

GETTING A TOP MANAGEMENT CONSULTING JOB FROM USC:
THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE

By

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
Graduation with Honors from the
South Carolina Honors College

May, 2020

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Thesis Summary

This thesis is meant to serve as an instructional guide on landing a job at an elite management consulting firm for students of the University of South Carolina. Management consulting is an attractive career path for many reasons, but it also is intense, has long hours, and is not the right career fit for everyone. The first section of this guide seeks to introduce the field, help students understand if the career might be right for them, and outline the steps they should take to make themselves competitive when they apply. In the second section, they will find the personal stories of USC students who have beaten the odds and broken into the industry.

Preface

Consulting is a nebulous concept, meaning different things to different people. As a general term, consulting refers to the business to business sale of advisory services. Tens of thousands of businesses call themselves consulting firms, ranging from one-man boutique shops to international behemoths that employ thousands of people. Before going any further, it is important to pinpoint exactly what type of consulting this guide focuses on. Management consulting is a part of consulting that seeks to improve the performance of businesses, institutions, governments, and non-profits at the management level. Strategy is a subsection of management consulting that helps the top-level management of organizations identify the strategic issues they face and develop plans to improve their performance.

This guide was informed by interviews with students that have landed jobs at top consulting firms, as well as by the author's personal experience. Interviews were limited to students working for three consulting firms: McKinsey & Company, Bain & Company, and Boston Consulting Group, for a few specific reasons. First, these companies are the three dominant players that still consider themselves to primarily work in the strategy space. Second, they are regularly seen as having the most competitive recruitment process and the most difficult interviews. If a student takes the advice of this guide to heart, my hope is that they will be well prepared for any consulting firm they apply to. Third, they have only begun to extend offers to students of our university in recent years. The pathway there for students was tough: with little to no on-campus presence from these firms, students had to go out of their way to learn about the industry, network with individuals, and earn themselves an interview.

My goal in writing this guide is to institutionalize the industry knowledge of the students who have managed to get a job at McKinsey, Bain, or BCG. My hope is that this will help you to understand as a fellow Gamecock what a job in management consulting is really like and how you can get there too.

What is Management Consulting?

Unlike most advisory firms that help organizations in specific business functions like accounting, systems integration, or restructuring, management consulting firms typically serve clients across virtually all industries and types of strategic problems. The dominant management consulting players do not position themselves as experts in one business function, nor do they recruit analysts to have functional areas of expertise. Instead, they believe in assembling teams of highly intelligent, analytical problem solvers from diverse backgrounds to critically think through and resolve their client's most strategic issues. Management consultants work with senior level management of major organizations, helping them understand questions such as:

- Why have we been losing market share?
- Would it make sense to merge with our competitor?
- What steps should we take now to remain competitive in five years?
- How do we develop a plan to improve international market penetration?
- Should we launch a new consumer product?
- What can the health institutions do to more effectively combat heart disease?
- Is our non-profit truly improving the lives of those we set out to serve?

The key element of strategy consulting work is that it concerns the types of decisions that will have a profound impact on a client's future. Partners and upper management of these consulting firms typically advise directly to the C-suite and other executives of the world's largest organizations. Entry-level consultants normally do not get too much exposure to senior client management, but the extensive research that they conduct with their team forms the foundation of the recommendation that their firm gives.

The Management Consulting Landscape

Today, the management consulting space is dominated by several large, key players. Within these, some consulting firms specialize in strategy problems for a specific aspect of business, some consult in everything, and some consult in nearly everything but hire people into specific practice areas. If you think that consulting could be the right career path for you, it's essential that you understand the differences between companies and what they mean for the work you will do.

The Big Three

McKinsey & Company, Bain & Company and the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) – commonly referred to as the “Big Three” or “MBB” – are regularly seen as the dominant strategy consulting firms. Although they are not the biggest consulting firms by revenue, they are often viewed as the

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most competitive in the industry and as working on the most high-profile, strategic projects. The advice given in this guide is tailored to the Big Three, informed by interviews with multiple students who have managed to get a job at one of them.

The Big Three are grouped together because they regularly consult for the same clients, bid for the same projects, and compete for the same talent during recruitment. Each has a strong global presence with dozens of offices across the world and may boast consulting for the vast majority of the Fortune 500. Big Three consulting firms hire on a generalist model, meaning that they make entry-level consultants work on projects covering a broad spectrum of industries and problems, rather than specialize in a certain consulting practice. Because of the caliber of students that they recruit and the intense business training that the job entails, these firms have impressive alumni networks, counting among their former employees numerous Fortune 500 CEOs and world leaders.

McKinsey, Bain and BCG all work in the same fields yet vary in size, culture, and the specific sectors they lead the market in. You can read about company cultures or stereotypes online, though there is no better way to understand consulting than by speaking to real consultants in the industry. It is not uncommon that students apply to all three, as did many of the interviewees profiled at the end of this guide. In the end, nearly all chose their firm due to cultural fit and the people they met during recruitment. If you intend to apply to one of these three, you should seek to understand the differences between companies by doing online research and speaking to consultants working there.

The Big Four

In the past few decades, the “Big Four” accounting firms – Deloitte, PwC, KPMG, and Ernst & Young – have extensively grown their consulting presence and now normally compete with MBB for project work and recruitment talent. Each has a very robust management consulting practice that is often demarcated by functional area of practice. This is an important distinction between them and competitors like Bain or McKinsey; the Big Four typically hire students to work in a specific consulting area, such as operations, human capital, or financial services, rather than as generalists. As a result, Big Four consultants typically specialize in a certain sector earlier on in their career than their Big Three counterparts, although this is not always the case. This could be a better fit for you if there is a certain business function that you are passionate about and want to pursue it right out of college.

Furthermore, there is an important distinction between the advisory and consulting practices of the Big Four, although the line can be a little blurry. It's best to just think through the two words. In one, you will act as an advisor, helping companies understand risk, follow regulation, and implement existing plans. In the other, you will be coming up with creative solutions to the problems that the business faces. Both are rewarding fields to work in but attract different people due to their different work scopes, job requirements, and career trajectories. If you apply here, do your research to understand which side of the equation you would like to work on.

Other Major Players

Other large management consultancies include Accenture, Oliver Wyman, L.E.K. Consulting, Booz Allen Hamilton, Mercer, Kearney, IBM, and others. Most of these primarily work in functional areas, such as Oliver Wyman in finance, IBM in transformation technology, or Booz Allen Hamilton in federal government work. The recruitment process is often very similar to that of the Big Three, with high expectations and necessary case interviews. If you know that you want to consult in a specific area or join that industry once you leave consulting, these are great ways to position yourself for success.

Why Do Companies Hire Management Consultants?

As you investigate the work that management consultants do, you may find yourself asking, "Why do companies hire consulting firms to tackle these issues or make these decisions? Don't companies know their businesses better than an outsider does?" The short answer is no, they oftentimes don't. The larger a company gets, the more bureaucracy it normally has, which in turn means more levels of management and less time for company executives to understand every aspect of their company. Ultimately, executives only have the same time in their day as you or me.

Companies consequently hire consulting firms for multiple reasons. First, it's possible that the client hasn't yet found the root of their issues or believe that doing it internally would take too long. Consulting firms work at a rapid pace and will quickly identify the critical factors of client's problems to move forward. Second, hiring an expensive consulting firm may in fact be much cheaper than solving an issue internally. Identifying the right people to hire, offering them a competitive salary, and waiting for results is highly expensive in terms of both time and money.

Management consulting firms typically have a deeper understanding of the client's market landscape and competitors. It is likely that the partner on a project has seen very similar issues at different companies. In addition, consulting firms utilize external networks to gather knowledge from former executives of the client's industry. Fourth, there may be political motivations; getting

the recommendation of a big brand name consulting firm may allow the C-suite to get the go-ahead from their board of directors. And lastly, the input of external voices goes a long way. Company executives might feel more confident in their decisions if they are backed up by the rigorous analysis of intelligent outside voices that they can trust.¹

How the Job Works

Management consultancies are firms, meaning they are led by a team of global partners that serve as the heads of projects and guide firm direction. The actual job is a team-based, project practice in which a small group of consultants work together to make a final recommendation to their client. The specific work you do will depend entirely on the scope of your project, but will include research, slide building, and daily meetings with both your client and team. Consultants work side by side with their clients, which means frequent travel. A typical week means traveling to the client site Monday through Thursday to investigate operations, conduct research, and meet with management.

A project teams typically has a partner at the top, an associate partner or principal, a manager that guides its day to day operations of the team, a handful of post-MBA consultants, and several post-undergraduate level analysts. The size and composition of a team completely depends on the scope of the project. Some projects have as few as six individuals, while others may have over a dozen. Projects last anywhere between a few months to up to a year depending upon their scope, the problem, and client expectations. At generalist firms like the Big Three, entry level consultants rotate across industries and problems on projects lasting between four to eight months.

What a Normal Week Looks Like

The scope and content of your work will entirely depend upon the project you are working on, but the structure of your week will follow a similar pattern in your time as a consultant. In a typical week, you will be travel to the client site Monday through Thursday. If the client is out of town, that means heading to the airport either Sunday night or Monday morning and staying in a hotel with your team until Thursday, when you return to your home city.

Each day of the week will normally contain the following elements: a morning check-in with your team, problem-solving for solutions with team leadership, meeting with clients to gather research and give updates, individual time to conduct research, slide building to communicate your insights, and a team-wide check-out at the end of the client's working day. Around 6pm, you will return to your hotel, but your workday is not done. You might grab a quick bite to eat, slide in a workout at the hotel gym, and spend a little time catching up with family or friends. After that, you will get

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your laptop back out for few more hours to respond to emails, polish off your work for the day, and prepare for client meetings tomorrow. About once a week you can expect to get a nice dinner with your team, in which you all put away work for a few hours and enjoy each other's company.

On Friday, consultants typically go into their home office. The structure of the day is essentially the same as the other days of the week but more relaxed. You may go out for lunch with home office colleagues, catching up with them on their projects and plans for the weekend. You will finish up the week with a team meeting to summarize the status of your project and finalize what you will be doing the following week. The time that you put your laptop away on Friday depends on the demands of your current project, but you will find that most consultants have headed to the break room for an office-wide happy hour by 4 or 5pm. Though you worked long hours Monday through Thursday, you are now done for the week and have your weekend freedom in front of you.

The content and approach of the research process for entry-level consultants also entirely depends upon the demands of the project you are working on. Research takes form in many ways. On a manufacturing operations improvement, you could spend a few hours per day interviewing plant managers to see what problems look like on the ground level. On a private equity project, you could interview external experts from the acquisition target's industry to understand macro-level trends. Maybe you spend your time reading through the transcripts of competitors' earnings reports, looking for insights in how they approached similar investor concerns or industry problems. On a telecommunications project, you might have to synthesize dozens of reports from the FCC in search of broad-level industry trends. Maybe you drive to the physical locations of a retailer to do field research on real customers. Sometimes it may be internal research, sifting through reports of previous projects the firm has done on similar problems. The central element of your research is that the answers don't readily exist out there; you have to find and create them.

Is Management Consulting the Right Fit for Me?

You may be thinking at this point that management consulting sounds like the right career for you. Helping companies solve their big issues sounds cool, right? Getting to travel to new cities while working one of the highest paying jobs you can at twenty-two? This may sound appealing, but in reality, the job is difficult, time draining, and frequently exhausting.

Many students think that working for one of the Big Three is the ideal career, but they don't truly understand what the job demands, the right reasons to want it, or how difficult it is to get there. If you're just interested in the money, prestige, or travel associated with consulting, then it probably isn't the right career for you. If you *are* interested in a highly rewarding career path that exposes you to a broad set of problems, challenges you to constantly learn, and are excited by creative problem solving, then it could just be the right fit for you.

What Does it Take to Get There?

Getting a job at an elite consulting firm is hard – very hard. This section is not meant to discourage you but rather to lay out some facts about what your expectations should be in trying to get there. Keep these in mind as you investigate management consulting, and remember: if students from our university have done it, you can too.

Consultancies like MBB try to recruit the best of the best for their analyst classes. They want the types of people that were leaders on their campus, exhibit exceptional academic performance and demonstrate strong professional experience. As a result, they have historically only recruited at the world's most prestigious universities: schools like the Ivies, Stanford, Duke, and top liberal arts colleges for the United States or Oxford and Cambridge for England. They spend massive amounts on recruiting at so called "target schools" every year, flying to campus to hold informational sessions, invite students to networking events, and interview. Even then, the offer rate at such schools hovers around three percent. Worldwide, firms hire fewer than one percent of those that apply.

Without this sort of on campus presence, this process is even harder for students studying at USC. To get an interview as student from a non-target school, applicants typically need a connection at the firm to stick their head out for them during the recruitment process. Every student interviewed in this guide had a so-called "champion" or "quarterback" that helped them navigate their way to consulting. How you can build effective relationships with full-time employees to get to this point is covered in detail in the networking chapter of this guide.

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Consulting firms want to see resumes with nearly perfect GPAs, strong standardized test scores, leadership involvement in extracurriculars, and impactful professional experiences. Getting past the resume screen is sometimes seen as the most difficult part of the process, as the chances are slim and presume significant professional development in order to be competitive. Resume reviews are holistic though, meaning that if you lack in one area of review, exceptional performance in another may compensate. But you should try to excel in all major categories.

Once you get an interview, the process doesn't get any easier. The top management consulting firms are known for having the most challenging interviews in the world. A 2013 study by Glassdoor found that McKinsey, BCG and Bain had the first, third, and fifth toughest job interviews respectively.² What makes them so difficult? The expectations are high and the questions are challenging. Consulting firms make candidates work through multiple, rigorous, half-hour case problems designed to mimic the work a consultant does. Answers must be highly logical, intensely analytical, and communicated as if you were talking to the client's CEO. Calculating an eight percent growth rate over a five-year timeline in your head is already hard, but it's especially hard when you have a partner sitting across the table from you. Some people are naturally good at case interviews, while most spend months practicing. If you want a job in management consulting, be prepared to spend upwards of fifty hours running practice cases with your peers.

