

When I envisaged writing this article, I nicknamed it the 'post-mortem of the CAT'. Little did I know that as the first ever online CAT unfolded, the term 'post mortem' would get to be so appropriate! Though many managed to attempt the CAT without a hitch, others experienced bizarre problems. Any forecast is fraught with risk, and this year's CAT fiasco makes the job doubly difficult. Here are some of the factors that might make a significant difference to the CAT scores of many applicants:

- Many candidates were able to get far more time than the allocated 135 minutes for the test. If the computer froze in the middle of the test, the clock stopped. While the largely clueless supervisors tried to reset the system, the candidate would invariably get extra time to solve the question that she/he was attempting before the computer froze.

- Many candidates got less time than allocated, again owing to computer problems.

- Some candidates did not get to see all 60 questions, literally. This is because the screen blanked out a part or whole of some questions.

- Some candidates were made to attempt the test more than once.

- Many questions, as many as 10 per cent of the total, were repeated from earlier administrations of the CAT.

Amazingly, the questions were exact replicas of questions from CAT 2003 to CAT 2005. Since the actual CAT test papers of those years were officially made available by the IIMs, many applicants had thoroughly studied those papers. I have personally come across innumerable students who knew the answer to several questions by heart. They spent mere seconds in selecting the correct answer choice! In an exam where admission to the top B-school in the country can be secured by getting 30-40 questions right, a gift of as many as six free questions can make a career-altering impact.

- Conventional wisdom suggests that students who remain calm and relaxed during the exam tend to do well. But CAT 2009 test centres were filled with noise, confusion, delays, and tears. I have personally witnessed students breaking down and begging

CAT 2009 IN ITS DEBUTANT ONLINE AVATAR OPENED A CAN OF WORMS, LEADING TO A SIMMERING DEBATE ON WHETHER THE GOOD OLD PAPER-PENCIL TEST IS STILL THE BEST OPTION. AJEET KHURANA TRIES TO EXPLORE THE NATURE OF CAT 2009, AND ATTEMPTS TO FORECAST THE EXPECTED SCORES

CAT CONFUSION

authorities to help them.

- The difference in level of difficulty of tests on different dates was substantial. And it was much more than what can be statistically eliminated by scaling scores.

- The 'Next' button to move to the next question was dangerously close to the 'End Test' button! Click a few millimeters off and it's bye-bye CAT 2009.

In this scenario, only a retest seems like a reasonable solution. It is my strong belief that we are indeed headed for a paper-and-pencil retest of the CAT. As always, we will keep you informed if and when that prediction comes true. For now, let us explore the CAT that was and evaluate your performance.

If you have been a reader of *Education Times*, you would recollect that we were the first to predict that CAT 2009 was likely to get easier than earlier CATs. The legendary 'killer' CAT questions would be few and far between. We are happy to note that this prediction largely came true. In the CATs from 2003 to 2008, even bright students barely managed to attempt 50 per cent of the questions. This time

Photo: Vivek Saranbalkar.
Graphics: Prashant Kumbhar

around, a large proportion of candidates managed to attempt as many as 70 per cent of the questions. Never before have candidates attempted almost all questions. This year several students attempted over 55 of the 60

questions asked.

HIGH OVERALL SCORES

There are several factors that convince me that the cut-off scores in the CAT of 2009 will rise significantly. Some of



them are:

- The questions were easier
- For attempting 60 questions, candidates were allocated 135 minutes, thereby giving them well over two minutes per question. In earlier CATs, the corresponding time was two minutes or under
- Several questions were repeats of earlier questions. Especially in the later administrations of CAT 2009, many students breezed through some questions, as they knew the correct answer choices by heart!

EXPECTED CUT-OFF

Each one of the 100+ institutes that accept CAT 2009 scores decides its own cutoff, but my expectation for the overall cutoffs for the top three IIMs (Ahmedabad, Bengaluru and Kolkata) is a net score of 58.3 percentage. Given the negative marks for incorrect responses, here is an example of how you could score 58.3 percentage:

- **Quantitative Aptitude:** Attempted: 14/20. Correct: 12
- **Verbal Aptitude:** Attempted: 16/20. Correct: 13
- **Data Interpretation & Logical Reasoning:** Attempted: 13/20. Correct: 12

This would put your overall attempt at 43/60, with 37 corrects and six wrongs. With a one-third negative for each wrong response, you would end up with a net score of 35. This score should be adequate to get you a call from all of the top IIMs.

