

Practice In-Tray Exercise

Answers and Candidate
Guidance Booklet

June 2011

Answers and Candidate Guidance

There follows an item-by-item account of the in-tray's main themes and some of the recommended actions/ideas for addressing them. This aims to demonstrate how providing a broad range of informed ideas and effective actions could address the key issues identified from individual and linked items. This answer models an effective approach for answering the in-tray. This is not intended to be the *only* correct answer. The length of the answers given are not intended to reflect an ideal answer length – that will very much depend on the number of items and amount of time given.

Similarly, the points awarded at the end are just a guide and different companies will have different scoring systems favouring their particular recruitment aspirations.

You can answer in bullet-points or paragraphs – the important thing is *what* you say, as assessors will be looking to see whether you correctly identified the pertinent issues and over-riding themes. Also whether you have provided action plans that are clear and follow-on from the information provided.

Whilst the actual scenario for each in-tray can vary greatly, the overarching task remains the same – to show an understanding of the issues and to come up with realistic solutions to the range of problems outlined in the exercise. Some of the solutions are specific to this in-tray, but some are more generic solutions. For example, those relating to managing others and customer service which may well be relevant to other in-tray answers.

Typically, competencies are used as the underlying measures to score an in-tray. A competency is a set of knowledge, skills and behaviours, such as *Managing Other People*. Assessors marking an in-tray look for evidence in your answer that you are addressing one or more competencies. By having an idea of the type of company to which you are applying you will have an idea of the sort of competencies they might be looking for. Company websites and job postings often describe what qualities they are looking for in new recruits. Try to have these competencies in the back of your mind when deciding how to respond to items in an in-tray.

This model answer tackles each item in the order in which it has been presented. An equally effective approach would be to tackle the highest priority items first – since under strictly timed conditions it would then be the lowest priority issues that were left till last (and potentially uncompleted). Themes across the items are described. In fact, responding to several items at once – grouped together into a theme – is another possible approach to answering an in-tray.

Item 1 – Operations Update bulletin

Action:

Note both Charlie Green's leaving do and Melanie Young's start date in the diary.

Scoring:

1 point for each diary entry

Item 2 – Jenny Brown's letter of resignation

Action:

You know from the letter and the organisation chart that Jenny Brown is on Elaine Smith's team and that Elaine is one of Ruth Roberts' team leaders. Judging by **Item 11**, Jenny is an asset to the team.

Ask Ruth and Elaine for their opinions and to check previous appraisals to see if she's consistently good. If she is, then check with Avril Atkins to see if she would consider matching or beating the salary offer. Good staff are worth hanging on to.

Scoring:

1 point for linking to Item 11.

2 points for speaking to the team leader and supervisor.

1 point for asking them to check previous appraisals for Jenny Brown's history.

Bonus:

2 points for encouraging Jenny to stay, possibly with the incentive of more money.

1 point for discussing with Jenny if salary is just an excuse and in fact there is another underlying reason for her resignation; it is often not as simple as pay.

Item 3 – Quality audit notification

Action:

The supervisors need to be briefed about the quality audit in time for them to cascade the information to their staff. You know from the background notes that you compile an agenda for the regular Friday meeting you have with your supervisors. You should add this to the agenda and also put it in your diary. The supervisors also need to confirm that the paperwork is up to scratch, as per **Item 8, point 8**.

It would be a good idea to ask for a volunteer (or to appoint one!) to deal with the auditors during the visit. As you have a supervisor on holiday, a team leader might be a more appropriate choice. The audit is important. You will undoubtedly spend some time with the auditors and should make sure you are available in the department in case you are needed, but your time is too valuable for you to be tied up with it all day.

Prior to the audit, email the contact name to Bob Norris so his people know who to report to.

Scoring:

- 1 point for linking to Item 8.
- 1 point for adding the subject to the Friday meeting agenda.
- 1 point for adding it to your diary and keeping the day clear of other appointments.
- 2 points for confirming that the paperwork is up to scratch.

