Assessment Centres and Psychometric Tests

Including Second Interviews

www.manchester.ac.uk/careers
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What is an Assessment Centre?
Where do they take place?
When do they take place?
What happens?

Essentially, an Assessment Centre is a place where a number of candidates are brought together by an employer for assessment. It could be an employer’s premises or a city centre or country hotel; one company uses the facilities at a Premiership Football Club.

The range of assessments is detailed later but importantly, for the employer, it gives them a chance to see how a candidate performs not only individually but with other people.

Typically, they take place after:
  a) A review of an Application Form/CV
  b) Some form of initial assessment.

The initial assessment is usually an interview (either face to face or on the telephone) or, less commonly, a Psychometric Test.

Assessment Centres can last a few hours or up to two days, detailed below are all the components that may make up a centre. Usually, they will not include everything we mention.

You will either be sent a programme of events before you attend or will receive one when you arrive. Study it carefully and prepare whatever you can in advance.

Basic stuff

What do I wear?
Unless told specifically otherwise, dress as you would if you were attending an interview. Obviously, if you have an overnight stay you would take a change of shirt etc. Some organisations, particularly the emergency services and armed forces, will have physical exercises and will tell you what to bring with you. Make sure you read your joining instructions carefully.

Do they pay travelling expenses?
The payment of travel expenses is normally mentioned before the event. If it isn’t then it is perfectly acceptable to make enquiries. If expenses aren’t covered (for Assessment Centres they usually are) then you will have to make a decision on whether you want/can afford to go ahead.

When will I receive the result?
It varies, from the next day to a week or more. Some organisations, holding a number of Assessment Centres, will not make a final decision until all have been completed; others notify candidates immediately after each one. If they don’t say, you can ask.

Can I ask for feedback?
At this stage in the recruitment process, particularly because the numbers are relatively small, employers will often provide feedback if asked.
**Presentation by the Employer and/or Office/Factory tour**

Often, the Assessment Centre will start with a presentation by the employer describing the organisation, their graduate scheme and career progression opportunities; this is sometimes followed by an office/factory tour. Pay attention to what is said as it may be useful to you at a later stage for example, a second interview. This section may not be formally assessed but staff will inevitably be forming impressions of the candidates so look interested and ask questions.

**Social events**

You are likely to meet senior personnel, graduate trainees and other candidates at informal events such as dinner and at the bar. Generally, you are not being formally assessed but you will be under scrutiny; assessors sometimes ask for the opinions of other company personnel who have met you on these occasions and that can also apply to staff you meet on arrival or on the tour (see above). It is a good opportunity to learn about the company culture and experiences of staff who may be your future colleagues. If a partner or managing director is present, don’t be afraid of talking to them as well – they have come in order to meet you.

Consider how your behaviour will appear to the employer. If you are naturally shy make an effort to talk with people you meet. Take care with how much alcohol you drink, it is likely to impair your judgement and show you in a poor light.

**Interviews**

Second round interviews may involve a panel of interviewers. The tip here is to direct most of your answer to the person who asked you the question while acknowledging, by brief eye contact, the other members of the panel. Don’t be put off by someone on the panel who says nothing but makes copious notes; they’re just that – note takers.

Sometimes you will be interviewed one to one, in sequence. Don’t panic, it’s just the way that organisation does things.

It is almost certain that you will be interviewed by at least one senior manager from the organisation. They are likely to be an expert in the field of work that you have applied for. Make sure you have researched the organisation so that you have some idea of what it does and where it’s going in the future. Keep in touch with current events by reading a good newspaper every day.

Questions are likely to be more probing than at a first interview and may revolve round topics that the first interviewer highlighted as needing further exploration. Keep in mind the list of competencies that were tested in earlier rounds. After the first interview, were there questions where you were not satisfied with your answers – motivation maybe or an example of teamworking? Think how you might perform better next time; the subject may come up again.

Above all, keep up your end of the dialogue in an enthusiastic and interesting way. All the advice for First Interviews applies here too.

