So What Makes a Successful Consulting Project?

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Introduction

What constitutes a successful consulting project is a question that has attracted interest from practitioners and researchers alike. Aside from getting the invoices paid, successful projects provide consulting firms with additional benefits and value. Marc Baaij, in his *Introduction to Management Consultancy* (2014) suggests the evaluation of the success of a consulting project potentially helps a consulting firm in four ways: 1) it offers a reference point by which the quality of the project's deliverables can be judged in relation to the fee charged; 2) it enables the scrutiny of the degree to which it contributed to the value created by the project, compared to, for example serendipitous circumstances; 3) it can provide the data to help the appraisal and development of consultants; and 4) it leads to the creation of learning and credentials for the firm's future work, in the form of reputational collateral, references, and knowledge.

How success is measured varies. For some consulting firms, indicators like repeat business or recommendations serve as proxy measures of the standing of the firm in the eyes of the client. Indeed, the rise in popularity of the Net Promoter Score (Reichheld, 2003) is based on such thinking. IBM Partner Sally Cross (O'Mahoney and Markham, 2013) reminds us that success might be determined differently by the consulting firm and by the client. Although the perspectives might be different, ideally a consulting project should be deemed successful from both vantage points. Fiona Czerniawska's work (2006) suggests the determination of success in practice is more artistic than scientific. She draws attention to the paucity of metrics in clients' evaluations of the results of consulting projects. This characteristic increases the subjectivity by which the success of consulting projects is determined, placing greater emphasis to the process adopted and the conduct of the consultants involved.

This paper looks at one consulting project whose success was endorsed by a distinguished panel of experts. Each year, the International Council of Management Consulting Institutes (ICMCI) organizes the Constatinus Awards, to celebrate consulting project excellence. The net for nominations is cast worldwide, which results in a rich variety of entries. The Constantinus Awards represents a considered independent perspective of what a successful consulting project looks like. Perhaps not surprisingly, the focus of the attention is more from the external stakeholder vantage point, rather

than internal metrics such as project profitability. In 2017, a UK-based consulting firm Challenges Worldwide came runner-up in the global award, having secured the British title en route. With Challenges Worldwide's blessing, this paper explores what success looks in the eyes of the Constantinus Awards' judges – both the questions asked and the answers given. As a result, this insight may help consulting practitioners reflect on the orientation of their own consulting projects and where emphasis might well be oriented in order to be judged as particularly successful.

Background

Before looking into the particular consulting project that caught the eye of the Constantinus judges, it's helpful to learn more about Challenges Worldwide and the type of work it undertakes. Challenges Worldwide has delivered private sector development interventions in over 50 developing markets around the world to small and medium enterprises with high growth potential since 1999. Since 2014, as part of a UK Aid programme, it has supported over 1,000 junior business support associates to deliver over 650 consulting interventions with small and medium-sized enterprises across Ghana, Rwanda, Uganda, and Zambia, amounting to over 90,000 on-site consulting delivery days.

Challenges Worldwide's core consulting staff are augmented by a team of Business Support Associates. These are volunteers aged between 18 and 25, who work directly with Challenges Worldwide's overseas clients. The Business Support Associates receive the Level 5 Certificate Professional Consulting training from its affiliate organisation Challenges Catalyst, a CMI (Chartered Management Institute) strategic partner in the UK. This is one example of Challenges Worldwide's linkages with recognized pathways around consulting professionalism.

The Constantinus Awards nomination was based on one of Challenges Worldwide's interventions – a project with Booomers International Ltd. This is a company based in Kumasi, Ghana, engaged in manufacturing bamboo bicycles, who were looking to improve operational capacity alongside raise investment and access to new markets, specifically the UK.

Success Looks Like...

This section examines the nature of success in consulting projects, with specific reference to the lines of enquiry posed by the Constantinus Awards and the responses from Challenges Worldwide.

The nomination form seeks a description of the project, and Challenges Worldwide answered this with direct reference to the consulting cycle. The consulting cycle exists in various forms, from the six-stage process articulated by Lippitt and Lippitt to the three-part one in the recent ISO 20700 Guidelines for Management Consulting Services. The consulting cycle for this particular project was articulated by Challenges Worldwide under the following headings: recruitment and exploratory meeting; contract

development; set-up; data collection and analysis; presentation; implementation; review and implementation. There are some key observations in Challenges Worldwide's responses, beyond the point of viewing the consulting cycle as a broad based construct which need to be personalized to the particular consulting situation – in content and terminology.

At the beginning of the consulting cycle, Challenges Worldwide explain the fit between the client context and Challenges Worldwide's own focus and ability to be valuable to the client. "Challenges Worldwide look to support high growth potential enterprises in sectors that will contribute to market and community level change. Our three main sectors are: agriculture – one of the largest employers in developing markets; craft – high number of female representation; and alternative energy – providing cheap and/or reliable power supply to communities. With Boomers we immediately saw growth potential for taking part in our programme due to the apparent trade linkages and investment potential to grow the business."

The contract development stage involved a two-step process, which recognizes the pragmatics around scoping terms of reference ahead of embarking on the investigation that forms part of the consulting intervention. Boomers and Challenges Worldwide signed an initial Terms of Reference detailing the three-month intervention from analysis to implementation. Post analysis stage, an appendix to this document was signed with more focused intervention deliverables by Challenges Worldwide's business support associates. In the set-up phase and with the establishment of the project team, Challenges Worldwide staged an Enterprise Seminar as a landmark event at the start of the project with the additional roles of sharing/shaping the project process and facilitating development of communication between the individuals in the Challenges Worldwide team and the Boomers organisation.

