

Selling Expertise, Delivering Inexperience: How Misrepresented Expertise Undermines Consulting Ethics

Mee Aye Kari Soe

Abstract

This essay examines whether the Dutch Association of Management Consultants (Ooa) expertise principle provides adequate guidance when commercial incentives lead firms to overstate team capabilities. Drawing on a jokes-based interview method with a junior IT consultant, the study presents a case in which a recent graduate was assigned sole delivery responsibility for a project that the firm's most senior consultant had previously taken over a year to complete, while the client was promised a three-month timeline. The case is analysed through consequentialist and deontological lenses, with comparative reference to the UK Management Consultancies Association code of conduct. The analysis reveals that the Ooa expertise principle, while normatively sound, is structurally insufficient: it addresses individual conduct but cannot reach firm-level commercial decisions where misrepresentation originates. Three reforms are proposed: extending the principle to firms and partners, mandating staffing transparency, and establishing organisational voice mechanisms for junior consultants.

Introduction

The Dutch Association of Management Consultants (Ooa) Code of Conduct defines expertise as a core professional obligation: consultants must possess the knowledge and skills they claim, apply these competently, and operate within the boundaries of their actual capabilities (Ooa, 2022). In principle, this requirement seems straightforward. In practice, however, the commercial logic of consulting creates strong structural pressure to claim and sell more expertise than a given project team can actually deliver.

This tension is not merely observational. Sturdy (2009) identifies lack of accountability and self-interestedness among the six popular critiques levelled at management consultants. Redekop and Heath (2007) found through qualitative interviews that commercial incentives and hierarchical power dynamics routinely prevent consultants from acting on their professional values. Allen and Davis (1993), in a quantitative study, demonstrated that while individual ethical values correlate positively with adherence to professional codes, those codes do not reliably translate into ethical behaviour, as context and reward structures intervene.

This essay asks: does the Ooa expertise principle provide adequate guidance for preventing unethical conduct when commercial incentives lead consulting firms to overstate their team's capabilities to clients?

To explore this question, I conducted a jokes-based interview (Bouwmeester, 2023) with Elena, an IT consultant with approximately two years of experience, first in the public sector and currently as an internal software consultant at a semiconductor company. Elena shared a case from her public-sector consulting role, in which she, a recent graduate with no prior project experience, was assigned sole responsibility for a data project that a senior colleague had previously taken over a year to complete. The client had been told the project would be finished in three months.

The case is analysed using two ethical frameworks: consequentialism (Poulfelt, 1997; Krehmeyer & Freeman, 2012) and deontological ethics, with reference to the Ooa expertise principle specifically. The analysis reveals that the expertise principle, while normatively sound, offers insufficient practical guidance precisely because the violation occurs at the level of the firm's commercial decision-making, a structural problem that individual codes are poorly equipped to address.

The Case: A Junior Sold as a Senior Solution

Approximately two years ago, Elena was working at a small public-sector IT consultancy. The firm's founder, functioning in the role of a senior partner, secured a data analytics project with a regional inter-municipal body, a collaboration of several Dutch municipalities. The project involved building data dashboards and applying machine learning methods to a governmental dataset.

The founder presented the project to the client with a three-month delivery timeline. Internally, however, the most analogous prior project, completed by the firm's most experienced consultant, had taken over a year. Elena was assigned to lead delivery, alongside one other junior colleague and a manager whose role was largely limited to client-facing meetings. She describes the manager as being 'there as a

decoration', present in weekly calls but not contributing substantively to the technical work.

Elena's junior status was not concealed from the client in any explicit lie, but it was not disclosed either. As she put it: 'I don't think they really realised that I was just out of uni, and I had little support from actual senior consultants.' The client had been sold a timeline and an implied capability that the actual team could not meet. Within weeks, the team discovered that the client's data was in disorder; it required extensive cleaning and restructuring before any analytical work could proceed. The three-month promise became impossible. Elena raised concerns with her manager, but felt unable to escalate further as a junior: 'If you're the only one complaining, why should we take you seriously?' The project eventually extended well beyond the promised timeframe. The client expressed confusion when deadlines were missed, having never been informed of the true capability level of the team assigned to their project.

When asked whether the client had been misled, Elena was clear: 'Yeah, I think so. How can you expect a junior to actually finish up a project within three months with little support from actual senior consultants, while the most senior person in the team for exactly the same projects actually took over a year to wrap it up?' She also noted that the firm had a plausible cover: when a junior underdelivers, management can attribute it to inexperience rather than to a structurally dishonest promise, effectively using her as a buffer for reputational risk.

Reflecting on the situation, Elena suggested that the root structural problem was financial: juniors are cheaper to deploy than seniors, and the founder, motivated by maximising margin on a large contract, staffed the project accordingly. The ethical dimension of matching staff capabilities to client expectations was subordinated to profit.

Ethical Analysis

A Consequentialist Reading: The Dilemma of Profit Over Outcome

Poufelt (1997) argues that consequentialist ethics, evaluating the morality of an action by its outcomes, is particularly well-suited to the realities of consulting, because consulting relationships are inherently about results. He identifies the dilemma of 'maximum income versus best solution' as one of the central ethical tensions in the profession: the firm's financial interest and the client's actual interest frequently diverge.

This dilemma is precisely what drove the conduct in Elena's case. The founder maximised margin by deploying cheap junior labour on a project that required senior expertise. The client received worse outcomes than they were entitled to expect: delayed delivery, a period of confusion and frustration, and a solution built under conditions of inadequate resourcing. From a consequentialist standpoint, the action fails: it produced worse aggregate outcomes for the client, and for Elena herself, who experienced the stress of impossible expectations, while benefiting only the firm's balance sheet.

