

# **Clients Determine the Maximum Possible Quality of Project Work Delivered by Consultants: A practical framework and theoretical grounding**

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## **Abstract**

This paper advances the hypothesis that the internal capability of a client organisation effectively determines the maximum ceiling of quality that may be delivered by the consultants they hire. Drawing on a rich set of literature, institutional economic theory, and the authors' grounded professional experiences, this paper progresses this hypothesis through the synthesis of a set of client capabilities – and corresponding potential sources of problems that might arise where the client's capabilities are lacking - that influence the maximum possible quality of knowledge services delivered by consultants. The findings provide client organisations with a basis for which to self-assess their capability to foster project success, and a corresponding framework for consultants assessing the potential risks of working with a particular client.

## **Keywords**

Consultants; Consulting Services; Quality; Transaction Costs; Institutions; Project Management

## 1. Introduction

Clients commonly engage consultants to deliver or apply knowledge to address a problem or mitigate against uncertainty, usually in a discrete project or as one part of a larger project. Since engaging the services of a consultant is an exchange of cash for bespoke information or applied knowledge, such transactions are commonly a high value and high-risk exchange (Pemer and Werr, 2013). At the start of any such transaction, the client is likely to be in a position of information asymmetry, at a disadvantage compared with consultants with greater topic expertise and market familiarity (Nikolova and Devinney, 2012; Sharma, 1997). Consulting services has credence qualities – qualities which are difficult for a customer to assess, even after the services have been delivered (Mitchell, 1994). The procurement and management of consultancy services can therefore be a significant and challenging endeavour.

The scale, diversity, and total value of consulting services is immense. While the different definitions and sectors complicate a neat total estimate, the value of the global management consulting services market is estimated at \$554 billion USD per year (Lonsdale et al., 2017). The world market of engineering consulting services is estimated to be around \$1-\$1.5 trillion USD per annum (BusinessWire, 2019; Gross, 2012). Recent market research estimates place the yearly value of all professional services at about \$5 trillion USD (The Business Research Company, 2021) – or about 6% of world GDP. Accordingly, even slight improvements in the degree of value and quality delivered by consultants yield significant economic benefits.

Effective, high-quality consulting must meet clients' needs and objectives. Organisations often engage a consultant to assist them in addressing the uncertainty impacting their objectives (Ojasalo, 2001; Pemer and Werr, 2013). Consulting is widely recognised as a co-creation process, dependent on both the input of the consultant and the client (Bettencourt et al., 2002; Nikolova and Devinney, 2012; Vargo and Lusch, 2016), and appointing a consultant fundamentally involves the transfer of some decision-making responsibility and risk (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003; Hislop, 2002: 669; Mills and Moshavi, 1999: 55). Hence, the manner in which a client and consultant establish alignment in their objectives to collaborate – commonly through a written contract operationalised as a working relationship – is therefore critical to the success of the engagement (Kubr, 1993; Turner, 2004).

Faults at any point in the working relationship between the client and consultant may result in the loss of the quality of the work delivered. Often, issues in an early part of a project form a root cause for severe problems realised later in the engagement (Dobes, 2016; Malmi et al., 2004). This effect means that early causes of poor quality may compound into problems later as the works progress and as costs become sunk. A successful consultancy agreement fundamentally depends on an appropriate form of collaboration between the client and consultant, which is usually achieved where the contract aligns the incentives of parties and where success is equitably shared through the engagement (Turner, 2004: 76).

For clients seeking to engage a consultant – especially for a large, complex, ambiguous, or novel commission – it may be unclear how they can best facilitate and ensure the consultant delivers the best possible outcomes. Clients are also often not aware of how their practices or constraints influence or constrain the delivery of quality services by consultants (Ojasalo, 2001; Perner and Werr, 2013; Schein, 1997). In other words: all successful consultancy projects are alike; each unsuccessful consulting engagement may become unsuccessful in its own way.

This paper advances the theory that the capability of a client organisation effectively determines the maximum ceiling of quality that may be delivered by the consultants they hire. This theory does not mean or imply that clients are solely responsible for poor quality work delivered by consultants. Rather, the argument put forth by this paper is that the actions made by clients may determine a practical maximum limit of the quality of the outcome. The consultant may then deliver up to this ceiling of quality, based on their specific competence and capabilities.

## 1.1 Research Approach

This paper advances consulting services theory by drawing on the professional experience of technical and management advisory consultants, and grounding those practice findings in the academic and practice-focused literature to synthesise a comprehensive framework of client actions that form causes of poor quality in consulting services. The paper is structured as follows: a literature review establishes the theoretical grounding of this paper in institutional economics and quality management theory (section 2). Second, the methods used to develop this paper are described, and the framework is presented (Table 1 and Figure 1). The framework is explained with extensive reference to quality management, transaction cost economics, institutional theory, and contract law literature (section 3). A discussion on the practical applications of the framework for practice and the academic study consulting services closes the paper (section 4).

## 2 Theory

The costs of transactions – and the mechanisms that societies establish to reduce them – are a foundational part of understanding markets and the development of economies (Coase, 1937, 1998; Kingston and Caballero, 2009; Williamson, 2000). In any transaction, buyers (*principals* or clients) and sellers (*agents* - in this case, consultants): have limited, imperfect and often asymmetric information; operate with biases and bounded rationality; have limitations in their resources available to assess proposed contracts; and may have related difficulty understanding and enforcing their specific rights (Sharma, 1997; Williamson, 2005). These limitations prevent parties to a transaction from perfectly assessing a potential contract agreement before entering it, and thus increase the uncertainty about the costs of the transaction.

Economics also recognises that all contracts are “incomplete” because it is impractical (and extremely costly) to attempt to define a contract that specified an agreement for all of the events and scenarios that might arise during the contract (Hart, 2017). Principals (clients) also appoint consultants to delegate finer decisions to them, recognising that a knowledgeable consultant – as their agent – may make informed decisions more efficiently than the client may be able to themselves (Bronnenmayer et al., 2016; Mills and Moshavi, 1999). In short, some finer details of contracts will inevitably need to be resolved along the way.

The New Institutional Economics theorises that “institutions” are the “rules of the game” that can explain how politics, law, and social factors can influence - and work to reduce - transaction costs (North, 1990; Williamson, 1987), including in consulting (Saam, 2012). Institutions – such as laws, standards, conventions, shared understandings, norms, and common preferences – are theorised to exist to mitigate these problems and reduce transaction costs by establishing conventions that reduce uncertainty and mitigate against typical sources of misunderstanding (Bai et al., 2016; North, 1990; Williamson, 1987). Institutions supplement a contract's (inherently limited) literal content by establishing common knowledge or compressed information that provide a more certain environment to support it (Carr et al., 2009; Ménard, 2000). New institutional economists generally do not consider that organisations (such as firms or government agencies) are themselves institutions – rather, organisations are institutional agents which work to shape and operationalise institutions (Ménard, 1995). Through time, institutions shape markets and begin to exert *path dependence* – that is, because institutions inherently have some resistance to change, they result in responses to past conditions influencing those for present conditions, even if they are no longer relevant (Kingston and Caballero, 2009). However, institutions themselves can change through time, and modifying an organisation's institutional settings is often the primary motivation for engaging an external expert in a client's project (Michaud and Lessard, 2000).

