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# The paradoxical image of consultant expertise: a rhetorical deconstruction

The paradoxical image of consultant expertise

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to explore the paradoxical image of consultants as “experts without expertise.” It examines the extent to which different stakeholders’ perceptions of consultants’ expertise are aligned, and why.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This research applies a creative approach to survey methodology by asking different stakeholder groups to react to consultancy expertise cartoons. This is followed by a rhetorical interpretation of the perceptions of consultants’ expertise using pathos.

**Findings** – This survey revealed that employees are the most critical of consultants, while clients and consultants retain positive impressions of consultants’ expertise. Unexpectedly, relative to other stakeholder groups, academics occupy a moderately critical position like outsiders. Given that consultants and clients value the same indicators of expertise, this explains the latter stakeholder group’s positive valuation.

**Research limitations/implications** – Since this study focusses on the expert image of consultants more generally, the authors cannot differentiate the conclusions for perceptions related to different types of consultants based on discipline or the image of their specific role (e.g. expert vs coach or change agent).

**Practical implications** – Consultants and academics need pathos that is stakeholder dependent, for getting their expertise better accepted.

**Originality/value** – This paper helps explain why managers, despite the many criticisms of the services consultants provide, continue to hire consultants for their expertise. Furthermore, it sheds light into why managers prefer the services of consultants vs those provided by academics. It also nuances the assumption that academics are the main critics of consultants. Instead, this paper identifies that the majority of consultant critiques come from employees in client organizations.

**Keywords** Experts, Image, Relevance, Pathos, Consultants, Humor

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

As an employee, a client, or a citizen, the effects of consultancy work are a phenomenon to which few people are immune (Fincham and Clark, 2002, p. 1). The consulting business does a good job of selling advice. This sale of advice can be considered an indicator of appreciation for the services consultants deliver. Yet the consultancy sector has also suffered from severe criticism expressed most strongly by the media and in academic discourse. For instance, consultants have been described as “charlatans” and “snake-oil salesmen” who lack real expertise (Abrahamson, 1996; Bloomfield and Danieli, 1995). Similar criticisms are leveled in jokes on the internet: “Hiring consultants to conduct studies can be an excellent means of turning problems into gold. Your problems, into their gold” (<http://nowthatisfunny.blogspot.nl/2005/10/jokes-about-consultants.html>).

These “digs” at consultancy contribute to what Roberts (2005, p. 687) defines as a professional image: “the aggregate of key constituents (i.e. clients, bosses, superiors,



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subordinates, and colleagues) perceptions of one's competence and character." Professional image is built on perceptions, impressions, experiences, knowledge, expectations, feelings, ideas, and can be expressed in different forms of discourse, including jokes. This consultant image is socially constructed and reflects consultants' professional identity and ethos. Professional image is important for both consultants and clients because there are few criteria to objectively assess the quality of advisory services. Thus, relying on image reduces client uncertainty when hiring a consultant (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003). It increases certainty for potential clients by communicating attributes such as reliability and expertise. A bad image might lead a client reconsider the decision to hire, therefore, impression management is crucial for consultants (Clark, 1995; Clark and Salaman, 1998, p. 18).

Academic debate about the image of consultants encompasses extremes, including signs of appreciation as well as criticisms (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002; Armbrüster, 2006). Several researchers have asked "Why do managers select and purchase products from the advice industry, which objective analysis reveals to be methodologically and conceptually flawed?" (Collins, 2004, p. 557). Sturdy *et al.* (2008, p. 134) describe the use of consultants in the following way: "It seems that their services have become indispensable while we love to hate them at the same time." This expertise paradox arises because consultants are criticized heavily while simultaneously greatly appreciated for their expertise.

Some suggestions have been offered to explain this paradox. For example, some say clients hire consultants to highlight or emphasize to employees or shareholders that management is tackling a problem (Dimaggio and Powell, 1983). However, this practice of hiring consultants does not necessarily imply clients expect consultants will solve said issue, or have the required expertise to do so. Then their degree of expertise would not really matter. Alternative explanations from institutional theory could state that hiring consultants may be based on mimetic pressures. This equates to clients hiring consultants because other firms hire consultants, which means that consultants' expertise is again no factor of importance. Or hiring consultants could be based on decoupling, and would be a ritualized practice independent of technical or economic rationales (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Although these institutional explanations might be valid in some situations, it is unlikely that clients continue to behave systematically irrational in economic terms. Holding onto a ritualized practice, irrespective if consultant expertise is flawed or not, could be very costly for a company in the long run. As such, we opt for a different perspective to explain the expertise paradox in which consultant expertise does matter, but differently so for different stakeholders.

This study explores the paradoxical image of consultants as "experts without expertise" from a rhetorical angle. The primary goal is to investigate the different images various stakeholder groups – like clients, employees, academics, outsiders, and other consultants – hold *vis-à-vis* consultants' expertise. To this end, we address the following research questions:

*RQ1.* What image do consultants, clients, employees, academics, and outsiders hold about consultancy expertise?

*RQ2.* Furthermore, why might the suggested expertise paradox emerge?

In this study we utilize a similar categorization as Freeman (2010, p. 1), who considers stakeholders as the "groups who can affect or are affected by a corporation." For clients and employees, this affect is most obvious given that consultants directly influence

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them with their assignments positively or negatively. Academics are affected by consultants in that they become competitors or rivals when academics apply knowledge for clients in contract research. Outsiders are those who base their image of consultants only on what they encounter in newspapers and other public discourse, not based on their own experience or research. Outsider judgments about consultants' expertise are thus least affected by consultants work and are only indirectly influenced via public discourse about consultants. Consultants themselves are affected by the work of other consultants in that they strive to maintain, change, and sometimes undermine their shared professional image and reputation.

By supposing that consultants (as speakers) try to convince these different stakeholders (their audiences) of their "expert image" (their subject), we frame these three elements as a "rhetorical situation" (Aristotle, 1991). How convincing the consultant image as subject appears to the various stakeholders depends, in terms of rhetoric, in part on consultants' professional ethos, which can make the speaker appear more or less convincing. Yet this is not the entire picture. Pathos, that is the ability to relate positively to the values and interests of the stakeholder groups you want to convince, is also involved. Pathos works by evoking the right emotions of sympathy and respect in your audience (Aristotle, 1991; Green, 2004, p. 659). However, due to pathos, consultants' expert image might vary among the stakeholders as their values and interests regarding expert knowledge may also differ. Hence we use the concept of pathos as a theoretical lens to explore differences between stakeholder groups' perceptions about consultants' expertise.

This research uses survey results based partly on stakeholder reactions to consultancy cartoons. Some studies (Sturdy *et al.*, 2008; Bouwmeester, 2013) argue that humorous discourse is an attractive source for studying the consulting profession. People laugh about things they recognize, feel, or care about (Cohen, 1999). Humor theory suggests that such jokes or cartoons are not just jokes, but are assumed to reflect serious ideas (Oring, 1992). Humorous representation, however, is still somewhat distorted, exaggerated, and in need of further interpretation guided by additional sources like consultant literature or the more traditional use of survey questions. As a result, we adopted a novel, mixed-methods approach to explore consultants expert image: challenge stakeholder groups with a combination of critical jokes or satire and follow-up with direct questions about consultants' expertise. After which, we statistically analyzed the differences between these groups.

