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ask

Preparing for Assessment Centres

Career KnowHow Series

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Assessment Centres

If you have reached this stage in the application process then congratulations. The assessment centre is often the last stage in a company's recruitment process. Employers are not in the habit of inviting candidates to assessment centres unless they think you are capable of doing the job. You have got this far, so take confidence from that. Be confident in your abilities but also be prepared to sell yourself.

What can you expect at an Assessment Centre?

Assessment centres are usually between half a day and two full days (which would usually include an overnight stay). They can include any of the following types of activity, in any order:

- Interview
- Group Exercise/discussion
- Role Play
- Psychometric/Aptitude/Personality Test
- Written Exercise/Report
- Presentation (by candidate and/or employer)
- Social Event
- In-tray Exercise/Case Study

It's crucial you study the letter inviting you to an assessment centre to see if there are any aspects of the process you may be able to prepare for in advance e.g. a presentation/psychometric test.

There could be any number of participants at an assessment centre (usually between 6 and 25). Those attending often make the mistake of feeling they are in direct competition with each other whereas employers are usually looking for candidates to reach a set standard.

What is an employer looking for?

Each company will have its own set of criteria based on the job description and will seek evidence of these during the different parts of the assessment centre. Some companies are very open about what they are looking for and may even refer to the attributes on their website.

Please see the separate KnowHow handout: [Creating your CV](#), for some examples of the types of skills companies look for.

Interview

The same rules apply to interviews as part of an assessment centre as they do for any other interview. If you prepare well enough you should have the confidence to perform at your best on the day.

Try to think of questions you might be asked and draft possible answers to them. You can use the STAR method to help you prepare for interviews, details of which can be found in our 'Preparing for Interviews' booklet (see below). Try to find time to read a good quality newspaper and keep informed about the sector you want to enter. Do your homework on the company beyond the company website by using resources such as LinkedIn/Twitter/Facebook and pay attention to any presentation that company representatives make as their information will come in useful during the process.

Please see our KnowHow handout: [Preparing for Interviews](#) for further details.

Group Exercise

Group exercises can take different forms. The task you may be asked to complete could be a leaderless task, a leadership exercise, a group discussion or a scenario related to the job. You may be assigned different roles within a group for a particular task. In this part of the process the assessors are looking for participation and contribution, the ability to present reasoned arguments, effective communication, listening skills, negotiation and co-operation. You may be marked against competencies such as 'working with others', 'problem solving' and 'Communication'

- Get a good grasp of the information but don't waste time on minute details
- Decide on your priorities
- Be assertive but also prepared to compromise
- Work with the group
- Make positive contributions and encourage contributions from others
- Keep your cool and use your sense of humour - but not too much!
- Keep an eye on the time.
- Try to avoid voting (voting very rarely takes place in meetings!)

In terms of group exercises participants should focus on quality rather than quantity and you should be conscious of talking too much during a group discussion without attempting to involve and ask the opinions of other participants.

Another common mistake in group activities is that participants often have no idea of time. The participant who looks at their watch at the start of the timed group discussion is a rare soul! A surprisingly small number of participants focus on completing the task in hand. This is often left until it's too late and rushed in the last few minutes of a task/discussion. Those who are task focused, bring others into the discussion and clarify other people's ideas generally do well in group discussions/tasks.

Role Play

This can be a popular method of assessment for sales and customer service roles but could be used for any type of job where you might be expected to take on a role similar to the job on offer. The main advice for role-playing exercises is: even though you are in a role, try to behave in a natural manner and take part as fully as possible even if what you are doing may seem pointless and/or extremely testing.

Psychometric/Aptitude/Personality Test

You can usually expect two types - aptitude tests and personality questionnaires.

Aptitude tests will test your ability in numerical, verbal, logical reasoning and sometimes in spatial and diagrammatic reasoning. These tests are timed and are often designed so that finishing all the questions is difficult. Remember the tests are just one part of the assessment process and they give the assessors an added dimension to the information already supplied via the application form and other contact with the applicants. As with all aptitude tests the following points should be kept in mind:

- Pay careful attention to the instructions
- If you don't understand anything ask
- Work quickly and accurately
- Avoid getting stuck on one question
- Calculators may not be allowed, so get used to working without one.

