MANAGEMENT CONSULTANTS AS INSTITUTIONAL AND PROCESSUAL ACTORS

Makoto OSUGA

Graduate School of Public Policy and Social Governance, Hosei University, Tokyo, Japan
makoto.osuga.9b@stu.hosei.ac.jp

Abstract
This paper reviews fragmented research on management consulting and develops an integrative framework that explains management consultants as both institutional and processual actors across private, public and not-for-profit settings. The study adopts an integrative literature review design and synthesises more than forty theoretical and empirical contributions drawn from institutional theory, organisational change, knowledge transfer, consulting research and public management. The review shows that consultants cannot be understood solely as external experts or symbolic legitimators. They also act as translators, facilitators and brokers of organisational change, and their effectiveness is co-produced through the interaction of technical expertise, relational trust, client absorptive capacity and sector-specific institutional conditions. On this basis, the paper identifies five interrelated dimensions of consulting effectiveness: technical, relational, capability-building, institutional and public-value effectiveness. The review is limited to English-language scholarship and focuses primarily on management consulting rather than adjacent advisory professions, and future research should examine longitudinal outcomes, cross-sector transferability and the implications of digital, hybrid and artificial-intelligence-enabled consulting. For practice, the findings suggest that organisations should evaluate consultants not only by short-term deliverables but also by their contribution to internal learning, implementation capability and context-sensitive adaptation. The paper extends prior reviews of management consulting by integrating institutional, processual and cross-sector perspectives into a single multidimensional framework and by repositioning consulting research more squarely within mainstream management research.
Keywords: management consulting; institutional theory; organisational change; consulting effectiveness; integrative literature review.

1. INTRODUCTION

Management consultants have become deeply embedded in contemporary organisational life. Organisations engage consultants when facing strategic ambiguity, large-scale transformation, technological disruption and demands for rapid performance improvement. Yet, despite the prominence of consulting in practice, academic understanding of management consultants remains fragmented. Research has developed across organisation studies, institutional theory, organisational change, knowledge transfer, professional service firm research and public management, but these streams are rarely integrated into a single analytical account. As a result, management research still lacks a sufficiently coherent explanation of how consultants influence organisations, how their interventions should be evaluated and why their roles vary across sectors.

This gap matters because management consultants are not simply external service providers. They are organisational actors who mediate between abstract managerial ideas and situated organisational action. They shape how problems are defined, how change is narrated and how solutions become acceptable within specific institutional environments. Their influence extends beyond project outputs to questions of organisational learning, legitimacy, capability development and implementation sustainability. A review that reconnects these dispersed strands can therefore contribute not only to consulting research but also to broader conversations in management about change, knowledge, power and organisational adaptation.

Against this background, this paper develops an integrative literature review of management consultants as institutional and processual actors. The review addresses three related questions. First, how do consultants shape organisational fields and diffuse management ideas across sectors? Second, how do consultant–client processes affect organisational transformation, learning and implementation? Third, how do sectoral conditions alter both the roles consultants are asked to perform and the criteria by which their effectiveness is judged? By addressing these questions together, the paper moves beyond narrow expert-versus-legitimator debates and repositions consulting as a multidimensional management phenomenon.

The paper makes three contributions. First, it synthesises previously fragmented literatures into a more unified account of consulting that links institutional, processual and cross-sector perspectives. Second, it reframes

Management Research and Practice
Volume 18, Issue 3 / September 2026

ISSN
2067- 2462

Management Research and Practice
Volume 18, Issue 3 / September 2026

consultant effectiveness as a multidimensional construct that includes not only technical problem-solving but also relational, capability-building, institutional and public-value dimensions. Third, it extends prior reviews of management consulting by showing more explicitly how consultants connect micro-level interaction, organisational change processes and field-level diffusion. In doing so, the paper offers a framework that can support future theory development and provide managers with a more robust basis for commissioning, evaluating and learning from consulting interventions.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the main streams of research on management consulting, including recent critical analyses, and identifies the limitations that motivate this study. Section 3 explains the integrative review design and the search and synthesis procedures. Section 4 presents the results of the review through three analytical lenses – institutional perspectives on consultants, processual perspectives on consulting interventions and cross-sector differences in consulting roles and effectiveness – examines contemporary challenges arising from digitalisation, artificial intelligence and sustainability, and integrates these perspectives into a multidimensional framework of consulting effectiveness. Section 5 concludes with implications for management research and practice.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on management consultants has accumulated across several partly disconnected streams. Three limitations of this literature are particularly consequential for management research and motivate the present review.

One reason for this fragmentation is that management consulting has been interpreted through competing and often polarised lenses. In some studies, consultants are portrayed as expert problem-solvers who introduce novel knowledge, facilitate change and help organisations respond to uncertainty. In others, they are presented as symbolic actors who package management fashions, legitimise pre-existing decisions and diffuse ideas whose popularity exceeds their proven effectiveness. This tension has been productive, but it has also narrowed debate. The result is an enduring binary in which consultants are seen either as genuine contributors to organisational improvement or as legitimating devices with limited substantive value. That binary no longer captures the complexity of the field.

