

# What A Consultant Should Do For You

*Karthik Suresh*

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to look at how a consultant can add value to an organisation and the kinds of things both parties should think about to make sure a project is successful.

What do you say when someone asks you what you do for a living? Sometimes it's easy. "I'm a doctor. A lawyer. A civil engineer." Sometimes it's less easy — and one of those times is when you are a management consultant. When I say I'm a management consultant there is no flicker of recognition, no flash of understanding in the listener's eyes. The next question is often, "So, what does a management consultant do?"

There's something interesting that takes place when you try and describe a thing. For example, if I said to you that I was a doctor, you'd instantly have a picture in your mind. That one word gives you a lot of information because you are already familiar with the idea of doctors and what they do. So, in essence, before you can understand the words "management consultant" you have to know what a management consultant does in the first place — and that takes a few more words.

### 1. What does a management consultant do?

The traditional way to answer such a question is to list activities: research, analysis, advice, and so on. The idea is that a consultant bring specific experience and expertise to your team that you don't already have. They are a part of the team in the same way employees are but with different terms and for a finite time. Your employees stay with you and consultants usually move on to the next assignment.

So, there are at least two things to consider: the things they do and the terms under which they do them. That seems simple enough, except it often isn't. For example, the thing to be done is rarely the same thing for different organisations. If the problem you need solving is straightforward then what you will probably do is go ahead and solve it. You don't need consultants involved. Instead you need people who can carry out productive work and deliver the result you need.

For example, if you need a new industrial boiler and have the expertise to work out the size you need or require a like-for-like replacement you'll go to a company that will price up and install exactly what you need.

The value of a management consultant is usually in situations where you don't know what you need — where there is a problematic situation that you could do with improving.

### 2. What's the problem here?

The first problem that needs to be addressed is one to do with the way we think. Many people, maybe even the majority of people, have been exposed to a way of thinking that assumes the world is full of systems and what we have to do is replace, improve or optimise those systems if we want to make things better. It's a view of the world that is mechanical — if you move these things, put these people in those roles and invest money in these pieces of kit then you will get this result. All you have to do is set a goal, decide what resources you need and track your progress and you will win.

These ideas are now so common that they are taken as self-evident — as obvious. Of course you should have goals. Of course they should be SMART: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound. You **must know intuitively** that this is the right way to do things? Except, what we forget is that

what seems intuitive is often the case only because it's familiar. We are familiar with the idea of goal setting as a way to achieve results and so we believe it is the intuitive and obvious way to do things.

The problem that comes up in real world situations is that goals that at first glance seem simple and obvious prove surprisingly hard to meet. For example, if you run a business you will need to think about quality, cost and time. If you set a goal for 100% quality in your factory, you will increase the cost of operations and the time it takes to produce what you make.

In real life, what often happens is that when you set goals they end up being incompatible. For example, the UK's goals of a decarbonised energy system, cheaper bills and security of supply cannot all be met in full. A fully decarbonised system based entirely on energy sources controlled by the UK would cost a huge amount of money — money that would be paid by consumers through bills. In real life the end result is often not the best you can do but the best you can live with. It's always a compromise, an accommodation, optimal given the constraints rather than optimising for the best possible result.

### **3. The one thing we forget to model**

In many business situations the people tasked with problem-solving have a technical background. They are trained as engineers, technicians or analysts. Perhaps they are finance experts, lawyers or accountants. They come with a set of tools and experiences that can be applied to problems.

The solutions they come up with usually range from simple to complex in technical terms. For example, you could have a simple solution that involves implementing a book-keeping system. Or you might have a more complex solution that involves a commodity management system that uses the principle of decision making under risk to measure and model the impact of decisions to create decision support material for decision makers. The common factor is that there are things in the world that need to be done and things that link them together like flows of information or money. It comes down to nodes and links.

Once you've designed your system and come up with the nodes and links, you can go ahead with the job of implementing the system. That involves getting the technical work done, training users and getting people to use the new system. This is the way most technical people see what needs to be done: a structured process to design and implement a system that consists of things and links. All you have to do next is add people and watch it work perfectly.

Except, it often doesn't. Technical people have often experienced the disconcerting result that happens when you add people to your perfect system and watch everything fall apart around you. It's got to be the fault of the people — the system works perfectly when you use it. It's when these normal people come around and use it that things seem to fall over and cause issues. There's a name for such clueless users — "lusers".

### **4. The fault [...] is not in our stars. But in ourselves...**

The thing that technical people don't realise, is that there is more to life than simple or complex systems. In fact, there are no systems in the situation we're looking at at all. There are things. And there are people. Things stay in one place and work when we connect them together. People have a mind of their own, have views and opinions and take action that **they believe** is the right action to take. They act with purpose and that is part of the situation we are trying to involve. Any solution, then, that doesn't include the people involved as a fundamental part of it is missing a hugely important piece of functionality. It's like designing a battleship and leaving out the engine that drives the propeller. If you want something that adds value, something that improves the situation you need an approach that combines the technical and social aspects of the situation — a socio-technical solution.

It follows then, that it is very unlikely that the same technical solution will work in exactly the same way in two different organisations because the people are different.

### **5. This is where a management consultant comes in.**

What you have then, in most organisations, is a problematic situation and the people affected by it. In many cases the people affected can come up with a solution that works for them. In other cases, a consultant can help — not by coming in with a magic solution but by bringing in a range of approaches, models and ideas that they have developed or seen in other places. They can work with the people in this

organisation to come up with a model of what organisation ought to look like and act and compare the parts of that model with reality to come with ideas and suggestions to improve the situation.

The main difference in this approach is that the people involved, including the consultant, stop seeing the problem situation — the reality facing them — as a system that needs re-engineering but instead see their **approach** to improving the situation as something capable of being done systematically. This is a subtle point, but the value added by the management consultant is often not in the form of a solution to the problem but in the form of a managed approach to solving the problem out of which a solution might emerge that is acceptable for the organisation and its people. A solution that may actually take root and work because the people involved have been an integral part of developing it from the beginning.

## **6. Conclusion**

The next time you face a situation that is problematic — one where you know you need to make an improvement you usually have one of two thoughts. Either you know what needs to be done and you just need someone to get it done. For example, I know I have a tap with a leaky washer and I just can't get it dismantled with the tools I have. I need a professional plumber. That is the kind of problem where I need a contractor, someone who will deliver a defined service in return for a fee.

The other kind of problem is where you aren't sure what needs to be done, or you have questions about which approach is likely to work. Such questions are fuzzy, with unclear edges. How they are resolved has to do with more than just things and where they are. They have to do with people, culture, politics and the feelings and emotions and thoughts and experiences that go into making up the system that is an organisation. In a sense, feelings and emotions connect people and situations in much the same way wires connect electronic elements or financial flows connect accounting systems.

A management consultant adds value by working as a member of the team with the ability to look at the situation from an external point of view, to model the nodes and links, both tangible and intangible and take a systematic view to understanding, thinking about, comparing, analysing and finally taking action to improve the situation.

In essence, then, a management consultant is someone who works alongside you on improving a situation by focusing on improving the way in which you improve the situation.

To reach the end, you both build a better way.

## **About the author**

Karthik Suresh is a Management Consultant who helps customers with energy, utility, sustainability, research, innovation and knowledge management projects. His experience includes working with large and small organisations to select and implement strategic decision systems, improve and develop management capability and deploy risk management, IT, communications and information systems projects.

Please feel free to connect on LinkedIn or read more at [www.handcraftedinsight.com](http://www.handcraftedinsight.com)