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Author biography

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Commercialized professionalism on the field of management consulting

Abstract:

In the last two decades, we have witnessed in the Western World that, instead of employing people with particular skills that they no longer need on a daily basis, organizations now source these skills when needed from external markets. This has led to a growth of markets for some types of specialized organizational and managerial services. This study argues that a new form of institutionalization of expertise is taking place in these markets. Through analysing the conditions for professionalism in management consulting, which is seen here as the most typical form of this kind of emerging expert work in contemporary society, a model that contrasts theories of traditional professionalism is suggested, in order to explore the mechanisms for “authorization” of actors in contemporary society performing in role of the expert.

Key words

New-professionalism, expertise, commercialism, trust, management consulting

The Marketized Expert ...

In the past two decades the use of external providers of various forms of managerial expertise by organizations has increased, leading to an emergence of new organizations that deliver services in areas such as IT, investment banking, risk analysis, business intelligence, law, auditing, management consulting, human resources, recruiting, PR, ethics, social responsibility, sustainable development, etc. (e.g. Furusten and Werr, 2005). Services like these are also increasingly offered by already existing service organizations, such as auditing firms, who have added them to their traditional service portfolio (Grey, 1998; Hellman, 2005). Thus, the markets for these services have grown rapidly. Despite the obviously considerable demand for these types of services, they also represent areas of expertise that are difficult to define and measure. It is, for instance, hard to know – even after a service has been delivered – what it was that was actually bought (Furusten and Werr, 2005). How organizations can first demand a service such as this and then entrust someone to deliver it, is a mystery. This means that one problem with this market is that it is difficult both for the buyers to know what they need and what they get, and for the sellers to know what to offer. Yet, organizations not only order these services, but also tend to pay quite a lot to hire providers to perform them.

The research question in focus in this study is how the professionalism management consultants represent is constructed. In particular, I will discuss the institutionalization of representations of professionalism on the market, and what *rites de passage* those who want to act on this market need to pass in order to be accepted members of the community of management consultants.

...is not authorized...

Compared to other complex knowledge fields such as medicine, law, auditing and architecture, where sophisticated abstract expert systems have evolved to help sort out the “quacks” from the professionals, the pathways to what is counted as trustworthy professionalism on the market for management advisory services are obscure (Whitley, 1984; Reed, 1996; Furusten, 2009). Still, it is reasonable to label these service providers as experts.

One reason for this is that they often see themselves as experts in a particular area of competence. One senior management consultant interviewed in the study this article is based on expressed this simply as: “I’m clever at management.” Although a very general kind of expertise, he was convinced that he really was an expert on management, and also emphasized that not everyone possesses such expertise. This particular consultant was in his late fifties with extensive experience both from management positions in large firms in manufacturing and the service industry, and from consulting. His reasoning was that a young consultant with a fresh new degree from a business school is not credible if he or she makes such competence claims, while a person with his background can be convincing in this role. Another reason why “expert” is a reasonable concept with which to label service providers of this type is that it is also likely that they are treated, by their clients, as experts in particular areas of competence. The clients may experience a lack of internal resources, e.g. to deal with innovations in the areas of IT, recruitment procedures, staying up-to-date on the latest management techniques, or may lack experience of handling complexities such as the internal working environment, quality assurance procedures, ethical and environmental certification, or lobbying and PR issues, etc. Although the meaning of the concepts *professionalism*, *professional*, *experts* and *expertise* can be debated, in practice at least, it would seem that when someone is convincing in his or her role as an expert, this person is likely to be legitimized to play the role of expert in this particular setting (Furusten and Werr, 2005; 2009). This suggests that how they are perceived is important in the construction of management consultants as professionals.

The growth of an industry for marketized experts providing management advisory services (MAS)

The industry of management advisory services in general has grown rapidly in the last two decades (Greenwood et al., 2006), and this is no doubt evidence that contemporary organizations experience a great need for the kind of services these experts provide. Why we trust them is not as clear-cut, however, as most of us often lack the specific knowledge required for certain situations (Furusten and Werr, 2005). Along with worldwide organizational trends such as outsourcing and re-engineering in the past decades, employing such services emphasizes the fact that handing work over to external specialists is now an

established way of dealing with complex situations in organizations. Taking advice from experts is, however, not a new phenomenon. Men in power have long turned to various types of experts for guidance. The ancient Greeks turned to the oracle from Delphi and other “authorities” for guidance; in the Middle Ages, the Prince of Florence took the advice of Niccolo Machiavelli, probably the best known “management consultant” of the time; and today, the US management consultancy Accenture is one of a handful consulting giants who offer services to help “governments and other public service organizations worldwide achieve high performance in the face of complex challenges” (www.accenture.com/090302). The list of past men of power who turned to wise men or women for guidance goes on, but it is in the last century and especially the last two decades that we see the development of an actual industry for management advisory services (Greenwood et al., 2006; Kipping and Engwall, 2002).

The first attempt towards professionalization in the MAS industry was taken in the US in the 1920s, when the world’s first association for management consultants was established (McKenna, 2006). Some decades later, a similar development can be seen in Europe, where Sweden became an early follower with the founding of a national association for management consultants in the 1940s. Later, similar structures began to appear in most countries in Europe and elsewhere, with Great Britain and France following in the 1960s (Furusten and Bäcklund, 2000; Furusten, 2003; Bäcklund, 2003). The strategy of founding national associations whose membership was open only to the serious actors follows the same pattern of how knowledge-intensive specialist work was organized in the late 19th century (Abbot, 1988; Burrage and Torstendahl, 1990), such as the work performed by medical doctors, lawyers, and to some extent also accountants and architects. The good representatives of a particular specialized field should then be those that have become members of the association. This served as a rational and handy system for the laymen, as well as for “wannabes” striving to become future representatives of these professions, and for those charged with hiring experts, since hiring a member of such an association provided a certain guarantee that this was a person who could be trusted. Typical examples of prerequisites for such membership include: a specific education, documented experience of a certain kind, conduct consistent with clearly defined ethical codes, control mechanisms to ensure members adhere to these codes and sanctions for those who don’t, and authorization or certification procedures supported by public authorities (e.g. Larson, 1977).

