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How to ace the case interview

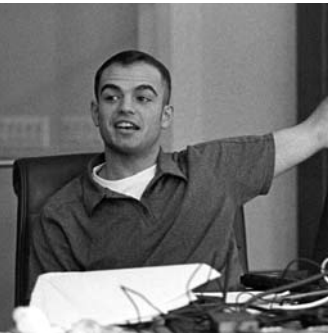


Up-front planning

The case interview is only one dimension of the recruiting process, but it is typically the part that raises the most anxiety. We hope this guide will help you to prepare for the case so that you can be confident and enjoy the interview.

You must have the ability to:

- Break a complex problem into its component parts
- Apply business judgment to identify value
- Generate a creative range of solutions to a problem's component parts
- Identify the most likely/attractive solutions through logical reasoning
- Generate thoughtful questions and ask for clarification of case data, as necessary
- Translate analysis into actionable recommendations
- Effectively communicate solutions in a concise and persuasive manner



Preparation:

A case study consists of a business problem taken from a real-life business situation, or an example drawn from your resume. It focuses on your analytic approach to the problem, rather than specific business knowledge.

First and foremost, you can succeed in a case interview without specific industry experience. Don't panic if the case you are given is based on an industry with which you are unfamiliar. Remember, we are interested in how you analyze the problem, not how much you know about the industry.

Practicing for the case interview is helpful. Practice by constructing examples from your resume and walking through steps 1–5. Finally, the answers mentioned demonstrate only one way to respond to the case; there is no single standard, best answer.

"Bain consultants learn how to make companies more valuable by delivering real results. We are looking for people who can combine intelligence, logic and creativity with practicality. Our entire interview process seeks to identify people who have great potential in these areas."

—Steve Ellis,
Worldwide Managing Director

"I find that a lot of the people that I interview use the 'fire hose' approach: they shoot a million facts and ideas at me without any organization or prioritization. A good candidate makes a few key points, but makes them very well."

—Lee Delaney, Partner

"I'm not necessarily expecting the 'right' answer. In practice, there often isn't just one solution. I'm most interested in hearing how the candidates think, whether they are logical in their approach to breaking down a problem. I look for eagerness to understand the issues and to focus on value."

—Molly Kerr, Manager

Interview tips

- Don't get thrown by the interviewer's questions. The interviewer is your ally and uses questions to get a better understanding of your thought process—not to stump you.
- Be concise. If asked for the top two issues, confine your response to two items.
- Provide logical backup for your answers. Be sure to explain what case facts led you to a conclusion, and how you reasoned from those facts to your conclusion.
- Don't be afraid to ask clarifying questions. If you don't understand the case facts, it will be tough to ace the interview.
- Relax and have fun. You should learn a lot about yourself through the case interview process.
- Good luck!



The case interview

The objective of the interviewer is to take the candidate through a series of steps and see how (s)he can tackle the various levels. The steps can range from identifying a critical issue, to breaking a problem into component parts, to finally identifying one or more solutions.

Step 1: Big picture thinking

The interviewer lays out the facts and asks the candidate to articulate the critical issues facing the business. “Big picture thinking” requires a focus on the key issues and not a “laundry list” of every problem facing the business. The interviewer then asks why the candidate chose the answer (s)he did.

Question:

You have just been promoted to be the President of the University you are currently attending. What do you think the biggest challenge facing you might be?

A good answer:

The University has several powerful constituencies—undergraduates, graduate students, professors, alumni, government and community. However, the University doesn’t have unlimited resources, and therefore it must prioritize where it spends its dollars. Long-term success for the University is driven by figuring out what the most important areas are, and at the same time ensuring that all constituents feel they are being treated fairly.

Step 2: Problem-solving logic

The interviewer asks the candidate to lay out all the elements of the problem: What factors should be considered?

Question:

How should you prioritize your limited resources?

A good answer:

Think about what drives the University’s success—reputation, economics, quality of students, quality of research. Understand what “focusing resources” really gets you. Each factor has a different set of implications/impact.

Step 3: Focus on value

The interviewer then lets the candidate choose which avenues to pursue, leaving the discussion open-ended: without suggesting focus, the interviewer determines if the candidate is instinctive about which path to choose and then asks why the candidate selected this path.

Question:

Which opportunity do you think will have the biggest impact?

A good answer:

Reputation. If you have a good reputation it can influence other areas. Reputation can be a long-term asset. Also, it is probably the hardest to fix once it is broken.

Step 4: Depth and breadth—business intuition

After getting the recruit to focus on a key area, the interviewer asks the candidate some probing questions about how (s)he would analyze that area.

Question:

Okay, so how would you improve the University's reputation?

A good answer:

I would focus on improvement in two areas:

- Promote activities that build reputation
- Eliminate factors that negatively impact reputation

Discussion then continues down both of these paths with specific improvement ideas.

Step 5: Results orientation

The interviewer returns to a key area of discussion, asking the candidate how (s)he would implement his/her solution. The interviewer could pose a tricky or hostile client situation and ask how the candidate would get results in a difficult environment.

Question:

Well, those seem like pretty sound strategies. How exactly would you implement those ideas?

A good answer:

We will need to start with a PR blitz, so I would encourage several articles to be written about "The New University" in the popular press. Also, I would heighten the pressure on professors to publish articles....(The answer continues with other implementation ideas).

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