Personality questionnaires, or more accurately, inventories, seek to define the type of person you are underneath, e.g. how you relate to people or how you might react in a certain situation. Unlike aptitude tests there are no right or wrong answers. The best policy is to answer the questions as honestly as possible and don't try to second-guess what you think an organisation is looking for. Additionally, don't over think the answers. Although such questionnaires are not timed, you would be expected to finish in a reasonable time, although these days you are often asked to complete these in advance of the assessment centre.

It is recommended that you practise psychometric tests as much as possible if you know they will form part of your assessment centre so that you can become familiar with test conditions. It is also recommended you use one or two reference books as they tend to contain answers more often than the free online tests you can take (which often give a score without letting you know which questions you have answered correctly). Some of these books are kept in the Careers library in University House

Students and staff who would like to practice psychometric testing in anticipation for recruitment can now do some full practice tests (which also allow them to check what they got right and what they got wrong). Salford Business School have purchased licence but any students with a Salford email address can access the test free of charge: <http://www.careers.salford.ac.uk/page/psychometrictests>

Written Exercise/Report

If written communication is important for the job, you may be asked to produce a piece of written work, such as:

- A summary of one or many documents
- A short report
- A business letter, e.g. a letter responding to a complaint
- An explanation of complex issues in lay person's terms
- Justification of a decision you made in a previous exercise.

Here are some ideas to help:

- Structure the time you are given
- Try to keep your writing legible if you cannot submit your work electronically
- Provide an opening paragraph and summary at the end if appropriate
- Keep your work concise and don't waffle
- Be prepared to present your report verbally without just reading it.

Presentation

This is an aspect of the assessment centre you may (understandably) feel nervous about. Giving presentations can be a nerve-wracking experience. The length of time you are given to prepare for the presentation can vary from several days before the assessment centre to a short preparation period on the day. The duration of the actual presentation may also vary; often ranging from 2 to 15 minutes and can be on a given subject or your own choice.

You may want to contact Careers & Employability to book an appointment with one of the Careers Consultants to discuss presentations in more detail and perhaps deliver a 'mock' presentation.

Here are some tips to help you prepare and reduce your anxiety:

- Give your presentation a structure: A beginning, middle and end
- Think about how much time you have and edit accordingly
- Practise in front of friends or a Careers Consultant
- If you use visual aids make sure they look good
- If you talk quickly, try to slow down
- Look at your audience
- Keep to the allocated time

Social Event

If you attend an assessment centre there will probably be a more informal part at some point in the proceedings. It may or may not be part of the selection process and this would normally be stated at some point during the day. Either way, it is a chance to talk to current employees in a more informal setting (but be careful not to over-indulge!) and will help you decide if the company and the role being applied for is right for you. Remember: even if it is not officially part of the assessment, you are always being watched and judged.

In-tray Exercise/Case Study

The in-tray exercise is designed to test your ability to absorb complex material quickly, to prioritise and to make decisions. The conclusions you reach are not expected to be perfect but you may be asked to justify them. Be prepared to develop logical arguments to defend the decisions you make.

The case study has some similarities to the in-tray exercise in that it is timed, and the information you receive would appear to be more than you can possibly assimilate in the time available. Essentially, the papers you receive will relate to a situation and you are asked to prepare a brief report making recommendations on the action to be taken. Again, your ability to think clearly and to present a reasoned and logical argument will be tested.

Top tips and hints from employers

1. Commercial awareness and career focus are very important. Other skills that assessors will be looking for are likely to include: leadership, team working, analytical skills, problem solving, communication and motivation.
2. Participate fully in all exercises, even if you think you are not doing well, as the whole assessment centre is considered when making a decision about you. Many employers will be sympathetic if you perform less well in one task so don't lose all hope if one element goes badly!
3. Wear a watch (and use it for timed activities)
4. Try to relax and enjoy yourself but concentrate on the tasks so that you can do your best but don't assume you know what assessors are looking for
5. Don't be put off by assessors (chances are you will soon forget they are there)
6. Be positive, enthusiastic and above all be yourself!

The decision

You should be informed within a few days of the company's decision. You may automatically be offered feedback on your performance but, if not, ask for it. You may find the feedback positive and encouraging even if you have not been selected to go to the next stage. Even if some of the feedback is negative and/or constructive you can learn from this in order to perform better next time.

Psychometric testing in more detail

This section is dedicated to giving more detailed information about psychometric tests as these tend to be one of the most popular tools in assessment centre activities.