Of considerable importance for the structuring of expertise in these competence areas has also been the manifestation, in law, that experts of a certain kind are required for

certain types of work, and that a certain formal background is required in order to be allowed to perform under the moniker of medical doctor, lawyer or auditor. For instance, Swedish law (the Swedish Auditors Act) states that listed companies must employ auditors that are formally authorized by the *Swedish Institute for Authorized Public Accountants* association for auditors (FAR, Föreningen Auktoriserade Revisorer). A similar development can also be seen in other competence areas where, for safety reasons, licensed/certified specialists are required by insurance companies, and sometimes also by public authorities, for electrical installations and wiring of buildings or when installing moisture barriers in bathrooms or other wet rooms. For example, in the case of an accident, it is only possible to receive compensation from the insurance company if a licensed electrician or certified builder performed the installation work. In these cases, it is very obvious why a certified specialist is needed and what is expected from him or her. This is also the case in auditing, the practicing of law, and in health care. In the management advisory services industry, however, this is not the case. Services of this kind are often described as intangible and hard to define (Clark, 1995; Kubr; 1996; Furusten and Werr, 2005; 2009). Defining the need for these services, measuring their output, and post-delivery assessments of whether they had any real impact, are also difficult. Still, somehow the providers of such services manage to establish trust for their special competence to the extent that they are often well-paid for the work they do.

Should we call consultants professionals at all?

As briefly touched upon above, theories of professions focus mainly on conditions for pure professionalism. They thereby limit the meaning of the concept of professionalism to those occupations that fulfil all of the attributes that are required by the professionals in order to be defined as a profession. Whether or not an occupation is, in a formal sense and in absolute terms, a profession, however, is not as interesting as how experts of different kinds are perceived as professionals in society and act accordingly. This is an issue that is rarely set to the fore in discussions of professionalism, meaning that there is a risk that these rising forms of experts and expertise in contemporary society are left out of discussions of professionalism. Scholars who work in the tradition of theories for professional service organizations criticize theories of professions claiming that profession theories are no longer appropriate when dealing with changes in modern society (Greenwood et al., 2006).

Professionalism is, however, not a core topic on their research agenda since the main focus in this tradition has been on developing theory of what they claim to be the contemporary knowledge society (Baradacco, 1991) populated by knowledge workers (e.g. Starbuck, 1992; Alvesson, 1993) working in professional service organizations (Greenwood et al., 1990). Their main concern is that the conditions for knowledge-intensive organizations are different from those of the manufacturing industry. Since organization theory is mainly based on studies of organizations other than knowledge-intensive ones, they argue that there is a need for a new theory for these types of organizations (Greenwood et al, 2006). The rise of modern accountancy is a typical example cited in these studies, and Scott (1998) calls this evolution of accounting firms, and other similar types of work forms, the new “intellectual industry”. Although this literature is interesting and important for the understanding of the conditions under which professionals of this kind work, what the system looks like in terms of the professionalism these actors represent has not been on their agenda. There are, however, a few exceptions. Groß and Keiser (2006) argue, for instance, that there is a need for developing theories of “new” professions. Thus, although theories of professions are well-established and well-defined, Groß and Kieser suggest that this does not mean that the relevance of these theories is necessarily appropriate at all times and for all expert service work. Due to the rise of the knowledge society, professional service organizations and the industry for management advice services, Leicht and Layman (2006) argue that the meaning of labels such as *professionalism*, *professions*, and *professionalization* need to be redefined in order to also represent occupations that are increasing in number and significance in contemporary society. In following, it is likely that it is another form of professionals and professionalism we see when we focus on the rise of the management consulting industry. If we are to believe Burrell (1996) who claims that new experts have forced out old professions and have thereby become a category of actors in society that has obtained significant power (cf. Brint, 1994), it is important to understand how new professionalism is constructed since.

Thus, recognition of the phenomenon of changing conditions for contemporary professionalization, and the fact that new areas of expertise are appearing is not totally new. For example, Reed (1996) divides what he calls late modernity’s experts into three main categories: traditional professions (such as lawyers and physicians), organizational professions (such as technicians), and entrepreneurial professions (knowledge workers such as consultants). Reed claims that these categories of experts live side by side and that they differ in terms of knowledge base, strategies and form of organization. The first (the traditional professions) are the most successful in terms of formalized structure manifested in

specified education and experience, and attributes for authorization or certification. Such fields of competence have also been called “full professions” (Ackroyd, 1996) or “abstract professional systems” (Giddens, 1990), where professionals – not markets – are believed to produce the professionals (Larson, 1977).

