Consulting in Legoland – The Jazz of Small-Scale Management Consultation in the Improvisation on Standards

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ABSTRACT

Large global management consultancies of US or Semi-US origin are often seen as important carriers of uniformity in management knowledge across the globe. This is an important characteristic of the recent development of the industry on a macro level, but one may question whether it is representative to let these firms be "spokespersons" for the field as a whole. This paper argues that the standards these actors travel in may constitute a standardised Legoland for consulting in the world, but that this Legoland is far from the reality of small and medium-sized locally based consulting firms. It is argued that they live in a world of standards for management and consultation, where the most important strategy for survival is to improvise.

Growth in the Market for Management Consulting Services

The 1990s saw a dramatic expansion of the market for organisation, management and administration services around the world. In Sweden, for example, the total turnover for management consulting almost tripled between 1987 and 1998 (Furusten & Bäcklund, 2000). This means that organisations today, to a larger extent than some 10 years ago, buy management consulting services from external service providers.

When this development of the management consulting industry is discussed in the literature and in the media, the firms referred to are usually the large, global firms of US or Semi-US origin, such as McKinsey & Co, Accenture (formerly Andersen Consulting) or PriceCoopersLybrand. This view reflects the current situation, at least from a macro perspective. In Sweden, for example, management consultancies of US or British-US origin in 1998 accounted for about 60% of the total revenues of the market. Ten years earlier, foreign consultancies operating in Sweden only had a market share of about 16% (*ibid.*). Similar patterns are also found in several European countries (Kipping *et al*, 1999; Kipping & Armbrüster, 1999). In other words, consultancies of US or Semi-US origin are undoubtedly important actors in many of today's national consulting markets.

However, in terms of who these external service providers are, there is more to the story. Keeble & Schwaalbach (1995) claim, for example, that the average number of employees in European management consulting firms is seven. Difference have also been observed between the kind of consulting that US, Semi-US and Swedish firms offer (Furusten & Bäcklund, 2000), and between the services offered by the Big Five firms and traditional strategy consultants (Hansen *et al.* (1999).[1] Furthermore, Werr (1999) argues that differences exist between consultants working methods especially in comparisons of large and small consultancies. Differences between management consultants are also highlighted in the normative management consulting literature. For example, it is common to distinguish between ideal types of management consultants: the specialised expert who sells prefabricated methods as opposed to the process consultants who first diagnoses the problem and then suggests solutions (e.g., Greiner & Metzger, 1983; Schein, 1988; Gummesson, 1992; Kubr, 1996). These studies suggest that management consulting is a service that comes in many shapes and can be carried out in several ways. Generalising about management consultants, therefore, is problematic. This becomes even more obvious when examining the literature on the functions of management consultants towards their clients. Even here

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[1] The Big Five consultancies consist of the consulting fractions of the large accountancies such as KPMG, Ernst & Young, PriceCoopersLybrand, Accenture, and Deloitte & Touche). Traditional strategy consultants refers to McKinsey, Boston Consulting Group, and Arthur D Little.

different pictures emerge. Greiner & Metzger (1983), for instance, promote the view of consultants as change agents while Rhenman (1974) and Schein (1988) see them as organisational therapists. Normann (1975), on the other hand, prefers the picture of organisational physicians who clinically make diagnoses and then suggest the cure. They have also been seen as word sellers rather than change agents, playing largely a symbolic role in the client organizations (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1988). In more critical analyses, they are seen as organisational witch doctors (Clark & Salaman, 1996) or actors who deliver false beliefs of how organisations really work (Keiser, 1998). Consequently, the literature on management consulting does not give one homogenous picture of what management consulting is all about. This also means that the large global actors that are often referred to in articles or discussions regarding management consultants can hardly be seen as representing all dimensions of services labelled management consulting.

The question this study attempts to answer is: what role do the large market players standards for management and management consultation play in the construction of services that other consultants deliver. To understand this we cannot talk of management consulting in general; we need to be more specific and distinguish between different kinds of consultation. In other words, it is necessary to leave the macro level and analyse the construction of services in different forms of consultation. By focusing on small (1-15 consultants) and medium-sized (15-40 consultants) management consultancies that primarily operate on one national arena, in this case Sweden, this study can be seen as an attempt at such an analysis. The reason for focusing on the form of consultation these consultancies provide is the lack of empirical studies on management consultants in general and on these groups in particular. Little attention has also been given to how consultants construct the service they deliver. Based on this data, conclusions will be drawn about tendencies towards convergence or divergence of management consulting in the Western world.

