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Configuring expert knowledge: The consultant as sector specialist

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Abstract

This study defines an aspect of consultant knowledge that provides credibility without claiming unrealistic status for a field like consulting. Our focus is the "sector knowledge" that consultants accumulate which derives from repeated assignments in the industrial sector in which the client organization resides. This has been under-researched partly because of an emphasis oil knowledge as technique and method. But knowledge configured around the sector enables consultants to play the role of the outside expert and draw oil a language and experiences held in common with the client. The paper explores the role of consultants as sector intermediaries through a case study of contemporary management consulting in a UK local authority. We see "the sector" as air alternative type of knowledge formation salient for a client-centered occupation like consulting. We also explore sector knowledge as a negotiated setting and dispel overly simple notions of know-how being "brought to" the client.

Introduction

The kinds of knowledge that management consultants and the consulting industry employ are not easily defined. Client firms can ''consult'' over a range of activities and problems, potentially drawing on different kinds of knowledge, while the complexity of consulting as a cluster of occupations has led to some very different images of skills. Consulting itself is in no sense circumscribed like some technical or professional occupations. However, considered as a part of the huge professional and business services industry, it has been grouped with categories of expertise that are seen as having only ''weak knowledge'' and an ambivalent place in the spectrum of expert labor (Alvesson, 1993; Reed, 1996). The implicit reference point for these knowledge forms obviously is the knowledge associated with codified or theoretical forms (''strong knowledge''). Hence there is an implied contrast with knowledge-as-theory or a body of communicable principles traditionally associated with expert labor such as the professions and scientific/technical occupations (Robertson & Swan, 1998).

But such divisions are perhaps rather crudely drawn and leave little room for formations that fall ''in between'' the strictly objective and subjective. While a corpus of abstract theoretical knowledge might be the defining feature of some professional groups, it may be less relevant for others who have to have knowledge of precedent and client preferences, as well as theoretical knowledge. For management consultants knowledge is accepted as being more client-centered (Fincham, 1999). But is this knowledge unique to consultants? Do not all suppliers of

services have to know their clients? Conversely, many consultant solutions will have an abstract side, even though they have to address the vagaries of the management task. Consultant activities like change management, for instance, are based on process theories that inform countless models and frameworks (Schein, 1988; Argyris, 1990).

Amid this confusing variety one lasting way of defining the consultant is that of the outside expert. The image of the ''outsider'' is potent and dramatic, and lends weight to claims of supplying something the insider cannot. Consultants have frequently been seen as marginal figures who gain influence by a degree of otherness and sheer difference (e.g., Antal & Krebsbach-Gnath, 2001; Anand, Glick, & Manz, 2002). Competence and credibility are derived from outside the managerial jurisdiction, but ''outside expertise'' has rarely been defined (cf. Menon & Pfeffer, 2003). What exactly is outside the client organization that the consultant is expert in? The argument of this paper is that an important element of consultant knowledge is formed around industry sectors. Consultants are here viewed as ''sector specialists'' who accumulate knowledge of industrial sectors through repeated assignments with similar client firms. Up to now this view has been under-researched and not appreciated as important perhaps because of tendencies to polarize subjective and objective forms of knowledge.

Consultants construct their appeal to the client by claiming various kinds of special knowledge (Kitay & Wright, 2003; Werr & Stjernberg, 2003). This may involve mastery of some technique or fashionable framework, familiarity with new equipment or hardware, or the esoteric skills of divining clients' problems—but also these claims are frequently backed by experience of problems and solutions bedded in a particular industry or sector grouping. The sector specialist claims to bring improved judgement and comparison with other sector players (benchmarking). Industry surveys suggest that managements are highly sensitized to this kind of information (Clark, 1995: 70). The industrial sector in which the client firm operates is a source of information about rivals, similar technologies and vital networks, and an intermediary who brings news of the sector is a crucial figure. Demand for sector knowledge may stem from clients who are familiar with standard fads and want more relevant know-how.

We propose to explore the sector concept in terms of the construction of expert knowledge and of the sector itself as an institutional space. The first focuses on how consultants develop this form of knowledge and how they solidify it to support claims to legitimacy. Here the professions literature helps in suggesting how expert knowledge translates into action. A number of theories reflect the decomposition of expert labor into different levels of activity that span the claims to identify problems and apply solutions—in particular Abbott's (1988) and Carlile's (2002) modes and stages of expert knowledge.

In addition, we also explore how client and consultant are involved in knowledge production. The so-called firm-in-sector theory (e.g., Child & Smith, 1987) has related the strategic development of firms with the dynamics of the industry sector, seeing managerial action not as simply constrained by pressures from sector competitors but as being complexly negotiated with external networks. Such an approach suggests that the ''simple model'' of the consultant as the outsider, who brings privileged knowledge in, needs greater nuance. Management consultants may be well placed to acquire this knowledge, but the boundaries are not rigid and clients as ''insiders'' will also have ''outside'' knowledge of their markets and industry sectors. Hence ''sector knowledge'' needs to be conceived as a distinctive construct where client managers and outside experts interact.

