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# From Babes and Sucklings: Management Consultants and Novice Clients

STUART MACDONALD, *University of Sheffield*

Although now awaiting a return to the heady years of the late 1990s, the modern management consultancy industry is still vast. So, too, is the number of managers experienced in the use of management consultants. But the expansion of management consultancy has also attracted new customers among managers who are yet to be blooded in the use of consultants. Conventional wisdom would have it that these novices are easy prey for the crafty consultant, that they will be less able than the old hands to stand up for themselves. This paper tests the proposition in a range of circumstances: it looks at the use of management consultants in the Church of England, in a couple of trade unions, and in Poland. The paper finds that these novice users are not quite as helpless as might have been anticipated, and that experienced clients of consultants, and even consultants themselves, may have something to learn from them. The paper explains the situation in terms of the close relationship that usually develops between management consultant and hiring manager. In the absence of this relationship, consultant and manager struggle to come to terms, but there are benefits for the hiring organisation.

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## Experience with Management Consultants

There can be few organisations of any size, in any sector of a developed economy, that have not at some

time hired management consultants. While there is much the organisation can gain from management consultants, there are also disadvantages, often deep-rooted and seldom acknowledged. Management consultants can easily become addictive, each successive consultancy increasingly likely to lead to another. Management consultancy can as easily become incestuous, consultants hired because other managers hire management consultants. And management consultants can encourage dependency, managers desperate to meet expectations made of them hiring consultants and finding that this only increases the expectations. Together, these ingredients make a powerful cocktail, and yet its effects are not often appreciated. The explanation would seem to be that management consultants are now so pervasive that it is hard to imagine or remember ever being without them. To be sure, there is dissatisfaction with the performance of management consultants (e.g., Dwyer, 1993), and there are prescriptive tips galore on how to get more from your management consultant. Generally, the assumption seems to be that those who have most experience of management consultants are best placed to proffer advice. But if hiring management consultants has indeed become compulsive, even compulsory, this is unlikely to be so. It may be that guidance is best sought elsewhere, from those who are new to hiring management consultants and have yet to adapt to the constraints imposed by the transaction between management consultant and client.

Not all of the considerable growth of the management consultancy industry in the 1990s is explained by regular clients hiring more management

consultants (Clark, 1995). There was also much new business, and some of it from organisations that might be considered unlikely customers for consultants. This paper looks at four such cases. First it investigates the use of management consultants in the former Soviet Bloc, specifically in Poland. The rise of capitalism following the fall of communism was to be facilitated by despatching management consultants from the West, an uncompromising introduction to the realities of Western business. The paper then turns to trade unions, examining the use of management consultants by the Communication Workers' Union in the UK and by the Irish Airline Pilots' Association to understand and influence the strategy of employers, not a traditional union concern. Lastly, the paper considers the use of management consultants in the Church of England, not exactly their customary terrain. It is particularly interested in the nature of the transaction between consultant and client in these cases. Are these new clients innocents cast to the wolves, or do they somehow manage to survive, and even profit from, their experience with the management consultant?

## Methodology

This paper emerges from a research project investigating the information transaction between management consultants and their clients. The research hypothesised that the information transaction between consultant and client could not be effected by the market because of the nature of information. The relationship between consultant and client could help compensate for this market failure, but at a cost, particularly to the hiring organisation. Basically, it was argued, if an information transaction was to occur, the management consultant and the hiring manager would have to collude. The research sought to discover the consequences of any such collusion. Understandably, though not predictably, neither management consultant nor hiring manager was anxious to talk about collusion (for accounts of similar difficulties, see Payne and Lumsden, 1987; Sturdy, 1997b). Even the details of the consultancy were often hidden on grounds of confidentiality. The research project was caught in a logical trap: the more critical the relationship between consultant and client, the less either would be willing to talk about it.

Here the problem does not arise. Here the relationship between management consultant and client seems to have been of no importance, and there was no reluctance at all to talk about it. This experience fitted an hypothesis that these novice clients would have had no opportunity to develop a relationship, and thereby to collude, with their consultants. This subsidiary research project sought to discover the consequences of these novel arrangements for the parties concerned, and the implications

for all those who demand and supply consultancy services. Clients who previously had rarely or never hired management consultants were identified in other research projects and were asked to participate. Managers most involved in hiring these consultants were interrogated at length. Some forty interviews were conducted, mostly in Poland, where managers from several organisations participated in the study. Ten management consultants were also interviewed because they had experience of dealing with novice clients, though not necessarily these clients. The paper is laden with quotations from these interviews, offered to illustrate, rather than prove, theory. The conclusions are necessarily no more than thoughts, though interesting, perhaps even significant, thoughts.