**Technical interviews**

Obviously ‘technical’ interviews will take different forms depending on the role for which you’ve applied. By their nature they will tend to have right and wrong answers but frequently it is your thought processes that are being tested and the odd slip-up is not disastrous. It’s a case of you preparing thoroughly and knowing the subject. Don’t be surprised if you are asked questions about things you might have studied in your first year.

Examples: For an engineering role you may be shown a piece of machinery and asked to explain what it is and how it works; for an I.T. job you could be asked to interpret some programming; for a scientific vacancy you may find yourself having to write out a formula to explain a chemical reaction.
or explaining how to design an experiment to test an idea; for a finance related job, questions on understanding what the role entails and current financial issues (in this case a thorough study of the financial press will be necessary).

Further resources about interviews

- First Interviews handout - available to collect from the Careers Service or download it from our website
- DVD - Making an Impact: The Graduate Job Interview - available online or at the Careers Service
- DVD ‘Why ask me that?’ – available at the Careers Service

Group exercises
These are an important part of any Assessment Centre.

Group exercises often take the form of a team discussion or exercise with assessors observing from the edge of the room. A number of qualities can be demonstrated in group situations. These include drive, decisiveness, self-confidence, social skills, communication, debating skills, logic, quick thinking, imagination, time management and speed in assimilating data.

The following are the different types of exercise you are likely to encounter with advice on contributing effectively.

Discussion Groups
This could be on:

- a topic related to the career you are applying for
- an issue of current affairs
- a subject related to a case study briefing you have just been asked to read

The way you contribute is as important as what you contribute. The selectors are not expecting you to be an expert on the subject under discussion but they do want to see evidence that you can make an effective contribution to the group.

Organisations often recruit to a standard. None, one or all of you may be selected, in which case the other group members are not in competition with you. In fact the selectors are likely to put considerable weight on your ability to get on with the others. Think of the group as a team engaged in the same task. It is possible for all members of your group to pass or fail this aspect of the assessment.

It is important to get involved but you must avoid the temptation to dominate the discussion. A discussion topic will be given to you, or your group may have to choose its own subject. Some employers will encourage you to choose a discussion leader but it is more likely that you will be discouraged from this.

You will be given a time limit and asked to reach a decision within the allotted time. Time and agreement are the issues here – very often there is no single ‘right’ decision.

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

The following notes should help you make a more effective contribution.

1. **Keep your contributions short**
   Your point is more likely to be understood and to have impact if you keep it reasonably short.

2. **Avoid interrupting others to make your contribution and do not let others interrupt you**
   In some discussions it is difficult to make your contribution. Once speaking there is a temptation to make several points for fear of not getting in again! This creates a vicious circle. Avoid it.

3. **Keep your non-verbal behaviour assertive**
   Both the **volume** and **tone** of voice are important here. Speak too quietly and you will lose impact and be open to interruptions.

   Use eye contact to get your contribution in, then distribute your eye contact amongst members. This enables you to judge how your contribution is being received.

4. **Timing your contribution**
   If you want to influence a discussion it is not just **what** you say that counts but also **when** you say it. Raise points at the relevant time for maximum impact. Don't wait until the last minute before airing an opposing view - if others are on the verge of making a decision they will be irritated if you suddenly come up with opposition.

5. **Getting a reaction to your contribution**
   If you follow the first two suggestions you stand a good chance of getting a reaction. If, however, no one reacts - then ask the group or an individual for a reaction.

6. **Changing your mind**
   This is a valid thing to do. Especially in light of new information or better ideas. Be honest and open about it - not apologetic.

7. **Falling in with the majority**
   If after exploring all the options you find yourself in the minority and time is pressing - it can be assertive to "fall in" with the majority rather than prevent the meeting from progressing.

8. **Not falling in with an apparent majority**
   You have a responsibility to make your doubts and disagreements known. It is important not to let the discussion be dominated by others whose point of view may be less valid than your own.

