

The Role of the Internal Consultant

by

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We must also thank our colleagues for their patience and prompting us to finish this report! – Our research, questions and curiosity will long continue, but we had to stop somewhere!

We welcome comments from any readers of this report, so that our knowledge and understanding continues to grow.

Executive Summary

In 2003 Roffey Park's Management Agenda reported that 32% of respondent organisations have internal consultancy teams, and that the majority of those who do not, believe their organisation would benefit from creating one.

As numbers of internal consultancy groups grow, our research at Roffey Park has sought to find out more about this trend, guided by the following questions:

- Why are organisations increasingly creating internal consultancy roles?
- What specific challenges and tensions do people experience in these roles?
- How are internal consultants developed?
- Is the internal consultancy process cycle the same as that of external consultants?
- How is it possible to offer consultancy services when you are part of the system to which you consult?

Over the past year and a half, we have interviewed 40 internal consultants, and held workshops to interrogate our findings with approximately 50 more. Our bespoke work in developing internal consultancy teams and our interactions with individual internal consultants through our 'Consultancy Skills for Organisational Change' programme, and our MSc in People and Organisational Development have given us additional insight into this complex role.

We have found that internal consultancy teams are most likely to be found in the financial services and public sectors, and that the individual consultants operate across a range of business areas. Most usually these have developed from centralised service functions such as IT and HR, but can also include general 'business' consultants, supporting both operational and (sometimes) strategic needs of the broader business areas. Issues such as cross charging, team structure, and reporting lines varied widely across the surveyed group.

The reasons given for the creation of internal consultancy groups indicate the rising push by functions such as HR to establish strategic purpose, but also suggest rather more bald financial imperatives ("controlling burgeoning costs on externals") on the part of other organisations.

What distinguishes the 'internal consultant' from others playing similar roles, for example project managers, centralised service providers, or business partners? By definition consultants operate outside the systems to which they consult. They do not, typically, hold budgetary or other resource power. The tools of their trade are knowledge, experience, expert skills and, especially, their ability to influence. In practice, the definition of 'consultancy' varies widely and is loosely applied. Consultants reported having to take a pragmatic approach and play different roles to gain entry with their internal clients. However this has a downside: consultants reported lack of role clarity as one of the biggest challenges in their work.

The research highlighted how some organisations appear more equipped to gain value from the internal consultant. Factors influencing this include having a clearly understood strategic reason for the development of the role, visible senior level support, and an understanding of the role by the consultants themselves. The prevailing culture will, of course, strongly influence the role's success.

Interestingly, the research shows that a strong 'internal customer' culture can make internal consultancy practice difficult to negotiate, as managers continue to expect instant solutions to the problems they define.

Unlike external consultants, the shadow of internal consultants' previous roles casts a heavy influence over their perceived credibility and access to particular types of work. This is not helped by the way organisations 'position' the consultant role. The research found that, in many cases, existing central service units had 'rebranded' themselves as consultancy groups without substantive changes to personnel, skill levels, or modes of working. The survey identified that over half of these internal consultants (62%) class themselves as middle or junior managers. An impact of this is that more junior staff members are now asked to perform challenging and sophisticated roles, often to influence senior managers, without being perceived as having the credibility or authority to do so. Against a backdrop of increasing organisational politics, new internal consultants report feeling disempowered and unable to extend the range of their interventions.

One of the key challenges facing the internal consultant is to influence cultural change. Being part of the organisation brings both advantages and disadvantages: whilst having a strong understanding of prevailing cultural norms, internal agents may also be 'blind' to them. With often only their own personal power and influence as tools, internal consultants may also fail to account for the extent to which they contribute to sustaining the culture, which they hope to change. High self-awareness appears to be a key requirement of an effective internal consultant.

The research used a standard consultancy cycle to examine how internal consultant's work with their clients. This identified the importance of the contracting phase in the success of interventions. However many internal consultants overlook the need for activity at this stage, tending to make assumptions about what the client needs, and how the need will be met. And whilst there are many examples of strong contracting at a 'formal' level, for example through the use of Service Level Agreements, when problems occurred this was more likely to be due to miscommunication, emotional reactions, politicking and power play. This is not surprising: the nature of contracting for the internal consultant is complex, often involving multiple contracting relationships up and across hierarchies.

The research also highlighted the challenges facing internal consultants in disengaging from projects. Consultants report the need to build strong relationships with clients, only then to find it difficult to 'say no' to further requests for involvement. With resource limitations, the clients – busy managers, often overstretched – can begin to draw the consultant into the business to deal with pressing operational needs, almost as an additional team member. And whilst this may be a legitimate role for the consultant to play, it has an impact on availability of time for other projects and on the consultant's perceived role.

We used 3 consultant roles (Schein, 1969) to examine how internal consultants regard their work:

- *Process consultant*: true collaboration with the client, wherein the client owns both problem and answer and the consultant's role is as helper
- *Expert consultant*: where the consultant's currency is their expertise, and where the problem is defined and the solution offered by the consultant
- *Pair-of hands consultant*: where the client scopes the problem and the solution, and the consultant's skills are used to solve it

The research shows that whilst the business, and the consultants themselves, aspire to work as process consultants, in reality they are more likely to operate in 'pair-of-hands' or 'expert' mode. As stated above, this is a function of many things including the client group's 'readiness' to work in a different way; the consultant's credibility within the business hierarchy and the prevailing culture. All of those surveyed report that they continue to use external consultants, and that these are the people who will get the more interesting and challenging projects at a strategic level. However there is also evidence that the self-image of the consultant is another strong influence, and can, in fact help to overcome some of the other barriers. A strong self-image, and sense of entitlement to a place at the strategic table can be supported through personal development for the consultant, through mentoring (to decode the political systems), and through team-based 'shadow consulting'.

Having a clearly identified skills/competence framework helps embedding consultant-specific development. Over 60% of those surveyed reported having specific consultant competences, with the most highly used competences focused on change facilitation and relationship building, together with business and technical competences. Interestingly, few frameworks incorporated competences related to contracting, handling conflict, and closure – areas reported as bringing most challenge to the consultant's role.

Whilst development opportunities are available for those in consultant roles, personal, rather than group, development prevails. Unlike in external consulting practices, where new recruits shadow, and are coached by a senior colleague, the typical structure of an internal consulting group is one where the individual consultant works 'solo' with his/her clients, providing little opportunity for co-consulting and knowledge transfer. The research suggests that organisations will benefit from creating these opportunities – through establishing 'supervision' discussions, creating Learning Sets, and organising group wide development events. It also suggested that organisations could do more to learn from the external consultants they continue to use, through collaborative working and explicit capability development programmes for the internal consultants.

In summary, the report suggests that the internal consultancy role can bring strong benefits: there is undoubted value in having 'inside' agents who understand what is going on, who have strong, established relationships, and who are skilled in their interventions. Any organisation looking to gain value from internal consultancy needs to:

- **Clarify the aims:** Understand the culture and values context for establishing the role
- **Foster support for the change:** Help to create client readiness for consultancy skills throughout the organisation by developing their skills and marketing the benefits
- **Establish who does it:** Be clear about the specific consultancy skills required for the role, and select individuals on the basis of this

- **Build the competence:** Provide consultants with ongoing development at both individual and team/group levels
- **Act like externals:** Build credibility by contracting effectively with clients
- **Be prepared to act as “expert” as well as “collaborator”** Help clients with anxieties they may have around taking on extra responsibilities
- **Know your limits:** In terms of capabilities and skills and what’s realistic against what the client is asking for
- **Pay attention to the politics:** Get to know the internal politics and build networks for greater impact

The Role of the Internal Consultant

Introduction

Consultancy is on the increase. Lean organisations, no longer able to internally resource their complex needs, look outside for sources of knowledge, frameworks for change, and a perceived objectivity. The consultant role, at once both reviled and revered, holds a key place in the business world.