The paper explores these aspects of consultants' role as sector intermediaries through an example of contemporary management consulting in a large UK local authority. This provided a significant context for sector-based interaction. The consultants utilized their experience of local government and the public sector as a context for knowledge and as a way of framing their understanding of the client's problem. The case study organization was embedded in a range of sector networks and contacts, while the central ''story'' of the case

involved managerial dilemmas in which sector knowledge was clearly being mobilized. Before looking at this material, a framework for how expert knowledge in this area might be legitimized is developed.

Consultant Knowledge and Sector Knowledge

Claiming legitimacy in a world continually reconfiguring around new media and technologies is problematic (Benders & van Veen, 2001). Indeed, where knowledge is ambiguous and transient, few would actually want to claim lasting stability. What would be the point in becoming qualified, say, in Business Process Re-engineering when that particular fad is going to decline and disappear in a few short years (Carson, Lanier, Carson, &Guidry, 2000)? Nevertheless, bodies of knowledge with no well-defined abstract forms do trade off these fast-moving fields.

Recent studies of weak-knowledge occupations have stressed certain kinds of less structured knowledge formations defined in relation to available sources of status. One very close to that of sector knowledge (and, indeed, which may be regarded as simply another expression of knowing the sector) is the knowledge accumulated around the client. In certain respects, a curious kind of contradictory relationship to the client as a kind of opposing ''other'' can be used to build expert claims. For example, Pieczka's (2002) research on public relations and Alvesson's (1994) study of advertising show how credibility is sought through knowledge that differentiates the expert from the client. The occupation as a whole claims some special judgement or instinct (whether it is the ''effective message'' in public relations or ''creative input'' in advertising) that enables it to formulate and solve problems, in whatever field, in way, the paying client cannot. In a sense ''the client'' is being constructed here as a set of predispositions and assumptions about expertise, and by playing off that, and creating a distance from or boundary with the client, the expert occupation defines its own niche.

However, clients can contribute more directly to tradable knowledge. For a sector speciality to develop, knowledge comes through repeated assignments and extra-project contacts involving its main players and their technologies and networks. For consultants, the sum total of interaction over a group of related clients equates to this sector-based experience. Here, for example, Føsstenløkken et al. (2003) highlighted the importance of learning from clients in joint project teams and client interaction as a key form of knowledge development. This interestingly reverses common assumptions about knowledge transfer in consultancy projects being a simple flow from expert to client. These researchers point out that having ''good clients'' was a major factor in consultants' individual development whereas other forms of learning (e.g., cognitive forms associated with the acquisition of abstract knowledge) were less well regarded.

Such alternative knowledge sources and knowledge formations may have been overlooked in the past because of the tendency to present knowledge in particular ways. Literature in this area, particularly on the professions (e.g., Friedson, 1986; Abbott, 1988) has typically had twin preoccupations. First that of abstract knowledge, the importance of which as a basis of occupational power cannot be overstated. There is of course a gamut of historical, political, and institutional factors that account for the occupational ascendancy of professions. But an abstract knowledge base at a fundamental level is what enables professionals to argue for elite status and exclusive jurisdiction (Wilensky, 1964: p. 144; Strang & Meyer, 1993), whilst ''abstracting ability'' (Abbott, 1988: p. 30) denotes the high ground of pure theory. Second there is the dualism between this knowledge and opposed forms of ''weaker'' knowledge reliant on the so-called esoteric skills and sensitivity to client needs. Once again professional ascendancy is seen to lie in the ''optimum combination'' (Wilensky, 1964: p. 149) between intellectual/cognitive knowledge and a set of practical capabilities.

These models of knowledge may need adaptation for ''newer'' groups like consultancy. The first would tend to emphasize discipline and methods-based skills, while the second divides these from more subjective or esoteric

forms. Consultants use both these knowledge forms but, as a matter of emphasis, they may distract attention from other knowledge formations and in particular more typical and salient intermediate forms. We can refer to research that does develop accounts which, while they refer to ''strong knowledge'' experts, may be adapted to be of broader relevance. Abbott (1988) has very usefully broken down the modes of knowledge of powerful professions engaged in client-centered work, and we can consider his framework in the analysis of consultants' sector knowledge (Table 1).

