Guide to...
Assessment Centres

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GUIDE TO ASSESSMENT CENTRES

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Congratulations! You’ve submitted a successful application and now have been invited to an
assessment centre. But what is an assessment centre?

Introduction

After you have submitted an application, graduate employers are likely to use assessment centre
activities and events as the next stage of recruitment. Assessment centres can include a series of
exercises to assess your performance in a range of situations and are generally used as the second
or final stage of the selection process. They are used to assess your suitability for the job by allowing
the employer to observe you undertaking various tasks and activities relevant to the role. This is their
opportunity to meet you in person and allows employers to test a range of your skills including those
that aren’t necessarily easy to assess during an interview.

Assessment centres are designed to be an objective fair appraisal to assess how you would fit with
the organisation and team. In a typical assessment centre you are likely to be one of a group of
other candidates who are all being assessed at the same time. It’s important to remember that you
are being assessed against the company criteria not against other candidates and so you need to
focus on your own performance rather than trying to compete with others. The types of activities
used as also not designed to ‘catch you out’ although they will test your skills and strengths.

Types of activities

The term ‘assessment centre’ refers to a set of different activities that assess whether you can ‘do
the job’. Assessment centre activities are carried out by all types of employers in organisations of
different sizes. Typical assessment centre activities might include:

• Presentations by the employer and by candidates
• Interviews
• Role play and simulation
• In-tray or e-tray exercise
• Group exercises/tasks
• Individual test e.g. psychometric tests
• Social events

How do these fit together?

In some cases an assessment centre may involve you completing a brief presentation followed by a
panel interview and so might last up to half a day.

An assessment centre could involve one or more activities spread out over a period of time e.g. you
may be asked to complete psychometric tests when submitting your application, you may then be
invited to take part in a telephone interview a week later, and then if successful you may be invited to
meet with the employer for a panel interview as the last stage of selection.
An assessment centre could also be hosted over a one, two or three day period and may involve undertaking a whole range of different activities. This arrangement might be known as more of a traditional assessment centre format. At this type of assessment centre you may be asked to complete psychometric tests, a one to one interview, group exercises, a presentation and you will also be observed during social ‘downtime’ e.g. at lunch. Typically, larger organisations tend to offer these one to three day assessment centre models as part of their placement and graduate recruitment.

Real employer examples
(Assessment Centre HQ)

- GSK: www.assessmentcentrehq.com/gsk-assessment-centre
- IBM: www.assessmentcentrehq.com/ibm-assessment-centre
- BDO UK LLP: www.assessmentcentrehq.com/bdo-assessment-centre
- PWC: www.assessmentcentrehq.com/pwc-assessment-centre
- KPMG: www.assessmentcentrehq.com/kpmg-assessment-centre
- Teach First: www.assessmentcentrehq.com/teach-first-assessment-centre
- RAF: www.assessmentcentrehq.com/raf-aptitude-test
- MI5: www.assessmentcentrehq.com/mi5-assessment-centre/
- Ernst & Young: www.assessmentcentrehq.com/ey-assessment-centre
- Police Service Northern Ireland: www.assessmentcentrehq.com/psni-assessment-centre-psni-ist
Who’s involved?

In a full day assessment centre you’ll usually be joined by other candidates (the number can vary considerably). Remember, you are being measured against the criteria of the role or organisation not against other candidates. So, it’s important to take time to get to know other group members and to demonstrate that you can work with new people. At some assessment centres, as you progress through different activities, you may find that some candidates are not asked to continue through to the end of the day.

Depending on the number of candidates there will also be a number of different representatives from the organisation present in each activity. They may include members of the Human Resources team, members of the senior management team, including your potential line manager, and current employees taking part in the organisation’s graduate or placement scheme. These representatives will be observing you, and making notes about your behaviour, from the second you enter the building (and potentially before if you have had a telephone interview!). They will use the information they record to discuss your performance and to make decisions about your suitability for the role or scheme.

But what do these assessment centre activities involve?

