1 Today's challenge: The consulting profession and its members in tension

The first Chapter introduces the research theme and answers the first subsidiary re-search question, concerning the way the individual consultant is viewed within the profession of management consulting today, and reveals areas of potential neglect and tension.

Starting with a definition of the profession, the chapter highlights the profession's low level of regulation and the dominance of a firm-level code of ethics. Consultants are asked to fulfil a complex range of roles and related skill sets including technical, analytical and personal skills. The consultant-client relationship is highlighted as an important bond in which the consultant is required to adapt to liminal environments, while trying to maintain the clients' trust. The relationship of consultant and the employing company is initiated by the firms' recruitment procedures, followed by a career which is dominated by a high level of self-selection, self-organization, and potential self-neglect. The importance of a company-wide culture is discussed. Impacted by different value systems, the consultants' identity is emergent and rationally constituted, requiring the individual to be open to continuous learning and self-reflection. Overall, the individual consultant is seen as under pressure within the profession, which is in turn confronted with high turnover rates, while lacking research on the individual consultant and their motives. Research within other professions indicates the importance of meaningfulness in one's work. Based on the findings, the research's objectives and key and subsidiary research questions are discussed at the end of this chapter.

1.1 The consultant: Being part of a weakly regulated profession

Management consulting is commonly described as a set of multidisciplinary activities of intellectual work and services provided within the field of management, which aim to create value and implement contractually agreed improvements, by providing external advice to a client (Kipping & Clark, 2012b; Kubr, 2002; Newton, 2010).

The advisory services are provided to the client organization by trained and qualified personnel (Greiner & Metzger, 1983). Clients engage a consultant due to missing talents and knowledge, in order to generate new ideas, or to serve special interests which need to be fulfilled by someone outside of their organization. On a personal level, management consulting is described as an evolutionary process conducted by a consultant trying to follow professional standards while meeting the client's and their own personal needs. The network of management consulting consists of various stakeholders as part of the profession, including the consulting firms, individual consultants, clients, public communities, the government, and universities (Greiner & Metzger, 1983). Consulting is described as a customer-driven industry, providing intangible services to clients. Access to talents and clients determine the competitive advantage among the consulting companies, which complicates any cooperation and association among consulting firms (Armbrüster, 2006).

While the mandate of the profession and its stakeholders has remained the same over the past decades, consulting companies have become increasingly involved on a global level. Complexity and cultural diversity are gaining in importance and degree of impact on the relationship between client and consultant and the broader network involved (Poulfelt, Greiner, & Bhambri, 2010; Poulfelt & Payne, 1995).

As well as the emphasis placed by the industry on creating and sharing knowledge within the profession (Davenport & Prusak, 2010; Kubr, 2002, p. 751), the consultants' behaviour and skills play an important part in dealing with the client and other stakeholders. The role of the consultant is moving towards a closer collaboration between consultant, client, and their business, away from pure consultant as expert roles, also referred to as relationship consulting (Poulfelt et al., 2010). This makes it vital to comprehend the consultants' behaviour and needs, in order to enable a good working relationship between the client and the consultant.

Accordingly, the foremost rational oriented consulting practices have been constantly extended by sociological concepts, such as group dynamics, organizational development and systematic consulting, also described as "revisions of rationality" (Kühl & Moldaschl, 2010, p. 13). The sociological foundation was not intended to counteract the existing purposive and rational oriented practices, but to add a socio-scientific foundation such as the concept of efficient humanism (Kühl & Moldaschl, 2010, p. 13), describing a behavioural pattern that provides increased autonomy and results in additional voluntary efforts by the individual.

Adding sociology-founded research into the domain of management consulting and the theory of consulting also aims to throw light on the consulted organization and the impact the selected consulting approach can have on this organization (Kühl, 2010, p. 217). Its primary aim is the deduction of a common consulting theory, relying on sociological concepts to describe and deal with the complexity within the consulting processes and related interactions.