The students from USC that managed to get a job at McKinsey, Bain or BCG knew what they were getting into. They spent months researching the industry, developing a personal network with firms, and practicing for interviews without even being sure they would get one. They were well aware that odds were stacked against them, but they embraced the challenge for what laid at the other side. The advice that USC give students is clear: if you think you want to work for a top management consultancy, be absolutely positive that it is what you want to do and then fully commit yourself to preparing for it.

Good Reasons to Pursue Consulting

An Affinity for Problem Solving

Above all, the best reason to pursue management consulting is because you like the nature of the work: problem solving. Are you the type of person that sees a problem with a business and immediately starts thinking about it could be solved? You should be excited by the idea of working with ambiguous goals, culling through different data sets in search of meaning, and coming up with effective solutions on a team. Companies pay consultancies top dollar because their problems are hard to solve or they don't have the resources to find answers on their own. Your job is to get

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to the root of an issue at a rapid speed and find effective solutions for your client. The work is challenging, forcing you to think creatively when the answer isn't clear. For some people this is intellectually stimulating, while for others it can be frustrating.

Broad Exposure to Industries and Problems

Successful USC students were highly attracted to the broad spectrum of industries, problems, and people that consulting exposes you to. The breadth of projects that consultants work on allows them to see business from a variety of different angles, developing what a consultant at Bain described as a core business skillset. Some projects may be highly analytical and research driven, while others might require frequent travel and client interaction. Throughout their diverse projects, consultants gain a deep understanding of business at an accelerated rate.

Critical Thinking Skills

Working in management consulting is like a crash course in learning how to clearly think through large problems. This isn't an industry where answers readily exist. Consultants must be able to identify the critical factors of an issue, pull together research from different sources, and synthesize key insights into actionable steps for the client. Oftentimes, getting to the root of a difficult problem is a matter of being able to sift through what matters and what doesn't. Because consulting projects are done at a fast rate, consultants must learn to do this efficiently in order to not waste their time and the client's money. When you leave consulting, you will have a valuable set of critical thinking and problem-solving skills that are highly sought after by employers.

Company Culture

If you want to surround yourself with intelligent, high-functioning individuals from a diversity of backgrounds, consulting could be a good industry for you. Every day you will be challenged by your peers in a highly supportive environment, but one that ultimately serves a client's needs. The bottom line of any firm is the value it creates for clients, so you must be comfortable with long hours and putting last-minute demands at the top of your priority list. Negatives like this are offset by the fun, collaborative culture that firms strive to foster for their employees. Happy hours, company retreats, and weekend parties with your coworkers are all commonplace in the industry.

Steep Learning Curve and Personal Development

Consulting is an industry with a steep learning curve that prioritizes rapid professional development. After a few weeks of training in the company's consulting approach, new hires immediately begin work on important aspects of the project they are staffed on. Some consultants describe this as a "baptism by fire approach," in which firms expect new hires to quickly perform

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to standards while helping them get there. Every time a consultant is comfortable doing their work, they will be given greater project responsibility that pushes them to perpetually grow.

At the end of the day, the only asset of a consulting firm is its people, so firms invest heavily in their employees to ensure they are the best in the industry. You will constantly be given feedback on how to improve and work with your superiors to make sure you are developing in the right way.

Exit Opportunities

Working at a top management consulting firm isn't a golden ticket to do *anything* once you leave the firm, but it does come pretty close. Traditionally, consultants choose one of three pathways after finishing their time as an entry level consultant: (1) graduate school, (2) direct promotion to a post-MBA role, or (3) exiting "to industry."

Many consulting firms offer partial or full graduate school sponsorship at top MBA programs if the consultant agrees to return to the firm for a few years once they finish school. For example, all three MBB firms will fully cover the cost of an MBA at top schools like Harvard Business School, Stanford Graduate School of Business, or Kellogg if consultants agree to return after graduate school for a period of two years. This is an attractive offer, as it allows you to take a break from the job, get a degree from a top institution, and feel comfortable in your job security. The details of each program differ by company. Bain, for example, allows a past consultant to capitalize upon the offer up to two years after they leave the firm. This means that past employees can leave the consulting industry, work for up to two years, and then decide to go back to business school with sponsorship. Investigate different firms' policies if this is something that interests you.

A second, less common exit opportunity is being directly promoted to the role for which firms normally require an MBA. This is limited to the top performers in each consulting class, as it is a fast track to gaining more responsibility on projects, doubling your salary, and growing your presence at the firm. Again, details differ by company. McKinsey, for example, has an accelerated pathway straight to their Engagement Manager role for exceptional Business Analysts.

Lastly, the majority of consulting hires leave the consulting industry once their contract ends. This is anticipated and actually encouraged by management, as it is part of the "up or out" system that most consulting firms use. Many people thoroughly enjoy the consulting job but want to understand what jobs are like "in industry," as consultants say. It's possible that you loved one of your projects and now want to dedicate yourself to that client's industry. Maybe you feel comfortable enough with your business toolkit to finally start the business idea you always had. Or perhaps you want to make a radical shift in your career trajectory, transitioning into

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government, law or an international institution like the World Bank. Firms understand that not everyone is going to stick around, so they want you to follow your passions with the skills the job has given you.

If you do exit into industry, you will find an eager job market in front of you. Companies like to hire ex-consultants because of the managerial toolkit that the job gives them. Leaving a consulting company, you will have extensive business knowledge, be a highly efficient employee with a strong work ethic, excel in team environments, and have valuable critical thinking skills. Essentially, you will have many of the competencies that companies are always looking for. Partners and others in consulting management can introduce you to those they know in the fields you are looking at. Hiring consultants makes companies feel like part of the vetting process is already done for them; if a brand name consulting firm trusted you, companies think that they should too.

In addition, it is not uncommon that consultants with a few years of experience are hired at more senior roles in industry than they would have progressed to if they had joined that company right out of college. Few industries develop you as quickly or intensely as consulting does, and companies in industry recognize that.

Another fairly common exit opportunity from the Big Three is transitioning from consulting into private equity. Consultants regularly do market due diligence for private equity firms, which gives them a solid understanding of the industry and valuable analytical skills that private equity firms desire. While ex-bankers will perform the majority of private equity financial analyses, ex-consultants will focus on the managerial strategy of the firm's portfolio, formulating and implementing plans to improve performance and value.

Bad Reasons to Pursue Consulting

The bad reasons to go into management consulting are typically those that initially attract people to it: money, prestige, and travel. It isn't necessarily bad to be attracted to these things, but they should never be your motivating factors for going into the field. If they are, you will likely find yourself burnt out after a few years and wondering where you went wrong.

Money

Let's start with the money first. Getting a six-figure job out of college sounds great, but money loses much of its allure when you consider the hours that you will be working. If look at a consultant's salary on an hourly basis, you'll find that many jobs will pay the same – you're just working more hours. Your overtime is already factored into the expectation that you will be

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flexible to do whatever the job takes, even if that means cranking out the atypical eighty-hour week. Management consulting is more like a nine to nine job than a nine to five, with the average work week somewhere in the mid-sixties for analyst roles. Maybe you're only working sixty hours a week, but across traveling to the airport, going through security, your flight, and Ubers to and from the hotel or client site, you hit seventy. You likely won't be reading a new book or watching a movie on the plane either—chances are your firm will have paid for inflight Wi-fi and you'll be knee deep in last minute edits for your client meeting the next day.

Prestige

If you're into the job because of the prestige associated with it, you'll be disappointed to find that nobody outside of a few business circles will know or care about the company you work for. Firms try to actively dissociate from the unflattering image of consultants as arrogant, business intellectuals that the industry's Iivied history created. Nobody likes the self-important person that feels compelled to let everyone know what they do for a living. No consultant, similarly, wants to work on a project with someone who chose their career to impress other people.

Travel

You will also be disappointed to find that traveling for work isn't always as exciting as it sounds. Consultants travel to where their client is, which could mean spending your Mondays through Thursdays in a rural manufacturing town an hour away from the nearest airport. Maybe you do get to travel to a cool new city, but even then you will be spending your day working at the client site, eating, and working at your hotel. When you finish for the day you will probably be tired, and the time to explore the city will have passed. The highlight of your trip might be getting a drink and a fancy dinner with the client or your team. Sure, you can travel on the weekends, but you can do that on any job. By the third month of a travel project, you may just wish to sleep in the luxury of your own bed. The suitcase that you once loved to pack can become the focus of a painful Sunday night ritual if you find yourself unsuited for the travel lifestyle.

Peer Pressure

Lastly, you shouldn't go into consulting because you feel peer pressure to. Competitive industries attract type A people, the kind that got good grades as a kid, excelled in high-school, and went on to be leaders in college. It's easy to fall into the trap of feeling like you have to go after a certain job because it seems like the logical next step. Management consulting is a rewarding field for those that genuinely enjoy its work, but it comes with drawbacks and isn't for everybody. Be honest with yourself. If the work of management consulting doesn't truly interest you, then why go after it? There are a multitude of incredible career paths out there, and the only person the job

truly matters to is you. Pursue a career in the things that excite you most, and you will find that you will not only appreciate the work you do, but you will also be much better at it.

Are You Mentally Prepared?

It is widely known that consultants work a lot of hours. Thankfully, most firms protect the weekends of those in entry-level roles. You likely won't be working on Saturday or Sunday unless there is something essential in the project pipeline, and you'll find that happy hours on Fridays are a regular event. However, you should understand what the demanding schedule of management consulting really entails. It is easy to not realize as a student how much of a time commitment sixty to seventy hours a week really is. The low end of sixty hours alone translates to 8am to 8pm Monday through Friday.

These demands of the job can come with considerable personal costs. Consider some of the following questions. Do you want a dog? Where will it go Monday through Thursday when you're on a travel case? Do you have a significant other? How will you two deal with you being gone for half the week? Are your friends from college working in the same city as you? What will you tell them when you can't meet up for the second time this week because of your project?

You learn to adapt to the pressures of the consulting lifestyle and your efficiency at work will creep into other aspects of your daily life. It *is* still possible to regularly go out with friends on the weekends, to work out every day, and have free time to pursue your passions. To excel in consulting requires a delicate balancing act of meeting the demands of your work and realizing your personal goals. If your friends are working a standard nine to five, you may envy the extra four hours per day that they have to do whatever they want. Thankfully, the other side of the picture is that you'll be spending your time in an extremely high learning environment with supportive coworkers. Is that a sacrifice you are willing to make?

Characteristics of a Good Consultant

Good consultants are intellectually curious by nature, excited to learn about the problems of complex organizations from a variety of angles. Every project will be different, and it is your job to learn as much as you can about the client and its industry. Not every project will be in the industry you're most interested in nor have the most thrilling problem to dissect. The people that love the job are those that can find the silver lining that excites them no matter what they are working on.

Second, consultants must have superb interpersonal skills. Consulting is a client services industry that is built upon trust, meaning you must possess high emotional intelligence to excel.

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Communication capabilities are essential to the job, from collaborating with your team to convincing your client to trust your recommendation.

Another common trait of good consultants is grit. The job will never be easy, and there's no giving up when you get frustrated. If the project you're working on gets exceptionally busy and you end up working on challenging piece of work at one in the morning, you need to have the mental fortitude to power through.

Consultants have to be flexible with the rapidly changing demands of the job. Consulting is one of the few industries in which the old adage "no two days will look alike" is exceptionally true. Every day, you will be working on new things, speaking to different people, and getting closer to the root of your client's problem. The project you work on in six months will look entirely different from the one you're working on now, meaning the day to day demands will change too.

Even during projects your work may change significantly. It's possible that a piece of research you have worked on for days becomes irrelevant to the team, so you have to immediately switch to something else. Sometimes you may have to book a last-minute flight to the client site because of a necessary new meeting hundreds of miles away. Occasionally, the central focus of your project may shift, and your entire team will have to reorient it's approach. Simply put, consultants are those who respond well to changing circumstances. As one McKinsey consultant said, "If you're not flexible, adventurous and willing to roll with the punches, then it's not a good industry for you. If you want a steady, 'this is what I do every week,' then consulting probably isn't the best lifestyle choice."

Developing Yourself and Your Resume

If you've stuck with me this far, then you're likely wondering how to develop yourself into the type of candidate that firms look for. Consultancies want to see excellence in three main categories of an application: academics, professional experiences, and leadership. In this section, I will describe how to take advantage of your time at USC to develop yourself personally, professionally, and make an impact in the things that you do.

Professional Capital

Professional capital – the notion that past professional experiences build upon each other to open new doors – pervaded the stories of students profiled in this guide. As one interviewee remarked, no one wakes up one day with a job at a top consulting firm. Successful candidates had thoroughly impressive resumes when they applied, interning at places like investment banks, foreign embassies, Tesla and venture capital firms. On campus, they were leaders of student organizations and could point to the impact they had within them. Just like their consulting job, they didn't just wake one day wake up with these past experiences. Every student came to campus with the same opportunities in front of them; it was a matter of how they spent their time that allowed them to get where they are.

Building professional capital is the product of investing your time in the right things. Just like financial capital, the earlier you start investing in yourself the better off you will be. The smaller roles you take on early will position you to become a leader in your student organizations, which in turn will teach you valuable skills to get your first internship. Your first internship will give you credibility, professional skills, and knowledge of the real world that opens doors for your second internship. As your professional capital grows, so will the opportunities that are available to you.

It is important to note that professional capital isn't just a matter of getting involved in a lot of different things or collecting internships under your belt. Real professional capital accumulates through the effort that *you* put into what you do, making an impact throughout your years as an undergraduate. If you make the most of the experiences you have, you will develop the personal integrity, leadership, and competence that top firms look for.

What Should You Study?

