Gaining the Competitive Edge: The Key to Successful Client Consultant Relationships

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ABSTRACT

This paper reveals the lack of discovery of the interrelationships between the various factors identified as key factors in building successful in client-consultant relationships. Masterful management of these success factors could lead to fruitful outcomes for both clients and consultants alike. In addition, consultants mastering these factors could gain a competitive advantage in a highly competitive profession. This paper reviews both academic and practitioner literature in relation to factors that are seen as impacting significantly on consulting assignment outcomes for both client and consultant and highlights the dearth of research surrounding the investigation of the interplay, connectedness and relationship between the various factors identified in isolation in the existing literature. In addressing this gap, a conceptual framework is proposed with a broad research agenda with seven propositions to establish the linkages between the significant success factors identified in the literature. This paper makes a unique contribution towards future research in this respect through the provision of a clear conceptual framework and robust research agenda.

Keywords: management consulting, client-consultant relationships, key success factors,

INTRODUCTION

For over four decades leading up to 2001, the global management consulting industry has grown rapidly with about a million consultants generating a total global revenue of approximately US $150 billion per year (Poulfelt, Greiner, and Bhambri, 2005). In tune with this growth, there has been a proliferation of literature on the key factors that determine successful client-consultant relationships. Both academics and practitioners have identified and scrutinised a variety of factors which influence favourable outcomes for both client and consultant. The overarching purpose behind this scrutiny is aimed at understanding these factors and managing them in order to harvest fruitful outcomes for both clients and consultants alike. In addition, consultants mastering these factors could gain a competitive advantage in a highly competitive profession. This competitive advantage could be a source of new business, referrals or repeat business.

The old notion of consulting success hinging on analytical expertise as well as the production of convincing reports is fast losing ground especially with clients who have built in-house analytical expertise (Turner, 1982). As clients gain a better understanding of how excellent consulting can achieve their broader needs, they will select consultants more wisely and expect more value from them. One contributory factor to the fast expansion of the management consulting industry is the repeat business that consulting firms gain from more sophisticated and discerning clients (Poulfelt and Payne, 1994).

The aim of this paper is to add to the understanding of the dynamics at play in client-consultant relationships. We review existing academic and practitioner literature on consulting and identify the main factors that have been identified as crucial for the success of client-consultant relationships. An evaluation of this literature shows that not much effort has been applied to systematically discuss these factors and to explain their interaction with each other. Thus, in a next step, we develop a conceptual model that aims to show the relations between the identified success factors. Using this conceptual model, we suggest that trust is a critical construct in the context of client-consultant relationships and develop some propositions about the role of trust.

LITERATURE REVIEW

General

In most cases, it is not easy to measure the success and value of consulting because the quality of consulting services cannot be assessed prior, and what is even more important, even after the delivery of

the service. Additionally, it has been suggested that it is important to distinguish between the results of consulting projects on the one hand and the effectiveness of, or client's satisfaction with, the consultant's performance in achieving those results on the other, which is called consulting process (May 2004; Czerniawska; 2002; McLachlin, 2000)

Gabel (1996: 1176-1177) developed a descriptive measurement model for consulting success that includes three areas of assessment: (1) consultant's recommendations, (2) client's learning, and (3) consultant's performance or process. As a result, he suggests six dimensions for measuring consulting success: (1) client's acceptance of consultant's recommendations; (2) client's satisfaction with the recommendations; (3) client's understanding of the problem solution (i.e. learning); (4) client's satisfaction with the level of understanding; (5) performance reasonability; and (6) client's satisfaction with the performance. It is worthy of note that the success of consulting projects depends to a very high degree on the client's assessment and satisfaction with both the suggested problem solution and the interaction process between client and consultant. In other words, the success of consulting projects can be measured only subjectively and often involves some emotional or affective aspects as well. Thus, the success of a project depends "on the clear identification by the client of its requirement as well as a comprehensive understanding by the consultant of the client's needs" (Bryson 1997: 103). This has important implications for the mutual relationship as consultants have to monitor continuously clients' satisfaction and understanding (also Hoffmann 1991).

