

UNIVERSITY OF PANNONIA

Doctoral School in Management Sciences and Business Administration



**Attitude-specific consumer behavior in the management
consulting market**

– service quality dimensions

DOCTORAL (PHD) DISSERTATION

THESES SUMMARY

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Research objectives and significance

Business marketing is one of the most exciting and enticing scope of academic research. In business markets instead of concrete and tangible solutions customers are more likely to seek solutions for their business problems, especially in consulting industry which is a professional service activity by occupation (Nádor, 2007a). One of the most complex interactions considered within the client-service provider interaction is consulting and therefore consultants are considered one of the most important suppliers of new management ideas and practices (Armbrüster, 2006). Management consulting is a professional service of which objective is to help the organization solve its own problems by making it aware of organizational processes, of their likely consequences, and of intervention techniques for stimulating change (Kubr, 2002). However, management consulting is a resolution for a not yet born and basically “only on paper existing” idea provided by a group of experts with assumed competences (Nádor, 2007b). Requirements of clients on consultants are rapidly changing, firms are expecting complex and diverse professional consulting service (Geoffroy and Schulz, 2015). Consumed consulting service may significantly impact the success and reputation of the client organization, thus consulting is a high relationship complexity service, where trust and ethical norms has a fundamental importance (Hakansson and Ford, 2002). Competence is a prerequisite of successful consulting projects, however expertise itself is not sufficient for an effective intervention. In fact, the key factor of successful consulting projects is how the selected consulting team is able to professionally deliver the service customized to the needs of the client organization (Skjølsvik, Perner, and Løwendahl, 2017). In academia the success factors of interventions and client-consultant relationship quality constructs have been discussed by many authors, yet few empirical works can be found on evaluation process of management consulting services. The reason of this phenomenon roots in the circumstances of consulting projects, where project scope is often indefinite, consisting of initial ideas, rather than concrete specifications or requirements. The greatest problem of the client organization is that of being able to select and identify the consultant team which fits their needs (Clark and Salaman, 1998). Detailed specifications and requirements are constructed through the intervention process by co-creation of partners (Macdonald, Kleinaltenkamp and Wilson, 2016), however consultants have superior knowledge compared to the clients and as a result the contractual power of the clients’ shifts (Werr and Styhre, 2002). The capability of customers to form rational decisions when choosing a consulting partner is limited and due to incomplete information, their utility preferences are unstable and often change through the project lifecycle.

The aim of the dissertation is to advance an empirically grounded approach to the study of utility preferences and perceived quality of management consulting projects by identifying the clients' underlying utility preferences and perceived quality dimensions. Based on the preliminary exploration of academic literature the research problems are defined as follows:

- Responsibility and role of consultants are not definite and well clarified, the nature and complexity of the business problem influence the applied consulting functions and roles.
- Service attributes of management consulting service are hidden, purchasing preferences and quality expectations of clients may vary.
- In academia there are few empirically based studies on the success factors of interventions and there is still no generally accepted quality parameter – quality attribute – quality dimension structure designed for management consulting services.
- Research papers are mainly focusing on client needs and expectations, yet few papers have confronted research results with the assumed clients' preferences of consultants.

I approach studying of consulting service quality preferences from the following research aspects:

- (1) Consulting is a know-how based professional service,*
- (2) which creates a knowledge and technological transfer to the buying organization and consultants deliver methods and policies,*
- (3) thus, service quality is regarded as a general additional value creation process,*
- (4) in a project context as new buying situation,*
- (5) where client-consultant relationship quality is a component of the provided service quality.*

Concept definition

Based on previous literature research I have articulated six (Q1-Q6) research questions to broad consulting service quality scientific works by exploring utility and quality preferences of the buying organization, identifying service quality process and dimensions of the perceived service.

Q1: What consulting roles can be defined based on the utility preferences of clients?

The buyer organization usually is lack of specific knowledge thus unable to articulate precisely and with confidence its problems. Consequently, buyer organizations are not aware of what solution would be the most appropriate or whether the client problem was solved appropriately, and consulting service met the expectations of the client (Ford, 2002). Aim of consulting intervention and specific roles of consultants may affect power relations between the parties, and this perspective has a significant impact on the level of cooperation and on quality perception (Nikolova and Devinney, 2012). “Suppliers cannot depend on what they currently know about customer value to hold into the future” (Flint et al., 2002, p. 102.). A solution that worked well before with a client may not fit the needs of the same client later, because client expectations and the organization itself is continuously changing.

Q2: To what extent are the preferences context dependent?

Judging the quality of consulting service prior to the delivery (ex-ante), and the sufficiency of the service after it has been delivered (ex-post) is very problematic (Bennett and Smith, 2004) moreover, due to the high number of credence qualities of consulting service, performance cannot be evaluated even after the consumption of the service (Gallouj, 1997). Secondly, “there is rarely a correct or incorrect solution” (Mitchell, 1994, p.335) and for solving the business problems of the customer there is no one ultimate solution, several alternatives and methods can be demonstrated. Furthermore, it is undoubtedly challenging to isolate factors that precisely describe the additional value of consultants’ performance and provide quantifiable system for evaluating results of consulting intervention. Buyer organizations are getting more and more professional and determined while consuming consulting services, yet evaluation of consulting projects remains unprofessional (Höner and Mohe, 2009). Scope of quality evaluation of management consulting projects typically focus on the contracted deliverables (Haverila, Bateman and Naumann, 2011; Smith, 2002) and nor the client, nor the consulting firm regard important the systematic quality evaluation of the provided service (Ernst and Kieser, 2002). Reasons behind this phenomenon are the lack of motivation, complexity of the evaluation and

the fact that the service quality cannot be measured by a single professional, many experts are required to be involved. These circumstances make it difficult to evaluate service quality (Bennett, Charmine and McColl-Kennedy, 2005; Cronin and Taylor, 1992).

