Client and Consultant Interaction: Capturing Social Practices of Professional Service Production

Abstract

Based on the investigation of seven consultancy projects within an international technical consulting firm, we identify three major practices that characterize client-consultant interaction – shaping impressions, problem-solving, and negotiating expectations - and discuss their respective characteristics, activities, and contingencies. Our discussion of these practices provides not only a more differentiated picture of client-consultant interaction but also uncovers the critical role that clients play in these practices.

Keywords: Consulting; Client-Consultant Interaction; Project Management; Consulting Success
1. Introduction

Client-consultant interaction is the most important factor for the success of consulting projects and, consequently, for the survival of every consulting company (Schön, 1983). Prior research has described the client-consultant relationship as a client-expert interaction (Abbott, 1988; Kubr, 1996; Schein, 1987; 1988) and as a symbolic interaction (Alvesson, 1993; 2001; Clark, 1995; Clark & Salaman, 1998a; 1998b). Both these views, although very different with regard to their assumptions and implications, place consultants at the centre of the discussion, with less emphasis on the client. A third view of consulting, which we call the social learning model, offers a more balanced model of the client-consultant relationship, emphasizing an equal role of clients in problem diagnosis and solution generation (Lilja & Poulfelt, 2001; McGivern & Fineman, 1983; Schein, 1999; Schön, 1983; Walsh, 2001). In this third model, the client-consultant interaction is seen as a participative learning process, in which both clients and consultants contribute valuable knowledge and ideas to a project.

We argue that these three main views stress important features of the client-consultant interaction but do not sufficiently take into account the complex and multi-faceted social practices involved in the production of professional services, a gap also indicated by other researchers (Engwall & Kipping, 2002; Fosstenløkken et al., 2003). Furthermore, despite the already large body of literature about the client-consultant relationship (Fincham & Clark, 2002), hardly any research has been conducted that explores empirically the nature of the social practices that characterize consulting projects (see Handley et al., 2007 as an exception). Therefore, the aim of this paper is to analyse this issue on the basis of seven consulting projects conducted by a technical consulting company and to develop an empirically grounded theory of social practices within client-consultant teams. We suggest that there are three practices which are crucial for the success of client-consultant interaction – impressing, problem-solving, and negotiating expectations –, and discuss their relevance, characteristics, activities, and contingencies. Our discussion of these practices provides not only a
more differentiated picture of client-consultant interaction but also uncovers the critical role that clients play in these practices.

In the first section of this paper, we introduce the three main models of the client-consultant relationship and discuss their respective views with regard to the nature of social interaction within client-consultant teams. Next, we describe our case study findings and show their theoretical and practical implications. In the third section, we synthesize the theoretical models and our empirical investigation by identifying and discussing three major social practices of client-consultant teams. Finally, we provide some concluding thoughts for future research directions.

2. Theoretical models of the client-consultant interaction

2.1 The expert model

The expert model dates back to the start of academic interest in the area of consultancy work and was pre-eminent in the consulting literature from the late 1950s until the mid-1980s (Fincham & Clark, 2002). It is associated with the assumption that professional action consists of solving concrete client problems with the help of scientific theories and techniques (Moore, 1970; Schön, 1983, p. 21). Consultants are seen as experts who have access to the knowledge base of a particular practice area and are able to develop solutions to problems within that area. This knowledge is not available, or at least not entirely, to a layperson, i.e. a client, which implies that consultants as experts possess an interpretive monopoly in their respective knowledge and practice areas (Mintzberg, 1983; Stehr, 1994). This privileged interpretive position enables consultants to “correctly” decide upon clients’ needs and to develop effective problem solutions. Thus, the general, abstract consulting knowledge of the consultant has been regarded by the proponents of the expert model as superior to the specific, context-dependent knowledge of the client (O’Farrell & Moffat, 1991). This implies an analogical power relation between both parties in the consulting process. As Galles-
sich (1982, p. 381) states, “Consultants, like other specialists, occupy positions of relative power, as they are often the sole authorities on certain technical problems and their implications.” The role of the client is reduced to that of being an information supplier during problem diagnosis, without being actively involved in the creative part of the actual problem-solving process. The role of the consultants is to adapt their abstract, general knowledge to the specific client situation in order to generate an adequate problem solution.

2.2 The critical model

In opposition to the expert model, the critical model takes a sceptical view of the interpretative monopoly of experts. Supporters of this view of consulting stress that knowledge is a socially constructed phenomenon dependent on social recognition and legitimacy rather than on scientific objectivity (Alvesson, 2001). Thus, professional knowledge is not, as traditionally pictured, scientifically substantiated knowledge, but rather a specific language. It is the language of managers and management consultants, “a language for representing mutually acceptable ways of knowing and defining and talking about management, managers and organizations” (Clark & Salaman, 1998b, p. 147). It is ambiguous, metaphorical, and context-dependent (Alvesson, 2000; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Clark, 1995) and is, as such, to a large degree a matter of beliefs, impression management, and images (Alvesson, 1993; 2001).

