

# Candidate Guide to Assessment Centres



Going to an assessment centre? Want to know what to expect and what the assessors are looking for? Our Candidate Guide to Assessment Centres will tell you everything you need to know, and how to succeed.

## **What are Assessment Centres (ACs)?**

Assessment centres are a series of exercises commonly used by employers to test skills not readily assessable from an interview alone. Assessment centres usually last a whole day but can last from half a day up to several days of testing and assessments. You will normally be invited to an assessment centre only after you have passed initial screening by the employer (for example an application form and an online aptitude test). The assessment centre is usually the final hurdle in the recruitment process, and is where the employer really puts the candidate through their paces.

Assessment centres take a lot of resource and time from the employer, so they put through only short-listed candidates who they think have a real chance of being right for the job.

An assessment centre is not a place in itself; it is a name given to a series of exercises. The exercises can take place at the employer's offices (if they have the space and facilities) or at a testing centre run by qualified assessors, or any conference space where candidates and assessors can get together.



*75% of assessment centres use group exercises*

# Candidate Guide to Assessment Centres



In the good (or bad) old days, a CV and an interview were enough to get you a job. But employers discovered that this wasn't always the most effective way of selecting the right candidate. Employers have turned to assessment centres as a second-round selection stage because interviews alone are very subjective and open to bias. The assessment centre aims to unearth the candidate's true potential to perform well in the job. This means the employer gets a well-matched employee, and the candidate gets assessed fairly on their merits.

# Chapter 1:

## Assessment Centre Basics

The reason your potential employer has invited you to attend an assessment centre is that assessment centres have a proven track record of finding the most suitable candidates for the job. Assessment centres are not going to go away any time soon, so get used to them! The assessment centre will be attended by a group of other candidates (typically between 5 and 10), all of whom are being assessed. The day you attend is likely to be one of many the employer is running. It is important to remember that the assessment centre is just a way of finding candidates suitable for a role; **you are not in competition with the other candidates**. If every candidate ticks all the right boxes, the employer will hire all of them. If none of the candidates meet the necessary standard, the employer will hire none of them.

“ *It's commonplace for the employer to reimburse your travel expenses, so don't be afraid to ask.* ”

The assessment centre will usually be run by the human resource department of the organisation to which you are applying. There might also be managers of the company, to provide technical input and more probing **panel interview** questions. Larger organisations might also have occupational psychologists on the review panel to provide professional insight into candidates' behaviours.

For role play exercises the assessors often bring in professional actors to play the part of an awkward customer or dissatisfied client. These actors are very good at adopting a role and because they create a realistic scenario, candidates often find it easier to behave in the way they would in real life. Ultimately, **the employer is using an assessment centre to simulate the kind of situations you might encounter in the job, and measure how well you deal with them.**

The assessment centre will consist of a range of selection and assessment exercises. Typical components of an assessment centre are:

- **Presentation by the employer**
- **Group exercises (including case studies and presentations)**
- **Individual exercises (including aptitude tests and psychometric tests)**
- **Interview (technical and personal)**
- **Role play and simulation exercises**

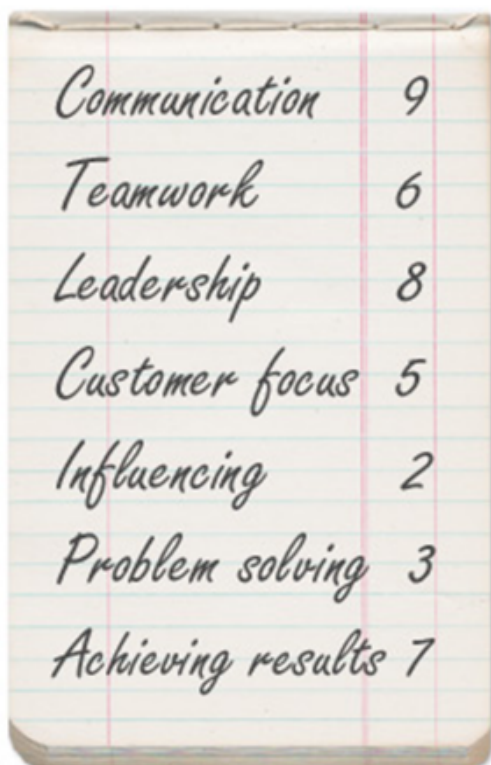
Throughout the assessment centre you will be examined on a *score sheet* filled in by an assessor. Typically at least one assessor is assigned to each candidate on each exercise, and then they rotate through the day. At the end of the day the assessors discuss their opinions with each other to

decide on scores. Each candidate at the assessment centre will be examined against their individual score sheet and you will not get to see your scores; the assessors often complete it when you are out of the room. The score sheet will be matched to the set of *competencies* the employer is looking for. It is *essential* that you have an idea of what competencies the employer is looking for before you attend the assessment centre, so you know what they are looking for. A good way to find out what values or competencies the employer is looking for is to check on their website or the original job posting. If you really want to make sure, try asking the company's HR department, although they might not tell you explicitly.

