



# Case Study Interviews

## What are case study interviews?

Case study interviews are often used as part of the assessment centre methodology; however, they can also be given as individual exercises by employers, recruitment consultants and management consultants.

For information on how the assessment interview methodology operates, please see the handout Assessment Centres on the Careers Centre website.

This is one of several handouts on interviews. For further information on the interview process see the handouts Interview Preparation and Practice, Behavioural Interviews and Assessment Centres.

One of the most common types of case study interviews is where you're given a business question or a scenario, which can often be about a problem an organisation is facing. You analyse a question or scenario, work through the answer logically and recommend or provide a solution within the designated time frame. You may be asked to work on the problem your own or in a group setting.

The scenario is given in either written or verbal form. You might be asked to look at the scenario from the point of view of each of the scenario's stakeholders.

You may take part in a case study interview as an individual exercise. The scenario could be in written form and require you to respond in writing and/or give a verbal presentation.

In a group setting, the assessor/s will often sit and watch this process silently. Not only will an assessor be evaluating your team's ability to analyse, strategise and communicate, he or she will also be assessing such factors as each individual's cooperation with the team, leadership abilities, decision making abilities, creativity and time management.

Another possibility is that you and the interviewer could role play, with you as the 'consultant' and the interviewer as the 'client' or 'manager'. This is a common style of case interview for management consulting roles.

As an example, the client's organisation could have been losing money over the last three quarters, so

you need to discuss the issue with the client and ask pertinent questions in order to analyse the situation and develop recommendations.

## Types of case study interview questions and scenarios

Sometimes the questions or scenarios require numeracy skills and ask you to estimate figures e.g. 'How many people do you think will vote in the next New South Wales Government election?'

You might need to answer a real or theoretical business scenario question e.g. 'LMN is a medium-sized grocery chain wishing to expand its online presence and services. What issues will need to be examined to decide whether this is a viable opportunity?'

Sometimes you're given lateral thinking scenarios such as 'What creative suggestions and methods can you suggest to further decrease the number of smokers in Australia?'

You could also be given information in pictorial form e.g. statistics or a graph and asked to interpret it.

In a management consulting environment, the questions are likely to be concerned with corporate and business strategy (profitability, growth opportunities, business mix, customer service improvements), investment strategy (viability of acquisitions) and performance improvement (effective management structuring, performance measurement, staff rewards systems and process improvements).

It's not necessary for you to have in-depth knowledge of the industry on which the question or scenario is based; however, if the question or scenario is based on the industry in which you're applying for the job, you should have researched the industry prior to the interview. For information on how to do this, please see the handout Interview Preparation and Practice.

## Structuring your response

Whether your case study interview is an individual or a group exercise, the actual solution is as important as the thinking that led to the decision. The personal qualities you displayed during the exercise are just as important as the proposed solution. There's often not one single 'correct' answer to any case study interview question or scenario.

The assessors are looking for indications you are well suited to positions in their organisation and the range of behaviours that would support this could include:

- a demonstration of your thought processes (talking through your answer as you work it out).
- your ability to structure your answer logically.
- to think systematically about the pertinent elements of the response.
- to display sound numeric ability.
- to be aware of the assumptions you are making when you work out your method for developing an answer.
- to assess how you could test your assumptions and the priority you may have assigned to different elements of the answer. This is sometimes referred to as a 'reality check'.
- to be able to review your response from different perspectives (different stakeholders, 'top down' or 'bottom up' approach).
- your ability to work well within a group setting and respond to new information or ideas and to manage your time efficiently.

Whether the case study interview is an individual exercise or a group activity, your ability to work well with others is paramount as team work in graduate roles in management, consulting and finance is critical to the success of the business. Your ability to interact well with your interviewer in an individual session, or with your group members in a team setting is important.

## Here are some tips for handling case study interviews

- Make sure that in a group situation your team has a shared interpretation of the aim of the exercise and the terminology used. In an individual case study interview, make sure that you check your understanding of the question with the interviewer. Don't be shy about asking for further data or to check you are on track.
- Develop a methodology for how you will approach

your answer and talk this through with your interviewer or group

- Be prepared to synthesise and filter the information provided as necessary. Not all the data you are given may be directly relevant or require the same level of priority when managing your response.
- Take notes and refer to them if necessary to summarise the scenario, analysis and solution.
- Make use of any resources in the room, such as a whiteboard, pens and paper.
- Use visual aids to document and demonstrate your structure or response. Depending on the question, you could use organisational charts, pie charts, timelines, graphs, flow charts or any other project management methodology.
- Listen carefully and pay attention to your own and others' verbal and non-verbal communication. Body language and tone of voice can sometimes be just as important, if not more important, than the words themselves. Non-verbal communication can be very helpful in gauging how the parties to the scenario are responding.
- Speak clearly, ask questions, seek further clarification when necessary and don't make rash assumptions. If you need to collect your thoughts, ask for a moment to do so. Always display your enthusiasm for this type of work!
- Always bring the discussion or information you are working on to a clear conclusion and response.

To find out more about case study interviews, go to the web pages of any of the major management consulting firms and look for the section on careers and interview preparation. You'll find some good tips and sample cases to work through.

The Careers Centre also invites management consulting firms to visit campus each year to present a guest lecture on case study interview skills. The notes from these lectures and a book, "Vault Guide to the Case Interview", are kept in the Careers Resource Centre.

You might also like to see the website 'Ace the Case' at [www.acethecase.com](http://www.acethecase.com) for free sample case study interview scenarios and questions.

If you wish to practise questions or scenarios it's a good idea to ask a family member or friend to be a practice partner to give you feedback on your communication skills, and your ability to think logically and laterally.