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# **Unit 7a: Assessment Centres**

## **Performing well at an assessment centre**

After completing this unit you will be able to:

- i) understand what an assessment centre is
- ii) list and describe some of the activities used in assessment centres
- iii) prepare for these activities so as to present yourself in the best possible way

**The Job Winners<sup>®</sup> Guide for  
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## Performing well at an Assessment Centre

Many people will go through their careers without having to face the rigours of an assessment centre as part of their job application program. However, according to *Graduate Grapevine*, the e-newsletter of Graduate Careers Australia, university students are 'almost guaranteed to experience an assessment centre at some stage during the graduate job hunt'<sup>1</sup>. This is especially true if they are seeking graduate positions with employer organisations such as government departments and large corporations that recruit for many positions at the same time.

## What is an assessment centre?

An assessment centre is a process, not a place: it is a highly structured process in which several candidates are assessed simultaneously. It can take place in a large room or public hall or conference centre hired for the purpose. The process may be conducted by the employer organisation's HR staff or by outside consultants. It may well take a whole day, sometimes even longer, and it can include up to half a dozen different tasks including structured interviews, group discussions or problem solving exercises, role plays, analysis and presentation tasks, written case studies, ability tests and personality measures.

While many of these activities are significantly different to a traditional interview, the principles for success, and much of the preparation, are the same. Employers are still looking for the same three qualities, skills, motivation and team (SMT). In fact, some of the activities are specifically assessing the candidates' ability to perform in a team. Someone could be very skilful in a certain area but, if they can't work in a team, it is unlikely they will ever achieve their potential. Make sure that, in any group activities, you demonstrate teamwork.

Trained assessors may be visibly present at these activities or they may be invisible, assessing your performance on CCTV or a video recording. Whether they are visible or not, know that you are being assessed from the moment you enter the venue until you leave to go home. You may be watched as you park your car and walk across the car park. You will also be assessed during coffee breaks and pre-dinner drinks if the assessment requires an overnight stay.

It sounds very 'big brother' but in reality, if you just behave in a natural, friendly way, you will show your true colours and, as long as those colours are the ones the employers are looking for, you'll be well considered in the selection process.

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<sup>1</sup> "Assessment Centres: Maximising Applicant Success" by Naomi McQuaid, Talent and Leadership Consultant, Victorian Leadership Development Centre, in the issue of Thursday, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2010.

The setting for these questionnaires is likely to be similar to that for psychometric testing. Don't let the exam like atmosphere unnerve you. Be yourself and answer the way you truly feel.

### Individual interviews

Be prepared for a structured, behavioural interview, not so much with HR staff but more likely with a prospective line manager, someone who may be supervising you if you win the position. Questions are likely to be of the 'what-would-you-do-if...' sort. Prepare well beforehand using the techniques outlined in Unit 7. One difference between this interview and those you may have had previously with recruitment and HR staff is that this time the interviewer will really know the nuts-and-bolts of the job and this is where the quality of your research into the position will have its greatest impact. Therefore, make sure that you do research the position and the organisation thoroughly, so thoroughly that you can properly plan your first few weeks in the job.

### Social activities

Ah, coffee break! What a relief to get out of that stressful assessment environment. Wait! You are not out of it yet. The assessors are also having their morning cups of coffee and you are still being watched and assessed. How you behave when slightly more relaxed is an important indicator of your true personality and the assessors are keen to see it. So be careful. Certainly be yourself but don't let your hair down too much. Behave as you would if you were working in the organisation and you were enjoying a coffee break during a company seminar.

## How to prepare for an assessment centre

Preparation for an assessment centre is similar to preparation for an interview. However, because the assessment centre process is longer and more thorough, so too must be your preparation. Extensive research into the organisation, its business objectives, its work practices etc will be especially important in activities such as the in-tray exercise, group discussions and role-play tasks. A behavioural interview requires considerable preparation of achievement statements, especially those of the SAO type and a well rehearsed Key Skills Statement will get the process off to a good start in the introductory session.

Practising group activities such as building the tower can help as long as you focus on the teamwork aspect of it - it will be the teamwork part that is most likely to get you the tick from the assessors, although some creative problem-solving will be an advantage.

The assessment centre process makes most people anxious so implement all the strategies for building and maintaining a positive self-image in Unit 6.

Above all, be yourself. Assessment centres are used because they are generally considered to be more able to accurately and reliably predict future performance than other methods of selection. This means that if you show yourself to be right for the job, the job is probably equally right for you. As long as you present yourself well, you are likely to be in with a good chance providing that the job is indeed right for you. If you present yourself well and yet you are not offered a position, it may be because the

job is not what you thought it was. It is possible that the priorities or corporate culture of that particular organisation would not suit your personality or your values and this has been noticed by the selectors and this could be, in fact, a benefit to you. If you get the job and then find that it clashes with your personality type or your values, you are likely to become stressed fairly soon and so stall your career at this very early stage.

When you get the job, it should be a win-win situation. If you don't get it, this may be a blessing in disguise. Move on and find another position that may suit you better and provide a better launch-pad for your career.