Our research draws together several approaches to shed light into the study and understanding of consultants' expert image by various stakeholder groups in four significant ways. First, our study helps to further explain and add nuance to the negative and positive aspects of the expertise paradox. It does so by differentiating between the opinions of clients, employees, academics, and outsiders. We challenge the assumption that academics are the main critics of consultants (Collins, 2004, p. 557) since our findings showed employees to be the most critical stakeholder group. We also challenge the assumption that clients are the victims of consultants (Collins, 2004, p. 568; Werr and Styhre, 2002, p. 46). These criticisms are presumed to be widely shared, but make the most sense from the perspective of a client's employees. Employees, may, from time to time, experience the victim perspective, which would explain their attitude from a pathos perspective. Thus far, academic debate on this topic is not sufficiently explicit about whose criticisms are being articulated. Second, this paper aims to contribute to the rigor and relevance debate by detailing how the values of practitioners, such as clients and consultants, differ from the values of academics in regards to consultants' expertise (Berglund and Werr, 2000; Bouwmeester, 2010; Gulati, 2007). The degree of alignment

between client and consultant values will influence how convincing the consultants' expertise is deemed. Again, this can be attributed to pathos. Third, we challenge the view of consulting as an insecure business given its dependence on high client demands (Sturdy, 1997) given that employees, not the commissioning client, proved to be the most critical stakeholders. Finally, we contribute to this field of image research by advocating the use of a non-traditional research method.

## 2. The paradoxical image of consultancy: experts without expertise

The consultancy image is the sum of various individuals' impressions, experiences, knowledge, expectations, feelings, and ideas about this profession (Roberts, 2005). The impressions of external actors are important to consultants, especially when these perceptions are held by paying clients. Consultants deliver services that clients cannot perform on their own (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003, p. 269), but their services are characterized by intangibility and abstractness (Edvardsson, 1990). This information asymmetry forces potential clients to rely on limited information during the evaluation of new consultancy partners (Mitchell, 1994). This, in turn, is further amplified by the fact that professional standards or contracts cannot fully guarantee the quality of the services delivered (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003). In such situations, a client's perceived image of expertise stands in for the lack of available information on credibility, reliability, and responsibility (Fombrun, 1996). Hence a positive image reduces uncertainty and provides consultants with a higher degree of legitimacy (Kipping and Armbrüster, 2002). On the other hand, a bad image has the reverse effect (Fombrun, 1996). Therefore, one can conclude that consultants' image plays an important role in the acquisition of projects. The rapid expansion of consultancy services indicates that successful impression management has been achieved. Consultants have become key figures in the process of knowledge production (Sturdy *et al.*, 2008).

Alvesson and Johansson argue that the debate about consultants involves extremes: opinions are either very positive or very critical. They state, "For many people, consultancy signals interesting, significant, dynamic and prestigious work" (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002, p. 229). Others express appreciation of consultants' problem-solving and coaching skills (Ginsberg and Abrahamson, 1991) and a generally satisfied client base (Payne and Lumsden, 1987). However, for critics, "consultancy means the absence of deeper knowledge, shallowness partly associated with fashions and fads as well as overpayment and an almost immoral attitude" (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002, p. 229). As this demonstrates, it is not unusual for professions to be both highly respected and widely criticized at the same time. Doctors, lawyers, and politicians – like consultants – continue to be the butt of many critical jokes and the target of satire. Galanter (2005, p. 19), in his study about lawyer jokes, suggests that jokes "reveal that the qualities and actions for which the experts are despised are closely related to the things for which they are esteemed." Table I illustrates that this mentality also applies to consultants. In various studies the expertise of consultants is despised; viewed as being ambiguous, unfalsifiable, and abstract. However, these characterizations appear paradoxical when clients continue to hire these same consultants for their expertise.

Both Wood (2002) and Poulfelt and Payne (1994) report that expertise is one of the most important explanations given for hiring consultants, while several other researchers and consultants emphasize their skilled and qualified nature (Fisher, 1990; Greiner and Metzger, 1983). Schein (1990) and Saxton (1995) describe consultants' "expert" and "doctor" roles as the most traditional ones; roles that entail consultants provide "helpful information relevant to the client's problem" (Saxton, 1995, p. 59). This infers an image of

consultants as aiding clients in need who lack the expertise to arrive at the desired solutions on their own (Sturdy *et al.*, 2009, p. 247).

Yet in critical academic discourse, having such confidence in consultant expertise could be described as overconfidence by both clients and consultants. Such critics portray consultants as possessing flawed knowledge, applying superficial methods, and lacking real expertise. They claim that consultants try to cover up these limitations through the use of jargon, storytelling, glossy brochures, slick PowerPoint presentations, and expensive suits (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002; Ashford, 1998; Clark and Salaman, 1998; Pinault, 2000; Whittle, 2006). Critical academics question the value of consultants' storytelling techniques, stating their stories are based on limited research and emphasize plots and symbolism over facts. In such critical discourse, consultants are accused of offering empty rhetoric. This criticism is expressed in a Dilbert-cartoon, which illustrates how "Ratbert" the consultant prepares for his job by compiling a list of words and phrases. Ratbert listens to Dogbert who states, "You'll seem very smart if you randomly combine the words on this list, and make many references to Wal-Mart" (see Figure 2 in our research methods).

Another critique pertains to how little specialized knowledge is required to be a consultant, hence anyone can call himself or herself a consultant (see Figure 1 in our research methods). Unlike law or medicine, consultancy as a profession does not have entry requirements or a generally accepted, common body of knowledge (Exton, 1982; Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003). Given the high likelihood that both parties received business educations, this can create an awkward situation where few differences exist between the expertise of consultants and the knowledge of their clients. Exton (1982, p. 212) argues: "One might well expect that those whose profession it is to counsel others should possess some knowledge not common to those counselled." Critics therefore joke: "A two-page story in Business Week is all it takes to make you an expert" (see [www.sconsig.com/tipscons/topten.htm](http://www.sconsig.com/tipscons/topten.htm)).

The weak boundaries that define the consultancy profession also make room for great variations in consultants' roles and disciplinary backgrounds (e.g. business administration, economics, engineering, psychology). We are aware of several expert consultant roles within the consultancy profession: doctors, legitimizers, devil's advocates, and hired guns (Bouwmeester and Van Werven, 2011; Saxton, 1995; Schein, 1990). However, in Saxton's study, the traditional expert remains the most reported role. Other roles include: change agent, implementer, and process consultant (Kubr, 2002; Schein, 1990); coach and friendly co-pilot (Block, 2000; Nees and Greiner, 1985); an extra pair of hands (Block, 2000); and scapegoat (Sturdy, 2011). In most studies, the traditional expert role is the starting point for further discussion

Criticism	Paradox
Ambiguous/unfalsifiable techniques and results (Clark, 1995; Mitchell, 1994; Sturdy, 1997)	Clients deliberately hire people without real expertise to solve their problems. Therefore paying for inferior services
Abstract and standardized models (Sturdy, 1997; Sturdy <i>et al.</i> 2008)	
Lack industry knowledge (Sturdy, 1997; Sturdy <i>et al.</i> , 2008)	
Old/repackaged ideas (Redekop and Heath, 2007; Sturdy, 1997; Whittle, 2006)	

**Table I.**  
Paradoxes in consultancy criticism

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about such variations, additions, and combinations of roles. Despite huge variety in the construction and perception of consultancy roles, the quality of expertise remains a crucial component in all roles and thus a critical factor in consultants' image.