Next, we review the existing literature on success factors in the client-consultant relationship by identifying those factors that have been indicated in the literature as critical.

Communication skills

Client-consultant communication is commonly regarded as a fundamental building block in a successful client-consulting relationship (e.g., Appelbaum and Steed, 2005; Smith, 2002; Bowers & Degler 1999; Bobrow 1998). Communication skills involve both the skill to listen to the other party and the skill to communicate clearly. The literature emphasises that consultants in particular need to be able to make sense of and translate what the client says with an appreciation of the circumstances and an understanding of the context of the client and project (Sobel, 2004). Consultants who listen to the client carefully and ask well-constructed questions about the situation and expectations will provide the client with confidence in the consultant's ability thus promoting the likelihood of success of the relationship

(Bowers and Degler 1999). The ability to actively listen to the client (Griffin 2001; Bobrow, 1998) is seen as a precondition for identifying possible conflicts in the project before they arise (Bowlers and Degler 1999; Nickols and Bergholz, 2004). Kesner et al. (1997) emphasise that consultants must be able to arrive at a consensus with the client in regard to expected outcomes and this must be done early in the engagement. A common pitfall most consultants fall into during the client engagement is the inability to communicate both good and bad news to the clients (Pagano and Pagano, 2004; Bowers and Degler, 1999; Hegyi-Gioia, 1999).

Whereas most of the literature on consulting clearly focuses on the role of the consultant in ensuring that effective communication takes place, others have pointed out that clients as well are responsible for creating a good communication atmosphere. Schön (1983) stresses that both clients and consultants: need to develop their communication skills; need to make their interpretations clear to each other at the start of their relationship; and need to commit themselves to a reflective investigation of their positions and interpretations. Schön also emphasises the need for clients to be highly involved in the problem-solving process. Without their willingness to exchange ideas and perspectives with the consultants, they will not be able to use the full potential of consultant's expertise. Thus, clients need to develop skills in asking questions and to cultivate competence to reflect upon their knowledge and assumptions (Schön, 1983).

Consultants could act as capacity builders here by assisting clients build these skills (Appelbaum, 2005). This would have a positive influence in working together to solve client problems. An important part of such an open communication is the willingness to challenge and be challenged, which has been also raised by other authors such as Duboff (2002), Fullerton and West (1996), and Handley et al. (2006). Facilitation of this open communication may lead to flow of essential information including client's tacit knowledge as well revelation of client staff motivations (Appelbaum and Steed, 2004; McDonald and Simpson, 2001; O'Burdett, 1994; Boss and McKonkie, 1983). This in turn will aid the consultant in developing a deeper cultural understanding of the client. elevates trust levels in the relationship (Cope, 2003). Higher trust levels increase the probability of problem solving (Bowers and Degler, 1999). Achieving higher levels of client confidence is significantly reliant on the consultant's communications skills (Kesner et al.1997; Hegyi-Gioia, 1999).

Technical competence

Consultants must have strong technical knowledge so that they can challenge clients in an appropriate manner and enrich the client with knowledge and ultimately earning their respect (Merron, 2005; Kumar et al., 2000; Riley 1999; Bobrow, 1998; Kesner , 1997). According to Czerniawska (2006: 3), technical competence is an "in-depth expertise with which a client is unfamiliar", while Bergholz (1999) describes technical knowledge as a competence that enables the consultant to deliver the contracted outcomes for the client. Ford (1974) cautions that consultants differ like any other professional group in the quality of their technical competence and that the onus is on the client to screen consultants for their technical skills.

Several authors point out that the possession of technical competence only does not guarantee a successful client-consultant interaction. Rather, it is necessary that consultants transfer this expertise to their client and facilitate clients' learning (Bergholz 1999; Vogl 1999; Merron 2005; Ozley & Armenakis 2000; Scanlan 2006). Bergholz (1999) believes that there is an implicit expectation on the part of the client that consultant will transfer their competencies to the clients' employees, and if this expectation is not met, the client does not see the consulting project as a success. This is confirmed by Vogl's (1999) empirical study of 250 executives.

