

Consulting Case Overview

from WetFeet.com

You're pacing nervously back and forth in the career center, waiting for the interviewer to come out and call your name. You're all dressed up in your interview suit, you've got your resume in hand, you've practiced saying why you want to be a consultant a thousand times, and yet, you're still nervous. Although you'd do anything short of shining your interviewer's shoes just to get a consulting job, you're deeply worried, because you know that, in a matter of moments, you're going to hit that most dreaded of all interview challenges: the case situation. Suddenly, you panic. Vivid memories of your last tragic interview/train wreck come flooding back...

Whoa! Slow down! Take a deep breath and relax. You may not ever learn to love the case interview question, but, with a little bit of thinking - and some practice - you actually will be able to sail through this part of the interview just as easily as the resume review. WetFeet.com is here to tell you how.

Let's start with a simple definition. The case interview is essentially a word problem based upon a real-life (or simulated) consulting situation. Thus, the interviewer might say "Okay, Terry, suppose a client comes to you and says, 'We're thinking about going into the light-bulb business, and we want you to tell us what to do.' What should you tell her?"

Cases come in all shapes and sizes, from the simple, straightforward question designed to see how you think about a problem, to the highly complex business strategy issue that takes twenty minutes to explain and involves charts, graphs, and buzzwords up to the wazoo. However, they all have one thing in common. (No, it's not to inspire fear in the hearts and minds of would-be consultants!) The consulting firms tell us that the case interview is an excellent way to test a candidate's analytical abilities. It shows his or her resourcefulness, how he or she thinks about problems, and ultimately, his or her aptitude for consulting.

How does the interviewer evaluate you? By watching for several things: how do you analyze the problem, how do you ask for additional details, how do you slice through extraneous information to get the key issues, how you pursue a particular line of thinking and stay with it, how you propose to identify information that will allow you to solve the problem, and, most importantly, whether or not you can develop (and present) a particular framework for organizing your thoughts and answers to the case question.

Although this may seem like a daunting assignment at the start, the good news is that there are many ways to prepare yourself for this task. Armed with these strategies, and bolstered by a little practice, you ought to be able to do every bit as well as anybody who has gone before you. Surprising as it may seem, you may also come to view the case question as the part of the interview where you can really shine!

The Bottom Line

Like it or not, if you're planning to get a job in consulting, you will have to learn how to handle the case interview. Although different firms and different interviewers have different approaches to the case question, all of them use it as an important tool in selecting and screening out job candidates. Indeed, you may have to clobber ten or more cases on the way to landing a job with a major management consulting organization. Fortunately, by studying up on the case process and honing your case interview skills through practice, you'll soon be able to amaze friends and family alike with your frameworks and graph-drawing skills. Even better, when that dreaded moment in the interview arrives - and the interviewer pops the question - you'll be more than equal to it.

What to Expect

The typical management-consulting interview generally consists of several parts. At a minimum, these include an introductory "get to know you" conversation, a resume review/prove-to-me-that-you're-qualified-for-a-consulting-job Q&A, a case interview question, and a follow-up "what do you want to know about us" discussion. Although the case question portion of the interview inspires the most terror, the other portions of the meeting are every bit as important. You've heard it in other contexts, but do not ignore the foreplay. Insiders tell us that many candidates, even at the very best schools, have already bombed the interview long before the case question slices the into tiny little pieces. Fortunately, WetFeet.com is here to help. Before we dive into the rocky, shark-infested waters of the case question itself, let's spend a little time warming up. The next few sections should help you navigate the path through the minefield to the point where the fireworks begin.

Part One: Getting to know you

"Hey! How are you doing? What a great day for a consulting interview!" It may sound like meaningless banter (and it probably is), but the interviewer is still checking you out. First question in the recruiter's mind: Is this candidate alive? If not, the interview is likely to drag. If you are alive - and seem interested, perky, and excited about the opportunity to interview with the company XYZ - then this is your chance to develop a rapport with your interviewer. Typical questions here may involve the weather, why you decided to attend Kellogg (or Stanford or Columbia or CMU or wherever), how classes are going, how the job search is progressing, what's up with the 49ers, and so on. Your key goal here should be to show the interviewer that you have an engaging personality, are fun to be around, and would be a valuable addition to the team.

Remedial interviewing for Would-Be Consultants:

Here are a few tips from consulting insiders about points at which previous candidates have fallen off a cliff. Take note - you don't want to be the next statistic!