Useful Books

The following books are available for reference in Careers & Employability. Please ask at our Reception in Careers & Employability if you wish to use any of these items:

How to Succeed at an Assessment Centre by Harry Tolley and Robert Wood

Includes advice on psychometric tests, group exercises, panel interviews, presentations, role-play exercises and personality questionnaires.

How to Master Personality Questionnaires by Mark Parkinson

Includes information on what “personality” is and how it is measured, why personality questionnaires are used, why different jobs require different personalities, what employers do with results and what questionnaires look like.

How to Pass Graduate Psychometric Tests by Mike Bryon

Includes 550 practice questions, 10 full length tests, glossary of essential terms in English usage, glossary of key mathematical terms and methods, study tips and winning test strategies, answers, explanations and interpretations of your scores.

How to Pass Numerical Reasoning Tests by Heidi Smith

Includes an overview of basics, a step-by-step guide to key skills including fractions and decimals; rates; percentages; ratios and proportions. Includes useful tips to help you understand and answer questions without a calculator.

How to Pass Verbal Reasoning Tests by Harry Tolley

Helps you prepare for tests with practice questions (including answers) on areas such as: missing words; word links; word swap; hidden sentences; sentence sequence; text comprehension; verbal logical reasoning.

The Numeracy Test Workbook by Mike Bryon

Includes real-life tests and offers to help speeding up basic numeracy skills, as well as practice questions based on number problems; number sequencing and data interpretation.

Passing Psychometric Tests by Andrea Shavick

Includes 35 different practice tests with 265 questions. Also available as an e-book to read outside the library. Check the University Library catalogue.

Professional Level Psychometric Tests by Sam Al-Jajjoka

Provides practice exercises that are relevant to those facing tests used in IT, management and finance recruitment. Contains 16 timed tests with more than 500 questions (with answers supplied).

The following books are occupation specific. Please ask at our Reception in Careers & Employability if you wish to use any of these items.

How to Pass the Civil Service Qualifying Tests by Mike Byron

This book aims to help those who want to work in the UK Civil Service. The book is aimed at both administrative staff and Fast Stream applicants. It contains over 450 practice questions, over 100 tips and insights, 7 practice tests and answers to all the questions.

How to Pass the Firefighter Selection Process by Mike Byron

There are nearly 60,000 applications for the Fire Service each year, with 40 applicants per place. This book can help with the application form, written test, interview, team exercises and physical tests.

How to Pass the New Police Selection System by Harry Tolley

This book aims to help those applying to the police force in England and Wales. It contains information and assistance with the entry requirements and competencies, application form, the assessment centre, preparing for psychometric tests, sample numerical reasoning tests, sample verbal logical reasoning tests, role-play exercises, written exercises, interviews and the job-related fitness test.

Don't forget: the main University libraries hold some books on psychometric tests. For more information, check the University catalogue (<http://www.salford.ac.uk/library/resources/solar/>); some titles are also available as e-books.

Useful Websites

The following sites have been checked by Careers & Employability in August 2016. Many will allow you to do short sample tests free of charge.

WikiJob (<https://www.wikijob.co.uk/content/application-advice/assessment-centres/how-prepare-assessment-centres>)

A resource on a well-known and used jobs and careers related website that has a variety of excellent resources (some free some paid for) relating to assessment centres and how to prepare.

Assessment Day (<http://www.assessmentday.co.uk>)

Assessment Day is run by a student who took several tests around the UK. It has both free and paid-for tests in both verbal and numerical reasoning. There is also a long list of interview questions for both formal and technical interviews, and a discussion forum.

ETS (<https://www.ets.org>)

ETS is a non-profit organisation based in the USA that offers information on a large range of professional tests, including articles on fees, test content and Frequently Asked Questions. For some, they also provide a selection of sample questions. The

organisation is also used by some American universities to develop personalised tests for their application processes.

Get Feedback (<http://www.getfeedback.net>)

Get Feedback is an online recruitment agency who offer services to both employers – as an agency – and students, as a portal to see what employers are looking for. They have a lot of information on the 3 main types of psychometric testing, as well as articles on online aptitude tests.

Graduates First (<http://www.graduatesfirst.com>)

Free and paid for versions available includes ability testing – numerical, verbal and logical. Personality questionnaire is trait-based. Unique feature is that individuals can go through and review what they got wrong. The university has acquired a licence for Graduates First which will enable versions to be available free of charge for all UOS students.

