Communication, Synthesis and Client Handling

Interview preparation summary · SC track

IN THIS SUMMARY

- Communicating a case
- Handling the room

INT.KC.1.a · Communicating a case

Open an answer with the conclusion and support it with two or three grouped reasons, in the order a listener needs them.

Answer first means the opening sentence of every answer is the conclusion, not the route to it. The pyramid principle, at overview level, puts one governing message at the top, supported by two or three reasons, each resting on evidence. The reasons should be mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive for the question and grouped by one logic: steps in a process, parts of a whole, or a ranking by importance. Interviewers ask for this because senior clients are short of time and because an answer that starts with the facts forces the listener to guess where it is heading. A strong opening names the answer, the number of reasons and their shape, for example: profit fell by 5.3m, for two reasons, margin and overheads. Candidates fail by narrating their work in the order they did it, by hedging in the first sentence, or by giving five reasons of mixed weight. If the evidence is not yet firm, give a hypothesis and say that it is one. The same shape works on a slide, where the title is the answer.

WORKED EXAMPLE: ANSWER FIRST ON A PROFIT FALL AT HARLOW BISCUITS

Harlow Biscuits is an invented UK food manufacturer. Last year revenue was 250.0m, gross margin 40% and overheads 82.0m. This year revenue is 260.0m, gross margin 37% and overheads 83.5m. The interviewer asks: why has profit fallen, and by how much? Convention: operating profit is gross profit less overheads; ignore tax and interest.

Answer: Say: Profit fell by 5.3m, from 18.0m to 12.7m, and two things explain it. First, gross margin: a three-point fall cost 7.8m, which more than cancelled the 4.0m we gained from growth. Second, overheads rose by 1.5m. So this is a margin problem, not a demand problem, and that is where I would look next.

> **Interview tip:** Write your governing sentence on your notes before you speak and check that a listener who heard only that sentence would still know the answer. The first ten seconds of an answer are what the interviewer remembers.

INT.KC.1.b · Communicating a case

Signpost an answer and think aloud in short, labelled steps so the listener can follow the structure and the arithmetic without losing the thread.

Signposting tells the listener how many points are coming and where you are: there are three parts, first, second, and that brings us to the third. Thinking aloud means narrating decisions, not every keystroke. The interviewer cannot see your pen, so state the method, then the key intermediate number, then the result and what it means. It is acceptable to ask for a minute to organise a structure, and a short pause is better than a rambling start. Silence in the middle of a calculation, with no word of what you are doing, is a worse habit, because a wrong turn cannot be rescued. To avoid rambling, decide the headline and the number of points before you open your mouth, speak one sentence per point before adding detail, and stop when you have finished. Typical faults are reading out every digit, filling gaps with noise, returning to the beginning after an interruption, and opening a case with six branches that nobody can hold in their head. A good opening restates the question, asks for a minute, gives three or four branches, and says where to start and why.

WORKED EXAMPLE: THINKING ALOUD THROUGH A MARKET SHARE GAP

Wexford Paints is an invented client in a 2.4bn market. Its share was 15.0% and is now 12.5%. The interviewer says: how much revenue has the client lost to this share fall, and how would you say it aloud? Convention: the market size is unchanged, and share is by revenue.

Answer: Say: I will apply the 2.5 point share fall to the 2.4bn market. One percent is 24m, so 2.5 points is 48m plus 12m, which is 60m. As a check, 15 percent is 360m and 12.5 percent is 300m, so the gap is 60m. That is one sixth of the client's revenue, so it is worth finding out where the share went.

> **Interview tip:** Use the pattern method, number, meaning. It keeps you talking while you work, shows the interviewer your method early, and gives them a point at which to correct an assumption cheaply.

INT.KC.1.c · Communicating a case

Close a case with a recommendation, the main risks and next steps, give a 30-second summary, and turn the same logic into a slide with an action title.

A case ends with a recommendation, not a summary of the analysis. The close has four parts in a fixed order: the recommendation in one sentence, two or three reasons with one number each, the main risks with a way to test or limit each, and the next steps with an owner or a timescale. Risks should be specific to this recommendation and tied to a number that would break it, such as the level at which payback passes the client's limit, not a generic list of things that could go wrong. A 30-second summary is the same close, compressed: about 75 spoken words. The same logic applies to a slide: the title is a full-sentence message, the body gives the evidence for that message and nothing else, usually one chart or table with the key point marked, and a source. Weak closes fade out with the word so, repeat every finding, or end on a risk. Strong ones end on the decision the client must take and the first action.

WORKED EXAMPLE: CLOSING THE CASE ON A SECOND DEPOT

Carraway Bikes is an invented UK cycle retailer weighing a second distribution depot. It costs 6.0m and is expected to add 1.5m a year of contribution. The board accepts projects with a simple payback of 4.5 years or less. Close the case: recommendation, risk and next step, and say what the title of the supporting slide should be. Convention: simple payback is investment ÷ annual contribution; ignore tax and discounting.

Answer: Say: I recommend building the second depot, because it pays back in 4.0 years against a limit of 4.5. The main risk is volume: if contribution comes in more than 11% below the 1.5m plan, payback passes the limit, and at 80% of plan it is 5.0 years. So my first next step is to confirm volumes with the three largest customers before the board signs.