## Theory

The management consultant earns his living – and some have a very good living – by advising managers how to manage. The rationale is that the external consultant's advice is different from, but complementary to, information already available inside the organisation. The consultant, it is argued, can look at the organisation from a new perspective, one directed by experience in comparable organisations, and informed by the latest management methods. When clients re-hire the same consultants – and they often do – they would seem to be depriving themselves of the impartial perspective and unattached insight that cannot be obtained within the organisation (Robinson, 1982). The explanation may be that such value was always more likely to be realised in theory than in practice and that managers hiring consultants are generally seeking other benefits altogether, benefits that the usual consultant, the regular man, the one already 'up to speed', understands he is expected to provide (Huczynski, 1993).

On the face of it, the client simply has a need and the consultant the means of satisfying the resultant demand. But buying and selling information is rarely simple. The problems reflect the peculiar characteristics of information as an economic good, and particularly the difficulty of expressing demand for information in ignorance (Clark, 1993). After all, the putative client cannot know what he does not know, nor can he be allowed to know what the management consultant does know. If the consultant reveals what he knows before he is hired, then there is no need to hire him to acquire his knowledge. So, clients are in no position to express demand, and management consultants find difficulty displaying supply. This fundamental problem of matching supply to demand tends to be overlooked by those who study the activities of management consultants. Many take a prescriptive approach to the subject, proffering advice either on how to be a management consultant, or on how to use one (e.g., Frankenhuis, 1977;

Washburn, 1989; Covin and Fisher, 1991; Schlegelmilch, Diamantopoulos and Moore, 1992; Shapiro, Eccles and Soske, 1993; Mitchell, 1994; Litwin, Bray and Lusk Lusk Brooke, 1996; Nelson and Economy, 1997; Corcoran and McLean, 1998). While such advice may be wise and welcome – and is infinitely more entertaining than a mechanistic approach to the topic (e.g., Kolb and Frohman, 1970) – it does tend to disregard the difficulties inherent in the information transaction between management consultant and client. More particularly, it neglects the exploitation of this relationship that is required to overcome these difficulties, and the consequences of this exploitation.

A small subset of the literature on management consultancy is more reflective (see, for example, Clark and Fincham, 2002). For example, some challenging work explores the relationship between management consultancy and management method. While the 'churn' of fads is clearly in the consultant's interest, it would seem that the client has even more incentive to welcome the latest management fashion with open arms (Gill and Whittle, 1992; Huczynski, 1993, 1996; Fincham, 1995; Abrahamson, 1996; Collins, 2000). Much is expected of managers these days, and the manager who does not embrace change as demonstrably as other managers is showing little regard for his career (Clark and Salaman, 1998a). This trickle of querying literature looks at the provenance of management consultancy in the huge auditing firms of the US, with their diversification into the provision of advice, first on IT and then on strategy (McKenna, 1995; Kipping 1996), and relates this development to the domination of the world's management thinking by the American school of management (Watson, 1994; Furusten, 1995). It also reflects on the issue of particular concern in this paper – the relationship between the management consultant and the manager who hires the consultant.

Given the pressure on the manager to be seen to perform, not hiring a consultant may be an unrealistic option (Ginsberg and Abrahamson, 1991). And the more managers hire management consultants, the more managers must hire management consultants. The explanation runs much deeper than managers seeking extra authority for their decisions, or somewhere to pass the buck if things go wrong. It lies in the cycle of expectation and dependency established by the hiring of management consultants, especially expensive ones. Benefits are expected, and the greater the expectation, the greater the manager's dependence on the means by which the benefits are supposed to be achieved. Having once relied upon a consultant, it becomes harder to deny the advantages of a consultant next time. Without a consultant, or so it may seem, decisions are harder to make and justify, management methods are mystifying, problems cannot be discussed nor positions supported (Argyris, 1961). The manager can easily find himself trapped in a spiral of expectation and ultimately

mately dependency. Insidiously, the confidence to manage is dissipated (Sturdy, 1997a).

