Cheng, Victor - Case Interview Secrets

Innovation Press, 2012, [Business] Grade ★★★★

Did you know that there are consultants consulting on how to become a consultant? The competition to get employed at BCG, Bain or McKinsey is murderous so the applicants who prepare ahead of the interview obviously have the upper hand. This book aims to prepare the hopeful jobseekers for the interviewing process. Victor Cheng should be well situated to guide the postulant consultant as he's a former McKinsey interviewer himself and today operates the site caseinterview.com with a similar purpose to the book.

In preparing the readers for the very specific case interviews that most management consultants use Cheng in effect uses two tracks. Firstly, he tries to make the reader think and behave like a consultant. If he does, the interviewer will feel that this guy is ready to start generating revenues from the beginning. Secondly, the author goes through the various interview types that are used at the big consultancy firms. These are also the ingredients of the book. Half of it presents the analytical process of management consulting and the toolbox that is used. Cheng discusses problem-solving tools like stating an early hypothesis, drilling down correctly structured, mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive issue trees to try to falsify the hypothesis and end with an – often-modified – hypothesis on a solution and finally shows how to effectively present the synthesis of what you've concluded. Cheng further presents some frameworks such as a numerical model analyzing the various components of profits and a more qualitative checklist to assess a company's business situation. In effect two models crucial to analyzing business problems.

The other half of the book is a run through of the many interview types, interview sub topics etc. that the major management consultants use – all with explanations why they are relevant for the prospective employer. Here a second purpose of the book emerges and that is to get the readers to use the author's web-based pre-interview training camp. To be fair though, when I browse at the site most of the material – but not all – is free as long as you register.

I've never applied to one of the large management consultants, but I've worked with a fair amount of their employees and in my experience the toolbox described is spot on. This is exactly how they work and think. The applicant who assimilates the process of the book will mentally be halfway to becoming a consultant. As I think consultants at times are a bit one-track minded, I find it part impressive, part depressing that employees are molded into the same form and shape even before they apply, as only that shape will pass the test and the applicants all know this. The analytical process is highly reductionist, meaning all problems are routinely deconstructed into smaller parts to be solved. In Cheng's own words "*In consulting, linear thinking is highly valued. The creative thinker, who often sees nonobvious, nonlinear connections between very disparate ideas, is not valued very highly.*" I totally understand that the firms want consistency and a high minimum level of performance from their employees, but it's also a bit sad.

This is a good book and it certainly delivers on its purpose. As a side comment though I think it could be "prettier". For example, the pictures give a cheap feeling and are far in-between. If you devote an entire chapter to preparing the optimal power point presentation and the perfect power point slide, why not show a picture of an example? At times there is also a glimpse of the slightly juvenile notion of the consultant as a superman that is so prevalent within the craft. But don't let this discourage you – if you plan to apply for a job at McKinsey, you should definitely buy *Case Interview Secrets*.

All in all this book delivers, the understanding of the analytical process and the interview situation will both improve the chance of a prosperous – but linear – future at a major consultancy.

Mats Larsson, April 10, 2014