RYAN TAN

LINKEDIN

INTERVIEW DONE BY BAEY SHIN EE

Ryan is a diverse professional who aims to broaden his horizons by exploring various roles. He is currently serving as a Management Consultant at Boston Consulting Group (BCG), with over a year under his belt. Prior to BCG, he excelled as a Product Manager at Shopee and interned at esteemed organisations such as J.P. Morgan, Accenture, PwC, and Zenyum, contributing to diverse projects in corporate strategy, consulting, and venture development. Ryan's journey is marked by a commitment to business and product strategy.



KNOWING THAT YOUR STORY WILL BE DISTRIBUTED AMONG THE NUS BUSINESS SCHOOL COMMUNITY, HOW WOULD YOU WANT YOURSELF TO BE KNOWN TO THE READERS?

I graduated from my class in 2021. consulting is my second job. My first job was actually in tech. I was a product manager in Shopee for a year, and subsequently ventured into consulting. I did a lot of different stuff across my time in school and also after school. It really broadened my horizon.

I am a person who is quite carefree in the sense that I don't want to be fixated on one particular role. Which is why I pivoted across all of my different experiences. If I'm doing a banking internship today, the next time I may be doing a consulting internship, then tech, and now I have come back into consulting.

The main reason why I made this pivot and eventually ended up in consulting is partially due to the fact that I do not want to be fixed in a role and I just wanted to explore while I am still young.

IS PURSUING A CAREER IN CONSULTING SOMETHING THAT YOU WANTED FROM THE GET GO? OR WAS IT SOMETHING THAT YOU DISCOVERED LATER ON IN LIFE?

At the start, like many ambitious business students, I wanted to do banking because I didn't know what was out there. Then as I progressed along the years, in my time in school, I realised that there were a lot of other opportunities. Consulting is one of them and tech is one of them. I really wanted to try all of them out before deciding which one is the best role for me. So in my time in school, I was actually quite lucky because I managed to do a banking internship and I also managed to do a consulting internship. I did my internship for consulting at Accenture. While for banking, I did a banking internship at JP Morgan. And then subsequently I was like, what else can I possibly do? I haven't done tech yet. I went to Google and saw, okay, based on my current skill set, based on what I am potentially good at, what is the best role in tech that I can possibly do? So they told me that product management is probably

a good fit and you have a lot of responsibility and autonomy to try things, which is why for my first role I went to do a tech role. After all of these experiences, what I realised is that for someone who is extremely young, what is the best possible route that I can go? So in terms of optimization and my personality, what is the best job for me? I felt that consulting would be better because consulting itself, you are not tied to one particular industry, you are not tied to one particular function. As you join as a fresh graduate or a relatively fresh grad out of school, you are typically what I call a generalist in consulting, where you venture across different industries and different functions. Just to share my current role as a consultant, I have worked across a couple of projects, and all of them are in different functions and across different industries. Some of the companies that I work with are large industrial goods companies. I work with food businesses, and you work on very different topics. Some of them deal with helping a company get listed, while some are more on the optimization and basically, they are spending a lot of money on their logistics. How do you try to cut down the spend in this particular area? So there are a lot of different problems that they are tackling, and no two projects are exactly the same, which is why I decided to go into consulting and why I still enjoy my time here, despite quite brutal hours.

I NOTICED THE VAST VARIETY OF INTERNSHIPS WHICH YOU HAVE DONE WHILE IN SCHOOL, RANGING FROM VENTURE HUB ANALYST AT PWC, CONSULTING ANALYST AT ACCENTURE AND STRATEGY ANALYST AT JP MORGAN. DO SHARE WITH US MORE ABOUT YOUR INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCES.

I think I was more fortunate in some sense. I do not think that I am typically the best candidate, and I do not think that I perform particularly well in my internships as well. I think there are a lot of people that did better than me. But in terms of securing the role, I would say that sometimes it's very important to set a good impression from the get go because an interview is probably 30 minutes to one hour long, and that is basically all they have.

They do not know what your real work ethic is. They do not know what your skills and capabilities are. So it's really just based on that impression. To be honest, I would say that even in school, I was not the most skilled student or the most skilled worker. There are people that perform better than me in terms of presentation and analysis. But what I really anchored on in terms of the interview process was how I actually presented myself as well as how I actually tried to build the rapport with the interviewer.

I think that is what I really indexed on and what I really focused on, which allowed me to gain some form of success in the interview process and to mitigate some of my shortcomings in terms of some skill sets that other candidates may have that I do not. So that is what I really focus on and I thought that it has been super helpful in terms of landing those roles.

HOW DOES ONE INCREASE THEIR CHANCES IN SECURING THE INTERVIEW IN THE FIRST PLACE?

For many of these companies, grades play an important role and to be fair, all you need is one name on your resume alongside good grades and good interview skills, and your subsequent internships will come easily. I would say that it is always the first internship that is the hardest to secure. Once you manage to land one particularly good or decent internship, the next one comes easy.