Management consulting firms want to hire smart people, not specific majors. So long as you have the business intelligence to excel in a case interview, McKinsey, Bain and BCG do not mind what you study as an undergraduate. The most common backgrounds are from business or economics given the nature of the field, but firms are composed of people from nearly every major imaginable.

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For example, the 2019 intern class of Bain's Atlanta office included a variety of academic backgrounds: computer science, history, business, applied mathematics, public health, economics, management information systems, industrial engineering, and public policy.

The majority of students at USC who went on to the Big Three were international business majors primarily because that was what the first people to get there studied. As they spoke with friends and informal networks, consulting awareness spread through the IB community. Other successful candidates majored in things like finance, chemical engineering, philosophy, international studies, operations and supply chain, and management. If you are worried that your major doesn't fit the industry, don't be. Firms understand the value in having teams comprised of various perspectives.

Majoring in business might give you a leg up when you start to practice casing, but non-business students can easily overcome this through self-education and practice. In fact, it may be beneficial to have liberal arts mixed into your studies. Philosophy, history, political science and similar disciplines actually provide some of the analytical skills that consultants use. Reading hundreds of pages of seemingly obscure, difficult information in order to extract a few key insights is very similar to consulting's core functions.

Academic Programs

Nevertheless, there are a few academic resources at the university that past students have found helpful to prepare for consulting. Do not think that you have to follow one of these tracks to be successful but consider them if they fit your interests.

Finance Scholars

This program is committed to building a pipeline to high trajectory finance jobs like Investment Banking, Asset Management, Consulting, and Corporate Finance. It has advanced and specialized course work for Corporate Finance (FINA 365) and Portfolio Management (FINA 469) that is structured in a case study format. Additionally, there are four 1-hour credit finance practicum courses such as Investment Banking, R code, Monte Carlo Simulation, and Financial Ethics. These courses are either taught by the top Moore School Faculty or with industry partners. Students will now apply in the Fall of their Sophomore year and the application involves a resume and statement of interest, as well as interviews with faculty, current Finance Scholars, and Alumni.

International Business Education Alliance (IBEA)

IBEA is a two-year track in the international business major that brings together a cohort of 40 students from around the world. Students study together for a semester each in Germany, the United States, Singapore, and Brazil. With a focus on management consulting, a hallmark of the

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program is a semester-long corporate project in each country. Conducted with large multinationals such as IBM, EY, Prudential, and PwC, these projects give students the opportunity to build a global network, collaborate across cultures, and gain valuable real-world experience. Often, students go on to intern or work full-time at one of these partner companies.

Along with corporate projects, studying abroad for three semesters allows IBEA members to immerse in different cultures and learn new languages, both valuable skills in today's global workplace. Perhaps the biggest value of the program is the cohort itself, a tight-knit and supportive community that pushes its members to reach their full potential.

Courses to Gain Consulting Skills

The Darla Moore School of Business (DMSB) offers a few different courses on business case studies and consulting. Professor Wolfgang Messner sometimes offers a consulting course to international business majors, in which students are graded upon the real consulting work they do for a business in the South Carolina community. In class, the professor teaches students the essentials of the consulting process and how to develop high-quality deliverables. In addition, Professor Messner teaches a case-study based class that challenges students to dissect the reasons behind major decisions of real-world businesses.

Strategic Management (MGMT 478) is a required class for business majors that teaches students to understand organizational strategy from a high level. One interviewee said that the course helped her cultivate a problem-solving mentality that helped her during case interviews. For example, she recounted having to formulate a strategic plan to counter aquifer depletion in the United States for one of her mid-terms. These sorts of assignments, in which answers are not readily available and you must think creatively, help develop the crucial thinking skills that management consultants need.

The Supply Chain Capstone course, limited to upper-level Operations and Supply Chain majors, puts students on teams to consult for major corporations in the region. Professors serve as advisors for teams, in which students must act as engagement heads, conducting research, formulating strategy, and interacting with the client company. This course is a great way to understand what consulting is like in the real world. If you are an Operations and Supply Chain major, you should apply to do this during your junior year so you have the experience by the time you apply to consulting firms.

Studying Abroad

Three quarters of interviewees studied abroad at least once and cite their experiences as a period of personal growth that was beneficial during their recruitment process. Uprooting oneself to a foreign environment is difficult, forcing you to become more flexible, outgoing, and comfortable in new social situations. Studying abroad was regularly a point of conversation for interviewees during the recruitment process, as they could demonstrate that they had developed these character traits that consulting firms desire. Furthermore, it's possible that studying abroad can make you more competitive for placement on international projects that have an element in the region you are already familiar with. If you can study abroad during your undergraduate career, it is strongly recommended that you do for many reasons far beyond its benefits in consulting recruitment.

Good Organizations to Be Involved In

Firms want to see that you made the most out of your time in college. They want to see a track record of leadership and impact in the organizations you join, because being a consultant means being the type of person that identifies and acts upon areas of improvement. When you become a leader in your organization, your goal should be to leave it better than you joined. Your involvement in extracurriculars forms the backbone of many of the reflective stories you tell in your behavioral interviews. Like your major, firms are less concerned with which organizations and more so what you did within them.

Professional Activities

The following are professional organizations on campus that students going into consulting have found particularly helpful. Many offer career advice, professional development opportunities, and hold events geared towards exposing students to different career fields.

Gamecock Consulting Club (GCC)

The Gamecock Consulting Club is the university's premiere undergraduate resource for students interested in consulting. GCC is a competitive-admit organization that helps students understand the consulting landscape, network with companies, mentor younger members, and prepare for consulting interviews. The organization works closely with the university to grow undergraduate awareness of consulting, hosting firm information sessions and speakers from the industry. Additionally, GCC has a track record of successful case competition performance and runs student-led consulting projects for social enterprises around the world. All eight interviewees in this project were members of GCC in some capacity, many in leadership roles.

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Although GCC was just founded in 2017, it may now count among its member alumni consultants at McKinsey, Bain, Boston Consulting Group, EY, Deloitte, IBM, and many other firms. Alumni typically are very involved with current organization members and work to bring their firms to campus. If you are trying to get into an elite strategy consulting company, GCC is your best resource.

Business Fraternities

Joining a business fraternity such as Alpha Kappa Psi, Delta Sigma Pi, and Sigma Omega Upsilon is often credited by students as one of the best ways to develop professionally, grow your network, and get involved in the school's business community. Business fraternities typically welcome students from all majors, meaning that membership exposes you to a number of different industries. They have well-developed alumni networks that current members may tap into. Some business fraternities have pro-bono consulting practices, which allow students to gain real-world experience by helping local businesses improve. The pledging process, in which new members must interview all brothers, has been cited by interviewees as a highly effective way to learn how to run informational interviews.

Professional Fraternities

Professional fraternities or honor societies are a great way to understand what career opportunities exist in that field and network with individuals passionate about them. The university has a number of professional fraternities, so it is likely that there is one for your major or career interests. For example, both engineering interviewees were involved with Tau Beta Pi, an engineering honor society.

Carolina Finance and Investment Association (CFIA)

The Carolina Finance and Investment Association is an organization dedicated to providing extracurricular educational opportunities for finance students. CFIA brings in weekly speakers to talk about the industry as well as the opportunities available. These speakers come from a wide variety of industries, including Asset Management, Investment Banking, Corporate Finance, Real Estate, Consulting, and Cryptocurrency. In addition to these weekly speakers, CFIA also does a trip each semester to either Charlotte or Atlanta to do office visits and to network with alumni. CFIA also leads professional development workshops, including Wall Street Prep, resume review, mock interviews, and recruitment overviews.

Case Competitions

The university offers several ways to participate in case competitions that allow students to analyze a problem, develop a recommendation, and present to company executives. Competitions are a great way to dip your toes in the consulting process to figure out if that type of work really interests you. Boeing, PwC, EY and other large companies regularly hold company-sponsored competitions at DMSB as recruiting tools, allowing students to network with employees and learn about employment opportunities.

Additionally, DMSB partakes in international case competitions, in which students and a faculty sponsor travel to other countries to compete against business schools from around the globe. These competitions are much more rigorous and require a larger time commitment for students. Two students interviewed spoke very highly of their participation in international case competitions. If a student is interested in being on an international case competition team, they should first try their hand at competitions held at the university.

Campus Activities

Greek Life

Multiple interviewees stated that their involvement in their social fraternity or sorority was one of their most impactful experiences in college. Greek organizations allow students to take on leadership responsibilities at a young age, and their social nature helps develop the interpersonal skills that consulting firms desire. One interviewee said that such membership exposes you to variety of people, to mentorship from an early stage, to alumni connections, and allows you to enjoy your time in college while concurrently developing yourself in other organizations.

DMSB Ambassador

Multiple interviewees have stated that their work as a Business School Ambassador was one of their most impactful student activities. This paid position requires working desks in the Welcome Center, assisting in DMSB alumni events, and giving building tours to potential students and business executives alike. Ambassadors are regularly invited to high-profile events, in which they represent the student body to corporate executives, alumni, the Dean, and other key stakeholders. Being a business school ambassador allows one to forge relationships with professors and administration while developing one's ability to effectively communicate.

University Ambassadors

Similar to the above, successful candidates have stated that being a University Ambassador helped them develop interpersonal skills for the consulting industry. Ambassadors give tours of the

university to groups of potential students and parents. They must present an extensive knowledge of what the university has to offer, be comfortable speaking in front of large groups, and have a trusting, conversational tone while answering questions. The position is unpaid but rewarding for those that do it.

Whatever Interests You

In the end, it is most important that your activities are genuine to you. There isn't a standard path of organizational involvement that consulting firms look for. Don't join an organization just because you think it would look good on your resume. According to a consultant at Bain, it's easy to tell between a candidate that joined an organization for the title and the one that did it out of honest interest. They want to see you be a leader in the things you are passionate about, because that is what will shine through in your interview.

Gaining Valuable Work Experiences

Professional experiences include internships, corporate projects, and other work you do for non-student organizations. Top management consulting firms expect you to have multiple legitimate professional experiences by the time you apply. Brand name experiences look great on resumes, but the most important thing is that your experiences reflect what you are interested in. There is no perfect collection of professional experiences that leads to consulting, no matter what you may read online.

The best way to find internships is to leverage your existing student networks. If you are interested in a specific field, chances are nearly certain that a student of the university has already done it. Ask students what their process was like getting there, what they liked about the experience, and whether or not they would recommend it to somebody else. Most of the interviewees profiled in the second section of this guide interned across a variety of fields. You should take their stories as encouragement to be comfortable pursuing what you want, not as a roadmap of what to do. Pursue internships in the things you find exciting.

Firms have slightly lower professional experience expectations for those applying to their internships, since most corporate internships are for the same summer as the ones that they offer. Nevertheless, you should strive to have at least one strong professional experience under your belt by the time of applying for your consulting internship. This doesn't have to specifically be an internship, but a meaningful way to spend your time in which you can make a tangible impact.

To demonstrate this point, one former Bain consultant recounted how he sold cars during the summer before he interned for the firm. Although it wasn't a brand name internship, he excelled

in the role and could communicate to his interviewers the valuable professional lessons he learned from the experience. One successful USC student forsook corporate internship opportunities during her sophomore summer to lead the Pillars for Carolina Program, as she saw it as a better opportunity to develop herself as a leader and create real change.

Creating a Compelling Resume

Consulting firms look for compelling credentials in three categories on a resume: academics, professional experiences, and leadership activities. The best applications will demonstrate strong performance in each, but applications are reviewed holistically. If one of these areas isn't quite up to par, exceptional performance in another may make up for it. Every piece of your resume will be considered.

In the academics section of your resume, firms specifically want to see high GPAs and standardized test scores. There aren't hard cut-offs for each per se, but there is a range that they typically hire from. Further, they take into account your major when considering your GPA. For example, students coming from business, technical, and social science fields should strive to have above a 3.85. On the other hand, those from highly rigorous fields like math, statistics or biochemistry are expected to have above a 3.7 to be competitive. Obviously, you should shoot to have the highest GPA you can, no matter what you study. Take USC's non-target recruiting status as a chip on your shoulder, because you'll likely be going up against students with 4.0s from the best universities.

The Big Three all require ACT or SAT scores as another data point to help them sift through the enormous number of applications they receive. A baseline for the Big Three is around a 30 on the ACT, but typical hires have a 32 or higher. For the SAT, a 1350 is around the minimum and a 1450 or higher is average. Again, really strong credentials in other sections of your resume or great networking can compensate for lower scores.

In your professional experiences and leadership activities, your resume should quantify the impact you had in your roles. Consulting is about driving change within organizations, so firms want to see that you have a track record of doing so already. Don't exaggerate the things you did but show the actions you took that you are proud of.

It's possible that you are a highly accomplished student and find it difficult to include all of your experiences on a single page. Remember, quality over quantity. If your resume looks overcrowded, a reviewer might think you are overextended and get frustrated trying to pick through the things

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you have done. A good resume should demonstrate the two or three most impactful or relevant experiences in each of your major sections.

If you want help improving your resume, there are multiple outlets you may take advantage of. The Office of Career Management in the business school offers resume reviews and consulting career advice for business students that schedule a meeting with a career counselor. The university's Career Center offers resume help to all students as well. Additionally, you can ask students familiar with the consulting industry to look over your resume for you. Seniors that interned at a consulting company are great resources to get feedback and see firsthand what successful resumes look like.

Networking

Once you think that management consulting would be a good fit for you, it can be daunting to think about how to get your foot in the door. This is many ways the step where USC students face the largest hurdles, given the lack of on campus resources that we have. If you want to break into the industry, then you will have to go out of your way to put yourself in front of companies. No matter the career you decide to pursue, knowing how to build yourself a network is critical to getting the job you want.

Simply put, networking is relationship building; it should be an honest activity that helps both parties get to know each other. The immediate goal of networking is to help you figure out if a certain job is right for you. Networking is not reaching out to random people and asking for a job, but it is the first step in landing the consulting job of your dreams. Throughout this section, I will discuss why networking is so crucial to consulting recruitment and describe an approach to it that has made USC students successful.

