

The Assessment Centre

Assessment centres, also called AC for short, are organised by companies as part of the selection process for trainee or more demanding (management) positions. They are very costly and time-consuming and so are only used very selectively.

What characterises an assessment centre?

At an assessment centre, a number of participants are assessed on their suitability by observers (mostly managers of the company) based on specific set criteria (from communication to analytical skills) as they carry out various exercises (e.g. presentations, e-tray exercises and role-plays). This structure is intended to make the procedure more objective than others. It very much depends on how well the observers have been trained by the people in charge of the AC.

Typical exercises besides interviews are:

- **E-tray exercises**
- **Role-plays**
- **Presentations**
- **Group discussions**

→ E-tray:

Here you will be asked to make a lot of decisions under difficult circumstances. Time is short and you are presented with an inbox filled to overflowing with up to 20 emails, memos and presentations. All appear more or less urgent.

Your task: to prioritise and process.



Example: you have recently become Head of Construction in company XY. In one hour you are embarking on a four-day business trip. Your inbox is full of new unanswered emails which you must take care of before you depart. (Your superior is expecting an update on project X, a staff member wants four weeks' holiday, your child is having problems at school and the teacher is asking you to call her back, the presentation for the management meeting must be forwarded tomorrow to...)

What do you do? What is expected? You are expected to prioritise, make decisions and delegate.

Tip: gain an **overview** of the situation. Prioritise and **decide fast** how you want to proceed. Be especially aware of **appointments/deadlines**. Consider the consequences of your decisions. **Delegate** wherever you can. Communicate your decisions **clearly and comprehensibly**.

→ **Presentation:**

The presentation will be on a prescribed topic using media to assist. The possibilities include a presentation about you, a presentation on a specialist topic or even an impromptu presentation on a current issue.

Your task: to present yourself and your topic convincingly and confidently. Example: presenting the business model (developed in the group), an innovative method of production or a concept for a workshop. Examples for impromptu presentations include climate protection and city centre driving bans. Your presentation is expected to have a common thread and be convincing.

Tip: include an **introduction, body and conclusion**. Let pictures/diagrams etc. show the facts so you can describe them. Use media with which you are familiar and also dare to switch between different forms of media (e.g. change between PowerPoint and a flip chart). **Be aware of your demeanour:** gestures, facial expressions, voice, maintaining eye contact. Be prepared for questions.

Bear in mind that someone may surprise you: in AC for sales representatives, you may well find that your given topic is suddenly changed to something entirely different shortly before you begin. This is where spontaneity and creativity come into play rather than perfection.

→ **Group discussion:**

A prescribed topic is discussed in a group of around six participants.

Your task: to lead the group to a conclusion.

Example: optimising the exchange between production and research: what should the future corporate structure look like? What is expected? **You are expected to have an active influence on the course of the group discussion and ensure that it results in a conclusion.**

Tip: lead the discussion. Include everyone. Keep an eye on the time. Argue comprehensibly. Listen attentively. Steer the group towards an agreed solution.

→ **Case Study:**

A problem that the company is actually facing is described in detail.

Your task: to develop a proposal for a solution alone or in the group.

Example: environmentalists are mobilising against one of your production plants. What is expected? You are expected to develop a proposal for a solution and be able to justify it logically.

Tip: process the pieces of information carefully. Pay attention to details. Derive your solution logically. Consider the various points of view involved. **Consider the consequences of your decisions.** Be prepared for critical further questions.



→ **Brain teasers:**

This is a popular method used by management consultancies in their selection process. You will be asked questions such as: how deep must a pool be in order for a diver to jump in safely from a height of 60 metres? You won't fail this exercise based on not coming up with the exact answer. Its purpose is to assess whether you can think creatively and apply deductive reasoning.

Your task: to use a fast, creative, deductive approach in finding solutions.

Example: in public swimming pools with 10-metre platforms, the diving pools are 5.4m deep. Assumption: 4m are definitely sufficient for people of normal weight. Water decelerates fast, let's say by a factor of 2. So for 20m we need a pool depth of 6m, for 30m 7m, for 40m 7.5m, for 50m 7.75m and so for 60m barely 8m.