Accordingly, impression management is at the heart of client-consultant interaction (Clark & Salaman, 1996b). In order to impress their clients and gain their business, consultants rely to a very high degree on rhetoric, images, metaphors, and humour (Greatbach & Clark, 2002). Consequently, consulting companies are regarded as “systems of persuasion” (Alvesson, 1993, p. 1011) that communicate with clients via series of success narratives that act as substitutes for consulting company’s ambiguous and vague knowledge base. Such narratives “define the managerial role” (Bäcklund & Werr, 2001; Clark & Salaman, 1998b)
and create organizational myths (Clark & Salaman, 1998a). Clients, on the other hand, are represented as passive actors concentrated on managing their own insecurities and fears.

2.3 The social learning model

The third model emphasizes that clients share the “centre stage” with the consultants and are active players in the diagnosis and problem solving process (e.g., Lilja & Poulfelt, 2001; McGivern & Fineman, 1983; Schein, 1999; Schön, 1983; Walsh, 2001). In the following, we concentrate on the works of Schön (1983) and Schein (1999), as they are the most comprehensive and best-known approaches.

Both authors develop their views on consulting as a response to the growing criticism of the traditional expert view of client-advisory relationships. Their approaches are based on the belief that there is no “knowledge ‘out there’ to be brought into the client system”, which is understandable and usable by the client (Schein, 1999, p. 8). Moreover, they stress that clients possess valuable knowledge which needs to be incorporated into the problem solution. A successful client-consultant interaction requires that clients and consultants jointly diagnose clients’ problems and develop problem solutions, thereby leading to a balanced form of their interaction (i.e. with neither side dominating the relationship).

Both Schön and Schein emphasize that clients and consultants often speak “different languages” and have difficulties in communicating with each other. Thus, successful proposals to handle a problem require that clients and consultants make their interpretations clear to each other and commit themselves to a reflective investigation of their positions and interpretations. They need to develop “a common set of assumptions and […] some common language” (Schein, 1999, p. 203). In this process of reflection in action (Schön, 1983) or dialogue (Schein, 1999), clients and consultants share authority and control over the negotiation of meaning.
The following table summarizes the main assumptions of the three models of the client-consultant interaction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>The expert model</th>
<th>The critical model</th>
<th>The social learning model</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key works</strong></td>
<td>Aharoni (1997);</td>
<td>Alvesson (1993; 1994; 2001); Clark (1985); Clark &amp; Salaman (1996a; 1996b; 1998a; 1998c); Kieser (1997; 2002); Jackson (2001)</td>
<td>Lilja &amp; Poulfelt (2001); McGivern (1983); Schein (1999); Schön (1983; 1987); Walsh (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consultant’s role</strong></td>
<td>Expert; responsible for diagnosis and problem-solving</td>
<td>Impression manager; storyteller; creator of myths</td>
<td>Facilitator of diagnosis and problem-solving; coach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Client’s role</strong></td>
<td>Provider of information; implementer</td>
<td>Audience; passive actor</td>
<td>Problem solver; coach; implementer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Power relation</strong></td>
<td>Consultant’s abstract knowledge superior to client’s specific knowledge; consultant dominant actor</td>
<td>Consultant’s rhetorical/argumentation skills superior; dominant actor</td>
<td>Consultant’s and client’s knowledge and contributions equally important; balanced relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relevance</strong></td>
<td>In all types of projects</td>
<td>In cases of high quality uncertainty</td>
<td>In cases of innovative and highly relevant projects</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1** Three Models of Client-Consultant Interaction

3. The client-consultant relationship in a technical consulting firm

3.1 Site

Our case study was conducted at Herrmann & Partners (H&P), a leading technical consulting company operating in a niche market.¹ The company was established in the early 1970s in Germany and has expanded continually over the last three decades, mostly due to its expertise in planning and implementing technical infrastructure. The first international offices were opened in Europe, and the company expanded later into North and South America as well as Asia. Currently, H&P employs around 220 consultants in 18 locations with

¹ In order to ensure the anonymity of our research partners, real names and critical data have been changed.
40% of the turnover generated outside of Germany. Step by step, the company has extended its original, predominantly engineering expertise to include areas such as strategy, IT, and change management consulting in order to be able to deliver an integrated consulting approach to its clients. However, a large part of its revenue is still generated from planning and implementing infrastructure projects. Nowadays, strategy projects, such as planning distribution networks or warehouse location decisions, represent important revenue areas and often lead to subsequent implementation projects.