## **2.1 Institutional Context of Consultancy Contracts**

A contractual agreement, supported by relevant institutions, establish practically all consultant engagements. A contract assigns proportionate liabilities and assets. Before a contract is signed, the client has a liability (the problem motivating the commission) and an asset (the available funds in the project budget). Once the contract is operating, the consultant becomes liable to deliver to the contract terms, and has a contractual guarantee of payment – which becomes the consultant's asset (Markovits, 2020).

While some institutions may codify legally-enforceable obligations, contract law widely assumes the principle of *caveat emptor* – that is, the client or principal bears an obligation to adequately inform themselves of the nature of a proposed contract before they agree to it (Juran and Godfrey, 1998: 2.8). Contract law also widely recognises the concept of *estoppel*, which asserts that a party to a contract

cannot renege on a prior agreement. The principle of estoppel commonly applies even if a party passively or implicitly agrees to something, through *waiving* (not enforcing) a term of the contract (Beale et al., 2008: 846–860; Murray, 2011: 700). A contract can only be varied by mutual agreement (including implicitly or by inaction), at which point the contract is modified to the extent of the agreed variation. The law on contracts also generally realises that a later agreement prevails over an earlier one, to the extent of any inconsistency (Beale et al., 2008: 846; Murray, 2011: 417). These common legal principles place a significant set of obligations on clients to actively define and manage the agreement with the client. If a client fails to meet these obligations to communicate through the formation and execution of the contract, they may harm the quality (or increase the costs) of the services delivered to them.

## 2.2 Costs of Poor Quality

The field of quality management initially arose during the twentieth century, through applied research to reduce production and operational costs (Malmi et al., 2004: 296), improve customer satisfaction and firm reputation, and ultimately enhance public welfare and living standards (Deming, 1986). Quality management theory has become widely applied to the management of professional services (Juran, 1992; Parasuraman et al., 1988).

Poor quality describes any instance where the results delivered to the principal are either unsatisfactory or result in additional costs to the product owner (i.e. the principal) or ultimate end-user (Deming, 1986: 12). The quality field first established the concept of Cost of Quality (COQ) - the costs of achieving quality (Feigenbaum, 1956; Juran, 1951). Over time, attention began to turn to the Cost of Poor Quality (COPQ), which includes costs that arise if a product fails to meet users' requirements (Harrington, 1987). Famously, Crosby (1979) declared that (achieving) "quality is free", recognising that the COPQ can be defined as "the sum of all costs that would disappear if there were no quality problems" (Juran, 1989: 50). In this view, poor quality is theorised to arise from preventable *root causes* (ISO, 2015: 7; Malmi et al., 2004).

Accordingly, any action in initiating, planning, executing, controlling, and closing a consulting contract can be highly influential in determining the quality achieved through the contract. Early issues in a consultancy engagement can often snowball or compound, only being fully realised as root causes once: contract terms are binding; the client's budget is fully committed and costs become sunk; intermediate work becomes available; misunderstandings become apparent; relationships become strained; rework becomes most costly; and when switching or cancellation costs are most escalated (Harrington, 1987; Krishnan, 2006). Accordingly, this paper synthesises a framework of client actions that may constitute root causes of poor quality delivered by their consultants.

### **3 Review Synthesis and Findings**

The framework developed for this paper was based on iterative workshopping with eight professional consultants working in technical and management consulting, supported by a literature review. This process was carried out over approximately three years, as the consultants (including the author) identified issues arising from clients' actions in the procurement and delivery of consulting services. Iterations of the framework were tested, discussed, and refined with the professional consultants, including by evaluating problematic engagements and difficult clients against the framework.

The framework was developed in the form of Table 1, which summarises a comprehensive list of 47 potential causes of poor quality in a consulting project, based on the factors that the client can feasibly control. Concurrent with the input from professional consultants, a review of the related academic, practice-focussed, and grey literature was conducted through iterative searching and snowballing. Through this review, the institutional economics and quality management literature were identified as the most relevant theoretical frames through which to assemble findings. A total of 203 sources were collated, of which 113 are cited in this paper. A complete bibliography is available at [BLINDED].

The causes of poor quality presented in Table 1 are framed negatively, with the corresponding implications for consultants. This negative framing of the potential causes does not imply that consultants do not contribute to poor quality – rather, causes are presented this way to enable Table 1 to be adapted as the basis of a practical qualitative capability or risk assessment tool. The causes listed in Table 1 include those related to a formal procurement process, typical for higher value engagements. While smaller or simple consulting projects might omit a formal tendering process, the underlying principles of establishing an effective working relationship through a consulting agreement (as detailed further through section 3) still apply.

Since many of the immediate causes of poor quality may stem from earlier root causes, Table 1 includes cross-referencing to illustrate common relationships between causes - within the phases of an individual project, and between the client's projects. Three types of relationships between causes are identified: direct (root cause to immediate cause) relationships; root causes that are likely to result in a wide range of immediate causes (where the relationship may be less direct); and root causes that commonly occur concurrently with immediate causes (where there may not be a specific causal relationship). These are described consistently in Table 1 and represented graphically in Figure 1. This cross-referencing provides a basis for identifying potential early issues, thereby enabling proactive intervention to mitigate against later problems. Causes and their implications are also explored against relevant literature through the remainder of section 3.

1 **Table 1: Framework of Potential Causes of Poor Quality Originating from the Client**

Phase	Milestones	Potential Cause of Poor Quality (#)	Implications for Consultant	Reference Literature and Specific Source(s)	Relationship to other causes
<b>Pre- Project (section 3.1)</b>	(Client's Usual Operations)	1. Client has poor data capture and information management	[Root cause of more immediate causes of poor quality]	Knowledge management and operations literature – e.g. data as an organisational resource (Kitchin, 2018: 117–127)	Common root cause for many other causes, especially #18, #24, #32, and #34, and #45
		2. Client has poorly developed internal knowledge (e.g. staff turnover, culture of low openness, knowledge of institutions)	[Root cause]	Organisational, knowledge management and human resources literature – e.g. dynamic capability theory, client readiness (McLachlin, 1999: 396; Schaffer, 2002: 81)	Frequently caused by #47. Common root cause for #7, #8, #9, #11, #18, #12, #18, #28, and #41
		3. Client has inadequately mature general project management capability and systems	[Root cause]	Project management literature – e.g. the project management maturity model (Kerzner, 2001), see also Turner (2004), McLeod and Schapper (2020).	Common root cause of many more immediate causes, including: #7, #8, #9, #12, #13, #15, #16, #19, #25, #28, #33, #35, #41, #42, #45, and #46
		4. Client's executive have unrealistic expectations (especially for rapid delivery of initiatives)	[Root cause.]	Management literature – e.g. unrealistic quality expectations (Belkhdja et al., 2012; Ojasalo, 2001: 203), optimism bias, valuing time over quality (Merrow, 2011: 114–115, 155–157), “death march” impossible projects (Pinto, 2013: 647)	Common root cause for #7, #8, #9, #14, #23, and #24. #28
		5. Client has poor relationships with suppliers, or a poor reputation (typically from poor conduct in previous projects)	[Root cause]	Service management and contracting literature – e.g. influence on consultants' decision to bid or not bid (Dobes, 2016: 3), see also #18-24	Often related to past poor procurement (see #12-31) or disputes with consultants (#32-46)
		6. Client has poor relationships with stakeholders, especially those with significant power and influence	[Root cause]	Stakeholder management theory – e.g. resource dependency theory, power-interest matrix (Lehtinen and Aaltonen, 2020), stakeholder negotiation and bargaining theory (Merrow, 2011: 84; Ward and Chapman, 2008)	Common root cause for #32, #33, and #43
<b>Initiation (section 3.1)</b>	Decision to undertake a project/initiative	7. Client poorly understands or defines the problem proposed to be addressed	Difficulty understanding client's underlying needs	Quality and requirements management literature, e.g. problem definition/ problem recognition (Kubr, 1993: 54–56; Mitchell, 1994: 316–317; Poulfelt and Paynee, 1994: 429), multiple clients (Schein, 1997), ambiguous and implicit needs, (McLachlin, 2000; Ojasalo, 2001)	Frequently caused by #2, #3, and #4. Can cause #17 #43
		8. Client ideates a preferred solution without adequately analysing the problem	Engaged for the wrong scope of work	Insufficient consideration of alternatives, lock-in (Flyvbjerg, 2009: 147; Samset, 2009)	Frequently caused by #2, #3, and #4. Often results in #17
		9. Client is unrealistic or over-optimistic in their ideation	No consultant could meet the client's expectations	Management literature – e.g. optimism and confirmation bias, vulnerability to “overzealous advocacy” or “strategic misrepresentation” of internal project proponents (Flyvbjerg, 2009; Pinto, 2013: 645)	Frequently caused by #2, #3, and #4. Often results in #20 and #21, #27, and #38

