

# **Assessment Centres**

**Including Second Interviews**

**Version 11.18**

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# Assessment Centres

## What happens in an assessment centre?

An Assessment Centre brings together a number of activities and tasks into one experience for an employer to assess your skills, behaviour and suitability for the job in question. It gives the employer a chance to see how you behave both individually, with other people and often in a group carrying out tasks similar to those that you could face in the role. They can last from an afternoon to two or more days, with an overnight stay, and can take place at the employer's site, in a hotel or at another central location.

Assessment centres are often unique to the employer but usually involve a variety of different activities from those outlined below. You will either be sent a programme before you attend or you will receive one when you arrive. Prepare for whatever you can in advance.

## What should I wear?

Dress as you would if you were attending an interview (smart, business dress), unless you have been told otherwise. If you have an overnight stay remember a change of clothes. Some organisations, particularly the emergency services and armed forces, will have physical exercises and so will tell you what to bring with you. The invitation letter usually has any additional details to ensure you pack everything that is required.

## How do I prepare?

Depending on how much preparation time you have, there are some key ways that you can prepare well and so enhance your performance on the day. The Careers Service website includes lots of tips and techniques for different assessment centre activities to help you. It also links off to other recommended sites for more tips and suggestions, including sites with feedback from other students who have attended a similar event. The Careers Service also has a folder of information where University of Manchester students have shared with us their own experiences of attending centres with different employers. This is very popular.

## Preparation Checklist

- How much do I know about the employer, what is important to them and how my skills and values fit into that?
- [www.acethecase.com](http://www.acethecase.com) Have I contacted anyone working in the organisation to find out more? (You could try connecting with people on LinkedIn?)
- Am I prepared for a second interview - clear about what I have to offer with examples I could use to demonstrate relevant skills?
- Do I know about positive group behaviours and what sort of things the employer is looking for in group tasks?
- Have I followed what is going on in the news in case I am asked to comment on this? In particular, what is this organisation doing or what is happening in the sector?
- Have I considered how I will introduce myself to others and any questions I could ask during social times?
- Have I thought of a presentation topic I could cover if I am asked to think of one on the spot?
- Have I read all the materials that have been sent to me – in particular any pre-reading – and thought about my views on this?
- Am I feeling confident in my abilities (you have done well to get to this stage) and keen to show my best qualities?

## More information about assessment centres

[www.careers.manchester.ac.uk/applicationsinterviews/assessmentcentres/](http://www.careers.manchester.ac.uk/applicationsinterviews/assessmentcentres/)

View sample assessment centre exercises with Graduate First (free access to Manchester students) - [www.graduatesfirst.com/university-career-services/manchester/](http://www.graduatesfirst.com/university-career-services/manchester/)

## How can I stand out on the day?

Your starting point should be the listed skills and qualities that the employer says they are looking for. This is usually on the job vacancy or the employer's website outlined as their core competencies or their values. They are also often the criteria that are used to assess your

performance in each activity. For example qualities like: influencing with integrity, use of initiative, respect for others, clear communication, problem solving are all commonly used. It's not usually about winning at a task or getting the answers right, it's more about how you got there, than where you got to.

## **What if it goes wrong on the day? – turning things around**

The assessment centre will usually have at least a couple of ways that it assesses a particular skill or quality, so if one exercise does not go well, you can usually compensate in another. You will usually have a second chance.

If you or the team face difficulties during the day, again, this can be a way to show your positive qualities depending on how you handle the situation. For example, are you calm under pressure? How do you handle tricky situations or over-assertive team members? Try to stay “in the moment” and not worry about your performance in an activity once it has passed. Speak up if you have lost your way in the group discussion, for example, and you will show you are taking control of the situation. Ask others for their contributions if the group is being dominated by one person and you will show your leadership skills. As long as you are polite and professional, and show respect for others you cannot usually do harm. Lastly, don't be put off and stop contributing. If you don't say what you are thinking you cannot be given positive marks for it.

## **Examples activities on the day**

### **Interviews (including second interviews)**

You could face your first interview at the assessment centre although more than likely you will have had a first round interview in person, on the telephone or as a recorded video interview, beforehand. If this is your first interview use our “Preparing for Interviews” booklet to help you.

Second round interviews may have more probing questions than the first round and could focus upon topics that the first interviewer highlighted as needing further exploration. Keep in mind the list of skills or competencies that the employer wants and what was questioned in earlier rounds. After the first interview, were there questions where you were not satisfied with your answers? - the subject may come up again. Have more examples ready for the relevant skills too.

