

Assessment centres – best practice

This guide will provide you with tips and ideas to help you successfully plan an assessment centre as part of your recruitment process.

Definition

In terms of selecting people for jobs, assessment centres are one of the most effective ways to predict whether candidates are going to perform in the way you want them to do when they are in post.

Assessment centres do not have to be costly, resource intensive or complex. A simple assessment day made up of three different exercises such as an interview, a written exercise and a service user interaction exercise where candidates are seen by more than one interviewer or assessor is a more effective way of selecting candidates than relying on an interview alone.

Different assessment exercises

The table below outlines the strengths and limitations of different assessment exercises and tools which you could consider including in your assessment day.

Assessment tool	Strengths	Limitations
Values/behaviour/competency based interviews	Can provide good evidence for how candidates behave in real situations and what their values, attitudes and motivations are.	Requires skilled, trained interviewers to probe candidates' responses to questions and encourage participants to open up. Candidates need to be sent information in advance from the organisation to come prepared with examples to share.
Role plays	Useful way of assessing a candidate's social and communication skills, empathy and ability to influence others in job relevant situations.	Requires preparation and development time to ensure role plays are realistic and role players are well prepared and briefed. The response of the candidate will be affected by the role player's actions and behaviours which may not be standardised for every candidate.

<p>Group exercises</p>	<p>Can provide useful evidence of teamwork and ability to interact and communicate with others. Can also assess ability to flex their approach and style to others.</p>	<p>Group dynamics of a particular group of candidates can affect the performance of individuals.</p> <p>Requires a group of candidates to be assessed at the same time which may be resource intensive and assessors may find it difficult to record all that is said.</p>
<p>Written exercise</p>	<p>Can usefully assess written communication skills, analysis and problem solving.</p> <p>If using a real life example from the workplace can provide the candidate with a realistic preview of the job.</p>	<p>Failure to understand the task or an inability to produce written work under time pressure may result in written communication which appears below the standard required.</p> <p>Disability must be considered and reasonable adjustments made for candidates where required.</p> <p>Takes time to mark the written work.</p>
<p>In tray/ Prioritisation exercises</p>	<p>Can usefully assess a candidate's ability to plan and prioritise their time management and problem solving skills.</p> <p>If using a real life example from the workplace can provide the candidate with a realistic preview of the job.</p>	<p>Failure to understand the task or an inability to produce written work under time pressure may result in incomplete plans being drawn up.</p> <p>Disability must be considered and reasonable adjustments made for candidates where required.</p> <p>Takes time to mark the exercise.</p>
<p>Ability tests – Numerical reasoning or verbal Reasoning</p>	<p>A valid, standardised and well-structured way to test whether candidates have certain abilities that are required for the job.</p>	<p>May be expensive to administer and produce reports.</p> <p>Must be relevant to the role being recruited to avoid unfair discrimination.</p>
<p>Personality profiling psychometric tests</p>	<p>A valid, standardised and well-structured way to identify personality traits and types in different candidates. If the tests have been developed for and tested with roles relevant to the role you are recruiting for e.g. for Care Workers, the test can</p>	<p>Tests measure a candidate's preferences and should not be used to screen candidates out without asking further questions at interview to check the information within the psychometric against the role you are recruiting for.</p>

	allow you to compare candidates against a proven “ideal” candidate	
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Best practice when designing an assessment exercise

1. Before designing any assessment exercises look at the job description and person specification and think about what makes the difference between good and poor performance in the job. Then produce a set of criteria which you want to assess all candidates against. The British Psychological Society suggests an ideal number of criteria are between 6 and 12.

For example

- Organisational skills
 - Teamwork
 - Self-motivation and ability to work on own initiative
 - Flexibility in approach to others
 - Written communication
 - Verbal communication
2. Each of the criteria should be defined in terms of positive and negative indicators of what assessors would expect to see and not want to see candidates demonstrating for each exercise to enable them to fairly assess all candidates.

For example

Teamwork	
Positive Indicators	Negative Indicators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Listens to others point of view ▪ Shows understanding and empath for others point of view ▪ Brings other people in and involves them ▪ Is supportive of working with others to achieve an end goal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ignores others point of view ▪ Is dismissive of others point of view ▪ Leaves people isolated, does not involve them ▪ Works in a silo from others to achieve the end goal

3. Think about the requirements of the job and what the job involves to decide which assessment exercises are the most appropriate. For example, a written exercise is only appropriate if the role involves a significant amount of writing. A role play is appropriate if the role involves one on one conversations with clients, it is not appropriate for office based roles with no client interaction.

