HEC MONTRÉAL

THE JUNIOR EXPERT

An auto-ethnographic field study on novice consultants in an international management consulting firm

by

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RÉSUMÉ

Les firmes de consultation en management telles que *McKinsey*, *Boston Consulting Group* ou *Roland Berger* recrutent la majorité de leurs employés directement parmi les diplômés récents qui, ensuite, débutent leur carrière professionnelle en développant des conseils stratégiques pour des grandes compagnies. En d'autres termes, ces « recrues » semblent faire un travail d'expert en management même s'ils ne possèdent pas d'expérience pratique significative. Ce mémoire se penche sur ce paradoxe en illustrant ce qu'apprennent les jeunes gradués inexpérimentés afin de devenir des consultants compétents. Basé sur une épistémologie du savoir qui postule que l'expertise d'un praticien compétent est située dans l'action, et non dans un savoir abstrait, elle examine comment des novices apprennent à travailler comme consultants. Fondé sur des descriptions détaillées des pratiques de travail d'un consultant junior qui ont été collectées lors d'une étude auto-ethnographique dans un cabinet de conseil de renommée internationale, ce mémoire introduit un modèle de trois pratiques que les novices apprennent à appliquer. La preuve empirique suggère que les consultants juniors apprennent sur trois niveaux : ils apprennent (1) comment devenir instruits en montant en compétence, (2) comment devenir productifs en orientant leur travail vers les résultats et (3) comment devenir responsable en s'appropriant leur travail. Ces résultats illustrent la façon dont les juniors développent une capacité à produire une expertise située; cette capacité est réalisée par des consultants individuels qui sont supportés par des systèmes de gestion des connaissances et par le collectif des consultants à l'intérieur de la firme. On en conclut que l'expertise du consultant ne repose pas dans un ensemble de connaissances, mais plutôt dans sa performance du savoir qui doit être de nouveau réalisée pour chaque client.

Mots clés: consultation, travail de connaissance, apprentissage situé, théorie de la pratique

ABSTRACT

Management consulting firms such as *McKinsey*, the *Boston Consulting Group* or *Roland Berger* recruit most of their staff directly among graduate students, who then start their professional career by developing strategic advice for well-established companies. In other words, they work as management experts although they lack significant practical experience. This thesis examines this paradox, illustrating what young and inexperienced graduates learn in order to become competent management consultants. Building on an epistemology of knowledge that postulates that a skilled practitioner's expertise lays in the knowledge contained in his or her actions, and not in abstract knowledge, it investigates how novices learn to work as consultants. Based on in-depth descriptions of a junior consultant's work practices gathered in an auto-ethnographic field study that was carried out in an internationally renowned management consulting firm, this study introduces a model of three practices that junior consultants learn to engage in. The evidence suggests that novice consultants learn on three levels: they learn (1) how to become knowledgeable by ramping up, (2) how to become productive by working output-driven and (3) how to become responsible by owning their work. These results illustrate how juniors develop the capability to produce situated expertise; this capability is performed by individual consultants, supported by knowledge management systems and the collective of consultants within the firm. The findings support the claim that a consultant's expertise is not a body of knowledge that he or she detains, but rather a performance of knowledge that needs to be realized anew for every client.

Key words: consulting, knowledge worker, situated learning, practice theory

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[1] Name changed for confidentiality reasons

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BCG	Boston Consulting Group
CMR	Complete Member Researcher
HR	Human Relations
IT	Information Technology
KIF	Knowledge-intensive firm
KMS	Knowledge Management System
LAA	Learning at ABC Consulting
MBA	Master in Business Administration
PwC	Pricewaterhouse Coopers LLP
R&D	Research & Development

STRUCTURE

INTRODUCTION: THE ROLE OF JUNIOR CONSULTANTS IN MANAGEMENT CONSULTING

In a management consulting firm, it is not only the experienced senior consultant who advises a client. Typically, consultancies set up teams comprised of senior consultants and young junior consultants, who can have as little as no consulting experience, if they come directly from university. In fact, becoming a consultant in one of the big international management consulting firms – such as *McKinsey*, the *Boston Consulting Group (BCG)*, *Bain & Company* or *Roland Berger* – has become a popular professional avenue among graduates from all backgrounds. Once employed, these junior consultants are expected to "hit the ground running", following a usually brief training ranging from a few days to maybe two weeks. After that, they join the workforce, delivering expert advice to experienced managers in well-established companies. They are paid to offer clients strategic advice and to resolve complex problems. But how can these novice consultants deliver "expert work" without any considerable work experience? What do they learn when they start to work as consultants? More precisely, ***what do junior consultants learn to become competent in their work?*** These are the questions that I want to investigate with this thesis.

Scholars have studied consultants as an archetype of the 'knowledge worker' (Alvesson, 1993, 2004; Starbuck, 1992), i.e. a profession that sells 'knowledge' to its clients in return for a high price. While previous studies have examined the nature of their expertise (Alvesson, 1993; Clark & Fincham, 2002; Fincham, Clark, Handley, & Sturdy, 2008) and how it is disseminated within the business community (Abrahamson, 1996), we know little about how novice consultants acquire this knowledge and what they actually need to know in order to become competent in such a knowledge-intensive job. This is especially interesting because hiring young and inexperienced graduates has become a recruiting strategy for many consulting firms (Edersheim, 2004; McDonald, 2014; McKenna, 1995).

With this thesis, I want to shed light on the learning process of novice consultants from a knowledge perspective. More precisely, I hope to illustrate what consultants actually learn when they start and how they become capable of performing their job. The thesis thereby deepens our understanding of the consulting industry, as it clarifies, first, what knowledge is necessary to perform consulting tasks, and second, what consultants do day-to-day. Consequently, it contributes to calls for further research from scholars such as Alvesson and Johansson (2002: 229), who point to a "relative lack of empirical work (…) detailing what goes on in management consultancy". Similarly, Sturdy (2013: 470) claims that "very little is known about what consultants (…) actually do day to day" and that "consultant's recruitment, training, performance evaluation, and development have been largely overlooked".

This thesis is structured as follows: The first part of the literature review will explain that although recruiting young graduates is a common practice within the consulting industry, we know fairly little about their training. Scholars interested in knowledge management systems have shown how knowledge can be transferred from senior to junior staff. However, their vision on what knowledge is necessary to become a competent consultant is limited. Therefore, drawing on a review of the academic literature on consultant expertise in the second part of the first chapter, I will illustrate that consulting knowledge goes beyond abstract knowledge and hard facts. Building on a perspective that understands a consultant's expertise as his or her capability to solve complex problems, I will construct a theoretical framework rooted in practice theory. Such a perspective postulates that knowledge does not lay in an individual's head, but in his or her knowledgeable capacity to act. I thus investigate in an auto-ethnographic field study the practices that junior consultants learn to engage in, thereby showing what their work looks like. I will provide detailed descriptions of three practices that junior consultants use in order to become competent quickly, before rounding the thesis up with a set of concluding remarks on how these findings can contribute to our understanding of consulting expertise.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The goal of this first introductory chapter is to provide a brief overview of the academic debate on consulting, especially the literature connected to knowledge, where I situate this thesis. Therefore, after some elementary definitions, I offer a short historical overview which illustrates how hiring young, inexperienced consultants became a successful business strategy for consultancies. Subsequently, I provide a brief section on the training of novice consultants. In the second part, I clarify the academic vision on consulting knowledge. I thereby want to show what 'competency' in the context of consulting means, so as to inform my discussion on what a newly recruited consultant needs to learn to achieve it.

1. Defining management consulting

Management consultants are an essential part of the business landscape of today. The global market size of consulting in 2010 is estimated to be worth around 350 billion USD, of which business consulting accounts for roughly 150 billion USD (Kipping & Clark, 2013). While it is not necessarily a big industry in terms of revenues, its rapid growth relative to the economy as a whole, especially since 1980, has made it a subject of interest for researchers (Kipping & Clark, 2013: 3). Yet, what makes the industry even more interesting is its magnetism for talent and human capital as well as its role in disseminating management fashions and organizational change (Kipping & Clark, 2013). Consequently, scholars have studied consulting from different perspectives, such as the historical development of management consulting (McKenna, 1995, 1996), the management of knowledge (Hansen & Haas, 2001; Hansen, Nohria, & Tierney, 1999; Morris & Empson, 1998; Werr & Stjernberg, 2003), the role of consultants in the international dissemination of management fashions (Abrahamson, 1996), or the consultant-client relationship (Fincham, 1999; Sturdy, 1997; Werr & Styhre, 2002). Moreover, consultants have frequently been the archetype for the "knowledge worker" and consulting firms have been analyzed as "knowledge-intensive firms" (KIFs) since their service – advice – is captured as a

form of esoteric, and thus rare, expertise (Alvesson, 1993; Morris & Empson, 1998; Starbuck, 1992). It is within this latter stream of literature that I position this thesis.

Yet, despite the relatively longstanding and active academic interest in the industry, a common definition of management consulting remains elusive. Difficulties stem from the relative volatility of the consulting industry, whose boundaries, composition and service characteristics are constantly changing (Fincham & Clark, 2002; Kipping & Clark, 2013). Moreover, scholars have pointed out that it lacks a unifying professional body of knowledge[2] (Alvesson, 1993) which could build a common denominator for defining it. According to Kipping and Clark (2013: 2), the only stable characteristic of consulting is that it is always based on "an advisory activity built on the consultant-client relationship". With respect to these considerations, and based on an early definition provided by the International Labor Office's Guide to the profession that is cited by Kipping and Clark (2013: 2) and later adapted by Kubr (2002: 3–4), I define management consulting as *the service of helping managers in the private, public or non-for-profit sector to identify and solve managerial and operating problems.*

Having defined management consulting, we can now turn to the subject of our thesis: the junior consultant or novice consultant. I will use these two terms interchangeably to describe *a person that has started working as a management consultant shortly after completing a university degree (either completing Bachelor- or Master-Studies, Master in Business Administration (MBA) or a doctoral degree), and who therefore has little or no practical experience in management.*

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[2] As Fincham and Clark (2002) elaborate tellingly, most attempts to define consulting did so by pinpointing the industry's boundaries, either by defining all the firms offering consulting services or by setting up a set of distinct tasks and skills that are held by consultants. However, different scholars report that the nature of consulting content as well as the industry's composition itself are constantly changing as new firms enter the industry and management techniques become obsolete, which makes such definitions less useful (Fincham & Clark, 2002; Kipping & Clark, 2013). Another popular way of defining management consulting is to refer to a body of professional knowledge that consultants use to help their clients solve problems. Yet, as Kipping and Clark (2013) and several other authors that have studied consultants as knowledge workers point out (Alvesson, 1993; Fincham, 1999), such a definition is problematic as it attributes a body of professionalized knowledge to consultants, whereas the nature of a consultant's expertise is questioned by researchers.

2. The role of the young and inexperienced in the consulting industry

Among my colleague business students at HEC Montreal, being hired by one of the big management consulting firms is a desirable career opportunity. Business literature, online forums, and videos on how to pass the selective recruiting process abound (i.e. Cheng, 2012). The consulting industry has succeeded in creating an aura of mystery, desirability, and excellence, which is highly attractive to students. But how did business consulting firms come to recruit young and inexperienced graduates – a profile that seems to be at odds with the image of an experienced expert who provides valuable advice to clients? Also, what structural elements have consulting firms put in place to leverage their young workforce? The next sections will showcase the junior consultant's role in the consulting industry and demonstrate that hiring recent graduates has a long-standing history among consulting firms.

2.1 Historical overview: how recent graduates became management consultants

The first management consulting firms were founded around 1900, yet it would take about 30 to 40 years for the industry to gain significant footage in the American economy. Founded in 1926, the consulting firm McKinsey already had two offices in New York and Chicago by 1930, and counted over 25 employees on its tenth anniversary (McKenna, 1995). Hiring young graduates became a competitive strategy of many strategy consultancies as they started to offer "business surveys" to analyze their client's companies (Kipping, 2002). James McKinsey, for example, developed the so-called "general survey outline" in 1931, that served specifically to help junior consultants do a screening of companies in financial distress (McKenna, 1995: 56). Since this survey was based on a fairly standardized approach, the firms could hire young graduates and train them in the specific methodology of their routinized analysis tool (ibid). Subsequently, when Marvin Bower took over the company, hiring recent graduates as management consultants was part of McKinsey's business strategy (Edersheim, 2004), as explained by McDonald (2014: 81) in his study of McKinsey:

> "Between 1950 and 1959, as the proportion of consultants at the firm with MBAs climbed from 20 percent to over 80 percent, the median age of McKinsey consultants dropped by almost 10 years. Younger and hungrier – and a lot cheaper. Betting on potential has become one of McKinsey's defining characteristics."

Today, one could hardly imagine management consulting firms without their typical mix of senior and junior consultants. Interestingly, one important ratio for consulting firms that is frequently found in academic case studies on consulting firms (see Nanda and Morell's (2006a, 2006b) case on BCG or Bartlett's (2000) case on McKinsey) is a firm's "leverage structure" (Maister, 1993). This ratio describes the proportion of junior to senior professional staff. It reflects a consulting firm's basic division of labor between partners and consultants (Hansen & Haas, 2001), with the latter doing the analytical work while partners manage the relationship with clients. Maister (1993) referred to the common attributions of three types of roles in consultancies: "finders", "minders" and "grinders". "Finders" (partners) seek out contracts with clients, "minders" (managers) assume team managing responsibilities whereas "grinders" (consultants) are junior staff who do "the technical tasks".

Table 1: The economics of leverage in consulting firms

Wave	Source of reputation	Type of project	Senior-to-junior ratio	Pre-eminent consultancies
Organization and strategy	'Top level advisors'	'Grey hair'	~6	Booz Allen, McKinsey, BCG
IT-based networks	'Implementation specialists'	'Procedure'	~20	'Big Five', Gemini, Accenture

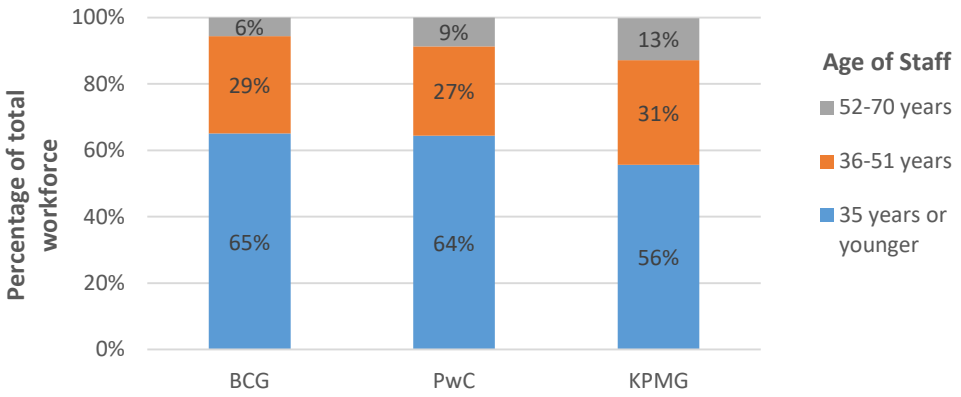
Source: Adapted from Kipping (2002: 38, 44)

The ratio of senior to junior staff can vary between projects, but it mostly differs among different types of consulting firms as it reflects their client structure and the service they offer (see Table 1). For instance, management consulting firms such as McKinsey or BCG usually employ senior advisers supported by a few junior consultants in what Maister (1993) called "grey hair" projects. Consequently, they have an average junior-to-senior ratio of ~ 6 (Kipping, 2002; Nanda & Morell, 2006a). In contrast, Information Technology (IT) consultants offer "procedural"

projects (Maister, 1993). They implement fairly unchanging processes or systems and rely, therefore, on a high junior-to-senior ratio of roughly 20 (Kipping, 2002).

Integrating young graduates into the organizational structure of consulting firms leads to a fairly young workforce. At BCG, for instance, almost two-thirds of the staff in 2016 are not older than 35, as shows the annual employee inquiry for the *Great Place to Work® Institute* (2016c). Its ratings are used for the well-known *"Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For"* list (see Figure 1). At Pricewaterhouse Coopers (Pwc) and KPMG, two professional service firms that offer accounting and consulting services, 64% and 56% of their staff is 35 and younger, respectively, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Age of the workforce in 2016: BCG, PwC, KPMG



Source: Great Place to Work® Institute (2016a, 2016b, 2016c)

Consulting firms hire these young consultants among recent university graduates, be it students in Bachelor-, Master or MBA programs. It is sometimes argued that the rapid growth of graduate business schools and MBA programs, especially in the United States, is tightly coupled with the rise of management consulting (Kipping, 2002: 41) since consultancies recruit graduates directly from business schools. Ruef (2002), for instance, displayed how the percentage of recent graduates from a sample US business school that joined the ranks of management consulting firms after graduation rose from merely 1.6% in the 1950s to around 22% in the 1990s. Over time, consulting became the most popular field of entry for MBA-graduates, even

beating careers in investment banking. Statistics from the Kellogg's School of Management indicate that in 2015, consulting was the most popular workplace for MBA graduates, with 35% of students opting for a career in the field (Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University - Career Management Center, 2015). Similarly, at Harvard Business School, 15% of MBA graduates from 2015 were planning to start their career in consulting (Auritt, Elizabeth S. et al, 2015), making consulting the second most popular career option after finance. These figures show that management consulting has become one of the most attractive fields of entry for MBA graduates in the US. Further, it also proves that starting a management consulting career with little professional experience is increasingly possible.

So far, I have demonstrated that the consulting industry has become a highly desirable career-path for students. This trend has been fueled by the industry's heavy reliance on recruiting junior consultants shortly after graduation. Thus, if novice consultants are an important part of a consulting firm, we should understand more deeply how they learn to work for companies whose reputation is built on an image of expertise and excellence that is hard to reconcile with the characteristics of young and inexperienced employees.

2.2 Sink or swim: the on-the-job training of novice consultants

A first thought that could come to mind is that consulting firms invest heavily in training their junior staff to recompense for their lack of experience. As a matter of fact, scholars have argued that it is vital for KIFs to attract, develop and retain qualified staff (Alvesson, 2000, 2004). KIFs secure the access to knowledge – their major 'input' and resource - by means of recruiting personnel (Maister, 1993; Morris & Empson, 1998). Consequently, scholars have paid close attention to the mechanisms that consulting firms use to hire 'the best and the brightest' (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006) and to secure the loyalty and commitment of their employees from an Human Resources (HR) perspective (Alvesson, 2000; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Alvesson & Robertson, 2006).

Yet, although it has been observed that consulting firms rely heavily on a young and inexperienced workforce (Alvesson, 2013; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011), the training of consultants has received less academic attention. It has sometimes been argued that consultancies have indirectly outsourced their formal training to business schools, from where they recruit the majority of their staff (Kipping, 2002). However, since consulting firms also hire graduates from non-business backgrounds, this can hardly count as a unified training method. Also, junior consultants do not pass any tests to adhere to a professional institution, as compared to lawyers or accountants, for instance. In the case of other professions, it has been argued that such a test can attribute expert status to individuals (Abbott, 1992). However, no comparable institution exists to legitimize the expertise of consultants (Kirkpatrick, Muzio, & Ackroyd, 2013).

In fact, consultants receive a rather informal training. Management consultancies are known to train their staff mostly 'on the job', supported by informal mentorship (Chao, 2005). In her study of novice consultants, Chao (2005) examines the learning process of consultants with an average tenure of two years or fewer. She finds that consultants mostly learn informally, through concrete work experience and interaction with their peers. This is possible because consultants work exclusively on projects. That means that for every new mandate, a team is created, composed of staff from different hierarchical levels: partners, managers, and consultants (Morris, Gardner, & Anand, 2013). This project structure allows recruits to quickly join a project team and work alongside colleagues on a 'real' client case.

This method is sometimes referred to as a "sink or swim" training, where novices need to learn quickly and on their own since they are directly 'thrown' into work. Although it has been pointed out that the combination of minimal or no formal training and high-performance expectations can cause stress and credibility tensions for consultants (Bourgoin & Harvey, 2015), we know fairly little on the knowledge side of the HR-practices. Particularly, we lack understanding of what novice consultants learn in terms of content and actual work practices, and how they become competent employees.

One possible answer is provided by the academic literature on the management of knowledge. This field examines the mechanisms that consulting firms put in place to share knowledge among staff, which can explain how junior staff overcome their lack of practical experience.

