What Clients Really Want from Management Consultants: Evidence from Australia

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ABSTRACT

There are various views about the nature of key success factors that influence client satisfaction in consulting engagements. This paper utilizes both academic and practitioner literature in the area of management consulting together with exploratory interviews of twenty consultants to address the one question, "Do consultants know what gives clients optimal satisfaction in consulting assignments?" In addressing this question, the paper explores clients' explicit and implicit expectations and the hard skill and soft skills of consultants necessary to achieve holistic client satisfaction. The paper concludes that the level of technical expertise of consultants is imperative for achieving client satisfaction. This is true for all consultants. However, beyond technical expertise, this paper shows that for consultants to achieve high levels of client satisfaction, they will also need to fulfill the unwritten and often unspoken psychological expectations of clients. If this need is addressed, consultants will be able to enhance their reputation and enjoy a competitive advantage over those who only fulfill the technical or written requirements of a consulting assignment. This competitive advantage translates into future revenue streams for these consultants even though there may not be any immediate impact on income that has been received.

Keywords: consulting, psychological expectations, client satisfaction, Australia

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the client expectations that are not explicitly written into consulting assignment contracts but nevertheless failure to live up to these expectations on the consultant's part can lead to client dissatisfaction. Consulting is a professional service that is expected to deliver both tangible and often intangible benefits to clients. The quality of consulting service is seen as important for both clients as well as consultants and is largely judged by reputation and by clients' subsequent word-of-mouth communications (McLachlin, 2000). In this respect, the challenge for consultants is to gain a competitive advantage over competitors through satisfying client needs (Appelbaum, 2004). To achieve such advantage, consultants must have a clear understanding of the factors that lead to the determination of the success or otherwise of consulting engagements by clients. In other words, consultants' aspirations of achieving competitive advantage can be best met if their engagements are successful, leading to a reputation for providing service that excel over the competition.

As clients gain a better understanding of how excellent consulting can achieve their broader needs, they will select consultants more wisely and expect greater 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). Hence consultants need to be able to demonstrate and deliver increased value for their greater value for their clients in order to win work, particularly through repeat business and referrals.

DETERMINANTS OF SUCCESS IN CONSULTING

There are a range of view points on the determinants of success in consulting assignments. A number of experts emphasize enhancement of client's business performance as a key determinant (e.g. Kubr 2002; Schaffer, 1997; Gable, 1996). The ability to solve problems for clients is highlighted as a key competence of consultants by several authors (e.g. Merron, 2005; Martin et al., 2001; Kumar et al., 2000; Rynning, 1992). Some 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). Others emphasize 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 2005; Glen 2002).

HARD SKILLS VERSUS SOFT SKILLS

Generally, there seems to be an emphasis on hard skills or technical expertise of consultants as a key determinant of success. The logic behind this is that 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; Bobrow, 1998; Kesner, 1997). According to Czerniawska (2006), 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. Both academic (e.g. Simon and Kumar, 2001) and practitioner literature (e.g. Czerniawska, 2002) place emphasis on technical skills of the consultant; seen as the most important selection criterion for clients. However, there are clearly soft skills such as communication skills which also feature in the literature. Client-consultant communication is commonly regarded as another determinant of a successful client-consulting relationship (e.g., Appelbaum and Steed, 2005; Smith, 2002; Bowers & Degler 1999; Bobrow 1998). Communication skills are seen as crucial to successful problem solving and leads to the development of trust (e.g. Robinson and Robinson 2006; Stumpf and Longman, 2000; Kumar et al. 2000).

PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPECTATIONS (PE)

Interestingly in the arena of soft skills, there are a number of articles, primarily in practitioner literature, that stress the importance of meeting psychological expectations of the client and how it can be a significant contributor in the strengthening of client-consultant relationship. Required technical competencies can be readily defined and written into legally binding contracts of engagement. On the other hand, psychological expectations form the basis of unwritten and unspoken psychological contracts. What are these psychological expectations and which of them should be met and to what extent? Schein (1990) emphasizes the importance of creating the right kind of psychological contract between the client and the consultant at the very beginning of the engagement process. He observes that the client is typically over trained to expect the consultant to take over as expert by transferring the problem onto the shoulders of the consultant. Having diagnostic tools and experience is insufficient in Schein's opinion and he recommends that the consultants communicate their ignorance of the psychological issues to clients at the very beginning. To clarify psychological expectations at the very beginning of the consulting assignment seems to be logical in the context of Schein's assertion, that is, psychological contracts are formed at the very beginning of the client-consultant relationship.

TYPES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPECTATIONS

Bergholz (1999) espouses that sound technical performance is easily undermined by failure to meet expectations in two key areas which can be classified as professional contribution and personal style. He defines professional contribution as a client expectation that is layered on top of the mandatory requirement of technical competence on the part of the consultant. This is based on the client's unspoken expectation that the consultant will contribute some extras such as carrying out the engaging executive's personal agenda, giving supplementary advice without extra charge and transferring some competencies to the client's staff. The personal style of the consultant is also a set of unspoken client expectations, defined as the consultant's ability to fit in appropriately by reading the environment of the client, being enjoyable to spend time with, to listen and empathize with the client, and providing some counsel without charging additional fees (Fullerton and West, 1996; Bergholz, 1999).

In a similar vein, Appelbaum (2004) through his literature review lists a number of variables that influence client-consultant relationship which apart from technical competence include an adaptation to client readiness, an investment

up front in learning the client's environment and a real partnership with consultants. Turner (1982) points out the need for consultants to gain an understanding of unexpressed client's motives for seeking assistance. These motives (apart from those associated with the technical competence of the consultant) could include an expectation of the consultant to legitimize results for political purposes (Poulfelt and Payne, 1994).

In addition, Heller (2002) suggests that unspoken political motives of the client could include 'ego' needs and 'super ego' needs, evasion of responsibility and intra-organizational competition. 'Ego' needs motives include those aspirations of managers to enhance personal image and is especially useful for promotions or to avoid losing one's job. 'Super ego' needs on the other hand have their foundation in an aim to get the organization to achieve what it set out to do, for example, achieving its strategic goals. The evasion of responsibility motive comes into play when managers seek to cover against risks of failure for certain managerial initiatives by obtaining sanction from management consultants. If things go wrong managers are able to shift blame to management consultants. The intra-organizational competition motive is based on an intention to overthrow an internal competitor or to obtain influence in a coalition whereby a management consultant may be appointed to run a performance check on internal competitors and then to suggest that their performance is below par.

Simon and Kumar (2001) in their survey of clients' views on strategic capabilities of consultants that led to the success of management consulting assignments, reveal items that relate to technical competence. However, on interesting item 'going the extra mile' emerges in this study. This client expectation is interesting because it does not relate to technical competence. However, these researchers did not explore the meaning of 'going the extra mile' with those they surveyed but chose to concentrate on the hard skills of consultants which were the focus of their paper.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We undertook an extensive literature review of articles (from databases such as Academic Research Premier, Emerald, Blackwell, Business Source Premier and others) in an attempt to understand key skills for consultants. We came to the conclusion that there is a dearth of research in the area of psychological expectations of clients. Researchers have yet to come up with a model for psychodynamics at play in a client-consulting relationship. Schein (2002) defines psychodynamics as the 'mutual helping' whereby the consultant can create trust by accepting what the client reveals and in turn change his/her own conceptions of out is going on. With the intention of bridging this knowledge gap, we conducted an exploratory study in which we interviewed twenty practicing management consultants in Australia. The purpose of this article is to share our findings with the managers who have responsibility for engaging and managing external consultants as well as the practitioner community. This article's major contribution to these managers and practitioners is that it gives a valuable insight into the variables that influence the psychodynamics of consulting engagements and the importance of these variables from the viewpoint of consultants.