Towards an Organisational Legoland?

It has been argued in the literature that market dominance is a force towards homogenisation of activities on a field, since other actors are supposed to follow the standards set by dominant actors (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Thus, when actors dominate a domain, they are often referred to as leaders while other actors have become followers (e.g. Thompson, 1967) or struggle to find segments of the market where they can provide niche services (e.g., Kotler, 1988). This would suggest, therefore, that global actors with US or Semi-US origin then, due to their size and global operations should have taken the lead in the field of management consulting (Engwall, 1999), and that all other consulting firms should have passively adapted to the standards set by them. The field of management consulting would then move towards convergence more or less globally. This would

mean that clients all around the world would meet consultants who act in a similar way and deliver the same standardised services and the same content. In that case, there must be a basic common understanding in society of the tasks that can be provided under these conditions, what they should consist of, how they should be provided and how they should be received. This requires both the receiving/buying organisation and the providing organisation to be standardised in several ways in order to identify where the interfaces between different forms of competence lie and when they should be available in house or bought from the market. To some extent, this view is supported by studies that argue that common understandings of what an organisation is supposed to be and how it is supposed to work have emerged world-wide (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Guillen, 1994; Meyer, 1994). This suggests that more collective efforts are viewed as organisations and that organisations tend to be more similar both across national borders and sectors (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 1998). If this true, it would imply that it has also become easier for external experts such as management consultants to provide standardised services to different organisations.

This would suggest that the interface between what client organisations demand from external service providers and what these actors are willing to sell has become more standardised. The receiving organisation would be better prepared to host external experts and both the client and the provider would be more confident about what such services should contain and how they should be formed. If this argumentation holds, it means that we are approaching an organisational Legoland where actors who in one way or another travel in management knowledge have reached consensus on standards for management, organisation, and consultation. The interface between different buyers and providers of consulting services would then be clearly defined by these standards and organisations, should therefore, like lego pieces, fit together perfectly. Management consulting as a service is supposed to fit with many and different client organisations or in some cases in combination with services provided by other consulting firms. Thus, the service is supposed to be the piece that hooks the consultant onto the client organisation rather effortlessly. This picture of management consulting can, however, be questioned.

In the world of organisations, the interface between two organisations is much more diffuse than in Legoland. This means that the standards for the interface, i.e. what the client organisation, the service, and the consulting firm should look like, are rather weak. Although it is likely that the globalisation of management consulting, management education, business and management media contribute to a more standardised world (Meyer, 1994), it is not likely that the result will be such a specified system as in Legoland. In the Consulting Legoland it is maybe more reasonable perhaps to believe that several competing standards will exist simultaneously. Following Røvik (2000), standards may be of great importance. However, instead of following one standard organisations – consultancies as well as their clients – might in fact use several of them at the same time and sometimes

translate, edit or melt them together into forms that are rather organisation specific (e.g. Sahlin-Andersson, 1996). This suggests that despite the many standards that could make providers of management consulting services and buyers fit together rather smoothly, like when Lego pieces are snapped together, a grey zone often exists where a great deal of versatility from both sides take place.

If we follow Meyer & Rowan (1977), Czarniawska-Joerges (1988), Brunsson (1989) and Fernler (1996), it could be argued that the providers of consulting services de-couple between what they say and what they do. Moreover, if we agree with Sahlin-Andersson (1996), such processes are likely to be described as processes of editing models to give them meaning locally. In a similar way, Czarniawska & Joerges (1996) and Røvik (2000) argue that models are likely to be translated during their journey between actors, place and time (cf. Latour, 1987). Thus, de-coupling and translation could be processes that small-scale management consultants are expected to be involved in when they relate to standards for management consulting and management in their construction of the services they deliver. However, de-coupling and translation are results of the construction processes rather than fair descriptions of the process in which consultants construct their services. Therefore, we need a better understanding of what consultants do with professional consultation and management standards and whether or not the globalisation of management standards causes global homogeneity in activities undertaken by management consultants?

Below we will look at how a sample of consultants representing Swedish small and medium-sized consultancies reason, and the strategies they use in constructing their services, and how they are influenced by general standards in the field. First, however, the method applied in this study will be described in brief.

