

CASE COMPETITION GUIDE

Introduction

The expression "case method" is sometimes bandied about as if it were the secret solution to problem-solving. In fact, it is simply the formalization of a logical process as expressed by the acronym PAR - Problem Identification, Analysis, Recommendations.

The methods and views presented in this guide are one view only - other approaches may be equally valid or applicable. Each case is unique and each must be approached according to its own content.

What is Being Tested

The case competition is designed to test the following abilities:

1. to adapt to an unfamiliar situation,
2. to identify the relevant issues,
3. to prioritize issues,
4. to apply your core knowledge,
5. to integrate,
6. to organize, and
7. to communicate effectively.

Since these skills are required of all good decision-makers, they warrant further individual comment.

1. Ability to Adapt to an Unfamiliar Situation

You are being tested on your ability to diagnose the problems in the situation provided and derive useful and practical recommendations. The skill being tested is your ability to assess the information provided and then relate it to the role you are to play.

2. Ability to Identify Relevant Issues

This skill is demonstrated if you are able to identify and focus on the most important problems (issues) in the situation provided. It is useful to keep in mind that you may have issues of equal importance.

The other aspect of relevance is your ability to focus on causes rather than symptoms, to deal with the root causes of the problems and supply permanent rather than "band-aid" solutions.

3. Ability to Prioritize Issues

This skill is the ability to "rank" issues in terms of their relative importance.

Issues must be addressed in a logical sequence. Where one issue will be affected by the analysis of another issue, the latter issue should be treated first. These conclusions can then be incorporated in the analysis of subsequent issues.

Some issues are time sensitive, either because the situation requires immediate corrective action or because deadlines have been given. You must recognize that an issue may be given importance simply because the user(s) of the information have made it so. In such situations, the urgency of the user request may affect your "ranking" process of prioritizing issues.

4. Ability to Apply Core Knowledge

Your ability to apply knowledge on a selective basis is being tested, given the particular issues and the particular circumstances of a specific problem situation. You must show that you have a comprehensive knowledge of a particular subject area.

This means that you are being tested not only on whether you have the knowledge but also whether you can select the appropriate techniques and procedures from that knowledge to resolve the issues presented.

5. Ability to Integrate

The ability to integrate is the skill of being able to analyze a multi-dimensional problem from several perspectives and derive a plan of action that draws from several subject areas. This plan of action must be consistent within itself and meet the needs of user(s).

Unfortunately, we spend much of our time studying subjects in isolation, ignoring the interrelationships of one subject with another, and ignoring problem-solving at an integrated level. This competition will encourage you to develop the integrative and analytical skills necessary to function in the complex business environment.

6. Ability to Organize

In the competition context, the ability to organize is a function of sorting through the information given, carrying out your analysis and preparing your response in an efficient way. The extent that you are able to do this will be displayed through your communication skills. Your ability to organize will have a significant impact on the quality of your presentation and cannot be assessed independently of your actual response.

7. Ability to Communicate Effectively

Much of the case competition centres around your ability to communicate. You can do a lot to ensure that your communication is relevant, effective and useful. The best analytical work possible is not much use unless it can be applied to resolve a problem and the solution is communicated to the user.

Working Through the Case

The first concern is to comply with the request of the 'Required'. That is, if the 'Required' asks for a report, provide a report. If however, the 'Required' does not specify format, you should use an approach that is logical for the particular case.

It is essential that you focus on the role that you are asked to play and on the needs of the user(s). Throughout your reading, you should be determining both your personal situation in the context of the problem situation, and the real needs of the recipient of your response if they are identified.

With questions not requiring a particular approach, you should try to organize your response so that you systematically deal with the issues or points at hand in arriving at a conclusion. While it is possible that some questions may not call for a conclusion, you can always conclude that there is no clear outcome. It is safer to plan on deriving an answer or conclusion than to run the risk of forgetting to pull your answer together.

