

ACTPS Recruitment Policy and Guidelines

Tool 7 – A Guide to Assessment Methods



When choosing an assessment method/s, preliminary discussions should be had by the selection committee and delegate to determine which method/s is most relevant to the capabilities required for success in the role. All members of the committee should understand the reasons for choosing the method/s, the information sought, and the weighting/value of the chosen methods in relation to the overall assessment of applicants. The committee should also have a common understanding of each of the capabilities being assessed and how the recruitment rating scale will be applied in each case

The Interview

Interviews are still one of the most commonly used assessment methods in recruitment. They provide the selection committee with an opportunity to meet applicants, and are a good way to assess behavioural capabilities, verbal communication skills and technical skills and knowledge. However, before choosing to interview applicants, selection committees should consider whether conducting interviews is in fact the best method and only method of assessment, particularly for non-office-based roles. Collecting evidence from applicants during an interview is an important and complex skill that is developed over time. Should a selection committee decide to conduct interviews, each committee member is required to undertake interview training as required by their Directorate. Please consult with your Directorate HR area for more information.

There are two types of interviews:

- **Structured Interview:** questions or areas for questioning are predetermined in line with pre-defined capabilities and are targeted to gather information relevant to these critical capabilities. The interview includes a strategy or method for scoring and comparing the answers of applicants, such as a rating scale.

Structured interviews are the most common and most valid form of interview, as judgments are formed by evaluating the evidence from an applicant's response against the required capabilities for the position.

- **Unstructured Interview:** questions are unsystematic, and the coverage can vary from one applicant to another. This should only be used where the structured interview has already occurred and as a second interview process where necessary.

When to use an Interview

When verbal communication skills and other behavioural capabilities and/or specific technical knowledge are important to the role, and when it is reasonable to assume that applicants have relevant experience to draw on.

Interviews can be conducted in person, by telephone or through video conferencing.

Preparing Evidence-based interview questions

It is best practice to use evidence-based interview questions. Past experience is an excellent indicator of future performance and behaviour, and asking evidence-based interview questions is an effective way to understand how an applicant is likely to perform in a role.

Evidence-based questions are used to explore an actual example and draw out a detailed description of what the applicant *did* in a particular situation or experience that they have chosen to talk about. It is also an opportunity to explore *how* the applicant performed certain tasks or *why* they behaved in a certain way. These questions specifically probe their work-related experience, skills and expertise. By asking detailed questions about the applicant's thoughts, feelings and actions in past situations, the selection committee gains clear evidence about whether the applicant has the ability to perform the duties of the role they are being interviewed for.

It is important that interview questions relate directly to the critical requirements of the job; are clear and unambiguous, and facilitate comparison between applicants. When asking evidence-based questions, we seek to find out what happened in the situation and the role that the individual personally played in what happened. The other important aspect of evidence-based questions is a focus on skills and behaviours that are going to be important for the role.

The first key to evidence-based interview questions is to ask about a real and specific situation, that the applicant was involved in. The applicant is asked to reflect on a particular event or situation. This allows the selection committee to investigate specific skills and behaviours of the applicants. Evidence-based questions start with phrases such as:

- ***“Tell us about a time when...” or***
- ***“Describe a situation where...” or***
- ***“Give me an example of when you....” or***
- ***“Explain how you have recently...”.***

The second key to evidence-based interview questions is to ask for events that are directly relevant to the role. Refer back to the “What you will do” and “What you require” sections of the Position Description and select the capabilities that are critical to the success of the role. For example, if *Initiative* is important, a question you might ask is *“Give me a recent example of a time where you showed initiative to solve a problem”*.

Follow-up or prompt questions are equally important. These are not asked initially, but used as further probing questions to obtain more detailed information and are dependent on the applicant's answer to the first question. If the applicant has already provided this information, these questions do not need to be asked. Examples are *“What were the circumstances?”*, *“In what way did you show initiative?”*, *“What was the outcome?”*. The selection committee can use these questions to understand the why, how, what, who, where, when of the situation.