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Phase	Milestones	Potential Cause of Poor Quality (#)	Implications for Consultant	Reference Literature and Specific Source(s)	Relationship to other causes
		10. Client organisation provides inadequate support from executive management or a suitably senior project sponsor	Client's representative lacks decision-making capability	Top management support (Appelbaum and Steed, 2005: 82; Bettencourt et al., 2002: 115; Bronnenmayer et al., 2016: 12; Jang and Lee, 1998: 70), multiple "clients" in client organisation (Schein, 1997)	Often results in constrained budgets (#14) and stalled client decision-making in procurement (#24) and delivery (#32 to #39, #43, and #46)
		11. Client organisation selects unsuitable client representative/project manager	Consultant will have difficulty communicating effectively with end-user client(s) and understanding requirements	Weak project manager, or manager lacking in authority or capacity to communicate (Kappelman et al., 2006: 32–34)	Frequently caused by #2. Often a root cause of #32 and #34
	Decision to engage a consultant	12. Client does not undertake adequate analysis about whether to conduct the proposed work itself (make-or-buy analysis)	Engagement is less efficient than if the client performed the work	Make or buy analysis (Klein, 2005; PMI, 2021: 65), value of pre-work and definition (Bell and Nadler, 1979; Kubr, 1993: 68; van der Valk and Rozemeijer, 2009: 5–6)	Frequently caused by #2 and #3
		13. Client decides to recruit a consultant primarily to attempt to transfer risks or assign blame	Consultant set up to fail by client not acting in good faith	Principal-agent problem, practical limitations of risk transfer in contracting (Sharma, 1997: 761–762; Ward and Chapman, 2008: 575)	Frequently caused by #3. Often results in #16
		14. Client allocates an insufficient or unrealistic budget allocation	Insufficient resources for delivery	(Bettencourt et al., 2002: 115; Kappelman et al., 2006: 33–34; Nikolova, 2007: 110)	Frequently caused by #4 and #10. Often causes #21 and may be followed by #27
		15. Client decides to sole source from a pre-determined consultant	Most capable consultant may be excluded. Perceived favouritism can erode market interest in the client	Clients may often default to the same repeat consultant (Hislop, 2002: 665). Consultants will not bid if there is a very low prospect of winning (Dobes, 2016: 34)	Frequently caused by #3. May be made worse by #4, as the client seeks to avoid competitive procurement
16. Client selects unsuitable type of contract (e.g. fixed price)	Misalignment of incentives.	Myth of "fixed price" and "lump sum" contracts (Merrow, 2011: 7), suitability of contract remuneration model/ fee structure (Kubr, 1993: 125–131; Turner, 2004: 77–81)	Frequently caused by #3. Often results from #13		
<b>Planning (section 3.2)</b>	Develop Request/ Brief/ Terms of Reference	17. Client's request does not adequately describe the problem the client is seeking to address	Cannot identify specific or underlying needs. Must bid on assumptions; bids likely to reflect different scopes	Client may develop informed request specifications through pre-work and early market engagement (Mitchell, 1994: 323; van der Valk and Rozemeijer, 2009: 6), see also #7	Frequently caused by #7 and #8. May result in #47
		18. Client's request is too vague, including not providing adequate background data and information, or specifying specific expectations	Same as source #17	Problems of vague briefs (Mitchell, 1994: 323), importance of specifications (van der Valk and Rozemeijer, 2009). Value of provision of client data to bidders (Dobes, 2016: 48). Likelihood of high markup in bids (or decisions not to bid) if request documents are poor (Laryea, 2011: 276)	Frequently caused by #1 and #2. Often results in #26, #35, and #45
		19. Client's requests does not make adequate use of reference standards, including (where available) standard contract terms	Misunderstanding on what the consultant's bid is to deliver	Same as source #18. Usefulness of standard form of contracts (Simister and Turner, 2003)	Frequently caused by #3, may result in #41

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Phase	Milestones	Potential Cause of Poor Quality (#)	Implications for Consultant	Reference Literature and Specific Source(s)	Relationship to other causes
		20. Client's request is overly prescriptive	Competing consultants cannot differentiate offers on anything other than price. Most capable consultants may be excluded	(Dobes, 2016: 34; Kelly et al., 2021: 191; Lonsdale et al., 2017: 161; Mitchell, 1994: 324; O'Mahoney et al., 2013: 231)	Frequently caused by #9
		21. Client's request has unrealistic budget/cost or delivery timeframes or asserts onerous contract terms	Must dispute with client, either in bid or in delivery. May dissuade competent consultants from bidding	Consultants may decline to bid (Drew and Skitmore, 1992: 229; Laryea, 2011: 276)	Frequently caused by #9 and #14
		22. Client decides on inappropriate selection method/criteria (e.g. limited invitation to bid, disproportionate criteria weightings)	Most capable consultant may be excluded	Standard selection methods – e.g. “Quality-Based and Cost-Based Selection (QCBS)” (FIDIC, 2019: 8; World Bank, 2014), “most economically advantageous” or “lowest total cost” rather than lowest fee (Roodhooft and Van den Abbeele, 2006: 494)	Common root cause for #27
Release Request		23. Client does not adequately distribute request or allow reasonable time to respond	Same as #22	A short timeframe may increase the likelihood of errors by bidders (Drew and Skitmore, 1992: 228), and discourage bids (Kelly et al., 2021: 193; Laryea, 2011: 285)	Frequently caused by #4
		24. Client does not provide adequate responses to queries or clarifications	Cannot identify specific or underlying needs. May dissuade competent consultants from bidding	Useful to inform bidders (FIDIC, 2019: 10). If there is insufficient information, bidders increase bid prices to cover risks (Lu et al., 2015: 715), or decide not to bid (Kelly et al., 2021: 198).	Frequently caused by #1, #4, and #10
Evaluate Bids/Offers		25. Client fails to identify limitations in bidder's offers/ terms, including assumptions, qualifications, and departures	Misunderstandings, may exclude the best overall offer	Principal-agent theory – e.g. proposal as a promise (McLeod and Schapper, 2020: 7), risk of opportunistic bidding and adverse selection (Clark, 1993: 242; Haaskjold et al., 2019: 201; Sharma, 1997: 1996), importance of qualitative evaluation (Werr and Perner, 2007: 100)	Frequently caused by #3
		26. Client fails to definitively clarify proposal by not seeking clarifications from bidder(s)	Same as #25. Some clients may unrealistically exclude competent consultants due to contract qualifications	Importance of clarifications (Dobes, 2016: 52; FIDIC, 2019: 23–25), role of bidder's qualifications on contract terms (Laryea and Hughes, 2009: 559–560)	Frequently caused by #18 and may follow #25
		27. Client selects lowest bid/least cost offer with insufficient regard for other criteria	Most capable consultant may be excluded. Likely to have an insufficient delivery budget	(FIDIC, 2019: 26; Haaskjold et al., 2019: 201; Lonsdale et al., 2017: 161)	Frequently results from #22, and often follows #9, #14 #25 and #26
		28. Client selects an unrealistically/unfeasibly low offer	Same as #27	(Haaskjold et al., 2019: 200; Kubr, 1993: 49; McLeod and Schapper, 2020: 7)	Frequently caused by #2, #3, #4, and often follows #18, #25 and #26
Negotiations and Contract Formation		29. Client does not ensure adequate consensus for most critical contract terms	Misalignment of expectations, misunderstanding	Same as #26	Frequently follows #25 and #26