Method

This study is based on empirical data collected mainly from open and semi-structured interviews with consultants working in small and medium-sized consultancies operating in Sweden. The data derives from about forty interviews with different categories of consultants: several large US firms at one end, and large, medium sized, and small Swedish firms at the other. Some ten interviews were also conducted with buyers of management consulting services in order to obtain their perspective. These interviewees were all middle managers in different types of public organisations. This particular category of respondent was selected due to accessing problems with private firms and the consultants they hire. The selection of respondents was incremental and pragmatic which means that we began with a few deep interviews and moved on from there. The interviews were held between 1997 and 1999. They were all tape-recorded and transcribed; they have been read carefully and interpreted in order to search for patterns both in the individual interviews and between them.

The Construction of Management Consultation Off Stage

It has been argued that a service only exists at the moment of its deliverance and reception, i.e. the moment of truth (Normann, 1983). At that moment the consultant can be said to be on stage, giving the performance the client pays for. This moment can last for long or short periods of time depending on what type of service it consists of. For the consultant, it is important to be on stage for as long as possible, but since the nature of a consulting project is that it only lasts for a limited time, the consultant needs to have a constant in-flow of projects. This means that the moment of truth, i.e. the time on stage, does not represent the whole scenario of what management consultants do. Thus, what they do on stage is only one dimension of the construction of the service that management consultants deliver. The focus here is therefore on what happens off stage, i.e., in a less glamorous dimension of management consultancy work.

In this section, an attempt is made to identify a number of strategies used by small and medium-sized consultancies when they are off stage in order to establish projects that for limited periods of time put them on stage. Thus, it is an analysis of how they struggle and prepare themselves for the performance in the moment of truth. The aim is to analyse the processes that characterise this construction work, and the role played by standardised building blocks (cf. Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Svedberg-Nilsson, 1999) in the consultants' institutional environment for management and management consultation. The focus is on the service providers and the strategies they use, i.e. not what they espouse. Four strategies have emerged as being of particular importance: being versatile, being there, being competent, and being different.

...being versatile

In management consulting, as in any business situation, building and maintaining relationships with clients and potential clients is of great importance. One important requirement of business relationships is to be versatile, i.e., to keep up with new developments in particular industries, management standards and fashions, and to listen and adapt to the clients. The importance of versatility comes through in the quotation below from a senior consultant who now works in his own one-man-firm:

> It is not unusual to feel that you are not sure of what you are going to do in a project, and the same goes for the client. Sometimes they are not sure of what they want from me, if they are going to hire me or what the project is going to look like. Sometimes they just want someone to talk to but sometimes these discussions turn into projects.

This consultant made it very clear that the service he delivers is quite often defined in open discussions with the client. Therefore, he has to be open-minded and flexible, which means that the service he delivers may vary a great deal depending on the outcome of these discussions.

How open a project is depends very much on how it is initiated. As the quotation above shows, the actual starting point of a relationship can be unclear. The client wants a speaking partner or wants to be updated in modern management, or simply meets with the consultant because he or she is curious about what the consultant can do for them. In other situations, clients may contact the consultant because they have come across books or articles that the consultant has written. In these situations, the assignment is likely to be more clearly defined from the outset.

Although his projects may differ in many ways, he still points out that there are limits to what he can do. To reduce risking his reputation, he tries to avoid projects he feels he is not qualified for. However, to keep the relationship with the client, he might pass the client on to a colleague in another firm whom he knows is more capable of providing that kind of service. Sometimes, several consultancies co-operate systematically in passing on potential projects between each other. This procedure may be based on agreements within groups of firms where the firm that passes a project on to another firm receives a fee for its broker service. The idea, therefore, is to build a system where the risk is reduced, but also where everyone involved will benefit from this form of cooperation. The fee is just one aspect, but the main goal is that the firms involved, in the long run, will receive projects from each other. Thus, one strategy to get projects.

Being flexible in terms of how best to help the client, or whether to keep or pass on assignments are not strategies practised by all consultants. A senior and a junior consultant at one medium-sized consultancy said that recommending someone else for a project can be very risky. In their view, even though someone else is doing the work, they still carry past of the responsibility for the project, which might be a problem since it is virtually impossible for them to assure the quality of the service that is delivered. They work in a rather different mode compared with the senior quoted above. They represent a category of firms that offer standardised services based on particular models. Their model is customised to suit growing firms. It is developed by the founder of the firm and published in books and articles in both the business press and in academic journals. This means that their business relationships start with the model. They inform potential clients that they have a solution to the kind of problems they as a growing organisation are likely to face. It is of crucial importance that the potential client matches the definition of a growing firm as defined by the consultancy. If it does not, they say that they always turn down the potential assignment since they believe that the service they offer would not suit such clients. Still, being versatile and humble in the relationships with their clients is important to them. The way they do it differs, however, from the consultant quoted above. They are not flexible in the service they deliver, but they are, of course,

flexible in terms of starting and ending points. They also offer a set of services that can be combined or bought separately. In other words, although the content of the project is not negotiable, there might still be room for negotiating about the shape.