2.3 Lending expertise to junior consultants through knowledge management systems

Inspired by the resource-based theory of the firm, scholars began to identify knowledge as a crucial resource for consulting firms (Gherardi, 2006) that, consequently, needs to be managed in order to ensure their competitive advantage (Hansen et al., 1999; Morris & Empson, 1998; Starbuck, 1992). More precisely, Morris and Empson (1998) argue that knowledge is not only the major input for consultancies but also their main output and core technology. Therefore, they see managing the creation, articulation, dissemination and renewal of knowledge as a strategic focus for consultants.

Scholars from the knowledge management literature therefore elaborate different strategies and techniques that allow consulting firms to codify their esoteric knowledge and share it across its staff via firm-internal, IT-based knowledge management systems (KMS), thereby lending expertise to junior consultants. With those means, juniors can deliver expert work without having much relevant work experience themselves (Morris et al., 2013). Werr and Stjernberg (2003), for example, illustrate how consultants share three different types of knowledge via an internal knowledge database in order to enhance their productivity: (1) concrete *methods and management tools* are used to provide a common language and knowledge structure that enhances knowledge sharing, (2) former *cases* transfer knowledge in a narrative form and (3) finally, *individual experience* is used to adapt knowledge retrieved from methods, tools, and cases to a specific mission. Thus, consulting firms extract their employee's knowledge and transfer it to a base, therefore making it collectively available which enhances their junior's competence.

Consultants are then hired for their capacity to generate and re-use knowledge, their ability to work with KMS, but not necessarily for their personal expertise, as Werr and Stjernberg (2003: 901) point out: In their view, companies are looking for individuals that have the "*potential* to develop consulting expertise by applying the company's structural knowledge (…). Qualities sought among potential employees included analytical and social skills and the motivation to achieve, rather than knowledge of a specific subject or domain" (ibid, p.901). According to this perspective, KMS allow consulting firms to successfully employ junior consultants. These systems provide the structural foundations for transferring expert knowledge held by more senior partners to juniors who then re-use and apply existing knowledge.

However, critics have pointed towards a set of problematic assumption of this stream of literature; some disagree with the assertion that simply transferring knowledge to juniors is enough to ensure their competence. In fact, *using* knowledge management systems is not unproblematic nor easy, as Hargadon and Bechky (2006) point out in their field study on creativity in consulting firms. They find that for solving complex problems, codified knowledge bases are not always helpful as the person using it would need to "know what they want to do, where they want to look, and what they want to find" (ibid, p. 496). They underscore that "framing a problem" and knowing what knowledge is needed to solve it is already a vital step of the problem-solving process.

That begs the following question: how do juniors learn to use knowledge management systems efficiently and are they useful for them at all? If novices do not know what type of knowledge they need when they encounter an unknown problem, how can they make use of a knowledge database? If the problems that consultants face were easy to identify, stable and similar over time, re-using existing knowledge could logically resolve them. But in situations where this is not the case, tapping into existing knowledge might not be helpful for novices.

Finally, part of what a consultant potentially needs to know to be competent cannot be captured by databases. In actuality, knowing how to frame a problem is essential

for consultants, as illustrated by Hargadon and Bechky (2006). This skill cannot easily be learned simply with a knowledge database, but requires immersion in these concrete activities. Thus, practitioners using KMSs risk missing out on such rather 'hidden' or 'untypical' types of knowledge that are not clearly identifiable and are therefore not transferred to a database. Even if such knowledge was recognized as being valuable, extracting and transferring them to a database would be problematic. Studies show that many people cannot describe what they actually do, are not aware of the steps they undertake and skills that they have (Suchman, 1987). It is thus difficult to 'externalize' (Nonaka, 1994) their knowledge and make it transferable. This is especially the case with tacit knowledge, which is sometimes portrayed as being "sticky", a term used to denote knowledge which is difficult to move across organizational boundaries (Szulanski, 1996).

These critics highlight the fact KMSs alone are not sufficient to allow junior consultants to become competent members of their firm. Although databases facilitate a certain level of knowledge sharing, it is difficult to assess the relevance of the knowledge contained within them and understand how juniors use that knowledge in their day-to-day work. Moreover, we cannot assume that the competence of novice consultants is an equation that simply depends on the wealth of knowledge that is made accessible to them. Therefore, the answers provided by the literature so far are insufficient to illustrate how junior consultants become competent in their job.

If we want to understand what a junior consultant needs to learn to become competent, we first need to understand what competency means and what it requires in the context of management consulting. How can we describe the expertise of consultants? Is it, for instance, the ability to apply existing knowledge, to build and internalize a body of abstract knowledge, or something completely different? More precisely, what do junior consultants actually need to learn to become competent actors?

3. Three perspectives on consulting expertise: the functional, critical and practice perspective

The goal of this second chapter is to develop an understanding of what competency in consulting means. As I will show, scholars are debating how to characterize a consultant's expertise and have not reached a consensus yet. We can use the perspectives presented in these discussions to inform our vision of what a competent consultant needs to know and to do. In the next sections, I therefore want to depict the nature of consulting expertise from three different academic perspectives.

By 'expertise', I refer to what is esoteric and valuable in the service of management consultants (Starbuck, 1992), and which allows them to create value for their clients[3]. As I will explain in the following sections, scholars have suggested different perspectives as to what allows consultants to deliver a form of expertise to their clients. Even though consultants are frequently depicted as the typical "knowledge worker", the nature of their expertise is a topic of vigorous academic debate. Put bluntly, there is the positive, or "enthusiastic camp" (Alvesson & Johansson, 2002) who believe that consulting *works*. On the other side of the spectrum, we find authors that adopt a more critical posture, and whose proponents picture consultants as "*charlatans"* (Bourgoin, 2015: 25). As Alvesson and Johansson (2002: 229) put it, "[a] peculiar feature of texts on management consultancy is the lack of examples that take a *neutral* position" (Emphasis added by the author). In fact, two opposing views on consulting knowledge have emerged: a *functional* and a *critical* perspective (Bourgoin, 2015; Fincham, 1999; Fincham & Clark, 2002; Werr & Styhre, 2002; Whittle, 2006).

More recent academic contributions (Bourgoin, 2015; Hargadon & Bechky, 2006) have investigated consulting expertise from a perspective centered on consulting

[3] I thereby want to differentiate this notion of expertise from authors such as Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1980) who see 'expertise' as a way of mastery that is opposed to the status of the novice or beginner. In their words, expertise can thus be achieved in any form of activity, as simple as 'brushing your teeth', whereas I refer to a type of esoteric and valuable knowledge for which clients are ready to pay for.

work and concrete everyday practices, thereby illustrating what consultants actually do. Although these studies remain scarce (c.f. Sturdy, Handley, Clark, & Fincham, 2009) they provide valuable insights and enrich the discussion between the functional and the critical perspective. The next sections will provide details on each of the three perspectives and show how taken together, they provide a fairly rich understanding of consulting expertise.

3.1 Consulting expertise as an esoteric and valuable body of knowledge

Authored by scholars, consultants or consulting academics such as Edgar Schein (1969) or Chris Argyris (1973), the functionalist perspective is mainly concerned with improving the effectiveness of management consulting; they develop and discuss tools, theories and practical frameworks that facilitate a consultant's work (Bourgoin, 2015; Werr & Styhre, 2002; Whittle, 2006). For instance, this literature offers normative advice to consultants and clients on how to successfully construct a client-consultant relationship or how to overcome resistance to change (Block, 2011; Kubr, 2002; Schein, 1969).

At the same time, these authors present consultants as experts that are hired by their clients for their ability to access and apply an esoteric knowledge base (Alvesson & Johansson, 2002; Werr & Styhre, 2002). According to the functionalist perspective, consultants thus have some kind of expertise that it is worth paying for. Its proponents portray the consultant as a competent professional who possesses "unquestionable expertise suitable for solving different kinds of management problems" (Alvesson & Johansson, 2002: 229). Different opinions exist on what this expertise actually entails: some scholars focus more on a "content" expertise based on scientific management techniques as suggested by Frederick Taylor, whereas others emphasize the consultant's "process" expertise.

Some scholars illustrate the consultant as applying a "scientific paradigm", using management knowledge and its rational and objective techniques to produce scientifically sound analysis and recommendations (Whittle, 2006: 426). Bourgoin

(2015: 26) explains how under the influence of the founders of scientific management, scholars position consultants as *problem solvers*. They see the consultant as a technical expert who uses tools that are considered rational, as introduced by Schön's (1983) term of the model of "technical rationality". Schön (1983: 21) argues that professional knowledge is dominantly seen as an activity of "instrumental problem solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique". According to him, this view of professional knowledge has become dominant by pushing practical knowledge to the background.

Schein (1969, 2002), on the other side, develops a model of process consultation. He describes consultant's expertise as their ability to accompany clients in defining and resolving their problems; the consultant is thus a *problem setter* (Bourgoin, 2015). This approach portrays consultants as a process expert, who know how to successfully lead a client-mission based on specific methodologies of interpersonal communication and client interaction. Building on psychological elements, Schein (2002: 21) further argues that the consultant is more a *"helper"* than an advisor. A consultant can successfully manage the "interpersonal process between client and consultant" and knows how to build a helping relationship with his or her client (ibid, p. 24-25).

No matter their focus, both wings of the functional perspective tend to picture the consultant as a "skilled practitioner" (Fincham, 1999: 337) whose content- or process expertise allows him or her to deliver a valuable service to his or her client. Moreover, they are building on the assumption that although the client detains the contractual power, it is the consultant who brings a superior knowledge to the relationship (Werr & Styhre, 2002: 44). That consequently balances the power distribution in their relationship. In their view, the consultant's competence relies on a toolkit of abstract knowledge and/or the mastery of a set of methods, which can thus be learned by newcomers. The authors accord a "real" and "objective" value to the consultant's expertise and tend to clarify how consultants can improve and maintain the latter by using distinct tools and frameworks (Bourgoin, 2015: 28).

This tendency to write about consulting in a narrowly prescriptive way positions these authors *within* the consultant discourse, and weakens their ability to give a critical or independent account of consulting (Fincham, 1999: 337). Therefore, the birth of the critical perspective is sometimes viewed as a "healthy reaction to the earlier dominant, self-celebratory texts on management consultants – on consultants, by consultants and, one is tempted to say, for consultants, not only as a target group as readers, but as a group whose interests, status and ego are promoted" (Alvesson & Johansson, 2002: 229). I now turn to the critical perspective, showing how their rejection of the functional perspective draws the academic attention to another aspect of consulting work.

3.2 Consulting as a performance of expertise: the role of rhetoric and persuasion

Critical authors have highlighted the relative ambiguity of consulting knowledge, which raises questions as to consultants' esoteric knowledge as described by earlier authors. They ask "how a non-codified body of knowledge like `consultancy' could become so apparently influential" (Fincham, 1999: 335).

In his renown article, Alvesson (1993: 1012) pinpointed the ambiguity of their knowledge and argued that consultant's expertise, compared to other professions, was not based on "hard" knowledge, i.e. rational, theoretical expertise, but rather on a set of tacit knowledge and skills, that "are badly captured by the word knowledge". He underlines that a consultant's main expertise might actually lie in his or her rhetoric and persuasion tactics:

> "Knowledge or core competence is still vital, but this becomes rather a matter of knowledge for the sake of being socially recognized as an expert, i.e. knowledge about how to act in an 'expert-like' way. The persuasive or rhetorical element then is vital. Being perceived as an expert is then more crucial than being one." (Alvesson, 1993: 1004)

Alvesson's (1993) argument contributed significantly to the birth of the critical perspective on consulting (Fincham & Clark, 2002) and triggered interest in the mechanisms that allowed consultants to manage their image (Clark, 1995). Authors

from the critical perspective (see Clark and Fincham (2002) for an introduction) argued that consultants used mainly "weak" knowledge – such as rhetoric – and notions of power and authority to convey an image of rationality and to overcompensate for their lack of an institutionalized body of theoretical knowledge, when compared to lawyers or doctors (Fincham et al., 2008).

There are different perspectives that have been suggested to explain how consultants use rhetoric to convey such an image. The logical starting point for these perspectives is to note that the consultant-client relationship is characterized by uncertainty, both for clients and consultants (Sturdy, 1997). Since consulting services are intangible (Clark, 1995) and usually consumed when the client lacks a solution, it is hard for clients to judge the substance of the consultant's work (Clark, 1995; Starbuck, 1992). Therefore, "generic symbols of expertise" help clients evaluate if the person that delivers the service looks, talks and thinks like an expert; at the same time, consultants "pay attention to their symbolic outputs" (Starbuck, 1992: 731).

Consequently, Alvesson (1993: 1011) describes KIFs as "systems of persuasion" and knowledge work as "symbolic action"; what imports is to "appear to have knowledge" rather than actually having it (ibid, p. 1012). He argues that knowledge workers therefore use two versions of rhetoric; one that aims to establish a link to science and technical knowledge, and another that "claims about a particular kind of subjectivity and an accompanying ability to deal with uncertainty" (ibid, p. 1013). Clark (1995) develops a similar thought and constructs a view on consultants as managers of impressions by referring to Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical metaphor. In his view, consultants have to convince their clients that their expertise is worth the price. Thus, "their skill lies in presenting themselves as experts and convincing their clients that they provide the most relevant solution. (…) The creation, management, and regulation of impressions and images is, therefore, a central feature of consultancy work" (Clark, 1995: 91–92). Finally, other scholars have explored how consultants use stories (Legge, 2002), storytelling (Clark & Salaman, 1998) or management fashions (Abrahamson, 1996) in order to legitimize their knowledge among clients. Thus, a consultant's defining competence is not his or her technical

knowledge base, but his or her ability to use different types of "soft" knowledge in order to convey an image of expertise, rationality, and professionalism.

In summary, the last two sections illustrated two radically different views on consulting knowledge – is there real value and expertise in their service, or is it simply an illusion? Their opposing perspectives are summarized in Table 2, whose content is taken from Werr and Styhre (2002: 46).

Table 2: Two perspectives on consulting

	Functionalist View	**Critical View**
Why use consultants?	Knowledge or resource deficiencies, independent judgement	Cognitive and socio-psychological needs emerging from the characteristics of the managerial task
Nature of the consultant	Provider of a knowledge-based service at the client's request: problem solvers and problem solvers	Manipulator of symbols in order to create impressions of value: professionals of persuasion
Nature of the client	Competent buyer who hires and fires, critical evaluators of consulting advice	Naïve, anguished victim of consultant's persuasive strategies
Nature of the client-consultant relationship	Contractual, arm's length relationship	Exploitive relationship with the consultant in control

Source: Werr and Styhre (2002: 46)

Both views trigger critics, one for its overtly positive stance, and the other for depicting the client as an anxious layperson who can easily be impressed and duped by performances of expertise in situations of uncertainty (Bourgoin, 2015; Fincham, 1999; Sturdy, 1997). Many scholars have argued that it is necessary to overcome this theoretical dichotomy (Bourgoin, 2015; Werr & Styhre, 2002; Whittle, 2006), suggesting for example that in practice, consultants and clients actively use both perspectives as two possible discourses to promote change (Whittle, 2006). In fact, the dichotomy might be a result of a lack of empirical work that closely examines "what goes on in management consultancy" (Alvesson & Johansson, 2002: 229). I

will dedicate the next chapter to research which has bridged this gap by investigating consulting expertise from a practice lense.

3.3 Consulting expertise as the ability to create knowledge

Although knowledge and the consultant's work are at the core of this discussion, studies that explore what consultants actually do day-to-day remain scarce (Alvesson & Johansson, 2002; Kipping & Clark, 2013; Sturdy, 2013). This is particularly due to the secretive nature of the industry which makes it hard for scholars to get access to in-depth or longitudinal studies on consulting work (Sturdy, 2013). However, a few exceptions exist.

Bourgoin (2013), for instance, examines how the value in consulting work is created from an individual perspective, thereby showing that it is not a stable property, but constantly emerging from the work consultants do day-to-day. Taking a perspective rooted in pragmatism, he identifies and illustrates a set of value-creating operations that allow the consultant to "compose and maintain chains of action" (Bourgoin, 2013: 433). For example, he illustrates the consultant's capacity to constitute himself as a figure of authority and a competent professional in action. For him, value creation is not a merely symbolic activity that is either put 'on top' of or replaces a consultant's 'work' entirely, as argued by proponents of the critical perspective. Instead, he sees it as an integral part of their everyday work: valuation and 'work' are mutually constitutive; together they are a proactive way of constructing the quality, efficiency, and legitimacy of the consulting service. Finally, Bourgoin's (2013) detailed description of a consultant's everyday work provides a rich picture of consulting expertise from a practice perspective. It directs attention to the cognitive, rhetoric, symbolic and relational elements of consulting expertise. It also describes the role of artefacts and tangible objects in the practices that consultants engage in. He convincingly shows the expertise that lies *in the development* of an advice, and thus directs our attention to the actions that are necessary to solve a client's problem. This perspective goes beyond the examination of the solution that is provided, by shedding light on the process of producing advice.

Hargadon and Bechky (2006) use a similar perspective, even though they focus more on collective practices instead of individual ones. They investigate how consulting firms collectively find creative solutions for complex problems which their clients bring to them. They argue that management consultants encounter problems where no obvious solution is to be found. In such situations, it would be insufficient to rely on existing knowledge, as new approaches must be devised to provide solutions for new and open-ended problems. Hence, they identify four actions that trigger moments of collective creativity "that the individuals involved, thinking alone, could not have generated" (Hargadon & Bechky, 2006: 489): (1) help-seeking, (2) help-giving, (3) reflective reframing and (4) reinforcing. Instead of focusing on individual knowledge or skills, the authors decided to scrutinize "moments of collective creativity" (ibid.), to identify the activities that play a role in triggering these moments. Their study illustrates how management consultants use collective action in order to find creative solutions that are tailored to the client's situation (Hargadon & Bechky, 2006: 487). Furthermore, they also claim that knowledge is not only applied when providing a solution to a specific problem. Rather, knowledge is necessary for different steps of the problem-solving task.

Both perspectives were created in the context of in-depth qualitative field studies of consulting work and the images of consulting expertise which are portrayed have significant similarities with works of the functionalist stream. However, Bourgoin (2013) and Hargadon and Bechky (2006) take an analytical stance instead of a prescriptive one. Bourgoin (2013) also pays attention to the discursive and relational practices evoked by critical authors. By including elements of the critical and functional perspectives, these authors show that competency might lie in the micro-operations that occur every day and that help solve complex problems. In fact, these authors claim that consulting expertise lies in the every-day activities that allow consultants to *create* knowledge. Consequently, consultants do not *possess* esoteric knowledge. Rather, they know how to develop it by using a set of distinct practices.

In my view, the practice perspective is illuminating for studying consulting knowledge as it overcomes the dichotomy developed by earlier authors. Its extensive

field work provides solid foundations for a new vision of expertise in management consulting, and will inform my study on the learnings that juniors necessitate to become competent consultants. If consulting expertise lies in the practices that allow consultants to create knowledge, juniors need to learn how to engage in those practices.

To conclude, I find it useful to recapitulate what I have illustrated so far. Based on an historical overview, I have shown that hiring junior consultant has become a strategic decision for consulting firms. Juniors are depicted as being the "grinders", and tackle the technical tasks, while others are charged with managing the staff and the client relationship. Firms usually do not train the new consultants formally; instead, juniors are quickly sent to work on real client assignments and learn in an ad hoc and continuous manner while doing their job. To support them, many consulting firms have invested heavily in KMSs, to help disseminate existing knowledge among consultants and hence allow juniors to recuperate and use it. Thus, the literature depicts juniors as "knowledge vessels"[4] who can be filled up with expertise from others.

However, critics argue that this does not fully explain how junior consultants become competent, as it assumes that the provided knowledge is sufficient. An extensive review of the literature on consulting knowledge illustrated that *having* abstract knowledge might not be sufficient to become a competent consultant since their competence might lie in their ability to *create* knowledge that is valuable for their clients. Yet, if that is the case, we need to develop a deeper understanding of a consultant's specific abilities, taking into consideration what junior consultants really do, the knowledge they acquire and how they translate it into action. Therefore, I ask: ***What do junior consultants learn to become competent in their work?***

[4] Term inspired by Treem (2012) who explains, based on the work of Abbott (1992) on professional service firms, that the professional literature has pictured experts as "vessels" of expertise.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: KNOWLEDGE AS SITUATED PRACTICE

As indicated in the introduction, I want to tackle the research question from a knowledge perspective. More precisely, inspired by recent studies on consultants (Bourgoin, 2015; Hargadon & Bechky, 2006), I want to construct a framework based on the practice perspective on knowledge. Such a change in the epistemology of knowledge is necessary to study 'professional' knowledge (Schön, 1983). Instead of looking for expertise in the heads of individuals or pinpointing a set of 'inferior' soft skills, this perspective sees *practices* as the starting point for understanding knowledge. Consequently, it allows me to prove a holistic and realistic account of the actual learnings of consultants by including practical knowing as well as abstract knowledge (Cook & Brown, 1999).