### 3. Stakeholder dependence on consultants' expert image

Given the paradoxical image of consultants, we examine each stakeholder group's appreciation of consultants' expertise. For a long time rhetoricians have argued that, due to different preferences, values, and interests, what is convincing to one person might not convince someone else. Pathos means taking these differences into account (Aristotle, 1991, p. 1356a). It helps to convince audiences that they are understood. Starting from pathos, could differences in knowledge preferences, interests, and attitudes among stakeholder groups explain the expertise paradox? Is it possible that the clients who hire consultants have different interests and needs for knowledge than their employees, who merely experience the effects of consultants' expertise? And what about outsiders, who have no direct interest in the work of consultants? How do outsiders, with only superficial knowledge about consultant expertise – largely based on hearsay, newspapers, and social media – compare with academics who compete with consultants as providers of relevant management knowledge?

Given that commissioning clients continue to hire consultants, they are likely to have a positive opinion about consultants' expertise despite the critical opinions sometimes attributed to them. Sturdy (2011, p. 522) reports that commissioning clients are the most positive about the impact of consultants compared to client project managers and end-users in a client organization. We might expect an analogical situation in relation to the assessment of consultants' expertise. Of all the stakeholder groups, commissioning clients are in a unique position to assess consultants' expertise since they are able to observe how they do their job from a seat in the "front-row." Clients experience first-hand how consultants apply their expertise to analyze and solve problems. This close interaction between client and consultant can result in a personal relationship and increased confidence that the consultant has the capabilities and expertise to get the job done. It can result in the appearance of client loyalty when the consultant appears to be putting the client's interests ahead of his or her own (Nikolova *et al.*, 2008, pp. 7-8). If things do not develop in this manner the client, as the buyer, has sufficient control to end the relationship or redefine the assignment (Werr and Styhre, 2002, p. 58). Given this close relation we expect clients' image of consultants' expertise to be considerably aligned with consultants' self-image.

Next to clients, employees from client organizations comprise a second important stakeholder group. Like the client they have direct experience working with consultants, and as such, they feel the effects of what consultants do in their own work. Smith (2002, pp. 94-95) demonstrates that employees frequently feel that consultants do not sufficiently involve them in processes, and that they underutilize their knowledge of the organization. This leads to a more critical employee attitude toward consultants. As employees are subjugated to the effects of consultants' plans, they are sometimes forced into the victim role, which could induce a negative image of consultants. A similar claim is made by Sturdy (2011) when he reports that end-users, who are often employees, tend to be less satisfied with consultants than commissioning clients.

Academics engaged in contract research make up a third stakeholder group. They are best characterized as rivals of consultants because consultants and academics

compete as producers of management knowledge (Rynes *et al.*, 2001). It is said that academics do not perform that well when competing with consultants (Berglund and Werr, 2000; Bouwmeester, 2010; Collins, 2004), which may trigger an envious attitude. Academics who study consultants are also said to be critical of them (Armbrüster, 2006, pp. 3-5), sometimes even portraying clients as the victims of consultants (Collins, 2004; Werr and Styhre, 2002, p. 46). While their primary role may be to bring benefits to clients, consultants are criticized for their acquired “insidious power” (Fincham, 1999, p. 336). More generally, academics tend to dislike the experience-based knowledge and normative arguments used by consultants, given that academics are guided by theory and attempt to describe reality in more neutral terms (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002; Bouwmeester, 2010; Berglund and Werr, 2000; Worren *et al.*, 2002). According to the literature, academics are frequently reported to be a critical stakeholder group.

A fourth group of stakeholders consists of outsiders with no specific knowledge of consultants. What knowledge they do possess is largely based on: hearsay; news and media articles; and consultants’ self-projections in interviews, web sites, and advertisements. This group may be nearly indifferent to consultants. Given they are not an interested party like clients, employees, or competing academics, their relationship with consultants is the weakest, their knowledge of consultants is rather superficial and so are the affects.

Mapping the relational distance and the kind of affect between consultants and each stakeholder group helps to identify the force of pathos between them. Clients appear most closely aligned to consultants because they work together on assignments. As such, there is a strong mutual affect between client and consultant. Also close are employees, who experience the positive and negative effects of what consultants do in their daily work. When employees are unhappy with the expertise or work of consultants, the affects can be strong. Academics are more distanced in their role as rivals, but mutual affect between rivals can still be substantial. Most detached and least affected are general outsiders, who are likely to be the most indifferent to consultants’ expertise. This relational distance to consultants influences the perception of different stakeholder groups’ consultancy image. Pathos suggests stronger feelings emerging from clients, employees, and rivals, and more detached reactions from outsiders. By using a pathos perspective, as a first step in our analysis we can explain how relational distance and affect matter to how stakeholders perceive consultants’ expertise.

Second, a pathos perspective can address if and how the (business) interests of these four stakeholder groups are, more or less, aligned with the interests of consultants. Since they engage voluntarily in such collaborations, which suggests a positive client attitude, client and consultant interests will be most closely aligned. The interests of employees are potentially the most opposed to those of clients and consultants, suggesting a more negative image. Often their interests are considered only if clients and consultants decide their feedback to be worthwhile. If consultants make mistakes, employees will experience these consequences directly. Thus, employees can be exposed to flaws in consultants’ expertise without the possibility of exerting sufficient control over the consultant. Academics competing with consultants can also have opposing interests in acquiring assignments. Outsiders are in the most neutral position because they have the least personal stake in the actions of consultants. Our pathos perspective helps to explain how the alignment, misalignment, or neutrality of interests regarding consultants’ expertise influences the overall



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consultancy image that different stakeholder groups hold. Our first hypothesis follows from these two considerations: interest alignment and relational distance:

*H1.* Consultants and clients have a more positive image of consultancy expertise than academics (primarily), employees, and outsiders.

We surmise that differences in knowledge preferences might add a third pathos element to our rhetorical explanation – at least for the stakeholders most interested in expertise: clients as seekers and academics as providers of expertise – of how stakeholders appreciate consultants’ expertise. A pathos perspective suggests that clients may be convinced by different forms of expertise given their knowledge preferences. We know that academics and clients use competing knowledge repertoires “for describing, performing and evaluating the nature of consultancy knowledge” (Whittle, 2006, p. 430). Hence one can conclude that the knowledge repertoires of academics are based on traditional, scientific standards, while consultants and clients may rely more heavily on practitioner-oriented, business knowledge. Table II presents the various indicators of expertise emphasized in the academic tradition (AT) alongside similar indicators stressed by professionals identifying themselves with the business tradition (BT).