Presentations

The Employer: Employers are likely to give a presentation to introduce themselves and the agenda for the day at the start of an assessment centre. Listen carefully to instructions and try to remember the names of the people who are introduced to you. Remember, although this might be the official start of the day, you will have been observed from the moment you signed in at reception.

You: You may be asked to develop and deliver a presentation as part of an assessment centre. Some employers may tell you the topic in advance to enable you to research and prepare, some may ask you to choose your own topic or you may be given a subject on the day and so have very little time to prepare for it. Although you may be used to delivering presentations as part of your degree studies, it is often harder to present information to others when it involves talking about yourself and under additional pressure. So, take time to remind yourself of why you applied, consider your skills and suitability for this role and organisation and revisit successful presentations you’ve delivered in the past to help you in your preparation. Some additional top tips for preparing and delivering an effective presentation at assessment centre:

Preparation:

- Find out what format the presentation should be, what technology and materials will be available to you and how long you will have.
- Try and find out who the audience will be.
- Follow instructions carefully i.e. are you being asked to use PowerPoint or other visual aids?
- Consider what your preferred presentation style is – this will support your confidence on the day.
- Practise your presentation – lots! Remember to get support with this; practice in front of a friend,
family member, Careers Adviser or houseplant so that you get used to articulating your thoughts aloud and refine your language ready for the big day.

Design:

• If you have a free choice of topic choose a subject you know well - you will be asked questions about your presentation and potentially why you selected this topic.
• Think about what you will do to keep the audience’s attention and ensure that you pitch the content at the appropriate level.
• Think about what your key messages are. What core ideas or messages do want the audience to receive? Consider keeping things simple and strong; it is better to expand on two or three memorable points than to have a long rambling narrative.
• Your presentation should have a clear introduction, a main point or message and a conclusion.
• Be brief with PowerPoint slides or visual aids: focus on using bullet points and key words or phrases which support your speech.
• Enhance any slides used with pictures, photos, graphs and screen-grabs as appropriate.
• Avoid trying to cover too much content. Be clear and concise and build your presentation to a strict time line.
• If you are thinking of having some audience participation, remember to prepare and bring any materials that you will need to use.
• Think about any audience handouts or supporting materials you want to produce: when will you distribute them?

Delivery:

• Think about your body language and be aware of your nerves. How you deliver your presentation is as important as what you say. Although you may be nervous, try to smile, maintain good posture, speak clearly, keep good eye contact and try to relate to each person individually.
• Pace yourself. Introduce yourself and your presentation confidently.
• Even if you have a prepared script try not to read directly from this, instead bring notes or prompt cards with bullet pointed headings to glance at if needed.
• It’s worth developing some relaxation techniques that work for you so that you can draw on these if you start to feel anxious. If you are really struggling with nerves, then don’t be afraid to ask to stop for a few moments whilst you gather your thoughts.
• Try and end your presentation confidently, especially if you have run out of time. Take control and end it with a purpose rather than stopping suddenly when you run out of things to say. Try to make a brief and clear conclusion and don’t forget to invite questions.

Some additional resources to help you in delivering an effective presentation:

• www.assessmentcentrehq.com/assessment-centre-exercises/giving-a-presentation/ – How To Deliver A Killer Presentation from Assessment Centre HQ
• www.jobs.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips/2131/10-top-tips-for-interview-presentations – 10 top tips for interview presentations from jobs.ac.uk
• www.allaboutcareers.com/careers-advice/interview-tips/interview-presentation – Interview presentation tips from AllAboutCareers.com
• www.kent.ac.uk/careers/presentationskills.htm – Tips on presentation skills from Kent University
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Careers service

Interviews

As part of an assessment centre you may have an individual or group interview. Interviews are a core part of an organisation’s recruitment strategy and not only give interviewers the chance to assess your suitability for the role, but also give you the opportunity to showcase your skills, experience, knowledge and personality and assess whether the organisation and role are a good match for you. Take a look at our ‘Guide to Preparing for Interviews’ and ‘Guide to Using the STAR Technique’ for some further advice, and these resources to help you in your preparation:

