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In: A.F. Buono, R. Grossmann, H. Lobnig, K. Mayer (Editors), *The Changing Paradigm of Consulting: Adjusting to the Fast-Paced World*, Information Age Publishing, Inc. Charlotte, North Carolina, 2011

DEVELOPING EXPERTISE AND SOCIAL STANDING IN PROFESSIONAL CONSULTING

What does professional consulting knowledge consist of? As a way of exploring this question, this chapter examines the nature of consulting knowledge, how such “know-how” develops over the working life of a consultant, and how this development relates to the evolution of a consultant’s social standing in the field.

LEVELS OF KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE

Considering this question from a practical point of view, which means on the level of a consultant’s direct operating knowledge, one can distinguish three different “levels” of insight. (1) the basis for expert know-how, (2) general process models of knowledge-based services, and (3) personal linking patterns between expert know-how and general process models of knowledge-base services.

Level 1: The Basis for Expert Know-How

Expert know-how concerns itself with the relevant field for the consultancy. This know-how reflects the applicable expertise relevant to provide the consultation. Business administration, industrial management, human resource (HR) management, and business law are examples of this kind of expertise. The expertise is primarily acquired – in standardized form – within the scope of university or similar environments. The translation of this knowledge into know-how takes place in practical application, either preceding the consulting activity or within the scope of professional consulting.

Level 2 : General Process Models of Knowledge-Based Services

The particular importance of general process models is based on the fact that expert know-how is never conveyed or applied, so to speak, “by itself”. Conveying it or applying it always takes place step by step; it always takes place within a process. Yet, however different these processes may appear in comparing the activities of various consultants, it doesn’t work without them. For example, some consultants might begin their work with a long questioning period, while others get into assignment very quickly with input based on their experience, the job of “consulting” *always* takes place according to a process, it is *always* a process! Therefore, in consulting, it is actually irrelevant to differentiate between “process” and “specialist” consulting, which has become common in the German-speaking consulting scene.

Regardless of the distinct professional focus, at least retrospectively each consulting task can be described as a specific set of answers to the following three questions:

- Generally, how was the consulting process structured (architecture, macrolevel)?
- How were individual sections of the consulting task actually realized; what instruments and methods were used for this (design, mesolevel)?
- What happens if something “didn’t go the way it’s supposed to” (intervention, microlevel)?

By answering these questions, however, in principle consultants do not always develop their professional approach – the way in which they implement their technical know-how according to a process – in a new way. In concretely designing their approach they fall back on a set of “principle approaches” that is available to them. Here I call these principle approaches “general process models of knowledge-based services”. What is actually meant by this? An example of such general process models of knowledge-based services used worldwide is the method and instruments of “project management”. Project management is deployed in the area of professional consulting like probably almost no other method to plan and manage projects. Another general process model with high empirical importance, particularly in the area of “systemic organizational consulting”, which I am giving as an example here, is the set of available architectures and designs in the area of T groups and group dynamics-oriented organization laboratories. But also large consultancies, such as McKinsey, to name only one of them, have their own general process models. Thus they standardize the implementation of their concrete consulting tasks (Handler 2007).

Here it should be pointed out that not all of these process models are exclusively used by consultants. Concerning the example of project management, this is obvious. However, even the above-mentioned process standards from the tradition of group dynamics are not used only by consultants, but also for instance by trainers in the course of training sessions.

Level 3: Personal Linking Patterns between Technical Know-How and General Process Models of Knowledge-Based Services

Despite all the available standard processes and general process models, in practice consultants don’t always fall back precisely, completely or in detail, on the standards available. In a concrete professional situation, consultants always link certain aspects of their individual technical knowledge with process steps primarily in a way that appears appropriate to them. However, they do not always do this only consciously but also intuitively. It is consistent with the character of professional consulting that when consultants are confronted with a concrete task, professional content and process elements, they always put them together along the lines of individual “linking patterns”. These personal patterns, the way consultants – when faced with a concrete professional situation – individually combine their technical know-how and the repertoire of general process models available to them, is an important component of their consulting know-how. As mentioned above, this linkage between the two levels of consulting know-how, technical know-how and general process models, frequently takes place more intuitively than consciously. I will come back to this point later.

Equipped with this three-levels-scheme, we can now seek answers to the second of the principle questions formulated at the beginning.

How does professional know-how develop in the biography of a consultant?