In the past the consulting industry was described as an emergent profession in search of an established body of knowledge, educational requirements, and tested procedures (Greiner & Metzger, 1983). Several professional member associations, such as the Association of Management Consulting Firms (abbreviated as AMCF) and the Federal Association of German Business Consultants (in German: Bundesverband Deutscher Unternehmensberater, abbreviated as BDU) are supposed to set professional standards. The AMCF organization closed its operations in 2015 after serving the profession for over 90 years, explaining their decision as due to the more diverse offerings and consulting company structures, being internally focussed, and not requiring any external professional organization (AMCF, 2017).

The profession of management consulting is described as a rather poorly regulated profession (Batchelor, 1995; Bohn & Kühl, 2010; Höner, 2008), attesting to a lack within that profession due to the dominance of firm-level codes of ethics and at the same time the weak link between the consultant and their employing company (Koppang & Løwendahl, 1995, p. 114) as well as standards which are seen as too abstract to encompass the huge range of consulting situations (Poulfelt & Payne, 1995, p. 79).

Management consulting, from its beginnings as a profession, was described as suffering from a low level of research due to its confidential nature, high competition, and a low level of organized investment in research. In the past, the profession was not regarded as a research area by academics and literature was published predominately by individuals with a high level of subjectivity and without empirical research. Therefore, this field of business started to demand increased professionalization and the establishing of a firmer scientific base (Williams & Woodward, 1994).

Over the last few decades several aspects of the profession have been looked at in detail, including scientific research. One part of this research, aimed at company level, describes how to successfully manage a consulting company, including contracting and pricing as well as methods of delivering projects (Block, 2011;

Greiner & Metzger, 1983; Kubr, 2002). The consulting companies' strategies, the management and compensation of partners, the motivation of employees and proper networking inside and outside of the organization were investigated (Kubr, 2002; Maister, 1993, 2001).

Other approaches to the profession emphasized the different roles and responsibilities a consultant has to cover during their career (Gallessich, 1982; Greiner & Metzger, 1983; Williams & Woodward, 1994). Role models were built based on the lifecycle of a consultant and the different roles s/he has to fulfil when facing the client using different sets of technical, interpersonal, consulting and analytical skills (Block, 2011; Kubr, 2002; Maister, Green, & Galford, 2000). Nearly all definitions of the profession emphasize the relationship with the client and the need to earn trust and build a strong relationship with the client organization and its members (Schein, 1999; Maister et al., 2000; Block, 2011).

Some approaches aimed to standardize the profession, including in terms of personal attitudes and feelings (Block, 2011) and their impact on the financial success of the consulting company (Maister, 2001), as well as general ethical considerations (Gallessich, 1982). Consultants were constantly expected to present themselves as enthusiastic, excited, motivated and involved (Maister, 1997), while being both internally driven and focused and without imposing their beliefs on others (Quinn & Quinn, 2010).

Therefore, the professional consultant requires a broad range of appropriate attitudes and behaviour, which are dependable, consistent and reliable (Maister, 2010). When feeling unsafe, consultants tend to return to the "higher grounds" of logical analysis. With regard to the qualification of consultants, school education is said to often lack proper interactive lessons, not paying much attention to human skills. Education within the consulting firm differs hugely depending on the bias of the company, and the lack of any common approach across companies. Experienced personnel play an important role, as consultants are asked to act as role models according to their levels, and non-compliance with firm values needs to be strictly monitored in order to make sure that everyone follows the same high standards and integrity. In general, a system to enforce accountability for these standards is missing. Accordingly, consulting firms are not forced to follow a standard, universalized set of procedures, including with regard to clients' feedback on past and on-going engagements.

Recent research questions have looked at whether management consulting can be documented and regulated as a profession, independent of the underlying

theory of the profession (Höner, 2008; Kirkpatrick, Muzio, & Ackroyd, 2012). Lacking both a scientific foundation and a standardized educational body, as well as both governmental (Höner, 2008, p. 210) and professional regulation (Kirkpatrick et al., 2012, p. 200), central elements of professionalization are not fulfilled. Therefore, it is being questioned if management consulting can and should be classified as a profession at all in the traditional sense.