The framework Abbott (1988: p. 40) provides is concerned with how expert claims are legitimized in the accomplishment of work. Professional work is decomposed into a sequence of diagnosis, inference, and treatment in which experts link back to their theoretical knowledge, and forward to solutions. This process defines different modes of expert labor, or what Abbott calls the ''three acts of professional practice'' (p. 36). The first, diagnosis, takes the problem into the expert knowledge system and is about ''structuring'' the problem in ways that align with existing knowledge. In diagnosis a ''picture'' of the client (and their problem) is formed and referred to a set of professionally legitimate problems. Actually dealing with client problems occurs in the final treatment phase. Here further aspects of legitimation occur, notably the control of categories of treatment and brokering kinds of treatment with the client. In between, inference is where the treatment strategy is worked out; in routine cases there is effectively no stage of inference because a simple diagnosis almost automatically produces a solution, but for more non-routine problems the ''middle game'' of expert thought is conducted.

This model, largely conceived in terms of the professions, points out a number of areas where knowledge legitimacy is problematic. In the middle stage, for example, there must be neither too little nor too much inference (Abbott, 1988: p. 52). Too little inference means too comprehensive a set of rules and then professional work becomes vulnerable to routinization; too much interpretation and the knowledge base of the expert cadre comes dangerously close to common sense and again may be challenged. In addition, professional ''treatment'' (akin to the consultant solution) confers control if imposed on its own terms, but there are always tensions and limits (Abbott, 1988: p. 47). The expert occupation lays itself open to rivals who are more willing to tailor and customize solutions, so that solutions shuttle between expert diagnosis and client-specific tensions. Considering this framework in relation to other types of expert labor, problem areas may be more acute, in particular for groups like management consultants that have relatively powerful organizational clients and less well-established knowledge bases.

Establishing contact and rapport with the client occupies much consulting effort (Sturdy, Schwarz, & Spicer, 2006). In this context, the analysis provided by Carlile (2002) is useful; he refers to another type of expert labor namely technical design groups engaged in product innovation. These expert workers are different from a group like management consultants, but they do require integration and surmounting the difficulties of expert talking to expert is a core problem. Carlile develops a sequence, also over three phases, that is not identical to Abbott's but is strikingly similar. His interest in the integration between innovating groups (a process which like knowledge legitimation results in a practical solution) is seen to proceed from a shared language that parties can familiarize themselves with and so communicate at base level. Next, opportunities for parties to learn about each others' concerns and for mutual sympathies to develop need to occur. And finally actual practices need to be engaged in and a context developed in which knowledge transformation may happen. This framework reflects three levels— syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic—that traverse from basic necessary conditions to conditions sufficient for integration. The final phase is particularly important as it contains ''new knowledge'' untainted by previous interests and conflicts. Carlile (2002: 445–446) suggests that collaboration is often clinched as people identify or create new knowledge.

Insights from combining these influential frameworks are particularly illuminating. While Abbott is concerned with the process of legitimizing knowledge (which is crucial for consulting), he is less interested in problems of integration with client groups (as powerful professional groups typically enjoy occupational control in these

areas). However, Carlile's analysis can supply added pointers as to how the client-consultant relationship might work, though it is less concerned with legitimation of knowledge (because effectively this is expert talking to expert).

Taking this analysis across to the legitimation of consultant knowledge (see Table 1) there is first the initial phase of problem diagnosis. The expert needs to claim an understanding of the client's problem and relate this to solutions. But experts who share knowledge with often powerful clients cannot monopolize the diagnosis. Instead experience of the client's sector provides a shared industry language and common reference points and a context for claims of being able to diagnose problems. Then, in the middle phase, the opportunity for the parties to adjust disparate beliefs and values (''semantic'' understanding) is similar to the notion of non-routine work on problems being carried out, and clients and consultants working towards common positions. Such a process of joint learning is aided by exploring understandings of actors and activities in the sector. Final consolidation occurs if consultants identify practical solutions that appeal to clients and that are referenced by recipes from the sector.

Table 1. Expert knowledge and sector knowledge

Abbott's (1988) three modes of expert knowledge		Legitimizing influence of sector knowledge
Diagnosis	Assigning the client's problem to a category that fits the expert's knowledge base	Diagnosis of the client's problem is couched in a model that provides an industry language shared with the client but in which the consultant also claims deep understanding of problems and solutions
Inference	Expert thought in which the treatment strategy is worked out	Knowledge of other sector actors and activities helps to build bridges between client and consultant in the process of using an expert knowledge base
Treatment	An outcome provided for the client that is prescribed by the diagnostic system	Consultants' orientation towards a solution bestows a degree of legitimacy and provides a shared practice in which differences and conflicts can be dissolved

Data Collection and Case Study

Our case involved a specific consulting project studied between March 2004 and May 2005. Observation and interviews were used in the collection of direct and reported data, and perceptions from both sides of a live client–consultant relationship were gathered. The case study was researched in the following manner. The consultants were one of the Big 4 IT/consulting firms and were developing a new procurement model for buying-in agency staff in a large local authority in the south of England. We interviewed participants involved in the project and also observed project meetings between consultant and client teams.

