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8 December 2017

AD5 (EPSO/AD/388/17) Assessment Centre Q&A with Andras Baneth

Welcome to those of you joining this live Q&A session about the EPSO Assessment Centre. I presume most of you have passed (...the E-tray...) and you're very glad and happy about this, that you're proceeding to the next stage.

As you can see here on the screen we are taking a very low-tech but high-impact approach. So, I won't be using any slides. What I will do is absolutely listen to your questions and try to the best of my abilities to answer those.

If there is something that I cannot answer live then we will follow up and we will get back to you in the form of a Q&A answer document, or an article, or a bilateral exchange of emails. I'm happy to share our expertise.

We were going to do this together with my colleague Jan De Sutter who is our senior coach and trainer for the EPSO Assessment Centre. He, unfortunately, cannot be here with me today, but if there's anything that relates to his area of expertise, I will convey that to him and he'll get back to you very shortly.

With that in mind I encourage you to use the chat box which normally is on the left side of your screen and just to warm up write in there where you are located. Perhaps you want to say if this is your first time experiencing the Assessment Centre or you've tried it before. Maybe say a word of welcome - just try and test how the chat function works.

While you are doing that: my name is Andras Baneth, I represent EU Training. I'm one of the founders of the company and I used to do a lot of trainings for the Assessment Centre. I'm the co-author of a book with Jan about this very topic, which was published in the series "The Ultimate EU Test Book". So, that's my background. I also have a certification as a qualified assessor, so that's something that I'll try to bring to the table today.





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I see lots of input coming in from Brussels, Romania, Frankfurt, Italy - a truly, truly European audience and we are so appreciative of that, that you are here with us from all over Europe.

From the beautiful Pamplona, I hope the bulls are going okay. And from Poland, it must be very cold out there, just like in Hamburg. Fantastic!

Just a few words about the Assessment Centre because I don't want to go into too much technical detail and rather focus on your questions. So, if you already have questions in mind please fire away and enter them into the chat box while I say a few words about how the Assessment Centre works.

This is an important step on your path to success, on your path to the reserve list and, ultimately, to an EU job. The Assessment Centre is a very different part in the overall selection system that EPSO runs. Namely, it is no longer selecting out, like the pre-selection tests were, which essentially looks at a very fair and balanced way of filtering the number of candidates who should proceed to the next stage.

From the E-tray exercise, including the Assessment Centre, the approach is very different. The approach is selecting in. They are actually looking for characteristics, personality traits that you should possess in order to be a good EU official.

It's very important in this part of the exam to demonstrate those competencies, eight competencies that EPSO has identified for the AD (Administrator) level. And these eight are communicated very openly, very transparently in the Notice of Competition. You need to demonstrate a high enough level in those competencies, and once you have it they score it, and based on these scores they do a ranking. The top certain percentage, or number of candidates who had the highest scores will get through to the Assessment Centre. So that's the core principle, the basic idea.

Another point, very important to bear in mind, is that the E-tray exercise that you've already done is part of the Assessment Centre, in regards to scoring. Not necessarily in a procedural sense, but your performance on the E-tray exercise is factored into your scores in the Assessment Centre. Again, that's something you may have seen in the Notice of Competition, where some competencies are partly evaluated by the E-tray exercise and partly on your performance in the Assessment Centre.





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With that in mind, it's interesting to consider how those points are evaluated. How do you demonstrate that you possess good Communication skills, or Working with others, or Analysis and problem-solving? As shown in the Notice of Competition, each

competency, so each of those eight competencies, are broken down into so-called indicators. The assessors will be looking for the manifestation of those character traits that we call competencies.

How it's being shown, and how it manifests itself and how the indicators are seen, is through exercises. And the exercises are the vehicle, the tool, through which you can demonstrate the existence of those competencies. The very practical way of demonstrating those competencies is by being good at those exercises. And the exercises are well known: it's the Oral Presentation, the Case Study, the Competency-based Interview, the Group Exercise, and the E-tray exercise. Each of those competencies need to be evaluated through two exercises. One - the E-tray exercise which you have already done for some competencies, whereas for other competencies, namely the Learning and Development you haven't done anything yet, you will demonstrate that at the Assessment Centre through the Group Exercise and Competency-based Interview.

Essentially, that's the idea behind the measurement of competencies.

