

RELATIONSHIPS IN BUSINESS CONSULTING SERVICES: A PROPOSAL OF A RESEARCH PROJECT

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Abstract

This paper presents a research project about business consulting relationships. Business consulting relationships are characterized by complex interactions. Consulting services are professional services characterized by high-perceived risk and are dependent of trust and collaboration among the parts. Several studies stress the high degree of uncertainty about skills of the consultants and the output of their work, the asymmetry of information, the differences in perceptions and expectations between clients and consultants and the close and confidential nature of interactions. Due to the characteristics of consultancy services and relationships, business consulting services are an interesting field to investigate relationships which needs to receive more attention.

The paper shows that the IMP Group approach can be an interesting way to research and analyse business relationships in the context of consultancy. The purchasing of professional business services is increasingly critical to the modern organizations and their performance. Furthermore, the strategic importance of management consultancy industry and their consequences for the client organization cannot be ignored because it aims to obtain successful outcomes for clients. First, we present a brief review about professional business services and business relationships, and second, we suggest a research framework to understand the nature and the typology of relationships in consulting business services. The paper highlights the importance of this research to identify critical aspects in the successful consulting business relationships.

Keywords: consulting services, relationships, service business relationships, IMP group.

PROFESSIONAL BUSINESS SERVICES

The purchasing of professional business services is increasingly critical to the modern organizations and their performance (Axelsson and Wynstra, 2002; Laing and Lian, 2005).

The distinction between professional services and other type of services is referred by different authors (Axelsson and Wynstra, 2002; Crane, 1993; Hausman, 2003; Lovelock *et al.*, 1999; Thakor and Kumar, 2000). Exchanges in the context of professional services are complex and long term. Solutions are often unique and are produced in cooperation between the client and the supplier. Due to the nature of professional services, the client is often insecure and tries to reduce the risk of their purchase. The existence of a stable and loyal relationship could be a way to reduce uncertainty (Mietilla, 1993).

However, professional services cover very different types of work and the strength of the relationships varies according to the professional context (Hausmann, 2003). The complexity and the application of the service affect the interaction patterns between buyer and supplier (Axelsson and Wynstra, 2002). Collaboration is essential in complex services, as services based on knowledge. The interaction between client and supplier is influenced in particular by the level of communication established to clarify expectations, the supplier competence and his credibility which is based for example on references, image, reputation and methods.

THE CONSULTING SERVICES

The significance of the management consultancy industry has been the main reason for the development of academic interest in consultancy services (Fincham and Clark, 2002). The growth of this industry is frequently explained by the complexity and dynamics in which the firms operate. One of the problems with research on management consulting concerns the definition and boundaries of industry (Kipping, 2002). Defining the nature of management consultancy is a difficult task due to the dynamics of the consultancy industry and the nature of consultancy work.

Consultants are characterized as specialists, organizational therapists, agents of change or also fashion setters and disseminators (Abrahamson, 1996; Greiner and Metzberg, 1983; Schein, 1988). They could influence and regulate many aspects of organizational management (Clark, 1995).

Several studies stress the high degree of uncertainty about skills of the consultants and the output of their work, the asymmetry of information, the differences in perceptions and expectations between clients and consultants and the close and confidential nature of interactions (Bennett and Robson, 1999; Gallouj, 1997; Karantinou and Hogg 2001; Mitchell, 1994). The consultancy services present a high-perceived risk and are dependent of the trust among the parts. The consultancy services are exchanged on a promise and this highlight the importance of trust. Consultants need to manage the client-consultant relationship to create the right impression on their clients (Clark, 1995).

The consulting work needs to be adapted to the characteristics and needs of the client and the performance of a consultant could also vary substantially depending on the client (Clark and Salaman, 1996).

These characteristics have implications in the criteria used by clients when selecting and evaluating consultants. It also influences the propensity of actors to remain loyal and develop long-term relationships (Gallouj, 1997; Karantinou and Hogg, 2001).

INTERACTIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CONSULTANCY CONTEXT

Due to the complexity and the diversity of relationships between organizations, there is not a single type or pattern of relationship development (Laing and Lian, 2005). Naudé and Buttle (2000) also stress that a good relationship could not be characterized by a unique measure.