This chapter first explains the theoretical routes of the knowledge-in-practice (KIP) perspective within practice theory. Second, I will illustrate how a framework crafted around *practice* helps to establish a conceptual link between consulting expertise and the novice. Finally, I will conclude with some remarks on the methodological implications of this framework.

1. The practice perspective on knowledge

The knowledge-in-practice (KIP) perspective is routed within practice theory (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Nicolini, 2013). Although a unified theory of practice does not exist (Nicolini, 2013; Schatzki, 2001), there is a growing literature on what has been described as the "practice turn" (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, & Savigny, 2001) or the practice "bandwagon" (Corradi, Gherardi, & Verzelloni, 2010) in social and organizational studies. According to Nicolini (2013), practice theory can build on long-standing theoretical underpinnings from different origins, such as social praxeology, activity theory, ethno-methodology and workplace studies as well as actor-network theory.

Despite the diversity of theoretical backgrounds, their conceptual differences (see Nicolini (2013) for a discussion) and different levels of engagement towards a practice perspective (see Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) and Corradi et al. (2010)), one can identify the basics of a practice-based ontology, as expressed by Schatzki (2001: 11): "practice accounts are joined in the belief that such phenomena as knowledge, meaning, human activity, science, power, language, social institutions, and historical transformation occur within, and are aspects or components of, the field of practices". In short, practice theory "treats the social as a nexus of activity" (Schatzki, 2001: 14), as a "field of embodied, materially interwoven practices centrally organized around shared practical understandings" (Schatzki, 2001: 12). That means that practices become the starting point for scientific analysis, as opposed to the individual or the institutional context, for instance. Thus, as Nicolini (2013: 2) puts it, practice theorists that study organizational phenomena understand "organizations as bundles of practices". Therefore, "the basic unit of analysis for understanding organizational phenomena are practices, not practitioners" (Nicolini, 2013: 7).

Practice theory has been embraced as a new way to study knowledge by scholars such as Cook and Brown (1999), Brown and Duguid (2001), Feldman and Orlikowski (2011), Gherardi (2006), Nicolini (2011; 2013), Orlikowski (2002) and Treem (2012). Essentially, the practice perspective on knowledge moves away from the cognitive perspective on knowledge as a possession towards an understanding that knowledge is inherently tied to practice (Cook & Brown, 1999; Empson, 2001). Consequently, it triggers a change in vocabulary: instead of focusing their research on "knowledge" as a resource, academics from this perspective are interested in the "knowing" as an action (Cook & Brown, 1999; Kuhn & Jackson, 2008; Orlikowski, 2002).

Hence, knowledge is visible in the "doing" and the locus of knowledge is seen in human action, and not solely in the human brain, or as Nicolini (2013: 5) puts it:

> "From a practice perspective, knowledge is conceived largely as a form of mastery that is expressed in the capacity to carry out a social and material

> activity. Knowledge is thus always a way of knowing shared with others, a set of practical methods acquired through learning, inscribed in objects, embodied, and only partially articulated in discourse".

From this perspective, the practice becomes the stage where knowledge is performed; knowledge and practice are thus "reciprocally constitutive" (Orlikowski, 2002: 250), "ontologically equivalent" (Nicolini, 2011: 604) and, as Gherardi (2006: xii) argues: "knowledge is embedded in practice, as the domain where doing and knowing are one and the same". Scholars that study knowledge under a practice perspective thus use the concept of *practice* as the essential unit of analysis when investigating knowledge, as "practice is where knowledgeability manifests itself" (Nicolini, 2011: 602). Nicolini (2011) describes practices as 'the sites of knowing', hence the instance where knowledge becomes analytically observable.

But what are practices? Since there is no 'grand theory of practice', there is no agreement on how to define a practice. From Nicolini's perspective (2013: 10), the only consensus that can be found is that practices are conceptualized as "molar units", which means that they are "complex wholes composed of other 'smaller' elements", such as actions, motions, or artefacts. According to Schatzki (2001: 11), most thinkers theorize practices, minimally, as "embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding". Practice scholars thus turn to flows of actions and highlight what types of knowing are necessary to build, perform, maintain and change these flows of action. The knowledgeable operations that are necessary can be of different types – they can be cognitive or practical, discursive, individual or collective, they can be retained as well in objects as in human bodies etc.

Therefore, one defining characteristic of the KIP perspective is that it overcomes the dualism between elements that are often treated dichotomously, such as mind and body, individual and institutional, cognition and action (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). As Nicolini (2013: 2–3) puts it, the practice approach provides an "enhanced explanatory power" since analyzing phenomena via practices allows integrating otherwise polarized elements such as action, cognition, and discourse. A practice approach emphasizes how these elements dynamically constitute each other in a form

of duality, as suggested by Giddens' (1984) structuration theory. Practices involve, among others, artefacts and individuals, collectives, institutions, structures, language and cognition, action and interaction (Schatzki, 2001) and are thus a powerful tool to analyze social phenomena such as knowledge. A KIP perspective thus helps to overcome the dichotomy between the real or illusionary value of consulting knowledge that I exposed earlier.

2. Building a research framework around 'practices'

As I have shown, practice is a useful unit of analysis that can provide a fresh perspective on knowledge. I am convinced that it is especially powerful for studying consulting knowledge since it makes it possible to reconcile the dichotomy elaborated earlier, which opposes 'soft' and 'hard' knowledge. It also helps to see symbolic and discursive actions such as rhetoric and abstract knowledge as complementary, instead of mutually exclusive. Building on the theoretical considerations elaborated above, I can now define the *practice* as my starting point to analyze what a consultant learns, instead of taking the individual novice as the unit of analysis. Building a conceptual framework around 'practices' means to depict consulting expertise as a set of practices that consultants engage in day-to-day, as well as the activities and other knowledge elements that compose them.

2.1 Learning how to practice consulting expertise

Now, two elements need to be clarified conceptually in order to structure a framework: what is consulting expertise and how do novices learn it?

First, if knowing is enacted, one could ask if expertise is actually the right term for a consultant's knowing. From a practice perspective, consulting expertise cannot be understood as an organizational resource that relies on a body of esoteric knowledge possessed by individuals or the organization. In fact, the practice perspective provides an alternative explanation for investigating such organizational resources. Authors from the practice perspective suggest that value lies in the *practices* that enact,

perform and maintain an organizational resource (such as consulting expertise), and not in the resources themselves (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Orlikowski, 2002). In their seminal work on the theoretical underpinnings of a practice theory, Feldman and Orlikowski (2011: 1249) elaborate this sometimes counterintuitive perspective tellingly:

> "Readers and reviewers at times find this [practice] focus confusing. They want to know what knowledge has been acquired or what resources are being used rather than how knowing is achieved or action is resourced. Many expectations rest on the understanding that, for instance, a resource is a thing or quality that either is, by nature, a resource or has become a resource. Given such expectations, it is unsettling to take on the notion that a resource is defined not by what it is, but by the practices through which it is enacted as a resource, and that such enactment as a resource is an ongoing and thus necessarily temporary accomplishment"

Thus, what matters when looking at organizational resources, such as consulting expertise, is the enactment and accomplishment of expertise as a resource *through practices*.

An example of such an investigation can be found in the study of global product development within a multinational company, undertaken by Orlikowski (2002). She illustrates that this resource, or competence as she names it, is not a "static embedded capability or stable disposition of actors, but rather an ongoing social accomplishment, constituted and reconstituted as actors engage the world in practice" (ibid, p. 249). Consequently, she identifies a repertoire of five practices, each comprised of a set of activities, which jointly constitute a "collective competence in knowing how to deliver innovative yet complex products in a timely fashion" (ibid, p. 256). Built on a rich description of these practices and their interconnectedness, she convincingly argues that competence is "a situationally enacted capability inseparable from the practices that constitute it recurrently over time" (ibid, p. 267).

This means that from a practice perspective, consulting expertise is not a disposition of the firm, but an ongoing accomplishment that is achieved by practices. Consultants have the competence to accomplish expertise through a set of routine practices. Their expertise is thus necessarily situated, always in the making, and needs to be achieved

every time anew, which makes it hard to grasp for outsiders, clients and also researchers. Thus, building on Orlikowski's (2002) line of reasoning, we need to understand what practices consultants put in place day-to-day to accomplish their consulting expertise.

Further, if competence lies in a practice which is shared among actors within a certain field or organization, learning becomes an act of becoming part of this practice. This process is most powerfully developed by Lave and Wenger (1991), who first introduced the notions of *situated learning* and *legitimate peripheral participation*. Lave and Wenger's (1991) influent contribution on situated learning describes the learning process as a mechanism of "legitimate peripheral participation" (LPP), where novices move from a 'peripheral' position towards 'full membership' of the community of practitioners by the means of participation in the shared practice.

What is most interesting in the case of novice consultants is the notion that learning is *situated*. That means novices learn when participating in the accomplishment of a practice. The latter is shared among a community of practitioners[5]. Thus, in a practice perspective, novices do not *acquire* knowledge, they *become part* of a practice; they both absorb and are absorbed into a practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991: 95). Consequently, practices, not the individual's mind, are the locus of learning: "learning necessarily requires involvement in, and contribution to, the ongoing practice and its development" (Nicolini, 2013: 80).

This vision is radically different to cognitive perspectives on learning which assume that the individual is the knowing subject and that (s)he acquires a "discrete body of

[5] Following Nicolini (2013), I decided to focus on a community of 'practitioners' instead of a 'community of practice'. The concept of 'community of practice' has received large attention in the years after Lave & Wenger's contribution, for example in Wenger (1998) consequential publication 'Communities of Practice'. However, scholars from the practice perspective such as Nicolini (2013), Contu and Willmott (2003) and Gherardi (2006) have pointed out that the concept of community took over as the defining criteria, errantly replacing 'practice'. The latter, as they argue, should be the dominant concept in a practice-oriented learning theory: "it is practice which performs community and not the other way round" Nicolini (2013: 94). Building on their argument, I therefore decided to focus on the notion of 'practice' as the unifying concept, not the community. I consequently call the community a community of 'practitioners'.

abstract knowledge which (s)he will then transport and reapply in later contexts" (Hanks, 1991: 14–15). Instead, according to Hanks' (1991: 14–15) foreword to Lave and Wenger (1991), the individual "acquires the skill to perform by actually engaging in the process [the practice]". Thus, practices are the locus of the situated learning process that novices undergo in order to become a member of the community of practitioners, i.e. the consulting firm. Over time, they learn to progressively increase their participation in the accomplishment of the collective competence.

In summary, to investigate how competency articulates within a practice framework and how novices become competent consultants, I have to observe how they acquire knowledge that is "enacted – every day and over time – in people's practices" (Orlikowski, 2002: 250). That means that *practices* are the center of my conceptual framework since they are the locus of knowing *and* learning. Practices are the sites where knowing can be analytically observed (Nicolini, 2011) and I therefore choose to investigate them in detail so as to depict how novice consultants become competent through the accomplishment of knowledgeable practices.

2.2 Investigating practices: implications for a field study on consulting

Now, after having established that a detailed observation of practices is necessary, I need to define more closely what I mean by practices and how I want to investigate them. First, I need to define what I want to describe since, as Nicolini (2013: 14) elaborates tellingly, "there is no such thing as a neutral description". In fact, describing work is already a theory-laden endeavor since it always includes a choice over what is included or excluded, how something is described and finally, what matters and how it is interpreted. However, as researchers we need to employ language in order to make practices visible and, more precisely, to turn them into an "epistemic object" that can enter the discourse (ibid, p. 217).

I therefore want to put forward a definition of practices as suggested by Cook and Brown (1999: 387), which I find useful for studying practices within a specific context. They define practices as "the coordinated activities of individuals and groups

in doing their 'real work' as it is informed by a particular organizational or group context." They elaborate that practices are thus sets of actions, wherein actions are defined as "behavior imbued with meaning", as opposed to "doing of any sort", which then describes behavior (ibid).

The challenge when collecting data then lies in choosing what we consider a knowledgeable or 'meaningful' practice. This can be done in different ways. For example, one can investigate practices in a *processual* manner, such as in the recent work of Nicolini (2011) on telemedicine where he describes how scenes of action unfold[6]. Alternatively, one can describe them *thematically*, as Orlikowski's (2002). In her study on global product development she identifies a repertoire of practices that represent recurrent *themes* of knowing, such as 'knowing the players in the game' through 'interacting face to face'. I believe the latter approach more useful for this thesis since I consider that deep dives into *how* these practices are carried out are richer than simply describing *what* is chosen as a course of action in a specific situation. Thus, it is necessary to investigate flows of action as they unfold in practice and to identify recurrent themes of knowing within them.

To put everything together, I want to recall that I consider consulting expertise as a *competence* that is comprised of a set of *practices*, which themselves are constituted of sets of *activities*. These activities can be performed by bodies or artefacts, they can be discursive, bodily, cognitive etc. Instead of starting the analysis with a tight definition of consulting expertise – either as a body of 'real' knowledge or a symbolic performance – and studying how juniors achieve this 'status', I understand consulting expertise as a situated competence that is itself never granted and always achieved anew. Thus, I investigate what novices learn in order to become active members in this collectively enacted competence. This shift in the unit of analysis from the

[6] Nicolini (2011) understands practices as instances of knowing, but emphasizes that knowing lies in the accomplishment of scenes of action – hence in decisions on what needs to be done to build, maintain and perform these "episode[s] of knowing" (ibid, p. 605) and how it needs to be done. This vision is more processual and pays less attention to the details of *how* practices are performed repeatedly over time.

individual to practice allows for a broader view of knowledge and leaves space for an investigation of all different demonstrations of knowledge as they unfold in practice. Moreover, it invites us to establish a powerful image of learning as a situated, praxis-oriented process where novices engage in routine practices with the goal of accomplishing their work.

Studying knowledge from a practice perspective does have a significant impact on the design of my study. In order to understand how junior consultants learn to become knowing actors in their environment, I should study their everyday work. This will provide meaningful insights on the process by which they become competent consultants despite their lack of significant former work experience. Thus, I am specifically interested in the micro-operations that novice consultants perform during their learning process after entering the firm: What do they learn specifically? What tasks to they do? What allows them to become competent and operational in their tasks in a short amount of time? Therefore, I choose to focus this study on the practice, assessing it through individual lenses, i.e. I want to study the practices and routine activities a junior consultant engages in. In the next section, I will explain how I collected this data and why I chose to do so via an auto-ethnographic field study.

METHODOLOGY

Having decided to understand knowledge as inherent in practice, it is then logical to examine the day-to-day actions of novice consultants. I therefore want to investigate the concrete practices that allow consultants to become experts in their work. To put it simply, I want to explain *what* they do day-to-day and *how* they do it in order to illustrate their knowing in practice. To achieve this, I chose to approach my research question with an inductive research design, based on a qualitative field study in the form of an auto-ethnography. More precisely, for a period of 12 weeks, I was a junior consultant in a renowned consulting firm, and acted as a participant observer, collecting data about my learning process amongst a group of experimented consultants.

Since we know relatively little about the roles and practices of junior consultants from a practice perspective, I believe it was necessary to collect field data in order to answer my research question. Moreover, since the perspective on consulting in the existing literature is ambivalent, an inductive approach using new data enables a fresh view on consulting, which can consequently nourish the academic debate.

Before going any further, I believe it is important to explain the reasons and considerations that went into choosing this approach and expose its limitations. As a next step, relying on Anderson`s (2006) call for a more analytical auto-ethnography, I will illustrate criteria that legitimize the use of this still rather rare methodology for academic research. Next, I will present the details of my research design, including the access to the field and confidentiality considerations, before explaining how I collected and analyzed my data using first- and second-order codes. Finally, I will conclude with some considerations about my writing process, explaining how I transcribed my analysis into the data presented in this thesis.

1. Methodological considerations: using auto-ethnography for studying 'work'

The goal of this section is to illustrate why and how an auto-ethnography is a suitable research methodology for this thesis. In fact, accessing the consulting industry from the vantage point of a worker, and not a researcher had two main advantages.

First, it allowed unique access to a consultant's day-to-day activities which would otherwise be hard to achieve due to the secretive nature of the industry. In fact, consulting firms highly value their clients' confidentiality which is the main barrier to conducting research. Second, doing an auto-ethnography provided a unique perspective on their practices. Since a consultant's work implies handling abstract databases and figures as compared to crafting a tangible product, observing their work is difficult since it is sometimes hard to visualize. Moreover, consultants would hardly accept to be slowed down in their day-to-day work by having to explain what they do to an outsider. Therefore, doing the work myself provided me with the opportunity to describe my actions in detail and to identify the practices I learned on site and that were hence context-specific.

Furthermore, an auto-ethnography provides the necessary methodology to support the conceptual choice made here to capture *practices* in their totality and authenticity. This would be hard to achieve via, for instance, interviews or quantitative methodologies. In their renowned article 'Bringing work back in', Barley and Kunda (2001) argue that studies on concrete work practices naturally need a methodological approach that will result in rich descriptions of actual work. They therefore suggest to use inductive, grounded empiricism to gather *descriptions* of actual work settings. Yet, accessing descriptions of work can be complicated. Workers often lack an awareness of what they actually do when they are asked to elaborate on it at a later moment (Suchman, 1987). They might have a specific idea of what constitutes 'work' and what doesn't and hence choose to omit certain actions in their descriptions. In a similar vein, Gherardi's (2006: 131) field study on safety in construction shows that the "expert knows more than s/he is able to explicate" and hence underlines

Suchman's (1987) observation that knowledge cannot adequately be accessed via interviews only. Barley and Kunda (2001) therefore argue for specific empirical methods such as ethnographic field studies and participant observation where the researcher can overcome these identified obstacles. In their view, that puts the researcher in a better position to identify work patterns or specific practices of which insiders might be unaware.

However, some more orthodox qualitative researchers are sometimes skeptical towards (auto)ethnography as a scientific method, more specifically the practice of using the self as only data source (Holt, 2003). Moreover, auto-ethnography receives criticism since traditional validity techniques that are used to evaluate the scientific rigor of qualitative investigations, such as its replicability, are hard to apply to data based on an inherently personal experience (Holt, 2003).

Before I enter the more technical details of my study, I would like to briefly explain my methodological approach and its core features. I relied on Anderson's (2006) eminent essay on auto-ethnography where he advocates for an analytical approach that serves to legitimize the method among other scientific research methodologies.

2. The scientific legitimacy of building theory from the field: Anderson's analytic auto-ethnography

As Anderson (2006) explains in his historical overview, auto-ethnography – as the ethnography of oneself - is a young phenomenon which is rooted in the more realistic and analytical ethnography practiced by proponents of the Chicago School. In fact, its students often had a personal connection to the social context they studied. Yet, the typical self-narrative or self-visibility of the researcher in the resulting text did only emerge with the first essay of David Hayano in 1979, who introduced self-observation in a study of semi-professional poker play. Since then, auto-ethnography, although still a marginal methodology, flourished significantly.

Anderson (2006) distinguishes two types: first, evocative or emotional auto-ethnography, which is interested in detailed narrative descriptions of emotional

experiences to create emotional resonance with the reader (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Second, Anderson (2006) himself argues to introduce *analytical* auto-ethnography, which is overtly dedicated to developing theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena.

This work positions itself as rather analytical, as I am committed to using the field data for some broader generalization on the practices that novices use to become competent and, eventually, on the nature of consulting knowledge itself. According to Anderson (2006: 378), analytical auto-ethnography should meet the following methodological standards: "(1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis."

Consequently, it is the researcher's goal to become a full member of the social field (s)he studies (CMR): to participate, while, at the same time, being an observant outsider. This "double agenda" – participating while doing research – can be an extremely exhaustive, and even schizophrenic role for the researcher, as there is always the possibility that one task may distract him or her from the other (Adler & Adler, 1987: 70; Anderson, 2006).

But the mission of full membership goes even deeper, towards a status of analytical reflexivity. In fact, the researcher should not exclusively rely on his or her own perceptions. (S)he should strive to be in dialogue with participants in the field in order to actively develop an understanding of his or her entourage. This is important in order to avoid self-absorption, as it forces the researcher to validate his or her own understandings of social processes with that of others (Anderson, 2006: 385). At the same time, the researcher needs to be reflective of his or her intimate interconnectedness with the field in an analytical manner. Anderson (2006: 382) describes this analytical reflexivity as follows:

> At a deeper level, reflexivity involves an awareness of reciprocal influence between ethnographers and their settings and informants. It entails self-conscious introspection guided by a desire to better understand both self and others through examining one's actions and perceptions in reference to and dialogue with those of others.

