

Financial Career Insight Series: Assessment Centre Group Exercise

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Most assessment centre group exercises involve a case study. Often this requires choosing 1 of 2 or 3 options e.g. Should XYZ company build a new plant in Brazil, UK or China? The group's recommendation will need to be presented by all group members in a time-pressured environment with each individual speaking for a minute or so.

Whereas arriving at a logical and well-argued conclusion is important, there are key behavioural traits which are, in fact, more important than the case study content and conclusion reached. It is how you interact and work with others that are key.

Most candidates are unaware of this dynamic leaving the well-informed candidate to apply some simple behavioural traits to truly stand out.

Names

As an 'ice-breaker' start the whole exercise by getting other people's names. Simply saying "Shall we go round the table and say our names so we know who we are talking to?" If there are 6 people in the exercise (which is typical) you might only catch 3 or 4 names. It is crucial to write these names down on a piece of paper in front of you in the position they are sitting in. You can then use their names throughout the exercise.

Indeed, when you arrive at the Assessment Centre start collecting people's names and background so you can use throughout the day's exercises i.e. "John, haven't you got a bit of experience in this...do you think it is a good idea if the company did XYZ?"

Timekeeping

Often the case study has a format similar to 15 minutes reading time, followed by 30 minutes to complete the group discussion including the group presentation.

It is rare to see an assessment centre group manage the time constraint well. Often they run out of time with the final group members often failing to get a chance to present.

This situation is solved, and great initiative is shown, if a candidate volunteers to be 'timekeeper'. A simple "Would anyone object if I kept track of the time?" is appropriate. (Who in their right mind is going to object to that question?). It is good to do this as early and as quickly as possible so as to secure this role. If somebody else steps in first, be complimentary; simply say "Good idea" using their first name if possible and then "Can we decide how we are going to best use our time before discussing the topic?" Similarly if you are the timekeeper, initiate the discussion on how best for the group to use its time.

Assuming you have the timekeeping role, if it's a 25 minute group discussion, advise the group when 10 minutes have gone, then 20 etc...also adding as needed "Guys, we need to think about preparing for the presentation".

Note: Any timekeeping role must be in addition to your general participation. Do not fall into the trap of solely being a timekeeper.

Use Whatever Is In the Room

Whether it is a 'whiteboard' or a 'flipchart', they are in the room for a purpose; to be used. Often they are ignored leading to a 20 minute 'discussion' where not much has been agreed and nothing is on the board 5 minutes before a presentation is due!

Again some simple assertive behaviour is required (best not immediately after you have just volunteered to be timekeeper but as the discussion progresses) "Anybody got any objections if I summarise our ideas on the board as we go along?" Again, nobody will object: More likely you will be greeted with "good idea". Then it is a case of simply writing on the board "Option A / Option B" "Advantages / Disadvantages" followed up by "John, what was that good point you made about XYX?"

A further advantage of this is, with you summarising the discussion in conjunction with your team members as you go along, after 20 minutes your presentation is now constructed on the board. This is significantly going to help with the time pressure issue. The group then simply agrees who's going to present "Option A Advantages", who "Option A Disadvantages" etc...(see *Presentation section*).

Note: Do not ask Assessors to use the board – we are looking for initiative!



When using the board write:

- Clearly (so people can read the board during the presentation)
- Not too many bullet points (3 or 4 for each advantage/disadvantage)
- Use a large part of the board

You should aim to do this on job on top of the timekeeper role. At this stage you are beginning to stand out!

Body Language

There is always a lot of information to digest in a short space of time. It's very easy to bury your head in the document and keep flipping through the pages without contributing that much. Contribute but don't dominate. When someone else is speaking show that you are listening to them and digesting their idea rather than just 'waiting to speak'. Responding to their point "so John you are saying XYZ" is ideal behaviour.

Interaction with Others

You want to occupy that middle ground of a healthy level of contribution whilst facilitating a group discussion. You are very likely to get from ill-informed candidates:

- People who try to dominate
- People who ignore other people's ideas

Such individuals don't get hired: Team players are preferred.

Indeed, it is desirable to adopt the opposite tactic by complimenting others multiple times during the discussion e.g. "That's a great Idea John". It will get noticed I assure you. It is even better to build on other people's ideas. "That's a great idea John, what if we took it a stage further and..."