Management consultancy industry is characterized by complex interactions and relationships. Alvesson and Johansson (2002) underline the variation in consultancy work and describe the nature of management consultancy as “contingent upon a plurality of consultants, clients, situation and task”.

The interaction process between the consultant and their client could be seen as a way to overpass asymmetry in relationship. The clients seems to be interested in relationship development because of the perceived risk in buying consulting services and the need of trust and close cooperation to lead to successful results (Karantinou and Hogg, 2009). Besides, consulting firms are also interested in client retention and relationship development, which means a changing from the past when they aggressively looked for new clients.

The existing relationship between buyer and seller is also relevant to service evaluation. The attraction, shared knowledge, trust and commitment influence the perception of the service process and its result (Bennett and Robson, 1999; Clark, 1995; Mietilla, 1993; O’Farrell and Moffat, 1991). Understanding client expectations could be relevant for the success of relationship development (Karantinou and Hogg, 2009).

Consulting services are described by Castro *et al.* (2005) as unique, discontinuous and highly complex. Furthermore, they are usually developed in a project basis. Each consultancy project is not an isolated event but an episode in relationship development.

However, trust and interdependence could exist at the end of a project but tend to decrease with time (Cova *et al.*, 2002). The relationship becomes a “*sleeping relationship*” and efforts could be developed to maintain the relationship after the end of the project.

Due to the nature of professional services as consulting services, the relationship approach is particularly relevant. The understanding of interaction between client and supplier and the ability to manage relationships could be so important as buying the desired service (Axelsson and Wynstra, 2002). The success of consulting projects is based on the relationship quality between client and consultant (Handley *et al.*, 2006).

EVALUATION OF CONSULTING SERVICES

The evaluation stage of the results of the consulting process is probably the less understanding stage of the referred process (Appelbaum and Steed, 2005; Armenakis and Steed, 2005; Puryear, 2008). Many doubts remain about the value of consultancy. As results of consultancy services are difficult to evaluate, research had made little progress about their impact in the client (Kipping, 2002). The value of consulting work depends on the achieved results so the clients need to understand the reasons for hiring a consultant and the expected results (O’Shea and Madigan, 1997). Furthermore, continuous interaction and cooperation allow a deepest knowledge of the other part and its needs. That can improve the quality of services and lead to new business opportunities (Crosby *et al.*, 1990; Karantinou and Hogg, 2001). The existing relationship between buyer and seller is relevant to service evaluation. The attraction, shared knowledge, trust and commitment influence the perception of the

service process and its result (Clarck, 1995; Karantinou and Hogg, 2009; Mietilla 1993).

Moreover, it is difficult to establish a detailed contract and consultants usually refuse to be paid according to the results of their work (Kipping, 2002). They argue that it is difficult to control other factors influencing client performance. It is also impossible to make a comparison with the situation of the organization without consultancy. Also some clients are reluctant to be compromise with quantitative objectives because of the unknowing variables which difficult the foresight of the results associated to a specific organizational change (Smith, 2002). Werr and Perner (2007) suggest that the difficulties of defining and evaluating consulting services could also be a consequence of the knowledge distribution between client and consultant.

The literature often stresses the client satisfaction as a measure of service value (Puryear, 2008). However, satisfaction could be not related directly to the business results. Investigation in the context of services suggests that results are evaluated but also the process which leads to these results (Grönroos, 1984). Expectations are often not clearly defined at the beginning of the engagement but tend to evolve and become more clear (Puryear, 2008). Clients evaluate the achieved performance and not particularly the contribution of consultant for this performance.

Moreover, consultants and client understand differently value concept and could use different criteria to evaluate the effectiveness or the value of their work (Fullerton and West, 1996).

THE IMP GROUP APPROACH TO CONSULTING RELATIONSHIPS

Due to the characteristics of consultancy services and relationships in this context, the IMP Group approach seems to be an interesting conceptual framework to study consulting relationships (Castro *et al.*, 2005; Woo and Ennew, 2005). Researchers noticed that organizational purchases are not isolated events and can only be understood if inserted in its context. The proposed Interaction Model identifies four groups of variables that describe and influence the interaction between buyers and sellers: the participants in the interaction process, the atmosphere, the environment in which the interaction takes place and the interaction process (Hakansson, 1982). The sum of all this variables conditions and is also conditioned by the interaction process. The relationship history, its atmosphere, the characteristics of actors and the nature of the business services influences the interaction pattern and relationships (Axelsson and Wynstra, 2002). Differences in application of the business services have also a significant impact on interaction patterns described in terms of the objectives, buyer and supplier capabilities, representatives involved and communication (van der Valk *et al.*, 2009; Wynstra *et al.*, 2006).

