CONSULTING CAREERS
Consulting is often described as challenging, fast-paced, stimulating, and fun.

Consultants who prosper early in the business use their initiative and their analytical, critical-thinking, and problem-solving skills. As their careers progress toward relationship-management and partnership, the need for excellence in creativity, sociability, communication, and leadership assumes greater importance.

Consultants must bring value to their clients by achieving a goal that their companies cannot do on their own:
- Solving an unusual problem
- Giving an objective perspective to an internal company controversy
- Managing change inside an organization where no internal leadership exists
- Providing expertise on an as-needed basis
- Offering state-of-the-art thinking about critical elements of management.

Consultants must bring value to their clients through professional standards:
- Being objective and apolitical
- Having a thorough knowledge of the subject’s problem
- Knowing the industry of the client
- Bringing creative thinking into solutions
- Adhering to the highest degree of confidential, honest, and ethical behavior.

Most hiring is by function and by customer group or industry. The largest specialization is MIS, the second is Compensation and Benefits, and the third is Management/Strategy Consulting. Most firms offer problem-solution and solution-implementation.

Some may view consulting as a way to try out a variety of work experiences in different industries and companies. Professionals say this method is not a time or cost-effective way to do your career research: many firms do not offer this flexibility and, even if you have the experience, your price tag may become too expensive for your targeted industry.

Others may think consulting is the path to management or entrepreneurial enterprises. Experienced professionals say these hopes may not lead to desired ends; however, they do suggest that if general management is your goal, look for internal consulting positions.

Choose consulting if your personality, interests, and skills are a good match for the job and you will find enjoyment from the work.

TYPICAL DESCRIPTIONS OF ENTRY-LEVEL ROLES IN CONSULTING MANAGEMENT

Undergraduates or those with graduate degrees but little or no relevant work experience:
- Research and interpret data
- Build computer models
- Learn industries and consulting methodologies
- And write reports and presentations.
Those with graduate degrees and solid work experience:

- Lead work sessions
- Design and conduct research
- Manage projects
- Maintain client relationships
- Mentor juniors
- Lead formal presentations
- And recruit.

QUALIFICATIONS FOR CONSULTING

Do you fit the consulting mold, whether in high tech, in strategy, or in financial investing?

What do you offer beyond technical expertise and content knowledge-- measured by the reputation of your college and your program, by your grades, and by standardized test scores?

What value-added skills do you bring to the hiring organization?

What can you write or say to prove to the recruiter that you fit both the consulting profession and the culture of the organization?

Consulting organizations demand professionals who are:

- Outgoing, enthusiastic, energetic, bright, articulate, and competitive with professional oral and written communication skills
- Conceptual, literate, and numerate with understanding of technological capabilities
- Able to handle multiple projects with fast cycles without sacrificing detail and the search for facts
- Able to understand the learning process, to manage constant skill-set changes, and to maintain strong core competencies
- Able to deal with ambiguity and to work to effective solutions when no established methodologies for current problems exist, especially in emerging technologies
- Able to operate with confidence on 60% of information and know how to make decisions: "consultants are a dime-a-dozen who can manage during times of stability and profitability"
- Emotionally intelligent and resilient
- Able to figure out "the lay of the land" and that "no one will take care of you"
- Able to progress from "me-centric to we-centric (team) to customer-centric"
- Able and willing to handle new business fast
- Practical with a "roll-up-sleeves" attitude and able to get things done
- Able to handle intense 12-14 hour days for seven-day weeks with time and stress management
- Able to develop and maintain stamina within a difficult and demanding lifestyle, especially the grueling ritual of travel
- Excellent with client-interaction skills and able to work equally well with the CEO and the worker on the floor
- Able to work with those from all cultures and to have the temperament and frame of mind to both understand the context of any environment and appreciate the specific problems of clients
- Excited by the virtues of global interconnectedness as a powerful arena for change.

