

19

PSYCHOMETRIC TESTS AND ASSESSMENT CENTRES

CHAPTER STRUCTURE

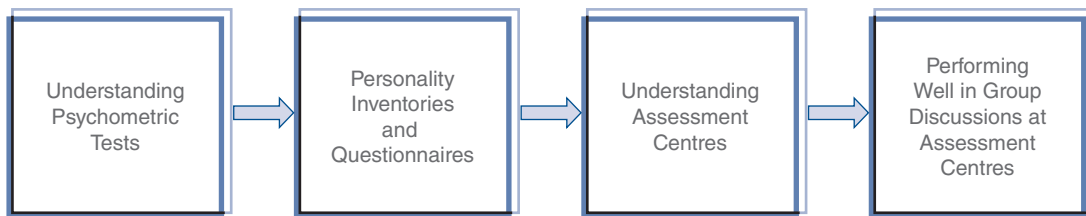


Figure 19.1

When you see the  this means go to the companion website <https://study.sagepub.com/morgan2e> to do a quiz, complete a task, read further or download a template. 

AIMS OF THE CHAPTER

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Know what to expect if asked to take a psychometric test or attend an assessment centre.
- Feel prepared for being asked to take a psychometric test and attend an assessment centre.
- Understand why some employers use such instruments to select graduate employees.
- Feel relatively relaxed if asked to attend such a selection process.

INTRODUCTION

Assessment centres and psychometric tests are used widely by graduate recruiters to select their candidates for jobs and are the two most commonly used selection tools. The Institute of Student Employers (2019) reported that 59% of graduate employers were using psychometric tests for graduate selection, while nearly 94% were using assessment centres.

The word 'psychometric' can generate a sense of confusion, but understanding what it means can simplify what it means at least to some extent. Psychometric tests will likely form part of any graduate selection process, though how they are used and the specifics of what are used may vary. All methods of selection are referred to as tools and used by selectors to determine whether someone can do the job well and to find the best individual(s).

'Psychometric' is derived from 'psyche', which means 'the mind', and 'metric', which colloquially means 'to measure'. In other words, a psychometric test is one which 'measures the mind' in some way. It is a little more complex than this, but as an outcome this is what a psychometric test does. This first half of the chapter will give some information about how these tests are developed and how they are used.

The second half of the chapter will look at assessment centres. An assessment centre is an 'event', not necessarily a place. The chapter will say more about what it is and how it is used, but it is said to provide a detailed analysis of the abilities and behaviour of an individual on tasks related to the role that they will be doing.

Both assessment centres and psychometric tests are developed in conjunction with occupational psychologists, individuals with sufficient understanding of psychological models of behaviour and research statistics as to be able to develop scientific methods to help HR professionals find those individuals that will help lead their organisations forward.

As stated in the introduction to this part of the text, all the exercises and selection tools used in graduate selection will test for the same abilities that you will have been developing as a student throughout your course: critical thinking, team-working, leadership, creativity, communication, analysis, presentation skills, and so on. If you have been doing well in your degree programme, then there is no reason why you should not do well in an assessment centre – and that should be reassuring. The final issue to bear in mind is that, if you are lucky enough to be invited to an assessment centre, the employer may be able to select all of those attending or none of you. Employers will have a finite number of vacancies and could take everyone from one assessment centre and none from another; they will not fill vacancies with those they think are unsuitable.

UNDERSTANDING PSYCHOMETRIC TESTS

General Introduction

As indicated above, there can be some anxiety or uncertainty regarding what employee selection experts call 'psychometric tests'. There are actually many kinds of 'tests', all developed under similar statistical processes and all with similar characteristics, but each will have a different theoretical foundation based upon other research and academic models of personality, ability and behaviour. Tests are nearly always multiple choice and are increasingly being used as tools at the beginning of the selection process to screen out those who do not meet essential criteria relating to reasoning, or whose personality does not fit the culture of the organisation, but they are also used for developmental purposes, at 'development centres' (the equivalent of assessment centres – see below – but for staff development).

There are two broad categories of psychometric tests:

1. Those tests dealing with intellectual abilities
2. Those dealing with personality

The key distinction between these two areas is a simple one: *the intellectual ability* of individuals is measured by their ability to correctly answer questions in a short period of time. This implies that there are right and wrong answers, and that there is a time limit. Put simply, the more correct answers individuals identify, the higher their score will be and the more likely they will be to progress to the next stage of the selection process. Such tests were originally termed ‘intelligence tests’ but research into identifying what intelligence is varied in its conclusions. What psychologists can say is that the ability to understand (‘to reason with’) various kinds of information (numerical, written) is related to job performance in most managerial/graduate-level jobs and correlates strongly with subsequent on-the-job performance – hence the use of verbal reasoning and numerical reasoning tests. Of the graduate employers using psychometric tests in 2019, 64% used numerical reasoning tests, while 47% used tests designed to determine candidates’ verbal reasoning skills (ISE, 2019). These figures represent a decrease in the figures in 2014, which were 75% and 77% in numerical reasoning and verbal reasoning tests respectively.

Measuring the personality of an individual is more complex: a personality questionnaire has no right and wrong answers; there is no universal ‘right personality’ or ‘wrong personality’ in the same way that there are right or wrong answers, but a certain combination of responses will make an individual more or less suitable for working in a particular environment. Usually personality questionnaires are longer and ask respondents to choose particular responses based on how likely they would demonstrate certain behaviours.

Personality questionnaires can examine a wide range of topics – we have already come across ideas and models looking at learning styles (Chapter 2) and team roles (Chapter 11). Personality research could cover a wide range of themes and a subsequent wide range of personality questionnaires. Some dating organisations use a form of personality inventory to match individuals together for relationships, while other questionnaires have been developed to determine susceptibility to stress-based disease (based on research linking heart disease and personality). However, for the purposes of this chapter, we will examine the use of personality questionnaires as they relate to performance on the job.

Understanding ‘Psychometric’: Reliability, Validity and Standardisation

Any form of measurement has to be undertaken ‘scientifically’. There is no purpose in measuring the length of a piece of wood if the tool you are using is not used correctly or if the tool itself has some problems, but the challenge is this: ‘How do we know whether something is producing the right results and is being used correctly when it comes to measuring mental/psychological qualities?’

The answer is to use three broad measures:

PSYCHOMETRIC TEST



A psychometric test is a valid and reliable selection tool measuring personal psychological abilities.

