Academics in the real world: Likes and dislikes

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A brief autobiography of the author

Dr. Shirazi is an assistant professor and director of the Center for Management and Market Studies at Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran. He has authored several books and articles and directed a number of major research projects in Iran and abroad. His research interests include organizational development, organizational culture and management transformation and education.

Abstract

A combination of economic and trade liberalization, technological advancement and globalization have significantly increased the complexity and uncertainty of managing organizations. Hence, many managers have sought the services of knowledgeable consultants to help them solve their organizational and managerial problems. Given the increasing role of consultancy industry in business transformation and improvement and the skills required to identify and retain the services of effective consultants, it is essential to understand the expectations and concerns of the industry key players. This paper aims to identify key factors that affect the satisfaction of Ferdowsi University of Mashhad academics and research staff when providing consultancy services to the outside organizations. An exploratory search revealed the importance of four groups of satisfaction factors, namely personal, political-social, client-consultant relations and project management. A questionnaire was designed, pilot-tested and distributed among the target group. The results revealed that while university staffs are satisfied with the personal factors, they are dissatisfied with the political-social factors when consulting client organizations. The findings are discussed and suggestions are made to overcome conflicts in consulting jobs.

Keywords: Consultancy, Consultant, client, satisfaction, motivators

Introduction

Drucker (1991) in highlighting the critical role of managers argue that managers are the most important factor in success or failure of societies and since we live in an information era, success is directly related to utilize the new knowledge and the most knowledgeable. However, as Ivins magazine (1995) estimates, an unprecedented advancement of knowledge over the last quarter of century has resulted in doubling of human knowledge every 18 months. In one hand, information, as the key managerial tool for decision-making is now readily and easily available to everyone, on the other, the volume and diversity of data and data sources and consequently diversity of specializations, are increased so fast and quickly that decision-making has become difficult and hazardous. Thus, managers faced with such uncertainty and competitive forces that see no other choices but to rely on the services of experts, particularly academic consultants, and this has caused the emergence of a new industry called consulting industry. This industry has experienced an astonishing growth in recent decades to the extent that management consulting

services for a few billion dollars in 1980s has increased to sixty billion dollars in the late 1990 (Greiner and Metzger, 1983, Czarniawska, 1998).

Identifying and hiring experienced and efficient consultants from thousands of consulting firms and independent consultants is one of the key issues and focus of research project in consulting industry and profession. Academic consultants employed in higher education sector are among the most knowledgeable and insightful consultants and hence are the most sought after consultants in the industry. Thus, identifying and understanding factors that affect the academic consultant satisfaction or dissatisfaction as well as barriers in consultants' job and ways to improve academic consultant-client relationships may assist the expansion of consulting activities by encouraging the academic staff and researchers to get involved in providing consulting services to organizations.

External consultant role

Kubr (1996) argue that consultants essentially plays two roles; informational role that involves the utilization of appropriate knowledge and experience to help client identify the nature of its problem, and process role that aim to help client organization to solve its problem by awareness about organizational processes. Schein (1999) in describing consultant role, refers to process consulting that highlights whatever goes on between helper and helped. He suggests that consultant is an organizational doctor. Argyris (1970) identifies three roles for management consultants, including collecting information, facilitating to identify possible solutions and instilling commitment in members to implement the chosen solution. While Turner (1988), Steele (1975), Burnes et al. (2003) and Werr et al. (1997) underline the learning role of consultant in today's competitive world, Larwood and Gattiker (1986) believe that consultant role is really nothing but to close the gap between consultant-client knowledge. As the result, if we agree that consultants' key role is to transfer knowledge and skills to client organization, we may deduct that they are change agent in organizations.

Despite an increasing recognition of the role of consultants in improving management decision-making and organizational performance, numerous criticisms have been laid against their role and efficiency. Arnaud (1998) describes consultants as opportunists. Shapiro et al. (1993) argues that the primary aim of consultants is to sign another contract before the current project is still in progress. De Burgundy's (1995) criticism goes even further, as he suggests that spending scarce resources for buying consulting services is useless and comes to nothing, except to keep some people employed. Stglitz (2001) refers to some projects in the Eastern Europe and developing countries where western consultants offered inappropriate solution for the local conditions which were either rejected, assessed inefficient or ended costing too much for the clients. Abrahamson (1991) accuses consultants for creating fads and new tools and techniques to prolong their contract. McKinley and Scherer (2000) believe that the language of consultants heighten the client's feeling of insecurity and uncertainty which may harm organizations, sometimes irreversibly and at a great cost. From this point of view, consultants are the main cause of consulting project failures. Table 1 shows a summary of writers and researchers' views on the role of consultants.