> **Interview tip:** Always attach the risk to the number that would change your mind. A risk with a threshold sounds like analysis, and the interviewer can see you know how far the plan can slip.

INT.KC.2.a · Handling the room

Ask a few clarifying questions that pin down the objective, scope and definitions, and use an interviewer's hint as information rather than as a verdict.

Clarifying questions come before the structure. Their job is to confirm the objective (what the client wants, by when, measured how), the scope (which products, markets and time period), the key definitions (what profit or growth means here) and the constraints. Two to four focused questions are enough, then a one-sentence play-back of your understanding. Questions that ask for data, such as the size of the market, usually belong after the structure, when you know why you need them. Ask the objective first, because the scale of the goal often changes the shape of the answer. When the interviewer does not know or will not say, state an assumption aloud and carry on. A hint, such as have you considered the customer side, is a signal that part of your structure is missing or too thin; the right response is a brief thank you, a visible change to your structure and then continuing. Defending the structure out of pride, or discarding it in panic, both lose credit.

WORKED EXAMPLE: HOW THE OBJECTIVE CHANGES THE STRUCTURE

Stavely Motors is an invented dealership group with revenue of 200.0m and an operating margin of 8%. The interviewer says: the client wants to grow profit. You ask what the target and timeframe are, and are told: plus 10.0m within two years. What does that tell you about the structure? Convention: assume revenue stays at 200.0m unless stated, and ignore tax.

Answer: Say: Before I structure this, can I confirm the goal? The client wants plus 10 million of annual profit in two years. That is from about 16 million to 26 million, a rise of roughly 60 percent, or a margin of 13 percent on flat revenue. A target that big probably needs both growth and cost action, so I will build the structure around both.

> **Interview tip:** Ask the objective question first and convert the answer into a number you can say back. The play-back shows you listened and gives the interviewer a chance to fix a misunderstanding before it costs you five minutes.

INT.KC.2.b · Handling the room

Respond to a challenge, a mistake or a gap in knowledge by staying calm, separating fact from assumption, correcting openly and saying how you would find out.

Interviewers and clients challenge you to see how you behave, and sometimes because they are right. The method is the same in each case. Pause, restate the challenge so it is clear, and separate what is arithmetic or fact from what is an assumption or opinion. Re-check the point quickly. If you were wrong, say so in one sentence, give the corrected figure and say what it changes; do not apologise at length. If you were right, hold your position politely and give the reason, and say what evidence would change your mind. Saying I do not know is acceptable when it is followed by how you would find out or estimate the answer, and often an estimate with a clear label. Guessing with confidence is the worst response, because a client acts on it. Candidates lose credit by becoming defensive, by changing a correct answer at the first push, and by hiding an error that they have noticed.

WORKED EXAMPLE: DEFENDING A SAVING WHEN ITS RATE IS CHALLENGED

You have recommended a procurement programme at Penhallow Foods, an invented company with 30.0m of annual spend in scope. You assumed a 20% saving, worth 6.0m, against a programme cost of 3.0m a year. The interviewer says: I think 20% is too high, I would expect 15%. How do you respond? Convention: annual figures, ignore tax and timing.

Answer: Say: That is a fair challenge. The arithmetic is right, 20 percent of 30 million is 6 million, but the 20 percent is my assumption. At your 15 percent the saving is 4.5 million, still 1.5 million above the 3 million programme cost. The recommendation only breaks below 10 percent, so I am comfortable, and I would test the rate against the three biggest categories.

> **Interview tip:** Treat a challenge as a request for a sensitivity. Give the break-even point, so the interviewer sees that the real question is not whether your number is exact but how wrong it can be before the decision changes.

INT.KC.2.c · Handling the room

Manage the time and structure of a case under pressure, take a fair part in a group exercise, and come across as credible and likeable with senior people.

Time is a resource to plan. In a case of about 30 minutes, a sensible shape is roughly a fifth on clarifying and structuring, well over half on analysis and exhibits, and the last few minutes kept for a synthesis that you do not skip. Set checkpoints and re-prioritise when behind: go to the branch with the largest impact first, and say you are skipping the rest. Under stress, the structure is the first thing to go. The remedy is to pause, say let me take a moment, return to the question, and rebuild from two or three buckets. In a group exercise you are marked on contribution and on how you help the group: listen, build on others, bring in quiet members, keep time and summarise, without taking more than your share of the airtime. With senior people, credibility comes from being concise, answering first, being honest about what you do not know and being courteous without being timid. Likeability is warmth plus competence, not agreement.

WORKED EXAMPLE: PLANNING A 30-MINUTE CASE AND CATCHING UP

You have a 30 minute interviewer-led case. You plan to spend 3 minutes clarifying, 3 minutes structuring, 18 minutes on analysis across three branches, 4 minutes on synthesis and keep 2 minutes spare. At minute 15, you have finished only one branch. What do you do? Convention: times in minutes from the start of the case.

Answer: Say: I have about 15 minutes left and two branches to go, so I cannot take both in depth. I will go to the one most likely to explain the problem, which is the cost branch, and spend about 6 minutes there. The other I will cover in a minute or two or list as a next step, and I will leave the last four minutes for my recommendation.

> **Interview tip:** Glance at the clock at fixed points, such as the end of structuring and halfway. Announcing a decision to cut scope is a positive signal; running out of time without warning is not.