Advanced Assessments Ltd

Horizon
Future Managers Programme

How to do well and get ahead: in selection tests & assessment centres
Participant's Manual

Horizon Programme – Assessment Centres Participant's Manual
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The British Psychological Society

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ASSESSOR BRIEFING PACK

HR Business Partner and HR Officer Assessment Centres

This pack provides the assessor materials required in relation to fictional   HR Business Partner and HR Officer roles in Example City Council. The purpose of this Assessment Centre is to predict future performance and identify which of the candidates is most likely to perform best if offered the post(s) in question.

Overall, the aim was to bring together and design exercises that are relevant, challenging and acceptable to candidates. More specifically, the criteria used to select the exercises were:

o   that the commercially available psychometrics had a good psychometric pedigree, i.e. good predictive validity across a range of professional contexts with 'norm' groups that were relevant to these roles;

o   that there was little or no adverse impact, i.e. that exercises did not discriminate unfairly against minority ethnic groups or those for whom English is a second language;

o   that the exercises had sound content validity – this is the degree to which the intellectual operations required to do well in the exercise are directly relevant to the skills required to be an effective HR Business Partner or HR Officer;

o   that the exercises had high face-validity, i.e. they appeared to measure something of value – a key measure of the success of a recruitment programme is the degree to which candidates feel they have been fairly assessed;

o   that the exercises were sufficiently challenging;

o   that candidates and assessors easily understood the exercises and the assessor scoring guide was easy to use; and

o   that the exercise outputs could map onto the Example City Council Competency Framework and be developed from the person and job specifications.

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Key Points for Assessors

It is important when running assessment centres to pay attention to detail, including the candidate's experience. They can be a stressful experience for anyone but there are a few things that we can do to help put candidates at ease.

Each activity has its own administration procedures, but certain considerations and protocol prior to completion of any activity should include the following:

o Welcoming them/asking them to make themselves comfortable – checking that the room is not too hot or cold, telling them where the toilets are, asking them to turn their mobile phones off, providing basic refreshments: water is essential in all the rooms.

o Briefly explaining the purpose and rationale for the exercises, for example, designed as a work sample to reflect certain aspects of what they might be expected to do on the job.

o Letting them know how long the session will last.

o Explaining about confidentiality and when selection decisions are likely to be made.

o The administrator's manner should become more formal once the test papers have been handed out or the activity has started.

o Ensuring that there is a clock in the room so that candidates can pace themselves.

o Ensuring candidates are not disturbed e.g. 'do not disturb' or 'interview in progress' signs on doors.

o Ensuring that candidate's have clearly labeled their paperwork with their name/number, as appropriate, and that all papers related to the exercises are collected before they leave

o Making sure all required reasonable adjustments are in place.

o Ensure all candidate information is kept secure at all times – even when going for coffee or to the lavatory. It should only be shared with your fellow assessors and others who may have a legitimate need to know.

o As well as the contents of this guide, assessors should ensure they are familiar with are the key Example City Council competencies for these roles and the exercises that will be used to assess them.

o We believe it is important to review the success of our work and learn from experience. As part of our commitment to continuous learning and development we would value your feedback at the end of the process.

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Assessment Skills

Experience has shown that the most effective method for assessing behaviour is the ORCE model, an acronym derived from the initial letters of the four activities involved – observing, recording, classifying and evaluating. The general process may need to be adapted slightly according to the particular activity or exercise being assessed, but has been proven particularly effective for 'live' exercises.

The four activities
are:

- **Observe** – look and listen carefully to the candidate's behaviour – what they say and do and how they say and do it.

- **Record** – note down the behaviours that you see/hear without interpreting or evaluating it. As far as possible everything that is observed is recorded.

- **Classify** – review the observed and recorded behaviours, and allocate them to the appropriate competencies.

- **Evaluating** – sometimes called rating, this final stage weighs up the behavioural evidence against the competency framework and rating scale to award scores.

The first two stages are normally done in quick succession in 'live' assessment situations. Observing behaviour correctly and recording this 'behavioural evidence' are crucial to assessing people objectively. By knowing what a person actually did and the words that he or she used, it is possible to draw valid conclusions about that person's likely effectiveness in a given job.

