

Turning with the tide

How we took Thames Water's graduate assessment centres fully virtual during the coronavirus pandemic and how we can continue to offer enhanced virtual recruitment



Transforming a crisis into a top candidate experience

At GTI Recruiting Solutions, we have been successfully conducting Thames Water's graduate and apprenticeship recruitment campaign for six years. This has encompassed everything from attraction, to assessment, to offers and regrets. We were well underway this year when the coronavirus pandemic took hold and lockdown hit. While some employers chose to halt or pause their recruitment, Thames Water were keen to continue. They knew that good talent could go elsewhere if they delayed.

We moved their entire assessment centre process on to a virtual platform, adapting activities (even creating new ones) and supporting candidates and assessors alike so that not only was there an excellent candidate experience but offers could be made with the same confidence as they would have been following in-person assessments.

- All 24 roles across 4 business areas were filled.
- Candidates from under-represented backgrounds in STEM appeared to do particularly well in the virtual assessment centre. For example, 67% of graduates hired identified as female (up from 52% the previous year) and 38% of offers were made to BAME graduates (up from 9% the previous year).
- 100% of candidates reported a positive experience on the day, despite 93% saying they were nervous about virtual assessment centres beforehand.

The entire process – from the initial decision to switch to virtual through to making offers – took less than three months. During that time, in response to the pandemic, we at GTI had been adapting our TARGETconnect platform, which is used by 87 universities as a virtual programme management platform, to accommodate the requirements of employers interested in switching to virtual assessments, work experience and events. TARGETconnect for Employers, or TC4E as it came to be known, was exactly what Thames Water needed to deliver their assessment centre: it was highly customisable and able to cope with multiple activities and users. 'The technology is working so well that it's almost like being in the room with the candidates,' one Thames Water assessor told us.

We want to take you through how we made the switch to virtual happen – the thinking behind our decisions, the positives (both expected and unexpected) that came out of necessity and the lessons we learned – in order to help you think about how your recruitment process could work in the virtual space. We are keen to show you how we are taking this forward for new clients to meet their specific requirements.

Executive summary

This case study seeks to explain how we transformed Thames Water's face-to-face assessment centres into virtual assessment centres at pace – and how doing so not only led to all vacancies being filled but ensured a significant increase in the number of offers made among those demographics typically under-represented in STEM.

Key points

- Working in partnership with a specialist business such as GTI Recruiting Solutions is the most effective way to switch to virtual. We have access to knowledge and relationships as well as other specialist partners to make things happen at speed.
- Finding the right platform is key – we found that TARGETconnect for Employers had the versatility we needed to deliver multiple activities and an excellent candidate experience.
- When devising activities, we found that this was an opportunity to rethink the status quo. Instead of just trying to transfer in-person activities to a virtual setting, we started with the competencies we needed to assess, came up with an entirely new group exercise and found ways to improve screening efficiency before the assessment centre stage.
- Adequately conveying an employer's culture in a virtual setting is challenging, but essential. We added more 'in-exercise' interactions, such as assessor introductions, but going forward we would include elements such as videos of workplaces, more question-and-answer sessions and opportunities to speak informally with current employees.
- Briefing both your candidates and assessors in advance on what to expect in a virtual setting is critical for an all-round positive experience, as well as having facilitators on hand to trouble shoot so that assessors and candidates can focus on the task at hand.

About us

GTI Recruiting Solutions is a tech-enabled, award-winning recruitment delivery business, specialising in graduate and apprentice strategy and hiring. When it comes to the attraction, assessment, engagement and retention of the best early years talent, we do pretty much everything. Whether managing an end-to-end multinational campaign or a single part of the recruitment process, we help our clients with the full scope of their recruitment initiatives. From application screening to assessment centre delivery, we're able to handle high volumes, ensuring candidates move through the recruitment process quickly and have a first-class, bias-free experience.

To find out more about how **GTI Recruiting Solutions** can help you, contact Hannah Harrison: hannah.harrison@groupgti.com.

To find out more about **TARGETconnect for Employers**, contact Simon Katchay: simon.katchay@groupgti.com.

