Assessment centres are considered to be one of the most reliable ways of assessing candidates. Because scores from several different activities are combined, employers gain a more accurate and comprehensive picture of your ability. They are able to observe what you can actually do and not just make a decision based on how good you are at interview. The vast majority of candidates, even those who are rejected, feel that they were given a fair chance to show the selectors what they could do.

Assessment centres include a range of activities: interviews, psychometric tests, presentations, work simulations, group and in-tray exercises as well as social activities, such as formal dinners or drinks receptions. Interviews, psychometric tests and presentations are covered in other booklets in the Employability Skills series, so this booklet will concentrate on in-tray exercises, group exercises, work simulations and social activities.

### In-tray and e-tray exercises

These exercises are completed individually. You have to put yourself in the position of a member of staff who has to deal with the tasks of a typically busy day. You are presented with a selection of documents in the form of memos, letters, organisational charts and reports in a simulated in-tray; your task is to assimilate the information contained in these documents, make decisions about how you would deal with them and prioritise your actions. Often this exercise is enlivened by the fact that further documents continue to arrive once you have started the task, thus testing your ability to be flexible and reassess your priorities. The key to success is to distinguish between urgent and important tasks, assimilate key information quickly and accurately and identify the issues involved.

An e-tray exercise is a more common version of the in-tray exercise nowadays. The information is normally presented in an Outlook mailbox and all responses are created and submitted electronically. You are required to deal with a series of emails and their attachments and, as with the in-tray, your task is to organise and prioritise these and then choose the appropriate action to take. You can be sure that further information and documents will ping into your mailbox as the exercise proceeds! On occasions, an e-tray can be part of an online application, thus coming at an earlier stage in the selection process. For an example, see the Civil Service website at [www.faststream.gov.uk](http://www.faststream.gov.uk/); look in the application process section.

Sometimes the in-tray or e-tray exercise isn’t really a collection of documents, but a list of things that are happening to you in the workplace. You have to decide which you are going to deal with first and what action you are going to take. See [At the Hotel Reception](#) in this booklet.

### Criteria for assessment

In in-tray and e-tray exercises employers are looking for evidence of your ability to:

- Read and assimilate information quickly;
- Identify key/relevant information, possibly from lengthy documents and diagrams;
- Express ideas accurately and concisely in writing;
- Demonstrate the etiquette of writing business emails;
- Show an understanding of organisational structure and procedures outlined in the documents;
- Manage your time to meet the task deadline;
- Demonstrate your initiative and creative thinking to solve problems;
- Keep calm and organised under pressure.
Group activities

Usually you work in a small group with other candidates. This can be tricky; naturally you will see the other candidates as rivals, but it is important to show that you can work collaboratively in a team. Remember that the employers, especially employers large enough to be running assessment centres, are often looking to recruit more than one person.

Group activities take several forms including discussions, prioritisation exercises, role plays and construction exercises.

Group activities are observed by a team of assessors, who normally sit outside the circle of candidates. They are not available for consultation or clarification on the task and don’t intervene, even if the task is going badly.

Group discussions
You are given a topic to discuss, often related to the sector. For example you might be asked to discuss a case study, the organisation’s annual report or a story in the news. Working to a time limit, your group has to deliver a clearly stated outcome, such as a recommendation for action, a presentation to summarise the discussion or a decision about the pros and cons of the information discussed. Sometimes you are expected to use your own knowledge in these discussions or will find it useful if you do have background knowledge; however the exercise is primarily intended to test your group work skills rather than your knowledge.

Prioritisation activities
These exercises require your group to reach a consensus in prioritising objects or people in a specific situation. Prioritisation of objects is very popular with companies as it is believed to avoid cultural bias.

Key factors for success in prioritisation exercises are: utilising any technical expertise which you have in the group; avoiding subjective judgements, prejudices and stereotypes; really taking time and care to understand the task; thinking of innovative and creative uses for objects.

There are two sample exercises for you to practise below: Lost at Sea and Shipwreck.

