

In-tray exercises

Library Services

London Metropolitan and Royal Holloway Universities

About London Met

Organisation:	London Metropolitan University
Department:	Library Services
Size:	48 FTE Library Staff
Industry Sector:	Higher Education

About Royal Holloway

Organisation:	Royal Holloway University
Department:	Library Services
Size:	47.6 FTE Library Staff
Industry Sector:	Higher Education

Overview

In-tray exercises are commonly used tool within selection processes to assess a candidate's potential aptitude to complete aspects of the role they are applying for.

The exercises often contain a business-related scenario with a list of tasks to be completed by the candidates within set timeframe. Tasks may include prioritising a set of tasks such as responding to complaint made by a customer, organising a rota for a front facing service or drafting an agenda for a team meeting. The exercises will usually assess a range of essential or desirable skills and abilities of the prospective candidates such written communication skills or ability to prioritise workloads. An in-tray exercise can be used across a range of jobs from administrators to senior managers.

Background

Royal Holloway has used In-Tray exercises as part of their selection process for the frontline supervisor's role for a number of years while London Met have recently included In-Tray exercises.

Case Studies

London Metropolitan University – Case Study

London Met implemented the use of In-Tray exercises as part of their recruitment practice in 2013 when two Reader Services Managers roles were created and advertised internally. They are now used for all posts in Library Services to assess the skills of time management, prioritisation and organisation which are selection criteria in all levels of posts. For management or supervisory positions, we also use the tests to assess problem solving as well as analysis of data skills.

In-Tray Exercises – getting started

Following research with colleagues in the CSGUK Group around the use of in-tray exercises, a small group of Library Managers at London Met met to discuss and devise the tests taking examples from real-life workplace situations at London Met and matching skills required from aspects of the person specification. Each in-tray exercise had two or three tasks and lasted from 45 minutes to 60 minutes depending on level of position.

Each task had an introductory paragraph explaining what skills the task would demonstrate e.g. teamwork, customer service, communication skills and what they would be assessed on for example generic IT skills, written communication skills, ability to complete the task within a given time.

We provided accompanying documents for each task. For each role one task was to prioritise tasks / events / situations and give the reason why they have chosen the tasks in that order. For higher level posts, background documents were provided such as Library Services Structure charts and budget information.

Other tasks used were to analyse a fictitious budget report, create an Excel spread-sheet and make observations on the data and what steps they might take, write a response to a student complaint or contact a member of academic staff about Faculty support.

The practicalities

All in-tray exercises were carried out on site before the interview took place. We asked suitable colleagues to act as invigilators and shortlisted candidates took the in-tray exercise in an IT lab at London Met. We provided temporary username and passwords to log on as well as USB sticks for candidates to save their responses on. In some cases we provided templates on the USB to complete.

The 'marking' of the tests did require input from all panel members to ensure standard marking particularly on the tasks to assess communication and analysis skills.

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Royal Holloway – Case Study

The in-tray exercise has been part of the frontline supervisor's recruitment process at RHUL for a number of years. It is used in conjunction with a Library Management System task (navigating the system), along with the interview process.

Collectively, the applicants are given 45 minutes to complete the task which has 10 scenarios, of which candidates are asked to prioritise the activities. Applicants are asked to give an explanation as to how they would deal with the scenario, along with the key notes that they wish to cover.

The activity is overseen by a supervisor who is responsible for scoring and feedback on individual applicants. Scoring is the most time consuming part of this activity, however, it has been a very useful tool that provides evidence of how prospective employees would react to and prioritise additional tasks and issues, alongside their day to day activities, which cannot be determined at interview. It can also be very helpful in the decision making process if applicants are very similar in their abilities.

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Summary

The integration of In-Tray exercises into the recruitment process can provide employers with an additional opportunity to assess the candidate's skills and abilities and suitability for a role which would be otherwise too difficult to assess in an interview alone. In-Tray exercises can be time consuming to create, organise and assess, however those that use this selection tool feel that it provides an additional assessment point for both the candidate and the employer and that it is worth the investment.