Role Playing

In answering questions developed in a practical setting, you are frequently required to play a particular role. This role may be as an employee or as a consultant. The proper exercise of this role will have an effect on your approach in the following areas:

1. The issues you address,
2. The language you use (technical or descriptive), and
3. The tenor of your report (authoritative, tactful, adversarial, supportive, etc.)

How well you play your role will almost certainly determine how relevant and useful your response is to the user(s).

User Needs

Users are not always right about what their needs are. One way of focusing on user needs is to ask yourself "If I were the user, what would I want to see in my answer?" Note the use of "I" in both cases. The question you should be asking yourself is "What would I be prepared to pay for if I were paying the consultant's bill or the employee's salary?" Good role playing makes it almost impossible to do anything but cut right into the heart of the concerns presented in the situation.

Recommendations are what the user(s) are most interested in. Recommendations should be pragmatic, relevant, useful and responsive to the user's concerns. Note that the absence of recommendations in any situational questions will render your response useless to the user.

Analysis

Most of us are familiar with the concept of analysis. Here, we explore the three clear components of analysis: depth, breadth and judgment.

Depth relates to the intensity of your analysis. The more complex, sophisticated and complete your analysis, the greater your depth.

Breadth includes looking at options, taking the broad picture, considering the qualitative aspects and including an analysis of corollary concerns.

Judgment involves the selection of the appropriate analytical techniques to be used for the analysis. This will take into account environmental and time factors, the degree of accuracy required and the theoretical correctness of the technique selected in the circumstances.

The proper use of judgment will help you avoid the risks associated with too much or too little depth and/or breadth. If you have too much depth on an unimportant issue, your efforts may be poorly rewarded. Conversely, too much breadth can lead to superficial conclusions and recommendations that are of little use to the user(s). If, however, your depth and breadth are not sufficient in connection with the major issues, you will not be in a position to make effective recommendations.

Good analysis should appear to be constructed in such a way as to argue your case. You should make your points so that they support your argument and your recommendations should flow forcefully from the analysis. Where you are dealing with both sides of the case, you should generally group arguments for and arguments against; you can then logically argue that one set is superior to the other or that the choice is too close to call.

If the analysis requires quantitative input, the quantitative analysis should be done first. However, before you venture into an involved quantitative analysis, you should ensure that it will be needed. You must first assess the overall situation to see whether your planned analysis is necessary or if the conclusion is obvious without the analysis. For instance, if the situation makes it clear that the company is in a survival situation, it would not be useful or sensible to go ahead and assess a potential investment requiring substantial unavailable cash.

Presenting the Case

It is important to identify the problem as a starting point. You must then proceed logically to a recommended correction of the problem. It is very important that you provide recommendations and that the panel knows that you are making them.

Criticizing past events ("You should have....") is not usually helpful. The user needs to know how to solve or improve the current situation, not be reminded of what has been done poorly.

in the past and cannot be corrected.

When you are making recommendations you should try to avoid the use of "if" (the conditional tense) and qualifying words. If your recommendations starts with " You could , "Perhaps", "You should consider.....", or "You might", you are not likely to be making a recommendation. The easiest way to ensure that you are clearly making a recommendation is to begin "I recommend that" . It is then very difficult for anyone to misinterpret your intention.

Identify all issues. Make sure you deal with all the components of an issue and develop integrated recommendations. If you have insufficient time to treat all issues, point out the issues you would deal with at a later time. Make sure you apply your analysis in the context of the problem situation presented. Make recommendations even if you do not have time for a complete analysis.

Where appropriate, ensure that your presentation contains both qualitative and quantitative analysis. Describe any calculations. This allows the panel to follow your logic.

A good presentation should have correct grammatical construction, flow from point to point and be readily understood by the users. Be as brief as possible without losing any content. A well thought-out, organized response need not be excessively long. Taking an excessive number of words to make your point does not improve it. It only provides the potential for confusion and contradiction. State each point and then develop it. Ensure that you clearly distinguish one point from another.

Good Luck.

(Adapted from the Society of Management Accountants' Business Competition Case Competition Guide)