In order to create a practical reference to answer this question I will outline the development of the personal basic know-how of a consultant along three phases:

Phase 1: Imprinting

On a general level concerning all professions focusing on knowledge, Henri Mintzberg (1979) calls this first phase of professional conditioning “indoctrination”. With respect to the development of a consultant’s basic know-how, to me this consideration appears particularly appropriate. Why? The transformation of knowledge acquired in a curriculum, usually academically, into applicable concrete knowledge does not come to consultants in their first years of professional practice abstractly/theoretically but always “by doing”. And thus always in the operative combination of content and process steps described above. Theoretically speaking, the necessity of practically applying technical knowledge in individual cases opens up an unlimited amount of combinations of elements of technical knowledge and general process models. In order to reduce this diversity so that it is manageable practically, various paths can be taken. Here I would like to describe two that seem important to me.

The first path is when a young, inexperienced consultant imitates a consultant with more experience. This “copying” takes place within the scope of the personal integration of the young consultant in some kind of professional context, in which inexperienced and experienced consultants cooperate. Whether it is cooperation in a consulting company or collaboration in a consulting network does not make a major difference. It is only important that the “young ones” cooperate with colleagues, peers whom they accept as “experienced”, who “can do it”.

The second path is the lonely one of trial and error. One or several inexperienced consultants, usually equipped with technical know-how that is in demand, do it somehow, and in as far as they are successful with it, begin to copy themselves.

In any case, and Henri Mintzberg points this out, only to a small extent do these acquirement processes proceed in a conscious manner. Imitating others or oneself does not require language or terms. This is a matter of an unconscious process of a professional socialization or “tacit learning” (Nonaka, Takeuchi 1995).

Actually this first phase of the professional development of a consultant is primarily characterized by imitation and professional socialization. In the first five to seven years of the consultant’s professional development and in coming to grips with the first job, the professionally relevant basis of standards and values and the operating patterns to combine technical know-how and general process models mature. This combination of professional norms in connection with the operative, personally acquired linking patterns constitute the core of the consulting know-how of a consultant. What is available in the way of technical and process know-how as the result of previous or simultaneous parallel training is processed as “raw material” in this phase of professional socialization.

To use the term imprinting to describe this phase seems appropriate to me for two reasons. First of all imprinting refers to the implicit, imitating conservative aspect of professional socialization. Secondly, imprinting points to the fact that the result of such a socialization process has now, figuratively speaking, deposited itself in the professional genetic make-up of the socialized consultant. In line with the motto

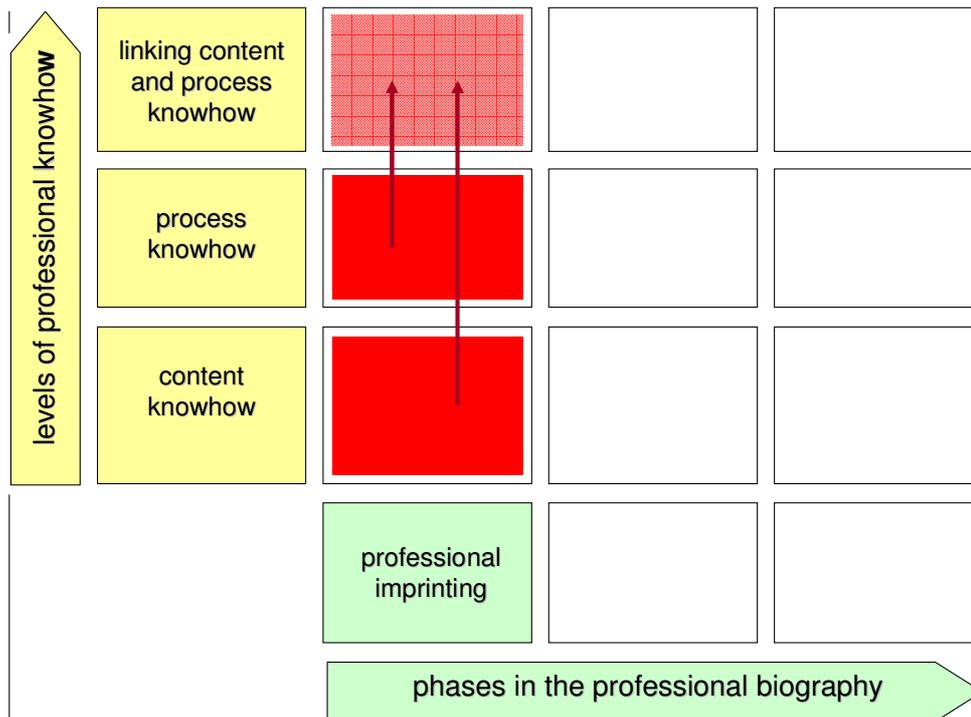
“you can’t teach an old dog new tricks“, the operative linking patterns and professional norms and values that are now available constitute the personal-professional DNA of a consultant.

