As a former McKinsey resume screener, I thought I'd share my thoughts on how to write the perfect consulting resume or CV.

Even if you have already secured your interviews, you should STILL read what follows because it explains WHY you were selected, what biases the firms have, and what areas of concerns the firms may have that they will likely test you on DURING the in-person interview.

In other words, what follows is an explanation of how the consulting firms THINK about recruiting new consultants. Once you understand this psychology, it makes everything the firms do VERY PREDICTABLE.

Keep in mind these resume tips apply only to strategy consulting firms (as opposed to IT or HR consulting firms) such as McKinsey, Boston Consulting Group (BCG), Bain, AT Kearney, Monitor, LEK, etc...

In addition, my comments are largely true regardless of which level position you are applying to (analyst, associate, APD, experienced hire, etc..)

To start, let me dispel one myth: Resume Format.

Many people obsess over how the resume is formatted. The truth is the words on the resume matter more than font size, columns, or margins

Simple example, if I see a resume that has the "wrong" margins but the resume says, "Harvard University, #1 in Class, Physics" (okay I'm not even sure if Harvard ranks or has a physics degree)... I WILL notice the                                                                                                                  resume.

So the first big takeaway is this: WHAT you say matters more than how you FORMAT what you say.

In screening resumes, I have see dozens if not hundreds of formats. Many different formats can work. The most important thing is the major accomplishments are easy to read. Here is what the big firms are looking for:

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What The Top Consulting Firms Look For in Resumes & CV's

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1) Big Brand Name Employers or Schools

2) Academic Performance (GPA)

3) High Standardized Test Scores in Math

4) Evidence of Leadership and People Skills

5) High Achievement Career Experiences (Proportional to Length of Career)

Keep in mind these are resume criteria for ALL levels of consulting, not just post-college roles.

Let me explain WHY each one is important.

1) Big Brand Name Employers or Schools

To be blunt, the top consulting firms are school snobs. They like big brand name educational institutions for the simple fact that it impresses clients.

If you're an Associate making $150,o00 - $200,000 USD per year, your employer is probably billing you out to clients at $600,000 USD/year. That's $50,000 USD/month. The client is going to want to know what and who they are getting for that kind of money.

When the answer is John or Jane Doe, who has a BS from Dartmouth, a MD from Yale and MBA from Harvard, clients respond with an "Oh wow... that's impressive" comment. It makes it easier to get new clients to say "yes".

Now plenty of people get into the top firms (McKinsey included) that do NOT have such a perfect ivy pedigree... but if you got it, make sure it is OBVIOUS (it will help a lot).

Let me explain the thought process some of these bias. The thinking is that only super high achievers get into the top schools... and the top firms REALLY like hiring super high achievers.

This is not to say that the firms do not hire from non-target schools (they do), but they assume the highest achievers from non-target schools will work really hard to contact the firm (generally via networking) –

thus demonstrating their determination.

(There is a lesson here. If you do not have a super pedigree, you'd better be super determined as evidence by the amount of effort you put into networking)

In addition, it is very expensive for the firms to do on campus recruiting. So they stick to schools where the offer rate vs. applicant ratio is high (high being defined as greater than 1%...

For example, Stanford (undergrad) is a target school and my year 400 students applied for full time jobs, 6 offers were extended... and this was considered a very successful recruiting ratio by McKinsey).

As a point of reference, when I was recruited by McKinsey, I heard a rumor that the firm spent $100,000 USD in recruiting expense to hire ONE Business Analyst.

This figure included all billable hours of interviewers and consultants who go to on campus recruiting events as well as "hard" costs for travel, renting conference rooms, hotels, etc...

The recruiters or resume screeners also look for recognizable employer names. It is easier to understand a candidate's accomplishment via the implied credibility of the employer name and it is also easier to convey to clients.

It is the same reason everyone wants to work for MBB - McKinsey, Bain or Boston Consulting Group -- it implies something on your resume that stays with you forever.

To this day, I am known as a Stanford Grad and an Ex-McKinsey "Guy". It is how I am introduced formally or informally when I give speeches. It stays with you for a very long time.

Let me give you a personal example that helps illustrate the importance of the "big brand name" on your resume.

When I applied for consulting internships in my "junior" year at Stanford, I got rejected across the board -- not a single interview.

The following year, I got interviews with EVERY major consulting firm that I applied -- with no exceptions.

I got interviews at McKinsey, BCG, Bain, Booz, LEK, AT Kearney, Monitor, Oliver Wyman (formerly Mercer), and a few others.

(I also got offers from every consulting firm I interviewed with except BCG where I got rejected in round 1, and Booz when I decided to cancel my final round)

So what made did I do in the 12 months that made such a big difference?