Industrial problem activities
This type of exercise involves making group decisions and plans related to real or imagined industrial problems. Example exercises include:

- Deciding between projects open to a company, taking into account, costs, effects on profits/sale and the public relations value.
- Deciding from a range of options how a Local Authority might make the savings necessary to balance its budget.

The assessment panel is looking to see that you can act pragmatically in the best interests of the company or organisation despite your own subjective feelings or personal interests.

Role play activities
The main objective of role play exercises is to argue a specific point of view according to the role you have been assigned, whether you agree with that particular perspective or not. In one activity we have come across each member of the group is allocated the role of a departmental manager who has to present the case for a member of her/his department to be given the last remaining place on a training course. The group has to reach a consensus, so the skill lies in presenting your own argument persuasively but also being able to negotiate, compromise and build alliances with the other ‘managers’ in the best interests of the company as a whole.

Industrial problem activities (above) could also be presented as role plays in that each group member might be given a particular project or solution to present and defend.

Many people struggle with the contrived nature of a role play exercise. For employers it can be a good way of testing your ability to explain and argue a case you don’t necessarily believe in, which is a particularly valuable skill for middle managers.

Construction activities
These are practical group exercises involving the construction of something (typically a tower, a bridge or a contraption to protect a fragile object when dropped from a height) using Lego, or an assortment of other objects such as stationery and household items, eg. balloons, cling film, drinking straws…

Crucial to success is an ordered planning and organisation phase, which looks at and decides on alternatives. The group needs to decide on allocation of roles based on particular strengths. You must avoid the common pitfall of grabbing the materials and rushing straight into
construction without any planning. Any technical expertise should be utilised, but the group needs to work co-operatively.

Please see The Games Manufacturer for a sample construction exercise.

Your role in the group
Sometimes the assessors allocate roles to members of the group. You might be given the outline of a job role or organisation that you are representing (see Role play activities above). While you need to present faithfully the ideas and views allocated to your character, you need to display your own interpersonal, persuasion, negotiation and reasoning skills.

Sometimes you might be allocated the role of chairperson or secretary in a group exercise, or you might have the opportunity to volunteer for one of these roles, or assume one of them without any overt decision being made. Do be careful about this. Acting as chair puts you in the limelight, but this doesn’t automatically mean you will impress the assessors. As chair, you need to demonstrate excellent listening, analytical and organisational skills, and encourage other group members to develop their ideas rather than impose your own. Acting as secretary can also work for or against you; beware of using this role as a chance to spend the time writing rather than participating in the discussion. Make clear and creative notes that can be seen by the group (use a flip chart or whiteboard rather than a notebook). Use your notes to clarify and guide the discussion. This role, if performed well, can be a great opportunity to demonstrate your organisational and interpersonal skills, as well as your ability to identify and develop the main points.

Criteria for success in all group activities
In group activities employers are looking for evidence of your ability and willingness to:

- Participate enthusiastically;
- Express yourself clearly, coherently and politely;
- Listen carefully to other participants, give positive feedback, clarify, develop and accommodate their good ideas;
- Influence others by putting your points across strongly and clearly;
- Build alliances with other group members;
- Analyse and get to the roots of issues;
- Introduce new ideas and approaches;
- Discriminate between the important and the trivial;
- Avoid being influenced by prejudice on personal issues;
- Make sure that your body language and facial expression show that you are engaged and interested, even when you are not talking;
- Be friendly and assertive, never aggressive;
- Persevere with the task and demonstrate resilience if things go wrong or other group members upset you;
- Demonstrate organisation and planning skills.

You should avoid being either too loud and domineering, or too quiet and cautious. Remember the assessors can only give you credit for what they see and hear you doing, not what you are thinking.

Body language is important too; make sure you maintain eye contact with other members of the group; smile; lean forward to show that you are keen to engage with the group. Show that you are listening by nodding and making non-verbal utterances (I see, yes, mmm…..). Don’t distance yourself from the rest of the group by sitting back in your chair or choosing a chair right on the edge of the group. Don’t create a barrier by putting items such as bags on the desk in front of yourself. Don’t write or sketch out plans unless you are sharing this with the group.