“ *Almost all employers are happy to provide you with feedback after the assessment centre. Sometimes the assessors also ask your opinion of the day to help them with designing future assessments.* ”

Skills employers are typically assessing at the assessment centre are: communication skills, interpersonal skills, leadership skills, negotiation skills and your 'fit' for the organisation. Obviously each assessment centre will be looking for a slightly different skill set depending on the job role. Don't be put off by the scoring system, it's something which you should be aware of but not afraid of.

Here are **some examples of competencies** with fictional scores employers have used in the past.



Communication	9
Teamwork	6
Leadership	8
Customer focus	5
Influencing	2
Problem solving	3
Achieving results	7

*Example competencies you will be assessed against.*

Research the company's competitors and how the company sits within the

marketplace. What services does the company provide that others don't? Also something you should be doing before assessment centres and interviews anyway, is familiarise yourself with your CV and make sure you can talk about things it says you have done.

Essential elements of an assessment centre are:

- **Predefined competencies (skills) against which you will be assessed.**
- **Realistic simulation of the skills required for the role being applied for.**
- **Fair and unbiased assessment.** For example pooling of data from different assessors.
- **Standardised recording of behaviour, for example score sheets and video.**

“ *The original job description is a good place to look for finding out what competencies the employer is scoring you against during the assessment centre. Find out what they are and have these in the back of your mind throughout the day.* ”

# Chapter 1.1:

## One-day assessment centre example

With your invitation to attend an assessment centre you will be given details of the day and an overview of what to expect. This will include an itinerary, joining instructions, address etc. The employer conducting the assessment centre will have put a lot of thought into the type of exercises they want to use and the exercises will probably be unique to them. The **bespoke nature** of assessment centres means there is no set template they follow, however below is an example of a typical one-day assessment centre.

- 10:00 Arrive, collect name badges, coffee**
- 10:15 Introductions and presentation by the employer**
- 10:45 Verbal and numerical reasoning tests**
- 11:45 Personality questionnaire**
- 12:30 Lunch with managers and current employees**
- 13:30 Technical interview**
- 14:30 Refreshments**
- 14:45 Individual task: In-tray exercise**
- 16:00 Group task: Case study exercise**
- 17:00 Debriefing**
- 17:30 Depart**

Whilst the informal activities such as lunch and refreshments are not directly scored, you should use these as a good opportunity to **socialise with other candidates** and the current employees you will likely meet. This will relax you for the afternoon's more interactive activities and the initiative will not go unnoticed by the assessors.

As you can see, the day is jam-packed. As much as your performance in each exercise, the employer wants to see how you perform under a heavy workload, as this will simulate a busy day in the real job.

# Chapter 2:

## Group Exercises

There are many types of group exercise used at assessment centres. In this chapter, we aim to explain a bit about them all, and how to perform well. Typical competencies measured in the group exercise are:

- **Analytical Thinking**
- **Achieving Goals**
- **Assertiveness**
- **Creativity**
- **Interpersonal Effectiveness**
- **Oral Communication**
- **Teamwork**

Group exercises at assessment centres are measuring your ability to work in a team, contribute, delegate, and solve problems. Assessors are looking for candidates who can listen to other people's ideas, be positive, and articulate their own ideas. In short, they measure the skills which are useful in a real working environment. Hopefully you can see

why an assessment centre is more useful to the employer than a simple interview; how else would they find out that you have a worrying tendency to start sulking when colleagues disagree with you!

“

*Remember you can be marked for only what the assessors see. If you have a good thought, make sure you articulate it.*

”



You may have heard all sorts of wacky stories from other people about what they were made to do at an assessment centre, but modern assessment centre group exercises tend now to follow a format which simulates the sort of work you will have to do in the job. The days of building bridges out of Lego and paper cups are coming to an end, in favour of case study type exercises which are a more fair and accurate assessment. To avoid discrimination, the employer should be assessing only skills which are relevant to the job role you are applying for.

“

*If you notice a member of the group is getting ignored, make a point of asking them their thoughts. This will demonstrate your ability to work collaboratively with others.*

”

During the case study, the group at your assessment centre will be presented with a scenario or a business problem. It might be a

struggling supermarket that needs a way to survive, it might be a natural disaster which needs cleaning up and dealing with. The scenarios are varied but whatever the exercise is, it will require team work and collaborative discussion with the other candidates at your assessment centre.

