



Assessment Centres

Assessment centres offer a chance for you to show your current ability, experience and potential so that the employer can find out if the role and organisation offer a good match for you.

Organisations use assessment centre activities because they offer a much better method of testing capabilities and potential than relying simply on an application form and interview alone. They highlight the difference between those who say they can do something and those who actually do have the skills and ability.

Assessment centres also help candidates as they give you an excellent opportunity to make sure that you are comfortable with your target organisation and role. In addition, they offer you the chance to learn more about yourself in the context of work and your intended career direction and are increasingly being seen by employers in this way rather than just as a competitive selection environment so that all candidates, not just those selected, gain effectively from the process.

➤ What are assessment centres?

They consist of a series of formal and informal exercises and settings designed to see how you perform in relation to an organisation's candidate profile/competency needs. Employers will test for key skills, behaviours, attitudes and values related to the role you are seeking, with each exercise typically lasting up to 2 hours.

Usually, assessment centres take between one to two days and usually occur as the final selection stage, but they can also take place at other points in the selection process. They usually take place either at the organisation's offices or training centre, or in a local hotel or conference centre.

Sessions are normally run by representatives from the employer, though sometimes, employers will use external agencies to run assessment centres for them and will only become involved in the process at final interview stage.

➤ Who will be there?

You can expect to be one of between 6 and 12 candidates, though there may be several sets of candidates going through the same process at the same time.

In addition to other candidates, you may meet three types of people:

- assessors, who have been carefully trained and are experienced in this role and are usually staff from the recruiting organisation;
- centre managers, again usually staff, who host the event, making sure you are clear about exercises, activities and what is expected of you; and
- role players, who are sometimes other staff or may even be actors who will take particular roles within activities eg unhappy customers.

There will normally be around 4 assessors for every 6 to 8 candidates.

➤ What does an assessment centre timetable look like?

Here is a typical timetable for a 2 day selection process:

Day 1

AM	Introductions - chance to meet fellow candidates and assessors Overview of the event Ice breaker exercise (designed to settle candidate nerves and help candidates get to know each other - this typically involves some form of game/exercise) Aptitude/personality tests LUNCH
PM	Group exercise (problem solving) Individual interviews
Evening	Company and product presentations/ tour Dinner Informal social activity and opportunity to meet recent graduates and other staff

Day 2

AM	Group case study and discussion exercise/group role play Individual in-tray exercises/work simulation exercise LUNCH
PM	Individual presentations Individual interviews Final address - group session; questions and answers Depart

➤ What will I be expected to do?

Typical activities will cover a mix of paper based and interactive activities designed to replicate the job and to test for key attributes. Tests will have been created in such a way that they offer a level playing field to all candidates regardless of your background or experience. Typical activities cover:

1 Paper based tests

These include case study/business case exercises where you will be presented with multiple documents about a situation. You will need to analyse the information and then make recommendations based on what you have identified. This sort of exercise enables employers to test your ability to analyse information and reach a decision. You will need to explain your approach and the reason for your recommendation.

2 In-tray/e-tray and planning exercises

These types of activities are work simulation exercises which require you to prioritise conflicting, often urgent, tasks and are designed to test your analysis, planning and time management skills. Typically you will be given either a real stack of papers, an inbox of a wide range of emails, or a mix of the two containing a range of items from messages and memos to papers and documents. The aim of the exercise is to produce an action plan showing in which order you would deal with these items and why. This type of exercise tests your management, decision making and organisational skills and gives employers a chance to see how you work under pressure.

If you are studying a more hands on subject such as computing, this element may be replaced by a test of practical skills; for instance an employer may ask you to write some software code to test your ability.

3 Psychometric and emotional intelligence tests

These types of tests give the recruiter a view of:

- how you process cognitively (how you think, approach problems and your preferred method of working);
- your emotional resilience (showing adaptability and how you cope with setbacks);
- your interpersonal sensitivity (how you show empathy and respect for others);
- your ability to influence and persuade;
- your level of intuition, consciousness and integrity

They fall into three different groups:

Aptitude - including verbal, logic, special, diagrammatic and numeric reasoning

Personality - such as MBTI (Myers Briggs Type Indicator) to test what you are like, including characteristics and qualities.