Experience and expertise

Consultants need a thorough grasp of business derived from their professional experience (Handley et al., 2006). Miner (1974) asserts that consultant's depth of expertise is instrumental in solving client's problem. Consultants will need to draw on prior experience to solve complex problems. Lack of depth in experience may result in sub-optimal or even disastrous prescriptions for solving complex problems. Some authors warn against consultants who use trial and error method as a result of their lack of experience to solve a client problem (Handley et al., 2006; Lewis, 2004; Ford 1974). Trial and error may be a luxury a client can ill afford especially when paying for outside expertise.

Problem solving ability

The ability to solve problems for clients is highlighted as a key competence of consultants by several authors (Merron, 2005; Martin et al., 2001; Kumar et al., 2000; Rynning, 1992 Beer et al., 1990; Ford, 1974). Ford (1974) associates problem solving with consultants ability to understand the uniqueness of the client's circumstances. He believes that this is where consultants often fail because

they often readily view client situations based on their experiences rather than factoring for the need to first understand the uniqueness of each client. Stumpf and Longman (2000) propound that quality work begins with dedication to solving a problem rather than dedication to applying a method. In similar vein to Handley et al (2006), some authors (Ozley and Armenakis, 2000; Scanlan, 2006), believe that having a wealth of experience is an important factor in problem solving.

In addition, it has been emphasised that problem solving should include the clients because they possess relevant context specific knowledge that otherwise will not be made available to the consultants. Furthermore, it has been shown that experts often engage not only in the traditional analytical problem solving, which is characterised by linear and sequential decision-making in an objective, logical, systematic and convergent manner, but also in a so called intuitive problem solving, which is relational, holistic, simultaneous, and divergent (Mintzberg 1976; Sadler-Smith 2004). Intuitive problem solving involves to a high degree judgment processes, which cannot be explicitly articulated. Rather, they are the result of "rules of thumb" or low-effort heuristics, experience, impressions, and feelings. In other words, it is a subconscious pattern recognition based on experience (Franz 2003; Bunge 1983a). It has been found that intuition based on previous experience is one of the major cognitive characteristics that differentiate the performance of experts from that of novices (Bunge 1983a; Rambow and Bromme; 1995). Becoming part of the client's team and participating as a team member in analysing problems and then seeking solutions is seen by a number of authors as a key to successful engagement (Stimpson, 2006; Thamhain, 2004; Appelbaum and Steed, 2004; Handley et. al., 2006).

Integrity and honesty

Several authors argue that integrity and honesty contribute to the success of the client-consultant relationship (Handley et al.; 2006; Kumar et al., 2000; Bobrow, 1998). Overwhelmingly, the management consulting literature discusses the issue of consultants feeling compelled by various drivers, such as future work and a cohesive relationship, to tell the clients what they want to hear (Williams 2003, McLachlin, 1999, Easley and Harding, 1999). There is also the danger of consultants failing to remember that a consulting exercise is an exchange of professional opinions, and that if trust is destroyed the relationship will suffer (Pagano and Pagano, 2004). Thus, a central notion of consultant's integrity is to put client's needs first by being honest in prescriptions to clients even if it is not that which the client wishes to hear (McLachlin, 1999; Bobrow, 1998; Allan and Davis, 1993; Shenson, 1990 cited in

Kakabadse et al., 2006). This also includes consultants' empathy to the needs of their client (May, 2004; Bobrow, 1998) and a demonstration of an active interest in exploring clients' specific problem (Scanlan, 2006; Pagano and Pagano, 2004; Long 2003; Bowers and Degler 1999).

Under the umbrella of 'integrity and honesty', several authors also emphasise the importance of ethical behaviour such as giving client's realistic time frames for projects, proper project scoping and fair billing (Weiss, 2005; Thamhain, 2004; Bowers and Degler, 1999; Hegyi-Gioia,1999; Kesner et al., 1997). Green (2006) and Appelbaum and Steed (2004) add the dimension of client focus to this mix. Client focus implies the consultant's ability to keep his/her focus on the client's best interest and on the relationship with the client.

