THE COMPETENCIES OF EXPERTS: THE CHALLENGES IN CONSULTING BUSINESS

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Abstract. Presented paper aims to reveal the problems related with the development of employees consulting skills. Authors introduce and discuss various theories related with expertise, social and cognitive competence. The impact of these competencies on the professional success of employees as the consultants are being analysed. The paper provide the results of the survey, which allows us to disclose how consumers react toward the consulting activity, how they perceive consultants’ competencies in the consulting process. Obtained results allow authors’ to conclude that the value of the consulting is not perceived adequately by all consumers and the lack of the holistic mindset towards the consultant competencies exists. The theoretical value of the research lays in development and testing of tree-dimensional approach toward consulting competencies. From the practical standpoint the paper allows us to indicate the competencies, which require further development.

Keywords: consultant, expertise competence, social competence, cognitive competence.

1. Introduction

The role of evaluation and development of competencies withing consultation activities is increasingly important. On one hand the consulting activities make great influence towards the performance of organisations and personalities. On the other hand, consultants perform some of the most critical roles in society (Tvaronavičienė, Korsakienė 2007). It is worth noticing that almost every day organisations rely on the experts’ knowledge and wise counselling (Melnikas, Smaliukienė 2007; Korsakiénė et al. 2008; Tvaronavičienė et al. 2008; Korsakiénė 2009). Hence, the quality of consulting is directly impacted by the consultants’ expertise and competence (Ginevičius et al. 2008; Stankevičienė et al. 2009).

It has to be pointed out that a broad range of approaches to the study of the structure and acquisition of expertise as well as expert performance have been developed. On the other hand, the nature of expertise has been studied in two general fields (Chi 2006). One field takes into account truly exceptional people with the goal of understanding how they perform. The researchers representing the second field seek to study experts in comparison to the novices. These two different ways have been identified as “absolute approach” and “relative approach”. Not going into theoretical debates about “absolute approach”, in the presented paper we assume that “the expertise is a level of proficiency that novices can achieve” (Chi 2006).

The paper aims to contribute to the recent elaborations by focusing on the problems related with the development of employees consulting skills. The paper is organized into six sections. The second section summarizes various views toward the notion of expertise in scientific literature. The third section is based on the theory of expert competence and discusses various attitudes towards social and cognitive competence of employees working in consulting business. The next presents research methodology. The fifth section provides analysis of the research based on the questioning of the consultants and consultees in order to disclose how consumers react toward the consulting activity, how they perceive consultants’ competencies in the consulting process. The final section provides conclusions based on the research.

The present research discusses some solutions on how to develop the competence of employees in consulting business. Thereby, our study provides suggestion for consultants and consultees while baseline in perceiving consulting service is different and communication regarding the common purpose is complicated.

2. The expertise of employees’ in consulting business

The scientific studies, analysing consulting business have attempted to define the concept of “expert”. However, some scholars point out that “there are almost as many definitions of expert as there are researchers who study them” (Shanteau 1992).

According to Bedard, the expertise is seen as a possession of a large body of knowledge and
procedurall skill that impacts the perceptual processes and strategies of problem solving (Bedard 1989; Bedard, Chi 1992). On the contrary, Davis and Solomon have proposed a performance-based notion of expertise (Davis, Solomon 1989). However, such a concept was criticized as an incomplete and inadequate (Bedard, Chi 1993). Bonner and Lewis have proposed to define expertise as task-specific superior performance (Bonner, Lewis, 1990). Later on Bedard and Chi have supported the definition proposed by French and Sternberg, which highlights expertise as an “ability, acquired by practice, to perform qualitatively well in a particular task domain” (Bedard, Chi 1993).

Notably, in order to highlight the differences, Shanteau has compared the concept “expert” with the concept “novice”, i.e. “a person admitted to a probationary membership in a religious community” (Shanteau 1995). The author has emphasized that expert must have and must be able use relevant expertise. On the other hand, expertise defines a continuum, ranging from top expert to a naïve expert. Such a definition has supported the notion about different levels of knowledge.

