

A Work Project, presented as part of the requirements for the Award of a Master's degree in
Management from the Nova School of Business and Economics.

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS FOR CONSULTING PROJECTS ADDRESSING NEW
CHALLENGES IN THE CURRENT CONTEXT

ELENA GONZALO SAUL

Work project carried out under the supervision of:

Professor Filipa Rodrigues

28/01/2025

Abstract

This study examines the evolution of success factors in management consulting in the context of technological advancements, increased client sophistication, and industry shifts. Drawing on insights from ten expert interviews, nine dimensions of project success were identified, encompassing direct factors, such as solution design and implementability, and indirect factors, including client commitment and trust-building. The research underscores the importance of adaptability, innovation, and collaboration in achieving sustainable impact. The findings emphasize the dynamic relationship between consultants, clients, and external influences, providing actionable insights for navigating contemporary consulting challenges and fostering long-term value.

Keywords: Consulting, Success factors, Consultant perspective, Framework

This work used infrastructure and resources funded by Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (UID/ECO/00124/2013, UID/ECO/00124/2019 and Social Sciences DataLab, Project 22209), POR Lisboa (LISBOA-01-0145-FEDER-007722 and Social Sciences DataLab, Project 22209) and POR Norte (Social Sciences DataLab, Project 22209)

1. Introduction

In 2022, the consulting market in Europe grew by 16%, reflecting growing demand for advisory services across industries. According to FEACO 2024, such growth has been driven by increasing demands for technological, operational, and strategic expertise. These three fields comprised around 60% of the European consulting market. Companies' priorities are digital and green transformations that could address the complexity of a turbulent globe that is changing quickly. Such developments illustrate how management consulting remains a relevant, dynamic, and influential industry.

1.1. Problem and Relevance

The consulting sector is undergoing tremendous change, driven by technological advancements such as artificial intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), and big data. At the core of this transformation, AI is significantly disrupting the industry by enabling predictive analytics, automating workflows, and enhancing strategic agility. These technologies are allowing organizations to process and use large amounts of information for innovative strategies, improved management, and increasingly personalized customer approaches. Organizations need to adopt these technologies to remain competitive in this digital, data-driven world. A recent survey by McKinsey depicts that 72% of companies have already implemented AI to a certain extent (McKinsey 2024). A notable case, for example, is Recursion, a biotech company that developed a generative AI platform to analyze biological and chemical data, significantly accelerating drug discovery processes (McKinsey 2024). For consulting firms, these advancements require deep expertise in AI implementation, change management, and driving digital transformation. Furthermore, consulting firms must also adapt their processes to align with these technological changes (Păvăloaia and Necula 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on reshaping the consulting industry, establishing virtual collaboration as the new norm. This shift has had a profound impact on client-consultant relationships as well as teamwork within consulting projects (Gabbianelli and Pencarelli 2022;

Pianese, Errichiello and Joao 2022). Building trust has become even more critical in remote teams, where physical distance and differing perspectives bear the risks of increased misunderstandings (Helge and Dulewicz 2018). To ease these challenges, virtual team-building initiatives and improved communication practices have become vital (Margaret and Buergi 2006).

Furthermore, an increasing number of women are attaining partnership positions, shifting the gender balance and enhancing diversity at the senior levels of consultancy firms. According to the UK's Management Consultancies Association, the proportion of women in partner and senior-level roles rose from 21% in 2019 to 32% in 2021, reflecting a positive upward trend (MCA 2021).

These developments prompt a critical question: *What is necessary to ensure successful consulting projects within this new and rapidly changing reality?*

1.2. Objective and Outline

The continuous changes in the management consulting industry caused by COVID-19 or new technologies have significantly affected the factors of defining project success. This research seeks to critically analyze existing frameworks and develop an updated model that reflects the dynamics of the current consulting landscape. The outcome will be a comprehensive framework of contemporary success factors for consulting projects, addressing the following key questions: 1. How is the success of a consulting project assessed within organizations? 2. How have recent changes in the consulting industry influenced project success? 3. What are the critical factors that drive the success of consulting projects today?

This study is structured into three parts: First, existing frameworks for project success in management consulting will be examined. Next, insights gathered from expert interviews will be analyzed to develop an updated framework regarding project success factors in management

consulting. Finally, the findings from the interviews will be compared with existing literature to identify key alignments and gaps.

2. Theoretical Frameworks

To understand the success of management consulting, it is essential first to define the field. Kubr (2002) describes it as “*an independent and objective advisory service provided by qualified professionals to help client organizations identify and analyze management problems or opportunities, recommend solutions, and assist in their implementation.*” This definition emphasizes the dual role of consultants: diagnosing challenges and delivering customized solutions. It also underscores the importance of effective knowledge management in transferring expertise to clients and tailoring solutions to their specific needs.

