

## Team-working skills

All employers are keen to recruit graduates who are able to cooperate, solve problems alongside others, and work in teams. Teamwork involves working confidently within a group, contributing your own ideas effectively, taking a share of the responsibility, being assertive, accepting and learning from constructive criticism and giving positive, constructive feedback to others.

## Group work exercises at assessment or selection centres

If you are invited to a selection centre as part of the interview process, it's very likely that you will have a group task, such as a case study, where your performance in the group will be assessed.

- Catch up with the latest news in the weeks before the assessment centre - sometimes topics for discussion will be based on recent items in the news.
- Be yourself. Don't put on a façade or mask. Talk to the other candidates and assessors between exercises to help keep yourself relaxed.
- When you read the information given for a group exercise, underline key points and the likely arguments and counter-arguments. Look for any obvious irrelevant or misleading facts.
- Keep a note of the finish time, and don't allow the group to over-run.
- If a particular group member is quiet, try to get them to contribute by encouraging them: *"We haven't heard from Mike yet - I'd like to hear what you think of the proposal."*
- Don't talk aimlessly. Try to move the group forward by your contributions: *"This isn't going anywhere. Why don't we move on and come back to this topic later?"*
- If a dominant individual tries to "hijack" the group, don't be afraid to challenge them, but do this calmly, logically and diplomatically. You could ask *"What are your reasons for saying that?"*
- Stick up for your opinions and argue persuasively and with logic, but also listen to the opinions of others and support those you agree with.
- Don't belittle the ideas of others - in most cases you're not competing directly against the other members of the group - everyone could be selected or everyone rejected.
- If you are made the leader of an exercise, it's a good idea to ask for volunteers for particular tasks such as note taking, and to delegate responsibility. Identify the strengths of the other group members and use them. Don't get too involved in the fine detail of the task - your role as the leader is to keep an overview.
- Keep cool and use your sense of humour. Be assertive, tactful and persuasive and work with the group.
- Try to be creative - introduce new ideas or build on the ideas of others.

## Example group exercises (given by Kent students)

- A discussion on who we would save given that X amount of people were in a cave, and the cave entrance had collapsed, so chances were that some people were going to die. We had to decide on the order of rescue. *(Cable & Wireless)*
- Given 4 plastic cups, 4 plates, masking tape and 8 sheets of very large paper, construct a bridge capable of holding a stapler (the stapler isn't seen until you've finished). *(Cable & Wireless)*

- A choice of two possible factory buildings: you have to make a decision as to which one you would choose. They give you info such as budget and details about each building. Don't think there is a right or wrong answer; you just have to justify what you value to be the most important criteria. *(AXA)*
- We were a small start-up company who were to create and organise an event for the launch of the 2012 Olympics. There are certain requirements such as budget and time scales but the rest is up to you to come up with something appropriate. 50 minutes to prepare and then 10 minutes to present it as a group. *(ATOS Origin)*

#### Tips and comments from Kent students:

- Take note of when an exercise started and how long you've got to prepare it. Also, decide on a time keeper for the group tasks.
- Be yourself, relax and enjoy. You will feel challenged, and feel very tired, but that's expected!
- The most important aspect is your interaction in the group. You must speak and play a prominent part in the exercise, not just react to other people. However, do not be overbearing and try to listen to others too. Ask lots of questions.
- You really are marked on the key competencies they provide you with, and you are given plenty of opportunities to demonstrate these skills. If you are aware of the competencies and think about the task, it is quite clear through the exercises which skills you should be using.
- The assessments were deliberately organised to put pressure on you time-wise. The point of most of the assessments didn't seem to be getting to the correct answer but seeing how you got there: so bear this in mind. One or two of the candidates tried too hard to impress and were very overbearing when it came to the group exercises: I'm not sure that this is what the assessors were looking for and it certainly didn't make them popular with the other candidates!
- A group of 8 candidates sat around a table and discussed a business proposal whilst 8 assessors sat around edge of room taking notes on us. This lasted for about ¾ hour.
- Take initiatives e.g. in group discussions go use the flip chart, propose to use it, watch the time. Show enthusiasm: this is very important when telling about an event in an assessment centre. Biggest hurdle is the time. Always watch for the time while you are working. *(Ernst & Young)*
- There are always people watching so be careful about what you say/who you say it to/when you say it. Be friendly to the other candidates. *(Deloitte)*
- During group work, always keep an eye on the time and make sure the panel can see you're doing this. Encourage everyone in your group to contribute and listen to their ideas.
- The biggest thing that gave me confidence was the realisation that not only was everyone else nervous, but the other candidates were very friendly with each other in general. I took it as an opportunity to chat to people in the breaks and I actually forgot I was probably being assessed as I was enjoying myself! I also found it helped to make small talk with the interviewers.
- Time management is pretty crucial in individual tasks and I suspect you get brownie points for keeping on top of this in group tasks too. Also remind yourself that what you're doing is good experience, and will teach you valuable lessons regardless of the outcome.

**(separate document?)**

### **The roles people play in meetings**

There are a number of different roles that people adopt in meetings, some of which are listed below. These roles are not always constant - one person might adopt several of these roles during one meeting or change roles depending on what is being discussed.