*Dependency is increased by using consultants. You can get hooked on consultants. You can become consultant-happy.*

Management consultant

*I would not have wanted to rely on my own judgement.*

Experienced client

However, although focusing on the relationship between consultant and manager, even this specialist literature rarely relates the relationship to the difficulty the parties face effecting an information transaction (e.g., TenEyck, 1989; Poufelt and Payne, 1994). Key to understanding the workings of management consultancy is not just that the relationship with clients is important, but also that it is information that is being bought and sold (Gummersson, 1978). Inevitably, this entails difficulties, and where there are difficulties there are also opportunities. It is because market signals are so faint and distorted in the sale of the consultant's information that the relationship is allowed to compensate for, and guide, the transaction (Clark and Salaman, 1998b). So, a conspiracy develops, a tacit understanding that it is in the interest of neither party to examine the failure of the market and the consequent reliance on the relationship between consultant and client to compensate (Easley and Harding, 1999). While such understandings have a major part to play in organisational life, and are explored in the theory of the convention (Orlean, 1994; Salais, Chatel and Rivaud-Danset, 1998), the theory has yet to be applied to the study of management consultancy. This paper retreats from such a monumental task. Instead, it explores but one nook of the situation: what happens when management consultants meet managers who do not appreciate the convention, who may not even realise that there is one. Such an encounter reveals just how reliant on the relationship between consultant and client the transaction has become, and the implications for the hiring organisation. In short, the major beneficiaries of hiring a consultant may well be the consultant and the hiring manager, rather than the organisation paying them both (see McGivern, 1983). The following studies suggest very strongly that, in the absence of the relationship, and the understanding that goes with it, management consultant and client struggle to effect an information transaction. This struggle may be inefficient, but it may be necessary if the hiring organisation, rather than the hiring manager and the hireling, is to reap benefits from the transaction.

## In from the Cold

With the collapse of communist governments, the enterprises of the former Soviet Bloc were suddenly



exposed to capitalism incarnate – the management consultant. Western governments argued that the conversion of Eastern enterprises to Western capitalism would be most thoroughly and speedily accomplished by sending in Western management consultants, and various programmes – most prominently the Phare Programme of the European Commission – were concocted to do just this (Jack, 1991). Of the 2 billion euros spent by Phare to the end of 1994, between 30% and 40% went on consultants (Marsh, 1995). These seem to have been less successful than the programmes promised, but then the transition to a very different sort of economic and social system has been much more difficult than Western enthusiasm allowed (*Masters of the Universe*, 1999).

*I met Western management consultants. They try to help. They came here with a feeling of mission and vision. I met these people with full respect for their knowledge. They were always surprised that we could manage. They started from the point that only we know, we will save you.*

Polish client

*I'm cynical about the Phare Programme. I am not at all convinced the money was well spent. Someone writes the terms of reference – usually a consultant with two weeks' experience – .... Then there is a tendering process in which everyone is looking for specific deliverables, which are usually completely meaningless anyway. These are milestones from nowhere.*

Western management consultant

It is hard to find among Polish management consultants and among their clients anyone uncritical of the impact made by Western management consultants working in Eastern Europe. Much of this criticism focuses on the disregard for cultural differences displayed both by Western management consultants working in the East, and by the government programmes which sent them there (see, for example, Fisher, 1991).

*They offer you things. Sometimes you find perfume on the table after they leave. But they can be sneakier, offering you trips to other countries in which they are working.*

Polish client

Among the cultural obstacles facing consultants in Poland was the notion, no longer common in the West, that bringing in management consultants suggested that an organisation was in trouble, much like sending in the bailiffs. Equally quaint is the notion prevalent in Poland that management consultants are hired simply for the advice they give and for no other reason. In the West, management consultants are hired for a plethora of reasons; to obtain advice is but one, and probably not even a very important one. In the West, the transaction that really matters is the one between the consultant and the manager who hires him; the transaction between the consultant and the organisation is of much less

importance (Huczynski, 1993; Clark and Salaman, 1996). But in Poland, what the consultant will do for the organisation is all that matters. In Polish organisations, an expectation prevails that would seem strange in the West and that astonished the first Western consultants to work in the country. It is that management consultants should know something about their client's industry, and that they should have years of practical experience rather than just a mastery of the latest theory, gained at the best business schools.

