

Chapter XVII

Information Technology Consulting in Global Information Technology

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ABSTRACT

In general terms, IT consulting is the service provided by an IT consulting agency when a company implements a new IT system, that is, a system with which companies store, retrieve, disseminate, and use information (FEACO, 2006). Parallel to the internationalization of the IT sector in globalizing economies, the field of IT consulting has grown and diversified significantly during the last ten years, comprising at present a wide range of business areas, technologies, and services. Due to the fact that information technology is increasingly seen as linked to business strategy, the borders of management consulting are becoming more difficult to discern. This chapter covers the various aspects of IT consultants' work to enable a more detailed exploration of their practices and their influence in organizations around the globe in the future. It gives an overview of the latest developments in IT consulting, identifying the main characteristics and discussing current research on the roles of IT consultants in broad economic and specific organizational contexts, providing a conceptual framework for further analysis.

INTRODUCTION

In globalizing economies, the implementation of information and communication technologies in organizations is believed to play a crucial role in making business processes more effective, in saving costs and in increasing a company's

competitiveness (i.e., Kennedy Information, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c). The business processes of companies are becoming increasingly embedded in systems, the control of which managers must oversee, and which can structure procedures and processes (Newell et al., 2006; Walsham, 2002; Breitenlechner & Buchta, 2001). Because the ICT

sector develops very quickly, managers and decision makers find it difficult to keep up constantly with recent developments and to decide whether to extend or to change existing IT systems. This is one of the reasons why they look for the advice of qualified IT consultants (Bloomfield & Danieli, 1995; Sturdy, 1997). Moreover, IT consultancy firms provide IT services ranging from application management to programming. Consequently, IT consulting is a field exhibiting high growth rates all over the world (EITO, 2006).

However, research on IT consulting is rare and fragmentary, and definitions vary across scientific disciplines such as sociology, economics, and information science. The exploration of consulting in sociology and economics focuses particularly on management consulting in Europe and the U.S. and its impact on managerial decision making (i.e., Fincham & Clark, 2002), neglecting IT consulting because it is considered mostly the sale of software products or IT systems (Jackson, 1996). Information management research, also addresses the social side of IT implementation (see Jaspersen et al., 2002), covering specific problems, and highlighting the technical side of software and systems implementation (see Krcmar et al., 2005; Markus, 2004; Amberg & Wiener, 2004). IT consulting is barely addressed here, although it is an important field of practice for information system managers (Cameron, Knight, & Semmer, 2005).

IT consultancy covers a broad variety of aspects that should be addressed analytically. Given the growing importance of information technology for the set-up and operation of business processes, IT consulting is increasingly believed to provide an exchange of knowledge between management and information technology. IT consultants seek to present themselves as the link between the two worlds of business and technology (Bloomfield & Danieli, 1995) and, because of their presence in several organizations, they may also be seen as agents of information technology implementation, fostering new IT applications or practices.¹ Because strategy also influences IT consultancy, it might be characterized as a form of management consulting (Bloomfield & Danieli, 1995). On the other hand, IT consultants are involved in the design, building

and implementation of IT systems linked to the operational business process level. Depending on the scope of the IT project (Markus, 2004), it may be associated with organizational change, possibly including elements of change management². Another aspect is the provision of IT services associated with programming, applications management and software maintenance, covering various tasks and requiring different skills. Moreover, the context of IT outsourcing implies the issue of innovation, which may be influenced by IT consultants as well (Ruiz Ben, 2007).

The chapter will cover this variety, providing a first step by mapping the field and providing a conceptual framework for studying various sectors and dimensions of IT consulting. First, the background illustrates the growing relevance of IT consultancy, giving an overview of the scope of the field in reference to the IT services market development. The main body of this chapter will discuss the principal characteristics of (management and IT) consultancy and information technology to show the blurring borders and to outline some overlaps. In particular, a critical approach consulting provides useful insights regarding the implementation of IT. Bringing these characteristics together, the solution section suggests a conceptual framework to reconcile different perspectives on consultancy to enrich the perspectives of IT consultancy research. The future trends show possible developments in the field and the conclusions sum up the suggestions made. Future research suggestions will allude to potential opportunities and directions.

BACKGROUND: THE WORLDWIDE MARKET DEVELOPMENT OF IT CONSULTING

IT consultancy is understood broadly as a service provided by an independent, professional IT consultant in interaction with a client for the purpose of giving advice on information technology, be it a product or the development of a system or software for a complex business-related problem (Becker, 2005; Bloomfield & Danieli, 1995).

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