This growth is matched by phenomena inside organisations: the development of the internal consultant role. Recent studies by Roffey Park show that 32% of organisations (from a sample of 372 managers across different sectors) incorporate roles defined as ‘consultant’. Of the organisations that don’t, 45% believe their organisation would benefit from developing such a role. (McCartney and Holbeche, 2003)

Our research at Roffey Park has sought to identify why and how these roles are created. We were interested to find out more about the tensions and challenges facing the internal consultant, and to determine how these relate to the experiences of external consultants.

The Nature of Consultancy Roles

Much has been written about the purpose and nature of the consultant role (Lippitt and Lippitt, 1986; Schein 1969; Block 1981; Cockman et al. 1992). The consultant role is typically defined through its separation from the system it serves: the consultant holds neither line responsibility nor budget, though may often have status and recognition.

“A person in a position to have some influence over an individual, group or organisation, but who has no direct power to make changes or implement programmes” (Block, 1981)

The process of consultation can be seen as a dynamic within which there are defined roles (the client/the consultant), where the client experiences dissatisfaction with the current state, and where there is at least a tacit understanding that the consultant is there to provide some sort of help:

*“A 2-way interaction – a process of seeking, giving and receiving help”
(Lippitt and Lippitt, 1986)*

Given their externality to the client system and lack of formal power to impose change, the most consultants can hope for is to influence the client through credibility, expertise, skills, knowledge and understanding and to change something. They do this through their interventions, coming into the client system and leaving once the client has been helped.

Whilst most writing on consultancy draws upon the external consultant as an example, writers accept that there are particular issues faced by consultants operating from within. It is recognised that internal consultants possess many of the skills deployed by their external counterparts (Armstrong, 1992; Duncan and Nixon, 1999; Laabs, 1997). They have the additional advantage of knowing the business – its systems, language and culture, from the inside. However the internal consultant works within a complex contractual environment where reporting lines may be the same as that of their client. They will typically not hold budgetary or other power to enforce change and may be perceived as agents of a broader corporate agenda rather than true client helpers. As Armstrong (1997) states:

“ Internal consultants may have just as much expertise, although as employees it may be more difficult for them to be – or to be seen to be – as independent as those from outside the organisation. They have to demonstrate that they are able to deliver truly objective advice.”

If the role of the consultant is to facilitate change, then particular challenges exist for the internal consultant over and above those facing consultants from outside. The skills and attributes they bring to the role are often overlooked when line managers look for support to achieve change so internal consultants can find themselves busy with mundane operational tasks whilst external consultants get the more challenging, strategic projects. This sidelining is a function of many factors, including the credibility of the consultants themselves; their ability to market their offerings; the micro political landscape and status; and value issues connected to consultancy use.

What is an Internal Consultant?

Typically the internal consultant is drawn from one of the teams of professional service providers such as HR, IT or finance where there is a history of supporting internal customers with specific problems.

Writers agree (Laabs, 1997; Armstrong 1992; Duncan and Nixon, 1999) that the internal consultant's role is to lead and influence change through supporting clients to learn and apply new skills. In this sense, there is a tension in the internal consultant's role: how to help the client, where the best help that can be given may not be aligned to the organisation's agenda.

Block (2001) recognises these tensions,

“Because you work for the same organisation, line managers can see you as being captured by the same forces and madness that impinge on them. Thus they may be a little slower to trust you and recognise that you have something special to offer them”.

The main differentiating factors between internal and external consultants are summarised below:

Internal/External Consultants: key differences in role:

External	Internal
Credibility through brand status and previous experience	Credibility through history of interactions within the business
Broad business perspective - bringing new ideas	Deep organisational perspective
Limited organisation-specific knowledge, possibly at content level only – “Not made here”	Understands its culture, language and deeper symbolic actions
Perceived as objective	Perceived as an organisational ‘agent’
Special	The same
Low investment in final success	High investment in final success
Meets client’s agenda	Meets corporate agenda – which may not be client’s
Needs time to understand the people – may misinterpret actions and interpersonal dynamics	Knows the people, but may have preconceptions
“on the clock” – timed, expensive, rare and rationed	Free, accessible, and available

As Maslein (1997) notes, there are multiple mutual benefits for organisations in developing an internal consultancy function, and for individuals in adopting consultancy roles. For the organisation, there is the chance to maximise the knowledge and skills currently existing within the system for added benefits. For individuals, taking up a consultancy role can provide stretching professional development

“After many years of proficiency in a particular field, people can get stale. In-house consulting experiences can provide invaluable variety, learning opportunities and can prepare people to handle organizational politics...” (Maslein, 1997, p.7).

The research

Over the past year and a half, we have interviewed 40 internal consultants, and held workshops to interrogate our findings with approximately 50 more. Questionnaires were sent to a cross section of our internal consultant clients across a range of sectors and business sizes from 500 to 10,000 employees. We found that team size varied from 3-150 and the age of the consultancy service was between less than 1-10 years and 75% were female. Our bespoke work in developing internal consultancy teams and our interactions with individual internal consultants through our 'Consultancy Skills for Organisational Change' programme, and our MSc in People and Organisational Development have given us additional insight into this complex role.

The questions guiding our interest were:

- Why are organisations increasingly creating internal consultancy roles?
- What specific challenges and tensions do people experience in these roles?
- How are internal consultants developed?
- Is the internal consultancy process cycle the same as that of external consultants?
- How is it possible to offer consultancy services when you are part of the system to which you consult?

The majority of our respondents came from HR and OD consulting roles. Our research has evolved over the period of more than a year and been both planned and emergent and so areas covered in this report go beyond our original questions.

Challenges and Tensions:

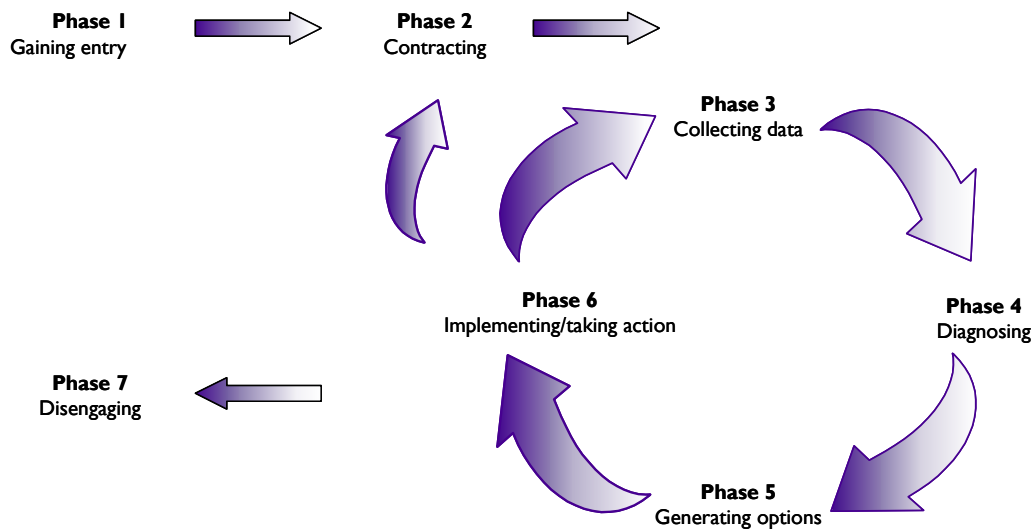
When we asked people what they felt were the biggest challenges facing them as internal consultants, by far the most frequently mentioned were:-

- Lack of understanding of the role within the business
- Lack of trust
- Lack of senior management support
- Lack of power to action projects/proposals

So although the definitions of internal consultant may seem fairly clear, what this means in behavioural terms is not so straightforward. We found many internal consultants very unclear about the boundaries of their role – particularly in the early stages of setting up a service. This has led to role ambiguity both on the part of the consultant and their internal clients.