Halinen (1997) applied the IMP Group's interaction framework to the context of a specific professional business services – advertising services. The development of agency-client relationships can be understood through the six conceptual categories and relationships between them: the context of a business relationship, the prerequisites for a business relationship, the interaction processes and interaction styles, an evolving relational infrastructure, the perceived outcomes of interaction processes and the evolving relational bonds. By applying a model to a new setting, the author contributes to improve this model. New concepts were added to complement the interaction model and a number of new concepts also emerged as important elements of relationships during the empirical investigation.

Besides the interest of the interactive model to identify and explain the nature and process of interaction between buyer and supplier, this approach is well documented. So the conceptualization developed by the IMP Group is relevant to analyze relationships between client and supplier in the consulting context and identify different patterns of interaction which could lead to successful or unsuccessful performance output.

PROPOSAL OF A RESEARCH PROJECT

JUSTIFICATION AND PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

The strategic importance of management consultancy industry, consequences for the client organization and characteristics of client-consultant interactions point out a potential area for investigation (Fincham and Clark, 2002; Karantinou and Hogg 2001).

Business consulting is a growing activity and its impact in organizations cannot be ignored.

Consulting services are professional services characterized by high-perceived risk, complexity, asymmetry of information values, differences in perceptions and expectations between clients and consultants, close and confidential nature of interactions. These services are dependent of trust and collaboration among the parts.

Moreover, clients and consultants seems to be more available for close cooperation and the development of long term relationships instead of the development of isolated projects which is important for the future of the consulting industry (Canback, 1999; Karantinou and Hogg, 2009).

Many doubts also remain about consulting value and how to measure the results of consulting services.

These reasons justify studying the nature of interactions between consultants and their clients and the benefits and costs of these relationships for both parts (Karantinou and Hogg, 2001).

Due to the importance of the establishment of valuable relationships, it is essential questioning how relationships are developed between the client and the consultant and understand if the type of relationship influences expectations and performance of the client.

Our investigation intends to answer to the following questions:

- a) Which are the different types of relationships existing between consultants and their clients?
- b) Different types of relationship between client and consultant leads to different expectations in terms of the impact of the consulting services to client performance?
- c) Different types of relationship between client and consultant influence the achieved performance?
- d) Which are the critical aspects of relationships for reducing the gap between expected performance and achieved performance?

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Based on the IMP approach to relationships and literature about consulting services and relationships on the consultancy context, we intended first to identify a typology of relationships in this context in terms of clients' characteristics, consultants' characteristics and relationships characteristics.

The following variables will be used to characterize the relationships between client and consultant.

Characteristics of client and consultant - Individuals that participate in the service production affect in a significant way the perceived quality and the whole relationship between client and consultant. The involved actors are important because their beliefs, choices and actions largely determine the existence, the form and the meaning of the relationships (Fullerton and West, 1996; Karantinou and Hogg, 2001, 2007; O'Farrell and Moffat, 1991).

Atmosphere - The concept of atmosphere provides a broader perspective about the overall climate of the partners' relationship (Woo and Ennew, 2005). The atmosphere is considered essential to understand and manage relationships (Roehrich and Spencer, 2001). This variable could be characterized by the following dimensions: power/dependency, cooperation/competiveness, trust/opportunism, closeness/distance and commitment.

Trust, commitment and the availability to develop close bonds influence the willingness to work together and share information which have an impact on the success of the relationship (Nielson, 1998).

