

Succeeding at Assessment Centres

Why employers use assessment centres

Assessment centres are now routinely used by many of the larger companies to assess candidates. However, smaller companies are also introducing elements of assessment centres, such as psychometric testing and in-tray exercises across a range of sectors. Estimates put the cost of putting a candidate through a full assessment centre at about £3000. So why do employers go to all this expense?

In the past, sitting an interview was all a candidate needed to do to get the job. However, research by business psychologists into the predictive validity of various recruitment methods demonstrated that traditional interviews are not a particularly accurate predictor of performance in the job role. Interviewing alone can also lead to bias in the selection process. The most predictive selection method is a combined approach including work samples, business case studies, ability tests and structured interviews (where behavioural questions are objectively scored).

Assessment centres allow an employer to see how you perform in a variety of tasks. Some of these tasks are designed to mirror those you would be doing in the job, so they are measuring you directly against the skills you need to do the job well. Others will focus more on certain core competencies or behavioural characteristics that particular employer looks for. These exercises also enable the assessors to see how you perform under pressure and how you work with other people. The fact that a team of observers assesses you also makes the process more objective; the final decision on who to recruit must be agreed on by a team of assessors using a range of methods. This enables them to build up a more comprehensive and accurate picture of your skills and core competencies to do the job.

The table below summarises the typical exercises undertaken at an assessment centre and which skill/competency is being assessed against each activity.

Competency	Group Exercise 1	Group Exercise 2	Product Exercise	Interview	Verbal and Numerical Tests	OPQ
Leadership	X			X		X
Team Working	X	X				X
Problem Analysis	X	X			X	X
Structure	X			X		X
Imagination/Change		X	X			X
Drive		X		X		X

What to expect at an assessment centre

An employer assessment centre might last anything from half a day to two or more days including an overnight stay. During this time you will typically be asked to take part in a number of different activities and tests designed to assess your skills and potential suitability for a role. These activities and tests could include a second interview, group discussion, role-play, psychometric test and presentation. Study any programme you receive in advance and look at our guide below to help you prepare. Our top tips section will help you perform to your best and avoid many of the common pitfalls.

Individual Activities / Exercises

Social events

These are an opportunity to meet senior personnel, graduate trainees and other candidates over dinner or in a bar. Although not formally assessed, do remember you are under scrutiny. Be careful not to drink too much.

In-tray exercises

An in-tray exercise is designed to simulate the administrative features of a job. You might typically be given a pile of papers consisting of letters, phone messages, emails, internal memos etc and asked to prioritise in order of importance/write notes with your suggested response. There will be a time limit given to complete the task.

Role-plays

You may be asked to role-play a situation with one of the assessors. These are often linked to the type of work you have applied for. For example, the assessor may adopt the role of a complaining customer if you've applied for a job in Retail. For a job in Human Resources they might role-play a troublesome member of staff.

Interviews

Most assessment centres will involve what is known as a second interview. It is likely that you would be interviewed by at least one senior manager, working in the function, and also an HR manager. They will ask you different types of questions — some may be 'technical' others will focus on skills/competencies. The interviews section has examples of typical questions.

Presentations

You may be asked to make a short presentation on a subject of your choice or a given topic. Some employers will give you advanced notice of this; others will ask you on the day. A typical start to an assessment centre involves people in the group speaking about themselves. Practice this in advance. You should also prepare a presentation topic of your own choice beforehand in case you are asked. This could be about something you have recently achieved or a favourite leisure interest. You need to think about two different aspects of the presentation: the information you are trying to convey and how you get this message across.

Psychometric tests

Verbal and numerical tests are often used at assessment centres. See the psychometric testing section for further information and advice.

Group exercises

Group exercises usually take the form of a discussion with assessors sitting round and observing. A number of skills and qualities can be demonstrated in these group situations e.g. drive, team-work, leadership, decisiveness, logic, task orientation, communication and social skills, creativity and speed in assimilating data. The main types of group exercises are as follows:

Leaderless discussion group — a general discussion topic may be given to you or the group may be left to choose its own subject. Each person in the group is monitored by an assessor and once the task is started the group is left to organise itself. The assessors are looking for the emergence of a leader and the sort of roles that people adopt. You will be given a time limit and may have to reach a decision within the allotted time. Time and agreement are key here — very often there is no single 'right' decision.