Cultural understanding

Consultant's gaining an understanding of client's organisational culture is seen as important success factor by a number of authors. O'Burdett (1994: 29) introduces the concept of "cultural convergence" which involves the consultant gaining an understanding of the present client culture and where that culture needs to transition to in order to achieve consulting project goals. Getting to know client's team members involved in a project is seen by these authors as a precursor to facilitating an environment of openness, understanding motivations of staff, facilitating flow of essential information including client's tacit knowledge, and setting realistic project goals (Appelbaum and Steed, 2004; McDonald and Simpson, 2001; O' Burdett, 1994; Boss and McKonkie, 1983). Chia (2004) confirms that gaining an understanding of client's organizational culture leads to trust building.

Trust

The idea that trust between clients and consultants is critical has been the focus of much literature (e.g.; Robinson and Robinson 2006; Stumpf and Longman, 2000; Kumar et al. 2000). According to Stump and Longman (2000), trust in the context of consulting is the willingness of clients to increase their vulnerability vis-à-vis the consultants; to put themselves in a situation in which potential benefit is much less than potential loss if the consultant abuses client's vulnerability (see also May 2004:). Further, May (2004: 21) adds that three elements need to be balanced: consistency, competence and caring. Consistency relates to behaviour that consciously avoids contradictory and hypocritical behaviour. For example, the consultant outwardly expresses client's welfare as paramount but the course of action he/she prescribes gives the client the impression that the path that leads to the highest fees

possible is the secret agenda of the consultant. Competence relates to having the expertise and capabilities required to achieve client's desired outcomes. Caring is seen as the 'softer side to trust' because it relates to the kinds of consultant behaviour that demonstrates care towards the client, for example, empathy, humility, sincerity, listening and cooperation/collaboration. Similarly, Joni (2005: 16) postulates that a sophisticated understanding of three levels of trust - personal, expertise and structural - is required for consultants to be able to provide the right balance. 'Personal level' relates to clients having confidence in the 'consultants to get the jobs done' while 'expertise level' is similar to the element of competence in May's (2004) sense. The 'structural level' denotes consultants' loyalty to the client and the placing of client's interests ahead of the consultants own interest.

Others such as Robinson and Robinson (2006) incorporate ethical behaviour and moral conduct of the consultant (as seen through the eyes of the client) in the definition of trust. In addition, some suggest that consultant's credibility is also associated with the trustworthiness of the consultant (Kumar et al., 2000; Stumpf and Longman, 2000). Credibility is, thereby, defined as client's confidence in the consultant's capability to deliver results (Robinson and Robinson 2006). Research on the nature of trust has shown that trust has both cognitive- and affect-based dimensions (e.g., McAllister 1995). Cognitive-based trust reflects technical competence and an obligation to perform, and is associated with consultants credibility (Butler 1983; Jeffries and Reed 2000). Furthermore, Rempel et al. (1985) argue that cognitive-based trust is based on predictability, past behaviour and fairness. Thus, cognitive-based trust includes the notions of consistency and competence as indicated by May (2004) as well as the issue of integrity and honesty.

Affect-based trust is based in emotional attachment and concern for the other party's interests (Jeffries and Reed 2000). Thus, this type of trust is closely related to notions about the need of consultants to put clients' interests first, to show an interest in clients' problem and to care for the client, which have been discussed in the consulting literature under the headings of "integrity and honesty" and "trustworthiness".

Project management skills

Several researchers have emphasised that in order to work effectively together, and thus to develop successful relationships, clients and consultants need to develop some shared understandings about roles and responsibilities, interaction patterns, communication channels, and role

interdependencies (Mathieu et al. 2000; Sommerlatte 2000; Wimmer 2004). Others emphasise the importance of project management skills, including the ability to set clear objectives, meet deadlines, deliver results and manage conflicts (Handley et al. 2006; Robinson & Robinson 2006; Weiss 2005; Appelbaum and Steed 2004; Glen 2002; Hegyi-Gioia 1999). Glen (2002), for example, stresses that many technically capable consultants fail to build sustainable businesses because they lose their client through lack of conflict management skills. Resolving conflicts requires the discovery of the client's views and feelings through careful communication on the consultant's part (Glen, 2002). Ashford (1998) argues that clients in particular often fail to give this element of conflict management the attention it deserves. This task is the responsibility of the project manager(s) who uses a number of social integrating mechanisms, such as, for example, goal specification, monitoring of progress, conflict management etc (see Marks et al. 2000 for a detailed overview) in order to ensure that clients and consultants work effectively together.

