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Gary I. Noble
University of Wollongong, gnoble@uow.edu.au

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Abstract
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Keywords
management, smes, client, their, impact, consultancy, consultant, relationships, outcomes

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Management consultant – client relationships: Their impact on consultancy outcomes in SMEs.

Gary Noble
Department of Marketing
University of Wollongong
Wollongong. NSW 2522, Australia.
Tel: +61 2 42215994
Email: gary_noble@uow.edu.au

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the findings of an empirical study that examined aspects of the consultant – client relationship (CCR) that affect the adoption of a consultant's recommendations in the context of a small or medium enterprise (SME). In addition, this study found that a SME client's judgement of the success of a consultancy project was based on three key factors – the financial change in the business, the gaining of new knowledge on operating an SME learnt through the consultancy and any new perspective on the business gained as a result of the consultancy.

These findings are drawn from three contrasting case studies each developed from interviews of client/owners in a government-sponsored program to assist SMEs through consultant development of business plans. These case studies explored the CCR from the client's perspective presenting an alternative perspective to the CCR from that contained in much of the consulting literature.

In the management consulting literature, there appears general agreement that the CCR is an important factor in determining if a consultant's recommendations are adopted or rejected by a client. Despite this significance, the CCR is most often represented and described in the literature from only two dominant perspectives, (1) in terms of the role of the consultant, and (2) in terms of the transactions that occur between a consultant and client. Neither perspective adequately explains the often unexpected outcomes of some consultancy projects, including the rejection of a consultant's recommendations. By identifying and exploring what might be important aspects of the CCR, in terms of social interactions, a greater understanding can be gained not only on the nature of the CCR but also its impact on a client's decision to adopt a consultant's recommendations and judge the success of a consultancy.

The three case studies revealed that, as suggested in the literature, both trust and power are important aspects of a CCR and can influence a client's decision to adopt a consultant's recommendations. However, the empirical findings suggest the literature requires clarification in both describing how trust may develop during a consultancy, and understanding the dynamics of power in the CCR. The study's findings also suggest that the influence of gender relations and the importance of communication flows along with a sense of obligation, reciprocity and commitment require further exposition in the consulting literature.

INTRODUCTION

Recent surveys (e.g., Gome 1999; Ernst & Young 1998; IBIS 1997) show an increase in the use of management consultants by the owners of small and medium enterprises (SMEs)[1] to assist in the planning of their businesses. With a number of government sponsored small business assistance programs, such as the 'Small Business Expansion Program' in New South Wales, encouraging the use of management consultants by SMEs through the provision of financial subsidies, this trend is likely to continue for the immediate future. However, despite increasing numbers of SMEs utilising the services of management consultants very few academic studies (notable exceptions being Sturdy 1997; Hankinson 1990 and McGivern 1983), have been undertaken with the purpose of investigating how management consultants function in the context of SMEs.

The purpose of this paper is to report, by way of presenting a summary of key findings, on an exploratory study into the use of management consultants by SME owners in the context of a State government supported SME assistance program. The study focused on two research questions, namely:

- What key aspects of the consultant – client relationship (CCR) in an SME affect the adoption of recommendations made by a consultant, and;
- How do SME owner/managers judge the 'success' of a consultancy project?

As a consequence of exploring the CCR, through an investigation of these two research questions, the study identified areas of existing theory regarding the process of management consulting that appear to be in need of further exposition by additional empirical research.

This paper begins by examining how the existing management consulting literature approaches and discusses the CCR. This discussion highlights the limitations of these approaches in assisting in an understanding of the outcomes of some consultancy projects, including a client's decision to accept or reject a consultant's recommendations. In the second half of the paper, findings from an exploratory study of the CCR in the context of an SME are described. These findings are drawn from three contrasting case studies developed from interviews of client/owners in a government-sponsored program to assist SMEs through consultant development of business plans. These case studies explored the CCR from the client's perspective presenting an alternative perspective to the CCR from that contained in much of the management consulting literature. As a result, accepted notions of the nature of trust and power within a CCR are drawn into a degree of question and aspects of the CCR not afforded priority in the literature including gender relations and the formation of a tacit agreement between consultant and client are described. This paper concludes by acknowledging the limitations of this study and indicating areas of additional future research.