A second limitation of the literature is that it often isolates levels of analysis that are closely connected in practice. Institutional research has clarified how consultants contribute to isomorphism, legitimacy and the circulation of management ideas across organisational fields. Process-oriented studies have shown that consulting outcomes depend on consultant–client interaction, trust, knowledge translation and political negotiation inside organisations. Cross-sector research has demonstrated that private, public and not-for-profit settings impose different expectations, accountability structures and criteria of effectiveness. However, these literatures are typically discussed separately. This separation obscures the fact that consulting interventions are simultaneously field-level, organisational and interactional phenomena.

A third limitation concerns the limited integration of recent critical analyses of the consulting industry. Over the last five years, high-profile critiques have argued that overreliance on consultancies can hollow out client capabilities and weaken governments (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023), echoing empirical evidence that higher consulting expenditure was associated with inefficiency rather than efficiency gains in English public hospitals (Kirkpatrick et al., 2019). More recent work qualifies this picture, showing that experienced public sector managers can use consultants selectively without hollowing out internal management functions (Kirkpatrick et al., 2023), while studies of sustainability consulting reveal consultants operating as discreet, outside-in change agents whose influence is easily underestimated (Gond et al., 2024). These debates underscore that the central question is no longer whether consultants matter, but under what conditions their involvement builds rather than erodes organisational capability. Recent integrative reviews have begun to reconnect the field's fragmented conversations (Mosonyi et al., 2020), but they focus primarily on knowledge, identity and power within consultancy rather than on the conditions of consulting effectiveness across sectors, which is the focus of the present review.

Taken together, these limitations indicate the need for an integrative review that reconnects institutional, processual and cross-sector accounts of management consulting within a single analytical framework. The remainder of this paper develops such a synthesis.

Management Research and Practice
Volume 18, Issue 3 / September 2026

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Review design

This paper adopts an integrative literature review design. An integrative review is appropriate when the aim is not to estimate the average effect of a particular intervention, but to synthesise conceptually dispersed streams of scholarship, identify tensions across them and develop a framework for future inquiry (Torraco, 2005; Snyder, 2019). Management consulting is particularly suited to this approach because the topic has developed across multiple subfields, including institutional theory, organisation studies, organisational change, knowledge transfer, professional service firm research and public management. A narrower systematic protocol would risk excluding theoretical contributions that are central to understanding consulting as a management phenomenon but that do not share identical methods, variables or outcome measures.

The review therefore follows an interpretive but explicit logic of synthesis. It is structured around three recurring perspectives in the literature: institutional accounts of consulting, processual accounts of consulting interventions and cross-sector accounts of consulting roles and effectiveness. These perspectives were selected because they capture the main ways in which the literature has tried to explain consultants' influence on organisations. Taken together, they also make it possible to connect field-level diffusion, organisational change processes and sector-specific contingencies within a single management research framework.

3.2. Literature identification and selection

The review drew on database searches, citation tracking and targeted hand searching. Searches were conducted in Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar using combinations of terms such as management consultant, consulting firm, institutional theory, institutional work, organisational change, knowledge transfer, public sector, public management and cross-sector comparison. These searches were complemented by backward and forward citation tracking from influential works in the field, including Meyer and Rowan (1977), DiMaggio and Powell (1983), Abrahamson (1996), Fincham (1999), Sturdy (1997), Sturdy et al. (2009), Reihlen et al. (2010) and Serrano-Velarde and Krücken (2012).

Studies were included if they met at least one of four conditions. First, they treated management consultants or consulting firms as a primary object of analysis. Second, they provided theoretical concepts directly relevant to consultants as organisational, institutional or change actors. Third, they addressed organisational change, knowledge transfer or intervention processes in ways that illuminate consulting practice. Fourth, they examined private, public or not-for-profit settings in relation to consulting, procurement, accountability or reform. Both theoretical and empirical studies were retained in order to preserve the conceptual breadth required for an integrative review.

In response to the need for transparency in review procedures, the search protocol was as follows. The search was originally conducted iteratively in January 2026 and was formally re-run and documented in July 2026. Primary searches were conducted in Scopus and Web of Science, with Google Scholar used as a supplementary source to identify additional relevant publications and citation links. The core search string combined actor terms and outcome terms – ("management consultant*" OR "management consultancy" OR "consulting firm*") AND (effectiveness OR "organi?ational change" OR "knowledge transfer" OR legitimacy) – adapted to the syntax of each database. No restriction was placed on publication date; the included contributions span 1977 to 2025. The primary searches returned 65 records. After removal of 5 duplicates, the titles and abstracts of the remaining 60 records were screened against the inclusion conditions described above, and 45 records were retained; excluded records either did not treat management consulting or consulting firms as a substantive focus or were not peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books or book chapters. The full texts of the 45 remaining contributions were then assessed, and 3 were excluded because they addressed adjacent advisory professions (such as audit, law or engineering consulting) rather than management consulting. This process, complemented by backward and forward citation tracking to verify coverage of seminal works, yielded the contributions synthesised in this review.