Being flexible about what types of projects one undertakes, or offering rather standardised models represent two extreme views consultancies get projects, but both strategies require versatility on the part of the consultants. This suggests that there are several dimensions of how consulting firms get projects. To some extent, it can be expected that the larger the firm, the less flexible and versatile it has to be, or it may satisfy the need for versatility by having in-house specialists that can provide different forms of services. It is also likely that larger firms have a reputation that sells projects more or less automatically. However, as we see in the quotation below, they cannot rely too heavily on their reputation; they also have to look actively for new business opportunities. A senior consultant at a large and well-established Swedish consultancy describes below how he and his colleagues do not just sit in their offices waiting for interesting projects to come along.

> I got the idea when I was working at the Central Student Support Agency (CSN). I realised that the model we tried to implement there had greater potential to be successful at Sweden Post. So, I went to the Royal Mail and declared that I could help them to develop a new area of business. I walked around their premises, walked up and down the stairs, popped in and out of offices and talked to one person after another. It took about two years to convince them to give me an assignment. I see no limit for how many times this idea can be sold. We have sold it to two other public agencies and are about to sell it to a third.

The service he refers to here is a technical administrative routine, which is rather different from the more general services offered by the consultants discussed above. Still, considerable versatility was needed in the situation described in the quotation although no negotiations of the content of the service took place. Nevertheless, the consultant fought hard to convince the client of the benefits for their organisation of this routine. Finding economies of scale and commodify services in this way is probably an opportunity that comes with the size of the consultancy. It is riskier for consultants who work alone, or run small firms to do this as they need to be more flexible since they cannot rely on always getting projects of a particular kind. It is therefore important for them to be involved in a number of parallel relationships with former or potential clients. Sometimes, they just have to take whatever comes along.

These three stories from the field mark a core dimension of consultancy work off stage: to search for new business opportunities all the time. In doing this, it is of great importance to establish and manage relationships with existing and potential clients. The mode of strategy that small and medium-sized firms in particular tend to use to do this is to be versatile. However, we have seen that large firms (here represented by a large Swedish-owned firm) also has to show some versatility in order to sell their specialities. This means that no one, i.e., neither small nor large actors, strictly follows the book of standards for management and management consulting. To what

extent they do depends on the situation and how much versatility is required to secure a project. In this regard, small firms, having less power to pick and choose, tend to be most likely to combine rather contrasting forms of consultation and to mix different standards. Large firms, on the other hand, are more likely perhaps to offer commodified and strictly standardised services since they have the capacity in their hierarchies to house different forms of commodities run by different specialists. This suggests that large firms would be less inclined than small firms to be versatile. However, although consultants such as the self-employed senior quoted above, claim that they do not use general standards and always see things from the clients point of view, they are still human beings that starts the thinking process in terms of models and solutions they are familiar with and fond of. Thus, the major difference between small or large-scale consultancies in this regard might be that in large firms the model is explicit, while in small firms it is hidden in the minds of individual consultants.

…being there

Being versatile is important but not the only strategy consultants practise when they are off stage. It takes more than versatility to enter stages. If clients look for methods about, say, service quality, they probably turn to consultancies that are regarded as having expertise in this area. On the other hand, if they have a good relationship with a consultant they like and consider competent, they might initiate a discussion about service quality in this already established relationship. In some cases these discussions might reveal that someone else is a better choice for the project. Still, it is not unusual for one project to lead to other projects in the same company, if contact is maintained. A quality manager in a division of the state-owned Swedish telecom company, Telia, described why he hired the self-employed senior consultant mentioned above, the first time, and then once again.

> The division employed a new CEO from Ericsson. Some time later the CEO hired me as his quality manager (QM). We used to be colleagues at Ericsson. I am an engineer but have gradually moved from practical engineering to area management positions. At that time, however, I had no experience of quality management. I thought the whole thing was a practical joke on the past of my former colleague, but it was not. So, in order to become informed in the area, I saw no other option than to hire a consultant, and I selected one from the pile of presentations on my desk of consulting firms I had got in the mail.