3.2 Data sources and data analysis

The aim of our empirical study was to understand the perceptions and interpretations of consultants, partners and, where possible, clients, with regard to the client-consultant relationship. Thus, the case study method, which involves tracing processes in their natural contexts, appeared most appropriate (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003). Seven case studies of consulting projects within H&P were carried out to gain insights into the nature of client-consultant-interactions. The case studies involved multiple data sources, including in-depth interviews, observations, and documents. Primary data were collected through 28 in-depth semi-structured interviews with consultants from different hierarchical levels and, where possible, clients. The interviews lasted from one to three hours each and focussed on consultant/client reflections on the acquisition and consulting practices. All interviews were taped and transcribed. One limitation of our interview database is that it is consultant-centred. We were only allowed to contact the client directly and conduct in-depth interviews for one out of seven projects. The primary data was complemented by secondary data in the form of project documents, company, client, and personal information, formal clients’ and consultants’ project evaluations, internal memos, and company publications. In particular, the client’s formal project evaluations were used as evidence on the client’s perspective in those cases where no primary interviews were conducted.
In the first step of our data gathering, we analysed the actual consulting market of H&P in order to contextualize the firm’s strategic position therein and gain an overview of the firm’s business practices, competencies, and culture. In the second step, we identified projects for researching specific client-consultant case studies. A total of seven projects were investigated. They are characterized by the following characteristics: project type – routine vs. innovative; level of international involvement – national vs. international; and project success – successful vs. unsuccessful. In the third step, we gathered detailed primary and secondary data on each of the selected seven projects.

The data analysis followed what Strauss and Corbin (1998) refer to as “grounded theory framework”. Essentially, the grounded theory framework is an open-ended discovery of emerging themes. These themes, though conveyed through the interviews, are often latent to practitioners. An open-ended coding allows both explicit and tacit themes to be identified. Using ATLAS.ti, a software program for analysing qualitative data, the interviews and secondary data were first open-coded in respect of client-consultant behaviours, the causes and consequences of these behaviours presumed by the interviewees, as well as their assessments of the client-consultant project experience. Already after three interviews, major phases of the consulting process became apparent, which could be classified under the headings of acquisition, consulting, communication, and expectations. In the context of iterative coding and the formation of groups and categories, comparisons within and across different cases were studied, and renewed coding, including the subsequent interviews and secondary data, and further subcategories were identified, and cause-and-effect associations between contingencies and properties were drawn up. We maintained a practice of rigorous questioning of our interpretations throughout the analysis in order to assure our interpretations’ continued grounding in the text.
3.3 Case study findings

We identified four major phases in the consulting process at H&P. These phases are acquiring projects (pre-project phase), consulting practices, communicating results (post-project phase), and coordinating expectations (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1: Major Phases in the Consulting Process](image)

3.3.1. Acquiring projects

The market for consulting services, in which H&P competes, has become increasingly competitive. According to our interviewees, clients have become considerably more knowledgeable and demanding in comparison to the past, being better skilled to judge the work of consultants and accordingly, more likely to set high expectations concerning their performance. As a consequence, only references from clients based in the same market segment or the same functional area were supportive of H&P’s claims of competence. References from other market segments or areas were not seen as helpful for client acquisition.

Depending on the type of project, i.e. an infrastructure or a strategy project, there were clear differences in the strategies used to convince potential clients of the expertise of H&P. As the founder, Dr. Herrmann, put it:

“You can show infrastructure projects. Strategy projects, in contrast, result only in a piece of paper and their implementation takes many years to become visible. Inventory has been reduced, processes have been accelerated, costs have been reduced but one cannot really show it.”

Based on their “visibility” and tangible character, a key persuading instrument for infrastructure projects were client visits to the facilities created by H&P. Potential clients were shown successful implementations of technical infrastructure and they could not only see the technology and the facility but could also talk to existing clients and ask them about their personal assessment of the infrastructure. Such references based on tangible and renowned projects were particularly convincing when it came to the acquisition of new projects.

