

# Assessment centres

## Preparation

Assessment centres are a series of exercises and tasks used by recruiters to assess and score candidates. They are often used by employers who are recruiting a large number of people at a similar time. They are less commonly used for a single job hire or a short term/casual opportunity.

They can be great fun as they are really immersive, and you can experience it with peers who are all nervous and excited as well. Assessment centres can last from a few hours to a few days, and can be carried out either online, or in person at an employer’s offices or a venue such as a conference hotel. Employers may pay for your travel and accommodation if the assessment centre isn’t local to where you live – ask them if it isn’t clear to you.

## General preparation

* Understand what they’re looking for – make sure you’re familiar with any published selection criteria, as they’ll be using these to ‘score’ candidates. Criteria might include competencies like communication, teamwork, problem solving, planning, influencing and commercial awareness.
* Research the company (and competitors), industry, role, and the details of the opportunity on offer.
* Re-read the application materials you’ve sent them so far.
* Plan which examples you might use if they ask you for examples of their competencies/criteria.
* Take our Practice Assessment Centre exercise on [www.graduatesfirst.com](http://www.graduatesfirst.com).
* Check the links they sent you for the online event work, or your travel plans if it’s an in-person event.

The kind of exercises and activities you might encounter at an assessment centre include:

## Group exercises

* You'll work with usually no more than 7 other candidates to complete a task in a set timeframe
* The task might be related to the job you’re applying for, or could seem quite random. Whatever the task is, it’s really just an excuse to see how you work with others when under pressure.
* You’ll have people observing you and noting down evidence against the competencies they’re looking for. Make sure you speak up regularly and clearly, so they have somehting to write down.
* Some ways to contribute include letting the group know how much time is left, summarising how far the group has got, listing what’s left to do and suggesting ideas.
* Show that you’re a good team player – offer ideas, listen to others, and help the group progress the task. This exercise is all about showing how you work with others.

* Good team players let other people speak and have ideas too; if there’s a quiet person in your group, you could offer them an opportunity to share their thoughts, and check group consensus when you’re agreeing on an idea or decision.

## Work simulation tasks

* Work simulations test how well you can do typical duties of the job. They will be different depending on the job, for example, you might be asked to analyse data if you’re applying for a role with data analysis, or role play a negotiation if you’re applying for a role where you’d need to persuade people.
* Any information you get before the assessment centre might give you a clue about how you could prepare. For example, if invite email mentions a business case study, you could read up on advice for business case studies.
* On the day make sure you read and understand the instructions, plan your time and act as if it was real (e.g. don’t ask to ‘stop’ a role play halfway through).
* In-tray (also called e-tray) exercises simulate being at a busy desk with lots of information to manage. Usually, the task is to decide what to do: judging what actions need to be taken, prioritising and then doing what is required. This might, for example, include writing some email responses, drafting documents, or compiling/using a spreadsheet. Come up with a rationale for what you’re going to do once you’ve assessed the situation (you might be asked about this afterwards).

## Presentations

* Either you’ll be given a title in advance, or you’ll be asked to create a presentation from a brief at the event.
* Check instructions that you’ve been given, such as time allowed, format, technology and audience.
* Structure your presentation with a beginning, middle and end.
* Give an overview of what you’re going to cover during your opening.
* Give a summary of what you’ve covered during your end stage. Offer to take questions at the end.
* Create clear, simple, concise visuals, with an appropriate font for the role.
* Plan for tech failure, for example, back-up files on a USB drive and/or paper copies.
* If you are preparing in advance, the assessors will expect you to know your content and presentation, so practice your presentation until you don’t need notes, then practice in front of friends/family.
* You can find useful further tips on [TargetJobs.co.uk.](https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/assessment-centres/275423-deliver-a-presentation-thats-worthy-of-a-graduate-job)

## Interviews and psychometric tests

* Read full advice on these areas in our *Interviews, Psychometric Tests* and *Sample Interview Questions and Techniques* information sheets, available at [reading.ac.uk/careers](https://www.reading.ac.uk/essentials/Careers/Applications-and-interviews/Compete-help-sheets)
* Practice to improve your timing, familiarity, and confidence – use our [Graduates First](https://www.graduatesfirst.com/) resource.

## Informal social events

* Be friendly but professional all the way through the event, from signing in at registration/logging on until you go home/log off. Do this even in the “informal” elements, like meals, or meetings with recent hires, as they are still a chance to make a good impression.
* Ask questions to, and chat with, employees and your fellow candidates. Many employers aim to recruit around half of the candidates they invite to an assessment centre, so there’s a good chance these might be future colleagues around you. Enjoy getting to know them!