Against this backdrop of the traditional foundation of many professions (Freidson, 2001, p. 127) other authors come to a similar conclusion that the existing consulting concepts (Bohn & Kühl, 2010, p. 68ff.) face issues due to the technology deficit, also described as a problem of standardization (Bohn & Kühl, 2010, pp. 80–81). As for management consulting, the industry is said to miss the critical elements which would qualify it to be considered a true profession. Missing an institutionalization and related means of control, the job title is not secured and there are no centrally governed criteria for job entry (Bohn & Kühl, 2010, p. 76). As discussed earlier, special interest groups and professional institutions do exist, but their regulations are not binding for all consulting firms. This has resulted in a missing standardization of operations, a missing standardized educational body and a missing knowledge base. The consulting industry relies mainly on standards set internally, which are not comparable across the consulting agencies. In addition, success is not made measurable in a proper way, as it is not clear how to measure the success of the services provided to individuals and organizations. The lack of a common set of standards for quality assurance and professional ethics make it a subjective endeavour to measure the quality of operations. It is argued that the missing professionalization is due to the client organization being the main object of consulting and not individuals (Bohn & Kühl, 2010, p. 80). As an organization becomes more complex, the measurement of interventions by consultants becomes more difficult to achieve.

In general, professions allow for the treatment of problems which cannot be dealt with through fully standardized solutions, including unexpected situations and resulting problems. A profession within management consulting, therefore, seems reasonable (Bohn & Kühl, 2010, p. 66). Another reason for striving towards an increased professionalization in consulting is seen in a stronger sense of professional identity rooted in shared socialization and resulting in a counterbalance between anxieties and insecurities experienced by the individual consultant (Kirkpatrick et al., 2012, p. 202).

Despite carrying some elements of a profession, management consulting and its legitimation is nowadays dominated by the leading consulting organizations

(Höner, 2008, p. 213). Further research would need to be conducted into whether regulation by the large firms could lead to a new view on professionalism (Kirkpatrick et al., 2012, p. 202).

The continuous challenge for the consultants' credibility and their governance require standards in professionalism, especially due to the consulting industry's low barriers for working within the profession. It is, therefore, recommended to give the consulting firm the responsibility for producing a morally-educated individual (Poulfelt et al., 2010) as an agent of professionalization (Muzio, Kirkpatrick, & Kipping, 2011).

In summary, the profession of management consulting is described in terms of a range of multidisciplinary activities of intellectual work and services provided to a client within the field of management. The individual consultant is an elemental part of the manifold consulting environment with a diverse set of expectations to meet. The relationship to the client and the behaviour of the consultant is gaining in importance, both from a business and a research perspective. At the same time the profession is recognized as not being properly defined and controlled, nor meeting typical criteria for professional work. Recent calls for professionalization have set the individual consultant and their moral education in the foreground.

Even if an increase in professionalization towards levels achieved in more traditional professions is cumbersome to achieve, this endeavour is at least worthwhile from the perspective of the individual consultant as the central actor within the profession and the employing consulting organization as the agent and institution in charge. Given the high demands on the individual, including functional, analytical and interpersonal skills, further research and, if possible, standardization in this area seems to be worthwhile conducting. The following paragraph takes a detailed look at how the individual consultant is seen within the profession.

1.2   **Roles and skills:** Manifold expectations towards consultants

The roles and related skills consultants need to fulfil are derived from the consulting mandate, the level of change and the way of collaborating with the client. When providing consulting services different phases are run through, which are similarly independent of the functional assignment and solution requested by

the client. The process is divided and defined within several consecutive phases (Block, 2011, pp. 6–8; Kubr, 2002, pp. 21–25), including a contracting phase, dialogue, analysis and decision phase, engagement phase, and finally an extension or termination phase, depending on how the engagement with the client will be continued.