The practical impact of what is described here is thus far reaching. I think that for each consultant the possibilities – but also the limits – that arise from future professional cooperation with other consultants are already established at the end of this phase of imprinting.

Professional Islands:

In connection with questions regarding organization culture, Edgar H. Schein introduced the term “cultural islands” (Schein 1987). Taking this metaphor further and applying it to our topic, for me the image of a young consultant, who after successfully completing his/her imprinting phase becomes an inhabitant of a “professional island”, is completely apt. The prerequisite for which the consultant has been awarded “citizenship” on this island is his/her professional DNA, through which the consultant’s know-how is defined and which now provides the basis for effective and simple cooperation with his/her colleagues. This concerns the development of consulting architecture as well as translation into a concrete design. It also concerns carrying out effective interventions while working concretely with clients “on site”. When consultants “get along well together”, when everything “flows smoothly”, they have identical linking patterns, they were coined in the same mint, they have “the same upbringing”, etc. This is my assumption so far.

Whoever has tried to work together with colleagues of other professional islands practically, on site, knows how difficult and tedious, and often also unsatisfying, such an undertaking can be. Emerging barriers that frequently cannot be overcome practically are not always due to different personality traits but – and this is also part of the assumption – primarily in the implicit quality of the different personal operative linking patterns of the participating colleague. This phenomenon has already been explicitly described or implied from various perspectives (cf. Froschauer, Lueger 2006, Janes/Schulte-Derne/Prammer 2001,, Wimmer, Kolbeck 2001, Handler 2007). Each group of consultants – whether it concerns a large or small company, or a professional network of colleagues is not important – can be deemed to be a professional island. If we keep to this image, the bird’s eye view of consultancy consists of a multitude of small, larger and large islands and groups of islands spread over the whole world.



III. 1: Structure of the Developmental Process of Phase 1

Phase 2: Optimizing

The next phase in the biographical development of consulting know-how is to reflectively create and continuously optimize professional standards.

This goal is pursued primarily by means of two instruments.

The first is the event-related exchange between colleagues, either organized as an informal talk between colleagues or in the more formal structure of a consultation, supervision between colleagues.

Talks like these are always triggered by concrete practical events and experiences. Examples of such occasions can be:

- new challenging tasks that a consultant is faced with; however, he/she does not yet have the requisite practice to solve them
- negative, non-comprehensible experiences or those that are difficult to understand in the consultant's own consulting work
- uncertainty in the relationship with a customer
- hypotheses developed in a concrete consultancy do not seem sufficiently sustainable to be able to develop practical solutions based on them
- problematical feedback on the part of individual internal cooperation partners in a change project
- conflicts between different internally relevant environments of such an undertaking, etc.

Exchange of views, consulting and supervision among colleagues implies describing, explaining and assessing one's own concrete practice, development of hypotheses, suggesting, recommending concrete procedures and solutions. My

own experience with hundreds of conversations of this kind has taught me that the majority of topics discussed in such peer groups does not concern questions of technical know-how. It usually has to do with general process questions (particularly with architectures, designs and interventions) as well as – and this is by far the predominant portion – with linking process elements and technical know-how in one concrete applicable case. In the outcome of such conversations, considerations for standard formations in the area of personal linking patterns arise, as well as subsequently also on the levels of general process models and technical know-how base. The participating peers are colleagues from one's own company, members of one's own consulting network or also professionally-contracted coaches, who are normally consultants themselves.