3.3. Synthesis strategy

The selected literature was analysed through thematic and conceptual coding. Each study was coded for the role assigned to consultants, such as expert, translator, legitimator, facilitator, institutional entrepreneur, symbolic actor or knowledge broker. Studies were also coded according to their level of analysis, ranging from individual interaction and project process to organisation, sector and organisational field. In addition, the review extracted the implied criterion of effectiveness used in each study. Some contributions emphasised technical problem-solving, whereas others highlighted legitimacy, trust, learning, internal capability, sustainability of change or public value.

This synthesis strategy makes it possible to move beyond descriptive summarisation. Rather than simply cataloguing prior findings, the review compares how different literatures frame consultants, what kinds of outcomes they privilege and where they leave explanatory gaps. Particular attention is given to recurring tensions in the literature, including innovation versus legitimation, externality versus embeddedness, standardisation versus translation and commercial interest versus professional independence. These tensions form the basis for the integrative framework developed later in the paper.

3.4. Review boundaries

The review has several limitations. It is integrative rather than fully systematic and therefore does not claim exhaustive bibliometric coverage of all consulting-related scholarship. The literature is also weighted towards English-language publications and towards work produced in Europe and North America, with more limited inclusion of scholarship from other regions. In addition, the paper focuses on management consultants rather than adjacent advisory professions such as legal, engineering or highly specialised technical consultants. These boundaries are not treated as weaknesses of the review design so much as conditions that define its analytical focus and indicate directions for further research.

In preparing this manuscript, a large language model (Claude, Anthropic) was used to support language editing, proofreading and formatting of the text. The tool was not used to generate the substantive content of the review, the analysis or the conclusions, and the author takes full responsibility for the final content of the paper.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Institutional perspectives on management consultants

4.1.1. Consultants as carriers of legitimacy and organisational models

Institutional theory provides one of the most influential explanations for the prominence of management consultants in organisational life. From this perspective, consultants matter not only because they deliver expertise, but also because they participate in the diffusion and legitimation of management ideas. DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) account of coercive, mimetic and normative isomorphism helps explain why organisations often turn to consulting firms under conditions of uncertainty. Consultants package managerial practices as transferable solutions, translate them across contexts and reinforce their legitimacy through professional authority. In this sense, consulting is not simply a market transaction; it is also a mechanism through which organisations become aligned with field-level expectations.

Meyer and Rowan's (1977) notion of institutionalised myths reinforces this point. Organisations may adopt consultant-backed reforms not only because those reforms improve technical performance, but because they symbolise rationality, modernity and conformity with accepted managerial norms. This helps explain why consulting outcomes are often difficult to evaluate using narrowly operational metrics. A consulting project may be judged successful because it reassures stakeholders, signals seriousness to external audiences or demonstrates alignment with contemporary management practices, even when its operational effects remain ambiguous.

4.1.2. Consultants as institutional actors

The institutional literature becomes especially relevant when consultants are viewed not simply as transmitters of established norms, but as actors involved in creating, maintaining and transforming institutions. Lawrence (1999) and Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) show that institutional work consists of purposive action aimed at shaping rules, norms and meanings. Reihlen et al. (2010) extend this logic to management consulting by showing how consultants build institutional capital through reputation, codified methods, legitimacy management and strategic positioning within professional networks. Smets and Reihlen (2012) further demonstrate that consultancies can be analysed as institutional entrepreneurs that shape maturing organisational fields, while Greenwood et al. (2002) clarify how professional communities can transform fields by theorising and legitimating new practices.

This perspective suggests that consultants help define what counts as an organisational problem, which practices become legitimate responses and what kinds of futures organisations are encouraged to pursue. Their role is therefore constitutive rather than merely supportive. A consultant-led intervention may alter not only structures and routines, but also how accountability, authority and competence are understood within the client organisation. Consultants thus participate in the social construction of organisational rationality itself.

4.1.3. Management fashion and the commodification of ideas

A more critical branch of institutional analysis emphasises the commercial and symbolic dimensions of consulting. Abrahamson (1996) and Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999) argue that management knowledge often circulates through fashion-like dynamics in which consultants, business schools, media and management gurus function as fashion setters. From this perspective, consulting firms do not merely transmit superior knowledge; they also help create demand for particular ideas by presenting them as timely, rational and necessary. Nippa and Petzold (2002) similarly argue that consulting firms perform economic functions by helping clients manage uncertainty and access external expertise, but these functions must be distinguished from claims of universal technical superiority.

This line of argument is important because it complicates any straightforward claim that consultants diffuse only evidence-based solutions. The popularity of a consulting method may reflect rhetorical appeal, institutional legitimacy and market promotion as much as technical superiority. At the same time, fashion theory should not be read as implying that consulting knowledge is necessarily empty. Rather, it highlights that management ideas acquire influence through a mixture of symbolic, institutional and commercial processes. For management research, the key implication is that consulting must be understood as both a knowledge practice and a marketised legitimacy practice.

