinised for such a long time can be challenging, but recruitment assessment centres allow you to compensate for poor performance in one task by excelling in another. Key skills that employers usually look for include:

- adaptability;
- analytical thinking;
- commercial awareness;
- communication;
- creativity;
- decision-making;
- leadership;
- negotiation;
- organisation;
- persuasion;
- planning;
- teamwork;
- time management.

How do I prepare?

As with interviews, good preparation is vital. Before the day, it's important that you:

- give yourself time to complete and practise any material that you've been asked to prepare;
- identify which skills, interests and experiences the employer is looking for by revisiting the job description and any other material that the company has sent you;

- practise potential exercises with a friend or family member;
- read the organisation's website, social media profiles and key literature (e.g. business plan, financial reports and corporate social responsibility strategy), ensuring that you're prepared to share your views and ideas;
- reflect on your first interview, asking the company for feedback, reviewing your performance, and noting any questions or situations that caused you difficulty;
- research the news, trends, competitors, history and opportunities of the organisation
- review your CV and application form;

Choose your outfit the night before, get plenty of sleep and avoid alcohol consumption. Plan your journey, aiming to arrive at least ten minutes early. Completing a 'dry run' if possible also combats nerves. On the day, eat a good, healthy breakfast and avoid too much caffeine.

How do I perform well at an assessment centre?

It's important that you:

- are assertive during all exercises;
- don't dwell on any mistakes, instead concentrating on performing well in the next task;
- don't worry about the other candidates, instead focusing on putting your key skills forward;
- draw others into group discussions;
- ensure that the assessors can see your working methodology;
- ensure that you understand the requirements of each task by quickly digesting the brief - revisit this once you understand the overall challenge;
- join in with discussions, even at 'informal' mealtimes - ask other candidates about university if you're struggling for conversation;
- maintain a friendly and polite manner with everyone you meet, and remember that you're always being assessed;
- relax and let your personality shine, as assessors warm to individuality.
- Are honest in your psychometric tests which are to understand your natural personality traits and how you perform under pressure as well as in every day situations

Example assessment day

Assessment centres vary dramatically in length, style and content, but an example assessment day might be:

- 09.00 - Arrival and introduction
- 09.15 - Employer presentation and group ice-breaker exercise
- 10.00 - Psychometric tests
- 11.30 - Individual task: In-tray exercise
- 12.45 - Lunch
- 13.45 - Group exercise: Case study
- 14.45 - Assessment interviews
- 16.15 - Individual presentations
- 17.15 - Evaluation
- 17.30 - Finish