NUMERICAL AND VERBAL REASONING



Numerical reasoning is the ability to understand, interpret and use numbers accurately.

Verbal reasoning is the ability to understand, interpret and use written information accurately.

PERSONALITY



‘Personality’ is an individual’s predisposition to act and behave in a particular manner across a broad range of situations.

PERSONALITY QUESTIONNAIRE



A personality questionnaire is a valid and reliable tool, which measures an individual’s predisposition to act and behave in particular ways.

- **Reliability or consistency:** The same tool measuring the same quality gives the same results every time. On occasions, tests can have items with similar meanings spread throughout the test to measure and ensure that consistency.
- **Validity:** The tool produces results which accurately measure the same personal quality as other tests measuring that same quality. For tests supposedly measuring a quality that is relevant to job performance, the test will not include items that do not relate to on-the-job performance. One form of validity for ability tests refers to whether the test discriminates between individuals who do have the abilities being tested for and those who do not.
- **Standardisation:** The tool is used in the same way on all occasions to produce comparable results.

In reality, these three qualities need to be present in any selection method used to give the outcome of the selection process some accuracy. If these three qualities are not found to be present in the research and development of the test, then the test is not seen as a credible one, and employers will not be allowed to use it. Every test publisher needs to show the results of their research and publish scores (or 'norms') so that employers can interpret the test scores for similar individuals (in terms of educational or occupational level, age and gender) correctly.

The implications of this are as follows:

1. When you take a psychometric test, the individual giving the test (or the computer screen, if you are taking the test online) will give you a standard set of instructions, delivered in as nearly an identical manner as on other occasions.
2. The circumstances under which you take the test will be the same as for other individuals taking the same test, as far as possible.
3. The way your score will be interpreted will vary slightly among different types of individuals, but your score will be interpreted in the same way as those from the same group as you.

As indicated above, any psychometric test is intended to be a scientific instrument used properly for the purposes of personnel selection. This also means that the individuals running the test (or giving you authorised access if it is done online) need to have been trained on a course which is professionally accredited. In the United States, that accreditation is given by the American Psychological Association, and in the United Kingdom, the British Psychological Society provides the same certification.

Psychometric Tests: What to Expect

Administration

While some organisations use paper and pencil tests, which require you to undertake a psychometric test at a particular location, the majority of employers will require you to take them online, where there will be strict identity checks. Physical paper and pencil tests enable an employer to be sure that you really are who you say you are, but online tests are being increasingly used by employers because of their flexibility in terms of timing and low cost. The following describes what will take place where individuals are taking pencil and paper tests, but there will be equivalent processes where tests are taken online remotely.

For each person doing the test, there will be a small desk with a computer-readable multiple choice answer sheet, a pencil and an eraser. If the test that you are doing is a numerical reasoning test, then you will almost certainly find a blank sheet of paper and a basic calculator.

To ensure standardisation, your test administrator will read out some instructions from a sheet (see Box 19.1 for a typical excerpt), and, during that time, will pass out the question booklet with strict instructions not to open it until you are asked to do so. (This may well remind you of attending a university examination.) For ability tests, there will usually be a small number of examples for you to

look at or to do; this is to ensure that you understand the mechanics of taking the test, and although you might disagree with the answers to those examples that the administrator might give you, they will *not* be permitted to tell you why something is right or wrong. If they see that you get a wrong answer to one of the examples, they will ask you to review that example question. Personality questionnaires will usually have a couple of example questions to look at.

BOX 19.1

Instructions Typically Given at the Start of an Ability Test

The following is a brief excerpt from the verbal instructions given by a test administrator:

'You will not be able to leave the room once the test has started, so please collect glasses or take a reading break now if you need to. [Pause]

The session will be conducted under test conditions, so there will be no talking, and, to avoid distractions, can you please turn off all mobile phones now?

Please remember:

- Work quickly and accurately.
- Listen carefully to the instructions which I shall read to you from a card.
- There will be some practice questions: these are not timed or scored.

Are there any questions? [Pause]'

Once any examples have been completed, the administrator will continue reading some instructions, will tell you how long the test will last (usually about 20–45 minutes) and will use a stopwatch to start and stop the test. If you are taking a test online, then the administration will be done online, but will take an equivalent form.

You will need to work quickly, but there must be a balance between speed and accuracy of course. Certain tests are very popular with employers because they originate from a good supplier and/or have been shown to have high psychometric qualities. So, if you are invited to take a test by a number of employers, you might find that you take the same test a number of times – in which case you should be able to complete more answers each time as you get used to reusing information for different questions – but this does not guarantee that you will be more successful in the test of course.



'BUT I HAVE A QUESTION ...'

... Can I learn how to do better on the tests? Is there somewhere I can practise?

This is a good question. Your university careers services will almost certainly be able to arrange some practice sessions for you and many employers will be able to send you something from a test provider in advance, giving you an idea of what exactly to expect in terms of the questions.

But the issue of how to do better is more complex. Psychometric tests are designed to measure your ability and so the questions are kept highly confidential: if your ability in X was marked as 6/10 one week and in the next week you did the same test and got 8/10, then you could argue that the test was not really measuring your ability in X, but rather your ability to do the test. In other words, test providers do not allow organisations using their tests to give you a chance to practise first.

There are some example questions below, which give you an idea of the kinds of questions to expect in an ability test.

Personality questionnaires are also timed, since employers want you to give your immediate response rather than to think about your answer too much. There may be questions about how you react in certain situations, and while the answer you might give in a selection interview to the same question might be 'It depends ...' and then go on to discuss what the answer actually depends on, you will need to give a slightly more definitive response in a personality questionnaire.

This can appear unfair, but, in reality, the test will have been constructed to take account of the fact that certain issues can influence our behaviour, so you may well be asked a similar question a number of times to take account of these influences. In addition, an organisation that uses personality questionnaires properly will always do a debriefing interview with you afterwards, to gather examples of your behaviour in certain circumstances and to ensure the validity of the questionnaire.