#### **Encourager**

- Energises groups when motivation is low through humour or through being enthusiastic.
- Positive, supportive and give praise to other group members.
- Does not like sitting around.
- They like to move things along by suggesting ideas, by clarifying the ideas of others and by confronting problems.
- They may use humour to break tensions in the group.

They may say: *"We CAN do this!", "That's a great idea!"*

#### **Compromiser**

- Tries to maintain harmony among the team members.
- They are sociable, interested in others and will introduce people, draw them out and make them feel comfortable.
- They may be willing to change their own views to get a group decision.
- They work well with different people and can be depended on to promote a positive atmosphere, helping the team to gel.
- They pull people and tasks together thereby developing rapport.
- They are tolerant individuals and good listeners who will listen carefully to the views of other group members.
- They are good judges of people, diplomatic and sensitive to the feelings of others and not seen as a threat.
- They are able to recognise and resolve differences of opinion and the development of conflict, they enable "difficult" team-members to contribute positively.

They may say: *"We haven't heard from Mike yet: I'd like to hear what you think about this.", "I'm not sure I agree. What are your reasons for saying that?"*

### Leader

- Good leaders direct the sequence of steps the group takes and keep the group "on-track".
- They are good at controlling people and events and coordinating resources.
- They have the energy, determination and initiative to overcome obstacles and bring competitive drive to the team.
- They give shape to the team effort.
- They recognise the skills of each individual and how they can be used.
- Leaders are outgoing individuals who have to be careful not to be domineering.
- They can sometimes steamroller the team but get results quickly.
- They may become impatient with complacency and lack of progress and may sometimes overreact.

They may say: *"Let's come back to this later if we have time."*, *"We need to move on to the next step."*, *"Sue, what do you think about this idea?"*

### Summariser/clarifier

- Calm, reflective individuals who summarise the group's discussion and conclusions.
- They clarify group objectives and elaborate on the ideas of others.
- They may go into detail about how the group's plans would work and tie up loose ends.
- They are good mediators and seek consensus.

They may say: *"So here's what we've decided so far"*, *"I think you're right, but we could also add ...."*

### Ideas person

- Suggests new ideas to solve group problems or suggests new ways for the group to organize the task.
- They dislike orthodoxy and are not too concerned with practicalities.
- They provide suggestions and proposals that are often original and radical.
- They are more concerned with the big picture than with details.
- They may get bored after the initial impetus wears off.

They may say: *"Why don't we consider doing it this way?"*

### Evaluator

- They help the group to avoid coming to agreement too quickly.
- They tend to be slow in coming to a decision because of a need to think things over.
- They are the logical, analytical, objective people in the team and offer measured, dispassionate critical analysis.
- They contribute at times of crucial decision making because they are capable of evaluating competing proposals.

- They may suggest alternative ideas.

They may say: *"What other possibilities are there?", "Let's try to look at this another way.", "I'm not sure we're on the right track."*

#### **Recorder**

- Keeps the group focused and organised.
- They make sure that everyone is helping with the project.
- They are usually the first person to offer to take notes to keep a record of ideas and decisions.
- They also like to act as time-keeper, to allocate times to specific tasks and remind the team to keep to them, or act as a spokesperson, to deliver the ideas and findings of the group.
- They may check that all members understand and agree on plans and actions and know their roles and responsibilities.
- They act as the memory of the group.

They may say: *"We only have five minutes left, so we need to come to agreement now!", "Do we all understand this chart?", "Are we all in agreement on this?"*

#### **What makes an effective team?**

- It has a range of individuals who contribute in different ways and complement each other. A team made up just of planners would find it difficult to cope with changing deadlines or plans whereas a team full of spontaneous individuals would be disorganised: you need both types. A good team produces more than the individual contributions of members.
- Clear goals are agreed on that everyone understands and is committed to.
- Everyone understands the tasks they have to do and helps each other.
- It has a coordinator who may adopt a leadership style from autocratic to democratic depending on the circumstances. Different people may assume the role of leader for different tasks.
- There is a balance between the task (what do we need to do?) and the process (how do we achieve this?)
- There is a supportive, informal atmosphere where members feel able to take risks and say what they think.
- The group is comfortable with disagreement and can successfully overcome differences in opinion.
- There is a lot of discussion in which everyone participates. Group members listen to each other and everyone's ideas are heard.
- Members feel free to criticise and say what they think but this is done in a positive, constructive manner.
- The group learns from experience: reviewing and improving performance in the light of both successes and failures.

#### **What makes an ineffective team**

- People talk more than they listen and only a few people may contribute.
- Some members are silent and don't contribute. They may be indifferent, bored or afraid to contribute.
- Members ideas are dismissed or even ridiculed and their views are ignored.
- There are arguments between members of the group (as opposed to constructive differences of opinion).
- One or two members dominate the others and make the decisions.
- Disagreements are put to the vote without being discussed.
- Some members are unhappy with decisions and grumble privately afterwards.
- Little effort is made to keep to the point or to work to deadlines.
- There is a lack of clarity regarding goals and specific tasks are not agreed to.
- Roles are not delegated to particular team members.
- There is a lack of trust and helpfulness.
- Members don't talk about how the group is working or the problems it faces.