Also remember the STAR technique. The follow-up questions can be used to obtain more information about the:

- **The “S”ituation, context, background, problem being solved**
- **The “T”ask, specifics of what was required, by who, when, what?**

- The **“A”ctions**, what the applicant personally did, skills used, approach taken
- The **“R”esult**, outcome, what was achieved? what impact did it have?

For the above example about Initiative, selection committees should be looking at the extent the applicant has taken responsibility for their own actions and made decisions, without referring to others. The selection committee should seek to understand to what extent the applicant has acted on their own initiative in the past.

For further information relating to the development of Evidence-based interview questions, please refer to:

Tool 8 – Examples of Evidence-based Interview Questions

Interview Structure

When preparing to interview applicants it is important that the selection committee create an inclusive and relaxed atmosphere. Careful thought should be given to seating, privacy, lighting, and other aspects that will make the applicants feel relaxed before starting the interview.

For some positions, particularly junior positions where the applicants may not have a lot of experience with interviews, the selection committee can provide applicants with the interview questions for a predetermined period of time before the interview commences. Typically, this is 10 to 15 minutes. Ensure that each applicant receives exactly the same instructions and the interview questions for exactly the same period of time so as not to give any applicant an unfair advantage. Provide them with a pen and paper, so that they can make notes during this preparation time. If the committee prefers not to provide the interview questions before the interview, the printed questions can be provided to the applicant to refer to during the interview. In both cases, always ensure that the applicant returns the questions to the committee!

At interview, welcome the applicant and introduce the selection committee members, and the scribe if one is present, explaining that the scribe will not be participating in the interview and is merely there to take notes. Explain the role of the selection committee in the selection process and clarify how much time is available for the discussion.

Other key points to cover include:

- Give a brief overview of the Directorate, the business area, team if relevant and the role. Mention that the committee will be focussing on the capabilities most relevant to the role;
- Explain that evidence-based questions will be used and they are an opportunity for the applicant to provide you with the information you need to make an informed decision about their suitability to the requirements of the position and relative to other applicants;
- Remind them that they need to provide ACTUAL examples of situations that they were involved in from their past experience;
- Briefly explain what the STAR method is;
- Alert them that you may cut their replies short at times when you have sufficient information;

- Say that you will be taking notes (it's a good idea to provide them with pen and paper so they can do the same);
- Tell them there will be an opportunity for them to ask questions at the end of the interview.

Remember that the process needs to be fair and consistent for all applicants being interviewed. This does not mean that all applicants will have exactly the same follow-up and prompting questions. Some applicants may provide enough information after the first, main evidence-based question for the selection committee to have enough evidence to rate their response. Other applicants may need some probing and a few more questions to provide the information. This does not mean they are an unsuitable candidate, and the selection committee members will need to balance this with keeping the interview process consistent.

At the end of the interview make sure that you invite and answer the applicant's questions and give them the opportunity to add any further points. Clarify the next steps in the selection process, including when they can expect to hear from the selection committee about the outcome of interview.

Practical skills tests

A work sample test or practical skills assessment can provide information about an applicant's ability to perform a specific task/s which simulate the technical requirements of a role. A well-designed practical skills test that assesses skills that are relevant to the role, is a useful assessment method as it is generally easy to relate performance on the test to performance in the role.

It is best practice to use a test that has been developed by a professional test developer. This will ensure that the test is valid, reliable and standardised. If the selection committee or a subject matter expert designs the test, it is really important to understand what the test is assessing and design the test to assess only that. For example, if the test is designed to test Excel skills, do not reduce the time for the task to also assess the applicants' response to pressure, as this detracts from the test's ability to assess the Excel skills. It is also critical that all applicants have exactly the same opportunity to perform the test, ie same time and same resources or equipment.

When to use a Practical Skills Test

When it can be assumed that the applicants to be tested already have some knowledge and/or skills relevant to the technical skills / knowledge required for the role.

If using a practical skills test as well as interview as part of your assessment, consider which one will be done first, and also the location of them. The test should be completed under "test conditions", so apply the same principles as you would to an interview, such as privacy, quiet room, all relevant instructions and equipment.