The group exercise will have an assessor in the room; try to ignore them and certainly don't engage them. The assessor will be watching to see if you can participate in group negotiations, think on your feet, behave courteously towards your peers, act confidently without being dominant, and encouraging of others in your group. Overall, they are assessing how you will perform in everyday working life, which involves getting on with people in a group. Often **discreet cameras** are recording the exercises so that your performances can be watched remotely by assessors. Note: assessors rarely re-watch candidate performances, any cameras are there for people sitting in another room (or country even). Assessors like to make their notes and scores live instead of re-watching any videos as this gives them a more realistic impression of candidates' performances.



# Chapter 2.1:

## Icebreaker group exercises

One of the first things candidates might be faced with at their assessment centre is an icebreaker exercise. The most common format for this is to ask the assessment centre attendees to spend 5-10 minutes finding out about the person next to them, and then tell the rest of the group about that person (a twist on the classic "tell everyone a little about yourself"). This is a good way to get candidates chatting to each other, and for the group to feel more familiar with everyone. Other typical ice-breaker exercises include "tell the group something about yourself which not many people know" or **"tell the group something interesting about yourself"**.

Treat this time as a good warm-up exercise because there will not be any marks riding on this exercise. This is a good time to give the impression to other candidates that you're a friendly approachable person to talk to, because you want them on your side during the exercises.

“

*Try to chat to and become familiar with the other candidates at the assessment centre (perhaps at the lunch, or meet and greet sessions). This will help you relax in the group exercises, and will increase your confidence in negotiating with them.*

”

# Chapter 2.2:

## What assessors look for in group exercises

To perform well in a group exercise it helps to know what the assessor is looking for. It's worth saying straight away that they probably are not looking for someone who dominates proceedings. Many candidates at an assessment centre fall into the trap of wanting to own the conversation and speak for the longest, regardless of the quality of their contribution. This will **not get you many marks**. In fact you will get a lot more marks by tactfully getting these type of people to shut up for a minute and let others contribute.

“ *A good way of showing professionalism and courtesy is to use people's names during the group exercise.* ”

Throughout the assessment centre try to keep in mind how you would behave in a business environment. The assessors are essentially measuring how well you would contribute to the employer's business. Before any assessment centre group exercise, think about

how you come across in relation to the following qualities.

- Are you taking on board everyone's input?
- What balance do you strike between letting go insignificant asides and making sure everyone agrees on important issues?
- How do you deal with quiet people?
- Would the discussion benefit from some structure, and how are you for time?
- Are you talking for talking's sake? Has your contribution helped solve the problem?
- How confrontational are you? Do you have rapport with the other candidates?
- Do you criticise or encourage input from others?
- How convincing are you? Do you speak with conviction?
- Can you think on your feet when presented with an issue?
- Can you recognise a good idea, and how do you tactfully deal with weak ideas?
- Do you take time to contemplate the problem or are you too busy talking?
- Have the group strayed from the original exercise brief?

Whilst it is important to demonstrate your abilities, try to forget the assessors are there. Candidates who look at the assessors or play-up their actions are at risk of exaggerating their true attributes and it doesn't reflect well. Most candidates find they get so involved in the assessment centre exercises that they actually forget the assessors are there.

“

*Whilst marks are available for teamworking skills, lots of marks are awarded for contributing genuinely good ideas to the discussion. Think of a good point and make it.*

”

# Chapter 2.3:

## *Assigned roles vs. open group discussion*

In most group exercises, the candidates are deliberately not assigned a particular role. This is done to see who naturally is a leader, a facilitator, an ideas generator, etc. Remember that the assessors are not looking for the person who shouts the loudest, or talks the most. The type of behaviour they are looking for will depend on what competencies the company has decided are important. Think of a valuable point to make, make it, and avoid being either the loud and shouty one or the quiet and subservient one.

In other assessment centre group activities candidates are sometimes assigned roles, such as 'co-ordinator', 'client', 'regulator' or 'chairman'. In these cases make sure you stick to your role and try to negotiate the best outcome for your character. At some point in the real job you will inevitably have to fight for a view not necessarily held by you. This assessment centre exercise is designed to measure how good you are at this.