Motivational and Career Interest tests such as MPVI (Meta Programmes Values Inventory)

Tests can either be paper based or screen based depending on the test.

4 Interactive exercises

Employers often make use of one to one role play or group exercises to explore work related issues. These exercises may involve having a verbal briefing or series of briefing documents to read beforehand. You will be assessed either through the exercise or afterwards if you have to produce a written document. You may find that for instance, if you are applying for a role which is customer focused, you have to deal with a dissatisfied important customer and then prepare a report for management; or the exercise may involve putting together a sales and marketing strategy for a new product which you have to select from a number of opportunities. You may be asked to take part in group discussions on topics which may or may not relate to the role or sector you are interested in.

You may also be expected to take part in team based problem solving exercises such as designing a solution to move a golf ball using only straws and paper clips. Depending on the role you are targeting, these exercises may be more technical in their content to test your knowledge as well as your skills.

5 Presentations

In the graduate work place, being able to present effectively is a key requirement and often employers will test for this in their selection process. You may have to give a short presentation on how your team came up with its solution as a result of the group exercise. Alternatively, you may be expected to prepare a presentation beforehand to last for up to 15 minutes either on a set topic relevant to the organisation or for instance on: how you fit the role; how you would develop it: what the key challenges for this industry are currently or in the short/medium term; or even what the strengths and weaknesses of your target organisation are.

6 Structured Interviews

Inevitably you will need to go through an interview lasting typically 30 to 45 minutes at some stage of the selection process. This may just be on a one to one basis, or, increasingly commonly, in a panel context.

The interview will test your past experiences (including work, education and other significant events), your skills and personality to check your competencies, attributes and ambition for the post you are targeting.

As part of this, interviewers may use information from your application form and also feedback from assessors on tasks you have carried out as part of the selection process. You may also be asked about your performance. Be honest and positive in your answers to show your own learning and self awareness. If there is an element which you feel you did not handle very well, use phrases such as “If I had this opportunity again, I would...” and then outline how you would approach it differently.

You may also be asked about the performance of others in your group, or the experience itself. Use the “feedback sandwich” approach here ie surround any constructive feedback in positive comments so that it comes across as balanced and helpful in tone. You may also be asked technical questions, if this is appropriate. Your interview may include a presentation. You should not be asked anything relating to your age, race, religious beliefs or gender (including your sexual preferences or whether you intend having children).

Remember that an interview is only a structured conversation designed to enable both you and the recruiter to establish whether you and the recruiter/ role match comfortably or not.

➤ What do employers really want?

Whichever tests you undertake, the recruiters will be looking at a number of key skills and attributes needed for the role and the organisation.

Typically these may include soft skills such as:

- Communications/interpersonal skills - how you interact with, influence and negotiate with others, convey thoughts to them verbally and in writing as well as through body language and how open you are to listening to others
- Problem solving - how you have a curiosity for different ways to solve a problem
- Decision making and leadership - how you use judgement and reasoning to arrive at your conclusions; how you move things forward
- Working with others - how you interact and support others to contribute to team success. This may include identifying your natural team role (eg your Belbin profile - see the resources section for links to more information on this)
- Information gathering and analysis - how you approach this and draw conclusions from materials/sources
- Planning and organising - how you plan and manage your time in a task

Recruiters will also be looking at personal attributes and aptitudes such as:

- Integrity - how you show moral and ethical principles, honesty and judgement
- Motivation and determination - how enthusiastic and focused you are on achieving results; what level of tenacity you have to achieve the desired outcome
- Initiative/creativity - how you can move things forward, add value, or identify new opportunities appropriately - often combined with problem solving
- Flexibility - how easily you can deal with change and ambiguity
- Vision - whether you prefer working with details or seeing the big picture
- Resilience - how you deal with pressure and being observed

See our page on what employers want (www.aber.ac.uk/careers/whatempswant) and read our leaflet ‘What do employers really want?’ for further insight in this area.

“If you feel you've messed up on a test - try to move on. Some people won't recover if they have a very bad exercise, but it says a lot about a person if they can bounce back. It's quite positive really. Also, be yourself and as much as possible try to ignore the assessors. If people try to act up to the assessors, they generally fall down.” Jo Freeman, Graduate Recruiter (Nationwide)

➤ How do they make the final selection?