Where to Begin

Networking can take place in many ways – informational interviews, coffee chats, phone calls, corporate events, and even chance encounters with people who have a job that interests you. Throughout all of these, your goal is to learn more about a specific company and the role of the person you’re speaking to. On their end, consulting companies use networking to get a better idea of who to pick out to fill their recruitment classes.

The first step in building a network is to reflect. Ask yourself: Which type of consulting interests me? What firms in this consulting sector am I interested in working for? Once you have a handful of companies, you should research them extensively to get a clear idea of what a career at that firm really looks like. You will have limited time to get to know a company when you speak to real consultants, so you want to make sure you go into networking with a solid understanding of the industry.

Your Personal Story

Next, you have to understand yourself. A crucial aspect of networking that cannot be understated is to have a personal brand that you can compellingly communicate. Each successful USC candidate had a unique background and understood how their experiences led them to management consulting. Like you learn in BADM 301, this can be considered your “elevator pitch” and will vary in length depending on the situation you use it in. It shouldn’t be forced or too sales-like, but quickly highlight your background. It should tell a thoughtful story of how your experiences led

you to both this industry and the person you are speaking to. This lays the groundwork for the rest of your conversation, showing the other person that you understand yourself, know what you are in for, and can articulate why a career at their firm interests you.

When Should You Start?

Some people say that you can never get started networking too early, but you shouldn't feel behind the ball if you're a freshman or sophomore and haven't spoken to anyone yet. A good rule of thumb is to begin early in the year that you plan to get through recruitment. If you want to apply for junior summer internships, you should start networking during the spring of your sophomore year. If you're looking at full-time recruitment, then you should start during the spring of your junior year. This gives you enough time to adequately know different firms and develop relationships with those you speak to.

Un prepared students commonly reach out to consultants for the first time just weeks before their interview, and it rarely leads to anything impactful. You want to be the student that has corresponded with a consultant for months already, so when you reach out with an interview you have a working relationship already. In this scenario, the consultant is much more likely to stick his or her neck out for you during reviews.

Getting an Informational Interview

With research and reflection out of the way, you are now ready to start looking for people to speak to. First, think through the people you know. Ask around in student organizations. See if you have any family connections to the industry. Even if your immediate network does not include anybody working at one of your consulting firms, it's almost a certainty that they know somebody who does. You will be surprised at how extensive your existing network is if you just ask.

Once you have found somebody working at one of these firms, ask your common connection if they could connect you two by email. Any time you ask for an introduction, you are asking the other person to put their reputation on the line. Be sure you have a good relationship with them and include a polished resume to send along with the introduction.

Another common way to connect with consultants is through LinkedIn. Keep in mind that consultants get messages from interested students all the time. If you can't find a common connection between you two, your chances of receiving a response decrease significantly. A good place to start is to filter your searches by company and graduates of USC. Alumni have historically played a decisive role in helping students get in front of top consulting firms. If you can find another common point, such as being in the same Greek organization, major, or student group, that

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is even better. Once you are in their shoes, you will probably want to help out students from the organizations you were in too.

When you send an invite to connect with someone, briefly introduce yourself, mention the common point you share, and state your reason for reaching out. A successful message might look something like:

Hi _____,

I am a rising junior at USC studying (common major). I'm incredibly interested in management consulting and (contact's firm) specifically. I'd love to set up a brief call to hear about your path from USC to management consulting and any advice you'd have for students looking to do same.

Thank you,

(your name)

You may attach your resume to the message to give them a better idea of who you are. Make sure you tailor each message to your commonalities. You won't get responses from everybody, and that is fine. All it takes is a few strong relationships to put you on a firm's radar.

Office Preferences

The Big Three all recruit by office, meaning that your application will be sent to the recruitment team of the office you list as your main preference. As a result, you should only try network with people in cities that you would be okay with living in after graduation. Even for internships, you have to keep this in mind. Internships typically turn into return offers, so the office you apply for in August of junior year could be the city you end up working in. This is something you *must* keep in mind to be tactical in your networking.

Ideally, you should have one "quarterback" each of the offices you plan to apply to. These are the people that will be willing to stick their neck out for you during recruitment. You should not try to build a relationship with a consultant in Chicago if you plan to apply for Atlanta or New York; they won't be able to help you much outside of their office. You will be wasting your time and theirs. Most of the USC alumni at the Big Three work in the Southeast in places like Atlanta, Charlotte, Dallas, or Houston because of your location. The farther you get away from the

Southeast the harder it will be to network for two reasons. First, there will be fewer alumni at those offices. Second, there will be significantly less brand recognition of our university. But it's not impossible.

Talking with Consultants

Running informational interviews is an essential part of the recruitment process, but it is especially important for students coming from non-target schools. Given that we do not have much on campus recruitment or presence, this is your main chance to make a favorable impression with consultants at the company. A conversation that goes well can open doors, while one that goes poorly can severely hurt your chances of getting the job. Consultants in the industry agree: every interaction with a company is a sort of interview. You want to make the best impression you can.

When you schedule an informational interview, make sure you're as flexible as possible with the contact's schedule. You are taking time out of their day, not them out of yours. Some students in this guide networked while on the other side of the world, staying up until the late hours of the night just to get on the phone with somebody. If they ask you for your availability, send them definitive time blocks like 'Tuesday 1- 4pm, Wednesday 1:30pm – on' to make their job easier. Be sure to send an email calendar invitation once you two agree on a time.

Preparation for the call is critical. Before speaking, you should fully understand your personal story and main points about the contact's company. You should shoot to talk for about thirty minutes, although great conversations can last as long as an hour. As you approach thirty minutes, let them know you that you are aware time is coming up. They might have to go, or they might tell you not to worry about it.

Again, your goal here is to get to know them and their company. Be prepared with a list of questions to ask but be open to going wherever the conversation takes you. Informational interviews should flow as a pleasant discussion between two people, not an awkward set of rigid questions. You should ask about things that are going to make a difference in your decision of company. If you are stuck between applying to two offices, for example, you should ask them how about culture and projects differ between the two. Ask them about the work they do in the sectors you're interested in. Other good questions include their reasons for going into the industry, what they like most about their firm, recent projects they have worked on, or advice they would give to interested students.

On the call, you should be professional, confident, and friendly in your tone. Something to remember is that consultants, no matter their level at the firm, are people too. Calls that go well

are sometimes a refreshing break in the consultant's day. In one way, being a good networker is a matter of being a good conversationalist. Listen to their answers and retool your questions to follow up on interesting things they have said. Consultants want to see that you have the same interpersonal skills you would use when interacting with a client.

By the end of the call, you should have a better understanding of that person and their company. You may still have questions about specific aspects of the job or work the firm does in a specific industry. If the call went well, you can ask them if they feel comfortable introducing you to somebody else in the firm. If the call went exceedingly well, they might even offer before you ask. From there, your network will begin to grow.

Building Relationships

After your calls, keep in contact with the people you speak to. Always send a quick thank you note within twenty-four hours of speaking with someone, then shoot to send a follow-up note every couple of months so that they can remember your name. These can be short and sweet, but they should be tailored to the conversations you have had with the person. Something like an email asking them how they are doing with an update on your plans would suffice. You could also give them an update on your recruitment intentions, ask a new question about consulting, or simply follow up on something interesting that you two talked about.

Once you feel comfortable enough in your casing capabilities, you can ask your contact if they would be willing to run a practice with you. Ask students who are expert casers if they think you're ready to get in from of a real consultant. People in the industry should help you fine tune your skills, not a way to get practice reps in. This is a great opportunity to show them that you have what it takes to do well in an interview, so you should only do this if you are truly prepared.

Many students recommend keeping an excel file to keep track of everybody you speak with. You should log their name, contact info, relevant notes from the conversation, and the last time you spoke. By doing this, you will know when you should reach back out to somebody, and your notes will give you some guidance in how to personalize the email with relevant details from your previous conversation.

You will find that the best networking relationships you build are those that become personal friendships. For example, one student recounted asking a contact about a concert he had mentioned planning to go to, since it was a band that both of them liked. Not only did this get his name in the contact's inbox, the contact was naturally happy to talk about the show, getting him on the phone again. Other students have met up with alumni at home football games or over coffee when the

contact is back in Columbia for the weekend. Many interviewees still keep in regular contact with people from the firms that they ended up not going to.

On Campus Presentations and Corporate Events

The same lessons above apply to other interactions you may have with consulting firms. You likely will not get too much time to speak to somebody if a firm comes to campus to present, but you should still go up and try to make a favorable impression. If you are invited to a corporate event like a networking happy hour, this is your chance to get to know consultants at a much more personal level. Your conversations should strike a balance between being professional and poised and conversational and easy to get along with.

The Recruitment Process

If you have followed the steps of the guide so far, you should be in a competitive position to get a consulting interview. Now it is time to prepare for the consulting interview. I only dedicate one chapter of this guide to the interview process, because there is a saturated industry of resources on how to prepare for interviews. This chapter will review the recruitment process from a broad level, point you towards the best resources to prepare for interviews, and give best practices from students who have been successful.

Remember what I said about interviews at top management consulting firms being considered some of the hardest in the world. Students who have been successful at Big Three firms typically practiced for interviews upwards of sixty hours across many months. Prepping for this long doesn't guarantee you a job, but not prepping enough surely will. This is something you have to take very seriously.

Recruitment Timelines

Consulting firms have an accelerated recruitment timeline, interviewing in the fall for internships and full-time offers for the following year. Applications will typically be due in early September, with full-time interviews that month and internship interviews in October. This varies year to year,

A good preparation timeline would be as follows:

- *January/February*: Begin networking with people in the industry
- *March*: Read books on how to do well in case interviews
- *May*: Start casing with peers
- *June*: Follow up with contacts about intentions to do recruitment
- *July*: Increase casing frequency, ask industry consultants to case

- *September*: Apply to firms and interview

How These Companies Recruit

There are two primary undergraduate roles that Big Three consulting firms recruit for every year: summer internships and full-time hires. The recruitment process and interview experience are virtually the same, although firms will have higher expectations of work experience and leadership for those applying for full-time roles.

The traditional summer internship programs of Big Three consulting firms are typically limited to students going into their senior or penultimate year of study. Across the three consultancies, the internship experience is very similar: for ten weeks, interns will be fully integrated into a project team and treated like a normal consultant in their first year. Interns will interact with the client, travel with their team, and be trained to perform at company expectations. In every way possible, the internship is meant to be a trial period of an actual consultant's job. At the end of the summer, interns that meet expectations will be extended an offer to join the company full-time after graduation. Summer internships are typically more competitive, as interns normally form only a third or half of the full-time class that a firm hires.

Recruitment for seniors is for full-time offers. The title of entry level roles will differ by firm, like Associate Consultant for Bain or Business Analyst for McKinsey, but the actual jobs are effectively the same.

In addition to these two main pathways, some consulting firms have begun to offer shorter internships to freshmen or sophomores coming from minority backgrounds. These programs are typically a week or shorter at the end of the summer, and upon successful completion, may lead to an offer for a traditional summer internship role.

Consulting Interview Overview

To get a consulting job, you must pass two or more rounds of multiple interviews, each consisting of two parts that are weighted equally: (1) a traditional behavioral interview and (2) a case interview.

In the behavioral portion, candidates will be asked a series of questions meant to gauge their interest in consulting, why they want to work at that company specifically, and how they have performed in difficult situations in the past. Behavioral interviews operate on the assumption that past actions predict future performance. You can expect to walk your interviewer through examples of times when you did things like resolve conflict in a team, lead change within an organization, or confront someone about something difficult.

The Case Interview

The case portion of the interview is the hallmark of the management consulting recruitment process. Casing is designed to show interviewers that you have the core skills of the job: business intelligence, analytical problem-solving capabilities, and strong communication abilities. As one interviewee working at Bain said, consultancies use the case interview to make sure you're already a consultant before they hire you.

In a case interview, candidates are presented with background information on a client and a problem they have encountered. Candidates must identify the root of the problem and make a strategic recommendation over the course of a half-hour conversation between the interviewer and interviewee. As stated earlier, the case interview is notoriously hard and regularly requires dozens of hours of practice to do well in.

Case Interview Resources

There are plenty of resources out there on how to do well in a case interview. Rather than write a section on how to case, I am going to point you towards the industry experts that have written entire books on the subject. All successful USC students read at least one of the following books, and oftentimes read two or all three:

- *Case Interview Secrets*, written by former McKinsey partner Victor Cheng, is the industry standard on learning how to tackle any problem the way a consultant would. Interviewees normally stated that this book was the most helpful, and it trains candidates in critical thinking strategies, rather than frameworks for specific types of business problems.
- *Case in Point* by Mark Cosentino is another industry standard, used by tens of thousands of hopeful applicants. Some interviewees found the book focused too heavily on specific problem-solving structures but found the wealth of practice cases in the book particularly helpful.
- *Embrace the Case* by BCG alum Brad Schiller explains every step of the consulting recruitment process, from networking to successfully solving case interviews.

In addition, there are plenty of resources online that interviewees found helpful. A simple Google search about casing will bring up hundreds of results, such as Management Consulted, Prep Lounge, I Got an Offer, Case Interview and more. Many consulting firm websites also have web pages with company-made preparation resources. You may find on YouTube videos of what strong case performances look like from firms themselves, former consultants, and career coaches. Additionally, many candidates have found Victor Cheng's "Look Over My Shoulder" program

particularly helpful, although it is an expensive resource. It is up to you which online resources you use.

Practice, Practice, Practice

You can read as much as you want about how to do well in a case interview, but nothing beats practicing live cases as if you were in an interview. You *must* practice and take this seriously. It's one thing to be able to think through a problem on your own, but it's far more difficult to do it in the pressure of an interview. If you can't do a case interview well, there are hundreds of other qualified candidates that can. Interviewees averaged between twenty-five to thirty practice cases before going into a single interview. Some practiced almost fifty. When you go into an interview, you should feel absolutely confident that you could tackle any case problem they throw your way.

