Designing work sample exercises

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There are a number of steps involved in designing a work sample exercise.

This guide uses a sector **Project Officer (Clerk Grade 7/8)** role to show how to design a work sample exercise.

Step 1: Identify what work is critical to the role

Your initial aim is to ensure there is a direct relationship between the work sample exercise and the type of work done on the job. This takes into consideration the importance of the task, outcomes sought and extent to which the work is part of the role.

One way of approaching this is to seek input from subject matter experts or people who are managing or are in a similar role to find out about the type of work that is most important to successful performance in the role.

Another option is to use the **key accountabilities** in the role description to help frame your activity so that it closely aligns with the role requirements.
Here is one of the key accountabilities in the **Project Officer (Clerk Grade 7/8) role description**:

> *"Prepare and maintain project documentation for reporting, monitoring and evaluation purposes to ensure accessibility of quality information and contribute to the achievement of project outcomes."*

Step 2: Decide on what you will be assessing

It is important to decide which capabilities to assess in the work sample. You do not want to cover too many capabilities in one activity – in general, it is reasonable to measure up to eight capabilities in a work sample exercise.

Review the capabilities to determine what fits well with the type of work being assessed.
In the case of the Project Officer role the relevant focus capabilities include:

- Manage self (Adept)
- Communicate effectively (Adept)
- Deliver results (Adept)
- Think and solve problems (Intermediate)
- Project management (Adept)

There is also an opportunity to assess complementary capabilities.
In the case of the Project Officer role, the complementary capability that fits well with the key accountability is:

- Plan and prioritise (Foundational)

See: **capabilities commonly assessed using work sample exercises** for guidance on choosing capabilities to be assessed.

Knowledge and experience also need to be assessed where these are in the role description as they form part of the role requirements. This assessment does not need to be separate from the assessment of capabilities as knowledge and experience are often inherent in the capabilities. You can design your assessments to draw this information out.

Make sure you set clear standards for knowledge and experience so you can record your findings against these when consolidating results. The standards should be based on the depth, breadth or context of knowledge and experience requirements being included in the role description.

See: **Role description development guidelines** for more information about knowledge and experience requirements.

Step 3: Choose the work sample exercise

You can now decide on a work sample exercise suited to assessing the type of work and related capabilities, knowledge and experience that you have identified.

See **work sample exercises** for ideas about the different types of work samples you can create.

For the Project Officer role you could ask candidates to develop a project plan based on some information you provide about a fictional project.

As part of the project plan, they could:

- briefly describe the project
- list the project outcomes sought
- develop a project schedule with key milestones for reporting
- identify any potential risks associated with the project
- allocate responsibilities to project team members
- briefly describe the resources needed (budget, personnel, time, materials).

You could ask the candidate either to develop a written plan or to do a verbal presentation.

You could also add in questions about the candidate's experience in developing project plans.

You do not want the task to be too onerous. You are looking to see if the candidate understands what they need to consider in developing a project plan.

Sometimes the instructions will involve the candidate being given the task and completing it in one sitting.

For other work sample exercises candidates can be given the scenario one or two days in advance and asked to present a proposal to assessors when they attend for interview. This is particularly useful for more senior roles (e.g. Grade 9/10 and above), including senior executive roles.

Step 4: Develop the scenario

Develop a scenario which will allow the candidate to demonstrate the capabilities you identified in **Step 2**.

You also need to create standardised instructions and determine the time limit for the exercise.

Step 5: Set the assessment standards

Determine upfront what is required for the candidate to meet the standards for the capabilities being assessed.

The **behavioural indicators** for each capability in the **NSW Public Sector Capability Framework** can be used to help assessors to identify the types of behaviours expected at the required level of capability.

Make sure the behavioural indicators are adjusted to suit the specific role and agency setting as well as the activity you are observing.

For the Project Officer role, the main things you are looking for in each capability are listed below:

Manage self (Adept)

- a high level of personal motivation is demonstrated
- a commitment is shown to achieving challenging goals

Communicate effectively (Adept)

- communication is tailored to diverse audiences
- complex concepts are clearly explained
- various communication channels are used to share information.

Deliver results (Adept)

- resource needs are identified to ensure goals are achieved within set budget and deadlines
- responsibilities for delivering outcomes are clearly articulated
- communication with team members and stakeholders about expected goals is built into the plan.

Think and solve problems (Intermediate)

- research and analysis informs recommendations
- issues are identified that may impact on the completion of tasks and solutions are found.

Project management (Adept)

- the project proposal is clear and defines the scope and goals in measurable terms
- the plan establishes performance outcomes and measures for key project goals, and defines monitoring, reporting and communication requirements
- the plan includes a requirement for monitoring completion of project milestones against goals.

> Note: you may not see all of these behaviours during an activity – they are a guide only, not a checklist.

If you are also assessing knowledge and experience, you need to think how you will measure these against the standards for the role.

For example, you may be able to determine whether the candidate has knowledge and experience in project planning based on the level of detail and complexity included in the plan, the tools used to develop the plan (e.g. use of computer software to develop timelines) and the inclusion of more advanced content that wasn't included in the assessment brief. You could also ask follow-up questions.

Step 6: Validate the work sample exercise

A good way of validating the work sample exercise is to administer it to high performers in the role.

You want to make sure the exercise is not so hard that candidates cannot complete it or so easy that it does not allow for differentiation between candidates.

To validate the exercise you need to consider:

- timing – is there enough time to complete the exercise in a way that challenges candidates while allowing them to develop a satisfactory response?
- common understanding – do those testing the work sample demonstrate a common understanding of what the exercise involves? This will be apparent in the consistency of responses
- job performance – are the results indicative of what is expected for successful performance of the task on the job?

You should also confirm that the exercise is inclusive and does not give an unfair advantage to some candidates, especially those internal to the agency (e.g. not using scenarios that assume agency-specific knowledge or are familiar to some but not all candidates).