• [https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/interview-techniques](https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/interview-techniques) – Interview Techniques from TargetJobs
• [www.jobs.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tool](http://www.jobs.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tool) – Interview Tool from jobs.ac.uk
• [https://careerhub.bathspa.ac.uk/docs/81/Interview%20Tips.pdf](https://careerhub.bathspa.ac.uk/docs/81/Interview%20Tips.pdf) – Interview Tips from AGCAS
• [https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk/advice/getajob/interviews/Pages/default.aspx](https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk/advice/getajob/interviews/Pages/default.aspx) – Preparing for Interviews by The National Careers Service
• Create a positive first impression
• Interview Simulator with typical questions and feedback from employers
• Telephone Interviews
• Skype interviews
• How To Shine In Interviews
• Asking questions in interviews
• Interview Training learning module
• Interview Preparation learning module
• The Interviewer learning module

Role play and simulation

You may be asked to take part in a role-playing exercise which simulates a professional work place scenario. You will usually be given a briefing pack and be asked to play a particular part. You might have to act out a role with the other candidates or with the assessors. This may be one-on-one or as part of a group. The assessors are looking for your individual contribution as well as your communication and influencing skills. Here are some resources to help you find out more:

• [www.assessmentday.co.uk/assessmentcentre/role-play-exercise.html](http://www.assessmentday.co.uk/assessmentcentre/role-play-exercise.html) – Role play exercises from Assessment Day
**In-tray and e-tray**

In-tray or e-tray exercises are tasks which simulate a ‘typical’ day or situation from the workplace. They are designed to examine your communication, organisational ability, problem-solving, planning, time management and decision making skills. You are usually given a time limit and after the task you may be asked to explain your approach and reasoning.

For example, you might be given an in-tray or email account inbox full of emails, reports, telephone messages and meeting requests. You might then be provided with information about the structure of the organisation and your place within it. You then need to make decisions, prioritise your workload, draft replies, delegate tasks, and recommend actions. Each exercise is designed to test how you handle complex information within a limited time. It allows you to show that you can analyse facts, prioritise information and clients and make effective decisions under pressure.

**Tips for tackling an in-tray/e-tray exercise:**

- Read the instructions carefully and thoroughly and try to stay calm.
- Keep a note of the time to ensure you pace yourself correctly.
- Read all of the background information you are given about the organisation, the staff and your role.
- Scan through all items in the in-tray or email inbox to get an overall view of everything that you need to consider, and if it’s helpful make brief notes.
- Prioritise according to what is most important and most urgent. Decide what can be delegated, forwarded or delayed.
- Identify key issues and any action that must be taken - detailing how, by whom and any timescales or deadlines.
- Highlight any possible resource restraints, conflicts between tasks, or implications for the organisation.
- Remember: there is often no right or wrong answer – this is about giving a logical and rational explanation for your decisions.
- Demonstrate that you have identified key issues, and give your reasons for all the decisions you make.
- Work as quickly and as accurately as you can.

**Here are some resources to help you find out more:**

- [www.assessmentday.co.uk/in-tray-exercise.htm](http://www.assessmentday.co.uk/in-tray-exercise.htm) – Example In-Tray exercise from Assessment Day
- [www.assessmentday.co.uk/e-tray-exercise.htm](http://www.assessmentday.co.uk/e-tray-exercise.htm) – Example E-Tray exercise from Assessment Day
- [www.kent.ac.uk/careers/interviews/intray.htm](http://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/interviews/intray.htm) – How to do well at in-tray and e-tray from Kent University Careers
Written exercises

Some employers may ask you to write an essay or letter on a topic of your choice or one given by them. Others may give you a document to review and improve. Here the selectors are testing how you express yourself, your spelling and grammar and whether you can communicate professionally and effectively.