Assigned group roles — in this type of exercise each member of the team will be given a role to play. For example you may each be asked to play the part of a manager from different parts of the organisation. You are usually asked to negotiate with the others and to argue a case for your own department. In this sort of exercise there will always be winners and losers. Remember it doesn't matter if you win or lose. It's the quality and structure of your argument that is important.

Case study — a more work-oriented form of exercise may be based on a briefing document about a business problem that you have to read individually and then reach a group decision. Case studies are often related to the type of organisation/function you have applied for and may be undertaken individually or as a group.

Practical team exercises — these can be undertaken both indoors and out. A typical indoor exercise is for the group to be given various materials and asked to (for example) build a bridge to a specification and to time and budget. The outdoor version would involve bridging a gap over an actual river. Exercises like this can be further complicated by putting teams in competition with each other. These exercises are aimed at identifying action competencies such as leadership, motivation, drive and creativity.

Top tips for assessment centres

Preparation and knowing what to expect at an assessment centre are really important if you are to perform to the best of your abilities. You also need to think about how you 'come across' on the day. This section will help.

Preparation

Make sure you have researched the organisation and know something about its future plans.

Prepare for any second interview by thinking back to your first interview and the questions you were asked. Were there any questions you didn't answer very well or better examples you could have used? Are there any other questions you would like to ask the company? Be prepared to answer technical questions about the role as well as questions about your skills.

If you are given a discussion document on your previous evening read it carefully. Try to decide what position you will take in the discussion and why.

Try and have an early night and remember not to drink too much at any social event/meal.

Making a positive impact

Remember you are not in competition with other candidates. It is normal for large organisations to recruit to a standard. All, several, one or none of you may be chosen. Selectors want to see how you react to and get on with others.

It's not just about what you contribute in terms of completing the task but also the way you contribute to the group overall. You are not expected to be an expert on the subject under discussion or the task to complete. The way you contribute is often most critical.

Selectors want to see evidence that you can make an effective contribution to the group. Play to your strengths and look for ways to make an effective contribution to the group by:

- Including others in the discussions
- Organising people
- Making sure the group keeps to time and completes the task
- Checking details and coming up with creative ideas.

Think about the impact you can make in a group activity and the way you interact with and can influence others. Keep contributions short and to the point and raise them at the relevant time for maximum impact.

Get involved but do not dominate the discussion or talk for the sake of it. Avoid interrupting others to make your contribution but do not let others interrupt you. Keep your non-verbal behaviour assertive. Use eye contact to get your contributions in. Make sure your voice can be heard but don't shout.

Put your key points across and don't let the discussion be dominated by others whose viewpoints may not be as valid as your own. However, if new information comes to light or better ideas are put forward it's OK to change your mind. Be honest and open about this, not apologetic.

If you find yourself in the minority and time is pressing it can be appropriate to 'fall in' with the majority rather than prevent the meeting from progressing. There's a danger you will be labelled as awkward or negative if you always take a stand on every issue. Assessors are very often as interested in the quality of your thinking and presentation as your particular point of view.

Avoid thinking about the assessors; concentrate on the task in hand. Be pleasant with people you meet. Wish other candidates good luck when they go for their interviews. It does get noticed.

Keep up your end of the dialogue. Even if some of the exercises seem slightly unusual they do have a purpose. Stay involved, enthusiastic and interested throughout. The most common piece of advice from successful candidates is to 'be yourself' and enjoy it!

Psychometric testing

Psychometric testing describes a range of exercises used by employers as a 'tool' to gauge an individual's aptitude or personality. Tests essentially fall into two main groups — ability and personality — and are designed to give additional insight into a candidate's aptitudes and behaviours. Where you take the test in the selection process should give you an indication of how much importance the recruiter places on your score or assessment.

Ability tests

The most commonly used ability tests include numerical reasoning, verbal reasoning, spatial awareness and diagrammatical reasoning. They are often linked to the type of role you are applying for. There are right and wrong answers and tests are taken under timed conditions. The recruiter may be looking for you to get above a certain score or look at your score as part of the overall selection process.