In this research report, we use the consultancy cycle (Cockman et al, 1992) to identify key issues for internal consultants and the challenges they face at each of the stages. This is interspersed with finding from our research – drawn from questionnaires and discussions with internal consultants. We pull together key themes towards the end of this report and highlight strategies, which we consider would be helpful for internal consultants to adopt. Finally we provide three case studies that tell the stories of internal consultants in different sectors.

The consultancy cycle



From: Client Centred Consulting by Cockman, Evans, Reynolds

The consultancy cycle above, and similar models, are often used to reflect the processes worked through by the consultant, with the client, in any intervention. Like all models, this conceptual framework does not always reflect reality. The consultant, whether internal or external needs to be familiar enough with the model to be able to use it flexibly and re-visit stages when necessary.

Gaining Entry

The term “gaining entry” is commonly used when referring to the early stages of a consultancy relationship. The term has a wide range of meanings. It is partly about having access as an individual or a group within the organisation to work in an effective way with your clients. This includes building effective relationships; being visible within the organisation; being clear about what you can offer and how you will work with clients and specifically, the benefits of internal consultancy to them and the organisation. It also includes issues of credibility including previous track record. Do people within the organisation at all levels (and particularly at the more senior levels) know who you are? What image comes to mind when they think about you or your group?

Our research suggests that, where an Internal Consultancy group exists – particularly where its focus is HR, the members are most likely to identify themselves as junior or middle managers (through pay or grading levels).

Usually the consultants are former HR or training specialists who have now been asked to operate under a different business model. Examples of the organization externally recruiting for specific consultancy skill sets are few. The visibility of the internal consultant based on their hierarchical status, together with their historical position, presents challenges in influencing

decision makers (often the clients) at more senior levels. We are often asked to help those working internally to develop their skills around gaining credibility, visibility and influence.

If you are working as part of a group within the organisation offering a consultancy service, what reputation already exists about your group? If you were offering a service under another guise, how might that impact on your credibility for the new service?

As much time, effort and resource needs to be put into marketing an internal consultancy as would be needed to establish one providing for an external client base. It is a mistake to try and reconfigure an existing in company service provider into one offering consultancy without addressing the following fundamental business planning issues:

- What do we aim to achieve by being in business - year one, year three year five?
- What is our customer profile and how are our customers differentiated?
- What are the products we are delivering to our customer groups and what are the benefits?
- What brand image do we need to support our business aims?

To quote from Schein (1987) "Consultants are typically thought of as outsiders. Even so called internal consultants who work full time for a given company are typically thought of as outsiders to the particular department they are working in at any given time. They are typically thought of as being free to negotiate their areas of responsibility with others who are defined as clients; they work on a contract basis they have the power that derives from being an independent outsider and being perceived as an expert in certain areas and they have the freedom to leave a difficult situation except where professional responsibility dictates as hanging in"

Reconciling this view of the role of consultants with how you are currently perceived is a critical milestone on the road to establishing a successful internal consultancy.

If you are currently seen as providers of administrative services, however good you are, prospective clients may not consider you for consultancy assignments. Credibility may not be a transportable commodity

What brand image do we currently have?

The advantage that internal consultants can be said to have is that they know the business from the inside out. Members of the consultancy team will most likely have lived and breathed the products, financing, staffing issues and business strategies and be well tuned into the hopes, fears, likes and dislikes of the movers and shakers within the business. Paradoxically, the disadvantage for the internal consultancy will be that they know the business from the inside out. The external consultant may appear to offer something new from another world, where as the internal consultancy may be associated only with the service they formerly provided. The internal consultancy may also seem to be enmeshed with the host organisation's culture and therefore lack the independence and objectivity of the outsider.

What is the gap, if any, between the brand image we aspire to and the brand image we currently have?

An internal consultancy needs to plan intentional activity to ensure that they align with their brand objectives. This includes how they interact with the business culture. If this is based on status and hierarchy, do they mirror this or make a statement of their independence and freedom by operating in a way, which reflects their own values and beliefs about consultancy. If the brand objective is to be seen as independent and objective the brand statement and action

might be “that we use the most appropriate person to do the job based on their expertise and experience.”

One way to gain credibility for the role of internal consultant is to be very clear about the business case for moving into this arena. From the internal consultants we spoke to, the following were cited as business drivers for a move towards internal consultancy:-

- **Strategic alignment**
 - to improve the alignment of people management practice with business goals
 - to help managers understand their people in the context of the organisation’s change requirements
- **Service**
 - to provide an accessible point of contact for clients
 - to improve overall service levels
- **Financial**
 - to provide improved services at no extra cost
 - to control burgeoning costs on externals

As stated above, most internal consultants feel they are able to offer as good a service (or sometimes better) than people working externally and feel frustrated that their clients do not always see them in this light.

Maslein (1997) offers a checklist for internal consultants to use in identifying the help they can provide to their clients.

What do your clients need from you?

1. Client’s Name/Business Unit?
2. Who is your client’s customer?
3. What type of product or service does your client provide?
4. What is your client’s long-term mission or strategic direction? How is it marketing this?
5. Over the next one to two years, what will be your client’s biggest marketplace challenge?
6. What kind of help will your client need to face this challenge?
7. How can you help your client to reach short-and long-term business goals?
8. How can you give your client more than standard help? What value-add benefit do you offer above and beyond your role?
9. If you’re already working with this person, how does he/she rate you in satisfaction terms? What kind of feedback has s/he given to you?
10. What important points do you need to keep in mind for future work with this client?

Client readiness and capability

The ability of the internal consultant to gain entry also depends on the client's readiness and capability for change (Beckhard & Harris, 1987). Often, the move into a consultancy role and away from operational support will mean a significant change for the internal client. For example, if managers have been used to personal contact with someone from HR to deal with personnel issues, which have now been transferred to a call centre, the shift in role will represent a significant change. Rather than a one-to-one meeting with someone to talk through problems/organisational issues, the manager may now have two or three people to contact about different aspects. In addition, the manager might need to deal with personnel issues themselves, with little skill or capability to do this.

Beckhard and Harris's model for assessing the client's readiness and capability for change is useful here:

- Assess the attitudes of key stakeholders towards the change – willingness, motives and aims = readiness
- Analyse the power sources, influence and authority issues, skills and information required = capability

Once an assessment has been made of the client's readiness and capability, the internal consultant can consider what needs to happen next towards successful change. Force field analysis can be applied to consider how to minimise any resisting factors or forces and how to increase the driving forces.

The readiness and capability equation can also be applied to those moving into the consultancy role as primary stakeholders in the change. It will be important to assess current levels of capability and skill amongst this group and find out what development needs they have at an early stage. Preferably skilling them up before services are offered.

Role requirements

The Internal Consultant must feel confident in their role and the power vested in them to be able to give difficult feedback to senior managers when appropriate. A lack of confidence or lack of position authority can lead to ineffective interventions, with the fear of credibility leading the consultant to make more expert judgements. There are particular issues for those moving from specialist functions such as training, personnel or operational management to consultancy. Internal consultants do not always have position power, particularly if their primary role is not that of internal consultant and they are performing this role as an additional function. The trainer or other "expert" who moves into the role of the internal consultant must learn to deal with the ambiguity and frustration that will inevitably come from a lack of position power.

Which people in your team would convince you to shift your thinking? If they wouldn't convince you – how will they convince others? Not everyone in the "old" team will be suitable for the new consultancy role. It is important to consider if the skills can be built internally or whether you will need to recruit people with existing skills set. There may be people in other areas of the organisation who have key skills/expertise that could be trained in the consultancy role and would benefit from being developed in this way.

Although the people we have surveyed regard themselves as consultants, there was a wide range of perspectives on what the role mean, and this was reflected in the types of development offered to people adopting the role, and in the competency frameworks adopted to define behaviours.

