The physicist’s guide to assessment centres

A series of booklets to help you in your career
The physicist’s guides are written to assist anyone with a background in physics regardless of what stage they are at in their career – this could be in education or employment.

These guides are unique because the writers have taken into account the skills and abilities that someone with a physics training or background has, so they are specific and relevant to physicists.

We hope that these booklets will be of assistance when you consider your career-development plan.

The IOP wishes you the best of luck in your career. If you require any further information or advice, e-mail members.careers@iop.org.

Other careers guides in this series can be found at www.iop.org/careers.
Some employers adopt an extended selection process that includes attendance at an assessment centre. This may happen after the first round of interviews or may even be used to initiate the selection process. The aim is to give employers a more accurate picture of your behaviour and skills.

Rather than asking you to describe how you have behaved, or might behave, in particular situations, an assessment centre puts you into such situations, where your behaviour can be observed directly.
What are assessment centres?
Larger employers use them routinely, but smaller employers and universities will often run similar events. By seeing you for a longer period of time and getting you involved in a range of different activities, the employer is more likely to see you behaving in a genuine way. This is good news if you get very nervous during interviews because you will have longer to make an impression.

How should you behave?
As with any part of a recruitment process, you should be yourself rather than trying to appear to be what you think the employer is looking for. However, you need to be comfortable because the organisation also needs to be a good fit for you.

The assessment centre will include a range of activities. Even if you feel that some of them are trivial or make you uncomfortable, you must still engage in them and take part to the best of your ability. Don’t be critical about anything that you are asked to do because, whatever your opinion, the activities have been carefully designed to bring out relevant skills.

Assessment centres will normally last one or two days, sometimes with overnight accommodation, and meals with other candidates and employees from the organisation. You should treat every minute as part of the selection process, so don’t relax too much during the apparent downtime because you are almost certainly still being observed.

How should you prepare?
If you have any queries about the assessment centre, contact the person who sent your invitation. Confirm arrival times and find out when you will be free to leave. Then reread your application, CV and any notes from interviews or presentations. As well as being tested during the event, you may have the chance to meet a range of people from the organisation who should be able to answer any questions that you have or give you personal insights into the working environment. Think carefully about what else you need to know about the employer in the event of your being offered a job.

“As with any part of a recruitment process, you should be yourself rather than trying to appear to be what you think the employer is looking for.”
Which activities might you face?

“If you are applying to the department in which you did your first degree, you have an advantage in terms of choosing a subject that you know well and a supervisor whom you think you will get on with.”
Although each employer will develop a unique programme for their assessment centre, there are a number of activities that are likely to feature, as described below.

**Interviews**

You may have a number of interviews or face a panel interview, so be prepared to revisit certain key skills in depth. *The Physicist’s Guide to Interview Techniques* should be of assistance.

**Tests**

You may find tests intimidating if you aren’t familiar with them. Luckily, most university careers services offer the chance to practise the most common kinds of test under realistic conditions. Employers often use numeracy and literacy tests, which measure aptitude, and psychometric tests, that relate to elements of your personal motivation, values and style of working. Aptitude tests are usually judged against a threshold mark that candidates must exceed, but psychometric tests are interpreted in a different way. You should aim to give an accurate and honest picture of who you are. Most tests are designed to make it difficult to “cheat”. Some are used not to select candidates but just to learn more about them, so there are no right or wrong answers. Tests allow employers to learn more about candidates than can be observed at interview. They are also used to ensure that potential candidates will fit the role and enjoy working for the organisation.

**Individual activities**

These might include short case-studies. You might be asked to give an opinion or make a decision, often in writing, that is similar to one that had to be taken by someone in the role that you are applying for. You might also be asked to go through a lot of information and decide what needs immediate action and what has lower priority. With any exercise of this type, be aware of time constraints and make sure that you don’t spend too long looking at each individual piece of information – some may be red herrings.

The employer uses individual tasks to observe your genuine behaviour in a situation that would occur in the job on offer and to see how you approach things. They may also look for signs of commercial awareness (what you know about the organisation and its activities), your attitude towards customers, and how you react to pressure or criticism. Once you start work, you will quickly be dealing with sensitive and important issues, people and situations, so the employer is looking for signs that you have sound judgement and will be a good ambassador.
Group activities

These are likely to include some common tasks, which might be a physical challenge (e.g. constructing a tower from paper); a mental challenge (e.g. deciding which items to select if marooned on a deserted island); or an emotive discussion (e.g. deciding who to throw out of a hot-air balloon). Activities may also be based on real business issues. Employers will be interested in the process by which the group makes decisions and takes actions.