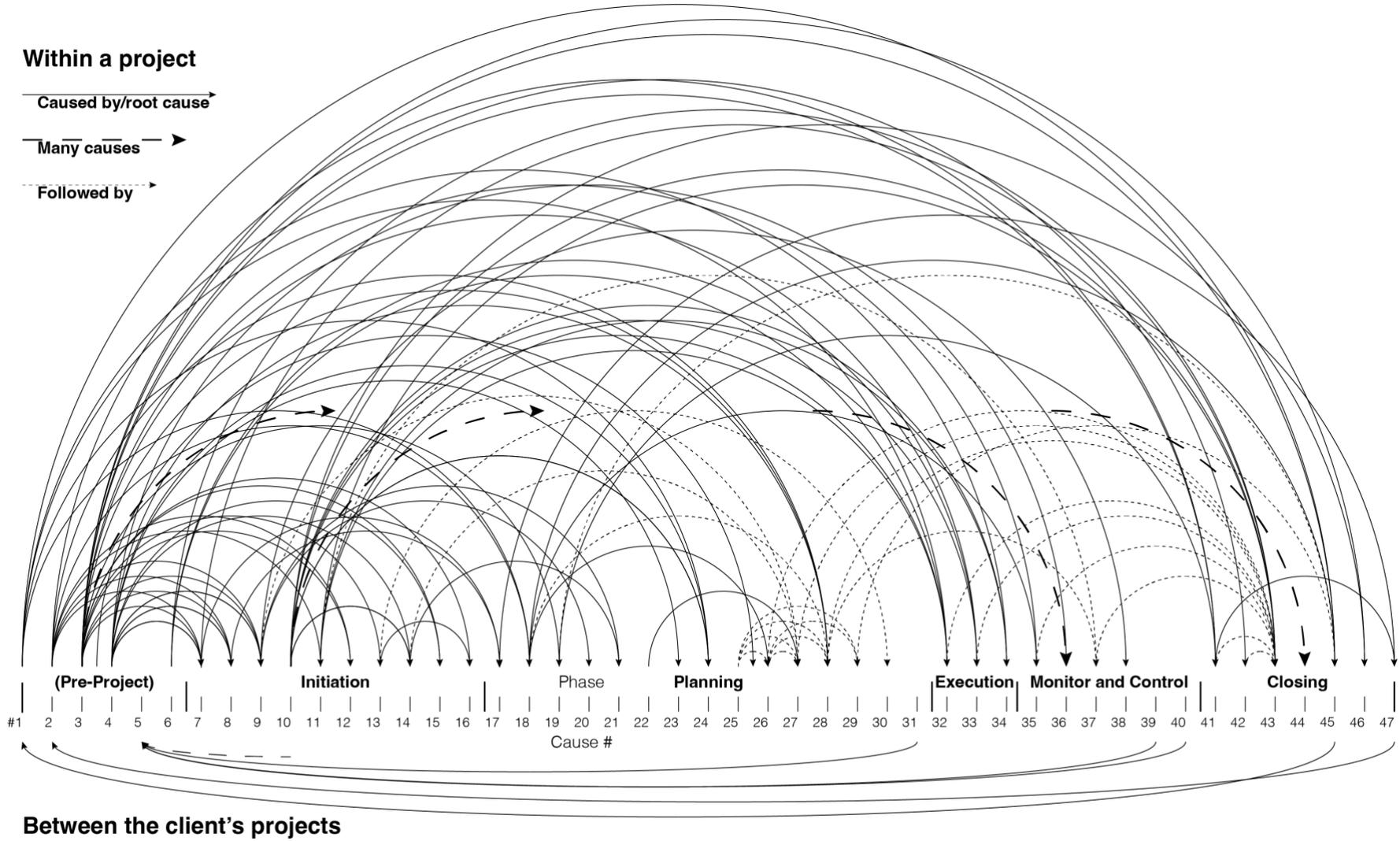
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		30. Client is overly aggressive in negotiation on terms to transfer maximum risk	Consultant may have to manage risks that are best handled by the client. Only a bidder that does not understand such risks may be selected	Adverse selection (per source #25), risk transfer (see source #13)	Frequently follows #13. Usually will not mitigate against cause #28
		31. Client does not provide reasonable debriefing for interested bidders	Lost opportunity for continuous improvement. Bidders may not bid for the client again	(FIDIC, 2019: 18; New Zealand Government, 2010; Sturgis, 2008)	Common root cause for #5.
<b>Executing (section 3.3)</b>	Working together	32. Client fails to provide timely inputs (including from stakeholders) to consultant	Lost opportunity for the integration of inputs, delay, rework	Consultant’s methods may rely on specific client inputs or the client’s data (Dobes, 2016: 48), importance of early confirmation of “basic data” or project parameters (Merrow, 2011: 137–155). Importance of client’s communication of potentially hidden or ambiguous “cultural, political, and personal factors” to consultant (Schein, 1987: 30)	Frequently caused by #1, #6, #10, and #11
		33. Client is unclear on preferred arrangements for engaging with their stakeholders, or otherwise poorly manages stakeholders	Same as #32. Potential for relationship breakdown with stakeholders	Importance of client decisions/direction (Dobes, 2016: 73; Lehtinen and Aaltonen, 2020), importance of “provided resources” (Bronnenmayer et al., 2016: 12)	Frequently caused by #3, #6, and #10
		34. Client is unresponsive to proactive requests for clarification or additional input	Same as #32	Same as #32 and #33	Frequently caused by #1, #10 and #11.
<b>Monitoring and Controlling (section 3.4)</b>	Managing change	35. Client is haphazard or unclear on confirming any scope changes	Contract agreement becomes unclear	Continued ambiguity on client objectives and requirements – “fuzzy expectations” (Ojasalo, 2001: 203), “requirements creep” (Pinto, 2013: 649); “mission creep” (Dobes, 2016: 69); importance of documentation (Harmon and Stephan, 2001)	Frequently caused by #3 and #18
		36. Client initiates excessive change requests (including those originating from poorly managed scope creep)	High potential for rework and sunk costs; can be difficult and sometimes impractical to manage. Contract agreement can become unclear	Client often needs to rectify poor planning during delivery (Li et al., 2015: 550). Client changing mind on a whim, or attempts to freeload on the client through incidental requests (Bell and Nadler, 1979: 99), “milking the consultant” for add-ons (Bowen and Collett, 1978: 480)	Frequently a symptom of poor ideation and/or request definition (#1-#30), may be exacerbated by an impatient project sponsor (#4)
		37. Client fails to assert contract rights, including ensuring the consultant’s staff/resources promised in the proposal are those who complete the work	Enforceable contract may begin to differ from the agreed contract. Consultants who use rent-seeking tactics may exploit ambiguity	Contract law doctrine of waiver and estoppel (Beale et al., 2008: 846–860; Murray, 2011: 700), consultant substituting staff – the “bait-and-switch” (Kovar and Mauldin, 2007: 36; McLeod and Schapper, 2020: 7; Sirosky, 1989: 11)	Frequently follows #11 and #28
		38. Client is unreasonable in negotiating on any additional work required (including work originating from stakeholders)	Insufficient resources to complete the work required. Significant potential for disputes	Importance of client’s “attitude to control” towards negotiating change/ variation requests (Chan and Yeong, 1995: 468), importance of management process (Bronnenmayer et al., 2016: 28)	Frequently caused by #9. More likely to arise after #6, #24-#30