While a central feature of auto-ethnography is the high visibility of the researcher as a social actor within his or her written text, (s)he imperatively needs to actively participate in the social world (s)he studies. This means considering his or her own feelings and experiences as vital data for understanding the field as well as participating actively in it, more precisely:

> "(…) they [autoethnographic researchers] should openly discuss changes in their beliefs and relationships over the course of fieldwork, thus vividly revealing themselves as people grappling with issues relevant to membership and participation in fluid rather than static social worlds. Autoethnographers should expect to be involved in the construction of meaning and values in the social worlds they investigate. As full-fledged members, they cannot always sit observantly on the sidelines."(ibid, p.384)

Finally, the researcher needs to be committed to using his or her data for analytical purposes. Rather than simply providing an insider's perspective, analytical auto-ethnography aspires to "use empirical data to gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena than those provided by the data themselves" (ibid, p. 387). Thus, the collected data is used for a theoretical illumination of the topic under investigation by means of data development, refinement, and extension. As Anderson (2006: 387–388) summarizes appositely:

> Analytic ethnographers are not content with accomplishing the representational task of capturing "what is going on" in an individual life or social environment. (…) The definitive feature of analytic autoethnography is this value-added quality of not only truthfully rendering the social world under investigation but also transcending that world through broader generalization.

To conclude, I believe that an analytical auto-ethnography that follows Anderson's indications as outlined above can produce relevant contributions to academic research, especially in order to understand concrete work and knowledge practices. I therefore developed my research design according to these five features established by Anderson which I will describe in more details in the next chapters.

3. Research Design

This ethnographic field study was realized during a 12-week employment of the main researcher as an intern within a major international strategy consulting firm: ABC Consulting[7]. During the 3 months of professional activity, I was completing a well-structured internship program with around 20 other interns all over Canada. Indeed, the firm mainly recruits its permanent junior staff among its interns. Consequently, the "summer internship program" which has existed for several years, has become a standardized process for recruiting full-time consultants, and it provided rich content for my study. In fact, after completing one week of formal training at the Canadian headquarter, every intern was allocated to a project team and was performing the role of a freshly hired consultant for the following 11 weeks. Thus, the program allowed me to have unique insight into the company's official training process.

Moreover, I experienced the day-to-day work of a consultant and observed interactions at different levels and sub-cultures of the firm, for example at the project team level, the local office or the national group level. Frequent social activities and networking occasions were part of the official program, as well as a mentorship program and a formal evaluation process. This latter process was put in place to evaluate each intern's performance and fit with the company and informed the decision as to who was receiving an offer for a permanent position at the end of the internship. A frequent exchange with my "intern colleagues" assured a validation of my own experience and perception and allowed me to get a better understanding of learning processes among new recruits. Moreover, it must be mentioned that on the last day of my internship, I was offered a full-time position at ABC Consulting, starting after my graduation. This can be seen as a positive accreditation of my work experience and gives the data gathered for this study additional credibility.

One could argue that an internship is not comparable to a "real" work experience since the intern might not be treated as a real hire. However, the company aimed to

[7] Name changed for confidentiality reasons.

choose the best candidates among the interns for permanent positions afterward and therefore made sure that they were tested and evaluated rigorously. Hence, interns were full members of project teams and were expected to be in contact with real clients even during their first weeks. Moreover, they did not only play a support role, as they were given full ownership of a piece of work within the project, which they referred to as a "module". In fact, for every mandate, consultants would split up the project in different pieces – so-called modules – and assign each consultant the responsibility for at least one of those modules. As a consequence, every intern was responsible for one module (I will elaborate on this later in the data). I therefore believe that the data provides a rich and interesting source for a study on learning processes in the consulting industry.

3.1 Access to the field and confidentiality

Numerous authors have underscored the relative difficulty of accessing the consulting industry for scientific research (Kipping & Clark, 2013; Sturdy, 2013). This is mainly due to the confidentiality of firms' practices. Moreover, consulting firms guarantee their clients rigorous protection of their strategic data. To access the field, I therefore had to pass the formal recruiting process that took place a few months before the beginning of the internship. When I finally had an offer to join the consulting firm for a three-month summer internship, I made it known that I was going to collect some data for this research, and received the approval of the consulting firm. With their written consensus, I collected auto-ethnographic data on my learning process and day-to-day activities. An approbation of the *Comité d'éthique en recherche* – an internal group assuring the quality of academic research as well as the compliance with ethical research codes of my university, HEC Montréal – was issued as well.

The name of the consulting firm as well as the names of staff and clients were anonymized to ensure their confidentiality. That means that colleagues are described by their title ('a manager', for instance) or by a false name. I informed most of my colleagues about this research project and its subject. At special occasions, such as gatherings of all Canadian staff, I could not inform all staff about my data collection

due to logistic reasons. I therefore made sure to erase all clues that could potentially lead to the identification of a colleague. Those that played an important role in the field study individually gave me their permission to publish this thesis. As I was the focus of the study, interactions with others were only captured when they were important for my competence development.

Moreover, it is important to note that ABC Consulting has no organizational stake in the outcome of this study. Besides, they have no property rights on the results and had no influence on them. Although many colleagues expressed vivid interest in reading the thesis after its completion, the company did not impose any restrictions on the publishing of the collected material, other than the anonymization of the company and its participants' names.

3.2 Field study context: ABC Consulting

ABC Consulting is a worldwide management consulting firm with offices in almost 50 countries. Founded in the United States, it is one of the "big three" leading international strategy consulting firms. ABC advises major clients from the private, public and non-for-profit sectors, including many *Fortune 500* companies. The private company counts more than 10.000 employees around the globe and is owned by its partners. Its workforce is mainly composed of graduates of management or engineering school, but it also employs staff with different academic backgrounds, such as physics or health care. Consultants are mostly hired directly after graduation, ideally after having successfully completed an internship within the company. Yet, hiring senior consultants or even managers from the industry is not an unusual practice. ABC's company structure is organized around practice areas, i.e. concrete industry sectors like, for instance, telecommunication, financial services or consumer goods. In Canada, ABC has several offices, with its head office in Toronto, from where all central activities such as recruiting, staffing and IT support were handled for all Canadian offices. I was employed in the local Montréal office, with three other summer associates and one summer consultant.

4. Data Collection

Although this auto-ethnography was conceived as an inductive research, its data collection was preceded by a focused exploration of the literature on consulting. This allowed me to preselect two related topics for my field study: the knowledge development and socialization of junior consultants. This selection was largely influenced by Bourgoin's (2015) ethnographic work, where both topics were discussed in details. Building on his concept of "competency development" (personal translation) allowed me to streamline my data collection efforts and finally led to a remarkable richness of data centered on 'knowledge'. Thus, after having finished the data collection, I decided to focus this thesis exclusively on the knowledge development of juniors.

Table 3: Consulting missions included in the data collection

CLIENT	CLIENT DETAILS	MISSION DETAILS	DURATION	PROJECT TEAM
Manufacturing (private)	▪ ~ 65.000 employees ▪ $16 billion revenues	IT restructuring & Integration among business units	8 weeks	Team of 4 ▪ 1 Sr. Partner ▪ 1 Team Manager ▪ 2 Consultants
Manufacturing (private)	▪ ~ 65.000 employees ▪ $16 billion revenues	Corporate outsourcing strategy	2 weeks[8]	Team of 4 ▪ 1 Principal ▪ 1 Team Manager ▪ 2 Consultants

Source: field notes

During the 12 weeks of internship, I conducted an auto-ethnography with special interest towards my learning process, socialization, and day-to-day activities that allowed me to become a competent consultant of the firm. The internship started with a one-week training at the Canadian head office in Toronto. Afterward I was assigned as a member of a project team which was in the process of pitching a follow-up mission to an existing client. Consequently, I worked on this 8-week project from beginning to end and joined an existing project team for my last two weeks (see Table

[8] The mission itself was longer, but the researcher was only present for 2 weeks in the middle of the project.

3). Both projects had the same client, since ABC was running multiple projects simultaneously with this specific client. Over the whole three months, I thus had access to the formal training and to two missions with two different project teams. This provided me with a good diversity of insights considering the short amount of time I spent with the firm during the internship.

During these missions, I had access to internal databases, company directory, and internal support resources. In fact, my research did in no way affect how I was treated by my colleagues. The company wanted to ensure I would perform to the best of my capabilities in order to evaluate my performance and decide if they would offer me a full-time contract at the end of the internship. Consequently, I was subject to the same procedures as any summer intern. At the end of the internship, I was offered a full-time job at ABC Consulting, which I could start directly after the end of my studies.

While interning, I collected data in the form of field notes via a notebook that I took with me in every meeting and almost everywhere I went during my working hours. Afterward, I transcribed those notes in a numeric document at working downtimes, in the evenings or on weekends. In situations where immediate data collection was not possible, I took notes shortly afterward in order to ensure I could still provide a detailed account. This was a very convenient and "unsuspicious" way of doing research since it is a common practice amongst consultants to always take notes. Since this was a perfectly normal behavior, there were no moments of intrusion during working meetings with colleagues and clients.

In fact, an ethnography can grant access to moments where actors are unconscious of the researcher's presence. This constitutes one of its main advantages as opposed to interviews (Whittle, 2008). Therefore, it was not the goal to act as a 'human tape-recorder' that captured moments of conversation word-by-word. Aiming for richness and rarity instead of accuracy, I always noted short 'snippets' of conversations – i.e. words, phrases, expressions, talking points – and detailed them shortly afterward or in the evenings. This approach enabled me to keep a conversation's intimacy and fluidity instead of interrupting the actor's 'real' interactions.

As highlighted earlier, my data collection focused on consultant's everyday work, with a specific focus on these two questions: *What* do junior consultants do in order to become competent quickly and *how* do they do it?[9] Specifically, I wanted to describe what one needs to do to be a "competent junior consultant". That means illustrating the activities that allowed novices to deliver competent work and to be perceived as competent colleagues by their peers. Therefore, I first identified concrete practices that were enacted recurrently with the aim of delivering satisfying work. Since I studied a mostly informal learning process characterized by on-the-job learning supported by mentorship, I did not limit myself to descriptions of what is typically considered to be 'work'. In fact, I also paid particular attention to my interactions with colleagues, documenting for example tips and tricks that they shared with me or feedback I received. In fact, I focused on understanding what "competent practice" meant for the actors in the field, relying on work practices, documents, materials, forms of interactions and so forth. This way, I hoped to capture all the activities that consultants judged as useful, be it 'working at a laptop' or 'chatting with a colleague'. Thereby, I avoided the pitfall pointed out earlier of having a narrow view of what is 'work'. Having laid out the theoretical considerations that preceded my data collection, I now want to turn to the analysis of the ethnographic field data.

5. Data Analysis & Writing Process

In this auto-ethnography, the data analysis and writing process were highly intertwined. The literature review was done progressively: I explored the literature before starting the field study and executed a deeper literature review after having completed the data collection. This allowed me to have a unique, fresh, and even naïve perspective in the field. Although it might seem counterintuitive, I believe that

[9] I also collected data on the socialization process of junior consultants, thereby exploring how I adapted to the company context, what I learnt, which colleagues were influential, etc. However, as this topic was not pursued further in the data analysis, it is not represented in detail in this thesis.

this ‘naivety’ was an advantage for my study rather than a disadvantage as it encouraged my analytical reflexivity and facilitated the construction of new concepts.

The goal of this thesis is to use the collected data for grounded theory building (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This qualitative approach operates almost in reverse when compared to research in a positivist tradition. Instead of deducting hypothesis from an existing framework, a study using grounded theory develops the concepts out of which its theory will be constructed *during* the research process (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Consequently, the KIP framework that I described earlier should be understood as a choice of epistemology. It is a vision of the world and a conception of the nature of knowledge. It guides my research as it determines ‘where’ I am searching for knowledge (in practices), but it does not limit the concepts that I will create thereof. These concepts are constructed through a multistep coding process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Before elaborating on the details of the coding, I want to point out that the collected data itself can, to some extent, already be viewed as a certain theorization. According to Anderson (2006), developing theoretical codes from auto-ethnographic data isn’t a clearly separable, two-step approach where the researcher first discovers the ‘facts’ and then builds ‘theories’ that explain and organize these facts (van Maanen, 1979). Anderson (2006: 381–382) argues that it is misleading to think of the social world under study as containing data in its purest and authentic form, and that it simply needs to be discovered by the researcher. In his view, facts are not always relatively clear to grasp and interpret, and the researcher’s task goes beyond simply capturing ‘what is going on’. According to him, “the autoethnographer is someone who helps to form and reform the constructs that she or he studies”. Thus, “the autoethnographer’s understandings (…) emerge not from detached discovery but from engaged dialogue”. That means researchers need to immerse themselves in the practice that they want to study, thereby being “a more analytic and self-conscious participant in the conversation than is the typical group member”. Since auto-ethnographers study their own understandings of a social context, they have to be more than discovering observers who make sense of concepts. In fact, they should actively construct these

concepts themselves while they are in the field (Anderson, 2006). Thus, I did not 'find' the data that I will present in the following section, I proactively constructed it myself while doing the auto-ethnography.

However, as Bourgoin (2013) has pointed out, it is difficult to create the necessary distance to be analytical and self-conscious - a behavior necessary to produce theoretical concepts from data. He explains that the researcher needs to 'step out' of his or her participating role in order to become an observer capable of abstraction. In an intensive occupation like consulting where long working hours are frequent, it was at times difficult to avoid having the scientific research be swallowed by the immersion in the field. In other words, there was an ongoing struggle between allocating time to working as a consultant and doing research. In the book version of his doctoral thesis, Bourgoin (2015: 39) describes this feeling very tellingly:

> "I preserve from this exercise a feeling well described in Whyte's [1996] appendix to *Street Corner Society*. I needed to tame the field and its actors before I could say anything empathic (observing without participating), after which I was so immersed that it felt impossible to have a detached view (participating without observing) until I finally found a fragile equilibrium between participation and observation that constantly needed to be reaffirmed by fits and starts and micro-adjustments." (personal translation)

Indeed, this fragile equilibrium between research and immersion lead naturally to difficulties in the analysis process. Here, the exchange with an outside researcher – my thesis director Alaric Bourgoin – helped me to create the necessary distance with my data.

The goal of my data analysis was to develop an understanding of practices that allow novice consultants to become competent consultants. I therefore used coding to identify sets of meaningful practices and activities. As a first step, I did an open coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) before entering a more systematic axial and selective coding of data as suggested by Corbin and Strauss (2014). Open coding aims to achieve a better understanding of the field and a first level of abstraction. Hence, I first inductively coded my whole data, attributing a 'label' or 'code' to a section of text where I identified a phenomenon or relevant data. I specifically focused on identifying relevant sets of activities and practices, asking consequently (1) what is

done and (2) how is it done. The coded text in this study could range from one sentence to multiple pages. Occasionally, when multiple phenomena were found in a text passage, multiple codes could be overlaid onto it.

For a label to be significant, it had to be used frequently (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and have explanatory power of dynamics that are considered important by the informants (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To name codes, I preferably used expressions used in the field to assure the authenticity and relevance of the labels. For instance, I coded several activities around leveraging knowledge, such as *'using internal knowledge database to gather industry figures'*, *'gather knowledge about the mission from colleagues'* or *'skimming through data'*. By this means, the open coding yielded many first concepts. These were subsequently related, merged into new concepts, and eventually renamed, modified and compared with the existing literature in order to develop a first level of abstraction. Eventually, at the end of this first coding exercise, I started to group different activities into a practice and to determine which codes were of the first order (practices) and which were of second order (activities). For instance, building on the former cited examples, I identified a code around "ramping up quickly" and a set of activities that supported this behavior, such as *'leverage knowledge from internal & external databases*, *'leverage knowledge from colleagues (experiences, case material, internal documents)'* and *'develop a search structure (questions/needs) before skimming through large amounts of data'*. Another first-step coding evolved around the practice *'deliver meaningful results'*, where I regrouped activities such as *'think of implications of your analysis/work for the project as a whole (« so what? »)'* and *'always ask the "why" behind the "what"'*.

The second step in the data analysis was the axial and selective coding. This involves collecting additional data on relevant codes in order to understand links between different themes and define patterns. Hence, I established an order of codes, defining what 'activities' belonged to what 'practices' and deciding which were the most relevant ones. For instance, I identified that the label *'ramping up'* from the first coding was a relevant practice and identified a set of activities that composed it. Consequently, I collected data on what it meant to informants, how it translated in

work, how it was communicated etc. During the whole process, frequent iterations between the field data, the developed codes and concepts and the existing academic literature were used to inform each other. When working on this concept, for instance, I could build on the existing category called "*montée en competence*" from Bourgoin (2015) and Hargadon and Bechky's (2006) '*help-seeking'*. The two other categories were fairly new for me, benefiting only partially from Hargadon and Bechky's (2006) insights on *'help-giving'*. As more data was collected through this inductive method, and as data was reviewed several times, I structured the identified activities around three practices. These will be described in detail in the following section.

DATA ANALYSIS: KNOWING HOW TO BECOME A COMPETENT CONSULTANT

This section focuses on a detailed description of the practices I identified during my data analysis. Let me recall that the data analysis builds on the assumption that learning is not an act of receiving and internalizing knowledge, but rather a process of becoming part of a set of practices. Newcomers thus learn what their role is and how they can perform it. Consequently, I identified concrete work practices in which I was absorbed and described sets of activities that allowed me to execute them competently.

Three practices emerged which illustrate how junior consultants become competent. I identified that junior consultants need to develop the following capabilities: they (1) *become knowledgeable by ramping up*, (2) *become productive by working output-driven* and (3) *become responsible by owning their work*. Each practice is comprised of a set of distinct activities (see Table 4 for an overview). In the following sections, I will illustrate each practice as well as its underlying activities in detail, supported by rich descriptions from the field study within ABC Consulting.

Table 4: Competency-elements for novices in consulting

Practice	Set of activities comprising the practice	Outcome
Ramp up	▪ Capitalize on knowledge from internal resources ▪ Skim through data: Set yourself time limits and focus on useful information ▪ Seek help from colleagues to mobilize information	Become knowledgeable
Work output-driven	▪ Define desired outputs as precisely as possible ▪ Approach data with hypotheses ▪ Iterate frequently with your supervisor ▪ Transform results into insightful conclusions	Become productive
Own your work	▪ Prepare trajectory of your work ▪ Show that you are in control of the execution of your work plan ▪ Ensure the validity of the content you produce	Become responsible

1. Knowing how to become knowledgeable: ramp up

At ABC Consulting, junior consulting staff could be assigned to any client mission, irrespective of the consultant's background or education. This means consultants frequently worked for industries or on projects in a field they were unfamiliar with. Therefore, they quickly needed to become knowledgeable and operational on subjects for which they potentially lacked experience.

Consultants referred to this practice as "ramping up" (field notes). The verb ramp (up) refers to an effort "to speed up, expand, or increase especially quickly or at a constant rate" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). It is frequently used in business, describing an increase of production in manufacturing. In a consulting context, ramping up describes the consultant's cognitive efforts to increase his or her knowledgeability and understanding of a certain context.

Consultants attempt to gain a certain level of understanding on a new topic in order to be capable of engaging, understanding and communicating with clients in a productive manner. They achieve this by proactively accelerating their learning process (see also Bourgoin (2015) on '*montée en compétence*'). Competent consultants leverage internal knowledge efficiently as a learning resource instead of tediously building their understanding of a certain topic from the ground. Therefore, knowing how to ramp up means knowing how to capitalize on learning resources detained by the firm, as a senior explains to us at the training: "When you enter a new project (…) you should ask for decks, materials, the proposal or any other documents that could be helpful for you to ramp up quickly." (Senior Manager, field notes – training).

Overall, I identified three activities that allow consultants to ramp up efficiently: (1) they *capitalize on knowledge from internal resources*, (2) *set themselves time limits and focus on useful information before skimming through large amounts of data* and (3) *seek help from colleagues to mobilize data*. I will now highlight these three activities in more details, illustrating how jointly, they form a distinct way of gathering, processing and mobilizing knowledge from different sources efficiently.