4.1.4. From institutional diffusion to managerial relevance

Tolbert and Zucker (1999) further clarify these dynamics by conceptualising institutionalisation as a process that moves from pre-institutionalisation through semi-institutionalisation to full institutionalisation. Consultants may play different roles at each stage, supporting experimentation early on, theorising and legitimating practices in intermediate stages and maintaining accepted standards once practices are taken for granted. This staged view explains why the same consultant can act as an innovator in one context and a conservative actor in another. Taken together, these institutional perspectives show why consultants occupy an ambivalent position in management research. They can be innovators, translators and field-level brokers, but also standardisers, legitimators and promoters of managerial fashions. This ambiguity is analytically valuable. It suggests that the significance of consulting lies not in deciding whether consultants are "good" or "bad" for organisations, but in understanding the conditions under which they reinforce conformity, stimulate adaptation or merely symbolise reform. This insight provides a crucial starting point for the more processual question of how consulting interventions actually work inside organisations.

4.2. Processual perspectives on consulting interventions

4.2.1. The consultant–client relationship as a social process

If institutional theory explains how consulting ideas gain authority, processual research explains how consulting interventions become organisationally consequential. This literature shifts attention from field-level diffusion to the dynamics of projects, relationships and interactions. Consulting is not a simple transfer of expert knowledge from seller to buyer. Rather, it is a negotiated social process shaped by trust, status, politics, expertise claims and mutual dependence. Fincham (1999) and Sturdy (1997) show that consultants must continually manage a paradoxical position: they are expected to appear sufficiently external to offer new insight, but sufficiently embedded to understand the client context and gain influence. Sturdy et al. (2009) further demonstrate that the boundary between consultant and client is not fixed but negotiated through everyday social interaction.

This paradox is central to consulting effectiveness. Too much distance can produce generic solutions that neglect local routines and power structures. Too much embeddedness can erode the consultant's distinctive role and weaken the perception of independence. Processual research therefore directs attention to the ongoing negotiation of outsider and insider status in consulting work. It also clarifies that consulting outcomes are co-produced rather than delivered unilaterally.

4.2.2. Knowledge transfer, translation and absorptive capacity

The processual literature also challenges the assumption that consultants "transfer" knowledge in any simple sense. Werr and Stjernberg (2003) conceptualise consulting firms as knowledge systems in which methods, cases and consultant experience interact. These elements provide structure and credibility, but they do not guarantee organisational uptake. Cohen and Levinthal's (1990) concept of absorptive capacity suggests that external knowledge becomes valuable only when organisations possess enough prior knowledge to recognise, assimilate and apply it. More recent work, such as Argote (2024), further shows that knowledge transfer depends on motivation, transfer mechanisms, depth of processing and characteristics of the knowledge itself.

This means that consulting effectiveness is not located solely in the consultant's expertise. It depends equally on the client organisation's ability to absorb, reinterpret and sustain what is introduced. Czarniawska and Sevón's (1996) idea of translation is especially useful here. Consulting methods do not travel unchanged from one organisation to another. They are edited, reframed and adapted to local culture, political tensions and institutional expectations. Seen in this way, consultants are not only experts but also translators who mediate between abstract managerial templates and situated organisational realities.

4.2.3. Symbolic, political and relational work

Consulting interventions are also shaped by symbolic and political expectations. Kaarst-Brown (1999) identifies multiple symbolic roles for consultants, including catalyst for change, external legitimator, scapegoat, symbol of change and resource. These roles remain analytically useful because they explain why consultants are often hired even when organisations already possess internal expertise. In many cases, the consultant's value lies not simply in technical insight, but in the capacity to legitimate difficult decisions, externalise responsibility or provide a language through which contested issues can be discussed.

The relational dimension is equally important. Glückler and Armbrüster (2003) argue that trust and networked reputation are central to consulting markets because clients cannot fully evaluate expertise before purchase. Trust, however, is not a purely positive variable. Too little trust limits influence and implementation. Too much trust can reduce critical scrutiny and encourage dependency. Processual research therefore highlights that the success of consulting interventions depends on carefully balanced relational conditions rather than on expertise alone.

4.2.4. Methods, problem definition and intervention effectiveness

Consulting methods function not only as technical procedures but also as cognitive and communicative devices. Werr et al. (1997) show that methods help structure change conversations, persuade clients and create shared vocabularies for action. Kilmann and Mitroff (1979) further argue that the way a problem is defined fundamentally shapes the success of an intervention. When consultants and clients define problems differently, subsequent interventions may address symptoms rather than causes, especially in politically complex settings. More recent work on organisational development consulting (Dryzin-Amit, 2025) and on change capability in public organisations (Vanhengel et al., 2026) suggests that sustainable interventions increasingly require adaptive space, emergent capabilities and post-project integration rather than one-off project deliverables.

4.2.5. Sustainability and capability-building

One of the most important contributions of processual research is its critique of short-term, project-based definitions of success. If consulting delivers reports, frameworks or process redesigns without leaving behind strengthened organisational capability, then apparent success may conceal long-term dependency. This concern is especially relevant in consulting engagements involving strategy, digital transformation or performance management, where external expertise can easily substitute for internal learning.

