The term ‘Assessment Centre’ does not refer to a location, but to a process which is being increasingly used by middle to large organisations in Australia and overseas. A typical Assessment Centre incorporates a set of varied exercises which are designed to simulate different aspects of the work environment. These exercises may run from 1/2 to 2 days.

While the process is intensive and commonly viewed as 'stressful' by candidates, it provides additional opportunities for recruits who feel that they are not able to demonstrate their abilities as strongly during an interview. Assessment Centres also enable candidates to obtain a practical idea of what the employer expects from staff, and opportunities to network with other participants during group activities.

How do they work?

The expense of conducting Assessment Centres mostly restricts their use to high volume recruitment such as graduate recruitment. Assessment Centres are usually used after the initial stages of the selection process. It may follow short listing, online assessments and/or an initial interview.

Assessment Centres are highly structured in their design, application and procedures. They may be conducted by external consultants who have invested large amounts of resources into researching and designing Assessment Centres. In other cases, Assessment Centres may be conducted by Human Resources staff. Each Assessment Centre is specifically adapted for the particular position, to assess factors such as level of skills, aptitude and compatibility with organisational culture.

During each activity in an assessment centre, a group of trained observers will rate individual candidates on a range of competencies, using a prescribed performance scale. Results are then compared against the same competencies, which are measured in other activities. On completion, observers meet to discuss the test results and reach a group consensus about each individual's ratings. Observers may be visible during the test, or may review each individual's performance via videotape.

What to expect

At the beginning of the Assessment Centre, candidates will receive an initial briefing about the organisation and the structure of the day.

The most common type of activities include:

- Group activities
- Case Studies
- In Tray exercises
- Technical skills assessments
- Role plays
- Group activities

Group activities involve candidates working together as a team to resolve a presented issue. They commonly measure interpersonal skills such as leadership, teamwork, negotiation, and problem solving skills. Activities can range from 'leaderless group discussion' formats to problem solving scenarios.

In a 'leaderless group discussion' you may be assigned a fictitious team member role and asked to attend a meeting with other team members who are actually fellow candidates. By the end of the meeting, the group will choose the best strategy to meet a future prescribed target. Your role is to discuss the merits of your strategy (described in your written briefing), and to comment on the weaknesses of other strategies which you suspect will be presented by other team
members. You will have some background on the other team members, including their past performance, knowledge of the product and situation etc. Other team members' briefs may ask them to promote the comparatively superior merits of their strategies.

One example of a problem solving scenario includes a Tower Building exercise, using play building blocks. In this exercise, a group may be competing with other groups to design and build a tower in accordance with a construction brief which may stipulate minimum height, time period the completed tower has to stand 'unsupported', colour, cost of block shapes, a time limit, and a budget. There may be monetary penalties for failing to reach particular aspects of the brief. Each group has access to a limited number of blocks.

Case studies

Project Managers may be asked to plan for the release of a new product, which incorporates scheduling, budgeting and resourcing. This type of exercise may measure the ability to analyse complex data and issues; seek solutions; project plan; and present findings.

In-tray exercises

If you are asked to do an In Tray exercise, you may be asked to assume a particular role as an employee of a fictitious organisation and work through a pile of correspondence in your In Tray. These tests commonly measure skills such as: ability to organise and prioritise work; analytical skills; communication with team members and customers; written communication skills; and delegation (if a higher level position). This type of exercise may take from several hours to a day. Try to imagine that you are at work doing the described duties, rather than completing a test. Phone interaction will involve a role player who has been thoroughly briefed in their respective role as a customer, manager etc.

Technical skills assessments

Accounts Clerk recruits were asked to complete tests measuring accuracy against speed. A particular test required invoices to be reconciled against a spreadsheet ledger, with errors being appropriately amended. Numerical tests may involve calculating hotel accounts, goods invoices, and vehicle mileage examples, using a multiple choice answer format. Many of these tests are not designed to be completed within the given timeframe.

Role plays

If you are asked to do a role play, you will be asked to assume a fictitious role and handle a particular work situation. Customer Service Officers may be asked to respond to a number of phone enquiries, including customer queries and complaints.

