Managing for Project Success:  
Client Perspectives on Client-Consultant Relationships

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Success in client-consultancy projects depends largely on the quality of the relationship between client and consultant. But what, in the eyes of clients, is an ‘ideal relationship’? To explore this question, researchers from four universities conducted research on *Knowledge Evolution in Action: Client-Consultancy Relationships* as part of the Government’s Economic and Social Research Council’s programme on the evolution of business knowledge (www.ebkresearch.org).

In addition to a fly-on-the-wall study of different project case studies, the research looked for ideal cases through a survey of clients who participated in the 2004/5 *Annual Awards for Best Management Practice* sponsored by the Management Consultancies Association. Awards were given on the basis of project summaries submitted by consultancy firms, but this time, they were supplemented by comments from their respective clients given, in confidence, to the research team. Almost 70 projects were submitted for an Award, representing a wide range of project categories.

![Client-consultancy projects (by category)](image)

*Figure 1: Client-consultancy projects (by category) participating in the MCA Awards 2004/5*
Although what’s important to clients varies somewhat, depending on the nature of the project, client comments indicated a number of key elements to the ‘ideal relationship’. Most important was a ‘partnership’ relationship with consultants (cited by 30% of clients) and consultants’ openness and integrity in their work and relationships. Clients also praised consultants who were ‘prepared to work with us side by side’ - who would integrate into the project team and not just act as outside advisors.

Shared commitment to the same project goals was essential, even if commitment might arise for different reasons. Clients valued consultants’ willingness to ‘go the extra mile’, coupled with an ability to be ‘flexible’ in the face of shifting project goals and the business environment. When asked about being ‘challenged’, some clients said they welcomed such interventions, but only if they reflected an intelligent understanding of the client and were delivered sensitively. This suggests that consultants face a difficult tightrope between proferring what might be seen as ‘helpful’ challenge and what is perceived as unconstructive. Clearly, iterative discussion was also important as client and consultant work together to resolve problems and define solutions.

Another important theme was the need for consultants to earn the respect of client staff at all levels in the organisation, not just from the project sponsor. Respect was earned by demonstrating intelligence, commitment and a willingness to get engaged with the client’s problems, and from recognising and respecting the experience and knowledge of client staff.

Finally, clients wanted their consultants to demonstrate a deep understanding of their business. A cursory knowledge of the sector was insufficient; instead, consultants often needed a thorough grasp of the business fundamentals derived from their own research and experience supplemented by insightful questioning of the client. Some clients ascribed this depth of understanding to the duration of the client-consultant relationship.

Unsurprisingly, there were also mixed messages and areas of ambiguity. An example of this was differences in the perceived value of personal and corporate relationships. Strong and productive relationships with individuals were cited by several clients as critical to project success. Particular individuals brought creativity and a wealth of experience which could be exploited in many ways. On the other hand, clients acknowledged that at a corporate level, a relationship with a stable consultancy brought continuity and consistency of approach, attitudes and working culture. However, these benefits seemed to be taken-for-granted and were no longer a differentiator between consultancy firms. Indeed, several clients said that ‘of course’ their project consultants were intelligent! Similarly, consultants’ capacity to meet deadlines and achieve milestones was rarely cited as a reason for the good relationship. The ability to deliver is perhaps now the baseline which must be surpassed if consultants are to be judged as adding value.
Clients also spoke about what they disliked about consultancy firms. Here, there were few surprises. Three behaviours were particularly irritating to clients. The first was 'bragging'. Several clients spoke of disliking the arrogance of consultants who tried to make sure “everyone knows how clever they are.” Clients were also irritated when consultants continually tried to ‘sell on’. On the other hand, consultants who promoted the project rather than themselves were praised for their dedication to the task at hand. Finally, clients were frustrated when consultants failed to appreciate the uniqueness of their business situation, giving an appearance of imposing a standard solution rather than crafting one with the clients. Clients, like most of us, like to feel special.

**Key points**

In an 'ideal' client-consultant relationship, clients tend to look for the following characteristics:

- Commitment, and willingness to 'go the extra mile'
- Passion for the task at hand
- Flexibility
- Willingness to challenge the client (and be challenged by the client)
- Openness and integrity
- Ability to gain the respect of client staff
- Respect for the experience and knowledge of client staff
- Understanding of the client's business and sector

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Further information about this research project and the *Evolution of Business Knowledge* programme is available from [www.ebkresearch.org](http://www.ebkresearch.org) or andrew.sturdy@wbs.ac.uk.