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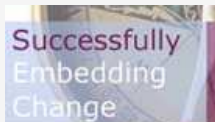
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More and more businesses are ignoring the high costs and turning to assessment centres to objectively determine a candidate or candidates' competency.

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One of the most important challenges for organisations is in dealing with change, yet research from the CIPD suggests that up to 60% of organisational change projects fail to meet their stated objectives.

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Print Tipoffs Online!

Greetings!

We've got our regular trim and format colours back as the October edition of Tipoffs troves through advice and guidance for the job hunter, targeting the matters of interviews and assessments. Our parent wing, Arras People, features a wealth of knowledge and expertise in job interviews, wading through questions you'll face, scenarios that will be posed, and a tried and true method for any interview query you'll face. We share some of our best tips this month. In addition, we look at the growing amount of opportunities in P30 and turn to CITI's Jill Spencer for her take on some of the traits you can bring to a P30 job interview. Our book review this month comes from guest contributor John Zachar of APM, who walks away amazed by the critically-acclaimed "The Lazy Project Manager", and as always, a chance for one reader to win the title penned by Peter Taylor. Our Q&A comes from a reader who wants to know more about why some assessment exams are given outside of an office setting.

Job Interviews: Ways and Mechanisms to Interview for Success

Interviews are the make or break of the job search; No matter how good your CV and career record is to date, the face-to-face (or telephone) interview remains the most important step towards achieving your objective. The old adage that "people buy people" is as true today as it has ever been, so what can you do to maximise the opportunity?



Sii Preparato! Or in English, be prepared! Such a simple statement, on which many hundreds of thousands of words have been committed to print, but one that is quite often overlooked! As project professionals we spend our lives planning, managing risks and reacting to situations in front of "clients" be they internal or external. This skill should put us at an advantage when it comes to performing at interviews, but we should also recognise that it may also raise the bar in terms of what the interviewer expects!

As part of the preparation, I have the following three elements which I believe are a fundamental to a good interview.

Think STAR: This is a favourite amongst the team at Arras People - **S**ituation or **T**ask; **A**ction you took; **R**esults **you** delivered. Applying the STAR Technique to key achievements and successes in your career to date, you will have a bank of clear stories ready for use at an appropriate time during an interview; sometimes regardless of the question! The STAR Technique again should help emphasise what you have achieved in a context that is appropriate to the role you are interviewing for.

By looking again at the job specification - the first few bullet points on the spec are normally the most important aspects to the role. You can take each point in turn and think STAR again. Pinpoint in your CV and career an example that could be used to highlight your understanding, experience, skills, competency and training against a requirement in the job specification.

You not the team! Whilst working in team environments we are constantly reminded that "there is no I in team" which in its place is fine. However, I see this mindset far too often when talking to candidates in interview situations. It is worth remembering that in an interview situation **you** are the subject matter, **you** have been offered an interview and the interviewer is interested in how **your**



Social Media Roundup

Blogs

- [Seth Godin on The End of the Job Interview - Seth Godin's Blog](#)
- [It Could Be Worse: Top 10 Job Interview Disasters - Landing The Job](#)
- [Employers - Avoid Inappropriate \(Possibly Illegal\) Interview Questions - The Hiring Site](#)
- [Assessment Centres: Carpe Diem! - Don't Compromise. AskEurope](#)
- [P3O: A Case Study - How to Manage a Camel](#)

Websites

- [Project Offices](#)
- [JobSearch Support Services from JobCentre Plus and Arras People](#)
- [pposig](#)
- [CITI](#)
- [APM Project Management Conference](#)

Podcasts & Vodcasts

- [The PM Podcast](#)
- [Project Shrink](#)
- [pm411.org](#)
- [pmthink](#)
- [Associated Content - Job Interview Q/ A](#)
- [University College Dublin - Job Interview Issues, incl. Assessment Centres](#)

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Interviews & Assessments

skills and experiences would be applied to the role. This is your opportunity to build your credibility and suitability; focus on "I", the use of "we" should be kept to a minimum.