In the West, organisations may hire the big consultancies at least partly for the credibility the reputation of these firms lends their advice; their very presence can lend credibility. Though foreign investors in Poland and foreign managers there may welcome the involvement of a name they recognise, the name has no great value among Polish managers. This reality may not yet have dawned on some Western consultancies, even those with Polish staff (see Merwin, 1987).

*There is general suspicion against consultants, especially foreign consultants. It is felt that all this money is going to people who do nothing. No one would praise me for hiring Coopers and Lybrand as such.*

Polish client

One Polish manager recounts how the branch head of one of the largest international consultancies kept losing the tender papers she sent him, eventually demanding his third set the night before the bid closed.

*He was so self-assured that he didn't even think what kind of image he was giving. The proposal was prepared in one night.*

Polish client

Western management consultants did not convert Eastern enterprises to capitalism overnight, and it was always naïve to assume that they would (Jack, 1991). Decades of experience of Western attempts to help the developing world screamed that this was not the way to operate overseas, that Western methods imposed on other societies regardless of local culture and systems were doomed to failure. Why, then, make the attempt in the first place? One explanation is that there was political value for both Western and host governments in demonstrating that a new age had dawned; it would have been hard to find a more complete embodiment of the new age, a more convincing personification, than the Western management consultant.

It can be argued that the squads of management consultants that arrived in Eastern Europe have actually delayed its transition to capitalism. Because their advice was culturally inappropriate, its implementation met with little success among clients and discour-

aged other enterprises from taking similar courses. In Poland, managers are unanimously scathing about the 'Marriott Brigade', the term adopted for Western consultants rarely seen outside Warsaw's best hotel, and the condescension of at least some Western consultants seems thoroughly deserving of their scorn.

*Foreign consultants came here not because someone identified a need, but because foreign schemes had money to spare. This helped create the Marriott Brigade.*

Polish client

Also likely to have discouraged change among Polish enterprises is the damage done to nascent Polish consultancies by the influx of Western management consultants. Not only did the Westerners give management consultancy a bad name among their potential clients, they also undercut prices in the local market – a fee reversal made possible by the subsidies of Western governments (Saunderson-Meyer, 1992). In consequence, growth of the local industry remained stunted until Western consultancies turned to hiring local staff and working with Polish consultancies. This, however, seems to have prompted wholesale and undisciplined entry to the industry. Almost everyone in Poland seems to be a part-time consultant.

The Polish experience is instructive. It allows an examination of management consultancy stripped of many of the new clothes it wears in the West. In particular, the credibility that Western clients associate with the efforts of the largest consultancies is little valued in the East. Without the support of reputation, at least some of their working methods attract a level of suspicion and criticism not common in the West.

*I was told you have to be very careful [with management consultants]. They send you names of senior people then, when the contact is signed, you never see these people.*

Polish client

*Their job is to find problems so even if the one you think you have isn't, they will find one.*

Polish client

But most impressive in the Polish experience is the simple insistence of Polish clients that the management consultant should do precisely what the management consultant promises to do. Polish managers expect to work their consultants hard.

*I pay for a consultant and get this feeling I can demand that they do the job. I can't demand this of my own staff.*

Polish client

There is a general expectation in Poland that the organisation really will benefit from the consultant's efforts, and there is little evidence of a crucial

relationship between client and consultant. Western consultants are not always prepared to satisfy such naïve expectations and the competitive advantage of Polish consultancies, at least in the short term, may lie in their eagerness to provide what their clients expect.

## Trade Unions – Working for the Workers

The period in the UK when the trade unions were said to be holding the country to ransom is well within living memory. The threat was in some part responsible for the rise of Thatcherism in the 1980s, a right-wing reaction that was replicated in many other countries and that was accompanied by a philosophy that easily accommodated the management consultant. The new, privatised, market-led economy elevated the manager to heroic status as leader, visionary and entrepreneur, and where the manager went, the consultant was sure to follow. It is little wonder that the vast increase in the use of management consultants coincided with their political acceptability.