The project team was staffed roughly symmetrically with six people: three consultants and three client managers. The most senior consultant, who was an acknowledged procurement and public sector specialist, provided the links back to the agency; there was a senior consultant who was another specialist in procurement and oversaw the project on-site, and there was a junior who provided data gathering and analysis manpower (we call these Consultants A, B, and C). On the client side, the most senior person was a director-level council officer who was effectively the project sponsor; the senior council officer who headed the procurement group was another key member, and one of the managers in the group also attended meetings (these are Clients A, B, and C).

For data gathering, six project meetings were attended and 11 interviews were carried out. Most of the interviews and meetings were taped but otherwise field notes were used. Project meetings were attended by a researcher as a

''fly on the wall'' taking an unobtrusive seat, and recording was possible in these relatively small gatherings. Meetings and interviews lasted 60–90 minute, and three of the more central participants (Clients A and B and Consultant A) were re-interviewed several times. For analysis, we sought categories related to the main consulting task (seeking new forms of procurement to gain efficiencies in buying in contract labor) and searched in the data for insights and sequences showing how respondents brought sector information to bear on this problem.

The consultants were investigating the supplier interface to the agencies from which temporary staff were employed. The project was part of a larger ''e.government'' agenda. Driven from central government (the source of most change in local government) this focused on a number of areas of which procurement was a prominent one. In the specific project we studied there were no direct links to the labor supplying agencies, as the consultants worked on internally held data about contracts and payments. However, what we might think of as the regular inhabitants of an industrial sector, namely the peer group of organizations similar to the client organization, were invoked to help internal decisions. Achieving efficiencies in procurement basically meant that a single set of bureaucratic rules had to accommodate some very different purchasing decisions and markets of supply (potentially from garbage collection all the way to professional areas like civic planning and surveying). How other councils had tackled these problems—the vendor models they were adopting, the preferential deals they were obtaining—was regarded as important information.

Legitimizing Sector Knowledge

Sector knowledge is developed partly via structural arrangements within consulting firms; it is ''extracted'' and formalized from client interaction and constructed as collective knowledge back inside the firm. Consultants are groomed within an industry or sector before moving on to other experience, and within firms (particularly large ones) there are arrangements of ''industry lines'' that overlap discipline-based and functional groupings. Capitalizing sector knowledge also occurred by individuals deliberately targeting this knowledge. Beyond the obvious point that consultants see clients operating in a sector and that knowing about this is important, they organize their careers and occupational identities around this knowledge. Especially in the diagnosis phase, sector knowledge was most clearly ''on display'' and used to embed other knowledge.

Diagnosis

Sector know-how was used in the diagnosis phase to claim a deep understanding of how local government was modernizing and e.procurement evolving. The senior consultant (Consultant A) in particular had worked with the council and several others for many years, and his role as client-relations manager, attending project meetings but ''not implementing,'' encouraged an encompassing vision. He had a complete narrative of how they had guided the natural history of changes. Through his firm's involvement in the sector (''50 consultants working in local government at any moment of time'') they had actually helped to form the ''simplification of what is really important and what really needs to be focused on.'' They were able to deliver the kind of model that would ''embed the discipline around the selected suppliers'' and make ''the buying process easier and more disciplined.'' However, the so-called professional diagnosis tends to take the problem away from the client, and consultants cannot risk being seen as outsiders talking an alien jargon (Kieser, 2002a). A situation in which they and the client speak different languages must be avoided. So the consultant has to face both ways; as well as fighting for the legitimation of knowledge (in the powerful professions built by abstracting the knowledge base) exclusivity must be balanced with understanding.

Industry terminology and vocabulary were not hidden but continually on display. The procurement models of local government reflected the unique nature of authorities as spending institutions while a set of distinctive concerns involved the contracts with vendors of temporary labor, the detail of councils' labor markets, spend and budgets, and so on. This insider language of authorities was thus based on industry/sector knowledge, and for the experts to converse convincingly with clients they had to have learned about the mass of detailed knowledge familiar to insiders. This requirement of a common model of understanding and knowing the sector gave consultants a language in common with clients within which diagnosis was embedded.

> What we've actually done over the past 18 months is created a model for local government that fits in with the national e.procurement project. So we have a local government-focused—a local government specific—procurement model. And then we've reviewed quite a number of categories of spend already with other boroughs. I don't know maybe 10, 15 something like that. So we've got those as references to bring in.We've then reviewed spend with a whole bunch of primary care trusts as well. So for social services there's direct correlation with the same categories but from the health side rather than social services side. So there's that which can be brought in as well. So it's a bit more than just a generic model. And actually I would argue now that the value that we bring is around the fact that we've made it local government specific. And we've got people whom we can bring in and who have got the local government knowledge, rather than just, you know, it's a generic model. The power within the team— there probably will be one or two who don't have local government knowledge but maybe have health knowledge, or something else—because cross-learning needs to happen all the time. And clearly they will be reliant on the model. (Consultant A)

We note later these legitimacy claims do not go uncontested. Nevertheless, overall the sector was important, in the basic stages of legitimizing knowledge, for asserting a kind of professionally exclusive diagnosis and for expert knowledge that reconciled clients and their problems with a knowledge base. Client managers accepted that aspects of the ''business case'' were orchestrated throughout the project by consultants' input.