Strengths and Weaknesses: We all have them and many interviewers use this questioning angle to get a feel for the "real you". I am continually amazed how many people expect this question in an interview, yet after a short nervous chuckle, remain unprepared to give a suitable response. The strengths seem easy, reign in your ego and try to align a response with the requirements of the role; possibly referencing what you have learned during the interview.

Weaknesses tend to be harder; we all have them (even the interviewer) but worry that we will expose ourselves in a negative light if they are shared. However, recognition of weaknesses highlights self awareness and thus it is possible to frame a weakness in a positive light by explaining how you recognise and address them. On both counts, whilst being prepared, do not over work your answers so they sound rehearsed.

And finally, when you arrive, **be yourself!** Personally I am not convinced that an interview is the right time to re-invent yourself. Changing jobs can be pretty stressful at the best of times without the added pressure of remembering that you sold a whole new you to a prospective employer!

Job Assessment Centres: Where The Candidate Sitting Next To You Is Not Your Enemy

If you've watched 'The Apprentice' or entertainment-oriented shows featuring judging panels, you might think you have a passing idea of what an assessment centre is all about. Really, you don't know the half of it unless you've been to one yourself.



The assessment centre is an examination tool used by employers for measuring job applicants in a real-world group setting. The exam is gaining traction in the corporate world because employers want to determine objectively what you really can do after you've said what you can do. Especially common in graduate-level hiring scenarios, the assessment group's participants include the candidates themselves, often ranging from as few as six to as many as 20. But if you can imagine an X-Factor contestant singing their song, then turning around and singing a song by one of their competitors in the head-to-head elimination, you might gain better insight into the assessment centre dynamics. Make no mistake about it - at the assessment centre, roles will be reversed for different group exercises. Leaders will become followers, followers assume leadership, new responsibilities are given, skills are assessed & identified, and the hiring criteria is met or found to be wanting.

The desire of higher-end companies to use assessment centres has increased no doubt due to the centre's attributes of objectivity in candidate evaluation. Wikijob.co.uk states that some companies:

"are prepared to spend money on assessment centres because they believe them to be the most accurate means of recruiting the right people for their vacant jobs".

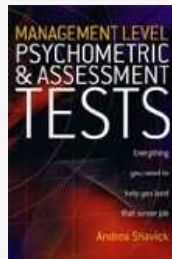
Assessment centres, in comparison to the more common job interview, have been judged by business psychologists to better determine a candidate's competency. Especially in terms of what the candidate can do on their feet - in pre-assessment centre functions, employers routinely disseminate more up-to-date company information than can be found through candidate research. So it bears mentioning that if you have a question about something, ask - your ability to turn around and do some last-minute research on the missed information may not bear out what you've been told, thus putting you at a distinct disadvantage.

According to prospects.ac.uk, an invitation to participate in assessment centres usually takes place after a face-to-face interview and tends to run for two days, though situations can vary. Even the seemingly informal matters involved are anything but: social events tend to lead off the process:

"...where you meet a variety of people, including other candidates, the assessors, recent graduates and senior management. This is an excellent opportunity for you to find

- [Arras People](#)
- [Previous Tipoffs Issue](#)
- [Alec.co.uk](#)
- [MyJobSearch.com: Beating Nerves](#)
- [CIPD](#)
- [CV Tips](#)
- [P3O](#)
- [PMI](#)
- [Prospects](#) (Mainly for Graduates)
- [Wikijob](#)

Bonus Book Review



Management Level Psychometric and Assessment Tests - Andrea Shavick

Click [here](#) to order the book no psychometric test taker should be without. Says our own Lindsay Scott: "I give it a 5-star rating!"



Latest News from Arras People

PMI Hosting Fourth Annual IPM Day



PMI will be hosting the fourth International Project Management Day Conference on Wednesday 11th November in Stevenage. The theme for the annual one-day event is "When It All Goes Wrong.....!"