There are several reputable suppliers of these types of tests, many of them available as online tests that can be used to pre-screen applicants before selecting them for interview. Please refer to your Directorate HR area for advice. Some examples of work sample tests include:

- Excel knowledge test
- Call Centre practical assessment
- Oracle knowledge test
- Advanced Outlook 2016 skills
- Payroll knowledge test

Psychometric tests

Psychometric tests are a standard and scientific method used to measure, amongst other things, individuals' mental capabilities and behavioural style. These standardised assessments are developed by expert Organisational Psychologists and are used to facilitate objective comparison; and are valid and reliable. Psychometric tests are designed to measure candidates' suitability for a role based on the required personality characteristics and aptitude (or cognitive abilities). They identify the extent to which candidates' personality and cognitive abilities match those required to perform the role. The information collected from the psychometric assessments can be used to obtain detailed information about candidates that are difficult to extract from a face-to-face interview. These assessments can include Ability tests (such as Spatial skills, Inductive Reasoning, Numerical Reasoning and Verbal Reasoning), Personality assessments, Emotional Intelligence or 360-degree assessments. Psychometric assessments are usually available as online tests and can be incorporated at any stage of a recruitment process. The results should be interpreted by a trained professional.

All psychometric testing must be approved by the Head of Service (or Delegate). Please consult Directorate HR Delegations schedule or contact the Directorate Strategic HR area for guidance) via a minute. The minute should outline the details of the recruitment process, including how the psychometric testing will be used, what the psychometric test assesses and measures, how the results will be used, and any other relevant information. The signed, approved minute needs to be attached to all requests to advertise a position where psychometric tests will be used, as evidence of approval. Advertisements must advise applicants if psychometric testing will be used as an assessment method.

Assessment Centres

An assessment centre is a selection process that can be used to obtain comprehensive information about skills and capabilities of an applicant or a group of applicants to determine suitability for a role. It is the gold standard of recruitment processes and, due to the high cost and time involved, should only be used for the selection of senior leadership or specialist positions, or used for bulk recruitment processes. This method combines a number of different selection techniques and can be conducted over a few hours, or one or two days.

The key features of an assessment centre are:

- Usually designed and developed by highly skilled Organisational Psychology experts, who will advise on what methods and assessment activities to include;
- A very structured approach, with very clear definitions and descriptions of the capabilities and how these will be assessed and measured;
- Allows applicants the opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities from different perspectives, e.g. verbal communication skills being assessed in a group setting, a one-on-one setting and written communication skills in a written exercise;
- Several applicants are assessed either individually or together;
- Assessment is via a combination of assessment activities (e.g. structured interview, group exercise and role play); and
- There are multiple professional assessors, who are well trained and have a good understanding of the positions being assessed, the capabilities required and how these will be measured.

Assessment Centres are tailored to each position and allows the selection committee to gain a comprehensive insight as to the suitability of the applicants. Depending on the position and the capabilities that are being assessed, an assessment centre can include any of the following assessment activities:

- Group exercise – looks at how applicants communicate, influence and collaborate with other people. It allows the selection committee to see how applicants interact and perform in a simulated team environment. The group is usually given a problem to solve, where they have to share information in order to do so.
- Research or Fact-finding exercise – measures an applicant's ability to interact with someone else and obtain information from him or her, or conduct research to answer questions about a particular topic. This may be combined with a Written Exercise, where that applicant is expected to write up their findings in a convincing way and professionally structured document.
- Role-play – usually involves an assessor acting as an applicant's direct report, client or customer in a simulation of a negotiation exercise, interview or performance appraisal. Applicants are given a briefing before the exercise starts. This allows the selection committee to see how an applicant performs in a hypothetical situation that may occur as part of the position. It is effective in demonstrating an applicant's ability to think quickly and logically and interact and verbalise their ideas in a responsive and professional manner.
- In-tray exercise – mostly used for leadership positions, usually involves a selection of strategic plans, memos, emails, financial statements etc that may be received by the position holder. Applicants are asked to respond to these documents within a time limit, demonstrating their skills in prioritising, decision making, organising, problem solving, communication and delegation.
- Presentation – looks at an applicant's ability to communicate to a group of people. Applicants can be given the topic on the day and should have time to prepare. They may also decide to give the topic a number of days before the assessment day so applicants can be do some research and be prepared when they arrive. This type of assessment is often used in sales and training roles where speaking to groups and formally presenting information makes up a large part of their job
- Evidence-based interviews – allows the selection committee to ask applicants specific questions in line with the capabilities. See details above.