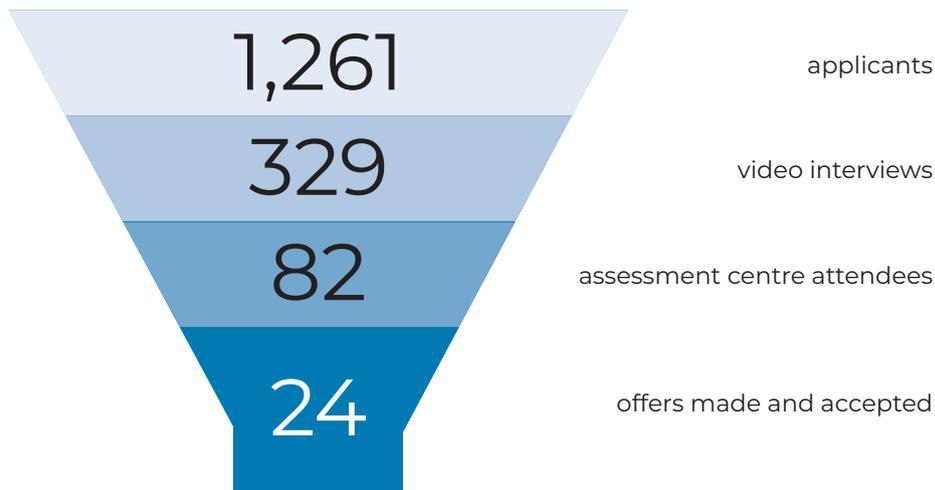
Feedback from client:

'Great to see so many good candidates that will help us get our gender leadership balance back on track! Really enjoyed it – count me in for next year.'

The scale of the challenge

Total number of vacancies available: 24 graduates

Graduate recruitment in numbers



We didn't reduce the number of candidates we invited to assessment centres because of the coronavirus.

Graduate hires



Female



Male



BAME



White

First generation to go to university



Prefer not to say



No



Yes

A third of graduate places were accepted by BAME students and graduates – a proportionally higher percentage than the approximate 19% of final-year BAME students on degree courses.*

*According to HESA data for 2018/2019.

What we created: our virtual assessment centre at a glance

Platform: TARGETconnect for Employers

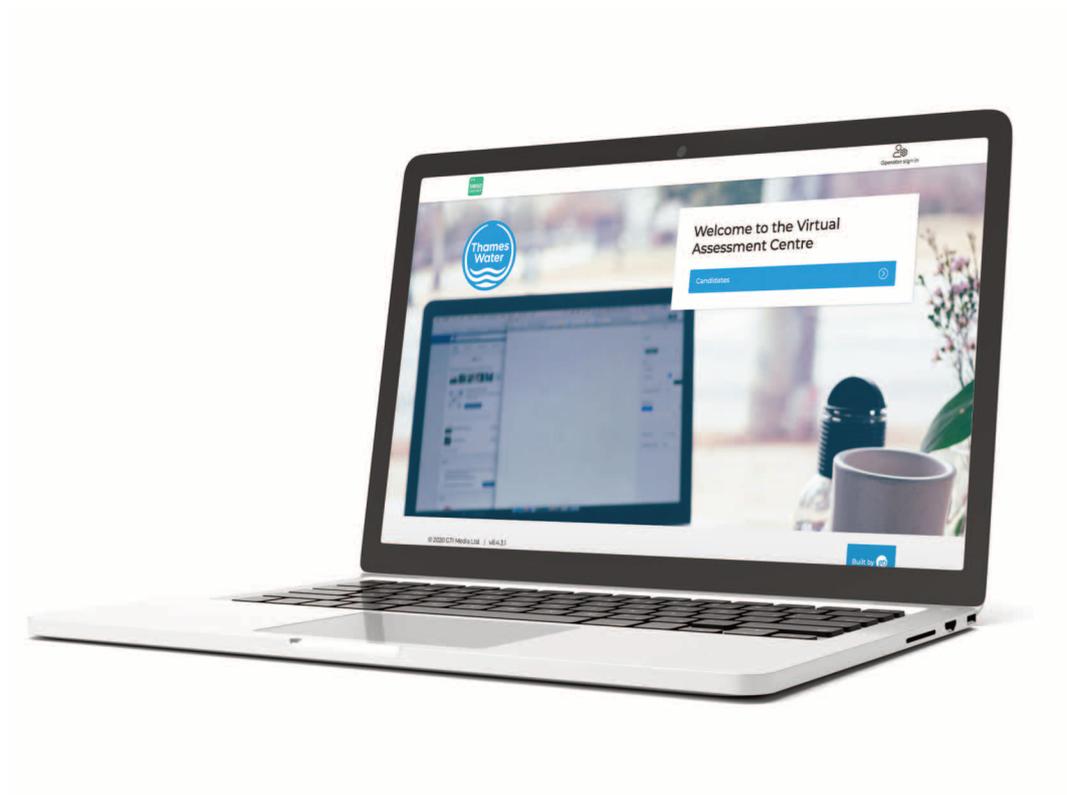
Selection methods:

