

How to prepare and perform to your best at Assessment Centres

What is an Assessment Centre?

An Assessment Centre is a method of employee selection, which is based on measuring job related competencies – i.e. particular behaviours which underpin an individual's suitability for a job.

Most Assessment Centres are designed to measure between six and eight competencies and will do that using several different activities including some or all of the following:

- interviews
- psychometric tests
- exercises in a group situation with other candidates
- role play
- a presentation and/or
- exercises to test analytical skills.

Most Assessment Centres last between half a day and a day, but some can take two days or longer.

What are competencies?

A typical competency for examination in an Assessment Centre might be '*Analysing and Solving Problems*'. Exercises in the Assessment Centre would be designed to measure whether you as the candidate demonstrate the qualities and behaviours which would show that you had this competence. For this particular competency, these behaviours might be measured by testing whether you:

- Identify the core issues of a problem
- Accurately analyse facts and figures
- Spot trends/patterns in information
- Explore a range of options/solutions to the problem
- Anticipate potential obstacles
- Make logical judgements.

In preparing to attend an Assessment Centre you might want to make a list of which competencies are likely to be assessed; these might include leadership, team working, planning and organising, communication skills and so on, depending on the role.

Interviews

Interviews take a number of different forms in Assessment Centres.

Top tips:

- Prepare for questions about your career i.e. track record, experience, positions held and responsibilities - for example, what attracted you to particular roles, why you left; the key purpose of the jobs you held; your main responsibilities; and how you demonstrated, and kept up-to-date with any technical aspects of your role
- Show how you used time constructively in any career breaks or employment gaps
- Have a maximum two-minute answer ready for the opening question '*tell me about yourself*'
- Be clear about your achievements - what you managed to do better or more quickly, with more efficiency or with higher quality. Be clear as to how what you did saved you/your team/the organisation money; or increased profits; or made better products; or made customers happier. Try to quantify these. Make sure any achievements you quote are justifiable and realistic, but don't undersell yourself either
- Do not criticise or be rude about former colleagues or employers
- Prepare for questions about competencies. First be clear on what is a competency (see above). Identify the key six to eight competencies likely to be important for the role
- For each competency, prepare one or two concise STAR example(s) i.e. Situation, Task, Action, Result: What was the problem or situation you faced? What did you have to do? What actions did you take? What outcome or results did you achieve?
- Listen carefully to the questions; ask for clarification if you are not sure what is needed - don't waffle or second guess what is required
- Sit comfortably during your interview - your posture should communicate attentiveness and interest. Try to appear neither too nervous nor too relaxed. Speak clearly and concisely, remember to use appropriate eye contact.
- Practice your interview technique and answers with a friend if at all possible before the interview

- After the interview, reflect on any question that you found difficult and think about whether you might answer it differently next time.



Psychometric tests

Psychometric tests are standardised exercises which compare your responses with those derived from lots of other people with similar backgrounds to you.

Most commonly used psychometric exercises in Assessment Centres include:

- Personality questionnaires
- Aptitude/ability tests

Personality questionnaires come in different formats, but most ask whether you agree or disagree with statements about working life. An example might be: ‘*I enjoy leading meetings.*’

Top tip:

- When completing a personality questionnaire, try to respond to the statements honestly and realistically. If unsure how to answer, think about the statements from a work point of view, and how you would tend to behave seven times out of ten.

Aptitude or ability tests are normally timed and have right and wrong answers. These can assess your ability in different areas, such as verbal reasoning and numerical reasoning.

Top tips:

- Make sure you understand what you need to do before the test begins
- Aim to remain calm. Strike a balance between working accurately and getting a reasonable number of questions done in the time allowed
- Before your Assessment Centre, practise your basic mathematical skills if you feel you may be ‘rusty’. Read reports and practise timed puzzles and IQ-type tests.

