

# In-Tray and E-Tray Exercises

In-Tray or E-Tray exercises are often used by employers at their assessment centres. They simulate what happens in business by requiring candidates to respond to information such as messages, emails and reports and identify any necessary actions.

## What form will the exercise take?

The term 'in-tray' refers to the tray on an individual's desk where reports, correspondence and messages might be placed, similar to an email 'in-box'. In-Tray exercises present you with various items of written information and involve reading these and deciding what action to take. E-Tray exercises are similar but are presented online in the form of incoming emails.

At the start of the assessment you are likely to be given a 'candidate brief' which defines the context of the activity (usually a work-based scenario) and your role. You then have to read the various items of information, analyse the issues they refer to, and decide what action to take. You will need to prioritise which matters require immediate attention, and be able to select from competing demands or conflicting information. Different pieces of information will sometimes relate to the same topic and often new information will arrive during the exercise, e.g. further emails will come in requiring your attention. The exercises are delivered under supervised conditions and test your flexibility, planning and decision-making skills, as well as time management.

## So what are the selectors looking for?

Those assessing the exercise will not normally assume that you have a *detailed* understanding of their organisation's management structure or knowledge of technical matters such as accounting procedures, or relevant legal requirements, etc. Instead the exercise is intended to test whether you demonstrate the competencies the employer is looking for and apply some important general skills such as:

- Verbal reasoning skills - can you understand the documents and pay attention to detail in order to identify the key issues?
- Sensitivity and 'common sense' - can you spot things which are likely to develop into sources of disagreement or controversy?
- Problem-solving skills – do you think logically and identify practical steps to resolve typical work-based problems?
- Ability to prioritise - can you distinguish between things which are urgent and/or important, and things which can wait?
- Confidence and assertiveness - if somebody senior to you makes unreasonable demands, are you willing to question these and/or suggest alternative, more efficient ways to get something done?
- Ability to delegate appropriately - can you recognise which tasks are suitable for the role you are given? Can you pass some to other staff to deal with and do you involve senior colleagues when necessary?

## Useful tips

### Read carefully

Wait until you have read everything before responding but note down your initial thoughts as you read each item. Information will be expressed in different styles, and may contain nuances or be incomplete. Try to appreciate the different viewpoints expressed so you build up a picture of the factors involved. Watch for details such as dates and times, so you are not spending time dealing with out-of-date issues.



## **Prioritise**

It is often helpful to create three groups of information, based on their relative importance, e.g. Important, Less Important, and Non-urgent. Once you have done this, you can work through each pile, deciding the order for completion but remember to look for links between the different items and take account of these.

## **Be familiar with the 'competencies' the employer is seeking**

It is important to remember that the exercise will measure how far you possess the qualities the employer is looking for and the values of the organisation, e.g. independent working/problem-solving/high-quality customer service etc. Knowing these can help you decide on the appropriate actions to take when considering the situations presented in the exercise.

## **Decision-making**

You will need to analyse the issues arising from the information and make decisions about what to do. To do this, evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the different actions you could take. As you may have to explain your decisions, e.g. in a de-brief or interview with a selector, make notes about all the important factors that you took into account when arriving at your decision, such as key individuals and their needs, diary commitments, resource issues etc. Remember, there will not necessarily be a 'right' answer – you just need to be able to talk through your thinking and give your reasons for the steps you decided to take.

## **Written Communication**

If you are required to produce a record of your recommended actions or to write emails as part of the exercise, aim to use clear, unambiguous and easy to understand language. Write in concise statements rather than lengthy prose. If you are required to handwrite anything, be careful to write legibly.

## **Time Management**

Make sure you know how long the exercise will last and divide your time accordingly between the tasks. Read quickly through every item first *before* starting to take action, but do not spend too long reading the content. Keep a check on the time as you proceed so you do not fail to complete the exercise. Keep calm and be methodical in your approach. Part of the assessment criteria could be to see how well-organised you are.

## **Further help**

**Online DVD:** 'In-tray exercise'. See the list of 'Videos' at [www.shef.ac.uk/careers/students/gettingajob/assessment](http://www.shef.ac.uk/careers/students/gettingajob/assessment)

### **Example In-Tray exercises:**

**Assessment Day** Practice E-Tray Exercises and advice [www.assessmentday.co.uk/in-tray-exercise.htm](http://www.assessmentday.co.uk/in-tray-exercise.htm) and [www.assessmentday.co.uk/free/e-tray/EtrayExerciseFree-Questions.pdf](http://www.assessmentday.co.uk/free/e-tray/EtrayExerciseFree-Questions.pdf)

**The Civil Service Fast Stream** uses an E-Tray exercise in their selection process and provides a timed online example ( 35 minutes to complete) [www.cubiksonline.com/Cubiks/Etray3/Instructions/ShowInstructionsForEtray](http://www.cubiksonline.com/Cubiks/Etray3/Instructions/ShowInstructionsForEtray) (NB: the exercise does not run in Google Chrome. You can use Internet Explorer, Firefox or Safari, and you will be prompted to download Microsoft Silverlight if your computer does not have this software).

**Inside Careers** Sample In-Tray test and solutions [www.insidecareers.co.uk/career-advice/in-tray-exercises](http://www.insidecareers.co.uk/career-advice/in-tray-exercises)

**Job Test Prep** has a free In-Tray exercise at [www.jobtestprep.co.uk/free-in-tray-exercise](http://www.jobtestprep.co.uk/free-in-tray-exercise), plus general advice and a priced practice test at [www.jobtestprep.co.uk/in-tray-exercise](http://www.jobtestprep.co.uk/in-tray-exercise)

**Note:** The above websites are listed as a source of free advice and opportunities to practice assessment tests. The Careers Service does not necessarily endorse external sites and inclusion of these should not be taken as a recommendation about the quality of the content. A number of graduate careers websites also have priced example in-tray tests. We advise you to try and get feedback from other users, or look for reviews of these products, before deciding whether to purchase practice tests online.