Personality tests

These describe a range of questionnaires and measures used by employers to assess if you have the personal qualities and characteristics needed for that role or particular organisation. Different employers and roles require different attributes. There are no right and wrong answers; you could answer the questionnaire in exactly the same way for different employers and be acceptable to one and not another.

Frequently asked questions

What are the main types of aptitude/ability tests?

Verbal and numerical tests are the most common tests used in the selection process for a wide range of jobs including most business and management functions. Diagrammatic tests are used mainly for computing/IT jobs. Other tests measure mechanical aptitude or other aspects of verbal/numerical/logical ability and are often closely linked to the function/career area.

How are tests used?

Tests are used to give employers an objective assessment of a candidate's abilities and to enable fair comparisons between candidates. The stage at which tests are taken might give you a clue as how important the results are to the employer. The earlier in the selection procedure you are asked to sit a test, the more important the results are likely to be to the outcome (although some employers who use tests even before first interview will only look for an average performance). Employers who use tests only at second interview stage will use them just as one of a number of factors. If you have done well on other parts of the selection procedure then they may make allowances for poor test performance.

How important are test scores?

The part that test scores play in getting you the job will vary greatly. For some employers, test scores may have major significance. Other firms will look at candidates' scores alongside other evidence from across a range of measures. In this case test results may play only a small part in the recruitment decision. Some employers may use tests to 'cream off' high-scoring applicants but for many others it may be enough for your scores to fall within, or slightly below, the average group. Your relative score (i.e. average, above average etc) will depend on the strength of ability among the comparison group. Some employers use general graduate data for comparison, others use data from people in the company and/or the same job.

Should I answer as many questions as I can?

The extent performance is measured against the clock can vary between tests. Speed is an important factor for many people. Timed tests are designed so that you will be unlikely to both complete them and to get everything right. However, if you are unable to finish the majority of a test it will be difficult to achieve a high score. Getting the balance right between speed and accuracy is important. While some employers do use un-timed tests, the majority of those used in graduate recruitment are timed. Quickly guessing at answers in order to complete the test could work against you, as negative marking may be used.

Can I get better at doing tests?

If a test is measuring skills that have been learnt (e.g. numerical skills) but you have not used for some time, then relearning/practicing these skills may improve your performance. While studies show that, for most people, practicing will only increase scores slightly, some people are able to make considerable improvements. Familiarity with the testing process may enable you to make more efficient use of your time and feel more relaxed. Try not to anticipate tests too much but follow all instructions on the day very carefully. Sitting a practice test can help improve some people's performance.

Will the conditions affect my performance?

Both the physical conditions under which you take the tests (heat, light etc) and your own physical/mental state on the day can affect your performance. It is important to arrive at tests in the best possible physical/mental state. If you do not feel well on the day of a testing session, try to rearrange it. If there is any factor likely to affect your performance (e.g. a disability), you must tell the test administrator before the tests. Make sure that the physical conditions of the test room are adjusted so you are comfortable.

How can I prepare for a test?

There are a range of practise tests available online and at the Careers Service. Good bookshops will also stock a range of self-help books and books to test your own IQ. Buying a GCSE maths guide can also be a useful way of brushing up on basic percentages and ratios. The Careers Service runs practise psychometric tests throughout the year. These are done under full test conditions and will familiarise you with both the types of test and process.

Are there tests I can do online?

Many of the test providers have websites where you can do example questions or take part in full tests.

http://www.shldirect.com/practice_tests.html SHL are a major UK based test provider that produce tests for many UK graduate recruiters.

<http://www.psychometrics-uk.com/bapt.html> Berger Aptitude Tests, also known as "B-Apt", are used by some employers to test your aptitude for IT.

<http://www.mba.com/mba/TaketheGMAT/TaketheGMAT.htm#ToolsToHelpYouPrepare> General Management Aptitude Tests (GMAT).

<http://practicetests.cubiks.com/linkpage.html> Cubiks online assessment information and practice sites with free numerical and verbal practice tests.

http://www.markparkinson.co.uk/psychometric_links.html various links to a variety of practice test websites (scroll to bottom of page)

www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise/ — improve your numeracy and literacy on the BBC website.