Candidates are marked on a numerical scale for particular skills, such as team working, managing people, impact and influence, analytical and conceptual skills and using the strengths of individuals in your group to advantage.

Work simulations
Some assessment centres include activities which replicate specific tasks you will need to perform in the job. On the AGCAS DVD At the assessment centre you can see candidates being tested via a role play: they are given 10 minutes to prepare a 5minute sales pitch to a client (role played by an assessor). Alternatively a simulation might involve reading case notes on a client or patient, then talking through your ideas to deal with the case. You might be asked to interpret and summarise a set of statistics and graphs; interrogate a database for specific information; or write a
response to an enquiry or complaint to the company.

Social activities

Assessment centres include various breaks for refreshments and meals, which can appear less formal but in reality are still part of the selection process. In your job you will have to meet clients and colleagues in social situations, and you will always be representing your employers, so they need to know you won’t let them down. It is essential to display good table manners. Don’t put too much food in your mouth; someone is bound to ask you a question just as you are chewing! Don’t pile enormous amounts of food on your plate. Try to avoid potentially messy food such as spaghetti in a sauce; you don’t want to end up splashing your new suit or getting tomato sauce round your mouth. In particular, beware of drinking too much alcohol. It can be tempting if the wine is flowing freely and you are feeling nervous; but stick to one small glass.

Even coffee and biscuits are not without danger. If you are balancing a cup and saucer in one hand, and holding a biscuit in the other, it is going to be awkward if you suddenly have to shake hands with someone.

Don’t talk at length about your personal situation and relationships. Apply the interview test: always ask yourself how the topic you are talking about might make you attractive to the employer. Be brave, and approach the employer representatives yourself. Ask them questions about their work and the company and show interest in their replies by following up with more in-depth questions.
In Tray Exercise

At the Hotel Reception

You have a part-time job as a hotel receptionist. It is 6.00 on Saturday evening and you have just come on duty. In what order are you going to deal with these things and what action do you take?

Indicate your priority in the right hand column by numbering 1 -10, 1 being the thing you would deal with first.

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>You have received your seasonal order of leaflets from the Tourist Information Board to be displayed in the reception area. The delivery is in a large box which is obscuring the reception desk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>It is company policy to wear your name badge at all times; however you have mislaid it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The inbox is open on the reception desk computer and you can see there are 10 new, unopened emails; one is from the hotel manager to all staff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>You remember that as you were leaving yesterday the manager said he needed to speak to you today as soon as possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The phone is ringing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The receptionist who has just finished his duty shift has left a note to say someone rang at 5:55 to book a room for the weekend after next. He didn’t have time to put it on the reservations database.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Someone is standing at the reception desk with their luggage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>One of the waitresses is crying in the bar, just opposite the reception.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>You have not had time to eat and you are very hungry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>You notice a guest has left his camera behind in the seating area in the reception.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sample group prioritisation exercise

1 Lost at Sea
You are lost on a raft in the mid Pacific. Below are 15 items which could be useful to you - just how useful is up to you to decide. Rank them in order of importance using 1 as the most important item. As a group try to make each ranking one with which all group members can at least partially agree. You have 20 minutes.

- 2 boxes chocolate bars
- Shark repellent
- Small transistor radio
- One 30 lb case rations
- 2 gallon can of oil gas mixture
- Shaving mirror
- 20 sq feet of opaque plastic
- Fishing kit
- Floating seat cushion
- 1 quart 160% proof Puerto Rican rum
- 5 gallon can water
- Fifteen feet nylon rope
- Mosquito netting
- Sextant
- Maps of Pacific Ocean
Sample group prioritisation exercise

2 Shipwreck

- **Collectively** you are the Captain of a ship. The engine has just blown up and the ship will sink in 20 minutes. Unfortunately, one of the two lifeboats was destroyed in the blast as well as most of the food, equipment and the radio.

- There is an island twenty miles East but the water is shark infested.