The questions

The questions in a psychometric test will be in the multiple choice format but will vary in nature according to the nature of the test. For tests of your mental ability, you will be asked to select one correct answer from four or (less commonly) five possible responses. The exact nature of the item and of the required response will vary according to the mental ability being looked for. Questions in a numerical reasoning test will typically be 'select one from the following', while questions from a verbal reasoning test will ask you to read a brief passage of text and then use your understanding of that passage to select one response, indicating whether you think a particular interpretation of the text is:

- Definitely True, given the information in the passage
- Probably True, given the information in the passage
- Probably False, given the information in the passage
- Definitely False, given the information in the passage, or
- You cannot tell from the information given.

(Or some variation of the above.)

Verbal Reasoning Test Examples

The following examples are typical of the questions which could be used in verbal reasoning tests. Read the passage and then answer the questions which follow.



FOR YOU TO DO

Have a look at the passages below and answer each of the questions according to the instructions given.

Passage 1

Many organisations find it is beneficial to employ students over the summer. Permanent staff often wish to take their own holidays over this period. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for companies to experience peak workloads in the summer and so require extra staff. Summer employment often attracts students who may return as well qualified recruits when they have finished their education. Ensuring that students learn as much as possible about the organisation encourages their interest in

working on a permanent basis. Organisations pay students on a fixed rate without the usual entitlement to holiday pay or sick leave.

Please read the following statements and then respond to each according to whether you think they are:

- True - the statement follows logically from the information in the passage.
 - False - the statement contradicts information given in the passage.
 - Cannot Tell - you cannot answer whether the statement is true or false without further information.
1. It is possible that permanent staff who are on holiday can have their work carried out by students.
 2. Students in summer employment are given the same paid holiday benefit as permanent staff.
 3. Students are subject to the organisation's standard disciplinary and grievance procedures.
 4. Some companies have more work to do in summer when students are available for vacation work.

Passage 2

Cancer is a condition which affects many people every year, for reasons that are still unclear. Cancer seems to affect individuals from all sorts of backgrounds, regardless of country, occupation, income, ethnicity or several other factors. There does seem to be a susceptibility to cancer for people who are older but even this is not universal, and just as folk who have had heart attacks can be as young as 35, cancer does not only affect older individuals. Many younger children across the world suffer from leukaemia, and this makes the need to find a cure for this form of cancer very urgent. The UK government, Cancer Research UK and the World Health Organization are amongst many bodies and organisations which are working to do so.

Please read the following statements and then respond to each according to whether you think they are:

- True - the statement follows logically from the information in the passage.
 - False - the statement does not follow logically from the information in the passage.
 - Cannot Tell - you cannot answer whether the statement is true or false without further information.
1. The causes of cancer are still uncertain.
 2. Cancer seems to affect people from some races differently to people from other races.
 3. People who have heart attacks are less likely to have cancer.
 4. Finding a cure for leukaemia is more urgent than finding a cure for other kinds of cancer.
 5. There are several organisations which are working together to find a cure for cancer.
 6. Many people die from cancer every year.

Passage 3

This is a test of your ability to recognise the conclusions being drawn from a passage of text. Please read the passage below and then, based on the information given in the passage, indicate whether you believe that the conclusion is:

- Strong - this is a strong conclusion and is one of the main arguments being made in the passage.
- Weak - this is a relevant issue but is not an important argument according to the passage.
- False - this conclusion contradicts information contained in the passage.
- Cannot Tell - the conclusion does not come from information given in the passage.

Schoolchildren are often seen being collected by their parents after school. The process usually starts half an hour before the school closes, when a large number of parents arrive in their cars and park by

(Continued)

the side of the road. It is unlikely that schools will ever ban parents arriving by car, but the large numbers of parents doing so in order to collect their children is actually increasing the level of danger around the school for a number of reasons. When cars are parked so closely together, it is difficult to see around them to be sure that it is safe to cross the road. Of course, any child who sees their mother or father smiling at them will want to run across the road to greet them, and maybe won't see any oncoming cars. A third issue is that the school buses which collect the children are often unable to see a child crossing immediately in front of them. Consultation with parents has developed ideas around school classes finishing at different times, having permits for parking outside the school or even creating different parking zones for different groups of children. The safety of children is always paramount, and so the issue needs to be taken extremely seriously.

1. All children should be taken on the school buses.
2. Roads leading up to schools should have strict speed limits.
3. Parents who wish to collect a child from school should not bring a car.
4. It would be better if parents arrived and parked their cars at different times.
5. Parents should not smile at their children when collecting them from school.
6. Cars and buses should be parked in different places.
7. The location of car parking at schools is something which should be monitored very closely.

The answers to all three sets of questions are given online.

The above items are similar to those commonly found in verbal reasoning tests, though there are different forms of test which look for slightly different abilities. However, all will be seeking information regarding your ability to understand, interpret and draw conclusions from the information given. If you are entering a management role, then your ability to do so is extremely important.

Numerical Reasoning Test Examples

The ideas behind numerical reasoning are very similar – how well can you interpret and use data given to you in numerical form? Again, the ability to do so in a management role is extremely important. It is also important to recognise, however, that this is not about being good at mathematics – being able to do calculus and trigonometry will not help here. Numerical reasoning is about understanding mathematical ideas and concepts and being able to apply the numbers to those concepts (in the ways that economists and accountants are typically able to do well).



FOR YOU TO DO

Have a look at the three sets of information below and answer the questions which follow. For each question, there are four possible answers. Please select what you believe to be the correct answer.

In preparation, you should have some rough paper and a basic (non-scientific) calculator. These tests would usually be undertaken under timed conditions, so you might wish to time yourself.

Set 1

Please look carefully at the information below and use it appropriately to answer the questions which follow.