It is important to note that Dreyfus and Dreyfus have proposed five levels of proficiency: novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient and expert (Dreyfus, Dreyfus 1980). Scholars have suggested the movement though the levels of skill acquisition in such a way: 1) movement from a reliance on abstract principles and rules to use of past, concrete experience; 2) shift from reliance on analytical, rule-based thinking to intuition; 3) change in the learner’s perception of the situation from viewing it as a compilation of equally relevant bit to viewing it as an increasingly complex whole in which certain parts stand out as more or less relevant and 4) passage from a detached observer, standing outside the situation, to one of a position of involvement, fully engaged in the situation (Tomey, Alligood 2006). In addition, Eraut has proposed expert’s characteristics, which comprise reliance on the intuitive grasp of situation, based on deep and tacit understanding, analytical approaches, used in novel situations, and vision of what is possible (Cheetham, Chivers 2005). Later on, different categories of expertise have been proposed by scholars, working in medicine and auditing. For instance, Patel and Groen have proposed four levels of expertise in medicine: novice, intermediate, sub-expert, and expert (Patel, Groen 1991). In auditing the categories, comprising: naïve as to the task, educated as to the task, experienced as to the task and expert as to the task, have been suggested (Bedard, Chi 1992).

The generalization of scientific research has led to a conclusion that an adequate grasp of domain knowledge is seen as a prerequisite for being an expert. According to Shanteau, this reflects not only textbook knowledge, but also insights gained from experience working on real issues (Shanteau 1993). Therefore, the concept of expert aims to emphasize a person who has been recognized by others within particular profession as having the highest level of competence (Shanteau 1995).

3. Competencies of experts in consulting business

The Theory of Expert Competence, proposed by Shanteau, emphasise five factors, impacting skills and abilities of experts, i.e. domain knowledge, psychological traits, cognitive skills, decision strategies and task characteristics (Shanteau 1992). In order to reveal the impact of these factors on the professional success of employees as the consultants let us analyse each factor in more detail.

As it was pointed above, adequate accumulation of domain knowledge is a prerequisite for being the expert. Notably, domain knowledge is seen as the task specific knowledge which is extracted from a human problem solver who knows how to solve specific problems in that domain (McFarland, Parker 1990). For instance, scholars state that “expert chess player is an expert in the realm of chess but is not necessarily an expert when it comes to home repair, income tax preparation gardening, or nuclear physics” (Galotti 2002). Therefore the deliberate practice in particular domain creates preconditions to become a consultant in particular field. On the other hand, discussions in the scientific literature, concentrating on the expertise competence, let us assume that domain knowledge creates preconditions to become an expert. Notably, domain knowledge is seen as the main knowledge creates preconditions to develop expertise competence. Not going into further discussions let us advocate the notion that expertise competence embrace special professional knowledge and skills, good understanding of processes and technologies, market and competitors or production and service areas (Savanevičienė et al. 2008; Kumpikaite, Ciamienė 2008; Kumpikaite 2008).

Notably, the experts demonstrate a set of psychological traits. For instance, self presentation in particular field, i.e. creation and maintenance of public image is seen as a common behaviour of the expert. The scholars point out that people who exhibit socially competent skills are preferred in interactions (Knapp, Daly 2002). Hence, social skills embrace communication skills and ability to work with people. Therefore, it is important to point out that social skills are necessary for the persons, working in consulting business.
Particular cognitive skills are the main aspect distinguishing the expert from the novice. Hence, cognitive skills depend on prior learning and preference. Scholars, analyzing cognition, distinguish such process as distinguishing, combining, tabulating, classifying, and analysing (Middleman, Wood 1991). Additionally, the scientific literature, analyzing cognition, puts emphasis on concepts, discrimination among concepts, rules to deal with concepts and processes needed to find and solve problems, such as remembering and setting priorities. Shanteau states that the expert has to display particular cognitive skills, i.e. attention abilities, a sense of what is relevant, the ability to identify exceptions to rules, and the capability to work effectively under stress (Shanteau 1992). Middleman and Wood, focusing on the work of social employees, have analysed such cognitive skills as follows: 1) recognizing feelings, 2) looking for patterns of behaviour, 3) drawing inferences, 4) hypothesizing 5) connecting the new to the known, and 6) reflecting on the work (Middleman, Wood 1991). Morran et al., analyzing counselor training and focusing on counselor self-talk, emphasize cognitive skills in relation to 1) attending to and seeking information about self, client and the therapeutic relationship; 2) organizing and integrating information into viable hypotheses and client conceptualizations; and 3) planning, guiding, and evaluating therapeutic interventions (Morran et al. 1999). Hence, the scientific works allow supporting the approach that employees, working in consulting business, have to develop empathy, attentiveness, orientation to others and interaction management.

According to Shanteau, experts use various formal and informal decision strategies that help systematize decision making and overcome cognition limitations (Shanteau 1992). For instance, the dynamic feedback, decomposing complex decision problems and prethinking solutions to tough situations are seen as the most common decision strategies. On the other hand, scholar puts emphasis on the task characteristics that determine weather it is possible for experts to behave competently or not. Not going into further debates; let us assume the ideas of Shanteau and the remaining of paper devote to research of skills in consulting business.