> Yeah, that's what they were brought in for, so I think we did learn stuff from that. Certainly there's the peripheral stuff around the access to information which they provide which you wouldn't be able to gather easily from other sources. So a benchmark of information and data around costs and prices. . . but they have an easier access to that from other commissions and other contacts. (Client B)

We see that sector knowledge did not operate in a vaccum with respect to other forms of knowledge. Abstract knowledge in the form of the professional field of procurement was used by consultants, but at the same time the setting out of a common industry model also stressed the importance of local over generic knowledge. It united the common language of internal and external expert groups, and provided the ''shared and stable syntax'' (Carlile, 2002: p. 443) that must exist if basic information processing is to go ahead.

Inference

These considerations of language and diagnosis affect how we view the client–consultant couple. Ostensibly the relationship is a collaborative one. Consultants as paid helpers serve their own interests by doing the best possible job for the client. Yet beyond this basic truth even mainstream literature on consulting recognizes conflict. Consultants are brought in to stimulate change yet their very presence may be resented and imply that insiders have failed (e.g., Schein, 1988; Argyris, 1990). There may be even deeper seated conflict—conflicts around deeper value systems that create differences at levels of meaning and sub-culture. So innovative relations require wider sympathies; groups need to specify what their difficulties and priorities are (Carlile, 2002: p. 452). The sector here serves as a space for carrying out processes of inference and integration.

In the ''middle game'' of bridging the distance between client and consultant, such a knowledge construct can be ''brought into'' the organization discursively so that actors have the opportunity to add what they know in a general synergy where ways forward can be explored. One central problem of the project was the basic procurement methodology they should adopt—this could involve going to a favored large main supplier, or several different suppliers. Each had a balance of factors around control, efficiency, and market forces. In a way this represented a classic management dilemma (like make vs. buy, or centralization vs. decentralization) in that pros and cons, and the ''right'' choice, were complex and contingent. The initial reading of the sector was that a dominant choice did exist in the shape of the so-called master vendor model, or the favored single supplier.

> A lot of them are keen on master vendor at the moment, understandably. Sets some extremely tight monetary-rewarded performance measures around some of the analysis and some of the things that you want to get done. So the additional premium that you're paying is going to be paid for by the better performance that you get. (Consultant A)

> ...it was always the plan to have a number of preferred supplier or properly negotiated contracts with all agencies, whether it's your master vendor, you know, all those options. So it's been on the cards for a while, it's been an obvious efficiency-type project because all the efficiency reviews across the country in local government are saying, ''Probably your number one saving is agency staff,'' it's identified as a common issue. (Client C)

But while this seemed an emergent recipe, there was also the alternative ''neutral vendor'' where the contracting agent acts effectively as a broker, or an agency for other suppliers separately contracted to find staff. This model needed evaluating too.

> Consultant A

> And were there many examples of neutral vendor in the public sector?

> Client B

> There are a few and there are certainly. . . I was talking to some people from [names another authority] who got procurement, I think they've actually maybe externalized part of the procurement function.

> Client C

> There aren't many pure neutral vendors around though. I mean, that's the thing, isn't it, I'm only aware of two able to get. . .!

> Consultant B

> The relationship at [local authority] was originally pure neutral. I don't know if it is now or not.

> Client C

> Well even the neutrals aren't totally neutral. [laughter] That's the thing, actually, probably, because it's sort of. . .!

> Client B

> It's more where the neutral is in the market. There's not many examples where they're pure service providers.

Consultant B

If you're talking about examples, I've been talking to [names an individual]. I haven't been able to pin anybody down that will confirm it yet, but I've been told that [local authority] have actually got a neutral vendor supplier established, and . . . I got that from the supplier, though, rather than from [local authority] so it's somewhat open to interpretation.

In this process of providing wider references and benchmarking, at least two things are going on. First, knowledge of the sector was itself being constituted. We may think of "sector knowledge" crudely as something external to the organization, but knowledge is imperfectly spread within project teams, and in exchanges individuals were being informed about the activities of particular actors and events they may have been unaware of. In evaluating routinized structures of the established models of vendoring, they introduced information that veered between the routine structures of a dominant model and alternative patterns reflecting how, in these processes, experts seek "not too little, not too much" inference (Abbott, 1988: p. 51). Second, information about sector actors of a quite fragmentary and uncertain kind was being pooled and regarded as legitimate in an effort to explore possibilities and move the discussion on.

