# Case Study Interviews

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Case Study Interviews

Case interviews are an unavoidable hurdle in most consulting recruitment processes. They are challenging and can be fun, but they also require preparation. Many great potential consultants don’t get through the process because they assume they can ‘wing it’ without preparing in advance. If you’re serious about consulting, then it is essential to know what case studies are and to practise before you go to interview.

Why do consultancies use this recruitment technique?

A case study interview goes through a process that mirrors an actual consulting project for a client:

- Clarifying the problem
- Structuring the issue(s)
- Collecting and analysing data
- Synthesis and recommendations

The 20- or 30- minute case interview goes through a similar arc, with an emphasis on clarifying and structuring the problem, and showing how you can grapple with some high level quantitative analysis (without your calculator!). The cases are often simplified versions of real client cases the consultancy may have worked on. They don’t require any prior knowledge of a particular business or industry, although good commercial awareness and common sense are both helpful.

The purpose is to watch you thinking in real-time – to see how you approach a problem, how you organise and structure your thoughts, how you handle maths on the fly, what insights you can draw, and how robustly you can defend a recommendation. They also want to watch you doing this in a pressurised environment because this mirrors life as a consultant – being put on the spot by clients during meetings and presentations.
What are they looking for in a case interview?

Your interview will be assessing not just the content of your case, but also how you handle yourself during the experience.

They will be looking for:

- **Good listening** – Being able to identify key issues amidst a deluge of facts, or trying to pick out the main question of the case is harder than you may think, especially at the beginning of the interview when you’re nervous.

- **Structured thinking** – Being systematic in breaking down a problem and thinking about solutions is a core skill being tested. You don’t need to use a specific business ‘framework’, but you do need to show that you have a structured approach.

- **Creativity and ideas** – Seeing an issue from several angles, showing flexibility in your thinking, and being able to brainstorm within a defined structure are great. Avoid unstructured brainstorming – even if your ideas are good, they need to be presented within a structured context.

- **Being at ease with numbers** – You do not have to be a mathematician to be good at case interviews. You do have to be able to do basic maths operations without a calculator, and most importantly, be happy to use numbers as part of your thinking.

- **Resilience and an appetite for case** – If the process feels like torture, this may show to the interviewer. They are looking for people who actually enjoy the ‘problem solving under pressure’ experience, so don’t crumble if you get something wrong or feel that you are losing your way (both are common experiences and not always fatal to the process).
Different types of case

One challenge in preparing for a consulting case interview is knowing which type of case will be used by the consultancy you’re interviewing with - there are several types. Most strategy consultancies use the Business Scenario case, and the guidance in this guide pertains mainly to this type. Be aware of the other assessment types you may encounter.

Business Scenario case – This case focuses on a single client problem scenario, usually described orally by the interviewer. It can last for 20-30 minutes, incorporating problem definition, data collection, quantitative analysis and recommendations. There may be handouts as the case progresses, and new information can be introduced along the way. It is a dialogue between the interviewer and the candidate. Some are led more strongly by the interviewer; others require the candidate to take the reins more actively to progress the case.

Estimation case – These were once used as a separate interview question, but are now more often incorporated into a Business Scenario case as part of the quantitative analysis. Many estimations are ‘market sizing’ cases, e.g. ‘How many women’s shoes are sold in Scotland each year?’ They often start with a population size, and then move towards an answer by deriving an equation and populating it with assumptions. This example might seem simple – figure out how many Scottish women there are; how many shoes they buy per year on average; multiply the two together.

But how can you come up with a good average? Might it be better to break down the female adult population in Scotland into different groups that have different purchasing behaviour? What criteria should you use – age, income, profession, fashion consciousness? Keep it simple – choose one criterion and about three groups – that way you won’t spend all day setting up and doing the calculation.

Brain teaser – Puzzles and brain teasers were once used more frequently, but their use has diminished in consulting interviews. This is probably because they favour people who are instantly good at puzzles (and maths), and may not favour a candidate who needs time to develop a considered view of a problem. If they are used in a recruitment process, they will be presented as a separate interview question,
without any context. Even though they are not widely used, it is worth being prepared in case you encounter them. Google ‘brainteasers and consulting’ for examples.

