

# Case Interview Guide



Career Services  
College of Business Administration  
University of Pittsburgh

<http://www.cba.pitt.edu/careers>

# Overview

Overview	3
Background to Case Questions	4-5
Styles of Case Interviews	5
Companies and Sample Cases	6
Tips from Past Pitt Students	7
Case Preparation – Case Commandments	8-9
Case Interview Tips	9-10
Frameworks and Consulting Case Topics	11
Example Business Frameworks	11-12
Group Case Interviews	13
Books	13
Online Resources	13

# Overview

**Case interviews are used to assess a candidate's thought process and analytical skills and are not focused on the answer arrived at by the candidate.** Case interviews have started to edge into various industries and functions over the years, including research, marketing, consumer product management and investment banking. The interview process is purposely designed to increase the pressure most people feel during a traditional interview by a few notches.

Organizations are trying to pick the best and the brightest talent. Individuals often have to work with the senior executives of a corporation and want to be effective leaders. This includes the ability to think on their feet, analyze problems, develop creative solutions, and be able to support their recommendations. Case interviews are one way to determine which candidates are up to the task.

Management consulting companies have used case studies to assess talent for decades. The consulting industry usually follows industry specific interview protocol. Recruiting for entry-level consultant positions typically begins in the fall. The process includes a case interview in which the candidate is asked to analyze a problem and provide a solution based on the information given. Depending on the organization, various backgrounds of individuals are recruited from the undergraduate, masters, and PhD levels. In addition, certain universities have established strong relationships with organizations for on-campus recruiting.

"As consultants leave consulting and they go off and do other things, they take this form of interviewing with them," says Marc Cosentino, president of CaseQuestions.com and author of Case in Point: Complete Case Interview Preparation. He adds the case interview provides a glimpse into the way a job candidate thinks. "It gives [employers] a chance to see how your mind works, how your thought process and your logic work, how you structure a problem, how you quantify things, how well you can articulate your ideas under pressure," explains Cosentino, former associate director of career services at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

***Case interviews are broad, two-way discussions, rather than one-way tests and there is no perfect answer. You will be assessed more on how you go about dealing with the problem, rather than on the specific answers you come up with.***

Source: McKinsey & Company Website

***Case interviews – they are about stacking up your skills against a real business challenge. You'll be asked to demonstrate your problem-solving skills, your analytical ability, and your strategic and logical thinking. These case interviews also help us assess your common sense, creativity, and comfort with ambiguity. At the same time, you'll gain insight into our approach because these cases represent real client projects.***

Source: Deloitte Consulting Website

# Background to Case Questions

*From Casequestions.com – February 2011*

## **What is a case question?**

A case question is a fun, interactive interviewing tool used to evaluate the multi-dimensional aspects of a candidate. Individuals are presented with information and asked to analyze, synthesize, and articulate a solution.

## **What is the purpose of the case question?**

Interviewers use case questions to see how well candidates listen, how they think, the logic behind their thoughts, and how well they can articulate their thoughts under pressure. Consulting firms also ask case questions to gauge self-confidence, discover the candidate's personality, and to see if problem solving genuinely intrigues them.

## **What's the objective of a case question?**

The objective is not to determine if the interviewee got the "right answer," but rather to evaluate the process the candidate used to structure a competent approach to derive a solution.

## **What are firms testing for when asking case questions?**

They ask case questions to test the candidate's ability to:

- analyze information
- sort through an excess of data and identify main points
- think logically, structure their thought process and organize their answer
- maintain poise and clearly communicate under pressure
- relay personality and characteristics that are considered a good "fit" with the company

## **What are firms looking for during the interview?**

They are looking to see if candidates are:

- relaxed, confident, and mature
- engaging and enthusiastic
- good listeners
- able to determine what is truly relevant
- asking insightful and probing questions
- organizing the information effectively and developing a logical framework for analysis
- stating assumptions clearly
- approaching the case creatively
- comfortable discussing the multifunctional aspects of the case
- trying to quantify their response at every opportunity
- displaying both business sense and common sense
- exhibiting strong social and presentation skill

## **Are all cases verbal or do some firms ask written cases?**

While most cases are given verbally, some firms give a written case. The candidate is given 30 to 45 minutes to read the case and make notes. S/he is then questioned about the case. Sometimes this is done one on one, other times the candidate is brought in as part of a group to solve the case. This is done to see how well a

candidate can work as part of a team with strangers. Is the candidate trying to dominate the interview or is she building on what another candidate said? Is s/he communicating laterally as well as vertically?