If someone really is dominating significantly, perfectly fine to alter this dynamic in an assertive yet non-aggressive manner "That's fine Tom but I wonder what other members of the group think..."

It is also commendable to invite a quieter member of the group to give his / her comments; a simple "Andrew, what do you think on this point?" will suffice (use a tone that doesn't put Andrew overly on the spot!)

KEY POINT: In all your communication move away from language such as "I think" ... to instead "Guys, what do you think?"...you can actually make the same point but in a 'group inclusive manner'!



i.e. “I think investing in Company A makes sense because of their greater growth potential?” = **WRONG**

i.e. “Guys, what do you think? Does investing Company A make sense because of their greater growth potential?” = **RIGHT**

Note: There are 3 levels of compliments scoring increasingly higher marks with the assessors.

1. I agree with that / That’s a great idea.
2. I agree with you John (this is why getting names at the beginning is important).
3. I agree with John – building on your idea how about XYZ?

If you are struggling to ‘get into the conversation’ a simple “I agree with that Mark” can help your participation levels without interrupting Mark’s flow!

New Information

It is highly likely that at some point during the exercise new information will be given by the Assessors, perhaps a page of A4 thrown on the table. The information is ALWAYS relevant and is testing your ability to be flexible and agile under pressure. Assume the information requires you to change or modify your decision! Don’t stick with your original decision. If the information comes to you, take the initiative “Guys, some new information just arrived, let me read it out *Donald Trump announcement etc...*so what does this mean for us?”

The Presentation

It is normal that all 6 participants are required to participate in the presentation speaking for only 30-60 seconds. Don’t get bogged down endlessly discussing who’s going to present what or what your final recommendation is. If you can’t agree on the final recommendation put it to a vote:

“Shall we put it to a vote? (*Its a rhetorical question!*).Stick your hand up if you vote Option A. Stick your hand up if you want Option B”.

Allocation of presentation roles: ask for volunteers.

“Guys there 6 of us and we could divide this up into 6 roles – four people do the two companies splitting advantages and disadvantages, one the introduction and one the conclusion. Who wants to introduce? Who wants to do Company A advantages etc...”

Timekeeping again! Regardless of whether you have assumed the timekeeping role during the discussion, you should take the initiative to assume the timekeeping during the group presentation (no other candidate will think to do this). These are always the most time-pressured moments as the



clock runs down. If you don't control the time you could be speaker No 5 and not get to speak as the first two speakers go over time! Simply saying "Guys...how about I'll give you a signal or a 'nod' when each person's 1 minute speaking time is up to make sure we finish as a group...sound OK?" should do it. Again, any candidate objection to a good idea like this would look foolish.

Q&A: Expect a couple of questions from the Assessors to the group e.g. "What more information do you wished you had to make your decision?" Try and step forward and answer or if someone else does, try and follow up with a further answer.

Key point: When in this presentation stage body language is key. During your individual presentation make sure you engage all Assessors looking them in the eye as much as possible. Both before and after your own individual presentation contribution, hold your hands comfortably together (no hands in pockets) and look at the presenter who is currently speaking. Stay engaged i.e. look at the current speaker and nod your head a few times in agreement because these are the points you just discussed as a group! Avoid at all costs staring into the corner of the room / showing you are not listening to the current group presenter.

Summary: All the above Assessment Centre points may appear fairly obvious once they have been considered. However, more often than not, candidates have not considered this side of the hiring process and very few have had, or taken, the opportunity to attend a mock assessment centre situation. The latter should be grasped as a golden opportunity if available.

- Get people's names at start
- Volunteer to be timekeeper
- Raise the question of how to structure the time
- Suggest using whiteboard or flipchart
- Compliment others throughout
- Use the language "guys what do you think"
- Maintain good 'listening' body language
- Put decisions to a Vote if the group gets stuck
- Expect new information!
- Volunteer to be a timekeeper during the presentation stage
- Stay engaged with group and Assessors during presentation
- Expect Q&A
- Remember throughout – It's ALL about teamwork!

This document is part of the 17 document Financial Career Insight Series