Bonus:

- 2 points for appointing a contact.
- 2 points for emailing information to the Quality Manager prior to the audit.

Item 4 – Your appraisal form and notification**Action:**

Your appraisal is tomorrow and you still have your appraisal form to complete. (You know this from the background notes.) You have many other things that need attending to as well. You could ask for a postponement, but bearing in mind the tone of **Item 1**, the Operations Update bulletin, and **Item 8, Point 9**, from the Operations Managers' Monthly Meeting, it would be best not to.

As this matter is now both important and urgent, you must complete the form before tomorrow morning. By all means try to fit it in this afternoon, but resign yourself to the fact that you might have to take the form home with you and complete it in your own time.

Scoring:

- 2 points for realising you have the form to complete.
- 1 point each for picking up on the link to Item 1 and item 8 and recognising the implications.

Bonus:

- 2 points for scheduling the work later in the day/accepting it has to be done no matter what.

Item 5 – Your supervisors' appraisal forms and interview schedule**Action:**

One of your first priorities is to reschedule your supervisors' appraisal interviews, two of which you missed whilst absent. While rescheduling, you must keep an eye on holidays, deadlines and other events. Note that you will have to arrange appraisals before the 19th which is the deadline for holding appraisal interviews (as per **Item 1**).

Bearing in mind Steph Gardner's' appraisal is scheduled for 10 o'clock today, you will have to make an early decision as to whether you will postpone it or go ahead. Under the circumstances, it would be best to postpone it, or at the very least move it to later in the day, not least because you need time to prepare by reading over the form and any other notes you have made. You must be able to focus your full attention on an appraisal and you are currently in catch-up mode. Looking at your diary, it will be difficult to fit it in before Thursday 11th.

You must conduct Ruth Roberts' appraisal early next week so that there is time to write up the form and get it signed before she goes on holiday. Paul Coulson will have to wait until after his week's holiday, but that is still within deadline. Avoid Monday the 15th: Paul will need to catch up with his team leaders and attend to any matters arising. Alternatively ask him when suits him to conduct the appraisal, to find a mutually convenient time.

Scoring:

- 1 point for noticing all appraisals have to be held before 19th June.
- 2 points for spotting that Steph's appraisal is at 10am and postponing/delaying it. (0 points for going ahead with it at 10:00 – unlike other matters on your desk, it is important but not yet urgent.)
- 2 points for rescheduling Ruth's appraisal for early next week.
- 2 points for rescheduling Paul's appraisal for w/c 15/6 due to his holiday.

Bonus:

- 2 points for rescheduling Steph's appraisal for after the Quality audit.

Item 6 – Note re Intranet project and meeting

Action:

You need to brief your supervisors about the planned Intranet project and make sure you all have the meeting date in your diaries. Add it to the agenda for Friday's meeting. It would be a good idea for them to sound out their teams for ideas and suggestions. You might give them a deadline of Friday 19th, so you can discuss the outcome at the regular meeting and decide what should go forward to the Intranet project meeting.

You could offer the chance to lead on the project to Steph Gardner, in the light of **Item 10**. Make a note to raise the issue in the 'looking forward' part of her appraisal (assuming you didn't go ahead with it at 10am).

Scoring:

- 1 point for delegating attendance to someone else. This workshop doesn't require your presence.
- 1 point for adding the subject to the Friday meeting agenda.
- 2 points for asking the supervisors to consult their teams and get their ideas, too.
- 2 points for linking to Item 10.

Bonus:

- 1 point for planning to let Steph lead on the project in the light of Item 10.

Item 7 – Customer Services query breakdown for May

Action:

This links to **Item 8, point 3, Item 10** and – more importantly – **Item 12**. Attach the query breakdown to the meeting request so it's to hand when you need it.

Scoring:

1 point each for linking to items 8, 10 and 12.

1 point for putting the query breakdown with Item 12.