For this reason, a more demanding view of effectiveness should include whether a consulting intervention enhances the organisation's future capacity to diagnose problems, coordinate change and adapt without continued external reliance. The processual literature therefore expands the evaluation of consulting from immediate project outcomes to the sustainability of organisational change and the development of internal capability.

4.3. Cross-sector differences in consulting roles and effectiveness

4.3.1. Why sector matters

The literature on management consulting has historically been shaped by assumptions derived largely from private firms. Yet consulting practices travel across sectors that differ substantially in goals, governance structures, accountability regimes and stakeholder environments. This raises an important question for management research: can the same consulting logic be applied across private, public and not-for-profit organisations, or do sectoral conditions fundamentally alter the meaning and effectiveness of consulting interventions?

A cross-sector perspective is necessary because organisations do not evaluate external expertise in the same way. Private firms tend to assess consulting through competitiveness, efficiency, innovation and shareholder value. Public organisations must also consider legality, transparency, democratic accountability and public value (Rainey, 2014). Not-for-profit organisations add further complexity because they combine mission orientation, donor dependence, volunteer involvement and community legitimacy (Frumkin & Galaskiewicz, 2004). Consulting research that ignores these differences risks universalising private-sector assumptions that do not travel well.

4.3.2. Consultants in private-sector settings

In private firms, consultants are commonly engaged to support strategic repositioning, restructuring, process improvement and innovation. Their effectiveness is often framed in terms of measurable performance improvement or enhanced strategic capability. This context tends to privilege speed, flexibility and commercial relevance. It may also encourage the use of standardised methods that can be efficiently replicated across clients. However, even in private settings, technical effectiveness is often entangled with symbolic and relational dimensions because consultant recommendations still require internal buy-in and political acceptability.

4.3.3. Consultants in public organisations

Public organisations represent a more constrained and politically exposed setting for consulting work. Rainey (2014) emphasises that public organisations operate under public missions, legal constraints and multiple principals, while Frumkin and Galaskiewicz (2004) highlight the stronger institutional pressures they face. In such settings, consulting cannot be evaluated only through efficiency or managerial effectiveness. Questions of procedural fairness, accountability, transparency and democratic legitimacy become central.

Procurement processes illustrate this clearly. Roodhooft and Van den Abbeele (2006) show that public procurement of consulting services is shaped by competitive tendering and transparency requirements, which can constrain the trust-based relational selection often used in private firms. Serrano-Velarde and Krücken (2012) further demonstrate how consulting becomes entangled with reform agendas in public administration. As a result, public-sector consulting may be more formalised, more scrutinised and more politically contested than its private-sector counterpart.

4.3.4. Not-for-profit and mission-driven organisations

Not-for-profit organisations create a distinct set of consulting challenges. Their goals are mission-oriented rather than profit-oriented, their resource structures are often fragile and their legitimacy depends on multiple stakeholders, including donors, volunteers, communities and regulators. Consulting interventions in these settings may therefore need to be evaluated not only in terms of performance or efficiency, but also in terms of mission integrity, stakeholder legitimacy and organisational resilience.

This sector also demonstrates why simplistic transfer of private-sector management tools can be problematic. Methods developed for competitive markets may not map easily onto organisations that are driven by mission, advocacy or service commitments. Consultants must therefore engage in more substantial translation work when operating across sectors, and organisations must judge effectiveness in light of mission coherence as well as managerial functionality.

4.3.5. Cross-sector implications

A cross-sector comparison does not imply that each sector requires wholly different theories of consulting. Rather, it shows that consulting effectiveness is contingent on sectoral logics and cannot be captured through a single universal criterion. The same consultant may be effective in one setting and ineffective in another, not because their expertise changes, but because the institutional demands surrounding the intervention differ. Cross-sector comparison therefore strengthens, rather than weakens, the argument for a multidimensional framework of consulting effectiveness.

4.4. Contemporary challenges: digitalisation, artificial intelligence and sustainability

The processual dynamics reviewed above are being reshaped by digital transformation. Consulting firms have progressively virtualised parts of their delivery model, using digital tools to standardise diagnostics, automate analysis and deliver advice remotely (Nissen, 2018; Crișan & Stanca, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic sharply accelerated this shift: consulting engagements, like other forms of knowledge-intensive teamwork, moved abruptly from co-located to virtual and hybrid formats, changing how informal communication, trust and tacit knowledge exchange occur within and between organisations (Vuchkovski et al., 2023). For consulting, whose relational effectiveness rests heavily on face-to-face interaction, boundary spanning and the gradual accumulation of trust, remote and hybrid delivery raises distinctive challenges. The relational and capability-building dimensions of effectiveness identified in this review cannot be assumed to transfer unchanged to virtual settings, and hybrid work arrangements are likely to require deliberate redesign of client interaction, joint problem-solving and knowledge handover practices.