- https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/assessment-centres/344910-written-exercises-at-assessment-centres-showcase-your-professionalism — Written exercises article from TargetJobs

Group exercises

Employers use group activities to assess your interpersonal communication skills and ability to work with others. You may be asked to complete a practical task, complete a case study or take part in a discussion. Throughout the exercise you will be observed; you will be assessed on your ability to work in a team and the type of leadership style you use. Throughout group exercises the employer will make a note of how you negotiate with your peers and how you communicate your thoughts and ideas.

Practical tasks and discussions:

As a group you may be asked to:

- Use equipment or materials to make something, for example, a bridge, using only dried spaghetti and marshmallows. The assessors are usually most interested in how the group interacts during the task, how they communicate, problem solve and cooperate rather than in the outcome of the task;
- Take part in a leaderless discussion;
- Take part in a role-playing exercise which simulates a professional scenario (usually you will be given a briefing pack and be asked to play a particular part).

Case Studies and exercises:

Case studies and business simulation tasks are designed to examine skills such as communication, organisational ability, problem solving, data analysis, planning, time management and decision making. There is usually a time limit on these exercises. After the task you may be asked to justify your actions.

For case study exercises, you will typically be given a set of documents relating to a hypothetical or real life situation. You are likely to be asked to analyse it and to give brief verbal or written report of your recommendations. You may be asked to complete the case study individually or as part of a group. Tips for tackling a case study:

- Practise with sample case studies in advance and brush up on your numeracy skills.
- Research the organisation, its markets and keep up to date with current affairs.
• Read the instructions you are given carefully and thoroughly.
• Read any background information you are given about the organisation, the staff and your hypothetical role.
• Focus on key points, and make brief notes. This will help you to get a feel for what is important.
• Scan through all items to get an overall view of everything that will need to be considered.
• Keep a note of the time to ensure you pace yourself; work as quickly and as accurately as you can.
• When presenting your conclusions be as clear as possible and don’t be afraid to disagree with the selector, or explain different views from other candidates, if you feel you have made the right decision.

Remember: good team working is about working together co-operatively to achieve a common goal.

You can demonstrate leadership within the team by:

• showing that you are listening carefully and hearing what is being said;
• taking the initiative;
• facilitating others to speak;
• reflecting on what has been discussed and summarising periodically if necessary;
• Staying positive and motivated throughout.

10 Top Tips:

• Read through and/or listen carefully to all the information you are given and make notes if allowed.
• Decide objectives and priorities. Agree on roles and tasks, make a plan and follow it.
• Be assertive and persuasive, but also diplomatic – be conscious of the tone of what you say.
• Make sure the group keeps to time. Help to steer things back on track if the discussion goes off track.
• Keep calm, and use your sense of humour where appropriate.
• Find a balance between advancing your own ideas and helping the group to complete the task.
• Actively listen to what everyone has to say, using nods, smiles and eye contact. Try to get the best contribution from everyone and do not assume that quiet members have nothing to contribute.
• Be inclusive.
• If a group member is dominating the conversation then try to support the participation of others.
• Be conscious of your own style and its impact on the group. If you are naturally very chatty maybe you need to focus more on listening. If you are very quiet remember that you need to speak up to make an impact on the assessors.

Here are some resources to help you find out more:

• https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/assessment-centres/275425-group-exercises-what-to-expect – Group exercises: what to expect from TargetJobs
Psychometric tests

Psychometric tests are designed to assess your aptitude and ability. They are usually computer based, time limited and multiple choice. You may be asked to complete these tests as part of your application before you are invited to an assessment centre and you may be asked to repeat these tests as part of an assessment centre.

Psychometric tests might include:

- Verbal tests
- Numerical tests
- Spatial reasoning
- Subject/job-specific tests
- Personality questionnaires
- Strengths based tests

To get the best out of these tests:

- Contact the organisation to see if they can give you any information about the types of test you will have to complete if the employer has not given you any information;
- Try as many practice exercises as possible;
- Work as quickly and as accurately as you can;
- If you get stuck on a question, move on and come back to it later if you have time (although be aware that often you cannot go backwards in an online test);
- You must often make a sacrifice between speed and accuracy - recruiters may deduct marks for incorrect answers.