9. **Deciding which issues to make a stand on**
   If in a discussion you find yourself out of line with the majority view being expressed, there will be many issues on which you could take a stand. There is a danger that if you take a stand on **every** issue it will become counter-productive and you will be labelled as awkward and negative. Make sure you know what you are talking about if you decide to make an individual stand on an issue.
Group Building Roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Initiator</th>
<th>The Clarifier</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• suggests new or different ideas for discussion</td>
<td>• gives relevant examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• proposes new or different approaches to problems</td>
<td>• probes for meaning and understanding of matters under discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Opinion Giver</td>
<td>The Tester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• states pertinent beliefs about what group is considering and others’ suggestions.</td>
<td>• raises questions to “test out” whether group is ready to come to a decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Elaborator</td>
<td>The Summariser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• elaborates or builds on suggestions made by others</td>
<td>• tries to pull together or reviews the discussion content</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Group Maintenance Roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Gate Keeper</th>
<th>The Harmoniser</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• keeps communications open</td>
<td>• mediates difference of opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• creates opportunities to encourage participation by others</td>
<td>• reconciles points of view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Compromiser</td>
<td>The Encourager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• does not stick stubbornly to a point of view but is willing to yield when necessary for the progress of the group</td>
<td>• praises and supports others in their contributions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• is friendly and encouraging</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Group work – making or doing something

Group work can consist of making something or a physical team task. You could be asked to do something that seems really bizarre! For example, constructing a tower from straws, paper and pins and competing with other groups to achieve the task at the cheapest price.

The exercise is merely the vehicle for the assessors to, again, see how you perform in a team environment. Much of the advice on group-discussion behaviour is also valid here. A common fault is spending too much time discussing design or strategy and leaving too little time to construct the item.

**Remember, for all types of group work where a time limit is given, completing the task in the time allowed is paramount.**
Case Studies

You may do a case study individually or as a group. Case studies are similar to in-tray exercises in that you are given a great deal of written information and are expected to make a decision or recommend a course of action within a time limit. You may have to present your recommendations individually or as a group and/or discuss them in an interview.

There will always be too much information to read properly in the time available so skim read rather than get bogged down in the detail.

In a group case study, often there is no right or wrong answer. The assessors are looking for how you approach the task, how you work with other people in the group, how you organise, prioritise and present your arguments and how you respond when your opinions and recommendations are challenged.

You cannot practice for a specific case study as companies obviously do not release them ahead of time. You can however familiarise yourself with how case study tasks are set out and practice reading quickly and extracting the critical points.

Question 5 (in Part One) and Part Two of our specimen In-Tray Exercise (see below) is typical of a case study you might be asked to undertake alone. You would be allowed 30 minutes for this one. A suggested answer is contained in Part Three.

Case study interviews
A case study interview may ask you to go through a particular business scenario. They are most applicable for those going for roles within Consulting or Investment Banking.

Sometimes there are role play case studies where the interviewer acts in a role play with you and you work through the scenario together. The interviewer supplies you with information and they may volunteer information as you work through the case. Often you need to ask questions to extract this information. Typically, you are not given any time to prepare.

- The interviewer is looking at how you analyse information, conclude, act and recommend actions
- Ask questions to clarify facts.
- Maintain good eye contact and listen carefully to the information you are given
- Make sure the interviewer is clear on your thought processes and working out

Further resources about case studies

- [www.michaelpage.co.uk/content/17805/competency-and-case-study-interviews.html](http://www.michaelpage.co.uk/content/17805/competency-and-case-study-interviews.html)
- [www.acethecase.com](http://www.acethecase.com)
- [www.bcg.com/join_bcg/interview_prep/interactive_case/default.aspx](http://www.bcg.com/join_bcg/interview_prep/interactive_case/default.aspx)

Reference books available in the Careers Service include

- Vault Guide to the Case Interview
- Case in Point – Complete Case Interview Preparation.