“ *Treat other candidates as though they are future colleagues. This will improve your rapport with the group and prevent you falling into the trap of thinking you're in competition with them.* ”

If the exercise does not stipulate specific roles to individuals, be careful not to tell other candidates what role they should adopt. You will be seen as **bossy** if you say "you should be the presenter...". Instead try "does anyone have any strong feelings about being the presenter" and wait for volunteers. It is poor leadership to assign roles to people before you have any idea of their skills, so avoid it.

In all group exercises, try to avoid ending up as the scribe. It is tempting to offer to write minutes of the group exercise, but the danger with this is that you divert time and attention away from showing the assessors what you are like. Does the task actually require any written record of your group discussion? Often there is no need to have written content in the outcome of a group exercise; what matters is agreeing on a decision. In which case just jot down a few bullet points to help talk through your findings, nothing more. If you do end up as scribe make sure to capture the discussion of the group, not just your own thoughts.

“

*Group exercises are often video recorded. It should be easy to forget about the cameras because they will be discreet.*

”



# Chapter 3:

## In Tray Exercises

In-tray exercises are basically a pile of fictional documents, from which you must answer questions and decide on courses of action. The documents, or 'items' are deliberately unordered with important issues and irrelevant chatter nestled alongside each other. AssessmentDay have a free practice in-tray exercise to try on our [in-tray exercise page](#).

Typical competencies assessed in the in-tray exercise are:

- **Analytical Thinking**
- **Assimilation of Information**
- **Customer Focus**
- **Prioritising Tasks**
- **Time Management**
- **Working Under Pressure**

A **classic example** is to be told you've just returned from holiday to a full

in-box and you have to meet certain imminent deadlines. Candidates are typically faced with an in-tray containing 12-20 items and a time limit of 90 minutes. The in-tray exercise is almost always done on your own.

“

*The instructions will remind you to do this but always read through all the items before starting to respond to any of them. A classic mistake is to respond to one item only to then notice conflicting information in another document.*

”



Here are some examples of the type of documents which will be in your in-tray.

- Letter from the Managing Director confirming his visit later in the day.
- Photocopied newspaper article about a competitor with a post-it note saying "how can we emulate this" from your line manager.
- Email from HR asking you to fill in a survey on employee benefits.
- Missed call note from your secretary. Something about a marketing company not paying their invoice.
- Copy of the company's monthly sales figures and target projections.
- Email saying a new colleague is joining tomorrow and they need a work plan.
- Email from your manager asking you to attend meeting later today.
- Email-string about a colleague dispute about responsibilities.
- Email from IT support about essential maintenance.
- A customer complaint letter.
- Memo on an urgent health and safety bulletin.

Your responses to the in-tray exercise will be compared against a scoring sheet which lists the actions you should have considered taking for each item. Sometimes your answers are entirely written but often candidates have to talk through their decisions with an assessor at the assessment centre. Talking through your observations with an assessor generally gives you more opportunity for demonstrating what you picked up on, compared with a simple written exercise where you overlook writing down all your thoughts.



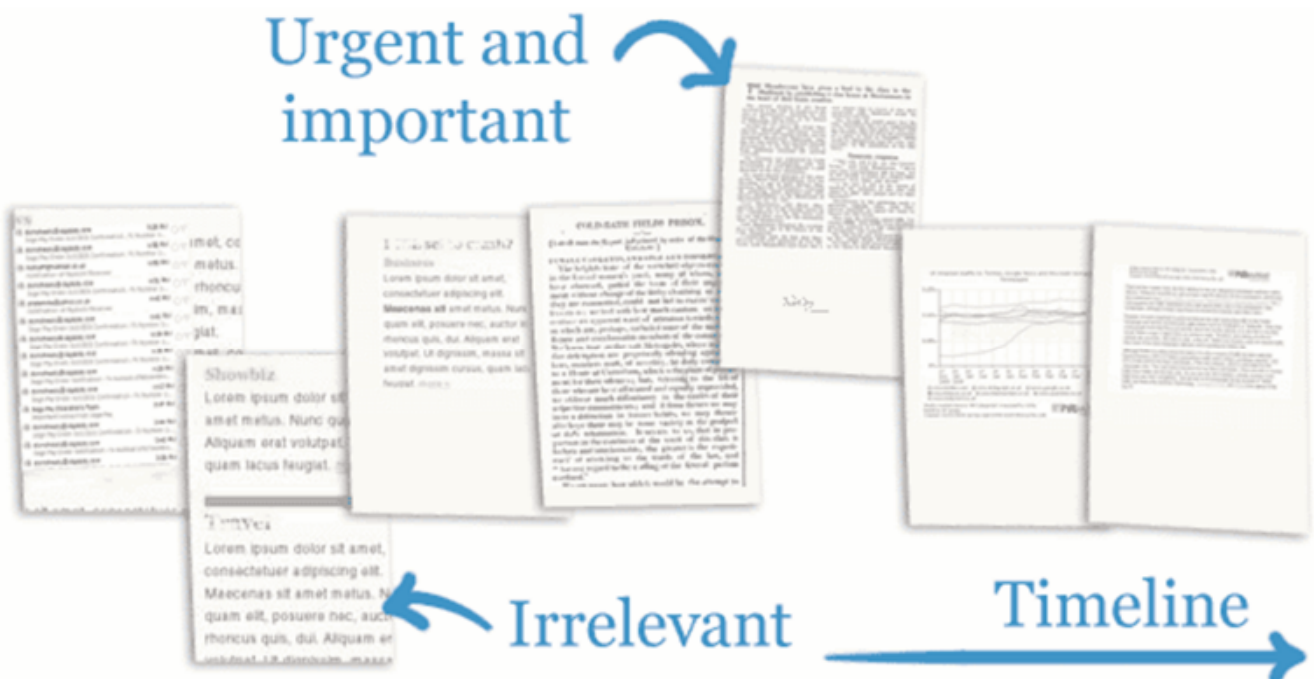
“ Pay attention to the dates of items. Supposedly medium-urgency items may now be very urgent since returning from your fictional holiday. ”