Check out these websites for more tips:

<http://www.shl.com>

SHL is a leading test publisher and its website offers plenty of relevant, high quality information concerning both aptitude tests and personality assessment. There are practice questions that can be attempted for graduates and managers under the: 'Try a Test' section

<http://www.savilleconsulting.com>

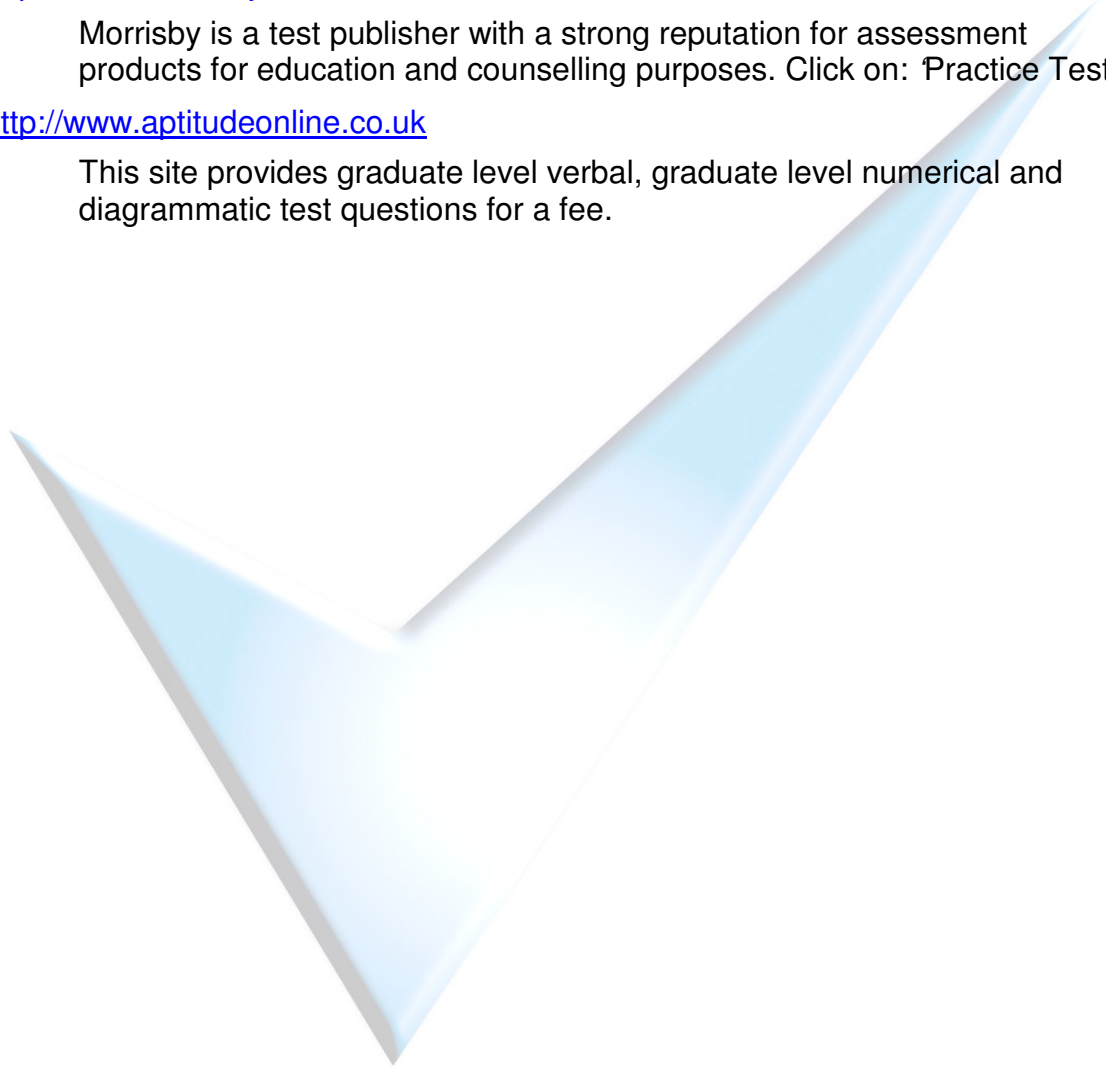
Saville Consulting is another leading test publisher. Its website offers advice and free preparation guides for test takers. From its home page, click on: 'Find out more about our aptitude tests' then 'Preparation & Advice'.

<http://www.morrisby.co.uk>

Morrisby is a test publisher with a strong reputation for assessment products for education and counselling purposes. Click on: 'Practice Test'.