This paper utilizes both academic and practitioner literature along with exploratory interviews with twenty management consultants. As there is not much by way of research findings in the area of psychodynamics of client-consultant relationship, through our exploratory study we were hoping to gain available background information about this research subject. An exploratory study tends to be highly flexible with researchers following clues, ideas and hunches (McDaniel and Gates, 1996) and that gives them the latitude needed to probe creatively into unanticipated observations or into areas about which the researchers lack information necessary to construct a logical model (Tharenou et al., 2007). The output of exploratory research is qualitative and may serve as a basis for subsequent quantitative research (Zikmund, 2000). The qualitative output of exploratory research often reveals some patterns regarding the phenomenon of interest. Qualitative data can reveal behaviour as well as actions which carry with them intentions and meanings and lead to consequences (Shaw, 2003). This forms a basis for developing theories for subsequent quantitative testing (Sekaran and Bougie 2009). Exploratory research is therefore often framed as a pilot study and usually undertaken in advance of a subsequent and more detailed study. Data collection methods for exploratory research are the literature review, pilot studies, expert surveys, case studies, focus groups, and personal interviews (Zikmund, 2000).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted September 2007 and February 2008 with twenty management consultants practicing in Australia for our study. The consultants were contacted because they had represented themselves as consultants in local business networking directories as providing services in management consulting. This study was funded through a research grant (with the approval of the Human Research Ethics Committee of the authors' university). The qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using NVIVO software. Each interview was open ended based on a standard protocol and lasted for about an hour. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and coded for various categories. The profile of each consultant (shown in numbers from 1 to 20) in terms of educational background, consulting experience and industries in which they participate is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of Each Consultant

Subject n=20	Years of practice as a consultant	Educational background	Works with (engaging executive)	Area of primary specialization	Consults to the following industries (using ANZIC classification)
C1	22	HRM	Divisional Managers	executive coaching	government administration & defence and manufacturing
C2	15	Marketing	C-Level Executives	strategic planning	agriculture, forestry, fishing & hunting, cultural & recreational services, manufacturing, and property & business services
C3	15	Management	Divisional Managers	project management	communication services, education, property & business services, and transport and storage
C4	11	Management	C-Level Executives	risk management	government administration & defence
C5	3	Organizational Psychology	Divisional Managers	change management	finance & insurance, government administration & defence, manufacturing and mining.
C6	30	Psychology	Divisional Managers	executive coaching	government administration, education, retail trade
C7	13	Management	C-Level Executives	change management	finance & insurance, government administration & defence, manufacturing and mining.
C8	20	Management	C-Level Executives	strategic planning	finance & insurance and government administration & defence,
C9	40	Sociology	Divisional Managers	change management	government administration & defence, manufacturing and mining, property & business services
C10	6	Management	C-Level Executives	strategic planning	cultural & recreational services, property & business services, and transport and storage
C11	22	Education	Divisional Managers	project management	finance & insurance, government administration, manufacturing, and mining
C12	17	Psychology	Divisional Managers	supply chain management	retail trade
C13	35	Management	C-Level Executives	executive coaching	finance & insurance, mining, education, and personal & other services
C14	15	Sociology	C-Level Executives	strategic planning	finance & insurance, government administration, mining, and education
C15	25	Management	Divisional Managers	strategic planning	Mining, personal & other services, and retail trade
C16	7	Management	Divisional Managers	change management	manufacturing

C17	6	Management	Divisional Managers	change management	government administration, retail trade, and manufacturing
C18	3	Management	C-Level Executives	project management	property & business services
C19	10	Management	C-Level Executives	business process re-engineering	finance & insurance, retail trade and transport & storage
C20	21	Management	Divisional Managers	strategic planning	manufacturing and cultural & recreational services

The research primarily involved establishing the existence or otherwise of client psychological expectations (PE). If the existence of PE was confirmed then the following were explored:

1. The forms PE take.
2. The importance of PE in relation to the written contract with the client.
3. Causes of variations in PE between different classes of clients.
4. The consequences of meeting or not meeting PE of clients for consultants.
5. "Running the extra mile" and its relationship with PE.