Some assessors will award you marks simply for allocating the **correct priority** to something. Perhaps more important than the priority you assign, is your reasoning for it. If you give good logic for your priority rating you are likely to score well. Other marks are awarded for taking the appropriate actions. To benchmark model responses to each item, assessors usually use existing managers from the recruiting company. If your responses are similar to existing successful employees, you must be a good fit!

In-tray exercises are popular at the assessment centre because they are a good simulation of the demands of the job. They can also be easily integrated with other assessment centre exercises if based on the same fictional case study information.

In one assessment centre you might find that all exercises are based around the same fictional scenario, for example a new product launch, organising a company event, or managing a new direction for the company. Sometime the in-tray exercise will be on an entirely new scenario.

The in-tray exercise is mainly a test of how well you prioritise information overload and how well you connect apparently unrelated items. For example one document might contain a solution for a problem which turns up later in the series of documents. A good tip for helping to order your responses is to lay out the in-tray items in chronological order, highlighting important or urgent items.



At the assessment centre it is also not unheard of for the assessors to enter the room during your in-tray exercise and **spring on you** some fresh information. This is all part of seeing how you react in a simulation of the real role. The key is to remain calm and quickly separate non-critical information from urgent and important information. It is unlikely that you will have enough time to read every item thoroughly, so be prepared to be pressed for time.

The competencies the in-tray exercise will be assessing at the assessment centre will be a close reflection of the role to which you are applying. Here are some typical skills which in-trays assess:

- **Recognising hierarchy of seniority. Who requires a more urgent response?**
- **Do events clash with one another? Who could you send instead?**
- **What tasks are acceptable to delegate, and to whom?**
- **Can you link interconnecting pieces of a puzzle?**
- **Do you treat customer complaints with the urgency and importance they deserve?**
- **Are you creative and insightful under time pressure?**
- **Do you know when it's best to meet someone in person vs. phone, vs. email?**

- **Are you able to politely let people down in order to meet more important deadlines?**

With every exercise in the assessment centre, try to think about what competencies the assessors are looking for. The assessors for a high-intensity trading role will be looking for a different balance of skills than those desirable for a research engineer for example. Have this in mind when undertaking the exercises at your assessment centre.

# Chapter 4:

## *Situational Judgement Tests*

The situational judgement test is designed to find out how you would theoretically behave in different work-related situations. The questions are designed by psychologists who ask managers of the company a) what typical situations arise in the job role and b) how an existing successful employee would behave in response to that situation.

Your answers to the multiple choice questions are compared to the 'model' answers to see how closely your behavioural traits match those of already successful people at the company. For an example of a situational judgement test please go to our [situational judgement test](#) page. A quick example of the types of questions they include is given below.

**Example question:**

"You are a team leader in a customer contact centre. You just overheard an employee in your team telling a customer that they were "over-reacting" and that they needed to "get psychiatric help". You are not sure what the customer's call was about but now the call has finished and you have a chance to speak to the employee. What would you consider the most effective and least effective response?"

<b>Response</b>	<b>Most Effective</b>	<b>Least Effective</b>
Tell the employee that you have no choice but to recommend their dismissal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Tell the employee that you will work with them to improve their performance over the next 3 months.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Tell the employee not to do it again.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ignore the employee's behaviour and hope they won't repeat their mistakes on another occasion.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

# Chapter 5:

## *Presentations*

You will almost certainly be required to give some sort of presentation at your assessment centre.

