

Internal Management Consulting: Historical Development, Current Practice and Future Trends

Gokhan Turgut

Abstract

There has been a growing interest in internal management consulting. Internal management consultants are salaried full-time employees of an organization who provide management consulting services to the same organization. While there is an ongoing debate, and fluidity around this definition, the previous studies indicate a lack of research on this topic and call for further examination. To advance our understanding of the concept, this article aims to build a foundation by providing a synthesized overview of internal management consulting. Specifically, this article discusses the definition and the details around the debate on this definition, the rationale behind its benefits and popularity, its differences from external management consulting, its current practice, its historical evolution, and future trends associated with it.

Introduction

Internal management consulting services have become more common in large organizations across both the public and private sectors (CMC, 2009). This trend highlights the strategic value that internal consultants bring, offering specialized knowledge and insights tailored to their employers' specific needs and contexts. The internal management consulting (or simply internal consulting) draws upon various knowledge bases, with the most represented areas being operational efficiency, organizational development, project management, strategic management, and human resources management (Sturdy et al., 2016; Sturdy & Wylie, 2011).

Traditionally, management consultants (or simply consultants) are seen as experts who provide objective insights to solve organizational problems. Management consulting (or simply consulting) can be seen in two ways (Manville, et al., 2018): The first is, which commonly used by professional associations, consulting is a specialized service requiring specific skills to analyze client issues objectively and recommend solutions (Greiner and Metzger, 1983). This perspective sees consulting as a separate profession from the management, where consultants are seen as expert advisors on organizational change issues (Kitay and Wright, 2007). The second is that any skilled person within an organization can act as a consultant by providing advice and support to others, regardless of their official title (Schein, 1988). This means that managers can also serve as consultants when they offer guidance rather than simply issuing directives (Kubr, 2002). While these two definitions may seem opposing, they can co-occur within organizations depending on context (Sturdy and Wylie, 2011).

Internal consulting has been part of organizational practice for decades (Bellman, 1972; Dekon, 1987; Kelley, 1979). Despite its growing popularity, internal management consulting has received limited scholarly attention (Grima & Trepó, 2011; Manville, et al., 2018; Sturdy & Wright, 2011; Wright, 2008; Wright et al., 2012). Most existing literature on management consulting focuses on external consultants (e.g., Block, 2000; Bloomfield & Best, 1992; Caldwell, 2003; Collins, 2006; Wright, Sturdy, & Wylie, 2012). Several scholars have emphasized the importance and impact of internal management consultants, highlighting the need for more comprehensive research to understand their roles, challenges, and contributions within organizations (Sturdy et al., 2016).

Definition of Internal Management Consulting

Internal management consultants, also referred to as in-house management consultants (Schumacher & Scherzinger, 2016) or consultant managers (Sturdy et al., 2015), play a crucial role within the broader literature on management consulting (Baaij, 2014; Manville, et al., 2018; Sturdy et al., 2013). An internal management consultant is an organization development professional who is employed full time by an organization, and who reports to a general manager or other senior manager (Lacey, 1995). This is important as unlike typical (or external) management consultants, internal consultants are fully employed by the organization they provide consulting services to and report to a senior manager therein (Buono & Subbiah, 2014; Grima & Trépo, 2011).

Conventionally, clients hire management consultants to receive advice on their decision-making and problems they face. However, the role of internal consultants extends beyond these formal advisory functions. They often assist in implementation of the advice that is provided to their clients. For this reason, internal consultants are valuable assets within organizations due to their unique position. They possess deep knowledge of the organization's culture, processes, and power structures. This insider perspective of internal consultants enables them to effectively manage change initiatives and foster communication among employees. Their involvement in both advising and implementing solutions ensures that recommendations are not only relevant, but also sustainable over time.

There is no standard practice of internal consulting. For instance, internal consultants can be structured in multiple fashions, they can either be merged into the current organizational structures or started as independent affiliates. Even their level of embeddedness can range from being fully woven into the company's hierarchy to functioning with fully autonomous entities. Their setup can also vary greatly, from compact teams dedicated to particular assignments to expansive units responsible for a large variety of activities. More so, their sizes vary wildly, from small group of specialist consultants to large divisions of consultants overseeing a diverse portfolio of consulting functions needed by the client. Moreover, their client base can also differ greatly, with some dedicated exclusively to serving within their own organization, while others extend their expertise to outside partners and customers.

From an organizational change perspective, internal consultants can be seen to have different roles and responsibilities (Kenton and Moody, 2003). Schein's (1988) consultant roles framework, which provides a comprehensive understanding of the varying dynamics and expectations in consultant-client interactions, can be used for this purpose. Based on this model, internal consultants are considered to have three separate consultant roles at any given consulting mandate: the process consultant, the expert consultant, the pair-of-hands consultant.