Your first few cases will naturally be pretty rough, but they get easier the more you practice. Typically, it takes around ten live practice rounds before a candidate begins to understand how to break any problem down. As you encounter different industries and problems in your practice, you will see your ability to identify what really matters in a case develop.

Try to find your peers that also want to go into consulting so you can practice together. Ask students that are skilled at casing to run one with you, so you can get expert feedback on how to improve. Once you feel comfortable enough in your own casing, reach out to those you know in the industry to see if they would run one with you too. Make sure you're confident in your abilities before asking a real consultant to case. If you don't do well, they may feel like you're wasting their time or not serious enough about the process. Practice with real consultants should be used to make sure you are on the right track and to fine tune your abilities.

Post-graduate MBB Opportunities

If recruitment doesn't work out for you as an undergraduate, that doesn't mean that your chances of working at a Big Three consulting firm are gone. Every year, the Big Three recruit about the same number of MBA students as they do undergraduates, and sometimes more. However, the list of schools from which they recruit MBA students is much shorter than that of undergraduate institutions. The Big Three rarely recruit outside of the United States top fifteen MBA programs, with a vast majority coming from the top seven or so. If you want to try to get in after business school, you should shoot for schools like Harvard, Stanford, Wharton, the University of Chicago, or Northwestern. Even then, competition is incredibly fierce among students for these roles.

Student Success Stories



Kathryn Corasaniti

Boston Consulting Group

Dallas

Majors: Finance, Operations and Supply Chain

Minor: Data Analytics

Year: 2019

“It just takes one relationship to lead to many. If you lay the foundation early and you lay it well, it will provide great base for you to build out a network and be successful.”

KATHRYN CORASANITI knows she made the right choice in starting her career as a management consultant, but her pathway there was never set in stone. Before deciding to join Boston Consulting Group, she had tried out a number of different fields across her six internships: global chemical supply chains, investment banking, marketing analytics, and the United Nations, to just name a few. Although she liked each of her experiences, none of them struck her as exactly what she wanted to. “I was asking myself, what’s something I could do that would tie all these together?” she remarked. She wanted a career that would combine her natural skillsets with the aspects of previous jobs she enjoyed. What is more, she had already moved six times for work in college and envisioned a career that would allow her to mimic that non-stationary lifestyle.

Interestingly enough, her first exposure to management consulting came by way of the firm she would ultimately work for. While studying in Hong Kong her sophomore year, Kathryn got involved with the Cambridge Consulting Network, which exposed her to a Boston Consulting Group case competition. She found that consulting required a number of skillsets from different disciplines, unlike other things she had pursued. “Consultants had to have both hard and soft skills, being creative, analytical, and capable of delivering a message well all at once,” she explained. When she was recognized for outstanding client communication skills in that competition, she realized she would excel in a career in client services.

While abroad, Kathryn was networking for investment banking and had a working relationship with Colin Jones, the professor in charge of the Finance Scholars program. The successes of students in the program showed her the severe lack of institutional knowledge and support for management consulting at USC. “Why doesn’t something like Finance Scholars exist for consulting?” she asked herself. “I wanted to see what I experienced in Hong Kong here at USC to show Finance Scholar students what opportunities existed beyond banking. Collin connected her with Mark Kingsmore, who had just become the first USC student to receive an offer to work full-time at McKinsey. Mark, a Finance Scholar himself, seemed to be asking himself the same

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questions. Over a series of FaceTime calls, they put together a plan for a consulting organization that Kathryn would start once Mark graduated.

Learning more about McKinsey for Mark, Kathryn applied for a McKinsey Women event taking place in New York City that summer. Attending the event allowed her to broaden her understanding of the management consulting industry. It also put her McKinsey's "Keep in Touch" system that kept her updated on employment opportunities for two years. By the end of that summer with Morgan Stanley, Kathryn still wasn't sure which industry she wanted to join out of college. She wasn't quite sold on management consulting yet, but she knew she could cross investment banking off the list.

When Kathryn returned to campus the following semester, the Gamecock Consulting Club was born. Getting GCC off the ground wasn't easy. She treated the club's goal and vision as evolving concepts, knowing the club would go through multiple iterations as it developed. "I was okay with knowing the club in its first iteration would like a lot different than it would in the future. I prioritized morale and vision over operations," she remarked. Her main goal was simply selling people on the idea that getting into management consulting from USC would be possible. To do so, she had to get the student leaders within USC's bubbling consulting community on board. "At the end of the day, you have no organization without the people involved. When I thought about GCC, I asked myself, 'who do I bring in as the founders of this organization?' If you don't have the right people you don't have the right culture surrounding you. You can have all these ideas, but they can't happen if you don't have the right people and culture in place."

Kathryn brought in Louise White, Carson Morris, and Emily Fordice to help set the foundations of the club. Louise and Carson had proven expertise on getting into the industry, as the two had just become the first USC students to receive full-time offers from Bain. Kathryn urged the two to take center stage of the organization. "If you don't build the right culture in an organization, you don't get buy-in from members, the university, or companies." She knew that with their proven knowledge of the recruitment process, Carson and Louise would be able to energize the right stakeholders to make the club grow.

Ever curious about different aspects of business, Kathryn next decided to try her hand at supply chain logistics the next semester. She moved to California to complete a global supply chain logistics co-op at Tesla. She enjoyed aspects of the work yet didn't like others. "The things that you don't like will teach you the most," reflected. With myriad industries and roles exhausted, she committed herself to management consulting.

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Kathryn already had by this point an extensive consulting network because of the work she had done starting GCC. “By that time, I had set up a baseline connection with an alumna working at BCG Dallas. I had talked to her maybe three times and had set up a call with her in the past for GCC. When the time came that I reached out to her for recruitment, we already had this pre-existing relationship that I developed over multiple years,” she explained. The alumna was willing to put her in contact with several other people at the office, who then got her in contact with even more. Soon enough, her network went from one person to two to six. “It just takes one relationship to lead to many. If you lay the foundation early on and you do it well, it will provide a great base for you to build a network to get an interview.”

Speaking to people from BCG showed Kathryn that the company had the corporate culture she had been looking for. “Everyone in the office was very fun and friendly. I feel like it has a really good mix of fun personalities but also very smart, academic personalities. At BCG, everyone is refreshingly different, with different backgrounds, communication styles, and education. I appreciate that. You don’t have to fit in because there’s no mold for you to fit into.” She was impressed by how excited the people she spoke to were about her interest in the company. Once she interviewed, she felt like it wasn’t just her trying to break into BCG, but those people wanting to help her get there. “There were five or six people rooting for me in the end. On my interview day people emailed me ahead of time and wished me good luck – which meant a lot to me. When I got to the office people approached me and did the same. It was a really natural fit.”

Kathryn clearly interviewed with a thoroughly impressive resume. Her professional capital could have rivaled that of any other student who applied. Interviewers asked about her experiences at big brand names like Morgan Stanley and Tesla. They were curious about her entrepreneurial drive that drove her to start the Gamecock Consulting Club. They liked the fact that she was in the capital funding stage of her startup, Maeve, created to help young girls navigate the transition from adolescence into adulthood. Each of these experiences though, owes itself in some way to Kathryn’s involvement in her first semester of college.

“You don’t just wake up one day and land the offer,” Kathryn said. In her first semester of college, Kathryn was the Vice President of Finance of her pledge class in DSP. This role didn’t get Kathryn a job at BCG, but it was the first step in establishing her professional capital. From this role, she positioned herself to become Vice President of Operations for the whole fraternity. The leadership lessons she learned in this executive position then became the stories she talked about in the interviews for her first internship at Eastman Chemical. The experiences at Eastman Chemical, in turn, became the topics of conversation for her interviews at Morgan Stanley. Morgan Stanley led

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to Tesla. In each step of her professional journey, Kathryn learned important lessons that allowed her to take on bigger and more impressive roles. All of this culminated in her becoming the first student from USC to earn a full-time offer to work at BCG.

A final thought Kathryn has about excelling in interviews is to be a good storyteller. This is helpful in both the behavioral and case portions of the interview. She had to craft a compelling narrative as to why, after having tried so many things, consulting would combine the aspects she liked most in her previous experiences. She wove her storytelling ability with her multidisciplinary background, which gave her a unique approach to case problems. “I think doing that showed I wasn’t just solving an academic problem, but truly thinking through a real, legitimate problem at hand.”³



Emily Fordice

Bain & Company

Atlanta

Majors: International Business, Business Economics

Minor: French, Political Science

Year: 2019

“There’s no perfect formula, no ‘right’ path. Mimicking someone else’s story would be pointless. It’s about forging your own path, writing your own story, and then articulating that story in a resonant way.”

EMILY FORDICE stumbled upon management consulting by chance when looking through internships to apply for in her sophomore year. She had approached her internship search with an open mind, looking for anything that would grab her interest. Her eye was caught by the Boston Consulting Group’s website, so she dug a little bit deeper and was instantly fascinated by the industry. “As a student exploring options, I was really industry agnostic and into a lot of different things at the same time. I would find certain aspects of one job in one industry that I liked, then find another job in the industry that I knew I would hate,” she said. “As I did a trial and error across a whole spectrum of industries, coming close but not being passionate about a certain one, I circled back to consulting.”

Emily wanted to gain experience across multiple fields, which is what initially drew her into management consulting. As she did more research, she realized that the firms presented a number of other perks as well. “You get to try all these industries, you are surrounded by brilliant people, and these firms treat their people better than any others. People are their only asset, and if their people aren’t happy, that bleeds into client services. All of the capital investment they would’ve put into physical assets, they put the humans,” she reflected. “What better industry to work in than the one that cares so much about your own personal and professional development?”

Emily had already garnered a little bit of consulting experience through her involvement in different organizations on campus. She had joined the business fraternity Alpha Kappa Psi and DECA during her freshman year, both of which gave her professional skills early on. “DECA was the opportunity to take something I knew in high school and test it out as an extracurricular in college.” She said. “Joining a business fraternity entailed doing 115 networking interviews and creating a resume and cover letter for the first time. It was a brutal crash course in professionalism, but I became a better business student for it.” The things she learned in AKPsi gave her the confidence to run for an executive position in DECA during her second semester at USC, which taught her at just eighteen years old the ins and outs of how a student organization runs.

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During her sophomore year, Emily became Vice President of DECA and the head of Propensity Consulting, AKPsi's pro-bono consulting engagement team. DECA gave her a fresh perspective on why students join extracurriculars and how student leaders must cater their organization's value proposition to every member. To her, it was an important lesson in effectively running an organization with "true buy-in, not forced buy-in," as she said. This would be helpful for her later in college, when she would become a leader in the Gamecock Consulting Club.

Leading Propensity Consulting allowed Emily to get a taste of what consulting engagements look like in the real world. In her role, she had to identify clients, decide which brothers were qualified to work on engagements, form teams with diverse talents, and match those teams with specific clients. It was difficult, but it taught her a lot about what it means to be a good consultant. "The first time I dealt with professional conflict was with Propensity Consulting, when I had to look our client in the eye and convince her that our work was important to her team. That taught me what client services actually means," Emily said. By the end of her tenure in the position, she had established a strategic partnership with the South Carolina Small Business Development Center to ensure Propensity would have clients once she left. This relationship showed Emily another valuable lesson about leadership that she would draw upon in the future: leaders must build sustainable foundations for their organizations to thrive once they leave.

Knowing she would do well as a consultant, Emily worked that summer as a Summer Games intern for Booz Allen Hamilton. Her job was to work with a team of interns to design the go-to market strategy for mobile app that used augmented reality to predict flooding disasters in Charleston, South Carolina. "When I was at Booz Allen, I learned how to problem solve with the team. I learned how to analyze problems that have never been analyzed before, come up with a creative solution within the expectations of the audience, and manage team disagreements along the way," she said. By the time she returned to campus the fall of her junior year, she had established a name for herself in the growing consulting community at Darla Moore. Kathryn Corasaniti asked her to join the Gamecock Consulting Club that was just starting to get off the ground.

That following semester Emily realized that strategy consulting was the only thing she could see herself doing. She dedicated her Spring semester abroad in Paris to a balance of traveling across Europe and preparing for interviews the following fall. "Study abroad provided a really unique platform for me to prepare for consulting interviews. I had more free time than I did at USC, so it was in some ways a breath of fresh air. I approached consulting recruitment with a set of fresh eyes for the first time, Skyping with all the members and mentors I had at the time. It was the first step in discovering that consulting was what I really wanted to do, and that I was really willing to

do it.” That summer she worked as a health consulting intern for Mercer, but her eyes and heart were set upon breaking into the strategy consulting space.

Emily likes to describe her networking experience like a snowball effect. To start, she utilized the connections she had from previous consulting internships to get connected with people they knew at the firms she was interested in. Quality over quantity formed the backbone of her approach. “It’s better to have five champions than to have 500 connections,” she said. “Once I had one mentor at one firm that thought I could do it, they would start connecting me with others. This is when you start to get good at networking and getting to know people professionally over the phone.”

She warns students from being so focused on getting their first networking call that they forget how to capitalize upon the opportunity. When you get on a networking call, she says, you must be fully prepared with your personal story and questions that you can’t find answers to online. She thinks she made this mistake when she first started. “Looking back, I feel like I wasted their time and mine because I didn’t know what to ask. I didn’t realize how important my side of the equation was. The student who can orchestrate an interview in which both people get to know each other is the one that will get the job. I was painfully naïve when I did my first ones.”

Emily was faced with two difficult tasks during the fall of her senior year: going through full-time recruitment herself and solidifying the Gamecock Consulting Club’s legitimacy on campus. She interviewed with multiple firms and accepted her offer to join Bain & Company in Atlanta, Georgia. Bain had stood out to her among its peers for its commitment to its employees. “I felt like Bain treated their people with the most investment and emotional intelligence. Personally, I think emotional intelligence is extremely important, maybe even more so than by-the-book intelligence. That came through to me during every step of the process in Bain. When I got there, I knew I would find people who would value the same things that I did,” she noted.

