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Knowledge and relationship of consultants as key in management consulting industry: the case of Portugal consulting sector

Renato Lopes da Costa*

Business Research Unit (BRU-IUL),
ISCTE – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa,
Lisbon, Portugal
Email: renatojlc@gmail.com
*Corresponding author

Leandro Pereira

WINNING Lab,
ISCTE – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa,
Lisbon, Portugal
Email: leandro.pereira@iscte-iul.pt

Álvaro Dias

Universidade Lusófona de Humanidades e Tecnologias,
Campo Grande 376, 1749-024 Lisboa, Portugal
and
ISCTE – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa,
Lisbon, Portugal
Email: alvaro.dias1@gmail.com

José Santos

WINNING Lab,
ISCTE – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa,
Lisbon, Portugal
Email: jose.santos@winning.pt

Rui Gonçalves

ISCTE – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa,
Lisbon, Portugal
Email: ruiahgoncalves@gmail.com

Abstract: In a volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (V.U.C.A.) world the consultancy industry plays a critical role in helping companies to continues change and transform their business model. The scientific literature of management consulting affirms that this industry is an extraordinary sector and a phenomenon in the business context, however, there's a lack of research

in this area to deeply understand how the sector is able to continue attractive and sustainable. To approach the lack of studies in this emerging area, this article aims to understand the role of consultants as knowledge-providers and simultaneously to realise the relative importance of the type of relationships to be built. Semi-structured interviews and questionnaires were applied to management consultants and SME managers in Portugal. Results show that consultants should provide not only a strategic but also structural perspective in the development of their work, relationships that are created within projects, between projects, and those that are created before projects.

Keywords: management consulting; relationships; strategy-as-practice; SAP; Portugal.

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Biographical notes: Renato Lopes da Costa holds a PhD in General Management, Strategy and Business Development by ISCTE (Portugal). He has articles published in several specialised journals in the East, the USA, Canada, Africa, South America and Portugal. He is currently a researcher and member of BRU-UNIDE and a professor at INDEG where he holds the post of director of the MScBA (Master in Business Administration) and guides students in the development of master's and PhD theses. He teaches business strategy modules in executive and post-graduate master's degrees. Since 2013 he has also accumulated teaching duties as an invited professor at the Military Academy where he teaches the knowledge management.

Leandro Pereira is a CEO and Founder of Winning Scientific Management, University Professor and Director of Master's Degrees at ISCTE Business School, being also the President and Founder of the largest global association in the area of Value Creation – the Business Case Institute – as well as Chairman of the Association for Strategic Planning for the Iberian market. He is a training specialist for the auditors of the Court of Auditors for the areas of economic and social value creation and for management auditing.

Álvaro Dias is a Professor of Strategy at Instituto Superior de Gestão and ISCTE-IUL, both in Lisbon, Portugal. He got his PhD in Management from Universidad de Extremadura, Spain, after an MBA in International Business. He has over 24 years of teaching experience. He has had several visiting positions in different countries and institutions including Brazil, Angola, Spain, Poland and Finland. He regularly teaches in English, Portuguese, and Spanish at undergraduate, master and doctorate levels, as well as in executive programs. He has produced extensive research in the field of tourism and management, including books, book chapters, papers in scientific journals and conference proceedings, case studies, and working papers.

José Santos is a PhD student and Head of Winning LAB the scientific laboratory of his company Winning Scientific Management. He has an extensive knowledge in management and already published several scientific papers and well as participated in several conferences as speaker. He has more than ten years of professional experience.

Rui Gonçalves holds a PhD in Management from Instituto Superior de Economia e Gestão, with research in information systems for operational risk management, a Master in Statistics and Information Management from NOVA Information Management School (NOVA IMS), with research in the area of intelligent agents, and a degree in Business Management from the International University. He is currently a Guest Assistant Professor at NOVA IMS and works as Manager in the Business Expertise division at SAS Portugal. In recent years, he has coordinated the areas of operational risk, compliance, fraud, audit and money laundering.

1 Introduction

In the same line of other fields of management domain, the evolution of the strategic disciplines in the organisations has been broadly diffused by the management consulting industry, this being the main reason why Canback (1998) describes this sector as the way to success which must be embraced by companies in the contextualisation of their strategic orientation and their professionals as the true disseminators of the complex phenomenon of business evolution until today is known. Considering a historical retrospective, the benefits of the management consulting industry were already clear in terms of the influence and contribution to the industries' growth in the 1950s (Stryker, 1954). For this same reason, Drucker (1979) 25 years later, approach it as an extraordinary sector and a unique phenomenon in the business context and not only by the unique, singular, objective and independent aid that translates into solving concrete problems (Greiner and Metzger, 1983; Canback, 1999) but also by the experience that it transports and that appears usually related to results with high productivity (Fincham, 2010).