The arrangement and execution of these phases, as well as the related expectations in terms of roles and related skills towards the consultant is dependent on the level of change required and expected by the client. With regard to establishing change at the client organization and the related implications this can have on the consulting process and related roles, it is assumed for this research, that consultants can be confronted with all levels of change. This ranges from first-order changes, improving existing systems or frameworks, leaving the organization within a known environment, as well as second-level changes, also referred to as the transition process in which the organization is changed, moving to a formerly unknown state(van Dongen, de Laat, & Maas, 1996). Even a third-order change, also referred to as a transformation process, in which the future state is not yet known, is common in today's consulting projects, supporting the client towards an as-yet unknown future state utilizing a trial and error principle (van Dongen et al., 1996).

Focusing on implications for the individual consultant when supporting and implementing change at the client's, the following section elaborates on the role and potential skills the consultants needs to have. Organizational change and its impact on the client organization and its members do not come within the focus of this research.

As part of the consulting process, the consultant is asked to act in different roles, depending on his level within the firm, experience, and skills. Consultants are required to inherit skills and to adapt to multiple roles and expertise in choosing the appropriate roles according to the situational need(Williams & Woodward, 1994). At the same time the consultant should be dedicated to excellence in serving the clients and their needs, while showing enthusiasm, excitement and involvement (Maister, 1997), ideally resulting in fun, enjoyment and happiness for client and consultant. Due to a constantly increasing competitiveness on a global level, clients expect consultants to show a state-of-the-art level of problem-solving skills, as well as functional and industry expertise (Werr, 2012, p. 262).

Role models try to structure the different roles into categories based on the underlying need for knowledge and skills, such as generalist versus specialist roles,

process versus content consulting, or analytical versus implementation biased actions (Greiner & Metzger, 1983). Gummesson (2000, p. 39) combines the role of researchers and consultants into a single role framework, consisting of seven overlapping roles with a discriminating core, differentiated by a specific situation and location. Analysts perform intellectual work in small groups on short to long assignments, while working frequently on other assignments. Project participants perform intellectual work as part of the project organization with frequent presentations, meetings and a final written project report. Catalysts or therapists perform intellectual work with the emphasis on human relationships, working closely together with individuals. Interventionists perform intellectual analysis, following the behavioural science approach, avoiding expert advice and frequently participating in trainings. Change agents act in a combination of the above roles, and in addition are action oriented, actively participating and residing in the client company. This role differentiation describes the different situations the roles belong to, rather than describing different aspects of the consulting process itself.

According to Gummesson (2000), it is recommended to ultimately shift to the role as a change agent, being part of a larger change process within a company and thus being responsible for change within the company consulted. In an ideal situation the consultant acting as change agent does take part in the solution implementation, being able to accompany the proposed change through its actual realization (Gummesson, 2000, p. 192).

In change theory, it is argued that taking on the role of a transformational change agent is not limited to those in leading positions or employees in management but open to everyone.(Quinn, 2000, p. 25). People need to make use of informal networks in order to implement change, building informal teams based on action flows and objectives rather than functions or positions (Quinn, 2000, p. 52).

Block relates the aspect of change to the work of consultants, describing organizational and cultural change as facilitating "the learning of others" (Block, 2010, p. xii). The consultant is required to introduce this social movement by causing "the personal to become public" (Block, 2010, p. xii), giving up privacy and personal space, showing a willingness for vulnerability and owning up to one's own failures.

Quinn even suggests changing one's identity on the path of personal transformation (Quinn, 1996, p. 45), stepping outside old paradigms and realigning the self with the changing environment, and searching for meaning and direction.

Consistent alignment is required among the different systems the individual is related to, including the cultural, the technical, the strategic and the political system. Once the system is no longer aligned, the individual should step back and reassess the situation and take corrective action if necessary.