Well I looked at who got interviews (most were friends of mine) and tried to figure out WHY they got interviews.

Their GPA's were identical to mine. Their areas of academic study were identical to mine. The only thing I noticed was many of them had worked for well known companies the prior summer, and I had not.

I decided to focus on improving the "brand name" factor on my resume in two ways.

First, I did an internship at Merrill Lynch DURING the school year. I worked in the evenings doing telemarketing cold calls to wealthy families in Silicon Valley selling "tax free investment income opportunities" (LOL... I still remember my phone script, I said it SO MANY times).

By the way, this was an UNPAID internship... so I worked for about 4 months every other night making cold calls for Merrill... just so I could put Merrill Lynch on my resume.

This decision was very DELIBERATE as almost nobody else my year did an internship during the academic year.

Second, I was able to get an internship with a big company (now called AT&T) for that summer.

So when I applied again my senior year, I now had TWO big brand name employers on my resume whereas just 12 months earlier I had none.

As I mentioned earlier, the following year, I got interviews with EVERY consulting firm I applied to in large part because of the brand name employers on my resume (I was competing against 400 other

Stanford students, so we all had the famous school on the resume so that was not a differentiator).

Similarly as an resume screener, many of us would read resumes with a big red marker. All we would do for hours was skim resumes while circling certain brand names on the resume that jumped out as recognizable or impressive.

2) Academic Performance (GPA)

The top firms want to know if you are smart. It helps to put your GPA on your resume. If you do not, they will either 1) ask you for it anyways or write it by hand on your resume after you submit it, or 2) assume it is low and assess your resume accordingly.

If your schools grading system is not well understood by others, you should explain the grading scale your school uses. Most US schools use a 4.0 GPA system - perfect marks is a 4.0 GPA out of a possible 4.0.

If yours is different or you are applying from one country to an office in a different country, then you want to put on your resume some way for the reader to interpret your GPA (put your rank or put your %... like top 1% of class, something along those lines).

For applicants coming out of college, many firms will ask for your transcript to see your specific grades on specific classes. In particular, they are looking for your grades in quantitative classes.

Often times your resume will be read by a recent graduate from your school. So if you went to Stanford at took Geology 101, the reader is going to know that you took "Rocks for Jocks" (the nickname for that class amongst Stanford students) and interpret your grades accordingly.

Again there is not cutoff and the standard will vary by school. Amongst the top undergraduate institutions, a 3.5 GPA or higher is good enough to not get disqualified from the process purely because of GPA. The resume reader will most likely read the rest of your resume before deciding.

My GPA at Stanford was 3.5 at the time I applied to the major firms... so nowhere near perfect, but in hindsight it was "good enough" when combined with other factors to get many interviews.

3) High Standardized Test Scores in Math

Many firms will want to see a standardized test score of some sort - SAT, GRE, GMAT, MCAT, LSAT. Because it is sometimes hard to compare GPA's from one university to another, the standardized test score is an easy to compare measure of one's math ability.

Strong math skills do correlate strongly with the ability to think in a logical and analytical way -- the preferred thinking style that consulting firms favor enormously.

Since I applied coming out of college, I had only taken the SAT (the US standardized test high school students take to apply to US colleges) and I had a score of 800 on the math section (800 out of 800).

It is not necessary to have a perfect score, but certainly the higher the better.

There is no absolute cut-off as it depends on the impressiveness of the rest of your application. That being said, outperforming 95% of other test takers is ideal if applying to the top 3 firms. The standard is not as high with other firms.

4) Evidence of Leadership & People Skills

Being smart (factors #2 and #3 above) is not enough to do well as a consultant. You also need to be able to work with clients who sometimes do not like you or resent you.

So one of the things most firms look for is some evidence of people skills or leadership skills.

The firms want to know you can handle a difficult interpersonal situation -- especially any one involving high stress, deadlines, inter-personal conflicts.

You will get asked about these kinds of leadership scenarios in your interview. They also look for it in your resume and consulting cover letters too.

If you have these experiences, PUT IT IN THE RESUME. It is a big mistake if you do not.

These experiences can include:

* Extra-curricular activities.

* Specific experiences at a particular job (especially people-skill type accomplishments that might not normally be valued by other employers in that industry, but would be valued by consulting firms.)

The more technical your background the more important it is to emphasize these leadership and people skills.

If you have a PhD in Physics from MIT, have been published 10 times, this is no guarantee of an interview. Here's why.

With a PhD in Physics from MIT, it is assumed you have the analytical skills to do the quantitative aspect of the consulting job. But now the firms want to know if you can work with people... or if you are a brilliant but arrogant ass.

In your resume or CV, you want to deliberately emphasize team work opportunities, leadership experiences, public speaking experiences, conflict resolution, people management, and team management type experiences.