DVDs available to watch in the Careers Service:

- Bain & Company: How to crack case study interviews
- Assessment Centre Video
In-tray / e-tray exercises

In-tray exercises are designed to simulate a situation that may face a manager on returning from a holiday or other absence. A pile of paper is given to you that will consist of letters, phone messages, internal memos etc. You may be asked to prioritise the documents in order of importance and/or write notes with your suggested response to each. There will be a time limit within which to complete the task.

e-tray versions of the exercise will consist of you being sat in front of a computer and dealing with a series of emails which arrive on your screen.

Further resources about in-tray exercises

- Specimen In-Tray exercise - available to collect from the Careers Service or download from our website.
- Assessment day – sample in-tray exercise
- www.civilservice.gov.uk/jobs/FastStream/HowDoIApply/e-Tray.aspx

Presentations

You could be called upon to make a short presentation on a subject of your choice or on a given topic. You are likely to be given advance notice and should rehearse what you want to say, preferably in front of a mirror, so that you get the timing right. Prepare a topic of your own choice beforehand just in case you are asked on the day. A normal start to Assessment Centres is to ask people to speak about themselves, which you can also easily practise in advance.

As part of a case study you may be required to present your recommendation for a course of action. In this case you could be presenting to a ‘panel’ of assessors and you will have to answer questions on your recommendations.

Further resources about presentations

Presentation Skills handout - available to collect from the Careers Service or download from our website

Reference books available in the Careers Service include:
- Presentations Skills, the essential guide for students – Patsy McCarthy & Caroline Hatcher
- Making Presentations – Tim Hindle
Role plays

Role plays are often related to the type of work for which you've applied. For example, the assessors may adopt the roles of complaining customers if you've applied for a job in retail. In Human Resources the assessor might role play a troublesome member of staff.

You will not be expected to be an expert on company procedures or services (although you can often pick up hints during presentations and tours), the observers will be looking at your interpersonal skills and how well you think on your feet. Above all, listen and don’t prejudge the situation.

“One of our exercises was to be a store manager who had to ‘speak to’ a departmental manager whose style was alienating the staff. We had to find out why and put a stop to it. My assessor, playing the departmental manager’s role to the full, began to break down and cry the minute I even hinted that there might be some kind of trouble. Faced with all this wailing and sobbed apologies, when I’d been expecting denial and stubbornness, really threw me.”
Sociology & English Graduate
(quote reproduced courtesy of GTI Publications)

Essays and written exercises

You may be required to complete a written exercise the nature of which may vary depending on the type of role for which you have applied. Writing a short essay on a given subject is common, as is writing a business letter, perhaps in response to a prescribed query or complaint. Alternatively you might be given a document littered with spelling, formatting and grammatical errors to correct. These exercises are intended to test your written skills particularly spelling and grammar but also may test your ability to communicate effectively and professionally in writing.

Don’t think that written exercises will be limited to literary or administrative jobs; IT and Finance firms use these methods too.

Psychometric testing

Psychometric testing describes a range of exercises used by employers to gauge an individual’s aptitude or personality. Used correctly the tests give an additional insight into candidates and will verify points coming out of interview. Psychometric tests usually form part of an overall selection process, whether at an assessment centre, or beforehand at the interview stage.

Psychometric testing - ability tests

Ability tests measure one or more of the following skills: numerical, verbal reasoning, spatial awareness and diagrammatical reasoning. The tests used depend on the type of role for which you’re being assessed.

You might do better in some types of tests than in others. Verbal and numerical tests are used to select graduates for a wide range of jobs, including most business and management functions. Diagrammatic tests are used mainly for computing/IT jobs. Most tests are timed and are designed so that you will be unlikely both to complete them and to get everything right. 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. The best advice is to work as quickly and accurately as possible and avoid guessing just in case negative marking is used (i.e. the number of incorrect answers is deducted from the number of correct ones, to give a net score.)