- The only safe way ashore is using the one remaining lifeboat which will hold only six people.

- The crew/passenger list is below.

- At a hurried meeting all concerned agreed to abide by your decision on the choice of the six people to use the boat.

- The island you will head for is uninhabited but fertile. It is well away from normal sea routes and it is doubtful than any distress signals leaving the ship would have been noticed. The Captain is also the owner of the vessel and is well known for his habit of slipping unseen out of small harbours without notifying the authorities of his destination.

You have 20 minutes to decide which 6 people should go in the lifeboat.

Crew/Passenger List:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Captain</td>
<td>Aged 54, alcoholic, smokes 50 cigarettes a day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Mate</td>
<td>Aged 35, keep fit fanatic, left leg severely injured in the blast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ship's Engineer</td>
<td>Aged 45, City &amp; Guilds in Mechanical &amp; Electrical Engineering, National Front supporter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ship's Cook</td>
<td>Aged 25, Chinese, owns a pistol which must stay with him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Mate's Wife</td>
<td>Six months pregnant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Botany Student</td>
<td>Second year, left wing militant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physiotherapist</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Builder's Labourer</td>
<td>Several convictions for GBH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic Priest</td>
<td>Retired, qualified in first-aid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aerobics Instructor</td>
<td>Aged 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bank Clerk</td>
<td>Aged 30, male, scout leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cookery Editor</td>
<td>Women's Own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics Graduate</td>
<td>London School of Economics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sample construction exercise

The Games Manufacturer

You work for a company which has produced board games for many years. Your market has been hit by the rapid growth in computer games software and you badly need a new game that will boost the company's falling profits.

You have been asked to join a project team to address the problem and to report back to the Managing Director with your proposals. Your immediate task is twofold:

1. To produce an outline strategy for the new game (market segment, launch date, etc.).
2. To prepare an initial mock up of a possible game.

You are provided with:

- paper, pencils, rubber and ruler
- scissors
- sellotape
- coloured pens
- elastic bands
- paper clips
- bendy straws
- ping pong balls
- small coins
- flip chart paper

You will have a total of 45 minutes for this initial meeting, at the end of which you will have to demonstrate your idea for the game and explain your outline strategy to the Managing Director.
Further information and help

Practice sessions
To practise most of these exercises you need a group. We run sessions where you can practise and get feedback on your performance. Check on our website for details of the next session. Alternatively you can arrange a practice session for your own group (minimum 6 people). After you have attended an assessment centre, it is worth asking for feedback on your performance, as this is not automatically given and can help you improve your performance in future tests.

Video
You can view the AGCAS DVD At the Assessment Centre in the Careers Centre by arrangement. This shows a real assessment centre taking place, what you can expect and what the assessors are looking for.

Book
Harry Tolley and Robert Wood How to Succeed at an Assessment Centre Kogan Page, London 2007

Websites
For examples of e-tray exercises see: www.faststream.gov.uk
For sample in-tray exercises, psychometric tests and situational judgement tests. You will also find some example exercises, and good advice on attending assessment centres on: www.assessmentday.co.uk
The Prospects includes information about assessment centres: www.prospects.ac.uk under Careers advice > Interview tips
Our own webpages have information about assessment centre activities: www.wlv.ac.uk/careers > jobseeking skills > assessment centres

See a careers adviser
Our Careers Advisers can help you prepare for your assessment centre by talking you through the programme, especially any elements that concern you.

Advisers are available in the Careers Centre on the MD Concourse from Monday to Friday 11:00am – 4:00pm. Special arrangements operate on other campuses. Ring 321414 or see our website for details.

Tell us about your assessment centres
We are always interested to hear about any activities you have encountered at assessment centres, so that we can constantly refine and improve our sessions and materials for the benefit of all our students and graduates.

Titles in the employability series

- Job seeking
- Your CV
- Interview skills
- Effective application forms
- Presentations
- Assessment Centres
- Psychometric Tests
- Making the most of volunteering
- Telephone interviews