Q3: What role do the personal preferences of individuals play during the purchase of management consulting services?

The difficulty in evaluating quality comes from the theory of constructed preferences (Bettman, Luce and Payne, 1998), which explains that customers do not possess stable preferences in complex buying situations, their preferences are often created during the purchasing process and perceived as set of values that should be constructed. This leads to the situation where each individual involved in the buying situation and service delivery is motivated by a complex combination of personal achievement motives and risk-reduction aspects which affect not just the buying situation but the perceived quality and satisfaction level of customers (Ehrhardt and Nippa, 2005).

Q4: What are the main quality dimensions during the evaluation process of consulting assignments?

Quality of relationship covers such “soft” competences as understanding of client needs and ambition for building successful partnership and win-win environment. Stump and Longman (2009, p131.) calls these “requirement of feeling comfortable”. What clients can depend on during the assignment is trust and relationship quality (Wünderlich, Wangenheim and Bitner, 2013). Schaffer (2002) describes the existence of an “implementation gap”, that is the difference between all that the client would have to do to benefit from the consultant’s recommendations and what the client is able of doing. Preliminary literature research highlighted that adaption requirements such as appropriate consulting style, methods and processes aligned with the culture of the buying organization can be found in the expectations of clients. However, there is no universal empirically validated model which integrates different aspects and define an integrated service quality structure of management consulting services.

Q5: In consulting service quality evaluation which relationship quality components regard clients the most important?

A company's most precious asset is its relationships with its customers (Levitt, 1983). Service quality and satisfaction can be experienced both at an episode and at a relationship level (Storbacka, Strandvik and Grönroos, 1994; Ulaga and Chacour, 2001). In b2b services personal connections are particularly important because they are “vital elements” of buyer-supplier relationships (Cunningham and Homse, 1984). Evolution of relationship marketing has proven that in business markets without conscious management and quality development of

relationships a partnership cannot be successful (Mandják et al., 2016), since these relationships are not just administrative, legal, economical, technical, technological but social bonds between the partners (Stone, Woodcock and Wilson 1996; Veres 2009). Accordingly, business partners are forming a community where interactions are not limited to transactional episodes but influenced by persistent change and conformation (Elo, 2003).

Q6: Is that any difference in the quality perception of individuals in different level of organizational hierarchy?

Clients do not all regard the value of consultancy services equally; rather, their evaluation of the utility provided depends upon the learning and developing background and organizational level at which the service is applied (Macdonald, Kleinaltenkamp and Wilson, 2016). Ehrhardt and Nippa (2005) emphasize, that evaluation process of the consulting service may depend on the person who is carrying out the evaluation, since experience, autonomy and position of the evaluator(s) significantly impact the form and quality evaluation process.

Research hypotheses

Table 1 demonstrates the research hypotheses and methods used for testing these hypotheses. Applying “quasi” hypothesis my approach was that a well profiled qualitative research sample provides the opportunity to make research assumptions (so called quasi hypothesis). The following testing technique was used for validation of qualitative data based on four criteria of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Thus, the heterogeneity of the sample allows generalizability, consequently suitable for hypothesis testing.

Table 1: Research hypotheses

| Used primary research methos | ID | Hypothesis | Data collection method | Data evaluation method |
|---|-----|--|-------------------------------|--|
| Explorative qualitative research (QH = Quasi hypothesis) | QH1 | Based on utility dimensions of consulting services classification of consulting roles and functions can be formed. | Interview | Content analysis of manuscripts of interviews with open, axial and selective coding of grounded theory method. |
| | QH2 | New purchasing situation strongly influences buying preferences. | | |
| | QH3 | In the course of uniqueness of project, the first phase of the consulting process is considered as co-learning (competence exchange). | | |
| | QH4 | Personal preferences of participants in the consulting process significantly influence the perception of service quality. | | |
| | QH5 | Assessment of utility of the consulting service is materialized in the post transactional process. | | |
| | QH6 | The dimension structure of quality evaluation of management consulting projects is hierarchical (conceptual model can be formed). | | |
| Quantitative research | H1 | The most frequently mentioned utility dimensions by clients are lack of special resources, project management, organizational stimulation. | Multiple choice questionnaire | Wilcoxon signed-rank test, principal component analysis, factor analysis |
| | H2 | There is a significant difference in the importance of quality dimensions (conceptual model). | | |
| | H3 | Importance of attributes of relationship quality are significantly differ. | | |
| | H4 | There is a significant difference between the importance of quality dimensions based on the organizational hierarchy. | | Paired-Sample T Test |

Source: own construct

Research methods

To be able to explore the scientific literature of consulting research domain I applied both *bibliometric (meta-analysis) and narrative literature research method*. Narrative literature review method may suffer from researchers' subjective evaluations and judgments, while bibliometric analysis is able to define dominant patterns and latent intellectual structures of a certain discipline and provide a well-established technique by measuring the influence and scientific contribution of each academic article involved to the research (Borgman and Furner, 2002; Diodato, 1994; Schneider and Borlund, 2004). Based on articles' metadata collected from scientific databases bibliometric analysis provide a statistical examination of publications in order to reveal some patterns in documents (Diodato, 1994) and make measuring, mapping of scientific domains and disciplines available (Tabah, 2001). Application of bibliometric research method would complement narrative literature reviews and support future literature studies with quantitative results.

Based on *empirical qualitative data from 22 in-depth interviews*, qualitative research advances an empirically grounded approach to the study of utility preferences and perceived quality of management consulting projects by identifying the clients' underlying utility preferences and perceived quality dimensions, describing utility attributes at each organizational level, and demonstrates a conceptual model of perceived quality dimensions. Research aim was to present a black-box approach and not to shape the qualitative research by reference to previous academic sources and findings. I relied on theoretical sampling as developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Interviews were converted into a total of 600 page transcript document. Analysis of the verbatim interview transcripts were continuous and were coded by marking and naming of key phrases (open-coding). An initial phase involving naming each word, line, or segment of data followed by a focused, selective phase that uses the most significant or frequent initial codes to sort, synthesize, integrate, and organize large amounts of data (axial coding). Finally, by selective coding all categories were connected to together around one core category.