Our research highlighted that 60% received consulting skills development with 40% receiving specialist training (e.g. on employment law, safety training, technical). Individual training rather than group development seemed to predominate, although our recent experience at Roffey Park suggests that more organisations are establishing 'intact' consultancy group training than before.

62% of people we spoke to said their organisations used a defined set of competencies for the internal consultant role. Others said they either used generic management competencies or were in the process of developing a specific competency framework.

The most prevalently reported competences used by organizations for their consultants included

- relationship building
- maintaining a long-term perspective
- disengaging
- active listening
- self knowledge/self-awareness
- contracting
- diagnosis
- design
- tolerance of ambiguity
- facilitating change

Responses in Roffey Park's Management Agenda (McCartney and Holbeche, 2003) identified the core skills required by an internal consultant as:

- facilitating and understanding the nature of change,
- relationship building,
- active listening skills

Other competencies, which we consider important, based upon the challenges expressed by active consultants, include:

- data gathering
- influencing
- challenging the status quo
- conflict handling.

In practice, the research shows, the most widely applied competencies are those relating to change management, communication and relationship building. Competencies relating to the skills involved in contracting and disengaging are less used. It seems that the values driving internal consulting role definitions inform a generic skills base, often being adapted from existing management competency frameworks. This leads to a lower emphasis on operating as a 'consultant' with less value accorded to, and therefore time spent in, contracting activities at the beginning and throughout an intervention. Not surprisingly, a lack of contracting and disengagement leads to many of the challenges internal consultants report in their roles.

Contracting

According to the Roffey Park Management Agenda (2003), only 6.9% include contracting in their top three competencies for internal consultants.

Having a clear contract with the key decision makers is critically important when working as a consultant, perhaps more so if working internally when the boundaries of the relationship can be less clear. It seems that those working internally are often faced with competing priorities and this, combined with a lack of perceived power and influence can mean challenges in defining the boundaries and priorities for work presented by clients. Internal consultants we spoke to identified the difficulties in "saying no" to work even when it did not seem to be high priority. The culture of the organization will have a significant impact on the consultant's ability to set priorities and manage the boundaries of their work as well as expectations of their role.

Contracting on an internal basis tends to take place in an informal way and with little attention to defining the time and other resources which might be needed for the work (including access to people). Whilst there are constraints to having a too-tightly defined contract, which leaves little flexibility, some defined parameters are essential for helping establish roles and responsibilities for both the consultant and client.

The "presenting problem" which the internal consultant is asked to tackle is often complicated by the overlaying culture of the organisation. For example, a request for a team-building event may, on further diagnosis show that a controlling leadership style or unfair reward strategies are the main contributors towards dysfunctional team behaviour. Internal consultants can find it difficult to get permission to go behind the presenting issue and get to the root cause of problems – often due to the issues of role, status and power highlighted above. Effective contracting plays an important part here in clarifying the expectations of both the consultant and client.

So what do we need to contract about? And with whom? The consultants in our research identified a difficulty in establishing exactly **who** the client is with some citing "the whole organisation". In a sense this will be true for internals and so, again, getting access to the more senior levels and decision makers in the organisation can be difficult. A sponsor for the piece of work may or may not be identified, but where the consultant is involved in helping with an aspect of change, it will be important that they are not seen as the "champion" for the work. Rather, it might be more appropriate if sponsorship comes at the most senior level of the organisation.

In our discussions with consultants it seems that there is little exploration in the contracting stage about the role and responsibilities of the sponsor. This may mean the role becomes more of a token gesture than a committed and valued contribution. Contracting needs to include

consultant expectations of the sponsor – again a difficult conversation potentially for those working internally. What would effective sponsorship look like? And how would this be demonstrated so that people throughout the organisation know the work has commitment and backing at the most senior levels?

Meislin (1997) suggests 4 key questions to explore at the beginning of the contracting phase:

1. What do you expect from a consultant? What type of help are you looking for from me? (What are your needs and wants in this relationship?)
2. How do you feel or think about what we've said so far?
3. Who are the formal and informal 'leaders' in this part of the organisation? Whose 'buy-in' will I need in order to implement an action plan?
4. When can we review the desired outcomes, agreements and next steps for this project

(adapted from Meislin, 1997, p.45)

At the contracting stage, emphasis is often placed on the “what” of consulting rather than the “how”. It will be important to clarify the issues as presented by the client, but equally important to discuss early on how consultant and client will work together. This leads into an exploration of the consultant role.....

Consultant roles are described in different ways in differing texts on the subject. Most people are familiar with the doctor-patient metaphor as a way of describing the consultant as expert. Where consultants have previously been regarded as an 'expert' through his or her specialist role, they may find themselves inadvertently providing expert solutions to clients who still perceive them in this way.

Expert or Doctor-patient role

In the expert role, the client places the responsibility for identifying the root cause of the problem and subsequent solutions in the hands of the consultant. The client is likely to take a passive role and in this way the relationship can also take on parent-child like qualities in transactional analysis terms (Berne, 1968), with the client/child playing up from time to time. However, this role can have some advantages for both the consultant and client. For the internal consultant it can be a good way to “gain entry”. If you have been known for supplying a particular expert service and are seen to be credible, you have an added advantage with existing good relationships with clients who will have valued you for the service provided. For the client it can provide a huge sense of relief to know that someone is prepared to “take-on” your problem and sort it out for you. At either a conscious or sub-conscious level, clients may also think that if something does not work out, they have a ready-made scapegoat to protect their credibility and reputation. Once in this role, attempting to get the client to accept ownership and responsibility for the problem/issue can be tricky and attempts by the consultant to release themselves from this expert role can cause anxiety for both consultant and client.

Many of the internal consultants we spoke to readily identified with the role of expert or doctor-patient.

Pair-of-hands or Purchase-Supplier role

This is the role perhaps most commonly identified by the internal consultants we spoke to. When asked what the key challenges were facing those working internally, quotes included:

“Being presented with the solution which someone thinks is right to implement rather than being allowed to research the issue/problem and complete a full consultancy process...”

“Actually being able to operate as consultants as opposed to project leaders”

“We have to work hard to push our way in and work alongside them (managers) so we can create project plans, but we still have to squeeze our way into their diaries”

Working as a “pair of hands” consultant usually means the power and responsibility lies with the client who invites the consultant in to provide some solutions for which they have perceived expertise. Again, there are advantages and disadvantages, although many we spoke to would see this as an undesirable role. A clear disadvantage would be in creating an expectation within the client that you will always work with them in this way and not being included in the early and important discussions and decisions about organisational development.

Process consultation/Collaborative role

This is the role many consultants aspire towards, mainly because in this role, responsibility and ownership rest equally with consultant and client. Each party sees that they have expertise and experience that will be of value in the relationship and they contract to work together in joint problem-solving and diagnosis. This clearly has some advantages for the internal consultant, particularly in helping organisations to manage change. To be seen as an equal contributor in identifying organisational issues and likely ways forward, rather than expert or implementer means that the client is truly seeing the internal consultant as a valued partner. If, however, the internal consultant is to work in this way, they need to have certain competencies including good self-awareness; skill in working with process issues; comfortable with ambiguity and an ability to challenge their client’s constructively if they feel they are being enticed into other roles!

In order to work collaboratively with the client as a process consultant, the client as well as the consultant must be capable and ready to work in this way. This, in turn, demands a set of values and behaviours for working which may be quite different from previous ways of working with internal service providers. If, for example, the client does not perceive a need for improvement, and/or the client does not have the appropriate problem solving skills to engage in joint diagnosis, then working in this way will prove very difficult. The extent to which cultural values of collaboration, open dialogue and self-awareness prevail has a key impact on positioning the client relationship within the intervention. So an important need exists for the internal consultant to check out the client’s readiness to “devote time, energy and the committed involvement of the appropriate people to a problem solving process” (Lippit and Lippit, 1986).

