

Tool 8: Selection activities

Presentations

If you wish to test communication skills – the ability to engage an audience and articulate key issues – you could set the presentation topic in advance to give time for preparation. In this case you should not set too much store by the content of the presentation topic, since you cannot determine how much advice someone has received. You should also be aware that NPQH would have given candidates the opportunity to consider in advance their responses to a range of topics.

If you wish to use the presentation to assess candidates' knowledge and ability to think on their feet in relation to specific selection criteria, you can set the topic on the day, giving time and an appropriate environment in which to prepare. You may find it helpful to enlist help in identifying in advance what sort of response to your topic you are anticipating. Presentations usually last for 10-15 minutes. They are followed by questions from the panel, so active listening is required.

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Close to tasks that a headteacher will need to perform regularly • Tests for clarity of thought, strategic thinking and conviction, as well as communication skills • Easy to organise and light on resources • Tests the candidate's resilience under pressure • Can ask candidates to talk about experience or philosophy and thus test multiple criteria 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not every effective headteacher influences through formal presentations • In reality, effective leaders may shape the influencing situations to suit their own styles • It can be hard to differentiate among large numbers of presentations • The topic needs to be chosen with care to elicit the right attributes • Risk of equipment failure or lack of facilities • Panel need to be prepared to ask questions

Panel (carousel) interviews

These involve mini-interviews with small panels asking questions related to specific topics or a combination of topics, which might include:

- financial management
- strategic leadership
- teaching and learning
- curriculum
- ethos, discipline and behaviour, inclusion
- monitoring and evaluating performance
- working with governors
- partnership with parents and the community

They may involve governors or members of staff who are not on the main appointment panel, so those people will need to be fully briefed about how to collect and record their evidence. The chair of each panel should collect and summarise their findings and report these back to the appointment panel.

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A familiar and conventional interview tool • Many members of the panel may be familiar with the process • An opportunity to ask a wide range of questions • An opportunity to involve a larger group of people • Effective in eliciting and confirming factual information about a candidate's background • An opportunity for the candidate to ask questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal interviews do not have a strong record of accuracy in choosing the right person or unearthing evidence of behaviours • Process can become overly formal and empty of content • Panel members may use forum to expound personal views and perspectives • Some panel members may feel intimidated by the process • Poor questioning techniques will limit effectiveness and may create an unfavourable impression with candidates

Assembly

You may wish to use an assembly to test relationships with pupils, in which case you must ensure that each candidate has a similar experience. Children may be divided vertically by age so that each candidate deals with children of all ages represented in the school and that no group of children has to take part in a series of assemblies. You will need to prepare the same brief for each candidate, setting out the theme and objectives for the assembly, the age groups who will participate, whether or not you wish to see written plans, what resources will be available, and what the normal customs are for the conduct of assembly. You may wish to arrange a conversation with the pupils afterwards, and you will need to think carefully how to structure this debrief to obtain useful and usable information.

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A highly realistic task – very close to assessing the prospective headteacher in action • May reveal behaviours and attitudes that are neglected by other tools • Can provide evidence on clarity of thinking, vision and values as well as communication skills • A good test of rapport with students • A means of involving the student body in the process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Logistically difficult, especially with several candidates • Requires careful planning, briefing and preparation with the students • A candidate's performance on a single event may not reflect their behaviour over a long period of time • It may not be appropriate for a candidate to conduct an assembly in the context of your school • You will need to consider carefully what you are looking for and how you will measure it

Teaching

If the post will involve commitment to class or group teaching, or you believe that either credibility in a classroom or insight into learning is critical for the post, you may want to arrange for candidates to observe and comment upon a lesson or part of a lesson. It can also be informative to ask candidates to offer feedback or advice to the teacher observed in order to evaluate their skill at communicating and coaching. Alternatively you may ask them to teach part of a lesson. To make comparisons fair you will need to ensure that the group of children taught by each candidate is broadly similar in terms of age, ability and attitude. You will need to enlist the support of an adviser to comment on their teaching or to evaluate the feedback from the candidate on their lesson observation. You will need to build in time to receive and consider the adviser's views.

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May reveal a candidate's depth of understanding of teaching strategies and classroom management • Tests the candidate's impact with your cohort of students • Gets the candidate in direct contact and interaction with students • May reveal behaviours and attitudes that are neglected by other tools • A good test of rapport with students • A means of involving the student body in the process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The lesson and environment will inevitably be unrealistic • It may not be critical to you that the candidate is individually an excellent teacher • It may be difficult to infer how the candidate would observe and coach other teachers to improve their practice • Logistically difficult • Requires careful preparation and planning • May be difficult to create a level playing field if different students in different lessons at different times are involved • May distract from teaching the students

Meeting pupils

Some schools arrange for candidates to meet and hold discussions with the school council or groups of pupils. You will need to prepare pupils so that they have a range of appropriate questions. Such meetings could be observed by members of the appointment panel using criteria set out in the person specification.