As such a theme would suggest, the event centres on project failure and recovery. Attendees will have the opportunity to listen to experts and learn from case histories, look for early warning signs and marvel at how some projects can in fact be saved. PMI stresses the event will be a great chance to network with fellow project management professionals from across the UK.

out about the organisation and to ask questions in a more informal setting. These events may appear to be informal and not part of the true assessment procedure, but you should behave in a way that reflects well on you."

As expected, actual assessments come next in the form of work-related activities. Employers set up these functions with the intent of re-creating the company's working atmosphere to a T, be it on company ground or elsewhere (hotels tend to be a common assessment spot). The [Chartered Institute of Professional Development](#) (CIPD) says that the tasks set at the assessment centre should coincide with the details of the job description. In essence, while you may not be doing the job 'on site', you are still carrying out the functions the job requires to be done.

Now for the fun part: how to associate with your 'teammates'. It can be a tricky situation, seeing as throughout various tasks, candidates have to switch responsibilities while associating with other candidates that can easily be construed as 'competition'. The situation almost indirectly calls for a 'master of all trades' performer - desire to achieve without aggression; a good team worker without appearing too compliant; doing remedial tasks well and willingly while avoiding complete subservience to leadership.

But one thing to clear up is this: your cohorts should not be viewed as your competitors. WikiJob backs up this assertion:

"All, several, one or none of your assessment group may be hired. You need to perform to a very high standard at an assessment centre, but you do not need to challenge, compete or disagree with other candidates. In fact, it may harm your assessors' opinion of you if you do."

The key to successful assessment centre approach is this - assume the role of your designated title at that moment to the best of your ability and to the benefit of the tasks at hand. Above all, projects need teamwork, communication, objective input, forward thinking and leadership. It's tough to maintain excellence at any of those standards if you're thinking along the lines of Vinnie Jones to their Paul Gascoigne in that infamous picture!

The heart of the objectivity lies with the assessment panel, an all-encompassing conglomeration of the company's top executives across the board. Some of them come from HR; others serve as departmental managers; still more can be company partners. In general, the idea is to judge according to what each person holds true to the effective performance of the job. A programme manager may spot a flaw or strength the partner might have missed, and vice-versa. The wider the range of personnel there are to provide input, the more input the panel can have at their disposal to make an informed decision. So your teamwork, communication and leadership skills, and the way you interact with fellow candidates during tasks, becomes central to your effective performance.

Here are ten central tenets to your approach to an assessment centre:

1. Remember that assessment centres are used to judge candidate's competency levels and is difficult to prepare in advance for i.e., Planning & Organising, Team Skills, Professional Knowledge & Judgement, Leadership, etc.
2. Generally, assessment centre activities for project management will include a project scenario (which may be derived from a real-life example). You may be asked (as a group) to produce any number of deliveries i.e., risk management plan, work breakdown structure, issues log, etc.
3. In group activities you may be assigned a team role or asked to put yourself forward for a position. Don't be concerned if you feel the role you have been assigned is not one of leadership, the panel are also looking for good team behaviours including how you support the leader.
4. Be prepared to make sure you get the best out of the team regardless of your role within the group. Ask questions, play the devil's advocate (a little!), confirm with the group on decisions made.
5. Assessment centres are not always about team working and group work, be prepared for tasks which are just directed at you. The panel will also be interested in seeing how you perform an individual task under pressure.
6. Give it 100% Assessment centres can be hard work and some of the others in the group can be hard work too. Just be

Sponsors
GlaxoSmithKline will be the official host site of the event in Stevenage, which will be held free to PMI UK members. However, a returnable £50 booking fee will be charged to ensure attendance. (The fee will be refunded upon attendance).

To sign up for this annual learning and networking opportunity, go to [this page](#).