At the international level, although the progress and heterogeneity of the scientific studies carried out in recent decades in the area of strategic consulting by prestigious authors such as Sturdy (2009), Kaiser and Kampe (2005), McGivern (1983), McLarty and Robinson, 1998), Fincham et al. (2008), Karantinou and Hogg (2009), Werr and Styhre (2002), Jackall (1988), Clark (2004), Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009), Whittington (2007) and Lundgren and Blom (2009) had added value, what should be retained is that strategic workers have not received much attention in the strategic field of research. Whittington (2007) gives an example of this emphasising that until 2007 had not been published any article approaching consultancy in the *Strategic Management Journal*.

Considering a more practical component, although the recent 'strategy-as-practice' (SAP) movement has implied some attention given to the consultants' importance (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2005), the truth is that this almost has not been reflected in SAP literature, excluding the research conducted by McLarty and Robinson (1998), Kaiser and Kampe (2005), and Lundgren and Blom (2009), the latter with a high degree of exposure as it is presented on the international community's website of academics and practitioners of strategy as practice. Thus, to combat the lack of studies in this emerging area, it is necessary to penetrate this market and to understand this activity, bringing to the academic field a considerable amount of information to contribute, in a concrete way, to the development of this field of research and one of the ways to accomplish it through the understanding and definition of the main characteristics and factors that lead to the identification of this industry identity,

perceiving its relationship with the market in terms of knowledge, rather than identifying it only with a set of static techniques to be applied (Fincham and Clark, 2002).

In this sense, the present study seeks to contribute to the development of scientific knowledge in the management consulting sector through the following objectives:

- *Research objective 1:* understand whether management consulting in Portugal is the basis of a reactive or proactive activity.
- *Research objective 2:* understanding whether the role of management consultants should provide a more strategic perspective linked to the consultancy practices and its implementation to address/solve them, or a more structural perspective as a consequence of international economic changes requiring a cooperative change in the most diverse contexts.
- *Research objective 3:* understand if, in terms of creating relationships and confidence between consultants and clients, the most important are created during the projects or those that are maintained between each project.

2 Literature review

Investigating the nature, characteristics and strategic importance of relationships in management consulting, thus becomes a preponderant aspect for the understanding and relevance of the construction of an increasingly important sector in terms of business, although in this field it was not still achieved a good understanding of what consultants and clients do, and especially what they do effectively together, which makes “the interactive process between consultants and clients still poorly understood” [Engwall and Kipping, (2006), p.8]. Since 1961, many authors have generally agreed that the relationships between consultants and clients were one of the key aspects of a successful consulting process (Rogers, 1961; Ford 1974; Swartz and Lippitt, 1975; Torbert, 1976; Davey, 1979; Kürb, 1976). Kürb (1976), for example, mentions in his work that consulting success consists of reading, listening, being patient and modest, and working in an organised and disciplined way, so that clients perceive what the consultant will do and which field will be their responsibility. Thus, the author defines two fundamental aspects of consulting, the analysis and solution of the problem, and the relationship between consultants and clients.

But, even though there are authors today who express their opinion by reinforcing consulting relationships as a critical factor for success, seeking to convey what factors should be considered in the search for the creation and maintenance of safe relationships, by the end of the decade very little was conveyed in this regard. The example of this is reflected in the book written by Kürb (1976), in which in a total of 350 pages only three pages approached this subject. As argued by many authors, developing relationships is an effective strategic pathway for building competitive advantage (Christopher et al., 2002; Gronroos, 1990; Gummesson, 2002; O’Malley and Tynan, 2003; Palmatier et al., 2006; Payne and Holt, 2001; Thakur et al., 2006), bringing tangible and intangible benefits (Karantinou and Hogg, 2009) to consulting firms, and may be associated with improved financial performance, business leverage, when achieving reputation, an uncertainty decrease and an efficiency shift (e.g., Buttle, 1996; Christopher et al., 2002; Gronroos, 1990; Gummesson, 2002; Moller and Halinen, 2000).

However, if the development of successful relationships is beneficial for the consultants, according to Karantinou and Hogg (2009), it also does not stop being for clients, because a strategic partnership allows the improvement of the collaborative factor and the levels of openness between the two parties, and levels of efficiency and trust, taking advantage of a set of assets that will allow the consulting firm to improve the understanding of customer needs and circumstances, diminishing the transaction costs and the levels of uncertainty. According to Fincham (1999), Ackroyd and Lawrenson (1996), Schein (1988), Argyris (1990) and Clark (1995) nevertheless, safe relationships are always created in a future success assumption, passing according to the authors by a joint work which will provide a more strategic perspective on consultancy practices and their implementation to solve them or, in a more structural perspective, as a consequence of the international economic changes that require cooperative changes in the most diverse contexts.

The high level of client involvement and personal contact in the delivery of services, the high level of professionalism involved in these services, the power balance (Pressey and Mathews, 2000) and the great experience and quality of the stakeholders are thus characteristics that have a significant impact on the judicious selection that clients make and on the possibility of creating loyalty bonds (Gluckler and Armbrüster, 2003; Halinen, 1997; Koelemeijer and Uriens, 1998; Mitchell, 1994; Thakor and Kumar, 2000).