Treatment

Solutions to problems get accomplished if client views are incorporated and experts use sources in common with clients. Knowledge from outside, drawn into this process, can draw the consultant closer to the client. In feeling their way towards a distinct position participants were reacting to received models and to the anchor points and orientations of the sector. In the project team the feeling was that there were different models out there and "nobody's got it spot on at the moment." One council had "really got it sussed" but they were smaller and their "organization of 200 is not relevant." Another was "an example of a master vendor where they've got better rates but they've seen no benefit in terms of actual reduction in numbers of staff." Yet another had obtained benefits by tightening internal management, but its "big blitz" was not sustainable. In short, sector knowledge was used to restrain dominant sector recipes and to keep options open.

Other sector actors were also introduced. Client B had been to a presentation from a legal firm specializing in procurement contracts, which had done work around "the things we're looking for inclusion in contracts and how the neutral transaction should work." Certain advantages of the model in managing suppliers that "you might fall out with" were identified. Then another council was referred to which had outsourced to an agent who used neutral vendoring, and the possibility was raised that their contract details could be examined which would "cut costs a bit." One of the consultant team (Consultant B) referred to the Contracting Group which all the authorities in the region support, and which acted as a clearing house monitoring and reviewing local government procurement. The Contracting Group was believed to have "actually got a neutral vendor preferred supplier established" using the model as a framework for a whole round of procurement contracts. However, Client B then volunteered information that this initiative may have got stalled—which prompted inputs from several participants about whether anything at all was going ahead.

Client A (half-humorously)

It just seems like horribly, horribly confused!

Consultant B

The key thing which we always talk about, because we've had initiatives all around all the time, is to focus on what's best for yourselves.

Client A

Absolutely.

Consultant B

If there are other people who want to join you, fantastic, but let's focus on that in the short term.

Client C

I mean, all the boroughs I've spoken to, everybody's doing their own thing. It's just like, if you wait for some big thing, it'll never happen.

Hence they leaned towards flexibility and had stories from the sector to support different choices. So while in one sense the sector might be thought to rationally transfer strategic recipes, the appeal of ''ready made'' or generic solutions did not seem especially strong and in our case more oppositional uses of information were going on. In debating the vendor model, or principle of vendoring they should adopt, back and forth, items of information were put together more like pieces of a jigsaw to arrive at a complete picture. The process of utilizing sector knowledge paved the way for a consensus to emerge around going down a pragmatic route.

Constructing Sector Knowledge

In the exchanges in project meetings information about what other sector actors were doing was clearly a touchstone in decision making. Sector knowledge was frequently ''on display'' and people were willing (or even competing) to contribute what they knew. A large amount of sheer organizational work and occupational identity-building was in process. The experience of problems and solutions across the sector supported the process of legitimizing knowledge and integrating with clients. Even from the examples used, however, this simple model was not the whole story. There were limits to any notion of (a) sector knowledge guiding action in some unreflective or mechanistic sense, and (b) sector knowledge being ''owned'' solely by outsiders.

(a) Knowledge construction in the broader sense has been described by theorists in institutional theory and the so-called firm-in-sector approach in terms of the interaction between internal and external actors and the networks that cross firm boundaries and act as information channels (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2001). Some early studies of sector evolution tended to argue for convergence and for the alignment of firm-level competencies with structural constraints (Abernathy, 1978; Whipp & Clark, 1986). However, others emphasized the uncertainties of emerging sector recipes and the need for a path between ''sector determinism and unconstrained volition'' (Child & Smith, 1987: p. 371). So while managers seek to understand their world in terms of institutionally shared constructs, there is also ''active learning'' from competitors and rivals, and from intermediaries and networks that traverse the sector. This implies a negotiated understanding of what the sector means to different actors and no simple transmission of ''recipes'' or assimilation in organizations (Fincham, Fleck, Procter, Scarbrough, Tierney, & Williams, 1994).

The key issue is the process by which people share or dispute a view of what knowledge of the sector means, and what is deemed relevant and irrelevant. The case extracts above, for example, showed sequences that reflected a pragmatic internal view.

Given that you all work from the same statutory basis, why is it that there's a selection of approaches? Why can't they be the same? But there are different approaches, different routes you have to go through, different wheels that you have to turn. That's just internally, then there's the statutory stuff. (Client B)

There were constraints on the ultimate relevance of outside knowledge and sector knowledge almost paradoxically was being used to prove the sector was no infallible guide. Client managers insisted on a boundary between firm and sector, while the organization was a practice that outside groups failed to fully penetrate.