Flying times (in hours):

	Beijing	Shanghai	Dubai
Shanghai	1.5		
Dubai	6.5	6	
New York	15	14	7

Time differences (in hours):

	Going from:			
Going to:	Beijing	Shanghai	Dubai	New York
Beijing		0	+5	+11
Shanghai	0	0	+5	+11
Dubai	-5	-5		+6
New York	-11	-11	-6	

Aircraft times from airport gate to runway at the different airports are usually:

- Beijing: 15 minutes
- Shanghai: 5 minutes
- New York: 30 minutes
- Dubai: 25 minutes

Questions

1. If my flight to Shanghai leaves the gate at Dubai Airport at 6 a.m., what time would I expect to arrive at my gate at Shanghai Airport?
 - a. 12.30 p.m.
 - b. 12.30 a.m.
 - c. 7.30 a.m.
 - d. 12 p.m.
2. By what percentage is the flying time from Dubai to Shanghai longer than the flight from Dubai to New York?
 - a. 1.6%
 - b. 85%
 - c. 12%
 - d. 16%
3. If I am flying from New York to Beijing, I can expect a headwind to add 20% onto my flying time. So, what is my total time from leaving the gate in New York to arriving at my gate in Beijing?
 - a. 15 h 40 min
 - b. 12 h 30 min
 - c. 18 h 45 min
 - d. 16 h 15 min

(Continued)

4. I need to fly from Beijing to New York via a connecting flight in Dubai which will leave two hours later. My flight will leave Beijing at 4.30 p.m. Assuming no delays and no need to queue for immigration or collect baggage in Dubai, what time can I expect to arrive at the gate in New York?
- 9.35 a.m. the next day
 - 9 p.m. the same day
 - 10.35 p.m. the same day
 - 6.35 p.m. the next day

Set 2

Annual data

	Salary (£)	Expenses	Investment fund rate (% per year)*
Martin	22,500	13,850	5.5
Paul	32,800	17,650	2.3
Sarah	29,765	12,780	4.8
Bill	18,920	8,790	3.9

* This is the rate of return on investments made. Calculated on a yearly basis, not a monthly one. Interest paid on the anniversary of the investment.

Questions

- If we measure the ratio of expenses to salary as the percentage of salary spent on expenses, whose spending is the least efficient?
 - Martin
 - Sarah
 - Paul
 - Bill
- Martin's investments are in an investment fund where the rate will not change for five years. If Martin saves all that he does not spend in an investment fund, how much is he likely to see in that fund in three years' time?
 - £8650.34
 - £9627.66
 - £27,377.25
 - £10,157
- If Martin saves all that he does not spend in an investment fund, but the other friends only invest 60% of what they do not spend in similar funds, what is the situation regarding the four friends' investments?
 - Martin has more in his investment fund than Paul.
 - Paul has more invested than Sarah.
 - As a percentage of his income, Bill has more invested than Paul.
 - Martin has less in his investment fund than Bill.
- During her second year of work, Sarah falls sick and is unable to receive a salary for half a year. However, during her first year, she was able to invest 85% of her net income (income minus expenses) into her investment fund. Assuming a 3% increase in salary and a reduction to save only

35% of her net income but no other changes, what would her investment (as a percentage of her total income over that period) be?

- a. 32%
- b. 49.7%
- c. 37%
- d. 69%

How did you find these? How long did they take you to do?

It is often true that the information you write down can be used a number of times.

Answers are given at the end of this chapter.

It is important to note that the tests used for graduate selection are not the same as those that might be used for lower level administrative positions. Individuals being recruited for management roles generally need to have higher levels of critical thinking/verbal reasoning than those in more administrative roles, and if employers gave graduates the same tests that they used for lower level jobs, then the tests would not distinguish between different levels of ability. After an applicant has taken a test, the employer will then use standardised results tables (called 'norm tables') to ensure that they are comparing individuals with a reasonable peer group – other graduates, in the case of graduate selection. If you are able to achieve a certain position in comparison with other graduates, then you will have passed, but the particular position required by different employers will vary, so passing the test with one employer does not mean that a candidate will pass with all employers. The questions in a numerical test are usually graded, with the easier questions appearing early on and more challenging questions appearing towards the end of the test. An increasing number of tests are now online, as indicated in Box 19.2.

BOX 19.2

Online and Paper-Based Tests

It was mentioned earlier that some psychometric tests can be taken online. Some consultancies make their tests available online so that applicants do not have to travel to a certain location in order to take the tests. The challenge is always how the organisations know whether the person taking the test is the same as the one whose application they have.

Organisations use a number of means to find out - including questions at interview, should the applicant get that far - but the test would be the same as a paper and pencil test and done under the same conditions, with an automatic timer. The additional advantage for the organisation is that the test feedback is instant and decisions can be made very quickly.

For the applicants, sitting at home and taking a psychometric test means that they can be more relaxed. The instructions to applicants would be the same, but being in familiar surroundings without the need to travel elsewhere can seem far less exhausting.

Feedback to the candidates will likely come in the form of either a letter inviting them for interview and further assessment, or a 'Thank you, but we will not be taking your application any further.' The latter seems very impersonal, especially if the test is online and is used in such a way that a candidate has never actually met the organisation or anyone from it. However, testing is intended to be an objective measure of someone's suitability for the role(s) being advertised.

Personality Inventories and Questionnaires

For personality tests, the formats vary considerably. You might be asked to select the answer that is 'most typical' and one that is 'least typical' from a group of four alternatives, or 'strongly agree/disagree' to every item in what is called a 'Likert scale format', or distribute a particular number of 'points' across a range of statements according to how you consider yourself to behave 'typically'.

In contrast to an ability test, a personality questionnaire is not a timed exercise to see how many answers you get right and wrong. Instead, the organisation will be trying to find out how you are likely to behave and what you are likely to do in certain situations. The implication is that there are no right or wrong answers. The temptation, however, is to believe that there are, and to give answers that are what you think the organisation will expect. In reality, there are methods within the scoring of the questionnaire to determine whether you are answering in what is termed a 'socially desirable' way, and if you 'trigger' something which indicates that you are not answering honestly, then your results will not be seen as very useful.

It is reasonable to say, though, that unless you are particularly unsure of yourself or have something to hide, there is every reason for you to answer honestly, without needing to consider your responses. If you get the job and the organisation finds out that your answers are not really accurate, then it would have every right to reconsider its offer to you. Alternatively, you could argue whether you really want to be in an organisation where your personality really does not fit so well.

The questions in a personality questionnaire will vary according to the personality inventory being used. Box 19.3 provides some sample questions. Some will ask you to rate how 'similar to you' a particular item is on a 1–4 or 1–5 Likert scale, but many will ask you to identify 'least typical' and 'most typical' responses from a group of four possible behaviours. There are different statistical approaches used in each questionnaire and the exact format will depend on the approach taken to develop the questionnaire and the underlying theory.



LIKERT SCALE

A Likert scale is a rating scale (usually from 1 to 5) which asks you to respond (with strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree) according to your view of the statement given.

See Chapter 4, page 71 (Skills Self-Assessment questionnaire), for an example of a questionnaire which uses a Likert scale.