So, this is the theoretical and semi-practical framework in which you need to optimise your performance. There are a million tips and tricks, best practices and ideas for preparation and for effective exam-taking in those exercises. I am sure that you will have lots of questions about the practicalities, perhaps about the process, perhaps about your chances or how to work with difficult participants in the Group Exercise, how to be good at the Oral Presentation and communication, how to prepare for the Case Study - I'm very happy to answer those questions. So please feel free.

I'm looking at the chat box and looking at what you may have asked so far. I see a lot of greetings and great discussion happening. Here's one question that will be the first one I will take:





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What kind of questions can we expect in the Competency-based interview?

Now, the Competency-based Interview is a very interesting type of interview. It's not a job interview, it's not CV-based. This is the first thing you need to bear in mind. They will not ask anything about your professional background, professional experience, or anything like that. What they will do is ask you to recall and tell personal stories linked to specific competencies and linked to specific issues. They might say 'Can you give us an example of when you demonstrated a high level of resilience?' And that is a very broad question which is not typical in any job interview. That's why it's called a Competency-based interview. It's closely linked to a competency they are trying to assess and evaluate.

The kind of questions you might have are open-ended and you need to give a very specific example, mostly from your professional background, but it could be from another, semi-professional setting as well, which demonstrates the existence of that competency.

If it's about resilience, then you need to give them a very specific story, an example when you've demonstrated resilience, when you've overcome adversity and your ability not to crash and fall under pressure. For that you need to look into your professional background and I say that with a little footnote, or an asterisk, because for the AD5 you are not required to have any professional experience. You might ask which experience should I talk about if I have no formal job experience? In that case you need to look at your university or college years, or if you interned at a company during summer holiday, anything that is semi-professional that helps look at how you work with others or how you demonstrated resilience in that setting.

The kind of question you get is truly related to a very concrete example, which might be a multi-year process where you want to demonstrate Learning and Development by talking about how you learned a new language or a new computer skill. But it could be very nuanced and it's just a one-time thing that you did interpreting for a high-level, local politician who asked you a question or used a word that you just couldn't remember how to translate but you were the interpreter. How did you cope with the stress and the unexpectedness of that situation if you're talking about resilience?

These sorts of examples can be short, they can be long, but they have to be very concrete, very personal and very specific.





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With that in mind, you always need to link that to the competency question. And they will tell you that up front, so you will know whether they are testing Learning and development, ... or Resilience for instance. Whatever competency it is, they will tell you up front that this is what they're looking for.

On our website you'll find multiple resources about the Competency-based interview. We have various webinars, and other tools, like E-books, where you can find the indicators, the broken-down, more nuanced aspects of a given competency. So, you can (and I love this term) reverse engineer the process which is being tested. You look at 'What do I need to emphasize?', 'What do I need to highlight?' in order to demonstrate a high level of a given competency. So - long answer to a short question, and happy to elaborate further.

Going back to the questions here, let's see what else you are interested in? Do type your AC-related questions, whether it's about the procedure or anything else.

Here's another one: **How important is the stuff we wrote under "Motivation" in our applications? When is that read, by whom, is it graded?**

Well, it's not very important at this stage for sure. It doesn't affect your score in the Assessment Centre. It only has some relevance once you are on the reserve list and a specific director general or EU Institution is looking to hire you they might look at the motivation part. It's not so important from that perspective of the scoring, not so important from the perspective of your chances in the Assessment Centre. It's not a determining factor - what you wrote in there. It can play in your favor if there's a question at the recruitment phase, but not at this selection phase.

Alright, let's see what else there is. **Can experience in EU Institutions be an advantage?**

Yes and no. I say no, because it doesn't mean any formal advantage, it doesn't give you extra points it doesn't give you a higher probability of succeeding. What it does give you is a better understanding of the institutional culture, the corporate culture, so to speak, if that has any meaning in the public sector. It gives you a better understanding, better insight into how these institutions operate. What are their key values, what is the kind of mindset through which you approach a certain problem and you have a better chance of demonstrating it because you





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understand how these institutions operate. But, in a formal sense, it doesn't give you additional, or any kind of advantage, over those who have had no exposure to the EU institutions whatsoever.

