

STAR PERFORMANCE

'Assessment centres? What are they?' you may cry in horror, but fear not, **Janet Cowell** has a wealth of 'insider tips' on how to shine like a star and bag the leading role

An assessment centre is not exactly a place, but rather an event or a process that many organisations use to assess a set of competencies or skills. Some run for half a day while others might last as long as two days depending on the style and requirements of the organisation. One thing is clear though; you need to be successful at the assessment centre to stay in with a chance of getting the job you want. So what are the key things you should know and what will make a difference to your performance?

Typically, assessment centres involve participants completing a range of exercises that are usually based on the requirements of the job. They could include a competency-based interview; role play; group exercise; psychometric testing; presentations or even an e-tray exercise – sometimes known as an in-tray. All these

tests are designed so that the participants have the opportunity to demonstrate the skills required by the job.

From a candidate's point of view, the good thing about assessment centres is that it offers a number of opportunities to demonstrate what you can do. And, if one exercise doesn't go as well as hoped, there are more chances to do better in the next one. Because the exercises are designed around the role it also gives the candidate a chance to evaluate whether the job is right for them. So it isn't just about the employer working out if the candidate is a good fit – it's a two way process.

Prepare to shine

There are two main areas that you can work on to be successful: preparation around the assessments and an awareness of body language – yours and everyone

else's. As soon as you get your invitation to attend the assessment centre, find out which exercises you will be undertaking and the competencies that are being assessed. A good organisation will send the competency definitions in advance as part of the 'candidate support pack'. If not, ring up and ask for further information on the assessments. If they are not available, there are likely to be clues in the advertisement, on the website or within the company values. Typical assessment areas include planning and organising; decision making; team-work; communicating and influencing.

For competency-based interviews, questions will involve providing examples, such as "Give me an example of when you were part of an effective team." The key is to prepare a number of examples for each competency. If you only prepare one answer, it is unlikely that the question asked will match perfectly.

Show confidence

The second area of preparation concerns body language. Keep your tone of voice positive and be aware of your posture – especially when you feel anxious. If you are feeling very nervous make sure this is not reflected in your body language. Hunching over, a lack of eye contact and talking too quietly does not make a great impression.

In any of the group exercises, make sure you monitor the body language of the other participants. Make sure you also smile, nod and acknowledge when others are talking. The organisation is looking for participants to demonstrate behaviours that they would like to see in their workplace. Put yourself in an assessor's shoes and think about what they are looking for. ■

For further information about the selection process visit www.1st-step.co.uk. You can also purchase support cards called 'Succeeding At Assessment Centres' from the website and also at the National Graduate Recruitment Exhibition.

Janet Cowell is Director at Resourcing Matters, an assessment and training company that sponsors www.1st-step.co.uk – a free graduate community website. 1st Step will be running a Mock Assessment Centre at the National Graduate Recruitment Exhibition, Manchester, on 5 & 6 February 2008.