But for the first one, I would say that what really can put yourself apart from the rest is since you do not have prior experiences, it is really based on number one, either your academics or number two, your co-curricular activities and share across what you are doing in these clubs and how they correlate to some of the possible internship positions that you are doing. Because some of the industry positions, as much as it may be super technical, there are also a lot of project management aspects. There's also a lot of communication aspects, problem solving aspects that you would have probably faced in your time leading certain clubs in school and sharing those project experiences to the interviewer could help them see if you are a good fit for the role. So I would say that is something that you can possibly prioritise for your first ever internship application. Once that comes in, for your second and third internship, always focus on prior internship work experiences because that will be a clear representation of what your work style and work accomplishments are. Ultimately, that is what I feel interviewers value more as compared to academics or your club activities.

HOW DIFFERENT WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR EXPERIENCES BEING A STRATEGY/ CONSULTING INTERN AT PWC, JP MORGAN AND BCG? ANY NUANCES IN COMPANY CULTURE OR ANYTHING IN COMMON THROUGHOUT YOUR TIME IN THESE COMPANIES?

I would say generally, they are all very business focused, professional companies that want to present a very professional image to everyone because they are selling a service. We are getting clients to pay you a lot of money for your work that you are doing. Overall the environment is similar, but expectations are very different. As you move from one firm to another firm, you realise that there is a gap between expectations for juniors and usually it can vary quite significantly. For certain firms the expectation for juniors is a lot higher but you get rewarded for it, in terms of opportunities and the project that you are doing. Even in terms of salary, you will get a lot of upside in that, but there are sacrifices that you have to put into to be there.

Of the main differences across these different industries, I can name for banking versus consulting. Ultimately consulting is more client facing. You are dealing with different projects, and meeting with the client counterpart. For example, if we are working with Unilever, we will speak to the Unilever counterpart. Whereas for banks, at the junior level, it is more internal facing. You work on your teams, and face your own team members rather than clients. It is in some sense more relaxing as you do not have that pressure and are familiar with everyone. Those are the two main differences across banking and consulting.

WHAT DO YOU ENJOY MOST ABOUT YOUR JOB? ANYTHING WHICH YOU DISLIKE?

Something I dislike about my job would be the working hours. All of these jobs are very demanding in terms of hours and you lose a bit of your life. It is very difficult to establish work-life balance in these kinds of jobs and that is something that I definitely miss and I am also actively trying to prioritise it in my job in terms of pushing back what is not required and only doing what is the most necessary. So that is something that I still am trying to improve.

In terms of what I enjoy, it is the work that I do, I think generally, it is very value adding. So in terms of the projects that you start on in BCG, they are projects that will help to shape the decision that the company makes or the direction that the company goes in the next five years.

I think there is a lot of bad press recently, in terms of hiring and firing in tech, right? So tech itself, I think Facebook/ Meta is aspiring 18,000 members. And what I know about is, there is a big consulting firm that is advising them, and potentially it is also correlated to the organisational restructuring, and causing them to lay off. So those are some of the big decisions that you work on, and you have to bear the responsibility of it, whether it is good or bad. If you ultimately believe that it is beneficial for the company, you have to go ahead to make a strong recommendation for it, or you would have to reject that particular recommendation, whether it is proposed on the kind or not.

I would say that you work on very big and meaningful projects, but the bad thing is that hours are bad and potentially it may not be directly in line with what you think is good for society. The last point actually just came up as I was talking about making big decisions, but I realised that, when you make these decisions, sometimes it's in a bid to improve the company or to enhance the profitability for the corporations but cause some negative social impact. So I would say that is a trade off that you have to make if you come into this professional service firm.

GIVEN THE COMPETITIVENESS TO ENTER THE MBB FIRMS, COULD YOU SHARE SOME TIPS ON HOW YOU MANAGED TO LAND A ROLE AT BCG?

It will be good to begin a prior internship at the Big 4 where it is less selective and from there it would be a very good stepping stone to naturally progress. Besides prior internship experience, good grades and luck. I guess grades are kind of a prerequisite considering that a lot of people who have First Class Honours are applying, and they have very good experiences as well. Once you lose that academic stamp, and you know that you are not the top student in your school, then it is very difficult to compete. Not saying that it is necessary, but it will be super important I would say. So in terms of academics, that is quite important.

In terms of prior experience wise, I think what they really value is regional, at least some form of regional experiences, whether it is through your exchange or prior experiences that you have, maybe living or studying abroad. It is all super helpful because, at least for the MBB firms, a lot of them require you to get staff overseas, meaning that you work on projects that are not based in Singapore. For BCG, we have what they call a regional

staffing policy that means you will work on projects all across Southeast Asia. So there are a lot of my colleagues that travel to Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei on a weekly basis to do casework there. So to have that kind of exposure, let's say student exchange which we have experienced, and where you pick up how to effectively communicate with a person of a different culture, that will be super important.

Also, try to understand more about the firm and what they are focusing on, that will give you an edge. For example, when I was interviewing for BCG, what I understood was that they are transitioning towards a core focus on renewables. When I was interviewing with the key partners in the firm, there was also a question that I really focused on. So in terms of transitioning to renewables, what does it really mean for the firm? Does it mean that we stop working with major oil and gas companies? Do we try to limit projects that have a negative impact on the climate? Then how do we balance across profitability for the firm and our social responsibility? Because people are always saying that we should transition to net zero and that we should work with clients that have a positive social impact. But if a large oil company asks us to do a project for them and they are paying us millions of dollars, is it possible to say no? Or what would you do if you had to face that particular decision? So, you really have to ask questions that relate to the company's overall direction, and I feel that is super helpful.