Next question: **When are we going to receive the date for the Assessment Centre?**

I believe the Case Study has been scheduled already for the 26th of January, if I'm not mistaken. So that's already set. The Assessment Centre will most likely take place towards the end of February. Perhaps even early March, it depends on EPSO's workload and how they structure their time. But a couple weeks after the Case Study. Though, again this is being said with a disclaimer that EPSO's processes are subject to change and they might think of a different way of going about it and they might say 'Well, from mid-January we'll start the Assessment Centre'. So, I know that's a vague answer, but unless there is any formal information or communication from the institutions, it's hard to say when that might happen. *(Editor's note: AC dates have already been released! Check your EPSO account.)*

Next question: **What kind of Case Study do we get? How much time do we have to solve it? And how do they evaluate it?**

Hm, very good and complex question. The Case Study is computer-based and the length is usually 90 minutes. So, you will have an hour and 30 minutes. And again, with the caveat that whatever they officially communicate to you will be the truly binding piece of information, but normally it's a 90-minute exercise. You will have to type it on the screen, or basically like into a word processor, as you would do in a Word document. You will have a lot of background documents that you need to process. You need to see how those documents relate to each other because it might be a press release from the commission, it might be a communication from an EU Institution saying they are opening a parliamentary resolution. It could be a press release that appeared in the Guardian, it could be a newsletter from a trade union, there are multiple ways and formats through which they can communicate various background information to you as part of the Case Study.

One of the challenges there is to truly be able to assess what is relevant and what is irrelevant information. How can you truly process that and find the relative weight of various documents? Occasionally they may contradict each other, this is because analysis and problem-solving





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requires you to truly analyse the documents to figure out what is relevant, and what may not be relevant. A part of the exercise is a synthesis and understanding, not just the content, but the overall context which is presented to you. Be mindful of distractions or pieces of information put there just to confuse you, in order to trigger that thinking process in you.

With that in mind, you need to write a pretty concise answer. Sometimes it's a summary, sometimes it's a different format. Usually for the AD5, for the Generalist, so for the Public Administration exams, it's a note to your superior, to your head of unit. So, sort of a summary. Always make sure you structure it very clearly and very specifically. Sometimes you have bullet points, or sub-headings, in a very clear visual format which helps the assessors understand.

That takes me to the next part of the question, how is that evaluated? It's evaluated according to a grid... [construction noise] ... going back to the original point - there is a scoring a grid according to how relevant your answer is, how well you analysed the information, and how you communicated that information. Is it truly reflecting the message that you are trying to convey? How about your reasoning in the Case Study? So, there are a lot of aspects to it, where you are being evaluated not just on the content, but to some degree on the form.

We have a Case Study simulation in our system with two different sets. You can either have Jan (De Sutter) or another expert of ours, evaluate them, or you can just simply practice using the interface, processing the information to see how that works. I encourage you to try it out so you become familiar with the Case Study set up. (Case Study with and without evaluation)

Let me go back to the other questions. **What is the best strategy to prepare for the Assessment Centre?**

Two ways: 1. Understand the theoretical framework and the process that the Assessment Centre uses. 2. Practice - and not just by yourself. If anything, this practice requires small teams or at the minimum with one other person, whether it's another candidate, or someone else who's willing to volunteer their time to help you - that's entirely up to you.

Do simulations of the Competency-based interview. Have a Group Exercise simulation. We run training courses that get candidates together to simulate the CBI and the Group Exercise. These are very helpful ways to prepare for the exam, because you are going to get that immediate exposure to the exam setting. You can provide feedback to each other, you can have that





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experience of what it will be like at the real thing. You're not going to be surprised when you go for the actual exam, when you go to EPSO's headquarters and everything is so new and so different.

So, understand what they are looking for, understand the process that's required and make sure you practice with someone else who can observe your behavior. And the good thing about the Assessment Centre is that whatever preparation you do, it's a good investment. And I absolutely wish for all of you to succeed and we are here to help you succeed. In case you still do not, any time you put into preparing for the Assessment Centre will help you no matter what. Preparation for the Oral Presentation will pay off - you will be a better speaker, a better presenter when it comes to an in-house team meeting. When you practice the Case Study you become a better, more structured writer. If you practice the Group Exercise you'll work better in teams. So, all of this is strictly about your own personal development, which will pay off. This is the broader message and the big picture of the Assessment Centre.

But if it's specifically the EPSO areas, obviously you want to look at the nuts and bolts of how this works and how this operates and make sure that you truly understand all the details that are out there.