Tests are generally bought from specialist companies, the recruiter then decides what the pass score will be depending on the demands of the job. You could theoretically sit the exactly the same
test for two companies and give exactly the same answers yet pass one and fail the other because they set different pass marks.

**Psychometric testing - personality tests**

Employers sometimes use personality tests to assess if you have the personal qualities for the job. Different roles require different attributes. 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. The thing to remember is not to try to anticipate the employer’s requirements. There are built-in checks to ensure your answers are consistent. Answer honestly; there are no right or wrong answers.

Where would your M and L be for the following?
- 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

**How psychometric tests are used in the selection procedure**

The part that tests play in getting you the job will vary greatly. For some employers test scores have major significance, others look at candidates’ test scores alongside other evidence. 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.

The earlier in the selection procedure you are asked to sit a test, the more influential it will be to your eventual selection. It is important to begin tests in the best possible frame of mind. If you do not feel well on the day of a testing session, try to rearrange it. If there is any factor that may affect your performance (eg a disability or if English is not your first language) inform testers in advance so that this can be taken into account.

**Psychometric testing - how your abilities change over time**

Whilst studies show that, for most people, practising will only increase scores slightly, some people are able to make some improvement. 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 however, and follow all instructions on the day very carefully.
Practice tests
Practice tests in timed conditions (verbal, numerical, diagrammatic) plus a Personality Profile (Type Dynamics Indicator) and Learning Styles Indicator. CareersLink login required to access passcodes. www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/tests

- The Careers Service runs regular testing sessions at nominal cost; check the events on the website or ask at the Careers Service for forthcoming dates. www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/events
- We have a collection of practice psychometric test practice books available on reference at the Careers Service.

The following sites all offer information or practice test materials

- **Berger Aptitude Tests.**
  Also known as "B-Apt", used by some employers to test your aptitude for IT. www.psy-test.com/TestIndex.html

- **Civil Service Faststream.**

- **Cubiks.**
  Online assessment information and practice sites with free numerical and verbal practice tests. http://practicetests.cubiks.com

- **Graduate Record Examinations (GRE).**
  Provide a sample test for doing postgraduate study in the USA. www.gre.org

- **Mensa.**
  IQ tests and puzzles. www.mensa.org.uk

- **Psych Press.**

- **Psychometric Success**
  Practice numerical, verbal, abstract, spatial, technical and clerical tests for free. www.psychometric-success.com

- **SHL.**
  Major UK-based test provider that produce tests for many UK graduate recruiters. www.shl.com/TryATest/TakeATest/default.aspx

- **Situational judgement test – practice**
  www.assessmentday.co.uk/situational-judgement-test.htm

- **Skillswise.**
  Improve your numeracy and literacy on the BBC website. www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise
There’s no such thing as a standard Assessment Centre
We have tried to cover all the areas that appear in assessment centres but they do take many forms

Two are outlined here:

A one day Assessment Centre undertaken by candidates applying for trainee management positions in finance with a large PLC consists of -

A.M.

9.00 Arrival & Coffee
9.15 Self introduction by candidates – name, degree, university etc. but also being asked to say who they would most like to have dinner with.
9.30 Introduction to the Company and details of the training scheme.
10.00 Psychometric test – Verbal
10.15 Break
10.30 Written Exercise (solo – 45 minutes)
11.15 Group Exercise (timed construction task)

P.M.

12.05 Lunch with current graduates (45 minutes)
1.00 Interview with a member of the recruitment team and a senior business manager (45 – 60 minutes)
2.15 Psychometric Test – Numerical
3.15 Close of day for candidates (Assessors gather to review performance and decide who are to be offered positions. All candidates advised of a decision within 24 hours)

BP’s Assessment Centre takes place over two days -

Day 1
P.M.

2.00 Attendees gather to meet with those administering the event to check in, have their photo taken and receive their schedule for the event.

2.30 Candidates meet the BP assessors and briefly introduce themselves.

3.00 Candidates then leave for a briefing on the BP ‘early experience programme’ they’ve applied for.

3.30 Students are then split up to begin completing the components of the assessment.

For one candidate the programme might continue as follows.