The overview provided in Table II shows how Ormerod (1996) and Kelemen and Bansal (2002) argue that academics believe expertise is equal to in-depth insights obtained through rigorous research. Academics underscore the importance of theory and theory building. Like Bouwmeester (2010), these authors find that such scientific standards are less relevant in a context of giving advice. In contrast, consultants focus less on academic standards and more on practical knowledge. Furthermore they consider a strong curriculum vitae, which details previous successes and experiences, to be valid indicators of expertise.

Clients seem to have sympathy with the practice approach more than with the academic approach, and hire consultants based on their industry experience and success in previous projects. Shapiro *et al.* (1993) even suggest that clients find the use of scientific knowledge alienating. More documented experience equates to stronger client evidence that the consultant has sufficient expertise (Dawes *et al.*, 1992). Regarding the criteria for useful and relevant knowledge, clients’ and consultants’ ideas appear to be closely aligned.

Academics, at the other end of the knowledge spectrum, criticize the consultant storytelling method as a cover-up for their lack of expertise. However, the advantage of storytelling for clients is that it creates a more active image of the situation that resonates with the practical experiences of the client and his or her organization (Whittle, 2006). Dodge *et al.* (2005) agree and argue that practitioners apply more narrative approaches when interpreting their reality, while Worren *et al.* (2002) add that narrative and visual knowledge generates greater practitioner interest than the propositional knowledge favored by academics. These authors refer to the lack of narrative knowledge as explanation for the academic relevance gap. When compared to academics, consultants and clients appear to take a different approach. Generally, academics value meticulous analysis over storytelling and prefer to maintain a critical distance and less engagement with client interests (Bouwmeester, 2010). These differences suggest that, when evaluated from a pathos perspective, academics will assess consultants’ expertise less positively compared to clients. Clients may be more convinced by the expertise of consultants because consultants and clients share many knowledge preferences. Comparing

*Expertise indicators emphasized in academic tradition*

Theoretical knowledge	Theoretical knowledge is often associated with academic knowledge as it is mostly based on rigorous research. Theoretical knowledge remains valid for a long time (Bouwmeester, 2010; Ormerod, 1996; Tynjälä, 1999)
Research/analytical skills	The ability to apply rigorous methods for analyses and fact finding. The information that results from the analyses can be used for theory building or accurate advice (Bouwmeester, 2010; Jones, 2003)
Rigorous methods	Rigorous methods refer to fact-based support, and therefore leads to arguments that are proved to be valid or true. Rigor is often associated with academic research (Bouwmeester, 2010; Gulati, 2007; Kelemen and Bansal, 2002)
Education	Evidence that the expert completed a validated curriculum. Academic education suggests the presence of a knowledge base, and analytical and research skills (Bills, 1988; Creplet <i>et al.</i> , 2001)
Specialist knowledge	Knowledge specifically focussed on one subject. Often provide in-depth argumentation accepted in a specific theoretical field. Associated with academics (Blackmore, 2000; Bouwmeester, 2010)
Publications	Having written an academic or professional paper or book is an indicator of expertise. Clients tend to select experts based on their publications (Armbrüster and Barchewitz, 2004; Creplet <i>et al.</i> , 2001; McGrail <i>et al.</i> , 2006)

*Expertise indicators emphasized in business tradition*

Credentials/CV	Credentials offer evidence of accomplishments. It includes the expert's references from previous clients, indicating the qualifications and competences of the expert (Bunderson and Barton, 2011; Jones, 2003; Kubr, 2002)
Experience	Experience indicates the application of expertise in several projects, companies, and industries. Because of their unique position consultants become aware of a large set of problems and solutions (Bunderson and Barton, 2011; Creplet <i>et al.</i> , 2001; Dawes <i>et al.</i> , 1992)
Know-how/practical knowledge	Know-how is based on experiences, and allows experts to be flexible in coping with changing realities. It refers to the advanced skills to translate theory into actual practice (Bouwmeester, 2010; Creplet <i>et al.</i> , 2001; Jones, 2003)
Previous success	The successful completion of previous equivalent projects provides evidence of the claimed expertise. Success provides experts legitimacy (Corcoran and McLean, 1998; Creplet <i>et al.</i> , 2001; Jones, 2003)
Generalist knowledge	Interdisciplinary knowledge that covers various subjects and industries. It allows experts to see inconsistencies by comparing the results from different sources of knowledge (Blau, 1979; Bouwmeester, 2010; Kubr, 2002)
Billing rate	"In the absence of alternative, external quality indicators an important indicator of the quality of a consultants' expertise may be seen to be its price. The higher the billing rate, the greater their expertise may be assumed to be" (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003; Jones, 2003, p. 259; Kubr, 2002)

**Table II.**  
Indicators of  
expertise

these more narrative practitioner, vs more theoretical academic approaches leads us to our second hypothesis:

*H2.* Compared to academics, clients and consultants assign higher importance to expertise indicators from the business world than to academic indicators.

*H1* and *H2* are similar in their considerations of clients and consultants. Clients and consultants share many knowledge preferences and their interests align when agreeing to consultancy assignments. Both clients and consultants are interested in forming a close

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relationship, therefore the three aspects explored from a pathos perspective – relational distance, interest alignment, and knowledge preferences – align for them most closely of all the stakeholder groups discussed.

#### 4. Research methods

##### *Analytical perspective*

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This study emphasizes that jokes convey serious ideas, which are communicated because they are meaningful (Oring, 1992). In other words, people do not laugh about things they neither recognize nor care about (Cohen, 1999). Galanter (2005, p. 21) suggests that jokes and cartoons express shared rather than isolated perceptions; they help to inform public opinion (Galanter, 1998). By presenting different stakeholder groups with humorous consultancy cartoons and watching their reactions, we captured the image they hold toward consultants' expertise.

The consultancy image is a social construction based on perceptions that are shared by different groups of people. In line with Doherty (2011) and Bouwmeester (2013), using jokes and cartoons lends itself to an interpretative epistemology for discussing the consultant image as reflected in these sources. Respondents were also assumed to possess the interpretative ability to respond to our questions, to interpret two cartoons on consultant expertise, and to relate these interpretations to their own opinions (i.e. do they agree with the sentiment expressed to some extent or not).

When interpreting the responses, we adopted a rhetorical analytical perspective. We looked at elements of the consultants' expertise that affected stakeholder groups differently due to their interests, attitudes, and values. The concept of pathos suggests a focus on the interests, values, and attitudes of such different audiences because they explain variation in the persuasiveness of the message (Aristotle, 1991). In this case that message is about consultants' expert image. Alongside this interpretive approach, we used statistical analysis to investigate whether differences in stakeholder perceptions between groups were significant.

##### *Cartoon selection*

The consultancy expertise cartoons we used for this study were selected from a database built by Haffmans (2010) and Bouwmeester (2013). This collection was expanded upon by searching Google, using a combination of the search terms "cartoon(s)" and: "consultant"; "consulting"; "consultancy"; and "management consultant." Terms such as "expertise" were used to focus the search. From this broad sample, we selected two cartoons that express a critical view of consultants' expertise (Figures 1 and 2).