Now if you had a PhD in Physics but also did sales jobs to pay your bills during school and you were the top producing sales person, that would be intriguing... and clearly someone worth interviewing.

In other words, you need to be the OPPOSITE of the stereotype for your area of academic study.

If you are an English major, they assumption will be you are good with people but lousy with numbers. On your resume, you need to prove the OPPOSITE to be true.

5) High Achievement Career Experiences (Proportional to Length of Career)

For applicants of all types (undergrad, post-MBA, experienced hires), the firms are looking for an impressive (career trajectory vs. length of career) ratio. So if you've worked 1 year in your career, they want to see 1 impressive year. If you've worked 10 years, they want to see 10 impressive years.

Things to emphasize in describing job experiences:

* Emphasize OUTCOMES, not just responsibilities

* When possible QUANTIFY your accomplishments with numbers

* Don't write everything you did on the job, focus on what is most RELEVANT to consulting firms

For example, if you have a very technical degree, really good math test scores, 4 years of work experience in a very technical field in a very technical role, it is a waste of space to spend too much time emphasizing your technical accomplishments.

Use those bullets to emphasize business results (derived from your technical work), the financial impact, quantify the measurable change in behavior from your work (because of this new system I developed, 8,000 people now get their performance metrics through this system vs 0 when I started, that sort of thing).

If you have a liberal arts background, a liberal arts majors, lots of extra-curricular activities where you showed you were a "people person". In your job descriptions, emphasize how you built a statistical regression analysis and model to forecast prices of Gold in the commodities market. Or became a self

taught software developer in a particular job.

So the key message here is this:

Pick you job description bullet points STRATEGICALLY.

You don't have space to put everything you did, so you must focus on emphasizing those things you want to convey about each job to round out your profile.

Another way to balance how which points you choose to emphasize in the bullet points under each job description, look for the unusual combo.

I remember one classmate of mind who interned at Bain. She was an English major, but took several advanced math class -- well over my head as a Quantitative Economics Major – and got perfect grades in each of them.  That's an unusual combo.

Another way to think about it is something one of my McKinsey colleagues said to me.

"We like to hire engineers with people skills. And we like to hire poets who can do math."

If you have an unusual combination of skills, be sure that comes through in your resume. Bust the stereotype that you might get type cast in.

**** Thoughts on Resume Formatting *****

Many different formats work, but a few general "common sense" rules of thumb apply:

* Put your education experiences at the top. Make sure the name of the school you went to is easy to read.

Whether you've never worked full time or been in industry 10 years, put the schooling at the top -- its what resume readers look for first, so don't bury it.

(If it is buried, it is assumed that the school name must not be impressive.)

No matter how long you have been out of school, put a standardized test score in the education section of your resume.

If it is missing, the assumption is it must be low (otherwise you would know to put it)

* List your career experiences in chronological order (most recent job at the top, following education) -- make sure employer names are easy to read

* Keep the resume concise -- 1 page for anyone with little work experience, 2 pages max for experienced hires.

* Use bullets to save space. Keep the points short and to the point. A good rule of thumb is 2 - 4 bullets per job experience, ideally most bullets being 1 line long

* Make sure the font size is easy to read (since a size 11 font will vary depending on which font is used), just make sure the reader can read it

* Make sure to bold all school names and employer names. No need to bold your job titles. Recruiters look at employer name first, job title second.

Emphasize the things that will catch a recruiter's eye first, draw them in to reading the resume, and then discovering everything else you have to offer.

If you worked for a "no name" employer, but all your clients were famous... list the client names (possibly bold them too... might be a little over the top, but at least it will get seen).

So if you worked for "John Doe Consultants"... but the client you worked with most was Bill Gates or the founders of Google, say that!

This is not resume writing, it is marketing!

* Do NOT include everything you ever did in your life. The point of a resume is NOT to write a personal biography. The point is to SELL YOU.

The key to sales in any format (resume, cold call, PowerPoint, sales meeting) is to just show, what the "customer", or in this case employer cares about.

* Use language and descriptions that the resume reader will understand. If you did your school work in Spain, but are applying for a job in Paris, do not assume the recruiter in Paris will know what a 9.5 GPA is... explain it is a 9.5 (out of 10.0) GPA.

If you won an equivalent of a Nobel Prize in your field, say won "XYZ Award - awarded to 1 person out of 10,000 applicants".

These are phrases that any resume reader can understand.

YOU MUST UNDERSTAND THE AUDIENCE before your write your resume.

Do NOT assume they have the sufficient background to appreciate your accomplishment; you need to EXPLAIN them on your resume.

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Good luck on your recruiting process. Also keep in mind that my website has over 300 articles all on the topic of case interviews.

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Thanks,
-Victor Cheng

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