THE CONSULTANT – CLIENT RELATIONSHIP (CCR)

There appears a general consensus in the management consulting literature as to the importance of the CCR in determining the success of an individual consultancy

[1] For the purpose of this paper, and related study, SMEs are defined as enterprises with fewer than 100 employees.

project (Bennett & Robson 1999; Czerniawska 1999; Jang, Suh & Lee 1997; Bork, Jaffe, Lane, Dashew & Heisler 1996; Clark 1995; Covin & Fisher 1991; Kubr 1986; McGivern 1983; Schein 1969; Tilles 1961). This general agreement extends to whether success is described in terms of satisfaction with the consulting process itself or with the outcomes of the consulting process. Despite suggesting the importance of the CCR in the success of a consultancy project, the consulting literature is not enlightening in discussing how the CCR impacts on a consultancy project. For example, the literature does not clearly identify those aspects of the CCR likely to influence a client in deciding to accept or reject a consultant's recommendations and judge a consultancy project a success or failure. Rather, discussion of the CCR is generally approached from one of two perspectives, either in terms of the 'roles' played by the consultant in the relationship or in terms of the nature of the 'transactions' that occur between a consultant and client.

Those writers who limit their approach and accompanying discussion of the CCR to the 'roles' the consultant may need to play during a consultancy (e.g., Bork et al 1996; Kubr 1986) seem to have borrowed heavily from the functionalist sociology literature that use the concept of 'social roles' as a means of analysing group and social interaction. Writers in this group often label the CCR according to their perception of the role the consultant takes on in the CCR, using expressions such as "expert role", "pair of hands role", "collaborative role" (Block 1981: 21) to describe the CCR. In the main, this approach can be described as prescriptive in its orientation with much emphasis being placed on giving rigid directions to consultants on what their role needs, or should be, in a CCR so as to ensure a 'successful' consulting project. Because of a focus on only the successful or ideal forms of the CCR and the role of just the consultant in the CCR, this literature as a whole is potentially limited and uninformed on the dynamics, characteristics and dimensions of the key aspects of a CCR.

A second group of writers in the management consulting literature, (e.g., Clark 1995; Lundberg 1994; Clark 1989; Schein 1969; Tilles 1961) consider and describe the CCR with reference to not only the roles played by both the consultant and the client, but also in terms of the nature of the 'transactions' that may occur between the two parties. This second group of writers can be described as adopting the 'transactional model' approach to the CCR. From such a perspective the CCR is often described as falling into one of three generalised categories, what are commonly labelled as; the "purchase – sale model", the "doctor – patient model" or the "constructive relationship model" (Tilles 1961: 88). As with the 'role' approach, the categorisation of the CCR depends primarily on the function of the consultant in each model. Although this approach to the CCR does acknowledge the interaction between consultant and client, in that it assumes a form of exchange that involves both parties in a degree of social interaction occurs, it does not adequately provide for an understanding or explanation of the nature of this interaction. That is, it does not indicate what aspects of the social interaction are significant and what social processes may facilitate or impede the 'transaction'.

Clark (1995) is an example of those who criticise the transactional model approach in the literature. He not only notes the lack of emphasis placed on the nature of the interaction between the consultant and client, but is also critical of the inherently rationalistic nature of the model. Clark (1995) suggest the transactional model can be

considered rationalistic since it assumes that both the client and consultant will, simply as a matter of course, play their respective roles in whatever the particular type of CCR is, purchase – sale, doctor – patient or constructive. Although the transactional model approach to the CCR appears embedded in the concept of social interaction it appears to steer clear of identifying explicitly what the important aspects of this interaction might be, such as trust and power.

It would be misleading to suggest there is a complete absence of reference in the management consulting literature to aspects of the social interaction between a consultant and client during a consultancy project. Words frequently associated with describing social relationships, such as trust, authority, commitment, respect, power, dependency and so on can all be found scattered throughout the management consulting literature (e.g., Schuyt & Schuijt 1998; Lipton 1995; Lundberg 1994; Covin & Fisher 1991). However, these words are used in a tacit manner, that is, they are not used to explain or describe the CCR in a discussion about its development and maintenance, but rather as taken for granted or accepted norms. An explanation as to why the literature treats the CCR in this way might be found in the argument of McGivern (1983) when he suggests that:

> *Most writers ... consider the relationship between the consultant and client to be almost entirely a matter of 'chemistry' and therefore not susceptible to any serious attempts by an individual to change ...people either get on or they do not" (McGivern 1983: 368).*

By identifying and exploring what might be important aspects of the CCR, in terms of social interactions, a greater understanding might be gained of the nature of the relationship and its impact on the outcomes of a consultancy project.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As this was intended only as an exploratory study of the CCR and how clients might judge the outcomes of consultancy projects, three qualitative case studies were developed from interviews of client/owners in a government sponsored program to assist SMEs through consultant development of business plans. These case studies explored the CCR from the client's perspective presenting an alternative perspective to the CCR from that contained in much of the consulting literature. Three cases proved sufficient to suggest what aspects of the CCR might be considered significant from a client's perspective and how SME clients might judge the success of a consultancy project.