‘Presentation’ case – There is a class of case interview that is less of a conversational, problem solving exercise, and more of a chance to review and synthesise information and present this back to your interviewer. It is usual in these cases to be presented with a large amount of text, graphs and tables, be given a set period of time to read and analyse these by yourself (almost always not as much time as you would like). You may be asked to create some slides or flip chart pages or simply notes to organise your thoughts. The exercise may be similar to Business Scenario cases in making recommendations to solve a business problem, or it may simply be to identify the key issues of the current situation. You would present your thoughts to one or more interviewers, and this would be followed by discussion and Q&A. These cases are harder to simulate in your preparation, but reading case examples can be helpful.

Group cases – Most case interviews are one-to-one with an interviewer. However, some consultancies ask candidates to undertake a case in a group setting, working with 4-6 other candidates. In these situations, you are being assessed on two levels – for both your contribution to the content of the case, as well as your performance as a group member. The latter is similar to group exercises at assessment centres – so if you are facing one of these types of cases, read up on assessment centre advice in the Careers Service library and online.

About the maths

The kind of maths that you will encounter during a case interview is nothing beyond GCSE level. However, you will be doing it under pressure, and without the aid of a calculator. You therefore need to familiarise yourself with basic maths operations like percentages, averages, operations using large numbers (keep track of those zeros!), and estimations that require variables to be suggested. You may be asked to do an analysis with numbers you make up along the way (How many smoothies are sold in Cambridge each day?), or you may be given a graph or table with data and asked to do some calculations. Be ready either way.
Beyond simply brushing up on your basic maths operations, it is worth thinking about the way numbers tell a story in a business context. You will be using numbers to assess a situation – they are part of the diagnostic process of understanding what is happening in the case. Getting a ‘feel for the numbers’ can be both a broad brush-stroke process as well as a detailed analysis. Don’t forget the more macro approach.

Here are a few pieces of advice to help you cope with the quantitative part of the case interview:

- **Choose good numbers** – If you are doing an estimation and choosing your own numbers to work with, choose numbers that can be factored by 2, 5 or 10, which will allow for more straightforward calculations.

- **Round your numbers** – It is ok to round up or down to keep the analysis simpler. Be sure to tell your interviewer when you are doing so.

- **Embrace big numbers** – You will often be working with thousands and millions, so remind yourself how to keep track of your zeros while dividing or multiplying.

- **Do a sanity check** – Once you come to the end of analysis, think about whether your answer makes sense and verbalise this thinking. Does the answer sound too high or too low? Why?

- **Organise your calculation notes** – It is important to be clear when writing down your analysis, in case you have to revisit your numbers later in the case. If things are too messy, you’ll be lost.

- **Remember a few key population facts** – Estimations often start with population size, so memorise the population size of the UK, Europe, USA, China, India. You won’t have to know other demographic statistics, but you should be able to derive anything through sensible assumptions.
Practising is 100% more useful than simply reading

It is rare for a candidate to get through the gruelling, multi-stage consulting recruitment process without ever having done a live case before their first interview.

You will often be doing 2 cases at each interview round, with up to 4-6 cases in total. Most strategy consultancies have little else in their recruitment process once you pass the CV screen and the numerical testing, so if you don’t perform well in the case interview, you can’t ‘make it up’ with other components of the recruitment process. It’s quite simple – if you’re not good at the case, you won’t get through.

It is therefore critical that you actually practise with a partner. You can take turns being the interviewer and the interviewee. If you can find someone who has a bit more experience at it than you, this would be helpful to avoid ‘the blind leading the blind’. You can find example cases online or in our library resources to use during these practice sessions.

The Cambridge University Consulting Society runs sessions during Michaelmas where members practise with each other. You can attend our employer-led skills sessions on case interviewing, but this is often lecture style or at best a case done in groups, so won’t give you experience of doing an actual one-to-one case interview. There are also some online sources of one-to-one case practice, but it is usually better to find case partners locally. Be wary of paying for case practice online.