Specifically, in the process consultant role, the client has the leading function, and the consultant has the supporting function. The client has diagnosed the problem and already decided on the solution. The internal consultant here acts as a facilitator. Collaboratively, both the client and the consultant share responsibility on the success of the project. In the expert consultant role, the consultant has the leading function, and the client has the receiving function. The consultant, using his or her specialized knowledge and expertise, defines problems and proposes solutions. This interaction resembles a doctor and a patient relationship, where the client patient is passive in choosing diagnosis but active in implementing the treatment. This arrangement is beneficial to both parties as the consultant increases its consulting experience, and the client benefits from its problems being solved. In the pair-of-hands consultant role, both the client and the consultant has the leading function, but at different stages of the consulting mandate. The client has diagnosed the problem and already decided on the solution. The consultant is asked to implement already decided solutions. Ultimately, the power and responsibility lie with the client as the client chooses to perceived expertise of the consultant, and the consultant choses how to implement those solutions (Block, 2000; Kenton and Moody, 2003; Meislin, 1997; Ray, 1997).

Evolution of Internal Management Consulting

Internal management consulting gained popularity as an economical alternative to external consulting in early 1990s. High demand for consultants in the dawn of digitalized business era paved the way for external consulting. However, faced with limited supply of available (external) consultants, thus the high costs associated with hiring those consultants, forced many large firms to seek more affordable solutions for their consulting needs. Thereby, they chose to create their own internal consultant practices. In forming these internal consulting units, firms established entirely new departments that attracted talent from well-known (external) consulting firms. These new internal consulting units provided benefits, such as reduced travel and better work-life balance, that appeal to many external consultants.

Very soon, organizational decision makers realized that the recent establishment of internal consulting functions within their organizational structures brought several advantages. For instance, organizations developed a deep in-house or tacit understanding of their operations and strategic goals, promoting a more integrated approach to their problem-solving related decision-making. They also realized that internal consultants could offer insights aligned with the company's culture and long-term objectives, which were particularly important in implementing phases of consulting mandates. Furthermore, these internal consultants helped reduce control costs by limiting dependence on high-price external consultants. By building their own internal consulting units, organizations started managing their consulting needs more efficiently and cost effectively (Armbrüster, 2006).

Differences Between Internal and External Consulting

The management consulting literature concentrates largely on the practices and contributions of external consultants and consulting firms (e.g., Buono, 2015; Howlett and Migone, 2013; McDonald, 2015). In contrast, internal consulting has not received equivalent scholarly attention and remains relatively unexplored in the literature (Sturdy and Wylie, 2011).

Internal consulting differs widely from external consulting in multiple areas, including how they are established, their integration within the organization, financial arrangements, number of team members, the nature of their clients, geographic scope, market strategies, and consulting approaches (Baaij, 2014; Lacey, 1995; Mohe, 2002). For instance, internal and external consultants work in different operational settings. External consultants are hired from outside and usually take on short-term projects for different client firms. They bring fresh ideas through gaining experience with many different businesses. On the other hand, internal consultants work full-time within a single client company. Since they are part of the formal structure of the organization, they understand its culture, language, and processes exceedingly well. This close connection helps them to give pinpointed advice that can put into action easily.

Additionally, internal and external consultants possess different levels of reputation. Internal consultants usually build solid trust and a good reputation inside the client firm, but they don't possess the same level of recognition outside of it. On the other hand, external consultants often have well-regarded credentials that make their advice more credible to clients (Manville, et al., 2018).

Moreover, internal and external consultants cost differently. Usually, internal consultants cost less because they are part of the company's regular staff. This makes them a practical choice for organizations that need ongoing extensive assistance over a longer period. They are also a logical option when budgets are limited for consulting services (Baaij, 2014).

Furthermore, internal and external consultants differ in expertise and experience. External consultants are commonly regarded as possessing superior expertise, reinforced by their broad exposure to diverse organizational contexts, and heightened reputational capital (Kubr, 2002). The considerable financial commitment associated with using external consultants tends to reinforce perceptions of their strategic worth and specialized capabilities (Kitay and Wright, 2007). The idea behind employing external consultants lies in their ability to import cutting-edge managerial practices and cross-sectoral insights, cultivated through wide-ranging engagements across differing industries and geographies (Ramsden & Bennett, 2005).