Talent Q Kenexa (<http://www.psl.com/practice/>)

Ability tests available

Human metrics (<http://www.humanmetrics.com>)

Personality profiling – MBTI-like (free)

Profiling for Success (<http://www.profilingforsuccess.com/>)

Ability and personality profiling: numerical, verbal and logical. Personality questionnaire is MBTI-like.

GMAC (<http://www.gmac.com/>)

GMAC is the Graduate Management Admission Council. They produce the GMAT, a psychometric test aimed specifically at business students and for business schools. It is used in over 155 countries across the world. When schools sign up, they also become eligible to take part in and receive the results of the VSS survey, which compiles the results of the GMAT from across the world and helps schools place themselves in a comparative list with others.

Graduate Prospects (<https://www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips/assessment-centres>)

The Prospects website has a good overview of assessment centres which gives a list of links directing students to more information on psychometric tests, interview questions and online practice packs

IQ Test Labs (<http://www.intelligencetest.com/>)

The IQ Test Lab offers a PhD certified IQ test, which tests your ability in 9 different areas. The test is free to take online, and you receive a comprehensive 25 page report with analysis about your results after completion. This includes statistics which compare your own results against others who have taken the test beforehand.

Job Test Prep (<https://www.jobtestprep.co.uk/>)

This website is packed with useful information on preparing for, and taking, psychometric tests. The site includes aptitude test preparation, personality test preparation, group exercise preparation and job interview preparation.

Monster (<http://www.monster.co.uk/career-advice/article/what-is-an-assessment-centre>)

Monster is an international job vacancy database, and the website has an in-depth section on ability testing and career management tools as well as an overview of assessment centres

Psychometric Success (<http://www.psychometric-success.com>)

This site is aimed at providing job seekers with the practice material they need to pass psychometric job selection tests. It has over 100 pages of information on psychometric and aptitude tests, free downloadable practice tests and a free eBook which gives expert advice on how to approach aptitude tests.

SHL Direct (<https://www.cebglobal.com/shldirect/en>)

SHL Direct is a website aimed at the individual testing themselves at ability/aptitude tests and personality questionnaires, as well as providing the opportunity to collect feedback on your responses. It is split into 5 sections, one for students, and one on career guidance, plus help on the assessments, practice and feedback.

Team Technology (<http://www.teamtechnology.co.uk/mmdi/questionnaire/>)

Team Technology is a website that has a wide range of articles and resources on business, leadership and management, as well as information on the MBTI (Myers Briggs Type Indicator) personality test. They also offer an in-depth online version of the MMDI (Mental Muscle Diagram Indicator) personality questionnaire.

Testing Direct (<http://www.testing-direct.com>)

This website has a registration fee of £12.50. It has 3 available tests made up of Personality, Motivation and Interests. They match your personality to appropriate job types, help you work on a Career Development Action Plan, and aim to enhance job satisfaction and efficiency. The test is 15 minutes long, and there are 21 pages of comprehensive feedback available online, immediately after the test has been taken.

Further support from Careers & Employability

Psychometric Information available online
at: <http://www.careers.salford.ac.uk/page/develop>

Free Take-Away Example Tests:

Careers & Employability has a couple of handouts for you to take away that contain some basic numeracy and aptitude tests for you to try out.

Speak to a Careers Consultant:

If you feel you need to speak to a Careers Consultant on a one-to-one basis about which options may be most suitable for you, book a confidential appointment. A Careers Consultant will listen to your ideas, help you identify your strengths and weaknesses and assist you in relating all of these things to the world of work.

Appointments are available for current students/graduates of the University by calling into askUS at University House in person or ring 0161 295 0023. You can also book appointments online via Advantage. If you find it difficult to make it to the Careers Office, you can ask your careers questions to our team of Consultants via [Advantage](#).

Watch a short film:

Watch *Selection Success in One* DVD which includes *The Assessment Centre Video* and is available to view in Careers & Employability and also available to view on any campus computer: <http://www.careers.salford.ac.uk/page/films>

View our Events Listings

We run workshops on preparing for Assessment centres and Psychometric Testing visit: <http://www.careers.salford.ac.uk/page/careers-workshops>

Other information on our website:

You may find useful our information page on job applications and interviews, visit: <http://www.careers.salford.ac.uk/page/careerguides>