Next question: **Is there online preparation material available for the Oral Presentation, Group Exercise and Interview?**

There is a webinar that I do every year, pretty much. the most recent one was a couple months ago perhaps even a year ago, just as valid still. It's a two plus two-hour webinar, so for four hours you have the joy of listening to my voice. I go through, in excruciating detail, all the steps of the Assessment Centre, so you understand all the nuts and bolts, ins and outs of how it works. With the caveat again, that with the Assessment Centre you need to practice and practice in a real life, physical setting preferably, so you do get that exposure once you learn all the tips and tricks. You cannot learn to play tennis just by reading books about tennis and watching videos about tennis. You need to start playing tennis. And it's the same thing here you need to maybe record yourself with your smartphone and then watch the recording, however painful that is, but see what you did with that white board. Put yourself under time pressure. In that sense, it's a very similar mindset and preparation as it is for the Computer-based tests. Just like for the CBT you did back then, you understand the framework and then you do a lot of





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practice tests, then you will improve. And again, the same thing - it's more human, it's more psychology-based, not so much computer-based testing, but for practice it makes a huge difference that you get that exposure. And certainly, we have an enormous number of free articles, e-books, tips&tricks and webinar recordings about the Assessment Centre proper and different parts of it as well, the Oral Presentation, the Group Exercise, the Competency-based Interview, and many other resources. And then we have webinars and classroom courses in Brussels or through Skype.

Alright, let's see the next one. **Could you please give more information on the evaluation scoring grid?**

Now the caveat, and that's the lawyer in me, EPSO obviously does not disclose the details of their evaluation scoring grid. Having said that, we have our experts, and our occupational psychologists who create assessment centres for various clients around the world. They were kind enough to inform us how that actually works from the professional perspective. So that's why we have those indicators broken down on the basis of the competencies. For instance, if I take Communication as a competency: what could be the key components of person being able to communicate clearly, orally and in writing? That person would probably not use a lot of jargon, or if they did, they would define it. You would structure visually, in writing, the content in a Case Study in a clear and concise manner. That is another indicator. The sentences are clearly formulated and do not contain grammatical errors and work linguistically. That's another indicator. Making sure that the logic in which you present the facts and information is clear. You can back it up with data, you can back it up with references to the background material, if we're talking about the Case Study.

If we're talking about the Oral Presentation, then your body language, the way you draw charts or any visual aid, on the white board, on that sheet of paper that you are given. That's another indicator.

All of this, if you think about it, there's a lot of common sense. If you do a brainstorming with friends and ask "What thing would make a person be good at delivering quality and results? What does it really mean?" And then if you come up with a couple of ideas, chances are most of [those ideas] would be what EPSO is looking for. Being very conscious of demonstrating those points is what will get you far.





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Alright, let's see the next question: **What is the difference between the webinar and the book?**

The webinar has a lot of exercises included, so it is more interactive, not as interactive as a classroom, but it's still more interactive than a book. But these tend to be quite complimentary. Also, because in the webinar I use a lot of examples, in the book there is a lot of background material that is useful for preparation on your own. Obviously with the theoretical part there is a bit of an overlap because you cannot reinvent the wheel, but again the approach is more preparation vs. practice aspect.

Next one: **How should I best deal with difficult people in the Group Exercise? For example, if someone interrupts me?**

That's a very good question and a very common question.

First of all, it's usually less common than you'd think it would be, so dominant personalities, or those that systematically interrupt you are usually rarer than we fear. But, let's suppose there is a person, or two people like that in your group. Probably you'd want to deal with them the same way you'd deal with someone who's interrupting you at your work place. You'd say 'Excuse me, Peter, but I haven't yet finished. May I finish, then I'm happy to have your input afterwards.'

So, you address the issue, but you try to be cooperative, you're not trying to monopolise the floor. That's also very important in the Group Exercise overall, that you are aware of what's happening around you. You are not trying to show off by being too much, talking too much and being that dominant person that the others would dislike.

The proportions are vital in the Group Exercise. How much do you speak compared to the others? Generally, try not to speak more than a minute, minute-and-a-half, because in this group setting the entire exercise is 40 minutes. Do not take the floor for more than a minute-and-a-half, otherwise you come across as a person who is too much, too dominant in the discussion.

Another aspect is when somebody does that, somebody does monopolise the floor, then your body language is your best tool to get your attention. So, you lean forward, you maybe raise your hand a little bit like this, or your pencil, and you very clearly indicate that you are about to say something. You are respectful of their message but you are trying to get the, virtually





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speaking, microphone - even if there's no microphone on the table. You very clearly indicate with your body language that you have something important to say. And if the person is somewhat sensible, they will see that from the corner of their eye and say 'OK, I need to have that person's input because I also want to score well on the Working with Others competency. Not just on demonstrating what I know, but demonstrating how well I work with others'.

