

Financial Career Insight Series: Assessment Centre Group Exercises

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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 may need to be presented by all group members in a time-pressured environment with each individual speaking for a minute or two.

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 is key.

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

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".

You should extend your timekeeping duties up to, and throughout, the group presentation. These are always the most time-pressured moments as the clock runs down. Again, simply saying "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" should do it.



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 15 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...

You should aim to do this 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'.

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 very often don't get hired. Team players are preferred.

Indeed, it is desirable to adopt the opposite tactic by complimenting others at least 2 or 3 times in the discussion "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.

All the above 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.

Additional Resources Relating To This Topic:

Opening City Door Financial Career Insight Series

- The Financial Market Career Landscape
- Investment Banking Overview
- Investment Management Overview
- Investment Banking Spring Weeks
- Investment Banking and Investment Management Internships
- Vendors and Rating Agencies
- Preparing For Financial Interviews
- Graduate Programme, Internship & Spring Week Deadlines
- Financial Market CVs
- Financial Market Covering Letters
- Financial Market Company Target Lists (150+ companies by sector)
- Building Your CV From University Day 1
- Assessment Centre Group Exercises
- Financial Career Master Resources Guide