Observin g

Behaviour is "what someone says or does, or does not say or do when something is expected of them". Therefore what you are looking for as an assessor is not just what candidates do, but also what they fail to do under certain circumstances.

The challenge when observing in an assessment situation is to avoid the tendency to jump to conclusions and start evaluating what is being observed. It is astonishing how easily people can be confused about what they truly observe; many so-called observations are littered with judgmental comments that reflect the biases, prejudices and interpretations of the observer. For example, remarks such as 'wasn't interested', 'wasn't listening', he was 'bored' are invariably based on assumptions, and are not supported by any tangible observations.

Recording

Noting behavioural evidence accurately is also important for two other reasons. First, a person's capacity for retaining information is limited. Up to 90% of new information is typically forgotten within 24 hours. If assessors record the evidence immediately it happens, then it is preserved for

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later retrieval. Secondly, having a written evidence record is advisable from a legal point of view in work contexts in case assessment decisions are contested.

Prepare yourself before recording evidence, so that you can focus on what the candidate is saying or doing. Make sure you have plenty of paper and a couple of pens. We will provide you with a choice of templates for recording the group exercise – you might also find that noting each time 5 minutes elapses can help you to see at how involved the candidate was at different points during the exercise.

If you have the facility, it can be useful to enter your recorded data onto a computer after you have produced a written summary of it. You can set up a document file on each candidate to record the evidence for each competence assessed in each exercise. This can help when producing written feedback reports for candidates, as evidence can be cut, pasted and edited from the file of evidence collected on their performance. Note that electronic files should be stored carefully to ensure confidentiality.

Classifying

Classifying is the analysis of the evidence obtained through observing and recording behaviours during assessment exercises or interviews. It involves sorting the recorded behaviour on the basis of the Example City Council competencies, deciding which behaviours provide evidence on which competency, and grouping the evidence to provide a summary of how the candidate has demonstrated that competency overall. Classifying is not as simple as might be supposed. It requires you to identify the behaviours that are relevant to the competencies and to ignore the rest. To do this accurately requires a good knowledge of both the competences and the assessment exercises.

A method of classifying

You may find the following method useful:

o Decide which competency you are going to assess. Read the definition again so that you are clear about what behaviours you are looking for.

o You will have your evidence source on paper, either as your recorded observations in note form or as a written script. Search for positive and negative evidence relevant to that competency

o When you come across an example of one of the behaviours you are looking for, circle it and indicate with a letter code which competency it relates to. Then use a plus or minus sign to indicate whether the 'evidence' you have found is a positive or a negative indication of the competency.

o You may then need to transfer your evidence in the form of summarised statements to a summary results form. When doing so, check that you have the correct form and make sure that the source of the evidence is clear.

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Evaluating

The final stage in the process of assessing a candidate's performance is to evaluate the classified behaviours – this is most commonly achieved with the use of a numerical and verbally-defined marking or 'rating' scale.

When evaluating, it is important to consider the opportunities afforded by the assessment exercises for demonstrating the competencies as well as the amount of positive and negative behaviour actually shown. Ratings can be given for the demonstration of competencies within individual exercises and across exercises according to the scale below.

As far as possible try to give a whole score rating. This will enable an average to be taken of the behavioural indicator ratings, which can be used as an overall mark for that competency in the exercise.

However, a note of caution: there is always the risk when assessing that the focus on the indicators (which are examples of the behavioural expressions of the competency) becomes too detailed and blinds you to the bigger picture. Behavioural indicators simply suggest where the evidence for a competency could come from. When using a competency as the yardstick to assess a candidate performance, it is important to return to the 'high level' description of the competency to avoid 'missing the wood for the trees'.

Therefore: a two-stage approach is suggested to avoid this occurring. Firstly, to give a provisional mark based on the detailed analysis of the evidence and an average of the indicator ratings (i.e. a bottom-up approach). Secondly, to re-read the overall (top line) description of the competency (or the key aspects of it) and ensure that you are comfortable that your rating reflects this (a top-down approach). If it does not (and gut instinct can be useful here), you need to go back and re-visit the evidence to work out why there is this mismatch until you are satisfied.