Krehmeyer and Freeman (2012) extend consequentialist analysis by introducing a stakeholder lens: whose interests are created or destroyed? In this case, the primary

beneficiary was the firm (higher margin); the primary losers were the client (poor expectation management, delayed project), Elena (unrealistic workload, professional stress), and arguably public-sector citizens who depended on the project's output. A stakeholder-aware consequentialist would find this conduct indefensible.

Critically, Redekop and Heath (2007) identify greed and commercial incentives as a structural reason why consultants fail to act on their professional values: not as a personal failing, but a systemic pressure. The founder's decision was not aberrant; it followed the internal logic of a commercial consulting firm optimising for revenue per project. This is precisely why, as Allen and Davis (1993) found, professional codes do not reliably translate into behaviour: the reward structure actively pulls in the opposite direction.

A Deontological Reading: The Expertise Principle and Its Limits

From a deontological perspective, the Ooa expertise principle imposes a duty-based obligation: a consultant must not represent themselves as possessing competencies they lack, and must decline or transparently qualify engagements that exceed their actual capability. Kant's categorical imperative would ask: what if every consulting firm substituted junior staff for senior expertise whenever financially convenient?

The answer is clear: the entire consulting profession would lose its credibility, since expertise claims would become systematically unreliable. The principle cannot be universalised without destroying the practice it governs.

Bouwmeester and Stiekema (2015) highlight the expertise paradox: consultants are hired for their expertise, yet the perception of whether that expertise was actually delivered varies strongly across stakeholder groups. In Elena's case, the firm's employees, particularly Elena herself, were aware of the mismatch. The client, however, was shielded from this awareness. This asymmetry of information is itself a deontological violation: the client was not treated as a rational agent entitled to make informed decisions about who would manage their project.

However, the deontological analysis also exposes the limitations of the expertise principle as formulated. The Ooa code addresses individual consultant conduct: it requires that each consultant operates within their competence. But in this case, Elena was not misrepresenting her own expertise. She did not falsely claim to be a senior; she simply did the work she was assigned. The violation occurred at the level of the firm's commercial decision and the founder's sales conduct. The Ooa principle, as an individual professional code, cannot easily reach the structural, organisational level where this decision was made.

This confirms Allen and Davis's (1993) finding: even when individual consultants hold strong ethical values, as Elena clearly did, given that she privately questioned the arrangement and eventually raised concerns, professional codes fail to shape behaviour when the locus of the problem is in the power and reward structures above them.

A Comparative Note: The English Code of Conduct and Collegial Ethics

A notable limitation of the Ooa code, when compared to its English equivalent, is its silence on how consultants should treat one another within the professional relationship. The Management Consultancies Association (MCA) Code of Conduct in the United Kingdom includes explicit obligations regarding collegial conduct, how

consultants interact with peers, juniors, and colleagues, not only with clients. This encompasses expectations of fair treatment, mentorship responsibilities toward less experienced colleagues, and a duty not to expose junior staff to conditions that exceed their capabilities without adequate support.

Elena's case illustrates precisely why this dimension matters. The ethical failure was not directed only at the client; it was also a failure toward Elena herself. She was placed in an impossible professional position by a superior who bore no accountability for doing so. The Ooa code, framed around the consultant-client relationship, provides no direct language for this internal dimension of professional ethics. If the Ooa were to adopt collegial conduct provisions analogous to those in the MCA code, it would create a supplementary accountability mechanism: one that might have given Elena formal grounds for raising her concerns internally, and would have placed explicit responsibility on the firm for the conditions in which its junior staff are deployed.

This comparative observation strengthens the essay's broader argument: the expertise principle, even if extended to firms and partners, requires complementary provisions that address the internal professional environment, not only the consultant's relationship with the external client.

Conclusion: What Would Help?

The expertise principle is normatively correct: consulting firms should not sell capabilities they cannot deliver. But the analysis of Elena's case suggests that the principle as currently formulated is insufficient to prevent the conduct it targets.

Three structural changes would meaningfully strengthen it. First, the expertise principle should be explicitly extended to apply to firms and partners, not only individual consultants. It is the founding partner, not Elena, who made the representation to the client; it is at that level that the code must apply. Poulfelt (1997) similarly recommends that ethical guidance in consulting focus on the dilemmas that arise from commercial decision-making, not only from execution-level conduct.

Second, transparency about staffing and capability should be treated as a core component of expertise. Clients should be informed of the experience level of the personnel assigned to their projects, particularly when those personnel are recent graduates being asked to lead independently. This is consistent with care ethics (Engster, 2011; Krehmeyer & Freeman, 2012): attending to the needs of all stakeholders requires that the client have the information necessary to evaluate whether their needs are being met.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, junior consultants need organisational voice and protection. Elena reflected that if a more senior colleague had backed her concerns, management might have acted differently. As Redekop and Heath (2007) note, the duty to the client is routinely subordinated to commercial hierarchy within consulting firms. Creating formal channels, perhaps internal ethics referees, or structured project review checkpoints, would make it possible for Elena's concerns to surface before the client experienced the consequences. The inclusion of collegial conduct provisions, comparable to those in the MCA code, would provide an additional structural mechanism for this purpose.

In sum, the expertise principle points in the right direction, but it needs to be applied with greater structural ambition. The problem in Elena's case was not that anyone lied outright; it was that a commercially motivated staffing decision created a systematic mismatch between what was sold and what was delivered. Closing that gap requires holding the whole firm, not just its most junior members, accountable to the expertise it claims.

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