BOX 19.3

Examples of Questions from the Eysenck Personality Inventory (Eysenck and Eysenck, 1975)

In the questions below, each pair has to add up to 5, so the possible combinations across (a) and (b) could be (a) 5 and (b) 0, or (a) 4 and (b) 1 or finally (a) 3 and (b) 2, where the higher number means 'I would prefer to do this' and the lower number means 'I would prefer to do this less'. This forced choice format pushes individuals away from being able to take a middle approach and giving 2.5 to each alternative. This particular questionnaire also asks individuals to reply according to how they 'would prefer' to behave. The distinction is important, since individuals may be pushed into behaving at work in ways that do not naturally fit. For example, I might quite like to undertake activities spontaneously, but in my work, I would need to use a diary to plan and prepare for activities to come, and therefore not act according to my natural preferences.

I prefer:	
1a	Making decisions after consulting others
1b	Making decisions without consulting others

2a	Being called imaginative or intuitive
2b	Being called factual and accurate
3a	Making decisions about people in organisations based on available data and systematic analysis of situations
3b	Making decisions about people in organisations based on empathy, feelings and an understanding of their needs and value
4a	Allowing commitments to occur if others want to make them
4b	Pushing for definite commitments to ensure that they are made

When answering the questions, it is very likely that a number of questions will appear very similar. There is very straightforward reason for this, which relates to the issue of reliability: the test makers build this into questionnaires deliberately in order to check which behaviours are likely to prevail regardless of situations and which are less likely to, and to ensure that there is some measure of consistency (i.e. reliability) in how respondents answer the questions given. Of course, try not to remember how you answered before – the key to personality questionnaires is that they are about you and your behaviour, so you need to answer quickly and honestly.

Once all the questions are answered, the selectors then need to go through what this might say about you. Personality inventories are not infallible and there are times when applicants misunderstand questions, so post-questionnaire interviews are essential for ensuring that the answers are accurate. During such an interview, be sure to give examples to back up what you are saying. If an organisation does not hold such an interview with you, then it is not using the personality questionnaire correctly.

Finally, personality questionnaires can never be used to replace ability tests. The questionnaires can give an indication as to someone’s temperament and likelihood of demonstrating certain behaviours, but cannot say anything about whether someone can think through certain problems and issues.

KEY LEARNING POINT



Ability tests and personality questionnaires are scientifically developed tools to help organisations understand the cognitive/intellectual abilities and personalities of applicants for key jobs.

UNDERSTANDING ASSESSMENT CENTRES

Good science and research underpin a great deal of good selection practice. In the 1940s, British Military Intelligence began using a form of assessment called the ‘assessment centre’ to select staff, and these methods are now used much more widely in industry. The basic principle is this: if you can observe how someone might work in enough real-life simulations, then you might be able to predict how they might perform in a real role in business. The ‘assessment centre’ is where that observation takes place, and while nearly all are private, some are very public – as Box 19.4 explains.

ASSESSMENT CENTRE



An assessment centre is a process used for managerial level selection, whereby applicants for senior role(s) are observed undertaking exercises relevant to the role(s) for which they are applying.

The Best Known Assessment Centre

Arguably the best known assessment centre is probably the TV show *The Apprentice*, shown regularly on U.K. and U.S. television over a long period of time.

Candidates are recruited and screened before the TV show presents us with the 12 individuals who have been successful in getting to the final round of selection. During the show, they are placed together in a house and, each week the show is broadcast, the teams of candidates have to work together to compete with another team as they undertake a task - for example, making money by organising an event and selling tickets, or producing a calendar to sell on behalf of a charity, or setting up a small business of some kind with donated resources. After the task has been completed within the time limit, the two teams are given the outcome: the successful team is given a treat, while the less successful team is invited to account for its actions with the team leader, and one of the teams will need to leave the selection process.

Although there is a significant element of entertainment built into the way the show is run and filmed, it does share many of the standard characteristics of an assessment centre. For example, applicants (or contestants):

- have usually been applying for a real job.
- have to undertake a number of tough group-based exercises.
- are observed undertaking those exercises.
- are given accommodation.
- are 'interviewed' after each exercise to account for their actions.
- have to both cooperate and compete in order to be offered the job.

It is clear that what the viewing public see is only a small part of the story and that there are other things going on behind the scenes. It is also artificial in that few organisations would ever really involve the direct line manager in such an intense way (or that the line manager would ever really share their opinions so directly - and often aggressively - in a real selection situation) and the show is intended to have some entertainment value, but it does give a basic idea of how an assessment centre works.

What Are Assessment Centres?

An assessment centre is usually the last stage in a managerial or graduate-level selection process. As described above, an assessment centre is a series of activities designed to determine whether an applicant for a graduate-level role has the required skills and abilities to do the role for which they have applied. It is often residential, requiring at least one night away in a hotel or corporate training centre. For the employer, it is very resource intensive, for reasons that are outlined below, so it is only used for positions where the expense is justified and where the cost of hiring someone inappropriate could be significant - that is, usually for managerial appointments and above.

Preparing for an Assessment Centre

Being invited to an assessment centre usually indicates that you have already demonstrated to a potential employer during an interview that you have some personal qualities which would help you to do a good job and which would enable you to fit into the organisation. The feedback and notes from that

previous interview would probably be in the hands of those organising the assessment centre, but you will need to focus carefully on what you are being asked to do.

If you are invited to attend an assessment centre, there are a number of initiatives you need to undertake, some of them quickly:

