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EPSO Assessment Centre Candidate Reports



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THIS COLLECTION OF CANDIDATES' EXPERIENCES

WHO HAVE ATTENDED THE ASSESSMENT CENTRE IN 2013 IS SHARED

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WHAT TO EXPECT IN THE EPSO ASSESSMENT CENTRE:

CANDIDATES SHARE THEIR FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCE

You have successfully passed the first round of exams to become a civil servant for an EU institution – well done! You are probably feeling both excited and anxious about the upcoming Assessment Centre. One of the best things you can do is to make sure you're as prepared as possible. Knowledge is power, after all, especially when candidates who have passed the tests themselves share it with you first-hand.

We have received **DIRECT FEEDBACK FROM THE REAL-LIFE EXPERIENCES OF FOUR RECENT CANDIDATES** who agreed that we share it with you provided we keep their names private. You will find each of the four candidates' stories below, packed full of useful insights and advice. Each candidate has helpfully provided a breakdown of each part of the assessment – Structured Interview, Oral Presentation, and Group Exercise – together with a summary of their overall experience and feelings about the day.

At the end of the article, you will find we've provided you with a summary of the most useful 'Top Tips'. If you would like more advice about any of the issues raised, or our [assessment centre training course](#), we are always here to answer your questions. Let's see what candidates have to say!

CANDIDATES' KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Ensure you're fully aware of all of the technical terms and EU institutional dynamics
- Making sure you're properly prepared will help you to stay calm and confident on the day
- Be prepared for the unexpected
- Cooperation in the group exercise is vital for success



**9 AMAZING IDEAS
FOR YOUR EPSO
ASSESSMENT CENTRE
PREPARATION**

**7 THINGS
YOU MUST KNOW
ABOUT THE EPSO
ASSESSMENT CENTRE**

THE STRUCTURED INTERVIEW



CANDIDATE 1

I am confident I did well discussing learning, leadership, and my desire to work with others. However, this is the part of the assessment I feel I was weakest in. My answers to questions about resilience were not detailed enough and the interviewer pressed me further. A few questions made me struggle. The first, she asked me about my biggest career disappointment; here I just gave a concrete example, without going into the personal details surrounding that situation. The second, I was asked how I cope in managing periods of intense workloads, and here **I FEEL I DIDN'T GIVE ENOUGH EXAMPLES TO PROVIDE A CONCRETE ANSWER**. This is where I found it difficult and, although I had prepared examples of resilience, I was unable to use them. I would have preferred to have stayed a bit calmer and steadier in my responses.

The time given to answer the questions is short – 60-90 seconds per answer – but they pressure you to respond in the shortest time possible. In total you are given 10 minutes for each competency. I found that providing four answers for each competency was not enough and felt pressured to come up with six or seven concrete examples.

CANDIDATE 2

I feel happier about my performance for this than I did the interview for the Assistant exam I also applied for. I provided a good introduction, and despite noticing I used vague 'filler' phrases twice, in general my responses were clear and concise. I was feeling good after the interview although, having had time to sleep on it, I've now come up with a few 'I wish I'd said that!' answers I could have given instead!

CANDIDATE 3

I'm happy with my performance during this part of the Assessment Centre. I was able to come up with answers to all of their questions. **I EVEN IMPROVISED SOME ANSWERS, BUT MADE SURE THAT EACH WAS RELEVANT AND VALUABLE**, not just given for the sake of trying to find something to say. I realised that the most important issue to talk about here is 'motivation', no matter which competency is being tested or asked. It is vital to share your inner drive with the assessors in all cases.

CANDIDATE 4

The mock questions during our [Online EU Training's](#) classroom and private sessions, were very useful. It was really helpful to use this as a foundation in my preparation for the assessment day, to think of various examples for each competency, possible questions that could come up, and to look at those examples from all angles.

The structure of the exam was following a pattern where I was given three or four questions for each competency, with no sub-questions. Each question required a different situation or to think of the same situation from a different perspective. The assessors had a list with all the questions, but I wondered if they didn't ask me sub-questions because my answers were so comprehensive? I certainly hope so.

The timing was very strict and needs to be adhered to. I'd say it was around two minutes to answer each question. It is also worth noting that the questions can be fairly generic, for example, thinking about how you deal with highs and lows with your work. I clarified if they required a specific situation as part of my answer and they explained that, although I could do that, it was not required.

IF I COULD GIVE ONE PIECE OF ADVICE TO PROSPECTIVE CANDIDATES IT'D BE TO PREPARE SEVERAL EXAMPLES (MORE THAN THREE, IDEALLY FOUR OR FIVE) PER COMPETENCY. It enables you to illustrate you have a range of experiences and will help you to feel more confident on the day.

