



Public Health Agency In-Tray: Exercise Description

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Public Health Agency (PHA)

Background

This is an in-tray exercise which requires participants to be able to prioritise, organise, and action plan around a series of typical events in general management. The participant takes the role of Regional Director in the recently formed Public Health Agency. The Public Health Agency was formed to play a major role in improving public health in England, Wales and Scotland, taking over from the environmental health provision of local authorities. The PHA forms a focus for coordinated liaison with other bodies such as the NHS, Food Standards Agency, Local Housing Associations, etc. The in-tray is intended for senior managers and aspiring directors, presenting a number of challenges (some with PR and reputational aspects) which must be met in a relatively short time-scale. Set in the public sector, the exercise is applicable to any role that involves managing other managers where there is some operational delivery focus. This is a written exercise that is completed individually, but can be administered to a group of candidates simultaneously.

The competencies that are relevant to this exercise and can be used as rating dimensions are as follows:

Leadership

Team Orientation

Analysis & Problem Solving Skills

Organisation

Written Communication Skills

Users may select the most appropriate of these or substitute versions of the above competencies from their own existing competency framework as desired.

A short set of Administration Instructions describes the task for candidates. Candidates have 60 minutes in which to review their papers and construct their responses. The exercise can comfortably be administered to groups of up to 12 provided there is ample desk space available for each.

Exercise Content

The initial Participant Brief consists of 1 page of instructions for how to complete the task and 3 pages of background information describing the current situation at PHA including a statement from the Chief Executive and some organisation charts. The task for candidates is as follows:

- “1. First you should review the items in the in-tray, identify the five major matters that are raised in the in-tray and prioritise these in rank order from 1 (high) to 5 (low). For each matter provide a brief rationale for your ranking.

2. Regardless of how you have ranked the matters provide more detail of how you would manage each one of the following three issues:
 - a. Letter from the MP - draft a letter in response to the MP
 - b. Data security breach - produce an action plan to deal with the matter
 - c. Request for nominations for performance awards – produce a plan to indicate how you would deal with the matter. ”

An overview of the participant's role is provided, including the following extract:

“You have recently been promoted to the post Regional Director in the South West Region of the Public Health Agency (PHA). You have responsibility for 4 Area Managers, each of whom looks after 3 or 4 offices. Your direct line manager is Malcolm Pike, Operations Director South. You have not previously worked in the South West Region. ”

The brief goes on to set the scene as follows:

“It is Tuesday 7th June 2011. Having just returned from a few days away there is now a growing in-tray of emails, phone messages and correspondence that requires your immediate attention over the next hour. Malcolm Pike is on leave today to attend an honours ceremony and cannot be contacted. As the internal mail server was down yesterday your Personal Assistant, Emma Charles, has identified a number of issues and has printed out the relevant emails, together with attachments and letters. She has also left a copy of your diary for the day and the monthly calendar.”

There are 19 individual items (emails, letters, policy documents, press articles, etc.) relating to 5 major topics. The items are presented in date order so that the candidate is required to recognise which items are relevant to each topic. The topics range from requests for additional budget allocations to a requirement to deal with a possible data security breach.

Candidates are provided with a structured Answer Book in which to record their responses.

Assessor Manual

The Assessor Manual provides full background information (i.e. Competencies assessed, Scoring, Priorities Rankings, Required Actions and Evidence for Competencies). A separate set of Administration Instructions with a full administration script is provided.

The in-tray has been designed to be scored more quickly and efficiently than most. The scoring process is supported by a detailed scoring guide, structured Assessor Scoring Form and a straightforward rating scheme. Full information about each topic and their relative priority is provided in the Assessor Manual along with detailed examples of appropriate actions for each topic and their links to specific competencies.

Quantities

The Administration Pack contains the following items:

- 12 Participant Briefs
- 12 sets of Participant Materials
- 12 Participant Report forms
- 2 sets of Admin Instructions
- 12 Assessor Report Forms
- 2 Assessor Manuals

After initial purchase of the Admin Pack, a Refill Pack may be purchased which contains the following consumable items:

- 12 Participant Briefs
- 12 sets of Participant Materials
- 12 Participant Report forms
- 12 Assessor Report Forms

Current pricing can be determined by reference to <http://www.sr-associates.com/pricing.html>

If desired, further queries as to the exercise demands and content can be made to:

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