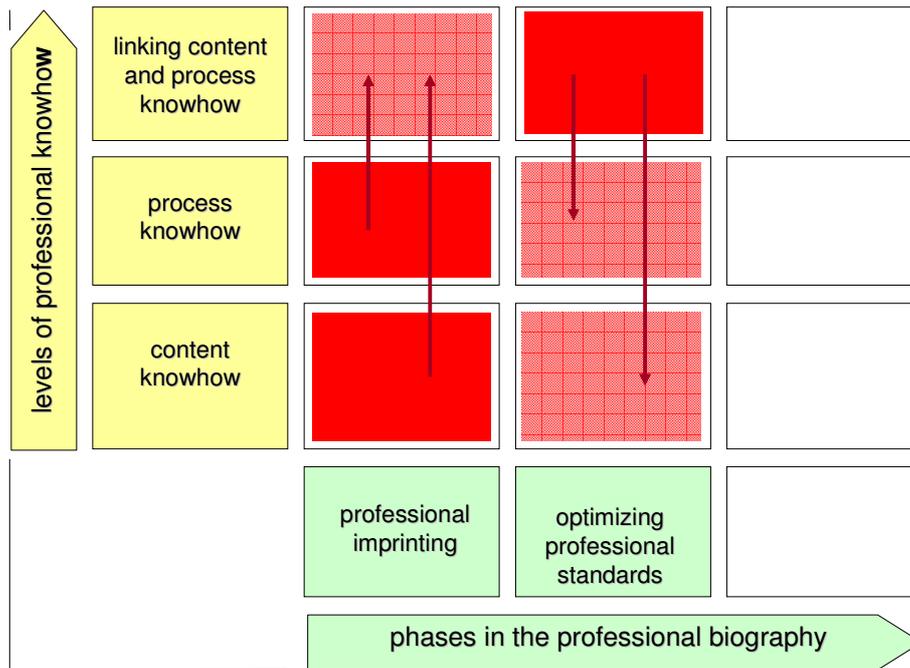
The second instrument for the development and on-going optimization of professional standards is setting up, developing and maintaining operating know-how databases. Here the focus is on carrying out one's own work efficiently and successfully by means of easy access to existing work materials, methods and instruments such as interview guidelines, diagnosis tools, sample offers, and standard processes for process phases that recur frequently. Simultaneously this also has to do with the enhancement and development of this knowledge pool from external sources.

The practical importance of the differentiation proposed here between this second phase of know-how development and the phase of professional imprinting lies in the change in the quality of the learning mode that takes place.

While professional imprinting, as described above, takes place on the basis of an implicit knowledge mode, the mode of optimizing professional standards is explicitly language-based.

Due to this fact, now, in this second biographical phase does a consulting theory evolve that is directly available and practice-related. Only now is the result of professional socialization verbally available by means of models, and thus can be discussed, standardized and optimized.

The impact on a consultant's know-how is considerable. The main prerequisites for the professional success of consulting, technical know-how, general process models of knowledge-based services, and especially in connecting them to an order-related situation, can now be named, described, evaluated vis-à-vis colleagues and clients, and justified with regard to their application. Now in the core of his/her know-how the consultant is "able to provide information" to colleagues and clients. His/her toolbox has now taken on an explicit shape.



Illus. 2: Structure of the Development Process: Phases 1, 2

Professional Islands:

In the past five to seven years the three levels of know-how have become even more deeply “embedded” in the professional DNA of a consultant. Simultaneously, this is now verbally and consciously accessible in all dimensions. In the meantime the consultant has been inaugurated into the clan of experienced residents of his professional island! He/she has acquired a reputation and influence and is sought after as an advisor for important questions.

Phase 3: Innovation

What is challenging in the innovation of the consultant’s existing basic operating know-how has to do with the essence of innovation. Here I would like to consciously differentiate between the constant developments and standardizations described in phase 2. Despite all attempts at trivialization, the “divine spark” remains divine. A comment attributed to the Columbian writer Gabriel García Márquez states that the first sentence of a novel is God-given grace, the rest craftsmanship. Now it seems to me that there is a “wide field” between craftsmanship and grace, at least in the context of consulting work. In the following I will describe two paths to lead through this field that seem possible: the first through planned confrontation with “Out-of-the-Box” Thinkers, the second through planned encouragement of a dialogue culture between consulting colleagues.