> I think consultants don't always quite pick up the vibe as to what the local cultural issues are sometimes. Often the solutions are very good but it's often the little subtleties about how we operate as opposed to the other... even though it's other boroughs, you think we're all the same but actually we're not. (Client C)

Thus, in terms of the rationales and information that actors used as guides, ''the sector'' represented a field where perceptions and decisions were shaped but without any crude trends towards sameness. This way of conceptualizing the firm–sector relationship reflected a level of differentiation. The existence of even quite small differences in organizations and sectors caused decision makers to respond in ways that did not ape market and technology leaders. Differences were sustained and replenished and decision making was about reading the actions of other players. Managers may seek information on authoritative models, and use it to inform and justify actions of their own, but they took on board differences that could lead to divergent strategic responses (see also Hislop, 2002).

(b) Attendant on this view of complex knowledge was the fact that insiders too possessed outside knowledge. The consultant may claim an ability to fuse local/specific knowledge with generic skills or market savvy, but the boundaries between insider and outsider, and between inside knowledge and outside knowledge, were complicated and variable. While outside experts ''know the industry via their experience of a clustered group of clients, insiders have other forms of access. Local authority managers' knowledge of their own operations was industry knowledge, and an element of sector knowledge, and they also knew their own industry peers. Networking was relatively intensive and other authorities going through procurement exercises were freely discussed. Council officers had good collegial contacts, and though personal relations were not common, contacts such as visits to other councils happened frequently. Clients' sector knowledge was used actively in finding solutions.

> I knew what other local authorities were doing in terms of big master vendor arrangements. I visited [names an authority] where it was mentioned, and I visited [names another authority] and one or two others to see what they'd been up to because I'd been saying, 'Look, we could do this quite easily ourselves.' But obviously I'd been saying to them, 'It's a big project that needs proper resourcing both from the tendering process and then the actual implementation.' (Client C)

These differential claims on knowledge found expression in conflict and power imbalances as client and consultant groups attempted to construct working relations. The client-consultant couple we have stressed is an example of a boundary-spanning relationship, but there are constraints not necessarily overcome by joint learning or mutual understanding. In the implicit or explicit contract on which the relationship was built, the possibility persisted of conflict between fractions of sector knowledge. Groups differentially valued their own access to the sector and might be suspicious of what they perceived as encroachment. Abrasive relations were in evidence on the client side in particular; the belief was that consultants brought in conventional business skills whereas because of the special nature of local government they, the client, possessed privileged and valuable sector know-how.

> Under the normal project you've employed them [consultants] because you haven't got that expertise, and therefore because of your knowledge gap you're sort of the weaker partner. And that wasn't quite the case

on this one. We sort of started off with areas of equal knowledge, and on areas of public procurement we had more knowledge. I'd say it was 50/50 but there were certainly elements of that about the structure of procurement within a local authority which was to their business advantage. (Client B)

Tensions in the relationship (based initially on convictions that the project could have been handled very well internally) led to talking up the knowledge of internal managers and disparaging that of the consultants. There were underlying currents in which the senior officer (Client A) in particular was highly supportive of his staff and combative towards the consultants, criticizing them as ''almost bystanders'' in terms of their sector know-how in relation to internal staff.

> There seemed to be lots of information that (Client B, his colleague) held which was very—you could see their eyes lighting up about where we are with some of the area-wide contracts and having levels of information that (Client B) had which would clearly have potential commercial value or interest certainly to them. So a lot of that… OK it was quite. . .to me it was kind of quite surprising. I was sensing that they would have more things to say. For example, they would say 'Yes, well, (names a local authority) have done this, therefore. . .' In this respect [I was expecting] much more of an active input. (Client A)

In short, the claim to intensive sector knowledge—basically that consultants had developed a powerful, local government-specific model of e.procurement—was contested. This takes us full circle to the issue of legitimizing consultant knowledge, and to the other side of this particular coin. Client managers did feel that they had gained valuable data and a ''rigor behind the analysis'' that they would have struggled for themselves—but simultaneously the suggestion that consultants gained from working with clients like themselves was put forward to challenge legitimacy. Sector knowledge as a category is thus built of elements that are managed and traded differentially in the client–consultant relationship. Some elements may be protected or blocked, in contrast to the free sharing of other kinds of sector information.

Discussion and Conclusion

Placing ''knowledge'' at the heart of expert groups identifies some widely differentiated occupations. Different kinds of expert labor include familiar forms like the powerful professions and technical/design occupations that command ''strong'' knowledge. Groups such as management consultants, on the other hand, are often linked with ''weak'' knowledge, esoteric skills, and persuasive devices. However, even the so-called weak knowledge may contain structures that are the basis of longer term appeal to clients, and that have perhaps not received the attention they deserve. This paper put forward such an example of consultant knowledge, namely expertise that helps client firms negotiate their sector. In studying this, the use of a single case study obviously limited generality—for example, the meaning of sector knowledge across different sectors, or how it might carry between sectors (how knowledge gained on one sector might benefit clients in another). In the most straightforward sense this category of knowledge meant knowing actors and actions in the sector, the histories of particular events, and claims to have been ''part of'' (or even to have orchestrated) changes.