A return to left-wing government during the 1990s in Britain and elsewhere might have been expected to bode ill for management consultants. Not so. The Third Way is some way from red-blooded socialism and the UK government has long encouraged the private sector's use of consultants (Segal Quince Wicks-teed, 1989), especially in SMEs, and has become a heavy user itself. Perhaps more surprising still is that even the trade unions are now employing management consultants. These consultants advise not just on the customary concerns of unions, but also on corporate strategy, the traditional preserve of senior management. Trade unions hire management consultants so that they may – as their consultants might put it – operate on a level playing field, as well-briefed and informed as management itself. Equally surprising is the skill with which the trade unions seem to use their consultants.

## Post Office Privatisation

Consider the example of the Communications Workers' Union (CWU), anxious to protect its members not simply against the machinations of management, but also against the government's plans for the Post Office. The Post Office suffered a decline in business throughout the 1990s. Senior managers and government responded by closing many of the Crown post offices – post offices in public ownership – to reduce costs and to make the whole organisation more attractive for privatisation. The pay and working conditions of union members – indeed, their very jobs – were threatened and the CWU called in consultants.

The Communication Workers' Union is the product of the amalgam of the Union of Communication

Workers and the National Communications Union in 1995. The privatisation issue arose just after the 1992 election. In response, the Union of Communication Workers had seen fit to approach a political lobbyist, an expensive exercise but entirely successful. In those days, only a slim majority remained to the Conservative government, and many Conservative MPs were concerned about their prospects of being returned to Parliament at the next election. Those from rural constituencies were reminded by the lobbyist just how unpopular closing hundreds of country post offices would be and the privatisation issue was dropped. When it reared its head again, the Labour Party was in power with a huge majority and unlikely to be swayed by political lobbyists arguing the case of voters in the shires. A new strategy was required, one requiring resources beyond those of the Communication Workers' Union. The CWU had the research resources, but its research department lacked credibility. Through John Kay at London Business School, the CWU approached London Economics to undertake the task.

*I knew they were credible. In no way was he fishing for business. Kay was also a friend of a friend. I just sort of talked my way round my network of mates. I may have started out with an idea. John Kay clinched it.*

Trade union client

Credibility seems to have been the quality most valued by the trade union client, but within this was included influence with those that mattered, in this case the government rather than management.

*London Economics [1998] produced a superb document which cost us a great deal of money. In terms of credibility in the highest echelons of government, it was invaluable to us. It is no exaggeration to say that the London Economics report was a crucial part of the argument we used to keep the Post Office in the public sector.*

Trade union client

To reinforce this credibility, the CWU co-sponsored a report from the Institute of Public Policy Research on the public corporation model (Robinson and Rubin, 1999). This contributed to the model's legitimacy and acceptability, but the consultant's report had established the principle. The fundamental problems of the Post Office remain in that its strategic options are constrained by limitations on its borrowing as long as it remains in the public sector, but efforts are now being made to find innovative solutions to these problems. In that brute privatisation no longer appears to be an option, the union and its use of consultants have been outstandingly successful.

### Strategic Airline Alliances

The second example is of the Irish Airline Pilots' Association (IALPA), a small union representing

600 pilots and anxious to increase its influence with the main employer, Aer Lingus. By the late 1990s, many small airlines were joining the strategic alliances established by the major airlines. In 1998, Aer Lingus took on management consultants to advise on whether it should join one of these alliances. The union, inspired by the example of the Telecom Eireann unions in using consultants, hired its own management consultant to look into precisely the same issue.

*In the past, we would have done it ourselves. We did one on airline policy about 15 years ago. It was on A4 paper and amateurish. [The consultant] was professional and carried weight.*

Trade union client

IALPA had first resorted to a consultant in 1990 – to help the union with its public relations – and it was this consultant who had recommended the management consultant who undertook this strategy consultancy.

*A lot of things happen like this in Ireland: someone knows someone else, there is a personal aspect. [A politician] said that [the consultant] would do a good job. In the previous government, [the consultant] was senior advisor to a government minister. He had key access to government ministers and public servants on first name terms and that was very useful.*

Trade union client

The consultant was a principal in an Irish accountancy firm that was seeking to expand its management consultancy activities, though not necessarily with trade union clients. He led the research personally throughout.