Design assessments exercises which are relevant to the job and which give candidates a realistic preview of the job but care must be taken to ensure these

do not disadvantage candidates who may have no previous experience of this type of work or require any prior knowledge.

Exercises can be designed in house which are inexpensive but require some internal expertise and experience in designing assessments. Or like psychometrics test they can be purchased from other organisations. This can be expensive and may mean that you are using exercises which are not an exact fit for your organisation but which are well developed and validated.

Example exercises for care worker posts

EXERCISE	EXAMPLE
<i>Group exercise</i>	<p>You are a group of care workers who have been asked by your organisation to attend a focus group to help the organisation to think about how it can better market itself as a place to work to people who may not have thought about applying to work for this organisation or thought about going into care work.</p> <p>Your manager has asked you as a group to come up with a list of reasons why you think people should come to work for this organisation and to come to work in care. And also to come up with a list of ideas for how they can better market themselves to potential recruits.</p> <p>You have 15 minutes for your discussion and to make notes on the flip chart provided and at the end of the discussion you are asked to hand in your written suggestions to the assessors.</p>
<i>Role play</i>	<p>You have been asked to meet with the son of one of the people you provide care to, Margaret Ward, as he is concerned that his mother is not getting everything she needs from her care package and he wants to discuss some ideas and concerns he has with you. You have been given a profile of Margaret and the care she has been receiving over the past 6 months.</p> <p>Your task is to meet with Margaret's son and to listen to and respond to his concerns.</p> <p>The meeting will last 10 minutes. There will be a role player acting as Margaret's son and an assessor in the room making notes who will not be contributing to the discussion.</p>
<i>Written exercise</i>	<p>One of the people you provide care for, John, is going to be moving into a care home in the next few weeks and you have been asked to provide a one page summary of his care needs and the service you have been providing him with over the</p>

	<p>past two years so that it can be sent to the care home with his file.</p> <p>You have been provided with several pieces of information about the work that you have been doing with John. Your task is to summarise this into a one page report which can be sent to his care home. You have 20 minutes to undertake this task.</p>
In tray	<p>You have been on holiday for two weeks and have come back to work to a backlog of work that you need to prioritise and then start to work through. You have been provided with a number of documents including emails, phone messages, reports and letters which relate to your work and people you are responsible for providing care to.</p> <p>Your task is to read through the different documents and to decide on which are the most and least urgent and how you will respond to each.</p> <p>You should complete the prioritisation plan you have been provided with starting with the most important priority and how you will deal with that and finishing with your least important priority and how you will deal with that. You have 20 minutes to complete the task.</p>

4. Think about how you will assess candidates against the criteria in each exercise. It is helpful to produce an assessment matrix so you know you are assessing each criterion at least twice in different exercises.

For example

Assessment criteria	Exercise		
	Interview	Written exercise	Role play
Organisational Skills	X	X	
Teamwork	X		X
Self-motivation/ initiative	X		X
Flexibility	X	X	
Verbal communication	X		X
Written communication		X	

5. Ensure all assessors have clear briefs for each exercise including what the candidates are required to do and what criteria they are assessing the candidates against. Where possible assessors should be trained or at least briefed in detail on what is required of them when assessing candidates. Assessors should not also be role players as it is difficult to focus on role playing and assessing at the same time.
6. A rating scale should be developed and applied consistently to each exercise to allow candidates performance to be compared across different exercises. The British Psychological Society recommends using a scale of between 5 and 7 points.

For example

Poor	Below Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Good	Excellent
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7. It is important to plan the logistics of the day in advance to ensure you have sufficient rooms available and staff available to assess candidates. It is helpful to do a timetable of the day for each candidate so they are aware what will be happening to them and the assessors are aware who they are seeing at different points in the day.

For example

Time	Exercise	Room/ Assessor
9.30am	Arrival and paperwork	JC, Room 3
9.45am	Interview – values and skills	KN & GT, Room 6
10.30am	Meet the clients exercise	LK, JH, ED, Room 4
11am	Written exercise	JC, Room 3
11.30am	Finish	

8. Details of the assessment day should be sent to candidates in advance with any information they need to prepare for the assessments if relevant. Candidates should also be asked if they have any requirement for reasonable adjustments to be made to the assessment day in order to enable them to participate fully.
9. Where possible any exercises should be piloted and tested before being used with real candidates such as by getting existing staff to try out the exercises. Once any amendments have been made the exercises should be finalised and

copies of all exercises and how they are assessed should be kept in a central place in the organisation to ensure consistency of use.

Further guidance

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) www.cipd.co.uk

British Psychological Society www.bps.org.uk