Management consultancy: Exploring the boundaries and alternatives

Call for papers
In recent years, management scholars have witnessed the expansion of the management consulting industry. Here, particular attention has been given to the increased economic and ideational significance of consultants and consulting firms. While recognising the scepticism that consultancy and consultancy-led changes often attracts, the industry has achieved a remarkable and almost continuous growth in size and status.

Research on management consultancy has progressed significantly during the same period, but what can we say about the boundaries of this industry and alternative, perhaps less high profile, approaches to achieving its functions? Management consulting has typically been considered as a particular, albeit notoriously ill-defined, part of a broader field of professional services. However, such an understanding runs the risk of both exaggerating the extent and impact of consultancy and underestimating the multiplicity of forms of management advice and alternatives to organisational innovation (Sturdy, 2011). Rather, a more profound understanding of the occupation of consulting and its influence on management and organisational practice, requires a conceptualisation of management advice as more diverse and something that can take hybrid forms (e.g. former consultants as managers) which often cross-organisational and occupational boundaries.

For instance various occupational and functional management groups such as internal consultants, auditors, accountants, project managers, HR managers, purchasing managers, interim managers and IT specialists, have sought to appropriate the position and discourse of consultants as a legitimate advice giver by colonising ‘external’ roles and practices or even transforming themselves in their image – ‘we are all consultants now’? Related to such changes are those which impact directly upon traditional managerial and consulting roles and identities such as the increasing ‘professionalisation’ of purchasing (Bäcklund and Werr, 2008), the development of firms’ own management advisory services, and the transformation of traditional consultancies into ‘multidisciplinary business services providers’. This draws attention to our questioning of the nature of management as well as consultancy.

This sub-theme aims to explore conceptualisations of management advisory and related services, beyond the traditional management consultant and consulting firm. The hope is to develop fruitful research directions into both consulting as an occupation/profession and organisational innovation, but also in relation to management and managerial identity. Encouraging the use of both critical and established, and empirical and theoretical approaches and perspectives, we invite papers that deal with the issues outlined above as well as the following, non exclusive list:

- Managers’ and other actors’ constructions of the consultancy-management boundary - roles, identities and dynamics of advice and other services.
- Colonisation and appropriation of consultancy, and the evolution of new consulting areas or advisory services (e.g. PR/communication, CSR).
- The politics and dynamics of defining consultancy – occupational identity moves towards and away from consulting
- Non-consulting activities of consulting firms and consultants.
- The consultancy (non) usage by managers and others, or active rejection of consultancy as a form of organisational innovation.
- Internal and external alternatives to consultancy in relation to its diverse functions such as innovation.
- The emergence and ‘professionalisation’ of actors mediating the relation between clients and consultants (e.g. advising on the purchase and use of consultants)
- Management consultancy and broader and historical discourses of advice.
References

The convenors
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