Following Reed’s (1996) terminology, management consulting would be sorted into the entrepreneurial category, which means that what we are seeing here is an occupation in an early phase of professionalization, which will gradually develop traditional professional attributes like specified expert knowledge, codes of conduct, systematic education and some form of certification and control of performance through authorization procedures. That management consultants belong to Reed’s (1996) entrepreneurial category of professionals, occupations is a line of thought also emphasized by authors who advocate professionalism in management consulting and who underline that more stable professional structures will be established over time (e.g. Greiner and Metzger, 1983; Kubr, 1996; Sadler, 1998). Still, although the notion of entrepreneurialism intimates that it is not yet a full profession as we talk about here, it should not be taken for granted that it represents an area of expertise that will see a gradual development towards more professionalism. Following, e.g. Leicht and Lyman (2006) and Groß and Kieser (2006), it can be questioned whether the proposition that a gradual professionalization, where experts move along a continuum from entrepreneurialism at one end to full professionalism at the other, is the natural and only way to understand the structuring and institutionalization of all forms of expert work in contemporary society. Thus, it can be argued that there is a risk that we miss important dimensions of the function of contemporary organizations where significant input is made by external experts who provide different types of management advisory services if we restrict the meaning of professionalism to apply only to occupations where formal structures for authorization have been established.

If they are not pure professionals, what kind of experts are they?

Studies of professional service organizations, such as law firms and accounting firms, offer some contribution to our understanding of what type of professionals management consultants represent. These studies argue that there are two archetypes of professional service organizations: the professional partnership and the managed professional business (e.g. Greenwood, Hinings and Brown, 1990; Maister, 1993; Morris and Pinnington, 1999). The

former builds on traditional professionalism as a guiding principle, while the latter represents organizations whose behaviour is more like a commercial business. Although the “professional” and “commercial” expert can be seen as two extremes, Grey (1998) suggests that the practice of professionals tends to include characteristics from both ends of the spectrum. In his study of accountants, he shows that they need the formal status of an authorized professional in order to do business in the field, but that they also need business competence since they compete with other accountants and accounting firms in the market. Hellman (2005) presents a similar argument about accountants who offer additional management services to their core accounting services, and Ainamo (2005) notes the same in a study of lawyers. Thus, although the ideal is that professionalism should be unaffected by the dynamics of markets, commercialism is a dimension of professional practice that cannot be neglected if we want to understand how the role of the professional providing services to organizations is formed today.

Although the risk of commercialization of professionalism is a recurring theme in the traditional literature on professions, there are authors who also point out the difference between professional ideals and professional practice. Hanlon (1999), for instance, argues that, over the last decade, professionalism has become more entrepreneurial, “managementized”, and commercial, meaning that the packaging and commercialization of the services provided has become more important. A similar argument is made by Fournier (1999), who argues that professionalism and perceived expertise need not necessarily go hand in hand. This suggests that norms, i.e. for experience-based expertise, can be institutionalized in an occupational group even when no formal structuring of expert knowledge takes place. Building on these observations, it can be argued that, in practice, there do not have to be definite borders between markets (where expertise is exchanged), organizations (where expertise is performed) and professions (where expertise is cultivated, constructed and controlled). Instead, inclusion of actors in processes where new experts and their areas of practice are defined may very well involve actors representing all of these contexts.

This suggests that we can distinguish between professionalism as an ideal, and professionalism as a practice. In this study, the focus is on the construction of professionalism as a practice, i.e. how professionals in the field of management advisory services are constructed in practice. If we accept the argumentation above, commercialism and market mechanisms are likely to be considerable components in this process. Mechanisms related to conditions such as competition and trust are therefore important to include as important organizing forces. This means that, if the service providers want to stay in the business, they

have to offer what organizations are willing to pay for (Furusten, 1999; 2003). This suggests that the expertise they offer is to some extent shaped in business negotiations with their clients – not controlled by the professional community. However, building on the argumentation above, it is also likely that there are other mechanisms involved in forming the role of professionals in the field of management advisory services.

We need to understand more about how the expertise of these experts is constructed, and what it is that shapes them as professionals in practice. Burrell (1996) touches upon this issue when he argues that traditional professional attributes and modern techniques of trust, such as membership in a professional association and a required expert knowledge well-anchored in science, no longer automatically extend trust to, e.g. physicians and academics. Instead, he suggests that there tends to be a growing place in society for negotiation of who is to be trusted, where self-proclaimed experts (such as management consultants) can, through hard work and a degree of cleverness, produce themselves as experts in situations where traditional professionals used to be predominant. Compared to traditional professions, it has been argued that new categories of experts tend to be governed more by external criteria such as market logic, where professional relations between clients and the professional can to a larger extent be characterized as business relations (Svensson, 2006; Leicht and Layman, 2006).

I will in the following, after a brief presentation of the design of the study and the methodological approach applied, discuss what the institutionalized system for acceptance as a professional in the management consulting market looks like in practice, and what this study has found to be the *rites de passage* for inclusion in the community of experts in management consulting.

The study

The paper is based on interviews with buyers and providers of management consulting services. In total, about 70 interviews have been conducted, of which about 55 were with consultants and 15 with buyers. The imbalance in numbers between providers and buyers has to do with the fact that consultants are the main research object here. The interviews with the buyers were conducted in order to establish reference points to the stories told by the consultants. The consultants were asked about what they see as characteristics of management consulting. Other questions centred on issues such as how they put together the services they

provide. The questions directed to the buyers were of a similar nature but adjusted to their perspective. Due to access problems with regard to the big international consultancies, who experienced our questions as too close to their core business model, most of the interviews conducted were with consultants of small (less than 10 employees) and mid-sized (11-40 employees) consulting firms of local Swedish origin. For access purposes, the buyers interviewed represent organizations in the public sector where the principle of access to information applies, meaning that they are obliged by law to provide the public open access to official records. Another reason for using this category of buyers is that they are likely to interact with the category of consultants in focus in the study. It was, however, not possible to study actual meetings between providers and buyers due to the perceived risk by the consultants that this could have an impact on their business success. The consultants interviewed were mainly senior consultants since it is mainly this category of employees that the consultancies in focus have on staff. We do, however, believe that due to their long experience, they are representative of the consultants involved in the construction of order and structure in the field. All interviews were seen as narratives from the field and have, as such, been interpreted and categorized qualitatively.