We have summarised the success factors in the client-consultant relationship have been identified in the literature as important in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

DISCUSSION

The literature provides an overview of success factors that are seen as critical success factors in the client-consultant relationships. Despite the contribution from practitioner and academic literature in identifying and discussing success factors, a major flaw that is apparent in the literature is the lack of structure and clarity in the discussion of the factors. Often, a number of factors are stated without any discussion about their interrelations and exact impact on project's outcomes. For example, the issue of trust has been singled out as critical by several authors but there is not a unified understanding of what trust implies or how does it develop: is it the result of the honesty of the consultant or of their ability to deliver satisfactory results, or both? Another crucial issue is the lack of clarity in the connectivity between technical knowledge, experience and problem solving. Are they independent from each other, or rather interconnected? How do these factors influence the outcome of consulting projects? Do they also contribute to the development of trust in the client-consultant relationships as they indicate consultant's credibility? We aim to provide a research framework to explore these questions through the development of a conceptual framework.

DEVELOPMENT OF CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND PROPOSITIONS

Technical competence, experience, and problem solving

Research on experts and the nature of expertise has found that an expert is a person who has access to the knowledge base, or competence area, of a particular field of knowledge and is able to develop solutions to problems within that area. This knowledge is normally the result of an intensive formal education as well as practical experience. Problem solving involves to a high degree judgment processes, which cannot be explicitly articulated. It is a subconscious pattern recognition based on experience (Franz 2003; Bunge 1983a).Intuition based on previous experience is one of the major cognitive characteristics that differentiate the performance of experts from that of novices (Bunge 1983a; Rambow and Bromme; 1995).

Technical competence and experience increase the problem solving skills of consultants. Consulting companies have been differentiated from traditional manufacturing companies through their ability to create value through their contribution of expertise and experience in solving client problems (Abbott, 1988; Løwendahl, 1997; Müller-Stewens et al., 1999). Therefore, we introduce the two following propositions:

Proposition 1: Technical competence is positively related to the problem solving skills of consultants.

Proposition 2: Consultants' consulting experience is positively related to his/her problem solving skills.

Trust, integrity, and cultural understanding

The concepts of integrity, honesty, fairness and trust are closely interrelated. Thus, we postulate that showing integrity and honesty when dealing with the client is a prerequisite for the development of a trustful client-consultant relationship as it increases clients' affect-based trust. In addition, the possession of relevant technical competence, experience and the ability to solve clients' problems leads not only to the delivery of better results but also contributes to the development of cognitive-based trust. The development of trust between clients and consultants has been identified by researchers as one of the critical success factors in the client-consultant relationship. Accordingly, we introduce the two following propositions:

Proposition 3: Consultants' integrity and honesty is positively related to clients' affect based trust.

Proposition 4: Consultants' problem solving capacity is positively related to clients' cognitive based trust

Communication skills, problem solving, and trust

Communication skills are crucial to successful problem solving and leads to the development of trust. For a client to feel safe and comfortable in sharing company issues with a consultant, a certain level of confidence needs to be nurtured in the relationship. As this level of confidence grows it in turn elevates trust levels in the relationship. Higher trust levels increase the probability of problem solving. Achieving higher levels of client confidence is significantly reliant on the consultant's communications skills. In support of this notion, we introduce the following two propositions:

Proposition 5: The ability of consultants to communicate effectively is positively related to client's confidence level in the consultant.

Proposition 6: Clients' confidence in consultants is positively related to client's trust levels in the relationship.

Project management skills

Successful client-consultant relationships also require the development of shared understandings about roles and responsibilities, interaction patterns, communication channels, and role interdependencies. Accordingly, the final Proposition is:

Proposition 7: The skill of consultants as facilitators of cooperative atmosphere in the clients' team contributes positively to the client-consultant relationship.

