

McKinsey Round One Interview

Frequently Asked Questions

By Victor Cheng

McKinsey First Round vs. Later Rounds

My question revolves around the differences between the two rounds in McKinsey's interview process. I've heard mixed stories on this and am hoping for a clear answer. My first rounds were very structured and the interviewer was primarily driving the case by asking a set of five to six specific questions per case.

I've heard that the second rounds, though, are primarily driven by the interviewee. What differences does this entail in terms of preparation?

Does the interviewer ask one broad question at the beginning of the case, and then expect the interviewee to structure an answer while probing them for more information?

My Reply:

The feedback I'm getting from around the world is consistent with your perception that second round will be an interviewee-led case. The interviewer will basically say the following:

Your client is a copper mining company. Profits are down about 25% versus last year. How do you help this client turn the company around?

The interviewer will then shut his or her mouth... and you are expected to take over. The interviewer will only open his or her mouth for one of two reasons--and you should be prepared for both.

a) If you ask a question asking for data, the interviewer will provide it, if it is available.

b) The interviewer will interrupt you and ask you a challenging question... mostly to test your thinking. Sometimes people get distracted by the interruption, forget where they were in the case, and basically get stuck because they got distracted.

I've seen this happen a lot to people who assumed that round two interviews would be just like round one. There is a very specific note taking technique I use to keep track of where you are... it is to take notes entirely in diagram format.

In my Look Over My Shoulder program, I have five different cases in there with recordings of 13 different candidates. The recordings demonstrate both how to do the cases properly, and also provide examples of *the* most common mistakes – and

how people dig themselves into a hole.

When I recently did my mock case interviews for the Look Over My Shoulder Program, I spent close to 20 hours interviewing people.

I was *extremely* surprised by how poor the note taking was for the people I interviewed -- including the people who ended up getting offers at McKinsey, Bain, etc.

In a 40-minute case, some people took eight pages of notes! This is a big problem because there's no way you can possibly remember what you were thinking seven pages ago.

To be clear, I am not discouraging taking notes -- but rather to take notes in a very specific way to avoid getting confused by your own notes.

I recommend taking notes on two different sets of paper. One page / set of pages -- is focused on the structure of the case. This page should be kept very *neat*.

It should consist exclusively of issue tree diagrams and hour hypotheses (see Cases 2, 4 and 5 -- the last examples of each in Look Over My Shoulder, for examples of these).

Notice the very *disciplined* approach of using a "process of elimination" to work through the case. Using this approach, if you get interrupted ten times, it doesn't really matter. It's very obvious to you and the interviewer (based on your diagram) where you are in the case.

You should not hesitate to show this diagram to your interviewer.

Next, you should have a separate page(s) of paper where you do computations. This is basically a scratch pad to do some math. You use this page to simply determine whether a particular part of the issue can be eliminated as a possible cause of the problem you're trying to answer in the case.

Important: Once you have answered the question for that branch of the case, you never have to refer back to the scratch pad anymore. You've reached your intermediary conclusion, and made the appropriate notation on the issue tree diagram.

This way your calculation notes can be six or seven pages, and it doesn't matter... because the *important* information, such as your conclusions and *structure* is in a single, easy-to-reference place.

Again, I was very surprised by how many people I interviewed just simply got

confused by their own notes. So as of very recently, I've decided to emphasize this particular approach to note taking.

McKinsey First Round Interview Tips

I have my first round of interviews with McKinsey, Africa soon and unfortunately I just discovered your site just a few days ago.

I have tried to go through the entire video but this has been tough, given that I have a full time job and I spend four hours driving to and from work everyday.

I must say that your tutorials have been amazing! I am a non-MBA and work in operations, so the whole case problem solving was very foreign to me. But just five days, and I know so much more!

And I also shared it with the other candidates I met during the coaching sessions, and their reviews have been amazing.

However, I am a little nervous that because I might not be very well prepared, since everyone else with offers spent hours and hours on the materials.

Have you got any last-minute tips for me?

My Reply:

In most countries, McKinsey first round (as opposed to the later rounds) has a slightly different style to the interaction.

Rather than giving you a type of case that I call a candidate-led case, where they give you some broad question and then you take over (like the examples in my Look Over the Shoulder Program), they use more of a Question & Answer approach.

So rather than say, which areas would you look at (e.g., framework would you use), the interviewer might say, I've decided to look at X, Y, and Z areas... and here is my hypothesis that I have in mind.

The interviewer then might ask you, "What data would you need to prove/disprove this hypothesis?"

So the overall case process is the same, but the *role* of the interviewer vs. candidate is shared. In many McKinsey first rounds, the interviewer decides on the structure, and often the hypothesis, and you are asked to analyze a small section of the case, rather than the entire case.

So in my videos, I would describe the candidate-led case as consisting of say a three-step process.

In the McKinsey first round, the *interviewer* might do Step 1 and then ask you to *only* solve Step 2. Or they interviewer might ask you to do Step 1, then they do Step 2 for you, and then ask you to do Step 3.

