

Working Title of the Abstract:

Developing a Framework for Assessing Professionalism in Management Consulting

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This abstract is for the category “Experience-Based Papers”

Developing a Framework for Assessing Professionalism in Management Consulting

Abstract:

This paper will discuss the professionalism within the context of management consultancy. The output will be the proposition of a framework for assessing professionalism within a consulting practice from the perspective of the main stakeholders.

Professionalism in management consultancy has long been talked about. *How* it has been discussed depends on who has been the propagator of the discussion – whether the perspective is that of layman, client, academic or consultant. An informal acknowledgement exists that this issue is a delicate one, not easy to pin down precisely, that it may even be something that is more ‘in the eye of the beholder’ rather than a tangible phenomenon.

In the course of carrying out their work consultants have three dimensions to consider: internal, to their organisation; external, to the client; and personal, career advancement. There is an acknowledgement of the inherent tension between providing what the client wants, doing what you believe the client really needs, maximising revenues and maximising utilisation. If this is put into the context of professionalism, then the first thing that is needed is a definition of what professionalism means with regard to Management Consulting.

The Oxford English Dictionary definition of ‘professionalism’ is: “Qualities or typical features of a profession or professionals”. No more helpfully, the Institute of Business Consultants (IBC) Code of Professional Conduct and Practice states “Put client interests first, doing whatever it takes to serve them to the highest possible standards at all times”.

In order to understand the concept of professionalism in management consultancy and how it manifests itself, neither of these two definitions is useful. If professionalism is adhering to standards set by a central body then surely these standards have to be more precise, more tangible and more clearly articulated? If professionalism is having client interests at the forefront at all times (as declared in the Codes of Conduct of the Consulting professional bodies) then this must include telling clients things they don’t necessarily want to hear, and whilst this is not necessarily articulated in the Codes, experience suggests it is low on a consulting firms’ list of priorities.

Consulting is generally skills-based but personality-driven. It is unlikely that any organisation would hire a consultant they did not feel they could ‘get on with’. A level of personal chemistry generally exists and forms part of the impetus of signing on the dotted line, committing the client in his purchase of the consulting service. In other words, professionalism, in the form of the necessary skills to do the job is a taken-for-granted aspect of the purchase. In the case of work that is put out to tender this is probably even truer since the selection of the companies invited to tender is based on a perceived skill level where typically the true contest is in the combination of price and personal chemistry.

Professionalism in management consultancy can be considered from a number of perspectives with a view to clarifying the concept and providing the basis for debate leading to a platform for further consideration and subsequent research.

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The first perspective is that of the dilemma facing consultants as they carry out their work with their clients. Not only do consultants have to ensure that they are doing the best for their client in the circumstances and within the confines of the commercial agreement defined by the articulated client need, they also have to consider how to put themselves in such a position as to be needed again by the client, preferably without a break in contracts. This can be done in a number of ways, but the most important way from the point of view of the consulting firm employing the consultant is the route of maximising revenue. Obviously, a consultant can maximise utilisation by reducing the fee rate. The client would most likely be very happy; the likelihood of the employer being happy is low. An interesting ethical situation arises in these kinds of scenarios, since utilisation and revenue are consulting terms, not client-facing terms. Utilisation and revenue are vital components of the consulting organisation's prosperity, and directly linked to a consultant's well-being, and indeed his longevity, in the firm. A client tends to see issues from his own viewpoint and sees the consultant as an enabler, a partner, as extra resource; it would be a rare client who considered himself a source of utilisation or revenue even though he is well aware that he pays the invoices presented. How ethical is extending your contract because it is good for you, regardless of the financial terms agreed to? To what extent are you putting your client interests first? Conversely, not carrying out an assignment to the depth the situation demands because you are conforming to a client's stated budget constraint or imposed limit could be seen as putting client interest first. This also arguably be construed as unethical or even unprofessional because you are tailoring your solution to a financial need and not the client's operational business need. In essence this could be construed as the Consultant's equivalent of the Prisoner's Dilemma.

The second perspective is that of understanding what professionalism means. Professionalism, whilst vague in some respects, nevertheless is a term with certain implications to most people. One of those implications pertains to quality of service. Like professionalism, quality of service is a much-used term. Unlike professionalism, quality of service has a large body of both academic and practical work attached to it. To understand quality of service, you need to be able to measure it. Part of measuring professionalism therefore has to be about measuring the quality of the whole consulting intervention from both parties' viewpoints.

What is meant by quality? Too much service is not necessarily helpful from the consulting firm's perspective. Equally, using your influence to extend the relationship for the financial gain of the consulting organisation is counter to an ethical approach, and indeed to both the MCA and IBC exhortation to "act solely in the interests of the client".

Is it possible to make a mistake and yet still give a quality service? Conversely, does turning a blind eye to suspect dealings or improper practices by the client also denote a quality service? In fact, might it be of interest to have this latter as a unit of measure when assessing the overall level of professionalism shown by an individual consultant and a firm?

This paper will propose a framework of measures of quality and professionalism for management consultancy which will form the basis of a full debate. These measures will take into account client, consulting firm and consultant perspectives, and will be built from a number of indicators that taken in the round will provide a quantified view of what is in essence an intangible. Customer Satisfaction is widely used in many industries as an important measure. Inarguably, customer satisfaction is important in consulting. However, it may not necessarily be a measure of professionalism.

In proposing the framework, this paper will also consider where professionalism manifests itself. How do we recognise it when we see it? Is professionalism an absolute that is definitively made up of particular things? Do we all recognise the same thing? If we do not, then having a defined set of measures will help create one view, one understanding. Once that is established it will then

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be possible to place manifestations of professionalism along a continuum perhaps, from total to total absence. It may even be possible to move from results-based payments to professionalism-based payments?