Throughout the session, the assessors will be observing/marking your performance and progress through tasks. To help them keep score, they will typically use some form of score sheet.

These will be used in the assessors’ review meeting when the performance and suitability of each candidate is discussed in turn. Feedback on each candidate will also include observations made by assessors. This may include, in particular, comments about behaviour observed both during and outside the formal elements of the assessment centre itself. Beware therefore and ensure that you behave appropriately at all times from the moment you arrive, until you have left the premises and make sure that you do not overdo the alcohol in any evening events.

➤ What happens next?

Let's assume that you have passed the exercises. Some assessors like to have final endorsement of their preferred candidates from senior management so you may have a final interview with the head of the role function/section you are applying for. The next step for the employer is to contact your referees for their opinion of you. Sometimes they will be asked to consider particular attributes because of the role/organisation you are interested in.



Some recruiters may require you to take a medical examination and will contact you to arrange this. Assuming both your references and medical are fine, you will then be told that you have been successful.

There may be an opportunity to negotiate over salary and other benefits at this stage. If there is, consider discussing this with a careers adviser to practise how you might handle this (www.aber.ac.uk/careers/book). Once concluded, if appropriate, the employer will then send you a written job offer with terms and conditions of employment outlining the duties and responsibilities on each party.

Read this carefully before you sign it as it is a legally binding document once you have signed. Seek clarification from the company and other sources if there is anything in it which you are not clear about. Once you are, sign and return your contract if relevant and make sure you keep a copy for your records if a spare was not supplied by the recruiter. Congratulations - now's the time to enjoy celebrating!

So what do you do if your application wasn't successful? Firstly, stay calm and ask for feedback. Reflect on what you hear and also how you feel it went. Consider what you have gained from the experience, what you would do differently next time and how this can help you be more successful in the future. Remember - this is not the only job in the world and there may well be a better opportunity for you elsewhere. Consider coming to see a careers adviser to explore how to improve and other options open to you.

➤ What if I have a disability?

More and more employers are recognising that not employing people with disabilities means that they are missing out on a rounded view of society and hidden talent. Furthermore, provided you do choose to declare your disability as part of your application,

employers are legally obliged to discuss what reasonable adjustments you may need, to have the same chance of success as other applicants without disabilities. Adjustments can be wide ranging and may include more time for tests, the opportunity to have a note taker or even a different type of test which will enable your abilities to be demonstrated effectively.

It's not always easy to decide whether to disclose your disability or not. If you are unsure about the implications of your disability or would like to discuss how and when to disclose if that is right for you, you may find a confidential discussion with one of our careers advisers who are experienced in this area would be helpful (www.aber.ac.uk/careers/book). Please let us know when you book that you would like to discuss this so that we can allow an appropriate amount of time for your session.

➤ How can I prepare best?

Remember that you are not competing with the other candidates - just focus on the key elements the recruiter is looking for and aim to demonstrate these as effectively as possible. Whatever the task is that you are set, make sure you keep your focus. Ask yourself the following questions to make sure you are effective in the task:

- What is the recruiter testing in this exercise (ie which skill(s)/attributes(s)?)
- What are they expecting to see/hear?
- What are the most important elements to focus on to meet this expectation?
- What process will I use to achieve this?
- What do I want/need to show (ie skills, attributes, understanding etc) ?
(Be particularly aware of this in group based activities).
- How can do I do this most effectively?

Make sure you visit the employer's website and read key industry press so that you are up to date with current developments and can talk about them if necessary.

Icebreakers - remember these are designed to help you settle, not feel exposed! If your icebreaker is one where you are asked to reveal a secret about yourself, make sure you choose something you are comfortable with - this is not a time to unburden your soul!