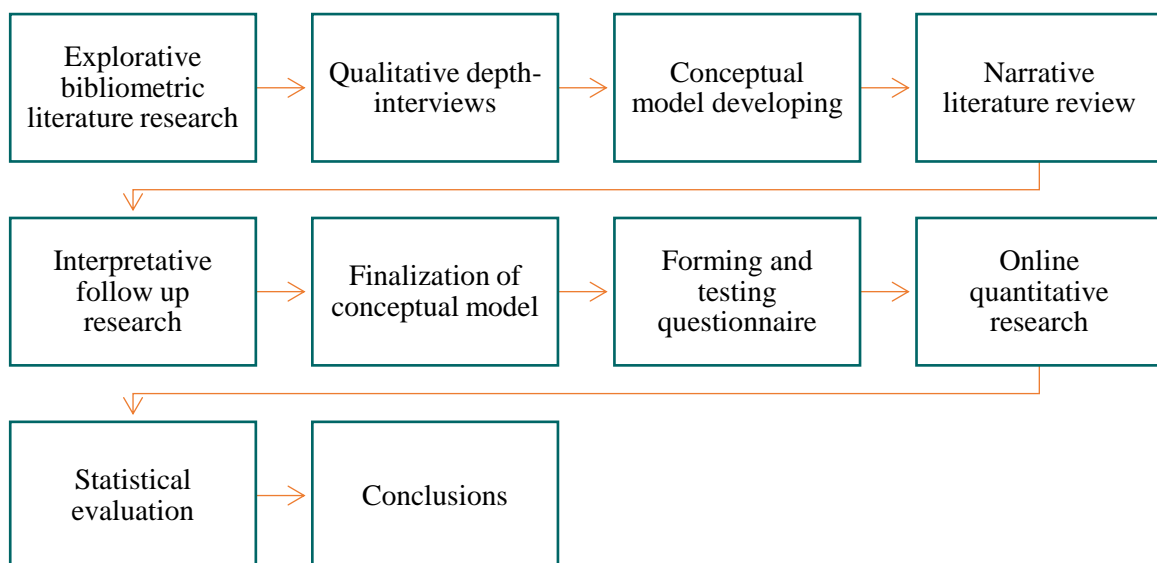
Conceptual model was fine-tuned based on *interpretative follow up research* with experts and targeted, manual narrative literature research of consulting service quality papers. Based on findings of literature review and interpretative follow up research the conceptual model was finalized.

The *quantitative research* goal was to test results of qualitative research. Questionnaire was designed based on the previous related scientific papers and manuscripts of interviews. Final version of the questionnaire was tested by experts and were aligned with the developed

conceptual model of service quality. Quality parameters of the conceptual model were transformed into 51 attitude statements. Attitude statements were categorized into attribute, subdimension and main dimension structure, thus, a four-level preference hierarchy structure were defined. 1-5 Likert scale were used to collect respondents' attitudes and opinions. Research data were examined with non-parametric analysis. Testing importance of each attitude statement, attribute, subdimension or main dimension *Wilcoxon signed rank test* were used. For analyzing the difference between a specific sub-group of the sample I applied *two sample median test*. Based on *principal component analysis* main components were defined of 16 subdimensions. Likert scale reliability were tested by *Cronbach alpha method* which evaluated the consistency of each variable within each main principal component. Finally, *factor analysis* was conducted to simplify complex data, find hidden patterns, and set the stage for deeper, more focused analysis.

Research steps are illustrated by Figure 1.

Figure 1: Applied research methods



Source: own construct

Literature review

Engwall and Kipping (2013) summarize the findings from the existing literature and highlight that management consulting literature has been influenced by three other fields of management: (1) practice, (2) education and (3) publishing, pointing out how their interaction furthers the diffusion of management ideas. Besides flows of ideas and people between the fields “there is also a gradual blurring of the boundaries among them” (p.86). In the last decades several number of literature reviews have been conducted with different classification logic (Varga-Toldi and Veres, 2020). Armenakis and Burdick (1988) provided a comprehensive review of existing literature and classified publications according to scientific rigor. They incorporated works to experience-based, quasi-scientific, and scientific research literature groups, and clinched them to consultation process stages as follows: (1) consultant recruiting, (2) entry, (3) contracting, (4) diagnosis, (5) feedback, (6) planning, (7) implementation, and (8) evaluation. Kipping and Armbrüster (1998) used a completely different method and distinguished existing concepts to (1) empirical-descriptive, (2) functionalist, (3) critical, (4) historical, and (5) hermeneutic approaches. Fincham and Clark (2002) as well as Kipping and Clark, (2012) have chosen a chronological and evolutionary stage-based structure for their literature examination. One of the most cited classification models comes from Nikolova and Devinney (2012) work, who defined three main perspectives of the management consulting literature:

- 1) *Expert/functionalist perspective* put client-consultant interaction into context by relating it to a contractual, time-limited temporary helping and problem-solving relationship, where consultants are seen as independent and objective experts of knowledge with specific functions and roles. The most important aspect within the client-consultant interaction is how clients gain, transform and apply the required knowledge. Some authors believe that roles of consultants can be well defined or categorized based on different aspects such as customer need, level of interaction or basic business functions of consultants (Massey and Walker, 1999; Nees and Grenier, 1985).
- 2) *Social learning perspective* defines client-consultant relationship a participative learning process (Lilja and Poulfelt, 2001), in which „both clients and consultants contribute valuable knowledge and ideas to a project” (Nikolova, Reihlen and Schlapfner 2009, p.289). Schein (1999) highlights that consultants should help clients understand their own problems better, thus clients can be more active in the problem-solving process.
- 3) *Critical perspective* draws attention to power, politics and conflicts in client-consultant interactions (Pellegrini, 2002), where clients become victims of consultant’s rhetorical skills

and impression management techniques (Fincham and Clark, 2002; Werr and Styhre, 2002) while consultants are also victims of pressure and emphasize anxieties of consultancy work (Sturdy, 1997).