Given the specificity of these factors, it seems pertinent to untangle one of the first views of the 1960s about the link between consultants and clients. One of the first ways to see the relationship between consultants and clients was constructed from the medical-patient denomination, which is an analogy that the consulting profession usually does, probably because it is an attractive way of building it (Tilles, 1961).

If to these explanations is added the fact that such analogy expects, in a certain way, an abstraction of the executive class in terms of responsibility for the diagnosis and the complete absence of managers' effort, the logical way to start talking about the consultants should according to Tilles (1961) refer to the question of the desired results since this determines what kind of aid should be sought and the type of role the responsible manager should take during the relationship.

According to the author, many managers begin a relationship with a consultant without first take time to carefully consider what they exactly intend to achieve by doing so. What often happens is that instead of looking at the results, the manager sees the relationship with the consultant as a purchase of a specific set of techniques. Sometimes it turns out that this technique is exactly what was needed. However, most often, the opposite leads this factor to cause one of the most common causes of failure in the consultant-client relationship. Thus, it is assumed that the role of the consultant as a researcher must change taking into account the different actors and interlocutors of each process to ensure that the rules of the game are not distorted, being the consultant' responsibility the research about the clients and the future use of different methods, to create an interdependent relationship that is mutually beneficial to the parties involved and which allows the creation and maintenance of safe relationships (McGivern, 1983). Therefore, for the maintenance and development of efficient relationships by consultants and clients, the following factors should be considered (Table 1).

Table 1 Factors that contribute to the development of relationships ‘within projects’

	<i>Consultants</i>	<i>Clients</i>	<i>Both</i>
Factors that contribute to the development of relationships ‘within projects’	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop the client’s trust spirit based on good relationships so that they can manage the post-project with greater comfort. • Foster joint work, since a higher number of interventions, will create better. • Rigorous criteria selection in terms of competence, credibility, and experience of the consultant(s) project’s leader. • Transparency of processes, values, and objectives. • Careful handling of the process in terms of service delivery. • Characteristics and individual arrangement of consultants. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Definition of what is expected to achieve (costs, productivity, time, satisfaction). • Periodic evaluation of the consultants compared to the initially established. • Definition and communication to the collaborators of the project contribution that will help the performance of their activities. • Open-mindedness and accessibility. • Aid facilitates. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outline an orientation regarding the type of relationship to be established

Source: Tilles (1961) and Karantinou and Hogg (2009)

The results here presented are involved in some ambiguity, but what is important is to illustrate a set of factors that must be carefully analysed to build a solid base of behaviours to have, so that relationships are developed, in this case fundamentally linked to short-term aspects. On the other hand, unfortunately, when evaluating the effects of change, many managers tend to think in terms of improving a single criterion, which considering Table 1 is perceived as a mistake. The responsible manager must think in more than one criterion for evaluating the change, choosing the combination that seems more appropriate to be able to later remit the active role of formulation and realisation to the consultant, allowing the consultant to balance objectives of short and long-range within short and measurable time frames for the use of these services.

According to Karantinou and Hogg (2009), another problem emerges. It is that if many clients are more focused on the task at hand and short-term benefits without emphasising any concern about the development of long-term relationships, some see the preliminary advantages of relationships in terms of continuity and consistency, perceived risk reduction, empathy, personal attention, trust and openness, and increased speed and efficiency, and are therefore more interested in service-related aspects and investment-linked to long-term benefits, which brings this paradigm to the retention

problem. The debate in terms of the retention argument, linked to the fact that it consists of a competitive advantage strategy for many active consultants, has been an intensely active paradigm so that the sector related to the management consultancy and marketing needs much more empirical studies to develop the investigative reliability for the various conclusions that have been obtained. It was from this 'gap' that Karantinou and Hogg (2009) distinguished between two different types of relationships, the so-called 'within-project relationships', linked to the course of action during the interactive process between consultants and clients, and the relationships 'between-project relationships', these being constructed as a result of long-term links between the stakeholders (Table 2).

Table 2 Factors that contribute to the development of relationships between projects¹

<i>Factors that contribute to the development of successful relationships 'between projects'</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisational philosophies similarity • Organisational objectives similarity • Personal chemistry existence between individuals • Empathy and commitment • Personal and organisational trust • Existence of good personal relationships • Conduct and manage relationships between different levels

Notes: ¹Considering long-term relationships as a significant strategy of profitability (Karantinou and Hogg, 2009) – ideas also found in previous experiences carried out by Payne and Holt (2001), Christopher et al. (2002) and Palmatier et al. (2006).

Source: Karantinou and Hogg (2009)

According to Karantinou and Hogg (2009), the construction of the set of factors necessary for the development of efficient projects in the area of management consulting results, therefore, from the intersection of ambiguity and simultaneously consistency between these two factors, both of which are directly and indirectly linked. While 'within-project relationships' provide a foundation and can affect the development of long-term relationships, on the other hand, it increases the likelihood of achieving excellent results for client' organisations and subsequently their satisfaction at the end of different processes.

