

Assessment centres & psychometric tests



Some employers have an assessment centre or second interview stage. This is usually held at the employer's premises and can take from a couple of hours to one or two days. Assessment centres may involve group exercises, ability and personality tests, discussions, presentations and a second interview.

It is an achievement to get invited to this stage and it means that you have a good chance of a job – if you prepare properly. To prepare yourself as best as you can, read the information below and attend the Careers, Internships & Employment seminar 'Should you lie in a personality test? How to survive an Assessment Centre and Psychometric Testing'.

Always assume you are being assessed from the moment you enter the organisation until the moment you walk out again. Informal lunches and evenings may not be formally marked, but the assessors will be weighing you up. Be careful with your alcohol consumption. You can use informal events, tours or talks to find out about the organisation and whether you want to work there.

What are they?

Assessment centres and psychometric tests are selection tools for recruitment, promotion or further training, and consist of a series of exercises and activities that correspond best with the type of work you will be employed to do. This means that they differ according to the employer and the job, depending on the key selection criteria and competencies to be assessed. Studies show that 70% of large organisations and 40% of smaller ones are using assessment centres for graduate recruitment.

Candidates generally join a group of six to eight people and are evaluated by a group of trained assessors to ensure objectivity and reliability. Depending on the number of exercises and tests, assessment centres and psychometric tests can take from a few hours to a couple of days. Your invitation should give you basic information on venue, programme and timeframes.

Purpose

'If you want to see where someone's strengths and limitations lie, put them into typical situations and watch them.' Saville and Holdsworth Ltd.

Employers use assessment centres to gain an accurate profile of candidates' abilities, knowledge, personality and motivation, in order to select the person most suited to the requirements of the position, or to identify areas for staff development and training.

Tests can help you to find out more about your own strengths and weaknesses through a fair and comprehensive assessment in a competitive situation. It enables you to select a career path for which you are suited.

'There is good evidence that tests, which are professionally used and evaluated, can provide objective, reliable and relevant information concerning the likelihood of job success.' Saville and Holdsworth Ltd, 1997, Practice Leaflet.

Any of the following activities may be included:

- Group exercises / Case studies
- Presentations
- Role plays
- In-trays
- Fact finding exercises
- Interviews
- Psychometric Tests:
 - Aptitude tests, ability tests or selection tests
 - Personality tests or questionnaires

Group exercises

The aim here is to see how you work with and react to others; how quick you are able to sum up people, situations and evidence.

A group of perhaps six or eight candidates may be given a general topic to discuss, such as 'should lead be used in petrol?' or 'is there a case for censorship?' It may be leaderless or candidates may be asked to take turns as chair.

Alternatively you may each be given a case study, a practical problem to work on: perhaps a batch of company papers to study, relating to an industrial problem, or you might be given a business game in which to participate, or a hypothetical situation to deal with. For example, you are survivors of an aircraft crash in a desert, which of the items of equipment available are most important to survival? You will probably have time to study the problem before being asked to discuss it.

Tips:

- Get involved and contribute as much as you can in the group.
- The quality of your contribution is more important than the quantity.
- Be assertive rather than passive or aggressive.
- Think outside the square.
- Help the group to achieve the goal, to get the task done.
- Be organised and complete the task on time.

Presentations

Presentation skills are important in professional and managerial roles, as well as in commercial, scientific and research positions.

The topic of the presentation could be given to you in advance or not. When part of an assessment centre, often you are required to give a presentation on the findings of the case study or the group exercise that you have worked on earlier in the day. Your skills, knowledge and personality are all measured in this exercise.

Tips:

- Organise a good structure for your presentation.
- Know the information and communicate this clearly, using visual aids if available.
- Stay calm.
- Show them your personality.
- Keep to the time limit.
- Summarise at the end & thank the audience.

In-tray exercise

An In-tray exercise is designed to test your ability to absorb a large volume of complex information quickly, to prioritise tasks and to make decisions. In this business simulation exercise you will be given a set of instructions, a large amount of information and a time limit. The information is likely to include: letters, memo's, minutes of meetings, reports and phone messages with a variety of importance, complexity and urgency. They provide details of tasks/issues you have to deal with and you have a limited time to make decisions and devise solutions. Be prepared for last minute changes.

Keep in mind that there could be several ways of handling in-tray material. Often there are two parts to this exercise: the actual exercise and the follow up discussion, where you explain the reasoning behind your chosen approach.

2nd Interview

This interview is often more thorough and probing than the first one you had with the organisation. It is usually a panel interview with one or more senior managers and an HR professional. The questions that you will be asked are more searching questions, driven by the selection criteria, outcomes of the assessment centre so far and 'problem areas' identified in your first interview.

The main recommendation is: Prepare!

Psychometric tests

Psychometric tests are standardised tests, designed to evaluate psychological functions: intelligence, ability, personality, interests, and values. They are pen and paper or computer based and are taken under standardized conditions, including strict time limits. The results are quantified by reference to a scale derived from research and your answers are objectively marked and analysed to produce a score or profile. Employers use these tests, often in conjunction with other tests or interviews, as they are seen as objective, scientific and fair. Psychometric tests also help them streamline their recruitment process and allow them to sift out unsuitable candidates at an early stage in the selection process.

