

How to demonstrate your skills at Assessment Centres

This handout explains some of the graduate level skills, or 'competencies', which are often tested through assessment centres. The first part describes the complex nature of these skills and some of the techniques you can use to demonstrate them when attending assessments.

Remember, there are many different competencies that employers seek and no publication can cover them all. This handout covers many of the most commonly-sought competencies and will help you think about how to display the skills that your chosen employer is seeking.

The second part of the handout lists some of the 'Indicators' that assessors look for when observing candidates to explain how you will be assessed, and help you understand the key traits you need to show.

Graduate-level skills

1. Verbal communication: aim for *clear – unambiguous – appropriate*

Your ability to speak clearly, concisely and appropriately to an audience is assessed through everything you do at an assessment centre. Social interaction, interviews, role play / group exercises and presentations all demonstrate your verbal ability and whether you can adapt it to different purposes.

Speech communicates information but also shows your reactions, opinions and emotions through tone of voice; the emphasis you place on words; the formality or otherwise of the language you use; and humour, tempo, and pronunciation.

Listening is also an essential part of verbal communication. Assessors want you to listen effectively, so make sure you have heard and understood what the speaker is saying, both through their words *and* the non-verbal clues they give.

In group exercises where you are usually aiming to make a decision or come to a consensus, things may become heated so a calm approach free of emotive language can help keep you and the group focussed. It should go without saying, but you should be courteous and considerate in all exchanges.

Tips: This is a lot to think about so don't even try to address everything about your communication style. Instead, in the run up to an assessment centre monitor how you use your communication skills and whether there is room for a little improvement.

How you feedback to others in an exercise needs to be tempered with sensitivity. Use a 'feedback sandwich' approach; i.e. start with a positive comment about your colleague(s) before mentioning any weaker aspects. Then conclude with a constructive statement.

2. Written communication: aim for *clarity – precision – brevity*

As a university student you should be a competent writer but exercises may require your 'answer' in the form of a report or summary and this may be unfamiliar to you. In any exercise, your writing skills as well as your solution and rationale will be assessed. As with verbal communication, your style needs to be suitable for the purpose; a report will be more structured than an informal summary of key points.

If you need to brush up on how to structure letters or reports; the Careers Service has resources to help you.

Tips: If you are weak when it comes to spelling or grammar brush up in advance. Sloppy mistakes undermine your credibility.

Readers value clarity, precision and brevity – don't distract them from your solutions by waffling or rambling. Keep to the issues, have a logical structure, avoid ambiguity and use plain English.

3. Presentation skills: aim to *prepare – keep it simple - rehearse*

You will probably be asked to make a presentation at some stage. You may be given a topic before or during the assessment centre or told to choose your own. You may have to present your conclusions from an exercise and could be presenting on behalf of others or on your own account.

Many of us are apprehensive when it comes to presentations but the basic principles will get you through. Preparation is vital whether you have had five weeks' or five minutes' notice. Think about why you are making this presentation; the audience and their level of understanding of the topic; your priorities and objectives; and the structure you will use. At its simplest you would have:

- An introduction: explain what you are going to do and what you will cover
- The core: provide information and develop your theme or argument with evidence and your rationale
- A conclusion: summarise what you have said and ask for questions

If you are inexperienced then the golden rule is to keep it simple and don't be too ambitious especially as you will have just a few minutes to present. If you can choose a topic, go for one you are familiar with rather than one to impress.

Tips: Make simple prompt notes to keep you focussed. Do not read from notes and never write out every word and then read it out – it usually kills a presentation stone dead.

Keep visual aids simple - don't get too ambitious with the technology. If you use slides or flip chart visuals keep to no more than six points per slide and six words to each point – less can more in this case.

If you have the time, rehearse out loud – what sounds good in your head sometimes comes across quite differently when spoken.

Publications available in the Careers Service offer more help with presentations.

4. Analytical thinking: aim to *understand – generate - decide*

In all activities you will need to draw on your analytical skills to identify goals and constraints and to understand information quickly and accurately with an appreciation of the variables affecting the situation. However, some assessment centre exercises such as Case Studies are specifically designed to test your analytical thinking by giving you a business situation to evaluate. See the Careers Service handout for more on 'Case Study Interviews'.