In contrast, it was much more difficult to provide supportive “evidence” for the firm’s expertise in strategy consulting, as the outcomes were not immediately recognizable and were quite difficult for clients to assess. According to H&P consultants, the most crucial elements in these types of projects were, together with references, the appearance of the consultants and their rhetorical persuasion skills; these being by far more important than in the more tangible and “objective” infrastructure projects. It was also clear that consultants were actively adjusting and fitting their language and rhetorical skills to the clients they were approaching. The increasing emphasis on the techniques of persuasion at H&P also gained importance due to the loss of a number of senior partners who had retired over the last few years. These so-called grey eminences possessed a particular charisma that projected expert status in the eyes of their clients. However, the currently much younger partners and project managers did not possess such a “natural” charisma and were forced to rely more on active influencing tactics based on their appearance, rhetorical skills, and their ability to tell success stories emphasizing their industry experience.

3.3.2 Consulting practices

The acquisition phase is followed by the actual consulting activity once the client has assigned the project to H&P. Our case studies showed that in this phase the type of consulting project – routine or innovative – strongly influenced the adopted consulting procedure with implications for the nature of the client-consultant interaction.
EXEMPLARY CONSULTING

In the case of routine projects, H&P was appointed as a problem solver for a particular issue. The consulting procedure was based on a largely standardized and sequential problem-solving process consisting of the following steps: problem diagnosis, generating alternatives, evaluating these alternatives, and implementation. The role of the clients was reduced to delivering the necessary data and information for diagnosing problems and, later, implementing the suggested solution. The expertise, for example in the case of solving a warehouse location problem, was entirely provided by the H&P consultants who developed tools for conducting “calculations.” With H&P’s traditional engineering focus, these calculations were perceived as an important part of its advisory work. Tools helped consultants work out practical problems by formally modelling, analysing, and interpreting client issues. This technical and methodological knowledge, which clients mostly lacked and therefore appreciated, allowed a fine-grained problem investigation and evaluation. As one partner from H&P put it, “H&P has the formulas, and calculates the results”.

In these typical “H&P” projects, clients relied completely on the reputation of H&P as an expert in the area and did only some preliminary work for the consultants. They fully accepted that their role was to gather data without being actively involved in the problem-solving process itself.

“It was a standard project, clear description of tasks; in addition we were faced with the normal problems in gathering data and working together within a non-homogenous team, but this is normal.” (client)

However, in order to ensure that the client accepted the suggested problem solution, H&P put a lot of effort into gaining the client’s affirmation of the assumptions and the data underlying the model. H&P consultants and clients debated intensively the data and parameter assumptions of the model in a number of workshops and discussed specific client require-
ments in order to confirm the chosen model. One of the H&P project managers summarized this approach as follows:

“First, we strive to affirm the basis of the model. Do you see this in the same way? Do you agree with it? […] This is very important. It is our standard procedure that we first prepare our plans, and that we then want confirmation that they are acceptable and correct.”

Another important task of consultants was to explain the logic of the solution to the client, as well as the extent of tasks that the client could fulfill as part of the project. In cases where the involved client team members possessed little or no experience or competence in the problem area at hand, consultants had to invest in additional activities, such as intensive conversations, explanations, and intensive client involvement, in order to familiarize the client with the problem and the data as well as with the tasks required for its solution. Experienced clients, on the other hand, could be involved in the problem-solving process as a competent and judicious partner. Such projects were executed much more efficiently because the client had relevant knowledge, there were fewer misunderstandings and the role of the client was clear from the onset.

**EXPLORATIVE CONSULTING**

In contrast to routine projects, innovative projects were characterized by a noticeably different procedure. The most important difference to exploitive consulting was the lack of the appropriate substantive and methodological knowledge to assist consultants in diagnosing problem symptoms and in developing a method for its resolution. Rather, this knowledge had to be generated in intensive and often time-consuming interactions with the client. In addition, consultants had to recognize from the start that the typical “expert procedure” was not transferable to an innovative problem. The procedure followed by the H&P consultants in the case of such innovative problems was highly adapted to the specific client situation. Because the H&P consultants did not possess the specific substantive knowledge critical for
problem-solving, their main task was to manage a high involvement, learning-intensive problem-solving process, which required an intensive interaction between clients and consultants, as suggested by one of the H&P senior consultants:

“I am always dependent on the majority of the client team members, and what is most relevant is the solution finding rather than the solution diagnosis. I had to ask questions rather than give answers […] because clients provide most of the answers. You only need to help them to generate those answers. And only if the client arrives at the solution himself is he convinced by it.”

Therefore, it was not the transfer of technical expertise that was critical for the success of such projects; rather, it was the support offered to the client in structuring and solving the problem with the help of specific high-involvement process consulting techniques.

