Consultancy

Introduction: what is consultancy?

The simplest definition is the provision of independent advice and assistance. The consultant is not in a line management relationship to the client, and may be external to the client organisation or internal to it but in a different part.

The consultant offers expertise, experience and sometimes methodology or technology which the client needs.

The nature of the advice and assistance varies widely and the emphasis varies from reviewing a situation or problem and recommending action to delivering services such as training or data collection or products such as a new website. That is, between recommending and implementing. This paper is most concerned with consultancy projects where the consultant has to recommend a way forward.

The consultancy process usually involves influencing the client's understanding and actions in some way. Consultancy normally involves change.

Sometimes a consultant finds that their role is to help deliver part of the organisation's ongoing activities. At this point, it is important to understand that the role you are playing is more akin to being a temporary or interim employee.

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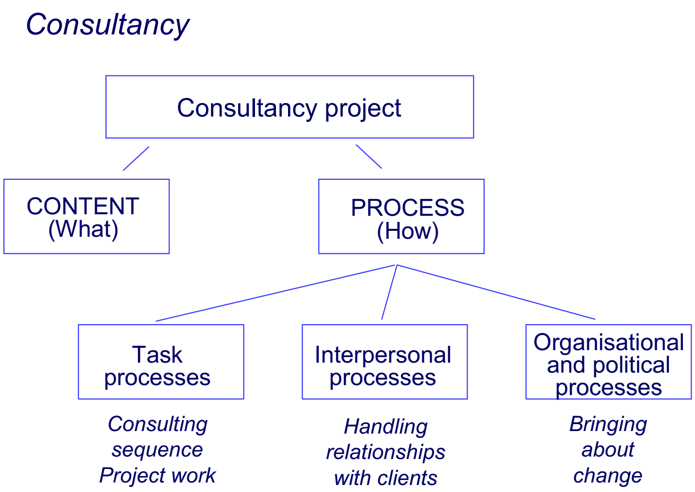
1 The consultancy process and consultancy style

The process

Consultancy - like any other activity - involves both content (what is done) and process (how it is done). The process of consultancy can be divided into three interconnected strands: task processes, interpersonal processes, and organisational and political processes. These are shown in the diagram below.



The task process is the consultancy sequence, the typical series of stages that a consultancy project goes through - these are described in more detail below. Effectiveness requires conceptual and analytical thinking, the ability to learn and to be creative, self-belief and resilience.

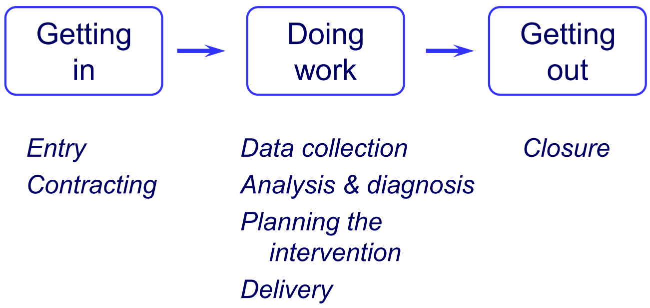
The interpersonal processes involve the use of a set of quite basic interpersonal skills: listening, asking questions, summarising information, giving feedback, presenting information, observing behaviour and making sense of what is going on in interpersonal encounters. These are described in a separate paper on Interpersonal Skills.

The organisational and political processes have to do with the idea that there is no point being right as a consultant if nobody takes any notice of your advice. The traditional view holds that it is the consultant's job is to produce the report and the client's to decide what if anything to do about it. This is increasingly being rejected as being too passive: it is seen as the consultant's task to engender a climate of acceptability for the recommendations of a study - and this requires a strong awareness of the political dynamics of the client organisation. However, making recommendations is not the only way to be helpful or influential.

The consulting sequence

It is vital to have a model of the process to guide your actions. The model shown below breaks the overall process down into three main stages, with each of these being further subdivided into its component parts. Few real projects occur in a purely linear sequence as there are almost invariably iterations between the stages, but the model provides a valuable conceptual focus.

The consulting sequence



Entry

This is concerned with establishing an initial working relationship with a prospective client. The tasks are: to identify the primary client (sometimes there is more than one potential client), to make an initial diagnosis of the need for consultancy (i.e. to form some view of what needs to be done) and if it is work you want to take on, to get the client to want to use your services as a consultant.

Contracting

The focus here is on agreeing what is to be done, what will be the objectives or "deliverables", roles, timescale, costs. What is done in all subsequent stages depends on the nature of the contract which is agreed.

Data collection

This involves systematically collecting information about the client's organisation and problem in order to be able to effect or propose a solution of some sort.

Diagnosis

This is the process of making sense of and drawing conclusions from the data which has been collected.

Planning the intervention

This involves formulating plans or recommendations to resolve the problem or address the issue under consideration. It is usually necessary first to feed back the results of the data collection and diagnosis. This feedback process is often a critical part of increasing the client's readiness for change.

Delivery

This stage involves delivering whatever was contracted for at the beginning. It may take the form of writing a report, making a presentation, facilitating a workshop, providing support, and so on.

Closure

Completion of the assignment with whatever was contracted for hopefully satisfactorily completed and the consultant's reputation enhanced. It is important to confirm that the client is happy with the outcome. There may be follow-on work to contract for. If not, the goal is to leave with the door open for possible future business.

Comments on the consulting sequence

As noted above, real life assignments reveal many variations from this standard pattern. Some common ones are briefly discussed below.

- There will be little or nothing resembling an entry stage where the project is a follow-on from previous work.

- The contracting phase should mark a clear boundary between preliminary work and the start of the project proper. In commercial consultancy it is the point at which charges begin: only after contracting can time be charged to a client rather than to overheads.