The first cartoon (see <http://cnx.org/contents/7037d48a-405a-476e-b48d-e0b5b0262641@9/project-planning>) reflects the criticism that consultants provide advice on subjects with which they have limited knowledge and expertise. The underlying assumption is that it does not matter how much you know as a consultant, it is enough to merely say you are an expert. This corresponds to the assumed absence of deeper knowledge described by Alvesson and Johansson (2002, p. 229).

The second cartoon (see [www.dilbert.com](http://www.dilbert.com)) reflects the criticism that consultant rhetoric is empty, and that it works to hide a lack of expertise behind buzzwords and storytelling. Some authors say these consultant techniques succeed in confusing clients, and trick them into believing a consultant has expertise in a subject matter (e.g. Alvesson and Johansson, 2002; Clark and Salaman, 1998).

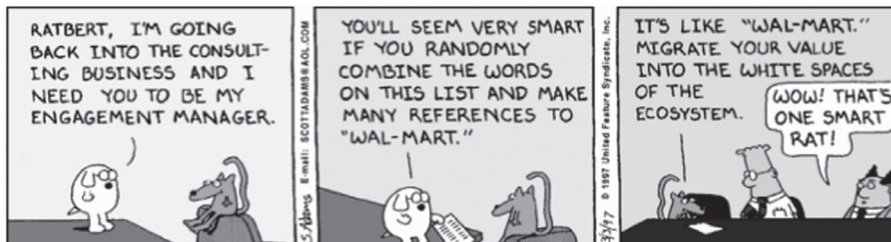
Since our focus remains on consultants' expertise, it is likely that when providing answers our respondents mainly envisioned expert consultants. However, coaches or



"I know nothing about the subject,  
but i'm happy to give you my expert opinion."

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Figure 1.  
Cartoon 1



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Figure 2.  
Cartoon 2

implementers also require expertise and might be included in our respondents' understanding of consultants' expert image. To assess respondents evaluation of the relevance of these alternative roles, we asked them about the value for money (1 = low, 2 = medium, 3 = high) of 11 different roles. Table III displays that our respondents considered the "expert role" and the "doctor role" of consultants as the best value for their money. This outcome indicates that our respondents would be most willing to hire consultants to fulfill their needs for applicable knowledge, analysis, diagnosis, and therapy or advice as suggested in the studies of Poufelt and Payne (1994) and Wood (2002).

#### *Survey, sample, and statistical analysis*

This research used a quantitative survey approach to gather standardized data in order to facilitate group comparisons. Since this was the first survey designed to explore the expertise paradox in consulting, our two-part survey was largely self-designed using the online tool Qualtrics ([www.qualtrics.com](http://www.qualtrics.com)) and then distributed via a direct link. The first

part of the survey uses humorous cartoons to measure different stakeholder reactions, while the second part conformed more closely to a traditional survey with statements on expertise. The first two items in Table V were adapted from Poulfelt and Payne's (1994, p. 431) research.

Stakeholder groups were initially targeted by spreading the link to the survey via LinkedIn groups aimed at consultants and managers, and via the authors' networks. Respondents were asked various questions in order to help identify their stakeholder group. This initial search strategy sufficiently reached all stakeholder groups except for academics. As such, a second round of outreach via e-mail targeted academics who were known to the authors based on their publications about consultants. This ensured sufficient group size in order to compare the academics with the four other stakeholder groups. The survey was opened for response for one month. The final sample size of this research consisted of  $n = 216$  respondents (consultants 22, clients 26, employees 19, academics 17, outsiders 16 percent).

Since this research compares multiple groups, we used one-way ANOVA tests combined with a *post hoc* Tukey-Kramer test to identify specific differences between groups. Subsequently, the results were controlled with a Games-Howell test due to the fact that sample sizes were unequal. When performing ANOVA tests, the data should ideally comply with two assumptions (Field, 2009). First is the assumption concerning the normality of the distribution. This research complies with this criterion due to the sample sizes used: "The central limit theorem shows that, for sample sizes greater than 5 or 10 per group the means are approximately normally distributed regardless of the original distribution" (Norman, 2010, p. 628). Second, we assume homogeneity of variance, which was tested with a Levene test where significance levels higher than 0.05 indicate homogeneous data. While in some cases the data lacked homogeneity, we still choose to conduct ANOVA tests because ANOVA remains a robust test for such unequal variances (Glass *et al.*, 1972; Lix *et al.*, 1996).

## 5. Results

### *Stakeholder impressions of consultants' expertise*

To study the paradox "experts without expertise," we asked respondents to assess the two cartoons presented in the methods section. The respondents were asked to consider how funny they thought the cartoons were by assigning them stars from 1 (least funny) to 5 (most funny). Next, they were asked about the extent of truth portrayed by these cartoons, and whether or not they reflected their own perception of consultants. The

**Table III.**  
Respondents  
assessment of  
the value for money  
of different  
consultant roles

Role	Average value for money ( $n = 216$ ) 1 = low, 2 = medium, 3 = high	SD ( $n = 216$ )
Expert consultant	2.31	0.69
Doctor role	2.28	0.60
Coach	2.14	0.69
Devil's advocate	2.11	0.67
Implementer	2.07	0.73
Change bringer	1.98	0.66
Hired gun	1.91	0.73
Friendly co-pilot	1.86	0.67
Extra pair of hands	1.80	0.65
Legitimizer	1.79	0.71
Scape goat	1.69	0.73

responses were assessed on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). Table IV presents a summary of the results.

Table IV illustrates that there were no significant statistical differences among groups regarding the question of how funny they found the two consulting expertise cartoons. Both cartoons were rated as fairly funny and awarded at least three stars. The groups did not differ in their judgments about the element of truth in the cartoons (average value 3.2). In response to the question of whether respondents agreed or not with the image expressed by the two cartoons, employees agreed significantly more (3.28 first cartoon and 3.45 second cartoon) than clients and consultants. These latter two stakeholder groups tended to disagree with the image expressed by the cartoons. Academics and outsiders held an intermediate position. Generally employees agreed most with the criticisms implied by the cartoons, suggesting that the humor displayed by the cartoons contained an element of bitterness for employees.

Table V summarizes the responses gathered with traditional survey questions about consultants' expertise. The different reactions displayed between the five groups are in line with responses to the cartoon questions summarized in Table IV.

There is a notable absence of significant differences among stakeholder groups for the claim that consultants are good at understanding a company's specific problems (average 3.58) and are able to structure complex situations (average 3.56). On average, all groups agreed that consultants had mastered these skills. It can, therefore, be concluded that criticisms about consultants' expertise do not focus directly on their skills.

Furthermore the average perception about the relevance of consultant knowledge was moderately positive, but with significant differences displayed among groups.