Table 1. Views on Consultant's role

Positive role		Negative role	
Source	Role	Source	Role
Argyris & Schon (1978)	Change agent	Ormerod (1997), Shapiro et al. (1993)	Opportunist
Kubr (1996)	Information & Process Source	De Burgundy (1995)	Modern idiot
Werr et al. (1997)	Helper	Abrahamsen (1996)	Fashion Cons
Schein (1999)	Doctor	Johansson (2003)	Story teller
Turner (1988)	Learning facilitator	Block (1999)	Opportunist
Steele (1975)	Teacher	Kostera (1995)	Missionnaire

Attractions and distractions of consulting jobs

Consulting like other jobs has attractive and distractive aspects. Identifying these aspects and their management, in one hand, can help removing them during implementation of consulting projects, and in the other, bring about motivation in engaging in such projects. The most important attraction of consulting job are diversity, contact with client and transfer of knowledge and skills from client to consultants (Steele, 1975), taking part in organization success (Argyris and Schon, 1978) and mental challenge (Kakabadzeh et al., 2006). The factors that adversely affect consultant to perform its role are long work hours, criticism as a consultant (Kakabadzeh et al., 2006), worry about job security (De Burgundy, 1995), bureaucratic barriers, lack of management support for finding key problems and fidgeting about solving them (Williams, 2003), ambiguity in evaluation process and management emphasis on short-term rather than long-term objectives, ambiguity about consultant role (Weiss, 2003).

In a study by Hu and Gill (2000) regarding academic motivational factors in collaborating with organizations, two set of factors, including investment factors (e.g. salary increase, promotion,…) and consumption or internal motivators (personal satisfaction derived from solving problems, recognition,…) were identified. In other words, an academic consultant expects the client to satisfy his or her external and internal motivation at an acceptable level. Hence, since clients usually refer to university staff to solve their organizational problems and challenges, identifying and understanding factors that affect academic consultant satisfaction is essential.

Factors affecting consulting projects

In some management research, factors affecting phenomena, such as performance, are referred to as success criteria or failure criteria. These are different claims regarding the rate of consulting project failures, from 25% (Czander, 2001) to 80% (Zackrison and Freedman, 2003). Clients often complain that consulting project do not meet their objectives or are behind their stated schedules. Experts, on the other hand associate many factors with project failures, including lack of internal communication (Pries and Stone, 2004), consultant-client different views on effective leadership (Fullerton and West, 1996), consultants ability, organization's inappropriate interference and consultant-client relationship (Queen and Fisher, 1991), internal politics

nuisances in consulting process, failure in assessing the real purpose of consulting project (Lister and Pirrotta, 1996) and lack of control and mismanagement (Smith, 2001).

Overall, factors attributed to project failures can be divided into four groups. The first group includes consulting characteristics, such as lack of competency (knowledge, ability and skills). The second group is related to technical problems, particularly ineffective management. The third group includes conflicting and unsustainable relationships between consultant and client that may have personality, behavioral or organizational causes. Finally, the forth group is related to political-social aspects of client organization, such as hidden goals or motivation and lack of readiness for change and resistance to change. Therefore, it is argued that if organizations pay adequate attention to fend off these deterrents or de-motivators, it is expected that both sides, i.e. consultant and client benefit from their mutual relationships.

Methodology

All academic staff at the Ferdowsi University of Mashhad who had been involved in providing consultancy to outside organizations through the Office of Scientific Cooperation between University and Society were invited to participate in the study. A random clustered method of sampling was used. Given that the total number of staff members involved in consulting projects (N=80), the error (ε =0.07) and the variance (σ²=0.023), the minimum sample number was calculated to be 38. The literature on consulting jobs, findings of previous studies and exploratory interviews with 12 academic staff in the population formed the basis for designing a questionnaire which aimed to assess dimensions and the extent of the university academic staff satisfaction in consulting projects. The questionnaire was tested in a pilot study and its Cronbach's Alpha was calculated to be 0.85. It then distributed among 50 academics of whom 42 completed and returned it. Descriptive statistics, t-test and regression formulae were used to analyse the collected data.

Findings

The results showed that the mean of length of service of the respondents was 15 years with the range between 3 to 28 years. The mean of number of projects academic were involved at the time was 2 with the range between 1 and 3. A t-test, using mean differences at 5% significance level, was performed to assess the respondents' satisfaction in consulting projects. The test used 3 as the value which indicates satisfaction for each variable included in the study. Table 2, shows the results for some of the variables. Letters "S", "A" and "D" denote satisfaction, average satisfaction and dissatisfaction respectively.