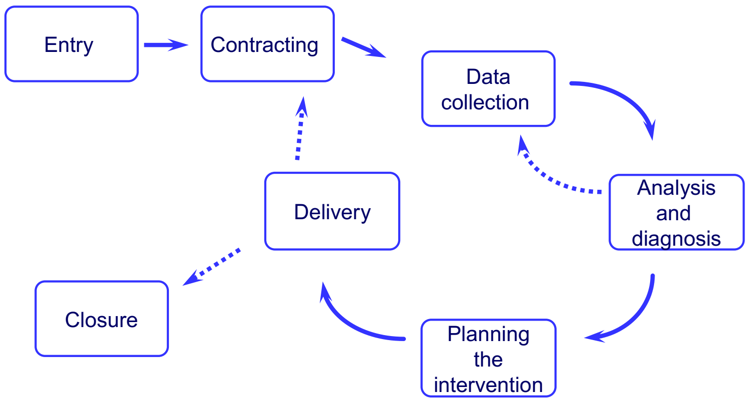
- Data collection and diagnosis in practice occur iteratively and interactively rather than in simple sequence. The data suggest a diagnosis which typically implies further data collection; the diagnostic method informs the choice of which data to collect.

- Implementation of recommendations is best seen as something which takes place (if at all!) after rather than during the consultancy assignment e.g. if the project is an organisational review culminating in recommendations for change. It is therefore usually the responsibility of the client rather than the consultant. Alternatively, it may become the next assignment.

- The goal is commonly achieve closure on the individual assignment without closure on the relationship.

These comments suggest an alternative way of presenting the consulting process:

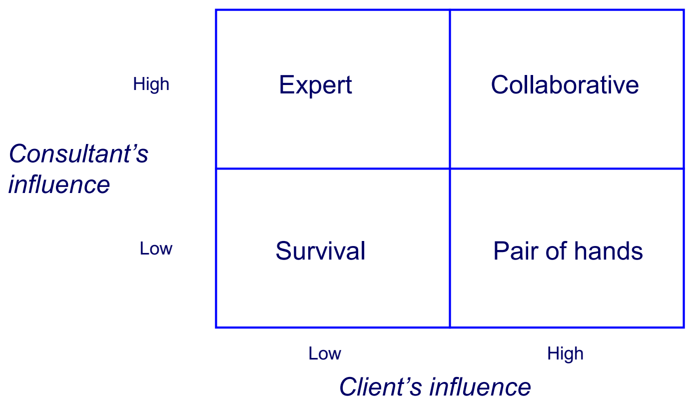
The consulting process



Types of consultant-client relationship

Consultancy relationships are of different types depending on whether the client or the consultant has the greater influence over the outcome. Four possibilities are tabulated below.

Consultant-client relationships



Expert

The consultant takes or is given the role of expert or doctor. The client provides information and the consultant prescribes what is to be done. This is most people's taken-for-granted model of a consultancy relationship.

Pair of hands

In this case the client knows exactly what needs to be done and simply contracts for the consultant to do it. This is arguably not really consultancy, but it is a role which consultants are frequently called on to play. It is not necessarily to be discouraged as work in this mode may precede or follow on from more conventional consultancy projects. It is important to be clear what role you are in.

Collaborative

The consultant works with (rather than on or for) the client on the identification of the problem and the development of its solution. In some cases the consultant's role is purely facilitative.

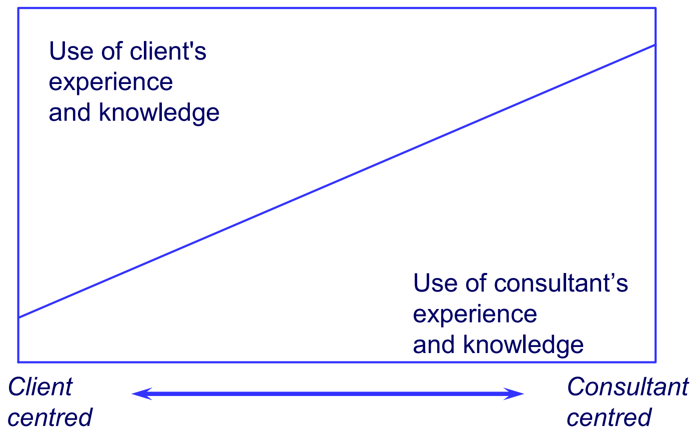
Survival

Sometimes it happens that the consultant is foisted on the client by higher authority (e.g. Head Office). In this situation no meaningful work is likely to be done. The goal must be to move, by re-contracting, to any of the other cells.

Consultancy style

Consultancy styles can be arranged along a continuum from client-centred at one end to consultant-centred at the other.

Consultancy style



The appropriate style varies according to the stage in the consultancy process - it is generally appropriate to be most client-centred during the entry and data collection phases - and according to the type of assignment.

It is important in most cases to be able to operate at both ends of the range, although it must be acknowledged that some consultants work only in the client-centred - and therefore non-directive - style.

2 Internal and external consultants

The table below summarises the similarities and differences between internal and external consultants.

	Internal consultants	**External consultants**
Objectives	May have to enforce or promote corporate policies, standards and objectives.	Commercial. Can appear more client-centred and flexible.
Client base	Likely to be finite: cannot afford to alienate too many.	In principle, infinite. More able to walk away.
Status	Organisational level is known. Can create difficulties with clients who are more senior.	May be given higher status. Can treat all clients as equals.
Competitive advantage	Accessible. Free or cheaper than externals. Knowledge of business.	Independence. Credibility, especially with top management. Breadth of experience.
Knowledge	Inside knowledge of organisation, its culture, history, people etc. But may lack wider perspective.	Knowledge of other organisations and possibly deeper knowledge of the subject area. May lack credibility if unfamiliar with the sector or particular client organisation.
Independence	Part of organisation's political system and culture: it may be harder to be objective and independent.	Easier to be independent, but may be too committed to client's interests.
Fantasy	The freedom and variety enjoyed by external consultants.	The continuity and stability enjoyed by internal consultants.
Anxiety	Being ignored, rejected and treated as unimportant.	Being ignored, rejected and treated as unimportant.