GENERAL INTERVIEWING

A typical sequence in securing a consulting position requires three-to-four rounds of interviews. The first rounds ascertain your problem-solving abilities while the latter rounds focus on personality and fit.
For your first interview:

- Schedule yourself among the first or last batches of candidates because the interviewers remember these people best—but do not be the first appointment as the interviewer is too critical and sharp.
- Be early by 15 minutes—lateness is an immediate rejection.
- Be poised, professional, knowledgeable, and mature—interviewers want to know how you will be with senior management and handle clients.
- Be able to speak about yourself in confident, positive terms.
- Show your enthusiasm and knowledge about the company—do your research, using all resources including your network:
  - Does the company specialize along functional, industry, or geographic lines?
  - What is the culture of the firm or office, its personality and values?
  - What kinds of problems does the company work on?
  - Does the firm participate in implementation?
  - Are new consultants directed toward specialization or generalization?
  - What is the role of a new consultant?
  - Does the firm encourage consulting competencies and expertise?
  - What is the firm’s commitment to training programs and professional development?
- Show a genuine passion for consulting work. Your answers should reflect your intelligence, curiosity, and creativity, rather than false attempts to impress the interviewer.
- Project a winning, and, yes, fun, personality—you will be a team-member spending long hours together.
- Show that you have high energy and stamina.
- Prepare for the questions you can anticipate but do not be over-rehearsed. Practice by conducting informational interviews with people in the industry to increase your knowledge and your self-assurance. Visit website devoted to job-search issues, many of which specialize in consulting careers.
- Prove your logic and analytical skills, the basic tools of successful consultants.
- Have an interview agenda, one, which will make you stand out from other candidates, and which shows how you fit this specific firm.
- Remember that you want to transfer the skills you have now to the profession of consulting. Be able to highlight your experiences, skills and temperament and have at least two-to-three anecdotes to illustrate your:
  - Personality and communication style
  - Problem-solving and analytical skills
  - Business and management sense
  - Teamwork and client relations
  - And fit with industry, company, and job.
- Talk about challenging experiences, which you survived while learning great lessons.

**CASE INTERVIEWING**

Consultants solve problems for clients. Case interviews are the mirror of everyday work.

Business cases help the interviewer learn if you can think like a professional-- quickly, logically, and calmly while handling an ambiguous problem. The interviewer presents a situation which reflects a real-life problem then observes your ability to analyze, to draw conclusions, and to make recommendations.

Cases differ from company to company: some use more quantitative problems, others more qualitative. Some firms will ask you about an industry with which you are familiar, other will not, on purpose. Most cases rely on your ability to integrate knowledge you have acquired across disciplines and functions.
The interviewer is evaluating

- Your business sense
- Your ability to handle numbers
- Your ability to sort through masses of information to frame the problem and come to a compelling solution
- Your response to pressure and unexpected circumstances
- And your ability to speak cogently and present your case knowledgeably without preparation time.

Your reactions during a stressful interview should reflect courtesy, tact, and confidence.

While you cannot study specifically for the case interview you will have, you can, however, practice case strategies to focus your method, style, and communication. You can become comfortable with identifying critical information and issues, pinpointing the underlying problem, and offering reasonable solutions in a short, intense time period.

Most cases have several possible responses, not a single correct answer. The interviewer is looking for your clear and sensible thought process based on the conditions of the interview, rather than what you would produce in the real environment of a business problem.

You should realize that most people who want to have a consulting career, study and practice cases diligently and competitively.

**TYPES OF CASE INTERVIEWS**

Pretend you are the interviewer: what hypothetical questions would you ask and what responses would you consider successful?

In the **RESUME CASE** the interviewer will quiz you in minutiae about your resume:

- Review your resume thoroughly before your interview.
- Know the main message and have a story for each category and bullet.
- Be specific and use details.
- Don’t use jargon: communicate easily, clearly, and interestingly.
- Tell what you have accomplished: go beyond a bare description of the task or responsibility but be succinct.
- Talk about your experiences with energy and enthusiasm: your resume is home turf.

**BRAINTEASER CASES** can be logic puzzles or open-ended, curiosity questions: “list all the ways you can find a needle in a haystack.”

Recruiters look for confidence in “thinking on your feet” and your interplay between creativity and logic and analysis.

The assessment is of your intelligence, your credibility, and your nerves under fire.

Think out loud and keep the answers coming. The interviewer might give you hints toward the sought-after outcome.

**BUSINESS OPERATIONS CASES** involve the gamut of running a business and moving the product. A typical case would ask the candidate to explain a company’s decline in profits.
Recruiters want to assess your business intuition, your knowledge of business fundamentals, your grasp of business processes, and your ability to sort through a large amount of information, as well as your common sense.

