Thirty Tips for Aspiring Consultants

Idea In Short

Interview season for consulting firms compresses years of career advice into a few weeks of resume polishing and case practice. Organized across three stages, before the interview, during the interview and after starting the job, a compact set of practical tips carries a candidate the whole way through.

Interview Season Compresses Everything

Interview season for consulting firms turns into a concentrated period of cover letters, resume polishing and case practice, and the advice worth internalizing sorts cleanly into three stages: before the interview, during it, and after actually starting the job.1

Before the Interview: Do the Real Homework

Curiosity sits at the foundation of great problem solving, echoing the famous line that genius is less about special talent than about being passionately curious. Real preparation means researching both consulting broadly and the specific target firms directly, since most firms genuinely want candidates to succeed and publish guidance on cracking their own cases. Thousands of pages of free case interview material exist online, worth skimming selectively rather than exhaustively, and talking to former interns or attending firm presentations beats reinventing preparation from scratch. Resumes and cover letters function as bait, meant to get a reader to bite, and the case interview itself exists to reveal mental horsepower, the ability to build rapport and genuine apprenticeship potential. Firms are looking for people who are smart, logical, quick-thinking and engaging, not slow, confusing or dense, and being someone clients would actually want billed to them at premium rates matters as much as raw intelligence.

During the Interview: Structure and Connect

A handful of case tactics matter most: structuring the problem as cleanly as possible, thinking mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive, narrating the thought process out loud rather than working silently, identifying and testing hypotheses directly, listening actively for cues while keeping the conversation genuinely fluid, and summarizing progress along the way before landing a strong, clear conclusion. Treating the interviewer like a real potential client, asking logically sequenced questions and building genuine rapport all matter as much as the analytical answer itself. A well-known informal standard, the airport test, asks whether the interviewer would want to spend eight hours stuck in an airport with this candidate, which captures both competence and likability as joint requirements. Frameworks are tools, not answers, worth knowing a handful of well but never treating as a substitute for genuine thinking; a sharp, motivated amateur should be able to solve most cases in a few hours with no framework at all.

After Starting: Understand the Model

Consulting runs on a leverage model built around finders, minders and grinders, and understanding what is expected at the current level, along with what the next level actually looks like, orients a new hire quickly. Being a genuine go-getter matters, since capable people tend to get fought over for staffing on the best projects. Relational power, being smart, self-aware, eager and simply pleasant to work with, compounds steadily over a career. Bringing energy and clarity as a new hire, advice attributed to a well-known technology executive, sets a strong early impression.2 Every project carries genuine tradeoffs worth extracting real value from, whether that value is content, performance or learning, and there is a meaningful, documented gap between good and great consultants worth studying deliberately.

Even Legends Started Small

One well-known McKinsey leader reportedly failed to make partner on his first two attempts, and his very first project involved analyzing chicken pieces for a fast-food box lunch configuration, a genuinely humbling starting point for someone who eventually reached the top of a storied firm. The lesson generalizes cleanly: nearly everyone starts with unglamorous, granular work, and career trajectories rarely move in a straight line from day one.

Building the Habit Beyond Interview Season

None of this advice expires once an offer letter arrives. The same curiosity that carries a candidate through a case interview, structuring ambiguity cleanly, asking sharp questions, staying genuinely engaged, is exactly the muscle that gets exercised daily once staffed on a real client engagement.3 Treating interview preparation as a one-time hurdle, rather than a preview of the actual job, wastes most of the value these thirty points were meant to deliver.

The Simple Closing Advice

Consultants spend enormous amounts of time in PowerPoint and Excel, and getting genuinely comfortable with both tools early pays dividends for years. Storytelling ability, explaining complex findings simply enough that a non-expert can follow along, separates memorable work from merely competent work. And the entire enterprise ultimately comes back to delighting the client: winning referral business, making the client's team look good and helping the people on the other side of the table get promoted.

- 1Job Interview
- 2Satya Nadella
- 3Case Interview

Summary

Curiosity carries the whole journey: before the interview, it means doing real homework. During it, it means structuring cleanly and passing the airport test. After starting, it means understanding the leverage model and bringing energy every day. Good is predictable, great varies.