

The Case Interview

BACKGROUND

Many management consulting firms, especially the strategy firms (McKinsey, Boston Consulting Group, Bain, Mercer, et al.) love to give prospective employees a problem to solve during the course of the interview. These problem-solving exercises, known generally as “case questions,” are designed to help the interviewer screen candidates and determine which people really have what it takes to be a real, live, card-carrying management consultant.

Case questions come in many forms and levels of complexity. To help you get a handle on them, we have identified four different categories of questions:

- Market-sizing questions
- Business operations questions
- Business strategy questions
- Resume questions

(Note that we are not covering the brainteaser category in this Insider Guide. Consulting firms rarely ask brainteaser questions; other types of cases give much more insight into the type of thinking that makes a good consultant.)

Each of these prototypes has certain distinguishing features, which we discuss below. In addition, our insiders recommend certain “rules of the road” that should help you successfully navigate the different types of questions. Don’t worry—you’ll never be asked to spit out a category name and serial number for the questions you receive in the interview. Nevertheless, if you can identify the type of question, you will have a better idea about how to effectively attack the problem.

WHAT YOUR INTERVIEWER IS SEEKING

It may seem as if your interviewer is using the case technique for one purpose alone: to humiliate prospective consultants. Although a few interviewers do seem to take a perverse pleasure in watching candidates writhe, this isn't the true goal of the technique. According to insiders, case questions really do help interviewers evaluate a candidate's aptitude for consulting. What does that mean exactly? Whether you're an undergrad, an MBA, or a PhD, consulting interviewers will likely depend on the case questions to check you out on the following dimensions:

- Analytical ability
- Structured thinking
- Intelligence
- Ability to not break into hives under pressure
- Common sense
- Ability to think on your feet
- Interest in problem solving
- Business intuition
- Facility with numbers
- Presentation skills
- Communication skills
- Ability to sort through information and focus on the key points
- Ability to analyze and then make recommendations based on the analysis
- Creativity
- Enthusiasm

Before you bid all your points to get an interview with name-your-consulting-firm, we recommend that you spend some time thinking about how consulting fits you. In particular, you must have good answers to two questions:

- Why do you want to be a consultant?
- And why do you want to work for this firm?

If you have good answers to these two questions, then you're ready to start thinking about cases. We start by discussing the case interview as it relates to several categories of candidates: undergraduates, MBAs, advanced-degree candidates, and experienced hires.

UNDERGRADUATES

Consulting interviewers tell us that the case questions and the expected answers for undergraduates tend to be simpler and more understandable than those for MBA students. Market-sizing questions are very popular (you will almost certainly get at least one of these), as are general business strategy problems. In the business strategy area, the companies and the topics may also seem a little friendlier; you're more likely to get a case about a beer company than about a company trying to license the latest packet-filtering technology for data encryption. Operations questions (with the exception of the ever-popular declining-profits question) are less common for undergraduates, and resume questions will more likely focus on academic or extracurricular activities than on work experiences.

Interviewers say that they often provide more prompting to undergraduate candidates during the interview. In evaluating your answer to a question, only the most sadistic interviewer would expect you to regurgitate all of the standard business-school terminology and techniques (after all, how else could the company justify paying MBAs the big bucks?). But beware: Rank amateurs are definitely not welcome. Thus, you must have a general understanding of basic business relationships (e.g., revenues – costs = profits), but don't get your knickers in a knot if you can't name even one of the Five Forces.