Case proposals were despised by the rank and file — one had a dozen bosses, unclear objectives, and virtually no coordination with co-workers. But in one sense, the proposals were good practice for real case work. Both involved stretching reality to fit whatever was assumed the client desired.

Despite having no work or research experience outside of MIT, I was regularly advertised to clients as an expert with seemingly years of topical experience relevant to the case. We were so good at rephrasing our credentials that even I was surprised to find in each of my cases, even my very first case, that I was the most senior consultant on the team.

I quickly found out why so little had been invested in developing my Excel-craft. Analytical skills were overrated, for the simple reason that clients usually didn't know why they had hired us. They sent us vague requests for proposal, we returned vague case proposals, and by the time we were hired, no one was the wiser as to why exactly we were there.

I got the feeling that our clients were simply trying to mimic successful businesses, and that as consultants, our earnings came from having the luck of being included in an elaborate cargo-cult ritual. In any case it fell to us to decide for ourselves what question we had been hired to answer, and as a matter of convenience, we elected to answer questions that we had already answered in the course of previous cases — no sense in doing new work when old work will do. The toolkit I brought with me from MIT was absolute overkill in this environment. Most of my day was spent thinking up and writing PowerPoint slides. Sometimes, I didn't even need to write them — we had a service in India that could put together pretty good copy if you provided them with a sketch and some instructions.