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Phase	Milestones	Potential Cause of Poor Quality (#)	Implications for Consultant	Reference Literature and Specific Source(s)	Relationship to other causes
		39. Client fails to accept or promptly remit reasonable payment claims	Trust breakdown and disputes	Importance of timely payments for relationship (Haaskjold et al., 2019: 217; Lengnick-Hall, 1996: 800). Poorly behaved clients cost consultants; may lead to consultant having to “fire the client” (Arussy, 2006; Sharma, 2008)	Usually a final result of earlier issues. Common (inter-project) root cause of #5
		40. Client escalates disputes prematurely – i.e. before reasonably trying to resolve them	Trust breakdown. Consultant forced to become similarly litigious	Can be a result of misunderstanding (Aaltonen et al., 2010: 577), typically very costly (Lu et al., 2015: 717)	Usually a final result of prior issues. Common (inter-project) root cause of source #5
	Review of deliverables	41. Client does not assess work against relevant established standards or conventions, etc.	Assessment of quality is more subjective; higher potential for misunderstanding	Quality control client checking and comments (McLeod and Schapper, 2020: 8), “measurable” results (Appelbaum and Steed, 2005: 82). Contract theory – ambiguity of descriptions of “quality” (Murray, 2011: 611), see also #44	Frequently caused by #2, #3, and #19. May result in #47
		42. Client fails to adequately check early and intermediate work (including by seeking relevant stakeholders’ comments)	Lost opportunity for correction. Risk for reputational damage for both parties	Feedback as part of co-creation (Bettencourt et al., 2002: 111; McLeod and Schapper, 2020: 8; Mills and Moshavi, 1999: 56), frustrating for consultant if client ignores (Dobes, 2016: 69) cost of poor quality (Harrington, 1987)	Frequently caused by #3; may be a form of waiver (#37)
		43. Client provides excessive, inconsistent, or contradictory comments	Consultant is unable to finalise work. May vary contract in an ambiguous way	Plurality of “clients” in client organisations (Schein, 1997), conflicting requirements (McLeod and Schapper, 2020: 3), self-conflicting feedback (Alvesson et al., 2009: 262)	Frequently caused by #6, #7, #10, #11, #17, #18, and often follows #25-#28, #32, #33, #35, #37, #41, and #42
<b>Closing (section 3.5)</b>	Realisation of project benefits	44. Client unreasonably refuses to accept deliverables	Disputes	Clients should establish “acceptance criteria” (PMI, 2021: 47–48), should not unreasonably refuse acceptance (Nokes and Kelly, 2007: 121). Most severe when client also withholds payment (Lu et al., 2015: 716)	Usually a final result of many prior issues and root causes
		45. Client fails to collect raw data and other intermediate work from consultant	Lost opportunity for client’s value/benefit realisation	Similar to #41 and #42. “Intermediate deliverables” common in information systems field and pedagogical theory (Benaroch et al., 2015: 25; Portny, 2010: 19). Delivery of raw files (e.g. sampling information) common in technical consulting	Clients frequently fail to specify rights to intermediate deliverables in contracts (#18). Frequently caused by #1 and #3, often follows #19 and #29
		46. Client does not undertake adequate lessons learned or sufficient debriefing of consultant	Lost opportunity for consultant’s continuous improvement	Value of collaborative “lessons learned” and knowledge consolidation at closure (Dobes, 2016: 80; Kubr, 1993: 163–164; Schaffer, 2002: 139–140). Importance of evaluation to inform future procurement (Werr and Perner, 2007: 111)	Frequently caused by #3 and #10
		47. Client fails to make effective use of deliverables	Same as #45	Same as #46, client’s “absorptive capacity” (Nikolova, 2007: 103), client’s “readiness” to implement results of the engagement (Schaffer, 2002: 81)	Frequently caused by #17, #41. Common root cause of #2

2 Source: Author, references for individual sources are throughout section 3. Refer also Figure 1.



4 *Figure 1: Relationship between causes – within and between the client's projects. Source: Author, also refer Table 1.*

### **3.1 Pre-Project and Initiation - Organisational Context and the Decision to Commence**

The organisational context of the client organisation substantially determines the maximum quality that a consultant may deliver, because the client's starting position defines: their degree of underlying needs motivating the initiation of the project, the extent to which they may be able to assess consultants' capability; their capacity to understand and manage the consultant's proposed service delivery; and their overall capability to utilise institutions to reduce transaction costs throughout these processes.

An expert client or "competent customer"<sup>1</sup> (Eliasson, 2010) is likely to enter into a more successful contract than a client with less developed systems and internal capability. Immature clients often attempt to recruit a consultant for a more ambiguous, or undefined problem, and may encounter related difficulty getting the best possible value from the transaction (McLachlin, 2000). Clients must also appoint a suitable person to lead the project and act as the client's primary representative – commonly, consultants are managed by a client's project manager who works at some distance from the problem the project is trying to solve (Schein, 1997). A client is often especially vulnerable to an outcome that improperly meets their underlying need if they have poor data collection and information management, or are otherwise not able to provide the consultant with specific data for use in the project work (Dobes, 2016: 48). Similarly, a consultant engaged by a client organisation with a very poor reputation among external stakeholders may face difficulties in delivering work due to the unpredictable and potentially unmanageable influence of those stakeholders (Lehtinen and Aaltonen, 2020). These issues are often made worse when the client organisation has low levels of embedded knowledge (e.g., high staff turnover, or a culture of low openness), or where the client has unrealistic expectations of the consulting project.