Hansen (2013) emphasizes the personalization strategy of knowledge management as a critical component of consulting success. This approach prioritizes the direct exchange of tacit knowledge—experiential, intangible, and difficult to codify—between individuals. Consulting firms depend heavily on the efficient transfer of such knowledge to deliver impactful outcomes. Werr (2006) further elaborates on the consultant’s role as an intermediary, bridging client-specific needs with best practices and innovative solutions. By transferring and applying tacit knowledge, consultants ensure their solutions are both effective and practical for clients. Consequently, the ability to manage and transfer personalized knowledge emerges as a cornerstone of consulting success and a defining aspect of the field's value proposition.

The literature already includes several frameworks addressing the key drivers of successful consulting projects developed in 1998, 2000, and 2016. Jang and Lee (1998) define consulting success as achieving tangible project outcomes such as on-time delivery, budget compliance, and exceeding client expectations (Jang and Lee 1998). The framework highlights the importance of consultant competence, with successful consultants adapting dynamically to roles as experts, managers, researchers, or counselors, depending on the project’s demands.

Clear goals, methodological compatibility, standardized procedures, and active client participation are identified as critical factors for smooth project execution. Organizational support, such as top management involvement and functional expertise within the client team, also significantly influences outcomes. This framework offers actionable insights for consulting practitioners, focusing on practical measures for effective project management ([Appendix C](#)).

Kumar's framework (2000) shifts the focus to strategic success, defined as aligning financial and operational measures (Kumar, Simon and Kimberley 2000; Kaplan, 1992). Anchored in the Environment-Strategy-Capability Gap Model, it emphasizes aligning internal capabilities with external market demands (Hubbard und Beamish 2015). Strategic success involves evaluating external forces—economic, political, and technological—while leveraging unique, hard-to-imitate capabilities for sustainable competitive advantage (Ansoff 2019). This framework underscores adaptability and strategic thinking as essential consultant skills and guides bridging internal resource gaps to meet external demands ([Appendix D](#)).

Bronnenmayer's framework (2016) broadens the definition of success to include project deliverables, profitability, organizational improvements, and future collaboration opportunities. Using Principal-Agent Theory highlights the importance of trust, shared vision, and intense collaboration in mitigating information asymmetry and aligning consultant-client goals (Ross 1973). Client involvement not only fosters acceptance of results but also reduces resistance, leading to more sustainable solutions (Freeman 2018). The Resource-Based View further emphasizes leveraging unique resources such as consultant expertise and top management support for competitive advantage (Penrose 1972). The framework highlights collaboration intensity, consultant expertise, and shared objectives as strong predictors of consulting success, noting that trust was not found to be significant in their quantitative analysis ([Appendix E](#)). Nevertheless, Appelbaum (2005) underscores the critical role of a trustful client-consultant relationship in achieving successful outcomes. Turner (1982) also emphasizes the necessity of

close collaboration, arguing that strong partnerships between clients and consultants are fundamental for effective results. Schaffer (2002) builds on this, advocating that robust cooperation is essential for developing unique and customized solutions tailored to the client's needs. Additionally, McLachlin (1999) highlights that the client's readiness to embrace change and transformation is pivotal, further solidifying the foundation for successful consulting engagements.

Each framework provides valuable perspectives on consulting success. However, they also have limitations, particularly in addressing emerging trends in the consulting industry. The Harvard Business Review (2013) highlights major disruptions in consulting and their impact on work practices. Traditional strategy work, which constituted 60–70% of the industry's focus 30 years ago, now accounts for only 20% (Christensen, Wang and van Bever 2013). Two key shifts stand out. The increasing number of former consultants in leadership roles has made clients more knowledgeable about consulting processes. These clients take an active role in managing resources, reducing the scope of outsourced work. Additionally, new roles, such as business analysts, and the rise of generative AI have reshaped the industry. According to a McKinsey study (2024), demand for such roles grew by 111% from 2023 to 2024.

Diversity has become an essential factor in consulting success. Studies show that companies with diverse leadership teams outperform their peers financially. Gender-diverse executive teams are 21% more likely to be profitable, while ethnically diverse teams are 33% more likely to lead in industry profitability (Hunt, et al. 2018). Diverse teams enhance decision-making, reduce cognitive biases, and foster innovation, all of which are critical in today's consulting landscape (Hunt, et al. 2018).

The evolving challenges of the consulting industry demand a more integrated framework. By building on the strengths of existing frameworks and addressing their limitations, a holistic model can better reflect the realities of modern consulting.

