THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO

Breaking Into Strategy Consulting

Everything you need to land an offer at McKinsey, BCG, Bain and the world's top consulting firms

Top 3	<1%	7 Stages
MBB FIRMS	ACCEPTANCE RATE	IN THIS GUIDE

Your roadmap from application to offer. No fluff, just what works.

What's Inside This Guide

This guide covers every stage of the consulting recruitment process, from understanding the landscape to negotiating your offer. Each section is actionable and built around what actually works.

01 **The Consulting Landscape**
Which firms to target and why it matters

02 **Building Your Profile**
CV, academics, and extracurriculars

03 **The Application Stage**
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Exactly what to do, week by week

01 The Consulting Landscape

Knowing where to aim is half the battle. Most candidates waste time applying to the wrong firms.

Understanding the Tier System

Strategy consulting has a clear hierarchy. Where you target should reflect both your ambitions and your realistic starting profile.

TIER	FIRMS	GRADUATE SALARY (UK)	PROFILE REQUIRED
MBB	McKinsey, BCG, Bain	£50-60k + bonus	Top academics, leadership, strong case performance
Big 4 Strategy	Deloitte S&O, PwC Strategy&, EY-Parthenon, KPMG	£40-50k + bonus	Strong academics, solid case skills
Tier 2 Boutiques	Oliver Wyman, Roland Berger, LEK, A.T. Kearney	£42-55k + bonus	Specialised knowledge and good case ability
In-House Strategy	FTSE 100 strategy teams	£35-45k	Good analytical base, more flexibility

Which Firms Should You Target?

Apply broadly, but not indiscriminately. A realistic shortlist for most strong candidates includes 2-3 MBB applications plus 3-4 Tier 2 applications as a safety net. Target firms based on three filters:

- **Fit with your background.** BCG values entrepreneurial thinking, McKinsey looks for rigorous problem-solving, Bain is team-culture oriented.
- **Practice area alignment.** If you have a specialism such as finance, healthcare or tech, seek firms with strong practices in that area.
- **Geography.** Confirm which offices recruit from your university and which accept applications from your nationality.

> **INSIDER TIP**
>
> Many candidates only apply to MBB. This is a mistake. Deloitte S&O and EY-Parthenon place people into careers just as strong, and the case interviews are nearly identical.

The Recruiting Timeline (UK)

MONTH	WHAT'S HAPPENING
Sept-Oct	Applications open for most major firms. Deadlines can be as early as October.
Oct-Nov	Online tests (SHL, McKinsey Solve, BCG Casey/Chatbot)
Nov-Jan	First-round interviews begin
Jan-Mar	Final-round interviews and offers for most firms
Spring	Spring Weeks and Insight programmes for first-years
Summer	Summer internships, the single best route to a graduate offer

Key rule: never miss a deadline. Most firms use rolling recruitment and close early. Apply in the first two weeks of the window opening.

02 Building Your Profile

Your profile is built before the application opens. Start as early as you can.

Academics: The Entry Bar

Most top firms require a 2:1 minimum, but in practice the median hire has a First. A strong degree from a target university (Oxford, Cambridge, LSE, Imperial, Warwick, Durham, Bristol) matters more than most people admit. However:

- A non-target university with exceptional grades and experience can work, especially at Tier 2 firms
- A lower grade can sometimes be offset by a compelling story, unique expertise, or exceptional extracurriculars
- STEM and economics degrees are not required. Consultants come from all disciplines.

Extracurriculars: What Actually Impresses

Consulting firms want to see **leadership, impact, and initiative**, not a long list of club memberships. Quality over quantity, always.

HIGH IMPACT

- President or founder of a society
- Competitive sports at captaincy level
- Running your own business or side project
- Consulting society or case competition wins
- Structured volunteering with measurable outcomes

LOW IMPACT

- Passive society membership
- One-off charity events
- Generic work experience with no ownership
- Too many activities with no depth
- Listing hobbies without substance

Work Experience: Does It Matter?