1st Path: Confrontation with “Out-of-the-Box” Thinkers:

The most important “instrument” regarding a consultant’s basic operating know-how is the face to face confrontation and discussion with concepts not pertaining to consulting, presented by reputable “out-of-the-box” thinkers. It is a kind of inspiration or spark for something fundamentally new to evolve. The innovative transformation of this “explosive” into one’s own profession – that is the craftsmanship in the innovation process – subsequently requires the activity of a taskforce of colleagues, recruited from a peer group working together in a non

hierarchic dialogue. Let me describe how that can be successful, by means of an example with which I am very familiar: The renewal of the group-dynamic principles of professional organizational consulting, particularly through the paradigms of systemic family therapy and the constructivist thinking of the late 1980's in Vienna. At that time there were numerous self-organized weekend get-togethers between members of the Viennese consulting scene – all of whom were “seasoned” socio-psychological-thinking consultants, versed in general systemic theory according to Ludwig von Bertalanffy – and representatives of what were then new and fascinating schools of thought. At this time these were concepts from the Milan School of Family Therapy along the ideas of Mara Selvini-Palazzoli (1978), the work of the constructivist biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1987), and the theory of social systems by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1988). With each of these personalities we organized a varying number of workshops, which culminated in individual task forces formed in the different consulting firms and in company-spanning networks. Their goal was to attempt to integrate these new ideas into the store of operating know-how of the participating consultants, both helping to prepare them for consulting practice and to accompany them in practicing consulting, as well as in assisting them to reflect on what transpired.

The results of this succession of planned, organized, irritations through face to face contacts with these unconventional thinkers and the subsequent operative integration caused a profound change in the genetic consulting make-up of the colleagues participating. Subsequently there were numerous innovations in terms of how to operate, concerning

- general process models; primarily individual concepts of systemic intervention techniques according to Selvini-Palazzoli et al. (1978),
- professionally relevant norms and values; primarily those concerning consulting attitudes from a more distant point of view and the concept of the “multi-directional partiality” according to Boszormany- Nagy (1973), and finally the personal patterns of linking these elements
- existing basic technical know-how; primarily in terms of integrating system-theoretical concepts regarding organizational theory according to Luhmann (1988).
- reorientation of personal linking patterns of the participating colleagues

This resulted in the consulting concept of the “Wiener Schule der Organisationsberatung”/ Vienna School of Organizational Consulting (Krizanits 2009). All other professional innovations in the Viennese consulting scene, such as in 1998 through the concept of “Affektlogik” by Ciompi (1998), or in 2003 by integrating the approaches from solution-focused therapy by Steve de Shezar and Insoo Kim Berg (1986) and the concepts of systemic structural constellations according to Varga von Kibéd and Sparrer (2000), as well as the current discussion with the presencing concept by Scharmer (2009), follow the same successful development pattern again and again, which I summarize here:

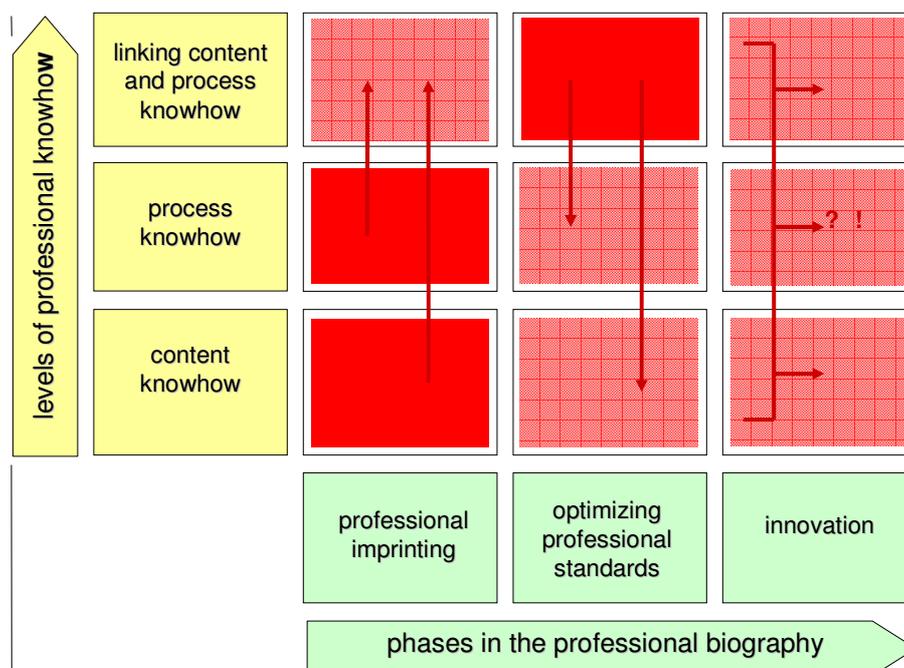
Step 1: “Irritation” of the existing basis of operating know-how through an organized face to face meeting with a recognized “out-of-the-box” thinker from a different field within the circle of colleagues. The fact that these unconventional thinkers are “gurus” from a different field is a prerequisite for success. The reason for this is that consultants – at least those from my generation, and that is a conviction I have acquired from years of experience – will not allow themselves to be changed dramatically by “their own peers”.