With assistance from officers of the NSW Department of State and Regional Development (DSRD), three cases were selected for exploration from DSRD's 'Small Business Expansion Program' (SBEP). This program provides financial subsidies to SME owners to engage a management consultant in the preparation of a business plan that contains recommendations for the improvement of the enterprise's financial position. From their extensive knowledge of the three cases selected DSRD officers labelled one case as "a successful CCR", one "an unsuccessful CCR" and one "a typical CCR". In each case the client/owner of the SME was interviewed at the conclusion of the consultancy project to identify their perceptions and experience of the CCR.

In the case labelled by DSRD officers as "successful", not only has the business improved its financial position but also the client/owner has retained the services of the consultant even though government subsidies from the SBEP have now ended. In this case the client indicated that they considered, *both* the CCR itself and the consultancy outcome a "success". In the CCR labelled as "typical", the client stated there had been a "degree of improvement" in the financial performance of the business whilst the CCR itself was described as experiencing a turning point at which time the client withdrew her support for the consultant and described the CCR as being of "moderate success". In the final case explored, the business experienced a decline in its financial position immediately following the end of the consultancy and the CCR deteriorated in terms of any mutual cooperation during the course of the consultancy to a point where the client decided to end the consultancy project and relationship with the consultant.

A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the three respondents. Questions asked in each interview were designed to identify important aspects of the CCR from the client's perspective, including how they perceived of trust and power within a CCR, as well as how the client's come to judge the success of a consultancy. For example, trust in the CCR was investigated by asking each respondent a series of questions on this theme including what they perceived represented trust in a CCR, if they considered they trusted the consultant and if they considered the level of trust had changed during the course of the consultancy. The interviews occurred several months after the conclusion of the consultancy projects as signalled by the presentation of the final business plan by the consultant to the client. A feature of each of the three cases was the fact that, many of the consultant's recommendations had been made and implemented during the course of the consultancy project. The effect of this was that the client's had sufficient time to judge the success of the recommendations on their business by the time the case study interviews took place.

RESEARCH FINDINGS.

The findings of the study suggest, as indicated in the consulting literature, that trust and power are significant aspects of the CCR. However, they also suggest the consulting literature might not fully recognise or understand these aspects of the CCR and how they impact on the outcomes of a consultancy project involving an SME. The study's findings also suggest that there are several aspects of the CCR that clients may afford high priority and the literature does not or are important in understanding the nature and impact of a CCR. Significant amongst these emergent aspects of the study were the role of gender relations in the CCR and how notions of obligation, reciprocity and commitment combined to create a form of tacit agreement between consultant and client that appears to set the parameters for acceptable consultant and client behaviour during the consultancy. In relation to the second research question, the study's findings suggest that client's judge the success of a consultancy project not just in terms of any improvement in the SME's financial position. Success of the consultancy also appeared to be judged by the clients in term's of new knowledge on operating an SME learnt through the consultancy and any new perspective on their business gained as a result of the consultancy. In other words, learning appeared a critical component of the consultancy projects explored in this study.

Trust.
As Lane (1998: 3) suggests "trust is a concept with many meanings" and is important in providing a mechanism for individuals in a social relationship, such as a CCR, to cope with such issues as opportunism, uncertainty and risk. This appeared to be true in each case in this study, what the respondent regarded as 'trust' appeared an important factor in the client deciding to implement the consultant's recommendations. However, it was apparent in the findings that trust was not founded on perceptions of 'expertise', as suggested in the literature (Bashein & Markus 1997). Rather, trust appeared to be founded primarily on the client's perception of two factors. The first factor was what the respondents referred to as the "honesty factor", that is the consultant's willingness "to speak the truth", rather than mask their views regarding the current and future position of the business. The second factor on which the client's based their notions of trust was the "confidentiality factor". This was described as the ability of the consultant to protect the commercial sensitivity of the information they gained in the course of the project. Both of these notions of trust relate to the client's expectations of the consultant and so resemble what Lane (1998: 4) refers to as "calculative trust". In the three cases studied there appeared no evidence to suggest trust progressed to, or included, other forms of trust such as those based on shared cognitions or common values (Lane 1998) despite the length or perceived intimacy of the CCR. Not only did the level or type of trust they afforded the consultant not appear to increase incrementally as the relationship progressed, each respondent suggested the level of trust as capable of moving in both an upward and downward spiral as expectations of the respondent were or were not met.