Questions	Statistical differences between 5 groups	
	ANOVA	Tukey-Kramer
Cartoon 1: Funniness Av. $\bar{X}$ = 3.25 SD = 1.050	No $F(4,211) = 1.630$ $p = 0.168 > 0.05$	None $p > 0.05$
Cartoon 2: Funniness Av. $\bar{X}$ = 3.00 SD = 1.119	No $F(4,211) = 1.957$ $p = 0.102 > 0.05$	None $p > 0.05$
Cartoon 1: Kernel of truth Av. $\bar{X}$ = 3.24 SD = 1.029	No $F(4,211) = 0.552$ $p = 0.716 > 0.05$	None $p > 0.05$
Cartoon 2: Kernel of truth Av. $\bar{X}$ = 3.21 SD = 0.998	No $F(4,211) = 1.859$ $p = 0.119 > 0.05$	None $p > 0.05$
Cartoon 1: Reflects the image of consultants Av. $\bar{X}$ = 2.82 SD = 1.037	Yes $F(4,211) = 5.386$ $p = 0.000 < 0.001$	Between employees ( $M = 3.28$ ) and clients ( $M = 2.64$ ), $p < 0.05$ Between employees ( $M = 3.28$ ) and consultants ( $M = 2.38$ ), $p < 0.001$ Between academics ( $M = 3.03$ ) and consultants ( $M = 2.38$ ), $p < 0.05$
Cartoon 2: Reflects the image of consultants Av. $\bar{X}$ = 2.91 SD = 1.046	Yes $F(4,211) = 5.040$ $p = 0.001 < 0.01$	Between employees ( $M = 3.45$ ) and clients ( $M = 2.73$ ), $p < 0.01$ Between employees ( $M = 3.45$ ) and consultants ( $M = 2.55$ ), $p < 0.001$

**Table IV.** Expertise of consultants: responses to cartoon 1 and 2

Statements	Statistical differences between 5 groups	
	ANOVA	Tukey-Kramer
Consultants are competent at structuring complex situations Av. $\bar{X}$ = 3.58 SD = 0.808	No $F(4,211) = 1.672$ $p = 0.158 > 0.05$	None $p > 0.05$
Good at understanding the specific problem of a company Av. $\bar{X}$ = 3.56 SD = 0.822	No $F(4,211) = 1.646$ $p = 0.164 > 0.05$	None $p > 0.05$
Consultants have much relevant knowledge Av. $\bar{X}$ = 3.46 SD = 0.806	Yes $F(4,211) = 6.037$ $p = 0.000 < 0.001$	Between clients ( $M = 3.80$ ) and outsiders ( $M = 3.34$ ), $p < 0.05$ Between clients ( $M = 3.80$ ) and academics ( $M = 3.24$ ), $p < 0.01$ Between clients ( $M = 3.80$ ) and employees ( $M = 3.12$ ), $p < 0.001$ Between consultants ( $M = 3.60$ ) and employees ( $M = 3.12$ ), $p < 0.05$
Consultants apply superficial methods Av. $\bar{X}$ = 3.11 SD = 0.994	Yes $F(4,211) = 5.610$ $p = 0.000 < 0.001$	Between employees ( $M = 3.57$ ) and clients ( $M = 2.91$ ), $p < 0.05$ Between employees ( $M = 3.57$ ) and consultants ( $M = 2.72$ ), $p < 0.001$ Between academics ( $M = 3.37$ ) and consultants ( $M = 2.72$ ), $p < 0.05$
Consultants have flawed expertise Av. $\bar{X}$ = 3.07 SD = 0.960	Yes $F(4,211) = 4.089$ $p = 0.003 < 0.01$	Between employees ( $M = 3.45$ ) and consultants ( $M = 2.83$ ), $p < 0.05$ Between employees ( $M = 3.45$ ) and clients ( $M = 2.80$ ), $p < 0.01$

**Table V.**  
Expertise of consultants: responses to questions

Clients (3.80) and consultants (3.60) agree about the relevance of consultants' knowledge, while all other groups were significantly less convinced. When asked about the use of superficial methods by consultants, employees (3.57) and academics (3.37) tended to agree. On the other hand, clients and consultants appeared to disagree and both valued this below 3. The same logic applied to questions regarding flawed consultancy expertise: clients and consultants slightly disagree with this claim while employees agree significantly more with this criticism (3.45).

Tables IV and V both demonstrate that employees are the most negative stakeholder group concerning the relevance of consultants' knowledge and the superficiality of their methods. This group retained the most critical opinion of consultants, while clients and consultants had the most positive image of consultants' expertise.

#### *Discussion: H1*

Based on these results, we find some support for *H1*. Both consultants and clients, compared to that of employees, held a fairly positive image of consultants. Employees had a significantly more negative image, and were more likely to consider consultants' methods to be superficial, their expertise flawed, and their rhetoric empty. Consultants and clients rejected the negative image of consultants' expertise as portrayed by the cartoons. Overall, the results indicate that client opinions are very much aligned with the opinions of consultants. Outsiders and academics, however, held more moderate

points of view. These two stakeholder groups were more critical than clients and more positive than employees, but never significantly.

As a result, *HI* is partially rejected. As expected from a pathos perspective, clients and consultants hold a more positive image of consultants than employees. Outsiders and academics were in an intermediate position in their criticisms. Contrary to the literature discussed to develop *HI*, academics are not the most critical stakeholder group. For the most part, responses from academics were not significantly more critical than the responses of clients and consultants. When perceptions of consultants by academics were less positive than their counterparts, as was the case regarding the relevance of consultant knowledge, academics, like outsiders, scored still slightly above 3. This made it difficult to interpret how critical academics really were toward consultants' expertise. "Not impressed" seems to be a better characterization. Additionally *HI* was only partially true for the predictions about consultants' expertise, but had to be entirely rejected for consultants' skills. Our research showed that all stakeholder groups assessed consultants' skills as fairly positive.

### *Indicators of expertise*

So far our findings have indicated that academics, when compared to consultants and clients, were less positive about the relevance of consultant knowledge and more critical of their methods. Clients strongly appreciated consultant knowledge, whereas employees tended to be more critical. To delve further into this issue, we focussed on the stakeholder groups most interested in knowledge – clients as knowledge seekers and consultants and academics as knowledge providers. We asked these respondents to indicate the level of importance they assigned to various indicators of expertise: six based on the AT and six based on the practitioner or BT. Table VI presents the ranking of expertise indicators from most important to least important. These expertise indicators were calculated as the average of different stakeholders' perceptions based on a 5-point scale (where 1 = very unimportant, 2 = somewhat unimportant, 3 = somewhat important, 4 = important, 5 = very important).

Table VI indicates that all stakeholder groups agreed on the importance of four expertise indicators, namely: experience (BT); analytical skills (AT); specialist knowledge (AT); and rigorous methods (AT). Here we do not find significant differences between any of the five groups. Since only one of these four agreed upon indicators (experience) is from the BT, it appears that indicators in the BT are the most contested. Yet, on average, business indicators were valued highest with both know-how (4.32) and experience (4.31) at the top.

Table VI shows that eight indicators were valued differently by at least two of the five groups. Our results again demonstrated agreement between consultants and clients, who both emphasized business indicators. Clients and consultants both assigned significantly higher importance to know-how (values around 4.5) and previous success (values around 4), while academics valued them both at half a point lower (3.95 and 3.47, respectively). Additionally clients valued generalist knowledge (3.91) more than academics (3.34), while academics assigned higher importance to academic indicators. Academics valued theoretical knowledge (3.79) more than consultants (3.11), and publications (3.21) more than clients (2.36). Clients considered publications rather unimportant as an indicator of expertise.