Tip: A recommended approach is to think in a logical and objective way about the problem and generate ideas about possible solutions. Next, evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the different solutions you have identified. This will help you make a decision about what action to take and how to go about it, whilst being aware of the effect and implications of your decision.

Using this framework of 'understand, generate and decide' will help you explain the process you took, and the conclusions you reached in assessment centre exercises.

5. Group or teamwork: aim to *contribute – collaborate - consider*

Groups have to work together to achieve an objective and assessment activities test how well you establish working relationships and contribute to your team. Assessors are looking for evidence of whether you have an open attitude, and are sensitive to the needs and feelings of others, and encouraged them to contribute. They will also note how you deal with criticism or rejection, your level of self-confidence, how you come across and how much you contribute. If emotions run high it is important to remain calm and objective and even to show you can defuse a delicate situation whilst keeping others' confidence intact.

Tips: Your own experience of working in groups will have examples of good and not so good 'teams'. Reflect on what makes a team work well or what works against them.

Some specialist roles may arise as the timekeeper or note taker, so be ready to take on responsibilities in the group. Running out of time, or not adequately recording the key points, are both common weaknesses in groups' performances at assessment centres.

The only guaranteed way to fail in these exercises is to make little or no contribution, or to try and dominate the group.

6. Interpersonal awareness: aim for *interest – respect - support*

Interpersonal awareness is a broad term which covers how you get on with others. In a work setting you will relate easily to some people whilst others may be harder going. Your interpersonal skills and awareness should help you establish good relationships with everyone regardless of their personality, position in the

organisation or relationship to your role. Your ability to develop a rapport, establish credibility and treat others with respect will be observed throughout most of an assessment centre.

Tips: Being *interested* in others is often a way to come across as *interesting* so don't be afraid to ask your fellow candidates or hosts what they do, what they enjoy and what is important to them.

Be co-operative, helpful and supportive throughout the assessment centre. You may not always agree with the views or attitudes expressed but respect the right of others to be different and remember that you might have something to learn from them.

7. Planning and organising: aim to *take responsibility – set objectives – meet deadlines*

Good time management underpins many activities. You take responsibility for what you do through setting your objectives, utilising resources and anticipating difficulties to ensure that you complete your task. Just about all assessment exercises are timed so you must plan how you allocate that time to make sure you cover all the tasks. In 'real' life we often work in a more elastic way but in an assessment centre you just need to be in control.

Tips: Spend a little time at the start of each exercise to form a basic plan of what you are trying to do, the steps you need to take and how much time you can allocate for each element. This will keep you focused and in control.

Sometimes a complication may arise; e.g. time might be reduced or an extra issue added to see how you cope with this. Don't be thrown, just incorporate the new information into your original plan. You may be able to make a simple adjustment or revise your approach. If you are running late then note significant points in bullet point form so the essence of your proposal comes across.

8. Leadership: aim to *communicate – facilitate – motivate*

At this stage the assessors are not expecting to see someone who could step straight in to a leadership role with confidence but they are looking for positive indicators and development potential. If a group exercise is designed to test your leadership qualities, you may be assigned or take on a particular role which puts you in a leadership position.

Leadership usually involves:

- Setting objectives and targets for groups
- Delegating/ negotiating responsibilities
- Encouraging communication /co-operation
- Utilising the strengths of individuals and supporting them
- Motivating team members
- Checking on progress
- Creating a good working environment
- Dealing with any intra-group problems that come up

Tips: A good leader does not tell everyone what to do, or have all the answers, so don't attempt to take all the responsibility. Instead establish what needs to be done and invite team members to contribute. Bear in mind that you will need to provide direction when decisions need to be made.

Before an assessment centre think about strategies for how you can do some of the above. What phrases could you use when directing and encouraging a team?

Think about people you see as good leaders; perhaps someone you have worked for or collaborated with in extracurricular activities. What did they do that made the team successful? Why did you enjoy working for them?