- Show enthusiasm for the company. How psyched will your Booz recruiter be if he suspects you're thinking, "Well, I'd really rather get an offer from Mckinsey, but they already dinged me." Yeah, make that two - DING!
- Practice saying: "I reeeeeeally want to be a consultant - and here are the three reasons why!" Say it at night, rather than counting sheep. If you don't, the other candidates are lined up about 300 deep right behind you, and there's an excellent chance that many of them really do want a spot in the consulting leagues.
- Don't talk about yourself in a negative manner. Self-deprecation won't get you anywhere in consulting. If you don't think you can tell a 30-year veteran at Goodyear a thing or two about tires, well, maybe you should sign up for an interview when Goodyear comes to campus.
- Demonstrate that you're a fun person. How about it? Would you want to go out for beers with a cold fish (even a smart cold fish); much less spend months working together in Indianapolis?
- Be high-energy! Smile! Be excited! Sixty hours per week may not sound so bad right now, but when you've been at the client site from 8am until 9pm everyday this week and last week and the week before... Anyway, the interviewer is going to be looking for people that have stamina and the desire to put in long, tough hours - and still come up shouting, "Please, sir. Give me another spreadsheet!"

Part Two: Prove Yourself to Me

You've had a clever little chat about the weather to demonstrate that you really are alive; you've told a good story about why you love your alma mater more than your own mother; and now it's time for the recruiter to pull out your resume. "So, tell me about the work you did for..." What's going through the recruiter's mind? Something along the lines of "What has this schmoe done that shows he or she is smart enough to handle the consulting workload?" To keep sailing straight toward that case question, you'll need to demonstrate that you have had significant work experience (or a reasonable facsimile thereof), can work well with others, have an aspiration to lead, and have the intellectual horsepower to do the heavy lifting required of consultants.

How to Impress a Consulting Recruiter:

Just exactly what impresses the hard-nosed consulting recruiter who has not seen it all before, but likely has done it all before (or at least advised a client on how to do it?) Here are several tips gleaned from WetFeet.com's conversations with management consulting insiders. One word of caution (especially to our friends at HBS) - you'll want to walk that fine line between providing evidence of your capabilities and seeming like an overbearing braggart.

- Talk about situations in which you have assumed a significant leadership role. You might mention the challenges you faced and how you overcame them, or what you learnt about yourself as a result of your experience. Your goal should be to demonstrate, with well-articulated examples, that you have the qualities of a Churchill, Martin Luther King Jr., or Mother Teresa.
- Think of several examples of projects at school, work, or in an extracurricular setting in which you were challenged and survived with flying colors. Remember that dating stories don't count!
- Prepare for the questions that you know are coming. In particular, have a good, concise explanation of why you want to be a consultant and why specifically want to work for firm XYZ. (Hint: Don't know the real difference between McKinsey and Bain and Mercer and Booz-Allen and...? Check out the most current version of the WetFeet.com insider guide on the firm. You'll learn everything you need to know to ace your interviews!)
- Be prepared to answer questions about anything on your resume. Consultants have a nose for obscure facts that can turn up pungent information. One of their favorite tricks is to take an item on the resume and turn it against you as the basis for a case question ("So, I see you've worked in software. Do you think Apple has any sustainable competitive advantages?"). Our advice: think ahead of how each bullet point on that resume can be turned into a compelling (short) story that demonstrates your aptitude for consulting.
- Think of examples of work in which you had to use consulting-type skills. No, that doesn't necessarily mean situations in which you charged exorbitant fees for your advice. Rather, look for situations in which you had to be highly analytical or in which you had to be very resourceful about identifying hard-to-find information.

The WetFeet.com Interview Coach

What is an example of an experience in which you took on a leadership role?

How have you demonstrated initiative?

How would you define your leadership style?

What are some key lessons you have learned about motivating people?

Part Three: Here Comes the Case...

Let's say that so far you're so well prepared that you have slam-dunked the get-to-know-you and prove-yourself-to-me portions of the interview. Admit it - you're feeling pretty good, as well you should. Now it's time for the infamous case interview. Sometimes, you'll get this question from the same interviewer who has been bouncing around all the high points of your resume. On other occasions you'll transfer to another interview room and an entirely different interviewer who will serve up The Question. Typically, it will begin with something like, "Okay, let's say you are meeting with the CEO of a large pharmaceutical company. He says to you..." Now it's time for you to show just how bright and analytical you really are.