The findings on trust in the CCR in this study also suggested that the respondents clearly distinguished, to the point of being mutually exclusive, between trusting the consultant as a person as compared with trusting the recommendations the consultant made. Clients "trusted" a consultant's recommendation on the basis of their expectation of gaining a benefit for the business from the recommendation against the risk of financial loss from implementing the recommendation. Most importantly, for a consultant's recommendations to be adopted by a client it appeared necessary for a client to have *both* trust in the consultant as a person as well as trust in the specific recommendation. This finding implies that suggestions in the literature that a consultant "needs to create a trusting relationship" (Bork et al 1996: 19) require additional clarification to recognise distinctions in what a client might be placing their trust in – the person or the recommendation. This finding might also shed some insight into those situations in which consultants have felt there existed a high degree of trust in the relationship and have been surprised at a client's decision to reject their recommendations (Czerniawska 1999).

Power.
Like trust, power is considered in the literature an important aspect of a CCR. In the consulting literature the term 'power' appears to be generally used to refer to the dominance of one party in the relationship and their ability to control the direction of the consultancy project. This perception of power appeared to match that of the respondents in this study.

In the consulting literature some writers (e.g., Clark 1995; Block 1981) appear to suggest that power is the sole domain of the consultant with dependency being the assumed fate of the client in a CCR. These same writers suggest the power of the

consultant stems from a client's perception of a consultant's credibility and expertise. In such circumstances where power lies predominantly in the hands of the consultant the literature places emphasis on the consultant in a CCR ensuring that, for the benefit of a collaborative relationship, power and dependency be "both mutual and in balance" (McGivern 1983: 368). The findings of this study did not appear to support these views within the literature.

In one case the client could perceive of no power existing in the CCR. That is, the respondent considered that no one party dominated or controlled the relationship, as the respondent stated "...there were no power struggles...we looked at each other pretty much as equals". In the remaining two cases studied the client's perceived they possessed most power in the CCR. This power being in the form of being able to 'hire and fire' the consultant at their discretion, a form of power one client exercised in the course of the consultancy. In none of the cases studied was any form of power attributed by the clients to perceptions of a consultant's expertise. The perceived expertise of a consultant appeared an important factor in the initial selection of the consultant for the project after which point perceptions of expertise appeared to recede and had little ongoing impact on the CCR itself.

The perceptions by the clients in this study of who possessed most power in the CCR not only contrast with assertions in the literature as to the power of the consultant they also appear to contrast with assertions in the literature that power needs to be perceived by consultant and client alike as being 'in balance' for a productive and collaborative CCR to exist (e.g., Clark 1995; Lipton 1995; Block 1981; Tilles 1961). In the cases in which the client considered they had most power, and communicated this to the consultant, the relationship still appears to have been productive in generating recommendations by the consultant that were implemented by the client.

Emergent Themes.

A number of themes emerged from this study not given significance in the literature but were afforded priority by the respondents. Two such themes include the role of gender relations and the development of a tacit agreement between the consultant and client. Both themes appeared to influence a client's decision to adopt a consultant's recommendations.

In the cases studied there existed a mixture of male and female clients and consultants with these gender differences appearing to have been a factor in defining the nature of the CCR in all three cases. Specifically, it appears from the data that gender relations was a factor in determining the level of 'comfort' experienced in the CCR. In the same gender CCR the degree of social distance in the relationship as evidenced in the level of informality in the relationship appears relatively small. Although not discussed in the consulting literature, it may be that clients and consultants are more likely to interact more positively with members of the same gender. As a result, gender relations may impact on the client's perception of trust and power and subsequently on their decisions regarding a consultant's recommendations. The issue of gender relations does not appear to receive any level of priority in the consulting literature, accordingly this may impinge upon the literatures ability to account for the diversity and complexity of some CCRs and their outcomes.

