

What do management consultants do?

Management consultants help managers and boards improve organisational performance in return for a fee. They identify specific business problems, perform analysis to identify solutions and can manage the proposed change if required. A management consultant's job is to provide specialist expertise, and to create value for the client.

Value may be created through:

- improving efficiency;
- providing a focus for the organisation's efforts;
- maximising growth;
- identifying opportunities;
- removing constraints;
- addressing threats or risks;
- organisational development;
- process improvement;
- implementing or shutting down systems;
- other approaches.

Tasks carried out will depend on the specific engagement but may include:

- reviewing employee and customer feedback;
- examining previous audit and consulting reports;
- collecting and analysing data;
- interviewing client's employees and stakeholders;
- running workshops to examine issues in detail;
- validating opinions and comments against data;
- assessing performance against benchmarks;
- identifying non value adding process steps

An old joke about management consultants is that a consultant is someone who borrows your watch to tell you the time. It is a good joke and may well apply in a few cases. The reality is that a good consultant borrows your calendar, shows you how to fill the coming days wisely, helps you do it, then walks away while you enjoy the benefits. The reason they can do that is a combination of objectivity, experience and methodology.

Objectivity is a key tenet of true management consulting and depends on independence from the client organisation, absence of ties to service providers and vendors, and no secret commissions. Many so-called consulting organisations are in effect sales and service representatives of other companies or sales agents for their own products. A true management consultant will not have such ties and will declare any potential conflict of interest before a client engagement is agreed. A client needs evidence of such objectivity to trust that a consultant is able to exercise independent judgement and provide advice that fits the situation and the client, not a pre-determined solution.

Experience is the reason that school careers advisors don't have brochures on becoming a management consultant. Management consulting requires real management experience with sufficient depth and seniority having been achieved in at least one specialist business area before entering consulting as a career. Experience could be in engineering, law,

accounting, operations management, finance, information technology, resource management or some other area. A minimum of three years consulting experience is required before a person is eligible to become a Certified Management Consultant (CMC). Experience is verified through provision of written case studies, thorough reference checks and being interviewed by a panel of existing CMCs.

Methodology is the process by which management consultants provide structured, verifiable analysis or sound implementations. Typical examples include: business process improvement methodologies such as LEAN, Six Sigma and TQM; project management methodologies such as PMBOK (PMI) and PRINCE2; investment analysis methodologies such as net present value and internal rate of return; software development methodologies such as Agile (e.g. Lean, XP, Scrum), USDP and RUP. There are approaches such as the Baldrige criteria which is a means of assessing and driving value and there are many proprietary consulting methodologies in use by specific firms.

A methodology will usually be based on a foundation of a proven set of principles and theories, be backed up by research, and be more likely to achieve consistent results than an ad hoc approach. Some types of methodologies can require scaling to match the client's size, budget or acceptance of formality. Such adaptation requires experience and a sound understanding of the theory underlying the methodology. A management consultant will often hold a Master's or higher level degree to ensure that level of understanding ... but an MBA alone does not make a good consultant.

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