Presentation skills are important in the workplace, so the assessors want to see if you are able to deliver a well-structured, clear, confident presentation. The good news is that it is possible to improve your presentation skills through practice and following some sound advice.

Typical competencies assessed in the presentation exercise are:

- **Oral communication**
- **Organisation and Planning**
- **Professional Style**
- **Presenting Information**
- **Time Management**



# Chapter 5.1:

## *Planned vs. On the Spot Presentations*

Most employers will give you information before the assessment centre about the presentation exercise, and what they expect you to have prepared **in advance**. This preparation time is a realistic simulation of the demands of a real job since employees rarely get asked to give a presentation off the cuff. To stretch you, assessors may interject during your prepared presentation or add a minor last-minute change to your brief, again to simulate a real-world scenario. Effective preparation will significantly improve your performance in the presentation exercise. At your assessment centre your presentation will probably have to be only **5-10 minutes** in duration.



Some assessment centres deliberately reveal very little about the presentation exercise before hand, so that all the preparation has to be done on the day at the assessment centre. This type of exercise is more a test of how well you deal with being put on the spot, and less a test of presentation skills.

In one scary example of a challenging presentation exercise candidates were given a handful of topics to choose from and 15 minutes to prepare a 5 minute presentation. Few assessment centres use this shock tactic as they are more interested in how you perform in realistic situations.

“  
*An effective saying goes "own the time". It's your presentation and you have the floor. There's no need to rush.*  
”

# Chapter 5.2:

## Preparing for your Presentation

A well-used saying goes “**fail to prepare; prepare to fail**”. This is most true for giving presentations. You will likely be given time before your assessment centre to prepare for your presentation, so take advantage of this luxury. Walking into the room confident in what you are about to say will settle your nerves and help you present with aplomb. Aim to have **rehearsed your presentation** so many times that if disaster struck on the day and you lose your notes (it has happened at assessment centres before), you could get by on your memory.

Establish who the audience will be and what level of knowledge they are likely to have, so that you can pitch your level of technical content accordingly. Your audience will either be just one assessor, or more likely, a mix of assessors and other candidates from the assessment centre.

What brief have you been given? You will get **marks for achieving the brief** as well as how well you present. Clarify with the assessment centre organisers beforehand what equipment will be available.

PowerPoint slides are much better than overhead projector slides or a flip chart. Remember you are in a simulated business environment, how would it look in a client presentation if you use scrawled acetate sheets? Ask the assessors if there is time for you to **familiarise yourself with the equipment** before your presentation, perhaps during a lunch break. Even if it’s not possible you are showing them what you would do in a real-life situation: plan and take precautions against the common nuisance of IT issues.

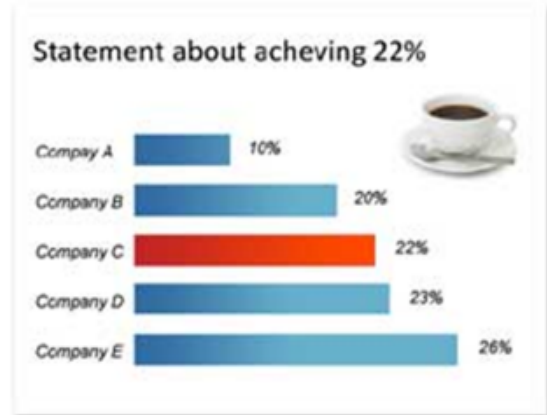
“ *Carry your presentation on two separate USBs and email it to yourself. It has been known for candidates to lose their presentation!* ”



A common mistake made by inexperienced presenters at their assessment centre is to use **too many slides**. As a rule of thumb, use no more than one slide per two minutes presenting. And keep the slides sparse! The slides are meant to be a prompt for the audience to follow what you're saying; they are not meant to be read, because you want the assessor's attention on you, not the slides. The best use of slides is for graphically presenting numerical information difficult to describe orally, not for showing blocks of text. It should go without saying but it's surprising how many candidates still just **read what the slides say**. This is a quick way to show the assessors you are not a good presenter.

If you want to stand out from other candidates at the assessment centre reduce the number of boring bullet point slides. These are a standard

PowerPoint template and quickly make audiences dreary. Professionals replace bullet point lists with a simple graphic alongside text.



*The best slides are clean and let the presenter be the focus of attention.*



*Too much boring bullet point text*



*Too much information on one slide*

Practice your presentation **out loud**. You will be amazed how differently it comes out compared to reading it in your head. Record yourself and play it back. This is a great way to discover where you could inject intonation, pauses or emphasis. Practising out loud will also give you an accurate estimate of how long it takes.