4. Research methodology

Presented above competence theory let us develop the research instrument. Hence, the existing approach toward consultancy competence, comprising expertise, social and cognitive competence, has served for the developing of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed following the recommendations on questionnaire dressing and demonstrates adequate psychometric properties such as stable factor structure (Buchanan, Bryman 2009). First part of the questionnaire is designed in order to identify the respondents’ demand and frequency for consultations in everyday life. All questions are easy understandable for respondents, without any specific terms. The second part provides the respondents opportunity to express their opinion about expertise, social and cognitive competence of the consultants. The respondents provide their attitude toward two comparable dimensions in consumption of consulting service – the expectations on and real expression of consultants’ competence in their service.

Especial attention was paid to the survey administration procedure. Selection procedure of the respondents was based on the population data; the anonymity, confidentiality and professional security was guaranteed to enable the respondents to provide data personally or via e-mail.

All questions in the questionnaire are easy understandable and deals with the same topic, so there was easy for the respondents to keep attention. The second part of the questionnaire employs Likert scale and measures relevance and expression of consulting competence decomposed according to theoretical dimensions. To determine construct validity pretesting was used. Construct validity has to do with the degree of correspondence between a given construct and the measures (Buchanan, Bryman 2009), so the pretest let us evaluate how well questionnaire measures the concept of competence in consulting. After pretesting, few questions were corrected and explained in more specific manner.

Two populations were indicated for the survey: school consultants and school principals (consumers of the consulting service). Simple random sampling was used for both populations. Respondent specific information such as age, gender, education as well as specific information as consumption of consulting service in the practice was included in the questionnaire. Based on populations' size, it was calculated that not less than 328 respondents need be involved in the survey. Data were collected during September 2009 questionnaires distributed to 300 school principals and 100 school consultants. In the resulting statistical analysis 298 questionnaires were usable, a 68.3 % of population. In order to increase participation, a direct distribution and collection method was employed. The analytical technique used descriptive statistics and Chi-square statistics.
5. Data analysis

Participation in the study was voluntary. A breakdown by demographical data showed that 27.6% were male (14% of consultants and 86% of consumers). It is notable that the demographic characteristics of the sample were quite similar. Majority of respondents (52.2%) have more than 16 years of experience and is 50-59 years old (41%). Vast majority of respondents (94%) indicated their experience in being consulted. Consultees indicated that they were the initiators of consulting practice, while consultants were initiators only in one-fifth of cases (16.67%). Different opinion was found in the answers of consultants, consequently standard deviation (SD) was quite big 1.528.

Data analysis provide result about the field that consultancy is most needed. In the school management the most important field for the consultation is teaching and learning (M = 1.197; SD = 0.430), while management of school culture experience least need for consultation (M = 2.048; SD = 0.537). The bigger need for consultation experience principles of primary schools (for example - the need for consultation in teaching and learning was 83.7%, $\chi^2 = 28.4; df = 10; p < 0.01$; support in learning – 41.6% ($\chi^2 = 32.299; df = 10; p < 0.001$). Women indicated bigger demand for consulting as men. The difference in demand varies form 12.7% ($\chi^2 = 6.820; df = 2; p < 0.05$) to 18.7% ($\chi^2 = 11.191; df = 2; p < 0.01$).

Consulting competence depends on expertise, social and cognitive competence. These competences create preconditions to become an expert in the consulting business. Table 1 show the importance of particular competence, while Table 2 illustrates the expression of the competence in consulting practice.

The assessment of competence’ importance varies according to respondents group. Attention is drawn to a number of specialist competences (competence to respond to change, to use data resulting from studies, to support consultee initiatives and the ability to create teams), which evaluation stood out distinctly between respondents groups. For example, 47.8% consultees stress the importance to respond to change, while only 26.3% of experts agree to this statement ($\chi^2 = 32.085; df = 3; p < 0.001$). Similarly, 55.5% of consultees and 33.3% of consultants emphasize the competence to maintain the implementation of consultee initiatives ($\chi^2 = 18.685; df = 3; p < 0.001$). Meanwhile, 57.3% of consultants and 27.2% of consultees are focusing on the competence to use data from previous studies ($\chi^2 = 31.6265; df = 3; p < 0.001$); 41.7% of consultees and 28.5% of consultees highlight the competence to create teams ($\chi^2 = 15.704; df = 4, p < 0.01$). Diverse perception was also identified regarding the competence to understand the school needs, to listen carefully, to overcome the resistance and conflict management. Demographic characteristic, as gender plays important role in the perception of consultants’ competence: women play bigger importance that men to such competence, as listen carefully (55.2%, $\chi^2 = 9.287$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.05$), improve the reflection and analysis competence (30.8%, $\chi^2 = 8.977$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.05$), the ability to adequately understand the school details (58%, $\chi^2 = 8.09$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.05$), responsiveness to change (45.9%, $\chi^2 = 9.459$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.05$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competence</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Create trust</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>0.493</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen carefully</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>0.614</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicate constructively</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>0.491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choose appropriate communication methods</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>0.620</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help to improve the reflection and analysis competence</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>0.728</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide best practice</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>0.725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate understanding of performance data</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>0.609</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the needs of consultee</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>0.517</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand the consultee culture</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>0.661</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respond to change</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>0.679</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcome resistance and conflict management</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>0.718</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use data from previous studies ***</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>0.737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain the implementation of consultee initiatives ***</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>0.594</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create teams ***</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>0.834</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpret audit data</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>0.737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See the exception to the rules</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>0.734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document successful consulting practice</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>0.946</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change leader</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>0.790</td>
</tr>
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</table>