Ten Things NOT to Do in a Case Interview:

10. Don't burst into tears.
9. Don't say, "I think that question really blows."
8. Don't call a friend from your cell phone and ask for help.
7. Don't look at notes you have scribbled on the back of your hand.
6. Don't ever say, "I don't have a clue."
5. Don't say, "Wait, what were we talking about?"
4. Don't say, "The answer is 10,000."
3. Don't say that the questions you got in your (other consulting firm's name) interview were really much more challenging.
2. Don't jump from topic to topic without explaining how it fits into a framework.
1. Don't reveal that you've been coached by the experts at WetFeet.com!

The WetFeet.com Interview Coach

Create several case questions for yourself based on your resume. (Not only will this help you prepare for possible questions; it will give you a better sense of what makes a good case question. Think about strategic or operations implications related to your previous industry or field. If you worked in a homeless shelter, for instance, a good case question might be: "Let's say your organization has had stable funding and client usage, but a new neighborhood shelter has grown dramatically. What's going on?"

Seven Steps to Surviving The Case Interview

So how exactly does one ace the case? Although the specifics of each case question will be different, we've devised an approach that, if used correctly, will take you a long way toward giving the consulting interviewer what he or she wants. Ours is mnemonic device for acing your case. Simply think of the words "WetFeet." Those seven letters will help you ace your case!

When the interviewer asks the question, listen carefully.

Take notes if necessary. Make sure you know what the interviewer is seeking. It's particularly important to keep this objective in mind as you work your way through the dense forest of detail that may be coming your way.

Everything there?

Determine whether or not you've been given the whole picture. If the question is unclear, it's probably unclear for a reason. Ask your interviewer for clarification. In particular, if there seems to be a gaping hole, ask about it. The interviewer may be testing whether or not you realize that there are many missing pieces to the puzzle. Or he may be holding back a key piece of information in order to see if you ask for it.

Think before you speak.

It's acceptable to spend a minute or two jotting down notes for yourself to follow, just as you would before writing out an essay for your final history exam. So take a minute and think about your answer rather than starting too quickly and digging yourself into a ditch.

Frameworks!

Identify a framework, or a combination of frameworks, to help you structure your answer. Be sure to inform your interviewer how you plan to proceed. Remember, choosing a framework isn't the goal of the exercise - it's supposed to help you structure an answer to the question. It will also help your listener (the interviewer) follow your presentation and show her how you think.

Every hint helps.

Interviewers often give hints, extra data, or suggestions. Listen for them. When you hear a hint, a suggestion, or additional information, use it. Even though he may not smile and his collar may be starched as stiff as a cardboard, your interviewer is likely to be a very nice person who was just as nervous as you are when he was trying to ace this case. Many interviewers will try to gently prod you in the direction they want you to explore. Listen for their clues! Use their help! They know what they are looking for and will usually try to steer you in the right direction.

Talk action.

Wrap up your case by briefly summarizing how you have approached the problem and noting where you would go if you had more time. The goal of consulting is almost never just analysis. Usually, a consultant is looking for good, solid, data-driven recommendations for the client.

Do Firms Approach the Case Interview Differently?

We've heard rumors from the interview cubicle that different consulting firms prefer different types of case questions - and different types of answers. If you think you have an angle on that front, go ahead and use it, and good luck. However, after talking to dozens of company insiders at a large number of consulting firms, we've determined that the similarities in case interviewing style from consulting firm to consulting firm are far more striking than the differences. Indeed, the primary differences in style seem to come from the personalities of the individual recruiters.

Let's face it, consulting interviewers come in all shapes, sizes, and temperaments. Since consulting firms take recruiting so seriously, as a rule you are more likely to end up with a great interviewer than you are with a guy who never calls his Mom on Mother's Day. On that count, well, cross your fingers and hope that you don't land on a particularly obnoxious interviewer. If you do, keep your cool, do your best, and remember as you leave the confines of the interviewing cubicle that your social life is going to be a lot more exciting over the next few months than his.

WeetFeet.com has identified one significant difference in consulting-interview styles, and that is the difference between undergraduate interviews and MBA/graduate student interviews. As you might expect, undergraduate case questions are usually less complex, less focused on specific business issues, and more focused on the skills that will be required of research analysts (or whatever the firm calls its undergraduate hires). In particular, the interviewer will often push the candidate to demonstrate resourcefulness, creativity in thinking about a problem, and ability to stick with a problem and get to the bottom of it. So if you're an undergrad, don't pass out when you read through the frameworks section of this report; your interviewer won't expect you to have mastered MBA-level concepts. If you are an MBA, however, start studying and be prepared for anything!