Item 8 – Minutes of the Operations departmental managers' meeting

Action:

You have four action points as a result of the meeting:

Point 3, the query backlog. This links to **Items 7, 10 and 12**. Put the subject on the Friday meeting agenda. You must instigate an investigation into the root cause(s) of the problem. Since Ruth produces the query statistics and reports, she would be a good choice to lead it.

Point 8, the Quality Audit, which you have dealt with already in **Item 3**.

Point 9, appraisals, which you have dealt with already in **Items 4 and 5**.

Point 11, Christmas party venue recommendations. This is not overly important however you could add to the Friday meeting agenda and ask the supervisors to come up with some suggestions by next Friday. Mark the response deadline date in your diary so you don't forget.

Scoring:

1 point for each of the four action points that you recognised.

1 point each for the three links in Point 3.

1 point each for putting Points 3 and 11 on the Friday meeting agenda.

2 points for initiating an investigation into the root cause(s) of the query backlog.

1 point for putting the venue recommendation response deadline in your diary.

Bonus:

2 points for recognising that Ruth produces query statistics and putting her in charge of the investigation into the root cause(s) of the query backlog.

Item 9 – Query escalation form

Action:

Call the customer as soon as possible. (Despite the notes below, if a customer expects a call from you, then they must receive one. Address any issues, but not at a customer's expense. You know this is the way to proceed from the background notes – the customer always comes first.)

Given the importance of keeping customers happy and the tone of the customer, you should find out how much money is at stake (from Lyndsey perhaps) and offer the customer a refund and apology. Don't get into a dispute about whether the customer has made a mistake.

You can see from the organisation chart that LyndseyAyre is a team leader. The query should first have been raised with Paul Coulson, Lyndsey's supervisor. Speak to Paul to check whether she spoke to him. If not, he needs to speak to Lyndsey to remind her of the procedure.

It would be a good idea to send a reminder to all staff to make sure they all know what they should be doing, especially with the quality audit coming up. Also, there may be a problem between LyndseyAyre and Paul Coulson, and this gives you the chance to find out and to address it if one does exist.

Scoring:

2 points for calling the customer today.

2 points for compensating the customer in some way to keep him happy.

2 points for checking whether the procedure has been followed.

2 points for issuing a reminder to all staff.

Bonus:

2 points for considering the possibility of a personal problem between Team Leader and Supervisor and looking into that.

Item 10 – Intranet suggestion from Steph Gardner

Action:

This sounds like a good – and a timely – suggestion. It ties in to four other **Items: 5, 6, 8, action point 3 and 12.** (See responses.) Acknowledge receipt and let Steph know it will be discussed further.

Scoring:

1 point for each of the four links you spotted.

1 point for replying to Steph (regardless of whether you decide it is a good idea).

Item 11 – Customer testimonial letter

Action:

This needs to be passed to HR to be added to Jenny Brown's personnel file. It links to **Item 2**, her letter of resignation. (See response.)

Assuming the mooted Employee of the Month scheme mentioned in **Item 8, point 10** is taken up as Avril expects it will be, this is an opportunity to get Jenny some well-deserved recognition. Keep a note of it for that purpose.

Scoring:

2 points for adding the letter to Jenny Brown's personnel file.

1 point for linking this with Item 2.

Bonus:

2 points for recognising that this could tie in to Employee of the Month.

Item 12 – Meeting request from Bruce Cameron

Action:

This links to **Item 7, Item 8, points 3 and 4, and Item 10**. You need to meet and since Bruce has offered a couple of suggestions for dates, one of which suits you too, you should confirm the Thursday date.

Scoring:

1 point for each of the four links spotted.

2 points for emailing back to accept the Thursday meeting suggestion.

1 point for putting it in your diary.

Item 13 – Telephone message

Action:

As it stands, the message is useless. You don't know when the call was taken, there is no ring back number, no surname or company name. Speak to Becky to see if she can give you any more details. If she can't, then you should discard the message. You must, however, address the situation.

