



ASSESSMENT CENTRES

What is an assessment centre?

The term 'assessment centre' refers to an interview type, or approach, in which groups of candidates participate in team-based exercises simulating workplace situations over a period of several hours. Attendance numbers may range from approximately six candidates to a very large group.

Trained assessors, often managers within the organisation, assess candidate behaviour and performance objectively and systematically against a set of pre-established criteria.

Candidates may also be asked to participate in individual assessment tasks such as panel interviews and psychometric testing.

You're most likely to attend an assessment centre after success at your first interview with an organisation. Some employers use an online assessment as a culling process prior to the first interview stage.

Assessment centre activities are usually conducted at the organisation's offices, and occasionally at a recruitment agency or a hotel. An assessment centre is therefore not a place you'd find by searching the internet or the phone book.

For further information on the interview process see the handouts on the Career Centre's website – interview preparation and practice, behavioural interviews and case study interviews.

Why do organisations use assessment centres?

Assessment centres are one of the best methods available for assessing candidates for the personal qualities needed in a particular job. Organisations use assessment centres to predict candidates' future work performance, including their fit with the organisational culture.

Assessment centres are used primarily by some (but by no means all) medium and large organisations.

This interview methodology is also commonly used for graduate recruitment programs. For further information on these programs, please see the handout graduate recruitment.

What does an assessment centre involve?

Many of the tasks are timed. Typical tasks include:

- Group exercises such as problem solving, creating a strategy, or debating. Sometimes there's an element of controversy in the subject area in order to encourage the expression of different opinions. These activities assess your ability to communicate, work in a team, listen to different opinions and come to consensus. It's important to read instructions carefully and agree on team goals.
- Preparing and conducting verbal presentations to test your ability to structure a presentation and clearly communicate information to others. You may, or may not be given your presentation topic prior to attending the assessment centre. You'll be assessed on the content of your presentation, your ability to keep to the point and be convincing and your verbal and non-verbal communication skills. Smile, try to maintain eye contact with the audience and avoid reading word for word from notes or audiovisual aids.
- Role plays where you need to act out a particular work-related situation. For example, you might be asked to play a customer service representative in a bank and help an unhappy customer whose salary hasn't gone into his or her account. Increasing levels of complexity of the problem may be revealed. You'll be assessed on your problem solving skills and your ability to analyse and communicate effectively.
- In-Tray exercises where you're given a full 'in-tray' of memos, e-mails, and phone messages typical of the role or level you are seeking and asked to prioritise each task and act on items within a timed period. Not only are you required to read and understand the information quickly, you're also required to reach consensus on the priority of each item and draft replies to correspondence and reports within the designated time period.
- Psychometric testing which includes timed aptitude and personality testing (generally not a group activity) – for more information please refer to information on the Career Centre website under applying for jobs – interviews.

- Events such as breakfasts, lunches or cocktail parties. Remember that you're being assessed even in a social setting, so consider consuming only non-alcoholic drinks. The assessors are interested in seeing your behaviour in a variety of situations, so make sure yours is consistently professional.
- Case study interviews are covered in the handout case study Interviews.
- Panel interviews are usually undertaken by only one candidate at a time. Panel interviews are covered in the handout interview preparation and practice.

What do the assessors look for?

They'll be looking for evidence of behavioural traits required for the job. Depending on the role, these behavioural traits could include:

- teamwork
- leadership
- communication skills – both written and verbal
- customer service skills
- motivation
- decision making ability
- social skills and emotional intelligence
- organisational skills
- problem solving abilities
- strategic thinking
- ability to deal with conflict
- ability to deal with ambiguity
- stress management
- goal setting and achievement
- time management skills
- intellectual ability
- lateral thinking
- flexibility
- technical skills.

How can I prepare?

It's important that you get a good night's sleep before attending an assessment centre. These are often very long days. You need to dress professionally and organise your travel to arrive on time. Bring any required documentation. If you wear glasses or require medication during the day, make sure these items have been brought with you. Take practice aptitude tests. It's important to have researched the job and the organisation before you attend (refer to the handout

interview preparation and practice). The Careers Centre has books and videos on assessment centres that can be viewed at the centre during opening hours.

How should I behave?

- Be at your professional best. If you have trouble remembering names, repeat them and write them down as those people are introduced to you, then refer to them by name.
- Be genuine. Don't try to behave or answer questions the way you think the assessors might want. It's important to be yourself.
- You may be required to work in teams with people who may, or may not be in competition for the same job as you. Be a courteous and professional team player. Don't dominate the group leadership; on the other hand, don't be a wallflower. Remember that your communication skills are being assessed, so speak up when you need to. Encourage quieter team members to contribute and be open to the ideas of others.
- Make sure you stay for the entire program of activities. There are very few acceptable reasons for arriving late or leaving early, and you could jeopardise your chances if you're not present for the whole program.
- Eat during the breaks and make sure you drink plenty of water throughout the day.
- Listen to instructions carefully and ask questions when you need to. Read all instructions and questions carefully.
- When you leave the assessment centre, reflect on what you did well and how you could improve. In some cases it's possible to receive feedback on your performance from the recruiter.
- Remember that in addition to your being assessed by the organisation, attendance at an assessment centre gives you an opportunity to assess the organisation and whether you'd like to work for it.