Czarniawska and Mazza (2012) introduced the *social constructivist perspective* which concept describes consultants as “merchant of meaning” metaphor which refers to a situation where consultants reconstruct clients’ managerial tasks and roles by reframing them with the help of images, labels, or metaphors (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2012, p.433).

Bibliometric research revealed that b2b relationship marketing concepts had an influence on consulting literature, the most common research theme in this research domain is client-consultant relationship (Varga-Toldi, Veres, and Rékasi, 2019). Number of articles with client-consultant relationship dominates in academia and little attention has been paid for the key marketing aspects of consulting, especially purchasing preferences of clients, procurement, selection and evaluation process of consultants which are regarded a very important b2b marketing topics.

Research papers on *evaluation and service quality of consulting projects* perceived success from different aspects. Some studies perceive successful assignments from the perspective of client-consultant relationship (Appelbaum and Steed, 2005; Fincham, 1999; Fullerton and West, 1996), while others reflect success as quality of collaboration quality of partners (Roodhooft and Van den Abbeele 2006; Sweem, 2009; Wang, Shieh and Hsiao, 2005). Some authors put perceived commitment and added value of consultants into the focus of successful consulting projects (Gable, 1996; McLachlin, 2000; O’Driscoll and Eubanks, 1993; Soriano 2004;), and few researchers believe that the key success factor is client experience (Bronnenmayer, Wirtz and Göttel, 2016 a,b; Williams and Plouffe, 2007; Wright and Kitay, 2002;). Only few empirical works can be found which try to describe the quality of consulting services with performance indicators (Kumar and Simon, 2001; Kumar, Simon and Kimberley 2000; Philip and Hazlett, 1997; Phillips, 2000P. Recent studies provide new contributions and complement existing management consulting knowledge. Today, we know a lot about client-consultant relationships and its dynamics, roles of each party yet we still know little about what makes management consulting assignments successful and how quality of such a service can be measured. Wright and Kitay (2002) highlights that it is not always easy to understand what consultants are actually doing because (1) consulting projects are not tangible; (2) assignments are operating in a changing business environment; (3) where consequences of consulting interventions cannot be clearly isolated and measured.

However, the total number of publications in the research field of management consulting has grown significantly over the last decade, we believe that management consulting research field has not yet reached its maturity. Although works of researchers are becoming more and more sophisticated and new contributions complement classical constructs, management consulting knowledge is still fragmented and not structured into a common intellectual repository. Number of articles with client-consultant relationship dominates in academia and little attention has been paid for preferences of consultants in management consulting literature, yet, evaluation of the expectation of consultants are also part of the successful interaction (Gable, 1996a and 1996b; McLachlin, 2000).

The *intellectual structure of the management consulting* research domain shows that management consulting studies are published principally in management science journals, management consulting as a research domain has no privilege, specific mother journals. Results indicates that management consulting studies are published most of the time in top-ranked management science journals, thus, traditional b2b marketing and industrial marketing research journals are losing their influence in this area. However, the total number of publications in the research field of management consulting has grown significantly yet empirical results do not seem to be connected to each other and management consulting knowledge is still fragmented and not structured into a common intellectual repository.

Research results

1.1 Qualitative research results

QH1: Based on utility dimensions of consulting services classification of consulting roles and functions can be formed.

Purpose of purchased consulting service is perceived in terms of the motivation, utility concerns of the client. Consulting firms should detect what the main motivation of the customer is and consultants are supposed to recognize where customer' uncertainty is coming from since these circumstances will determine the consulting style. Explored consulting roles are demonstrated in Table 2. Research results are harmonized with previous consulting role studies (Kakabadse, Louchart and Kakabadse, 2006; Kubr, 2002; Nees and Grenier, 1985; Schein, 1989; Steele, 1975), however qualitative research results complete these existing studies with the perspective of motivation and perceived uncertainty of clients.

Table 2: Generic purposes and main consultant roles of management consulting

| Purpose | Motivation | Uncertainty | Tendency | Consultant role |
|---------------------------------|---|-----------------------|------------|----------------------|
| Lack of special resources | Human resource | Delivery questions | Decreasing | THE EXPERT |
| | Special expertise | | | |
| Access to network | Information | Inquiry questions | Constant | THE INFORMANT |
| | New relationships | | | |
| Defining new opportunities | Providing guidelines | Inquiry questions | Constant | THE GUIDE |
| Project management | Bringing appropriate methodology | Delivery questions | Increasing | THE MANAGER |
| | Managing complex projects and programs | Delivery questions | Increasing | |
| Facilitating | Easing internal political debate | Delivery questions | Constant | THE MEDIATOR |
| Supervising | Risk reduction (internal mistrust) | Affirmation questions | Constant | THE JUDGE |
| | Expectation of parent company (external mistrust) | | | |
| Validation | Confirmation and completion of existing ideas | Affirmation questions | Increasing | THE SUPPORTER |
| Stimulation (Paradigm shifting) | Implementing changes | Delivery questions | Increasing | THE CATALYST |

Source: Own construct

QH2: New purchasing situation strongly influences buying preferences.