Any experience is better than none, but relevant experience is gold. Prioritise in this order:

1. **Consulting internship**
   The single best signal. Even a small boutique matters.
2. **Strategy or finance internship**
   Investment banking, PE, or corporate strategy shows analytical rigour.
3. **Entrepreneurial experience**
   Real business ownership demonstrates initiative and problem-solving.
4. **Any professional experience**
   Shows maturity and stakeholder management.

> **IF YOU ARE IN FIRST OR SECOND YEAR**
>
> Apply for Spring Weeks and Insight Programmes now. These are designed for early-year students and are a direct route to internship offers the following year.

03 The Application Stage

Your written application is a filter, not a formality. Get it right.

Your CV: The Consulting Format

Consulting CVs are one page, achievement-focused, and ruthlessly edited. Every bullet should follow a results-first format:

> **THE FORMULA**
>
> **[Action verb] + [what you did] + [measurable impact or scale]**
> Example: "Led team of 8 to restructure society events programme, increasing membership by 40% in one term."

Consulting CV checklist:

- One page only, no exceptions
- Reverse chronological order
- Quantify everything possible (%, £, team size, timeframe)
- No personal pronouns ("Led" not "I led")
- Education section first if you are a student
- Tailor slightly for each firm, referencing their values or focus areas
- Zero spelling or formatting errors

Cover Letters: Less Generic, More Specific

Most cover letters fail because they are vague. A strong cover letter answers three questions:

1. **Why consulting?**
   Show you understand what consultants actually do day-to-day. Mention a specific engagement, methodology, or topic that excites you.
2. **Why this firm specifically?**
   Reference a specific practice area, recent project, or cultural attribute. Don't say "collaborative culture", every firm says that.
3. **Why you?**
   Pick two or three experiences that directly demonstrate consulting-relevant skills: structure, analytics, communication, leadership.

Online Tests: Don't Be Caught Off Guard

Every major firm now uses online assessments before interviews. Preparation makes a significant difference.

FIRM	TEST FORMAT	KEY FOCUS
McKinsey	McKinsey Solve (Imbellus)	Problem-solving game, pattern recognition, cognitive flexibility
BCG	Casey Chatbot / BCG Online Case	Mini case study in conversational format
Bain	SOVA assessment and case simulation	Numerical, logical, situational judgement
Deloitte	Immersive Online Assessment	Video questions, game-based, situational judgement
Oliver Wyman	Written case study	Data interpretation and structured written answer

Practise at least 10-15 timed sessions before your first real test, using the individual firm practice sites and dedicated test platforms.

04 Case Interview Mastery

The case interview is the defining test. Preparation here is the biggest lever you have.

What Interviewers Are Actually Assessing

It's not about getting the right answer. Experienced interviewers assess four things:

- **Structure.** Can you break a messy problem into a clear, logical framework?
- **Numeracy.** Can you do mental maths quickly and accurately under pressure?
- **Insight.** Do you generate interesting hypotheses and spot non-obvious patterns?
- **Communication.** Can you explain your thinking clearly and adjust based on pushback?

The Case Format

Most case interviews follow a predictable structure. Knowing this reduces anxiety and helps you perform consistently:

1. **Prompt**
   Interviewer gives you the case situation, typically a business problem. Take notes.
2. **Clarify**
   Ask one or two clarifying questions to confirm scope and key constraints. Don't skip this.
3. **Structure**
   Take 60-90 seconds of silent thinking. Then walk through your framework out loud.
4. **Explore**
   Dive into the most important branches. Lead the discussion, don't wait to be pushed.
5. **Data**
   You'll be given exhibits or data. State your observation, then your interpretation, then the implication.
6. **Synthesis**
   Give a crisp recommendation: situation, then complication, then resolution. Lead with your answer.

> **THE MECE PRINCIPLE**
>
> Every good framework is Mutually Exclusive (no overlapping categories) and Collectively Exhaustive (nothing important is missing). This is the standard for structured thinking in consulting.