ESI Offers Free Online Networking Forum



Time is running short to sign up for the Online-Virtual Trade Show held by ESI International, a worldwide trainer and consultant in project management.

Held free of charge, *Impact: An ESI Virtual Event To Help You Build Talent and Drive Results Worldwide* will be held 21st October, offering a wide range of subjects for discussion and analysis, including project management, business analysis, programme management and business skills. This unique trade show event commences online next Wednesday starting at 1pm, and will continue for the next 24 hours. The show will feature video/web presentations from worldwide industry experts, downloadable resources & tools, live "chats" with subject matter experts, online networking opportunities, and more.

You can register for this event [here](#).

- yourself and remember that the panel is looking for a display of strong competencies NOT how competitive you are.
7. Be gracious. If others in the group look a little lost or overcome with shyness, help them along by including them in the activity. Compassion will not be overlooked by the selection panel.
 8. Often the activity will include an opportunity to present back to the panel on completion of the exercise. Not everyone will have the opportunity to do the actual presentation, so be prepared to perform another role like scribe or offer to part share the presentation with others in the group.
 9. Some assessment centres include older more informal tasks such as the Shipwreck or Plane Crash exercises. If you're not familiar with them, take a look.
 10. I think you know what the final point of advice is going to be...be yourself! Really! Preparation is difficult for assessment centres, other than understanding what competencies are important for the job you are going for, you should be concentrating on giving the best performance you can.

Getting a Position in P3O - Springboarding Yourself Into a Project Management Career



from Jill Spencer, CITI

A position in a project, portfolio or programme management office (P3O) can be an excellent route into a career in project management. A secondment into such a support environment can also be a useful time for development and reflection for a project management professional. It allows them to view project management 'from the other side of the mirror' and can provide the P3O, and indeed the wider organisation, with invaluable expertise and development opportunities from an expert coach!

But how to land that role?

The important thing to bear in mind about P3Os is that they are only successful in the context of the organisation in which they are operating and that they support. They will only survive if they are perceived as being of value to the business and that value will be judged by many different stakeholders with many different agendas.

Your access to information about the organisation and its project environment will vary depending upon whether you are already working in it or not. Try to find out about the stakeholder environment: consider the supply side (i.e. the project management community) and the demand side (i.e. the senior management of the organisation). What are their needs and wants and what would they consider valuable from the P3O?

Try to find out about its P3O environment itself:

- Is it well established? What type of functions does it perform? Are projects currently perceived as successful?
- What are some of the current 'hot spots'?

Then think about what the organisation is trying to achieve with its P3O and its stage of maturity. Does it want to:

- Free up project managers to do 'more valuable' work?
- Provide standard data and highlight performance gaps?
- Improve predictability of project performance and results?
- Raise standards and create a centre of excellence?

It is also key to remember that P3Os will rarely remain static for long - they must change to meet the changing needs of the business. Therefore you need to present yourself as an individual capable of driving change, or at least open to it, providing direction and setting standards.

Think about your own skill set - what can you bring to the P3O? What knowledge, skills and experience do you have that will be valued by it and the (changing) environment that it supports? Do you have technical skills? Do you have project management know how? Do you have managerial capability? Organisations are often looking to uplift their P3O function from an administrative role to one that can either help them to gain control over their projects or to provide more proactive guidance to the project and programme management

community. Where can you add value?

If you can't establish the answers to all of these questions prior to the interview, then use them as a way of provoking discussion during it. You may not receive all the answers, but it will provide food for thought. It will also demonstrate to your potential employer that you are thinking strategically about the P3O and how it can add value to the business because that, after all, is what it is there for!

Good luck!

Jill Spencer is a Principal Consultant at CITI. Jill's projects include several major business restructuring projects, all with a significant IT content, with the objective of improving efficiency and effectiveness of business as usual. She has recently used this expertise and knowledge to effect in developing and delivering education programmes, setting up project and programme management offices and facilitating health checks on critical business projects.