Management Consultants – True Experts in Trust-building

This section reports on the empirical analyses. The data is presented under four main inductively constructed categories of characteristics relating to what the consultants do in order to produce themselves as trustworthy experts on the market. In the analysis of the data, these categories appeared to represent the core behaviour management consultants need to apply in order to gain legitimacy for their expertise. The four categories are systematic processes of: (1) building and maintaining relationships with clients, (2) being available, (3) representing relevant competence, and (4) differentiation. A small selection of quotations that clearly reflect the patterns that emerged from the analyses are used to illustrate the views of the interviewees.

Building and maintaining relationships through versatility

In management consulting, as in any business situation, building and maintaining relationships with clients and potential clients is of great importance. Our data shows that to succeed in this management consultants continuously struggle to be versatile. In this case, this means that they struggle to keep up with new developments in particular industries, management standards and fashions, and to carefully listen and adapt to the needs of their clients. The importance of versatility in building and maintaining relationships is demonstrated by the following quotation from an interview with a senior consultant who, at the time of the interview, was self-employed:

It's not unusual to feel unsure of what you're going to do in a project, and the same goes for the client. Sometimes they're not sure what they want from me, if they're going to hire me, or what the project is going to look like. Sometimes they just want someone to talk to, but sometimes these discussions turn into projects.

This consultant made it very clear that the service he delivers is quite often defined in open discussions with the client. Therefore, he has to be open-minded and flexible, which means that the service he delivers may vary a great deal depending on the outcome of these discussions.

How open a project is, however, depends very much on how it is initiated. As the quotation above shows, the actual starting point of a business relationship can be unclear. The client wants a sounding board or wants to be brought up to date on modern management, or simply wants to meet the consultant because he or she is curious about what the consultant can do for them. The consultant also explains that clients may contact him because they have come across books or articles that he has written. He belongs to a category of consultants who publish books and articles. When these are familiar to the client, the assignment is likely to be more clearly defined from the outset.

Although the consultant's projects may differ in many ways, he still points out that there are limits to what he can do. In order not to risk his reputation, he tries to avoid projects he feels he is not qualified for. However, to keep the relationship with the client, he might pass the client on to a colleague in another firm that he knows is more capable of providing that type of service. Sometimes several consultancies cooperate by systematically passing on

potential projects to each other. This procedure may be based on agreements within groups of firms, whereby the firm that passes a project on to another firm receives a brokerage fee for this service. Hence, the idea is to build a system where the risk of not getting assignments regularly is reduced, but also where everyone involved benefits from this form of cooperation. The fee is just one aspect, but the main goal is that the firms involved, in the long run, receive projects from each other.

Versatility, in terms of how best to help the client or deciding whether to keep or pass on assignments, is a common strategy in use among consultants, but is not a strategy practised by all consultants. A senior and a junior consultant at one medium-sized consultancy reported that recommending someone else for a project could be very risky. Even though someone else is doing the work, in their view, they still carry part of the responsibility for the project, which could be problematic since it is virtually impossible to assure the quality of a service delivered by someone else. These two consultants work in a rather different mode compared to the senior consultant quoted above, and represent a category of firms that offer standardized services based on particular models. Their model (developed by the founder of the firm and published in books and articles in both the business press and in academic journals) is customized to suit growing firms. The business relationship begins when they inform a potential client that they have a solution (the model) to the kind of problems the client is likely to face as a growing organization. It is of crucial importance that the potential client matches the definition of a growing firm as defined by the consultancy. If it does not, the consultants say that they always turn down the potential assignment, since they believe that the service they offer would not suit firms that are not growing. Still, being versatile and understanding in their relationships with clients is important to them, but they do not apply these qualities in the same way as the self-employed consultant quoted above does. While they are not flexible in the service they deliver, they are naturally flexible in terms of starting dates and deadlines. They also offer a set of services that can be combined or purchased separately. In other words, although the content of the project is not negotiable, there may still be room for negotiating its size and form.

Being flexible about what types of projects one undertakes or offering relatively standardized models represent two extremes through which consultancies win projects, but both strategies require versatility on the part of the consultants. To some extent, we would expect that the larger the firm, the less flexible and versatile it needs to be – or a firm may satisfy the need for versatility by having in-house specialists that can provide different types of services. It is also likely that larger firms have a reputation that sells projects more or less

automatically. However, as the quotation below shows, they cannot rely too heavily on their reputation; they must also actively seek new business opportunities and build new and maintain old business relations. A senior consultant at one of the larger medium-sized and well-established Swedish consultancies describes how he and his colleagues do not just sit in their offices waiting for interesting projects to come along:

I got the idea when I was working at the Central Student Support Agency (CSN). I realized that the model we were trying to implement there had greater potential to be successful at Sweden Post. So I went to Sweden Post and told them that I could help them develop a new area of business. I walked around their premises, walked up and down the stairs, popped in and out of offices, and talked to one person after another. It took about two years to convince them to give me an assignment. I see no limit to how many times this idea can be sold. We've sold it to two other public agencies and are about to sell it to a third.

The service he refers to here is a technical administrative routine, which is rather different from the more general services offered by the consultants discussed above. Still, considerable versatility was needed in the situation he described, although no negotiations regarding the content of the service took place. Nevertheless, the consultant fought long and hard to convince the client of the benefits of this routine for their organization. Finding economies of scale and commodifying services in this way is probably an opportunity that comes with the size of the consultancy. It is riskier for self-employed consultants or small firms to focus on one particular type of service. They need to be more flexible since they cannot rely on always winning projects of a particular kind. Sometimes, they just have to take whatever comes along. It is therefore important for them to be involved in a number of parallel relationships with former or potential clients.