GCC was at a crossroads that semester when Emily took the reins as President. Although the organization now had a track record of placing students at great consulting firms, it was too small and lacked organizational focus. Emily knew the club had to make important changes in order to realize the vision she and Kathryn had set out with. Under her leadership, the club developed a formalized recruitment process, nearly tripled in size, and began building a network of consultant alumni willing to help GCC members. Emily herself invested hours into training younger members for case interviews, which ultimately led to three GCC juniors becoming the first USC students to intern at Bain and McKinsey. By the end of the year, GCC had become the university’s primary management consulting resource, and students were beginning to take notice.

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Having been on the job for nearly a year as of May 2020, Emily has a number of reflections on what makes a good consultant, she says. The first characteristic is a willingness to learn. “In the entry level roles, it’s the willingness to learn that gives you the greatest leg up. You have to approach every piece of feedback with the mindset that it’s going to help you.” The second attribute that makes consultants excel is grit. “You can’t give up in this job. The client needs what it needs and you have to do it. You have to toughen yourself up to get better every day and it never stops.” The third characteristic is a passion for developing the specific skills you naturally good at. Consulting is necessarily a group effort, so firms want to have teams made up of people that excel in different things. “As you get into your job, you will see that some people are great at getting client buy-in. Some people are super analytical, and that’s great for other projects. After a few years, you kind of get good at your thing and that’s what you’re known for at Bain, although you’re still a generalist.”

Her time on the job has also given her an understanding of good and bad reasons to go into the industry. Once you get your consulting job, your reason for being there can either lead you to thrive or burn out easily. She thinks the best reason is that you want to develop the skill set that consultants have: strong problem-solving capabilities, communication capabilities, and the human intelligence that goes with it. Company culture is also a strong reason to think you would want to work somewhere. “Putting it in student terms, it’s like why you’d want to join a business fraternity. Do you want to surround yourself with smart people with a diverse set of interests? Going to a company like that, spending the majority of your time with people like that, is an incredible way to spend the first few years after graduation.”

On the other hand, she thinks there are a few bad reasons to become a management consultant. To her, going in the consulting simply because you like the extra opportunities doesn’t make sense. “You shouldn’t walk into the first day of your job thinking about how you can leave or where your next step will be. The employee that does will take every shortcut possible, losing out on the key learnings along the way. They’re just looking for a stamp of prestige,” she thinks. “That stamp of prestige will not get you through an eighty-hour week at the client site. While it may be a perk at the back of your mind, it’s not a good reason.” She also thinks you shouldn’t pursue consulting just because you want to travel. “Everybody likes going on vacation or studying abroad, but traveling for work is not the same thing. You do get the opportunity to travel to new places, but you explore on the weekend – which you can do on any job.”⁴



Hope Manninen

McKinsey & Company

Charlotte

Majors: International Business, Operations and Supply Chain

Minor: French

Year: 2020

“Coming from a non-target, you can get in your own head. But if you truly exhaust all your opportunities to learn and grow while providing value wherever you are, you can do pretty much whatever you set your mind to.”

HOPE MANNINEN decided to pursue management consulting her freshman year, after sweeping her case competition category at the national collegiate DECA conference. She wasn't too aware of what a consulting career entailed, but her partner, Emily Fordice, told her that it was a job she would excel at. As Hope began to look further into the industry, she realized that Emily was right.

Knowing early on what it would take to get a job in management consulting, Hope sought out opportunities in college to help her develop the skillsets that consultants use every day. She had already rushed the professional fraternity Alpha Kappa Psi her first semester of college, which gave her the confidence and professional knowledge to run informational interviews as a freshman. She took the first steps of networking early, laying the foundation of relationships she would draw upon years later when she finally applied. The same year, she began training to be a Moore School Ambassador and became an Orientation Leader for Pillars for Carolina. Becoming an ambassador was the best thing she did, Hope says, because of the interpersonal skills it helped her develop for consulting.

She joined the nascent Gamecock Consulting Club her sophomore year while stepping up to leadership positions within Pillars for Carolina. That summer, she forsook pursuing a traditional internship in favor of leading the Pillars program as Director of Logistics. Although it was not a brand name experience, it gave her much more responsibility than a sophomore internship would have, a fact that stood out to her consulting interviewers. “Working orientation, the perception I received was beneficial,” she explained. “Every day was a completely new dynamic, and I was able to speak to my ability to work under pressure and quickly problem solve. Even though it wasn't a corporate internship, I talked about it in every networking call, showing how it taught me how to deal with uncertainty.” At the end of the summer, Hope's hard work thus far paid off: she accepted an offer to intern in EY's Financial Advisory Practice in Charlotte for the next year.

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Once Hope got back to campus as a junior, she knew she wanted to be a leader in the growing consulting community at Darla Moore. She became the first Vice President of Engagement in GCC, working to understand how other student organizations managed to run real consulting engagements. In her business fraternity, she joined a student-led engagement team that was working with a refugee resettlement community in Columbia. These experiences taught her how to effectively interact with a client and manage a team of students, skills which would help her start GCC's first real consulting engagement in her senior year.

Both of these skills were also particularly helpful when she began her internship at EY the following summer. At EY, she learned what consulting looked like in the corporate world. She thoroughly enjoyed the people she worked with, the culture of the company, and the city she was in, but she began to second-guess if it was exactly the work she wanted to be doing. In the financial advisory practice, she didn't feel like she was getting the diversity of industry experience that had initially drawn her to the consulting world. She was missing the creative strategy element of the field.

When Hope received an offer for full-time employment from EY, she had to make a difficult personal decision. She wanted to stay in Charlotte after graduation but switching to EY's generalist-model practice meant having to transfer to Atlanta. Should she accept the offer from a company she really liked, or should she try her chances at recruitment for a more strategy focused role? Emily Fordice, who was now working full-time at Bain, encouraged Hope to give it a shot if she thought it was what she really wanted to do. She decided to go for it.

Hope then reconnected with the people she knew at McKinsey and Bain, gaining different perspectives about her current career situation. Recruitment was quickly approaching, and she knew she couldn't waste time. "When you reach out to someone, you want to ensure that you're not going to waste their time. Everyone is busy. You want to ask things will add value or spark discussion with them," she said. "I found someone working at Bain that had the same background and junior year internship as me, so I reached out to her, saying 'hey, I'm going to go through a lot of the same decisions you had to.'" Consultants gave her honest advice that confirmed her commitment to going through recruitment.

At the same McKinsey Charlotte networking reception that Trey and others attended, Hope got to meet consultants in a more down-to-earth environment rather than speaking on the phone. "The way people talked to each other, you didn't know you were talking to McKinsey's Global Head of Risk," she remarked. "Even though we weren't the most experienced people in the room, so many

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people would come up to me and ask about my experiences in college. Having people whose level I had desired to be at for so long take interest in what I was doing... that really stuck out to me. There seemed like so much mutual respect in their culture.” In the end, Hope interviewed with McKinsey Charlotte and received an offer to join the office. She only had twenty-four hours to decide whether she would accept or stay with EY. She followed her gut to McKinsey, going with the company that she thought would be the best fit for her career interests.

Looking back, she wishes she had understood much earlier when a door is truly closed and when it's not. She never applied for internships at McKinsey or Bain because she had thought she didn't have what it took, underselling her experiences to herself. “A lot of times we get this idea that this opportunity isn't for me and we talk ourselves out of things. It's okay to realize that you can enjoy an internship but feel like you may belong somewhere else.” So long as you are graceful in your interactions with a company, receiving an offer doesn't have to be an end all be all.

Hope wouldn't change her path to McKinsey, but she would change the mentality she had in getting there. “Everything I did, I did because I wanted to. But sometimes I wish I had been more confident and recognized the value that USC can truly provide if you just go for it,” she says. “Coming from a non-target, you can get in your own head. But if you truly exhaust all your opportunities to learn and grow while providing value wherever you are, you can do pretty much whatever you set your mind to.” People want somebody who can bring value to their life and team at the end of the day. If you can show that you have given your utmost effort in the environment you come from, you end up in a much better place than doing something because you think it looks good, she believes.

This fact was reflected in the feedback Hope received about her involvement on campus. “For me, it wasn't necessarily the credentials that I had but the entrepreneurialism that went along with them” she said. Hope had done five consulting projects at USC, three of which she initiated herself. She did not do a corporate internship her sophomore year because she thought she could have a greater impact somewhere else. “The road less traveled is usually the more interesting one when you're telling someone about your personal story. Taking opportunities off the beaten path not only makes people more interested in what you did, but also it can show what you're passionate about. This builds a whole other side of your character that you can't see through corporate internships.”

Hope thinks there shouldn't be so much pressure to find a corporate internship during your freshman or sophomore summers. Instead, students should seek to make a positive impact in a

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capacity that is meaningful to them. In the end, that is what will give you the stories and experiences that make an interviewer want you on their team.⁵



Emily McCluskey

McKinsey & Company

Atlanta

Majors: International Business, Management

Minor: French

Year: 2020

“Interviewers don’t want a robot. They want somebody who can think for themselves, because they’re not trying to hire the next analyst. They are trying to hire the next partner.”

EMILY MCCLUSKEY was initially attracted to the idea of working in international development consulting, not management. Her time in college was tailored to consulting, studying international business as part of the IBEA cohort that corporate consulting projects across three semesters abroad. It wasn’t until the Fall of her junior year that she shifted her interests to management consulting specifically, when an alumni working at McKinsey spoke to her IBEA class. He explained that McKinsey worked in nearly all sectors, from general business to international development. She was intrigued by the nature of strategic problem solving and wanted to look further into what the career entailed.

Looking back, Emily sees her story as slightly fortuitous: she didn’t know about management consulting until a few weeks before McKinsey’s internship applications were due. Unlike other applicants that had been preparing for months, she had a very limited timeframe to get caught up to speed if she wanted to be competitive. She acted quickly, connecting with other consultants from McKinsey. The consultant from her class introduced her to Mark Kingsmore, an alumnus of the Gamecock Consulting Club working at the same office. She absorbed as much as she could from Case Interview Secrets then started practicing. Fortunately for her, she was one of the rare students that naturally excelled at case interviews.

“Once I started case prepping, Mark was kind of the spoke of the wheel that connected me with people,” she said. “He introduced me to a couple Business Analysts in the Atlanta office. In total I connected with 6 of 7 people outside of interviews. We’d usually have a 15-20-minute intro call and then we would run a case.” She adhered to networking best practices, working around consultants’ schedules and going in with good things to ask. “I prepared for my calls, had good questions, was optimistic and friendly, sent thank you emails, and wasn’t afraid to reach out to people.” After working hard over a condensed preparation period, she accepted an offer to intern at McKinsey’s Atlanta office the summer before senior year.

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Thanks to her involvement in the IBEA cohort, Emily had a wealth of unique professional and academic experiences to speak upon in her interviews. She believes this was one of the strongest parts of her application. During her semester in Germany, she worked on a corporate project for EY in international tax consulting. In Singapore, she and her cohort helped the French retailer Decathlon resolve pain points in customers' online shopping experiences. At USC, she worked with East Agile, a Hong Kong-based marketing group. Emily tried to take advantage of every opportunity she had, so she even interned with PwC from January to March before her semester in Singapore began. At PwC, she worked on supply chain and logistics in the developing world for a major fashion retailer. Working across industries and seeing business from all angles affirmed her desire to work for McKinsey, and that showed in her interview answers.

These experiences not only looked great on her resume, but they also gave her many of the intangible skills that consulting firms seek. "I think having spent three semesters abroad and having that much experience working in companies abroad is a huge selling point for a firm," she noted. "It shows you've already dealt with cultural differences and worked on international teams. I got feedback that that was one of the reasons why I was hired." Once on the job, she found her ability quickly adapt to changing work demands and scenarios helped her as different aspects of her project shifted.

After graduation, Emily will be returning to McKinsey Atlanta. She's extremely happy that things worked out for her, but she thinks that she should have started the process much earlier. She hadn't really looked at any other specific consulting firms when she applied to McKinsey. "If I had to go back and do it again, I would have started way earlier. I only had like a week to prep," she noted. "I think I would have chosen McKinsey if I had offers from all three because of the cultural fit, but I didn't really know about Bain or BCG or other firms at the time I applied."

In some ways though, she saw her limited preparation window as a benefit during recruitment. She is a firm believer that students can case too much. "Interviewers don't want a robot. They want somebody who can think for themselves, because they're not trying to hire the next analyst. They are trying to hire the next partner," she said. Over-casing can make a candidate fall into a rigid approach that inhibits the outside-of-the-box thinking that firms really look for. "People think these consultancies want people who can conform to a case the way Victor Cheng would answer it. That's the opposite, at least at McKinsey." In addition, she felt her limited time helped her feel a little less pressure in her interviews. "I was thinking about this process as good practice for casing for international development firms, so I was way more relaxed. That let my personality come

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through.” Because she had only known about the job for two weeks, Emily felt like she had less riding on the outcome.

If students take away anything from her story, Emily would want them to not put too much pressure on themselves while networking and interviewing. If you get too caught up in your own head, then you aren’t yourself when you interview. Remain calm during the process, let your true self shine through, and do your best in trying to get there.⁶



Matt Neumann

McKinsey & Company

Charlotte

Majors: Finance, Business Economics

Minor: History

Year: 2020

"It's easy to fall into the trap of believing your odds at accessing a career in management consulting are insurmountable coming from USC. What is much harder, but much more rewarding, is realizing that it actually is possible."

