

Useful consulting tools and techniques

Brief descriptions of 20 useful consulting tools and techniques and some helpful concepts.

Distinguishing complex from straightforward consulting projects

There are consultancy projects which are completely clear – there is little complexity to them, while there are others that require a rigorous process in order to carry them out well. The two are contrasted below.

Straightforward projects:

The presenting problem or predicament is clear.

The form of the project needed to address the problem is clear.

The methodology used is proven and familiar.

The consultant(s) have previously conducted a similar project and can use the same process.

Complex projects:

Exploratory work is needed to identify the precise nature of what the presenting problem or predicament is.

Considerable skills and consideration is needed to formulate what the project should be.

The methodology or its application is new.

The project may need new ideas and techniques.

Again, these are not unique identifiers. The final test is whether the project can be confidently mapped out from beginning to end; if so, it is likely to be straightforward. If in doubt, the project should be treated as complex. Failure to do this may result in the wrong work being done and opportunities to help clients on a large scale missed.

What is your definition of quality?

Quality can have many definitions, amongst which are those shown below. Also shown are possible interpretations of these definitions as they might apply to the business of consultancy:

Free from errors: Does not have mistakes in materials. Technical soundness.

Meets specifications: The deliverables meet the assignment promises within the time and resources promised

Fit for purpose: The project addresses the real needs of this client

Good value: The project management processes are of a high standard so that the results are produced economically

Innate excellence: The methodology or approach used addresses the real predicaments of this client

Hot and cold reviews

These are the terms applied to any project review. A hot review takes place during a project, while a cold review takes place after the project has been completed.

The challenge meeting

This is a hot review in which one or more consultants not involved in the project (sometimes called “the red team”) are presented with progress to date, problems encountered and plans for the future. The task of the red team is to constructively question the operating team, challenging their assumptions. The outcomes of such a meeting might be:

- Creating the opportunity for the operating team to reflect on and communicate their work
- Providing the operating team with new ideas
- Identifying any gaps or oversights
- Giving the operating team more confidence in their conclusions
- Adding to the learning of the red team

DICE – assessing the likelihood of success or failure of a project

The Boston Consulting Group reported a method of anticipating the success of a project in an article in Harvard Business Review, Oct 2005. Entitled “The hard side of change management” they proposed a formula as follows:

Score each of the following factors on a scale of 1(good) to 4 (bad):

- D= duration of programme or time between reviews
- I= project team’s integrity
- C= commitment of top management (C1) and employees affected (C2)
- E= effort needed beyond usual

The DICE score = $D + (2 \times I) + (2 \times C1) + C2 + E$

The conclusions from their research were:

- 7-14=win
- 15-17=worry
- 18+ = woe

The risk of being a “friendly helper”

One analysis of interpersonal behaviour categorises individuals as “tough battlers”, “logical thinkers” and “friendly helpers”. The character of many consultants is that of friendly helper: they like to be liked and they also like to help those who ask.

This can create problems if consultants take on a client's problem and adopt it as their own. In some cases, this is entirely justified, but in others simply means that the consultant is left with a situation that is time consuming and difficult to resolve. This particularly applies when demonstrable client management authority and support is needed, or client resources required for success.

For example, a client may be keen on a change programme, but the staff below the top sponsoring echelon of management is not interested. This should be a matter of concern for the client – not be simply left to the consultant to sort out.

Ordinary vs. extraordinary endeavours

Interim managers are often engaged to design and implement transformational change. A key question to ask at the outset is:

“Is this an ordinary change – i.e. one that can be accomplished within the routine processes and management resources of this organisation, or is an extra-ordinary change – something that lies beyond the capability of the organisation?”

If it is extra-ordinary, this is often an indicator that other interim managers or consultants are needed to boost the capabilities of the organisation. The use of this “ordinary vs. extra-ordinary” language is often quite helpful to clients.

Organization agility

Some organisations are used to introducing and implementing change; others are less so. Early on it is useful to assess what can be called “organisation agility”. This might be high in areas of the business used to rapid change, but less so elsewhere, so agility may not be evenly distributed throughout the organisation. Plans for change need to allow for this and perhaps provide for activities that result in increased agility. Initial implementation in early adopter areas can be useful in building confidence elsewhere in the organisation.