04 CASE INTERVIEW MASTERY, CONTINUED

Frameworks: A Starting Point, Not a Straitjacket

Don't memorise frameworks robotically. Understand the logic behind them and adapt to the case. Core frameworks worth knowing:

FRAMEWORK	WHEN TO USE
Profitability Tree	Revenue or cost decline, profitability questions
Market Sizing	Estimating size of a market or quantity
Market Entry	Should a company enter a new market?
Merger / Acquisition	Should a company buy another company?
Porter's Five Forces	Competitive dynamics analysis
Cost-Benefit / ROI	Investment or initiative evaluation
Value Chain	Identifying where value is created or lost

How Much Practice Do You Need?

Most successful candidates complete 50-80 practice cases before their interviews. Here's a realistic prep plan:

PHASE	DURATION	FOCUS
Foundation	2-3 weeks	Learn frameworks, understand case types, watch example cases
Structured Practice	4-6 weeks	Two or three cases per week with a partner, self-reflect after each
Intensive Mock	2 weeks pre-interview	Daily practice, focus on weak spots, simulate real interview conditions
Polish	Final week	Light practice, focus on communication and confidence, not new material

Resources That Actually Work

- **Case in Point** (Marc Cosentino), the classic textbook. Read it early.
- **PrepLounge**, best platform for finding practice partners globally
- **Victor Cheng's LOMS**, audio recordings of real practice cases, exceptional quality
- **Firm websites**, McKinsey, BCG and Bain all publish sample cases
- **Your university consulting society**, often runs mock interview sessions with alumni

> **THE MOST COMMON MISTAKE**
>
> Practising alone. Cases are a conversation, and reading a case solution silently teaches you none of the things you are actually being marked on. Find a partner in week one.

05 Behavioural Interviews and the PEI

McKinsey calls it the PEI. BCG and Bain call it fit. Every firm has one, and most candidates underestimate it.

What They're Really Testing

The Personal Experience Interview tests whether you have the personal qualities to succeed in consulting, and whether you'll thrive in the culture. Firms look for:

- **Personal impact.** Have you influenced people or outcomes without having formal authority?
- **Entrepreneurial drive.** Have you taken initiative beyond what was required?
- **Inclusive leadership.** Have you built and motivated a team through difficult circumstances?
- **Problem-solving.** Have you tackled a complex, ambiguous situation with structured thinking?

The STAR Method, Done Properly

Structure your answers around Situation, Task, Action, Result, but most people stop too early. The **Action** section should be the longest part and demonstrate your specific contribution, not your team's.

STAR BREAKDOWN: TIME ALLOCATION
Situation (10%) Brief context: what was happening and why it mattered.
Task (10%) Your specific role and the challenge you faced.
Action (60%) What you specifically did, step by step. Show your thinking process.
Result (20%) Quantified outcome plus what you learned or how it shaped you.

Building Your Story Bank

Prepare five to seven strong stories before your interview season. Each story should be flexible enough to answer multiple question types. Categorise them by theme:

THEME	EXAMPLE QUESTIONS
Leadership	"Tell me about a time you led a team." / "Describe influencing without authority."
Overcoming adversity	"Biggest failure or challenge you've faced." / "When things went wrong."
Impact	"Most significant achievement." / "When you made something better."
Collaboration	"Difficult stakeholder." / "Conflict within a team."
Initiative	"When you went beyond what was required." / "Entrepreneurial situation."

05 BEHAVIOURAL INTERVIEWS, CONTINUED

AVOID GENERIC STORIES

"I led a group project at university" is forgettable. A story about launching a product, saving a failing campaign, or turning around a struggling team is memorable. The more specific, the better.

Firm Culture Fit: What Each Firm Values

FIRM	CULTURAL EMPHASIS	SHOW THIS IN INTERVIEWS
McKinsey	Rigorous intellect, structured thinking, personal impact	Precise logic, clear structure, moments of individual leadership
BCG	Innovation, intellectual curiosity, entrepreneurship	Creative approaches, original thinking, initiative beyond the brief
Bain	Team spirit, client results, energy and warmth	Collaboration, client empathy, enthusiasm for the work itself
Deloitte S&O	Inclusivity, sector depth, commercial awareness	Cross-functional thinking, awareness of industry trends

Questions To Ask Them

Every interview ends with your questions, and a weak one undoes a strong hour. Prepare two per interviewer, specific to them rather than to the firm:

- Ask about a project they personally worked on and what surprised them
- Ask what separates the analysts who do well in their first year from the ones who struggle
- Ask what they would change about the firm, which invites an honest answer

Avoid anything answered by the website, anything about salary or hours at first round, and anything that sounds rehearsed.