For the consultant who was hired in this way, it was just a coincidence. His letter reached the QM at a time when he was receptive to quality management services. It was a garbage-can situation (Cohen *et. al*, 1972) where the QM had a problem and the consultant a solution to such problems. The solution was on the market while the problem was experienced in the hierarchy. The QM continues his story:

> The first project was designed as an examination of what kind of quality management system the division should go for. It was therefore rather technical in character. I felt, however, that we needed more than this. I therefore started discussing this with Lennart since he had rather eagerly and repeatedly expressed his interest in being involved in one way or another in the quality management project in the division. We met for lunch a couple of times and I thought he was a nice guy who had interesting and unusual ideas about quality management compared with the technical information I had received in the report from the first consultant. I hired him as a sounding board in order to bring more philosophical insight into the quality management project in the division. The report by the first consultant suggested that ISO 9000 was the system the division should go for. Gradually, Lennart's first assignment lead to a situation where I asked him if he could act as a kind of undercover agent to very carefully underline the philosophy of quality management in the organisation during the process of the division's struggle for ISO 9000 certification.

This story reveals how incredibly important it is for small and medium-sized consultancies to stay close to former and potential clients in order to be around

whenever the client is ready to do business. If one consultant is not around at this point in time, it is very likely that the project will go to someone who is. Once they have established a good relationship it also seems to be very important for the consultant to maintain it. This also comes through very clearly in the following quotation from the senior consultant whom the QM hired twice:

> You have projects over the years and then after seven years you get: "Hey, can you help me with this thing?" But you already have a relationship, not only personal but also a relationship with this company, this industry or this organisation and these people […] When you do a large project, it often leads to other projects, but after some time it becomes less and less. But then, after a year or so, they give you a call. Of course, all the time you have been doing some kind of relationship marketing. Sending a letter every now and then, a fun article and the like. But nothing rude, and you should be careful not to over-sell yourself, or they might get the impression that there is something wrong with you or your service!

Both projects this consultant had at Telia and the project the first consultant had during this period are examples of how important it is for a consultant to be close by and ready to act when the opportunity arises. It is very much a matter of timing, i.e., to catch the client when he is receptive, and then making a good first impression. The client can be caught on the spot in various ways: in letters, telephone calls, lunch meetings, through recommendations from other clients or consulting firms, or in a combination of these. Enthusiasm combined with eagerness is yet another strategy for winning clients. This was what characterised the work of the senior consultant at the large Swedish consultancy when he tried to convince Sweden Post of the brilliance of his administrative routine. His running up and down the stairs, popping in and out of offices and chatting with different people for two years finally led to them hiring him as he was there so frequently and regularly that no other consulting firm could enter this domain.

Being updated on management standards and current fashions can be a way of finding receptive clients. Nonetheless, the consultants in focus here tend to reach their clients in other ways.

…being competent

Being versatile and present are two important strategies consultants use when they are off stage in order to get back on stage, and both have to do with the importance of trust in the relationships with their clients. Still, if they are not considered competent, little will come of their efforts, it seems. This competence has two dimensions: one social and one conceptual.

In the Telia case referred to above, quality management and ISO 9000 was the arena where the quality manager and the consultant met. In that particular case, a fashionable standard constituted this arena. The QM claimed that he and his organisation had a lack of expertise, while the consultant claimed that he had been

working in quality management since the early 1980s, long before it became fashionable. He also referred to a book he had written on the topic. However, the conceptual facts were not what first made the QM interested in him; the consultant's social skills were more important. In his opinion the consultant was a nice and interesting fellow that he wanted to continue talk to. In the discussions to come, the consultant's conceptual competence in quality management authorised him to act as somewhat of an expert in quality management. If the consultant's social behaviour in the early critical phase of the relationship had been of great importance, his conceptual competence gradually became more important for the relationship and finally resulted in the first project and then the second, and possibly more in the future. However, a third project was unlikely since the client subsequently felt that the consultant had nothing more to offer.

In this particular situation, the consultant had extensive experience of focal point of the project. Not all projects are of this kind. The same consultant explains, for example, that the management tool or technique he delivers depends on particular circumstances of each single project. However, he was keen to point out that when he chooses his tools, he does not turn to books or seminars. Instead, he says that he relies on his own feelings and creates the tool based on his own experiences and his analyses of every single situation in the client's organisation. Learning is therefore a crucial aspect of demonstrating know-how to the client. However, it is difficult to link the learning that underlies a delivered service to particular events or books. It is a complex and continuous process. He said:

> You are always learning – every time you do something you learn, but it is very difficult to know what it is you're learning and when or where you're learning. Hopefully you learn something every day.