$p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001$

Table 2 presents the results obtained from the evaluation of consultants practice. Both groups of respondents - consultants and consultees evaluated the spread of consultants’ competences in practice.
Table 2. Evaluation of consultants’ competences in practice (percent, M: 1 – sufficient, 2 – not sufficient)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competence</th>
<th>Consultants</th>
<th>Consultees</th>
<th>\chi^2</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sufficient</td>
<td>Not sufficient</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expertise competence</td>
<td>32.18</td>
<td>67.82</td>
<td>64.05</td>
<td>35.95</td>
<td>26.325***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social competence</td>
<td>89.41</td>
<td>10.59</td>
<td>83.33</td>
<td>16.67</td>
<td>1.820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive competence</td>
<td>48.24</td>
<td>51.76</td>
<td>79.76</td>
<td>20.24</td>
<td>30.958***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p < 0.001

Obtained results and their analysis allow us to state that the application of consultant’ competence in practice is evaluated differently by consultants and consultees. Standard deviation in almost all evaluations was near to 0.5 which shows big divergence in perception.

According to the results of survey, the most important competencies in consultant practice are social competencies, while expertise competences are least important. It is noted that the expertise competence are unappreciated both by consultant and consultees.

At the same time it should be emphasised that the respondents’ attitude towards particular competencies in expertise activities are stressed differently. The majority of expertise competence are evaluated by consultees as sufficient (e.g., competence to select appropriate communication patterns, help to improve the reflection and analysis skills, adequate understanding of performance data, understand the consultee culture, \( r = -0.305 \)), use data from previous studies \( r = -0.358 \); document successful consulting practice \( r = -0.333 \), be a leader in change \( r = -0.292 \)). Consultants evaluated their expertise competencies as not sufficient.

The analysis of results by demographical data shows that the majority of male respondents tend to believe that the expertise competencies are expressed sufficiently. Meanwhile, women are more likely to respond respondent negative evaluation (estimated difference – 12.3 to 18.5 %, df = 1, \( p < 0.05 \)). Women are stressing the lack of such competencies as competence to establish mutual trust, choose appropriate communication methods, help to improve the reflection and analysis competence, adequate understanding of performance data.

Similar dichotomy was observed by analysing data according to respondents’ age. The competencies were evaluated differently by two age groups: 30–39 and over 60. The first group is more likely to stress the need to improve the competencies in expertise (43–74 % of respondents, df = 4, \( P < 0.05 \)). This group highlights the importance of competence in understand performance data adequately and competence in responding to change. In contrast, the second founds these competencies sufficient (72–91 % of respondents, df = 4, \( P < 0.05 \)).

6. Conclusions

Analysis of literature allows us concluding that various scholars provide different definitions of expert. Notably, we would like advocate the notion, stating that the expert in the consulting business is the person recognized by others within particular profession as having the highest level of competence.

Notably, domain knowledge creates preconditions to become expert in particular field. However, accumulated knowledge and specific competencies allow distinguishing novice and expert. Therefore in order to become an expert, the consultant has to accumulate knowledge in particular domain and develop such competencies as expertise, social and cognitive competence.

Presented above survey let us formulate the following considerations about consulting and competencies of consultants in Lithuania’s public sector. The consulting is seen as the common activity in every day life of majority of respondents. Majority of respondents have indicated that they have been consulted or they have consulted customers. However, the added value of consulting process is not seen adequately by all respondents. Therefore, the respondents did not mention or indicate the most valuable competences of consultants.

The obtained results allow concluding that perception of the main consultant’s activities significantly differs. To generalize, the lack of the holistic approach towards the consultant’s competencies and consulting process exists.

References