With increasing ambiguity of the issue at hand, consulting skills that emphasized personal relationship building with clients became more and more important. The more ambiguous the client issue was, the more difficult it became to evaluate the specific contribution of the consultant to a problem solution. Consequently, the practices that gained importance were those that shaped the client’s positive image of the consultants’ work despite the causal ambiguity between this work and the realized outcomes. A senior H&P consultant explained this as follows:

“When we are engaged to build a warehouse, we know what is right and appropriate. In such cases, we argue on the basis of mathematics and logic; we do not consult in terms of strategic relations; rather, we are merely technical planners. However, the more you move towards the human level, the more insecure the environment, and your own position become and the more you are dependent on the ability of the client to follow and comprehend the whole process.”

3.3.3 Communicating results

While communication is the lifeblood of any consultancy engagement, the final presentation of results as the last stage in a consulting project was considered as crucial for delivering the advisory product. The concrete outcome of the consulting project was presented to
management and compared to the initially agreed content and financial “terms of reference”. While each project also produced tangible facts such as meeting deadlines, financial targets, and operational performance criteria, especially for infrastructure projects, its quality evaluation still left the client with a great degree of interpretive flexibility. In other words, the facts of the project did not speak for themselves; a key task of consultants, therefore, was to help shape client interpretations of the consultancy results. The less experienced the client was in working with consultants, the more important it became for the consultants to work on shaping client perceptions. Here, the consultants’ appearance, rhetorical skills, and argumentative brilliance were particularly important in order to be convincing and effective in the eyes of the client. As suggested by one of the interviewed consultants:

“It is not enough to have a 100% solution, because it will not sell itself. If, technically, I can only sell 2/3 of this solution because those who decide do not understand it, the result is only 66%. Yet if a competitor has an 80% solution but manages to communicate 90% of it, the outcome is 72%.”

Our case studies showed an interesting feature of H&P as a mid-size consulting firm specialized in the area of technical consulting. Since the majority of H&P projects were not negotiated with the client’s top management but rather with senior middle line managers, the success of these consulting projects was additionally dependent on how well and successfully the results were communicated to top management. However, this communication process did not always involve H&P consultants. Thus, it was an important task for H&P consultants to support and coach their direct clients in presentation skills in order to ensure that the project outcomes were communicated successfully to top managers. As one senior consultant put it,

“[…] don’t just hand in the documentation to the person who hired us, but offer to that person to help him out in presenting this project to his superiors. Make him look good. […] We are presentation experts. […] Selling the results to top-management and skilling him, the client, is an important subtask … So by helping
that person in his presentations …, we get to reach and we get to be known by upper management.”

3.3.4 Coordinating expectations

The success and the mutual satisfaction with the course of the project were dependent on the coordination of clients’ and consultants’ process and outcome expectations. The study showed that consulting projects were more difficult and resulted in less favourable outcomes when those expectations were not well coordinated in the early phases of the project. In other words, disappointing clients was the ever-present risk in consultancy work. The more complex the advisory task was, the greater the risks of disappointment were.

PROCESS EXPECTATIONS

Process expectations were concerned with the way in which clients and consultants were supposed to interact with one another, including how the consultancy problem was constructed, how participative the interaction was designed to be, and which role each party was assigned during the consultancy project. The following example illustrates how a client’s disappointment is created by a misalignment in terms of process expectations.

H&P was engaged in an innovative project by a client - the problem was related to a competence area that had only shortly before been established at H&P. The H&P consultants did not yet possess any major previous experience in this area but did have access to methods and techniques in order to involve the client in a joint social learning process. The client on the other hand expected H&P consultants to have the necessary expertise to solve the problem independently of the client rather than the suggested cooperative consulting approach. Although the client was willing to provide the necessary information to the consultants, he was not prepared to send his employees to time-consuming workshops in order to support joint learning processes. In addition, the client’s expectations remained equivocal during the next stages of the project, which further increased the consultants’ frustration, as
they did not know what exactly was required of them. The responsible project manager expressed his frustration as follows:

“We had a very well-structured and clear proposal, which he [the client] had agreed upon and signed, but he is not abiding by it at all. I don’t know his expectations. I only know that he expects us to help him with the problem … There must have been a breakdown in communication.”

Although the client and the consultants did reach a joint solution in the end, both sides saw the project as a failure because the generated solution was regarded as unsatisfactory and the planned budget had been exceeded.

OUTCOME EXPECTATIONS

While codifying the expected outcomes of a project is part of the contractual arrangement between the client and the consultancy firm, the interpretation of these outcomes was still a subject of interpretive differences between clients and consultants. An outcome expectation can be conceived as a judgement of the likely consequences of a pattern of behaviour (Bandura, 2002, p. 94). With respect to the projects we studied, “disappointments” over outcome expectations occurred when the project results were not well-defined a priori. In one of the cases we studied, H&P had developed a technologically very sophisticated solution, which however had not been well coordinated with what the client really expected to receive from H&P. The client explained this as follows:

“The team … ignored the strong financial orientation of our Dutch headquarters. ... This aspect got lost during the project and the result was a very technical solution.”