Another senior consultant who is a partner in a small consultancy gave a similar account of how he learns in order to be regarded as competent by his clients. Today, the firm employs some fifteen consultants, and they are all seniors. In this firm, this means that the consultants have turned forty, at least, and have the relevant management skills for the kind of service they deliver. This, they claim, can only be gained through long experience of both consulting and management positions. Assistant work, they claim, is often done much better by young employees in the client organisation who have a business degree since they have greater insight into the organisation than a junior consultant ever could. Their view on skills development is that it can only result form hands-on experience in the field. This senior consultant expressed his thoughts about learning in the following way:

> I am not conscious of everything I learn. An enormous amount of know-how is accumulated in your head, your body, in the bookshelves, on the wall, in your fingers, in your sensitivity, in your smell, in your hearing. This type of knowledge is different from technical knowledge.

In this view consulting skills are accumulated and constantly upgraded in every new situation. It is life-long learning, and it is hard to define where it comes from since input is continuous. On the other hand, when it concerns technical knowledge, the situation is quite different. This can be learned from books, seminars and education. Technical knowledge is also easier to commodify. He claims, however, that he and his colleagues do not sell technical knowledge.

> There are 17 000 management techniques out there to choose from. We use them in our services if the situation calls for them, but we do not sell them. We are not method consultants like the large US firms.

What they do, according to this senior consultant, is to offer a service based on management competence, not on competence in management techniques. Such services are difficult to sell and cannot be sold by juniors who do not have the know-how. He continues:

> When I once said to a potential client that "Well, I am clever at management, at understanding management situations", he said: "OK, but what books have you read?" Then I decided to go home. This was someone who had never before bought real management consulting services. It is very difficult to put your finger on this type of knowledge since it is not technical. You are trying to tell them what you know. It has a lot to do with intuition: to have the ability to relate things such as your experiences, what you know, and the technical knowledge that is available.

What he means is that the know-how he and his colleagues base their service on cannot be specified in black and white, and can therefore not be read in books. He believes that consultants with right know-how intuitively know what to do in the consulting process. Thus, it is difficult to trace the origin of the knowledge and skills they travel in since, in the words of this consultant: "you learn new things all the time through constant work". He adds:

> We read literature, of course, and try to keep up-to-date, but what we do explicitly in terms of learning to consult is to go to other industries. We go to the theatre but not to be on stage and say dogs and cows like the Boston Consulting Group. There are so many similarities between directing a play and being a consultant. There is a deadline in seven months. You have a cast you haven't chosen. You are short of money and when you start you have no idea of how the hell it will all turn out.

What he suggests is that the kind of consulting he performs is more like art than anything else. It is necessary to have the skills and talents to perform the art, but the performance can never only be technical. The kind of service they offer can therefore never be based on particular methods. In their world, methods are just tools that can be used when the problem is clearly defined.

The kind of consulting referred to here confirms the picture drawn above of management consulting as an unspecific service where the content consists both of

individually embodied know-how and international management standards and faddish management tools. Some consultants have the capacity to sell their services by telling the client that they are good at management and that they therefore are to be trusted. Others, on the other hand, have to commodify their services and relate to standards in order to have a chance of being seen as competent. Seniority is one capacity that makes it possible to sell a service generally presented in terms of "I'm clever at management." For those who are not seniors with years of experience both in management positions and consulting, it seems to be more important to be a specialist with extensive technical knowledge, and to draw upon established standards. However, if social skills are lacking, there will be no business however clever the consultant may be at standardised management techniques and what is regarded as professional management consulting. Thus, the consultant must possess a combination of conceptual and social skills. The construction of this combination, however, tends to vary between different forms of consulting.

...being different

Being versatile, present and competent is crucial for small-scale consultancies, but perhaps less so once they already are well established, have a good reputation on the market, and many connections and good relationships with clients and other consultancies. However, if this is not the case, how they appear in comparison with other consultancies on the market becomes important.

This conclusion is drawn from small-scale consultancies' tendency to emphasise that they are not like the others. Swedish consultancies in particular, irrespective of size, appear to be anxious to define themselves as non-US firms, meaning that they are not method or expert consultants. Instead, they say, they offer a service that first helps their clients to define their situation, then they help them to define their problems and identify solutions. Sometimes they also assist them to implement these solutions. They say, also, that the large global US or semi-US based consultancies conduct comprehensive situation analyses but do not have the expertise to implement solutions. This, on the other hand, is the expertise local consultancies claim they have. The latter form of consultation is what is meant by process consultation. Thus, if this is a fair description of the market, large consultancies, and in particular the US firms, would provide standardised methods and solutions to standardised problems. Smaller, locally based consultancies, on the other hand, would do something else since they provide real process consulting where they do not know the problems beforehand and do not act as travelling salesmen of particular methods.