Where indicators were contested, in line with our earlier results, employees were the most critical stakeholder group. This applied to indicators from both the academic and the BT. Employees were especially critical of two elements: consultants' premium



Indicators Ranks	ANOVA	Statistical differences between 5 groups Tukey-Kramer
1. Know-how (bt <sup>a</sup> ) Av. $\bar{X}$ = 4.32 SD = 0.726	Yes $F(4,211) = 4.138$ $p = 0.003 < 0.01$	Between clients ( $M = 4.46$ ) and academics ( $M = 3.95$ ), $p < 0.01$ Between consultants ( $M = 4.47$ ) and academics ( $M = 3.95$ ), $p < 0.01$
2. Experience (bt) Av. $\bar{X}$ = 4.31 SD = 0.711	Yes <sup>b</sup> $F$ (4,211) = 3.055 $p = 0.018 < 0.05$	None $p > 0.05$
3. Analytical skills (at <sup>a</sup> ) Av. $\bar{X}$ = 4.04 SD = 0.831	No $F(4,211) = 2.004$ $p = 0.095 > 0.05$	None $p > 0.05$
4. Specialist knowledge (at) Av. $\bar{X}$ = 3.89 SD = 0.870	No $F(4,211) = 1.313$ $p = 0.266 > 0.05$	None $p > 0.05$
5. Previous success (bt) Av. $\bar{X}$ = 3.79 SD = 0.879	Yes $F(4,211) = 5.966$ $p = 0.000 < 0.001$	Between clients ( $M = 4.11$ ) and academics ( $M = 3.47$ ), $p < 0.01$ Between clients ( $M = 4.11$ ) and employees ( $M = 3.40$ ), $p < 0.01$ Between consultants ( $M = 3.96$ ) and employees ( $M = 3.40$ ), $p < 0.05$
6. Curriculum vitae (bt) Av. $\bar{X}$ = 3.73 SD = 0.838	No <sup>c</sup> $F$ (4,211) = 2.036 $p = 0.090 > 0.05$	Between clients ( $M = 3.91$ ) and employees ( $M = 3.43$ ), $p < 0.05$
7. Generalist knowledge (bt) Av. $\bar{X}$ = 3.60 SD = 0.919	Yes $F(4,211) = 3.071$ , $p = 0.017 < 0.05$	Between clients ( $M = 3.91$ ) and employees ( $M = 3.38$ ), $p < 0.05$ Between clients ( $M = 3.91$ ) and academics ( $M = 3.34$ ), $p < 0.05$
8. Rigorous methods (at) Av. $\bar{X}$ = 3.55 SD = 0.919	No $F(4,211) = 1.877$ $p = 0.116 > 0.05$	None $p > 0.05$
9. Theoretical knowledge (at) Av. $\bar{X}$ = 3.34 SD = 0.847	Yes $F(4,211) = 5.666$ $p = 0.000 < 0.001$	Between academics ( $M = 3.79$ ) and consultants ( $M = 3.11$ ), $p < 0.01$ Between academics ( $M = 3.79$ ) and employees ( $M = 3.03$ ), $p < 0.01$
10. Education (at) Av. $\bar{X}$ = 3.12 SD = 0.891	Yes $F(4,211) = 2.867$ $p = 0.024 < 0.05$	Between academics ( $M = 3.37$ ) and employees ( $M = 2.80$ ), $p < 0.05$
11. Billing rate (bt) Av. $\bar{X}$ = 2.78 SD = 1.019	Yes $F(4,211) = 5.501$ $p = 0.000 < 0.001$	Between clients ( $M = 3.04$ ) and employees ( $M = 2.28$ ), $p < 0.001$ Between consultants ( $M = 3.02$ ) and employees ( $M = 2.28$ ), $p < 0.01$
12. Publications (at) Av. $\bar{X}$ = 2.45 SD = 0.929	Yes $F(4,211) = 10.794$ $p = 0.000 < 0.001$	Between academics ( $M = 3.21$ ) and clients ( $M = 2.36$ ), $p < 0.001$ Between academics ( $M = 3.21$ ) and consultants ( $M = 2.32$ ), $p < 0.001$ Between academics ( $M = 3.21$ ) and employees ( $M = 2.00$ ), $p < 0.001$

**Table VI.**  
Statistical results  
for indicators  
of expertise

**Notes:** <sup>a</sup>(bt) stands for business tradition, (at) for academic tradition indicators; <sup>b</sup>the ANOVA did reveal a significant result, but none of the *post hoc* tests indicated which groups differ; <sup>c</sup>however the ANOVA did not reveal a significant results, both the *post hoc* tests did

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billing rates (2.28) and the importance of publications (2.00) as expertise indicators. Also, on average, these indicators were ranked as the least important.

The paradoxical  
image of  
consultant  
expertise

*Discussion: H2*

Overall, our results supported *H2*. We found that clients favored expertise that aligns more closely with the professional values of consultants than with those of academics. Consultants and clients, when compared to academics, considered some business indicators of expertise more important (i.e. know-how and previous successes). Academics, on the other hand, assigned significantly more importance to some academic indicators of expertise (i.e. theoretical knowledge and publications). These different valuations assigned to knowledge indicators by each stakeholder group explains why clients appreciate consultants' expertise in spite of the criticisms articulated in academic discourse. Clients are immune to these criticisms because of their own preferences, which this study acknowledges through its pathos perspective.

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## 6. Discussion

Our study makes four theoretical contributions: one to the debate about consultants' professional expert image, another to the rigor and relevance debate, one to research on uncertainty in consultant-client relations, and, finally, a contribution to research methods. First, our study aims to deconstruct the consultancy expertise paradox by applying a pathos perspective to demonstrate that various stakeholder groups hold different perceptions about consultants' expertise based on what is most relevant to them. By deconstructing the expertise paradox using rhetorical analysis with a focus on pathos, this work adds nuance to the academic criticisms about consultants referred to in Alvesson and Johansson (2002) and Armbrüster (2006, pp. 3-5). In their portrayal of clients as the helpless victims of consultants (Collins, 2004, p. 568; Werr and Styhre 2002, p. 46), these authors seem to imply that clients must also be critical of consultants. Consequently, clients may hire consultants only to make it visible to other relevant stakeholders that they are actively addressing a problem (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, p. 152), without necessarily assuming that consultants have the expertise and skills to truly solve their problem. Alternatively, there may be a decoupling mechanism at play (Meyer and Rowan, 1977, p. 356). We doubt the force of such explanations in the light of our results.

Since clients continue to hire consultants, one can assume clients are able to select the consultant best suited for their specific needs, and, that they are also likely aware of the potential pitfalls related to advice services (Poufelt and Payne, 1994; Kitay and Wright, 2004; Werr and Styhre, 2002). Contrary to the critics' suggestions, we find that clients are largely positive about consultants, and for the most part, agree with consultants' positive self-image regarding their own expertise. The positive client perception about consultants can be explained by pathos insofar as clients' and consultants' values and attitudes about expertise are closely aligned. Given these shared preferences, commissioning clients seem immune to criticisms voiced by other stakeholders.