In this paper, we publish part of the findings that relate to confirmation of the existence of PE, the forms PE takes and the consequences of meeting or not meeting PE of clients.

FINDINGS

Existence of Psychological Expectations

All our respondents confirmed the existence of client PE. Generally, clients do not overtly make PE known to clients but seem to give some indication of these expectations implicitly. Consultants 3 and 20(in Table 1) gave the following examples respectively.

C 3:

"No they're not explicitly discussed but they're there in the sub text of everything that's said."

C20:

"Yes there are unwritten expectations that are not discussed. An example would be comments/innuendoes made by the organization's representative that allude one to a particular way of thinking and behaving such as: "you know this is a very important project not only for the company but for myself and I can see that by doing this my position in the company is going to be much better particularly if these options are selected".

However, ten consultants recounted instances when PE were conveyed explicitly to them. C9 said:

There are always psychological expectations. And that's why I say, that's the important thing. Sometimes, you know they're very straightforward and they're pretty much overt.

C1 gave an example of PE by way of a client's verbal instruction which was not in the written consultancy contract:

"...And this model is X, I don't care what else you do but I want that to be the outcome."

PE Driven by Hidden Managerial Motives

The responses gave us an insight into the motives that cause PE in managers or senior executives (in most cases these managers are charged with circumscribing the ambits of the consulting project). Broadly, the examples of motives all respondents had experienced can be classified using the motives suggested by Heller (2002), that is 'ego motive', 'super ego motive', intra-'organizational rivalry', and 'evading responsibility'.

1. Ego needs.

Ego needs are clearly self-centered and their main objective is the preservation of the engaging executive's position in the organization and or enhancing his/her personal image. 9 respondents gave examples of ego needs such as:

C 4:

"They're trying to get a report to use for their own purposes, to advance their own cause and there are other issues within the organization which they haven't revealed and which would affect your view of what you've seen and

therefore we have to be very careful that when you gather information that you're getting all the information not only part of it… They are mercenary in some regard trying to advance their cause and trying to use the organization to foster their own career in some way or their own salary or get back at some of the members of the organization."

C 5:

"You try and make them look good and then they'll give you more jobs."

C12:

"So for example I'm talking to someone at the moment who I know is a pretty political animal and he is looking for research which is undoubtedly designed to make him look good but not conflict with the current position that they hold in the market place or the current direction they've taken in terms of dollars they've spent already. So they've spent millions of dollars going in one direction and the research doesn't support that at the moment because they took that decision without any research. So now it's a matter of politically moving that information throughout their business such that no one loses face over those sorts of decisions and that's a very difficult thing to manage over time."

2. Super ego motives.

'Super ego' motives are about achieving what is good for the organization. Under this scenario, the engaging executive's aim is essentially to work towards the betterment of her/his organization. Nine respondents described situations where super ego motives were at play. Typically, this covered situations where the client:

(1) expected the consultant do extra work (usually arising out of scope creep) without any extra charge;

(2) assisted someone in the organization to perform better (executive coaching situation) by using the consultant's services; and

(3) expected mentoring from the consultant but without this being part of the consulting brief.

C4 typified free extra work with her following comment:

"They expect you to run the extra mile for no pay"

C6 described the situations of engaging executives seeking to change the behaviour one of their senior employees through executive coaching but without revealing to that employee the concerns that they had expressed to the consultant:

"So then they say to me, "We're having trouble with this person and we want them coached", and it generally comes out of an issue of concern. Occasionally it's because they see this person as a star and they want them coached because they are up and coming. But generally they'll say things to me privately which I will then say to them (the employee to be coached by the consultant).*"*

3. Political Motives.

Political motives encapsulate Heller's 'intra-organizational rivalry' and 'evading responsibility' motives. Intra-organizational motive's primary aim is to downgrade the image of an internal competitor by providing evidence of a rival's incompetence through the findings of an independent external consultant.