However, advocates of internal consulting argue that internal practitioners offer a different but equally valuable form of expertise—one rooted in deep organizational embeddedness. Their familiarity with the firm's distinctive organizational climate, cultural uniqueness, and operational intricacies enables them to comprehend challenges more precisely and thus, limit the adaptation of generic, externally brought solutions (Armstrong, 1992; Buono, 2015; Kenton & Yarnall, 2012). Moreover, internal consultants' familiarity with the organizational dynamics and tacit knowledge grants them privileged access to organizational memory and intelligence, which are essential in creating a tailored solution to the firm's challenges (Mottram, 2016). Thereby, their insider status can generate seamless integration into change initiatives.

Similarly, internal and external consultants differ widely in terms of their understanding of the client. The choice of choosing between internal and external consultants is contingent upon several strategic and contextual factors (Baaij, 2014). Internal consultants are typically preferred when deep organizational insight is essential, particularly in politically sensitive situations or when discretion is of utmost importance. Their deep contextual understanding of organizational dynamics makes internal consultants valuable. In contrast, external consultants are preferred when an unbiased opinion is important. For example, they are often brought in for reviewing the performance of the management or the company. Because they are outsiders, they can offer fresh ideas and challenge long-held beliefs without risking any interpersonal relationships. Their out-of-company or out-of-industry, or even out-of-market experience with different businesses may translate into novel ways of solving problems that the client might not have considered before.

While this broad spectrum of differences between internal and external consulting signal great variation, it should not be interpreted as a strict dichotomy in their nature. It is true that internal consultants use their in-depth understanding of the organization to focus on implementing solutions effectively, while external consultants often contribute broader expertise and fresh perspectives. In other words, both internal and external consultants provide essentially similar services with subtle differences. Relatedly, both internal and external consultants have their own strengths and face unique challenges.

Rationale behind Internal Management Consulting

A significant element behind the growing popularity of internal consultants has been the growing dissatisfaction with the services offered by external consultants. Clients frequently see externally proposed solutions as too theoretical and far away from the real challenges their organizations face. This gap has resulted in a tendency towards searching for internal consulting solutions, which possess a better understanding of the organization and its context-specific peculiarities, and thus, lead to more effective and workable suggestions (Armbrüster, 2006).

Management consulting literature indicates that organizations significantly benefit from internal consulting (Anand et al., 2007; Anderson, 2012; Armbrüster, 2006; Clegg et al., 2004; Kelley, 1979; Kenton and Moody, 2003; McKenna, 2006; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001). Several of these benefits are listed as follows:

- (1) Cost effectiveness: Internal consultants cost significantly less than external consultants. They provide similar services without hefty price tags, which makes internal consulting a sought-after organizational advice provider.
- (2) Strategic alignment: Internal consultants are more knowledgeable with the organization and its efforts towards an agreed upon vision. This alignment paves the way for creating cohesive strategic plans that supports overall business objectives.
- (3) Enhanced service: Internal consulting teams have the unique advantage of being deeply familiar with the working dynamics of organization's employees. Because they are already integrated into existing networks, employees can readily seek internal consultants' input or involve them in key collaborations. This proximity enhances timely responses and result in greater satisfaction among employees.
- (4) Seamless change: Internal consultants bring both specialized knowledge and supplementary internal capacity, making it easier to launch and manage important change efforts.
- (5) Enhanced coordination: By directing teams to align their actions with organization's strategy, internal consultants help promote collaboration among employees. This broader perspective enhances the organization's ability to achieve its long-term goals.
- (6) Knowledge mobilization: Internal consultants often serve as key centres of organizational knowledge, combining critical information and insights so they can be easily accessible to organizational actors. This centralized knowledge base improves the speed of business decisions and encourages sharing of best practices within the organization. Moreover, by facilitating the retention and sharing of tacit knowledge within the organization, internal consultants help protect valuable intellectual property therein.
- (7) Improved creativity: Internal consultants play a vital role in connecting different departments, enabling the exchange of ideas and collaborative problem-solving. Additionally, they are also skilled at researching and developing new ideas and identifying root causes of organizational problems. With the help of this cross-

functional coordination, internal consultants tackle complex challenges and foster organizational improvements.

(8) Smooth political navigation: Internal consultants have a flawless understanding of the organization's internal processes, its key knowledge sources, and the unwritten rules of power and influence within. This unique insider perspective gives them the ability to foresee possible resistance and skillfully navigate through organizational politics. Thereby, they are better equipped to evade political pitfalls due to their complete internal insight.

(9) Contextualized solutions: Internal consultants possess tacit organizational knowledge. Their close familiarity with the organization's unique environment and challenges enables them to design solutions that fit perfectly within the organization's specific context. They provide tailored, actionable results that external consultants might struggle to provide without such in-depth insight.