<http://www.aptitudeonline.co.uk>

This site provides graduate level verbal, graduate level numerical and diagrammatic test questions for a fee.



Group exercises

Group exercises require you, and other candidates, to work together as a group to fulfil a particular task or solve a problem.

These exercises can take the form of a '*round table*' discussion, or can be more practical, such as designing and building a particular object using components supplied on the day within set guidelines or restrictions.

Top tips:

- Be clear about the task before you begin and ask the exercise administrator if you need clarification
- Draw on all members of the group to help solve the problem. Ask quieter group members, '*xxx, what are your thoughts on this?*'
- Don't let one candidate dominate to the detriment of the group. Say, '*xxx., great idea but can we just see what the rest of the group think first?*'
- Before leaping in to the task, help the group to plan what needs to be done. Set timescales for key tasks and monitor the time
- Avoid interrupting others. Work in a collaborative way; offer help and support, and play to your strengths.

Presentation exercises

You may be given a topic in advance of the Assessment Centre date or on the day with time to prepare.

Top tips:

- Plan what you want to say, think about your audience and how you can achieve the most memorable presentation in the time slot you have been given
- Think carefully about whether visual aids – like PowerPoint slides - will add value to what you want to say. If you choose to use them, keep them clear and don't simply write your 'script' on them. Two carefully chosen diagrams/models might be helpful but avoid over-complex imagery or too many slides.
- Always have your presentation readily available on the desktop of your own laptop and also on a CD/memory stick to use on your host's equipment if yours should fail. Make sure it's the only thing on the memory device and check that the 'properties' of the file are appropriate i.e. that they don't name your previous/current employer!
- Hard copies of any material would also be a good idea to take along – make sure your full name and the presentation title and date is on each of them
- Prepare and rehearse your presentation in front of a critical friend asking for feedback and refine it until you are happy with the material
- At the start of the presentation, introduce the topic and outline what you are going to cover
- Stick to the presentation time slot given
- Keep eye contact with all the assessors; speak clearly so that everyone in the room can hear.
- Be open and positive in your mannerisms and body language
- At the end, summarise what you have said.

Role play exercises

In a role play exercise, you will normally be asked to assume a role and 'meet' with another person normally acted by an assessor to solve a particular problem.

Top tips:

- Be clear about what you are being asked to do and seek clarification if necessary
- In the role play meeting, listen carefully to the other person's points. Ask open questions to get behind the problem. Summarise and re-cap on what they say
- Remain polite, calm and controlled and avoid interrupting them
- Clearly state any actions you wish to propose; 'sell' the benefits of what you are suggesting to the other person; be prepared to negotiate on some points, but hold firm on what you feel are the important areas.

Analysis exercises

Analysis exercises come in different forms, but normally consist of a set of briefing documents which need sorting, prioritising and analysing. You are asked to either write down how you have approached the exercise and explain your reasoning, or present your responses verbally, or sometimes both.

Top tips:

- Be clear about what you need to do and ask for clarification if you are unclear before the exercise begins
- Manage your time very carefully
- Firstly review all the papers in the file briefly - decide which look important and what seems less important. Look for any links or connections in the material across different documents
- Follow the instructions you are given carefully
- Communicate your points clearly - say what needs to be done, and who needs to be involved, and why; show how you would follow up on the actions you are proposing.

Overall hints and tips

Assessment Centres are demanding but stimulating events designed to see how you fare in different situations and against different competencies.

Top tips:

- Ask beforehand what you can expect on the day
- Get a good night's sleep the night before - allow plenty of time for your journey, know exactly where you are going and allow for rush-hour delays
- Watch out for '*hidden assessment*' - be on your best behaviour from the moment you arrive to the moment you leave, including any rest or break times
- Always be clear about what you are being asked to do before the exercises begin
- Try not to panic if you feel an exercise goes badly for you - remember it is the whole 'event' that will be taken into account
- Enter into each exercise positively and energetically, even if it seems not very relevant to you or it does not play to your strengths
- Be polite to others; don't try to '*trip up*' other candidates
- Ask for feedback after the event - look back on what went well, and what you could do better next time. Think how you could better play to your strengths, and minimise the impact of your weak points, next time.