You will probably be interviewed by a senior manager. They are likely to be an expert in the field of work that you have applied for so research the organisation well and the job area in question. Using professional body websites to keep in touch with current events, use journals, newspapers and watch the news daily. They may also want to focus on your reasoning for wanting to work for them and where you see your role progressing in the future.

You could face a panel of interviewers on the day. The tip here is to direct most of your answers to the person who asked you the question while acknowledging, with 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.

Above all, stay enthusiastic, positive and keep contributing.

### **Technical interviews**

'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 such as the process by which you came to your answer. 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 so remind yourself of the topics that you have covered.

**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 explain how to design an experiment to test an idea; for a finance related job, be prepared for questions on understanding what the role entails and current financial issues (in this case a thorough study of the financial press will be necessary).

**More information about interviews:**

[www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/interviews](http://www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/interviews)

Books covering different interview types and for different jobs are available in our Careers Service (The Atrium in University Place).

## **Group discussions**

These are often a key feature of an assessment centre and usually take the form of a team discussion or exercise with assessors observing from the edge of the room. Discussions are used to observe a variety of qualities in candidates including: motivation (how you take part), decisiveness, self-confidence, listening skills, effective communication, debating skills, use of logic, quick thinking, imagination, time management and speed in assimilating data.

Discussion topics could be:

- a work scenario related to the job area you are applying for
- an issue in the news lately
- a task related to a case study you have been asked to read

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

Organisations typically 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. 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.

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. Assessors are at least as interested in the quality of your thinking and presentation as your particular point of view. However, avoid the temptation to dominate the discussion, this will not help you.

Worried about the assessors observing you? – Once the discussion begins, you are likely to forget all about them.

### **Ways to make a positive contribution in group discussions:**

1. Keep your contributions to the point  
Your point is more likely to be understood and to have impact if you keep it reasonably short, focus on the key messages and present with confidence and enthusiasm.
2. Avoid interrupting others to make your contribution  
In some discussions it can be difficult to make a contribution, however, you could agree with / build on what others have said to help you get started.
3. Consider your non-verbal behaviour  
Use positive open body language throughout including active listening with eye contact, nods and smiles.



Both the **volume** and **tone** of your voice are also important - if you speak too quietly you will lose impact and be open to interruptions. When making a comment make eye contact with other members of the group, this enables you to gain their attention and 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. 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 suggestions above you stand a good chance of getting a reaction. If, however, no one reacts - then ask the group or an individual for their comments or responses.

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 discussion from progressing.

8. Not falling in with an apparent majority

You have a responsibility to make your doubts and disagreements known, particularly if you have all been given different information.

There are many positive ways to contribute to, and shape, a group discussion. Be yourself, stay engaged and keep contributing.

Here are a few positive group contributions -

## Group Building

<p>The Initiator</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ suggests new or different ideas for discussion</li><li>▪ proposes new or different approaches to problems</li></ul>	<p>The Clarifier</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ gives relevant examples</li><li>▪ probes for meaning and understanding of matters under discussion</li></ul>
<p>The Opinion Giver</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ shares pertinent points about what the group is considering and others' suggestions.</li></ul>	<p>The Tester</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ raises questions to "test out" whether group is ready to come to a decision</li></ul>
<p>The Elaborator</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ elaborates or builds on suggestions made by others</li></ul>	<p>The Summariser</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ tries to pull together or reviews the discussion content</li></ul>

## Group Maintenance

<p>The Gate Keeper</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ keeps communications open</li><li>▪ creates opportunities to encourage participation by others</li></ul>	<p>The Harmoniser</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ mediates difference of opinion</li><li>▪ reconciles points of view</li></ul>
<p>The Compromiser</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ does not stick stubbornly to a point of view but is willing to yield when necessary for the progress of the group</li></ul>	<p>The Encourager</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ praises and supports others in their contributions</li><li>▪ is friendly and supportive</li></ul>

### More information about group exercises

[www.assessmentday.co.uk/group-exercise.htm](http://www.assessmentday.co.uk/group-exercise.htm)

[www.targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/assessment-centres/275425-group-exercises-what-to-expect](http://www.targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/assessment-centres/275425-group-exercises-what-to-expect)

View sample group discussion exercises with Graduates First (free access to Manchester students) - [www.graduatesfirst.com/university-career-services/manchester/](http://www.graduatesfirst.com/university-career-services/manchester/)

## Case Studies

You may do a case study individually or as a group. Case studies usually involve you being given a number of documents based on a real life business situation. You will be asked to make a decision or recommend a course of action within a time limit. You may have to present your recommendations individually, in report form or as a group and/or discuss them in an interview.