Our research suggests that the internal consultancy role, in practice, is less likely to fulfil the aspirational challenge of process consultancy. Particular factors, specific to internal consulting, appear to have a strong influence on the roles internal consultants feel themselves able to play.

‘Internal Customer’ values:

On the face of it, it might seem that a strong ‘internal customer’ value would align well with internal consultancy activities. However, in practice this is more likely to create tensions as the customer’s need for a speedy solution and sense of entitlement to that meets the consultant’s drive to explore the problem in more depth, or maybe even to challenge the initial problem scoping.

Relating this high customer-focused value to the consultant roles determined by Schein (1969) shows the challenges this can bring for an internal consultant:

Consultant role	High internal service expectation
Expert	Deliver solution quickly without high client involvement Customer needs met early No systemic approach to diagnosis – allows expert to express problem in his/her terms so capability/knowledge retains within specialist areas
Pair of Hands	Reasonably aligned with high customer-focused values Focused on meeting customer needs Power lies with customer
Process	Works against notion that the ‘customer is always right’ Working collaboratively may be construed as ‘passing the buck’ Customer expectations for solutions may not be met within the desired timeframe

In some cases a clear distinction between the concept of ‘customer’ and ‘client’ has not been established when developing an internal consultancy group: rather one approach has overlain the other, causing confusion in both the consultant’s expectation of his/her role, and the client’s expectation of the working relationships. One example highlighted this: in a large manufacturing company, an internal consultancy group had been established to provide HR interventions at divisional levels. As the group developed an awareness of their role, they began to understand where providing solutions (to what were often complex people issues) did not help the client in the long-term. In fact, as stated above, these actions were helping to create a higher level of dependency – particularly once the client had built a strong relationship with the consultant and ‘knew where to go’ with an issue. But whilst individual consultants recognized the need to move towards a process consultancy role, the message from their manager, a Director, was that the Internal Customer model of working should prevail. This began to lead to frustration and questions about the strategic relevance of creating the consultancy group in the first place.

Data gathering and diagnosis

This stage of the consultancy cycle, as with others, can provide challenges for both the internal and external consultant. On the face of it, the internal consultant should more easily be able to access information in the organisation either through primary or secondary methods. However, sometimes the role of someone working internally can be viewed with suspicion and so access to certain individuals or information may prove difficult if full trust has not been established. A positive advantage for the internal consultant can be an ability to identify with the culture and values of the organisation and how they impact on behaviour. A skilled consultant will be able to identify how they are impacted by what is happening in the organisation as a member of that system and use themselves as a live part of the diagnosis. For example if communication of change is leading to confusion and anxiety in the organisation, the internal consultant is also likely to experience this. If they are able to stand back and assess what they are experiencing, this can be another valuable source of data contributing to the overall picture of what is happening.

Those working internally will have to deal with their own feelings of discomfort and anxiety about the changes before they can effectively support others – working to uncover dissonance in their own value systems before working with others. The internal consultant can easily find that clients become overly dependent on them as experts. Managing client anxieties as someone working internally with their own fears and concerns about change and how this might impact on them can also result in unhelpfully co-dependent relationships.

It will be really important for the internal consultant to demonstrate the behaviours they are trying to influence in others when selecting methods for data gathering and diagnosis. In this way they will be able to build credibility and respect by “walking the talk”. Issues of confidentiality are also key during this process. External consultants are more likely to be trusted to respect confidences and act impartially, so the internal consultant needs sometimes to work harder at demonstrating a commitment to keeping confidences.

At the contracting stage it will be even more important to clarify with the client what exactly can be kept confidential and what they expect in terms of information being passed on.

Early termination of the consultancy assignment can take place where the client has been surprised unexpectedly by the emerging data, which goes beyond the original contract or terms of reference.

Options for Moving Forward/Interventions

The options generated after the data gathering and diagnostic stage will depend on the nature of the contract which could include a wide range of possible strategies. These will be decided upon collaboratively with the client or suggested by client or consultant operating as ‘expert’.

The research brief for this project did not include an investigation of the interventions made by internal consultants, however it is clear that the internal consultant needs to be familiar with the range of tools and approaches used by external counterparts. Many internal groups involved in the research were able to point to the ways in which they had developed internal capabilities through working with externals – in fact some appointed externals purely for this purpose!

The extent to which internal consultants felt themselves able to respond creatively with options for their clients was also linked to the nature and range of development opportunities they had accessed. Conversely, low credibility within the client system was, not surprisingly, often also related to a view that internals' knowledge or skills base was out of date.

Disengaging

Those working internally are often good at establishing effective working relationships with their clients and the phrase "getting into bed with the client" may reflect how this can appear. There are advantages and disadvantages to this cosy relationship. Clients need to feel they can trust the consultant and the consultant needs to be accessible when needed. However, being too available and accessible can create client dependency. Withdrawal and disengagement increases the risk of clients feeling vulnerable, particularly if they do not feel well prepared for their continuing role in implementing and supporting change. It is also the case that the client can often perceive the consultant as integral to the system, and therefore not needing to leave. Being clear about the boundaries of the piece of work and the time to withdraw will be essential if the internal consultant is to be able to manage the many conflicting priorities with which they will be presented. Disengaging becomes much easier and clearer when the contracting process has been effective. Whether this is done formally or informally if the consultant's role and the client's expectations about the outcomes for the piece of work have been clarified, the ending should feel both appropriate and timely.

Summary: Developing your internal consultancy service

Our research suggests that creating and developing an internal consultancy group is not a straightforward process. There is undoubted value in having 'inside' agents who understand what is going on, who have strong, established relationships, and who are skilled in their interventions. However achieving this, we propose, requires keen attention to the following:

- **Clarify the aims** – What value are you trying to add by introducing internal consultancy? Is it just a title change or are there pressing business needs that you hope the internal consultancy role will address? Why would a consultancy approach be better than other approaches in this situation? (e.g. using external consultants or continuing with the existing service). What was missing from previous approaches?

Consideration needs to be given to the balance between internal and external focus in core values. Internally focused values will tend to highlight the relationship between people within the organisation – for example "teamwork". Externally focused values will include those that inform the interface between the internal and external customer and how the organisation wants to be perceived in the world at large. An example of this might be "customers are our top priority" or "we are committed to ethical practice in all our financial dealings". The internal consultant needs to be aware of the impact of these values on the interventions they are making, and of how they will affect the construction of their roles.

- **Foster support for the change** - Help to create client readiness for consultancy skills throughout the organisation

Who is defining the need? – is it HR driven or clearly defined by senior managers and others in the organisation?

We commonly hear internal consultants talk about the importance of getting "buy-in" for change programmes. However, in our view there is a significant difference between buy-in and

true engagement and commitment. Whilst those working internally may well be able to get Senior Managers to give the verbal go-ahead for change interventions, it is a far cry from true sponsorship. Managers often need help in defining what sponsorship would look like from the internal consultant's perspective. Where managers are taking on responsibility for (for e.g.) HR issues as part of the change process, they need to be supported and equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills. Internal consultants are then more likely to be able to move away from a traditional operational role towards working as consultants to the organisation.

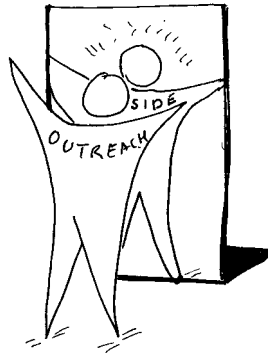
Establish the key stakeholders and be clear about the benefits to them. It is always useful to ask the three simple questions: "who knows? Who cares? Who can?"

- **Establish who does it** – not everyone is suitable for the internal consultancy role. Consider if you can build these skills internally or whether to recruit people with an existing skills set. If you are looking to influence technical managers, consider who, in the technical arm of the business, may be interested in working as an internal consultant and possess some of the core competencies you require. Whether recruited internally or externally, focus on the key skills and competencies necessary for the role.