Step 2: Reappraisal and translation of the foreign knowledge into one's own professional context. And subsequently, integration into one's own basic operating know-how through the work of the self-organized and non-hierarchic working task forces.

Step 3: Explicit transmittance of the newly-evolved concepts and instruments into the available know-how databases.

2nd Path: Planned Structured Dialog Processes between Colleagues ("Presencing"):

There is scientific discourse even in consulting networks and companies, which orient themselves on the communicative traditions of universities where scientists learn to "successfully" defend their work. I call this form of scientific discourse – a kind of "intellectual martial arts", which is based on attack and defense – "debating" according to Scharmer (2009). Recently, under the term "presencing", a group of researchers at the Sloan School of Management in Boston (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworsky, Flowers 2004) has concerned itself with the question through which it is possible to shape a exchange of views between participants in such a way that something profoundly new can arise. To say it right off: What the authors report and recommend is practically the direct opposite from what I just outlined above as being a prevalent culture of scientific discourse. Innovation and new ideas should come about in the concept presented in such a way that without reservation the participants should go beyond their own interests, interpretation and perception patterns and let themselves get intellectually and emotionally involved in the ideas introduced by others. Such an emphatic dialogue on its own should lead to new, profound innovative ideas and impetus. At the moment it is still too early to judge the practical innovative power of the taskforces that have currently established themselves in consulting firms, here in Vienna, and which are attempting to deal thoroughly with their own basic know-how by applying presencing concepts.



Illus. 3: Structure of the Development Process: Phases 1 to 3

Professional Islands:

Through the debate with fascinating personalities and their exciting ideas, in the circle of some selected peers, a mutation of the professional genetic make-up, the DNA of a consultant, has taken place. This mutation concerns all three of the know-how levels discussed here. The impact on cooperation with the other natives of one's own professional islands is dramatic. A kind of selective retention movement (Mayr 1942) is evolving. Operative cooperation with colleagues who have not taken part in the innovation processes described is becoming increasingly difficult, less efficient and in direct consulting work with customers on site is increasingly strained by conflicts. To the same extent as the exciting new cooperation with the colleagues from the taskforces is quantitatively increasing, the cooperation with those "who are left behind" is quantitatively decreasing, for psychodynamic reasons as well as those regarding content. In actual fact, now the consultant is only really happy working with his/her taskforce colleagues. A clear subsystem, defined by the new consulting know-how, has now been formed. This development leads to an organizational spin-off. The colleagues who are putting an enormous amount of energy and working and cooperation-pleasure into implementing and using the new concepts operatively, emigrate and settle on a new, as yet unpopulated professional island. This is now their own island. After they quickly become very successful on the global market, there are soon parties interested in immigrating; young, highly-qualified, adventurous colleagues who apply for citizenship on the newly populated island. Some of them acquire a resident's permit and begin, under the leadership of experienced island inhabitants, to learn the consulting trade by imitating them.....

Some Considerations on the Social Reputation of Consulting

In the course of this chapter, I have frequently used the adjective "professional" with regard to consulting. I would like to discuss now the relationship between the professionalism and the social reputation of consulting.

In the everyday use of the term, "professional" means "within the scope of a job-oriented activity". This should be a constant reminder that "consulting" is the term for a quality of activity that does not only take place in a business context. After all, each of us probably tries time and again more or less successfully to give advice in a private context!

However, let's ask ourselves whether consulting is a "profession" such as that of a doctor, teacher or mason, and if we do this – according to the area of application of consulting – from a global perspective, there is not a obvious answer (Hasenzagel 2009). And above all, does this question have practical content? Does it even make sense to think about it?

In my opinion one cannot answer this question – to any extent whatsoever – until the criteria for the definition of "profession" have been clarified. And if it also clarified whether or not they are relevant for consultants, for their clients, and for the consultant-client relationship. I will get back to this topic later.