Cooperation - A professional service provider as a consultancy firm must understand the customers' problems and needs (Wynstra *et al.*, 2006). The complexity of the service and the type of solution (standard or customized) affect the interaction between the service supplier and the client (Axelsson and Wynstra, 2002). Frequently, providers of complex services as knowledge-based services need to create a problem solution in collaboration with the customer. Continuous interaction and cooperation allow a deeper knowledge of the other part and its needs. That can improve the quality of services and lead to new business opportunities (Crosby *et al.*, 1990). Commitment and trust are also important for cooperation behaviours and consequently relationship development (Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

Communication - The communication between customer and supplier is important to clarify and align the expectations of both actors (Axelsson and Wynstra; 2002; Smith, 2002). Reluctance to reveal critical information could influence the level of trust between partners and affect the problem resolution (Crosby *et al.*, 1990). Moreover, open communication helps to increase trust and commitment (Anderson and Weitz, 1992). The characteristics of the product could also affect the content and the extent of communication process between the actors (Axelsson and Wynstra, 2002).

Closeness - This dimension is particularly important to understand trust and relationship development (Laing and Lian, 2005). It is a complex factor in a relationship which could be defined by various aspects: time orientation, degree of customization, level of coordination, formality of communication and strength of social bonds.

Adaptation - Adaptations are stressed as an important component of business to business relationships (Woo and Ennew, 2005). Adaptations occur when “one or other party may make in either the elements exchanged or the process exchanged” (Hakansson, 1982, p. 18).

The consultancy work must be adapted to the characteristics and needs of the client. (Clark and Salaman, 1996). The service they create for a particular client is unique and their performance could be very different.

Social Exchange - Social bonds are particularly important in professional services contexts and the strength of social bonds is a valuable indicator of the status of relationship between organizations (Laing and Lian, 2005). Social episodes are important in the short term but the social bonds are more important in the long term. The involved actors and their personality, objectives and expectations will affect the social contacts and exchange information and consequently interactions between organizations.

Commitment – Commitment could be defined as “an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship” (Moorman *et al.*, 1992), “the parties’ intentions to act and their attitude towards interacting with each other” (Storbacka *et al.*, 1994) or also “a desire to develop a stable relationship, a willingness to make short-term sacrifices to maintain the relationship and a confidence in the stability of the relationship” (Anderson and Weitz, 1992).

Trust - The importance of trust has been stressed in relationships literature and in particular in the context of complex services with high level of uncertainty and high-perceived risk.

Trust could be defined as “having confidence in an exchange partner’s reliability and integrity” (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), or also a “willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom has confidence” (Moorman *et al.*, 1992).

The existence of a high quality relationship means that the client has “a confident belief that the salesperson can be relied upon to behave in such a manner that the long-term interest of the customer will be served” (Crosby *et al.*, 1990)

Trust which is built by a process of doing and fulfilling promises (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987) is important for the development of relationships and their stability (Anderson and Weitz, 1989). Trust is important for the development of expectations (Dwyer *et al.*, 1987) and the quality of interaction and relationship (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Trust influences attitudes and behaviors of the clients with the suppliers, motivating them to invest in their relationship.

The consulting service is sold according to a promise and could not be tested before their buying and that stresses the importance of trust between the consultant and the client (Edvardson, 1990). Clients need also to trust on consultants and believe that the shared information will not be used against them.

Expectation of continuity - Expectations about the future of the relationship influence for

