

# Group Exercises

In any organisation you will be required to work as part of a group at some point, for example in meetings, on projects, giving presentations, preparing bids etc. Group exercises, where several candidates are given a joint task, are used by many employers to help them ascertain how you operate and perform in a group setting with your peers. Moreover, employers find this an effective way of finding out what type of 'team-player' you are. Are you a regular team-player, a natural leader, or a maverick? Do you tend to be the ice-breaker, the protagonist or the ideas generator in the group? In particular they are interested in the skills and qualities that make you an effective team-player, communicator or team leader. Consequently, this is likely to be the most closely observed part of an assessment centre.

## GROUP DISCUSSIONS

This is the most common type of group exercise. A group of candidates, usually four to eight, discuss one or more topics. These topics are likely to be related to current affairs or an issue relevant to the employer. Increasingly, employers are asking groups to discuss a subject related to a case study you are presented with or asked to read. You will be told how long you have for the discussion. Quite often you will be asked to reach a unanimous decision by the end of the allocated time, but remember that the main objective of the exercise is to observe how you relate to others in the group, not what decision the group comes to.

### Examples of topics used by employers

- There should be a £2m limit on the lottery jackpot.
- This country has too few roads, not too many. What is needed is a proper motorway network.
- Everyone should be made to have a year out between school and university.

### What are the assessors looking for?

During the discussion you will be closely observed by the assessors. The key thing to remember is that the objective of good teamworking is not always to get your own ideas taken on board. They are looking to see how effectively you work in a team and interact with others. The way you contribute is as important as what you contribute so listening to, co-operating with and using the ideas of others to reach a goal are vital.

Assessors are likely to be looking for candidates who can also demonstrate good analytical and logical reasoning skills so try and demonstrate these by:

- showing clarity of thought and expression
- being able to understand and absorb information easily
- being able to identify key points and reach a conclusion
- having the ability to think laterally and produce new ideas.

### Top tips:

- Be the person you are rather than the person you think they are looking for. Second guessing is likely to make you come across as muddled.
- Try to forget the assessors are there; this will prevent them from inhibiting your performance.
- Make regular contributions without appearing competitive or domineering.
- Do not interrupt others or allow yourself to be interrupted.
- When stating your views back them up with reasons.
- Respond constructively to the ideas of others without taking offence if they do not reflect yours.
- Be supportive, sensitive and friendly, encouraging contributions from quieter members.
- Try to focus on the key issues and not get bogged down with the minutiae.
- Use diplomacy and tact to avoid digression.
- Use humour and charm to deflect conflict.
- Lead only when it comes naturally or if instructed to do so.
- If not particularly enthused by the topic remain involved through listening attentively, summarising, moving the discussion forward and timekeeping.

### How to prepare

To contribute to group discussions with confidence you need to be well informed and able to talk about current affairs. Being used to speaking in public can also enhance your performance:

- Read broadsheet newspapers. The weekend papers also provide useful summaries of events.
- Read trade journals, specialist periodicals and check relevant websites to make sure you are up-to-date with any developments affecting the organisation or sector.
- Actively contribute to seminars, tutorials and student union or society/club meetings.

## DISCUSSIONS WITH A LEADER

It is not common but sometimes the assessors assign one candidate as group leader. This is an influential position allowing the candidate to focus and clarify the discussion, encourage contributions, and guide the group to a conclusion. If someone other than you is chosen to be leader, the selectors are usually impressed by supportive, constructive and positive behaviour, and not usually by behaviour which intentionally challenges the leader.

## GROUP TASKS

Sometimes the assessors will ask the group to carry out an activity with a clear goal, rather than discuss a topic. For example, you might have to construct a tower out of plastic bricks or build a bridge using

only paper and rubber bands. Sometimes the exercise has rules to ensure that different members have specialised roles. As with discussions, the assessors are looking to see how well you communicate and co-operate within the group. This is often more important than whether you complete the task or not. Therefore the same principles as for group discussions apply.

**HOW WILL YOUR PERFORMANCE BE ASSESSED?**

Remember that you are unlikely to be in direct competition with other candidates in your group as you are assessed to a standard and not in comparison with each other. It may be that all of you are successful, one or two are successful, or none of you are successful. The assessors will probably assess each candidate against a check list of key skills that they value in the organisation. The example below is from an assessment sheet which has been used by a well-known employer.

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**Communication/Interpersonal Skills**

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1 <input type="checkbox"/>	_	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	_	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	_	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	_	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	_	6 <input type="checkbox"/>
expresses self poorly difficult to understand significantly nervous shows arrogance/superiority			expresses self clearly and concisely speaks at a measured pace without rushing communicates information in an understandable way firm but friendly manner shows interest and enthusiasm, honest and open							

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**Judgement/Assimilating Information**

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1 <input type="checkbox"/>	_	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	_	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	_	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	_	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	_	6 <input type="checkbox"/>
does not consider consequences misinterprets others views introduces irrelevant information misunderstands questions/issues raised thinking appears confused/jumbled makes no attempt to question			thinks through the consequences of possible options interprets requirements in a logical reasoned way concentrates on main issues, avoids superfluous information assimilates relevant information when unsure asks for guidance repeats information to ensure own understanding							

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**FURTHER INFORMATION**

- [www.careerstagged.co.uk](http://www.careerstagged.co.uk) a unique resource designed by the Careers Group. Search the information you want by typing in tag words like 'Assessment Centres'.

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