This is newer information not yet reflected in some of my materials, so just be aware of this difference in style.

The actual skills being tested are essentially the same, but the skills are being tested at a component level rather than at an integrated level (which will take place in subsequent rounds).

I would also suggest going through the samples test I have posted on my McKinsey Problem Solving Test resource page.

<http://www.caseinterview.com/mckinsey-problem-solving-test/>

The sample questions, particularly around data sufficiency, are useful to practice. If McKinsey Africa Round 1 is similar to other countries, the style of the interview will be equivalent to a verbal version of some of those sample tests.

This way you can get used to some of the abruptness of the interaction.

Also one other nuance: at the start of the interview, the interviewer may give you a lot of data - charts, data, tables, and the like. So rather than you asking for specific information (and them only giving what you ask for), they give you *everything* and you have to figure out what is important.

So if you're not expecting this, you can be caught by surprise. In general, if you have time, it is useful to get a feel for what data is available. But, when it comes time to actually analyzing things, you still want to be hypothesis-driven, and then *you* go look for just that piece of data you need.

So the process is still the same. You say I'd like to see X data, and guess what, you already have X data in front of you (Along with Y, Z, A, B and C data too...).

What Approach to Use with Interviewer-Led Cases (Most Common in McKinsey Round 1)

I have a case interview with a Top 3 firm in two days' time. Thank you for the excellent materials that you've put up on this site.

I am using your case interview preparation videos and the LOMS program exclusively to prepare for my interview. Your materials have really given me a lot of confidence.

Just one question relating to the interview: I was told during the case interview workshop organized by the firm that their interview would be much more structured, i.e. they will ask a broad question initially but then guide you along the way.

My friends who have attended the interview confirmed this point. An example is as follows:

- 1. The interviewer would first ask, "Why is profitability in Company X falling? What would be your approach for this question?"*
- 2. Regardless of how Question 1 was answered, the interviewer would then ask the candidate to estimate the market size of the industry.*
- 3. Then, the candidate would be asked to do some quantitative analysis on a particular area, e.g. the effect of raising prices on sales (data would be provided).*
- 4. After that, the candidate would be asked to list down some broad suggestions as to the ways to increase revenue (pricing, marketing, geographical expansion, etc.).*
- 5. Conclude*

It feels as if the interviewer actually has a checklist in front of him. I guess this is what you would call an "interviewer-led" case.

I have two questions here:

- 1. Do I need to adopt a different approach in such interviews (c/f to your examples in the LOMS program)?*

I would probably not have too many chances to ask questions and isolate the issues. How and when should I synthesize? Only at the end of the case?

- 2. Question 1-5 seems quite detached. Can I ask for some time (about 30 seconds) before answering each question? Or should I only ask for time at the very beginning?*

My Reply:

In terms of your questions, yes you need to adopt a slightly different approach, as you'll be doing the case one component at a time.

Consider each question as its own mini-case. So the first question is generally a problem structuring... framework or custom issue tree question. They want to know

how you would set it up, then promptly do *not* ask you to solve it in the way you intend. It is an abrupt interruption to the case.

So this is most similar to the first five minutes of the cases in Look Over My Shoulder... and then they abruptly stop you and say, "ok, great answer"... and then they jump to a totally different part of the case.

(Many people find this format of case is easier because you're doing the case in small "bite-size" chunks. Others who are not aware of this particular difference in dynamic can get distracted by the stop and go format of the case and the jumping from one part of the case to another.)

You have five to eight minutes per "question", so it is useful to make sure your answer is concise (but it does not need to feel rushed). So don't spend eight minutes asking clarifying questions just for Question 1 thinking you are getting everything clear to answer the whole case.

Synthesis would only occur at the end for the whole case, and generally they would ask you, "So what should the client do?" (Read: synthesize the whole case). It is useful to do a mini-synthesis (two to three sentences at the end of each question, if it makes sense to do so).

In terms of asking for some time, I suppose do whatever you need to do to answer the question correctly. So if you need some time, ask for it or just take it. Thirty seconds feels like forever though.

Usually if I need 30 seconds, I'll say, "Oh, that's so very interesting..." then I'll ask a clarifying question or two (a question where I don't really care about the answer... just to get myself some time to think)... or I will restate the question out loud or paraphrase it... (yet another way to get some more time and also to hear the question again in my own voice... sometimes makes it easier to think)... And then after doing all of that, which takes 30 seconds or so, I figure something will pop into my head and I'll proceed.

If you'd rather just take 30 seconds of silence, and that's what it takes for you to get the answer right, then by all means, take the 30 seconds.

Some candidates find this style of interviewer-led much easier than the candidate-led cases. It tests the same skills, but because the format is a bit different, if you're not expecting it, it can be a bit disorienting.

But once you get used to the style or prep yourself to expect it, it's actually the same process as a candidate-led case, but done in small semi-independent pieces.