3 Entry

Introduction

Entry occurs in the consultancy process in two ways. At the overall project level, it is the process of handling the initial contact with a new client system and culminates in contracting to do work (or perhaps deciding that you do not want to). Entry and contracting may take place in a single meeting or it may be necessary to hold a series of meetings and submit a written proposal.

The entry phase of a project then is the initial discussion or discussions with people in a new client system or with a new potential client in an existing client system. The entry process is obviously more difficult if you initiated the contact than if the client contacted you, but the issues and the skills required are very much the same.

Entry also needs to take place with every member of the client system you come into contact with and this is considered in a later section.

Tasks

The entry phase has two main tasks: to collect the information required to be able to contract for work and to sell yourself to the client as the person or organisation they need.

Collecting information for contracting

You need to:

- Reach an understanding of the work which the client wants or needs to have done and a preliminary diagnosis of the situation, including an assessment of the client's real motives. A separate Pre-contract checklist identifies more fully the information required.

- Identify who is the primary client for the work - this may well not be the person you were initially in contact with - and other significant stakeholders in the situation.

This will enable you to decide if you want the work (if you have some degree of choice about it) and help you formulate your position for the process of contracting.

Selling yourself to the client

Assuming you do want the work, you need to create a favourable impression with the client such that he or she will want to employ your services. To do this you need to:

- Establish rapport with the client so that they feel that you are on their wavelength and understand their needs.

- Demonstrate your capability to do the work: knowledge, skills, experience, familiarity with the organisation, etc.

- Deal with any particular anxieties or concerns which the client may have about consultants in general or you in particular.

What to do

- Try to anticipate the client's likely concerns and plan how to handle them and how to present yourself.

- Express appreciation that the client is seeing you and show your interest in the possible project, but don't grovel.

- Set an agenda: typically to understand the background to the meeting and to discover how you might be able to help.

- Concentrate on getting the client to talk, clarify his or her concerns, objectives, expectations, fears etc. - listen, ask questions, summarise, reflect.

- Try to present yourself as a person who is genuinely interested in what the client has to say and who is genuinely helpful.

- Accept the client's view of the uniqueness of their organisation and the difficulty and complexity of their problems, but show that you do understand and are willing and able to help.

- You cannot resolve anxiety over the eventual outcome at this stage, but you can make a competent start by handling the meeting in a professional way and asking intelligent questions.

- Use relevant knowledge, ask informed questions and relate what is being said to your own experience as ways of demonstrating credibility, but beware of overdoing it.

Entry within the client system

Once a project has been contracted for, it is tempting to think that you are now "in" and no longer have to worry. However, entry also needs to take place with **every** member of the client system you come into contact with. This is even more obviously the case if the contracting was handled by a colleague rather than yourself.

This need for entry most apparent during the data collection phase but may also arise at the planning stage or as recommendations are being formulated or actions planned. No one can enter for you. Even if you have got the go-ahead from senior management, you will still have to enter afresh with succeeding levels of management and staff. Often you can use an initial entry to smooth the way elsewhere, but sometimes it can be a handicap - e.g. being identified as management's hatchet man. Effectiveness usually requires however that you successfully enter with a variety of different interests in the client system.

Issues

The issues to be handled are predominantly emotional ones.

Anxiety

People within the client system will primarily be concerned about your motives and purpose - are you likely to make proposals for change which will threaten their interests? Whose side are you on?

Trust

Everybody you speak to will have to decide how far they can trust you with their true feelings and opinions. They may also fear that the overt purpose of the project conceals a hidden agenda.

Credibility

People in the client system need to feel that you are competent, both technically and interpersonally, to help. Your reputation and that of your organisation will precede you, which may be a help or a hindrance.

Expectations

People will have expectations and perhaps stereotypes of what consultants are like, how they work etc., based on past experiences. This too may be a help or a hindrance.

What to do

- First explain who you are, where you are from, what you are doing and why you are there.
- It may be helpful to say something about the objectives of your study, what stage you are at and what will happen following the interview or meeting.
- If this produces any questions, overt anxiety or hostility accept that these must be dealt with before you can expect to get any further.
- Set a clear agenda for the meeting: "I'd like to talk to you about..."
- Set out any ground rules (e.g. about the confidentiality of the information you collect.).
- Check to confirm that what you said is acceptable, then begin the business of the meeting.

4 Contracting

In general, contracting is simply the process of reaching an agreement between two (or more) parties about their respective roles and responsibilities. As such it is essentially the same as negotiation although without the overtones of conflict, ritual and game-playing which are frequently associated with negotiation.

In consultancy, the contract is:

- the explicit agreement
- between client and consultant
- which defines the consultancy project
- and sets out the expectations each has of the other.

Probably the biggest mistake in consultancy is to begin work without an explicit agreed contract - to simply do what you think the client wants or needs. However, the next biggest mistake is to find out what the client wants and then agree to do it without discussion or exploration. A pure service orientation is likely to be self-defeating. A contract is - or should be - an agreement freely entered into by **both** parties. You can say no. It is important to bring your own requirements and constraints to the discussion and to test and challenge the client's assumptions and pre-conceptions. The process is harder with naive clients and in this case it may be necessary to educate them on the nature of the consultant-client relationship.

