How to prepare for assessment centres and selection tests
Why do employers use assessment centres and selection tests?

Assessment centres and selection tests form part of the extended recruitment process for many graduate positions.

Selection tests (also known as psychometric tests) may be used during the initial interview process. They enable recruiters to narrow down the volume of applicants or to test candidates as part of an assessment day.

Assessment centres give employers the opportunity to assess large groups of candidates, seeing how they behave individually and as part of a group.

What can I expect at an assessment centre?

Assessment centres are often held at an employer’s offices or at another location such as a training centre or conference centre. They usually last for one or two days.

The content of an assessment centre will vary depending on the organisation, but they will usually involve a mix of the following.

Social/informal events

This could be a lunch or a drinks reception. It’s often an opportunity to meet recent graduate recruits or senior staff members and ask them questions.

While these social events are not formally assessed, the staff taking part will be asked for feedback on how you came across and how engaged you were.

Think of some questions that you might like to ask during the social events. It’s a good opportunity to find out information about the company that isn’t obvious in the recruitment material.
Presentations

You might be asked to prepare a presentation in advance on a given topic or one of your choice. Or you might be asked to create a presentation on the day, sometimes as feedback from a group exercise.

If you have had advance notice of the presentation, make sure you practise your timings beforehand. Think about the content and pace of your presentation.

Visit the Skills Hub website for tips on preparing for presentations:
www.sussex.ac.uk/skillshub/presentations

Group exercises

Group exercises are an important part of an assessment centre. They give assessors a chance to observe how you work with other team members.

They are designed to assess qualities such as:
- communication
- team working
- leadership
- confidence
- logic and how quick thinking you are
- time management
- data assimilation skills.

Group exercises may take a wide variety of different forms and often depend on the organisation recruiting. They could include a discussion based on a current affairs issue, a career-related or organisational topic, or a case study.

It’s important to remember that assessors are not assessing candidates against each other during group tasks, but against a set of criteria relating to the job. How you contribute is as important as what you contribute.

Be involved in discussions. Try not to dominate unless you’ve been asked as a group to choose a leader, at which time you can volunteer if you feel this is a role you would like to take.
Avoid interrupting other speakers, make your contributions short and relevant, and try not to speak over others.

Interviews (individual, panel or technical)

Assessment centres might include an interview as part of the day. This could be a one-to-one interview with an HR representative or a senior member of staff, a panel interview or a technical interview.

For example, for an IT role, you might be asked specific questions about the role and your area of expertise. You might be asked to interpret some programming code.

Questions might revolve around your CV or be more specific questions about your motivations for the role or the competencies required to do it.

It’s important that you prepare for all eventualities beforehand by revisiting the job description and recruitment material, and also your CV and original application.

You can find more information on preparing for interviews at: www.sussex.ac.uk/careers/interviews

Practise answering questions beforehand (with a careers consultant or housemate) so that you prepare the structure of your answers and think about the examples you plan to use.

Think about what questions you would ask if you were interviewing for the job.

In-tray/e-tray exercises

In-tray exercises are designed to simulate the situations you might encounter in the role. You’ll be given a pile of paperwork to read (or email correspondence for e-tray exercises) which might contain letters, phone messages, emails, internal documents etc. You’ll then be asked to prioritise and respond to the situation within a time limit.
In-tray example

It’s a typical Monday morning. Work has piled up and you need to prioritise your tasks before an important meeting at 9.30am. In your ‘tray’ there are a selection of requests, memos, phone messages and information.

The principles for tackling in-trays are the same as those for e-trays:
- Read through all the information swiftly and start to prioritise.
- Decide on the most appropriate action for each piece of correspondence.
- Record and justify your decisions.

You can practise in-tray and e-tray exercises using our online resources: www.sussex.ac.uk/careers/assessmentcentres

Selection tests/psychometric tests

Selection tests or psychometric tests describe a range of exercises used by employers to test an individual’s aptitude and personality. They’re often used to give additional insight into a candidate, either in the early stages of the selection process or as part of an assessment centre.

What kind of selection tests could I be asked to do?

Selection tests can take a variety of forms depending on the job role, but often include the following types.

Ability tests

These tests are taken under standardised conditions with strict time limits. They measure skills such as numerical and verbal reasoning, spatial awareness and diagrammatical reasoning.

They can be either online or using paper and pencil. They are often multiple choice questions and marked by a trained person or computer program and scored against norms.
Tests are normally bought from specialist companies and the recruiter decides what the pass score is, depending on the role.

Personality questionnaires

These provide information on an applicant’s personality style and assess whether a candidate has the personal qualities for the role. Different roles require different attributes.

These tests are not timed and there are no right or wrong answers as companies are looking for a ‘fit’ in their candidates.

Situational judgement tests

These types of tests are becoming increasingly common and are used by employers to determine how you will respond in different situations.

You’ll be asked questions about situations that might arise in the role and then marked against a set of responses that the ideal candidate would have.

Some selection tests will form part of the initial screening from employers and you’ll have to take the tests after you submit your initial application. Other tests are used during assessment centres.

There is evidence to suggest that practising tests can improve your performance and that increased familiarity with the structure of tests can help.

We have test resources on our website that you can use to prepare: www.sussex.ac.uk/careers/selectiontests

Tips on preparing for selection tests

Before a test

- Brush up on your maths ie. times tables, percentages, long multiplication
- Practise as much as you can under timed conditions to simulate the real thing – there are lots of examples online or in books
• Read instructions carefully and ask the test organiser or administrator if you need to check anything
• Contact the employer beforehand if you require any special provisions or adjustments

During a test

• Work accurately and fast and be positive
• Avoid spending too long on questions you find difficult
• If you’re uncertain about an answer, enter your best choice
• Keep working hard throughout the test
• If you have any time, go back to any blank answers
• Don’t worry if you don’t complete them all – it’s unlikely you will as many tests are designed not to be completed

How can I make a good impression at an assessment centre?

• Prepare well beforehand – research the organisation and role, and practise exercises you may be given.
• Show enthusiasm and interest
• Demonstrate that you want the job and stay motivated throughout the day.
• Be yourself and try to join in with activities as much as you can. During activities, try to ignore the observers and keep in mind that they’re assessing you against criteria and not other candidates.
• Remember that you’re being observed from the moment you attend the centre until you leave, so be professional and engaged throughout your time there.
• Speak clearly in interviews, presentations and group activities and maintain eye contact.
• Try not to dominate discussions and think before you speak.
• There will be different types of assessment involved. Even if you’re not good at some of the tests, you can excel at others.
• Dress as if you’re attending a formal interview. Smart is key!
• Make sure you plan your journey and read instructions carefully.
What is a typical day like at an assessment centre?

Morning

8.30: Introductions and company presentations
9:00: Selection tests including personality questionnaire
10.30: Group exercise

Afternoon

12.30: Lunch (with assessors)
1.30: Case study exercise
2.30: Individual presentations
3.30: Panel interview
4.30: Refreshments
5.00: Close

Need more help?

We can help you get ready for selection tests and your assessment centre by going through scenarios and giving pointers on how to prepare.

You can book an appointment with a Careers and Employability Consultant via CareerHub: 
www.careerhub.sussex.ac.uk

You can do practice tests online: www.sussex.ac.uk/careers/jobs/selectiontests

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