Write your prompt notes on envelope-sized cards, not A4 paper which can distract from your presentation and will exaggerate any shaky hand tendencies.

# Chapter 5.3:

## *Giving Your Presentation*

When it comes to presented information, people tend to be very slow at taking it in. So use simple, clear language. Break down what you are saying into simple sentences. Tell them what you're going to say, say it, then remind them what you said.

Look at the audience, not the slides. This is another **classic mistake** made by inexperienced, or nervous presenters. Don't take your cue from the slides; keep your attention on the audience and take your cue from your note cards. This looks very professional.

Your introduction should briefly explain who you are (in the fictional scenario) and what your presentation will cover. Reiterate **anchor phrases** on each slide to emphasise what you're talking about. For example, if you're talking about projected sales, title your slide "Sales Projection" and open with something like "the projected sales are increasing because..." Then end that slide with something like "...which is why we see these projected sales".

Think about how you want to take questions. Are you the sort of person who gets thrown by interjections? If you think you can handle questions as you go along, this will impress the assessors. Whatever you decide, tell your audience at the start whether you'd prefer to take questions at the end or as you go through.

Commonly presentation exercises are being video recorded so assessors can re-watch your performance later, or refer it to someone else. The cameras used are usually discreet security type ceiling-mounted ones so they're not overly imposing.

# Chapter 5.4:

## *What presentation assessors look for*

The assessors will gain an overall feel of your presentation, but to standardise assessment amongst candidates and to justify hiring decisions, the assessors will be scoring you against a set of criteria agreed with the employer. Obviously each employer will have their own scoring criteria but an example of the type of criteria used is below:

- **To what extent were visual aids used effectively?**
- **Was prior preparation and planning evident?**
- **Did the candidate come across confident and convincing?**
- **Were the audience engaged?**
- **Was the brief question satisfactorily answered?**
- **What was the standard of oral communication?**
- **How well were questions addressed?**

If the assessment centre assessors enjoy your presentation they're more likely to notice and remember how you fared against their set of scoring criteria.



# Chapter 6:

## *Role Play Exercises*

The assessment centre is a great way to assess how you deal with difficult situations and awkward encounters. Traditionally interviewers would have to rely on asking the candidate how they would respond in fictional situations, but now with assessment centres, the employer can actually see how you perform for real (well, simulated reality). Typical competencies assessed in the role play exercise are:

- **Achieving Goals**
- **Assertiveness**
- **Customer Focus**
- **Interpersonal Effectiveness**
- **Working Under Pressure**

Role play exercises make use of professional actors to simulate scenarios such as:

- **An angry customer**
- **A dissatisfied shareholder**

- **A disgruntled colleague**
- **A failing supplier**

Due to the expense of hiring professional actors, you usually meet with just one role-player. You will be given a brief before you meet the role player, with instructions to try to achieve a particular outcome. Some examples of what you might have to do are:

- **Placate a customer who is angry about a failed product, but you have been instructed not to issue a refund because they didn't follow the operating instructions.**
- **Encourage a colleague to pull their weight in a shared project.**
- **A disgruntled colleague**
- **Placate an angry supplier who can't understand why his company has been dropped for another.**

The role player will also be given a brief they have to follow, they may be trying to reach an outcome different to the one your brief gives. In this situation the challenge is to **negotiate** your way to an amicable resolution in this fictional situation.

The role player's brief will be to push you into challenging situations but not to outright provoke you. They will deliberately be awkward but they will also respond well to tactful, sympathetic negotiation – the theory goes, just like in real life. The role player will have to be equally recalcitrant to every candidate to make it fair. In many ways the role play exercises are more difficult for the actor than for the candidate!



Before your role play exercise you normally get 15-30 minutes to read the background information and to prepare. Use this time to **pre-empt** possible arguments the role player might use, and their possible reposts. Make sure you understand the brief and think about strategies

for achieving the outcome your fictional character wants. Before you walk into the room get your mind into character, otherwise you will appear flustered.

“ *Imagine you will have to work with the role play characters again, that way you'll be much more focused on winning them round instead of arguing with them.* ”

During the exercise an assessor will either be in the room observing you, or increasingly, a **video camera** will be recording you and the assessors will be in a separate room.

Walk into the role play exercise positive and cheery; you want to project a **positive attitude** to what might be a fractious conversation. Start with social pleasantries and try to establish rapport with the role player instead of taking a hard line from the off. You may **score marks** for reducing the friction and keeping the situation amicable. You will also come across well if you end the role play exercise by **reaffirming** anything you think you agreed with the role player. It's all too easy to shy away from bringing up contentious issues again, but before you leave the room you want to consolidate all that hard bargaining you did.