*I am able to talk to the Minister – she tried to shout me down once and I told her to fuck off – to talk to the unions and to management. IALPA were buying the base skill of knowing how to use the levers of power.*

Irish management consultant

The result was a report that was not just strategically sound, but also politically astute, a matter of no small importance for a publicly-owned airline (Farrell Grant Sparks, 1998). For example, while Aer Lingus's own consultancy report confused the strategic alliance issue with the planned privatisation of the airline (Aer Lingus, 1998), the IALPA report steadfastly kept the two issues separate (Wall, 1998a), thus allowing both management and government maximum flexibility in their response. Unlike the CWU report on Post Office privatisation, this report had to be sold to management as much as to government. To this end, the consultant conducted a number of 'angel' meetings with Aer Lingus managers (just as the existence of angels can be denied, that these meetings had ever taken place could also be refuted) to explain the report and quell their fears. The consultant also succeeded in procuring extensive press coverage for the report – published precisely a



week before the Aer Lingus report – press coverage so favourable that it would have taken a brave government and a braver management to ignore the report.

The union's consultant was also able to use union links to obtain information that would probably not have been available to a management consultant working for a commercial organisation. For instance, the resources of the union's affiliate in the United States, USALPA, were tapped both for financial analysis and – rather more important – for access to foreign airlines, including, as it happens, Aer Lingus.

*They opened all their books. It became embarrassing. I was given the profit levels on each route even though I said I did not want them.*

Irish management consultant

Indeed, Aer Lingus managers came to rely on the union's report in preference to their own.

*The Assistant Chief Executive of Aer Lingus says they have stopped using their own consultant's report. They use ours instead. ... He told me, 'This is one of the best documents we have seen on the subject. We are using it in our own negotiations with other airlines.'*

Trade union client

Aer Lingus joined the One World strategic alliance in June 2000 – a link with British Airways of which IALPA had originally been wary (Wall, 1998b). There has also been a conjunction of airline unions in Ireland and IALPA's consultant now advises the union amalgamation, his fee paid by Aer Lingus.

Just why should these two trade unions have proved so proficient in their use of management consultants? Could it be that, while client managers in other organisations are at least in part concerned about what the management consultant can do for them as individuals, unionists who hire management consultants cannot have quite the same interest? They are responsible, either directly or indirectly, to a membership unlikely to be impressed by management consultants *per se*, and perhaps with an instinctive distaste for them (see [Transport and General Workers' Union, 1983](#); [Labour Research Department, 1988](#)). Moreover, unions are fundamentally democratic organisations whose members must be persuaded. Management consultants are accustomed to catering for the needs of senior managers, for clients who exert control over their employees. When management consultants work for unions, their whole rhetoric and value system are redundant. Working for unions, management consultants have to prove their worth by the advice they give, which is not always the case when they work for managers of commercial organisations. It may also be that the deep suspicion unionists can feel for management consultants spurs them on – much like clients in

Poland – to ride the consultants hard, extracting every ounce of benefit they can. To be sure, management consultants who have worked for trade unions do not regard them as an easy touch.

### The Church – Shepherd's Mate

The Church of England also employs management consultants and also makes effective use of them. One use is advising on the training requirements of vicars, training in the Word no longer being thought adequate compensation for the absence of training in pastoral care. The modern Church of England considers itself to be as much in need of management, and consequently all the trappings of management (of which management consultants are but one), as any other vast, global organisation. But the Church is also a decidedly political organism, as political as any large organisation in the private sector, or even the public sector. It would be quite impossible for any external consultant to proffer any sort of advice anywhere in such an organisation without threatening the prevailing balance of power.

If ever there were an organisation whose managers might be forgiven their anxiety to hire the usual consultants, it would be the Church of England. So convoluted are its ways that a huge premium must attach to the consultant practiced in them. It would be difficult to imagine a more Byzantine organisation, one in which subtleties of precedence and position have greater influence over performance, in which behaviour is as much determined by conditioning and culture as by code. One would have expected a fundamental requirement of management consultants working for the Church to be that they are thoroughly inured in its ways. Instead, the Church's consultants are not even expected to be Christians; such a requirement is seen as irrelevant, even a disadvantage.