**BUSINESS STRATEGY CASES** can be complex, encompassing multi-industry, multi-national, and multi-issue problems or can be narrowly focussed questions.

To succeed in business-operations and strategy cases, follow a general pattern in which you probably have 15 minutes to work through your answer:

- Listen carefully to the interviewer’s presentation.
- Gather information and take notes.
- Take your time; use two minutes to gather your wits about you and stay calm. Determine the exact problem the interviewer wants you to solve and isolate the main issues: you can develop hypotheses but don’t “shoot from the hip” and propose answers without thought or analysis. Recovering from a poor start is difficult.
- Ask questions for clarification and keep probing because the case’s opening statement might be intentionally vague, indefinite, or incomplete. Show your thinking and state your assumptions clearly. If you are off on the wrong direction, the interviewer might break in and give you additional information.
- Spell out the plan you will use to approach the problem: make a general foundation statement or use a standard business framework as an outline. Break down the problem into manageable, logical sections, and work from big to small, considering how critical elements interrelate. Be structured and clear. Think about the constituencies who must be served and the cost and ease of the process you will recommend.
- A framework is a structure you use to organize your thoughts in order to analyze the critical issues of the case. “There are three key questions to answer: a, b, and c.”
- Choose a framework with which you are comfortable and which will work with the recruiter’s questions, identify your choice, and walk through it step by step. But be flexible: each problem is unique demanding a distinctive solution.
- Some typical business frameworks are internal/external, supply/demand, cost/benefit, fixed cost-variable cost, and a 2x2 matrix.
- The interviewer is observing how you make assumptions, your justification for your choice of framework, and the manner in which you use that framework. An informational interview with an employee of the firm with which you are interested can give you an edge in selecting the best framework for that particular interview.
- Remain calm and respond carefully to the interviewer who, in general, will help you by subtly telling what is relevant or not and by giving you a little bit more information after each of your responses or questions.
- Communicate out loud your next steps: tell the interviewer that you will spend the following minutes reviewing notes and asking more questions; show your creative, yet organized approach while you avoid awkward silences.
- Make hypotheses but be methodical in narrowing your focus to the key, primary issue. Follow the 80-20 rule: talk about the issues that will lead you 80 percent to an appropriate conclusion.
- Paraphrase, analyze, and review the information and data as you go along.
- Draw a diagram of the situation so you can display your thinking visually.
- Offer action-oriented and cost-conscious solutions which would satisfy real clients.
- Try to leave time for a “formal” summary:
  - Restate the case and the problem, communicating in clear and assertive words.
Select a single **action** solution and recommendation with supporting evidence and analysis, moving from general statements to specific examples.

List potential alternatives but justify your reasons for their elimination by stating your assumptions and rationale.

Restate your conclusions, i.e., the **action plan**

Do not ramble; silence is better than irrelevant words.

Show confidence in your position without arguing or being flustered. Do not over-explain your reasoning, take back parts of your discussion, or fidget. Tell yourself that you are being tested and that you are passing the test.

If you do feel you are heading in the wrong direction:

- Take a breath and ask for a minute “to think things through” and collect your thoughts.
- Explain that you think you have misinterpreted the problem and that your response “has missed the mark.” Then state what approach might be better.
- Focus on the most important issue and do not try to address every aspect of the problem.
- Try to get “partial credit”—go as far as you can with the problem even if you think you will not come to a workable solution.

Final words of advice: approach the case challenge with professionalism but, too, with enthusiasm and a sense of fun; the experience will be happier for both you and the interviewer.

**SUCCEEDING IN THE INTERVIEW AND GETTING THE OFFER**

- Practice so that you become natural, confident, and compelling.
- Demonstrate how you stand out from other bright, competitive, industrious candidates.
- Be on your best behavior, but be honest and be yourself.
- Explain why you want a career in consulting; even though companies hire from a range of backgrounds, be prepared to show your rationale, especially if you are a career changer.
- Delineate your experiences and skills with concrete examples to show how you add value to the organization in problem-solving, teamwork, and leadership.
- Be prepared to deal with questions about your weak areas. Have answers ready to questions you hope no one will ask.
- Respond to the interviewer with intelligent, thoughtful questions that show your depth of knowledge about the company and that show your desire to be a good fit and add value.