

University of Surrey

Careers Service

<http://www.surrey.ac.uk/careers>

Assessment Centres

What are they?

Despite the continued popularity of the interview as a means for selecting applicants for jobs, a number of studies have shown that it is not a terribly successful method. As a result, some employers, particularly those recruiting for graduate training positions or who hire lots of graduates, have devised alternative assessment procedures. They bundle these together and run them in what are called selection or assessment centres. They are usually run either on employer's premises or in local hotels and last for one, two or even three days. The longer time allows employers to find out more about you through a series of exercises.

What kind of exercises?

If you're not told in advance what sort of exercises they are going to put you through you can try to work it out. The clue to it all is the job description. What sort of person are they looking for? If they want numerate applicants - expect a test to measure this. If you need to display self-confidence in the job, they may ask you to give a presentation in order to assess this and so on. Over the next couple of pages you'll gain some idea of what you might expect and also a few tips on how to do well.

Discussion groups

These are designed to find out how well you communicate in a group, usually of five to eight people. One or more assessors watch the group interact. Generally a leader is not appointed, they want to see the different roles members of the group take, for example: leader, ideas person, timekeeper, diplomat etc. You have a topic to discuss or problem to solve within a time limit. Sometimes you are given the information in advance but usually not.

Whatever form they take there are a number of things you can do to improve your chances of doing well. First of all, it is essential that you say something early on. The longer you leave it the harder it is to get going. Don't worry about making a fool of yourself at this stage. It's far more important to get used to the sound of your own voice. You will gain in confidence the more you speak.

Second, if you feel shut out of the discussion at any stage - you can come back in fairly easily either by complimenting someone on a view or an opinion which they've expressed or by asking them to clarify something they've said. But avoid interrupting other participants as employers will mark you down.

You can stop a person from dominating the discussion by summarising the situation at convenient opportunities. Acting as time-keeper is another way to stay involved. You will be marked positively for these kinds of contributions because they are seen as moving the group along in a supportive way.

Third, if you are leading the discussion you should aim to: introduce the topic; set down any guidelines such as encouraging only one person to speak at a time; establish and get agreement on how the group is to approach the task, curtail overbearing contributors if you can whilst involving those on the edge of the discussion. Finally, steer the group towards a point where you can make a short summary of the discussion. Be aware of the time because you need to complete the task in the time allowed.

Personality and aptitude tests

Personality tests are designed to measure different aspects of your personality such as your sociability or your assertiveness that are needed for the role you are applying for. They are not usually timed. It is best to answer these as honestly as you can and try not to give the answers which you think the employer wants you to give.

Aptitude tests have a different purpose. They are used to measure your ability in some area. For example, how good are you at working with figures, can you recognise patterns, are you good at reasoning with words, and so on. They are nearly always timed and multiple choice. Take full advantage of the preparation time, as the instructions are read out, make quite sure you understand what you are asked to do. Make the most of this opportunity to ask questions while you can, once the test starts it's out of the question! You'll have practice examples to try. Don't worry about holding everyone up if you find these difficult. It is vital you understand what is required before the real questions start. Then aim to work quickly and accurately, you won't have time to check each answer as you do it. Some tests start easily - don't be fooled. They often get more difficult as the test proceeds and it is common to run out of time before the last question.

Written tests

It is easy to see why so many recruiters want their applicants to be good at writing. Frequently a piece of work needs to be presented in a written form. Whether it's a report, an email, a memo or an article for publication, it is important to express your thoughts clearly and accurately. The format varies but the three commonest you will expect to find are:-

Drafting a letter

A common version of this test requires that you respond to a letter of complaint from someone - it could be a colleague or a customer. Although the detailed circumstances will vary, there are some general guidelines which might help you. Make sure you convince the recipient that you have understood their problem. Consider whether an apology is required or whether an explanation would be enough. Avoid responding aggressively, try instead to be both polite and tactful.

Problem solving

This test involves analysing a mass of complicated written material before presenting a reasonable solution to the problems which it contains. There aren't necessarily any right or wrong answers. The assessors are simply interested in knowing whether you have understood the issues and whether your proposals are well thought out. Whilst the written part of this exercise can be minimal, it is still important to present your recommendations clearly and logically.