### **How is a first round consulting interview structured?**

While it varies from firm to firm most first rounds are two back-to-back 45 minute interviews. In the first of the two, the interviewer spends about 15 minutes asking questions like:

- why consulting?
- why our firm?
- how are your quantitative skills?
- give me examples of your leadership experience
- tell me about a time you worked together as part of a team to reach a common goal
- have you ever failed at anything?

These questions are asked to gauge leadership, drive, and enthusiasm, as well as to determine the candidate's true interest in and commitment to consulting.

More and more now, firms are incorporating ways to test candidate's quantitative skills. Some interviews include a written exam, though many still rely on cases to help determine an individual's quantitative capability. Most important, the math component is added to determine how a candidate processes information under pressure.

Next comes the case question, which can take up 10 to 15 minutes. Here they are testing poise, analytical, and communication skills.

Finally, the last couple of minutes are for the candidate's questions. They want to see if the individual has done their homework and whether they can ask intelligent questions.

In the second of the two interviews, the recruiter may ask one or two questions about the candidate, but the majority of the time will be taken up with a bigger case. Again, the candidate may have time to ask a couple of questions, so it is important that the candidate prepare questions ahead of time.

## **Styles of Case Interviews**

*From "Ace the Case Interview" by Thad Peterson, Monster Staff Writer – February 2011*

In a case interview, the interviewer presents information about a company, as well as a problem or dilemma the company is facing. The case can be presented orally or on paper. The company and the issues addressed can be real-world examples or imaginary. The interviewee comes up with answers or suggestions for the company.

Michael Steiner, who has conducted case interviews for a leading management consultant company for years, cites a variety of case-interview styles:

- **Open-Ended Cases:** The interviewer gives you a sentence or two of information, and then expects you to run with only that information and your own assumptions.
- **More Structured Cases:** The interviewer gives you information, and then proceeds to guide you through the problem-solving process.
- **Paper-Driven Cases:** You're handed a "deck" of information, and the interviewer sometimes leaves the room while you pore over the text and graphs contained in the deck. You then prepare a brief analysis, presenting it when the interviewer returns.

# Companies and Sample Cases

Below is a listing of companies who conduct case interviews including their recruiting website and online case resources which may include sample cases.

**Bain & Co.** - <http://www.bain.com>

- Recruiting Website: <http://www.joinbain.com/apply-to-bain/recruiting-process/undergraduate.asp>
- Online Case Resources/Sample Cases: <http://www.joinbain.com/apply-to-bain/interview-preparation/default.asp>; <http://www.bain.com/bainweb/pdfs/acethecase.pdf>

The logo for Bain & Company, featuring the text "BAIN & COMPANY" in white capital letters on a red rectangular background.

**Boston Consulting Group** – <http://www.bcg.com>

- Recruiting Website: [http://www.bcg.com/join\\_bcg/interview\\_prep/process/default.aspx](http://www.bcg.com/join_bcg/interview_prep/process/default.aspx)
- Online Case Resources/Sample Cases: [http://www.bcg.com/join\\_bcg/interview\\_prep/tips/default.aspx](http://www.bcg.com/join_bcg/interview_prep/tips/default.aspx)

The logo for Boston Consulting Group (BCG), featuring the letters "BCG" in a large, green, serif font.

THE BOSTON CONSULTING GROUP

**Deloitte Consulting** – <http://www.deloitte.com>

- Recruiting Website: <http://careers.deloitte.com/united-states/students/studentgrad.aspx>
- Online Case Resources/Sample Cases: [http://careers.deloitte.com/united-states/students/csc\\_general.aspx?CountryContentID=15862](http://careers.deloitte.com/united-states/students/csc_general.aspx?CountryContentID=15862)

The logo for Deloitte, featuring the word "Deloitte" in a large, dark blue, sans-serif font with a small blue dot at the end.

