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Defining 'Done': The Ethical Dilemma of the Body-Shopping Model in Consulting

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Abstract

This paper explores the ethical implications of the body-shopping model in consulting, where firms embed consultants in operational roles within client's organization. Based on a real-life case, explored from the client's point of view, the analysis draws on institutional theory, consequentialism, and stakeholder theory to examine how such practices challenge consulting principles. The case highlights how institutional environment can compromise ethical judgement, raising questions about the effectiveness of individual-level codes of conduct. The paper argues that ethical responsibility must be considered beyond the individual consultant, addressing systemic issues within the consulting industry.

Introduction

Technology has emerged as a transformative force in professional services firms (PSFs), fundamentally altering both operational and strategic models (Smets et al., 2017). As PSFs integrate digital tools and standardized solutions, reliance on human expertise has diminished in certain areas, leading to a shift in knowledge intensity - long one of the core characteristics of PSFs (Kronblad, 2020; Smets et al., 2017). This shift has not only changed how consulting firms operate but also driven business model innovation. Many have evolved from offering purely strategic advice to providing end-to-end digital transformation solutions, from needs analysis to implementation (Tavoletti et al., 2021). Consequently, consultants are no longer limited to advisory roles but are often hired as extra “pairs of hands” (Sturdy, 2011). Such engagements challenge the definition of the consultant function, described by Shaw (2019) as advising clients as a practical and informed partner, helping them set goals and determine how to achieve them effectively. The body-shopping model, where firms place consultants in operational roles without bound deliverables, raises concerns about professional independence, misrepresentation of expertise, and broader ethical ambiguity.

This essay examines the body-shopping model in consulting, discussing how it affects the profession’s principles and ethics. Based on a real-life case, this dilemma is analyzed through the lens of institutional theory, consequentialism, and stakeholder theory, reflecting on the applicability and limitations of professional codes of conduct in addressing challenges rooted in the institutional level (O’Mahoney, 2011).

Methodology

Discussing ethical dilemmas in consulting can make interviewees feel vulnerable; therefore, it is essential to create an open and non-judgemental environment. To foster such a setting, we employed the jokes-based interview method described by Bouwmeester (2023). This approach uses humour to lower social desirability bias and encourage candid reflections (Bouwmeester, 2023, p. 11). We showed the interviewee a few cartoons about common misinterpretations of digital transformation and agile ways of working and asked if any felt relatable based on his experience. While the initial focus was on the interviewee’s experiences as a consultant, the open-ended and flexible format of the interview led to a shift in perspective. Instead of recounting a case from the consultant's side, the interviewee shared an experience in which he was on the receiving end of consulting services. This shift provided deeper insights into how the body-shopping model functions in practice and its ethical implications for multiple stakeholders.

The Case

Robert[1] began his corporate career in boutique IT consultancies, guided by the values of brutal honesty and professional independence. For him, this means focusing on ‘the definition of done’: “It means that this company needs to stand on its

[1] A pseudonym has been used to protect the interviewee's identity.

own legs as soon as possible ... we should always be happy that in due time they can do without us” (p.c. interviewee).

As he progressed in his career, Robert stepped into a CIO role in a transportation and logistics company. Rather than overseeing an in-house team, he found that much of the day-to-day work was being performed by consultants from large IT service firms. They filled internal team roles rather than delivering strategic value. What concerned him most was that, as many of them were juniors, they lacked the level of skill or expertise that, in his view, did not justify their rates.

“I'm not paying a consultant to learn at my company. I want to learn from him ... they're amateurs per hour, right? And for that rate, I would love to get a little bit more skilled people who help grow the team instead of just doing the duties of one role” (p.c. interviewee).

Realizing their continued presence did not contribute to building a high-performance organization, Robert terminated long-term engagements and kept only consultants who offered strategic value. His decision wasn’t personal - it was based on what best served the department and the company.

The cutbacks were quickly noticed. A partner from the consulting firm escalated the issue to the CEO, leveraging their influence. However, Robert’s rationale was well received by the CEO, who approved the changes and handled discussions with the firm. This case illustrates the body-shopping model used by many IT service firms, which results in long-term engagements that foster client dependency.