In the data collection and analysis phase, Challenges Worldwide employed an approach used by many consulting firms, namely to deploy a proprietary analysis framework, which is nevertheless underpinned by a sound research base. In this case, Challenges Worldwide used a 51-point diagnostic which helps generate data for insight into areas like market analysis, industry structure and production process mapping. As the project moved into the presentation stage, Challenges Worldwide was able to identify a series of six short term recommendations. The merits of 'quick wins' and 'low hanging fruit' with the associated benefits for project momentum and stakeholder buy-in are well recognized in the consulting literature.

The Constantinus Awards nomination form seeks data around the specific benefits achieved by the consulting work. This draws attention to both the importance and difficulties around specific metrics in consulting work. The first area referred to was the increased revenue/profit generated for the client as result of the consulting work. Challenges Worldwide's response that, having recently completed the project it was too early to determine a difference, draws attention to the complications around timescale and causality when looking at outcome-level indicators of consulting work. But of the Challenges Worldwide scope of work included a post project impact assessment, six months after the completion of the work.

In relation to process and output measures, Challenges Worldwide was able to provide data generated with the help of its 51-point diagnostic. This showed improvements for the client in areas like leadership, sales and marketing, and product processing. While the determination of quantitative data is not an easy endeavor, Challenges Worldwide's response reminds consultants of the value of having a considered response to question by a transparent method, especially when the consulting work is open to external scrutiny.

Challenges Worldwide was able to explain more far-reaching benefits of its work with Boomers, as the Constantinus Awards sought illumination of more societal impacts of consulting work. With management consultants often being criticized in the press for failing to make positive contributions to society and not being seen a part of the 'case for good'. With what many see as a growing disparity between societal values and corporate behavior, this serves an encouragement to principals of consulting firms to retain sight of a broader responsibility to society and the consulting profession.

In response to questions about societal benefits and long term impact, Challenge Worldwide drew attention to Boomers' work to support human development through job creation and educational development, whilst providing a sustainable carbon neutral and 'green' alternative mode of transport. And the value of enabling children in rural areas to have a better means of going to school; education development and youth employment is the key focus, currently providing bicycles as part of a UNICEF programme.

In relation to improving innovation strength (which is about the client's capability and cultural development), Challenges Worldwide was able cite activity in helping Boomers diversify its product range in the bike and bamboo market though linking to new markets, and introduce renewable energy to their production process as part of investment raise.

A major component of Challenges Worldwide work is capacity building. Its narrative about the Boomers project form referenced its eighty-eight days on client site, and its sixteen CMI (Chartered Management Institute) training sessions. The Constantinus nominations form looked for an explanation of how the learning from the project was transferable to a wider audience. Beyond the capacity building that formed part of the project, Challenges Worldwide made reference to more wide dissemination of learning enabled by the project. One example – its business support associate teams were able to share CMI learning and implementation across four international markets through its peer-to-peer learning platform. This allowed young people to engage with different city and country groups, to improve consulting delivery.

As would be anticipated, the Constantinus International nominations form sought feedback on client satisfaction. The Challenges Worldwide nomination included a positive endorsement from the primary client.

"I felt the impact of the Challenges Worldwide Program in that it changed the face of my business. Through that program, I was able to have a better strategy for new markets."

- Kwabena Danso, CEO, Boomers International Limited.

The gravity of the client endorsement was added to by some comparative data included by Challenges Worldwide. While a team of consultants might commit strongly and consistently across its projects, a major variable in the success of consulting work (Markham) is the client. Challenges Worldwide was able to report that its project metrics suggested its work with Boomers led to an improvement in operational output for client of 30% above the norm for this type of project.

Conclusions

The experience of Challenges Worldwide helps shine light on what particularly successful consulting looks like. The ability to demonstrate project delivery to agreed objectives seems to be a hygiene factor rather than a distinctive quality in the way success is judged. The Constantinus experience points to three qualities over and above this. First is the presence of recognized good practice in the consulting firm. Challenges Worldwide's submission made direct reference to recognized pathways to developing consulting competence and approaches such as the consulting cycle (the consulting cycle forms part of the new ISO 20700). It may be no surprise that the Constantinus Awards judges were positively disposed toward such formalized approaches which the ICMCI helped create, but the take-away for practitioners is the importance of being able to demonstrate recognized good practice. Second are the characteristics of the project itself. The more eye-catching consulting work is that which is interesting and out of the ordinary. Challenges Worldwide is unconventional in terms of both its business model and project for which it was nominated. Particularly successful consulting is probably distinctive consulting well executed rather than routine work well executed. Third is the importance of wider value in consulting. Management consultants may not have enjoyed universally good press in recent years, so the merits of consulting endeavors that focus on social justice and a greater good have a particular appeal. It could be said the business world needs to raise its game in the areas of enlightened value, environmental and social responsibility, so consulting projects which help blaze this trail are likely to enhance the reputation of the consulting profession as well benefit the stakeholders for whom they were intended. This was certainly a positive attribute of Challenges Worldwide's involvement with Boomers International Ltd.

References

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