Next question: **What is expected in the Group Exercise? Are they looking for leaders?**

I'm happy you asked this, because the whole idea, and the competency called Leadership, is pretty misunderstood at times. Leadership is not dominance. Leadership is not management skills. Leadership is more about bringing a group towards a result, and it's not about you imposing anything on the group. So that's why being a moderator in a Group Exercise is your number one goal. Trying to synthesize, trying to summarise what others have said, you pay attention to every person. And imagine you are, well, not first among equals, but you are truly equal with them, but your goal is to bring the discussion forward. If it gets stuck, or there are two camps of differing opinions, you can come in and try to broker some kind of compromise and say 'There's an interesting perspective from Maria, there's an interesting perspective from Susanna, there's an interesting perspective from Thomas, we could do this and bring it together in the following way'. The leadership as a competency, and also how you demonstrate that in a Group Exercise is a vital part. Some participants may indeed misunderstand and think 'I need to talk a lot! I need to truly show that I'm there because this is how I'm going to show my leadership!' That's the wrong approach.

I had a couple candidates tell me afterwards 'I thought I did so well at the Group Exercise, but still on my Competency Passport (basically the evaluation sheet that you get at the very end of the process) they totally scored me down in the leadership!' Leadership and Working with Others - these are two competencies that go hand-in-hand in the Group Exercise. You are not dominating, you are truly taking in others opinions, and you are trying to bring the discussion upwards, or forward, in a way that you sound out what the differences are and say 'Here is where we are, here is what we could do next, what do you think?' And the 'What do you think?' is an important part because you're not saying 'I am proposing this and you better agree to it.' No. Say this is where we are and then you go on and ask the others for their input while trying to be constructive and proactive.





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Alright, here's technical question: **Maybe a silly question - is there a dress code?**

Not a silly question. I don't think there is a formal dress code, but usually I suggest you go in formal business attire. So, guys would go in a tie and ladies would go perhaps in a skirt or a business suit, whatever formal clothing makes you comfortable is fine. But I'd rather be more formal than less formal. I wouldn't go there in my sports sneakers and hope it works out. Well if you score super well, you are absolutely able and capable to do an outstanding performance, yeah, that might work, but why expose yourself to criticism up front. Minimise those risk factors and focus on things that you can influence, because there will be a lot of things you cannot influence, so you need to be flexible and find solutions on the fly.

Group Exercise: **Do we have roles assigned to us?**

In short, no. But then again, not really might be a more appropriate answer. The reason I say that because in the Group Exercise everybody has the same information except for one sheet in your background briefing which is different for everyone. This is not a mandate, this is not a unique assignment, or position that you are required to represent in the Group Exercise. This is just some additional piece of information which is unique to you. That doesn't mean you will need to play a role or represent a stakeholder or an EU Institution. But it's information that you need to bring into the discussion so others will learn it from you. In that sense it's not a role play exercise, everyone plays the same role. But the discussion is fostered, and it's improved by the fact that not everybody has 100% the same background info.

Next question: Are roles assigned in Group Exercise? Well I think I answered this... though let's go back to it for a second... So, **for example are you representing the Commission, Council, members of a trade union?**

Usually they will tell you who you represent. Again, each individual representing the same entity in the group. So, you could be DG [Directorate-General] in the European Commission, you could be the DG presidency in the European Parliament or the Environmental Public Health Food Safety Committee in the Parliament, you could be basically any entity that you are role playing. More likely than not this will be an EU Institutional role. Identifying with that role is a good first step, if you are requested to represent the Commission you could say 'We' as in the Commission, as in third-person. That's something that those coming from the private sector or





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not based in Brussels often forget. Try to internalise which role you are playing in those 40 minutes you can speak to the others accordingly. That's just a good indicator of you understanding what your role is at the exercise.

Next one: **What is the length of the different exercises?**

As I said the Group Exercise usually lasts 40 minutes. And again, with the caveat that this year EPSO, or the Selection Board, may have decided to slightly change the duration, but most likely they won't.

The Oral Presentation is usually 10 + 10. You have ten minutes to prepare and ten minutes to present and answer questions.

The Case Study is usually 90 minutes.

The Competency-based Interview is usually 30 minutes, sometimes 40 minutes.

Again, this depends on some factors, but gives you a rough indication of the timing and how you should prepare.