An example competency framework is given as Annex B in this report.

- **Build the competence** - one of the key skills of experienced consultants is self-awareness. This is often developed through co-consultancy activities, which provide for feedback on personal style and behaviours, and their impact. Internal consultants can establish support networks inside the organisation to help individuals 'shadow consult' on projects and so highlight personal assumptions and beliefs that might impact unhelpfully on their consultancy work. An alternative could be to work closely with external consultants or coaches who may be able to assist in reframing what is happening, and so offer insight into issues such as unconscious collusion or 'cultural blindness'. We have found that development programmes that bring together internal consultants to examine the roles they typically play, help individuals to understand where and how blocks to change are occurring. For example, if a pattern of "expert" or "pair of hands" consulting is emerging, these can be discussed as a group and strategies for improving the working relationship determined. Where possible, continuing support should be made available to allow internal consultants to reflect on their practice in a supportive and challenging environment.
- **Act like externals** – Build credibility by acting professionally. Keep confidences confidential. Use a consultancy process such as the consultancy cycle to ensure that boundaries are kept and your client feels comfortable with the process. Avoid making assumptions about your clients or the situation because you know them well.
- **Contract, contract and contract again** – clarify the boundaries about what, who, how, when, where and why. Establish the end point at the outset to avoid getting overloaded with projects. Be assertive with your clients, sometimes you will need to say no.
- **Know your limits** – in terms of the skills and capabilities and what's realistic to achieve against what the client is asking for. Don't be afraid to get help from external consultants when necessary and make sure you contract effectively with them to increase your skills and capabilities. Too few internal consultants work together with externals on joint projects; they usually use them as experts or "pair of hands".
- **Pay attention to the politics** – get to know the internal politics. Build your networks and use your influencing skills to have greater impact.

Turning Inside Out! – A new model of Internal Consulting



An internal consultant's experience: by Jean Floodgate - Founder of Inside Outreach and previously Head of Learning and Development at The Body Shop International.

This is the story of a journey through internal consultancy into an external consultancy environment and arriving at a model, which seeks to bridge the two.

- Starting off in internal consultancy at The Body Shop
- Recognising the limits of internal consultancy
- Establishing an external consultancy as “outsiders”
- Operating as “insiders” from the outside

Internal Consultancy at The Body Shop

From 1996 – 1999 as Head of Learning and Development I had the opportunity to set up a new concept Learning And Development internal consulting team - who became affectionately known as the LADs. I recruited the team, mainly from inside, typically trainers together with some line managers from different parts of the Business.

Interestingly the environment was already quite training orientated, with the emphasis on course delivery. What was unique and different in the Body Shop, though, was the entrepreneurial spirit and campaigning heart of the organisation which was intuitively applying a very learning focused approach. Fair Trade and Community links were key to all business activities and staff had half a day a month to spend on a Community project of their choice. We were able to build on this commitment - and lots of our learning activities made strong connections to social and environmental projects.

Our approach was to build a team who operated like a Business within a Business but inspired by the Body Shop mission - it had to be "business as unusual".

We researched the key criteria for being effective consultants from both a business and a marketing perspective. We spent time exploring this with external consultants and marketeers.

Our “service offer” was to generate engagement with Learning – and be demand led – not supply driven in our approach. We found it very valuable to have a clear consulting cycle as a framework for action - and to consider more overtly how we worked with our clients e.g. making sure we were contracting properly.

We also spent time getting clear client relationships - recognising that in every piece of work there is likely to be more than one client - users, deciders, influencers etc.

Being demand-led still meant that we had to take some proactive measures. We actually spent a lot of time with data collection - asking individuals what helped them to learn best . We heard from our internal customers that there was a negative reaction to "sheep dips". People, when asked, don't like having training "done to them". The Induction programme got reshaped into a hands on practical experience - rather than a lot of "talking heads" - with staff travelling round the whole organisation - making a product in the labs and following its path; ending up on the beach - conducting an environment "beach clean".

We also threw out the old course directory, and instead went to Line Managers with some very powerful questions about their needs. This prompted an interesting response: "How can I tell you what I need until I see the list of courses?" This was a measure of the dependency loop that had been established.

As a team we saw ourselves on a continuum from dependency to independence to interdependency or partnership. We mapped this out as a way of plotting our relationship with Line Managers without realising that it would potentially be the path we would take more holistically with the organisation as a whole.

The External and Internal Marketing advice we received was excellent. We established for ourselves a Brand and image –and used the power of metaphor to capture the passion and imagination of our learners. To build a common sense of what we were trying to achieve we created the image of the learner as an independent explorer and traveller, not a passive spectator. Our slogan was "Learning is for Life .. not just for courses" and we used this extensively in our materials and marketing literature.

When we were clear about our offering, we mounted a campaign for learning and we used a lot of visual imagery which fitted into the Body Shop culture and visual environment - with quotations like E M Forster's: "Spoon feeding teaches you nothing but the shape of the spoon" strategically placed over the canteen servery. Plus we had the Board Directors team giving out Passports to Learning at the factory gates at 6.00 a.m. on a cold January morning!! The care we put into our image alongside delivering the goods really paid off.

We had some clear messages about our offer and what we were doing to disseminate within the organisation and beyond and we were well published in the internal communications and external press. There was a great motivation and enthusiasm amongst the team – success bred success. All the work we did had a positive impact and got reinforced.

We particularly impacted through the design and delivery of a suite of management development programmes –with the innovative approaches moving the thinking more towards a learning culture.

There were strong and tangible measures of positive change and increased individual responsibility for learning through Social Audit results etc. and our efforts in supporting the Business resulted in a number of internal and external awards. We were finalists for the People Management Awards 1997 for our contribution to the Business.

We earned a seat at the top table and I was asked to find a way of engaging the whole management group in the roll out of a new Business plan.

Recognising the limits of internal consultancy

In 1997 there was a Business plan that needed to be rolled out but no one was really taking responsibility for it. I had heard of Large Scale Strategic Change as a method of co-creating strategy in a participative way. It was agreed that this was the approach we would take. However, the organisational climate was one where individualism was rewarded and people were encouraged to speak their minds and be different - rather than collaborate on shared ownership and solutions. The challenge was to work counter culturally to achieve both.

The LADs got asked to support the roll out of the Business plan. We explored the potential of large-scale participation - really got to understand the issues. We created a tape called "The Case for Change" in preparation for the meeting and to create a sense of urgency. We were now operating as a catalyst to the organisation. We were lighting the blue touch paper.

A 2-day Business plan meeting was designed and delivered with 80 Senior Managers plus 30 representatives from Stores. The meeting process was highly participative and we all experienced an amazing journey from past into present and future - leading to some strong joint ownership and commitment to establishing a forward, sustainable momentum.

Our success with this process led to a greater challenge, which was to run the International Franchise meeting for 180 people from across the world - participatively. A traditional motivational, new product launch, "dry ice" and special effects conference was turned into a participative "working things through" meeting. It was a real turning point - people started to work together differently sharing and solving issues in the meeting - things were changing for the better. At the same time some flaws in the organisation got exposed and the unsayable got said. Facilitating on this scale makes you have to stand back to see the whole system. Suddenly you see the pattern on the carpet - where you have been too close to it before.

The international event was a great success and a great breakthrough for the organisation in terms of participation and engagement. It was also a major turning point and it has taken from then in 1999 to more recently to achieve some of the changes it heralded.

But it was painful - I remember standing on Eastbourne seafront on the fourth evening in tears - partly exhausted but also realising that my insights into the organisation had just shown me that the best path forward was to leave the organisation.

Seeing the whole system was a bit like an out of body experience - you are up in the air seeing things you would never see on the ground. It made me realise that to have any real ongoing impact on the required change in the organisation I had to step further away. I had to step outside.