Smaller consultancies do not deny that they know particular methods or that the solutions they suggest may be based on popular and well-known management concepts or methods. Nevertheless, they claim that their suggestions are based to a larger extent on the clients' real problems rather than emerges from a particular

method they happen to have developed or adopted. This argument emerges from the comments of the senior partner in the firm of 15 consultants mentioned earlier. He explains:

> There are consultancies that develop models and turn them into products – "this is our model" – and then they try to press all sorts of problems into that model. A model has one advantage, and many of the large US firms do it. That is why they can use young consultants because they have a product: –"Do this product! You first do this, and then that and that." We say: "Yes, but we do not know the method until we know the situation."

Thus, to emphasise their unique identity seems to be extremely important for smaller actors on the market while the situation is different for firms with a strong brand name, such as McKinsey & Co or Accenture. The local and smaller actors tend to work very hard to market themselves in terms of "I am that kind of consultant and not the other, I am not like the others." Large firms are, perhaps, more likely to follow certain well-defined methods. However, this should not be understood as small consultancies work without methods! They are also likely to have particular methods, but since the form of consulting they provide is more individual, they do not have the same need as larger actors to formalise and present their methods.

The need that small-scale consultancies have to stress that their offering is different, if not unique, may derive from the complexity of the service they offer. If they cannot sell themselves by telling potential clients that they are clever at management, a formalised mode of working, based on standards may be more convincing. Clearly presenting the service as non-US, non-method and problem-driven might make the difference. The standards for management consulting, labelled here as process and method consultants, may thereby become useful in marketing the service. With regard to what the consultants do on stage, these labels are no longer very important since the service they perform tends to include aspects of both ideal types of consultation. However, what form it takes tends to vary between different projects. Small consulting firms are more likely to be less purist since they tend to act as experts in one project and process consultants in another.

To conclude, smaller and locally based consultancies emphasise that they are not like other firms. They all claim that their service is unique since they all have unique experiences and know-how. Still, when comparing the service provided by small-scale and locally based consulting firms, they have a great deal in common. This means that while claiming to be different, they struggle not to be different.

The Jazz of Small-Scale Management Consulting

It was argued above that consultants tend to employ four different strategies when they are off stage: being versatile, being there, being competent and being different.

This is what small-scale management consultants tend to do when they are off stage in order to enter new stages. All these strategies takes place in the grey zone between management standards at one end and management consulting practice at the other. The strategies the consultants use off stage would appear to reveal three alternative scenarios of how they handle the relation between standards and practice, namely rejection, de-coupling and translation; all three are well recognised in the literature (e.g. Meyer, & Rowan, 1977/1991; Latour, 1987; Brunsson, 1989; Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996; Furusten, 1999; Røvik, 2000). Consultants might well reject the standards in their efforts to be different. However, despite what they say they do not always succeed in being different, i.e. they are likely to de-couple between what they say and what they do. The most common scenario, however, tends to be that standards come in at different stages in the construction process and that the consultants translate them into something of their own. This could be anything from re-labelling to combinations of bits and pieces of different standards.

All these scenarios are results of the strategies consultants use in order to enter new stages, but it does not tell us about the processes that lead to these results. Thus, what is it that consultants do when they are versatile, stay close to clients and potential clients in order to be prepared to deliver whenever a client is receptive, to be competent and different? Moreover, what is the role of standards in these processes? To answer these questions we can compare the work of management consultants with improvising jazz musicians. In this comparison, the balance between standards and practice that leads to consulting contracts, can be called the jazz of small-scale and local management consulting, and the process in which this takes place can be called improvisation.

When something is improvised, it has not been planned in detail beforehand. An improvisation, however, is not totally unplanned or unpredictable (Zack, 2000). As the famous jazz bassist Charles Mingus once said "You can't improvise on nothin'. You gotta have somethin'." (Barret & Peplowski, 1998). Based on this something, an improvisation can take several forms. One extreme is when it is difficult to recognise what song the improvisation is based on. Another is an interpretation of a well-known melody that is close to the original, but the improvisation could also be all forms in between. Thus, improvisations result in performances which, to some extent, are de-coupled from the standard but they are mainly translations. In this study, it has been argued that small-scale consultants tend to view standards as tools or techniques they can draw upon or use in different performances, as long as they are not used to define problems. They have to be up-to-date on the standards, i.e., have the competence to "play" them if required. This means that they have to learn the standards, but do not need to become experts on every single technique. This suggests that apart from developing literary expertise in standards, other learning processes are needed here, e.g., learning to improvise. Such learning takes time and the source of it is complex, or as put by Pasmore (1998, p. 563), "Learning how to be flexible or innovative in

ways that 'fit' takes time and knowledge of the whole organization." The improvising jazz musician needs knowledge of music theory, harmonies, scales and tunes in order to be able to improvise successfully when he is on stage. He also needs to learn how to read the language of music – the notes. Furthermore, he needs to develop skills to play an instrument or to sing. On top of all this some talent could be useful, to have a feeling for what works and to have the timing to do it when it fits best, to know when 'now's the time'.

