Public Sector, Non-Profit, and Risk-Based Case Interview Variants

Most case interview preparation revolves around a familiar cast of characters: a company deciding whether to launch a product, enter a market, or cut costs. But a meaningful share of live cases — particularly at firms with public-sector, social-impact, or risk-advisory practices — depart from that script. They ask you to reason about a government agency redesigning a service, a non-profit allocating a limited budget, or a financial institution weighing a risk it cannot fully quantify. Candidates who have only ever rehearsed commercial cases can find these unsettling, simply because the usual anchors — revenue, market share, profit — are no longer the obvious north star.

What changes when the "client" is not a company chasing profit

In a public-sector or non-profit case, the objective function shifts from profit to some mix of impact, equity, cost-effectiveness, and political or reputational feasibility — and often more than one of these at once, in tension with each other. A few adjustments help:

- **Define "success" explicitly, early.** Is the goal to serve more people, serve them better, spend less doing it, or satisfy a mandate from elected officials? These can pull in different directions, and naming the tension shows maturity.
- **Bring stakeholders into the structure.** Citizens, frontline staff, oversight bodies, taxpayers, and political leadership often have different — sometimes conflicting — interests. A structure that only considers "the agency" misses half the picture.
- **Treat budget as a hard constraint, not a variable.** Commercial cases often ask "how much should we invest?" Public and non-profit cases more often start from "here is what we have — how do we get the most from it?"
- **Acknowledge measurement difficulty honestly.** Impact is harder to quantify than revenue. Naming a reasonable proxy — wait times, satisfaction scores, cost per outcome — and explaining why you chose it is more convincing than pretending the number is precise.

Reasoning about risk when the numbers are uncertain

Risk-based cases — common in financial services, insurance, and regulatory contexts — ask you to make a recommendation when the central quantity (a default rate, a claims probability, a compliance exposure) cannot be known with confidence. The instinct to reach for a single "correct" number is usually a trap. What interviewers are listening for instead is how you reason under that uncertainty:

- **Separate likelihood from impact.** A low-probability, catastrophic event and a high-probability, manageable one require very different responses — naming both dimensions, rather than collapsing them into one "risk score," shows you understand what risk actually means.
- **Reason in scenarios and ranges.** Rather than asserting a single figure, sketch a plausible range — "if the default rate is closer to 2%, the exposure looks manageable; if it's closer to 6%, it changes the recommendation entirely" — and say what would tell you which scenario you are in.
- **Distinguish risks you can mitigate from risks you can only monitor.** Some exposures can be reduced through action (diversification, controls, contracts); others can only be tracked and prepared for. Recommending the right type of response for each is more useful than recommending "more caution" across the board.

What stays the same — and why that's reassuring

Underneath the different vocabulary, these cases reward exactly the same instincts as any other: a clear structure, calm reasoning under pressure, and a recommendation that is grounded in what you have actually discussed rather than asserted out of nowhere. The shift is in what you optimise for and how you talk about uncertainty — not in how rigorously you think. Practising one or two cases of this kind deliberately, rather than treating them as an afterthought, takes away the surprise factor — so that if one shows up on interview day, it feels like a variation on a theme you already know, rather than an entirely different test.

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