Next question: **Given that we have to identify with a role we should probably know a lot about EU Institutions, what they look like, how they are structured, etc.?**

Good question. You are not formally expected to know how the EU works, because the information will be in the background briefing. But obviously, to process the information faster, to understand the context better, you are much encouraged to do some background reading. Spend part of the Christmas break, not just eating amazing cakes and chilling watching Netflix, a little of your time could go towards refreshing your knowledge about the EU Institutions.

We actually have quite a few, completely free, e-learning courses and short presentations on EU Training, where we explain how the Commission works, how the Council works, how various other institutions work, the Lisbon Treaty - what it brought into the system, with the caveat that I don't think these have been updated for two, perhaps even more, years. Some pieces of information may not be completely up-to-date. Nevertheless, it still gives you a good framework, a good background to understand how the EU works. And that will help you process the information faster, so you will understand the context in the Case Study faster. When you speak in the Group Exercise, the technology, the words, the way you speak to the others will be helped by the fact that you have at least a basic notion of how the EU operates.





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This is not something you are formally evaluated on. But it's something that will truly help your performance if you do some background reading.

Next question: **Is it important to know how cooperation between units and stakeholders work within the Institutions? How can I get such information?**

Again, it might help you on a broad level, indirectly, that you know those dynamics. There's a very good book, and we're happy to link to it in the follow up, by a friend of mine Alan Hardacre, who wrote... actually I have it on my desk! There you go, I'll show you, this is the one. *How the EU Institutions Work and How to Work with EU Institutions* and I'm not getting a royalty. It's just a really good book. As you can see it's a bit bulky, hefty, you don't have to read all of it. But certain parts of it are super helpful. It talks about the decision-making process the inner 'kitchen' of the European Commission, it talks about lobbying and general stakeholder management, stakeholder consultation, all of that is in this book. So, if you are hesitant, or uncertain, this is a very good resource. And certainly, you can find tonnes of stuff online, where you can do that background research.

Next thing: **Do you plan on having some training sessions in French as well?**

Oui. I think. I need to check with Jan, if he's available to do it. He's certainly bi-, or rather trilingual and we were at one point planning some French Assessment Centre training sessions. And I believe we're going to offer that sometime in January/February. I need to check that internally, but I'm happy to raise that, and that's a good point. And in terms of coaching, Jan does that a lot, and we also have others who are francophones, so very happy to discuss that in the follow up.

Editor's note: A French-language AC Training has been added for 2 February 2018. Follow the link for more info.

Next question: **Could you leave the link to the EU documentation available on the website?**

Yes. We will absolutely share that, or if Rita could help me out and copy/paste the link into the chat box, that would be very helpful - to the e-learning courses and perhaps even to the book *How EU Institutions Work*. But in any case, we'll send that in the follow-up note and when we





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post the transcript on the website. Ok there you go, Rita was kind enough to copy/paste that. Thank you so much for the link. All you need to do is log in, you don't need to pay anything, it's completely free, but you need to be registered to access these free e-learning courses.

Next question: **How many people are expected to get a job once on the reserve list?**

Oh, that's the million-dollar question. Usually, well in very marketing terms, the conversion rate, the number of candidates on the reserve list versus the number of people getting a job is roughly 80%. I need to check specifically in EPSO's annual report, DG Human Resources, what the numbers are. But it's around 80%, and you might ask, so what about those 20? What if I'm in those 20? The chances are quite low of not getting a job. Let me rephrase that, the chances are quite high *of* getting a job, because those 20% have moved far away from Europe, they are no longer interested, their family situation has changed. There could be a multitude of reasons why someone might not take up a job despite having gone through the lengthy process of the EPSO selection system. So that's the 20% - those who are determined will find a job sooner or later. I actually did a webinar, it's available on our site, on how to get a job once you are on the reserve list. And there a few classic job-hunting tips come into play, namely creating a great cover letter, creating a good CV, making sure you do some networking, try to form an alliance with some heads of unit and eventually those efforts will pay off.