It is helpful to distinguish two kinds of contract: the business contract, which covers the work itself and which is mostly written and the unwritten "psychological" contract. These are discussed below.

Although contracting marks the boundary between the entry phase of the consulting sequence and actually doing the work, it should not be seen as a once and for all process. Contracting occurs continuously as the project unfolds.

The importance of contracting in consultancy projects

- The contract marks the boundary between the pre-project discussions (i.e. the entry phase) and the project itself. It therefore separates work which is charged to (or recorded against) a client from that which is free to the client and charged to (or recorded against) the overhead.
- Both parties know where they stand: the consultant knows what to do and the client knows what to expect.
- Client anxiety is replaced by a feeling of being in control of the situation.
- There is reduced risk that the project will end in tears with the client blaming the consultant for not producing the goods - from the consultant's point of view the contract is a safeguard or insurance.

- The consultancy organisation can plan, allocate and manage its resources.
- The contract provides a baseline against which to handle new requirements or changes of situation.
- It copes with changes of personnel: what has been agreed has an independent existence, rather than being solely in the minds of the participants.

The process of contracting

There are four main ways in which business contracting takes place:

Verbal agreement

The work is discussed face to face or over the phone and a verbal agreement is reached. This is potentially highly risky and is only really appropriate for small pieces of work or situations where there is high trust between client and consultant.

Written agreement

An initial contact is followed up by a meeting (or a series of meetings) at which a verbal agreement is reached regarding the work to be undertaken. The consultant (usually) writes to set out the agreement and client replies confirming acceptance. The consultant may simply send a letter or may produce a project description or other pro forma.

Proposal

The initial contact is followed up by a meeting or meetings, the outcome of which is that the consultant puts forward a proposal to do the work which has been discussed. There may then need to be another meeting to discuss the proposal, which could result in an amended proposal being submitted. The process ends with a letter (or email, fax or phone call) of acceptance from the client. In this context a proposal is not very different from a written agreement, although there are some conventions as to style and content. This is the most common commercial practice.

Tender

The client issues an Invitation to Tender to selected consultants. Each consultant typically has an informal meeting with the client to collect background information and establish credibility. Tenders are submitted and evaluated by the client - this usually involves the consultants making a presentation of their proposals. The client writes signifying acceptance of the successful tender.

Dealing with uncertainty

Consultancy projects should be subject to an agreed business contract. However, at the start of a project you often do not have sufficient information to be able to contract fully for the work. This probably does not matter if the consultancy is a free service, but is a major issue if a charge is involved. In this case there are a number of options:

- Contract initially for a scoping study to assess the nature or scale of the issues to be addressed.

- Adopt a phased approach: identify a series of phases of work and contract for later phases on completion of earlier ones.

- Agree to work on a "time and materials" basis and charge the client for the amount of effort actually expended.

- Negotiate a call off contract for a number of days work to be initiated by the client as required.

- Use your best judgement and accept that there is a level of risk: if the job turns out to be bigger than you expected, you may have to work extra hard or perhaps make a loss.

Who are you contracting with?

The obvious answer to the question who to contract with is "the client". This is true but too simple to be of much practical help. The first question is who can be a client? The client is normally understood to be the person for whom the work is being carried out, the person who commissioned it. A satisfactory client therefore must be able to take decisions about the work, must be able to commit the client organisation to the project, must have the budget to pay for the work (if it is chargeable) and must have the organisational "clout" to be able to make it happen. It is an important task of the entry stage to identify the appropriate client to contract with.

There are several situations however in which it is not realistic to think in terms of a single client. The two most common are probably:

Central and local clients

In this situation the responsibility and budget for the work are held centrally in the organisation but the work is actually performed primarily for local managers. Common examples are some types of IT project and much training work. Usually the central Department has its own agenda as to standards or objectives for the work. It is usually necessary to contract at both central and local levels, but equally there is often no real doubt that the central client is the primary client with the local client as a secondary client.

Boss and subordinate clients

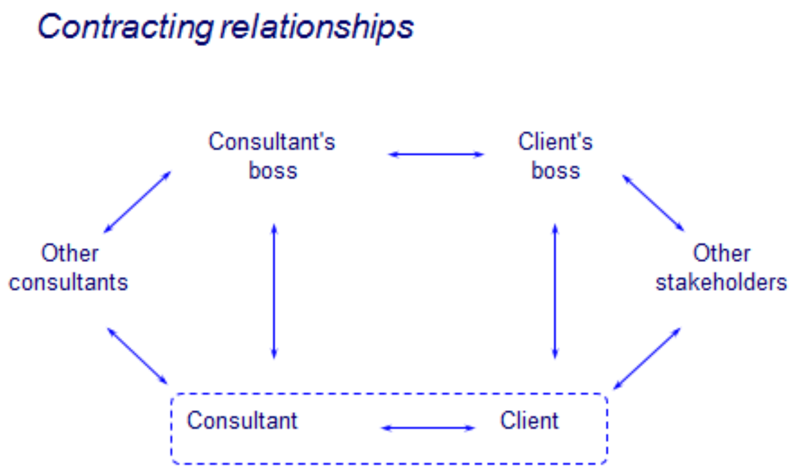
In this situation the work is commissioned by a boss to be carried out somewhere within his or her command. The line manager of the area concerned is a secondary client who will need to be contracted with. The common problem here is that the local line manager denies there is any problem which they need help with.

Proxy clients

It sometimes happens that you are unable to deal directly with the "real" client. For example, where an individual is assigned a task by their boss or by a group to which they report. In these situations you will no doubt try to gain access to the real decision makers, but this cannot always be achieved. The implications are that you need to put more on paper than might otherwise be necessary and write everything as a persuasive document, designed to be read by the unseen client.