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Common Assessor Biases

It is inevitable that your own attitudes towards work and society will have an effect on how you assess candidates.

A number of common assessor biases have been identified, which may lead an assessor to be biased in favour of or against a candidate. Biases in either direction result in a reduction in the objectivity of the assessment process and consequently, may mean that candidate evaluations are unduly influenced by 'irrelevant' factors.

1. **Central Tendency:** This is the tendency to go for the 'easy option' by only using ratings in the middle of the scale and not scores at the extreme ends of the scale (i.e. 1 and 5), which may require more justification.
2. **The Logical Error:** This is the tendency to score a candidate highly on two criteria that seem to be logically related, but in fact are more often not.
3. **The Error of Leniency:** This is the tendency sometimes seen with less experienced assessors to demonstrate undue leniency, which is usually prompted by a lack of confidence causing them to err on the side of caution.
4. **Stereotype Effect:** This is the tendency to make positive or negative judgements on the basis of surface characteristics.
5. **Halo/Horns Effect:** This is the tendency to assume that because a candidate is good in one exercise or one criterion, that he or she will be good in others.
6. **The Mirror-Image Error:** This is the tendency to recruit in one's own image – to assume: "I know I'm good, therefore to be good, they must be like me".
7. **First Impressions:** This is the tendency to let first impressions cloud subsequent judgement of a candidate.
8. **Rushed Decision Making:** This is the tendency to spend insufficient time evaluating candidates.

The use of this structured process ensures that these attitudes have as little impact as possible on the evaluations that are made and that the assessment of candidates is as objective as possible, focusing assessors on job-relevant criteria at all times. It is also important for us to be aware of your own likes and dislikes. This awareness will enable us to impartially examine the other person's background and attitudes.

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Diversity and Fairness in Assessments

Sankofa are dedicated to the ethics of diversity in all aspects of their work, and have a code of practice that states that we are committed to the principles of equality of opportunity, and will adhere to transparent and standardised procedures in the conduct of assessment and selection processes for all candidates. In the case of disabled applicants who identify themselves at the application stage, reasonable adjustments will be offered to enable such candidates to compete on an equal basis.

The ability of each candidate to perform the job description will be compared objectively against the selection criteria for that job, and all candidates will be assessed in the same way. Information sought from candidates and passed to those responsible for appointments will relate only to the qualifications for or requirements of the job as outlined in this assessment process.

When considering diversity, we naturally tend to concentrate our thoughts on the most obvious factors of gender, disability, ethnic origin and age. However, it is equally as important to be aware of the differences between, for example, our values, social class and working styles and that of the candidate, can influence our decisions as assessors. The following provides guidance around what assessors can do to ensure that they are applying good practice in the assessment role.

Fairness in the assessment process is present when assessors are aware of and guard against the way in which their assumptions and biases can creep into their decision-making.

How unfairness can occur
In addition to the most common assessor biases already mentioned, here are some related more directly to diversity:

1. Premature decisions
A common mistake when assessing candidates is to rush to judgement instead of collecting more evidence. Assessors should be aware of this natural tendency to make premature decisions and of its adverse effect on impartial observation, evidence gathering and interpretation.

2. Different probing
Assessor should probe all relevant areas with all candidates to ensure consistency. Probing different areas based upon assumptions or stereotypes of a candidate should be rigorously avoided.

3. Different rapport
Assessors establish a better rapport with some candidates than others. It is important to remember that regardless of the rapport you have established with a candidate, you must treat them the same and remain objective in your observing/decision making.

4. Different Interpretation
Where expectations exist about a candidate, it is easy to interpret the same evidence as positive for some and negative for others. This usually happens when an assessor possesses a particular stereotype, or has formed an impression about a candidate.

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5. Lowering standards for minority candidates

Assessors may occasionally feel tempted to adapt their scores for particular groups of individuals, but must avoid giving someone the benefit of the doubt in a way that they would not do for an over-represented group.

6. Comparing candidates

In a group of poor candidates, an average candidate can appear much better in comparison. It is important that assessors remember to assess candidates against Example City Council's standard, rather than each other.

7. Influence of negative information

There is a common tendency for negative information to be weighted more strongly than positive information. This can lead to candidates with more variable performance being evaluated as performing less well than they should be compared to a more even performer.