Based on the work of Schein (1999), Block (2011) has précised a role model, which is of a selective nature. The consultant chooses between one of the three roles defined, depending on the situation and personal preference (Block, 2011, pp. 22–27). In the role of an expert, the consultant searches for a solution without much collaboration with the client, as the problem-solving efforts are based on specialized procedures. Issues can arise when taking this role, as only purely technical problems are addressed. In most cases though, technical problems are related to organizational issues, requiring change and the involvement of the client. In the "pair-of-hands" role, the consultant takes a passive role, acting on behalf of the client, who retains full control. Two-way communication is limited and collaboration is not necessary. Issues with this role arise, especially in the problem discovery phase, as the consultant has to rely on the clients' abilities to understand and transform his understanding in a clear action plan. Finally, the collaborative role inherits problem solving as a joint, interdependent and bilateral task, as the consultants' knowledge is combined with the clients' knowledge of the organization, especially with regard to human interaction and change. In summary, the consultant supports the client manager in solving their problems themselves. Issues arising in this role include the increased time required to solve problems and the resistance of the client, accepting this level of collaboration. In general, it is said that the more collaborative the relationship between client and consultant is, the more successful and useful the consultation can be after the consultant has left (Block, 2011, p. 29).

Taking on these different roles, a broad range of skills is demanded from the consultant, including technical, interpersonal and consulting skills as well as knowledge (Block, 2011, p. 8; Maister, 1993). Technical skills are the basis of consultation, specific to the project and its discipline, covering expertise in one or several areas such as engineering, marketing, manufacturing and finance. Knowledge in this area is described as the reason clients ask for a consultation. Interpersonal skills, which are applicable to almost every situation or phase in the consulting process, include skills required to interact with people, such as assertiveness, supportiveness, confrontation, listening, management style and group process. Finally, consulting skills are specific to the phase of the project and include all required skills and abilities to execute and deliver each sequential

step within the process. Skills mentioned in this area describe a mixture of abilities, such as running meetings, funnelling data, dealing with contract negotiations and applying the necessary social skills to deal with problematic situations during the consulting process, such as dealing with concerns about loss of control, dealing with the political climate, working with different forms of resistance, and not taking things personally.

Next to these skills, the personal style and the consultants' feelings and needs, should also be considered as important dimensions throughout the project engagement and relationship with the other stakeholders (Block, 2011, p. 8). These needs are described as organization-related, that is, the need to prove the value of one's work to the company, as well as personal needs, such as striving for validation and appreciation of one's own work and effort (Block, 2011, p. 16).

Not only knowledge, including both general and specific knowledge, but also the personal attributes of the individual have an influence on how the situation is understood (Gummesson, 2000, p. 73). General knowledge includes knowledge of theories, techniques and methods, which can be gathered on training courses which take place beforehand. In contrast, specific knowledge covers the knowledge gathered by experience as well as knowledge about social patterns valid for the particular customer and project, which are often difficult to obtain and require close collaboration with the parties involved. The third type of knowledge can be summarized under personal attributes, covering intuition, creativity, vitality and social abilities. Personal values and motivational aspects are not mentioned as part of Gummesson's research.

The quality of the consulting service is thereby not only determined by technical and consulting skills, but also the personality of the consultant, summarized by Gummesson (2000) as, "all the good attributes that a human being can have are considered suitable requirements for a consultant." (p. 194).

As part of an effective consultant, qualities related to the consultant's personality (Greiner & Metzger, 1983, pp. 29–35) include diagnostic abilities such as objectivity, intense curiosity, and conceptual, analytical and inductive reasoning. Solution skills include abilities such as imagination, courage and the ability to teach. Communication skills include sensitive listening skills, exceptional writing ability, oral presentation skills, and intervention skills. Personality characteristics include ethical standards, empathy and trust, positive thinking, self-motivation, acting as a team player, self-fulfilment, mobility, energy and self-awareness.