1.1 Capitalize on knowledge from internal resources

The first step when ramping up is to capitalize on existing material or immaterial forms of knowledge provided by the firm. As often as possible, consultants gather work material from former projects through internal knowledge databases. My supervisor Thomas[10] explains how a consultant should proceed:

> He tells me (…) that I should check what already exists on that topic. "Most importantly, do not reinvent the wheel. Have a look at what already exists in our documents, screen through [ABC's internal knowledge database] and reuse as much as you can, that will save us time." (Manager, field notes, personal translation)

He insists I should "not reinvent the wheel" and "reuse as much as [I] can", starting from documents the team has developed earlier. I should also look for documents in the knowledge database that is maintained by ABC worldwide. Colleagues encouraged me to reuse existing documents, their content, structures, and layouts; it helped to "save [us] time" and to accelerate our learning process.

Different sources were accessible to ABC staff: external (mostly business) databases and research reports from external providers, an internal knowledge database, and data provided by colleagues directly. They provide consultants with valuable information which would otherwise be hard to access for an outsider. Juniors are expected to independently gather information from different sources in order to understand the context they are currently working in, and to be able to communicate with clients and their team members with a shared vocabulary.

I will explain the different types of documents and sharing structures that are commonly used by consultants in the following sections. For a general inquiry about a specific industry or company, *external databases* provide a useful source in order to gather reliable information. During one of our training classes, for example, a colleague showed us what information we could look up if we only had an hour left before our first team meeting:

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[10] Name changed for confidentiality reasons

> So they tell us that first of all, we should focus on understanding our client's product. In the fictional case, our client produces kitchen appliances so that was pretty straight forward in the first view, but when he then asks us to explain how and where these products are sold, packaged & assembled I quickly realize that I do not have a very good understanding of the product. After all, I never bought a kitchen in my life! [Manager] tells us that we could obviously skim through our client's homepage, gather news on Google News, look for competitors and read through their respective web pages. But we should also go a step further and use more professional databases such as Factiva, ORBIS and Thomson One in order to find information about the client firm and Euromonitor for general information about the industry our client was in. They briefly show us how to easily access these databases via our internal knowledge navigator. [field notes, ABC training]

The managers want us to realize that although we may intuitively think we have an "understanding" of a certain industry or product, for instance kitchen appliances, the reality is that we lack deep knowledge about its business context. At ABC, nobody presumed that novices should be experts in their client`s field when they enter a new team. However, colleagues expected juniors to proactively make themselves knowledgeable by using the firm`s internal resources. In this example, we see that juniors should be able to paint a picture of their client's product, their current business situation and position within the industry. Therefore, ABC provides its consultants access to professional business databases such as Factiva, Thompson One and Euromonitor, which can easily be accessed via a direct login from the internal browser. These can be used to access readily edited, high-quality market information which can help consultants get a quick overview of an industry.

Aditionnally, ABC also has a vast *internal database* which contains material from former missions and learning material created by members of the firm. The information is already summarized and interpreted, making it easy to digest and mobilize, and providing a more analytical view on specific topics. I discovered these documents when I started working on my first real case following the training. The project was located in the IT department of an industrial manufacturer, and I had no understanding of the activities undertaken by an IT department. Thus, I relied on different types of documents prepared by ABC colleagues around the world that I found in our knowledge database.

'*Onboarding primers*' for example are introductory PowerPoint presentations designed to describe the specifics of a certain industry, such as the oil & gas sector or specific business practices such as IT or HR. My IT primer explained how an IT department was built, what services and products it delivered to the firm, what processes and activities were generally carried out by the department, etc. '*Basic guides'* are set up for the different practice areas[11] that ABC serves and provide case-specific overviews of typical steps and best practices. They are structured around specific types of client missions such as outsourcing or transformation of an IT department. Finally, '*LAA*[12] *videos'* – or "learning at ABC Consulting" videos – are instructional videos supported by PowerPoint presentations. In these videos, ABC consultants explain a topic in detail and provide exercises and tests to verify that crucial information is effectively retained.

With these different types of documents, I could gather extensive information about any particular topic and approach it from different angles, i.e. what does an IT department do? How is the IT service-provider industry structured? How does a typical work plan for an outsourcing project look like? Overall, these documents usually serve at the beginning of a new mission, when consultants need to appear familiar with a specific industry, business function or project type.

Other than these generic materials, ABC also collects *material from specific client missions*, for example calculation sheets, business documents such as requests for proposal, tools to evaluate possible outsourcing locations, and much more. These can be accessed either via a search in the internal database or via a request for support from ABC`s knowledge team. This team is composed of staff that maintains, populates and facilitates access to the internal knowledge database. When I helped a colleague prepare a proposal, he showed me how to submit a "knowledge request" to

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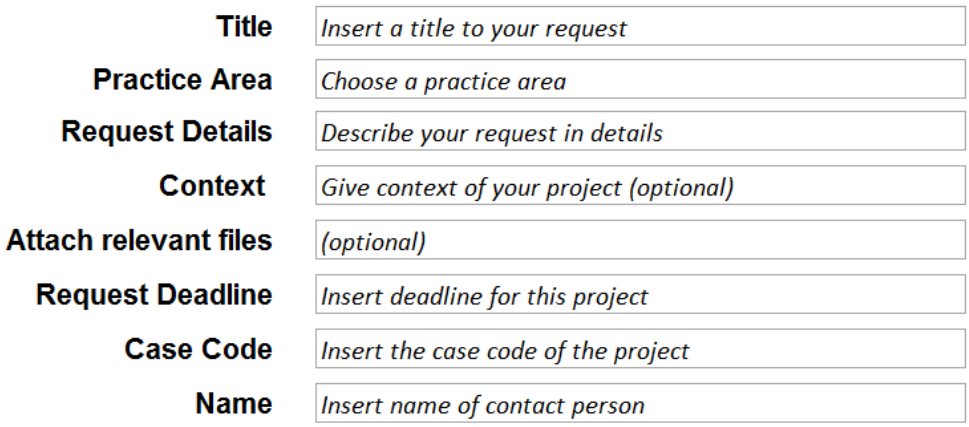
[11] Consulting firms are typically structured around "practice areas", which represent clusters of industries that they serve (i.e. telecommunication, financial services, consumer goods etc.). ABC`s more junior consulting staff circulates relatively freely between these practice areas, whereas more senior staff will usually specialize in one practice area.

[12] Name changed for confidentiality reasons.

our knowledge team instead of looking in the database on my own. I just needed to fill out a request form in our intranet, indicating the case and client context and some additional information (see Figure 2 for details).

Figure 2: Interface for making a knowledge request



Source: Reconstruction from field notes

Following a request, the knowledge team staff would prepare a set of documents that could be relevant to me. In general, material that was shared across ABC was always "sanitized". This means that it had been anonymized by the knowledge team, hiding the name of the client for which it was originally prepared. The firm introduced this policy to protect its clients' confidentiality. Still, having material that is somehow similar to your own task proved to be very useful during my internship as it provided inspiration as to how to tackle a specific problem. Even if the content had been crafted for a different client, I could still reuse it as an inspiration and recycle its structure, layout elements, and vocabulary.

In addition, *asking colleagues for useful documents* was a very common practice among ABC consultants. During the training, a senior manager encouraged us to leverage our colleagues:

> "At [ABC], we do not want you to waste your time doing something someone else has already done. And chances are high that somewhere across the globe, someone else has done something very similar to your task. So, as a general advice, you should always check out our internal database to find the person

> who has done what you'll do – even if it is for a different industry or not exactly the same, it will help you a lot. So, to do that, you just go to the internal website, (…) and make a search in the search bar..." [Shows us some examples of what we can find online.] (Senior Manager, field notes – training)

When a consultant is in the process of ramping up in a specific field, searching the internal database for colleagues that have significant experience in the matter, is seen as a task that "will help you a lot". The company does not want its consultants to "waste [their] time doing something someone else has already done". Therefore, consultants were encouraged to "find the person who has done what [they]'ll do" in order to ask them to share tangible material, especially since not all material was available on the internal knowledge database. Colleagues with a longer tenure could take advantage of their network in order to get access to a specific person. For junior consultants, however, whose network within the firm was relatively small, searching for people in the database was a necessary step. Yet, they were not significantly disadvantaged by their lack of network as compared to more tenured consultants, since there was a fundamental willingness among colleagues of all hierarchical levels to put their work aside in order to share information with colleagues, whether they knew them personally or no

For client-specific information, consultants would contact colleagues that had been working with the client in question. Since many clients had longstanding relationships with ABC, the firm often possessed documentation from former missions with particular clients. These documents are particularly valuable as they grant access to high-level analysis. However, since documents on the internal database are always anonymized, it is impossible to retrieve presentations made for a particular client. Therefore, knowing a colleague who can share these documents and point out the most relevant ones provides great leverage.

1.2 Skim through data: Set yourself time limits and focus on useful information

Once they have gathered internal resources as indicated above, consultants apply specific techniques to process these large amounts of information quickly. In fact, ramping up is a specific way of acquiring functionality in a specific domain, without

being a trained expert. Thus, consultants do not actually memorize every detail on a specific topic, but they learn how to quickly retain the most critical information. Subsequently, they can communicate efficiently with clients who - since they have accumulated significant experience in this field - are usually more familiar with the specifics of an industry or function than a consultant can ever be. I will now illustrate these activities in more details, focusing on the techniques of quick reading and selective deep-dives under time constraints.

First, it is important to notice that ramping up, as opposed to any "normal" type of learning, is a very time constrained task. In a normal set-up, consultants do not have a week to ramp up before they start a project. The reality is that within days of starting a project, they need to start producing tangible outcomes. Therefore, in practice, consultants need to minimize their time spent ramping up. If we go back to the above cited example of a client selling kitchen appliances, we remember that novices had one hour to gather information for a meeting. Although we did not execute the search in the training, the managers showed us what information we should have found:

> They [managers in the training] then flip to a few slides with information that we should have found: the client's company size, their product portfolio, their financial situation, the development of their sales figures over the last years, their situation in the kitchen appliances market, their value chain etc. When I see those slides I am honestly overwhelmed – do they really expect us to gather all that in only 1 hour? (field notes, training)

Ramping up is challenging because it requires significant cognitive efforts of rapid information processing. Although expected to gather complete and extensive information, juniors should not spend a lot of time on this task. Here, one hour is said to be sufficient in order to come up with a pile of raw material and a fairly deep understanding of the client's current economic situation. But how do consultants achieve this? I have found that consultants apply different techniques to efficiently process large amounts of information: they skim through data with a clear timeframe in mind and they identify what information they need before reading through it.

During my first weeks working, I learned to use a specific reading tactic called "skimming through". Consultants quickly look at the structure of a given document

and try to get an idea of the overall message or information, without spending much time on details. My team manager explained to me how I should process large amounts of data:

> "If you have a task like this where someone gives you a lot of information for you to skim through before you can start working, you risk losing yourself in the data and then finally, the task takes you too much time. You really need to avoid this kind of trap. So, especially at the beginning, you really need to force yourself to just spend a certain amount of time on [the data] and then you put [it] aside and you think about how you can apply this to your problem. In this case, for example, you can say to yourself "OK, Thomas sent me 6 documents of roughly 100 pages each; if I read everything I will spend the night at the office". So you have to tell yourself "I will put 15 to 30 minutes – maximum 45 – to skim through the data and then I close everything, I take a blank piece of paper and I should be able to structure my own ideas with the support of everything I just read."" (Manager, field notes, personal translation)

I should avoid "[losing myself] in the data" and spending too much time ramping up on a subject, for that was understood as a "trap". Consequently, attributing the right amount of time to ramping up is critical. Consultants need to find a balance between ramping up and delivering work for their client. Therefore, they force themselves to limit the time they spend on reading through materials by dedicating a time frame of, for example, 15 to maximum 45 minutes to "skim through" 600 pages of data.

However, learning how to "skim through" such large amounts of data in short periods of time was one of my major difficulties during my internship. It requires being extremely focused, identifying what documents are the most useful and deciding what content needs to be understood deeply before reading your material. Thus, as mentioned earlier, ramping up does not mean memorizing every detail of a topic, but rather achieving a 'good-enough' understanding of it. As a result, consultants need make wise decisions when deciding how to allocate their time, judging which information is most relevant among various sources.

After attending a phone call with the client for the first time in my project, I struggled with this specific technique. In fact, I had been given a lot of different documents as well as explanations from my supervisor, but felt there was too much information to be processed in the time that I had:

> I step out of the meeting without having understood the big picture, feeling kind of lost. I have the impression that I have such a huge number of new information in front of me – it would take me a week to sort everything out and understand what is going on. I don't even know what question to ask; the questions in my head seem "stupid", for example, I even do not really know what an IT department in a manufacturing company actually does. I thus decide to spend a few minutes thinking about how I could organize this ramp-up and I try to just sketch down my thoughts in my notebook in order to calm myself. First, I write the question "what is important for me to understand?" and I try to define the topics that are most important. I then rank them according to priority and also logically (understand topic 1 first in order to understand topic 2 etc.). I also write down what topics I will put aside and I establish a list of all the internal documents I received from my colleagues and I try to figure out where to find the required information. (field notes)

Distinguishing important from irrelevant content is a critical step when ramping up. In short, consultants should first understand *what* they need to know. The excerpt shows how I develop a search structure around identified goals. To begin, I ask "what is important (…) to understand?" Next, I prioritize these questions according to relevance and logical connection. Since I am now able to distinguish which parts I have to read deeply and which I can put aside, I can accelerate the reading of the documents. In fact, working on predefined questions or topics forces me to stay focused on the necessary insights instead of losing my time trying to understand less important information. This procedure guides my reading: I spent more time on parts that I judged worthy of a "deep dive" as opposed to sections where a brief overview was sufficient. Identifying *where* to find which answer also allows me to remain focused as my reading now has a specific goal: finding the answer to one specific question. In other words, ramping up is a cognitive ability to speed up one's processing of large amounts of data by only mobilizing the vital information.

In summary, it has been argued that consultants are mainly concerned with time constraints when they ramp up. They have to become operational extremely quickly, which does not allow for time-consuming education or immersion in a new topic. Instead, they apply specific cognitive techniques that help them process large amounts of information in short periods of time, such as setting themselves timeframes and focusing on useful information when skimming through data. Thus,

to communicate with clients and understand their problems, consultants aim to gain a rough understanding of the topic and to assimilate its vocabulary.

1.3 Seek help from colleagues to mobilize information

After having gathered and processed useful information, consultants must mobilize their newly acquired knowledge. This means that consultants require the ability to *use* knowledge for specific problems, hence to situate and contextualize information within one's project context. Thus, after having understood *what* is useful to know, it is necessary to know *how* this is useful for your purposes. To achieve this, I found that consultants proactively seek help from more experienced colleagues in order to mobilize their knowledge. This activity is encouraged by a very strong willingness within ABC to support colleagues quickly and informally.

The need to pass from processing to mobilizing information emerged relatively vividly during my first weeks of working as a consultant. Even though I knew details of the mission, having read my assigned ramp-up material, I lacked a big picture understanding of the project as a whole. Therefore, I could not follow the quick-paced work of my colleagues. In fact, while I was supposed to "ramp up", my colleagues were already working on the project. The following excerpt of my thoughts during a telephone conference with a client illustrates this:

> I try to take notes during the meeting, but I do not even know who is talking, I have the feeling that I do not understand a word of what is going on. (…) After the call, Thomas & Sebastian quickly talk about the outcomes of the call and discuss their next steps. I sit next to them, not really knowing what to do: On the one hand I want to ask them what is going on, but on the other hand I do not even know what to ask precisely. As I do not want to interrupt them, I prefer to listen and hope that it will help me make sense of everything that is happening around me. (field notes)

This excerpt illustrates my struggles to "make sense" of the data I mobilized before. It hinders me from becoming a competent member of my team. In fact, understanding a project's background information is crucial for the consultant. Knowing "what is going on" and understanding how the information you gathered translates into action becomes significant in order to become a contributing member of your team.

Although I had processed a lot of information, I did "not even know what to ask precisely" nor formulate what knowledge I lacked and that could help me become a functional consultant.

Thus, I learned that consultants deepen their understanding of a given situation by proactively reaching out to colleagues for help. This could be done informally or formally, depending on the relationship with the targeted colleague and the type of desired support. During our training, several managers insisted that juniors should not hesitate to ask senior colleagues for "coffee chats" or informal "catch-up meetings" where they could ask questions in a casual set-up. In fact, they consistently offered those openly to all interns. At the beginning, I thought that these meetings served the purpose of learning more about the organizational culture and of establishing social ties with superiors. However, during my first client mission, I realized that reading through material was not sufficient in order to understand what was really going on. I learned that these informal moments were the best occasion for me to ask questions about how the information I gathered was connected to the mission as a whole. Consequently, I tried to seize occasions for informal talks with Sebastian and Thomas, for example by going to lunch together, taking coffee breaks or leaving the office with my colleagues.

When it came to more specific interrogations, it was equally easy to seek help from colleagues even outside my project team. Indeed, at the beginning of the mission, my manager told me which colleagues I could contact if needed:

> At the end of our client call, Thomas quickly explains the organizational structure of [client name]. (…) After a few words that were barely enough to explain the situation, he excuses himself and leaves the room in order to prepare a meeting for next week. He tells me to (…) reach out to Sebastian for clarifications on the IT specific documents and Peter for any questions regarding the former project done for the client. He leaves me in the room with 3 pages full of incomprehensible notes and two contact persons who can save me. (field notes)

It was common that colleagues were responsible for any documents they had created or helped create. Hence, they should answer "any [upcoming] questions". Although Peter was not working on this project anymore, he was still accountable for the

content he created a few months ago, which thereby made him responsible for explaining details of his work to me. Moreover, colleagues would generally emphasize that you can "reach out" to them if you had any further questions on the documents they shared with you. Thus, contacting colleagues was not only a means to accessing relevant data, but also an opportunity to leverage their experience to deepen your understanding of complex situations or problems.

Even senior consultants mobilized colleagues frequently for knowledge requests. When we conceived a call for tenders for our client, my manager would frequently schedule "expert talks". In these phone calls, he would ask colleagues from ABC around the world about their experiences in similar client projects. Furthermore, he would seek feedback on material we prepared and discussed details of our approach with them. Since documents in the knowledge database were frequently assigned to a colleague, it was easy to seek further explanations in person if necessary. Thus, leveraging colleagues to accelerate your learning curve was a highly encouraged practice within the firm, be it for finding the most relevant materials or to assimilate their content.

In summary, consultants mobilize knowledge in order to leverage it when advising their clients. Therefore, we have to understand that 'knowledgeability' means more than possessing knowledge. It is the ability to use it for concrete actions. My supervisor summarizes the idea of mobilizing knowledge tellingly in this short sentence:

> "The [learning material] will help you get the appropriate terminology to hit the ground running." (Project Manager, field notes)

This quotation is interesting in two ways. First, it illustrates that gathering material not only provides content and context for understanding but, most importantly, an occasion to pick up the "appropriate terminology" that is typical in the client's industry. This allows the consultant to communicate with the client efficiently. Second, we understand from the metaphor of the consultant "hit[ting] the ground running" that ramping up is a cognitive effort of taking up speed. Consultants do not simply gather large amounts of data. They extract the most important information

quickly in order to use it immediately when working with the client. Following the same metaphor, this allows the consultant to start his project "running" instead of slowly picking up the pace. "Running" thus stands for the ability to contextualize the acquired knowledge and to use it adequately within a short period of time.

To conclude, we are now able to frame how consultants ramp up efficiently. Ramping up on a new topic is a major activity that helps juniors become knowledgeable and operational in a field where they have no experience. They gather and mobilize information from different sources in order to develop a good understanding of a particular situation, allowing them to communicate with people from this field in a competent manner. They achieve this by rigorously leveraging resources that are accessible within their company instead of engaging in time-consuming off-the-ground research or education on a topic. The process is greatly facilitated by the consulting firm as they provide access to knowledge sharing structures and encourage a help-seeking and help-giving culture among consultants. Colleagues can help identify and access the right material which saves valuable time researching the most relevant information. Setting themselves timeframes for skimming through large amounts of data and establishing search goals allows consultants to process large amounts of data efficiently. Finally, they can easily leverage their colleague's experience in formal or informal conversations in order to understand connections between the data and their current task or problem. Consequently, consultants can capitalize on internal resources, process this information quickly by using cognitive techniques and mobilize it for their projects, in order to quickly become knowledgeable and operational on new subjects. Overall, knowing how to ramp up means knowing how to capitalize on available information within a short period of time in order to be competent in a field one barely knows.