The coordination of expectations not only implies a constant renegotiation, but also offers additional opportunities for the creation of trust between the consulting company and its clients. In one case, H&P advised the client to interrupt the project shortly after the consultants had been engaged because H&P did not believe that the assessed client situation was compatible with the initial project aim. By making this suggestion, H&P was risking a large
percentage of the negotiated consulting fee. However, this move was perceived by the client as highly professional behaviour and it created an atmosphere in which the client saw the H&P consultants as trustworthy experts. This not only influenced the further project outcome but also generated subsequent projects with H&P. A project manager explained:

“After six weeks we had a work-in-progress presentation…We then recommended interrupting the project because the original project objectives weren’t making any sense. The first reaction was an embarrassing silence. We then explained to them our reasons and we suggested using the rest of the budget to get to the bottom of the problem. This took a moment to sink in but was the main reason for our managing partner to establish a strong bond with the client.”


4.1 Overview

The following section synthesizes insights from the theoretical models presented in section 2 and our empirical investigation at H&P in section 3. Our empirically grounded theory implies that client-consultant interaction is centred around three practices – (1) shaping impressions, (2) problem-solving and (3) negotiating expectations – that together provide the social fabric through which clients and consultants shape common background assumptions, communicate, and create knowledge and shared expectations (see Table 2). Since the consultancy knowledge that is offered to and produced with clients is subject to multiple interpretations, the first social exchange practice we identified comprises activities that shape impressions by either demonstrating tangible solutions or by utilising storytelling, rhetorical skills, and charisma in order to reduce interpretive variety and convey the symbolic meaning of a highly complex product. Second, consultants and clients engage in the interwoven activities of problem diagnosis and treatment, through which issue-related knowledge is enacted, communicated, and sometimes materialized as a tangible problem solution. Depending on the type of consultancy approach, clients and consultants follow different roles and
procedures for problem-solving. Third, communication of impressions, facts, methods, goals, rules, and social roles is embedded in reciprocal expectations of clients and consultants. We therefore identify the negotiation of expectations as a social practice in which clients and consultants develop common behaviour norms concerning the consultancy process and outcome. To what extent clients and consultants have some shared understanding and values, or need to engage in activities to develop such shared understanding depends on a number of issues (see Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Activities comprising the practice</th>
<th>Contingency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shaping impressions</td>
<td>▪ Storytelling, rhetorical skills, charisma</td>
<td>▪ Tangibility of consulting product</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Demonstrating tangible solutions, client reflections</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Problem-solving</td>
<td>▪ Exploitive consulting</td>
<td>▪ Novelty of consulting problem</td>
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<td></td>
<td>▪ Explorative consulting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negotiating expectations</td>
<td>▪ Convergence of expectations</td>
<td>▪ Past joint experience</td>
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<td></td>
<td>▪ Divergence of expectations</td>
<td>▪ Intensity of interaction</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>▪ Novelty of consulting problem</td>
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**Table 2** Client-Consultant Interaction as a System of Interwoven Social Practices

4.2 *Shaping impressions*

Our study supports the argument developed within the critical model on consulting that consultants strongly rely on rhetorical skills and argumentative brilliance in their interaction with clients. Although H&P, as an engineering consulting firm, seems to be less dependent on impression management than suggested in the critical literature on consulting, our study showed that H&P consultants did indeed use a number of impression strategies and tools, including series of past success narratives, in order to positively influence clients’ percep-
tions and impressions, as well as to convince clients of the benefits of working with H&P in the project pre-phase. In addition, due to the difficulties for clients of evaluating the quality of the delivered consulting service even ex post (Clark, 1995; Løwendahl, 1997), consultants need to shape clients’ impressions after a problem solution has been developed, during the post-project phase. As our case study showed, even in the case of routine problems, the evaluation of the service quality leaves the client with a degree of interpretive flexibility. This interpretive ambiguity is much higher in the case of innovative problems.

Furthermore, our study showed that a major task of consultants is “to make the client look good in front of his management.” Thus, consultants’ stories and rhetoric were used as powerful impression tools to support their immediate clients when the outcomes of the project were presented to top management. Top managers rarely know the details of such projects and do not have the expertise to evaluate the suggested solutions. In such situations, clients make use of consultants’ impression management techniques in order to persuade their superiors.

Depending on the project type, we identified two different impression management strategies: one strategy based on rhetoric and the other based on tangible problem solutions.