8. Inaccurate recording

Everything that is recorded should be based upon what has been observed and should be accurate and objective evidence. Where there is no evidence on some aspect of a particular candidate's performance, do not confuse this with poor performance.

What assessors can do to minimise adverse impact

As well as applying the assessment model to maintain objectivity assessors can also:

1. Examine your own behaviour styles, beliefs and attitudes

It is important to examine the sorts of stereotypes and assumptions you may hold and to bear in mind that this refers not only to stereotypes of, and assumptions made about, ethnic minorities or women, but all forms of bias that can enter into decision-making.

2. Consider your own feelings and reactions to people who are different

Consider your own feelings and reactions to people, particularly if you find these individuals cause you irritation or annoyance. Try to explore objectively why they might cause this response.

3. Try to see things from other people's perspectives

When trying to see things from others' perspectives, remember the fact that people from other communities and cultures may have different perspectives from our own on certain issues and this does not necessarily mean they are wrong.

4. Examine your own communication style

Examine your own communication style by asking 'to what extent are you open to new views, ideas, way of working, etc?'

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The Competencies: What will be assessed

HR Business Partner

Communication and Influencing

Communicates clearly and persuasively both orally and in writing, expressing their views coherently and succinctly and defending their points appropriately. Actively participates in discussions, and influences by skilful presentation of arguments and adaptation of language and style. Negotiates with a range of stakeholders to achieve objectives and ensure alignment with Example City Council policies, without alienating others. Listens to others and checks for understanding.

Personal Orientation

Open, honest and generates trust – prepared to admit they don't know everything, shows a desire to meet expectations with integrity and treats people consistently and with respect. Takes the initiative to contribute proactively to project work and adopts a positive attitude, with a professional demeanour in pressurised or difficult situations. Demonstrates awareness of their strengths and areas for development – monitors their own performance, actively seeks feedback and looks for ways to maintain their own continuing professional development and improve their skills.

Builds Positive Working Partnerships

Uses interpersonal skills to build rapport with others, shows integrity in relationships; uses understanding of the motives, concerns and situations of others to encourage them to give of their best and achieve goals; values diversity and seeks opportunities to advocate its benefits. Puts energy into building strong and positive working relationships with managers and staff. Works constructively with colleagues and external partners whatever their background to develop and deliver effective policies, products and services. Approachable, open and engaging in collaboration with others.

Leadership, Management and Coaching

Provides strong leadership to the team and manages people's performance and motivation on a day-to-day basis, demonstrating energy and enthusiasm about the HR proposition. Gets the best out of people by giving clear direction, offering support and encouragement, treating everyone fairly and valuing diversity. Provide coaching to managers to enable them to handle problems and resolve matters relating to the management of people. Uses a coaching approach to develop people to the next level, beyond their comfort zone. Clearly understands and articulates how HR strategy can deliver Example City Council organisational outcomes.

Business Focus and delivery

Understands the business and seeks appropriate solutions in accordance with best practice, Example City Council policies and the legal framework. Looks at the bigger picture within which the HR function operates and is able to see the impact on the business as a whole. Ensure local changes are implemented effectively and that issues are resolved quickly. Support the development and

implementation of HR projects and processes and makes sure that business decisions focus on improving customer experience and developing loyalty. Is able to anticipate organisational needs, assess and take appropriate business risk, and is tenacious and practical in seeking to deliver effective outcomes.

Knowledge and Expertise

Has specific, relevant knowledge and expertise relating to the role of HR Business Partner and is flexible in adapting HR activities to Example City Council context. Develops and maintains knowledge of the HR System to provide guidance to managers, as well as identify and resolve issues at an early stage. Stays abreast of information to be able to keep the senior HR Business Partner and other HR team members informed of current casework and live issues. Ensures that all relevant employment and discrimination law requirements are taken into consideration when advising managers.

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HR Officer

Planning and Organising

Plans and organises work activities, reviewing and prioritising as necessary to meet deadlines and expectations; is proactive and uses initiative when problems arise or progress is slow; takes a lead and encourages others when appropriate; shows resilience under pressure and does not let setbacks affect their performance or relationships. Consistent and process driven. Always carry out the basic fundamentals of HR practice and complete all that is required. Prioritises activities effectively, even when under pressure. Ensuring the successful achievement of results through the effective planning and management of resources, which are in line with the organisation's strategic direction.