In a team there are a number of different roles that can be adopted. If you don't feel that you are a natural leader in such situations, don't assume that this will put you at a disadvantage. Things that you can do to contribute positively include asking quieter members of the groups for their thoughts, suggesting your own ideas and reinforcing ideas that have been missed by others. Things that you should avoid include criticising others (even if you feel justified), dominating discussions, opting out or muttering at the periphery of the group.

Although you want to stand out, it is important to realise that you won’t gain an advantage by making other candidates look bad. If another candidate makes a poor suggestion during an activity, a dismissive or insulting reaction from you will do you more harm than it will them. It would be better to ask where they think their idea could lead and then ask others for their reactions. The employer will want to see professional behaviour and evidence of consideration for others.

Presentations

The ability to give a presentation is likely to be an important part of most jobs (e.g. reporting to managers, communicating with clients and sharing information with a research group). The invitation to the assessment centre might include details of the topic and duration of the presentation that you will be asked to give. You should prepare according to the guidelines that you are given, particularly in relation to the time. Make sure you practise your presentation in advance. Look for any additional training on presentation skills that you can attend before the event. Somewhere in your institution (e.g. the careers service, the student union or a skills training unit) you will find help.

The employer uses presentations to see your behaviour in a more formal situation. They may ask difficult questions to see how you handle challenges. If the topic is technical, they may be testing your ability to communicate physics and therefore test your understanding of topics that are integral to the organisation. If the audience is mixed, they can also assess how well you communicate with non-specialists.

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Role-plays

These are interactions with one or more representatives of the recruiting organisation. They may be managers, other staff or, less commonly, professional actors hired to play a part. You might be asked to participate in a role-play session where you have to act out the part of a manager in the job and to deal with problems that are task or staff related. Information about the situation will normally be presented at the assessment centre and you will only have a limited amount of time to familiarise yourself with it before the role-play begins.

This is difficult to prepare for but the general advice is similar to group activities. Try not to be aggressive, dismissive or judgemental. Ask questions to ensure that you understand the position of the other person in the role-play, and try to put yourself in their position when considering how to respond.

The employer uses role-plays to see how you interact with other people in controlled situations and how you deal with negotiation, conflict and ambiguous situations. They may also explore how you deal with awkward individuals or challenging questions (i.e. how you manage your behaviour in difficult situations).

Tours

These are often mistaken as a chance to relax a little during the event. The person showing you round the office or laboratory is still part of the recruitment team and may be asked to report back on your behaviour during the tour. This might sound sinister, but it just reinforces the advice to be yourself. The tour guide is often a fairly recent appointee – perhaps someone in a similar role to the one that you are being assessed for – so they can give you a range of opinions on what it is like to work there, describe the induction or training programme, and explain how their career is progressing. Don’t be afraid to ask them about their working environment and what is most and least enjoyable about the job.

The employer will also ask your tour guide about the impression that you made while being shown around. They may not discuss individual questions, but they might say how interested you were in the company and give their opinion on how you might fit in with existing staff.

Social activities

As an impoverished student or graduate, the temptations of free food and drink may be difficult to resist, but remember that your behaviour will still be observed and reports of any late-night antics are sure to reach the ears of the recruitment panel. You are allowed to relax but you should continue to behave in a professional manner. You are also likely to have a demanding day following your night of socialising, so accept that an early night is the best recipe for success.
Final thoughts

Assessment centres may seem an overcomplicated way of deciding on the right candidate for a job, particularly if some of the activities are taken at face value. For most employers, though, seeing you in action, rather than having to believe and interpret what you present on a CV and at interview, substantially increases their chances of selecting the most suitable person for their organisation and the job.

Where can you look for more support?

www.prospects.ac.uk offers a great range of advice, and links to online tests that are similar to those used by major employers.

www.doctorjob.co.uk provides more advice and links to tests. There is also a forum, where specific companies’ recruitment processes may have been discussed by previous candidates.

Some employers invite careers service staff to observe assessment centres. Ask in your careers service for additional insights that they can give you.

Careers services may run “mock” assessment centres with tests, group activities and discussions.

Your institution may offer short residential courses that can help you to develop your teamworking skills and get involved in similar activities to those featured at assessment centres. If you are an undergraduate or masters’ student, try the insight programme at www.crac.org.uk/insight/insight.htm. If you are a doctoral research student, consider attending a GRADschool. See www.grad.ac.uk/gradschools.

Written by Dr Sara Shinton.
Find out more...

More information can be found at www.iop.org/careers.
Contact information
The Institute of Physics
76 Portland Place
London W1B 1NT
Tel  +44 (0)20 7470 4800
Fax  +44 (0)20 7470 4848
E-mail  members.careers@iop.org

www.iop.org