3.30 Attend a ‘technical’ interview. With two interviewers present, this will last for approximately an hour. Science and engineering graduates face a technical question. For non-science, engineering and technology applicants, the interview consists of one or two scenarios involving the decisions facing a BP manager. The scenarios are likely to be based on a real example. Two assessors lead the candidate through the decisions to be made and develop the answers with further questions.
5.00 The next exercise is a group game with a number of other candidates. There’s lots of information to assimilate on an individual basis, followed by a group discussion to reach a consensus. The exercise runs strictly to time. A number of assessors are present to look at the candidates’ behaviour, assessing them against the skills and competencies outlined in the brochure and on the web. Remember to focus on the task in hand not on the assessors.

6.30 Assessment finishes for the day with a welcome break before meeting for dinner.

7.30 Candidates and assessors meet in the bar and then have dinner. There is no formal assessment taking place here but it’s still wise to be on your best behaviour while also relaxing and chatting to others.

Day 2
A.M.

8.30 - The first exercise of the day is a second group game with a different set of candidates.
10.00 BP uses two games so that the individual has two chances to demonstrate behaviours.

10.00 An individual in-tray exercise. Individual exercises can take a number of forms but will often involve prioritising information.
11.30 The last stage involves a competency interview with two interviewers. This is based on the four competencies identified by BP as important for its recruits. Many companies make detailed information about the competencies they look for available on their website and in their recruitment marketing. It’s important that you research these well in advance to know what they are looking for so you have examples to hand that you can use to illustrate these skills.

P.M.
1.00 Lunch and departure for the candidates. The assessors now meet to decide which candidates have met the standard and are to be offered a position. All candidates, successful or not, are offered personal feedback.

Top Tips

- Remember, when taking part in those group exercises you are not in direct competition with each other. The assessors want to see how you react and work with others.

- Be pleasant with all the people you meet. What’s wrong with wishing other candidates good luck when they go off for their interviews? It does get noticed.

- If you are given a tour of the organisation and it’s appropriate, speak to some of the employees, not just the ones who are wheeled out for you to meet at coffee or lunch.

- The thing to remember is that Assessment Centres are expensive, time consuming events for employers and are therefore carefully designed to find the best candidates for the vacancies on offer. So, even though the exercise you are asked to undertake may seem a little bizarre you can be confident it has a serious purpose. Try to work out the skills they are testing.

- The majority of students tell us they found their assessment centres enjoyable and stimulating. The single most common piece of advice from those attending interviews and assessments is ‘be yourself.’
To find out more:
All of the following resources are available on reference at the Careers Service

**Essential basics – if you are pressed for time these are indispensible**

- AGCAS DVDs - Assessment Centres

- Handouts: download from our website [www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/startingpoints](http://www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/startingpoints)
  - In-Tray exercise
  - Presentation Skills
  - First Interviews

**Useful reads - if you have some time before your assessment centre you could learn something and improve your skills with these**

- 30 Minutes to make the Right Impression – Eleri Sampson

- Vault Guide to the Case Interview

- Presentations Skills, the essential guide for students – Patsy McCarthy & Caroline Hatcher

- Making Presentations – Tim Hindle

- 30 Minutes to Boost Your Communication Skills – Elizabeth Tierney

- For Team Members Only, making your workplace team productive and hassle free – Charles C. Manz, Christopher P. Neck, James Mancuso & Karen P. Manz

- Persuasive Reports and Proposals – Andrew Leigh

- Impact and Influence, tools and techniques for creating a lasting impression – Richard Hale & Peter Whitlam

- How to get the Best Graduate Job, insider strategies for success in the graduate job market – David Williams, Phil Brown & Anthony Hesketh (part 4 How to deal with Assessment Centres)

To find further resources on this topic – use the Careers Library Catalogue [www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/library](http://www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/library)