Artificial intelligence poses a further challenge to the traditional consulting value proposition. Advanced analytics and generative artificial intelligence can automate parts of the codified, analytical work that has historically underpinned consultants' expert claims, potentially shifting the industry's value proposition towards judgement, contextual translation and relational work. At the same time, the adoption of artificial intelligence in consulting raises ethical risks concerning transparency, accountability, data protection and client dependence (Gînguță et al., 2023). Viewed through the lens of this review, artificial intelligence is therefore likely to increase, rather than diminish, the relative importance of the relational, institutional and capability-building dimensions of effectiveness compared with purely technical analysis.

Finally, sustainability has become one of the fastest-growing consulting arenas and a revealing test case for the framework developed below. Consultants design the tools and standards that shape markets for corporate social responsibility (Gond & Brès, 2020) and act as discreet, outside-in change agents for corporate sustainability transformations (Gond et al., 2024). At the same time, critics observe that large consultancies may advise fossil-fuel clients and the governments seeking to regulate them simultaneously, raising questions of coherence, accountability and public value (Mazzucato & Collington, 2023). Sustainability engagements therefore illustrate that the public-value dimension of consulting effectiveness extends beyond the public sector into private-sector settings, and they underline the need for evaluation criteria that go beyond short-term technical deliverables.

4.5. An integrated framework of consulting effectiveness

4.5.1. Moving beyond fragmented explanations

The preceding review shows that management consulting research has advanced through three partially disconnected conversations. Institutional work explains how consultants gain authority and diffuse managerial ideas. Processual research explains how consultant–client interactions shape change projects and learning processes. Cross-sector research explains why consulting roles and effectiveness vary across organisational settings. Each perspective is valuable, but none is sufficient on its own. An integrated framework is needed to explain how consultants operate simultaneously as field-level actors, project-level actors and sector-sensitive actors.

4.5.2. Five dimensions of effectiveness

To support this integration, this paper proposes a multidimensional framework of consulting effectiveness, summarised in Table 1. The first dimension is technical effectiveness, referring to the extent to which consultants help organisations diagnose problems, design solutions and support implementation in ways that address the substantive issue at hand. The second is relational effectiveness, referring to trust, communication quality, political navigation and the ability to establish productive working relations with internal actors.

The third dimension is capability-building effectiveness, which captures whether a consulting intervention leaves behind enhanced organisational learning, absorptive capacity and future problem-solving ability. The fourth is institutional effectiveness, which refers to the extent to which a consulting intervention helps align an organisation with field-level norms, expectations and legitimacy demands. The fifth is public-value effectiveness, which becomes especially important in public and mission-driven settings and refers to whether consulting contributes to accountability, transparency, stakeholder legitimacy and mission-consistent outcomes.

TABLE 1 – FIVE DIMENSIONS OF MANAGEMENT CONSULTING EFFECTIVENESS

Dimension	Definition	Primary literature stream
Technical effectiveness	Extent to which consultants help organisations diagnose problems, design solutions and support implementation in ways that address the substantive issue at hand	Processual research on consulting interventions
Relational effectiveness	Trust, communication quality, political navigation and the ability to establish productive working relations with internal actors	Cuts across institutional, processual and cross-sector research
Capability-building effectiveness	Whether an intervention leaves behind enhanced organisational learning, absorptive capacity and future problem-solving ability	Processual and knowledge-transfer research
Institutional effectiveness	Extent to which an intervention helps align an organisation with field-level norms, expectations and legitimacy demands	Neo-institutional and management-fashion research
Public-value effectiveness	Whether consulting contributes to accountability, transparency, stakeholder legitimacy and mission-consistent outcomes	Cross-sector and public management research

Source: Author's own elaboration based on literature review

4.5.3. Analytical value of the framework

This framework has two main advantages. First, it helps explain why consulting projects can appear successful under one criterion and unsuccessful under another. A technically sophisticated intervention may fail relationally. A legitimacy-enhancing intervention may do little for internal capability. A project may improve efficiency while undermining mission coherence or public accountability. By treating effectiveness as multidimensional, management research can better capture the actual complexity of consulting outcomes.

Second, the framework creates a bridge between literatures that are often discussed separately. Technical and capability-building dimensions are particularly visible in processual research. Institutional effectiveness emerges most clearly from neo-institutional and fashion-based accounts. Public-value effectiveness becomes essential in cross-sector and public management research. Relational effectiveness cuts across all of them. The framework therefore offers a way to synthesise previously fragmented research without flattening the differences among perspectives.

4.5.4. Implications for future management research

The integrated framework also suggests a more focused future research agenda. Scholars could examine how the five dimensions interact over time, whether trade-offs exist among them and how they vary across project types and sectors. Longitudinal studies would be especially valuable in tracing whether short-term technical gains translate into durable capability-building. Comparative studies could investigate when institutional effectiveness substitutes for technical effectiveness and when it complements it. Research should also examine how digitalisation and AI-enabled consulting reshape the balance between technical expertise, translation and relational work.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper set out to review and integrate fragmented scholarship on management consultants as institutional and processual actors. It argued that consulting research has too often been divided into separate streams concerned with legitimacy, intervention processes and sectoral context. By bringing these streams together, the paper moves beyond a narrow expert-versus-legitimator debate and shows that consultants perform a broader range of roles, including translator, facilitator, broker and symbolic actor. Their effects on organisations are therefore more complex than either celebratory or critical accounts alone suggest.