These two stories from the field reveal a core dimension of consultancy work: the constant search for new business opportunities. This involves successfully establishing and managing relationships with existing and potential clients. To do this the strategy that small and medium-sized firms in particular tend to use is to be versatile, which also involves a great deal of flexibility. We have, however, seen that larger firms (represented here by one of the larger medium-sized Swedish-owned firms in our study) must also show some versatility in order to sell their specialized services. Whereas small firms, having less power to pick and choose, tend to be more likely to combine rather contrasting forms of consulting, larger firms are perhaps more likely to offer commodified and strictly standardized services. One reason

for this is that the large firms have the capacity in their hierarchies to house different types of commodities run by different specialists. Another is that large firms house more senior consultants that can be involved in processes of establishing and maintaining relationships. Nevertheless, versatility is mainly a concept that represents the kind of activities consultants are involved in when struggling to build and maintain relationships, and is thereby one quality that everyone who wants to be accepted as a legitimate player in the consulting market needs to learn.

Being Available

It takes, however, more than versatility to win projects and survive in the consulting market. If clients know what they want and are looking for, for example, methods of service quality, they probably turn to consultancies that are regarded as having expertise in this area. On the other hand, if they have a good relationship with a consultant they like and consider competent, they might initiate a discussion about service quality in this already established relationship. In some cases, these discussions might reveal that someone else is a better choice for the project. Still, it is not unusual for one project to lead to other projects in the same company, if contact is maintained. A quality manager in a division of the Swedish telecom company, Telia, describes why he hired a particular self-employed senior consultant, the first time, and then once again:

The division employed a new CEO from Ericsson. Some time later, the CEO hired me as his quality manager (QM). We used to be colleagues at Ericsson. I'm an engineer but have gradually moved from practical engineering to area-management positions. At that time, however, I had no experience of quality management. I thought the whole thing was a practical joke on the part of my former colleague, but it wasn't. So, in order to become informed in the area, I saw no other option than to hire a consultant, and I selected one from the pile of presentations I got in the mail from consulting firms.

For the consultant who was hired in this way, it was a question of lucky timing. His letter reached the QM at a time when he was receptive to quality management services. It was a "garbage can situation" (Cohen et al., 1972), where the QM had a problem and the consultant

a solution to the problem. The solution was in the market while the problem was experienced in the hierarchy. The QM continues his story:

The first project was designed as an investigation of what kind of quality management system the division should go for. It was therefore rather technical in character. I felt, however, that we needed more than this. I therefore started discussing this with Sven-Goran¹ [the self-employed consultant] since he had rather eagerly and repeatedly expressed his interest in being involved in one way or another in the quality management project in the division. We met for lunch a couple of times and I thought he was a nice guy who had interesting and unusual ideas about quality management compared to the technical information I had received in the report from the first consultant. I hired him as a sounding board in order to bring more philosophical insight into the quality management project in the division. The first consultant's report suggested that ISO 9000 was the system the division should go with. Gradually, Sven-Goran's first assignment led to a situation where I asked him if he could act as a kind of undercover agent to very carefully underline the philosophy of quality management in the organization during the process of the division's struggle to attain ISO 9000 certification.

This story reveals how important it is for small and medium-sized consultancies to stay close to former and potential clients in order to be available when the client is ready to do business. If a consultant is not around at this point in time, it is very likely that the project will go to someone who is. One example of how this can be realized in practice is that once the consultant has established a good relationship with a client, they are likely to attempt to maintain this. This also comes through very clearly in the following quotation from the self-employed senior consultant (Sven-Goran) whom the QM hired twice:

You have projects over the years and then after seven years you get: "Hey, can you help me with this?" But you already have a relationship, not just a personal one but also a relationship with this company, this industry or this organization and these people. ... When you do a large project, it often leads to other projects, but after a while it is less and less. But then, after a year or so, they give you a call. Of course, you've been doing some type of relationship marketing the entire time. Sending a letter every now and then, a funny article and the like, though nothing vulgar. And you should be careful not to over-sell yourself, or they might get the impression that there's something wrong with you or your service!

¹ The names of individual interviewees have been changed to protect their privacy.

The importance of being close by and ready to act when the opportunity arises is an aspect of consultancy work most interviewees emphasize. Thus, how particular services are constructed is very much a matter of timing, i.e. catching the client when he is receptive, and then making a good first impression. The interviewees mentioned several strategies for achieving this. The client can be won on the spot in various ways: through letters and email, telephone calls, lunch meetings, through recommendations from other clients or consulting firms, or with a combination of these. Many interviewees also emphasize that enthusiasm and eagerness is yet another strategy for winning clients. This was what characterized the work of the senior consultant of the larger medium-sized Swedish consultancy referred to above when he tried to convince Sweden Post of the brilliance of his administrative routine. His running up and down the stairs, popping in and out of offices, and chatting with different people for two years finally led to them hiring him as he was there so frequently and regularly that no other consulting firm could get a foot into this domain. Thus, a constant but not desperate presence among potential service buyers is another necessary component in trust-building, and thereby another quality consultants need to acquire if they want acceptance as professionals in the market.

Representing Relevant Competence

Although versatility and availability are two core attributes for the construction of trust for the single consultant and certain consultancies in the market, this is not enough to win clients. If the consultants are not considered competent, it would seem that little will come of efforts to meet the other two attributes. Thus, potential clients have to believe that the consultants can in some way provide them with relevant services. This relevance has two dimensions: one social and one conceptual.