Next question: **Is being too young or lacking experience a drawback?**

Certainly not. So EPSO, not just EPSO, but generally other institutions, tend to be very conscious not to have any age discrimination, for those who are more junior and those who are more senior. It all comes down to your willingness, or much rather how relevant of a candidate you are. Despite your age, if you happen to speak a language that is in great demand, perhaps German, perhaps Russian, apart from the core languages that are required, you might be a very attractive candidate to some commission directorate. If you have experience in a country or in a policy area like waste recycling, renewable energy, blockchain, whatever it might be and it's in demand at that time of recruitment, you are a great candidate. It very much comes back to your profile and you might want to think "how can I make myself a more attractive candidate for certain jobs? And if I don't have so much experience, maybe in the next couple of months I'm going to volunteer at some organisation, do some freelance work, or I'll try to get more exposure in a certain area to increase my relevance to those future jobs.





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Next thing: **"I'm a scientist and I have no experience in EU bodies," says Andrea. "Am I going to be in that 20%?"**

No, Andrea, fear not. Scientists are in great demand. We lawyers know nothing about science, we are pretending that we do, but we don't. So, anyone who has a formal qualification in no matter which part of science, whether it is engineering, physics, biochemistry, or any other, is in demand. DG Santé, dealing with food safety and public health, wants those scientists. DG Climate Action wants those scientists, many other directors, the George Research Centre of the European Commission wants those scientists. So, do not fear that you'd be in that 20% section. You will not be. Once you have passed the Assessment Centre and are on the reserve list, I'm pretty positive it will increase your chances of finding a job.

Next question: **Is the reserve list only based on performance at the competition or also weighted for nationality, gender, etc.?**

Good question, important question. The reserve list itself is truly only based on the competition. That's what makes the system a very good, and to a large extent unbiased, system. I say to a very large extent, not 100%, because simply evaluating human nature, personalities and character traits in a structured manner is an awfully difficult exercise in the Assessment Centre. This is not like verbal reasoning, or even numerical reasoning, where you either get the methods right, or you don't. Here we're talking about assessing human behaviour and turning that into some form of a scoring system, so certainly there is some bias or at least the likelihood of having some bias, which the assessors are trained to fight and go against, but, by and large, it's a pretty good system, where you have two exams to evaluate for each competency, you have a multitude of assessors, who are rotated to observe you from multiple angles, so they try to build in those safety nets and controls. In short, you end up on the reserve list pretty much on the basis of how you perform throughout the selection process.

What about the recruitment? Recruitment becomes more delicate and, in all honesty, becomes slightly more political. Political in the sense that in the staff regulations of the EU institutions, you have a clause that says that fair representation or, I don't remember the exact wording, proportional representation of the member states needs to be ensured for EU staff. What does that mean? You are probably not going to have 5,000 Maltese and 200 Germans given the relative size of the member states. It's trying to reconcile a merit-based system of who's on the reserve list while looking at the overall breakdown according to nationality in the various





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institutions. So that's a difficult exercise, if you are the HR officer of a commission, how do you bring these two together? The reserve list is the merit-based system, the pool of candidates from which they can choose, and then they look at it and it's often more difficult, and I'm sorry to break the news, for those of Belgian nationality, because there are a lot of Belgian passport holders in the institutions. But then again, the distribution might vary to a great extent. This may not be the case in Luxembourg, it may not be in the case in all DGs, because you have a lot of Francophone, English-speaking and Flemish-speaking Belgians, whereas in another DG there may be barely anyone. It's a very uneven distribution. And if you really want to go deep into that, I believe there should be some public reports by the DG HR on the commission's website, where you have certain charts or breakdowns. My feeling is that it should be public in the name of transparency and that would give you some indication where you might have more chances with your profile and nationality. And then in terms of gender, generally, there is an effort in the commission to have a more proportionate representation of men and women, and especially in more senior roles, so head of unit and above, they're trying to increase the proportion of female leaders.

Next question: **Would you give us some advice on how to stand out from 'the crowd'?**

Well, nice question. Let me take a step back. When it comes to the Assessment Centre, you don't need to stand out from the crowd, you need deliver good performance. Good performance as an individual and good performance in a team. that's the most important thing. You don't need to reinvent the wheel, you don't need to be extraordinarily visible, because that might backfire, you don't want to be too shy and invisible, that would also backfire, so delivering good performance by actively and proportionately representing yourself well is important. Writing a good case study, just doing what needs to be done. Standing out from the crowd might become more important when it comes to the actual hiring process, but once you are on the reserve list and are looking for a job, then you probably want to stand out in one way or another. And I mentioned that webinar that I have on the website on how to find a job once you are on the reserve list and I also have a presentation called *14 Tips for an EU Career*, I think that's the title. If you Google it, then you'll find it. It contains a lot of ideas on CV writing, mistakes to avoid, stuff like that, ways you can 'hack' the process, if that's the right word, to your advantage and present yourself in the best light to stand out from the crowd.