In-tray exercise

This is one of the most popular tests used by employers. You are asked to play the role of a manager, for example, who has returned from holiday to find a huge pile of work waiting to be dealt with. You have to separate the urgent tasks from the non-urgent and the important from the unimportant.

The key to doing well is to skim all the papers very quickly at first. It is tempting to try to read everything, including the cleverly placed 30 page report which would take up the whole of the time allocated to the test if you fell into the trap of reading it! After your initial skimming, attempt an early prioritisation of papers. Some are obviously important - like the email from the managing director requesting a review of safety procedures following the recent fire. Take a look at your watch and see how much time you have for a more detailed look at the material. This could lead to some changes in your priorities.

The written summary of your recommendations is, once again, fairly brief, but should nevertheless be clear, logical and concise. You must take care to leave enough time to write your summary. The assessors won't be able to guess what you intended to write after you've found you've run out of time!

Presentations

Employers include this kind of exercise in order to measure your clarity of expression, your time-keeping, your self-confidence and your ability to structure your material. Unless you're a born actor or are totally nerveless, you're likely to be nervous. However, there are one or two things you can do to reduce some of the stress and at the same time produce a more effective presentation.

First of all, you're often told in advance what you will be required to talk about. It could be on a subject of your choice, or perhaps a leisure interest or your project or it could be related to the job you're applying for. If you have time you can write out the whole thing beforehand but it's not a good idea to read it out word for word on the day. It is better to write out the key points on a series of numbered index cards. As you come to each point during your talk it will remind you what to say. If you use PowerPoint or OHPs keep the content of each slide to brief points.

Secondly, the beginning and end of your talk are the critical points. Try to grab their attention with something different from the usual "I'd like to talk to you about". Why not try something like "It was once said that" or "It is not commonly known that....." as a slightly more unusual way of introducing your subject. A powerful opening sentence is also a great confidence booster and will help you get into stride for the rest of your talk. Your finish should be effective too because that will leave the examiners with a positive opinion about you.

Thirdly, try to practise your talk in advance if you can. Get a friend to listen and tell you how you are coming across. Work hard to get the talk into the time you've been allowed. You will probably be penalised if you don't - or you might even be cut off in mid-sentence. Highly embarrassing!

Finally, when you get around to delivering the real thing - remember to project your voice so everyone can hear and try to make eye contact with each person in the room at some stage during your talk. That will make them feel personally involved and they will be all the more appreciative.

Interviews

Although you are likely to have already had an interview before being invited to the assessment centre, it is equally likely that you will be interviewed again as part of the longer assessment process. There may even be several interviews. The leaflet on First Interviews should help you to prepare effectively for these.

Socialising

There will be times during the selection process when you will dine or socialise with some of the recruiter's staff. Although it is a good thing to use these opportunities to relax and catch your breath, it is also important to retain an air of confidence and composure. It is quite possible that your social skills will be observed during these times. Your behaviour is bound to influence them in some way and you need to make sure it's a positive influence. This can be a great opportunity to find out about the organisation from the people who work there and your interest is viewed very positively by the assessors. It's a good idea to try to remember people's names, especially any employer representatives and to refer to them in conversation whenever possible, as this suggests you have mature social skills.

Final tips

Although you will be trying to perform well at every stage throughout the assessment process, it is quite possible that you will make a mess of at least a part of it! The important thing to know is that candidates are seldom rejected on the basis of just one exercise. If you focus and concentrate on doing well in the remaining exercises, there is no reason why you shouldn't still get through. You may even get extra marks for demonstrating that you are able to remain calm under pressure.

Finally, assessment centres are not 'competitions'. It is possible for every candidate in a particular group to be successful if they all meet the employer's requirements. So if you get the feeling that someone is 'better' than you just ignore it. Concentrate instead on doing the best you can.

To see an assessment centre in action visit our website www.surrey.ac.uk/careers/current/work/assessmentcentres/ or come into the Careers Service and watch the "Assessment Centre" DVD. Look out for our practical workshops details of which will be advertised on our website: www.surrey.ac.uk.