SECTIONAL CUT-OFFS

Predicting sectional cut-offs is murkier business especially as the level of difficulty of CAT 2009 varied significantly from day-to-day. But a good estimate of the sectional cut-off for the top IIMs (for each of the sections) is a net score of 50 percentage. Here is how you could score 50 percentage in a section:

You attempt 14/20 with 11 corrects and three wrongs. With a one-third negative for each wrong response, you would end up with a net score of 10, i.e. 50 percentage. If you attain this score in each of the sections, and achieve an overall score of 58.3 percentage you should get a call from all of the top IIMs.

COMPARISON WITH EARLIER YEARS

The estimates mentioned above are significantly higher than the actual cut-offs observed in earlier years. Overall cut-offs have usually been close to 40 percentage and sectional cut-offs have been in the vicinity of 33.

WAS CAT 2009 TOUGHER?

Whenever any test is administered on multiple days, there is the risk that one version of the test would be of a different level of difficulty than another. The statistical process of 'scaling' irons out these discrepancies ensures that scores of all students can be compared. Though the actual process of statistical scaling is quite complex, a simplistic explanation would be: 'scale down the scores of students who got easier tests and scale up the scores of those who attempted tougher tests'. The estimates provided earlier are for the average CAT 2009. So, if your specific version of the CAT was easier than average, you would have to score a little more. Likewise, if your version of the CAT was more difficult than the average CAT, you could get by with a little lower score too. But, regardless of how difficult your CAT was, it is unlikely that the overall cut-off would be lower than 50 percentage and that the sectional cutoff, in any section, would be lower than 45 percentage.

CAT 2009 WAS DIFFERENT

● **Ungrouped questions:** Usually, if a test has four questions on, say, jumbled sentences, and then they all appear in a group. This year, such grouping was absent other than in the case of Reading Comprehension and Data Interpretation. So question one could be on jumbled sentence, two on English usage, and three on jumbled sentence again. This was one of the few ways in which CAT 2009 raised the level of difficulty.

● **Reading passages were shorter:** Once again, as first reported in this paper, the length of the Reading Comprehension passages was shot down. Interestingly, most students received three passages despite the reduced number of questions. But unlike any earlier CAT, some of the passages had as few as one or two questions following them.

● **There was a substantial question-variety:** despite the reduced number of questions, the test makers managed to introduce substantial variety in the questions. As a result, there



CAT CONFUSION

were very few questions of each type.

● **Quantitative Ability in different versions was substantially different**

Education Times had predicted that algebra, geometry and number systems would be the most important topics in the Quantitative Ability section. We were proven right. In all

THE FUTURE COURSE

As far as the CAT 2009 is concerned, one needs to be mentally prepared for a retest. Though there is no guarantee that this will take place, there is a high likelihood that it will. So do not pack those practice tests away yet. In any case, there are several top MBA entrance exams that are just

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versions of CAT 2009, at least eight out of the 20 questions were from these three topics. In some, as many as 12 out of 20 questions were from these three topics. This means that if you had studied only these three out of the total of 20 odd Quantitative topics, you could possibly clear the sectional cut-off! Within these three topics, some versions of CAT 2009 were substantially different than others. On the one hand there were versions with as many as six questions from geometry, while others had as few as one geometry question. If you hate geometry, you would have a tough time if six out of 20 questions were from it!

around the corner. And syllabi for these exams are largely similar.

Do not forget to prepare well for the GDs and interviews that will follow a successful attempt at an MBA entrance exam. Make sure that you read news and views (editorials) on a regular basis (b) practice group discussions (c) introspect about what you are really seeking from your career.

(The author is Director of Peak Seekers)

Disclaimer: The views expressed in the article are those of the author. This publication and the author's organisation may not necessarily subscribe to those views.

PUTTING ASIDE THE CONTROVERSIES THAT SHROUDED THE CAT 2009, IT IS TIME FOR STUDENTS TO LOOK AT OPTIMISING THEIR PREPARATIONS FOR THE GROUP DISCUSSION (GD) AND PERSONAL INTERVIEW (PI) ROUNDS. **MEGHA GUPTA** OFFERS SOME SUGGESTIONS

Up Next



Having made it past the CAT, you are a step closer to making it to the B-school of your choice. Thinking about the competitive aspect of the GD/ PI can prove to be nerve wracking for some students. The fact that tried and tested formulae don't work for Group Discussion (GD) and Personal Interview (PI) adds to their tension. "Every student, who makes it to the GD/ PI, has successfully cleared the CAT, thus the competition level rises at this stage. This causes anxiety for many students," informs Gejo Sreenivasan, Principal Consultant at Career Launcher. However, self-doubt at this stage helps no one. Instead, students should focus on giving themselves positive reinforcement. To begin with, toss away all pre-conceived notions you may have had and start afresh for this stage of the management admission.