Many clients also seek to engage a consultant without adequate consideration for whether they could internally work to address the problem - known as "make or buy analysis" (Klein, 2005; PMI, 2021: 176). A savvy client might undertake (either internally or through a small consultancy engagement) early front-end research and definition work ahead of engaging a consultant for a larger, more defined engagement (Bell and Nadler, 1979; Kubr, 1993: 68). Similarly, a client should identify the format of engagement (fixed price, hourly rates, etc.) that best suits the nature of what is to be delivered, and which establishes mutual incentives through the form of the consultant's remuneration (Dobes, 2016: 44–45; Easley and Harding, 1999; Turner, 2004).

A client who goes to market to appoint a consultant incurs specific initial transaction costs, and consultants similarly incur costs in formulating a contract (Hillebrandt and Hughes, 2000; Saam, 2012). Since institutions exist to reduce transaction costs by establishing "rules of the game" of trade, clients face particular disadvantages if they do not have a working familiarity with institutions of the market they are procuring services from (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003; Perner and Werr, 2013). If clients

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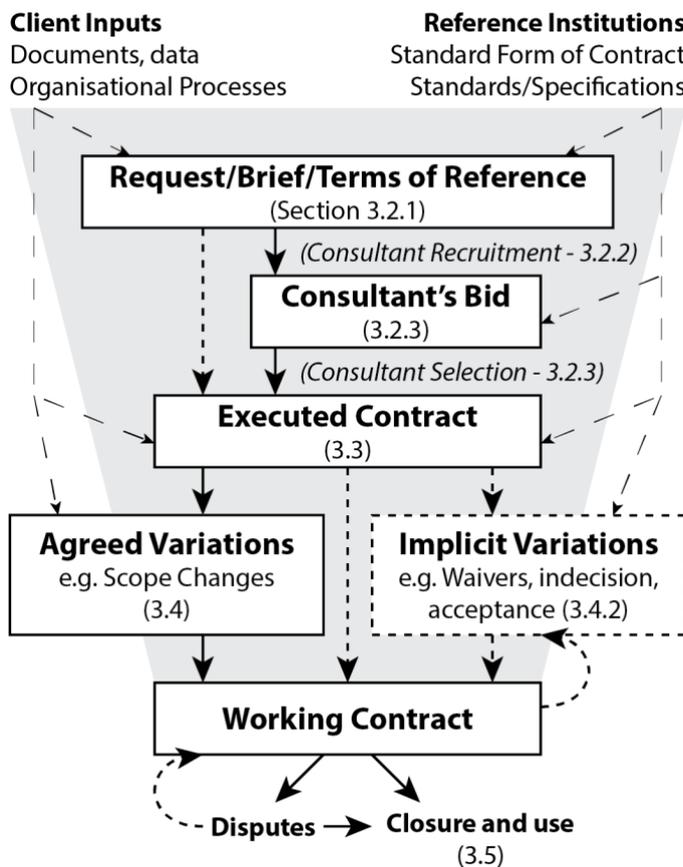
<sup>1</sup> The term "strong owner" is used in the project management literature

discount the transaction costs of engaging an external supplier – or worse, when they seek to avoid these transaction costs through forgoing prudent procurement – they may be much more likely to find external delivery of work of unsatisfactory quality.

### 3.2 Planning – Embedding Client Needs and Aligning Incentives

Clients must work to form a contract that can be understood as a clear basis for managing the planning and delivery of consultant services, to a realistic level of quality, and based on a fair and mutually beneficial exchange. When executed, this contract binds the client in a form of temporary monopoly with the appointed consultant (Williamson, 1979: 241).

Any avoidable lack of clarity on the problem the consultant is being engaged to address - and any specific requirements that the consultant is to deliver - drastically increases the risk of a poor quality outcome. This is especially true if the contract between the client and consultant does not provide a sufficient budget to complete the work or if the client’s expectations are unrealistic (McLachlin, 2000; Ojasalo, 2001). A general process for how consulting contracts are formed is depicted in Figure 2.



**Figure 2: Typical Model of Contract Formation, cross-referenced to sub-sections.**  
 Solid lines depict the typical legal order of contract formation.  
 Dotted lines depict avenues for implied or default contract formation.  
 Source: Author.

Errors in the recruitment and selection of the consultant can form a root cause of deficient quality in the work delivered, as they may exclude the most competent consultant from being selected by the client. Clients may often revert to recruiting the same consultant without seeking alternatives (Hislop, 2002: 665). Since the market for consultant services is very dynamic (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003; Perner and Werr, 2013: 24), clients typically benefit from work to solicit multiple proposals, ideally under some degree of competitive tension.

### *3.2.1 Request*

In commencing the process of contracting, a client must clearly articulate the primary motivations for the contract, commonly documented in what is known as “Brief”, “Terms of Reference”, or “Request” distributed to recruit a consultant. Such client needs or “requirements” may relate to what is to be delivered, and the constraints or implied obligations the client expects about how the consultant delivers the services (ISO, 2015; Ojasalo, 2001). Exact detailed requirements are often uncertain, may evolve, and conflicts between requirements are almost always encountered (Alvesson et al., 2009: 262; Basu, 2014; Mitchell, 1994). Request documents form the base of the consulting contract, and any specification in them usually prevails wherever the client’s proposal (or subsequent negotiations) are silent. Request documents inform for the development of all consultant’s proposals (offers), and are the client’s first step in negotiating how it expects the risks of the engagement to be assigned.

Contractual agreements that assign risks to the party most able to manage them - while also establishing incentives that align both parties' interests - tend to yield the highest quality results (Bronnenmayer et al., 2016; Turner, 2004). It may be tempting for a client organisation with limited internal capacity to manage risks to seek to bundle and wholly transfer risks to the consultant through a contract. However, doing so is often perilous, since: competent consultants will generally avoid onerous contracts (Dobes, 2016); it can be costly and difficult for clients to enforce onerous contract terms (Williamson, 1985); and the client still ultimately owns the underlying risks related to the problem the consultant has been hired to help solve (Kubr, 1993: 56; Mellow, 2011: 6).

Accordingly (and since they will likely have other opportunities to pursue), capable consultants will almost always require a degree of fairness in the contract (Bennett and Smith, 2004; Bronnenmayer et al., 2016). For instance, fair contract terms might provide that: resources and inputs required to deliver high-quality work will be available to the consultant; the client will reasonably negotiate (and, where applicable, revert to institutions and norms) when unforeseen circumstances arise (or where the contract is otherwise incomplete); and the consultant will generally not suffer any disproportionate loss (such as reputational, financial, or legal harms) in delivering work under the contract (Bettencourt et al., 2002). A client who seeks to be too aggressive with consultants risks excluding capable and reputable consultants who will not tolerate onerous contracts.