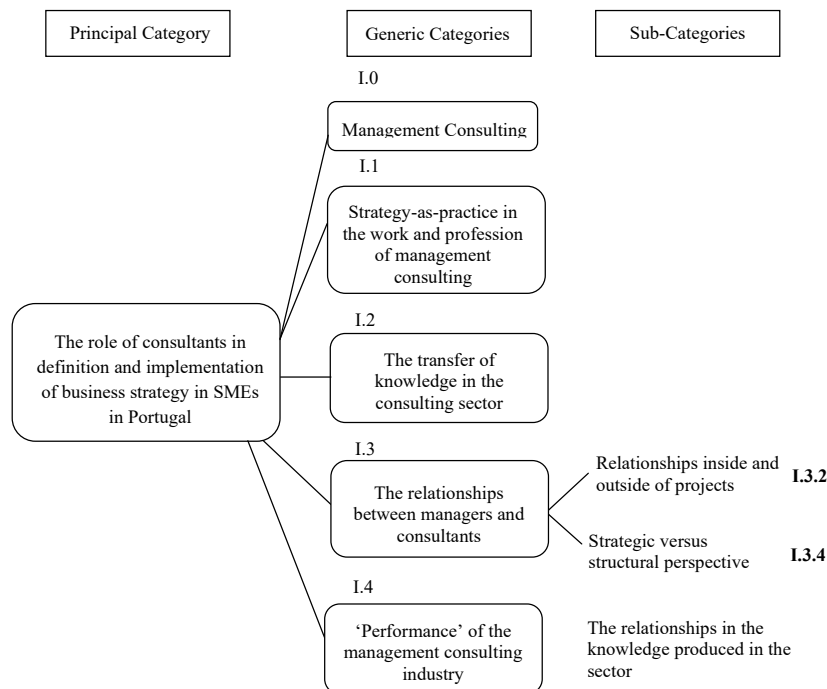
Thus, identifying the elements that can build a link of significant high quality in the relationships must be taken into account for the development of efficient consulting projects and becomes a vital step for the construction of knowledge in the literature field. Although we have to take into account that such construction is implicit in a high degree of subjectivity given the different interpretations that can occur concerning quality, different preferences in terms of the type of behaviours to obtain from relations between actors (more formal or informal behaviours), different perceptions and visions of effectiveness and quality coming from the different hierarchical levels of the organisations, and different experiences of the consultants themselves.

3 Methodology

The present investigation was based on a pragmatic or inductive character and was conducted from a non-probabilistic sample for convenience, constituted according to the availability and accessibility of the elements addressed (Carmo and Ferreira, 1998), in this case by management consultants and senior managers of Portuguese SMEs. In this sense, 300 questionnaires were sent to SMEs and 350 to management consultants (including 50 independent consultants) via e-mail. There have been 37 returned questionnaires from PME managers and 29 from management consultants, totaling 66 questionnaires filled with a response rate of 10.15%. The data was collected between May/2019 and November/2019, mainly based on LinkedIn profiles of consultancy individuals in the first and second relationships from the authors, inviting them directly to participate in the research.

However, considering that the interest of this research was centered on discovering the meaning and to represent the experiences of multiple realities, it was also used as a qualitative method of analysis the realisation of 17 interviews with 9 senior management consultants and 8 managers of SMEs in Portugal. In terms of the qualitative analysis technique used to interpret the data reproduced from the interviews, this was translated into a content analysis, trying to relate the semantic (meaningful) structures with the sociological structures (meanings) of the utterances, to articulate the text surface with the factors that determine their characteristics – psychosocial variables, cultural context, processes (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Categorisation and coding of the interview corpus for qualitative analysis



Source: The authors

In summary, this research was based on a set of primary sources, from the application of surveys on the form of 17 semi-structured interviews to 9 consultants and 8 managers of SMEs, and the application of questionnaires with open and closed questions to 29 consultants and 37 SME managers, being the representative sample of the group of respondents predominantly male (63%), whose ages have an arithmetic average value of 37 years. Almost all respondents are educated at a higher education level and have been working in their current companies on average for about 8 years. It should also be noted that the sample at the SME level is fundamentally linked to the retail and consulting area in the most diverse sectors of activity that compose the business management area.

4 Results

As mentioned earlier in this research, many authors define management consultants as creators and disseminators of the knowledge generated in the industry, providing ideas and practices that often end up unlocking resistance to changes in organisations, although, as noted in this research, at SME level, these are almost always linked to reactive records – content analysis (Table 3).

