

Information Guide No. 11

Assessment Centres

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1. Introduction

With increased concerns over the cost of recruitment and the cost of poor performance, many large companies are investing more money on the selection process, especially in the area of Assessment Centres.

Results show that about 75% of candidates selected by an assessment centre perform as well as expected whereas about 25% of candidates selected by interviews alone do as well as expected. Obviously these centres have been highly productive.

2. Assessment Centre Process

The method consists of putting individuals through exercises related to the job to see how they perform and reveal each individual's true "style".

Typically this will take at least a full day consisting of:

1. A personality questionnaire which will help answer any questions such as: What is the person like? Are they a natural leader? Do they prefer to work on their own or in a team? Will they be easy to manage? Do they have sales potential? What is their approach to people and tasks? How will they react to stress?

These questions give an indication of how people behave. They are not incredibly accurate. The best approach to them is to answer them as honestly as possible – it is usually fairly easy to spot biased responses – think about what you are like on a good day when things are going well, how do you behave most of the time in these circumstances.

2. Ability Tests to give an indication of the candidate's ability to handle data e.g. verbal and numerical tests, or to look for specific aptitudes such as mechanical skills and suitability for such roles such as computer programmer.

It is possible to get books and magazines of tests and puzzles in order to practice. It is especially important to develop the technique of working quickly and accurately. In most ability tests there is no time to double check questions – it is always faster to get the next few marks than check that you had the last few right.

3. Exercises to test the written communication skills of candidates, their ability to prioritise tasks and make decisions logically and with common sense. These often come in the form of in-tray exercises where each candidate is given a bundle of papers(of the type they would find in their tray if they got the job) and asked to sort them out; prioritise the items and write a report on what they would do and why.

With selection days for trainers and managers it is common to ask them to make a presentation to show communication skills, the ability to put their case logically and take questions from a critical audience.

Sometimes the topic will be given some days before the selection day and some on the day itself. This sort of exercise will also indicate the level of skill in using visual aids and collecting and presenting data.

4. Biographical interviews may be used to test how consistent a person's career has been and how they have made important choices in their lives, what their goals are and where their motivation comes from. These are characterized by questions about key decision points, O-Level and A-Level choices, leaving school or university, choosing jobs etc., e.g. How did you choose a career? Why did you decide not to go for promotion?
5. Operational Interviews may be used to determine the level of technical skill possessed by candidates, their ability to think on their feet and present logical arguments, their ability to generate workable solutions to problems and see the strategic picture. These are characterized by technical and theoretical questions e.g.:-
 - How would you go about setting up a customer database?
 - If you were the Chief Executive of Bournemouth Borough Council and received news that a tanker had beached near the pier spewing out poisonous fumes that would blanket the whole town in 4hrs time, what would you do about it?
6. Group exercises to show how people react in a situation where they debate the key issues or where they are expected to persuade others to their point of view. Do they fight their corner firmly but fairly? Do they listen to others and build on the best ideas? Do they take the lead or follow?

Are they polite and assertive? Do they make process suggestions to help the meeting progress? Do they address the people issues within the meeting? Do they give in to group pressure? Do they take the first suggestion made and work with that or consider a range of possibilities. Do they communicate confidently in a group? Typically 4 to 8 people in a group.

7. Leadership exercises, sometimes outdoors, are often used to show the different styles a person uses to lead a group and the way they react to the leadership of others. These may involve moving barrels and people over a real or imaginary obstacles requiring some vigilance for the safety of participants and a balancing of task and people issues. Alternatively, it may be an indoor task e.g. making a Lego tower, can individuals show leadership qualities or contribute constructively to the meeting?