- Group exercise
- Interview
- Solo presentation (prepared in advance on a given topic specific to the role)

Number of candidates per assessment centre: up to 12

Length of assessment centre: 9.00 am to 5.00 pm with a one-hour lunch

Time for assessor wash up, selection and feedback: 2 hours



Our seven steps to success

When the pandemic hit, we knew that it would be the assessment centre stage of the recruitment process that we would have to adapt. Before the pandemic, the assessment centres were traditionally held at the Madejski Stadium in Reading and for certain programmes there were visits to laboratories and sites; clearly, this couldn't happen. In consultation with Thames Water, we took the following decisions and actions.

1. We took a bespoke approach

We had already committed to undertaking live video interviews for Thames Water's apprenticeship recruitment, due to a tight timeframe. However, we were also clear that we wanted to assess our graduates through a greater range of activities, similar to what they would undertake in-person. For that reason, we invested time in identifying and testing the right platform.

2. We experimented to find the right platform

To interview potential apprentices, we used MS Teams, having provided candidates with instructions on how to use the platform and additional briefings on what to expect. The system worked well for the fairly straightforward interview and presentation format we were following – candidates who had prepared visual material for presentations were able to share their screens and, as facilitators, we were on hand to sort any technical difficulties, but otherwise remained muted. However, we did find that the student generation were unused to using MS Outlook to diarise their time. Through their academic studies, they were more familiar with logging on to a system to access resources and upload work. We decided that, going forward with our graduate recruitment, providing a system similar to what they were used to would offer a more comfortable candidate experience.

It was at this time that colleagues within the business were developing TARGETconnect for Employers – a platform that could manage different types of virtual programmes, from assessment centres to internships to onboarding and induction, with a great deal of versatility. For example:

- it allows administrators or candidates to book timeslots for activities, such as interviews or group exercises
- it allows videos and extra resources to be uploaded from external sites
- it can lock different activities until earlier ones are completed to ensure that candidates are accessing material at a time controlled by administrators – in this way, for instance, it can ensure that candidates access briefing material before continuing on to a group exercise
- it integrates with our TARGETfeedback survey functionality so that candidates can be immediately surveyed on their experience and upload reflections.

We were confident, too, that a good proportion of Thames Water's graduate candidates would be familiar with the TARGETconnect system; the platform

facilitates the careers services and support services at c. 75 universities. For these reasons, it seemed a good fit for Thames Water.

Our developers were on hand to adapt the platform as we needed and we worked hand-in-hand with them to ensure that the platform was able to meet all the requirements of Thames Water and, by extension, other clients as well.

Feedback on TARGETconnect for Employers from candidates and assessors was positive:

- **Candidate:** 'The technical aspect of the day ran very smoothly; I was very impressed.'
- **Assessor:** 'The morning's been brilliant. Technology is working so well that's it's almost like being in the room with the candidates.'

TIP: Invest time in finding a platform with full functionality, which your candidates are likely to be familiar with, in order to enhance the user experience.

3. We devised activities according to the competencies sought

When planning the assessment day, we started by thinking about the competencies required and how they could be appropriately assessed in a virtual format: these included customer focus, delivering results, teamwork, communication, resilience and influencing. We worked with Thames Water to ensure that all of the assessment exercises really focused on key competencies and that each competency was assessed multiple times in different ways.

TIP: Don't try to adapt an in-person activity; start with the qualities you are assessing and what you'd expect from a 'good' candidate.

Thames Water was keen to incorporate a group exercise to better observe candidates' commercial awareness and collaboration in practice. We turned to business psychology consultancy Sten10 to design a virtual-friendly exercise. We worked alongside the consultancy to ensure that the exercise was centred around the business acumen that Thames Water was keen to assess. To begin the process, we facilitated brainstorming meetings to ensure that ideas were captured before narrowing down our options.

TIP: A recruitment outsourcing business has the expertise and the knowledge to easily locate the best suppliers for the virtual activities you want.

The aspects that were hard to replicate were the technical/practical exercises that candidates for more technical roles were traditionally set. Instead, all candidates undertook an inductive reasoning test and finance candidates also completed a numeracy test. All candidates were also asked to present on a topic related to the area they applied for. These approaches worked reasonably well, but in future we will investigate the possibility of delivering more interactive exercises via TARGETconnect for Employers.