“ *Whilst the situation is fictional, don't pretend you are someone you are not. The assessors are interested in your ability, not your acting skills.* ”

**But I'm no actor!** It is important to be yourself in a role-play exercise. Although it is called a role-play exercise, this does not mean that you should be playing a role or acting. These exercises are designed so that you can demonstrate your skills in a more real-life scenario. Think of it as a first-date; you're not acting as someone else but you are emphasising your qualities.

Always **take the actors seriously** and always address them as the fictional character they are playing. Rest assured that most role play actors are professional and try to make candidates forget they are in a fictional scenario, thus allowing the candidate to focus on deciding how to handle the situation.

Role play exercises are used because there's no better way to accurately assess how you behave in a difficult situation, short of getting you to deal with a real angry customer!

# Chapter 7:

## Case Study Exercises

The case study exercise is a realistic simulation of the type of business or strategic problem you are likely to encounter in your new role (if you get the job!). Typical competencies assessed in the case study are:

- **Analytical Thinking**
- **Assimilation of Information**
- **Business Focus**
- **Creativity**
- **Time Management**
- **Working Under Pressure**

The case study presents the candidate with a series of fictional documents such as company reports, a consultant's report, results from new product research etc. (i.e. similar to the in-tray exercise except these documents will be longer). You will then be asked to make business decisions based on the information. This can be done as an individual exercise, or more likely done in

group discussion so that assessors can also score your teamworking ability.

After **analysing** the documents and deciding on a way forward, you (or the team) will be required to present your proposal in the form of a brief report or presentation. With individual case studies, you will probably present your recommendations at an interview with an assessor. The exercise is assessing your **approach** to solving the problem as much as the solution you arrive at. In fact, case study exercises are usually designed not to have one 'correct' answer. As long as you logically justify your recommendations, and these stands up to interrogation from the assessor, you are likely to score marks.

Skills you will require for the case study exercise include:

- **Interpreting lots of data in varying formats and from various sources**
- **Analytical and strategic analysis of problems**
- **Formulating and committing to a decision**
- **Commercial and entrepreneurial insight into a problem**
- **Oral communication skills for discussing your recommendations**

Employers like to use case study exercises because they can easily be bespoke to the company and offer an accurate test of how you might get on in the real job.

“ *It has been known for employers to use real live projects for the case study exercise with sensitive information swapped for fictional examples.* ”

The sort of questions you will have to make recommendations on, in the form of a brief report or an interview with an assessor are topics such as:

- **Which of the three proposals from the consultant should be implemented, and why?**
- **Should the business invest in product X, and why?**
- **Is the joint venture a good idea, and why?**
- **Is the way forward online presence or increased high street outlets?**
- **Which market has the largest revenue potential and why?**

Information from the case study exercise lends itself to be used as scene-setting for other exercises at the assessment centre. It is common to have the **same fictional setting** running through the assessment centre, to save time on having to describe a new scenario for each task. You will be told in each exercise if you are expected to remember the information from a previous exercise, but this is rarely the case. Usually the only information common to multiple exercises is the fictional scenario; all data to be used in each exercise will be part of that exercise.

# Chapter 8:

## *Psychometric Tests*

This chapter is really only to summarise the psychometric tests you are likely to encounter at your assessment centre, since we already have dedicated pages covering [psychometric tests](#), [numerical reasoning tests](#), [verbal reasoning tests](#) and [inductive reasoning tests](#). The important thing to remember is that many companies ask candidates to sit a repeat psychometric test at the assessment centre, even if they've already completed an online test. This is because the assessors can never be totally sure that you weren't being helped during your unsupervised online test. If they re-test you at the assessment centre they will know for sure that your score was achieved by you.

The most common forms of psychometric test seen at assessment centres are personality

questionnaires, numerical reasoning tests, and verbal reasoning tests. The personality questionnaire is more likely to have been done online before hand, and you won't be asked to repeat it because you can't 'cheat' in a personality questionnaire; there are no right and wrong answers. The personality questionnaire just aims to find out about your motives and preferences, like if you prefer working in a team or on your own.

Numerical, verbal, inductive, and diagrammatic tests are strictly timed (usually between 18 and 30 minutes) and are multiple choice. The difficulty is such that you should be capable of answering all the questions but most people will not complete the test within the time limit.

*A huge thank you to the assessment centre designers and employers who helped put together this guide on attending an assessment centre.*

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