2. Knowing how to become productive: Work output-driven

When producing deliverables for the client, juniors learn to be focused on creating relevant outputs, or, in the consultant`s vocabulary, they learn to "be output-driven" (field notes). A junior colleague who has been hired as a consultant after having

completed an internship for ABC, explained to me how she felt compared to other newcomers when she started as a full-time consultant: "You know, I really felt that I was way more relaxed than the others [newly hired consultants that had not worked in consulting before] since I already have internalized all the necessary reflexes, such as working output-driven (…)" (field notes).

Being an output-driven consultant means to know how to quickly produce relevant tangible outputs. That implies not only a mere overall rapidness for doing tasks but working with a cognitive mindset trained to spend your time exclusively on tasks that deliver useful results for your team and the client. Consequently, consultants continually question what they are doing and why they are doing it. Moreover, such a mindset includes conceiving tasks in a manner that ensures that their content is relevant to the project. Consultants, therefore, rely on four different practices that allow them to be output driven: (1) they *identify desired outputs as precisely as possible*, (2) they *approach data with hypotheses that are to be tested*, (3) they *iterate frequently with their supervisor to test their production* and finally, (4) they *transform results into insightful conclusions*.

2.1 Define desired outputs as precisely as possible

A first step in producing relevant outputs is to think about the specifics of deliverables before you even start to work on their creation. Thus, it starts by rigorously thinking "top-down" (field notes), which means to define desired outputs as early and precisely as possible, and then allow them to guide all your subsequent actions. I was first exposed to this top-down approach during my training, when a senior manager told us what steps we should take when setting up a work plan:

> "It [your work plan] should include a rough layout of the output you want to produce, (…). I would say that it is critical for you to ask yourself three questions: First, what are the key questions that I have to answer and how do they fit in the broader context of our project? Second, what is a possible answer? (…) Third, what facts do I need to support my analysis?" (Senior Manager, field notes – training)

He encouraged juniors to develop a work plan by starting from "a rough layout of the output [they] wanted to produce". Thus, before doing any analysis, they should already have an idea of the deliverables they wanted to produce. Additionally, a consultant should have a predefined idea as to the answer, i.e. "what is a possible answer?" These two questions seem similar, yet they represent different cognitive efforts. Knowing the layout of your answer implies having a visual conception of how the deliverable will be materialized, i.e. in what form (excel, word, PowerPoint, etc.), how it should be structured and what content is needed. Knowing what the answer could be means to have an assumption of how your deliverable translates into a recommendation for the client and what it contains. The idea of always knowing what you want to achieve before the fact is also present in the idea of the "elevator pitch":

> "You should always have an elevator pitch ready – imagine you meet [an ABC] partner in the elevator and they ask you "so, how are things going in your case?" and you just have a few seconds to give them the most important information. That pitch should consist of the answers to 3 questions: What am I trying to achieve? What do I think is the answer? And what are the next steps?" (Senior Manager, field notes – training)

Our colleague recommended that we should always be ready to showcase our current work briefly. Instead of explaining in details what our tasks look like, we should illustrate what we are trying to achieve and what we estimate the answer to be. This mindset forces us to understand our work in a different way, as we continuously have the goal in mind and work actively towards achieving it.

I realized quickly that our senior partner mastered the output-driven thinking; he even used it as a tool to manage our team:

> Today [Monday morning] we have a quick 30 minutes check-in with Michael and the whole team. This week will be really important for the [part of the project] and we therefore immediately agree on what we need to do during the week. Right away, Michael pushes us to "think in slides" that we want to produce for our final recommendation deck and explains what our final recommendation will look like according to his point of view. He starts to explain that from his understanding of the vendor benchmark, he expects us to [gives details on how the final solution would take shape]. In parallel, Thomas starts to draw the layout of these slides on the whiteboard in the meeting room. (field notes)

The consultants develop a capability to immediately « think in slides ». They shape their thoughts in a way that can be expressed through a set of PowerPoint pages by breaking themes into blocks. Consultants conceive the layout and content of these slides even before having done the necessary analysis. As a team, we develop a structure for the deck and, with Michael's input, define contents for each slide. This set then forms our "shell" presentation which subsequently needs to be filled with content. Although we do not know the results of the underlying analysis, we agree on the questions we want to ask and try to foresee their answers based on our preliminary understanding of the data. Since everyone knows exactly what to produce, we can streamline our efforts considerably. The "shell" presentation also helps to estimate the time needed to realize it and what slides to prioritize. This was especially valuable at the end of our project, when the time was scarce, since working with a shell facilitated our teamwork and allowed us to produce our outputs on time.

Eventually, this would also translate into my day-to-day habits, for instance when setting up work plans on my own. For my first tasks, Thomas would help me to define the layout and content of my outputs:

> After the expert call, Thomas and I are brainstorming together on what the newly acquired information means for us (…). We eventually succeed to define a task which will probably be my responsibility in this project. (…) Thomas uses the whiteboard to sketch out three slides that he wants to do: one resuming all IT activities, one matrix that shows the spending and savings for each activity which we will call "Most likely sources of value". He tells me to think of some slides that would allow us to come up with this final slide (…). Thomas suggests one slide where [gives details on the content of the slide]. Then, according to him, we would also need another slide on [provides more details]. (…) While Thomas starts to draw the layout of these slides on the whiteboard, I finally look forward to starting this task, even though I honestly have no idea of what I actually will have to do and how I will calculate these savings. But at least I know in what direction I want to go and what inputs I will need in order to get there. (field notes)

This excerpt illustrates how my supervisor defines a task by "sketch[ing] out three slides that he wants to do". He designs the layout and content of these final slides in significant details in order to guide my efforts. Since I don't know how to achieve these results, Thomas suggests that I "think of some slides that would allow us to come up with this final slide". Defining the task from a top-down perspective helps

me to "know in what direction I want to go" although "I have no idea of what I actually will have to do" and how to perform the underlying calculations.

When I first had to design a work plan myself, I mobilized the same top-down approach, as the following excerpt shows:

> I first go back to my goal – to evaluate and compare the supplier's proposals – and I split it up into four different steps. For each of them, I define a precise question that I want to answer and I then sketch out the rough design for each slide that represents the answer to one of the questions. After that, [on a blank piece of paper,] I develop the structure of the excel document that would become a support document for calculating the final score for each vendor. (field notes)

We see that I start planning my task by defining the output, not the information that I will be required to process. I therefore first define the desired outcome – to be able to "evaluate and compare supplier's proposals". Then, I design as precisely as possible "the rough design for each slide that represents the answer to one of the questions". At last, I identify the necessary steps to achieve it. Finally, I translate these steps in tangible documents – a PowerPoint presentation and an Excel workbook - and I "sketch out" their layout and structure on a blank piece of paper before I start to arrange them on my computer. This way of proceeding forces me to align the documents' structure towards the delivery of a concrete goal. The more precisely I conceive the layout and content, the easier it is to ensure that I only spend time on essential tasks.

For my performance evaluation[13] it was important to internalize this top-down mindset during my internship. According to my manager, I was « [a]lready able to structure [a] set of slides in [a] pyramidal way » (excerpt evaluation document, field notes). That means that I began to structure PowerPoint presentations starting from the desired goal. Analytical presentations are usually composed of summary slides

[13] Consultants at ABC receive a formal performance evaluation at the end of each project which is for internal purposes only, thus it is not shared with or influenced by clients. This evaluation influences their promotion and career within the firm. They are rated by their supervisor along different criteria, for example "problem solving and insights". At the end of the internship, we also received such a final evaluation, from which these notes are taken.

presenting final results, supported by slides that describe and explain how they were achieved. Hence, pyramidal thinking means to define the look and content of the summary slide as precisely as possible before even doing the analysis. Thus, consultants first identify what they want to achieve in order to derive the necessary steps from there. This way, they avoid producing slides that are irrelevant to the project, and their attention and time is focused on the delivery of useful and relevant results.

In summary, thinking top-down forces the consultant to continuously align each step towards the achievement of an overall goal in a project. Therefore, consultants rigorously define their deliverables as precisely as possible – both in terms of content and layout – before doing any analysis, calculations or other supporting activities. Having a clear understanding of the goal to achieve becomes crucial as it helps to decide what steps are useful in order to deliver the desired outputs. For example, consultants spend considerable time building "shells", i.e. they develop a presentation structure and define each slide as clearly as possible before analyzing data. This helps them to focus exclusively on necessary tasks and to finish their deliverables on time.

2.2 Approach data with hypotheses

When facing quantitative tasks or problems, consultants at ABC applied a hypothesis-based approach in order to produce relevant outcomes quickly. This technique can be construed as a translation of the top-down approach to quantitative problems. I first heard of the hypothesis-driven analysis when I prepared for my recruiting interviews for ABC Consulting. In fact, candidates had to resolve figurative "real" client cases in front of the recruiter. Approaching these problems with hypotheses instead of open questions was a frequently-praised best practice among my graduate colleagues. As such, it was no surprise to me when a consultant advised us to use hypotheses as a mechanism to structure our thoughts when it came to quantitative analysis:

> At ABC, we practice an "output first model". That means you should always structure your analysis like this: make one or a few hypotheses that you want to test and that will help you find the answer to your question. Define then what the necessary data is and validate if you have it. If your assumption leads you

> to a satisfying answer – great. If it doesn't, you can start all over again and tackle the problem with a different hypothesis. Limit your analysis to these identified steps and do not lose your time in data analysis, because we all know you can spend weeks there!" (Consultant, field notes – training)

As we can see, using hypotheses is seen as an essential element to the "output first model". The consultant indicates that by "limit[ing] your analysis to these identified steps" you will "not lose your time in data analysis", in turns making you capable of delivering the desired answers more efficiently. Broadly speaking, when handling large quantitative datasets for problem solving, consultants develop hypotheses that they test with the available data. Simply put, when they seek to understand why the profits for a client's specific product line have dropped, consultants could set up the following hypothesis: either the sales have gone down or the products' costs have gone up. Next, they try to evaluate if they have the necessary data to corroborate this hypothesis. If the profit loss is found to be due to a significant drop in sales figures, they will develop a new hypothesis to explain why this is the case, and so on. Otherwise, if a hypothesis turns out to be invalid, the consultant would set up a different hypothesis and verify if it applies. To illustrate this, we can imagine the hypothesis-driven problem solving process as a funnel, narrowing down solutions starting from the most obvious or logical.

When I had to perform my first quantitative analysis, my supervisor reminded me to be hypothesis driven. He writes me:

> *I would like to ask you to run some quantitative analyses. [Shares details about the database]. Here are a few key ingoing thoughts about some stuff I'd like to know – to be reviewed / complemented by you: [lists different project-related questions]*
> *Can you please take the lead on this, i.e. lay out hypotheses / things you want to look at, have a look at what data we have, define what analyses you'd like to do… and then do them?(field notes)*

The structure of the task illustrates the typical steps consultants undertake in a situation where they have to analyze a database in order to inform the project team. As a matter of fact, as a consultant, I am not expected to simply "do" analysis. Rather, as my supervisor describes, I should structure my analysis in the following way: To begin, I should develop the "stuff I'd like to know", then I should "lay out

hypothesis/things [I] want to look at". Looking "at what data we have" helps me to "define what analyses [I]'d like to do". The final step is to "do" the analysis.

Interestingly, when I did start this task I first lost myself in the data before realizing that approaching it with hypotheses could be a good approach:

> The database he sent me is no less than huge and I start to be afraid of this task. (…) I then start to familiarize myself with the data, I try to understand the content of the different columns and play around a little bit with the data. The more time I spend, the more I start to panic because I have the feeling that I am getting completely lost in the data. Also, I have never really analyzed databases of a comparable size with excel and I honestly do not even know how to do a pivot table. I turn to the colleague next to me who is known as our "excel expert" and ask him in a forthright way if he can explain to me how to do an analysis. He tries to help me and asks me what my problem is and why I want to look at the data. Since I cannot really explain it to him, I would eventually turn back to my desk and tell myself that I should maybe start to develop some hypotheses instead of asking around with no clear goal in my mind. (field notes)

Although I knew how I should proceed, I found it difficult to avoid getting "completely lost in the data". I first "play around" with it, hoping that I will find insights that way. Insecure about how to proceed, I seek help from a colleague, but quickly realize that I first need to know "why I want to look at the data". Thus, this excerpt illustrates the advantages of using this approach. As consultants usually handle large datasets to find solutions for complex problems, they use hypothesis to overcome the complexity of their work.

In fact, this procedure is somehow similar to the above described top-down approach. Consultants do not set up all possible solutions and eliminate them one-by-one, which would be a bottom-up approach. Instead, they estimate the most likely solutions, testing them one after the other. Relying on a consultant's intuition, hypotheses can accelerate the analysis. This demands self-confidence as you must rely on your own educated guesses as to possible solutions, instead of exploring the data exhaustively for possible explanations. Approaching data with a deductive methodology also means that you must identify logical connections between different factors. Consultants hence need to develop a sound understanding of the problem in order to identify plausible explanations. Thus, using hypotheses in quantitative analysis is a

way of working towards the delivery of relevant outputs in a timely fashion. By using their judgment, consultants spend their time on the most promising avenues towards the solution.

2.3 Iterate frequently with your supervisor

ABC's consultants also confirmed the relevance of their deliverables through frequent iteration with their supervisors and team members. This way, they made sure that they were meeting their manager's expectations and that they were aligned with the team's established course of action.

During my first weeks, I observed that my supervisor Thomas and my consultant colleague Sebastian sat together several times a day to verify that Sebastian's production was going in the right direction. I understood that consultants work closely with their supervisors in order to ensure they were meeting expectations. Thomas explained to me at the beginning of our project that a good consultant proactively includes feedback from his supervisor as early as possible in his production process, for example when building PowerPoint presentations:

> "So, before you start I just wanted to give you some advice on how a consultant works. When you have to do a slide, do not immediately start to work on PowerPoint because that will make you lose a lot of time. Doing all the layout can be quite long and in many cases, your manager will want to change a few things even though you already spend a good amount of time on it. I recommend that you always take a blank page and try to put your whole slide on it before even using PowerPoint. I know that this might be difficult for you for now because you do not have a lot of experience, but that will come. Also, it's way easier to just come see me with your piece of paper, then we will discuss it, I will give you feedback and you can rework it – a kind of frequent iteration. I would like that we function like that, that you come see me whenever you like." (Manager, field notes, personal translation)

The excerpt illustrates that consultants avoid "los[ing] a lot of time", for example by working too early on the layout of a slide. Since supervisors also control the layout of deliverables, Thomas strongly suggests that I work by initially drawing my slide on a piece of paper before building it with PowerPoint. I should then use this drawing and come see him, discuss it with him and incorporate his feedback in a "frequent iteration" where I can "come see [him] whenever [I] like." This means that

consultants discuss frequently with their supervisors, usually many times a day depending on the task, to inform him or her of their work. This exemplifies the type of teamwork that reigned at ABC Consulting. In fact, consultants preferred a tight control of their deliverables. We also see that managers meticulously verified each deliverable in detail. Hence, consultants adjusted their work in short iteration cycles, instead of running the risk of doing work that would not contribute to the mission.

A second reason for maintaining a close iteration cycle with your supervisor was to avoid being stuck with a difficult task. Consultants learn to seek help quickly if they struggle with a specific piece of work. Subsequently, when Thomas gave me tasks, he insisted that we keep an ongoing conversation about my work and that I proactively ask him for help if I have difficulties:

> Then, he reminds me that I should not spend too much time on this task, especially as it really seems to be a rather quick one. He estimates that I should take maximum 45 min. to go through the material. Then I should come back to see him with a piece of paper where I drew a first design of my structure. It doesn't have to be perfect, but he prefers that we work like that and that we avoid that I become stuck, which would halt my progress. (field notes)

As we see here, Thomas mainly wants to avoid that "I become stuck, which would halt my progress". He defines being "stuck" as not being able to do the assigned task in the time frame that he deems to be reasonable, i.e. 45 minutes for this task. Since the frequent iteration cycles forces consultants to quickly seek help if they cannot respect certain time frames, it gives the project team more oversight and capacity to adjust in order to respect deadlines. Hence, it was essential to learn estimating how much time a specific task should take and to know when it was time to contact one's supervisor for support. Being output driven thus translates into a willingness to confess one's struggles to the team and to seek help from your supervisor as early as possible. This requires thriving for speed over trying to protect your personal pride. Indeed, I learned that it was not a sign of weakness to frequently seek help and feedback from my supervisor nor to admit difficulties openly.

In summary, the overall goal of frequent iteration is to ensure a consultant's efficiency. Hence, consultants learn to speak up when grappling with their work, and

to proactively identify situations where it's advisable to seek help, for example when running out of time for a specific task. The fairly soft hierarchy and close relationship between consultants and their supervisors facilitate frequent and spontaneous iterations. At the same time, consultants must be willing to openly admit their struggles, prioritizing the speedy production of deliverables over individual achievement.

2.4 Transform results into insightful conclusions

Finally, other than ensuring the relevance of *what* they do, consultants also needed to prove the relevance of their concrete results for the project. In fact, after having produced a deliverable, for example a complex quantitative calculation or a benchmarking procedure, consultants need to show *how* these concrete results are relevant, i.e. what implications they have for the client. Thus, they need to transform their results into insights, as explained by a senior manager:

> "Then, once you have done your analysis and played with your resulting data, always ask yourself "so what?" – That forces you to take your analysis one step further and understand its meaning for the case team. Because what you want, in the end, are insights." (Senior Manager, field notes – training)

We are told that by asking ourselves "so what?" when evaluating concrete results, we further clarify how they contribute to the client mission. We need to "understand [the result's] meaning" for the project, i.e. instead of merely saying "the result is xyz", we need to be able to explain what a result of "xyz" means. Depending on the type of result, consultants achieve this by using different techniques. When calculating a specific mathematic ratio, for instance, I interpreted it by using comparable numbers from other companies. Otherwise, consultants would use logic or their common sense in order to understand their results' meaning. By doing so, consultants communicate *how* their results are relevant as they contextualize their outcomes within a specific industry, mission or other reasonable context. Thus, we "take [our] analysis one step further". This way, a consultant can transfer mere results into "insights", useful interpretations of information that help to strengthen the coherence of proposed answers on specific questions.

Furthermore, intermediate results should have an impact on the final advice to the client. In my performance evaluation, it was written that I "[p]rovided insightful conclusions from [my] own analyses to inform [the] broader answer" (excerpt evaluation document, field notes). Thus, competent consultants not only deliver relevant results, but they interpret them and understand how to transform them into "insightful conclusions". For instance, consultants aim to explain what concrete implications their result "XYZ" triggers and how to embed them with other findings from the team.

Producing insights is an important ability for consultants at ABC. "Problem solving and insight" is one dimension in their performance evaluation. More precisely, they are even rated according to the "grade" of their insights. Thus, they distinguish between first-, second- and third- order insights, with third-order insights being the most valuable. The grades describe the level of understanding that a consultant reaches with his or her conclusions. For instance, evaluating the impact on a client's profitability of an increase in Research and Development (R&D) spending relative to realized unit price would be considered a first-order insight since the conclusion remains within the direct context of the two ratios. However, combining this insight with findings about the client's market share and industry structure to formulate a conclusion on his R&D spending would be considered a 2nd-order insight since it translates the information within another context and relates it to further information.

This final step in the production process - transforming one's results into insights - is a crucial one as it is necessary to prove the relevance of one's work. Consultants need to interpret their outcomes and provide insightful conclusions to their clients. They can achieve this notably by doing benchmarks, using logical verifications or combining different figures. Most importantly, they learn to recognize and explain *how* their outcomes are relevant for their project.

In summary, the sections above have provided an overview of the practices that allow junior consultants to become productive. Knowing how to produce relevant outputs is an important competence that is achieved through different steps: when setting up and structuring tasks, when performing analysis, when producing deliverables and when

interpreting their outcomes. Hence, being output-driven requires the consultant to critically assess his work by asking himself if it will be relevant in the larger context of the project. Consultants therefore start their production process with a top-down methodology, identifying their desired outputs as precise as possible in terms of content and layout before defining the steps that are necessary to achieve them. Following a similar logic, they approach complex analysis by developing hypotheses, relying on their understanding, experience and intuition. They then subject their hypotheses to tests, and then confirm or reject them. This is different from longitudinal bottom-up approaches where different answer possibilities are eliminated one after the other, and it allows consultants to reach results more quickly. Furthermore, during the production process, they continuously iterate with their supervisor in order to assure that they are doing relevant work. Finally, they ask themselves how their results contribute to the project and what insights they provide. By assuring the relevance of their whole work, they provide useful support to their team and to the client.