Research results indicates that the greater the project complexity, the greater the quality evaluation uncertainty. The greater the uncertainty in evaluating quality, the greater the personal impressions of client-consultant interaction. Participants explained that most of the time the scope is “moving” and defining requirements at the design phase is almost impossible. The evaluation of fix price consulting projects therefore is principally based on assumptions and impressions. The continuous fine-tuning of scope does not enable customers to set quality criteria in advance. Instead, customers construct their requirements and quality expectations during the consulting process and view quality as a perceived value that should be constructed throughout the collaboration and not as a phenomenon that can be described beforehand.

QH3: In the course of uniqueness of project, the first phase of the consulting process is considered as co-learning (competence exchange).

Fixed price consulting projects are often established to solve such business problems that customers cannot handle alone or have never met or managed before; consequently, these projects are regarded as new purchase situations with high transactional uncertainty. Most of the time request for information process (RFI) only includes preliminary requirements for the required service and neither RFP nor the consulting contract cover the scope properly. Consequently, no traditional quality management plan is produced. Participants explained that the more time the consultant spends with the customer, the clearer picture the consultants will have about the problem of the customer, and the more definable the deliverable solution will be and in view of this, the exact scope of the project changes continuously. The first phase of the consulting process is considered as co-learning.

QH4: Personal preferences of participants in the consulting process significantly influence the perception of service quality.

Our research has revealed that clients do not all regard the value of consultancy services equally; rather, their evaluation of the utility provided depends upon the organizational level at which the service is applied (Table 3). Higher tiers of management hierarchy tend to be more sensitive to the personal and unit-specific benefits on offer and place a substantial premium on the perceived efficacy of their teams within the organizational structure. In turn, little or no emphasis may be placed on specific project deliverables, and successful management consultants must modulate their approaches accordingly.

Table 3: Utility dimensions of management consulting by different hierarchical levels of the buying organization

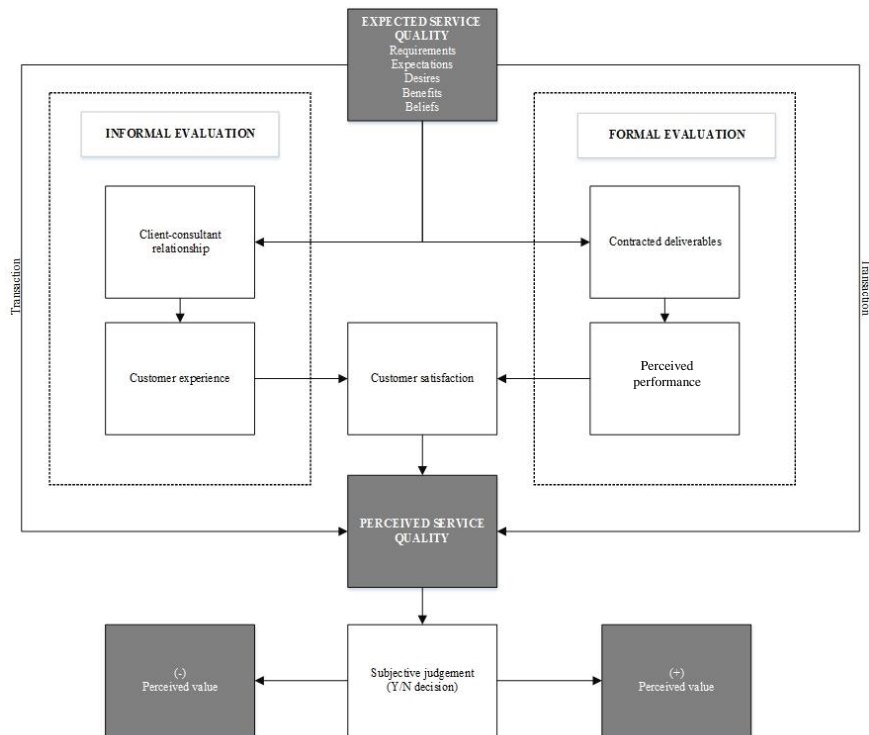
| Level | Focus | Benefits | Time dimension |
|---------------------|------------------------------------|---|-----------------------|
| Operational | Atmosphere & Learning | Less work | Short-term |
| | | More interesting work | |
| | | Pleasant working environment | |
| | | Career development | |
| | | Receiving attention | |
| | | Access to information | |
| Functional manager | Ideas & Team work | Feedback from immediate supervisor | Short-term |
| | | Acquiring new information | |
| | | Having new ideas | |
| | | Usable solutions | |
| | | Task assignment | |
| | | Acceptance and positive image of unit | |
| Executive directors | Position & Power | Well-functioning team | Mid-term |
| | | Strengthening own position | |
| | | Growing organizational power | |
| | | Self-certification | |
| | | Reaching targets | |
| Top management | Change & Transformation | Receiving concrete action plans and decision supporting materials | Long-term |
| | | Take to market (“make it happen”) | |
| | | Implementing change | |
| | | Improving employee engagement | |
| Procurement | Budget & Relationships | Strategic support for vision and long-term objectives | Short/Mid-term |
| | | Quantifiable and secure purchasing process | |
| | | Staying within budget | |
| | | Development of supplier relationships | |

Source: Own construct

QH5: Assessment of utility of the consulting service is materialized in the post transactional process.

The quality assessment of consultants is based on qualitative metrics rather than direct impact on the quantifiable measurement of the contracted deliverables. The first level of quality evaluation is formal and best defined as the quality of project deliverables and performance of the project team, while second level refers to an informal and the less tangible evaluation based on personal impressions (Figure 2). The evaluation can be best described as the level of customer experience and directly affects the ultimate judgement of the customers regarding the quality of the consulting service. Most of the participants reported that “real-time” transactional evaluation (during project and at project closing) unhelpful since the value of delivered solutions and documents may increase as time goes by and more and more tangible and quantifiable results of the intervention emerge.