You will always be given too much information to read properly in the time available so it's a good idea to skim read first, 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 – if appropriate, 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.

### **Case study interviews**

In a case study interview you may be asked 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 so:

- 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 information on case studies**

- [www.acethecase.com](http://www.acethecase.com)
- [www.job-interview-site.com/case-interview-examples-case-interview-questions.html](http://www.job-interview-site.com/case-interview-examples-case-interview-questions.html)
- [www.joinbain.com/apply-to-bain/interview-preparation/](http://www.joinbain.com/apply-to-bain/interview-preparation/)
- [www.bcg.com/careers](http://www.bcg.com/careers) - (search “case interviews”)

Books are available in the Careers Service (Atrium-University Place)

### **In-tray / e-tray exercises**

In-tray exercises are designed to simulate a situation that you may face as a manager on returning from a holiday or other absence. A pile of documents may be given to you - letters, phone messages, internal memos etc. E-tray versions of this exercise will consist of a series of emails which arrive on your screen for you to respond to. You may face a combination of the two. You will be asked to prioritise the documents in order of importance and/or write notes or emails with your suggested response to each situation. There will be a time limit for this task. Skills such as prioritising, decision making, delegating, seeing the bigger picture and communicating effectively in writing may all be assessed here.

Less commonly used, but also possible, are written pieces of work, such as a business letter or report summary in response to a piece of information.

### **Further information about in-tray/e-tray exercises**

- Link to a variety of in-tray/e-tray exercises from our Careers Service website

[www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/applicationsinterviews/assessmentcentres/](http://www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/applicationsinterviews/assessmentcentres/)

- Assessment day – sample e-tray exercise  
[www.assessmentday.co.uk/in-tray-exercise.htm#freeTests](http://www.assessmentday.co.uk/in-tray-exercise.htm#freeTests)

## **Presentations**

There are a few ways that you could be asked to present during an assessment centre, so it will help you to look at tips for effective presenting.

- You could be asked to give a short presentation on a topic of your choice or you may be given a topic in advance. Think ahead about what you would choose, just in case you are asked on the day. Rehearse what you want to say, preferably in front of a mirror, so that you get the timing right.
- You may be asked to introduce a little bit about yourself at the start of the day - you can also practise this in advance.
- As part of a case study you may be asked to present your recommendations. You could be presenting to a 'panel' of assessors and may be asked to answer questions on your recommendations.

### **Further information about presentations**

- Download our Presentation Skills handout from:  
[www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/applicationsinterviews/assessmentcentres](http://www.manchester.ac.uk/careers/applicationsinterviews/assessmentcentres/)
- Books are available in the Careers Service (Atrium-University Place)

## **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 member of staff facing an issue or causing problems.

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 (another reason why you should pay attention during these sessions), the observers will be looking for evidence of the core skills needed for this vacancy such as your interpersonal skills, customer focus and how well you think on your feet. Above all, listen and don't prejudge the situation.

## **Presentation by the employer and office/factory tour**

The assessment centre will often start with a short introductory presentation by the employer describing the organisation, their graduate scheme and their opportunities; this is sometimes followed by an office/factory tour. This section may not be formally assessed but staff will inevitably be forming impressions of the candidates, so look interested and ask questions where appropriate. You may want to build on what is said, or any questions you have asked in any interviews during the day. Asking questions around something that has been discussed, can help you to demonstrate your motivation and interest.

## **Social events**

You are likely to meet senior staff, graduate trainees and other candidates at informal events such as coffee breaks or dinners. Generally, you are not being formally assessed but you will be observed; assessors sometimes ask for the opinions of other staff who have met you on these occasions and that can also apply to staff you meet on arrival or on the tour (see above). These times are a good opportunity to learn about the company culture and the experiences of other staff who may be your future colleagues. If a partner or managing director is present, don't be afraid of talking to them – they have come in order to meet you. Try to think of questions that are not already answered on their website.

Consider how your behaviour will appear to the employer. If you are naturally shy make an effort to talk with people you meet. Stay enthusiastic yet professional at all times, particularly during any social events or evening entertainment.

## **Example Assessment Centres schedule**

There's no such thing as a standard assessment centre, but here is an example schedule of a one day event.

9.00	Arrival & Coffee
9.15	Self-introduction by candidates – name, degree, university
9.30	Introduction to the Company / 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 business task)
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)

### **When will I hear back?**

You may hear on the day or it could be a week or more. Some organisations, holding a number of 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?**

Employers are usually happy to offer feedback on your performance at an assessment centre. Be encouraged to get in touch and ask if it is not offered up-front. Students and graduates often find it invaluable for improving their performance.

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