Here are some example practice aptitude tests to try, most have free examples. Be aware that some may incur a small charge to use:

- www.assessmentday.co.uk/ – Assessment Day Practice tests
- www.cubiksonline.com/cubiks/practicetests/ – Cubiks Online Assessment
- www.psychometricadvantage.co.uk/ – Psychometric Advantage
- www.psychometric-success.com/ – Psychometric Success
- www.cebglobal.com/shldirect/en – CEB Global
- www.kent.ac.uk/careers/psychotests.htm – University of Kent Careers

Personality questionnaires give employers an indication of your personality type. They may have a time limit for completion. There are no right or wrong answers; the questionnaire is intended to give the employer a profile of your interests and your working style. Usually you will be asked a set of questions or be given a series of statements or options to choose between. You may feel that you are being presented with the same questions or options in different ways. This is to establish
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consistency in your responses to get a more accurate indication of your preferences.

Some guidelines for approaching personality questionnaires:

- Try out some questionnaires in advance using the links below. They may not be exactly what the selector will use but will give you practice in doing them;
- answer each question in a relaxed manner;
- Be yourself - avoid trying to predict what would be a good or bad response. Go with your gut instinct and answer honestly;
- If any question or option confuses you don’t worry about it - move on to the next selection and come back to it later if you have time.

**Practice personality questionnaire** resources include:

- [www.teamtechnology.co.uk/myersbriggs.html](http://www.teamtechnology.co.uk/myersbriggs.html) – Team technology

Some additional resources to help you in your preparation and practice for psychometric tests are listed here:

- [https://bathspa.careercentre.me/Resources/imodule/M9.aspx](https://bathspa.careercentre.me/Resources/imodule/M9.aspx) – Practice Tests Learning Module from ‘My Career’
Social events

Some employers will use a social event or activities to observe your behaviour. A social event might include the coffee or lunch break during the assessment centre where you meet with other candidates and employers from the organisation. It could also include being invited for an overnight stay or for a group dinner the evening before an assessment centre. While it’s important to enjoy these opportunities to network and meet others it’s also important to be aware that you are being assessed from the moment employers meet you and so be mindful of how you present yourself as you relax. Be friendly but not overfamiliar and although there may be free drinks on offer try to resist the temptation to over-indulge.

So, do as much research as you can into the organisation, its sector and current affairs. Make sure you have interesting questions ready to ask of the organisation’s representatives and try to avoid the temptation to just chat to other candidates.

Assessment centre preparation

It is very important to take time to prepare and practise in order to be successful at an assessment centre in the same way you would for an interview or an exam. Although the key activities have been outlined in this resource, assessment activity will vary across employers and across graduate and placement schemes and jobs. While there is no fixed format, you should receive details from the employer, in advance, so you know what to expect. As well as using this information, it’s important to check anything you are unsure of and to do your own research into how employers assess candidates. Some actions to consider:

• Carefully read instructions you have received from the employer
• Look at the employer website for tips on how to prepare.
• Talk to other people who have attended assessment centres to ask for their advice; use online forums and resources like Glassdoor to find out more about how employers assess potential candidates: www.glassdoor.co.uk/index.htm
• Use social media to your advantage; check the LinkedIn profiles of the employers you know will be observing you at the assessment centre.
• Practice for individual tests and hone your presentation and interview skills.
• Plan your time and travel plans

Remember your reasons for applying

In order to show your motivation, as well as your suitability for the role, it’s important to spend time...
thinking about your reasons for applying to the job. Think about how you match the requirements of the role and how well your own values align to those of the organisation. Go back through your application or tailored CV to remind yourself how you presented yourself to the employer. Some questions to help you in your pre-assessment reflections:

• Do you have an interest in the organisation’s field of work?
• Will the job support your long-term career goals?
• Are your skills and qualities ideally suited to the job?
• How have your degree studies prepared you for this role?