For further assistance please speak to your Directorate strategic HR team or Shared Services Recruitment.

Because the capabilities are being assessed several times, through the use of multiple assessment activities in an assessment centre, it allows the weaknesses of any particular method to be compensated for by the strengths of another, increasing the overall chance of selecting the best applicant/s for the position.

The benefits of using an assessment centre include:

- assessment centres have the highest reliability and validity of different assessment methods;
- it facilitates the efficient comparison of applicants;
- it demonstrates the applicants' strengths and weaknesses in relation to the specific role;
- it ensures objectivity and a merit selection process;
- it allows for further differentiation between closely ranked applicants;
- it allows the selection committee to see how the applicants will fit into the organisational culture and team; and
- it allows the selection committee to observe an applicant's leadership and interpersonal style.

When to use an Assessment Centre

When the nature or complexity of the position requires there to be at least three selection activities used. Most suited to bulk recruitment, senior leadership roles or roles where there have been retention issues.

Referee Checks

While it is not mandatory to conduct referee checks, they may be used by the selection committee to substantiate the evidence collected from the applicant during the earlier stages of the recruitment process. Referee checks can be used to obtain information from a previous manager or supervisor regarding an applicant's work history, to confirm examples cited in an applicant's application or at interview and the referee's view of how the applicant has performed in the past.

It is good recruitment practice to ask the referee to provide specific examples of where an applicant has demonstrated specific capabilities in the past. Merely providing a rating out of 5 doesn't really give the in-depth understanding of the applicant's past performance.

Typically, referee checks are conducted during the final stages of the selection process, unless required to be prepared in advance, by selection committee members. Where a member of the selection committee is providing a reference for an applicant, this reference must be in written form and should be finalised and signed prior to the commencement of the short-listing stage.

Referee comments can be provided in writing or verbally. The advantage of verbal referee comments is that the selection committee can ask further follow-up questions, to gain a better understanding if needed. Verbal references should be recorded and read back to referees for their agreement. If the selection committee requires, they may seek additional verbal comments and/or clarification at any time.

The selection committee should only speak with the referees nominated by the applicant. Should the selection committee wish to speak to a person not nominated, they should seek specific permission from the applicant. If the applicant has not provided their current or a recent supervisor/manager as a referee and permission to contact them is refused, they should be informed that the lack of this reference could affect whether they are selected. This is especially important if the applicant does not provide a manager or supervisor as a referee. You are not obliged to speak to all referees nominated by the applicant.

An applicant must be made aware of any adverse comments made against them by referees and be given an opportunity to respond before further assessment is conducted and a decision is made. Doing so ensures that you comply with procedural fairness.

Where a scribe has been used for interviews, the selection committee may wish for them to obtain referee reports on their behalf. Where this occurs, the selection committee must be satisfied about the content of the report before signing it off and making a recommendation to the delegate.

When conducting referee checks, the selection committee should:

- confirm the information provided by the applicant at interview, such as the applicant's role on a project and verifying the outcome;
- only ask questions relevant to the requirements of the position;
- ensure as far as possible that one of the referees is the current manager or supervisor;
- if a member of the selection committee is a referee, obtain at least one other report. Committee members should compile their written references before the selection process commences.

Referee information should be considered together with all the other evidence and information collected, via all selection methods used, when making a decision regarding an applicant's suitability for a role. Bearing in mind that referee checks are, by their nature, very subjective and merely represents someone's view of the applicant's performance, the information obtained should be considered in this context.

Review

This document is an attachment to the ACTPS Recruitment Policy and Guidelines 2021 and is due for review in line with the policy.

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