**PriceWaterhouseCoopers / PRTM Management Consulting** - <http://www.prtm.com/>

- Recruiting Website: <http://www.pwc.com/us/en/careers/pwctv/index.jhtml>



**McKinsey & Company** – <http://www.mckinsey.com>

- Recruiting Website: [http://www.mckinsey.com/careers/is\\_mckinsey\\_right\\_for\\_me/backgrounds\\_like\\_yours/bachelors\\_degree.aspx](http://www.mckinsey.com/careers/is_mckinsey_right_for_me/backgrounds_like_yours/bachelors_degree.aspx)
- Online Case Resources/Sample Cases: [http://www.mckinsey.com/careers/how\\_do\\_i\\_apply/how\\_to\\_do\\_well\\_in\\_the\\_interview/case\\_interview.aspx](http://www.mckinsey.com/careers/how_do_i_apply/how_to_do_well_in_the_interview/case_interview.aspx)

The logo for McKinsey & Company, featuring the text "McKinsey&Company" in white capital letters on a dark blue rectangular background.

**Novantas** – <http://www.novantas.com>

- Recruiting Website: [http://www.novantas.com/careers\\_process.php](http://www.novantas.com/careers_process.php)
- Online Case Resources/Sample Cases: [http://www.novantas.com/careers\\_cases.php](http://www.novantas.com/careers_cases.php)

The logo for Novantas, featuring the word "NOVANTAS" in a bold, black, sans-serif font with a yellow circle around the letter "O".

**Oliver Wyman** – <http://www.oliverwyman.com>

- Recruiting Website: <http://www.oliverwyman.com/ow/careers.htm>
- Online Case Resources/Sample Cases: <http://www.oliverwyman.com/careers/19.htm>

The logo for Oliver Wyman, featuring the text "OLIVER WYMAN" in a bold, dark blue, sans-serif font.

# Tips from Past Pitt Students

*From a 2010 CBA Junior Student Interning in Deloitte Consulting's Human Capital practice:*

- “Definitely get a copy of the book *Case in Point* by Marc Cosentino. This book gives terrific advice on how to approach a case interview and provides many different case examples. While you are reading the book, do not panic (easier said than done)! Try to use the book as a framework rather than attempting to memorize the details.”
- “Look at the website for the organization with which you are interviewing and see if there are case examples online. Many consulting companies have interactive websites that allow you to analyze a hypothetical fact pattern and then provide the “preferred” analysis of the facts. The examples are typically very helpful!”
- “Try to get a good night’s sleep the night before. Sometimes difficult to accomplish while trying to review *Case in Point* one last time but definitely desirable!”
- “Realize that every other candidate is in the same position that you are and that case interviews are likely to be nervous for everyone.”
- “Try to stay calm. Think big picture and know that you will survive. Once you start, have faith in yourself and just keep going. Don’t judge your answers as you speak.”

*From a 2008 CBA Alumnae Employed Full-Time at Deloitte Consulting:*

- “I interviewed with two consulting firms, so I have gone through two of them. I went into the first one unprepared because I found out about my first interview about a week before, so I had very little time to prepare...and it didn’t go well. From that experience, I learned that preparation is essential for any case interview, and there are many ways to prepare.”
- “To prep for my second interview, I worked with some CBA professors. I reviewed some online guides to case interviews and utilized the case materials on the firm for whom I was interviewing’s website.”
- “Students should prepare by first reviewing any case materials on the firm’s website, if they have any, because it will give students a feel for the nature of the cases they may be asked as well as the answers the firm expects from the candidate. Additionally, practicing with someone, e.g., a professor, a peer, or someone one knows in the industry is invaluable, because the interviewer judges not only on the quality of the answers, but the candidate’s comfort level, logical flow of questions, and ability to think on their feet.”
- “During the interview itself, it is very important for candidates to not be afraid to ask as many clarifying questions as they need to and to take notes. The interviewers do pay attention to this and consider it a positive behavior. Interviewers also expect the students’ question and answer flow to be logical, and in some cases, the logical nature of a students’ answers is just as (or more) important as the content of the students’ answers. For example, when Deloitte interviews for Business Technology Analysts (BTAs) at Pitt, the cases used in our interviews do have a technical nature to them since the BTA position is technical. However, we interview students like myself with little technical background, and for CBA students like me, the expectation is not that the students give extremely technical answers, but rather that they display some sort of technical knowledge and strength in logical thinking/thinking quickly on their feet.”