HOW IS IT LIKE WORKING IN BCG? WHAT IS A TYPICAL AND REALISTIC DAY IN THE LIFE AS A MANAGEMENT CONSULTANT ASSOCIATE THERE?

It varies from project to project, and for every individual. I can share about a day in the life of my current project. I am doing a project where we are working closely with many US counterparts. That means that we have a lot of calls scheduled at very late hours. Because of this timing, I would have to get up early, probably about 7-7:30 AM, and what I do is that I will go to whatever calls that I have because we are having these calls with people that are halfway across the world. So usually 8-9 AM is when the call is scheduled, and then we will have that call till 9. Then I will go for a short break, and after that, probably after lunch, I will begin on all the analysis and stuff that I will have to complete till evening and then I will shut down, go for dinner and rest. Subsequently I will prepare for my late night calls.

Typically, you have to be really flexible and you are working around the clock because based on where your client is located, you have to accommodate them, rather than for them to accommodate you.

So that is one of the key challenges that I am also facing in my current project and typically what my day in life looks like. So because you are working long hours from Monday to Friday, what I try to do is I try to shut down on the weekends and try to not do any work at that particular period and get a recharge.

DOES THIS HAPPEN EVERYDAY THROUGHOUT THE YEAR OR ARE THERE CERTAIN CRUNCH TIMES?

Unfortunately for consulting, as long as you staffed, it is always crunch time. At least for MBB, projects are relatively shorter so you get staffed from anywhere from six weeks to twelve weeks. So you are only engaging with the client from a period of one to three months. And what they're paying you is really big money for this period of time and they expect you to give it your all. So for this one to three months, it is crunch time from start to end. Occasionally there might be some breathers, but I would say that the relaxing time would be what they call beach time in consulting, which means in between projects when we are not staffed. So for example, if I end this project in June and I'm only getting staffing in mid July, then from end June to mid July, I won't have a lot on my plate and I can rest. So that is when you get your break time. But when you're in a project, generally it is very difficult to find time to cool down.

DO THE WORKING HOURS GET ANY BETTER AS TIME PASSES?

It is very intense till after 7-8 years, then you become a partner. But else I think from my level to middle management it is all very long hours and very stressful. So potential points to consider if you are thinking about consulting is whether it's worth it for you or not. But most people here do not stay for long. If you are considering MBB, the average tenure here is one to two years. Usually after one to two years, people go on to bigger roles but it depends. Some people choose to stay here as well because it is quite rewarding in terms of salary, as you progress up the level, I think it is very significant and rewarding.

HOW CAN ONE GAIN THE NECESSARY BUSINESS ACUMEN FOR CONSULTING?

There is this thing called case interviews. It is how people usually get grilled in a consulting interview. At the start you can read up the frameworks and once you get very adept and familiar with it, you realise that it is actually very logical in terms of how things are thought through.

In terms of facing a particular question, there are always certain levers that you can use to explain it. To give you the most basic example, in a profitability case, how you split down to the different buckets, whether it's from a revenue or cost perspective, then tackling each one, understanding where the core problem is.

You get trained over time when you get exposed to more of these questions until it becomes second nature to you. So when people ask you something, you can easily break down that particular question. For example, why this product is not selling well. And then you can explain, is it because the item is not priced well? Is it because the item is not being distributed properly and you don't have the proper channels to distribute the product. Is it because you're not promoting your product well? You are able to break down all the different angles and then go in depth into each of these different angles to understand what is the true reason why the product is not selling. So in consulting, this is typically how you tackle the problem in a real working situation. So I would say that comes with practice and you can definitely train to be good at this.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR UNDERGRADUATES SEEKING A CAREER IN CONSULTING? WHAT DIDN'T YOU KNOW BEFORE YOU GOT INTO THIS INDUSTRY THAT YOU WISH SOMEONE HAD TOLD YOU? WHAT WOULD BE A GOOD WAY TO START?

I think it comes naturally and just try your best. If you really want to do consulting, try your best, join clubs and practise your interviews. If you do not get it, then you can do something else. At least for me, from my perspective, I also did try consulting when I was graduating and I didn't get to any of the MBB firms. I got into a couple of tier two firms, and then I thought, is it worth going to a tier two or should I just try something else in tech? Then I just went to tech, and when I was in tech, I tried again for the MBB firms and I got the offer, which is why I transitioned here.

I would guess that it comes naturally. Sometimes if you do not get it, it is not because you are not good, but maybe it is you are not performing on that particular day or your interviewer was having a bad day. Or there are other candidates at that point in time who were super outstanding.

Ultimately there is a quota to fill and those people will get filled first. So if you really want it, try your best, but you know, if you do not get it, you can always try again. There are also a lot of other opportunities which are super interesting apart from consulting. As much as consulting is fun and nice, it does not necessarily need to be everything.