(10) Streamlined implementation: Internal consultants play a dual role, being involved both in creating solutions and overseeing their implementation. This requirement forces them to offer suggestions that are not only realistic but also aligned flawlessly with the organization's resources and capabilities. Besides, their active participation during implementation fosters constant feedback and necessary adjustments, which make the proposed solutions more effective.

(11) Revenue generation: Internal consultants sometimes find themselves in access capacity. During these times, they can act as external consultants and offer their services externally. In doing so, internal consultants not only gain further experience, but also generate additional financial value to their organizations.

In sum, internal consultants have a powerful place within organizations by driving change and helping shape their strategic direction. When internal consultants are integrated into both planning and execution, they help create more effective results while fostering a culture of collaboration and ongoing improvement. This makes them essential actors in pursuing long-term success.

Future of Internal Management Consulting

Internal consulting has been, and is still, evolving. There is an ongoing debate and fluidity around the definition of it (Manville et al., 2018). For instance, internal consulting generally refers to consulting activities conducted by professionals who are active members of an organization, either as direct employees or as part of a separate internal consulting unit. However, this boundary between internal and external (or separate) consulting may get blurred when internal consultants operate as a legally independent sub-units and offer services to external clients (Armbrüster, 2006; Manville et al., 2018). This practice complicates the classification of internal consultants as purely internal or somewhat external (Sturdy & Wylie, 2011). Even some authors try to redefine this externality of internal consulting. For example, in one of these attempts internal consulting is defined as any consulting unit that is overseen by board of directors regardless of whether they operate externally or are legally separate (Niedereichholz & Niedereichholz, 2006).

Moreover, consulting and management were seen as distinct functions historically, but today, these boundaries are increasingly merging. Research shows that the traditional distinction between consulting and management are diminishing, with internal consultants increasingly involve in implementation and change management activities (Morris, 2000; Scott & Barnes, 2011; Sturdy & Wright, 2008). This has led to a merging between the consultant and manager roles, further blurring the traditional definitions (O'Mahoney, 2010; Randall & Burnes, 2016). Another factor contributing to this shift is the expansion of project and program management beyond traditional areas like engineering and IT, resulting in what is often called the 'projectification' of management. This phenomenon integrates consulting approaches into everyday management tasks and decision-making (Maylor et al., 2006).

Additionally, this merging of roles between consulting and management signals a notable identity shift for internal consulting. As the skill sets and responsibilities of managers and internal consultants increasingly overlap, the unique identity of internal consulting faces challenges. Today, internal consultants need to have skillsets of managers, which were not the case previously. While the qualifications and competencies expected of external consultants have been assumed to apply equally to internal consultants (see Bowman, 1995 and Haslam, 2017 for details), they are also expected to have strong communication skills to articulate complex ideas and influence stakeholders, analytical abilities to diagnose organizational challenges, creative problem-solving to develop innovative solutions, and relationship-building skills to maintain ongoing collaboration within the organization, and leadership capabilities that enable them to guide projects and drive change (Armbrüster, 2006).

Lastly, internal consulting, despite its growing significance within organizations, is still an area that lacks a standardized framework. This is especially visible when examining the management consulting literature. Much of the existing academic research conceptually builds internal consulting on the framework of external consulting, rather than exploring it on its own building blocks. This relative approach fails to capture the unique identity, scope, and dynamics of internal consulting (Armbrüster, 2006; Sturdy et al., 2015). Similarly, due to the evolving boundaries of internal consulting, it is challenging for scholars to study the full potential of internal consulting. Establishing clearer theoretical models and conducting more empirical studies remains essential tasks laying ahead.

Conclusion

Internal management consultants, also known as consultant managers, play a crucial role within organisations. The literature acknowledges numerous benefits of internal consulting. These include cost-effectiveness, as internal consultants typically incur lower expenses compared to external consultants. They also provide better strategic alignment, ensuring recommendations support the company's overall vision. Their ongoing presence within the organization fosters stronger relationships and quicker access, enabling seamless communication and collaboration which external consultants lack. Furthermore, internal consultants contribute to smoother change management by combining specialized expertise with internal capacity, enhancing coordination and knowledge sharing across departments.

Compared to external consultants—who bring broad, cross-sector experience and objectivity—internal consultants offer deep organizational insight and political acumen, allowing them to navigate complex internal dynamics and deliver highly tailored solutions. What is important, the choice between internal and external consultants ultimately depends on the strategic needs of the organization—internal consultants are valuable in sensitive, context-dependent situations requiring long-term involvement, while external consultants are valuable for unbiased perspectives and infusions of fresh ideas.

In conclusion, internal management consultants, when effectively integrated, complement external expertise and are critical in driving sustained organizational transformation and competitive advantage.

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