Figure 2: Quality evaluation process of management consulting projects

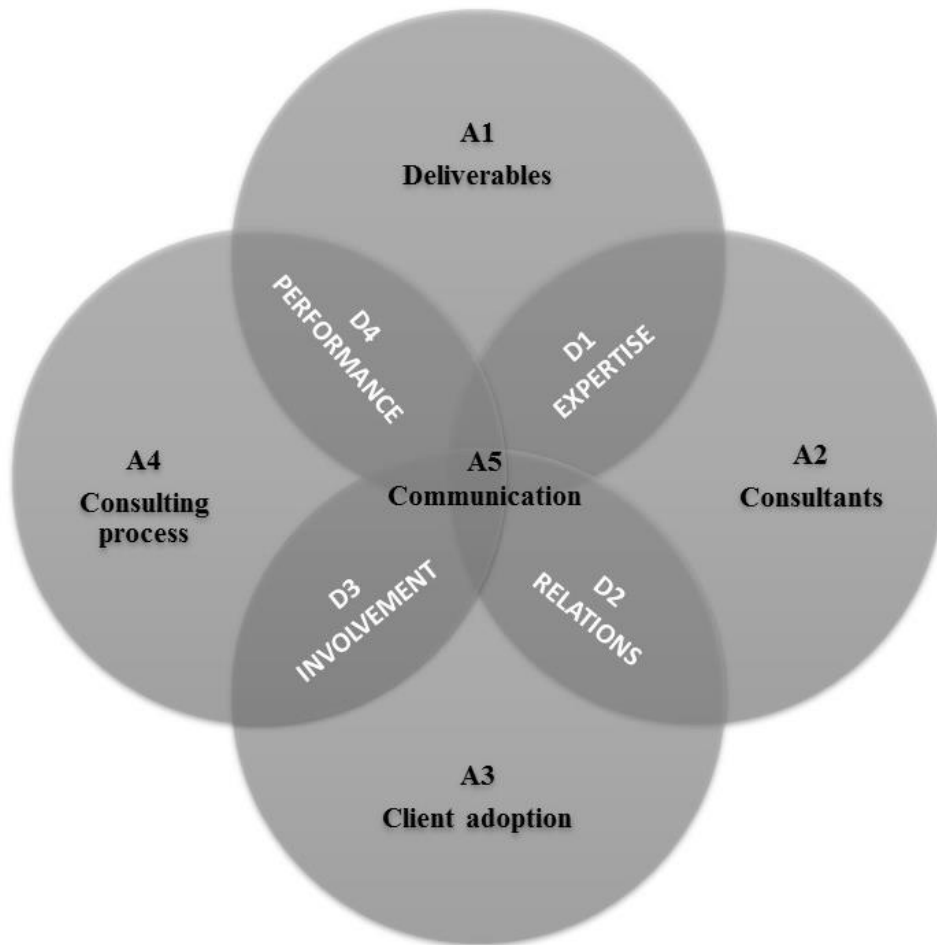


Source: own construct

QH6: The dimension structure of quality evaluation of management consulting projects is hierarchical (conceptual model can be formed).

Based on content analysis customers construct their judgements on consulting service quality through 5 main aspects: (1) deliverables, (2) consultants, (3) client adaption, (4) consulting process, (5) communication. A 5-element but four-pronged model has been defined and communication as a fifth aspect was placed in the center of the model as the other four attributes are connected through this aspect and communication is in a close relation with the other four aspects as well. From this 5-element structure four, relatively separable quality dimensions emerged: (1) Expertise, (2) Relations, (3) Involvement, and (4) Performance (ERIP model, Varga-Toldi and Veres 2021), as demonstrated in Figure 3. Dimensions are not distinct, they all had a connection with each other as overlapping sections show; however, these four dimensions effectively illustrates how customers construct their quality judgments.

Figure 3: Perceived quality dimensions (D1-D4) of management consulting projects – The ERIP model



Source: Own construct

1.2 Quantitative research results

The research aim of quantitative research was to validate and test research results of qualitative research. Questionnaire was designed based on the previous related scientific papers, manuscripts of interviews and was aligned with the framework of ERIP conceptual model. The used quantitative conceptual model is illustrated by Table 4.

Table 4: Quantitative conceptual model

| Attribute | Sub-dimension | Dimension | Number of attitude statements | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| Junior and senior ratio | Expertise | Right project team structure | 1 | |
| Availability of senior consultants | | | 1 | |
| Expertise | | Competence | 1 | |
| Experience | | | 1 | |
| Knowledge transformation | | | 1 | |
| Applicability | | Relations | Strategic fit | 1 |
| Sustainability | | | | 1 |
| Vision setting | | | Empathy | 1 |
| Adaption skills | 2 | | | |
| Tranquility | Assertiveness | 1 | | |
| Enforcement | | 2 | | |
| Appropriate consulting communication | | 1 | | |
| Cooperation | Involvement | Commitment | 1 | |
| Commitment | | | 2 | |
| Information sharing | | Management support | 1 | |
| Transparency | | | 1 | |
| Competence development | | | 1 | |
| Responsibility | | Ethical norms | 2 | |
| Discretion | | | 1 | |
| Objectivity | | Performance | Efficient (client) resource use | 1 |
| Preparedness | 1 | | | |
| Efficient resource allocation | Change management | | 1 | |
| Assertion of interests | | | 2 | |
| Acceleration | | | 1 | |
| Internal conflict resolution | Organizational learning | | 1 | |
| Knowledge sharing | | | 1 | |
| Constraint management | Performance | Productivity | 1 | |
| Quick wins | | | 1 | |
| Budget | | | 1 | |
| Deadline | | | 1 | |
| Scope | | Excellent delivery | 3 | |
| Flexibility | | | 1 | |
| Thoughtfulness | | Supplementary benefits | 1 | |
| Additional value | | | 1 | |
| Additional benefits | | Organizational buy-in | 3 | |
| Visibility | | | 2 | |
| Demonstrability | 3 | | | |
| Attendance | Availability | 3 | | |
| Availability of professional contents | | 1 | | |

Source: own construct

H1: The most frequently mentioned utility dimensions by clients are lack of special resources, project management, organizational stimulation.