At times, a consultant may be used as political weapons or a scapegoat for advancing a hidden political agenda or for experimenting with an untested managerial intervention predetermined by the engaging executive. In this situation, Heller believes that the engaging executive is evading her/his own responsibility. These include situations where the engaging executive already has a predetermined solution and prefers the consultant to prescribe this solution as the consultant's own. If the preferred solution fails then the consultant becomes the scapegoat for the failure with minimal or no adverse impact on the engaging executive's image within the client organization. In total seventeen consultants gave examples of political motives. The quotes below give typical examples of these:

C5:

"Because the unions were starting to get involved so that was really difficult and politically very contentious and they were trying to basically find a scapegoat without telling me that they wanted to have a scapegoat (in reference to the consultant).*"*

C14:

"I don't expect anything to change (engaging executive's assertion). *So he immediately put his stamp on the process coming really from his point of view. We hadn't had engagement about what his expectations were and he quite*

specifically stated amusingly enough that he didn't want a certain kind of scenario to be developed because one group of participants had really started creating a scenario away from his point of view."
C18:
"It became fairly obvious that what was going on is one pharmacist wanted to get rid of the other ...so one party engaged me to make life very hard for the other party."

The Importance of Meeting PE

The benefits perceived by all respondents from meeting PE of clients can be classified under the following categories. Accompanying quotes reflect the general sentiments expressed:

1. Yields competitive advantage.

There was a perception that consultants who meet PE of their clients will have a competitive advantage in the market place over those who merely meet written contractual obligations.

C7:

"Which means that opens a lot of doors for a whole range of things that I mentioned earlier on in our interview such as in the global market place. Those consultants that I've worked with that haven't met the psychological expectations generally find themselves out of work very quickly."

2. Sign of satisfactory completion of consulting assignment.

Meeting PE was also seen as mark of overall satisfactory completion of the consulting assignment. Here the implication is that meeting PE generates greater level of client satisfaction then just meeting written contractual requirements.

C13:

"I don't think it's just important, I think it's critical. I think it's probably the most important thing there is because underlying it all, our mutual satisfaction with each other. Any human beings depend on the degree to which we meet each other's psychological expectations. A lot of it is unwritten; you can't define a relationship between you and me, for example, according to a contract, you really can't. I mean it's all this stuff that's not said and not written down that really governs what happens in real practice."

3. Sign of fitting into client's organization.

Bergholz (1999) in his definition of desirable personal style of the consultant included the consultant's ability to fit in appropriately by reading the environment of the client, being enjoyable to spend time with, to listen and empathize with the client. This was confirmed by respondents.

C16:

"So future possibilities are not necessarily based on the content of the assignment, they are also based on how you actually operate with that company and whether you have kind of fitted in, okay?"

4. Strengthens relationship with client.

The meeting of PE was also seen as strengthening the longer term relationship of between client and consultant.

C8:

"Critically I think on the basis that it's about building a relationship and building a relationship from a monetary value means you're keeping your business. From a personal value that's goes back to my making a difference at the end of the day."

The Benefits of Meeting PE

When canvassed about the benefits that accrue to the consultant of meeting the PE of clients, it was very clear that two main benefits emerged. The first was additional business in the form of new consulting assignments or an extension of existing assignments from clients. The second benefit was in the form of referrals by satisfied clients to other clients both within the organizations and outside. Some consultants also perceived this referral as free advertising for them. A few commented that this was the best form of advertising for a consultant. Although not all referrals translate into new business, generally respondents felt that referrals were a good source of new business.