Contracting relationships

Unless the consultant is a solo operator there are in fact normally a minimum of six parties to the contracting process as shown in the diagram below.



Contracting is never simple and always involves multiple relationships. Often the client is unclear, ambiguous, multiple or changing. One of the requirements for success is to simply accept and live with this situation - while clarifying it as much as possible.

You need to try to be clear who you are treating as the client at any point in time. In deciding who is the client you are in effect deciding which side you are on. Sometimes it is not a problem, but on other occasions this will have major implications for how you can present yourself to different parts of the organisation and how you will be received.

The psychological contract

No matter how comprehensive is the formal business contract, some aspects will always be left unsaid. These taken for granted assumptions and expectations concerning the behaviour and motives of the parties are the psychological contract. They may have to be surfaced and contracted for explicitly.

Typical examples would be:

- How the consultant behaves and dresses.
- When the consultant arrives at and leaves the client's premises.
- The apparent priority the consultant attaches this client's work.
- How far the client is really open to change.
- What will be the relationship between the consultant and the client (e.g. formal or informal, deep or superficial).

How to contract

Contracting often involves reaching a verbal agreement which is subsequently confirmed in writing or embodied in a proposal.

At a behavioural level, successful contracting requires you to:

- Ask questions to discover what the client wants and all the other information you need to be able to reach a sensible contract (see separate checklist). It is particularly important to ask clarifying questions to ensure you understand the other person's point of view.
- Summarise frequently to confirm understanding, sustain rapport and build dialogue.
- Test and challenge client assumptions and constraints but avoid flat contradiction of what the client is saying.
- Clearly state your own constraints and requirements (and be clear in your mind about fall back positions if appropriate).
- Think on your feet to begin to develop proposals in response to the client's stated requirements.
- Seek positive agreement, don't take silence for assent. Don't be afraid to pin things down: "When exactly?". Be persistent and patient - keep plugging away, don't get frustrated if agreement is hard to reach.
- Listen actively especially for any signs of misunderstanding or lack of commitment to what is agreed.
- Test the proposed contract: "Are you content with what we've agreed?"
- Aim to make everything clear and explicit - the two main dangers are vagueness and unchecked assumptions.
- Close by restating the next steps (e.g. "I'll send you a proposal based on what we've discussed").

The above assumes you want to and are able to reach agreement. Sometimes you will be asked to do things which you cannot or do not want to do. In these circumstances the contracting process must end with you saying no as acceptably as possible.

Issues for contracting

This would also serve as a checklist for preparing a proposal or tender.

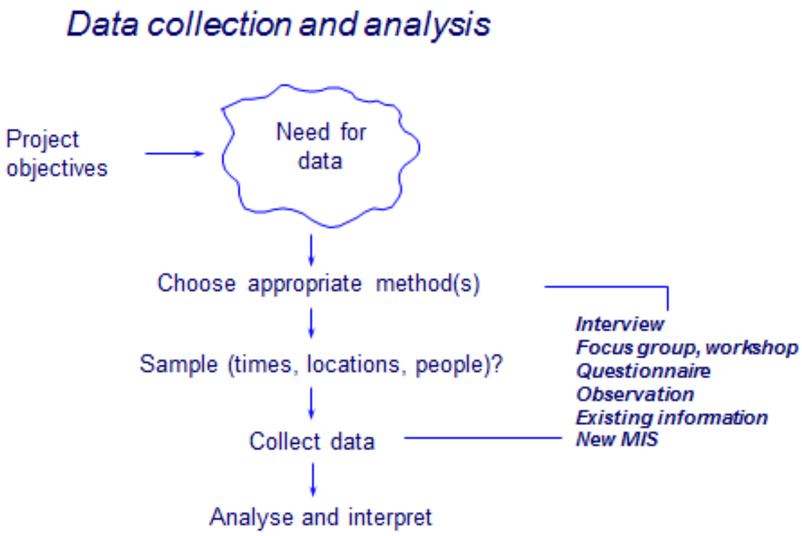
- the scope of the project (which parts of the organisation are to be included in the project, and which are not)
- objectives (the more specific and measurable the objectives are, the easier will post project evaluation be)
- "deliverables": the output of the project
- your role: expert, facilitator, pair of hands
- approach and perhaps methods
- timescales
- assistance from the client (e.g. resources, equipment, services, accommodation, the services of a "fixer")
- costs and fee basis (e.g. fixed or time and materials) and expected cost
- milestones
- constraints to be taken account of
- arrangements for reporting progress and findings
- evaluation criteria and process
- access to information and people
- internal publicity about the work
- confidentiality and intellectual property

The scope, objectives, methods, deliverables and perhaps timescale may be incorporated into Terms of Reference and of course may have been part of a proposal or tender.

In the commercial context, some of the areas in the list above and others of a more detailed kind (e.g. invoicing and termination arrangements) are included in Terms of Business, which are in effect standard contract items applicable to all projects.

5 Data collection process

The process of collecting and analysing data is essentially the process of doing research. The main stages in this process are depicted below.



This is of course a simplification: the whole process is likely to contain iterations. Data collection for example can take place in distinct phases. The initial phase is often that of sensing and is concerned with identifying issues for detailed study. Appropriate methods in this phase would be: interviews, group discussion and reference to existing information. The second phase would then be that of collection of hard data and this would be more likely to employ observation and questionnaires.

What data to collect

In the end, the project objectives will determine the data required. Some suggestions for approaching data collection in relation to projects which are concerned with reviewing the current set up are offered below.