When the QM referred to above hired the self-employed senior consultant, quality management and ISO 9000 formed the arena of competence where the quality manager and the consultant met. In that particular case, a fashionable management standard constituted this arena. The QM noted that he and his organization lacked expertise, while the consultant claimed that he had been working in quality management since the early 1980s, long before it had become fashionable. He also referred to a book he had written on the topic. However, the conceptual facts were not what first got the QM interested in the consultant: his social skills

were more important. In the QM's opinion, the consultant was a pleasant and interesting fellow that he wanted to continue to talk to. In the discussions that would follow, the consultant's conceptual competence in quality management authorized him to act as somewhat of a quality management expert. If the consultant's social behaviour in the early, critical phase of the relationship was of great importance, his conceptual competence gradually grew in importance, ultimately leading to the first project and then the second, and possibly more after that.

In this particular situation, the consultant had extensive experience of the focal point of the project. Not all projects are of this kind. The same consultant explains, for example, that the management tool or technique he delivers depends on the particular circumstances of each individual project. This is a behaviour he shares with most of the study informants, although this particular consultant was keen to point out that, when he chooses his tools, he does not turn to books or seminars. Instead, he says that he uses his intuition, his experience and his own analysis of all aspects of the client's organization to create the tools that are required. This therefore suggests that, when describing their know-how to potential clients, it is crucial that small-scale management consultants highlight learning as a fundamental component of their experience and expertise. However, it is difficult to link the learning that underlies a delivered service to particular events, books or management standards. Learning is a complex and continuous process, or as expressed by the same consultant:

You're always learning – every time you do something you learn. But it is very difficult to know what it is you're learning and when or where you're learning. Hopefully you learn something every day.

Another senior consultant, a partner in a small consultancy, gave a similar account of how he learns in order to be regarded as competent by his clients. In his firm (as in many other small consultancies), all the consultants are senior consultants. In this case, the consultants are all over 40 years of age and have the relevant management skills for the kind of service they provide. This profile and approach to seniority does not characterize all small-scale consultancies, although they all agree that seniority can only be gained through long experience of both consulting and management positions. Assistant work, however, is still needed, but instead of employing junior consultants in their own firms, they often use young employees from the client organization who have a business degree. They also see this as an

advantage since these people have greater insight into the organization than a junior consultant ever could. Regarding the competence of senior consultants, they claim that professionalism can only result from hands-on experience in the field. The senior consultant quoted above expresses his thoughts about professionalism and learning in the following way:

I'm not conscious of everything I learn. An enormous amount of know-how is accumulated in your head, your body, in the bookshelves, on the wall, in your fingers, in your sensitivity, in your sense of smell, in your hearing. This type of knowledge is different from technical knowledge.

If these thoughts are representative of how senior consultants in small-scale consultancies reason, consulting skills are accumulated and constantly upgraded in every new situation. Learning takes place continuously, but it is difficult to define where it comes from. On the other hand, the situation is quite different with technical knowledge. As emphasized by many interviewees, technical knowledge can be learned from books, seminars and education. They also stress that technical knowledge is more easily commodified. This is implied in the following quotation, also from the senior consultant cited above, in which he also claims, however, that he and his colleagues do not sell technical knowledge.

There are 17 000 management techniques out there to choose from. We use them in our services if the situation calls for them, but we don't sell them. We're not method consultants like the large US firms.²

Thus, what small-scale consultancies claim they do, as expressed by this senior consultant, is offer services based on management know-how, not on technical knowledge. Senior consultants believe that such services are difficult to sell and cannot be sold by their junior colleagues, since junior consultants do not have the know-how, or – as the same senior consultant explained:

When I once said to a potential client “Well, I'm clever at management, at understanding management situations,” he replied, “OK, but what books have

² Whether or not this view of the large US firms is justified is not addressed here. It is, however, a view shared by most of the interviewees in this study. Swedish firms that claim they are not like US firms may do so as part of their marketing strategy.

you read?” At that point, I decided to go home. This was someone who had never bought real management consulting services before. It’s very difficult to put your finger on this type of knowledge since it isn’t technical. You’re trying to tell them what you know. It has a lot to do with intuition: to have the ability to relate things such as your experience, what you know, and the technical knowledge that’s available.

What he means here is that this know-how cannot be specified in black and white, and can therefore not be acquired from books. He believes that consultants with the right know-how intuitively know what to do in the consulting process. This is also emphasized by other interviewees. Thus, it is difficult to trace the origin of the knowledge and skills small-scale management consultancies gain through experience since, in the words of this consultant, “you learn new things all the time through constant work.” He also adds:

We read literature, of course, and try to keep up-to-date, but what we do explicitly in terms of learning to consult is to go to other industries. We go to the theatre but not to be on stage and talk about dogs and cows like the Boston Consulting Group. There are so many similarities between directing a play and being a consultant. You have a 7-month deadline. You have a cast you didn’t choose. You’re short of money and, when you start, you have absolutely no idea how it will all turn out.

What he is suggesting is that the kind of consulting he performs is more like an art than anything else. Relevant competence for small-scale management consultants would thus appear to involve possessing the skills and talents to perform the art, but the performance can never be only technical. The kind of service a small-scale consultant offers is therefore not exclusively based on particular methods. Or, as the consultant says above, methods are just tools that can be used when the problem is clearly defined.