If you wonder why practising is so much more important than reading, then consider this: would you prepare to play a new sport (like ice hockey or basketball) by reading about how to skate or shoot a basket? No, you would just get out on the ice or the court and see how it feels. This is how you should approach your case interview preparation. After you have done enough reading, leave the security blanket of the books behind, and start trying it live.
**Top tips**

- **Listen VERY carefully** – it’s easy to miss the key question
- **Take notes** – quick schematic notes are helpful, and consultants love diagrams
- **Think about categories when mapping the problem** – organise and group the issues
- **Verbalise your thinking more than usual** – sharing your thinking out loud takes some practice
- **Articulate your assumptions** – if you are developing a hypothesis then say so
- **Speak your numbers out loud as you do the analysis** – let the interviewer hear what you’re doing
- **Read your interviewer for non-verbal cues** – watch for signs that you’re heading in the right direction and vice versa
- **Summarise mid-stream** – a nice technique to synthesise the material covered

**Things to avoid**

- **Don’t fixate on getting the ‘right’ answer** – it’s a process you are demonstrating
- **Don’t make it a monologue** – make it a conversation
- **Don’t bombard your interviewer with a random series of questions** – be structured and explain why you’re asking
- **Don’t force-fit a ‘framework’** – it’s fine to create our own structure
• Don’t do all the numbers in your head – you can also write things down
• Don’t jump to the first solution that comes into your head – show you can evaluate alternatives
• Don’t fall apart – don’t worry about being corrected or redirected provided you take it in your stride

Summary of what you can do to prepare

1) Understand what a case interview is by doing some initial reading
2) Go to a few of the employer-led skills sessions on case interviews organised by the Careers Service
3) Find a source of live practice – friends, societies, online resources
4) Get comfortable with numbers – get used to ‘back of the envelope’ calculations without a calculator or spreadsheet
5) Try problem mapping using hypothesis trees or pyramid principle outlining
6) Improve your commercial awareness by reading the business press
7) Practice, practice, practice!
Resources for Consulting Case Interviews

Careers Service books and resources:
We have numerous books on case interviewing, and all are available for overnight loan. These include:

- Ace Your Case: Mastering the Case Interview by WetFeet
- Case in Point: Complete Case Interview Preparation by Marc Cosentino
- Case Interview Secrets by Victor Cheng
- Case Interview Success by Tom Rochtus
- Case Interviews for Beginners by Stephen Pigeon
- Interview Math by Lewis C. Lin
- Embrace the Case Interview by Brad Schiller
- Vault Guide to the Case Interview from Vault Career Library

View the full range of books online at www.librarycat.org/lib/Camcareerslib

Vault Career Inside Library – We subscribe to the downloadable guides on your behalf. Get them via the Careers website. Look out for:

- Vault Guide to the Case Interview
- Vault Case Interview Practice Guide 2: More Case Interviews

Both are available to download free at www.careers.cam.ac.uk/library/vault.asp
**Consulting firms’ websites** – Google the obvious consultancies along with ‘case interviews’. Remember that not all consultancies use the same type of case interview, so do your research.

**Information on structured thinking techniques** – Google ‘issues trees’, ‘logic trees’ or ‘pyramid principle’ to get ideas of how to apply structure to problem solving.

**YouTube** – Watching a few videos to get a feel for what a case interview looks like can be very helpful. Victor Cheng has some decent Introduction to Case Studies videos that can be worth watching.

**Forums and blogs** – Don’t waste too much time here, but some decent and comprehensive advice at: http://www.quora.com/What-are-the-best-ways-to-prepare-for-interviews-with-top-tier-management-consulting-firms

**Commercial resources with some free material** –

These sources are either free, or have free material alongside information you have to pay for. **Be cautious about paying** for access to material or advice – this can be expensive and there is enough free material out there.

- www.caseinterview.com
- www.casequestions.com
- www.consultingcase101.com
- www.masterthecase.com
- www.mbacase.com
- www.myconsultingcoach.com
- www.preplounge.com
- www.vocaprep.com
Numeracy and numerical reasoning

- Careers Service online practice material – We subscribe to Job Test Prep, a supplier of a range of pre-interview tests including numerical tests – none of these are exactly like a case interview, but helpful when revising your maths. Find these under ‘psychometric tests’ on our website.

- *Interview Math* – find this in the Careers Service library

Sources of case partners for practice

Use your friends – Try to link up with other people targeting consulting and take it in turns to do cases. You can learn as much being the interviewer as the interviewee.

- CU Consulting Society – They help members get together to practise cases, so connect with them once term begins.

- Preplounge – Basic service lets you see others who want to practise cases and set up meetings.

- My Consulting Coach – They offer a ‘meeting board’ to find case partners. Fully international so be aware of time differences.