3. Knowing how to become responsible: own your work

During my training and first few weeks, I discovered that consultants have a specific way of organizing their work as a team. In fact, unintuitively, they accord fairly high levels of responsibility to young and inexperienced juniors. In the following excerpt, my manager Thomas describes how he distributes work among the team:

> "I really want to give you a project that will be 100% yours and not something that will take you 5 hours while Sebastian could do it in 10 minutes. You see, it's important for me that you are not just doing supportive work for us, but rather that from the beginning you have a piece that you own and where you are responsible. And, you know, it takes some time to define such a module." (Manager, field notes – personal translation)

When a project is set up, consultants split it up in "modules" which each represent a stream of work. My manager wants to separate the project in adequate pieces so that I have a project that I "own" and for which I am "responsible". Modules are usually structured around topics or processes and are then attributed to consultants who "own" them "100%". Usually, supervisors do not "own" a piece of the project

themselves; they coordinate the communication with the client, manage the team of consultants and oversee their work closely, as described earlier. In our project, for example, we had three different modules that were split up between the two consultants, my colleague Sebastian and I: he owned two and I owned one. These three modules were separate projects in the beginning, yet led to one final recommendation in the end.

In consequence, novices learn how to own a module by showing responsibility for their work. However, as I will explain in the following section, I found that "ownership" in consulting had specific traits. I identified three activities that consultants deploy in order to show responsibility for their work: (1) they *prepare the trajectory of their work*, (2) they *show that they are in control of the execution of their work plan* and (3) they *ensure the validity of the content they produce*.

3.1 Prepare trajectory of your work

Every consultant at ABC was responsible for preparing a work plan for their module, and its execution. Hence, novices learned how to prepare the trajectory of their work – where it was going, and what steps they would take. In a training session, a senior manager illustrates how we show ownership for our module:

> "Usually after 1- 2 days of reading the material and having discussions about your module, you should come up with a work plan – go through it with your [manager] once you have developed it. It should include a rough layout of the output you want to produce, the key questions you want to address and an overview of your milestones during your work." (Senior Manager, field notes – training)

Consultants are responsible for developing a "work plan", detailing "key questions", a "rough layout of the output" and an overview of the steps and "milestones". In short, they decide what needs to be achieved, how it will be done and estimate the timeframe for each task. We once again see the output-driven character of the work plan, which should include a "rough layout of the output you want to produce". Yet, it is important to notice that juniors set up these work plans entirely by themselves. However, they are encouraged to do so in close interaction with their supervisor; they

should “go through it” with them in details in order validate that it meets their expectations. This illustrates that their responsibility is curtailed since they must align their work plans with their supervisors and seek their approval for any important decisions.

Finally, consultants also continuously change the trajectory of their module by adapting the work plan to changes and new information. This quote by a senior manager describes this mindset: “(…) always force yourself to think ahead” (Senior Manager, field notes – training). While “think[ing] ahead” might sound easy, my experience taught me the contrary. From observing my colleagues, I learned that a good consultant acts as a representative of his module. He or she must proactively think about how any event, significant or trivial, may affect their module. For instance, after meetings, my colleagues would frequently discuss the impact of the discussions on our overall goal and on their module in particular:

> After the call, Sebastian takes the lead of the conversation and instantly starts to talk about how he needs to change several of his documents and what documents still need to be done from scratch. I admire how quickly he can react to what just happened, and I try to participate by describing how the call also affects the excel sheet on which I am currently working. (field notes)

We see that I admire my colleague’s ability to extract the relevant outcomes of a meeting, and to describe how he will integrate them in his work by adapting his deliverables accordingly. In the following meetings, I try to participate in these conversations and learn to interpret a new piece of information’s relevance and impact for my module.

However, as described in the excerpt above, I found this fairly challenging. It requires a deep understanding of the project’s background, and a clear idea of the module, which I lacked in the beginning. Thus, Thomas would gradually ask me to plan the next steps in my module and to discuss them with him, so that I would become more confident with this task. While casually talking about my vision for the next steps and drinking coffee, Thomas exposed his view of responsibility:

> He asks me what I think the next steps are for us. I think out loud, without really knowing where I am going “Ok, let me think, what can I do to advance this project [and enumerate a few ideas]”. He interrupts me and says: “No,

> Viola, you do not think about "what can I, the little intern do" – you think about what we need to do as team ABC in order to push this project and YOU do it!" (Manager, field notes – personal translation)

I believe this quote illustrates tellingly what ownership means for consultants. Rapidly, novice consultants are encouraged to contribute and make decisions on the structure of a module, without being hampered by concerns about hierarchy or experience. I should not limit my range of thinking by seeing myself as a "little intern" with no experience or power, and whose contributions to the whole project are rather minimal. Instead, I should take on a holistic view of the situation, thinking as a valuable member of ABC in order to establish what "we need to do as a team in order to push this project". He encouraged me to provide my thoughts on the next steps and to perform those tasks, irrespective of my inexperience.

In summary, preparing the work plan and trajectory of a module is a way to showcase ownership of one's work. Consultants set up work plans for their modules and decide how to achieve their goals and how to manage their time by prioritizing tasks. They proactively come up with next steps and adjust their trajectory to new information. Preparing the trajectory for your module means to continuously be conscious about how the project's development affects your module and to adapt it in consequence. Consultants were encouraged to embrace these responsibilities and become confident members of their firm, taking decisions despite hierarchical considerations. However, since they needed to obtain their supervisors' feedback and approval, they did not have absolute power over their module.

3.2 Show that you are in control of the execution of your work plan

Once they have planned the trajectory for their module, juniors are responsible of executing their work plans: They produce the deliverables that are necessary for their module. While accomplishing their tasks, they must demonstrate that they are in control of their module and guarantee the robustness of their work.

Clearly communicating how every step you take is useful and necessary for the client mission is a great way of demonstrating that you are in control. Therefore, managers

frequently pointed out that we should "always try to see the bigger picture of [y]our module within the project" (Senior Manager, field notes – training). Thus, we should know how our tasks contributed to the project and be aware of the reasoning behind them:

> (…) they [the managers] insist above all that a good consultant "asks the why behind the what", i.e. that before doing any analysis, he should always ask himself the question "Why this analysis? What do I want to know? Why is this relevant?" (field notes – training)

By asking ourselves "the why behind the what", we should know why we want to do a certain analysis, what we want to achieve and why it is "relevant" for the project as a whole. Furthermore, consultants use these thoughts in their communication with supervisors in order to convey an image of control and responsibility.

When I first attend a meeting where my colleague Sebastian asks a partner for help, I realize how he shows responsibility for his module:

> I instantly realize how his incredibly structured way of presenting his work allows him to make a good impression on the partner and to receive constructive feedback. Instead of getting straight to the point, he would start to explain where this piece of work was situated in our project. Starting from what we as a team wanted to achieve, he derives the steps he took and so on. Astonished by the impact of a few simple words, I start to take notes about what Sebastian says and how he formulates and structures his thoughts. I plan to do exactly the same in my next meetings with Thomas. (field notes)

At this early stage of my internship I am most of all impressed by my colleagues' communication skills, his "structured way of presenting his work", the "impact of a few simple words". I therefore "take notes on what Sebastian says and how he formulates and structures his thoughts" in order to apply the same techniques in my next meetings with my supervisor. During the following weeks, I practice it in my meetings with Thomas:

> Then, I present my first draft of the excel sheet for the vendor responses to Thomas. Inspired by how Nick has done it the last time, I start by briefly putting my task into context, explaining my framework and the goal of my approach. (field notes)

From then on, I consequently introduce my work with "putting my task into context, explaining my framework and the goal of my approach". Once again, this way of

proceeding is coherent with output-driven thinking. However, I would like to use this excerpt to illustrate how consultants demonstrate ownership of their module. This example exhibits that juniors are expected to rigorously provide logical and acceptable reasons for their choices in order to appear in control of their work. Always forcing myself to relate my task to "the bigger picture" and to overtly communicate my thinking allowed me to verify that every step I took was relevant for the project. Consultants demonstrate a deep understanding of their contributions to the project, which gives them the necessary awareness to invest time exclusively in necessary tasks.

Consultants also try to show control when they ask colleagues for help regarding their work. In fact, we learned in the training that we should refrain from using help-seeking meetings as an occasion to leave difficult decisions to supervisors. Rather, we should lead these conversations and present solutions instead of mere problems, as explained by a senior manager:

> "Of course, there is a good way of addressing important or more complex questions with your [manager]. You should proactively set up some time with him or her and already think about possible answers to your question so that you have a sense of what the answer might be. When you are meeting with your [manager], you should be leading the conversation and drive to a solution together. This is a really good way to address difficulties that you might have, because you are showing ownership and responsibility of your module" (Senior Manager, field notes – training)

The juniors are told to approach help-seeking meetings with their manager in a proactive way. More precisely, they should already "think about possible answers to [their] question" before asking for help. Further, they should be "leading the conversation" instead of merely asking their supervisor for the right answer to their question. Thus, "showing ownership and responsibility" means that it is not sufficient to simply seek help when one encounters a complex issue. Instead, one should prepare themselves carefully and structure help-seeking meetings in a productive and efficient way.

Moreover, I learned that consultants should refrain from taking their supervisor's comments and practical feedback for granted. Instead, consultants should critically question any input before implementing it:

> I frequently blunder into the trap of accepting Thomas' corrections without questioning them, without verifying if the adjustments that he suggests for one slide are aligned with the whole presentations or if there are repetitions, for instance. Indeed, several times Thomas makes me notice that I should never take his comments for granted. Instead, I should use my common sense when integrating his adjustments and become truly responsible for the content I create. (field notes)

The excerpt illustrates how tempting it is to blindly accept my supervisor's corrections without questioning or verifying them thoroughly. Yet, in order to "become truly responsible for the content I create", I need to develop a critical view on any comments from outsiders. I learn to make sure that new comments are integrated responsibly, instead of becoming a kind of executing robot who takes his supervisors comments "for granted". My reflections after a meeting with Thomas where he pointed out a lot of easy mistakes that I had made, illustrate this point further:

> (…) but I did not go the extra mile, I did not proactively seek other relevant information. As a matter of fact I did not question Thomas' indications. Actually, since he always goes over my work and corrects it, I got used to leaving him the final responsibility, I relied on the fact that he would correct my work anyways… (field notes)

In other words, although it is tempting to leave the final responsibility to one's manager, showing ownership means to "go the extra mile". Competent consultants always seek "other relevant information" to consider, and use their critical reflection in order to think about as many possibilities as possible

To conclude, consultants show responsibility for their work by demonstrating that they are in control of what they do. Specifically, they ensure that their work is robust by keeping track of their decisions. They also communicate how their work contributes to the client mission and why it is relevant. By showcasing that they 'know what they do', novices warrant team members' trust in their work. Furthermore, asking for help is a way of showing ownership for your module, as you

make sure that your deliverables are relevant for the team. However, consultants never seek help empty-handed; they lead help-seeking meetings and try to structure them as efficiently as possible by preparing possible answers beforehand.

3.3 Ensure the validity of the content you produce

Finally, consultants also learn to assure the validity of the content they produce. Other than assuring the robustness of *what* they do, they also need to prove that their colleagues can trust the accuracy of their results, especially for quantitative analysis. Therefore, consultants learn to apply 'sanity checks' to their deliverables.

Early on, we were told that at ABC, junior consultants would have significant responsibilities when it comes to data analysis. During the training, we had an entire session dedicated to methods leading to solid quantitative analysis. Beyond sharing practical advice on how to structure an Excel-worksheet and some useful functions, the consultant in charge also pointed out that we needed to become truly responsible for the content that we generated:

> "Also, keep in mind that your [manager] usually does not like excel, and they would not normally look at your calculations or models. Actually, you don't want them to look at it because that would be a bad sign. You have to establish a level of credibility for your analysis so that he or she believes that they can totally trust your data and the recommendations you deduce from them." (Consultant, field notes – training)

We understand that junior consultants should do everything they can to "establish a level of credibility for [their] analysis". It would be "a bad sign" if their supervisor were to control their deliverables as it would indicate that he or she questions their correctness. The colleague explains that if you want your supervisor to "totally trust your data and the recommendations you deduce from them", your role as a junior consultant is to constantly do "reality check[s]" of your outcomes:

> "So, how would a good associate tackle a data analysis? First of all, it's really important to do a reality check. This means, just quickly go through the data and try to see if something is missing. Then, just use your common sense to validate the data – does it make sense? As an example, if you were presented with a list of sales items along with the date and the value of goods sold, you could make a rough summary and verify with the revenues (…) – that's just

> one example but that should really become intuitive for you. And it's really not complicated, you just have to take the time to do it. It should be done all the time, not only at the beginning of a case. I tell you, sanity checking will be part of your life at ABC!" (Consultant, field notes – training)

Verifying that a dataset from which you draw quantitative analysis is solid is a first step in the "sanity checking" process. A consultant should assess whether or not it represents a realistic overview of a given situation by asking "does it make sense?" Consultants "use [their] common sense to validate the data", a process which "should (…) become intuitive" for them. Sanity checking does not only apply when receiving a data package, but also when producing quantitative analysis and recommendations based on calculations. A colleague shared some very useful advice with me on how to assure the validity of my results:

> [He] explains that I should always memorize a few reference figures that will help me to sanity check my numbers. For this case for example, it is useful to know the current baseline and the number of full-time employees by heart and to have a rough idea how the baseline splits up into the main functions, for instance Governance accounts for [x]% of the baseline, Infrastructure for [x]% and so on. Thus, every time I do an analysis I should first double-check any calculations and second, use the fore-mentioned reference figures to roughly estimate if the results make sense. (field notes)

Thus, sanity checking is more than a simple double-checking of calculations; it includes a contextualization of results within other figures to verify if they "make sense". Consequently, situating new results within a selection of memorized figures becomes important in order to judge the validity of your results. Therefore, consultants choose "a few reference figures" that they memorize in order to use them for verifying the validity of their results quickly. I remember that consultants frequently used the metaphor of "bullet-proof" results. This meant consultants had the responsibility of assuring that they could defend their calculations, even under a very high level of scrutiny.

In addition, consultants should guarantee the robustness of their work in a larger sense. In fact, we were trained to develop a sense of responsibility towards continuously providing reliable and trustworthy work. Even in my first tasks, I was given freedom to make certain decisions on my own. For example, I compounded a

list of expectable savings for an IT-merger based on experiences from previous ABC consulting missions. However, this freedom came with a responsibility: I had to be able to explain and defend my choices in front of team members and clients. When I had to set up a table of figures explaining how much cost savings a company could realize when merging its IT functions, my colleague shared some useful advice to facilitate this:

> He tells me to never lose sight of the connection with our project and to do an application check with my numbers in order to see if they fit. Furthermore, he insists that for every number I choose, I have to be able to defend it in front of the client. Since this is my slide, it will be my duty to answer questions from the client, so I should not take this task lightly. Hence, he recommends that I take note of the source for each number, and also to keep track in instances where I choose the median of two figures, etc. (field notes)

My colleague makes a direct allusion to the feeling of "duty". To become truly responsible for the content I create, I should be able to trace back my decisions. The excerpt is a good illustration of the meaning of ownership for consultants in their day-to-day work: although I have the freedom to make decisions, I must keep track of the reasoning behind them in order to potentially defend them in front of my team and clients. Sebastian points out that this is an important part of my responsibility as a consultant, thus "I should not take this task lightly". Hence, consultants frequently add comments in their materials which document sources and adaptations on which they can rely in case they need to explain details.

In short, a consultant owns his work when (s)he is capable of demonstrating the credibility of his deliverables. Consultants can achieve trustworthiness and produce reliable work by taking the responsibility of independently verifying the validity of numbers and calculations, and by ensuring the robustness of their deliverables. For this purpose, they have to critically reexamine any results and contextualize them quickly within the project by using reference figures. The overall objective of these activities is becoming credible to their team, leading them to trust their deliverables and recommendations.

To conclude, we are now able to explain how consultants become responsible for their work. Every consultant owns a determined piece of work which means that (s)he

is leading its planning and execution. Hence, consultants develop detailed work plans, set up timeframes for their tasks and continuously adapt their work plan to changes that arise during the project. During the analysis, they interact frequently with their supervisors to assure that their work is aligned with the project's line of action. While consultants execute their module, they make sure to demonstrate that they are always in control of their work. Therefore, even in situations where they struggle with their tasks, they proactively seek help quickly to avoid losing time. Finally, consultants need to prove the robustness of their work – they demonstrate how their work contributes to the project and ensure its relevance for the team. In a similar vein, they aim to generate a level of trustworthiness for their concrete results, i.e. they take responsibility for the correctness of their outputs. As such, consultants have a rather "controlled responsibility" for their work. Although they are responsible for preparing the trajectory, executing the tasks, ensuring the robustness of their choices and correctness of their results, they do not have a high level of power. Thus, showing ownership means to constantly prepare and lead your work, but to also to quickly validate any decisions that you suggest with your supervisor. This helps to ensure its relevance for the team, with the goal of avoiding errors and correcting them quickly.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Having explained three practices that allow junior consultants to become competent quickly, I now want to suggest a framework that shows the kinds of knowing that juniors engage in. Subsequently, I will discuss how these results inform the academic debate about consulting expertise.

1. Learning how to construct knowledge

As shown, a novice's learning process is aimed at becoming part of an existing nexus of practices that are executed by a community of practitioners (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Nicolini, 2013). Novices get introduced into the practice by learning how it is composed, who and what is involved, what things are done and how they are done (Lave & Wenger, 1991). They also seek to understand what role is expected of them in this complex net of practices, by asking themselves questions such as: what is my role? What does it entail? What is expected of me and what is a good way of doing a task? I have identified three distinct practices that allow consultants to become knowledgeable, productive and responsible. We will now take a closer look at the kinds of knowing that these practices entail.

Ramping up is a set of activities in which the individual aims to create an understanding of a particular field in order to be able to communicate with actors and produce insights that are valid within a certain context. This practice combines pure cognitive activities such as the processing of large amounts of information (Bourgoin, 2015) with the use of judgment. The latter is necessary to identify important information and to estimate the relevance of certain documents. As Bourgoin (2015) also pointed out, it is intensively linked to databases on documents, peoples and projects. He also depicts how the use of a certain types of IT-infrastructure and software such as PowerPoint facilitate the ramp-up, as it makes information rapidly digestible. Finally, there is a collective element to ramping up, as consultants leverage their colleagues when trying to make sense of information. This is facilitated by a culture of help-seeking and help-giving (Hargadon & Bechky, 2006). Therefore,

ramping up also has a relational element embedded in it, as consultants need to build up a network within the company and offer help to colleagues.

Being output-driven applies one step later in the process, when consultants are knowledgeable enough to produce tangible results based on their analysis. It is a set of activities that aim to concentrate the consultant's efforts on relevant tasks only. Consultants want to demonstrate that they are always conscious as to the direction of their work, and not blindly exploring a topic. Hence, working output-driven involves analytical thinking, a cognitive operation that allows the consultant to define the layout and content of a deliverable or to set up hypotheses before doing any analysis. Yet, it is not merely a cognitive task; it is also collective as the team defines outputs jointly through frequent iteration and discussion. Being productive also involves judgement based on logical deferrals, 'gut feelings' or experience. Finally, output-driven work is also discursive, as consultants must present and, eventually defend their point of view in front of colleagues and clients.

Owning one's work is a distinct practice that operates on a different level than the other two. While ramping up and being output-driven are related to the production of advice and are thus more outward and content-oriented, showing ownership is an inward-bound operation. A consultant demonstrates that (s)he knows how to be responsible by engaging in collectively shared processes such as making sanity checks or showing control of his work during meetings. To convincingly demonstrate ownership of one's module, it is thus important to produce quality work in a predictable and reliable manner. First and foremost, it is thus a way of interacting with the collective. The consultant proactively demonstrates that (s)he assumes his place within a functioning nexus made of persons, processes, objects etc. In fact, showing ownership is a way of signaling to the community that one understands his role and fulfills it duly to the expectations. Being responsible is thus highly discursive, as described earlier. It includes convincing colleagues that one is capable of ramping up and of being output-driven, capable of leading a part of the project and that one's results are trustworthy. In short, owning one's work is fulfilling tasks in accordance with the expectations of the community.

Even though the three practices themselves are presented as distinct entities, they are highly intertwined. For instance, since being output-driven is highly valued within the firm, consultants show ownership by communicating that they are constantly driven by outputs. Also, the "output-driven mindset" can be found in the way a ramp-up is organized: consultants define, if possible, clearly what they need to know before reading much material. They are thus output-driven when they ramp up.