Thus, the picture that emerges is that the relevant competence for a management consultant is non-specific. It consists of combinations of individually embodied know-how, international management standards and faddish management tools. The interviews show that seniority, generally presented in terms of “I’m clever at management” is one capacity that can sell a service. For those who are not senior consultants and lack considerable experience of both management positions and consulting, it appears to be more important for them to be seen as specialists with extensive technical knowledge. Drawing on popular management standards may also be important if they are to demonstrate that they possess relevant

competence. Having said that, it can also be concluded that if social skills are lacking there will be no business – no matter how clever the consultant may be at standardized management techniques and what is regarded as professional management consulting. Thus, it seems that, to be regarded as having the relevant competence, the small-scale consultant must possess a combination of conceptual and social skills, although the exact combination tends to vary between different forms of consulting. Learning to be relevant is therefore another quality necessary to become accepted as a professional in the consulting market.

Differentiation

As argued above, being versatile, available and representing relevant competence can be interpreted as crucial in trust-building for consultants, but perhaps less so once they become well-established, have a good reputation in the market, and have many connections and good relationships with clients and other consultancies. However, if this is not their reality, how they compare with other consultancies in the market becomes important.

This conclusion is drawn from senior consultants' tendency to emphasize that they are different from the others. Local consultancies in particular, in this case of Swedish origin, irrespective of size, appear to be anxious to define themselves as *not like* US firms, meaning that they claim they are not method or expert consultants. Instead, the consultants in this study say that they first offer a service that helps their clients to define their situation, then help the clients to define their problems and identify solutions. Sometimes they are also involved in the implementation. They also say that the large global US or semi-US-based consultancies conduct comprehensive situation analyses but do not have the expertise to implement solutions. This is the expertise local consultancies claim to have. Thus, if this is a fair description of the market, large consultancies, and in particular the US firms, provide standardized methods and solutions for standardized problems. Smaller, locally based consultancies, on the other hand, provide true process consulting without knowing the problems beforehand, and do not act as peddlers of particular methods. We must remember, however, that these are ideal market positions emphasized by locally operating consultants.

Smaller consultancies do not deny that they are familiar with particular methods or that the solutions they suggest may be based on popular and well-known management concepts or methods. Nevertheless, they claim that their proposed solutions are based to a larger extent on

the clients' real problems rather than on a particular method they happen to have developed or adopted. This argument is common among the interviewees and is exemplified in the following quotation from the senior partner of the small consultancy referred to earlier (i.e. with only senior consultants, all of whom are over 40). He explains:

There are consultancies that develop models and turn them into products – “this is our model” – and then try to fit all sorts of problems into that model. A model has one advantage, and many of the large US firms use them. That's why they can use young consultants, because they have a product: “Deliver this product! First you do this, and then that and that.” We say: “That's nice, but we don't know the method until we know the situation.”

Thus, smaller market actors clearly need to stress their uniqueness, while the situation is likely different for firms with a strong brand name, such as McKinsey & Co or Accenture. The local and smaller actors tend to work very hard to market themselves in terms of “I am this kind of consultant, not that kind. I am not like them.” According to small-scale Swedish consultants, large firms are more likely to follow certain well-defined methods. However, this should not be understood to mean that small consultancies do not use methods. But, since the form of consulting they provide is more individual, they do not have the same need as larger actors do to formalize their methods in order to present a united front to their client.

The need of small consultancies to stress that their offering is different, if not unique, may derive from the complexity of the service they offer. If they cannot sell themselves by telling potential clients that they are clever at management, a formalized mode for presenting their work, for example, one based on standards, may be more convincing. Presenting the service as clearly non-US, non-method and problem-driven, might make the difference, as may positioning oneself as different or complementary, or claiming to be as good as the US firms in every way, but much less expensive.

To recap, smaller and locally based consultancies emphasize that they are not like other firms. They all claim that their service is unique since they all have unique experience and know-how. However, a comparison of their services reveals many similarities. This means that, while claiming to be unique, they cannot risk being too different, and learning that this must be done continuously is another quality needed for acceptance in the market as a professional.

The “rites de passage” for professionalism and procedures for legitimacy

Following from above, and also emphasized by the consultants interviewed in this study, it seems that the most important mechanism for inclusion in the management consulting professions is acceptance by the market. If someone manages to sell his or her services on the market for management consulting, this person is accepted as a member of the occupation. However, not just any kind of behaviour is likely to work. The main control mechanism is trust, meaning that there is a great chance that the buyers buy services from a particular consultant if trust has been established between them. Still, as shown above, there is also a pattern regarding the type of strategies representatives of this occupation tend to employ as they endeavour to become accepted by the market and included as members of the community. They tend to be:

- (i) *versatile* – insofar as they listen and offer what the prospective client believes he or she needs and then package their services in a format that has the potential to be attractive in the local business negotiation,
- (ii) *available* – so that, in practice, there will be few alternatives for the prospective client to choose from whenever a choice of hiring an external expert is to be made,
- (iii) *relevant* – by working hard to represent a form of service and competence that allude to problems and needs experienced by local buyers,
- (iv) *and different but not deviant* – by providing services that look unique but do not deviate too much from institutionalized and fashionable standards.

This suggests that the management consultant’s performance in any single business situation does not tend to be judged based on factors such as how well a management standard or a standard for management consulting is followed. Instead, performance tends to be evaluated on how well it satisfies the expectations of the members in the client organization and, most importantly, whether or not this leads to the establishment of trust in the business relation. The presence of a management consultant in a client organization may thus be evaluated primarily on the basis of how well the consultant manages to meet expectations and provide comfort and beliefs that give client organization members the confidence to deal with their daily toils. Thus, the problem the consultants are hired to solve may not always be the

service they deliver, it may be to deliver confidence and still the uncertainty experienced by the organization (Furusten, 2009).