In many assignments the following basic sequence will be appropriate:

- Describe and understand the present state: document and quantify how things actually are at present.
- Evaluate its appropriateness and effectiveness.
- Identify likely future trends and requirements.
- Discover what changes people would like to see and why.

It is generally desirable to move from:

- The big picture to the fine details.
- The overall purpose or role to the specific organisational arrangements.
- The start to the finish of a workflow or process.
- The top to the bottom of a hierarchy.
- The outside to the inside - i.e. ask the customers for their views before talking to the service providers.
- The normal and common to the abnormal and unusual.
- The structure to the process - the process can be hard to understand without the structure to provide a context.

Definition

In order to collect data you have to define your terms. For more formal methods of data collection an “operational definition” is required which states what you will understand a particular term to mean for the purpose of your study.

Most of the problems here are caused by terms in everyday use like “dwelling” or “household” which lack a precise definition. When you are doing a data collection project however, such terms have to be defined unambiguously so that you are sure whether or not to include any given collection of rooms or people.

Suppose for example that you are interested in collecting information on how vacancies have been filled, perhaps to check for possible bias. Does the concept of “vacancy” include temporary as well as permanent positions? New posts? Reshuffles and swaps? There are no right answers to these questions, but in order for the data collection activity to have value, an operational definition must be explicitly arrived at and then checked to ensure that it fits the requirements of the project you are carrying out.

6 Data collection methods

There are a surprisingly small number of basic ways of collecting data in the course of a consultancy project. They are:

- Observation of people and things.
- Observation of files, records and papers.
- Interviews.
- Focus groups and workshops.
- Questionnaire surveys.
- Use of existing information.
- Set up a management information system (MIS).

This section reviews each of these methods in turn and considers the pros and cons of each. The appropriate combination for any given project depends obviously enough on what the project is trying to achieve. In most cases a mixture of "hard" data (i.e. that which can be subjected to statistical analysis) and soft data (i.e. that which requires a more interpretative approach) will be needed. Whatever other methods are employed, it is almost always appropriate to interview the main stakeholders in the project. They may have valuable alternative perspectives on the project and at the very least you can say you have sought views from all interested parties.

Observation of people and things

Examples

- Observing interactions at the public counter
- Monitoring the size and composition of a queue at different times of day
- Watching a person do a part of their job
- Surveying the condition of a building
- Assessing the amount of vacant office space

It will normally be appropriate for the observation to be overt i.e. unconcealed.

Pros

- It is first hand: you saw it for yourself and can therefore be confident that other people did not distort the information in any way.
- It is the only way to be sure about what actually happens as distinct from what is supposed to happen.
- It can resolve conflicting accounts e.g. between service providers and customers.
- If no records exist, going and seeing for yourself may be the only way.

Cons

- It is not always obvious what to observe: preliminary interviews or discussions will often be needed to get on a fix on it.
- People sometimes behave differently when they are observed - this is known as "reactive bias".
- Some types of behaviour are too sensitive to observe e.g. appraisal interviews.

- Sometimes the behaviour is so long drawn out that observation would be impossible or uneconomical e.g. a training programme.
- What is observed may not be typical

Observation of files and records

Pros

- Can produce a comprehensive, historical picture which permits patterns and trends to be identified.
- Systematic.
- Generally not disruptive or intrusive.

Cons

- The information you want may not exist at all or not in an accessible form.
- Some records reflect what was supposed to have happened, rather than what actually did (e.g. time sheets).

Notes on use

- Both types of observation can produce original data and are vital when a problem or a feature of the present situation needs to be quantified or pinpointed.
- Some means of recording the data needs to be designed in both cases - usually a check sheet of some sort will be appropriate, but you also need to note down new types of information or insights.

Interviews

The comments that follow relate to open ended interviews: where you have a list of questions or information to guide you but where the precise content emerges in interaction with the interviewee. In some cases an interview may consist of asking a standard set of precisely worded questions - in other words it involves administering a questionnaire. The features of this type of interview are covered in the section on questionnaires below.

Pros

- Invaluable for obtaining “soft” data - opinions, priorities, ideas for change.
- Especially appropriate for complex information since you can explore, check and clarify until you are sure you have understood.
- A means of visibly involving all stakeholders.
- Can be used to influence and persuade as well as collect data.
- May precede more detailed data collection and be used to identify problem areas requiring investigation.
- Open ended, so you can find out things that you did not know that you did not know.
- It is easier to get at the “truth”: people find it harder to misrepresent the facts and are more likely to be candid face to face rather than on paper.

Cons

- Data cannot readily be aggregated and tabulated because of variations in the way questions were asked or answered or the answers were recorded.
- Relatively time consuming and expensive.

Notes on use

- If quantification is required, a questionnaire approach is usually to be preferred.
- It is essential to take notes, which must include the date of the interview and who it was with; the notes can also be used to jot down impressions and ideas, topics for further probing, follow up actions etc.
- In scheduling interviews remember to allow some processing and recovery time; for example, if the interviews are expected to last one hour, four or five is the realistic target for a day's work.

- Most appropriate in the in initial stages of projects and where relatively small numbers are involved.

Focus groups and workshops

Types

- A discussion group which is convened for an hour or two to seek views on a particular issue; may consist of similar people (by job, grade etc.) or may deliberately be constructed to provide a cross section or total coverage of a group (e.g. a management team).
- A workshop lasting a morning, a whole day or longer; this is likely to be part of a consultation or commitment building process .

Pros

- In general offers the same sort of benefits as interviews but in relation to larger numbers of people.
- Often the only practical way to have face to face contact with a large number of people in a short space of time.
- The interactions between the participants may provide useful observational data.
- A good way to involve people in the client system in the project. Group discussions can be used to build readiness for change and to float ideas.
- Often a very efficient way of surfacing the main problem areas.