While we have wanted to highlight sector knowledge, we are not saying it is only because of a mastery of this type of knowledge that consultants become legitimate in the eyes of clients—clearly there is an issue around the relevance of this category of knowledge and the role it plays in comparison with other forms of knowledge associated with consultancy. Is it a major source of legitimacy for a consultant, or is its role, for example, more of a ''facilitator'' for other knowledge types? Certainly a number of knowledge types and sources of recognition were in play in the case example. Our example was of ''big firm'' consultancy and legitimacy did not only derive solely from the sector experience of consultants, but also from this kind of prestigious practice. The consultants brought to the table particular techniques (methodologies and databases) that were proprietary to the firm, and

fused them with professional know-how from the field of procurement (Consultant A in particular saw himself as a ''procurement professional''). Reputation and recognition of these methods and approaches to problems was evident and we saw how client managers acknowledged the ''rigor'' of the consultants' work and in varying degrees the substitution of their own labor. The capacity to supply solutions that were generic and spanned several sectors was a large part of client appeal.

That said, it may be an artificial choice between the sector as a category that defines a form of knowledge, or instead that helps in mobilizing other sorts of knowledge (much as it is difficult to disentangle categories of tacit and explicit knowledge). Knowledge work in general is rarely about either purely technical expertise or about skills of persuasion alone. In this fluid and uncertain world, solving problems and constructing solutions is no less important than the ability to manage relations with powerful groups (Alvesson, 2004; McKinlay, 2004). Sector knowledge in one sense is only the ability to navigate around a group of actors. It is always going to be transient in relation to disciplines and professions, and anyone who trades off it needs to be adaptable and flexible (as we know consultants are). Nevertheless, sectors were coherent assemblages of contacts and industry languages, and the industry peer group was a significant reference point.

In a sense, this emphasis goes back to the basic ''relational'' character of consulting work—work that is not particularly opaque to the client, and that deals often with powerful client groups. Such a context necessitates establishing working relationships, which almost invariably means that a culture and common set of experiences has to exist. Expertise built up as shared sector knowledge represented a common set of people and events to talk about. In this sense, being able to draw on sector experience was essential for clients and consultants to convincingly ''take their place'' in the decision-making discourse. The possession of this knowledge could almost be seen as the stake that allowed actors into the game. The fact of sector knowledge being often fragmentary and partial in a sense only underlined that their place had been legitimized.

The theoretical lenses used in the analysis were linked by a consistent view of the legitimation of sector knowledge. Abbott's (1988) analysis provided a useful perspective on the stages of using and legitimatizing knowledge. Nevertheless, it needed adapting since the modes of expert conduct of powerful professions (his main focus) differ from those of a group like consultants, and in this respect our conceptual contribution may be considered an advance on Abbott. Applied to consultants' sector knowledge we saw that consultants have to face two ways. Orientation to a knowledge base helps in claiming ownership of problems through an initial diagnosis. But (lacking a monopoly of knowledge) they need a language in common with the client. Here Carlile's (2002) framework used in conjunction with Abbott's suggested a shared syntax partly provided by knowledge of the sector in which the client firm resides. The example of client–consultant interaction is a classic boundary-spanning relationship and the sector was utilized within it as a decision-making resource. The stages of building towards a solution involved the exchange of sector information, or knowledge sharing, which built legitimacy, integrated client and consultant interests and shaped a solution.

On another level, though, ''sector knowledge'' could be considered as complex knowledge. This had related implications: that sectors as negotiated spaces were not simple forces of outside influence, and that outside knowledge was also held by insider groups. Such a view would moderate ''institutional'' arguments that put greatest emphasis on outside influences. For instance, links between the realm of consulting and that of management fashion have produced models of demand for consultant services; under conditions of uncertainty a tendency to copy practices and fear of losing ground in a given sector is one of the main factors behind the appeal of imported solutions (e.g., Kieser, 2002b). We observed rather that sector know-how was actively negotiated across boundaries and that it preserved differences between decision-making settings. Certainly, in the local authority case, networking sustained the sector as a group of peers and a powerful reference for managers and consultants, and it sustained negotiation around institutional knowledge (''recipes''). But sector knowledge provided no technical fix of any kind. While sectors transmitted some industry recipes into firms via consultants,

these were negotiated networks. Knowledge localized in pragmatic solutions was something that parties found easy to defend, while knowledge held by clients (e.g., privileged knowledge of industry peers) was a key component in negotiation. Internal managers had plenty of sector knowledge and our study refuted any simple model of consultants as knowledge intermediaries.

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