1. **Reply to the invitation, indicating whether you accept it.** If you have had a recent interview, keep an eye on the email address you have given to the organisation. You will probably be a well-organised individual but check your diary first: the dates of the assessment centre might just clash with a family wedding, another interview or another assessment centre (in which case, you need to ask your careers services to assist in negotiating with the organisation).
2. **Make the practical arrangements.** Accommodation will usually be arranged by the organisation but you will need to arrange your own transport. Your costs will usually be paid by the organisation, but do not take this as an opportunity to travel first class or by air when the cost of a standard-class train ticket would be reasonable. If you are unsure, then ask; organisations will usually indicate in their invitation what they would accept as reasonable.
3. **Learn about others' experiences of that organisation's assessment centre, if possible.** Knowing roughly what to expect will reduce your anxiety about it. Sometimes, your careers services will have some information from someone who attended an assessment centre from that organisation recently, or there may be some information on the Internet, so it is worth doing a search.
4. **Make sure that you have a copy of your application to this organisation.** It is highly likely that you will be given another interview (or maybe more than one) as part of the assessment centre and you need to have your application with you.
5. **Find out as much as you can about the organisation.** This was covered in Chapter 15, but at this much later stage you will be expected to know things in a lot more detail. You will be expected to know where the company operates (and perhaps where you might like or need to be based), what it will be like to work there, why you want to work with that organisation and not a different one, how your skills match what it is seeking and how much investment it puts in to developing its people. You might wish to find out about the organisation's strategy, what its strengths and weaknesses are, and how it might change what it does to overcome any increased success from its competitors.
6. **Ensure that you have the correct clothing available to you.** For male applicants, this will mean at least two ironed shirts, a decent tie, a clean suit and smart shoes (and maybe some shoe polish). For female applicants, it will mean a business suit, comfortable shoes (you will need to wear them for a lengthy period of time, so do not wear any shoes that may be uncomfortable) and two blouses. If you need to pack smart clothes into a suitcase for travelling, then use a suit cover which you carry separately (usually available from any tailor or shop that sells suits) or fold and pack them carefully: there are ways of packing clothes to keep them flat during long journeys. Check what you have available to you in advance: you do not really want to find that, with two days to do at the assessment centre, your suit is dirty in some way.

The above should help you in preparing for an assessment centre, both practically and in terms of thinking things through, but there is little substitute for knowing what you will be doing there. What is certain is that you will be doing a number of exercises, you will be observed at every opportunity and you will be assessed – and accepted or rejected for the role(s) – according to the qualities you show.

What to Expect at an Assessment Centre

A good assessment centre is designed around the skills and qualities that an employer will be seeking, and thus every assessment centre will be different. However, it is reasonable to say that there are some features in common:

- It will usually last between one and two days.
- There will probably be a formal dinner with all the candidates and all the observers.
- It will be tiring, so relax, be yourself and enjoy it as much as you are able.
- You will almost certainly have a formal interview at some stage (there may be other informal discussions over lunch, so note that an interview is a 'conversation with a purpose' and does not need to happen in an office).
- There will likely be at least 15 other candidates there, and quite possibly up to 30.
- You will very likely need to deliver a presentation.
- You will need to do verbal and numerical reasoning tests.
- The observers will be looking for a variety of skills (negotiation, critical analysis, persuasion, giving others feedback, developing strong arguments, planning, giving information, personal organisation, etc.) during the assessment centre exercises, but will *need to see you lead others successfully* in at least one exercise and work constructively with others throughout the assessment centre.
- All exercises will have strict time limits, which need to be monitored carefully.
- The observers will have regular meetings during the assessment centre to identify gaps in information (where they do not have sufficient information about you from what they are seeing), to corroborate information that they do have from what they have seen, and to reallocate groups so that all candidates get the chance to work with as many of the other candidates as possible.

If there are four candidates working together on a team exercise, then there will likely be two observers, each watching two different candidates and taking notes about what they do, what they say and how they do it. The structure of a typical assessment centre is outlined in Box 19.5.

BOX 19.5

Typical Structure of an Assessment Centre

Day 1

Candidates arrive early to mid-afternoon, register and settle into the hotel.

- 4 p.m. Introduction by HR manager
- 4.30 p.m. Group allocation and introduction for Exercise 1
- 4.45-5.30 p.m. Ice-breaker and Exercise 1
- 6 p.m. Formal dinner with selectors and other candidates
- 7.15 p.m. Exercise 2
- 8 p.m. Company presentation
- 9 p.m. Informal drinks in the hotel bar

Day 2

- 7-8 a.m. Breakfast
- 8.15-9 a.m. Debrief interview ('What did you think of the exercises last night?')
- 9.15 a.m. Verbal and numerical reasoning tests
- 10 a.m. Coffee break

10.20-12 a.m. Exercise 3 (including presentation)

12.10 p.m. Formal interview

1 p.m. Lunch

2-2.45 p.m. Exercise 4: 'In-basket exercise'

3 p.m. Informal discussion with selectors about the organisation

3.30 p.m. Tea break

3.45 p.m. Debrief interview from Exercise 4 ('Why did you do what you did?')

4.30-4.45 p.m. Brief assessment centre debrief interview ('Any comments on what we have done here?')

5.15 p.m. Thank you and final announcements

5.30 p.m. Candidates depart; observers meet to discuss their notes

The details of exactly what an assessment centre will involve will vary according to the skills being sought, but you may be asked to undertake some of the following.

- **Negotiation exercise:** You need to negotiate resources in competition with other candidates, based on information given to you. How will you form your argument? How will you use your communication skills to ensure that you get what you need? What will you be willing to compromise on? Would you take the role of chairing/leading the discussion?
- **Business case study:** You are part of a team facing an important business decision. Will you lead the exercise? How will you analyse the information? What do you think are the important issues? How can you help the team arrive at the decision which is right for the organisation?
- **Role:** You are given a role to play as part of a team discussion and an objective for that role to achieve. How will you go about achieving that objective? What are the strong arguments? The weak ones? Will you lead the discussion?
- **Information gaps:** Everyone in the team has different and complementary pieces of information, and all the information is needed to achieve the objective. You will need to give your information. Will you lead the activity? How will you structure the team's information gathering activity: according to the team member or according to the nature of the information – or both? How will you organise the information that team members give?
- **'In-basket exercise':** You need to catch a flight in 30 minutes, but you have some urgent emails and memos to deal with before you go. Some of these will relate to your diary appointments, some will relate to communications with the public or your employees, or senior managers, and some will require immediate action while actions for others are not urgent, but your ability to pay attention to detail is very important. How will you respond to each email? What is urgent, and what is less urgent? Can you ensure that there are no diary clashes? If you are being asked to do two things at the same time, how will you decide which to do? How will you respond to 'ceremonial' requests as opposed to day-to-day management activities and meetings? How would you change your language to deal with people in different levels of management?
- **Practical/physical exercise:** You are given some instructions, some resources and asked to build or make an object. How will you work with others to plan and develop some designs? How would you use the resources appropriately? How will you evaluate your success? How do you lead?

- **Individual presentation:** You are given some information which you need to analyse quickly and present a summary to other members of a team. How will you structure, develop and deliver your presentation to ensure that the key points from the information come through? What parts of the information will you need to focus on? What is less important? How will you conclude your presentation? How will you explain any complicated ideas?
- **Ice-breaker discussion:** This is a brief activity to enable folk to learn about and then succinctly present each other, according to some questions given to you. How will you present the information? Will you be a little humorous or serious? What will you say, and what will you leave out?