Cons

- Less comprehensive and detailed views from each individual.
- Less opportunity to establish personal rapport.
- Can be dominated by a few vocal and perhaps unrepresentative individuals.
- Designing workshops is not as easy as it looks.

Questionnaires

Types

The fundamental distinction is between self-completion questionnaires and those which are administered by an interviewer. Each of these can be done in different ways, giving four types in all:

- Self completion on site (e.g. handed to callers to complete before they go).
- Self completion by mail (or email, or web site).
- Telephone interview.
- Face to face interview.

Each type of questionnaire has its own features and these are discussed in a separate paper on conducting surveys. The common themes are reviewed below.

Pros

- The easiest, often the only way, to gather information from a large number of people.
- Can produce quantifiable information about subjective matters e.g. opinions and attitudes.
- May be the only realistic source of the information

Cons

- Possible bias in the pattern of responses such that you cannot safely draw general conclusions.
- You can generally only find out what you asked about, thus the utility of questionnaires is limited in highly uncertain situations.

Notes on use

- Should be understood as a part of the PR work of a project: often a questionnaire will be the only contact individuals will have with it and so you need to think about the impression you will create.
- Detailed discussion of questionnaire design is contained in other papers.

Using existing information

Examples

- Management information system figures, performance indicators, regular figures of all sorts
- Working papers, consultants reports, annual reports, publicity material etc.

Pros

- Saves time and effort.
- The second category above provides invaluable background information and often suggests fruitful avenues for enquiry.

Cons

- May be subject to unknown bias and distortion - it is critical to discover how the information was collected and what definitions etc. were used.
- Published material will focus more on how things are supposed to be rather than how they actually are.

Set up a management information system (MIS)

Examples

- Monitoring the way vacancies are filled by external recruitment and internal processes to ensure there is no gender, ethnicity or other bias.
- Quality monitoring.

Pros

- Consistent, comprehensive, often quite detailed data.
- Comparisons are possible through time and between locations, units etc.
- Sophisticated analyses, modelling and forecasting become possible.

Cons

- Can be difficult, time-consuming and expensive to set up.
- Can be expensive in resource terms to operate.
- Can be open to manipulation and distortion, depending on how the data is actually collected.

7 Data analysis

In thinking about how to analyse the data you have collected, a useful starting point is the recognition that there are different types of data which need to be approached in different ways. The fundamental distinction is between hard and soft data.

Soft data is concerned with feelings and opinions about issues, ideas, possibilities, intangible benefits, problems etc. It is often the product of interviews and group discussions. It can be described in words but can be difficult to count accurately or subject to numerical analysis. Hard data on the other hand is concerned with things which can be counted and measured and therefore subjected to some level of statistical analysis. The distinction is not absolute of course: attitude surveys for example are an attempt to make the inherently soft opinions and beliefs into data which can be tabulated and analysed.

As a general rule, soft data requires limited preparatory work prior to collection, but is more difficult to analyse. Hard data requires careful preparation prior to collection, especially in the design of some sort of recording instrument, but the analysis is more straightforward, even if possibly laborious.

Soft data

Working with soft data, e.g. from a series of interviews, involves identifying the main or recurrent themes and exercising a level of judgment about what is important and significant. The results may be presented as:

- a list of issues
- pros and cons of a course of action
- a list of strengths and weaknesses
- a set of options
- a descriptive picture

The common threads are an absence of precise quantification and a high level of interpretation on the part of the person analysing the data. The analytical process is nearer journalism than science.

Soft data collection will sometimes be the prelude to collecting hard data and is usually vital to indicate the kinds of hard data which would be needed.

Hard data

Hard data involves numbers - but all numbers are not the same. Four levels of measurement can usefully be distinguished and are important because the appropriate statistical procedures are different for each. They are arranged in a hierarchy such that the higher levels include the characteristics of the lower levels.

Nominal

Often the level of measurement is limited to being able to sort the objects of data collection into categories or classes which are simply different from each other. At this level of measurement there are no considerations of more or less or degree of difference. Many human and organisational characteristics are included here: blood group, eye colour, marital status, gender, grade, location, etc. Answers to pre-coded questions and open questions (once they have been analysed) fall into this category. The basic method of collecting nominal data is counting.

Ordinal

At this level it is possible to scale or order what is being measured but you cannot be sure about the degree of difference between the points in the scale. A good example is the Likert scale: does "very satisfied" compared to "satisfied" imply the same difference in feeling as "very dissatisfied" to "dissatisfied". There is no way of knowing. Ordinal data is often the product of rating scales.

Interval

These are scales of measurement where the intervals are constant, but there is no true zero. Temperature is the classic example: the difference between 70 degrees and 60 degrees is the same as the difference between 20 degrees and 30 degrees, but you cannot say that 60 degrees is three times as hot as 20 - only that it is 40 degrees more. Scores on IQ tests and marks in an exam have the same property.

Ratio

Ratio measures have a true zero and can be subject to any type of statistical manipulation. Examples would be: height, weight, age, time, income, distance. The distinction between interval and ratio measurement is seldom important in relation to organisational problems. Both ratio and interval data are collected by measurement.

Analytical techniques for different types of data

- Nominal: Counts, Totals, Proportions, Cross tabulations, Mode, Pareto analysis
- Ordinal: Median, Tabulate combined categories
- Ratio: Range, Arithmetic mean, Ratio

8 Diagnosis

Diagnosis is the process of making sense of the data collected and analysed during a consultancy project. Diagnosis is both grounded in the data and also guides further data collection.

There are normally three things to diagnose in any given project:

- The client.
- The context (the client system).
- The problem.