The form of contract used to establish the engagement is critical to the quality delivered, especially since it governs how the client will make resources available to the consultant to complete work. Since contracts are inherently incomplete, reference to relevant institutions (such as industry standards, references, and guidelines) can strengthen a client's understanding of, reference to, and specific contractual rights to meet a more defined set of requirements. A contract without institutional references may be at particular risk of uncertainty, unclear or haphazard decision-making, and poor quality outcomes (Merrow, 2011: 64–65). Standard forms of contract are an important institutional tool. They reduce transaction costs by reducing the effort needed by consultants to familiarise themselves with proposed terms, and by signalling the client's intent to act in alignment with established industry norms (Simister and Turner, 2003). For these reasons, clients can utilise standard forms of contract to enable greater complexity in contract structures, such as for alliance contracts or agile-type projects. Many professional associations, government entities, and industry groups have established general conditions or standard forms of contracts, such as the New Engineering Contract system, Joint Contract Tribunal standards, the World Bank Framework, the FIDIC model agreement, and Australian Standard AS 4122.

### *3.2.2 Releasing Request and Signalling Preferences*

In releasing a brief or request, clients can work to receive high-quality proposals from consultants likely to deliver high-quality deliverables by engaging with the market of prospective consultants. Clients must establish selection criteria for guiding consultants' development of their bids, and the client's selection between them. Consultant competence is the primary critical success factor for achieving quality work (Bronnenmayer et al., 2016), and clients should work to collate evidence or indicators of competence among bidders. However, some clients (particularly in the public sector) may have rigid procurement processes that heavily weigh price over other factors, or that do not allow them to take into account past performance by that consultant (FIDIC, 2019: 13; Sporrang, 2011). These risk discounting evidence of quality, and selecting consultants who rely on aggressive commercial tactics (detailed further in section 3.2.3).

Clients should seek to reduce ambiguity in their requirements by responding to requests for information through the procurement process (FIDIC, 2019). Recognising the doctrine of caveat emptor, both the client and consultant bear a duty to investigate facts and undertake due diligence about the proposed contract (Beale et al., 2008: 532). Where requirements are highly ambiguous or subjective, the client may be wise to provide a budget estimate which signals their tolerance to pay for degrees of grade or quality.

Clients should evaluate potential reasons why competent consultants may not bid for a project. Problems in previous experiences with a client may dissuade suitably experienced consultants from bidding, or escalating their bid prices to factor in risks (Lu et al., 2015: 715). Consultants may decide not to bid if the client has a poor reputation or is signalling an insufficient budget for the engagement

(Dobes, 2016). A client who is unresponsive or vague in responding to requests for information may discourage capable consultants, especially those with greater working knowledge of typical costs and risks (FIDIC, 2019). In short, clients and consultants should signal a genuine intention to partner towards the long-term, rather than profit at the other's expense in futile short-term games.

### *3.2.3 Understanding Proposals as Contract Bids/Offers*

Commonly, consultant proposals (which are both a bid price and an offer to form a contract) become the most definitive part of the contract – with the request and other terms only prevailing where the proposal is silent. Therefore, a client can only realistically expect the level of quality implied by the proposal.

Clients' selection between bids can compromise the quality of end results if clients make decisions that exclude the most capable, realistic, or honest consultants. Because many client organisations may use very predictable procurements processes, or operate under bounded rationality or asymmetric information, opportunistic consultants may structure their bids and business models to win work (Kubr, 1993: 49).

The literature recognises many commercial tactics and methods of opportunism consultants may use to win work (Bai et al., 2016; Segal, 1964; Sharma, 1997). Many consulting markets have relatively low barriers to entry, resulting in a fragmented market (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003; Perner and Werr, 2013: 24). Hence, clients may receive proposals from consultants who act irrationally or unethically to win work – giving rise to “adverse selection” risks (Clark, 1993: 242; Sharma, 1997). Clients who accept such bids are likely to struggle to yield high-quality deliverables at the lowest overall cost. A set of common bidding tactics that have significant potential to compromise delivery quality are compiled in Table 2.

**Table 2: Common Consultant Bid Tactics**

<b>Tactic</b>	<b>Definition and Potential Implications</b>
Underscoping or Excluding Scope	Providing a bid price that represents only part of the work needed to meet the client's needs. This pushes negotiation on price into the delivery phase - when the client is contractually bound to the consultant and thus has much higher switching costs. A consultant may rely on "add-ons", "bolt-ons", or other change requests for profit margins. At worst, the consultant may hold projects ransom over such variation claims.
Buying the Work	A consultant may bid to "buy the project" at or below actual cost as a commercial loss-leader, or simply to provide short-term revenue. This is particularly dangerous as it may anchor a client on an unrealistic budget, and result in problems if the consultant cannot or will not sustain subsidising the work in the delivery phase.
Bait-and-switch	Using less experienced personnel to complete the work than the consultants promised in the bid, including by outsourcing work
Brochuremanship	Implying a standard of quality that is not actually made explicit or enforceable in the contract terms – a client may be captivated by the puffery and implied promises of the proposal, which they cannot practically enforce in delivery.
Ignorance/Error (Bounded Rationality)	A bidder (especially one with bounded rationality) may simply lodge a bid that erroneously underestimates the cost of completing the work. This risk is more likely for inexperienced consultants.

*Source: Author, drawing on (Bell and Nadler, 1979; Clark, 1995; Drew and Skitmore, 1992; Kubr, 1993; McLeod and Schapper, 2020; Schaffer, 2002; Segal, 1964)*

A common cause of poor quality recognised across a wide set of literature is naïve clients succumbing to the temptation to accept the bidder with the lowest (and often unrealistic) bid price (FIDIC, 2019), often by deferring or internalising project costs. A client's decision to accept a low price is, in effect, a bet that it will not cost the client more than any savings between bids to manage or fix any deficiencies that arise from the successful (low-bidding) consultant's work. The quality management literature (see section 2.2) indicates this is generally a poor bet for the client.

At the end of the selection process, clients should offer to debrief unsuccessful bidders, as both a courtesy recognising the resources spent on each proposal, to mitigate against the risk of disputes, and as an investment in attracting quality bids in the future (New Zealand Government, 2010; Sturgis, 2008).

### **3.3 Execution – Competent Working Routines**

Once a consultant is appointed, it remains essential that the client works to input information through the consultant's work. Clients must provide input (such as data, information, or confirmation of preferences) as early as possible to allow it to be available for the moment the consultant undertakes specific tasks reliant on it (Bronnenmayer et al., 2016; Schaffer, 2002). Ideally, open communication and supportive working routines established through the procurement process continue into the delivery phase to achieve this end (Turner, 2021). A client who only provides information after a consultant has

completed the task likely incurs a lost opportunity to achieve quality at the lowest cost (i.e. per Crosby, 1979), and risks having to request the consultant re-work the task. Clients should also express any preferences (especially where they may relate to institutions that encode quality standards) as early as possible, both to reduce the need for any rework, and avoid implicit variation of the contract terms by the client's inadvertent waiver (see section 2.1).

For contracts in which the engagement of external stakeholders are critical to the quality and success of the consultant's work, collaborative involvement of the client is especially important (Lehtinen and Aaltonen, 2020). Since it is impractical to encode in the contract precisely how the consultant should respond to the dynamic input and position of stakeholders, and as the client retains ownership of the relationship with the stakeholder even after the consultant completes their work, clear direction from the client is critical.

### **3.4 Monitoring and Controlling**

Since contracts are incomplete, and consultant work can result in early and intermediate discoveries, both consultants and clients must actively manage the emergent discoveries through the contract to allow them to become integrated into the working agreement. Clients must reserve and enforce their rights to obtain the specification of quality established under the contract, including through the review of early work and deliverables (Bettencourt et al., 2002: 111; McLeod and Schapper, 2020: 8; Mills and Moshavi, 1999: 56).