The only other thing to keep in mind, is in subsequent steps in the case they will use

their framework or hypothesis, not yours. So maybe they'll say, I have a hypothesis that X is true. What data do you need to disprove this hypothesis?

So it's the same skill as coming up with a hypothesis in a candidate-led case and then creating an issue tree to prove, only this time it's someone else's hypothesis.

So the questions asked generally fall into the following categories:

1) Given a particular problem, what framework or custom issue tree would you use (e.g., what are the branches of the issue tree you would use)?

2) A basic algebra problem... so something along the lines of, "If a company was to cut prices by 10%, how much more units would they have to sell to maintain the same level of profits?"

Basically, it is a "solve for X" type problem. (It's usually harder than this). This is just to see if you can do math at the level they are expecting.

3) Given this situation, what are the range of possible hypotheses that could be going on in this situation (trying to see if you have either business acumen or common sense or intuition to have a sense of what the possible issues are).

This type of question is usually phrased as, "X has happened to the company or industry; what are the possible causes for X?"

Example: "The XYZ market has shrunk by 15%; what are the possible causes for this?"

Or, "What different ways can XYZ Company attempt to grow market share?"

Now the wrong way to answer this question is to start listing a bunch of reasons in a random order.

The better way to answer this question is to come up with *categories* of possible answers, list the categories, and then within each category list your specific ideas.

This is a more structured way to answer this question.

(By the way, it's worth re-reading the last three paragraphs *several* times... yes, it is that important).

4) Here's a graph, tell me what you think (an analysis and mini-synthesis is good here).

5) Synthesize what you've learned in the case and what the client should do.

So overall, the case is much more stop-and-go than the candidate-led cases in Look Over My Shoulder, but if you look carefully at what is asked all the specific steps are the same as in a candidate-led case (and thus the skills tested are similar), but the part that you need to be prepared for is you are *not* controlling the tempo and direction of the case.

You are being told *which* parts of the case to do *when*—and often it is not in the *order* that you would do it, even though the actual questions are ones you would naturally tend to answer yourself in a candidate-led case.

Or phrased differently, rather than being in the driver's seat during the case, you are now in the passenger seat -- but despite where you sit, you are still using the same case interviewing skills, but using them in stop-and-go /bits and pieces.

Questions to Ask about McKinsey First Round

I have been fortunate enough to get in touch with a consultant at the office I'm interviewing with. He has generously offered to help me answer any questions I might have about the first round interview or about the firm in general.

In that regard, I was wondering whether you might have any suggestions in terms of what questions would be useful to ask him to best prepare for round one of interviews?

My Reply:

In terms of your interview "buddy", the question to ask is for the particular office you're interviewing at, what to expect in the first round. First round McKinsey *does* vary a bit from country to country. Rounds 2+ tend to be *much* more consistent.

So the questions to ask, or find out the answers to, is: Will the first round be case only or case + leadership questions? Will the case be interviewer-led, which has a different flow to it than the more traditional interviewee-led cases?

Will this round include the McKinsey problem-solving test, or was that done before the first round (may vary by country)? So basically, just figure out what that particular office does for first round so there aren't any surprises.

Estimation Questions in the First Round

Regarding estimation questions -- my friend recently did a first round interview at Booz and Co., and the first interview, the full hour was dedicated to estimation questions. I was wondering if I should expect that at a McKinsey interview, or do they

usually appear as part of a business case?

My Reply:

It's unusual to get a 1-hour estimation question. McKinsey first rounds in most part of the world tend to be interviewer-led cases. So they give you some basic case information, and then they ask you questions about the case.

In situations where this is not the format, you're more likely to see either a few estimation questions, or a business case where it is candidate-led with an estimation question sometimes included within the business case.

For the more open-ended format, keep in mind each individual interviewer has remarkable leeway in terms of what they ask. Most candidates think it's some big coordinated effort.

Sometimes it's just the recruiter roaming the hallways inside McKinsey saying, "Hey, my interviewer called in sick, are you free to do a few first round interviews for me?"

This is how I first started interviewing.

Do you know how much time and thought I put into the question I would ask my candidates? About 60 seconds. The time it took to get from my office, take the elevator down three floors, and to meet my first candidate in about three minutes.

I made up the case during the elevator ride.

Every individual interviewer is different, and they in large part pick whatever case they want to do. Some will coordinate with others (you would want a final round to be six hours of only estimation questions) and some will certainly coordinate who will do a case vs. who will do a resume-type interview.

But once an interviewer is designated to do a case, they will in many cases use personal preference to pick the case.

Also, some will not intentionally plan to give an estimation question in the middle of a business case. But sometimes, a candidate is solving a particular part of a business case and a quick estimation question is just a natural next step -- so they'll ask it right then and there.

By the way, this happens on the job all the time. A client asks you some unexpected question. You don't have access to the company's computer systems, so you do a quick estimate to see if the client's idea is remotely feasible.