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Less disruptive and easier to organise than a full lesson• Often highly revealing of behaviours and values• Can get to see their relationships and behaviour with students outside the classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• You will need to brief, prepare and supervise the students carefully• It may be difficult to ensure a level playing field if different students are involved• Success depends on your ability to both observe the interaction and to elicit the students' views effectively• Be careful to manage students' expectations about their role and input

In-tray exercises and case studies

These involve asking candidates to prioritise a number of typical issues that a headteacher might find in their in-tray and say how they would deal with them and when. In-tray exercises test a range of skills, including ability to work under pressure, values, attitudes, and ability to prioritise and delegate. Someone will be required to put together an appropriate range of scenarios (a letter from a parent, a telephone message etc). Marking the exercise and feeding back to the panel will require specific professional understanding. Candidates may be given between 30 and 60 minutes for this activity. You might ask candidate to prepare a short memo outlining their priorities for action resulting from the information, or a short presentation. You may have a conversation with them to debrief them.

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A good test of clarity of thought, creativity, strategic thinking, attention to detail, ability to prioritise and resilience under pressure • Can be designed to reflect real challenges and situations faced by the school • An activity which candidates can engage in with minimal supervision (creating time to, for example, interview another candidate) • Can include interruptions or new information to test flexibility • Can be combined with a presentation or discussion to gather additional evidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behaviour under special test conditions may not be representative of their day-to-day habits • Materials require extensive preparation and careful testing • Preparation of the materials may require specialist expertise • The analytical and intellectual skills which come to the fore in this exercise may not be your key priorities • Can take up a significant amount of time during the interview day for briefing, study, drafting and presentation • If you will be requiring written submissions, you will need to arrange time during the process for panel members to read them

Group exercises

In a group exercise the candidates are observed discussing a given topic. This may illustrate skills in communication, teamworking and persuasion. Some specialist help may be required in assessing the outcomes objectively. The candidate who speaks less may be the most reflective and considerate. Candidates do not always feel comfortable about the degree of competition involved in being observed in this way.

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be used to test a candidate's presence and confidence, ability to persuade others, ability to listen to others and work as part of the team • Can reveal the natural leaders in a group • Can reveal authoritarian or aggressive tendencies • Strong test of ability to collaborate with peers and distribute leadership • Can be combined with other exercises (like presentations and case studies) for added richness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires a reasonable-sized group of candidates to be feasible • Candidates' behaviour under the formal conditions may be unrealistic and unrepresentative • Candidates may be uncomfortable • You will need to prepare a robust exercise • You will need enough observers to catch the behaviour of each candidate in detail at the same time

Role play

Role play assessment activities simulate common activities within the role to observe the candidate's behaviour under close to "live" conditions. They allow for a complex picture of the details of behaviour rather than abstract or hypothetical descriptions. They create the opportunity for the unexpected and to observe interpersonal traits under pressure. An actor can be hired to play the roles opposite the candidates, or members of the panel or colleagues could take on these roles, although it is usually advisable not to be observing and acting at the same time.

Some possibilities for roleplay include:

- coaching a member of staff to improve their performance
- dealing with an angry parent or disaffected pupil
- counselling a member of staff
- chairing a senior leadership discussion or meeting

You will usually want to limit the event to 10–15 minutes, and you will need to ensure that both the actor and candidate have a detailed enough briefing to create a realistic situation.

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creates close to lifelike conditions • Enables you to observe behaviour under pressure and in conflict situations • Particularly effective for measuring interpersonal skills • Often produces rich and detailed evidence on behaviours • You can set the scenario to reflect the demands your school faces • Many candidates lose themselves in the scenario, forget the observation and act authentically • Usually works best with professional actors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Panel members may feel uncomfortable playing roles • Requires careful thought to establish a scenario and prepare briefing notes • The fact that it is "only a role play" may create confidence in some candidates that they don't exhibit in real life • You will need to arrange for observers as well as actors • Some candidates don't engage with activities like role play

Formal interview

The formal interview usually takes place at the end of the process and may involve a reduced number of candidates. The Director of Children Services or his or her representative attends the formal interview. Prior to the interview, the panel will need time to reflect on any areas of questioning that need to be directed at individual candidates as a result of their performance in prior activities, in addition to a set of questions for all candidates covering topics that have not been dealt with before.

The panel should have previously confirmed the point on advertised salary range at which they are prepared to appoint. Some candidates take the opportunity either at the final interview or when the verbal offer is made to discuss the salary, and you need to be prepared for this discussion. At the end of the formal interview, candidates should be offered the opportunity to ask questions and offer additional information in support of their application. They should all be asked if they would accept the post if it was offered and have the opportunity to comment on the overall fairness of the process.

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obligatory • An opportunity to probe on any areas of uncertainty or doubt • A formal and clear conclusion to the recruitment process • An opportunity for the candidate to ask remaining questions • An opportunity to judge the candidate's impressions of the process and test their likelihood of accepting the post • Stronger at confirming factual information about the candidate's background 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal interviews do not have a strong record of accuracy in choosing the right person or unearthing evidence of behaviours • Process can become overly formal and empty of content • If placed at the end of a day of exercises and tests, both candidates and interviewers may be tired and find it difficult to process information effectively