The assessment centre procedure

It is important to note the difference between observation and assessment in the assessment centre. Firstly, there is pure observation of behaviour such as "speaks quietly", "interrupts people", "actively asks other people for their opinions"... At the end of an exercise, the observations are summarised to form an assessment. At the end of the process, an overall assessment is made based on all of the individual assessments.

The criteria observed are intended to be extremely relevant to the position to be filled. For example, it is logical in the financial sector to observe analytical skills, negotiation skills and ability to deal with conflict, whereas the tasks for a designer focus more on testing powers of persuasion, customer orientation and assertiveness.

The goal of the assessment centre is for several observers to observe every participant as he/she carries out a variety of practical exercises. Typically, both individual and group exercises are represented in an assessment centre - as in real life.

Preparing for an assessment centre

You can prepare yourself very well for an assessment centre. First of all, you can practise the classic exercises such as **e-tray exercises** or **brain teasers**. In doing so, you can learn the different ways of solving brain teasers and how to be quicker and keep your cool in e-tray exercises. You can also easily practise **presentations** by taking advantage of every opportunity to present. It is important here not only to practise how to give a presentation about you, but also how to give a brief introduction of another person or follow an unusual approach. For example, you may be required to give a presentation about yourself based on a picture or word.

Case studies, group discussions and role-plays will also improve for practice. The best thing you can do is meet up with like-minded people and practise with them.

It is also important that you are well-informed about the company that has invited you. What did you say in your application? What can you find out about the company, and possibly even about some of the company representatives? Don't rely solely on the website; do some research on Google, read business magazines and follow updates on the corporate blog or on Facebook. The more you know, the more content you'll have for small talk in breaks and in the interview.

Smalltalk und Gabeltest



As well as preparing professionally, there's one thing you shouldn't forget: an assessment centre consists of many exercises and of **what is supposedly casual socialising between units**. You often meet with the AC participants for lunch, and there may also be company representatives present from other departments and from the management.

This is a chance to demonstrate your social skills. There are some definite no-goes, such as drinking alcohol at lunch even if offered. You should also have a few topics at your disposal for small talk: the weather, holidays or football (almost) always do the trick. Avoid political, social and cultural issues.

Wrap-up

Even if you prepare well for an assessment centre, you can't turn yourself into a different person. And would you really want to do that? Ultimately, it's about getting to know people as they get to know you, even if you are "on trial"! If the demands don't suit you, the job probably wouldn't be much fun for you either. The best thing you can do is **show your best qualities and be authentic and hands-on**. And use the assessment centre and the feedback that you are given at the end as another learning opportunity.

Check-list for preparing for an assessment centre

- **Check documents:** what did I say in my CV? How did I describe my motivation?
- **Information on the company:** what can I find out about the company? Don't rely solely on the website; do some research on Google and read business magazines and the latest press releases.

- **Practise tasks:** brain teasers, e-tray exercises and other puzzles can be practised. With practice, you can understand the tasks more quickly, remain calm for longer and so score more points in a shorter amount of time.
- **Practise in a group:** group discussions, interviews and presentations will quickly become a lot more confident and hence a lot better through practice. Give each other feedback.
- **Get your things ready:** plan your journey carefully, leave enough time for it and pack your things in good time. Make sure there are no missing buttons for example, and that your clothes aren't creased.
- **Don't get complacent:** even in breaks you are being observed. Therefore, ALWAYS present yourself as best you can.

Further information:

Holger Beitz, Andrea Loch: **Assessment Center.** Erfolgstitps und Übungen für Bewerber. Bewerber (Tips for Success and Exercises for Applicants). Goldmann 2004. ISBN 978-3442166442. Euro 6,95.

Weblink Brainteaser

Brainteaser im Bewerbungsgespräch, 140 Übungsaufgaben für den Einstellungstest. (**Brain Teasers in Job Interviews**, 140 practice exercises for the aptitude test.) Squeaker.net 2015.

Christian Püttjer, Uwe Schnierda: **Training Assessment Center:** Die häufigsten Aufgaben – die besten Lösungen. (**Assessment Centre Training:** the most common exercises - the best solutions.) Campus Publishing, 2011. ISBN 978-3593393674. EUR 24,99.

Haben Sie noch Fragen?

Wir beraten Sie gerne auch persönlich:

<http://www.uni-due.de/abz/career.php>

Viel Erfolg bei Ihrer Bewerbung!