In thinking these through, you might wish to have some ideas in mind about how you will go about performing and behaving in those assessment centre exercises you need to do. Each exercise will examine a number of important skills and each skill will be assessed at least twice for each individual in different exercises.



'BUT I HAVE A QUESTION ...'

... What do employers look for during these various exercises?

Well, each exercise will look for a number of skills, but the skills commonly sought in an assessment centre will be:

- Analysis and problem solving
- Critical thinking
- Interpersonal skills
- Communication (listening, speaking clearly)
- Personal drive
- Leadership potential
- Team-working (organising, time keeping, making sure others have their say).

The individual who does well in these situations and who demonstrates these skills consistently and successfully will likely be offered a job role. It is true that focusing on so many of these skills at once is difficult, unless they become part of naturally occurring behaviour. That is why university gives you so many opportunities to work in teams and lead others.

PERFORMING WELL IN GROUP DISCUSSIONS AT AN ASSESSMENT CENTRE

Part IV of this text dealt with employability skills and three areas from that part are relevant here, most notably team-working, leadership and communication skills. However, a team such as those described in earlier chapters will need to work together over a relatively long period of time. At an assessment centre, you do not have time to get to know each other properly, or have conflicts or develop any rules. You will get a short period of time to undertake the exercise, so the emphasis is on how you can best help your team to do that. Some basic rules are given below:

1. **You need to contribute somehow:** If you do not contribute, then the observers will have nothing to take away as evidence of your skill, and you will not be successful.

2. **Are you the person making notes?** This is not a great role to have in a situation like this. It is helpful to your team to be able to complete the exercise by making a written record of the points raised, but it is also very difficult to listen, contribute and make notes at the same time. It is quite possible that the person taking notes will not make a great contribution to the exercise.
3. **Are you the team leader?** Within an assessment centre exercise, leaders are not appointed by anyone, they emerge naturally. If you are leading the exercise, then consider the roles that individuals are going to play in the exercise – including someone to manage the time! – and ensure that all are aware of the goal of the exercise before starting the exercise itself. Finally, you will need to think about how the team intends to plan what it needs to do. All of these can be done quickly, which is important because you will not have a lot of time.
4. **Eye contact:** Any individual who does not look at the others who are speaking or who avoids eye contact will not be successful in the assessment centre. Avoiding eye contact means that you will not be able to perceive others' interpersonal skills and you may miss important nuances in what people say.
5. **Competition v cooperation:** Although you may be in competition to some extent with others that you see at the assessment centre, it is worth recognising that employers may be able to select all of you or none of you. In light of this, it is much better to cooperate and work with those in your team, rather than trying to compete. Employers will be looking for this far more than they will be looking for competitive behaviours.
6. **Tone of voice:** If you have something to say, say it clearly and ensure that your voice gets heard. This does not mean, of course, getting upset, emotional or shouting, but it does mean ensuring that anything you say gets heard. It is better to keep your voice calm and unemotional – a low pitch is better than a high-pitched voice.
7. **Persistence:** You should not be afraid of pushing for an idea if you think it is a good one, but you need to be able to do so in a way which discourages others from making contributions or in a way which is going to alienate others. There may come a point when you decide that the good of the team is more important than achieving the task successfully, but that is a risky judgement in the face of a short exercise.
8. **Listening skills:** Listening is usually an underrated skill. It is very tempting to want to interrupt and make your point clearly, especially when the pace of the conversation is very fast, but doing so will be seen as evidence of very poor communication skills. Do not interrupt, let others finish and then say what you wish to say. If you think that the pace of the conversation is too fast, you can slow it down yourself when you get to speak.
9. **Using questions for team building:** It is a good idea to use questions to get people to see your point of view, but they can also be useful for checking information that has already been given and for checking for agreement from others. If asked calmly, questions can be a useful way of persuading people of your point of view.
10. **Acknowledging and encouraging (quieter) others:** It is very easy to consider that you are in a selection situation and it is your performance that is being watched, but it is also important to recognise that part of your performance (especially in a leadership role, although this applies to everyone in the team) will be encouraging and acknowledging the views from quieter team members. It is not something that is done particularly well, but it is something that observers will notice.
11. **Balance between listening and talking:** Be mindful that the one talking all the time may not be the best candidate for the job. You do need to make some contribution, but dominating others without listening properly to what is being said is not the best way to demonstrate your team-working, leadership or communication skills.

12. **Seating and body posture:** Depending on the layout of the room or table, you may find that you have your back to others in the team. Whether you are leading the team or not, make sure that everyone can easily see everyone else. This might mean physically moving your chair, or turning around a little.

BOX 19.6

Contributing Well - and Badly - in a Team Exercise

By their nature, assessment centre exercises are competitive. There will be few jobs, and all of you will be competing for them, but showing competitive behaviour is not good. The aim is rarely to beat the other candidates down, but rather to show the assessors how you can use your skills to persuade others around to your point of view, and to lead or work as a member of a team to successfully arrive at a particular conclusion. So demonstrating the skills mentioned above is important to getting through into the next round.

So, how can you deal with someone who is more competitive?

1. Realise that many companies actually see competitiveness as a bad thing and so while there may be competitive individuals in your group, relax: they may push to speak more and may seem to rubbish other peoples' ideas, but they will probably not get through into the next round.
2. Engage with them in a constructive way: acknowledge the value of their ideas but if they are having a negative impact on the group, then try to bring them back to the main discussion and set some ground rules.
3. Apply the rules of giving good feedback that we saw in Chapter 9 on Communicating Effectively.
4. Do speak, but once you start speaking, you can control the conversation in terms of its pace and emotion. Slow it down by slowing down your own speech if you need to, or quieten it down by using a quiet tone of voice. Emotional speech tends to be loud, high-pitched and fast: if you get the chance to speak, then you can change the level of emotion by changing any of these three - or even all of them.
5. If you have been able to achieve your own goal, then help others to achieve theirs too. The best candidates focus on assisting others - because they will need to, as a leader...