As with gender relations, the literature does not appear to place emphasis on how obligation and reciprocity might function within a CCR and their importance in a consultancy project. The interview findings suggest that mutual obligation and reciprocity might play an important part in the development of commitment between the consultant and client. As commitment developed in the CCRs studied there appeared to also develop an agreement between the consultant and client, largely tacit in nature and different to notions of trust within the CCR. This tacit agreement appears to have been perceived as binding on both parties and is largely moral in nature and not governed by any formal contract. One respondent in the study made reference to a "bargain" between her and the consultant, an arrangement in which she felt "...expected to complete tasks" such as gathering information relevant to the consultants next visit whilst also having expectations of the consultant such as "...turning up on time". The importance of this tacit agreement lies in its role to set parameters for the expectations of the behaviour of both parties during the course of the consultancy. Additional research into the nature of this tacit agreement and its influence on the level of co-operation between a consultant and client appears justified.

Success?

The second research question that this study explored was how do SME owners judge the 'success' of a consultancy project? The literature suggests success is most often associated with and judged by a client in terms of a project's ability to achieve pre-determined goals (Jang, Suh & Lee 1997). In each of the cases studied the agreed goal between the consultant and the client for the project was an improvement in the financial performance of the business. This was not achieved to any significant extent in two of the cases studied, yet despite this, these consultancy projects were still judged by the clients involved as a "success". Perceptions of success also did not appear to depend on the nature of the CCR, for in the two cases where significant difficulties were experienced in the CCR, the consultancy project itself was still regarded as successful.

Success appeared dependent on three factors. Firstly, the ability of the consultant to improve the financial performance of the business appears important in determining both how the clients judge the CCR and the consultancy itself. However, of additional importance in judging the success of the consultancy is an increase in the client's knowledge of operating an SME along with the perceived quality of new "ideas" or "perspectives" on the business that a consultant can provide. In other words, what appears important to a client is both the achievement of pre-determined goals as well as the level of learning resulting from a project.

CONCLUSION

It is accepted that there are a number of limitations to the findings of this study. These limitations include not only the number of cases explored but also various contextual factors concerning each case such as the methodology of each of the consultants and the impact of a third party (DSRD) in providing funding for the consultancy project. However, despite these limitations, the consistency in the findings in the three contrasting cases point to the importance of certain aspects of the CCR over others in influencing a client's decision to adopt a consultant's recommendations and how they

come to judge the success of a project. The findings also assist in identifying possible 'gaps' in the literature as well as avenues for future research.

Some findings on trust and power within the CCRs studied appeared to conflict with widely held assertions in the literature. Trust, as suggested in the consulting literature, is perhaps the single most important factor in determining the success of both the CCR and the outcomes of a consulting project. However, in each case studied, trust was regarded as high regardless of the overall outcome of the project and how the client perceived the success of the project. This appears to contradict a general assumption in the literature (e.g., Stroh 1987; McGivern 1983; Block 1981) that a successful consultancy and CCR is *always* associated with a high level of trust. In a similar manner, power in the cases studied did not support the widely held assertion (e.g., Clark 1995; Lipton 1995) that power rests in the domain of the consultant only. In two cases the clients perceived that they possessed a greater level of power than the consultant. In addition, when viewed from the perspective of the client, other aspects of the CCR, such as gender relations and the formation of a tacit agreement, appear to take on significance in understanding the impact of the CCR yet are not considered important in the consulting literature. As a result the literature may be potentially misleading and ill informed.

This paper points to the need for additional formal research to investigate the apparent contradictions in the literature identified in this exploratory study and to gain clearer insights into the CCR and its impact on a consultancy project's outcomes. In contrast with much of the existing literature this study aimed to explore the CCR from the client's perspective, further empirical research from this perspective appears important to increasing the density of the existing management consulting literature. Such future research may wish to involve a larger sample representing a range of contextual conditions. Specific issues identified in this study that appear to warrant future research include:

- Clarifying the nature and dimensions of trust and power within a CCR.
- Investigating further the impact of gender relations on the outcomes of consultancy projects.
- Examining the development of any tacit agreements between a consultant and client and how their breach, by either party to the CCR, may influence feelings of dissonance within a CCR.

Empirical research into these and other aspects of the CCR from a client's perspective would assist in clarifying what appear ambiguous notions within the existing management consulting literature and add further to our knowledge of the management consulting process in the context of SMEs.

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