



The  
Careers  
Service.



# Handout

## 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 deal with information such as messages, emails and reports and identify the actions needed to be taken.

### What form will the exercise take?

The term 'in-tray' refers to the tray on an individual's desk where reports, correspondence and messages are 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.

At the start of the assessment you are likely to be given a 'candidate brief' which defines the context of the activity and your role. You then have to read the various items of information, and identify the tasks involved, plus the action you decide to take. You will need to prioritise which ones 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. another set of 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 marking the exercise will not normally assume that you have a detailed understanding of their organisation's management structure or any knowledge of technical matters, such as accounting procedures or relevant legal matters, etcetera. Instead the exercise is intended to test whether you have:

- Basic verbal reasoning skills - can you understand the documents and identify the key points?
- Sensitivity and 'common sense' - can you spot things which are likely to develop into sources of major conflict or controversy?
- Ability to prioritise - can you distinguish between things which are urgent and things which can wait?
- Confidence and assertiveness - if somebody senior to you makes unreasonable suggestions or demands are you willing to question them?
- Ability to delegate appropriately- can you recognise the sorts of tasks that can safely be passed on to more junior staff?

### 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 issues involved. Watch for details such as dates and times, so you are not dealing with out-of-date information.

#### Prioritising

It is often helpful to create 3 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 an order for completion but remember to look for any links between the different items and to take account of these.

## **Decision-making**

You will need to analyse the various issues and make choices about what to do. To do this, evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the different possible actions you could take. This will help you make a decision about what action to take. Remember, you may have to explain your choices during the exercise or later, perhaps in a de-brief to the exercise or in your interview. There will not necessarily be a 'right' answer – you just need to be able to talk them through your thinking process and explain your reasons.

## **Written Communication**

If you are required to record your recommended actions, aim to write using clear and easy to understand language. Use concise notes rather than lengthy prose. Be careful to write legibly if you are required to handwrite your recommendations.

## **Time Management**

Clarify the amount of time allocated to the exercise and divide your time accordingly across the tasks. Do not spend too long on reading all of the content and keep a check on the time as you proceed so you do not run out of time.

## **Example In-Tray exercise**

Assessment Day: Practice Aptitude Tests

<http://www.assessmentday.co.uk/example-in-tray-assessmentday.pdf>

*Please be aware that this is a difficult exercise in comparison to most.*

Further advice and information can be found on Wikijobs [www.wikijob.co.uk](http://www.wikijob.co.uk) and on the GraduatesFirst website [www.graduatesfirst.com](http://www.graduatesfirst.com)