Should I answer personality questions honestly?

Some employers use personality questionnaires to assess if you have the personal characteristics to do the job. Different roles require different attributes and you could answer questionnaires of this type in exactly the same way for different employers and be acceptable to one and not another. Sometimes you are given a series of statements and asked to mark the one that is most (M) like you and the one least (L) like you. For example:

- I don't feel that time is wasted on planning.
- I feel uneasy in the company of unconventional people.
- If I'm annoyed with someone I don't show it.

The important thing to remember is not to try to anticipate the employer's requirements; there are in-built checks to ensure your answers are consistent. Answer honestly; there are no right or wrong answers. If you did manage to 'fool' the system you could end up being accepted for a job for which you are temperamentally unsuited, resulting in an unhappy you and an unhappy employer.

What should I do if I have a disability such as a visual impairment or a condition such as dyslexia?

Psychometric tests can be an important aspect of the recruitment process for disabled people, as they are less open to bias than, for example, an interview. Tests are rigorous, objective and fair and come in many formats.

If you feel that your disability means you would not be able to complete the tests on an equal basis with a non-disabled applicant then it would be a good idea to contact the employer in advance to discuss your needs. While you know what your disability means and how it affects you, others may not, so you need to be prepared to make suggestions about what sorts of adjustments would be most appropriate for you. The sort of adjustments employers might make include allowing extra time, providing a personal reader/writer or signer, adjusting the pass mark or providing specialised equipment such as loop systems or braille keyboards.

Interview Tips

Research the Employer

Thoroughly research the organisation to impress those with whom you are meeting and to allow more time to tell your story and discuss specifics of the position. Some of the information you will want to know includes:

- size of organisation
- location of facilities
- structure of organisation - by product line, function, past, current & potential growth
- types of clients
- product line or service
- potential markets, products, services
- price of products or services
- present price of stock
- structure of assets
- who the competition is
- name of recruiter
- training provisions
- relocation policies
- length of time in assignments
- recent items in the news
- others you know in the organisation

Store visits are very important.

It is also important to research issues, trends, and problems. Such information can be obtained from people in the field, the internet, trade journals, business magazines, and directories.

You should prepare a list of well-researched questions for the interviewer. We have left a few pages at the end of this pack for you to do so.

Know Yourself

Analyse your strengths and weaknesses and know exactly what you want to say and do not want to say during the interview.

Evaluate problem areas in your track record and be prepared to offer a strong case for these during the interview, if necessary. Do not volunteer negative information about your self or a former employment situation.

Write out answers to possible questions from the interviewer, as a practice activity.

Know why you want this job, including why you would like to work for Zara

Prepare

- Know the name, role, and level of responsibility of each individual with whom you are to meet.
- Know exactly how to get to the organisation and be prepared to arrive early and stay late.
- Dress to project an image of confidence and success; your total appearance should be appropriate to the job.
- Prepare to bring additional materials to the interview such as copies of your CV, a list of referees, and examples of your work.

During the interview

Before the interview you should have considered what you want to communicate and how you are going to communicate. You will want to communicate: personal qualities, functional skills, and special areas of knowledge that relate to the particular interviewer or organisation. How you communicate those personal attributes and background facts is indicated by your attitude, non-verbal behaviours and verbal responses.

Your first task will be to help to build rapport with the interviewer(s). The characteristics of building rapport involve (1) attitude and (2) non-verbal and (3) verbal behaviours.

- 1) Your attitude should be one of openness or sensitivity to the interviewer's style and a feeling of mutual responsibility for creating a comfortable atmosphere, establishing a common ground. You should be thinking positively. (If you don't think you are the best person for the job, how can you hope to convince the employer you are?)
- 2) The non-verbal behaviours, which contribute to rapport, are: dress and posture, eye contact, handshake, voice level, and gestures.

- 3) The verbal behaviours contributing to build rapport include: courteous observations, initiation of discussion, and disclosure of personal qualities.