The three practices articulated above have been investigated from a perspective centered on the individual, yet they cannot be generated by the individual alone. This means that each practice is a combination of individual knowledge elements, i.e. discursive, analytical, or relational, together with collective processes, shared beliefs, as well as supporting external elements. In fact, the individual consultant at ABC leverages two main elements: (1) the *knowledge management system* and (2) the *community of practitioners* within the company.

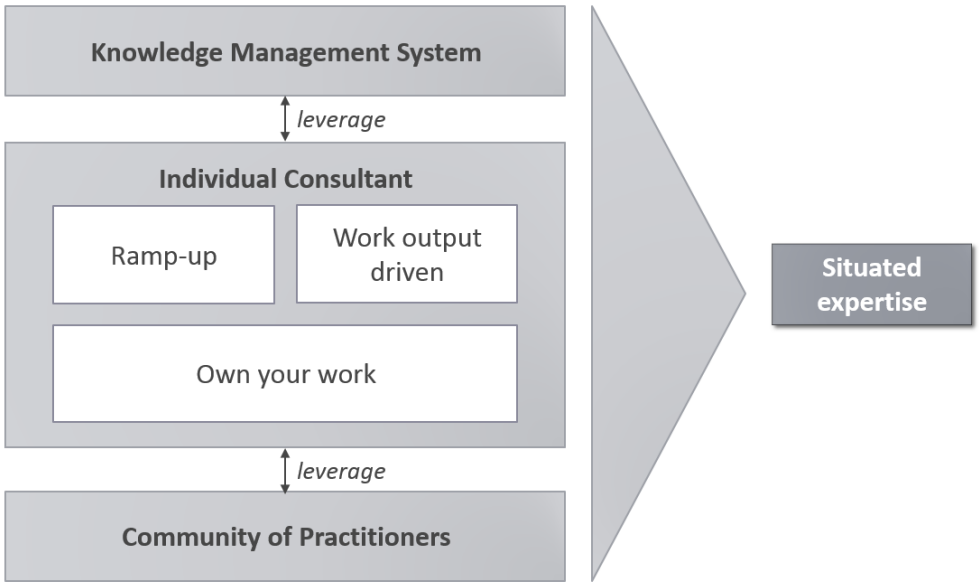
Knowledge management systems do play an important role in consulting expertise; they are part of a nexus of activities, individuals, artefacts, and processes that make up a successful practice. Hence, they must be understood not as an entity that is apart and distinct, but woven into practice via human actions. They are leveraged by consultants for different reasons. For instance, when consultants ramp up, they use the internal case database and/or the people inventory to identify colleagues that might be of help to gather useful material. The knowledge management systems thus becomes an enabling resource for consultants, given that they know how to leverage this resource effectively. Moreover, consultants use technical infrastructure such as the Microsoft Office Suite (Powerpoint, Excel, Word) to communicate their work to clients via presentations or calculation sheets. Hence, mastering how and when to use them is essential to achieve results quickly.

Second, the consulting competence is not an individual accomplishment, but a collective one. Consultants at ABC have different roles and responsibilities and collectively deliver valuable advice to their clients. Without the collective, this would be hard to achieve. Therefore, novices learn how and when to leverage the community of practitioners. For instance, individuals leverage their colleagues when

they ramp up, either indirectly via the data that they provided within the database or directly via help-seeking. When producing deliverables, consultants are seldom making decisions entirely alone; they usually discuss them with colleagues. Novices also learn how to structure help-seeking meetings and how to identify the right colleague for a request.

By combining all these elements, I can now explain what kinds of knowing junior consultants engage in to become competent quickly. The results are illustrated in Figure 3. I argue that practices are part of a bigger network of elements, forming a complex nexus of sites of knowing (Nicolini 2013). Practices are not only dependent on the individual consultant, but also on other elements such as the KMS or the community of practitioners. The nexus of practices forms a distinct way of doing consulting that has been established by ABC's consultants. It is constantly evolving, collectively shared and negotiated over time (Orlikowski, 2002). This set of practices is thus a complex aggregation of different elements, including not only individuals but also artefacts, processes, infrastructures, capital, assets, etc. (Nicolini, 2013; Schatzki, 2001). Put simply, a practice doesn't exist in a vacuum. To realize an exemplary practice, an agent might need support from documents, coordinated action and capital. By leveraging these different elements adequately, consultants perform a

Figure 3: A collective capability to construct situated expertise



collectively enacted capability to construct situated expertise.

Novices take part in performing this capability by ramping up, working output-driven and showing responsibility. They are absorbed in this nexus of practices, learning how to use individual cognition, discourse, logical deductions and judgement. They also learn how and when to leverage the collective and the KMS. In short, they become a junior practitioner within this nexus, leveraging available resources for their work. Thus, juniors can become competent members quickly because (1^{st}) they have a specific space in the nexus of practices, and (2^{nd}) the competence of a consultant lies in his ability to contribute to the enactment of a collective capability to produce insights that are rational, trustworthy and useful, and not simply in the possession of a superior type of knowledge.

2. Consulting expertise as a performance of knowledge

The results of this study contribute to the debate on consulting expertise that has been exposed in the literature review. Via rich descriptions of the learnings of consultants at the beginning of their career, I can deduce some characteristics of consulting knowledge. The findings join works from Bourgoin (2013; 2015) and Hargadon and Bechky (2006) who investigate consulting from a practice perspective.

To start, I have found that senior consultants do not simply relay a lot of abstract knowledge to juniors. Furthermore, novices are expected to do more than simply apply existing knowledge (c.f. Werr & Stjernberg, 2003). Knowledge contained in databases thus plays an important role as it allows consultants to become knowledgeable on specific topics. Ramping up provides them the legitimacy, confidence and ability to interact with clients (see also Bourgoin, 2015). However, while ramping up allows a consultant to become knowledgeable in a field, it is insufficient to deliver an expert advice to clients. To achieve this, consultants need to produce tangible deliverables that create useful insights and knowledgeable conclusions based on a rational thought process. Thus, consultants first become operational in a field, and then they produce expertise for their clients. In other words,

to advise clients, consultants proactively *construct* new knowledge that is adapted to the client's problem by leveraging the firm's existing knowledge.

Thus, if learning how to be a competent consultant is not about acquiring a set of abstract strategy models, consulting expertise itself is not to be understood as a body of abstract knowledge. Consultants do not *possess* knowledge as sometimes argued by proponents of the functionalist view. Neither are they simply hiding the fact that they do not possess any 'expert' knowledge, using impression management and rhetoric, as suggested by the critical perspective on consulting. Rather, the data shows that knowledgeability is not a given, it needs to be achieved anew in every client mission (Bourgoin, 2015). This is exactly where consulting expertise lies: in the practices that allows consultants to rapidly construct a useful, trustworthy and rationally grounded advice, situated within a specific context.

This expertise is thus not universal, but dependent on the client's problem at a specific place and time. Consulting knowledge is not an expertise wherein the client is expected to simply state his problem to which the consultant will provide a definite answer. Put bluntly, consultants would not sell their expertise by stating: "tell me your problem and I will tell you the answer". Rather, they sell their capacity to consult a client in the context of an important decision. That makes consulting expertise a *performance of knowledge*, thus, a capability, instead of a stable disposition.

Table 5 describes how this practical view of consulting expertise compares to the functionalist and critical view in a few key categories. On a conceptual level, the practice view on consulting expertise avoids the debate as to whether consulting knowledge is 'fact' (functional view) or 'fiction' (critical view). Instead, it is oriented towards studying how it is achieved in practice. As Salaman (2002) pointed out, academic research on consulting has been overly concerned with the debate between the functionalist and critical view. According to him, "[t]his only makes sense if one presumes the possibility of the existence of authoritative expert knowledge claims which describe the world as it is" (Salaman, 2002: 250). However, a sociology of consulting should not be interested in determining whether consulting knowledge is

'true' or not. He argues that if consulting expertise is important for social actors, such as managers, scholars should take it seriously and study it as a 'social fact'.

Table 5: Three perspectives on consulting expertise

	Functionalist View	**Critical View**	**Practice View**
Scholar's interest	How does consulting work? How can it be improved?	Why does consulting work? Why is it so influential?	What do consultants really do?
Scholar's inquiry	Tools, Methods	Rhetoric, myths, impression management, etc.	Practices, day-to-day activities
Assumptions about consulting expertise	Consultants' expertise builds on a specific, unquestioned knowledge	Consultants' expertise is symbolic, built on persuasion and rhetoric	Consultants' expertise is their capability to create knowledge for their clients
Consultants' expertise	Professionals of technical-rationality	Professionals of persuasion	Professionals of relevance and efficiency

Source: Adapted from Bourgoin (2013: 28)

Consequently, accepting that consulting knowledge is valuable for the industry's clients – hence, taking it as a social fact - opens the possibility of examining its nature, without being restricted to debates as to whether it is 'the truth'. We thus find functional and critical elements in the practices that I described. For instance, similar to functionalist authors, I have shown that consultants use specific tools and strategic models for analyzing data. However, technical skills alone are not sufficient to be competent. To show ownership in front of their team members, novices also use rhetoric and other skills, which are comparable to the skills that senior consultants use to convey an image of professionalism and trustworthiness in front of clients (see Bourgoin, 2013).

Hence, a practice view reveals that both technical knowledge and impression management are necessary components of competency in consulting, like two sides of the same coin. Analyzing consulting expertise through practices made it possible to discover both sides, without taking a normative stance as to whether they are 'true'

types of knowing. In other words, there is no superior knowledge on which consultants can rely. Instead, consultants need to *perform* knowledge. That means they create new knowledge that is tailored to their clients' specific problem and use it to advise them when taking and implementing a decision.

Extrapolating the findings of this study for a comprehensive conceptualization of consulting expertise as a performance of knowledge might be beyond the scope of this study. However, based on the results, a few things can be said regarding the characteristics of consulting practices. First, a common thread in the practices described earlier is a constant quest to achieve *efficiency* and *relevance* in every action. Consultants use different techniques to increase their efficiency: they increase their speed when doing tasks by leveraging high-quality sources (ramp up), they reduce the necessary steps to a minimum (output-driven behavior), they split responsibilities for their work among each other and ensure that no time is lost verifying their results by striving to provide outputs that are accurate and of good quality (ownership). In fact, achieving relevance becomes a means to achieve efficiency, since consultants aim to waste as little time as possible doing irrelevant tasks. Hence, consultants learn to identify what knowledge is relevant (ramp up) and what they should do in order to craft documents that are relevant for the mission (be output-driven). Learning these practices makes consultants more efficient since it aligns their work towards useful results. One could say that novices learn that by striving for useful outputs (relevance), they can reduce their investment of time and resources to a minimum (efficiency). Therefore, building on Bourgoin (2015), novices learn to become *professionals of relevance and efficiency*[14].

[14] I adopt a slightly different and, I must admit, *simplified* understanding of relevance and efficiency as compared to Bourgoin (2015). While he mentions that consultants strive for '*cognitive* efficiency', I choose to omit the notion of 'cognition', as it doesn't take into account other collective, relational, discursive, bodily etc. elements that contribute to the achievement of efficiency. When it comes to relevance, he defines relevance as the capacity to produce a maximum of outputs with a minimum of resources and time, building on Sperber and Wilson (2001). However, with reference to my data, I conceived of relevance as a quest for the delivery of *useful* results, regardless of speed. For me, speed is rather a consequence of efficiency, which itself is a consequence of relevance.

Second, the set of identified practices are highly contextual and situated within the nexus of individuals, processes, objects, infrastructure etc. that constitute them as a field. By that, I mean that the described capability is dependent on a set of practices. Outside this set, it loses its power and effectiveness. You cannot be successfully output-driven in a work environment where such a behavior is not supported. For instance, pointing to results that one simply 'expect to achieve', could possibly be construed as arrogant by colleagues, and lead to the rejection of one's work. Similarly, it would be hard to ramp up on a topic without access to high quality information, such as the databases that are accessible to ABC's employees; the research for reliable information would be time-consuming, and knowledge would most certainly need to be built from scratch. Hence, this illustrates that practices are 'sticky' (Szulanski, 1996) because they rely on a complex net of different elements.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to develop a detailed account of what junior consultants learn when they enter their career by relying on rich data from an in-depth auto-ethnographic field study. To round up this thesis, I want to present a summary of its findings, before concluding with an account of its limitations and some avenues for further research.

3. How novices develop a capability to construct situated expertise

The point of departure for this thesis was the observation that a university graduate can work as a management consultant directly after finishing their studies, without having accumulated significant practical experience or detaining any institutionalized accreditation. I have explained that, in fact, hiring young and inexperienced graduates has become a normal practice among consulting firms. However, since novice consultants do not receive extensive formal training or complete any official tests, we know relatively little about what they actually learn in order to be able to perform their job.

Many studies on knowledge management systems within consulting firms highlight how knowledge databases provide the means to leverage novice consultants, since they allow for the transfer of valuable expertise from senior consultants to novices. Yet, such a perspective on learning reflects a particular vision of what competency in consulting actually means. As shown, it refers to consulting expertise as a body of technical knowledge – either on specific processes or actual content – that can be possessed and shared, as if it was a resource. Scholars who have called this position into question widened our perspective on consulting knowledge, so as to include 'soft' skills such as rhetoric. Finally, a few scholars have directed our view towards the study of concrete and situated practices, such as the capability to 'reframe a problem' (Hargadon & Bechky, 2006), to create knowledge and to maintain chains of action (Bourgoin, 2015).

Hence, adopting a similar perspective on knowledge as the latter cited scholars, I investigated a junior consultant's learning process from a practice perspective. This framing led me to study instances of knowing and learning within concrete, everyday practices in which novices engage. It also provided me with the theoretical background necessary to understand that knowledge lies within practices, and, as such, is the achievement of a complex network of individual actors, a community of practitioners, objects, artefacts, processes, infrastructure and so forth. Hence, since knowledge cannot be understood as an individual achievement alone, the learning process of juniors had to be captured as a process wherein they were being 'absorbed' into this nexus of practices. To investigate this, qualitative field data was collected during an auto-ethnographic field study. During this study, I worked as a novice consultant in a consulting firm for three months, thereby participating in the practice and observing my own participation.

I thus found that juniors engage in three main practices – *ramping up, working output-driven* and *owning their work* - and that the two main supporting elements are the *knowledge management system* and the *community of practice*. In fact, novices learn on three levels: they learn how to become knowledgeable, how to become productive and how to become responsible. They thus learn, for instance, what concrete activities allow them to become knowledgeable, what 'being' knowledgeable means in this particular context and how they can achieve it. To become knowledgeable, consultants build on cognitive as well as relational abilities in order to gather, process and mobilize large amounts of information efficiently and quickly. To become productive, they engage in a continuous quest for relevance, thereby assuring that every piece of work they deliver is relevant and useful for the client mission. Finally, throughout the process, they become responsible by assuming ownership for their work; they show that they are in control of everything they do and that their work is trustworthy and valid.

Together, via engagement in these three practices and by leveraging the KMS and the community of practice, consultants have the capability to construct a situated expertise anew for every client. Overall, I have shown how novice consultants

become professionals of *relevance* and *efficiency* who realize performances of knowledge.

4. Implications for practitioners

The results of this study have valuable implications for practitioners in the field: working consultants, future consultants and clients alike. For consulting firms, the results can guide their HR practices, especially their way of structuring the 'onboarding' of new hires. Once we acknowledge that even in a so-called "knowledge work", the knowledge lies not only in some abstract body of information but also in the way things are done, the onboarding of new recruits can be structured around practices. This could mean that novices should participate as early as possible in the everyday work. Moreover, practices could be shared more explicitly, by combining learning methods based on abstract descriptions of these practices and concrete 'learning by doing'. At the same time, it implies that training a consultant is somehow longsome, as (s)he will need to be exposed to many different situations before becoming solid and independent in his practice.

Interestingly, ABC constructed their onboarding for new employees around a relatively short formal training, followed by an immersion into practice. This method focuses on teaching ways of doing (practices), and not abstract concepts of consulting knowledge, such as the BCG product portfolio matrix, Porter's 5 forces, or Porter's value chain model. In my view, ABC understood that their "valuable asset", so to speak, is not necessarily their body of knowledge, but their way of doing consulting, and that it is the latter that they have to teach novices. This insight could be useful for other consulting firms' onboarding practices.

Second, consulting firms can also infer from these findings *what* knowledge they actually need to protect in order to remain competitive, especially at a time where virtual data protection is a challenge not only for companies, but also for governments and the individual. Here, knowing that valuable knowledge resides in practices is encouraging news. Furthermore, that these practices are dependent on a

complex nexus of practices and other elements that are hard to reproduce is probably even better news. Even though the practices provide protection against incumbents and competitors, consulting firms should also be aware that one would expect that it is cumbersome to change a set of collectively shared practices radically. Hence, a possible drawback of this finding might be that individual consulting firms could be rather slow adapters in the event of a disruption of the industry (see Christensen, Wang, and van Bever (2013) for an interesting account of possible future scenarios for the consulting industry)

The results presented here can also be highly valuable for clients that buy consulting services. The findings provide a better understanding of what consultants actually offer. The literature has shown that consultants are pictured as 'charlatans' and that people frequently reject their recommendations. Yet, if clients had a better understanding of consultants' work, they would be more likely to trust their advice, instead of seeing it as 'quick' or 'superficial fixes' to complex problems. While it could be disappointing to discover that consultants do not 'possess' superior knowledge that can be simply to applied to your situation, this assures that the suggested solutions are tailored to the client's specific problems. This makes it thus more likely that they could trigger long-lasting change.

Lastly, I am personally convinced that these results will be fruitful for students who are considering a career in consulting. I have witnessed the magnetic pull that the consulting industry has on many students. However, many are also reluctant to work as consultants, since they don't truly understand what a consultant actually does. Hence, thinking that they are not competent enough to 'play the expert', and to live up to the expectations, they decide against applying for these jobs. This, I believe, is especially true for female students. Many of my female colleagues believed that consulting did not offer a suitable career track for them. In fact, many thought that consultants needed to be tough, convincing and considerably self-confident – all characteristics that are often perceived as being more predominant in males. I hope that this thesis will help to reduce the mystery around consulting work, consequently adjusting students' expectations as to what awaits them as consultants. This is not

only beneficial for students, but also for consulting firms that want to increase their workforce's diversity.

5. Limitations and avenues for further research

This thesis is bound to have several limitations. First, I focused explicitly on *management* consultants, thereby putting the numerous other forms of consulting, such as IT-consulting, project consultation, engineering consultation and so forth, aside. This focus was mainly due to practical reasons, as given time considerations, I could only collect data in one firm. The auto-ethnography's advantages – depth in data, access to raw, intimate and authentic data about work practices – are counterbalanced by the fact that the data comes from a single company, as well as a single individual. Hence, further research would be necessary to see if the results presented here can be applied to other consulting contexts. Hansen and Haas (2001), for instance, have pointed out that management and strategy consulting firm's expertise is different than that of IT-consulting firms. The latter offer mainly implementation services, the former build their service around complex problem-solving (see also Hargadon and Bechky (2006)). It could thus be fruitful to verify what practices juniors in other types of consulting firms engage in and to compare the results with those provided here.

Second, I only had access to work practices in which *juniors* engage. That means the exposure to clients was marginal. Furthermore, I did not have access to all aspects of the consulting practice, notably the sale of consulting services or the establishment and maintenance of the consultant-client relationship. Hence, subsequent ethnographic field studies could further investigate what consultants actually do in these unexplored facets of the career. While Bourgoin (2015) has already described many of the aspects of a consultant's career, the consultant-client relationship would merit closer investigation.

Such work could also influence our vision on knowledge-intensive firms, where the dominant point of view still is that the accumulation of knowledge is advantageous,

i.e. “the more knowledge the better”, and that competitive advantages stem from larger investments in knowledge management (McIver, Lengnick-Hall, Lengnick-Hall, & Ramachandran, 2013: 597). However, in a quantitative study on the role of knowledge sharing for the performance of management consultancies, Haas and Hansen (2005: 1) have found that a consulting firm’s performance “depends not on how much firms know but on how they use what they know”, indicating that increased knowledge flows might impede competitive performance. Here, complementing qualitative field studies on the work of more senior staff could lead to interesting results on what types of knowing are valuable at higher levels of hierarchy. Of course, it is relatively hard to conduct an auto-ethnography at a senior consultant level, as the entry requirements are significantly higher. For researchers, it is thus more difficult to work as a senior consultant. Therefore, qualitative methods such as non-participant observation or semi-conducted interviews might be an avenue for researchers interested in understanding consulting expertise further.

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