What skills are they looking for?

Following your case interview, your consulting interviewer will complete a written evaluation form. The evaluation forms often include a list of qualities, traits, and abilities and ask the interviewer to assess the candidate against the list. Following is a list of these special traits that, according to consulting insiders, interviewers will be keeping an eye out for as you work through the case interview:

**Leadership skills**

You'll hear this from every consulting firm out there - they want leaders. Why, you might ask, would a consulting firm need a leader? After all, many beginning consultants are consigned to independent number-crunching and research. The fact is, however, that consultants are often called upon to work independently, shape projects with very little direction, and direct others. You should demonstrate your leadership skills by taking charge of the case interview. Ask your questions confidently. Inquire whether the case interview relates to the interviewer's own experience. While your resume and previous leadership experience will probably most strongly convey your leadership ability, your demeanor in the case interview can help.

**Analytical skills**

The core competency of consulting is analysis - breaking down data, formulating it into a pattern that makes sense, and deriving a sensible conclusion or recommendation. You should display this skill through your efficient, on-target, and accurate questions while wrestling your case to a solution.

**Presentation skills**

Presenting your analysis is an essential part of consulting. Once consultants have analyzed their case engagement and decided on the proper course of action, they must present their findings and recommendations to their case team and to their clients. Interviewers will be watching you closely to see if you stumble over words, use inadvisable fillers like "um" or "like" frequently, or appear jittery under close questioning. Remember: When you're speaking, slow down and smile. If asked a question that temporarily stumps you, take a deep breath and pause. It's always better to pause than babble. Ask the interviewer to restate information if necessary.

**Energy**

Even the most qualified and analytical consultant won't be much good if she quits at 5 p.m. during a long and arduous engagement. Interviewers look for zest and energy - firm handshake, sincere and warm smile, bright eyes. Remember that consulting firms expect you to take a long flight and show up at work the next day alert, perky, and ready to go. If you must, drink lots of coffee and use eyedrops - just be energized.

**Attention to detail/Organization**

Consultants must be as painstaking as scientists in their attention to detail. And consultants who juggle two or more flights a week and engagements all over the world must be extremely organized. You can display this skill through a disciplined, logical approach to your case solution, and by showing up for your interview prepared. You'll want to take notes, so bring a pad of paper and a pen. Interviewers notice when candidates must ask for these materials. You must arrive on time.

**Quantitative skills**

Those spreadsheets you'll be working with as a management consultant need numbers to fill them. Consulting interviews will inevitably test your grasp of numbers and your ability to manipulate them. Many interviewers will assess your quantitative skills by giving you a "guesstimate," either within the case question or separately.

**Flexibility**

Consultants may have to arrive at the office one day and be packed off to Winnipeg for six months the next. This kind of flexibility of schedule is mirrored in tests for mental flexibility. To test your grasp of a case interview, the interviewer may suddenly introduce a new piece of information ("Okay, let's say the factories must be opened either in Canada or China") or flip the terms of the case interview ("What if this labor contract is not guaranteed, as I said earlier?") and then watch how quickly you're able to alter your thinking.

**Maturity**
Consultants must often work with executives and company officials decades older than they are. (This is why consultants are taught the right way to answer the question, "How old are you?") Eliminate giggling, fidgeting, and references to awesome fraternity events you may have attended, even if the interviewer seems receptive.

**Intelligence, a.k.a. "mental horsepower"**

Rather straightforward - consulting interviewers are looking for quickness of analysis and depth of insight. Don't be afraid to ask questions for fear of looking stupid - smart people learn by asking questions and assimilating new information. At the same time, asking your interviewer to repeat an elementary (or irrelevant) concept 20 times will not do you any favors.

**What kind of case will I get?**

While there's no way to tell for sure what case question you'll get, there are some things that can tip you off to the kind of case you'll receive.

If you're an undergraduate or other non-MBA student, you can probably be safely assured of getting a creative or "open-ended" question. "We don't expect our undergraduate candidates to know that much about business," confides one interviewer. "What we do expect is the ability to break down and articulate complex concepts." Undergraduates are also much more likely to get guesstimates and brainteasers than MBAs.

Are you a business school student or graduate? Then your case question will probably be less open-ended and drive toward an actual solution. Your interviewer may posit something from her own experience - knowing what course of action the consultancy actually ended up recommending. This doesn't mean you have to make the same recommendation - but you'd better be able to back up your reasoning!

Alternatively, one thing case interviewers love to do is look at your resume and give you a case question that relates to your past experience. "For example," says one consultant, "if you were on the advertising staff for the school newspaper, you might be given a question about investing in advertising agencies." For this reason, advise consultants, "it makes sense to follow up on your field in The Wall Street Journal because you may be asked about recent developments in it. If you know what's going on you'll be that much more impressive." Some guesstimates, like figuring out the total worldwide revenues of Tarzan, are broad enough so that most people can make a reasonable assumption of numbers.