The client

The main things to be trying to understand are: the client's motives and intentions, success criteria, preconceptions, openness to change and new ideas. The more clearly you have identified these, the easier it will be to work with the client to produce an outcome which will be mutually satisfactory.

The basic method is through repeated interviews and meetings. Listening carefully to what the client is saying and indeed not saying, probing judiciously and using the three level questioning technique to uncover underlying feelings and values would all be appropriate. See also the separate paper on Interpersonal skills.

The context

The challenge here is to understand the dynamics of the organisation sufficiently well to be able to effect change. If the project involves producing recommendations this means creating a situation where the recommendations are likely to be accepted as suitable for implementation.

The first step in this is to identify the key stakeholders who can make or break proposals for change and to understand their objectives and perspectives. The overall pattern of stakeholder positions can be mapped using Force Field Analysis.

It is also important to understand the broader organisational context in the form of longer term strategies which the organisation is pursuing and the environmental trends and forces which it is subject to.

The problem

This will mean different things according to the nature of the project. If the consultancy was to solve a particular problem a detailed problem analysis will be necessary to specify exactly what the problem really is. The result will often be a redefinition of the problem in terms which are almost always different from those in which it was originally stated.

Traps to avoid

- Prematurely jumping to conclusions - seizing on the first available statement of the problem and settling for that.

- Diagnosis not grounded in data - based only on gut-feel or hunch. This may well be right, but is unlikely to be convincing.

- Failing to identify the key features – this leads to the consultant presenting lots of data without stressing what is important.

- Diagnosis based on preconceptions, fixed ideas or pet schemes.

9 Intervening with and influencing clients

Consultancy work almost always entails influencing the client in some way. Primarily this will be by rational persuasion, i.e. the use of reason, logic and evidence. Persuasion by more emotive means is not generally seen to be appropriate. Effective rational persuasion is however more complicated than "letting the facts speak for themselves" and requires the application of a combination of personal skills and tactics.

The most obvious means of influence is by reporting back your findings, conclusions and recommendations. This may be face to face, in writing or often both. It is important to realise however that the way you go about the project is itself part of the influence process.

The conduct of the project

Involve all key stakeholders

All the key players must be identified and involved in the project in some way: interviewed, invited to meetings and workshops, asked to review documents, kept informed of progress. This does not guarantee that they will accept the outcome, but it will help to increase their receptivity.

Use the data collection phase to prepare the ground

If handled properly, interviews and workshops can serve not only to collect information from people but also to start them thinking about the kinds of outcome which are likely - and therefore increase their readiness and reduce their resistance.

Adopt a "no surprises" policy

Maintain close and reasonably frequent contact with the client. One of the key tactical issues is timing - the more contact you have, the more opportunities you have for a well-timed intervention. Provide information on your emerging conclusions and ideas and test out preliminary conclusions and recommendations. If a report is required, let the client see it in draft.

Face to face presentations

Establish and maintain rapport

- Use the client's language and concepts. Match their use of visual, auditory or feelings-based language.
- Listen actively when the are speaking.
- Adopt a similar bodily posture.

Put your point of view

Do so clearly and concisely; spell out the reasons, benefits, etc.

Recognise that people do things for their reasons rather than yours

- Discover what is important to the client in relation to the situation at hand.
- Show you have listened.
- Show how what you are saying fits what is important to them.

Diagnose resistance

If the client seems opposed to a particular idea, ask something like "What it is that makes it difficult for you to accept it?" or "What would it take to get you to accept it?" The key point here is to ask questions and develop a deeper understanding of the client's view, rather than press ahead with trying to push or justify yours.

Find some energy to work with

Either yours or the client's.

Written reports

Demonstrate the problem before proposing the solution

Demonstrate that there is a problem, that the status quo is not an option, before putting forward proposals for action. Sometimes reports contain a presumption that this is so without ever actually providing explicit justification. Conversely, the actions proposed should be solutions to the problems identified and should cover all the problem areas raised.

Spell out the argument

All the steps in the argument need to be spelled out - it is vital to avoid making logical leaps where the intervening steps are not made explicit. The connection may be obvious to the consultant, but the reasoning needs to be explained to the client.

Deal in facts not opinions

Sometimes a professional judgement may be acceptable, but generally assertions and conclusions should have some evidence to back them up. This evidence may be "soft" data of course, i.e. other people's opinions. If you cite statistics, research or other authorities for what you say, the source should always be stated.

Make the data transparent

In other words, present the findings of the study in such a way that readers can draw their own conclusions and can check the validity of yours if they want to. In practice this means:

- Explain how the data was collected.
- Spell out definitions.
- Show how calculations were made (probably in an appendix).
- Describe assumptions which were made.
- Show both numbers and percentages.
- Indicate sample sizes and totals.
- Show response rates for surveys.

Talk their language

Use the language, concepts, jargon and abbreviations of the client system in preference to your own. This will help to reassure the client that you really have understood what they are about. Your jargon and language can act as a barrier.

Make a recommendation

Obviously this depends on what you have contracted for, but clients usually like to see that you have considered a range of possible options **and** that you have come down definitely in favour of one of them.

Stress the benefits of recommendations

Describe the recommendations and show how they respond to the problem identified, but also spell out the benefits the client can expect to receive from implementing them.

Avoid argument dilution

Many people believe that advancing reasons for a course of action is like a weighing scales: the more you put in, the more likely it is to come down on your side. This is not the case. If you put weak arguments in with strong the effect is to distract attention away from the strong ones and on to the weak. It is preferable to stick to a few well-founded arguments.

Anticipate and deal with obvious problems

Sometimes a recommendation can be guaranteed to generate questions in the client's mind. Anticipating this and providing answers will increase client confidence that you really have thought through what you are proposing.