**IMPRESSING THROUGH RHETORIC**

Rhetoric is the art of speaking or writing influentially or persuasively. It seeks acceptance or agreement to specific claims by means of representing them in a favourable light, especially by noting their intrinsically appealing features (Rescher, 1998, p. 49-53). To take consulting as an example, a consulting success story is a rhetorical move in the language game between consultants and clients. Which success stories are regarded as effective manipulations of (clients’) subjective impressions is influenced by the communicative context, including the client’s background, his/her problems, and industry culture. In the practice of impression management at H&P, the impression strategy based on rhetoric became espe-
cially important when no visible evidence for consulting quality could be provided from previous projects, as is the case in strategy projects. Under these circumstances, the importance of rhetorical tactics increased, which created positive client impressions and quality expectations. Such tactics involved rhetorical skills, linking the project to recent research outcomes, and the use of H&P’s success stories. Consultants’ appearance, rhetorical skills, and argumentative brilliance were also particularly important for shaping client’s impressions of the delivered problem solution when clients were less skilled in the consultancy field. The way results were presented was often as important for their acceptance by not-involved clients as the results themselves. This was particularly the case when results had to be presented to top managers who were not involved in the projects.

IMPRESSING THROUGH TANGIBLE SOLUTIONS

The second impression management strategy involved convincing the client of the competence of the consulting company by referring to previous successful tangible problem solutions. In contrast to the rhetorical strategy, which is based on impression creation by utilizing well-presented ideas, the second strategy aims to empirically “prove” success stories, which had until then only a hypothetical character. This presupposed the existence of reference projects, which were not purely conceptual (expressions in language), as in the case of strategy and concept planning projects, but had already been implemented by clients and resulted in visible outcomes. In the case of H&P, infrastructure projects, e.g. the construction of a warehouse, were particularly helpful in this regard because clients could see the outcome. Consultants regarded clients’ visits to such an infrastructure as particularly important because clients were not only presented with success stories, which were common to all other consulting companies, but also got to see “empirical evidence” as a support for the presented success story. In other words, the consultants’ impression strategy relied in this case on “empirically proven” knowledge.
To sum up, the practice of shaping impression is critically important in the pre- and post-project phase of consulting engagements. However, at the level of the consulting project clients and consultants were less concerned with impression management activities, but rather participated jointly in creating and applying consulting knowledge for problem-solving (see also Sturdy et al., 2008).

4.3 Problem-solving

Our study showed that consultants spent a major part of their time engaging in learning processes with the task of generating knowledge for the diagnosis and solution of client problems. Thereby, consultants followed a problem-oriented learning process through which they created a well-argued and justified knowledge base for their consulting projects. In this process, clients played an important role as, for example, they were engaged in questioning the appropriateness of the assumptions made, gathering relevant data, and developing creative ideas for problem solutions.

Our study also showed that the nature of client-consultant interaction and the roles of the involved parties vary, depending on the type of the problem at hand. In the case of routine problems, client-consultant interactions mostly followed procedural characteristics, as described by the expert model. The role of the consultants was to develop a “correct” problem structure and to generate an appropriate solution on the basis of their expertise. The role of the client was reduced to that of an information supplier and implementer of the suggested solution. Such a clear division of labour between clients and consultants is highly efficient in projects requiring a tangible form of expertise. The existing empirical “proof” for the expertise of consultants in such cases allow clients to trust the reputation of the consultants, making an intensive, time- and resource-consuming interaction with the consultants unnecessary.

However, viewing consulting projects as client-expert interactions also leads to some important problems. As our study showed, consulting work cannot be regarded merely as a
transfer of technical expertise between clients and consultants, as suggested in the expert model. Even in the case of routine problems, consultants and clients need to work closely together in order, for example, to discuss the model’s assumptions or the rationale of the generated solution. Only then will clients be able to implement those solutions successfully.

This is all the more the case when clients and consultants face an innovative problem, which requires, as Schön (1983) and Schein (1999) stress, that they jointly construct the problem. Under these conditions, the consultancy task becomes a “wicked” (Mason & Mitroff, 1981; Rittel, 1972) or “multi-context” (Kirsch, 1988) issue requiring competence in reflective conversation for the generation and negotiation of advisory knowledge. These reflective conversations were seen as vital for exploring the contextuality and particularity of the consultancy case. The role of both consultants and clients in innovative projects is more appropriately described by the social learning model. With the help of reflective conversations, consultants engaged their clients in cooperative learning processes, which are based on a mutual exertion of influence through dialogue and mutual advice.