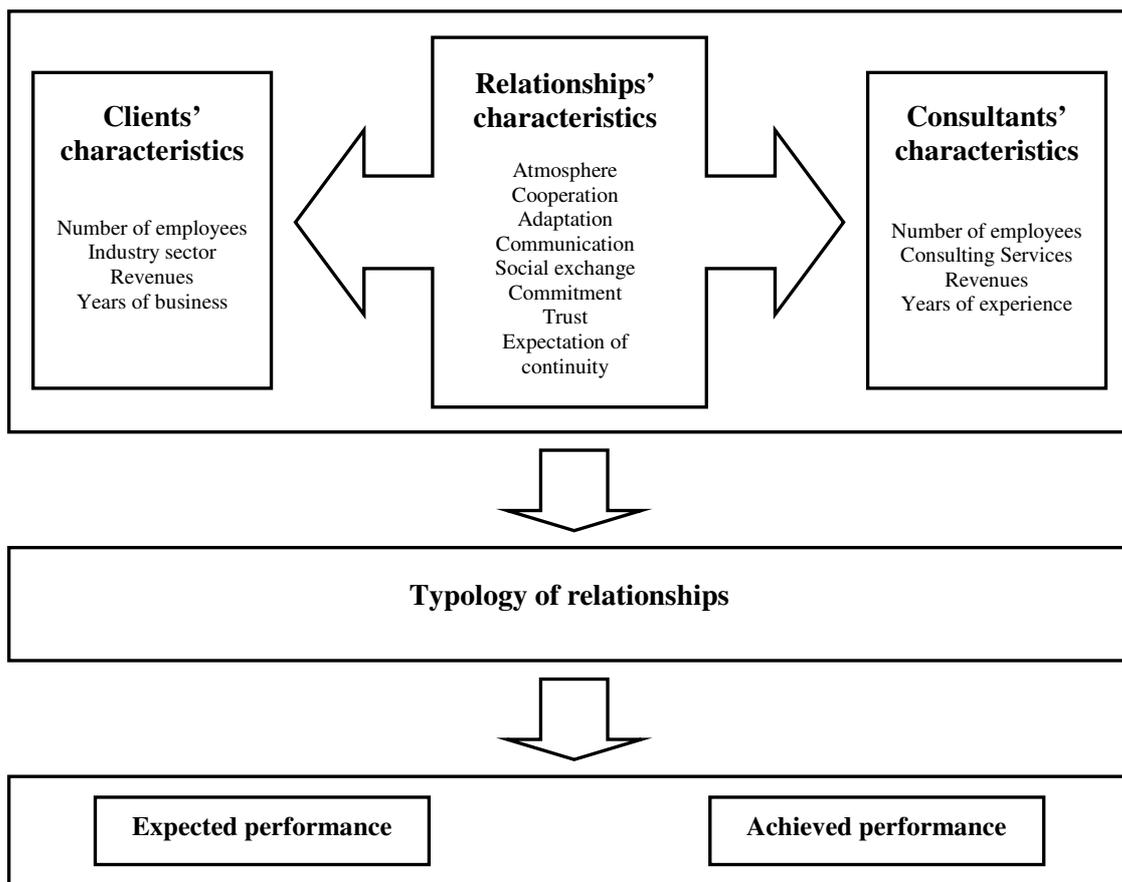
example the development of joint actions (Heide and John, 1990). Moreover, successful long term relationships tend to demonstrate what Yorke (1990) name as a “meeting of minds” to achieving shared purposes. The existence of a long term perspective depends on the level of trust between parts, which must believe that their partner will not act against their interest, even in unexpected situations (Ganesan, 1994). When relationships are only based on dependence and specific assets which compel parts to collaborate, both parts try to reduce the existing dependence.

The propensity of clients to develop relationships and invest in their continuity could also vary and must be evaluating (Karantinou and Hogg, 2009).

After that we intend to analyse in which way the identified types of relationships (1) lead to different levels of expectations concerning future performance and (2) influence the achieved performance with the consultancy work.

Our research framework is presented in the Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Research framework



METHODOLOGY

Laing and Lian (2005) have used a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches to define a typology of inter-organizational relationships in a specific business services context - occupational health services. For the purposes of our study, we will follow a similar methodology.

We will start with a quantitative approach using a questionnaire survey to define a typology of relationships in the consultancy context. The questionnaire will focus the dimensions which are referred in Figure 1. Measurement items will be mostly borrowed from existing studies based on the IMP framework. Literature about relationships in consultancy context could also help to capture the features of the consulting services and relationships. Data will be subject to a cluster analysis in order to identify a typology of relationships based on characteristics of the client, the consultant and their relationship.

Later, it will be chosen a dyad in each one of the identified relationships type, which will be analyzed with resource to the method of case study (Yin 2003). The methodology of study of cases has been broadly used in the study of the relationships and the approach of the dyad is fundamental for a better understanding of each relationship.

INTENDED CONTRIBUTIONS

The business consulting services relationships is an interesting research field which needs to receive more attention. Business consulting is a growing activity and its impact in organizations can not be ignored.

Our study intends to contribute for the knowledge of the business relationships in a specific context of professional services – the consultancy. First, we pretend to enhance the understanding of the establishment and development of relationships in this context. Second, we hope to stress the importance of consultant-client relationships in the client performance. The identification of the critical aspects in these relationships can be relevant to achieve the intended performance levels and an effective management of the firm's relationships. We suggest a research project that aims to identify different patterns of relationships in consulting business services, and to analyze the impact of these relationships patterns in the clients' performance.

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