COMING INTO COLLEGE, Matt thought he wanted to get a job in finance or to start his own business. It wasn't until the end of his sophomore year that he learned about opportunities in management consulting, quickly drawn to the job's broad exposure to different ideas and strategies. As he explored different aspects of finance in his internships, he had realized that he couldn't see himself going into an inherently narrow role coming out of college. To him, management consulting seemed like a career that would constantly challenge him to think and learn about a variety of exciting things. "For a long time I've had an interest in entrepreneurship, VC, new ideas, and trying to understand how real value is created," he said. "The career gives a lot of insight into that, I think, because you get to understand at a granular level how ideas are put into place, how value is created, and how strategy affects it all. In my mind, it's kind of like best practices for creating a business or starting something new, which has always been my main career goal."

The following semester, Matt joined the Gamecock Consulting Club and committed to pursuing a job in management consulting. He missed recruitment for junior year internships, but GCC connected him with Mark Kingsmore of McKinsey Charlotte, who was looking for members to apply for a secondary interview cycle that Spring. Although Matt ended up not getting the internship, he did not let that get him discouraged, knowing he would apply again for full-time jobs. "I was doing the whole process abroad in Turin, Italy, and being there, having limited opportunities, made it more difficult. It wasn't devastating for me because I knew it was a hard thing to do. But after that, I took very active steps to improve for the fall knowing that I was going to try it again. I practiced and kept in touch with the people at the office that I knew." Matt thinks this persistence is one of the key reasons he stood out in his full-time interviews. Alumni at different firms could see he was serious in his desire to work as a management consultant. "I was very close the first round but had a few things to work on, so I kept in good spirits and stayed focused."

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Once Matt received a full-time offer from McKinsey, he withdrew from the interview process of other firms. Ultimately, it was the people Matt met that made him know he wanted to begin his career at McKinsey Charlotte. The quality of the people at McKinsey shined through to him throughout his networking process. “They had a broad variety of backgrounds which I thought was really cool. Being able to meet people with specialties in science, people from the army, former professional athletes, and people who had started companies really drew me in,” Matt said. To him, the people at a firm matter much more than its reputation. “All the accolades and history are important, but for your own personal experience it doesn’t matter as much as who you’re with, what you’re learning from them, and how they’re going to help you learn things to be a valuable member of the team.” He saw that McKinsey people were willing to challenge common business assumptions and be comfortable working without general guidelines, both traits Matt saw in himself. “I think I really let that show in my interviews, which they picked up upon. It’s easy to feel weird in case interviews. They know you’re playing a sort of game, but I just acted like it was a normal conversation between two businesspeople.”

This ability to converse with anyone is a second factor Matt believes made him stand out in the recruitment process. “Being very comfortable throughout the process is what set me apart in a lot of situations. It’s easy for me to always be ready to speak to someone new and do so with a sense of humor. I can quickly switch gears between a personal and professional demeanor.” This came in handy during his McKinsey final round interview when the partner who founded the office cut off his case twenty minutes early. “He was clearly satisfied with my performance and just wanted to get to know me better, so I took advantage of that opportunity. We ended up having a great conversation. I could tell that as a senior partner what he really cared about was the quality of the people and maintenance of the culture, not just that I could effectively solve a case.”

Looking back, Matt credits his interpersonal ability to the things he learned at the first job he ever had. An avid golfer, he worked throughout high-school at an exclusive country club in Cincinnati, caddying for the biggest names in the city. “That gave me a perspective on how to approach getting to know someone in a personal and professional setting. From then on, I’ve never had any reservations about things like that,” he said. “Even though I was interviewing with senior partners, it was just another person that I was getting to know. And I think that’s a really valuable skill you need to have on the job when meeting with top-level clients.”

On campus, Matt was involved in a number of organizations apart from GCC that helped him continue to grow his interpersonal and professional skills. He rushed the social fraternity Sigma Phi Epsilon in his first semester of college, which gave him the chance to take on leadership roles

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that he talked about in his interviews. “The fraternity is my strongest example of being involved in making decisions where I had a pretty heavy stake in what’s happening,” he noted. “It’s also what I think is the best way for a college student to develop themselves personally, socially, and professionally all at the same time.”

In the business school, he explored his interests in finance and entrepreneurship as a member of the Carolina Fund and Investment Association (CFIA) and the Entrepreneurship Club. He found that CFIA was incredibly beneficial in opening his mind to the diverse career pathways that existed in finance, as the organization would host speakers once or twice a month. Although he is going into consulting immediately out of college, he finds it helpful to know what opportunities exist out there for further into his career. The Entrepreneurship Club gave Matt the chance to flex his creative muscles on different projects, which was something he struggled to find in other organizations.

Overall, Matt encourages students to act as normal as possible throughout consulting recruitment. It is a stressful experience that takes a significant amount of dedication and time, but you can’t let that get into your head. When you interact with firms, you want to get to know people on a personal level. Doing well in a case is just the baseline expectation in an interview; getting the offer is a matter of showing them that you are the person they want to work with.⁷



Max Portwood

McKinsey & Company

Charlotte

Major: Chemical Engineering

Minor: Business Administration

Year: 2020

“There’s no replacement for passion and preparation. Finding what you love to do and then going the extra mile to make it a reality is the best way to succeed.”

HELPING OUT AROUND his father’s business while volunteering in his community, Max learned early on that he had deep interests in both business and helping others. He went to school to become a chemical engineer, thinking that engineers did what he now knows to be the job of a consultant. “People told me, ‘Oh, you’ll be the go-to guy solving problems around the plant.’” he recounted. “Engineering is a very academic field, heavy in math and science, but I always kind of felt like it was too pigeonholed. You focus on a specific process. For chemical engineering, you would be something like the chemical safety officer at the plant. I wanted more.”

By the end of sophomore year, Max began to think that chemical engineering did not best utilize his skill set. “I’ve always enjoyed talking to people – I am an extrovert.” A friend told him about consulting that Fall, just after recruitment for internships had passed. Max saw in management consulting a career pathway that would allow him to combine his intense, analytical training with his naturally extroverted demeanor. Looking deeper into the field, he also saw that it would satisfy his personal desire to work in a capacity that serves others.

Max’s passion for helping others took form in his leadership endeavors in college, helping organizations and fellow leaders make positive change on campus. This, he thinks was a natural progression into consulting. “What really stuck out to me was the development of people that management consulting prioritizes. The fact they help employees along their own professional journey was my favorite part.” He had the academic, professional, and leadership credentials, so he decided to try his shot at breaking into management consulting.

Max joined the Gamecock Consulting Club, which got him in contact with Mark Kingsmore of McKinsey Charlotte. Mark encouraged him to apply for secondary cycle of internship interviews that the office was conducting. “What differentiated me is that I found out about consulting from a friend in October, and I didn’t consider it as a real career path until November. I had my interviews in February, so it took a lot of work to get caught up to speed. I had to turn on a dime.”

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With his nose to the grindstone, Max started casing multiple times a week and got in contact with other people at Mark's office. His hard work was worth it; he received an offer for the Summer Business Analyst internship at McKinsey.

His story is similar to Emily McCluskey's in that both only applied to one firm. "It really was my only option but there's one million reasons I would've chosen McKinsey if I had known more at the beginning," he says. "Once I got there, my favorite part of McKinsey was the culture. Everybody had a level of trust. They trusted each other to get their work done and were very open to helping, but never competitive." He also appreciated the readiness of people to mentor him. "From partner on down, I noticed that everyone wanted to help you grow. Let's say you're in a meeting you're not sure if something. A partner will pull you aside and explain it to you. There's a big notion of sharing knowledge that makes the job so much easier."

Max also likes that he got to work with people from multiple McKinsey offices, not just those from his office in Charlotte. McKinsey is the largest of the Big Three consultancies, allowing them to staff people from different offices on the same team. "Most of my team was from Atlanta and New York, while the partners were from Charlotte. I can't speak for other firms, but I think part of the reason it's so fluid at McKinsey is that if you want to do something, there's very little standing in your way if you're an established person at the firm. You can work with who you want, when you want, and wherever you are."

When Max thinks about what made him stand out, the first thing that pops out to him are the hard credentials on his resume. He had a very high GPA coming from an engineering background. "My GPA and my test scores maybe got me through the first resume screen. I firmly believe that once you get past that point, your resume matters a lot less," he said. "What matters is your ability to network, talk to people, ask the right questions, and the airport test. Your personability test. I think for me, learning about and understanding consulting happened at the perfect timing. I was excited about consulting, and that excitement really showed in my interviews." His interview wasn't even set in stone, but he approached case preparation like it was. Once those he knew at McKinsey saw that he had a legitimate shot at getting the job, they were more willing to help him get there.

"You have to know exactly what you're walking into when you interview," Max said. Two of his strongest factors in interviews were his creativity and ease in casing. "You can predict the answers when you get to a certain point of case prep, and that's when you have to learn to be creative to stand out." Sometimes you can see the obvious solution, but if you throw in some creativity you allow the interviewer to see more of who you really are. "This goes with case prep. You have to

hang in there and be comfortable throughout the interview process. Obviously, they do not want you to go into a client meeting with a deer in the headlights look. You have to admit a steady aura of confidence.”

Max also knew how to best portray his experiences. The summer before interning with McKinsey, he had two jobs: one as a stock boy at a wine shop and another as a part-time operations manager of a park in his hometown of Detroit. These were not big brand-name experiences, yet he could articulate the important lessons that he learned from both. For example, he talked in interviews about how the wine store taught him to be comfortable starting conversations with strangers while earning their trust. Sure, he wasn't talking to a client as an investment banking or Fortune 500 intern, but he was able to demonstrate that he learned the same interpersonal skills nonetheless.

The last portion of Max's resume was rounded out with solid extracurricular involvement on campus. “Being vice president of my fraternity, Delta Kappa Epsilon, was probably most important for me because that was really where I got to make change on my own without a lot of supervision. It was about what I wanted to do and the choices I wanted to make.” Max learned a lot about himself and how to drive real impact in his time as vice president. “From a resume standpoint, the consulting club was definitely important because it's a checkmark that you understand what consulting is and that you're going to be well-prepared.” When he returned to campus after his McKinsey internship, he gave back to GCC by serving as an internal team lead for the club's first real consulting engagement, working with a social entrepreneur in Kenya.

As he prepares to graduate, Max's best advice to students – especially engineers— is to not let others pigeonhole their major or define what they should do. “You need to let your skills and interests define where you want to go, not what other people think you should be doing,” he says. If you come from a non-business background, he suggests that you go the extra mile throughout every part of the process. “You're normally not as prepared as business majors to go through it, since you need to understand business fundamentals. If you don't dive headfirst into it, it'll be a little more difficult for you than someone coming from the business school. The little things in recruitment are often what make you stand out from other great applicants. Things like making the small edits to your resume, or your cover letter, or doing that last networking call.”⁸



Kristen Shipley

Bain & Company

Atlanta

Majors: International Business, Operations and Supply Chain

Minors: Spanish, Data Analytics

Year: 2020

“If you think you want to do consulting, speak to many people. Evaluate what you want in your future career and decide if it’s really what you want to do. You have to be 100% into consulting.”

“IF YOU JUST pursue your interests, you’ll end up in a career that interests you,” Kristin Shipley believes. When you look at her resume, they see an impressive array of unique experiences: broad involvement in campus organizations, volunteer work in the community, two different semesters abroad, and internships in various industries. In each of these experiences, Kristin just pursued the things that she was most passionate about. Consulting was not in the picture until the beginning of her junior year.

Similar to other interviewees, Kristin was led to consulting by reflecting upon the aspects she enjoyed most in her different experiences. She interned during her sophomore summer beneath the COO of a mining start up, focusing on operations and general business activities. She recalls loving the company’s start-up culture and fast-paced, project-based work. However, she disliked that she had limited human interaction beyond a few other employees and that she sat behind a desk for the majority of the workday. Kristin wanted the opportunity to work on teams, but all of her work was done individually. She sat back and asked herself, “What are the things I love about this, and what career can I pursue that is project-based with human interaction?” She realized that a career in consulting checked all the boxes she was looking for.

When Kristin joined the Gamecock Consulting Club her next semester, she decided that she wanted to go after a career in management consulting specifically. GCC taught her how to network, how to case, and what it would take to get one of the jobs she had her eyes on. She knew that she couldn’t rely just on GCC’s alumni connections, so she set about building a solid network on her own. “At that point, I had no idea where I wanted to go or which firm I wanted to join,” she said. She cast a broad net and used her informational interviews to figure out where she really wanted to be. “I didn’t think I had what it took to go to Bain, McKinsey, or BCG, so I networked all over the place. I spoke to people from those three, every single Big Four firm, and some even outside of that.” For her, networking wasn’t just a check off the recruitment list, but rather an honest pursuit to identify the right place to work. “When I spoke to people at different firms, I really got to know

what their experience was. I'd ask about the specific areas I was interested in, like social impact or sustainability. I would ask consultants about the opportunities within these sectors at their firms and if they knew anybody with experience in them." If the firm couldn't offer her opportunities in the areas that she had a passion for, she knew it probably wouldn't be a good fit.

She ultimately received a full-time offer to join Bain & Company and accepted after performing a thoughtful pro/con analysis of the places she was interviewing at. She mainly picked Bain for the company culture, but her list of pros for the firm was extensive: she liked the firm's generalist model, the strong relationships of workers outside of work, their mentorship emphasis, and the opportunities for projects in the industries that excited her. The generalist model would expose her to a broad set of industries and problems, which was something she struggled to find in consulting roles at Big Four firms. In addition, she was instantly attracted to the welcoming culture that Bain fostered. Bain consultants seemed to all be genuinely good friends due in part to the company's home-staffing model, in which all team members come from the same office. The home-staffing model also meant that Kristin would not have to travel as much if she didn't want to. "When I went through my interviews at Bain, I felt like I was immediately friends with the people I spoke to. It felt so casual and natural," she remarked. These were the people that she wanted to surround herself with, the type she could envision herself working with late into the night if the project demanded it.

In essence, Kristin felt that the people she met at Bain seemed to go the extra mile to make her feel she really belonged there. "After I got my offer, I had five different people reach out to me about things I wanted to get involved in." What's more, she had a partner offer to help her navigate the move to Atlanta, given that she was engaged and her fiancée was job hunting in different locations. "He said that they put significant others really high in the Bain culture, which I thought was really important."