Table 3 Content analysis - management consulting as a reactive activity rather than proactive

<i>Content analysis – interviews</i>			
<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Text</i>	<i>Category generic</i>	<i>Sub-category</i>
Consultant 3	SMEs, for example, are not so proactive but are always reactive. They cannot anticipate so much, even though they live and feel the context, because they are in the sector, but react or follow. For example in the wine sector, until recently its market was national, and from time to time the national market was transformed and the capacity of supply surpassed. Some of the cooperatives closed because they did not have the capacity, and the sector, having no capacity to innovate and to launch new projects, resorted to internationalisation. So what we have witnessed, one started to come out, another to come out, and now we have almost no company that does not already have its sales in the foreign market.	1.3	1.3.4
Consultant 8	Often what we find in an SME is someone who has an extraordinary ability to see and who can have an extraordinary market and sectorial reading, and who has a highly interesting competitive path. There are some cases like this. But always linked to second level practices, that is, reactive practices.	1.3	1.3.4
Consultant 5	I already had two consulting companies of which I participated in the capital and that had almost 30 people, and almost always I had to deal with situations in SMEs already in decadence, trying to react.	1.3	1.3.2

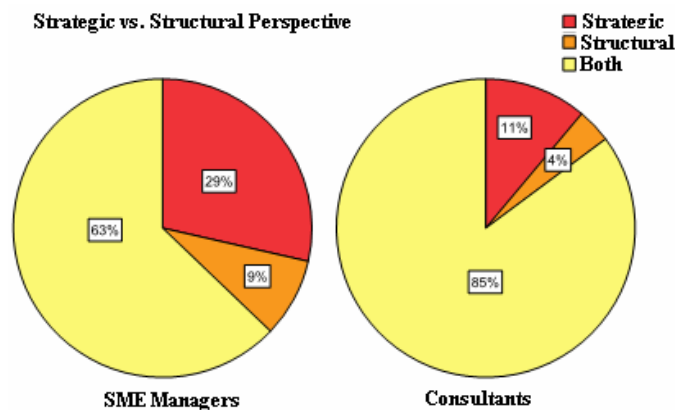
Source: The authors

Table 3 Content analysis - management consulting as a reactive activity rather than proactive (continued)

<i>Content analysis – interviews</i>			
<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Text</i>	<i>Category generic</i>	<i>Sub-category</i>
Consultant 5	One lives in a context that can be often aggressive for the consultant himself. The consultant does not even know if he can ever receive his fees. The company may be in a stage where when asks for help it is already too late. Usually, men change in two ways, and companies are the same. 99% is for pain, 1% is for vision. When someone thinks that he is feeling the company hitting valves and that it takes a new vision, I would say that in these cases, there is a strategy. We can afford to make a strategy with all the letters. In the remaining 99% of cases, companies have the pain.	1.3	1.3.4

Source: The authors

In this context, the role of management consultants should provide a more strategic perspective and implementation of consultancy practices to address them, or a more structural perspective as a consequence of international economic changes that require a cooperative change in the most diverse contexts (Fincham, 1999; Ackroyd and Lawrenson, 1996). Figure 2 shows the evaluation of respondents [from consultants and clients (managers)] in the perspective of the provision of a more strategic approach and the implementation of consultancy practices to solve them, or a more structural perspective as a consequence of the international economic changes that require cooperative changes in the most varied contexts.

Figure 2 Strategic vs. structural perspective (see online version for colours)

Source: The authors

Table 4 summarises the results of content analysis, specifying the role of the management consultants should provide a strategic perspective linked to the consulting practices and their implementation to solve them, and structural as a consequence of the international economic changes that require cooperative changes in the most varied contexts. Combined with Figure 2 is possible to recognise the role of the management consultant

should always be contemplated in these two aspects, not being able to be considered without the other, on the one hand trying to solve problems of an organisational nature and, on the other hand, trying to fit them into the constant changes of the international economy.

Table 4 Content analysis

<i>Content analysis – interviews</i>			
<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Interviewee</i>
Consultant 1	Both, although often have to do with the project and the client. It is always analysed what is most important.	1.3	1.3.4
Consultant 3	The two things are interconnected. It is impossible to make a strategy without taking into account the situation. This is impossible. It is unthinkable not only in terms of the contextual perspective, of the conjuncture, but also of the structure itself. Competitors, customers, suppliers. You cannot design a strategy without taking into account the situation. Not to mention the political, social, technological, and environmental aspects that are also so popular today. That is, strategy without the structural part is a shot in the dark. Like playing Russian roulette.	1.3	1.3.4
Consultant 4	When the strategy is developed, one cannot be immune to what goes on in the broadest terms. The strategy has to respond to what happens, that is, to the two approaches mentioned. But everything depends a lot on our projects.	1.3	1.3.4
Consultant 5	Again I cannot give more importance to one than the other. The two are important, however, there are projects where you lean more to one, where you realise that you should lean more to another.	1.3	1.3.4
Consultant 6	I do not think we can dissociate strategy from the structure. Usually, our projects always have these two variables.	1.3	1.3.4
Consultant 8	At this moment the structural question is conditioning much the strategic aspect. I tend to be relatively optimistic by nature, and in the company I often say, let's invest, and I define my idea of how that company could develop.	1.3	1.3.4