*There are a lot of Christian consultants whom I would not hire.*

Church client

*The team wanted someone who was not in the Church to provide a different perspective.*

Church client

A large part of the explanation seems to lie in the unwillingness and perhaps sheer inability of the Church of England to pass itself off as an organisation just like any other. It may need management, and therefore management consultants, like other organisations, but the Church of England is not of this world and can never be a learning organisation getting itself close to its global customers with a just-in-time, total quality product. If such notions make little sense in other organisations, they make none at all in the Church. The problem for



management consultants who might work for the Church – a problem they encounter when working for trade unions – is that these notions are often inherent in the way they think, how they work, and what they advise (Kolb and Frohman, 1970, p.52; Werr, Stjernberg and Docherty, 1997). Many management consultants are unable to work on any other basis, in any other currency. Such consultants would find anything smacking of a pre-packaged solution unacceptable to the client; indeed, they cannot treat the Church like other organisations without seeming slightly silly. The strong intellectual tradition of the Church and its limited familiarity with management methods mean that many management consultants run the risk of actually being told they are silly.

The consultant's reluctance to explore the hostile terrain offered by the Church of England is conventionally and conveniently explained in terms of money: the Church is unable to afford the high consultancy fees of the commercial consultant, and the commercial consultant is unwilling to accept lower fees. But the disjunction is really much more fundamental. Most management consultants would be, at the very least, disturbed by the apparent chaos they would encounter in the Church of England. They would certainly be frustrated in their attempts to make its systems and structure more conventional. For example, while Church expenditure is necessarily a formal commitment, much of Church income is alarmingly informal and uncommitted. And while much of the Church workforce might be committed, it too is informal; parishioners cannot be forced to work longer or harder, or even to retain their membership of the organisation.

*The problem with using volunteers as consultants is that you can't bollock them; they just walk away.*

Church client

Such workers might well take exception to performance indicators or measures of efficiency. What measures should be used to determine, say, whether a funeral is conducted efficiently? What indicators disclose level of performance in coping with bereavement? The very order and efficiency that is central to so much consultancy advice sits awkwardly with an ecclesiastical tradition that values diverse opinion and encourages criticism of the sort that would lead to instant dismissal in other organisations (see Baritz, 1987; Oliver, 1998). In short, most consultants would be unable to offer much of value to the Church of England (Coghlan, 1987). Interestingly, managers in the Church of England seem well aware of this.

*If the client does not accept the consultant's value system, he is unlikely to give that person credibility. It was dishonest to take on a consultant whose value system you did not respect. It was a fruitless exercise.*

Church client

There is absolutely no point, then, in the Church of England administrators hiring bright young MBAs from the large consultancies, or even hiring more experienced consultants from smaller firms. There is little tolerance in the Church of peddlers of fads and fashions (Armstrong, 1994; Abrahamson, 1996). A rather special person is always required, and such consultants are found through personal recommendations and individual networks, much as the unions find consultants. A person is sought who can supplement the Church's own resources with a very specific skill, rather than provide a complete package of assistance (cf. Cummings, White and Wisniewski, 1990). Above all, someone whom people in the Church will respect and whose skills they will value is essential. The sort of management consultant most valued in most other large organisations does not satisfy these requirements at all.

## Thoughts

One would expect new clients of management consultants to be ineffective users of their services, less able than experienced clients to make the most of what management consultants have to offer. Those who hold management consultants in particularly low esteem might even expect consultants to take advantage of these novices. And yet, the examples offered here suggest such clients are perfectly able to look after themselves and to make good use of consultants. Indeed, they would seem to be much more capable than many experienced clients of extracting value from management consultants. Now why might this be?

It is always possible that novice clients strike a sympathetic chord in consultants, inspiring them to work especially hard on their behalf, almost out of charity. This is possible, but not probable. It is only slightly more likely that consultants work hard to attract repeat business by impressing new and uncommitted clients. These clients attach little value to a relationship with a regular consultant. By far the most probable explanation is that the very innocence of these new clients means that they strike a deal with management consultants very different from that struck by more practised clients. The latter, it would seem, are primarily concerned with what the management consultant will do for them as individuals (Sturdy, 1997a). The organisation facilitates this transaction and might well benefit eventually, at least indirectly, but the primary beneficiary is the hiring manager acting in collusion with a consultant well aware of this tacit arrangement. Novice clients are ignorant of this understanding, this convention; they actually believe that management consultants are hired for the direct benefit of the organisation, and they do their utmost to ensure that the consultants they hire provide this benefit.

