# Case Interview Season Begins

## Idea In Short

Prepare early, practice deliberately and treat the interviewer like a client. Master the basics, structure your thinking, show your work and build genuine rapport. Curiosity and leadership matter more than perfect answers.

## The Upside of Early Preparation

Students just arrive at school, move in and start meeting people. Then suddenly it is late September and time for case interviews. The upside is enormous because you may have a job offer before Thanksgiving. Nothing beats having a position lined up six months in advance. Investment banking can move even sooner, with juniors receiving full-time offers 18 months ahead.

Albert Einstein reportedly said everybody is a genius, but if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing it is stupid. The same applies to case interviews and fit.

Do the basic research. Know what a day in the life of a consultant looks like. Read white papers to understand the work. Be able to differentiate between Accenture, Bain and Deloitte in an interview. Management Consulted offers free resources to get up to speed quickly, with hours of material available.

Firms want you to succeed. The last thing partners and directors want is a series of painful, bad case interviews. Listen to what the buyers say. McKinsey, Bain, Deloitte and Oliver Wyman all publish guidance on their interview processes. Videos are easier to watch than reading, and Bain offers side-by-side comparisons of three consultants tackling the same case.

## Understand the Format and Practice

Case interviews differ from typical interviews. The interviewer gives background and an ambiguous business question. Your job is to politely, effectively and logically tease out answers that piece together a thoughtful solution. Sometimes the interviewer provides handouts and graphs as you uncover key areas. Sometimes they do not. Know the setup and be ready.

Read through case practice examples online for free, or buy a book. Case Interview Secrets by Victor Cheng and Case in Point by Marc Cosentino are popular resources. When practicing, get feedback from partners. Record yourself on your phone and review the playback. It takes practice, and repetition builds comfort.

## Get on the Interview List

Sometimes this is the hardest part. Even at a top business school, interview spots are oversubscribed like an initial public offering. Go to company presentations, reach out to your network for informational interviews and show genuine interest. Be authentic and develop one real relationship rather than collecting superficial contacts.

The path to an offer looks like a chain. It starts with a clear, persuasive cover letter and a well-organized resume. Then comes a great first interview, a strong second case interview, a productive internship and finally a full-time offer. Each link matters, and weakness in any one can break the chain.

## Demonstrate Mental Horsepower and Rapport

Recruiting teams use the phrase mental horsepower frequently when reviewing resumes. They look at undergraduate degrees, math majors and grade point averages. If you come from social science, nonprofits or another function with a reputation for being soft or non-quantitative, fortify that part of your resume.

Firms look for consultants that clients will like. Being likable is a key skill consultants use daily. If the client does not like you, they will roll you off the project. This happens often. The biggest gap during case interviews is rapport. Too many candidates get 80 percent of content right but remain rigid, unfriendly, awkward or no fun.

Be human. If you are uncomfortable and forced, the other person feels it too. Ask yourself whether you would pass the airport test. After spending five hours with you at an airport, would most people like you more or less? 1

## Add Value and Treat the Interviewer Like a Client

Firms want to know whether they can hire you, train you for a month and send you to the client site. They bill your time at $125 to $300 per hour. Assuming the client needs five to six times your bill rate in value, you need consistent $10,000 value days. Show that kind of value in the interview.

Treat the interviewer like a client who has all the answers. You would be respectful, attentive, thoughtful, logical and positive. Build rapport, listen well and speak concisely and confidently. The interview is a simulation of client work, not a performance test.

## Structure the Problem and Be Curious

Know the basic frameworks and put ideas in buckets. Show wisdom and business acumen without force-fitting a solution. Listen, be present and pick up on clues. Even if you think about the 4P, 3C, Porter's Five Forces or break-even formulas, do not brag about applying them. That resembles telling your date you are going to hold their hand now.

Consultants like to solve puzzles. If you treat the case like a puzzle, you will find it enjoyable rather than terrifying. Do not treat it as a trial or performance test. You and the interviewer collaborate to reach an answer in a quick and friendly way. Intellectual curiosity is the key to long-term career success.

## Look for Numbers and Show Your Thinking

Consultants love data. Show comfort working with numbers and love data. This is like math in high school, where you get points for showing your work. Cases have multiple potential answers, and how you reach conclusions matters as much as where you end up. Do not wait for a big reveal at the end.

Summarize findings as you go to give the interviewer confidence that you have a plan. This mirrors the Minto Principle, even without all answers yet. You might say you would like to share initial thoughts, or that the Southern region has margin issues, or that you discovered two things. Summarizing builds structure and trust.

## Transition and Pace Yourself

The case interview feels strange because the interviewee asks many questions, which can seem confused or desperate. Mitigate this with an upfront structure that casts a wide net. Be calm when moving from one idea to another, and transition seamlessly between topics.

You might say that after discussing revenues, both price and quantity, you will move to costs. You might note there is little cost savings on the supplier side and suggest moving to process. You could ask about competitive pricing or pivot to supply chain. Smooth transitions signal control and competence.

Summarize findings as you go and give a strong conclusion. Include recommendations, risks and implementation considerations at the end. Pacing matters because rushing through the case leaves the interviewer unconvinced, while dragging signals lack of direction.

## Lead and Be Thankful

While being respectful, show competence, confidence and control. Firms will not hire people who cannot lead meetings, interviews, conversations and work. Dwight Eisenhower said leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because they want to do it.

Write a thank you note to your interviewers and the people who supported you. Yes, even your buddies who practiced cases with you. Consulting is super selective, and the selection process is not perfect. If they did not choose you, they do not deserve you. Lots of opportunities exist for capable people.

Consulting is an attitude of curiosity to solve problems and help people. It is drive to get things done and relationships because nothing happens without people. Whether you get the offer or not, you can be more of a consultant in everything you do. Be, do and say.

- 1Harvard Business Review on leading when you do not have formal authority

## Summary

Case interviews reward preparation, curiosity and human connection. Do the research, practice with feedback and structure your thinking. Treat the interviewer like a client, lead the conversation and be thankful. Consulting is an attitude of curiosity, drive and relationships.