As discussed in Schein (1997), within the client system employees are positioned as the "passive recipients" of consultants. Our results show they are the stakeholder group most critical of consultants. Importantly, the entire client system is not critical of consultants and employees are also quite critical of academics and their indicators of expertise. Again, applying a pathos perspective here makes sense given that consultants try to serve the interests of their clients. That said, consultants do not

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serve the interests of a client's employees to the same degree. Suggesting clients are critical of consultants based only on the denunciations voiced by employees leads to incorrect generalizations.

The literature on consultants promotes another flawed assumption in need of challenging, namely: the critical attitude of academics. Collins (2004, p. 568), for example, states that academics "put the *con* in consultancy." We found that the academics in our sample – who were themselves involved in consulting research – hold a rather nuanced viewpoint compared to that of employees. We also found that the views of academics were more similar to the views of outsiders in that they were less outspoken and more detached. Although critical of some issues in our findings, our academic sample did not share the same criticisms as voiced in the consultant literature. Thus, if academics act more like a spokesman then they have not been very explicit about from where the criticisms they refer to originate or what persons were their sources. All in all we have to reformulate our first hypothesis into a new proposition: consultant and clients have a more positive image of consultancy expertise than employees. It means excluding academics and outsiders from the equation. Given that our academic sample consisted predominately of researchers studying consultants, a limitation in our sample is that they were not necessarily rivals of consultants who compete to win contract research.

By better attributing each stakeholder group's evaluations about consultants' expertise, and by addressing mistaken generalizations, we deconstruct the expertise paradox and add clarity and nuance to the debate about consultants' expertise. We do so by providing a rhetorical explanation grounded in pathos that explores contrasts in how consultants' expertise is perceived. Consultants' expert image was found to be socially constructed, and constructed differently by various stakeholder groups – consultants (i.e. their own self-image), clients, employees, academics, and outsiders. We even expect to find more subtle differences within these groups, as we have pointed out for the group of academics in our sample.

A second limitation of this study is that we only differentiate for audiences, but we do not differentiate within groups of consultants (i.e. for different consultant roles or for their different disciplinary backgrounds). We believe that these elements – varying consultant roles and backgrounds – will also influence the social construction of consultants' expert image. Further research can help differentiate consultancy ethos as an additional rhetorical explanation for perceived conflicts and contrasts regarding perceptions of consultants' expertise.

Second, our findings contribute to the academic rigor and relevance debate by distinguishing more stakeholder groups than only clients/managers vs academics. Instead of opting for analyses produced by academics in their contract research (see Bouwmeester, 2010; Fincham, 1999; Collins, 2004), we add a rhetorical explanation for why managers hire consultants. Based on a pathos analysis, we find that clients and consultants share what they consider to be relevant knowledge and skills. These preferences are opposed to academic values, which favor rigor and strictly framed theoretical knowledge (Kieser and Nicolai, 2005). Thus both clients and consultants value indicators that fit the BT over those of the AT. However, their academic counterparts consider both sets of indicators as equally important. As a result, the boundaries between clients and academics discussed in Gulati (2007) also seem to be present between consultants and academics. This does not seem to hold true between consultants and clients given their shared knowledge preferences. These findings are in accordance with Shapiro *et al.* (1993) insofar as clients consider

the kind of scientific knowledge presented in academic publications alienating. The alignment of client and consultant values regarding expertise indicators provides a new rhetorical explanation for Bouwmeester's (2010) and Collins's (2004) observations that academic contract researchers perform poorly – at least in terms of market share – in competition with consultants. Therefore, as long as academics cling to AT without questioning their own standards, they will be unable to compete with consultants when bidding to produce advice and management knowledge. Based on our consideration of pathos, consultants are better able to convince clients of their added value.

Third, our study adds to a more differentiated understanding of consultancy as an insecure business. Sturdy (1997) argues that consultants seek the acceptance of clients, but work under high pressure to meet the expectations of their self-announced, unique, and value-adding services. Our findings portray an image of a self-confident consultant, with an optimistic image of his or her own expert knowledge. Where previous studies interpret this confidence merely as means to better exploit a client's uncertainty, an interpretation that has been criticized by Kitay and Wright (2004), the present research shows that consultants' self-confidence is reinforced by the fairly positive image clients have of consultants' expertise. Here clients reassure the position of consultants, which frames the concerns discussed by Sturdy (1997) differently. It is unlikely that a lack of management support can be the primary source of presumed consultant insecurities. Our findings suggest that where these insecurities emerge, they are provoked by negative and critical employee attitudes coupled with a lack of cooperation from these employees. This ultimately works to undermine the position of consultants.

Finally, this study made use of both conventional and unconventional methods to study the expertise paradox: both consultancy expertise cartoons and more traditional consultant survey questions. Jokes and cartoons exist and poke fun at wide range of subjects (Bouwmeester, 2013; Doherty, 2011; Galanter, 2005), which multiplies the number of possible new research questions. Given the other consulting paradoxes this research has not touched upon, we recommend that future studies apply similar methods to explore these issues. For example, future research could explore the tensions between consultants' high status and their occupational taint. There are many "taints" associated with dirty work (Ashforth *et al.*, 2007) that could apply to consulting, such as: moral taint (dishonesty, focus on sell-on relationships); social taint (serving low-status clients); and physical taint (based on high work pressures) that potentially conflict with the high status of the profession. Jokes may help to illuminate such tensions.

## 7. Conclusion

Our findings demonstrate that the image of consultants' expertise differs between stakeholder groups. Concerning the value of consultants' expertise, this research shows that the consultancy image is socially constructed, and done so differently by various stakeholder groups. When differentiating the pathos perspective within the various stakeholder groups, one may discover more variation in the perception of consultants' images than already identified. Thus, generalization seems problematic in this instance. Moreover, these localized social constructions of professional image get institutionalized in a manner similar to that of managerial practices (Green, 2004). Future research that explores these local processes of institutionalization may therefore add more depth to our rhetorical explanation.

While the social constructions of consultants' expertise by employees and some academics are less positive, one practical implication stemming from this research is the need for consultants to pay more attention to their impression management. Our research has shown that such impression management seems to work with clients. This will make consultants' management of impressions, as described by Clark (1995) and Clark and Salaman (1998), more complex. Their pathos must be tailored to different stakeholder groups, especially also to employees.

The implication of stakeholder-dependent impression management will, however, also apply to academics in their role as producers of relevant management knowledge. When they work for clients, they also need to be sensitive to the difference between client and employee interests. Even further, academics must acknowledge that practitioners' knowledge preferences for more narrative kinds of knowledge differ from that of their usual audiences – especially other academics. In order to better convey their message when addressing different audiences, academics will also need to develop pathos that is stakeholder dependent. This may, in turn, assist academics in overcoming their difficulties of competing with consultants (Bouwmeester, 2010; Collins, 2004).

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#### Further reading

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