4.4 Negotiating expectations

Several authors indicate the importance of client expectations within consulting projects (e.g., Gable, 1996; Schein, 1999; 2002; Schön, 1983). Schein (1999, p. 36, emphasis added) stresses that “exploring mutual expectations” with regard to status and role of both clients and consultants is extremely important for a successful client-consultant relationship. However, in general, the importance of negotiating expectations within client-consultant teams has been neglected in the literature on consulting.

Expectations reflect standards of social behaviour, which appear in our memory traces when we engage in social interaction. Parsons (1951, p. 40) explains norms as the “complementarity of expectations” and Luhmann (1995) argues that communication is a transitory element, the meaning of which is influenced by “enduring” structures of expectations. Con-
Consultancy work therefore consists not merely of communicative actions but is also shaped by expectation structures, which give meaning to and provide the risks of the consultancy process and outcome. As our case study indicates, clients and consultants either converged or diverged in their process and/or outcome expectations, which became an important factor in the perceived success or failure of a project. Following social interactionism (Mead, 1967; Vygotsky, 1978), the convergence of social expectations is the result of sharing practice and experience between consultants and clients, which leads to a joint social reality. Convergence of expectations is, then, the emergent product of shared understanding, norms, values and practice, which results in a highly involved and rich communicative social exchange that facilitates insights into others’ and updating of one’s own standards and beliefs (also Handley et al. 2007). This high involvement interaction became particularly important during explorative consulting practices where project goals became a moving target and process expectations were subject to many changes. Contrarily, the divergence of social expectations between consultants and clients was mainly the result of a lack of shared understanding and practice, which resulted in poor social exchange making it difficult to scrutinize and coordinate the individual standards of the involved parties. Low social interaction provides few opportunities to establish and update our mental models, including our standards of social behaviour (Ringberg & Reihlen, 2008). Thus, we argue that successful consulting projects require continuous social processes of negotiating mutual expectations and developing shared understandings and identities (Handley et al., 2007; Nikolova, 2007).

5. Conclusion

Based on the existing literature and integrating insights from an empirical case study in a technical consulting firm, this research contributes a more differentiated picture of client-consultant interactions. Our research frames client-consultant interaction as a system of three interwoven social practices in which the client shares the centre stage with consultants
in the constitution of their project work. In particular, the underlying argument presented in this paper can be summarized as follows: (1) In line with the critical model on consulting, we argue that client-consultant relationships are *symbolic interaction systems* characterized by rhetorical language games in the form of sets of success stories, metaphors etc. These symbolic interactions help consultants create an expert image in the eyes of their clients and shape the meanings clients create from those interactions with consultants especially under conditions of interpretative ambiguity. (2) As recognized by both the expert and the social learning model, client-consultant relationships are *problem-solving systems* geared towards the creation and application of knowledge. Through its influence on cognition, decision-making, and the need for learning, the degree of innovativeness of consulting projects has important effects on key aspects of the problem-solving process—for instance, social roles of clients and consultants, power distribution, or needed social interaction between clients and consultants. (3) The dynamic interaction between clients and consultants generates behavioural variations which creates an ever-present risk of social disappointment. Therefore, it is necessary to negotiate and stabilize the relation between consultants and clients through reciprocal outcome and process expectations that become condensed forms of shared meaning structures (also see Luhmann, 1995). As our study showed, only when clients’ and consultants’ expectations overlap to some degree, they can make sense of the actions of others and work successfully together.

Our study and the propositions it suggests offer several potential contributions to the client-consultant research field. First, it lifts the long existing separation between the three “competing” models of the client-consultant relationship by empirically showing their relevance and theoretically combining their insights to account for the multifaceted nature of client-consultant interaction. Moreover, in scrutinizing clients as powerful co-producers and in highlighting their active role in shaping the client-consultant relation, we have made a contribution toward revealing the complexity inherent during the production of consulting
knowledge. We believe that a focus on what clients and consultants actually do under various settings brings different views together within a practice-based approach that will further enrich our understanding and managing of this critical exchange relation.

From a theoretical perspective, future research would benefit from further exploring the link between problem-solving and impression management by paying attention to the role of power in client-consultant interactions. This issue is particularly relevant for the case of innovative projects when no sufficient problem-solving knowledge exists. Including power in the discussion of client-consultant interaction will contribute to a more thorough understanding of the interaction process and its success factors.

From an empirical perspective, the analysis of dyadic client-consultant relationships would be particularly insightful. However, it is often difficult, as we experienced it during our study, to get access to such dyadic relationships because most consulting firms are unwilling to allow interviews with their clients, particularly in cases of unsuccessful projects.

This paper reveals that consulting work involves a complex set of social practices between clients and consultants. Taking this complexity into consideration, rather than trying to reduce it, is what we see as a crucial guideline for the development of a better understanding of client-consultant interactions.
References


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