Figure 1 shows our conceptualisation of the connections between the identified critical success factors in the client-consultant relationship.

We have omitted the items 'cultural understanding', 'setting expectations' and transfer competencies to clients covered in the literature by some authors because these items are encapsulated within the definition of project management skills which is covered in proposition 7.

Insert Figure 1 about here

CONCLUSION

This paper provides a research agenda with plausible propositions based on a robust conceptual framework. It lays the foundation for future research into identifying the relationship between the various significant factors identified in the literature as isolated factors. For the first time, an attempt has been made to establish the interplay between these factors by deciphering the clues given in the extant literature. It now is possible to investigate these factors and their correlation through research using the seven propositions provided herein

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Table 1: Success factors in the client-consultant relationships

Key: x – Indicates factors highlighted by authors.

	Communication skills	Technical Competence	Transfer Competencies to Client	Experience & Expertise	Problem Solving	Integrity and Honesty	Cultural Understanding	Trust	Project mgmt skills	Setting Expectations
Allen & Davis, 1993						x				
Appelbaum & Steed, 2005	x				x	x	x		x	
Bobrow, 1998	x	x				x				
Boss & McConkie, 1983						x	x		x	
Bowers & Degler, 1999	x									
Bergholz, 1999	x	x	x							
Chia, 2005							x			
Czerniawska, 2002										
Czerniawska, 2006		x								
Duboff, R.,2002	x									
Easley, C.F. and Harding, C.F. 1999						x				
Ford, 1974		x		x	x					
Fullerton & West, 1996	x									
Glen, 2002	x	x			x					
Green, 2006						x				
Griffin, 2001	x					x				
Handley, et. al., 2006	x			x		x	x		x	
Hegyi-Gioia, 1999	x					x			x	x
Kesner et al., 1997		x								x
Kumar et al., 2000	x				x	x		x		
Long, 2000	x									

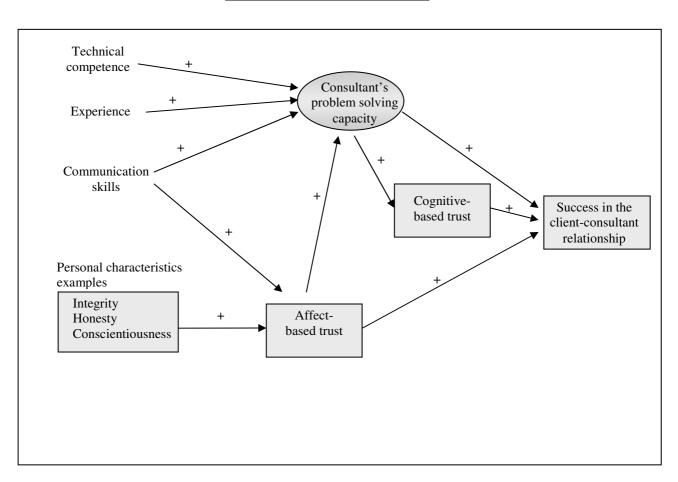|	Communication skills	Technical Competence	Transfer Competencies to Client	Experience & Expertise	Problem Solving	Integrity and Honesty	Cultural Understanding	Trust	Project mgmt skills	Setting Expectations
Martin et al., 2001					x					
May, 2004	x									
McDonald and Simpson, 2001							x			
McLachlin, 1999						x				
Merron, 2005		x	x		x	x				
Nickols and Bergholz, 2004	x								x	
O'Burdett, 1994							x			
Ozley & Armenakis, 2000			x	x	x					
Pagano & Pagano, 2004	x									
Riley, 1999		x								
Robinson & Robinson, 2006								x	x	
Rynning, 1992					x					
Shenson, 1990						x				
Scanlan, 2006	x		x		x					
Smith, 2002	x									
Sobel, 2004	x									
Stimpson, 2006							x		x	
Stumpf and Longman				x	x			x		
Tilles, 1961							x		x	
Thamhain, 2004							x		x	
Weiss, 2005									x	x
Vogl, 1999		x	x							

Figure 1: A conceptual model of critical success factors in the client-consultant relationship