Source: The authors

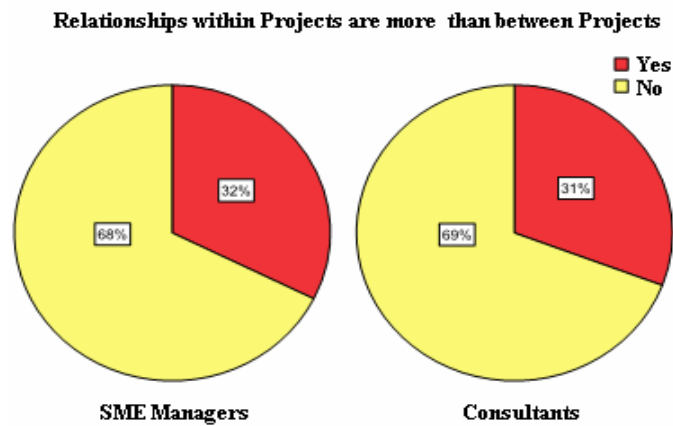
On the other hand, another finding obtained from the theoretical and practical developments during the development of this research, confirmed even in the previous subchapter, is that the development of successful relationships has a preponderant role in optimising the results that can be obtained in the scope of management consulting projects. But is it more important in terms of creating safe relationships between consultants and clients that are created within projects, or those that are maintained between each project? The answers can be found in Figure 3 and Table 5.

Table 5 Content analysis - the importance of creating relationships between management consultants and clients (managers) 'within projects' and 'between projects'

<i>Content analysis – interviews</i>			
<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Interviewee</i>
Consultant 3	Both. So I do not think there's a rigid rule in this. I continue to insist, the quality, the fulfilment of the deadline, the service, are always the aspects that feed and that have fed them. Then there are always price variables, but that is something else.	1.3	1.3.2
Consultant 4	I think they are both important. In a relationship, consultant-client, you should not separate projects, and ideally is the relationship is always maintained. While the project is being run to ensure, when the project is over, the consultant has to show interest, and realise how you are running, what was the impact produced. Therefore, this relationship must be continuous, and not only when the project takes place.	1.3	1.3.2
Consultant 6	In the first project, there is no relation. Someone calls us. I do not know this person, eventually, he may come recommended from another client, so he already takes anything there in my favour, but there is no relation. The relationship begins to build up before there is a project, and as I also say, the customer will only buy if the trust has already been achieved. If you do not accept that person will get your hands on your organisation. There is a third variable, the before. Besides being before, you must cultivate it.	1.3	1.3.2
Consultant 6	Sometimes we just need to point out our concern to this customer. Sometimes it also goes through a phase where the project ends at an initial stage a monthly contact to ask if things are going well, if there is news, to schedule a lunch.	1.3	1.3.2
Consultant 6	Then there are always those typical moments like Christmas that can provide a more warm contact, a gift that can be sent, a personalised Christmas postcard, a special electronic mail. These are points of contact that help to maintain the relationship.	1.3	1.3.2
Consultant 6	Then, although it is very variable, it is frequent in my case, in particular, to maintain the relationship with clients, through a phone call, whatever the pretexts, if it is going well, concerns with resources, concerns with a director, concerns of financial scope, personal concerns, the matter is vast. Is it better? So what about that? Did you get around? Then lunch. We have lunch sometimes. And sometimes it is at this lunch that the need for more work is detected.	1.3	1.3.2

Source: The authors

Figure 3 The importance of relationships created within projects and between-consulting projects (see online version for colours)

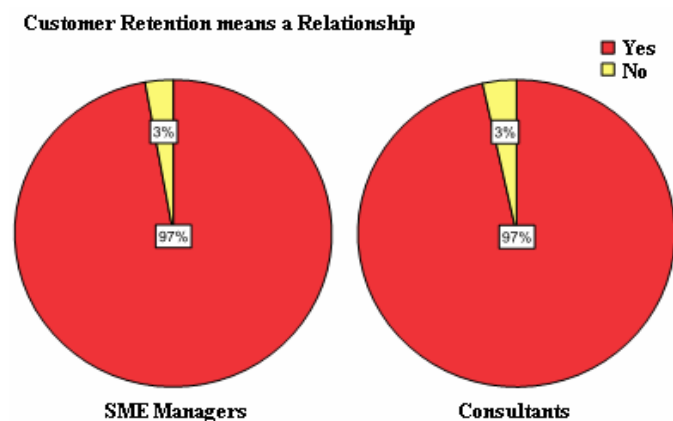


Note: Yes – more important are those that are created within projects; are created between projects.

Source: The authors

From the questionnaire data and reports collected from consultants and clients through the interviews, what is verified is that you cannot and should not separate projects, and the ideal is that relationships can always be maintained continuously. However, what happens in practice in Portugal is that this monitoring is not very usual or frequent and, although it is seen that sometimes consultants during the development of the projects create conditions for the construction of future relations, the truth is that the long-term perspective in the post-project is not cultivated and normally does not exist, being this key factor fundamental to generate repeated business and projects. It was important to note, however, the existence of a third unequal variable in the studies of Karantinou and Hogg (2009), namely 'pre-project' relationships, an essential element of confidence-building until the moment of sale.