# Case Preparation – Case Commandments

From *Casequestions.com* – February 2011

These Commandments are the result of years of research. Mr. Cosentino, author of “Case in Point”, has interviewed recruiters, consultants, and partners and debriefed hundreds of Harvard students.

## 1. Listen to the Question

Listening is the most important skill a consultant has. The case isn't about you or the consultant. It's about the client. What are they really asking for? Pay particular attention to the last sentence – one word can change the entire case.

## 2. Take Notes

Taking notes during the case interview allows you to check back with the facts of the case. As someone once said, "The palest ink is stronger than the best memory." If you blank out, all the information is right in front of you.

## 3. Summarize the Question

After you are given the question, take a moment to summarize the highlights out loud:

- It shows the interviewer that you listened
- It allows you to hear the information again
- It keeps you from answering the wrong question
- It fills the otherwise awkward pause when you're trying to think of something intelligent to say

## 4. Verify the Objective(s)

Professional consultants always ask their clients to verify their objective(s). Even if the objectives seem obvious, there could be an additional underlying objective. When the objective seems apparent, phrase the questions differently: "One objective is to increase sales. Are there any other objectives I should know about?"

## 5. Ask Clarifying Questions

You ask questions for three main reasons:

- To get additional information that will help you identify and label the question
- To demonstrate to the interviewer that you are not shy about asking probing questions under difficult circumstances (something you'll be doing on a regular basis as a consultant)
- To turn the question into a conversation. Nothing turns an interviewer off quicker than a five-minute monologue.

## 6. Organize Your Answer

Identify and label your case, then lay out your structure. This is the hardest part of a case—and the most crucial. It drives your case and is often the major reason behind whether you get called back.

*A good case interview should be an enjoyable and thoughtful discussion of business issues and problem-solving techniques. We are not looking for a “right answer” or asking you to spit back memorized business terms, current events or well-known frameworks. Rather, we hope to see a good dose of problem-solving skills, creativity and common sense.*

Source: Bain & Company website



7. **Hold that Thought for "One Alligator"**

The interviewer wants you to think out loud, but think before you speak. If you make a statement that is way off-base in an interview, the interviewer will wonder if s/he can trust you in front of a client.

8. **Manage Your Time**

Your answer should be as linear as possible. Don't get bogged down in the details. Answer from a macro-level and move the answer forward. Stay focused on the original question.

9. **By the Numbers**

If possible, try to work numbers into your answer. Demonstrate that you think quantitatively and that you are comfortable with numbers.

10. **Be Coachable**

Listen to the interviewer's feedback. Is s/he trying to guide you back on track? Pay attention to his/her body language. Are you boring or is s/he enthralled?

11. **Be Creative and Brainstorm**

Consulting firms like liberal arts candidates with intellectual curiosity that can "think outside the box" and offer up a new and interesting perspective.

12. **Exude Enthusiasm and a Positive Attitude**

Recruiters want people who are excited by problem solving and can carry that enthusiasm throughout the entire interview.

13. **Bring Closure and Summarize**

Create a sense of closure by summarizing the case. Review your findings, restate your suggestions, and make recommendations.

## Case Interview Tips

*From Caseinterviews.com – February 2011*

The following tips are by Marc Cosentino, the author of the book *Case In Point*, a popular guide to case interviews. We strongly recommend it if you're new to case interviews!

- **This is more of a story than a tip.** A student of mine studied hard for his case question interview; however, when the time came, he froze. He just couldn't think of how to begin. So he looked at the interviewer and said, "To be honest with you, I've already heard this question and feel that it wouldn't be fair for me to answer it." The interviewer thanked him for his honesty and then gave him another question, which he easily nailed.
- **Take graph paper with you into the interview.** It helps you organize your thoughts, keeps the numbers lined up when you add or multiply and reminds you to try to graph part of your answer.
- **Practice your basic math, particularly multiplication and percentages.** Almost all recruiters will not let you take a calculator into the interview. Most students make simple math mistakes like being off by a zero or two.