Book Review - The Lazy Project Manager

by Peter Taylor, available through [Amazon](#)



See details on how to win this book below

It is extremely unusual for me to pick up a 'management book' involuntarily. I think I lost that particular desire when I did my MBA in the nineties. However, occasionally there is a need to acquire additional information or background knowledge.

So it was with some trepidation that I picked up Peter Taylor's book one Sunday afternoon, knowing that I'd promised a review. I finished it later that day, having only put it down for a meal. I really, really enjoyed it.

I've read a number of the 'jokey' type of management books over the years; those that have catchy titles, and purport to be a fun read, yet seem to be. This time I was pleasantly surprised that the book not only caught and kept my attention, but that it did it in a very enjoyable, easily absorbed way.

Peter's use of analogies and stories is where I found some of the value. The remainder of the value came in the real content of the book. Over the years as a project / programme management consultant, lecturer, teacher and practitioner, I've built up a pretty good education about how to manage change into organisations through projects. I cannot find fault with any of Peter's recommendations - especially the bit about being lazy!

Peter has been able to enrich the content by using his stories and analogies to make a number of points, all of them common sense; even things like "it is important to separate the important from the immediate" (my words not his - you find his analogy in the book).

One of the analogies that Peter uses, almost from the outset, is that of a dinosaur - in fact a brontosaurus. "I'm sure you know the one, thin at the front, thick in the middle, then thin at the other end." Well, Peter modifies the analogy a bit by saying that projects should be thick at the front, thin in the middle and thick at the other end again.

The thickness of the project shape represents the amount of effort or work that needs to be done at that stage of the project. The corollary is: initiate well, compensating for difficulties, be lazy in the middle because a well organised project can run on its own like a well oiled machine if initiated well, then put some effort into finishing with real enthusiasm, helping all the stakeholders realise how well it has gone, and what a wonderful result we have.

Organising your project in this fashion allows you to apply the principles of being a lazy project manager - and still be successful. That is really what it is all about.

Don't forget, this is not about just being lazy and not doing the job - this is being lazy, and being successful as well. Do the job, but do the job in the most intelligent way you can, so that you can be lazy when you can. That is my kind of project management. The other bits that are interspersed throughout the book are about how to achieve the above by using a great deal of common sense.

Peter's book made this entertaining, yet useful for me.

- Reviewed by John Zachar, Product Development Manager with the APM. John has previously written for both [Tipoffs](#) and [How to Manage a Camel](#), and would love to hear your feedback. Feel free to contact John with your thoughts about *The Lazy Project Manager* at john.zachar@btinternet.com. This review is the work of Mr Zachar and is no way connected to any views, beliefs or opinions of the APM.

Want a chance to win this book?

We want to hear from you in 100 words or less what the laziest thing is that you've ever done as a project manager. [Email us](#) and you could be in with a chance of winning! To purchase the book online, go to [Amazon](#).

Q&A

"I can't make sense of a company e-mailing me an assessment test to do on my own time. Why wouldn't they want me to do this in an office setting instead?" - Manish, London

Manish, thanks for your question. There are two main reasons for this, and both are to your advantage. Firstly, some organisations do request that you come in for a face-to-face interview and complete the assessments tests whilst you're there. This is a heavy day! Chances are that there will be more than one assessment test and each test can take up to one hour. Let's say you have both a verbal and numerical test to take and then the interview. This is an intense three hours that will leave you feeling wiped out by the whole process.

So secondly, by taking the tests away from the interview situation and allowing you to do them in the comfort of your own home, you are much more likely to perform better without the additional stress. You can also take as many practice tests as you like before commencing the "real" test and you can also carry out the tests armed with a coffee and chocolate to keep your energy up!

I must admit, some people have been known to include their family members or friends when taking the tests but realistically the time limits on the test often mean you really do want to give it your best shot and avoid the temptation of cheating!

Got a question for us? [Contact us](#) today.

Sincerely,

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