I had the interview first and kept in mind the techniques [Online EU Training] recommended to me. The assessors were strict with their vigorous questioning, but made me feel at ease. I was prepared for all of the questions I was asked. The only slight variation was that one or two were given a different focus or expressed a little differently in how they were asked. The assessors expect very detailed responses and the competency 'communication' is indirectly assessed throughout the entire process.

THE ORAL PRESENTATION



CANDIDATE 1

The training I had received from [Online EU Training](#) prepared me very well for the presentation. It dealt with a very specific take on the EU cultural policy, whereby we had to establish a European Heritage label ourselves, outline the possible difficulties that could arise, and make recommendations to overcome them and move forward.

I FOUND THAT MY UNDERSTANDING OF EU INSTITUTIONAL DYNAMICS, the sheer number of opinions, stakeholders and questions which arose, **WERE GREATER THAN MY CURRENT POOL OF KNOWLEDGE**. This meant that I was not clear what options were feasible and was not sure of how we could move forward, so I talked about the need for governance set-up and further policy options. I felt more confident in presenting my summary of the issue at hand and was not asked for further information drawn from the dossier, from the panel, as I covered everything from budgets to the distribution within the four key areas I discussed.

During the Q&A part of the exercise, I think I handled the first part well, but lost my way a little during the second half. I feel at one point I wasn't able to clarify my thoughts to the panel sufficiently. Later, I was asked a very open question about my personal opinion, but I successfully managed to hone this into an answer using my knowledge by making reference to the European principles in the dossier and using a particular example of a possible candidate for the cultural label in question.

Overall, I feel fairly comfortable about my performance, but I have some doubts surrounding my ability to give concrete working options.

CANDIDATE 2

This, again, was exactly as I was expecting from what you'd explained. To add to candidates' confidence in doing a presentation, I'd suggest they use their creativity by preparing responses to possible outcomes, especially those related to an EU institutional setting, but also dealing with stakeholders, relations between co-legislators, policy proposals, and so forth. **IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO BE AWARE OF THE SHEER NUMBER OF QUESTIONS THAT YOU WILL BE ASKED** to find out how you would complete a task and what your suggestions and options would be.

I am confident that I was capable of presenting my case in a structured way. I was able to answer all of the questions thoroughly by bringing in facts and figures that hadn't been included in the presentation, but I'd gathered from background files. The assessors seemed to be particularly impressed by this.

CANDIDATE 3

I was most nervous about giving my presentation, so I was pleasantly surprised by how smooth I found it. The topic was the same as we later did for the group exercise and was related to the field of my competition. **THE ASSESSORS PUT ME AT EASE AND WEREN'T OVERLY CRITICAL**.

CANDIDATE 4

CANDIDATE 4 had no Oral Presentation exercise



THE GROUP EXERCISE



CANDIDATE 1

The group was made up of five participants, including myself – as we had one no-show. It was a great group to work with and overall I had a positive experience. During our briefing for the exercise, they explained **OUR SCENARIO WAS A “MEETING TO COMPARE INFORMATION AND MAKE RECOMMENDATIONS WITH VARIOUS STAKEHOLDERS PRESENT”**. The subject under discussion was the EU Transparency Register and Code of Conduct for the Lobbyists, from the Council’s viewpoint.

The main difficulty I had was in understanding the overview of all the registers and codes. I found it rather technical and couldn’t follow the options and objectives of the session. However, thankfully, three people knew quite a bit about the subject. One person really helped guide my understanding by taking the lead and getting the group/Council meeting to focus on two key questions.

I have mixed feelings about my performance. I am able to see that there are certain things I did well, but feel less confident about my abilities in other areas. In terms of the positive things, as soon as the task started, several people leapt to make their views heard, but I decided to hold back. After a few suggestions had been made, I offered my own plan to have a minute to each tour the information table, and bring back key points about each stakeholder to share with the group.

On two occasions I suggested we look at things from a different perspective. At one point, I outlined the need to look towards how the situation may unfold in the future and how that should influence our thinking of the current issue at hand. Later on, when discussing the potential administrative burdens, I suggested we gather and evaluate data from EU Agencies running similar projects, to learn a few best practices. I made sure I referenced specific items from the dossier, together with referencing the EU’s desire for transparency in our work and I highlighted that **WE NEEDED TO TURN THE MINUTES OF OUR MEETING INTO RECOMMENDATIONS**.