Figure 4 Customer retention for relationship-building purposes (see online version for colours)



Source: The authors

Since relationships built between management consultants and clients (managers) are a key factor in generating repeat business and projects, does this mean that customer retention can suggest the idea that some kind of relationship has been built or created between the parties? Figure 4 presents the evaluation of respondents [consultants and clients (managers)] related to customer retention for relationship-building purposes (yes – customer retention means creating a relationship; no – customer retention does not mean creating a relationship)

Based on the third part of the conceptual framework of Karantinou and Hogg (2009), whose perspective refers to the nature of the interactions themselves, to the existence and characteristics of the relationships and the potential costs and benefits of these same relationships as a result of active participation of the interactions of the actors (consultants and clients), this research sought to realise to what extent the benefits and costs of the relationships created in a management consulting project can be counted quantitatively and if this is carried out by the consulting companies in Portugal.

5 Discussion

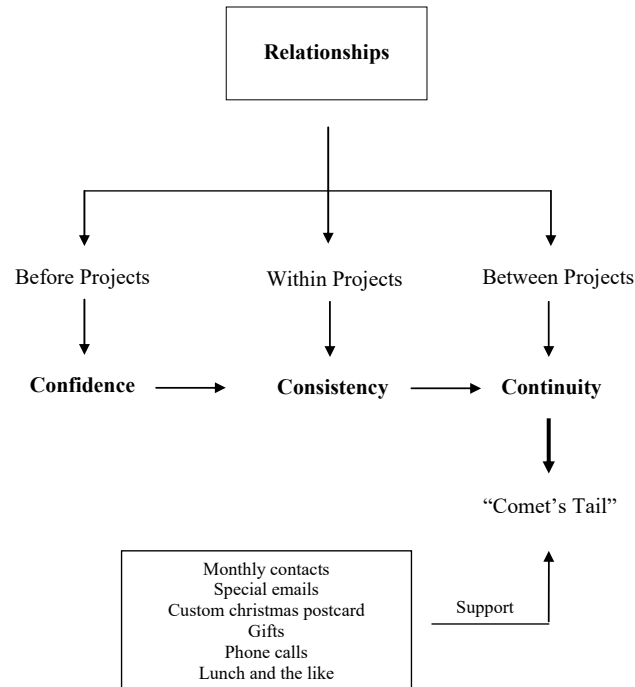
Starting from a basic assumption that there must be a cooperative model of players in the management consulting industry to build constructive relationships between consultants and clients, we can assume that the consultant's role must be linked to pragmatism, objectivity, rigor and the exigency, and all these criteria must be oriented towards objectives and results. If we refer this situation to the scope of SMEs, this is a reality almost nonexistent in the Portuguese business scenario, and often what is more common is to find someone who has an extraordinary vision in terms of market and sector, with a competitive path considered itself interesting, but always linked to a second-level or reactive practices. This line of orientation makes that these type of companies, although they can live and feel the context by their close connection to the sector of activity where they are inserted, have reactive records rather than proactive, which lead them to react when they feel 'pain' rather than anticipating the future over facing the day-to-day scenarios confronting them. Ideally, SMEs could run counter-cyclically and invest in anticipation and this does not happen in Portugal.

Without this structural vision, as one of the interviewees points out, often what happens is that 'SMEs end up walking in the dark, and it is impossible today to walk without the specialisation of people, without avant-garde knowledge and without people who dominate certain contexts'. Therefore, it is impossible to delineate a strategy without considering the social, environmental, technological, and competitive context, but also the organisational structure itself. In short, we have to question everything and nothing can be dissociated from the strategy. It is in this context that consultants enter the business system as the creators and disseminators of knowledge, being also suppliers of ideas and practices, suppliers of relevant information, and an important alternative to internal resistance to change. So, as stated by Fincham (1999), the role of the management consultant in organisational processes should not only provide the strategic perspective associated with consulting practices and their implementation to solve problems in organisational activity (Schein, 1988; Ackroyd and Lawrenson, 1996), and on the other hand, in the very structures of the international economy, and to create the means to generate efficiency.

It is therefore assumed that the role of the consultant, as already stated in this research, must above all be linked to the detailed study of his clients for later use of the different methods to be used (McGivern, 1983). to create an interdependent relationship that is mutually beneficial for the involved parties and that enables them to create and maintain secure relationships. According to the aspects previously mentioned and to create safe relationships between consultants and clients, should consultants and clients considered the relationships created within projects or those that are maintained between each project? In the context of the management consulting activity, there are always two factors linked to the creation of relationships, one that is fuelled by the work itself and another that results from the results that can be obtained, besides the relations of continuity can only be obtained from the synergistic effects of these two variants of analysis.