Establishing an external consultancy as “outsiders”

Not long after this three of us sat down with Gordon Roddick and worked through some of the significant strategic changes that were emerging. Gordon was aware and very supportive of a “break out” group. One that could help the organisation on an OD and Learning and Development level – but one step removed.

This is how Inside Outreach was born. I left The Body Shop and Inside Outreach was set up as an independent limited company co-operative. We built on the deeply held beliefs and values of being an ethical business - that had been so strongly advocated at The Body Shop.

We offered them back our own Business plan – which showed ourselves as giving 50% of our time to The Body Shop – and also working with other organisations, ideally creating knowledge sharing links between clients. There was a reciprocity arrangement where we would offer lower consulting rates in return for reduced rent on offices, some IT support and the ongoing association with the organisation – being able to tell the story.

Interestingly it did not quite work out as planned. Initially, Gordon involved us in some significant change work around brand with the Board, and one of the other Board directors got us doing a major Global project on Customer Service. We also helped the internal HR group work on developing Internal Consulting Skills, but most of our colleagues in Learning and Development pushed us back for a while. It was almost as if they were not sure how to relate to us.

I am not sure if this goes back to the need to go from Dependency to Independence and then back to Interdependence - but it is a pattern I have seen repeated elsewhere.

Indeed it was a good 9 months – and a large redundancy challenge for The Body Shop - before we got the chance to re-engage with the Internal Learning and Development group. Most of them were choosing to leave and wanted to join us. One did – many of the others are still working as associates with us.

With a decrease in the internal resource at The Body Shop we were now needed more substantially and this was the chance to rebuild the relationship that had always been intended. We became a kind of “outsourced” team, operating close to the organisational values and heritage but able to be less emotionally involved. The separation time had actually helped with this transition.

In addition, we had been working with other organisations going through similar change processes and were able to make connections and indeed run events, bringing together groups from different organisations to swap notes and share learning.

Finally, our added value in a redundancy situation was that we could be seen as a slightly objective resource and we did some innovative work including sharing our own learning as a small business and coaching others setting up in a small business context. We jointly developed a concept called the Entrepreneurs club, which was a “package” of additional benefits offered to people choosing redundancy who wanted to set up their own business.

When things settled we once again found ourselves on a different footing and were bidding for projects alongside other providers. We were not given any preferential treatment but we won the work to project manage, design and run a whole new suite of Management Development

programmes for the organisation. So now we were back on the inside – but clearly outside and particularly outreaching for suppliers to support the different aspects of the programmes. This has proved a great partnership - and one leading to recognition as a finalist for the 2002 National Training Awards.

Operating as “insiders” from the outside.....

We started to realise that we had evolved a different way of work. We had always been keen to work with clients as “buddies” rather than in the more “FORMAL” way consultants tend to relate.

What started to differentiate us was that we had learnt to tread the line between internal and external. To care about each of our clients – their business issues and their needs – but to be able to stand back and help them use us as a mirror and a more objective resource. We now use this as part of our marketing approach.

That “out of body “ experience that I had felt on Eastbourne seafront had some how embodied itself into a way of working which now means that we quite often find ourselves in a kind of interim "internal consultancy" role.

We go into an organisation and become part of the team – supporting or leading the group (depending on the need). Over time we build the internal capability so that we can let go – and we are careful to contract our exit right at the start.

We were engaged to work at the Dome at Greenwich in this context - project managing the Visitor Service Training. With the internal team we were once again pleased to become a finalist for the 2000 People Management Awards.

Many of our clients respond to us in a way that feels unique and different from being "external consultants".

For us consulting comes down to 3 things - Relationships, Relationships, Relationships and through these enabling our clients to do so much more for themselves.

From our perspective we have established a real mix of the internal and external –blurring the boundaries. We also have a range of clients who actively seek opportunities to work with us on other external projects and we do include them in our team when working with other organisations.

It is all about seeing consultancy as a larger Community of learning - working wider than specific organisations -operating as an interdependent eco-system and sharing knowledge across the typical boundaries.

Finding ways forward for individuals is usually a combination of external and internal factors - a holistic approach to working things out. It is the same for Organisations. Internal or External consultants alone will find this too difficult - but together -in partnership - there is a real chance.

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The Internal Consultant: The Role in Action

This case study reflects a summary of question posed to the manager and team members of an active internal consultancy group within a large national grouping.

What is the size of your organisation?

26,000 + employees

How many internal consultants do you have?

14 – 8 full time and 6 part time within the HR consultancy; there is also an OD consultancy with 4 people.

What services do you offer?

Full range of HR generalist support, facilitation, project management, OD support, research, process improvement, and large scale restructuring

What were the aims for setting up the internal consultancy service?

Consultancy came in to existence as part of a large organisational restructuring which was to provide a service model with 25% headcount savings. There was also a general aim to set up a pool of professional HR people who could be assigned to pan-organisational pieces of work which have an impact on the wider organisation.

How did you foster support for the change?

The changes were communicated as part of the overall structural changes which took place simultaneously. There was support for the function from the HR director and the senior HR team. We worked very hard on our service proposition: we identified the key work-strands where we felt we could add value and set about promoting this with divisional teams. We wanted to promote a professional image and so we spent a lot of time designing the processes that would support the way we worked within the consultancy

Describe the current structure of the internal consultancy service – how does this fit in with your client needs?

The Consultants report to the Consultancy Resources Manager who in turn reports to the Controller of ROC (Recruitment, Operations and Consultancy). The Resources Manager is responsible for allocation of work to the consultants based on skills, development opportunities and, more often than not, availability. The team works as teleworkers – a set-up which allows us to work in any part of the organisation. The

consultants hot-desk when they come in to the central headquarters to attend meetings, see clients etc.

The service was originally perceived to be a resource to the divisional set up i.e. the strategic divisional HR Partners would be responsible for commissioning work. This does happen, but in reality the team has in general provided support to a number of HR-led initiatives, and increasingly on work streams arising from the key organisational change project outcomes. These have tended to be more pan-organisational, than divisional-facing initiatives. This inevitably has caused some frustrations as the model has evolved from its original offer, but the work we deliver is perceived to be adding value rather than just being an 'extra pair of hands'.

Our clients can either be members of the HR leadership team or the HR partners.

How was it decided who would carry out the role?

The consultants were selected through interview process as part of the re-structure – all roles were advertised and competed for in the normal way.

How did you prepare your clients and market the benefits of having an internal consultancy function?

There was no specific launch of the consultancy – it came into existence as part of the wider changes and was communicated thus. It evolved from the restructure rather than being a big bang because a number of the team were still supporting old roles through the transition. What we did, as described above, was to communicate a new way of working across the business without specifically naming it 'consultancy'.

What consultancy process(es) do you use and why?

We use project scopes to help both ourselves and our clients understand what our deliverables are and to enable us to go back and re-scope when project 'creep' occurs. We always use evaluation forms to check we have delivered. If we are asked to deliver an OD intervention, facilitate a focus group, or run a teambuilding event, then we are likely to use tools such as psychometrics.

Some of the team use models such as Burke Litwin, others use Project management software – to be honest, others use the proverbial 'back of a fag packet!'

This all really depends on the type of work we're being asked to do: so if we're working on a change management project, a restructuring or large-scale piece of work, we will have a very formalised project plan. It is important to be clear – both from our point of view and the view of the client, what the consultancy is being asked to deliver and what the success criteria might be.

What are the challenges you have faced and how have you overcome them?

The main challenge is the acceptance by our customers who know us already that we provide more than just an additional pair of hands. We need to constantly ensure that we continue to operate as consultants and not get pulled into the everyday operational

needs. This can be difficult when 'starting from scratch' in an organisation that has a 'just do it' mentality.

A key issue, of course, is credibility: – we have to earn that by results, by our professionalism. We also have to focus on the informal systems – networking throughout the organisation.