One of the biggest things that Kristin thinks set her apart during interviews was that she always tried to be personable and easy to talk to. She believes that this is an area in which USC students often have a leg up over those from target universities. Whether in her networking calls or her interviews, Kristin was able to show that she had the strong interpersonal skills that consulting firms look for. She looks back at her time as a University Ambassador as one of the best things she did to develop these skills. "University ambassadors improved my presentation skills immensely, having to give ninety minute tours to potential students and their families. "It taught me how to phrase my thoughts in a presentation which was great for casing," she reflected.

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“Another thing that made me stand out was my breath of diverse experiences, which showed that I was a good fit for the generalist model.” The summer after freshman year she worked at a newly launched chiropractic office as an office manager. The next summer, she worked for the previously mentioned mining start-up, formulating marketing strategy and initial translations of legal documents from Spanish to English. She studied abroad twice, once in Australia and once in Peru. Studying in Peru could have prevented Kristin from gaining a final internship experience, since universities in the southern hemisphere don’t start their Spring semester until the middle of March. She knew that she had to make the most of her time in order to be competitive for consulting, so she did an internship from January to March at Deer Valley Resorts, an experience that taught her how to excel in client services.

Kristin was initially worried that her experiences didn’t amount to what she saw as the cookie-cutter consulting resume: she had never interned at a well-known company like Coca-Cola or a large consulting company. However, she found that her interviewers were actually interested in the diversity of her experiences when she walked them through her personal story. “I think that helped me stand out, because I was just pursuing my interests.” When she spoke about how interested she was in working in the firms social and environmental sustainability practices, for example, her previous experiences showed that they were something she was genuinely passionate about.

Furthermore, interviewers could see she was honest in her interests through her real-world consulting experience in GCC. While Kristin was busy going through consulting recruitment, she was also serving as one of the project leads on GCC’s first real consulting engagement. She helped guide a team of students in building a strategic plan for a digital literacy social enterprise in Kenya. The experience both solidified her desire to be a management consultant and gave her stories to demonstrate to her interviewers that she was in it for the right reasons.

Overall, she thinks the biggest thing for students is to make sure they are one hundred percent committed to management consulting if you want to apply. “Speak to many people. Evaluate what you want in your future career and decide if it’s what you truly want to do. It’s a big preparation process, and you need to be dedicated.”⁹



Trey Vest

McKinsey & Company

Charlotte

Majors: Chemical Engineering

Minor: Business Administration

Year: 2020

“Do not let the major you decide at eighteen years old dictate the rest of your life. Be confident in yourself and be ready to outwork the competition.”

A CHEMICAL ENGINEER, Trey Vest didn't consider management consulting until the second semester of his junior year. “I did engineering because I was stronger at math and science, so it seemed like a natural progression,” he said, even considering going so far as earning a PhD in the field. After completing a lab research internship his freshman year though, he realized that the narrow scope of research didn't excite him as much as he had hoped. The following summer he pursued a chemical manufacturing internship but found that it also didn't give him what he wanted in a career.

Just before he had left for his second internship, Trey talked to fellow chemical engineer Max Portwood about summer plans and Max's upcoming internship at McKinsey. Hearing Max talk about McKinsey immediately piqued his interest in management consulting. “The main thing that caught my eye about consulting was having large project ownership,” Trey said, something he felt like he was struggling to find in traditional engineering pathways. “Coming out with an engineering degree, your job is likely going to be a small role in a plant, like optimization, where you get small ownership over things.” He saw management consulting as an industry that would allow him to immediately have a much broader impact in the projects he worked on. “There's no other industry where you can be 23 and influence the choices of a Fortune 500 vice president. You obviously won't be the person one-on-one telling them what to do—they're 45 and know what they're doing – but you'll be part of a small team that will collectively find solutions to improve their company.”

Trey's worries about his non-business background quickly disappeared once he learned that firms regularly hire engineers, so he fully committed himself to pursuing the industry. He spoke with students at USC, researched firms online, and began to reach out to alumni on LinkedIn to develop his network. He joined the Gamecock Consulting Club that semester, which he credits as a stamp of approval that helped him during recruitment. Not only did GCC open up existing alumni networks, but it also made untapped alumni more receptive to speaking with him. He cast a wide

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recruitment net, connecting with people from Deloitte, KPMG, McKinsey, Oliver Wyman and others to learn about their experiences in the industry. Although he was unsure at that point which firm he would end up at, he knew he wanted to leave USC with a job in management consulting.

Trey knew getting the job wouldn't be easy, but he embraced the challenge to get there. Throughout the summer of his manufacturing internship, he got a head start on interview prep, honing his casing skills with members of the Gamecock Consulting Club and others planning to go through recruitment that fall. At the same time, he developed a closer relationship with alumni at McKinsey Charlotte. This led to an invitation to a networking happy hour at the office in August. Seeing the company in person, he was impressed by the people he met and the firm's corporate culture. By the time interviews rolled around, he was well-prepared to succeed.

Ultimately, it was the people and culture that factored most into his decision to accept his offer from McKinsey. "I felt like I could get a better connection at my office due to the amount of time and effort the people made to make me feel like I belonged there. People I had no relation to at the office would talk with me for an hour," Trey remarked. "Every time your conversation stopped with someone, they would thank you for coming, be super excited you were there, and say 'Hey, let me know how recruitment goes. If you need any help let me know. I'm happy to get you in contact with someone who could work with you.'" Overall, McKinsey Charlotte felt like the right fit.

A few things come to Trey's mind when he tries to think about the factors that made him a successful applicant. First, he was able to get his foot in the door for an interview due to the relationships he had with people at the office. By keeping in frequent contact and casing so much, he was able to show them that he had what it took to do well in an interview. "I think it's highly important that USC students join organizations that have networks readily available for them to reach out to," he reflected. "If you're a in social fraternity, sorority, or professional organization, you have alumni that came through that organization who are more receptive to helping you." For him, that was the Gamecock Consulting Club.

Second, he thinks his ability to be outgoing and make conversation with strangers helped him stand out in networking events. "Basically, it was being able to go to a social environment where I didn't know anyone and be comfortable to go up, say hey and be a normal person, laugh, make jokes, and hang out while getting to know them and their company better." Students can improve these critical networking skills, he says, by joining overtly social organizations on campus.

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Lastly, Trey credits his success to the amount of preparation he did for recruitment. By the time his interviews rolled around, he was confident in his capability to creatively think through any case he encountered. This made him comfortable throughout the process, allowing his interviews to flow more like a conversation.¹⁰



Audrey Ware

McKinsey & Company

Charlotte

Majors: International Business, Marketing, French

Year: 2020

“I’ve met quite a few people who talk about the money, prestige, or something else. But I think you should just figure out what field is right for you and where you’d be happy at work. Finding the people that you want to work with is crucial.”

AUDREY CAME INTO USC thinking she would leave college with a career in diplomacy. With majors in international business and French, an affinity for languages, and a natural ability to speak with others, she thought this was a natural career path. However, she wanted to understand the world from multiple angles so she tried out working in the government, business, and nonprofit sectors in her internships. The summer after her freshman year, Audrey did an intensive French language program whereby she studied for five weeks and then worked for two months in a French-speaking bakery. Then, while completing the Washington Semester program during the spring of sophomore year, she worked for an international community development nonprofit. Next, she worked as a digital marketing intern, doing mockups and analytics for Michelin. Finally, she interned with the foreign commercial services of the US Embassy in Paris, after studying there during the spring of her junior year. Following her senior year, she worked with the director of the undergraduate international business as an “IB Consultant” to increase international cohort program enrollment.

Although none of these experiences showed Audrey exactly what she wanted to do, she enjoyed the diversity of lessons that she learned at each. Senior year rolled around, and she still wasn’t quite sure what she wanted to do after college. She was one of two students accepted into the IB Oxford program during her senior year, meaning she would spend a fifth year studying abroad at Oxford University in England. This gave her at least one more year to figure out which career path was right for her. Consulting wasn’t on her radar until somebody in her business fraternity, Sigma Omega Upsilon, posted a notice in their group chat that McKinsey was going to be at USC to give a presentation. She went to the event and remembers thinking there, “Oh wait, this could really be it for me,” she said. She really liked the problem solving and dynamic nature of consulting projects. “I remember really liking the people – they seemed like people I wanted to be friends with.” She met USC alumni Mark Kingsmore and his coworker Aly at the presentation. She connected well

with Aly, who had studied at the London School of Economics and was willing to talk to her more about McKinsey and life abroad in England.

As Audrey reflected upon her newfound interest, she realized that her previous roles had already shown her the job of a consultant in many ways. “One way you can think about internships is as previous consulting projects. You have to constantly adapt to new working environments. Anywhere you go, you have to adapt to how people operate, the working style, and what the expectations are,” she said. “In my previous internships, I was able to come up with my own projects. I would notice something and say ‘hey, I think we should do this.’ I took the small projects I had and ran with them, going beyond to find ways to genuinely improve the operations of where I was working.”

Ally invited Audrey to a McKinsey Charlotte networking happy hour the summer before she left for England. There, she met the office’s USC intern, Max Portwood, and other students interested in the company. “Everybody was very extroverted and intelligent, and I felt like I got along with everyone,” she noted. “I really liked the people in Charlotte and the office’s smaller size. If someone doesn’t come into the office on Friday, Mark said, they would wonder where they were. There’s a sense of small community.” Ultimately, she liked every person from McKinsey that she spoke with and the wide array of international opportunities that McKinsey presented. By the end of the event, Audrey knew she wanted to do management consulting and she wanted to do it for McKinsey in Charlotte. “It’s not as though I approached it from the perspective of, ‘oh I want to do management consulting and look at all the firms, rank them on these characteristics, etc.’ I just went to the presentation, liked the firm, connected really well with the people, and wanted to focus on that company.”

She decided to apply for a McKinsey summer internship rather than a full-time role, knowing that she wanted to pursue a Fullbright Scholarship for a Masters program in Spain after her year at Oxford. She cased with students she met at the McKinsey event, finding that practice was the only way to know what to expect in interviews. “Reading a book like Case in Point makes you feel like there’s a right answer or right framework to use, but in reality you just have to think through what makes sense and use your creativity,” she said. You cannot box yourself into thinking with the frameworks and mindset of a book you read. “It took a while for me to think independently, and then it just sort of clicked.”

Once Audrey got to her interviews, she was confident in her background and preparation. It’s hard for her to pinpoint exactly what got her the job, but a few things come to mind. Above all, Audrey

sees herself as a genuine person. She's very talkative and friendly, yet she says what she means. Being fluent in two foreign languages and having worked in one was a major plus due to McKinsey's international presence. "It could be that I have a lot of experience working in diverse fields, so I'm used to interacting with a lot of different people. They could see my flexibility in jumping into different situations," she said. "If you can show that you were comfortable in a foreign environment, it's beneficial for the job. In consulting you're constantly changing your work environment and you have to be comfortable with that." Audrey did her first-round interviews from a hotel just after arriving in England, when she was jetlagged from an overnight flight with little sleep. The conditions were opposite of a deal, but she took the situation in stride and made it work. This showed interviewers firsthand how flexible she really was.

Looking back on her time as a student, Audrey doesn't think she would change much about her pathway to consulting. "We learn so much from our experiences. If I changed something, I would not be the same person I am today. Sure, I made mistakes, but I learned from them." The only thing she thinks she would do differently would be to join a business fraternity during her freshman year, rather than as a junior.

"My largest thing is that it should feel right," Audrey tells students looking into management consulting. Students need to make sure that they want to go into the career for good reasons. At Oxford, she has met people who talk about the money or prestige of consulting, but she does not think those are the right reasons to pursue any career. "I think you should just figure out what field is right for you and worry about being happy at work. Finding the right people you want to work with is crucial."¹¹

Closing Thoughts

By this point, my hope is that you have a solid understanding of what management consulting really looks like, what getting a career at the Big Three entails, and clear, actionable steps on how to get there. First you read the collective advice of the students who followed this path. Then you got to see that advice contextualized through their own personal stories, with the nuance that characterized each students' unique pathway there.

If you think that working for one of the Big Three is the right career for you, I want to reiterate three final things. First, make sure that you are fully committed and willing to do what it takes. You know that getting there is not easy, but it is worth it for those who believe in the process. Remember, shooting for the Big Three is just one route of many you can take in consulting. There are a multitude of ways that consulting can be rewarding, and your task is to find out which part of this broad, multifaceted industry would be the one that is most rewarding for you. The advice of this guide, particularly the chapters on developing yourself and how to network, can be applied to whatever career path you follow, whether that be at the Big Three, another consulting company, or even in another industry.

Second, you have to take networking very seriously. As stated before, this is where USC students face the biggest hurdles. We have to go out of our way to reach these companies; they don't come to us. Each of the stories in this guide comes from students like you, who once knew nobody in the industry. Each student went out of their way to meet people, learn more about specific firms, and develop relationships that helped them navigate recruitment. This came primarily by way of alumni working in the industry and experienced students who were generously willing to give their time to help newly interested students understand how to get there. Each of these students, in turn, feels compelled to give back to other students in the same way, which is why they were willing to help in the creation of this guide. Once you break into consulting, the expectation is that you will be willing and eager to do so too.

Third, you must take casing seriously. This guide only briefly covered the subject because there are so many comprehensive resources already out there. You should expect to spend around fifty hours running cases, both as the interviewee and the interviewer for your peers. *Nothing* can take the place of practice to understand what it truly takes to excel in your interviews.

I wish you the best of luck in your journey forward. Whichever career you end up in, make those who wear the garnet and black proud.

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In his time at USC, Cameron served as both President and Director of Alumni Relations for the Gamecock Consulting Club, as Co-President of the International Business Student Advisory Council, and was a member of the Sigma Phi Epsilon Fraternity. He spent both semesters of his junior year abroad at Université Paris – Dauphine.