06 The Offer and What Comes Next

Getting the offer is not the end. How you handle the next steps sets up your career.

Receiving an Offer: What to Do

- Express enthusiasm immediately, even if you're considering other options
- Ask for the offer in writing before making any decisions
- Request details on start date, team placement, and onboarding programme
- Confirm the deadline for accepting, typically one to three weeks

Can You Negotiate?

Graduate consulting salaries are mostly fixed within bands, but there is occasional flexibility, especially at smaller firms or boutiques. It is generally **not worth negotiating salary** at MBB at graduate level. Instead, negotiate:

- Start date, useful if you have a prior commitment
- Office location preference
- Sector or practice area preference, requested as a conversation rather than a guarantee

Holding Multiple Offers

If you have multiple offers, handle them professionally. Contact firms you're still waiting on and politely request an expedited decision. Never accept an offer you intend to reject, consulting is a small world.

> **IF YOU'VE BEEN REJECTED**
>
> Ask for feedback. Many firms will provide a brief call. This is valuable for future applications and shows professionalism. You can reapply to most firms after 12-18 months.

What Happens in Your First Year

STAGE	TYPICAL TIMELINE	WHAT TO KNOW
Induction	Weeks 1-2	Classroom training, firm culture, tools. Take notes, it moves fast.
First project	Weeks 3-8	You'll be thrown in. Ask questions early, not late. Meet your workstream lead.
Review	3-6 months	First formal performance review. Feedback is honest, use it.
Promotion track	12-24 months	Analyst to Consultant to Engagement Manager. Each step requires active effort.

07 Your 90-Day Action Plan

Stop reading about consulting recruitment. Start doing this, today. This plan assumes roughly 90 days before your main application window opens.

Days 1-14: Foundation

- Read Case in Point, chapters 1-6
- Watch 10 full case interviews online
- Update your CV using the consulting format
- List your five to seven strongest experience stories
- Research six to eight target firms and their deadlines
- Find a practice partner and join your university consulting society

Days 15-45: Build Momentum

- Complete 15-20 practice cases with a partner
- Draft and refine your cover letters, one per firm
- Do three or more informational interviews with consultants
- Complete at least one practice online test
- Practise your STAR stories out loud and record yourself
- Apply for any open Spring Weeks or off-cycle roles
- Research your target firms' recent projects and sectors

Days 46-75: Go Deep

- Complete 30-40 total cases
- Record yourself doing a full mock interview
- Practise under timed pressure, 45 minutes per case, strict
- Work on your weakest area: maths, structure, or synthesis
- Submit all written applications before windows close
- Prepare five firm-specific questions for each interview

Days 76-90: Polish and Execute

- Do daily light case practice to maintain the habit
- Review your story bank and tighten every answer
- Research your interviewers before each call
- Sleep, exercise, and manage your energy, this is a marathon
- After each interview, write down what you'd do differently

Where To Start This Week

If you only do five things after reading this guide, do these.

1. **Rewrite your CV in the consulting format**
   One page, achievement-first, every bullet quantified. This gates everything else, so it goes first.
2. **Write down your deadlines**
   Six to eight firms, with the exact date each window opens and closes. More people miss offers by missing dates than by failing interviews.
3. **Draft your five core stories**
   Leadership, adversity, impact, collaboration, initiative. One paragraph each, written down rather than memorised.
4. **Do your first practice case this week**
   Badly, out loud, with a timer. The first one is always bad, which is exactly why it should happen early.
5. **Sit one timed numerical test**
   Find out now whether maths under pressure is a weakness, while there is still time to fix it.

> The candidates who get offers aren't necessarily smarter. They're more prepared, more consistent, and more deliberate. Start earlier than you think you need to.