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Next question: **Do they check the knowledge of other languages listed in the profile?**

Well, they shouldn't, because linguistic knowledge isn't one of the competencies being tested. Having said that, you should possess a good solid level, a good command of the given language that you indicate. If you indicated a third language, let's say Spanish, will they test your Spanish? Normally, they shouldn't. And I say that because, and it's a very anecdotal piece of evidence, but I heard from perhaps one person, if not more, "oh, they did test my..." whatever language that person indicated, I don't recall. I was quite shocked, because they were not supposed to do that. In that case, it might be a violation of the process because if it is not enshrined in the notice of competition, why would they do that and expose you to that experience, something you did not prepare for? If you indicated a third language that was not a pre-requisite in your exam application, or the EPSO process, which might be the case for translators and interpreters, who are required to offer three languages, not just two. So, if you indicated that you speak a third language, which is an optional category in the application form, they could test that, but at the recruitment phase, not at the Assessment Centre phase. If that happens, make sure you check the process, the notice of competition, because the chances are that they are not supposed to do that.

Next question: **What kinds of topics can we have in the Oral Presentation?**

The oral presentation is very similar in its nature to the case study in that you have a background briefing with a high diversity of documents and you need to go through those pretty fast and make sure you write up notes and you talk about that. The topic usually has something to do with the EU, so how the EU is trying to tackle hate speech online, which seems to be quite an important and current discussion. What is the EU's thinking on renewable energy? What about self-driving cars? A couple of interesting topics they might look at, mostly from an EU perspective, so it wouldn't be astrophysics or any other super-technical area that you are not really required to know anything about. It's more in the area of politics, policy and EU government that you can expect topics to come up.

Next question: **Is taking the Assessment Centre in your mother tongue a drawback? How would you stand up for your choice?**

Great question. And the reason I say it's a great question is because native speakers have this





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double-edged sword. They are at a huge advantage, because they are native speakers, so they can express themselves in a way that most of us cannot. The proverbs, the way you formulate sentences is very different from those who have that language as a learned second or third language. Having said that, be very careful if you are a native speaker. Try not to use metaphors or proverbs or any other idioms that may be unknown to those who have English or French or Italian or Spanish as their second language, including the assessors. If you use some beautiful proverb that you learned from your grandma and that describes the situation very nicely, it may backfire because the assessors may not get it and others around the table may not get it. So be very careful in your choice of words, including difficult or sophisticated vocabulary, which may harm you in a spoken context. If it's written, obviously when you are absorbing information, you're the one reading that information, it definitely helps you, because you have simply mastered the language to such an extent that you're not going to have words in the case study or background briefing that you just don't understand. I remember when I did my lawyer-linguist competition long ago and we had to do translation without a dictionary, there was this term 'interlocutory injunction', crazy legal jargon, and it was really difficult to find a way to translate that into another language.

Next question: **Can you offer strategies to make it through this day without becoming totally exhausted?**

Red Bull, probably that's the answer. But on a serious note, the day is very intense, not because the net time you spend at the competition is so long, it just drags out because there is a lot of waiting involved. The time you actually spend on the oral presentation, the time you spend on the group exercise, the time you spend on the competency-based interview is very limited, but given the whole logistics of it, how they put you together with candidates, how much you have to wait, it certainly exhausts you because you are nervous, because you want to see what the next step is. The strategy is to just be in good physical shape, have a good night's sleep - unlike me, you see the bags under my eyes, but I'm not doing an Assessment Centre tomorrow. Travel to Brussels the day before, make sure you are there on time. Try to eliminate any stress factor that doesn't get you closer to your goal.





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And the final question: **Is there a specific order for the exercises, like oral exercise, interview or other combinations?**

Usually, they would start with the competency-based interview or the oral presentation, so usually one of these two. It might vary from one candidate to another, just to make sure they can assign you to the right exercise, because you need to be in the room at the same time for the group exercise, by its very nature. All six of you – sometimes it's five, sometimes seven, but they try to have six candidates around the table – need to be there at the same time, so usually the group exercise is the last one of the day, usually around four o'clock. The others happen in the morning. You might be convened to the EPSO HQ at 8.30 or 9 in the morning, or you might be expected to go there only at 10 or 10.30. This varies from one candidate to another, but they communicate that to you in advance, so you know what the upcoming schedule is.