It takes years of practice for the improvising musician to develop all this knowledge and intuition. Management consultants, at least those who work in small and medium-sized firms, can be seen as living under similar conditions when they provide their services. In order to be successful, or at least be accepted by the audience, the consultant needs to balance his personality with standards for professional management consulting. Thus, he has to be versatile, but also present and competent. To stand out in the crowd he also has to claim to be different. To combine this in every situation and to be able to balance different consulting projects at the same time is an art, and it does not work for everyone all the time.

The small-scale consultants claim they learn from everywhere all the time. Standards are one important departure point for their improvisation since they constitute the global language of management. When this language is recognised by the clients, there is a basis for communication between the clients and the consultants.

> "The trick in improvisation is, as Paul Desmond puts it, to aim for 'clarity, emotional communication on a not-too-obvious level, form in a chorus that doesn't hit you over the head but is there if you look for it, humour, and construction that sounds logical in an unexpected way." (Gioia, 1988, p. 89 cited in Weick, 1998, p. 547)

It should be there, but in an "unexpected way" seems to be what they struggle to realise. Thus, it is not the original standard they bring in. It is an unexpected version of it, a version that can be anything from a rejection to a translation into something that makes sense in the particular situation (cf., Røvik, 2000).

Conclusions

In the introduction to this paper, it was argued that if management consultants base their methods on standards for management and management consulting, their work is a force towards convergence of management consulting across the globe (cf. Meyer, 1994). If they also dominate local markets for management consulting, it could be argued that they set the standards other actors on the market have to adjust to (Engwall, 1999). However, this scenario is not supported by the analyses here of the processes in which small-scale locals construct their services. The standards are of great importance but belong more to the setting of every consulting situation than to the actual consultant's performance. One extreme example is the consultant who, like a stand-up artist, improvises on stick words from the clients. S/he interprets the situation, twists it so it both satisfies what the clients think they want and suits the competence of the consultant. However, as in improvised jazz, it must be recognisable to the listener/client in order to make sense. This is where the standard comes in. The standard is usually well recognised by many, and in the consulting Legoland there are standards for several things, e.g., organisation, management, leadership, human resource management, quality and management consulting. Finding combinations of standards that work in different situations is what small-scale management consultancies are clever at. In other words, they improvise in order to be versatile towards the client, are there when the clients are receptive, are competent in the areas that are of importance for different clients, and they are different.

To conclude, the assumption that the existence of standards promoted by large global actors should lead to homogenisation is not verified by the observations made in this study. What locals tend to do is to improvise on standards often associated with global actors or with a global management discourse. This results in numerous variations on these standards. For an improvisation to be successful, there have to be certain rules and a certain order that all involved need to agree upon. Otherwise, no one will understand what the rest are playing and this will turn out to be chaotic and non-acceptable by a "normal" audience. The global actors can be seen as important channels for dissemination of particular management techniques in the world. In this way they contribute to the standardisation of management techniques, but they also become important standardisers of a global language of management. Thus, the standards constitute these rules and become the "somethin´" Charles Mingus meant is necessary when improvising. Thus, the jazz of small-scale management consulting is not only a matter of technicalities and the distribution of management standards. The construction of the services delivered by consultants is to be seen more as a process of learning the rules to improvise.

What does this mean in terms of a possible global convergence of management consultation? Clearly, standards have been established for what professional

management consulting and management are supposed to be, and it is likely that the large global actors play an important role here. Yet, this study concludes that the standards do not regulate the activities of the consultants in any openly conspicuous way. They constitute the basis for management consulting in the same way as established scales, harmonies and so-called standard melodies form the basis for improvising jazz artists. Based on these standards they improvise. Thus, it seems as that convergence is to be found in terms of the "somethin" that improvisations have to be based on in order to be accepted. Still, the improvisations on the standards differ in different consulting situations, particularly among small-scale consultancies.

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