This structure of professionalism in management consultancy field is hard to grasp for newcomers, i.e. buyers and sellers who have little or no practical experience of management consulting, or outsiders. The situation is different for more experienced actors, however, for example, senior consultants who have internalized the institutionalized conditions and the organization of their field. For them, the structures are quite clear. They know intuitively what to do in different situations. They know what role they play and what identity they have. They have learned through experience where the borders of the field are and where its different genres belong. They know the established rules for legitimacy in different arenas and they know which arenas other consultants perform in. They have found centres of legitimacy in the field, from which their performances can draw more generalized authority. Using this insight as a base, they have developed skills to pass the *rites de passage* and to improvise in ways that enable them to win the confidence of clients in different situations, without compromising their trustworthiness.

Following from the above, becoming a professional in the management consulting market, in the meaning suggested here, seems only to occur through successful production of oneself as such. Being recruited by an established consultancy or cooperating in other forms with senior consultants already established in the field are two ways to enter the consulting stage. Once there, however, new professionals have to create their own space. This differs from the ideal picture of professionalism drawn in the traditional literature on professionalization, where the system itself is supposed to set and control the rules of entry into the occupational group through prerequisites for membership (e.g. Larson, 1977). In management consulting and other similar new professional fields with vague institutional conditions, the professionals are still involved in the shaping of the system but, instead of maintaining and controlling the formal prerequisites for entry, are constantly forced to produce and re-produce themselves in the expert role over and over again in business negotiations with clients. This means that no-one can be expected to gain legitimacy as an expert in new situations just because they have been accepted and legitimized in the role once, and no-one can expect to be treated as an expert in all contexts on the sole basis of having succeeded in one situation in one particular context.

To earn the capacity and insight to see the structures for professionalism in the field (how to be versatile, available, relevant and different), or internalizing the structures, as Berger and Luckmann (1967) describe similar processes, can be seen as the core rite of

passage in new professional expert fields such as management consulting. Exactly how such insight is created varies and it is more or less impossible to formally define when someone has succeeded. The single most important prerequisite is management consultants' ability to convince organizations to buy their services. There are no clear rules for what kind of learning leads to future acceptance and there are no guarantees that the professional status will stand the test of time. Instead, it is necessary that the passing of these rites of passage is carried out repeatedly. The rite of gaining legitimacy as a professional in the field is not something that is passed once. It has to be passed over and over again – at different times in different ways and in different contexts.

Thus, if someone manages to sell his or her services, the market has accepted this person as a professional. From a traditional professional perspective, this is seen as a sign that the system has not attained autonomy, a system that is not controlled by the professionals themselves, and thereby has not reached the status of “profession” (Abbott, 1988; Reed, 1996). Commercialism is also seen as a threat to pure professionalism since it is believed there is a risk that business rationalities will overrule professional rationality. It has been argued that this risk is considerable, since the professionals risk losing control of the relevant expertise to laypeople in client organizations (Fournier, 1999). However, as pointed out by Grey (1998), business mechanisms have long been a considerable dimension of many traditional professional fields. If they do not manage to sell their services, they will not be able to act in the role of the professional due to a lack of financial resources (Leicht and Layman, 2006). Thus, although commercialism is a threat to the ideal view of the professional, it is a core dimension of the professional practice also in traditional professions.

Conclusions

One conclusion of this study is that the system for professionalism in practice among experts such as management consultants does not follow the routes of an emerging entrepreneurial profession as suggested by Reed (1996). Although Burrell (1996) claims that new experts have forced out old professions, and have thereby become a category of actors in society that has obtained significant power, this does not automatically mean that professions have run their course as some authors argue (Pfandehauser, 2006). It is another form of professionalism we see here that relates more to what Grey (1998) defines as professionalism in practice,

where commercialization is the basic mechanism in the organizing of this professional system. This means that acceptance in the market is the major form of authorization for someone to act in the role. Still, the way to achieve this is to earn trust, and for this to happen consultants are expected to follow the institutionalized *rites de passage* of the market, which are: versatility, availability, relevance, and differentiation but not deviation.

This means that there are *rites de passage* for these professionals other than a specified education, documented experience and expertise (Larson, 1977; Abbott, 1988; Reed, 1996). Still, although these attributes are not relevant here, management consulting services is an emerging form of expert work (Brint, 1994; Leicht and Leiman, 2006; Groß and Kieser, 2006; Svensson, 2006) that represent a system that is as good as it gets, showing no signs of being entrepreneurial and over time moving further to fulfil all of the necessary attributes of the ideal classic profession. The argument here is that it is important to take this fact into consideration since there is a large and growing number of new professional experts of this type around in contemporary society, offering their services to a growing number of public and private organizations that pay a lot for their services (Greenwood et al., 2006).

Thus, due to the growth in number, competence areas and importance of these forms of expert work in contemporary society, we must open our eyes to the fact that, among experts hired by many organizations today, professionalization in practice takes routes other than those suggested in traditional theories of professions. Understanding this is necessary if we in turn want to understand not only *that* we live in a service society today, as the literature on professional service organizations makes clear (Greenwood et al., 2006), but also *how* the expertise of the professionals populating these organizations is constructed and what it represents for the organizations that hire them. This is a dimension of contemporary professional work that has not received much theoretical and empirical attention in the literature on management consulting, professional service organizations and professions. This study offers empirically based conclusions about what the professionalism of management consultants consists of, but the role such new professionals play for organizations and the evolution of society remains a challenge for other studies to explore (cf. Buono, Sturdy and , Werr, 2009; Furusten, 2009) – empirically as well as theoretically – where the understanding of the rise and construction of new professionalism is a good place to start.

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