Verbal and numerical reasoning, and other aptitudes: taking Psychometric Tests

Psychometric Tests can crop up at any stage in a selection process including at an assessment centre. They are within your capability but familiarising yourself with them will help you when you take the real thing. There are many resources in the Careers Service, plus many online practice tests on the internet. Our 'Profiling for Success' practice tests are available through the Careers tab in MUSE or via the Careers Service website.

Positive and Negative Indicators of skills

During assessment centre activities, recruiters look for and record observable 'indicators' of candidates' abilities. The table below summarises some of the behaviours that are seen as positive or negative indicators of competencies. Understanding these will help you concentrate on demonstrating the preferred traits.

Positive/Effective	Negative/Less Effective
1 - Verbal Communication Speaks clearly Speaks at an appropriate pace Keeps to the point Uses straightforward language Listens actively, giving good eye contact	Mumbles Speaks quickly Verbose Uses jargon inappropriately Sounds hesitant
2 – Written Communication Style and vocabulary appropriate to the situation Arguments/decisions presented clearly Logical structure and flow	Inappropriate tone Key points or decisions not clear Uses no, or inappropriate structure
3 – Presentations Uses visual aids as appropriate Keeps eye contact with the whole audience Projects voice Invites audience participation Uses appropriate structure with an introduction and summary	Uses visual aids as a script Over-uses visual aids Looks away or only at certain members of the audience Cannot be heard clearly by all the audience One-way communication Has no introduction or summary
4 – Analytical Thinking Spots inferences in arguments Distinguishes information relevant to the task Keeps the overall objective in mind Considers both the benefits and risks of a particular course of action Makes links to spot trends in diverse information	Makes inappropriate assumptions Introduces information not relevant to the task Focuses on less critical details Acts on suggestions without analysing advantages/disadvantages Considers information in isolation
5 – Teamwork Supportive of others and their ideas Active listener – shows they have heard what others say Encourages others Volunteers for tasks within the team Helps move the group forward to achieve a common goal	Fails to get involved Contributions are limited or don't add to what's been said Persists with ideas that the group has rejected Criticises others
6 – Interpersonal awareness Assertive when faced with difficulty or differences Non-verbally: leans forward, keeps eye contact Verbally: calm level tone, states clearly what s/he wants or thinks Listens actively Asks others to contribute Summarises others' contributions Builds on the suggestions of others	Aggressive when faced with differences Cuts others out of the process e.g. sarcastic Blocks others' proposals Passive when faced with differences Non-verbally: e.g. avoids eye contact Verbally: e.g. sounds hesitant

<p>7 – Planning and Organising Takes time to react when faced with difficulties or changes Suggests an informal plan Monitors time regularly Accurately completes tasks on time Distinguishes between important and urgent tasks</p>	<p>Presses on with an initial plan regardless of difficulties Moves to the task with no attempt to plan Does not mention time Fails to complete tasks to time and standard Defines urgent tasks as important</p>
<p>8 – Leadership Involves others as appropriate, e.g. by asking for ideas and information Allocates tasks appropriately by setting standards/guidelines for allocated tasks and follows up by checking progress Acts decisively when appropriate and backs up with reasons (e.g. time pressure) Keeps the overview (e.g. overall objective, time) Allows others to work out solutions as appropriate</p>	<p>Takes over unnecessarily, e.g. imposes own ideas Allocates tasks with no follow up Hesitant; directions are unclear or not made at the appropriate time Excessively 'hands on', e.g. gets involved in unnecessary detail Takes decisions without reference to or confirmation from others</p>

Based on 'A Practical Guide to Assessment Centres and Selection Methods' by Ian Taylor publisher Kogan Page © Ian Taylor, 2007.

Further help

For a summary of the main types of exercises used at Assessment Centres and other resources to help with assessment centres, see the Careers Service Briefing Sheets on 'Interviews and Assessment Centres' and 'Psychometric Tests', available to download from the relevant sections at www.sheffield.ac.uk/careers/students/gettingajob or from the Careers Service

Note: The Careers Service does not produce its own details of different published assessment tests, as these are suitably explained elsewhere. We recommend Wikijobs www.wikijob.co.uk or the descriptions and advice provided on the GraduatesFirst website www.graduatesfirst.com