This type of exercise assesses: communication, customer service and problem solving skills. Managers may be asked to provide feedback to a sales representative staff member, after viewing a videotape of the sales representative's call with a client, or meet with a same level manager of another section, to gain their agreement on a service delivery strategy.

Tips for success!

You cannot study for an Assessment Centre, although it does help if you have some idea of what to expect:

- If you have been given pre reading material prior to the Assessment Centre day - read, prepare and understand what is asked of you.
- Re-familiarise yourself with the job description, duty statement and other background reading material about the organisation. This will provide some clues as to what type of employee they are seeking.
- Get a good night's rest before the big day.
- Arrive early so you do not feel rushed. Perhaps your waiting time in the reception area can provide you with a 'feel' for the environment - i.e. the written material in the reception/waiting area, other candidates you may see.
- Read all instructions carefully. Are all the resources, which are listed on the test instructions available and working?
- Be yourself - bring your own personality and experience to the Assessment Centre.
- Take the exercises seriously - the hypothetical scenarios will require you to 'suspend your belief' and go along with the exercise. They are not designed to match the employer's real life workplace.
Do not guess what is being measured as this may affect your participation and assessment eg. quoting the employer's Mission statement, verbatim, may have no relevance to your assigned role as 'project manager of ACME Ltd.', when required to discuss a hypothetical problem with other 'ACME' team members.

Treat your attendance as a day at the workplace.

View the Assessment Centre as an opportunity to learn about the employer and the advertised position.

Consider the process as a positive learning experience.

Ask for feedback if you were not successful so that you can improve your performance in the future.

A student’s perspective

Q: What organisation invited you to attend the assessment centre?

A: Rail Infrastructure Corporation

Q: At what stage of the application process did you attend the assessment centre?

A: An initial screening of written applications had been performed, but no interviews or tests had been performed.

Q: Were you given any information on what to expect? How useful was this?

A: We were told to expect an interview, group exercise and some multiple choice tests. They were not too specific on what the group exercise would involve, other than it would involve a team based exercise. Since I had been to other assessment centres before this, I guessed this would involve solving problems as a team.

Q: How long was it?

A: About four hours, but this included everything. The interview was about one hour long, the group exercise about another hour, and the tests another one and a half hours.

Q: How many students were there?

A: There were twenty applicants for the session I was in.

Q: How many observers were there? Or were you videoed?

A: For the group exercise, there were two observers, both I think were HR people. In this case, the exercise was not videoed.

Q: What types of activities did you participate in? What skills do you think they were looking for?

A: The group activity involved solving a business problem, first individually, then as a group. In this case, our group was given the task of solving a problem faced by a computer consultancy firm. Only one staff member was available, but three clients were asking for assistance in fixing their problems. Each client faced various problems and we were to decide which client should be scheduled first to have their problem solved. One of the clients was financially important to the firm, another client had a problem which was causing great financial loss to itself, while another client had a close relationship with one of the staff of the firm. Since there was clearly not one correct answer, group members were forced to prioritise certain values over others. Ideally, this would expose to the observers how the participants solve problems, what values the participants consider important, how participants work in teams and put forward a case in a team setting. Problem solving, verbal communication and teamwork skills were the skills most closely examined in this activity.

Q: Did you ask for feedback? Did the organisation offer feedback on your performance? If so, was it helpful?

A: I did not receive any feedback from the firm, but I did not ask for any feedback.

Q: What was your overall impression of the experience?

A: With the individual interview and the tests included in the assessment centre, it was a quite lengthy experience. A presentation on the firm also gave me greater insight into the role a graduate is expected to perform in the Rail Infrastructure Corporation.

Q: What advice would you give students on how to prepare?
A: Research the firm you are applying for to find out what sort of company they are and what they are looking for. Make sure in a group exercise you make a sizeable contribution to any discussion, though of course you don't completely dominate the meeting.

**Book an Assessment Centre workshop**

Ask at the Careers and Employment Office to watch the Assessment Centres DVDs.