➤ Preparing for paper based tests

- **Focus effectively** - remember this type of exercise is designed to test your ability to analyse information, reach a decision, explain your approach, the reason for your recommendation and make sure you manage your time effectively.
- **Read effectively** - read the instructions carefully so you can be clear about what is wanted from the activity eg a written or oral report. Read through all the material quickly once. Use this first read to give you an overall understanding of what you are dealing with to help you see the big picture. Then read it with a more detailed approach, highlighting important material as you go through it. Use this material as evidence for your decision(s) in your report.
- **Plan effectively** - invest sufficient time in planning the task - work out how long you will spend: reading the material: analysing it; and how long you will need to write it up if it's a written activity.
- **Write effectively** - if a written report is required, remember the audience you are writing for and use an appropriate style/ format (ie what is the objective, what length of report, what style, what content and structure is most appropriate) for the context. Be objective and balanced - remember the task's objective by reviewing it regularly if you begin to lose focus. The same approach also applies for oral reports.

➤ Preparing for in-tray/e-tray exercises

Remember the aim of the exercise is to produce an action plan showing in which order you would deal with a range of items from messages and memos to papers and documents items. You will also need to explain your reasoning for this order.

Complete a fast first sift - code the different pieces of material into their different types, ie urgent, important, important and urgent, neither urgent or important. This will help you get a sense of what the contents of the exercise are.

Remember to consider the material from different angles eg what matters for the business, what is important to individuals, what issues are raised by the item.

Watch the time!

➤ Preparing for psychometric tests

The old saying "practice makes perfect" is really important here. Practising beforehand will help you brush up your existing skills so that you can be more

effective when you take the test to illustrate your innate ability. Aim to answer as many questions as possible. Use a process of elimination to answer if necessary if you get stuck. Remember to consider the nature of the job you are aiming for as this may help you understand the context and needs of the test more effectively (ensure of course that you are well suited for it before you apply as well!). You'll find more details on how to prepare effectively for psychometric tests on our website: www.aber.ac.uk/careers/psychtests.

➤ Preparing for interactive exercises

Again, make sure you prepare beforehand.

Consider the exercise from both your perspective and the employers so that you understand how they will feel and what they are looking for.

If you are not clear about what they want during the activity, or the implications of something, clarify what they mean. Make sure you engage effectively through the use of good verbal and non verbal skills eg body language.

Do not expect to know all the answers.

Keep an eye on the time through the exercise if you need to produce a written report to time afterwards.

Make good use of the opportunities to develop your self awareness and evidence of skills and experience which AU's PDP activities offer.

➤ Preparing for group exercises

Be aware of the different role that people perform in groups. Broadly these consist of:

- The organiser (keeps meeting focused and in order so that everything on the agenda can be discussed)
- The facilitator (ensures that everyone gets a chance to participate and be heard and acknowledged for their contribution)
- The recorder (notes the outcomes of decisions and makes sure everyone is aware of them)
- The time keeper
- The co-ordinator (sees the big picture and takes a more strategic view looking for gaps and overlaps)
- The lookout (makes sure the solution/decisions are future proof)
- The encourager (brings good humoured appreciation to the session and defuses tensions, keeps morale high).

Consider looking at other team analysis approaches including Belbin (www.belbin.com) to help you get a better understanding of team roles and how you behave in this context.

Use your knowledge of these different roles to develop your teamwork ability. Avoid conflict with other members! Contribute your ideas freely. You can do this by making an original contribution by introducing a new idea, building on another to take it in a new direction or by finding a new way of looking at the problem; use techniques such as restating to help the group maintain clarity; move discussions on by using phrases such as “Let’s think about the next point, we can come back to this later”. Make sure you give positive feedback where appropriate to other team members. Encourage those on the fringes to participate; find common ground to negotiate a good outcome and make a contribution through summarising to ensure that everyone is in agreement and knows what has been decided. Above all, keep an eye on time and the aim of the task.

Contribution to group discussions is particularly important. You can do this in a number of ways:

- Make an original contribution (introduce a new idea; build on another idea and take it in a new direction; or find a new way to look at a particular problem)
- Make a contribution to draw others out (encourage their participation)

➤ Preparing for presentations and interviews

Get as much practice as you can at speaking in public. The more you do it, the easier it becomes. Remember that you are on show from the minute you arrive at the centre to the time you leave, so make sure your behaviour reflects this, particularly during the social elements of the assessment centre eg at dinner and in the bar afterwards (make sure you moderate your alcohol intake appropriately!)



Research the company effectively before you go, even though you probably did this when you applied, just in case things have changed. That way you can show you are up to date and really interested in them.