Personal Orientation

Open, honest and generates trust – prepared to admit they don't know everything, shows a desire to meet expectations with integrity and treats people consistently and with respect. Takes the initiative to contribute proactively to project work and adopts a positive attitude, with a professional demeanour in pressurised or difficult situations. Demonstrates awareness of their strengths and areas for development – monitors their own performance, actively seeks feedback and looks for ways to maintain their own continuing professional development and improve their skills.

Effective Communication

Communicates clearly and persuasively both orally and in writing, expressing their views coherently and succinctly and defending their points appropriately. Actively participates in discussions, and negotiates to achieve objectives without alienating others. Listens to others and checks for understanding.

Builds Positive Team Working Relationships

Act as an ambassador for the HR team, using interpersonal skills to build rapport with others. Works effectively as a member of a team, showing commitment to team goals and supporting management and employees throughout Example City Council and collaborative organisations. Actively works at building strong and positive working relationships with colleagues and external partners whatever their background to develop and deliver effective policies, products and services

Commitment to Customer Service

Understands the needs and priorities of customers inside and outside the organisation and shows the desire to meet their expectations. Persistent in solving problems for customers - exhaust all avenues to find a solution. Builds instant rapport with customers by demonstrating empathy and consideration for their likely reactions. Interested and motivated to understand customer needs and exceed them. Works to build effective relationships with all customer groups, external and internal.

Knowledge and Expertise

Has specific, relevant knowledge and expertise relating to the role of HR Officer. Develops and maintains knowledge of the HR System to provide guidance to managers, as well as identify and

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resolve issues at an early stage. Stays abreast of information to be able to keep the senior HR Business Partner and other HR team members informed of current casework and live issues. Ensures that all relevant employment and discrimination law requirements are taken into consideration when advising managers.

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The Exercises: How the competencies will be assessed

The exercises that will be used during the assessment centre to measure the suitability of candidates for the Example City Council HR Business Partner and HR Officer roles are:

Verbal Reasoning Test

Both roles require the ability to understand, analyse and interpret written information, often of a complex or specialised nature. Both groups will be compared to a norm group of Graduates and Managers

Personality Questionnaire

A some time during the Horizon programme you will be asked to complete the Occupational Personality Questionnaire. These will be administered online by a member of the Sankofa team and assesses the individual preferred styles of working. These instruments provide reliable measures of how an individual is likely to relate to others, conduct tasks and what drives and motivates them. Their profile scores will then be mapped onto Example City Council core competences for that these HR roles and your real job role and helps identify potential risk areas that may require further probing for evidence at the interview.

An Electronic in-tray (E-tray) Exercise

This is a work simulation exercise designed to simulate a job-relevant task and elicit job-relevant skills and competencies. The following are brief descriptions of the exercise scenarios.

- o **HR Business Partner**
  The Candidate assumes the role of a Factory Personnel Manager of a leading motor components manufacturer. The role requires them, supported by a small team, to be responsible for all HR matters at several sites and this entails managing a wide range of correspondence, from various levels within the organisation. The issues raised relate to selection, appraisal, training & development, internal communications, rewards and disciplinary matters. Candidates are not required to display specific knowledge of HR practices or legal principles, beyond what would be expected of any line manager.

- o **HR Officer**
  The Candidate is asked to imagine themselves as a Graduate Trainee at Midshires Consulting, a large accountancy and professional services firm. The scenario involves the Candidate returning from a training course to find that their in-tray is full of emails, circulars and reports as well as information regarding future meetings and presentations. The object of the Exercise is to prioritise and organise the items in a structured and considered way.

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A Group Exercise

This exercise is designed to assess social skills and confidence, ability to work in a team and influence the direction of a discussion. A full assessor guide for this exercise will be provided. The following are brief descriptions of the exercise scenarios.