In this context it is important to consider as fundamental the relationships that are created within projects, in a context of permanent contact, but also those that must be maintained between projects, allowing the former a sense of achievement and the latter the maintenance of relationships that need to be cultivated over time. The important thing to keep in mind is that consultants should create references and have concerns about the preliminary advantages of relationships in terms of continuity and consistency. This phenomenon of feeding the relation, as mentioned by one of the consultants, we can denominate as the 'tail of the comet', and this type of relationship is very simple to maintain, being needed only at least a monthly contact during the initial phase of the project (at least during six months) or sending a special email, a personalised Christmas postcard, a gift or a phone call to schedule a lunch or a coffee. The important and fundamental matter is that they are creating moments of some informality so that references and connections are created. There is no magic formula or script in this context, the important thing is that they keep having contacts at least annually so that customers do not forget that if they were helped once they can always be again.

This line of thinking is exactly what Karantinou and Hogg (2009) found in the empirical research that the authors carried out in the article 'An empirical investigation of relationship development in professional business services', whose development of safe relationships must provide a systemic approach, within-project relationships being the basis that can affect the development of long-term relationships and increase the probability of achieving excellent results for client organisations and subsequently their satisfaction at the end of different processes and 'between-project relationships', the basis for efficient projects that are or will be carried out between the parties, which will only benefit the quality of the resulting procedures. Still, it is important to consider a third variable that was not considered by the authors, the 'before-project relationships', a fundamental element of confidence-building until the moment of sale of the project and which will be the basic foundations for what is being built in terms of relationships inside and outside the action (Figure 5).

Figure 5 Trust, consistency, and continuity as a way to create safe relationships

Source: The authors

It follows that relationships can be used in a variety of different ways. Indeed, business interactions cannot always manage the different forms of relationships that may arise as a result of these interactions, although it has to be taken into account, as mentioned by the respondents and contrary to what Karantinou and Hogg (2009), that retention means itself a relationship. What is important in this context is to clarify a set of questions in terms of the nature of the interactions, the characteristics of the relationships, the attitudes, philosophies, and strategies of the consulting firms concerning management relationships, customer perspectives, benefits and costs of managing relationships that are associated with consulting firms and clients (Karantinou and Hogg, 2009).

6 Conclusions

In short, it can be seen that the role of the management consultant has to be linked to pragmatism, objectivity, rigor, and demand. All these criteria must be oriented towards objectives and results based on a strategic and structural vision (regardless of the different control assumptions that may be implicit in the type of project to be developed, or of the different types of SMEs that may be involved in this context, what is important is that successful relationships are developed, competence and experience of the consultants, their ability to understand clients, their professionalism and credibility, and mutual transparency in processes, values, and objectives.

It is also important to keep in mind that consultants should create references and have concerns about the preliminary advantages of relationships in terms of continuity and

consistency (these must be built ‘within projects’, ‘between projects’, but also ‘before projects’), since they are the basis for what will be built in terms of efficiency in and out of action, and this base must result from attention in increasing the performance of a certain activity that needs to be improved, attention to the building strategies, concentrating efforts on the areas of concern and, essentially, identifying the client and the business and identifying their interests, values, attitudes, and visions. However, it should also be considered the findings presented in this study that result from the limitations inherent in a small investigation in terms of the size of the sample (respondents) and the reproducing results in a given context (SMEs) in a given country (Portugal). In this sense, in terms of external validity, e.g., the possibility of generalising the results found to other contexts or samples, although this study has reinforced some of the existing theory regarding the concept of management consulting, this was only an exploratory study that cannot be generalised or representative. On the other hand, although the secondary sources have been used and other analyses have been elaborated to complete the results, this factor can not justify that the results presented here can be seen as necessarily generalisable in terms of the consulting practice.

Another of the limitations was related to the impossibility of observing ‘in loco’ client-consultant interactions and, therefore, the consequent peculiarities of problems, ideas, and techniques that could result from this same interaction. Although this article aims fundamentally to combat the lack of studies on the management consulting industry, it is necessary to continue to penetrate this market and to perceive this activity, bringing to the academic field a considerable amount of information that brings above all originality and contribute in a concrete way to the development of this field of research. One of the ways to respond to this gap is to focus, establish and institutionalise the practices and activities used in the management consulting industry and their implications in terms of organisational results, seeking to obtain a set of new developments in the construction of literature with the introduction of new theoretical and empirical perspectives in this area.

7 Future lines of research

It is important to extend these studies to a deeper basis on all these subjects, to explore the future of the nature of practices, activities, stages, and relationships in the management consulting industry and future research to include in this sense the construction of a model that allows relating all these variables, to be able to identify which one is more determinant for the success of a management consulting project.

The ongoing task of the study of the sector should not forget also the impact that all this can have downstream of the chain, namely to the level of client’s satisfaction with the work developed by the consultants and the suggestions that are they advise for the improvement of the achievements.

Another very relevant analysis is to deeply understand the business model and the value chain of the consultancy companies, in particular, to validate how they create value and sustainably maintain their business.

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