Research results show that the most frequent utility dimensions of buying organizations are lack of special resources, project management, organizational stimulation. Important to highlight that defining new opportunities statistically as important as organizational stimulation, thus this utility dimension has its place in the top utility dimensions. Results are harmonized with qualitative research and findings of relevant literature.

H2: There is a significant difference in the importance of success dimensions (conceptual model).

The four dimensions' index distribution significantly differ from the other and their importance also significantly shows variance (Table 5). The most important dimension of successful consulting service is expertise, which is followed by relations and performance. The least important dimension is involvement.

Table 5: Index distribution of dimensions

| Dimensions (ERIP) | Mean | Median |
|-------------------|------|--------|
| Expertise | 3,90 | 3,88 |
| Relations | 3,76 | 3,75 |
| Performance | 3,70 | 3,68 |
| Involvement | 3,58 | 3,63 |

Source: own construct

There is a significant difference how consultants and clients regard the importance of each dimension. Research results show (Table 6) that consultants view the importance of involvement dimension less than clients (at significance level of 0,1).

Table 6: Index distribution of dimensions of consultants and clients

| Dimensions (ERIP) | Consultant/Client | | | | Significant difference? $\alpha = 5\%$ | Significant difference? $\alpha = 10\%$ |
|-------------------|-------------------|--------|------------|--------|---|--|
| | Client | | Consultant | | | |
| | Mean | Median | Mean | Median | | |
| Expertise | 3,93 | 4,00 | 3,85 | 3,88 | No | No |
| Relations | 3,75 | 3,75 | 3,77 | 3,81 | No | No |
| Involvement | 3,60 | 3,75 | 3,54 | 3,50 | No | Yes |
| Performance | 3,70 | 3,68 | 3,70 | 3,74 | No | No |

Source: own construct

Attitude statements can be grouped based on their importance into three category which classification provides a practical and managerial perspective for interpretation of results (Table 7).

Table 7: PCP classification of management consulting service quality attributes

| Importance (mean) | PCP quality model service attribute group | Number of attitude statements |
|-------------------|---|-------------------------------|
| 4,00 < | Pivotal | 14 |
| 3,50 – 4,00 | Core | 23 |
| 3,50 > | Peripheral | 14 |

Source: own construct

Based on PCP service quality model theory (Philip and Hazlett, 1992) there are pivotal service attributes which are crucial and a must have factors of management consulting service quality perception (14 preferences). Core service attributes are important, however not critical (23 preferences). Peripheral attributes are less important preferences (14 preferences). Table 8 demonstrates the top preferences of successful consulting interventions.

Table 8: Top preferences

| Attitude statement | Mean | Dimension | Sub-dimension |
|---|------|-------------|---------------------------------|
| ERIP23: Consultants working on the project arrive well prepared | 4,33 | Involvement | Efficient (client) resource use |
| ERIP21: Consultants meet ethical standards and act responsible, handle information with greatest secrecy. | 4,31 | Relations | Ethical norms |
| ERIP39: Consultants understand the actual motivation of buying organization. | 4,30 | Relations | Commitment |
| ERIP34: Consultant meet legal and contractual measures with the highest proficiency. | 4,21 | Performance | Productivity |
| ERIP4: Consultant possess the relevant industry-specific experience, will not learn it “on the job”. | 4,18 | Expertise | Competence |
| ERIP8: Consultants deliver solutions which fit the organizational strategic goals. | 4,15 | Expertise | Strategic fit |
| ERIP15: Consultants are committed to the client and project goals. | 4,15 | Relations | Commitment |
| ERIP36: Consultants besides using standard methods deeply investigate to find other solution alternatives. | 4,13 | Performance | Excellent delivery |
| ERIP5: Consultants are able to share and transform their knowledge. | 4,08 | Expertise | Competence |
| ERIP13: Consultants can and dare to say no to client if they assume that its needed in favor of the successful project. | 4,06 | Relations | Assertiveness |
| ERIP3: Consultant are aware of the latest best practices. | 4,05 | Expertise | Competence |
| ERIP33: Consultants meet delivery deadlines. | 4,04 | Performance | Productivity |
| ERIP45: Consultants communication is consistent, transparent about the progress of the project, inform and manage their stakeholders. | 4,18 | Performance | Organizational buy-in |
| ERIP46: Consultants are available and answer promptly. | 4,04 | Performance | Availability |

Source: own construct

H3: Importance of attributes of relationship quality are significantly differ.

Based on relationship quality academic works it has been assumed that interpretation of relationship quality between consultants and clients can be subjective, and participants view importance of sub-dimensions differently (Table 9). Research results indicates that there is a significant difference between the importance of sub-dimensions of relationship dimension. The most important sub-dimension is commitment, followed by ethical norms and assertiveness (at significance level of 10%).

Table 9: Importance of relationship dimension components (sub-dimensions)

| Sub-dimensions of relations dimension | Mean | Median |
|--|-------------|---------------|
| Commitment | 4,23 | 4,50 |
| Ethical norms | 3,83 | 4,00 |
| Assertiveness | 3,76 | 3,75 |
| Management support | 3,64 | 3,67 |
| Empathy | 3,42 | 3,33 |

Source: own construct

H4: There is a significant difference between the importance of success dimensions based on the organizational hierarchy.

Research has not found any significant difference between consultants and clients based on the importance of dimensions. Small variance can be found between mid and top leaders yet nor at significance level of 5% nor 10% this gap cannot be statistically proved. However, in case of two attitude statements there were a significant difference by position level in organizational hierarchy. Higher tiers of management hierarchy tend to be more sensitive to the competence and expertise of consultants, yet little or less emphasis may be placed on specific project deliverables. These findings accord with results of explorative qualitative research.