While prior reviews have mapped the historical evolution and disciplinary footprint of management consulting research (Cerruti et al., 2019; Mosonyi et al., 2020), this paper advances the conversation by integrating institutional, processual and cross-sector perspectives into a single multidimensional framework of consulting effectiveness. The paper contributes to management research in three specific ways. First, it synthesises dispersed literatures into a more coherent account of consulting as a multidimensional organisational phenomenon. Second, it proposes a five-dimensional framework of consulting effectiveness that includes technical, relational, capability-building, institutional and public-value considerations. Third, it shows why cross-sector comparison is not peripheral to consulting research, but central to understanding when and how consulting knowledge travels across organisations.

The review also has practical implications. Organisations should be cautious about evaluating consultants only through short-term deliverables, speed of implementation or symbolic reassurance. A more robust evaluation should ask whether a consulting intervention builds internal capability, fits the institutional setting and generates value that remains after the formal project has ended. This is especially important in public and mission-driven organisations, where consulting interventions carry implications not only for performance but also for legitimacy and accountability.

Several directions for future research follow from this review. More longitudinal work is needed on the durability of consulting effects and on the conditions under which capability-building occurs. Comparative studies should examine how sectoral logics shape the transferability of consulting methods across private, public and not-for-profit settings. Management research should also pay greater attention to the relationship between consulting and digital transformation, including the implications of data analytics and AI-enabled advisory work for expertise, legitimacy and client dependence. Finally, future studies should explore whether the growing codification of consulting knowledge changes the balance between technical standardisation and context-sensitive translation.

Taken together, these directions suggest that management consulting remains a strategically important but theoretically under-integrated domain of management research. A more cumulative literature will depend on moving beyond isolated lenses and developing explanations that connect field-level diffusion, project-level interaction and sector-level variation. This paper has proposed one such route by repositioning management consultants as institutional and processual actors whose significance lies in how they shape, mediate and evaluate organisational change.

REFERENCES

Abrahamson, E. (1996). Management fashion. *Academy of Management Review, 21*(1), 254–285. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1996.9602161563

Abrahamson, E., & Fairchild, G. (1999). Management fashion: Lifecycles, triggers, and collective learning processes. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 44*(4), 708–740. https://doi.org/10.2307/2667053

Argote, L. (2024). Knowledge transfer in organizations: Opportunities, mechanisms and outcomes. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior, 11*, 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-012423-091123

Cerruti, C., Tavoletti, E., & Grieco, C. (2019). Management consulting: A review of fifty years of scholarly research. *Management Research Review, 42*(8), 902–925. https://doi.org/10.1108/MRR-03-2018-0119

Cohen, W.M., & Levinthal, D.A. (1990). Absorptive capacity: A new perspective on learning and innovation. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 35*(1), 128–152. https://doi.org/10.2307/2393553

Crișan, E.L., & Stanca, L. (2021). The digital transformation of management consulting companies: A qualitative comparative analysis of Romanian industry. *Information Systems and e-Business Management, 19*(4), 1143–1173. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10257-021-00536-1

Czarniawska, B., & Sevón, G. (Eds.). (1996). *Translating organizational change*. De Gruyter.

DiMaggio, P.J., & Powell, W.W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review, 48*(2), 147–160. https://doi.org/10.2307/2095101

Dryzin-Amit, Y. (2025). Adaptive space and emergent capability in organizational development consulting. *Journal of Organizational Change Management, 38*(1), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-01-2024-0023

Fincham, R. (1999). The consultant-client relationship: Critical perspectives on the management of organizational change. *Journal of Management Studies, 36*(3), 335–351. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6486.00147

Frumkin, P., & Galaskiewicz, J. (2004). Institutional isomorphism and public sector organizations. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 14*(3), 283–307. https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muh028

Gînguță, A., Ștefea, P., Noja, G.G., & Munteanu, V.P. (2023). Ethical impacts, risks and challenges of artificial intelligence technologies in business consulting: A new modelling approach based on structural equations. *Electronics, 12*(6), 1462. https://doi.org/10.3390/electronics12061462

Glückler, J., & Armbrüster, T. (2003). Bridging uncertainty in management consulting: The mechanisms of trust and networked reputation. *Organization Studies, 24*(2), 269–297. https://doi.org/10.1177/017084060324

Gond, J.-P., & Brès, L. (2020). Designing the tools of the trade: How corporate social responsibility consultants and their tool-based practices created market shifts. *Organization Studies, 41*(5), 703–726. https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840619867360

Gond, J.-P., Brès, L., & Mosonyi, S. (2024). Consultants as discreet corporate change agents for sustainability: Transforming organizations from the outside-in. *Business Ethics, the Environment & Responsibility, 33*(2), 157–169. https://doi.org/10.1111/beer.12649