Unexpectedly, another challenge has come from within the organisation – where people have expressed jealousy and suspicion of these new roles. This has meant we have had to be extra-conscious of being open, and approachable and 'not precious' in our roles.

One practical challenge comes from our resource-base: our IT infrastructure is not robust enough to support us properly as teleworkers and this continues to be a frustration.

What skills development have your Internal Consultants had?

Consultancy skills – through an initial 5-day programme, run internally by an OD practitioner in two modules. Following this we had a 3-day residential OD programme for the team.

We have since then organised additional training and development event – for example teambuilding using our MBTI results.

What would you offer as advice to other organisations setting up this role?

- Determine your market and client base and decide how you are going to communicate the change in emphasis of the support/ work you will undertake
- Have a plan and vision for your consultancy which is bought into by your leadership /management team.
- Be clear about what you can and can't do for your client – but look for strategic pieces of work where you can really make a difference
- Ensure you have a common base of skills training
- Develop a strong self-help and development culture within the team
- Ensure the infra-structure is set up internally to support your way of working

Developing Consultancy Skills for Experienced HR Practitioners at Shell People Services

In a bid to enhance internal consultancy skills and develop more effective service providers, the HR Advice & Consultancy practice of Shell People Services - a shared services organisation within the Royal Dutch/Shell Group - commissioned Roffey Park to design and run a modular development programme for a broad mix of HR professionals.

Shell People Services was established in January 2000, following a strategic decision by the Royal Dutch/Shell Group to create an internal HR shared services organisation offering both transactional and expertise services to its businesses. Staffed by experienced human resources practitioners, Shell People Services is now a global HR operation which provides HR strategies and organisational development - as well as support for global recruitment, performance management, learning, payroll, expatriate services and industrial relations. One of the practices within Shell People Services is HR Advice & Consultancy which comprises around 30 staff, who are either HR Advisors (providing operational and strategic HR advice) or HR Consultants (providing HR expertise in project-related work). “We help Shell businesses to build effective people strategies and to carry out high quality operational HR processes,” said Claire Seabrook, Team Leader of the HR Advice & Consultancy practice. “We either provide a full service for clients who are too small to have their own HR people on the payroll or we provide additional expertise and resources to supplement internal HR teams. Our clients can therefore access a full range of skills and services without having to maintain their own internal HR infrastructure.”

The staff within the practice predominantly have HR generalist backgrounds, having worked in several operating environments both within and outside Shell. However some had not had prior experience of internal consultancy. To address this, the practice approached a number of external providers to discuss the feasibility of a development programme concentrating on internal consultancy skills. “Consulting is a label that people can get overly attached to and it can become a huge blocker if you don’t consider yourself to be a consultant,” said Claire Seabrook. “Roffey Park recommended a modular programme that we felt was the best fit for our requirements because it would not only break down the mystique of consultancy but it would also give people the skills and the confidence they needed to be effective.”

Programme outline

Called *The Consultancy Skills Programme*, it covered the role of a consultant and the techniques and frameworks of effective consultancy. The programme ran twice, at Roffey Park, for a total of 20 junior, middle and senior-level HR professionals. It was split into three modules, each of which lasted three days and ran six to eight weeks apart. “The short modules proved very powerful because they allowed the participants to focus on specific issues and they also gave time and space to reflect on the learning,” said Claire Seabrook. “The participants were able to see how the theory played out in practice, back in the workplace, before coming back together to share experiences.

Another benefit of the short modules was that the actual time spent away from the office in any one period wasn't too long." The programme highlighted an established cycle of consultancy which involves gaining entry, contracting, investigating, reaching conclusions, making recommendations and delivering to them. It also covered a range of issues such as influencing others, interpersonal awareness and personal presence.

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Checklist of Consultant Competencies

Self Assessment

Below we list some key areas of effectiveness for a consultant, divided under three main headings:

- Personal and interpersonal effectiveness
- Working as an agent of change
- Consulting skills

The checklist is intended to guide personal reflection in identifying development needs. Please complete the checklist as honestly as you can – it is easy to be too hard or soft on ourselves.

Instructions

Read each section of the checklist carefully then complete the following rankings for each of the competencies:

- Your **current skill level** for each competency using the following rating scale: 1-5, where 1 is a 'strength', 5 is a 'development need'

Example:

Personal and interpersonal effectiveness	Skill level: 1 - 5
Self knowledge	2
Self awareness	2
Active listening	4

Checklist of Consultant Competencies

Personal and interpersonal effectiveness	Skill level: 1 - 5
<p>Self knowledge Awareness of the values and beliefs that influence the way I work. Awareness of my own motivations and the personal rewards I derive from consulting. Awareness of the ethical choices I do, and would, make when faced with difficult, conflicting options.</p>	
<p>Self awareness Awareness of my own emotional response to situations and people, particularly awareness of patterns which may lead to inflexible behaviour.</p>	
<p>Active listening Attending to the content and process level in communication. Being attuned to non-verbal signals and their possible meaning Ability to draw others out. Diagnosing possible underlying feelings, concerns and motivations.</p>	
<p>Self expression Ability to express my own thoughts, ideas and feelings clearly. Awareness of incongruities in my verbal and non-verbal expression.</p>	
<p>Relationship building Building open, collaborative relationships. Exchanging feedback in a timely and constructive way. Being assertive, when appropriate, particularly with authority figures. Balancing support and challenge in relationships. Ability to influence others and gain commitment. Being open to influence from others.</p>	
<p>Conflict handling Valuing and exploring differences. Ability to challenge without alienating. Maintaining flexibility, choice and self-esteem when faced with conflict and hostility. Having the personal courage to open up potentially difficult areas.</p>	
<p>Personal and professional limits Awareness of the limits of my own competence. Willingness to ask for help. Willingness to admit my own mistakes without loss of self confidence. Commitment to my on-going development.</p>	

Working as an agent of change	Skill level: 1 - 5
<p><i>Tolerance of ambiguity</i> Ability to live with uncertainty and complexity without undue stress. Searching for meaning without grasping at over-simplistic interpretations or rushing in premature action. Tolerating incompleteness.</p>	
<p><i>Maintaining a long-term perspective</i> Helping clients identify and articulate desired futures. Setting short and medium term goals in the light of a longer-term sense of purpose.</p>	
<p><i>Maintaining a wide perspective</i> Attending to the wider context of my work. Not drawing boundaries too tightly. Dealing with each subsystem's interaction with its suprasystem. Keeping abreast of trends and developments in organisational, business and world affairs.</p>	
<p><i>Understanding the nature of change</i> Developing an intellectual and experiential understanding of change process – how and why people change, how and why they avoid change, how larger systems change or avoid changing.</p>	
<p><i>Facilitating change</i> Encouraging widespread participation in the design and implementation of change. Supporting others through the stress of transition. Being aware of myself as a catalyst and seeing the possibilities of intervention in all aspects of my work and interaction with clients.</p>	

Consulting skills	Skill level: 1 - 5
<p>Agreeing working with contracts Clarifying mutual expectations and responsibilities. Renegotiating the terms of my work when necessary</p>	
<p>Data collection Choosing appropriate methods of data collection. Asking pertinent questions. Formulating useful questions. Encouraging client ownership of data.</p>	
<p>Diagnosis Having a range of frameworks and models for understanding individuals, groups and organisations. Maintaining a critical approach to models. Ability to construct my own models. Encouraging joint diagnosis with my clients.</p>	
<p>Design Being creative and purposeful in designing interventions. Not relying on packaged, favourite interventions. Being willing to redesign on the spot. Designing at the level of content and process simultaneously.</p>	
<p>Closure Disengaging well from assignments. Avoiding mutual dependency with my clients. Reviewing learning from each project.</p>	

From: Shaw and Phillips, *A Consultancy Approach for Trainers*