There is no way of telling how urgent or important the message is, however it would be reasonable to assume that if the caller wanted an immediate response, Becky would probably have included that in the note.

Scoring:

2 point for speaking to Becky.

1 points for recognising you must take action to avoid this ambiguity happening again, perhaps by sending a reminder that people should include call-back numbers when taking telephone messages.

Item 14 – Letter from Phil’s phones

Action:

This letter has nothing to do with you. For all the writer is a customer, he is a customer of the Sales Department. Pass the letter on to the Sales Manager as a matter of some urgency.

Scoring:

1 point for recognising the letter isn’t your responsibility.

1 point for passing it on to the Sales Manager.

0 points for contacting the customer or trying to deal with it in some other way.

Example Completed Diary:

Additions in red italics

Mon 1st June 10am Ops monthly meeting	Tues 2nd June 10am Appraisal RR <i>RESCHEDULE</i>	Wed 3rd June 2pm Appraisal PC <i>RESCHEDULE</i>	Thurs 4th June <i>- Today's date -</i> 10am Appraisal SG <i>RESCHEDULE</i>	Fri 5th June 10am Appraisal with Avril – <i>ends 11:30</i> 3pm CS meeting
Mon 8th June <i>10am Appraisal RR</i> PC hols 1 week	Tues 9th June 4pm QIF	Wed 10th June <i>9.30 Quality audit – ALL DAY</i>	Thurs 11th June <i>10am meeting BC</i> <i>2pm Appraisal SG</i>	Fri 12th June 3pm CS meeting
Mon 15th June RR hols 2 weeks	Tues 16th June <i>10am Appraisal PC</i>	Wed 17th June	Thurs 18th June	Fri 19th June <i>Email venue suggestions to VH.</i> 3pm CS meeting <i>Charlie's leaving do after work.</i> <i>Last day Charlie G.</i> <i>Deadline for holding appraisals.</i>
Mon 22nd June <i>Melanie Young starts</i>	Tues 23rd June 4pm QIF	Wed 24th June	Thurs 25th June <i>10am – 1pm Intranet meeting</i>	Fri 26th June 3pm CS meeting <i>HR deadline for appraisal forms</i>
Mon 29th June CC hols 2 weeks	Tues 30th June	Wed 1st July 10am Ops monthly meeting	Thurs 2nd July	Fri 3rd July 3pm CS meeting

Example Completed 'To Do Today'

Item 1	No further action today.
Item 2	Speak to Elaine and Ruth re Jenny Brown. Ask them to look at appraisal history.
Item 3	No further action today.
Item 4	Complete your appraisal form. Make any additional notes you feel are necessary.
Item 5	Make sure you speak to Steph before 10am to explain her appraisal will be postponed. Speak to all the supervisors today and let them know the times of their rescheduled appraisals.
Item 6	No further action today.
Item 7	No further action today.
Item 8	No further action today.

Item 9	Call Mr Thomas and offer compensation. Speak to Paul to determine whether the procedure was followed and ask about the working relationship between him and Lyndsey. Draft and send an email to all staff reminding them of the correct procedure.
Item 10	No further action today.
Item 11	See Item 2.
Item 12	Email Bruce Cameron.
Item 13	Speak to Becky. Either: send a reminder of the correct procedure OR add to Friday meeting agenda.
Item 14	Pass letter on to the Sales Manager.

Score sheet

Enter your scores here:

Item	Score	Bonus	Total
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			
14			
Total			
Grand total			

Results:

This is the maximum you could have scored:

Item	Score	Bonus	Total
1	2		2
2	4	3	7
3	5	4	9
4	4	2	6
5	7	2	9
6	6	1	7
7	4		4
8	12	2	14
9	8	2	10
10	5		5
11	3	2	5
12	7		7
13	3		3
14	2		2
Total	72	18	
Grand total			90