Be aware of your body language and how you communicate non-verbally. You will want to convey sincerity, a dedication to achievement, confidence and a high energy level. These attributes are communicated through your attitude and actions as well as through your verbal responses.

Consistency between the non-verbal and verbal messages is very important to an effective interview. The non-verbal behaviours that are important in an interview include:

- Eye contact which should be open and direct when listening, asking and responding to questions. Eye contact is usually broken when concentrating or reflecting on what you want to say or what was said.
- Posture which should be well balanced, erect, relaxed, straight-on and open. Know your nervous habits and practice controlling them.
- Hands which should be used in a relaxed way for animation, communicating excitement, interest.
- Facial expression which conveys sincerity and can add to or detract from your words.
- Voice tone which should be firm, warm, well-modulated and relaxed.
- Timing which involves your use of silence, and comfort with pauses.
- Active listening which affects how you respond and communicate your interest.

How you communicate verbally involves your ability:

- To use active verbs.
- To use concrete examples.
- To be concise and complete.
- To summarise and make transitions.
- To be positive and "own" what you have done and what you know.

Knowledge of what contributes to a "strong answer" also contributes to effectiveness. A strong answer does not create more questions than it answers. The components of a strong answer include:

- Backing up a statement with a specific example.
- Sharing your role (the challenge and accomplishments).
- Sharing the outcome or solution.
- Summarising to emphasise your strengths.

Strong answers can also be described as frank, open, thoughtful, complete and concise.

You should be ready to ask questions from a prepared list. Techniques for asking good questions begin with the use of open questions. Questions should be developed ahead of time and should reflect the amount of research the candidate has done rather than their lack of research.

Salary questions are usually inappropriate in the first interview, but you should research the salary range for the job/field ahead of time, consider how much the job is worth to them, and recognise that the consideration of the pay raise structure of the organisation is just as important as the entry level rate in assessing an offer.

Be alert to and evaluate management style, organisational structure, turnover, job responsibilities and growth potential, work atmosphere, staff/supervisor and co-worker relationships.

At the end of the interview

- You must know that you have performed the best you can and that there are no reservations that if possible you haven't overcome.
- You must ask the question – "What reservations do you have?"
- This is not negative!
- How do I match? What else do you need to know? What haven't we covered? Etc. will not tell you what the interviewer is actually thinking.
- If you learn the reservations it gives you opportunity to overcome them!!
- You must then set parameters for the next contact: "When may I expect to hear from you?", "What is the next step?"

After the Interview

Use the interview as a learning experience. You should take notes on what was covered how you can improve next time

You should send a letter to thank the interviewer, and stress points in your interest and areas in your background that qualify you for the position.

If you do not get the job, you should take constructive criticism and recommendations for future interviews. If you are consistently passed over for positions, try to identify potential problems; then seek guidance for improvement.

Competency Based Interviews

What is a Competency Based Interview?

The CBI consists of a structured series of questions aimed at gathering information on the competencies that are found critical to fulfil a job successfully. It is different from a traditional biographical interview in that it will focus on particular skills and attributes instead of exploring your CV.

CBI has been designed to help you share specific past examples of situations relating to these critical competencies. CBI focuses on situations you approached in a successful way as well on situations that might have required a better approach.

Which competencies?

For the position of Category Manager, 5 competencies may be covered during the interview:

Understanding Customer Needs
Creative Thinking
Influencing Others
Commitment to Quality
Passion for Results

How to prepare for a Competency Based Interview:

Think about the past experiences you have gained so far that have prepared you to be successful in the job you are applying for. You can refer to previous work, academic or social experiences. Be prepared to describe situations clearly, outlining under each competency, and your interviewer may want to explore them in some depth.

More information about the technique

In order to help you become familiar with the technique prior to the interview, here follow a few examples of questions.

- Competency – Stress coping
- Definition : dealing successfully with stressful situations so that performance is not affected.
- Questions
- Tell me about a stressful situation you have been confronted with in your current role. When was that ? What did you do ? What was the result ?
- Tell me about a recent time when you have felt under pressure ? How did you notice that you were under pressure ? What did you do ? How did other people react ?
- We know that stress is an individual reaction. Which situations generate stress for you ? Can you share a recent situation with me...