4. We redesigned the day and resequenced the process

We were conscious of the need to limit screen time and group numbers if we wanted to ensure an excellent experience for candidates and assessors and maximise their concentration. For this reason, our assessment centre had no more than 12 candidates, instead of the 15–20 we would have invited to the in-person day.

We moved certain exercises to earlier in the process. For example, we used to hold a colour-blind test only when making offers, as part of the required medical assessment, but instead we researched online colour-blind tests and had candidates take it beforehand. This is something we will take forward in future years, as it increased our screening efficiency (candidates who are colour blind are not eligible for some roles, so it makes sense for them to be screened out earlier in the process).

TIP: Moving to a virtual platform leads to opportunities to rethink the recruitment process, question the status quo and increase efficiency.

Next, we shortened the length of activities and we built in screen and comfort breaks. We staggered the day. Typically, all candidates joined us at 9.00 am for a group exercise, but then while half underwent their individual activities, the other half were invited to join us later in the day. This had the advantage of requiring fewer assessors and ensured that not all candidates had to be logged in while waiting for their exercises. However, the system can easily deal with higher volumes of users if required by the client.

For the group exercises, we divided the candidates into groups of four, with two assessors per group. Fewer numbers enabled the assessors to fully observe and maintain concentration throughout, but it also encouraged the more introverted and shy candidates to actively contribute; we noticed, too, that being in smaller groups seemed to reduce all candidates' nerves.

TIP: Maximising concentration by limiting screen time and participating numbers helps assessors to make more informed choices and enables more introverted candidates to shine.

5. We were keen to replicate the in-person experience and employer culture

When designing the assessment centre, we were conscious that students would miss out on gaining the feel for the organisation and the role that they would gain from an in-person experience. To mitigate this:

- interviewers provided inspiring overviews of their roles and experience within the company and this went some way to conveying a sense of the culture and the opportunities for career progression
- we ensured that the case study was based on a genuine business scenario so that candidates would get a realistic sense of the commercial decisions they'd make in the role
- we took particular care with all of our candidate communications to ensure that they embodied Thames Water's values and were warm and helpful.

TIP: How you communicate with candidates, for example in your briefing papers, goes a long way to conveying your culture, even if budgets are limited.

However, we know that, if we had not been constrained by lockdown, we would have done a lot more. For example, we would have created video tours of different sites and working environments and sent candidates branded items (eg a Thames Water notepad and pens for notetaking) and vouchers for refreshments (eg Just Eat vouchers). This is something we are now looking into for other clients.

Similarly, while we encouraged candidates to get in touch with Thames Water graduates through LinkedIn, in future, we would consider implementing a more formal process through which candidates could contact employees.

TIP: Look to facilitate a 'buddy' system between candidates and current graduates.

6. We gave thorough briefings to assessors and candidates

Virtual assessment centres were new for both the assessors and the candidates, so we knew it was important for our briefings to be both comprehensive and reassuring. Before the assessment centre, we gave the assessors a full briefing on:

- the process and how to log on to the system
- what the day was going to look like
- how to assess via a virtual platform (what to listen for and watch out for)
- unconscious biases to be alert for due to the nature of the virtual programme

(as we had already conducted video interviews and virtual onboarding for other clients, we had the expertise to highlight these)

- how to upload their notes and documentation to the system.

Assessors had access to SharePoint documents consolidating these points and the interview questions (which had already been agreed between assessors and HR). We were also on hand to answer any subsequent questions.

Candidates were provided with a full briefing pack, which included:

- a timetable
- information about what each exercise involved and the competencies being assessed
- some tips on how to approach each exercise, including links to careers advice features on targetjobs.co.uk
- guidance on dress codes
- joining instructions for the platform
- information on what to 'bring', eg notepad and pen
- contact details for our team so that we could answer subsequent questions.

As noted above, we took care to ensure that these briefings were reassuring. It was important to us, for example, that candidates were comfortable, so our dress code suggestions were:

The dress code will be smart casual, which means no suits needed!

We want you to be relaxed and feel comfortable but remember that first impressions always count.

The ideal outfit is a collared top or shirt.

On the day of the assessment centre itself, we introduced everyone, explained what would happen and stressed that we would be on hand to help with any technical issues that would arise. After the assessment centre, we asked candidates to fill in a survey about their experiences on the day – provided via our TARGETfeedback functionality – so that we could take on board any constructive suggestions for improvements.

