WHAT IS AN IN-TRAY EXERCISE?

An in-tray is a business simulation exercise in which you will deal with a large number of items such as internal and external memos, telephone and fax messages, e-mails, reports and correspondence, together with information about the structure of the organisation and your role within it.

You are expected to prioritise and take decisions on each item: drafting replies, delegating tasks or recommending action to superiors, and so on. Often time constraints are built into the exercise so effective time management is essential.

WHY DO EMPLOYERS USE IN-TRAY EXERCISES?

In-tray exercises can be useful in recruitment because they:

- can be designed to be representative of the tasks that people typically encounter in the role, and are therefore quite realistic
- provide evidence about a variety of competences such as decision making, analytical skills, problem solving, working under pressure and written communication skills

In-tray exercises are most usually incorporated into employers’ assessment centres, although may be used at other stages of the selection process.

Employers currently using in-tray or e-tray exercises in their graduate recruitment processes include KPMG, Deloitte, Thames Water, the Civil Service and Citigroup amongst others.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AN IN-TRAY AND AN E-TRAY?

It is becoming more common for the information in an in-tray to be presented electronically on a PC or laptop, in order to reflect the reality of working life. In these circumstances, the exercise may be referred to as an e-tray. However, whether it is a paper or electronic version, the basic principles of the exercise remain the same.

WHAT MIGHT AN IN-TRAY EXERCISE INVOLVE?

Typically, you will undertake the role of member of staff within an organisation. The scenario may be that you have just returned from holiday or you have been asked to cover the workload of a colleague who is off sick – hence the reason for the build up of workload in the 'in-tray'.

Your task will be to prioritise and deal with the items in the in-tray. Some items may require only a quick response, for example, a 'yes' or 'no' response to a query. Other items may require a longer response, such as drafting a written response to a customer complaint. You may also be required to carry out analysis of information in order to deal with some of the items (this could be working out budgets or sales figures, based on information provided). Items are often inter-related, so that your response to one may impact upon another.

Electronic exercises are becoming more interactive – don't be surprised if e-mails appear in your inbox as the e-tray progresses.

In some cases, you may be asked at the end of the exercise to discuss the decisions you made and the reasons behind them with an assessor.
TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- Follow instructions carefully – don’t be tempted to rush ahead without being clear what you have to do
- Make sure you read through all the items before you start writing – you will need this overview to be able to plan your responses
- Use the time well – prioritisation is vital, as you will be under time pressure. Make sure that you deal with the most important and urgent items first, so that any critical issues are not left until the end
- Don’t let seemingly urgent but trivial matters outweigh issues which are less urgent but which are nevertheless more important
- Delegate appropriately – if you feel that some tasks could be carried out by another member of staff ensure you state who it is being delegated to and why. Don’t delegate important tasks which fall within your own responsibility
- Look for links between items – and refer to these when giving your responses so that the assessor can see you have recognised them
- Look out for conflicts or clashes between items – agreeing to attend an event for example, may clash with an important meeting outlined in another item
- Keep your responses clear, response and jargon free – if appropriate, include a note of the rationale behind your decisions

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION AND PRACTICE

Books:


Chapter 6 provides advice and guidance on an in-tray exercise, along with a short sample exercise.


This book aims to guide potential applicants through the recruitment process by explaining why assessment centres are conducted, what employers are looking for and what to expect on the day.

On-Line:

Information on Prospects website at: http://www.prospects.ac.uk/ (Click on ‘Applications and Interviews’, followed by ‘Assessment Centres’ in the Jobs and Work section)

Information on Doctorjob website at: http://doctorjob.com/careersadvice/ (Click on 'Assessment Centres')

Civil Service Example e-tray at: http://faststream.gov.uk (Click on How to Apply, then Example e-tray)

PwC Example e-trays (3 different types according to job role) at: http://www.pwc.com/uk/eng/carinexp/graduate/home.html (Click on 'Interact with us')

University of Birmingham Careers Network– a short e-tray exercise is available to current students via WebCT. Please ask at Careers Network Reception for further information.

Other:

Read students’ comments and advice on in-trays and other assessment exercises in:

‘Assessment Centre Survey’ file available in the Job Seeking Information section of Careers Network.