Prepare likely examples to demonstrate that you have the key skills required. Remember to use the STAR approach (include details on each of: Situation; Task, Action, Result) when you prepare and deliver your answers so they are easy to follow and understand.

Prepare some appropriate questions to ask about the role or the organisation which you have been unable to answer through your own research/the company’s literature including website.

To develop your skills and confidence in presentations and interviews, consider booking a mock interview with a careers adviser who can give you feedback on how you come across as well as suggestions for any improvements.

Also consider attending our popular events which include a range of sessions designed to help you be successful in applications, presentations, interviews and assessment centres.

Full details are available on our events page (www.aber.ac.uk/careers/events). Sign up early to guarantee your place and improve your career success.

➤ Demonstrating skills and personal attributes

To ensure you have a rounded skill set, spend some time reflecting on and developing your abilities in these areas.

- Communications/interpersonal skills - practise listening to understand the other person’s perspective, develop your ability to negotiate and move discussions forward through the use of good questions such as “How can we solve this?” “What should we be considering here?” “How does this affect our outcome?” At the same time, make sure that you practise developing and contributing ideas to discussions so your contribution is not just that of a facilitator.
- Problem solving - seek to understand how you approach this area and the strategies you use to be effective. Practise working out what it is you want to achieve in a situation so you are clear about the criteria you want to achieve. Then brainstorm as many solutions as possible. Ask yourself “how can we solve this? How else? Repeat this question until you have exhausted all possible solutions. Then check which solution is best by considering how well they fit your desired criteria and how practical they are as solutions.
- Leadership and decision making - develop your ability to make decisions confidently based on a clear understanding of what the desired outcome is. Ask yourself “What is likely to happen if I take this route as opposed to the alternative?” to help you make a confident and informed decision. Reflect on how you are drawn to or avoid leadership and decision making and consider taking action to stretch your leadership and decision making muscle and develop more confidence in your abilities.

- Working with others - identify your natural team role (www.aber.ac.uk/careers/teamroles). Be aware of how your style contributes to or could hinder team work and work to increase your ability in this area. Aim to develop balance across a number of different approaches. See if you can identify who takes which role in group activities in a range of different settings. Seek out opportunities to lead discussions and make sure that everyone is included and able to contribute.
- Information gathering and analysis - consider what approach you use and how effective this is for you. Consider exploring eg Mind Mapping (www.mind-mapping.co.uk) as a useful tool.
- Planning and organising - review how effective you are in your day to day planning and organising. Ask yourself "How could I do this more effectively?" if you find that you are not working at your best. Be clear about what matters most and focus on that.

➔ Coach your referees!!

Make sure your referees are in the best place to be most effective for you. Let them know what you are applying for, give them copies of your completed application including the job description and explain why you are so keen to do the job. That way, they will be able to write a more informed reference which should add even more value to your application.

➔ Getting there

Make sure you leave plenty of time for your journey. Make sure you have an accurate map and know how to get there. Take all the relevant letters with you as well as a copy of your application so you can refer to these as necessary.

Remember to pack appropriate clothes for the duration of the assessment centre itself as well as for the evening (if less formal) and any other clothes if you are staying at friends.

Make a list of all the items you need for your trip and check off items as you pack - that way you'll have everything you need with you. The letter from the company will include details on this and other instructions so read it carefully as you prepare for your trip.

Keep a note of your costs if the company has indicated that it reimburses travel costs.

Make sure you have money for taxis, your mobile phone (switch off during sessions!) and your phone charger.

Finally, get a good night's sleep beforehand so you can take part feeling well rested.

➔ On the day

- Be yourself
- Ask appropriate questions
- Stay focused
- Stay calm
- Read/listen to instructions carefully
- Watch the time in exercises
- Give your best, keep your own counsel about your own performance and remember that you are always being observed!

Good luck!!

➔ Resources

Our events: www.aber.ac.uk/careers/events

Careers Service Leaflets:

What do employers really want? -
www.aber.ac.uk/careers/docs/whatempswant_en.pdf

Psychometric Tests: www.aber.ac.uk/careers/docs/psychometrictests_en.pdf

Weblinks:

Nexis - www.aber.ac.uk/en/is/electinfo/eiaz/#N
www.prospects.ac.uk
www.belbin.com