Research theses

Results of hypothesis evaluation are summarized in Table 10.

Table 10: Research theses

| Used primary research method | ID | Thesis | Scientific novelty |
|--|-----|---|--------------------|
| Explorative qualitative research (QT = Quasi thesis) | QT1 | Based on utility dimensions of consulting services classification of consulting roles and functions can be formed. | New |
| | QT2 | New purchasing situation strongly influences buying preferences. | New |
| | QT3 | In the course of uniqueness of project, the first phase of the consulting process is considered as co-learning (competence exchange). | New |
| | QT4 | Personal preferences of participants in the consulting process significantly influence the perception of service quality. | New |
| | QT5 | Assessment of utility of the consulting service is materialized in the post transactional process. | New |
| | QT6 | The dimension structure of quality evaluation of management consulting projects is hierarchical (conceptual model can be formed). | Novel |
| Quantitative research | T1 | The most frequently mentioned utility dimensions by clients are lack of special resources, project management, organizational stimulation. | New |
| | T2 | There is a significant difference in the importance of quality dimensions (conceptual model). | Novel |
| | T3 | Importance of attributes of relationship quality are significantly differ. | New |

Source: own construct

Research limitations

This dissertation can be regarded as fieldwork which may provide basis for further research. The qualitative study relied on interviews from 22 participants from 14 different organizations results reflect participant's subjective perceptions about the quality of consulting projects. Qualitative research indicates opinions of 167 professionals. These circumstances limit the generalizability of interpretation. As a key criterion for approaching a suitable sample I focused on financial service provider sector, since "financial services has historically been by far the largest market for consulting firms, accounting for one-third of the total in some countries" (Czerniawska and Toppin 2005, pp. 23). The fact that interviewed and surveyed clients have broad industry experience and extensive business practice with consultants from various field suggests that results in other service dominant industries might not be too different. Based on my research identified consulting roles, proposed consulting service quality model can be generalized as it fits and is in line with the previous b2b service quality and relationship quality models. For further and deeper analysis of proposed conceptual model data collection can be extended to a more heterogenous, comprehensive sample (500+) with wider industry scope. These methodological refinements allow to execute factor or cluster analysis of dimensions of ERIP model. Gap between consultants and clients in point of perceived quality dimensions may hold great and interesting research results in future.

Practical application value of results

There is a wide-range of literature with focus on client-consultant relationships, factors of successful engagements, contracting and selection criteria of consultants but most of the papers in this field study perceived quality in relation with specific types of consulting in different markets and not with a universal approach. The value of the paper is the empirically grounded approach to validate consulting market specific conceptual quality model which work academically fills a void in consulting and service marketing literature. Research findings can support of buying organizations in managing their activities for improving service quality and setting clear behavioral and professional objectives to their consultants. Furthermore, findings assist sales executives in finetuning their pre-sales techniques by considering client quality preferences through tender and offer phases.

Relevant publications

1. Varga-Toldi, K., 2018. Attitűd specifikus vásárlói preferenciák a tanácsadás piacán. Conference paper. In: Józsa, László; Korcsmáros, Enikő; Seres, Huszárík Erika (szerk.) A hatékony marketing: EMOK2018 Nemzetközi Tudományos Konferencia, Komárno, Szlovákia: Selye János Egyetem, 1004-1014.
2. Varga-Toldi, K., 2018. Product attributes and purchasing preferences of clients in the consulting market. Conference paper. IMP Doctoral Colloquium 2018, 34th Annual Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Conference, Marseilles, France.
3. Varga-Toldi, K., 2018. A tanácsadói szerepek és alkalmazott stílus jelentősége a tanácsadási szolgáltatások minőségészlelésében. Conference paper. Haza Szolgálatában Konferencia, Nemzeti Közszolgálati Egyetem.
4. Varga-Toldi, K., Veres, Z., 2018. Utility attributes and quality dimensions of management consulting projects – theoretical considerations and empirical results. In: 34th Annual Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Conference, 1-15.
5. Varga-Toldi, K., Veres, Z., 2018. Vezetési tanácsadási projektek minőségi dimenziói - elméleti megfontolások és empirikus eredmények. Conference paper. In: Józsa, László; Korcsmáros, Enikő; Seres, Huszárík Erika (szerk.) A hatékony marketing: EMOK2018 Nemzetközi Tudományos Konferencia konferenciakötete, Komárno, Szlovákia: Selye János Egyetem, 950-958.
6. Varga-Toldi, K; Veres, Z., 2019: Most Influential Studies and Popular Research Topics of Management Consulting. A Quantitative Literature Review. Conference paper. The Beauty of. B2B Marketing. 9th BMM-EMAC Biennial International Conference on Business Market Management
7. Varga-Toldi, K., Veres, Z., 2020. A vezetési tanácsadói szerepek változása: Szakirodalmi kitekintés és empirikus eredmények. Vezetéstudomány, 51(7-8), 13-26.
8. Varga-Toldi, K., Veres, Z., 2021. ERIP: service quality model of management consulting projects. Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing, 36(7), 1090-1102.
9. Varga-Toldi, K., Veres, Z., 2024. Service Quality Dimensions of the Management Consulting Market. Pannon Management Review. Before publishing, expected due to date: 2024Q4

10. Varga-Toldi, K., Veres, Z., Rékasi, L., 2019: A vezetési tanácsadási szakirodalom intellektuális struktúrájának feltárása – b2b marketing kitekintés. Conference paper. In Veres, Z. Sasné Grósz A., Liska, F. (szerk): Ismerjük a vevőt? A vásárlás pszichológiája. EMOK XXV., 36-46.

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<https://m2.mtmt.hu/api/publication?format=html&labelLang=hun&sort=publishedYear,desc&cond=authors;eq;10052773>

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