

Psychometric tests

Psychometric tests are a method used by some recruiters to assess your suitability for the role. They involve answering a series of questions online within a certain time limit and are generally used by larger employers who receive large numbers of applications. They could also be one of the tasks at an assessment centre. Knowing what to expect and how to prepare is a useful way to improve your test performance.

Preparation

Applicants are often asked to successfully complete a psychometric test before being given access to the application form. It is useful to practise these each week, as you are often only given a few days of notice before having to take the test.

Practising questions and sample tests will help to improve the speed and accuracy of your answers. It will also help you become familiar with how to manage the time limit and identify any weaknesses that you might want to address. Contact your careers department for details of online practice tests.

Types of test

There are many different tests used by employers and the type of role you're applying to will determine which task you'll be asked to take. Generally they fall into the following main types. Even if you are given a test with a different name, it is still likely to be assessing one or more of the elements listed below:

Numerical reasoning

Requires you to find the answer using information given in graphs, charts and tables. The maths you will be asked to complete is not complicated, but you will have to conduct a number of these calculations in order to get to the correct answer, which is where errors can be made. Revise calculations such as finding percentages, ratios and fractions.

Study graphs, charts and tables in the business pages of newspapers to familiarise yourself with this type of data; look for trends and try to interpret the data yourself.

Verbal reasoning

Tests your reading comprehension and reasoning, and whether you can use written information in a logical way to answer a question. Your answer must be based on the information provided and not on any prior knowledge.

To prepare, read a variety of business-related articles, news and blogs, so you become familiar with a range of business topics, writing styles and the vocabulary used. Practise reading a piece of text and then summarise what you've read. During these tests, scanning for keywords can be helpful.

Critical thinking, Watson Glaser

Whereas in verbal reasoning the answers are within the text, these tests require critical and logical thinking skills to decide whether statements relating to the text are logical and compatible with the text or not. Prepare as you would for verbal reasoning tests (see above).

Diagrammatic, logical or spatial reasoning

Using shapes and symbols, you apply rules and are required to identify the next stage in a sequence. This tests your visual problem solving and pattern recognition ability and is commonly used in engineering and IT. Familiarise yourself with flow charts and business process diagrams, and look for patterns, sequences and rules (i.e. if x then y).

Situational judgement tests

You are presented with a series of work-related scenarios and need to choose which solution or action you feel is the most effective from a series of options provided. These tests are tailored to individual employers to reflect situations relevant to the job and look for the characteristics important to them.

Useful explanations of why one option is considered better than another are often provided in practice tests, so review your answers carefully at the end.

When you are choosing your response, think about the qualities and skills the employer has said they are looking for. Which response demonstrates these?

Make sure you read each response carefully before choosing, so that you have the full information.

Think about the long-term consequences of each of the actions. Which would lead to the best outcomes for the organisation in the long run?

Consider how actions would affect different stakeholders, and which stakeholders are most important. For example, if you have to let someone down or miss a deadline, it is probably better to let a colleague down than a client.

Personality questionnaires

Personality questionnaires are designed to explore the way you react to, or deal with, different situations. They are occasionally used in selection to identify candidates with characteristics that are appropriate to a specific job role.

- Be honest. You do not know what personal qualities the selectors are seeking and the assessors will be able to spot inconsistencies in your answers.
- It's best to put down your first reaction to the questions rather than spending time pondering their meaning.

General strategies

Read the instructions carefully. The test will have some practice questions at the start, so ensure you understand these before starting.

Try to balance speed and accuracy. Some tests let you skip questions and go back to them later. If you can do this, rather than spending too long on a question, answer the easier questions first and then go back to the hard ones.

On most tests, you aren't marked down for wrong answers, so if you don't know the correct answer, but you can rule out some, make an educated guess. If the instructions do say you will get marked down, be more cautious about guessing. Sometimes the questions get harder as you work through them, so be aware the later questions might take longer to answer.

If you have a disability and receive special provisions or adjustments at university, such as extra time in exams, contact the employer about this in advance. In most instances, they'll make the same adjustments.