Together with these positives, I am also conscious that I spent time looking through the papers we were given and worry this may have made me appear uncertain of the group task and my role within it. I noticed my language wasn’t always concise and I realised I used a ‘filler’ word from time to time. I don’t feel I took as much control over the discussion as I would have liked. Again, this comes back to me feeling slightly lost in the technical and institutional procedures in the EU, especially the Commission. Other people in my group were able to formulate solid ideas about how we should proceed, for example, involving “EcoSoc” and setting up a Working Group for the project.

OVERALL, IT WAS A VERY GOOD EXPERIENCE, WITHOUT ANY DISAGREEMENTS AMONG THE GROUP. Everyone was co-operative group and, although one person didn’t take part quite as much as everyone else, no one was excluded from participating. We reached our group consensus with three minutes remaining and I think that we all did quite well.

CANDIDATE 2

The training I had completed with you before the assessment centre meant that I was much more aware and prepared than other candidates for the task ahead. The others in the group seemed uncertain of what to do, so I immediately look the leadership role. I am hoping that this leadership will not be perceived negatively, because I was conscious of not imposing my own ideas onto the group. I made sure that I focused on gaining all group members’ ideas by encouraging them to speak up, acknowledging their suggestions all the way through the exercise, connecting all the proposals together, and then using them to create a framework for our discussion.

CANDIDATE 3

I’d advise people to practice the exercise with colleagues and friends if they can. We were given a single page each, full of background information with views from the various stakeholders and committee members, but we didn’t need to play out those roles/views, just collate them. I was part of a co-operative group, but in order to ensure you help to create a positive group experience, I would advise people to follow some of these common sense tips:

- Try to understand the “role” you’re allocated as fully as possible
- Try and blend your views with the views of your group members.
- Don’t be afraid to be proactive, but always remember to include others.
- Try and find common ground with group member’s views wherever you can.

CANDIDATE 4

We were told we had 12 minutes to read the documents in front of us. I turned immediately to the final page, as this contained the instructions specifically for me and my role, then spent

the rest of the time familiarising myself with the rest of the document. However, with only two or three minutes remaining, I spotted a second document in the file, which also contained instructions! I queried this and the EPSO secretary explained to everyone that due to a no show, we had all been given two different versions of the instructions document to allow us to integrate those views into our discussion. This was the reason for the extra two minutes of preparation time, although they apparently forgot to tell us about this at the start of the exercise.

In spite of this setback, overall the group exercise was a good experience. I took a leadership role from the start, proposing how we could structure our discussion, and this continued naturally, although with another member of the group, throughout the exercise. We completed our task, and were ready with our conclusions, with two minutes left to spare.

FINAL THOUGHTS

CANDIDATE 1

Overall, it wasn't as bad as it could have been, but the questions around resilience were much more challenging than I was prepared to handle, so I'm not confident that I've passed the resilience competency. I'm also unsure of my proficiency in the quality of work and leadership competencies, but expect that I successfully passed the others.

CANDIDATE 2

I left the centre feeling positive about my overall performance but, the next day, while waiting to hear the outcome, I began to feel less upbeat.

CANDIDATE 3

I wish to thank you so much for all of your valuable advice. It helped me to feel prepared and confident on the day, which is so important.

CANDIDATE 4

My overall experience of the whole day was a very positive one and it really taught me a lot about myself. This is down to the fact that I felt prepared and confident. I know I wouldn't have felt this confident if I'd not taken the training course beforehand and known what to expect.



SUMMARY OF THE CANDIDATES TOP TIPS

TIP 1:

FEELING PREPARED WILL HELP INCREASE YOUR CONFIDENCE AND ABILITY ON THE DAY

TIP 2:

TAKING PART IN A TRAINING COURSE BEFOREHAND IS INVALUABLE IN HELPING YOU TO FEEL PREPARED

TIP 3:

REMAIN FLEXIBLE AND ADAPTABLE – EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED!

TIP 4:

ENSURE YOU HAVE A SOUND KNOWLEDGE OF THE RELEVANT EU TERMINOLOGY AND INSTITUTIONAL DYNAMICS

TIP 5:

PREPARE IN ADVANCE SEVERAL EXAMPLES PER COMPETENCY, FOR THE INTERVIEW STAGE AND BE AWARE EACH QUESTION SHOULD BE ANSWERED IN ROUGHLY 1.5 MINUTES

TIP 6:

PREPARE RESPONSES TO POSSIBLE OUTCOMES FOR THE Q&A SECTION OF YOUR PRESENTATION – BE CREATIVE!

TIP 7:

DURING THE GROUP EXERCISE, ENSURE YOU FULLY UNDERSTAND YOUR OWN ROLE, REMAIN COOPERATIVE, BUT DON'T SHY AWAY FROM BEING A PROACTIVE MEMBER OF THE GROUP



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