MUGGING NEVER HELPS

Following 'textbook answers' at the GD/ PI, claim experts, is a 'recipe for disaster'. The aim of simulated exercises like the GD is to discover the real

'you' and thus communicating what you believe is the key to success. "During GD and PI, candidates should give perspectives that they believe in. They should be innovative and original rather than clichéd, as this helps to get them noticed," says Neelesh Kossambi, National Manager at IMS.



MOCK TRIALS

A good way to 'revise' for this stage of the b-school admission is by attending 'mock' trials. Tanshu Khandelwal, a student of K J Somaiya Institute of Management Studies & Research, who appeared for the GD/PI last year, elucidates, "Mock group discussions with friends and classmates and simulated personal interviews are extremely useful as they help in understanding one's flaws and working on them."

Kossambi suggests having at least eight trials on different topics that have grabbed headlines on the Internet or in newspapers and magazines. The actual GD may have anywhere between eight to 15 students and usually lasts between 10 to 15 minutes. Thus, students should

aim to have a similar set-up in the mock phase.



PICKING TOPICS FOR GD

There are essentially four types of topics that appear at a GD — socio-controversial topics that generate the maximum opinion, for example 'reservation at education institutes'; factual topics that require a sound knowledge of the facts are the more common types. The others are abstract topics like 'love is a four letter word'. At the first instance, such topics seem complicated and may draw a blank from some students. But once the GD begins, they develop and provide students an opportunity to display their creativity. The last type of topic — case studies — is commonly used by the IIMs. They comprise a hypothetical case where students are asked to put forth their opinions.

Given this background, topics that may appear at this year's GD range from the Copenhagen summit to the nuclear deal and security post 26/11.

Up Next



Hence, the best way to prepare for a GD is by discussing and reading up on a wide range of issues. Pallavi Shetty, who appeared for the GD/ PI last year, says, "The more you read, the more knowledge you get and it becomes easier to frame your arguments." She suggests that one should use a notebook and jot down interesting ideas and opinions and also recommends going over texts that detail commonly occurring topics of discussion.

RUMOUR HAS IT

It is common for students to hear rumours surrounding the GD/ PI. Recalls Khandelwal, "When I reached the venue of my PI, some people were saying that the college does not accept students who don't have any work experience. However, this turned out to be false." As such experts recommend students to sieve out such 'unnecessary details'.

Also, irrespective of what you may have heard, fact is that interviewers at a PI are not keen on making things difficult for you. Hence, Kossambi advises students to calm down and concentrate on putting their best self forward.

NERVOUSNESS HELPS

Contrary to popular belief, being completely *bindaas* isn't always a good thing. "A little nervousness is expected. Besides, it conveys a sense of seriousness and intent. However, being nervous to a point where your faculties begin to fail is another extreme which one must avoid," says Kossambi.

DON'T JOIN THE 'FISH MARKET'

Sharing his experience at the GD, Khandelwal reminisces, "I had a terrible GD, where some people were unnecessarily argumentative and aggressive. In fact, the moderator had to interject a couple of times. I just put in my opinion when I felt it was due instead of adding to the noise." Khandelwal's example is not an isolated case. In fact, experts believe that students should start off by expecting such a situation. However, just because the others are shouting, it should not become an excuse to either take a back seat or to join the 'fish market'. Says Kossambi, "The moderators look for candidates who add value to the GD than disrupt it. They want good team players."

IT'S NOT PERSONAL

Getting emotional at a GD is never a good idea. "Sometimes, overriding passion for a particular topic or

participant can stoke a student's emotions. At such times, it's important to not let one's emotions take over. Just because someone disagrees with you doesn't imply that they have a problem with you. Try to think like a manager and remain logical," avers Kossambi.

KNOW YOUR STUFF

The panelists in any PI want to know whether a student has a sound understanding of what he/ she has done at the undergraduate level. Reminisces Shetty, "I had done a double major in economics and statistics at the undergraduate level and my interviewer, who was an economist, quizzed me about it. As such it's important to know your subject of study and own up if you don't know something. Faking will not help anyone."

Sreenivasan adds that apart from having such fundamentals in place, students should have a clear idea of their strengths and weaknesses. "Every student should have three or four things about him/ herself that portray him/ her in the best light and which they want the interviewer to know."

WHY MBA?

This question always makes it to the list of frequently asked questions at a PI. But strangely, many students don't have a ready answer for it. The MBA is an education first, and a means of increasing your salary afterwards. Many students, feels Sreenivasan, pursue an MBA only with the monetary rewards in sight, and this is never a good decision.

IN CONCLUSION

Having cleared the CAT successfully is an achievement for any student, but the GD/ PI is a chance to bring out one's personality and shine. Clarity about individual goals topped off with a winning personality is a sure shot recipe for success.