Being Ethical in an Unethical System

We reflected on the case through the lens of the Code of Conduct developed by the Dutch association ‘Order of Organizational Experts and Consultants’ (OOA). The OOA Code outlines five core principles intended to guide members’ decision-making in a professional and ethical manner: expertise, reliability, meticulousness, professional independence, and societal responsibility (OOA, 2022). We argue that four of these principles were compromised in this case.

The consultants lacked the expertise to provide added value. Reliability was undermined by the indefinite nature of their engagement, which lacked a defined scope. Meticulousness was disregarded, as consultants failed to prioritise the client’s best interests. Lastly, their role blurred the line between external advisor and internal employee, eroding professional independence.

This highlights a broader concern raised by O’Mahoney (2011): how much ethical responsibility can be placed on individual consultants when the core issue is institutional? Institutional theory suggests that the institutional environment influences social choices (Hoffman, 2017). In this context, consultants may not have questioned the engagement model, seeing body-shopping as standard industry practice.

Thus, ethical dilemmas in consulting often go beyond individual judgement and are embedded in the firm’s business model. The conflict between revenue generation and ethical responsibility originates at the institutional level. This raises critical questions about whether codes of conduct, designed primarily to govern individuals, are sufficient to address structural, industry-wide ethical concerns.

Consequentialism

Consequentialism, as defined by Sinnott-Armstrong (2023), evaluates the morality of acts based on their outcomes; actions are considered ethical if they lead to positive consequences. We apply this lens to the case, as we lack full insight into the motives of those whose earlier actions caused the situation Robert inherited.

On one hand, Robert's predecessor hired consultants as temporary team members to support change processes. While this may have met short-term needs, it failed to account for long-term consequences, such as the absence of in-house capability and growing dependency, making the decision ethically flawed. On the other hand, the consulting firm may have realised their contributions were no longer valuable but continued to deploy consultants. If this was a deliberate choice, it suggests that the firm prioritised its own gain over the client's benefit. From a consequentialist perspective, this would be morally wrong, as it led to negative consequences such as an eroded firm–client relationship and eventually terminated engagements.

In contrast, Robert's decision to end most engagements aligned with the organization's long-term interests: building internal capabilities and optimising resources. However, the partners' reaction adds complexity: one could argue their response was justified, as they were continuing the work they had been hired to do. Additionally, the body-shopping model has negative consequences for consultants. Despite working alongside the client's team, they are not fully integrated into the organization, which can lead to disconnection. At the same time, they are expected to carry out internal firm work, often resulting in long working hours (Blagoev & Schreyögg, 2019).

Although the issue is complex and our analysis relies solely on Robert's account, we argue that his decision was ethically justified from a consequentialist perspective, as it led to the best outcome for the organization.

Stakeholder Theory

As Krehmeyer and Freeman (2012) argue, consulting firms operate within a network of stakeholders with competing interests. In this context, the firm's partners are key decision-makers who must balance business interests with the client's needs (Poulfelt, 1997).

Their challenge is twofold: ensuring junior consultants gain experience while maintaining profitable engagements and delivering effective solutions. Juniors, while not decision-makers, are stakeholders whose careers are shaped by firm-level priorities. By prioritizing profitability and employee development, the interests of the client organization were deprioritised.

From the client's perspective, staffing consultants may seem cost-effective due to flexibility. However, over time, the value delivered did not justify the spending. The consulting firm's approach failed to produce sustainable improvements, raising ethical concerns about who truly benefited from such engagements (Krehmeyer & Freeman, 2012).

Conclusion

To conclude, we return to our central question: “How does the body-shopping model misrepresent consulting?” Our analysis through stakeholder theory showed that while the model may benefit firms and junior consultants, it fails to serve the client’s best interests. The consequentialist view emphasized that ethical consulting should focus on long-term, sustainable outcomes - making indefinite engagements ethically questionable. This case also illustrates the limitations of codes of conduct in addressing institutional-level issues. Placing ethical responsibility solely on individual consultants is insufficient; the broader industry structure must be considered.

In conclusion, we take guidance from the interviewee, who also mentors many consultants: “Focus on this definition of done and be transparent. There's a lot you have to offer, but you're not part of their team” (p.c. interviewee). For consultants navigating ethical ambiguity, this advice serves as a crucial reminder that maintaining professional independence and clearly defining the scope of engagement is essential to preserving the integrity of the profession.

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