#### *3.4.1 Managing Change*

Change is a common part of most consulting contracts. In most jurisdictions, contractual arrangements are superseded whenever there is a subsequent agreement by the parties – including implicitly (section 2.1). Implicit changes to the contract may include: direct client instructions; client acceptance of early work or deliverables; and - at worst – by client inaction and waiver. Commercial tactics of consultants (see Table 2) may only become evident when consultants submit change requests for proposed variations part-way through delivery. Misunderstanding about the scope and requirements for a commission or poor early planning is a typical source of variation claims (Li et al., 2015: 550). Clients may also seek to extract additional unpaid work out of the client through scope or requirements creep (Bell and Nadler, 1979: 99; Dobes, 2016: 69; Pinto, 2013: 649).

Generally, a client should manage a consultant's contract so that the only changes that arise are those where the client's requirements have changed – either due to external factors, or where early work has made discoveries requiring additional work (Bronnenmayer et al., 2016: 28). Such project changes should be viewed as an opportunity for fair negotiation. However, misunderstandings or divergent views that might result in a change request have the potential to escalate into a dispute when the client and consultant cannot agree on a remedy. The escalation of conflict into formal disputes inevitably results in very high transaction costs (Lu et al., 2015), and clients who assign a disproportionate share

of the blame for failure on the consultant usually face the most significant difficulty in managing the contract to achieve a high-quality result.

Several contractual mechanisms can be applied to mitigate against the “bait-and-switch” substitution of personnel during project work (see Table 2). For instance, quality management systems established under ISO 9001 commonly require an accountable person to sign version control and quality check forms shown on deliverables. In some high-risk fields, such as safety-critical technical consulting, it is sometimes a requirement that the curriculum vitae of the consultants responsible for the work are appended to the final deliverables as the record.

### *3.4.2 Review of Deliverables*

Client feedback (commonly through review and comment on deliverables or services) is an essential component of the co-creation process (McLeod and Schapper, 2020; Mills and Moshavi, 1999: 56). Generally, the later a quality problem is identified, the more costly it is to fix (Harrington, 1987). Accordingly, the client’s review of early and intermediate work (such as draft deliverables) has significant power to reduce the cost of quality.

Disputes about the quality of the service delivered are more common when clients cannot ground their perception of quality requirements against documented specifications or acceptance criteria, especially those codified in established institutions. Institutions are a powerful enabler of client review, since they can reduce ambiguity in benchmarking measuring quality standards against industry norms. Similarly, the careful use of third-party peer review and verification can be important for reducing information asymmetry between the consultant and the reviewer, and providing a degree of independence in assessing quality (Dobes, 2016: 37). Clients must also work to collate comments to remove any contradicting positions or self-conflicting feedback (Alvesson et al., 2009: 262). In doing so, the client can focus the consultant’s attention towards the most substantial opportunities for meeting core requirements and thus achieving the highest quality at the lowest possible cost.

## **3.5 Closure – Realising Benefits and Facilitating Inter-project Learning**

The client’s practical use of consultant work is the most pivotal factor in achieving value through engaging a consultant. While it is the consultant’s duty to provide useful outputs, it is the client’s job to use them (Bell and Nadler, 1979; Schaffer, 2002). The literature also recognises the importance of collaborative knowledge capture and codification as an important part of closing an engagement (Dobes, 2016: 80; Kubr, 1993: 163–164; Schaffer, 2002: 139–140). For the consultant, the closing phase is an opportunity to realise intangible benefits from the commission, such as through consolidating lessons and knowledge; saving tools and materials (including proposals) for later adaption and re-use; attracting positive publicity and consolidating industry reputation; and identifying leads for further work (Fincham, 2012). Competent clients might also consider how the commission might

influence future procurement decisions (Werr and Perner, 2007: 111). – especially if any errors on the client’s part might discourage competent consultants from engaging with them in the future.

## **4 Discussion and Conclusions**

Every consultant engagement is a co-creation process, dependent on the inputs of both the client and their consultant. By collating insights from the professional experience of practising consultants, grounded in a review of the literature, this paper has advanced the theory that the actions taken by the client determine the ceiling of maximum possible quality that may be delivered by the consultants they hire. By applying quality management concepts, transaction cost economics, institutional theory, and broad contract law principles, this paper has established a framework for how clients’ decisions can deprive an engagement project of resources needed to deliver quality, including through the unnecessary escalation of transaction costs. By applying quality theory to the specific nature of consulting projects, this paper has demonstrated that common problems in quality that may arise in consultant engagements typically have a root cause established much earlier in the interaction between the client and consultant (see Table 1 and Figure 1).

This framework has three main applications for practice, and one for scholarly research. Firstly, Table 1 may serve as a proactive checklist or risk register for clients (and consultants assessing a prospective client). Through such a review, a client might identify an organisational issue or weakness that is likely to form a root cause of a problem during a consultant engagement - especially if the issue is motivating the employment of a consultant. In doing so, the client may identify an opportunity to clarify the appropriate scope of the engagement and the likely inputs they will have to provide to realise a high-quality outcome. In short, clients should look inwards before engaging an external consultant.

Secondly, the framework may serve as a tool for retrospectively diagnosing and evaluating problems encountered during a consulting contract. For instance, consultants may apply such a tool to assess how their clients may have impacted the profitability and success of individual contracts.

Third – and more generally - the findings arising through both the practical synthesis of the framework and the review of the literature triangulate consistently illustrate the value of early identification of needs and requirements, particularly those which may be encoded in written institutions (Appelbaum and Steed, 2005; Dobes, 2016; Ojasalo, 2001). The evidence collated through this research emphasises the significant value of early effort spent communicating, testing, and establishing mutual understanding of needs and requirements between the client and consultant (Kubr, 1993; Laryea and Hughes, 2009; McLachlin, 2000; McLeod and Schapper, 2020; van der Valk and Rozemeijer, 2009). Clients can utilise written institutions common to the relevant consulting field (such as standard forms of contract, guidelines and specifications) to establish a clear baseline description of quality and acceptance criteria that they can expect and enforce through a contract with a consultant (FIDIC, 2019;

Turner, 2017). While specifications are commonly established through a formal procurement process, the principles and process of contract formulation illustrated in Figure 2 also apply in less formal types of agreements. In such cases, institutions still enable the reduction of transaction costs by grounding the contract to industry norms and standards. For clients urgently seeking to appoint a consultant, engaging a reputable consultant to assist with planning the broader work – especially to establish reference to existing institutions – is very likely to be time effectively invested in the long-run quality of the whole project.

Lastly, this framework may serve as the foundation for further academic studies of consulting services, such as the quantitative work of Appelbaum and Steed (2005) and Bronnenmeyer et al. (2016). For instance, the clear next step in this thread of this research is to quantify the relative significance and frequency of the causes listed in Table 1 among a much larger sample of consulting professionals and experienced client representatives.

Clients cannot practically defer or escape their contribution to the success of consultancy projects. As this paper has identified, there are several common traps clients may fall into, which form the root cause of poor quality in the services and deliverables consultants may deliver for them. It is essential that clients take the ultimate leadership role in their consultant projects and services, rather than allowing them to be led solely by the interests of those who are contracted to serve them.

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