TIP: Comprehensive briefings should be backed up with opportunities to ask questions and further support on the day.

Candidates appreciated the thorough briefing:

- 'I felt supported throughout, especially through Joanna [a member of our RPO team] – she did a really good job at explaining what to expect and giving additional support. The information packs sent before the process were really well detailed and helped answer any questions I had.'

- ‘Everyone I spoke to made me feel at ease and comfortable, explained how the day was going to go and prepared me for the next steps.’

7. We facilitated everything for the assessors

We saw our role as making everything easier for the candidates and assessors, prior to the assessment centre, during and afterwards. In the interest of speed and to make things easier for the assessors, we undertook the entire administration of the process and the ‘back-end’ of TARGETconnect for Employers – for example, booking sessions in assessors’ diaries. All the assessors needed to do was review candidates’ CVs, turn up on the day, take notes, score candidates against competencies and then upload their notes. However, if clients want to administer TARGETconnect for Employers themselves, we can provide access and in-depth training.

On the day itself, after we had introduced everyone and explained what would happen, we muted ourselves and were on hand to dive in if there were any technical issues. We had done a lot of trouble-shooting beforehand, but of course there were some rather unexpected challenges – for example, a candidate experienced a slower connection due to a housemate also using the wifi for their PlayStation (after a quick chat with us, the candidate told their housemate to get off it!). We kept everyone’s mobile numbers to hand so that we could call them immediately to resolve any issues, which helped to reduce panic. On one occasion, a candidate’s microphone failed, so we had the interviewer call them so that they could speak over the phone and still see each other on video.

TIP: It pays to have facilitators in addition to assessors, so that the assessors can concentrate on assessing.

We argue that the virtual assessment centre allowed assessors to be more aware of their assessment decisions than ever before – potentially because the platform allowed them to focus on candidates without outside distractions. They were able to mute themselves and ‘go dark’ so that they could observe the candidates and candidates weren’t consciously aware of them or watching their reactions on screen. This is one advantage over an in-person group exercise.

Results and recommendations

In the wash-up sessions, assessors confirmed that the quality of candidates was equal to what they'd see in a face-to-face setting. All of the graduate vacancies were filled across all locations, some of which have been traditionally tricky to fill, and with a comparatively high proportion of candidates from under-represented backgrounds within STEM. A third were from a BAME background and, in fact, 38% of offers went to BAME students and graduates, up from 9% the previous year. Two thirds of offers (both made and accepted) went to students and graduates who identified as female.

We had overwhelmingly positive feedback from assessors and candidates alike – while 93% of candidates admitted feeling nervous about undertaking a virtual assessment, 100% reported having a positive experience afterwards.

Feedback from assessors included:

- 'Thank you for the opportunity to be involved – two fantastic days and some real talent and great potential for the future of the business.'
- 'I thought the days went very well virtually. Well done for innovating. Also, great to see so many good candidates that will help us get our gender leadership balance back on track! Really enjoyed it – count me in for next year.'
- 'The morning's been brilliant. Technology is working so well that's it's almost like being in the room with the candidates.'

Feedback from candidates included:

- 'I felt supported throughout. With this being my first virtual assessment experience, I would thoroughly recommend any company use this method in their recruitment, as it was a great experience.'
- 'Everyone I spoke to made me feel at ease and comfortable, explained how the day was going to go and prepared me for the next steps. The technical aspect of the day ran very smoothly; I was very impressed.'
- 'Considering the situation, the experience was absolutely fine. Potentially the new normal? Shout out to Joanna – she was really helpful at all times.'

Recommendations

- We would recommend turning to an outsourcing business such as GTI Recruiting Solutions, as we have proven that we have the expertise and the resilience to turn something around quickly and we have the pre-existing relationships with subcontractors to devise the best exercises for you.
- Have facilitators on hand so that assessors can concentrate on assessment – another advantage of using an outsourcing team.
- To run a successful virtual assessment centre, you need to have a user-friendly platform that is equipped to manage multiple activities: we found that TARGETconnect for Employers was more than versatile enough for our needs.

- Although we deliberately kept the number of candidates small, it is possible to upscale using TARGETconnect.
- Take care to showcase the employer's culture as much as possible – to this end, we are now adding more information sessions and Q and As to the day and putting candidates directly in touch with current employees.
- Provide detailed and supportive briefings and information packs to ensure a better experience for assessors and candidates.

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