Greenwood, R., Suddaby, R., & Hinings, C.R. (2002). Theorizing change: The role of professional associations in the transformation of institutionalized fields. *Academy of Management Journal, 45*(1), 58–80. https://doi.org/10.5465/3069285

Kaarst-Brown, M.L. (1999). Five symbolic roles of the external consultant: Integrating change, power and symbolism. *Journal of Organizational Change Management, 12*(6), 540–561. https://doi.org/10.1108/09534819910289126

Kilmann, R.H., & Mitroff, I.I. (1979). Problem defining and the consulting/intervention process. *California Management Review, 21*(3), 26–33. https://doi.org/10.2307/41164855

Kirkpatrick, I., Sturdy, A.J., Reguera Alvarado, N., Blanco-Oliver, A., & Veronesi, G. (2019). The impact of management consultants on public service efficiency. *Policy & Politics, 47*(1), 77–95. https://doi.org/10.1332/030557318X15167881150799

Kirkpatrick, I., Sturdy, A.J., Reguera Alvarado, N., & Veronesi, G. (2023). Beyond hollowing out: Public sector managers and the use of external management consultants. *Public Administration Review, 83*(3), 537–551. https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13546

Lawrence, T.B. (1999). Institutional strategy. *Journal of Management, 25*(2), 161–187. https://doi.org/10.1177/014920639902500203

Lawrence, T.B., & Suddaby, R. (2006). Institutions and institutional work. In S.R. Clegg, C. Hardy, T.B. Lawrence, & W.R. Nord (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of organization studies* (2nd ed., pp. 215–254). SAGE.

Mazzucato, M., & Collington, R. (2023). *The big con: How the consulting industry weakens our businesses, infantilizes our governments and warps our economies*. Allen Lane.

Meyer, J.W., & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology, 83*(2), 340–363. https://doi.org/10.1086/226550

Mosonyi, S., Empson, L., & Gond, J.-P. (2020). Management consulting: Towards an integrative framework of knowledge, identity, and power. *International Journal of Management Reviews, 22*(2), 120–149. https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12218

Nippa, M., & Petzold, K. (2002). Economic functions of management consulting firms. *Schmalenbach Business Review, 54*(1), 70–89. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03396704

Nissen, V. (Ed.). (2018). *Digital transformation of the consulting industry: Extending the traditional delivery model*. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-70491-3

Rainey, H.G. (2014). *Understanding and managing public organizations* (5th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Reihlen, M., Smets, M., & Veit, A. (2010). Management consultancies as institutional agents: Strategies for creating and sustaining institutional capital. *Schmalenbach Business Review, 62*(3), 317–339. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03396802

Roodhooft, F., & Van den Abbeele, A. (2006). Public procurement of consulting services: Evidence and comparison with private companies. *International Journal of Public Sector Management, 19*(5), 490–512. https://doi.org/10.1108/09513550610677799

Serrano-Velarde, K., & Krücken, G. (2012). Private sector consultants and public universities: The challenges of cross-sectoral knowledge transfers. *European Journal of Education, 47*(2), 277–289. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-3435.2012.01520.x

Smets, M., & Reihlen, M. (2012). Institutional entrepreneurship: A literature review and analysis of the maturing consulting field. In M. Reihlen & A. Werr (Eds.), *Handbook of research on entrepreneurship in professional services* (pp. 297–317). Edward Elgar. https://doi.org/10.4337/9780857933389.00020

Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research, 104*, 333–339. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039

Sturdy, A. (1997). The consultancy process – an insecure business. *Journal of Management Studies, 34*(3), 389–413. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6486.00062

Sturdy, A., Clark, T., Fincham, R., & Handley, K. (2009). *Management consultancy: Boundaries and knowledge in action*. Oxford University Press.

Tolbert, P.S., & Zucker, L.G. (1999). The institutionalization of institutional theory. In S.R. Clegg & C. Hardy (Eds.), *Studying organization: Theory and method* (pp. 169–184). SAGE.

Torraco, R.J. (2005). Writing integrative literature reviews: Guidelines and examples. *Human Resource Development Review, 4*(3), 356–367. https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484305278283

Vanhengel, S., George, B., Letens, G., & Verweire, K. (2026). The organizational change capability of public organizations: Concept and measurement. *Public Money & Management, 46*(1), 112–123. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2025.2506732

Vuchkovski, D., Zalaznik, M., Mitręga, M., & Pfajfar, G. (2023). A look at the future of work: The digital transformation of teams from conventional to virtual. *Journal of Business Research, 163*, Article 113912. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2023.113912

Werr, A., & Stjernberg, T. (2003). Exploring management consulting firms as knowledge systems. *Organization Studies, 24*(6), 881–908. https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840603024006004

Werr, A., Stjernberg, T., & Docherty, P. (1997). The functions of methods of change in management consulting. *Journal of Organizational Change Management, 10*(4), 288–307. https://doi.org/10.1108/09534819710177922