First of all, however, one level of reflection deeper: does the question posed above – in light of the social reputation of consulting – even make sense?

Here are some assumptions relative to the above:

1st assumption: When German speaking consultants are asked what their profession is (e.g. in filling out a registration form in a seminar hotel), only a very few give “consultant” as an answer.

2nd assumption: Yet if a consultant gives “consultant” as an answer, the semantic content of the label “profession: consultant”, as opposed for instance to the above mentioned examples (doctor, teacher, mason...), is extremely vague. This has to do with the fact that at least in German speaking countries, the semantic content of the terms “consultant” or “consulting” is still largely unclarified. Whenever a consultant says that he/she is a consultant, this comment does more to open up an association process, than to provide the basis for a meaningful understanding of what the profession actually is. It is part of my theory that this is a general, widespread phenomenon.

3rd assumption: To take the 2nd assumption one step further, if there is no shared experience between a consultant to a client, the statement “I am a consultant”, does not give the client much relevant information about the services, professional standards and service quality that can be expected from the consultant. At the present time the most important process to determine whether a consultant is good and works “professionally” is “blind tasting”. If a client believes that the results of a paid consultation are “good” then the consultation was good, the consultant is good, and under certain conditions the consulting firm is also good! However the details of how this consultant actually managed to do it. It is like a wine tasting. The main thing is that it tastes good! If the price is also acceptable then the product and the producer can be recommended. What “normal” consumer – when tasting wine – tries to analyze the chemical ingredients of the delicious wine that he/she has just tasted? And if indeed he/she analyzes it, what would be the point? And in addition – getting back to consulting again – due to vast number of different offers of all the “inhabitants” of all the “professional islands” strewn across the globe, I talked about! The diversity of the professional norms and values, linking patterns, general process models and expert competencies of what is offered is absolutely boundless. The most important process to evaluate consulting quality – which influences the consulting market considerably – is accordingly related to both need and output. Consultants and their work are given ratings by their clients such as “quality” or “that was very professional”, primarily according to their concrete expectations (“need-related”) and output-related. Input-oriented criteria, such as

- the existence and empirical assessability of the effectiveness of proven methodical and process-related standards (process know-how: general process models, personal linking patterns)
- scientific recognition of applied theories (technical know-how)
- how state-of-the-art these methods, processes and theories (innovations) are

play rather a subordinate role, in my experience.

4th assumption: In my opinion this means that attributing a defined professional competency to a consultant – and by this I mean reputation – or of a consulting company, is not derived from the fact that we are dealing with a consultant or a consulting company, and that he/she or the company has consulting competence (How is one supposed to know what this is?). Reputation primarily comes from a client’s appraisal of the consultancy provided by a concrete person or a concrete company. This distinguishes consultants from the above-mentioned doctors, teachers and masons.....

5th assumption: Even in those social segments (e.g. managers in industrial enterprises) in which consulting and consultants have a “socially-established reputation”, I believe that this may be ambivalent and that quite a few negative traits are also attributed to consulting: dubious, quack, “don’t take responsibility”, “are overpaid”, “penguins” (behavioral pattern!), “PowerPoint artists” etc. etc.

How can international certification efforts enhance the social reputation of consulting?

Against the background of the above-described need-related and output-related evaluation practice it is not surprising that for the certification of consultants, the standards of the International Council of Management Consulting Institute (ICMCI) require compulsory proof of such need-related, output-related evaluations by the customer (incite 2009) . The candidates are required to present such customer evaluations in writing. Therefore, a consultant is good simply when he/she is good!

In contrast – again not surprisingly – the certification standards in terms of input-oriented criteria concerning the personal competence of the consultant are only expressed very generally. The definition, interpretation and the way in which this interpretation is used in the concrete certification process in formulating this competence are subject to the autonomy of the regional certification institutions. Let’s imagine, for instance – in terms of a “gedankenexperiment” – that the ICMCI wants to try to define a concrete set of behavioral and verifiably formulated consulting competencies. And let’s also imagine that as part of the certification standard this institution would verify that each candidate possessed these criteria. In a similar way that doctors, as part of their education and before they are let loose on humanity hopefully have to prove that they know that, for instance, a person has a liver, and where the liver is located, and perhaps how much wine per day the liver can sustain! What would be the impact of this? At least two things – and this is still part of the “gedankenexperiment” – seem foreseeable. Most likely the majority of all inhabitants, all the professional islands spread across the globe, would not even notice this initiative! However, of those who did notice this initiative, probably only those would agree to these standards – particularly if they were inhabitants of large, market-powerful islands – if they corresponded to their own ideas of professional consulting!

