

How to prepare and perform to your best at Assessment Centres

What is an Assessment Centre?

An assessment centre is a method of selection, which is based upon competencies.

Competencies are the name given to particular behaviours which underpin job success.

The competencies will be defined in a particular way depending upon the role you are applying for, and the nature of the job.

Most Assessment Centres are based on 6-8 competencies, and will consist of several different exercises.

Have a look at how this typical competency, entitled “*Analysing and Solving Problems*”, has been defined:

Positive behaviours:

- Identifies the core issues of a problem
- Accurately analyses facts and figures
- Spots trends/patterns in information
- Explores a range of options/solutions to the problem
- Anticipates potential obstacles
- Makes logical judgments.

If this competency was being used in an assessment centre, then these are the qualities which assessors would be looking for you to demonstrate.

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 upon the role.

Most Assessment Centres last between half a day and a day, but some can take 2 days or longer.

Interviews

Interviews take a number of different forms in Assessment Centres - there could be questions about your career track record, achievements and experience and questions about competencies.

Top tips:

- Prepare for questions about your career 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 - [What is an Assessment Centre?](#)). Identify the key 6-8 competencies likely to be important for the role. For each competency, have 1-2 concise STAR example(s) - Situation, Task, Action, Result: what was the problem or situations you faced; what did you have to do, or the tasks that were needed; what actions you took; and the outcome or results you achieved.
- Listen carefully to the questions; clarify if you are not sure what is needed - don't waffle or double-guess.
- 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.

- If you found a particular question difficult, think about how you would answer it 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 yourself.

Most commonly used psychometric exercises in Assessment Centres include:

- Personality questionnaires
- 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 answer 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 7 times out of 10.

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.
- Practice your basic mathematical skills if you feel you have got "rusty". Read reports and practise timed puzzles and IQ-type tests.

Check out these web sites for more tips:

<https://www.shldirect.com/en/practice-tests>

SHL is a leading test publisher and their 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.

<https://www.savilleassessment.com/PracticeTests>

Saville Assessment is another leading test publisher. Their website offers advice and free preparation guides for test takers.

<https://www.morrisby.com/practice-aptitude-questions>

Morrisby is a test publisher with a strong reputation for assessment products for education and counselling purposes.

<https://www.trytalentq.com/>

Talent Q is a leading test publisher with a range of practice tests and assessments on their website.

Group exercises

Group exercises ask you, as a member of a team with other candidates, to work together to solve a particular task or problem.

These can be in the form of a “*round the table*” discussion, or a more practical exercise, such as designing and building a particular object using table-top or larger-sized plastic components within set guidelines or restrictions.

Top tips:

- Be clear on the task before you begin; ask the exercise administrator if unclear.
- Draw upon all members of the team to help solve the problem. Ask quieter team 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 time scales for key tasks. Monitor the time.

- Avoid interrupting others. Work in a collaborative way; offer help and support, and play to your strengths.

Presentation exercises

You can be given a topic either in advance, or be given the topic on the day with time to prepare.

Top tips:

- Plan out what you need to do and when you need to do it to deliver the presentation.
- Keep visual aids like slides simple and clear - avoid over-complex or too many slides. Always have “*back ups*” and hard copies of technology you are planning to use.
- At the start of the presentation, introduce the topic and outline what you are going to cover.
- Stick to the presentation slot time given.
- Keep eye contact with all the assessors; speak clearly, concisely, and loud enough for all to hear. Speak a little more slowly than you would in day-to-day conversation.
- Be open and positive in your mannerisms and “*body language*”.
- At the end, summarise what you have just said.

Role play exercises

In a role play exercise, you will normally be asked to take on the role of a person and have a meeting with an “*actor*”, (normally an assessor), to solve a particular problem.

Top tips:

- Be clear on what you are being asked to do.
- In the role-play meeting, concentrate on listening carefully to the other person's points. Ask open questions to get behind the problem. Summarise and re-cap on their points.

- Remain polite, calm and controlled, 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 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 then asked to either to write your answers and explain your reasoning, or present your responses, or sometimes both.

Top tips:

- Be clear on what you need to do - ask 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 on what you are being asked to do before the exercises begin.
- Try not to panic if an exercise goes badly for you - remember it is the whole day that will be taken in to account.
- Enter in to 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.