FOR YOU TO DO

Video Analysis

Watch the YouTube Video 'Assessment Centre Role Play' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NRLSfsVKAB4>)

This video shows a role play group discussion exercise with a diverse group of graduate candidates and while there is no such thing as a 'typical' exercise, the task given here would not be unusual. The group of four has to decide on the international expansion of a company and the video is split into three parts.

1. The group needs to decide on which country to expand to: different group members have been asked to give their views on selected countries - and may have been told that they need to be an advocate for a particular country.
2. Having decided on which country, the group now needs to decide on the strategy to use in order to locate themselves in that country.

3. Finally, representatives from the group are asked to meet with senior managers (who in real life would likely be managers who had watched the group undertake the discussions) to propose their recommendation. We only see two members of the group here, but it is likely in real life that all four members of the group are asked to do this in turn.

As you watch, try to answer the following questions:

1. Based on the nature of this exercise. what do you think the selectors might be looking for from the candidates might be looking for from the candidates?
2. The one who seems to lead the task might or might not have been asked to play the role of leader: which do you think is the case here, and why?
3. Which of the candidates perform the best and the weakest in the exercise, and why?

KEY LEARNING POINT



While there are many aspects to bear in mind when attending an assessment centre, the main point of an assessment centre is to see whether you have the right kinds of skills that the organisation is looking for. So be as natural as you can and practise what you can in order to develop your skills.

BUT I HAVE A QUESTION...



Are there any other exercises that take place in an Assessment Centre?

The form and number of exercises that can take place in an Assessment Centre is infinite. Participants can be asked to create videos about themselves as part of the assessment process, can be asked to lead a game, can have a meal with selectors, can be asked to do or lead anything that shows their abilities and skills.

- Role play situations are used extensively in certain high-pressure jobs - e.g. police or nursing
- Planning exercises - e.g. a holiday or a business activity
- Writing a brief report - 'What would you do if...?' - can be used where a job might involve crisis or risk management
- An exercise where you are trying to bid for resources on behalf of a particular department or client

...And many others. So the skills and techniques covered elsewhere in this text become invaluable when seeking to 'conquer' the Assessment Centre: it is in such processes that our natural behaviour reveals itself. But it is too late to start learning these skills before the assessment centre: they need to be learnt throughout your time as a student, as you interact and lead others.

INTEGRATION AND APPLICATION

Passing an interview, then psychometric tests and then an assessment centre is not something that anyone else can do for you – you will have to do this yourself. Your careers services can help you with some of these areas and can give you opportunities to practise, but the demonstration of your skills is

something that will be up to you, bearing in mind the activities you have done at university, the earlier content of this text, any part-time work or responsibilities in student societies and your engagement with the careers services.

In nearly all selection processes, it is fear of the unknown that can make life hard, so the current chapter has sought to provide some idea of what you might expect from ability tests, personality questionnaires and assessment centres. There are some basic principles to think through:

1. **Prepare:** Find out information, try some exercises and tests, and get some experience in the kinds of activities you will be asked to do.
2. **Act:** Demonstrate the skills and abilities (behavioural and cognitive/intellectual) that have been tested and developed throughout your time at university.
3. **Review:** Consider how well you did in the exercises and the tests. You can normally get some feedback on the exercises and a little feedback on the tests, so use that feedback to improve, whether you were successful or not.

You should always be able to receive feedback on your performance in any part of the selection process, but the feedback that could come from an assessment centre has the potential to be much more detailed than that which could come from a single interview.

CONCLUSION

You should now:

- Know what to expect if asked to take a psychometric test or attend an assessment centre.
- Feel prepared for being asked to take a psychometric test and attend an assessment centre.
- Understand why some employers use such instruments to select graduate employees.
- Feel relatively relaxed if asked to attend such a selection process.

Having an understanding of what the tests and assessment centres are and what they look for does not guarantee that you will do well, but it will probably help to reduce nerves and make life slightly more relaxed. One of the things that individuals who have been invited to a number of assessment centres find is that they have a better idea of how they work and this, in turn, helps them to prepare better – which really has been the purpose of this chapter. In terms of tests, they also find that there are times when different employers will use the same reasoning tests (because they look for similar qualities), so the ability to remember what information to record and what calculations to do means that individuals are more likely to finish the tests the more they do them, but this does not guarantee that they (or you) will get more answers correct, of course.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Based on the content of this chapter, what do you now know about psychometric tests and assessment centres that you did not know before?

What key learning point had the most impact? Why?

Do your answers to either of the above questions have the potential to change your ability to perform well when taking a psychometric test/personality questionnaire or attending an assessment centre? Why?

What will you now do differently? (Write this down and put it somewhere where you can see it regularly.)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Want to learn more? Visit <https://study.sagepub.com/morgan2e> to gain access to a wide range of online resources, including interactive tests, tasks, further reading and downloads.



Website Resources – Assessment Centres

Bangor University – leaflet including a large number of additional websites: www.bangor.ac.uk/careers/services/documents/AssessmentCentres11-12ENG.pdf

Changingminds.org: http://changingminds.org/disciplines/hr/selection/assessment_center.htm

Jobsite.co.uk – How to impress at selection centres: www.jobsite.co.uk/hobsons_articles/select_centre.html

Prospects website: www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips/assessment-centres

University of Aberdeen: www.abdn.ac.uk/careers/resources/topics/18/

University of Birmingham: <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/employability/careers/apply/assessment-centres/index.aspx>

University of Liverpool: www.liverpool.ac.uk/careers/applications-and-interviews/assessment-centres/

University of Sheffield: www.shef.ac.uk/careers/students/gettingajob/assessment

Website Resources – Psychometric Tests

Careerplayer.com: www.careerplayer.com/psychometrics

Changingminds.org: <http://changingminds.org/disciplines/hr/selection/psychometric.htm>

Manchester Metropolitan University: www.mmu.ac.uk/careers/students-and-graduates/resources/guides/aptitude-personality-practice-tests.pdf

Newcastle University: www.ncl.ac.uk/careers/interviews/tests/#preparation

Practice Aptitude Tests.com – giving you the opportunity to practice reasoning tests you might be given at an Assessment Centre: www.practiceaptitudetests.com/psychometric-tests/

Prospects website – SHL practice psychometric tests: www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips/psychometric-tests/preparing-for-shl-practice-tests

University of Liverpool: www.liverpool.ac.uk/careers/applications-and-interviews/psychometric-tests/

University of Sheffield: www.shef.ac.uk/careers/students/gettingajob/psychometric

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