- o **HR Business Partner**
  Candidates meet as members of a Diversity Panel working for a local authority. Findings from a recent diversity survey have shown that most employees do not feel valued by the organisation and some individuals feel they have been discriminated against. Furthermore, there is concern that the workforce is not reflective of the population as a whole. The candidates have to discuss issues relating to the survey findings and decide on the best way to implement a series of new government initiatives in accordance with changes in Equal Opportunities legislation.

- o **HR Officer**
  Candidates meet as members of a quality circle team within a District Council Office. As a panel they have collective responsibility to assist a wider group of colleagues, namely helping to resolve pressing office problems. Their specific task is to make recommendations for handling: a neighbourhood dispute, a planning permission request, the use of an open public space and the rescheduling of waste services. A team approach is required for final recommendations.

A Competency based Interview and Presentation

This is a style of interviewing that is used to enable candidates to show how they would demonstrate certain behaviours/skills in the work place; by answering questions about how they have reacted to and dealt with previous work place situations. This is also the opportunity to elicit evidence on their Knowledge and Expertise for the role.

Candidates have been asked to prepare a 5-minute presentation to be delivered at the start of the interview. The titles are:

- o **HR Business Partner**
  "How can HR add value to the business?"

- o **HR Officer**
  "Why do we need HR?"

As with the Group Exercise, a full assessor guide will be provided.

For details of the competencies assessed in each exercise see the Assessment Matrices at the end of this guide.

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Rating Scale: How performance on the exercises are evaluated

Scoring of the exercises is made against a standard 1 to 5 marking frame. Assessors should mark the candidate's performance against each competency as follows, in relation to the level required for the role(s) being assessed.

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Mark	Description
5 – (Excellent/near perfect performance in this competency)	Consistently strong positive evidence seen across the competency indicators, which far outweighs any slight shortcomings. Very good performance that surpasses the acceptable level achievement for this competency.
4 – (More than an acceptable performance in this competency but does not have to be perfect)	Good to strong positive evidence seen across the key competency indicators. There may be some negative evidence but this is slight or occasional, but in any event is easily out weighed by the positive. Overall, a good to very good performance, which indicates a more than acceptable achievement in this competency.
3 – (satisfactory / an acceptable performance in all important respects)	Positive evidence seen across most of the competency indicators although there may be some inconsistency in performance (e.g., candidate may sometimes fail to show sufficient positive evidence). Some negative evidence although this is relatively minor and is outweighed by the positive. Overall the candidate's performance was acceptable.
2 – (Needs some development / less than satisfactory)	Some positive evidence seen, but this was insufficient, or the positive evidence was outweighed by the negative evidence. The candidate's performance showed too many weaknesses for this competency and needs further development to perform at an acceptable standard. Overall, performance is generally below the standard required for this competency.
1 – (Below the standard / needs a lot of development)	Little positive evidence seen for this competency or candidate demonstrates significant negative evidence. On balance, a weak (very little positive evidence) or unacceptable performance (significant negative evidence), which indicates that the candidate is well short of the required standard for this competency.

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Agreeing criteria for passing/failing the assessment centre

Grade	Meaning	Relation to overall scores
A	Excellent candidate, well exceeds the standard for the competencies in all areas	All 5s and 4s, more 5s than 4s
B	Very good candidate, exceeds the standard for competencies in all areas	Some 5s, mainly 4s, one 3 (max)
C	Good candidate, meets, or exceeds, the standard in every competency area	4s and 3s, more 4s than 3s
D	Acceptable candidate, meets the standard for most competencies, may need some development	More 3s than 4s, maybe one 2, but only if balanced by at least one 4 and not in key areas
E	Below acceptable, meets the standard in some competencies, but would need too much development	Two or more 2s, or one 2 in a crucial area
F	Well below acceptable, meets the standard in a few competencies only	Mostly 2s and 1s, perhaps one to two 3s

Where a candidate achieves '3' or above on every competency, they should be seen to have passed the assessment centre. This does not necessarily mean they will be offered a role, however, as the results for other competing candidates may indicate they are even more suited to the requirements. Where a candidate scores two or more '2' ratings or below, they should be considered to have failed the assessment as they have demonstrated a wide range of development needs. Additionally, where a candidate shows a '1' rating on any competency they may also be failed at the discretion of the assessors, given this would indicate significant development would be needed to perform in the role.