

Management consultants are often 'more project workers than ideas people'

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The popular impression that management consultants are key to spreading new ideas in organisations is exaggerated and misleading, according to a unique fly-on-the-wall study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

The consultant's image as an expert outsider bringing new knowledge or understanding to clients is firmly contradicted by findings from the three-year long project led by Professor Andrew Sturdy, of Warwick Business School at the University of Warwick.

For the investigation, researchers spent 30 months working alongside consultants and their clients in four diverse consultancy projects. Their aim was to clear away the mystique and understand exactly what clients and consultants do when working together and how their relationships work for or against the flow of knowledge.

Observations, surveys and interviews took place among people involved in projects in a multinational company, a financial services retailer, a prison and a local authority. The researchers also gathered insights from clients involved in the Management Consultancies Association's 2004-05 Best Management Practice Awards.

They concluded that, contrary to widespread belief, management consultants are, like their immediate clients, more 'knowledge brokers' than innovators. Both groups are often more concerned with managing projects and getting the job done.

Professor Sturdy said: "The image of consultants as experts - the shock troops of the latest approach to management - doesn't match their day-to-day work with clients in projects.

"Typically, they are seen as outsiders, bringing ideas and organisational techniques which are new to their clients. But in reality, we found that prospective clients were unlikely to welcome consultants if their knowledge was 'too new'."

The study findings suggest that consultants walk a tightrope between offering what might be seen as either a 'helpful' challenge or an unconstructive interference. So whilst clients were generally happy to be challenged, this was only if the consultant did so sensitively, showing a good understanding of the business.

Consultants also needed to earn the respect of staff at all levels in the organisation - something best achieved by demonstrating intelligence, commitment and willingness to engage with its problems, and respecting the knowledge of its employees.

It was frustrating when they failed to appreciate a client's particular circumstances and seemed to impose a standard solution.

Clients were often themselves very knowledgeable - sometimes with similar backgrounds and education to the consultants. Far from being the outsiders then, consultants could often be seen as insiders, personally and politically close to the commissioning client and in terms of shared knowledge with other client project team members.

Professor Sturdy said: "The real outsiders then, are those people not directly involved in the project team, often including the most senior management and the rest of the client organisation.

"This is important, as it means that consultants are not as innovative or different as is often thought. But this can help in their role as knowledge-brokers. The main barriers then become the initial selling process, and later the implementation; typically still the preserve of managers more than consultants."

Source: University of Warwick

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