If this hypothesis is correct, one cannot help but speculate on how long it will be before these innocents become sufficiently practised to achieve the same relationship with management consultants as experienced clients (Edvardsson, 1990). The transition may not be a simple function of time, but may also depend upon the acceptance of management method, of management itself, in areas and activities in which these would not previously have been considered appropriate. In other words, the intervention of the management consultant in all things may be contingent on the acceptance of all things being manageable and the subsequent argument that methods are essential to management (see Pascale, 1990). From this position, it is but a small step to the management consultant, and but short hops from the first consultancy to the second and the third.

This is not an inevitable progression, of course. It is quite possible that taking on management consultants will always be exceptional in some organisations and that there will always be novice clients. The problem with such a scenario is that it would probably require the determined intervention of management, especially senior management, to restrict or prohibit the use of consultants. It is hard to imagine such intervention being effective without the use of management consultants. Put bluntly, a strategy not to use management consultants would be unlikely to prevail unless it were devised, justified and implemented by management consultants (see Ginsberg, 1986). Profligate use of management consultants in the British Broadcasting Corporation was stemmed only by management consultants advising against the use of management consultants (Economist, 1997).

It seems that those organisations that make much use of management consultants may have lessons to learn from those that make much less use, that there is something like an inverse learning curve. All these novice clients were able to take advantage of their inexperience to gain benefits from their consultants that might have eluded experienced clients. They saw the function of the consultant and their relationship with the consultant as disarmingly obvious. It followed from this – especially in Poland – that the consultant could not do the job properly unless he knew something of the client's business, or – as in the other cases – made the client's business central to the advice offered. In most cases, the consultant's value to the client lay in his ability to complement organisational knowledge with his own experience and expertise, and to work with this combination in the outside world. There was no interest whatsoever in any of the management methods with which management consultants belabour their more experienced clients. These novice clients were already suspicious of management consultants in general and would not have been impressed by the latest in management fashion. It would take a brave and foolish management consultant to offer

the Church of England a mission statement, or to tout empowerment to a trade union. These clients were similarly unimpressed by the reputations of management consultants, an attitude which made apparent how very little else some consultancies have to offer.

Each of these clients sought a custom product from the consultant, not a pre-packaged one and certainly not one that had already been used elsewhere. It is striking how different this is from the requirements of many practised clients, desperate to use management consultants to keep up with the latest management methods. This is the demand that has fuelled the vast growth of the management consultancy industry. A possible consequence may be that those organisations long accustomed to using consultants have become increasingly consultant-friendly, as attuned to the requirements of the consultant as to those of the market. In this happy world, supply of consultancy services creates its own demand for yet more consultancy services.

This situation makes all the more valuable the experience of individuals who are not steeped in the ways of management consultants, individuals from organisations that have not been tailored by these same consultants. The experience of such clients – or perhaps their lack of experience – reveals the very essence of management consultancy. Its weaknesses become evident, but so too do its strengths. In each of these cases, the consultant was skilful and flexible enough to play an essentially political role, and with great success (see Gattiker and Larwood, 1985). Each was expected to devise solutions that were intellectually robust and which would withstand vigorous criticism. And each was expected to devise these solutions for an environment which – like most organisations in practice – was chaotic. It may be that experienced clients are not making the most of their consultants when they allow them to shape the organisation to suit the consultant's methods, when they are timorously respectful of the consultant's credentials (Poulsen and Payne, 1994). Demanding what is fashionable circumvents some of the problems inherent in effecting the information transaction between consultant and client; the relationship between the two avoids most of the others. Where there is no relationship, client and consultant struggle to match information demand to information supply, but with real benefit for the hiring organisation. There are surely lessons here for all organisations that hire management consultants.

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**STUART  
MACDONALD,**  
Management School,  
University of Sheffield,  
9 Mappin Street, Shef-  
field S1 4DT. E-mail:  
s.macdonald@sheffield.  
ac.uk.

Stuart Macdonald is Professor of Information and Organisation at the University of Sheffield. Research has long been concerned with the role that information plays in innovation and in change more generally. Most of the research is strongly empirical, generally involving long-term investigation within organisations. An approach that makes information central to enquiry does not fit comfortably within the boundaries of a single discipline and has necessarily been pursued in several. This is reflected in publication in journals of many disciplines – economics, physics, geography, history, engineering, electronics, agriculture, management. Inevitably, the research has become interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary. Much of it has been carried out overseas, a great deal in Australia, and there are currently research collaborators in many parts of the world. Always the aim of the research is to contribute to understanding and thereby, perhaps, to corporate strategy and government policy.