These ‘Career assessments tools’ are helpful in understanding yourself and in giving you an insight into how employers see you: https://bathspa.careercentre.me/resources/careerassessments/

Revisit your research

Employers respond positively to applicants who have done additional research into the organisation and the job requirements. So, it will be important to revisit your application form, to revisit the job description, purpose of the job and the person specification. This will help you to identify the competencies and behaviours that are important to the employer and to remember the skills that you have which match their requirements so that you can demonstrate these during the assessment centre.

You can demonstrate your research by keeping up to date with the news and company webpages so that you are aware of the most recent developments, policy updates and challenges. You can also source further information on the organisation’s website, such as the annual report, their vision and mission statement, news items, press releases, LinkedIn pages, blogs, and staff profiles.

Top tips

Preparation:

• Thoroughly research the organisation and revisit the role requirements.
• Carefully read all instructions you have been given and prepare any supporting documentation that you might need to take with you
• Draw up a list of your main strengths, focusing on those most relevant to what you have applied for.
• Think of questions you may want to ask on the day to get these answered and to show your interest.
• Take time to consider ways to calm your nerves to help you on the day
• Practice, practice and practice – tests, interview questions and your elevator pitch!
• Plan your journey to arrive in good time for the start of the assessment centre.

On the day:

• Be yourself.
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• Listen carefully to the instructions given to you at the start of the day.
• Read information given to you in each individual activity carefully and thoroughly.
• If you feel you haven’t done as well as you’d like during one activity – stay positive and do as well as you can for the others - the assessment centre will give you a number of chances to show your strengths and meet their criteria.
• Stay focused and motivated throughout the day – remember to keep an eye on the time for presentations and particularly if you are undertaking time limited exercises and group work.
• Remember, you are being measured, not against other candidates, but against certain criteria.
• Make an effort to get to know the other candidates - this will help when it comes to group exercises later. Also ensure that you’re polite and friendly to everyone you meet from the organisation.

After the event:

• Reflect on your performance for each activity. How did you find the activity, what did you learn that might be helpful in the future?
• Consider following up with a courtesy email thanking the employer for their time.
• Even if you are unsuccessful, ask for feedback so that you can learn for the next opportunity.

Resources to help you

• www.jobs.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips/1821/surviving-the-assessment-centre/ – Surviving the assessment centre by jobs.ac.uk
• www.assessmentcentrehq.com/assessment-centre-introduction – What To Expect At An Assessment Day from Assessment Centre HQ
• www.assessmentcentrehq.com/how-to-prepare-for-an-interview/ – How To Prepare For An Assessment Day from Assessment Centre HQ
• www.assessmentcentrehq.com/assessment-centre-tips/ – Top 10 Assessment Centre Tips from Assessment Centre HQ
• www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips/assessment-centres – Assessment Centre overview from Prospects
• https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/assessment-centres – Assessment Centre tips from Targetjobs
• https://careerhub.bathspa.ac.uk/docs/251/Assessment-centre-guide-from-assessmentday.co.uk.pdf – Assessment centre guide by Assessment Day
• https://bathspa.careercentre.me/Resources/CustomPage/CustomPage2.aspx?CustomPageld=320 – Assessment Centre Tool (My Career)

Further support from Bath Spa Careers

If you would like further advice on job searching and making job applications and/or want to discuss your career goals, you may find it helpful to book onto one of our Careers Workshops (open to all...
students) and/or book a 1:1 Careers Guidance Appointment. Appointments and workshops are bookable via MyCareer or alternatively you can contact Careers Reception on 01225 875525.

Whilst we endeavour to make sure that the information provided in this guide is current, we are unable to endorse particular organisations or opportunities (August 2016).
GET A HEAD START

We’re here to help you get a great start to your career. We’re open all year round, so come and visit us in the Careers Space, book an appointment, or get in touch.

Careers Space, SL.G04
Steward’s Lodge

careers@bathspa.ac.uk
01225 875525

thehub.bathspa.ac.uk/mycareer

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Every effort has been made to ensure the information in this leaflet is accurate but we recommend that you check all details carefully.

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