- The two main types of psychometric tests used in recruitment are:
- Ability, Aptitude or Intelligence Tests
- Personality Tests or Questionnaires

Ability tests

Ability tests measure maximum performance in verbal reasoning (spelling, grammar and sentence completion), numerical reasoning (ability to reason with numbers and analyse data and graphics), abstract reasoning, technical reasoning, spatial reasoning etc. Answers are right or wrong and questions start off easy and get harder. There is a strict time limit to these tests, so it is important that you work quickly and accurately.

Most frequently used tests are verbal reasoning and numerical reasoning. For many jobs, abilities with words and numbers are the major aptitudes an applicant must possess. Some specialised jobs may demand specialist knowledge and abilities and as such dimensions as mechanical ability or spatial relationships may be tested.

The numerical tests usually involve solving mathematical problems, some of which will be easy and others will be much harder. You may have to find missing numbers in a sequence or continue on with a sequence of numbers using the same logic as demonstrated by the numbers that are given.

The verbal tests are aimed at assessing your ability with, and understanding of, language and your ability to understand and reason with written information. You may be given tasks that ask you to relate or categorise abstract concepts. The more difficult items are usually at the end.

Tips:

- You are given one or two examples first. Read the instructions carefully.
- Keep an eye on the time.
- Ensure you record your answers in the correct way.
- Don't spend too long on any one question. Move on to the next. The more questions you answer, the better your chances of getting a higher score.
- Check with the test administrator whether the test is negatively scored for wrong answers. If not take a best guess if you are unsure of the answer. A blank line is a scoring opportunity missed. However some tests do apply a 'guessing correction'.
- Free time at the end anyway? Use this to check your answers.
- Practice!

Personality tests

These are questionnaires that measure your preferred way of behaving and typical performance related to your personality, motivation, values, attitudes and interests. The aim is to identify a personality fit with job and company. Answers to the questions are not right or wrong and there is usually no time limit. The answers are used to provide your Personality Profile.

Sometimes these tests present you with a statement with which you either agree or disagree. Usually these have five points along a scale with a neutral or 'don't know' response in the middle. Sometimes you are given a multiple-choice format. The more sophisticated versions however, have a lie scale built into the scoring formula and if you manipulate your answer to what you think is 'best', you could get caught out by the score on the lie scale. Frequently the people doing the assessment have an 'ideal person profile' which they match to the results of your test. The amount of your variation from the ideal is what they're looking at.

Tips:

- Know yourself and the job.
- Be honest and positive about yourself.
- Place your answers in the appropriate context.
- Trust first impressions.

How to prepare for assessment centres and psychometric tests

Before

- Adopt a positive mental attitude.
- Take another look at the Position Description and the company information.
- Be familiar with the skills/competencies for the role, so you can portray these to the assessors.
- Practice.
- Brush up on your basic arithmetic skills – make sure you can work out fractions and percentages without a calculator.
- If you have a disability, make sure you inform the organisation in advance so they can make necessary or alternative arrangements.
- Bring glasses or hearing aid if you wear them.
- Be as relaxed and well rested as you can.
- Arrive on time (15-20 minutes before start time.)

During

- Relax and get into a positive frame of mind. View the exercises and tests as a challenge and an opportunity to demonstrate your skills.
- Be yourself.
- Read or listen to the instructions carefully. Ask if unclear.

- Don't give up if you haven't done well in the first 1 or 2 exercises.
- It's the criteria you have to beat, not the other candidates.
- Give 100% – Enjoy it.

After

- Expect feedback, on the day or later.
- Self-review: Make notes on what you did well and what went wrong. What have you learned about yourself, the job and the organisation?
- Offered a job? Congratulations! You'll need to decide to accept or reject the offer.
- Rejected and it comes as a surprise? Ask for feedback if you haven't received any.

For more information on psychometric tests

- Careers, Internships & Employment Seminar: Should you lie in a personality test? – How to survive an Assessment Centre and Psychometric Testing.
- Books and DVDs on how to succeed at assessment centres and psychometric tests are available on loan from Careers, Internships & Employment. For a full list of titles see our website under Career Resources.

There are practice aptitude questions and tips for performance available on the following websites:

- SHL www.shlgroup.com or www.shldirect.com
- Team Technology www.teamtechnology.co.uk
- Morrisby Organisation Tests www.morrisby.co.uk
- www.profilingforsuccess.com/freepsychometrictesting.htm
- Fun and interesting tests and questionnaires: www.allthetests.com/
- The British Psychological Society www.psychtesting.org.uk/
- The Keirseley Temperament Sorter-II-personality test: www.keirseley.com/sorter/register.aspx
- 2hcom: www.2h.com – Personality Tests, IQ Tests and Entrepreneur Tests Online
- Psychological assessments on www.queendom.com Click on Tests & Profiles – Go to IQ Tests – Try the spatial and verbal IQ tests for their similarity to questions used in psychometric tests.
- Psychometric Testing Centre with valuable information. www.opra.co.nz
- ASE Psychometric tests on www.previsor.co.uk/