Table 2. T-test to assess academic consultants' satisfaction

ariable	Meaning Values	Mean Diff	Satisfaction	Variable	Meaning Values	Mean Difference	Satisfaction
Client interference	0.031	-0.11	D	Promotion of academic rank	0.038	-0.31	D
Incentive flexibility	0.017	-1.00	D	Appointment to Executive positions	0.047	-0.44	D
Trust in consultant	0.372	0.44	A	Playing multiple roles	0.022	0.66	S
Management commitment	0.104	0.44	A	Mental challenge	0.05	0.66	S
Realistic client expectations	0.04	-0.11	D	Bureaucracy in client organization	0.012	-0.44	D
Transparent client objectives	0.001	0.11	A	Access to resources and facilities	0.065	0.77	A

Table 3 shows the results for each of the primary group of variables, namely project management, consultant-client relationships, political-social and consultant personal characteristics.

Table 3. Academic satisfaction for each of the group of variables

Factors	Stat. Value	Degree of Freedom	Significance	Mean Diff.	Satisfaction
Project management	1.405	41	0.198	0.194	Average
Political-social	-0.768	41	0.025	-0.146	No
Consultant-client relationships	1.895	41	0.093	0.308	Average
Consultant Personal Characteristics	0.850	41	0.020	-0.125	Yes
Overall	2.06	41	0.073	0.203	Average

As seen in Table 3, the significance level for variables related to project management and consultant-client relationships is greater than 0.05 which implies that academics are somewhat satisfied with these groups of variables. In contrast, the significance level for the consultant personal characteristics variables is less than 0.05 which together with its positive mean difference suggests that academics are satisfied with this group of variables. Furthermore, political-social factor has significance level less than 0.05, but since its mean difference is negative, it may be said that academics are not satisfied with it. Finally, given that the significance level for all four factors together is greater than 0.05, it may be concluded that academics level of satisfaction with working on consulting projects for outside organizations is average.

Discussions and conclusions

The findings revealed that of 30 variables tested in the study, university academic staffs are somewhat satisfied with little more than half or 16 variables. Somewhat satisfied or average level of satisfaction means neither satisfaction nor dissatisfaction, rather an absence of dissatisfaction, as suggested by Herzberg's two factor theory of motivation. According to this theory, people feel satisfied with what they do when motivated by higher order needs or motivators, including achievement, recognition, advancement and growth (Herzberg et al. 1959).

Misconceptions, be real or fiction, about barriers in effectively delivering research or consulting project is the main reason for some academics to refuse to engage in these types of projects. The underlying cause of real barriers in consulting jobs that leads to academics dissatisfaction seems to relate to the structure of all centralized economy, including the overarching role of government in economic planning and activities, inefficient bureaucracy and lack of management accountability regarding their performance. In the private sector, barriers and challenges are more universal which include traditional organizational structure and management

that are inflexible, risk-averse and resistance to change. Most consultants complain about management lack of support in implementation phase of consulting project, management interference and delays in paying the consultant fee, as agreed in the contract. Thus, as Greiner and Metzger (1983) argue, consultant-client relationships should be within the framework set in the contractual agreement. Furthermore, the findings showed that consulting projects do not usually lead to scientific publication or job promotion, primarily due to the confidentiality of these types of projects, it is therefore as suggested that university administration should set rules and regulations that provide promotional opportunities for academic consultants with credentials and earning capacity and also to encourage other potential academics to actively seek consulting projects. In doing so, the university meets one of its primary objectives that is to solve societal problems.

One revealing finding expressed by some academics in interview sessions and in the questionnaire was the unusually large number of consulting jobs that are commenced without a written contract. The experience has shown that providing consulting services based on oral agreements often cost the consultant dearly. Some young and inexperienced academics may commit themselves to demanding and complex projects for personal reasons or friendly favor, which if they go wrong or the client reneged on its oral agreement leaves them with little or no return on their efforts and time and no legal avenue to turn to. It is therefore suggested that academic consultants should thoroughly think through all aspects of a consulting job offer, including the fit between their expertise/experience and client expectations, client willingness to support the project both financially and administratively and a legally-binding contract that is signed by both sides. A consulting contract should include items such as complete personal information of the consultant and client, objectives and nature of the job, client expectations, unit of work in the client organization, organization liaison officers, length of project and its conditions, project progress methods and conflict resolution approach, payment date or a phase for the work done and contract cancellation conditions. The objective of signing such a consulting contract is to reduce ambiguity, risk and feeling of dejection when providing or receiving consulting services.

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