Stakeholder analysis

This identifies who are the key individuals, the nature of their power, and what their personal objectives might be.

This is often difficult to assess at the start of a project, so points the way to data that needs to be collected about this client. A good way is to maintain PowerPoint organisation charts that can be annotated over time to yield a powerful reference document.

Power mapping

Power mapping shows the strength of relationships between key individuals – positive and negative, business and social. This is very useful in planning how to get the acceptance of a recommendation. Again, this is often difficult to complete at the start of a project, so points the way to data that needs to be collected about this client.

The “quick success” or “early win”

Early in the project demonstrating that you have reached a milestone when you said you would shows that you are keeping your promises. If, in addition, you can provide some additional value to the client beyond that which is contracted, then this is also helpful.

Levels of intervention

There are four generic levels of intervention at which a consultant might be involved in a project:

- Purposes: to establish the business priorities that need to be addressed
- Problems: to identify the items that are standing in the way of these purposes being attained
- Solutions – to address the problems as defined
- Implementation of these solutions

These are sequential and their adequacy relies on the integrity of the definition of the earlier levels. Starting at too low a level – when the work of defining the higher level has not been done by client or consultant – means that the work done may be sub-optimal.

Using hypotheses

In situations when there are a lot of unknowns, it is useful to distinguish between those items that you confidently know or can assume compared with those that are unknown. Use hypotheses to define those that you are not sure about.

Issue analysis

Issue analysis surfaces the issues that exist in a situation and is particularly useful in the early stages of a project. Issues can relate to concerns about:

- The client's business situation
- The presenting problem or predicament
- Risks associated with your firm taking on the project
- The capability of the consulting team to deliver the project

Some of the better known business analysis models can be used to cluster issues, or to prompt ideas about new ones; examples of such models are:

These – or any others – should be used only to the extent that they are deemed to be helpful.

Pareto's principle

This is more commonly known as the 80:20 rule or law of diminishing returns. It states that in many situations a few causes account for most of the effect. Its application in projects might include:

- a few sources of risk account for most of the risk on a project
- there are only a few significant client executives who need to be got on side to get your recommendations accepted
- of the deliverables, there are a small number that the client sets particular store by

At the start of a project, the manager assisted by members of the project team should identify the Pareto items affecting success.

Handling a mismatch of expectations

Consulting is an abstract product and there is plenty of scope for client and consultancy practice to have quite clear but different expectations in respect of a project. The protocols in this and other guides should reduce the risk of this, but inevitably there will be occasions when a mismatch occurs.

The guidelines for handling these are:

1. Establish if this is a real mismatch or a negotiating tactic being used by the client for commercial purposes
2. If there is a real mismatch, then establish if this is a matter that arose in the pre-contract stage or if it has occurred post contract. If pre-contract, the sales team will need to be involved in resolving the mismatch
3. Normally the resolution of a serious mismatch entails commercial negotiation. Consultants should ensure that the right level of authority is engaged in any re-negotiation of a contract

Position papers

On a long project, a client may need to wait some time until the deliverables are ready. Under such circumstances the client may be reassured by regular progress reports, but need more substance (e.g. something to show sceptical colleagues to demonstrate progress).

A position paper can be helpful here. This is a document perhaps reviewing thinking on a topic relevant to the client. It is not an assignment report but a half-way house.

A trivial example might be for a client wanting to move their head office. A position paper might comment on the criteria that could be applied to a new site and the experience of other organisations that have made a similar move.

Planning the client experience

One technique is to consider the client relationship as the sum of all interactions between the client and the consulting team, then to consider each interaction that occurs in the course of delivery and plan what experience is desirable at each interaction. Thus at kick-off, review meetings, brainstorming meetings etc. the Project Manager has recorded a desired 'client experience' in advance, increasing the likelihood of this happening in practice.

RAG reporting

RAG stands for Red, Amber, and Green. Use on progress reports as follows:

- Green – on schedule
- Amber – off schedule but recoverable
- Red – off schedule and will make this element of the project late.

This is particularly useful when summarising a complex project in a report to senior (client) management.

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<https://cmce.org.uk/knowledge-bank/useful-consulting-tools-and-techniques>