- **Ask for numbers.** If the numbers aren't an important part of the case, then interviewers will more than likely tell you not to focus on them.
- **Prioritize issues.** There may be several issues to be addressed in order to reach a conclusion. Prioritize and then address the issues one at a time, especially since your interviewer may not expect you to get through all of them in the allotted time.
- **Turn the interview into a conversation.** A five minute monologue will do more to hurt your chances than any other mistake. Remember, you ask questions not only to get additional information, but to draw the interviewer into the case with you.
- **Listen to the question, write it down; then repeat it to the interviewer.** Candidates are always answering the wrong questions because they don't take the time to identify what the interviewer is really asking.
- **Think before you answer.** I see it all the time where people can't give me the answer fast enough. Slow down. Don't jump right off the mark and give the first answer that pops into your head. Take your time and analyze the information.
- **Lost? Stop and summarize.** If you get lost somewhere during your answer, the first thing to do is to stop and summarize what you have done so far. This will lift you out of the puzzling web of details and hopefully show you a new path to take. If this doesn't work, then ask the interviewer for some guidance.
- **Written cases.** While most cases are given verbally, some firms actually give a written case. The candidate is given 15 to 20 minutes to read the case and make notes. S/he is then questioned about the case. Sometimes this is done one on one, but other times the candidate is brought in as part of a group to solve the case. This is done to see how well a candidate can work as part of a team with strangers. Is the candidate trying to dominate the interview or are they building on what another candidate said? Are they communicating laterally as well as vertically?

### ***Practice, Practice, Practice***

It is important to understand that the single most important factor in achieving success with case interview questions is to *practice, practice, practice*. So, if you have a case interview coming up, finish reading this guide and the other references; then get to work on live practice as soon as possible.

#### ***Practice Tips:***

- Work through many types of case questions, identify your weak areas, and focus your efforts on improving those skills.
- Set aside scheduled time to practice.
- Practice with your friends, classmates, and alumni in consulting.
- Set up a practice interview with CBA Career Services.
- Participate in case competitions.

# Frameworks and Consulting Case Topics

An understanding of common business frameworks is integral to working through a case successfully. However, two case interview preparation experts, David Ohrvall with MBACASE and Marc Cosentino with Casequestions.com, caution against overuse or misuse of frameworks.

The bottom line is, it is important to be familiar with business frameworks, but relying too heavily on one framework may cause you to ignore critical issues. Avoid forcing a framework onto a problem. Instead, take a step back and make sure you identify the key issues, and then begin drawing upon frameworks to establish a structure for answering the question.

Sample Consulting Topics:

- Market Sizing
- Reduce Costs
- Industry Analysis
- Increase Profitability
- Pricing and Valuation
- New Market Entry
- Investment Decisions
- Mergers and Acquisitions (M&A)
- Business Turnaround
- Organizational Behavior
- Product Development and Launch
- Government/Non Profit Strategy

## Example Business Frameworks

- **3 C's (Company, Customer, Competition)** - A framework for analysis that includes understanding the internal operations and strategy of a company, the customers and demand for the product, and competition in existing and new markets.
- **4 P's (Product, Price, Promotion, Place)** - A framework used to analyze marketing initiatives and new product launches. Product refers to the characteristics of the item being sold. Price refers to the amount it is sold for. Promotion refers to the strategy of how it is sold (PR, Marketing, etc.). Place refers to the channels through which it is sold and how it is positioned.
- **Cost vs. Benefit** - A simple framework that allows you to divide your analysis of a business case between the costs that will be incurred by a specific action (physical costs, reputation and brand, etc.) as well as the benefits that will result from the action (efficiency, revenues, strengthening of brand, building relationships, etc.)
- **Fixed vs. Variable Costs** - Costs can be split up between those that stay constant, regardless of a company's activity (fixed costs) and those that vary based on the amount of sales (variable costs). An example of a fixed cost is rent. An example of a variable cost is raw materials.
- **Internal vs. External** - A framework that analyzes a business case from internal perspective (culture of organization, core competencies, products, etc.) and the external perspective of the organization. (barriers to entry, capacity of industry, competition, etc.)