Now back to our question about the contribution of international certification efforts to develop the social reputation of consulting. What can this contribution consist of, or what contributions can be recognized?

1. Many of the consultants who undergo a certification process have practiced consulting for several years. For them the course of study that usually precedes a certification hearing is their first opportunity to reflect on their own consulting practice within a circle of colleagues and supported by a “teacher”. In my experience, the focus is usually on questions of general process models and personal patterns of linking such models in the particular situation with the elements of their technical know-how (“personal linking patterns”). Here the candidates can develop a practical theory and methods language coherent for themselves and thus get the opportunity to optimize their own professional standards (level 2, see above).
2. Through the formal proof of professional qualification connected to the certificate, “young” consultants who are not yet versed on the market attain more professional assurance vis-à-vis clients.

3. In my opinion, the most important contribution of international certification initiatives to develop the social reputation of consulting has evolved through the following: That regarding the topic of quality standards in consulting and the reliability of expectations by the clients towards consultants, an institutionalized open dialogue was initiated and continued. Through this process a momentum has evolved in the right direction.

Is consulting a profession, or if it is not one yet, should it become one?

In conclusion, some considerations on the professionalism of consulting, which also focus on its social reputation:

In the European tradition of guilds, corporations and trade laws a profession is the result of an institutionalized standardization achievement, which releases individual members of the profession to a considerable degree from having to provide personal proof to a client of his/her professional ability. Regarding content this standardization concerns a defined system in every profession consisting of

1. at least rudimentary theory models concerning the subject of the profession,
2. products and service offerings,
3. identified professional methods,
4. practical proven instruments and technologies, as well as
5. binding and at least principally enforceable quality standards.

For this reason we know – thank God or unfortunately – that when we go to the dentist with an infected tooth, send our beloved child to primary school, or hire a mason to build a garden wall, what we can expect!

At this point once again I would like to conjure up the island metaphor:

If one observes the communication and professional exchange among all the inhabitants of professional islands across the globe, we have the following situation:

Despite all the politeness (generally one doesn't speak badly of other professional islands to clients) and at times selective curiosity of each other (one is naturally interested in knowing how business is with "the others" and why business is going like it is, hypotheses are even developed about it), the exchange among colleagues is primarily characterized by competition and rivalry. In my opinion this quality, due to the growth in the number of providers, is permanently increasing. This relationship has a considerable impact on the field of professional consulting:

Due to the "cautious" strategic-tactical manner of dealing with one another, no substantial and emotional dialogue that would make it possible to connect exists between the professional islands.

Neither worldwide nor nationally, nor regionally, neither inwards (between the consultants of different professional islands) nor outwards (towards the market) are there transparent standards on the above-mentioned five levels of standardization criteria for professions.

As also mentioned above, there is no island-spanning joint concept on the prerequisites of what competencies a consultant should possess.

Above all, and this is fundamental, the inhabitants of all these islands do not have a common, practical language of methods and theories. And from what could this

have evolved? The field of professional consulting does not have a common, professional “lingua franca” in which everyone is proficient.

Summarizing all of this, at present, although professional consulting can look back at roughly one hundred years of history (Handler 2007), professional consulting is still a long way from becoming a profession!

I cannot prove my personal assessment of the impact of these findings on the social reputation of professional consulting empirically. Irrespective of this, however, I am convinced that what I have described here limits this reputation. Or to state it differently: The development potential of “professionalism”, which principally is still open to the field of professional consulting, also contains the potential of increasing reliability of expectation and thus – building on this – also social reputation.

In conclusion, my assessment of the situation is the following:

On the one hand, each development in the field of professional consulting towards more reliability of expectations and, building on this, social reputation, clearly demands an increase in systematized, practical language of theory and methods about consulting. Consultants have to learn their “Latin”.

On the other hand, those who further develop and formulate this practical theoretical language may not be inhabitants themselves of one of the professional islands concerned.

For I do not believe that consultants would be prepared to confide in the competition about something that would have such a major impact on their own practice – as a globally understood and practiced practical theoretical language would undoubtedly have.

Welcome science!

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