

How to do well at In-tray and E-tray Exercises

What is an in-tray exercise?

It is a business simulation, usually part of an assessment centre, where you play a member of staff who has to deal with the tasks of a busy day. You will be given a selection of letters, emails and reports in either paper or electronic format, which somebody doing the job might find in their in-tray or email inbox first thing in the morning.

You have to read each item, decide on the action to be taken, the priority to be allocated to it and complete related tasks such as summarising a report or drafting a reply to an email. There is a tight time constraint.

- It will probably start by describing the background scenario. Subject matter is usually related to the job you are applying for.
- There is a lot of work to get through caused by your return from holiday or having to cover the work of an absent colleague.
- Typically you will be given one to two hours to complete the tasks which will consist of a large number of items (perhaps 20 or more) to see how well you can handle several complex tasks in a short period.
- Some tasks may just require a yes or no answer. Other items may need a longer response, such as drafting a reply to a customer complaint, writing a report, delegating tasks to colleagues or recommending action to superiors. You may need to analyse information for some items (calculating budgets or sales figures, using information provided). New items may be added while the exercise is in progress.
- As part of the exercise it's possible you might be asked to make a phone call to a "customer", role played by one of the assessors.
- At the end you may be debriefed by a selector and asked to discuss the decisions you made and the reasons for these or you might be asked to prepare a memo outlining your priorities for action, or make a short presentation.
- In-tray exercises are usually done individually but can be run as a group exercise.

Contents

The in-tray could contain any of the following together with information about the structure of the organisation and your role within it.

Memos

Letters

Letter of complaint

Telephone messages

Emails

Personnel information

Organisation charts

Policy documents

Reports

A calendar

What is the difference between in-tray and e-tray exercises?

- In an **e-tray** exercise the information is **presented on a computer** and all responses are entered on-screen. You have to deal with a series of **emails** (rather than paper-based

materials as in the case of an in-tray). You organise and prioritise these then choose the appropriate action to take and type replies to some emails. Sometimes an e-tray can be part of an on-line application.

Why do employers use in-tray exercises?

- **They allow employers to check how well suited you are to a particular work role.** They are designed to represent the tasks that employees usually encounter in the job, and therefore provide evidence on a variety of relevant skills. Job interviews are notoriously unreliable when used on their own to select staff as at interview candidates may alter their behaviour to satisfy expectations.
- **In-tray exercises allow employers to simulate working attitudes.** Exercises that require candidates to perform typical job tasks are a good predictor of job performance. They can find out if you can analyse facts and figures, prioritise information and make good decisions under pressure: qualities not easily demonstrated at interview.
- Employers using in- tray or e- tray exercises in graduate recruitment tend to be **large organisations which recruit substantial numbers of graduates** such as the Civil Service Fast Stream, KPMG, Deloitte, and Citigroup.
- According to Personnel Today magazine, there has been a decline in in-tray exercises used by organisations in assessment centres being used in only 15% of assessment centres.

Tips

To perform successfully you will require the ability to:

- **Take in information quickly and accurately. Analyse problems using logical and critical thinking.**
- **Identify key issues and prioritise effectively.**
- **Evaluate relevant factors**
- **Make rapid accurate decisions**
- **Assess possible problems**
- **Plan and implement solutions**
- **Be aware of resource constraints**
- **Manage time and tasks efficiently**

Tips

- **First read carefully through the background information.** Pick up clues about the organisation; this should help you decide what is considered to be particularly important to the organisation.
- **Follow the written instructions carefully,** especially what you are required to do.
- **Make a rough plan** before answering the actual questions in the exercise.
- **Quickly read all the items before you start any of them** because later tasks may influence your decisions.
- **Prioritise the tasks in terms of importance and urgency.** You may need to balance these two elements carefully.
- **Identify key issues, what action to take,** how, by whom and when, and give your reasons. Tasks are often inter-related, so your response to one may affect another.

- **Focus on key points** not the details. Don't be distracted by irrelevancies.
- **Stay calm:** this exercise is about showing you can cope with pressure.
- **There isn't usually a right or wrong answer** but you have to show an understanding of the issues and offer reasons for decisions.
- **Sometimes you won't be given complete information and you will have to make assumptions.** Just do your best with what information you've got.
- **Work quickly and accurately and keep a note of the finish time.**
- **Give reasons for your decisions** and say why you would allocate certain priorities. The recruiter is looking for clues about how you would cope with a 'real work' situation.
- **Who is the message from? What is their importance to the organisation?** Are they **internal** (staff) or **external** (customers, suppliers, bankers) to the organisation? Do they represent unions, government, newspapers, regulatory bodies, accountants, or factory inspectors?
- **When is the item dated?**
- Is there a **deadline**? Is there any flexibility with this? If unclear can you get clarification or negotiate extra time?
- **How important is the issue?** You might be able to ignore unimportant items. What area of the organisation's business is involved: the supply chain, factory operations, cash flow, a legal matter, health and safety issues, relations with unions, other businesses, competitors, the organisation's PR or customer satisfaction?
- **Don't try to do everything yourself.** Are you the most appropriate person to deal with a task or should a task be **delegated** to a junior member of staff; **forwarded** to a more appropriate colleague; **deferred**, or **prioritised** as urgent? What is the person's level of responsibility?
- **Do other tasks have to be done first** before other activities can be completed?
- **Can some tasks be done simultaneously** and/or by the same person?
- **Are there conflicts** between tasks?

On-line Examples you can try

Assessment Day www.assessmentday.co.uk/in-tray-exercise.htm Excellent example in-tray exercise with model answers.

KPMG In-tray Exercise - Edinburgh University (simple example)