- **McKinsey 7-S Model** - Strategy (firm's goals), Structure (organizational form that best suits firm's goals), Staffing (what type of staff does firm require), Style (management style), Skills (what skills do employees need), Systems (what measurement systems are needed), Shared Valued (firms' culture).
- **Porter's Five Forces** - Developed by HBS professor Michael Porter, this is a framework to analyze an industry. The five forces are Power of Suppliers, Power of Buyers, Substitutes, Rivalry (among firms), and Barriers to Entry.
- **Profitability** - Profit is defined as Revenues - Costs. To analyze a profitability scenario you can analyze revenues (quantity \* price) and costs (fixed vs. variable costs discussed above). To fully understand profitability, study an accounting income statement.
- **STP (Segmenting, Targeting, Positioning)** - A framework for finding the correct market for a product or service. Segmenting refers to identifying the distinctions between customers. Targeting refers to identifying the target group. Positioning refers to the strategy of appealing to this target group.
- **Supply vs. Demand** - Economic analysis which aims to forecast the price of a good or service based on the intersection of supply and demand curves. Supply analysis looks at production of goods and services to see how much is available for the market. Demand analysis looks at consumers' desire for a good or service and how much they are willing to pay for it.
- **SWOT** - A simple presentation framework that allows you to pinpoint an organizations Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats
- **Value Chain/Supply Chain Analysis** - A framework for understanding the flow of goods and money in an industry. Components include Inbound Logistics, Production Logistics, Outbound Logistics, Sales and Marketing, Service.
- **Other Frameworks** - Macroeconomic Frameworks, Political Frameworks – (non profit motivating organizations), Organizational Change Frameworks, Produce Life Cycle, System Development Life Cycle.

***A framework is a structure that helps you organize your thoughts and analyze the case in a logical manner. Often, however, you have to cut and paste from a number of frameworks in order to answer any single case question. ...the difference between a framework and a system is that a framework is really a tool, while a system is a process. Instead of memorizing seven individual frameworks and then trying to decide which one(s) to apply, you learn the system, which already has the tools built in.***

Source: Marc Cosentino - The Ivy Case System from Case in Point: Case Interview Preparation

***Solving complex business problems is what we do every day. If you're excited about working through a case, you'll probably enjoy working as a consultant.***

Source: Oliver Weyman website

# Group Case Interviews

From Vault.com

Another variation on the case interview that is becoming more popular is the group case interview, where candidates are grouped together and told to solve a case cooperatively. Insiders are unsure whether the increased incidence of group interviews reveals a renewed emphasis on teamwork and fit, or simply a faster way to sift through applicant pools. In a group interview, between two and five candidates are given a case and asked to present their findings in one hour. A few consultants from the firm remain with the candidates to silently observe their progress.

One important thing to remember is that the group interview is not a zero sum game. "Everyone may get an offer, or no one may get an offer," confirms one consultant. The key with group case interviews is to show your keen organizational and teamwork abilities. Don't bully your fellow candidates, but don't sit back and quietly do as you're told. One recent group case interviewee suggests "Present your thoughts on how to divide the analysis. Listen to what others have to say. If you disagree with their thoughts or estimates, say so, but never be denigrating or rude. Look like you're having a good time. Otherwise, the analysis is pretty similar to a regular case."

## Books

- **Case in Point: Case Interview Preparation, 10<sup>TH</sup> Anniversary Edition**, (Marc P. Cosentino, 2009).
  - <http://www.casequestions.com>
- **Crack the Case: How to Conquer Your Case Interviews**, (David Ohrvall, 2005).
  - <http://www.mbacase.com>
- **Management Consulting: A Complete Guide to the Industry**, (Sugata Biswas and Daryl Twitchell 2002) - Includes 100 case interview questions. Chapter 6: Mastering the Case Interview.
  - <http://www.insideconsulting.com/Case%20Interviews.htm>
- **Vault Guide to the Case Interview**, (Mark Asher et al., 2007).
  - [http://www.vault.com/wps/portal/usa/store/bookdetail?item\\_no=848](http://www.vault.com/wps/portal/usa/store/bookdetail?item_no=848)

## Online Resources

- **Ace Your Case II: Mastering the Case Interview** by Wetfeet – <http://www.cba.pitt.edu/careers/>
  - Includes sample case questions, tips on how to nail your interview, detailed explanations of case types, and the insiders scoop
- **Consulting Case 101** - <http://www.consultingcase101.com>
  - Forum with user submitted case questions and company interviews.