Variations in PE

Interestingly, a number of common factors that cause variations in PE among clients were cited by the respondents. Consultants with high profiles were expected to have greater understanding of PE and the ability to decipher PE. Experienced clients (usually engaging executives) usually have higher PE requirements. Nature of consulting assignment was another factor that determined PE. For example, C5 and C8 pointed highlighted the fact that strategic planning assignments usually had high PE because of the vested political interests and senior positions of engaging executives in client organizations. Four respondents believed that the larger the client organization, the higher the PE. Ten respondents pointed to the nature of industry as another determinant of the level of PE. Public sector organizations were seen as very politically motivated and hence higher in PE. In the private sector, service industry such as banks and insurance companies were seen as having higher PE because of the politics of the organization often driven by career motives of engaging executives. Whereas industries such as mining were lower on PE because most of their requirements in relation to expected consulting assignments outcomes usually related to legal compliance such as health and safety laws. Therefore, the expected outcomes were usually explicitly written into consulting contracts.

Skills Required for Deciphering PE

Consultants were also asked to articulate the skills required to decipher the PE of clients. These are summarized below in Figure 1.

Consultant's requisite skills	Outcomes in relationship with client
Political awareness	Receptiveness to client's (engaging executive) political PE needs enhances the image of the consultant in the client's eyes.
Verifying and managing client's non-contractual expectations	Clear identification of expectations that were not written in the consulting contract. Assists with being realistic with client in what can and cannot be achieved.
Fitting into client's team	Allows client's team to feel comfortable and this may facilitate revelation of PE including hidden agendas.

Figure 1: Consultant Skills for Deciphering PE

Three main skill items emerged as useful in deciphering clients' PE as shown in Figure 1 above. Political awareness in terms of being receptive to the client/engaging executive's organizational and political needs was cited by nine consultants as important. The 'political awareness' skill allowed identification of the ego needs of the client and this was seen as necessary in enhancing the image in the eyes of the client because the consultant was seen as politically savvy.

Verifying and managing client's expectations that were not stipulated in the written consulting contract were seen as another useful skill. Five consultants were of the view that for total client satisfaction to be achieved, PE expectations needed to be met. Apart from formal client assignment briefing, extra meetings or informal interactions including meeting socially outside the work environment were seen as ways of obtaining insights into PE. Two consultants believed that these meetings can strengthen the bond between client and consultant, thereby creating confidence in the client to reveal hidden agendas.

Almost all consultants (nineteen) expressed the need to 'fit into the client's team' as a requisite skill for facilitating the revelation of PE. Consultants must put aside their own egos and endeavour to interact sensitively with the client's staff involved in a consulting project. Being sensitive to team's needs and the organizational culture that they work within were cited as two important factors in exercising this skill. The outcome of client's team feeling comfortable with the consultant as a team member is that they are more likely to be at ease when it comes to revealing their hidden agendas and PE.

CONCLUSION

Quality of service in important for the client and in this regard consultants must remember that their future engagements or referrals depend on their ability to satisfy clients' needs holistically. Most consultants understand the need to be technically competent in area of expertise required by their clients. However, clearly this research shows that consulting success is not simply dependent upon delivering that written contractual outcomes but also meeting unwritten expectations of clients/engaging executives. Much has been written about these unwritten or psychological expectations but research into this area is virtually non-existent. This research gives an excellent insight into the factors that influence client satisfaction from a psychological perspective.

Client Benefits	Consultant Benefits
• Strengthening relationship with consultant that leads to trust building. • Ego and Super ego motives met. • Political agendas achieved. • Preferred solution achieved using consultant as an instrument. • Access to some extra assistance from consultant at no extra cost.	• Strengthening relationship with client that leads to building trust. • Sign of provision of quality service. • Additional business from clients. • Referrals from clients to other prospective clients. • Gains competitive edge over other competing consultants.

Figure 2: Benefits of Meeting Psychological Expectations

The main benefits are summarized for both client and consultants in Figure 2. It is clear that the main outcome as result of the benefits accruing to the consultant is future revenue streams. Through this research, we have established for the first time that psychological expectations impact upon the success of client-consultant relationships. This is a major contribution to the body of knowledge as previously no other academic research demonstrated that meeting the psychological expectations (PE) of clients enhances service quality in management consulting assignments.

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