3. Methodology of Empirical Research

This section outlines the research design employed to identify and analyze the success factors of consulting projects in the current industry context, detailing the methodological approach, data collection process, and analysis framework.

3.1. Research Design

The objective of this research is to define the success factors of consulting projects in today's context. To achieve this, an inductive approach based on grounded theory was employed (Barney and Strauss 1967). This qualitative research method aims to develop theories directly from empirical data rather than testing existing ones. Data was collected through semi-structured expert interviews, ensuring both flexibility and comparability.

The analysis followed the Gioia Methodology, which involves identifying participant-driven categories, organizing them into theoretical constructs, and subsequently synthesizing them into overarching concepts (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton 2012). As a final step, a visual framework was developed based on the data to illustrate the relationships between the identified success factors more effectively.

Expert interviews were chosen as the data collection method because they offer valuable insights into practical challenges and provide a deeper understanding of real-time issues in consulting projects. The interviewees were partners from consulting firms whose positions enable them to assess the interdependency between strategic decision-making, client relationships, and project success comprehensively.

3.2. Data Collection and Interview Design

Ten partners from internationally leading strategic management consulting companies were purposefully sampled as interview participants, comprising six men and four women from Austria, Germany, Norway, and Spain ([Appendix F](#)). This diverse group included three senior

partners with over 15 years of consulting experience and seven partners with at least 8 years of consulting experience. The sampling approach involves the selection of participants based on specific characteristics were designed to ensure a wide range of perspectives and to select individuals with significant expertise, enabling them to provide reliable insights (Kumar, Stern and Anderson 1993).

The interview guide consists of open-ended questions to uncover detailed insights and explore participants' experiences, perspectives, and reflections ([Appendix G](#)). It was divided into two sections: "Determinants of Project Success" and "Gender and Success." The first section examines the critical factors influencing the success of consulting projects, including the impact of industry developments such as advancements in AI and big data, the rise of remote working, and the skills and roles of partners in achieving favorable outcomes. The second section investigates the role of gender in consulting project success, addressing gender-specific challenges, strategies to overcome them, and evolving client perceptions of female consulting partners.

The guide was refined during the research process to address overlooked aspects, such as the role of team dynamics in project success. These improvements ensured a thorough exploration of both established and emerging success factors (see [Appendix G](#) for the full guide).

All interviews were conducted online via Teams or Zoom, ranging from 20 to 40 minutes. They took place between October 15 and November 18, 2024. With participants' consent, all interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis ([Appendix J](#)).

3.3. Data Analysis

After conducting and transcribing the expert interviews, the analysis was carried out in three steps based on the Grounded Theory approach (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton 2012). However, it was decided at the outset to exclude the sections on "Gender and Success" and "Role of a Partner" from the analysis. The responses regarding "Gender and Success" were not sufficiently

conclusive to identify gender as a critical success factor. Similarly, the "Role of a Partner" section was removed, as the findings were deemed irrelevant to the broader picture of success factors in consulting projects.

In the first step, provisional categories and First-Order Codes were developed, derived from straightforward, descriptive statements. Following Glaser's (1967) approach, the data were systematically broken down into discrete segments, thoroughly examined, and assigned appropriate labels. The open coding processes were conducted iteratively and simultaneously, resulting in the identification of 48 distinct codes by the end of this stage.

In the second step, the identified codes were examined for their relationships, commonalities, and differences. Axial Coding was applied to systematically connect the First-Order Codes and develop 23 Second-Order Themes. Axial coding is a qualitative data analysis technique used to identify and systematically connect relationships between categories and subcategories, focusing on causal conditions, contexts, strategies, and consequences to create a coherent framework for understanding a central phenomenon (Corbin and Strauss 2008). These themes were created concerning existing literature.

In the third and final step, the developed themes were aggregated into nine overarching dimensions to form the "big picture." The analysis revealed that these dimensions could be logically categorized into those that directly or indirectly influence the successful execution of a project, ultimately resulting in project success.

Figure 1 illustrates how the First-Order Codes were clustered into the various theoretical dimensions. These dimensions represent the "success factors" for achieving project success. In the final step, the various dimensions were interconnected, and a framework was developed to highlight the current success factors of a consulting project (Figure 2). A more comprehensive version of the framework is provided in [Appendix H](#).

4. Results

To determine the factors that make a project successful, it is first crucial to establish a shared understanding of what exactly constitutes a "successful project." The insights gained from the conducted interviews indicate that project success is assessed in multiple stages. Firstly, the fulfillment of basic commitments: In the initial stage, project success is evaluated based on whether the basic, agreed-upon requirements are met. This means that the focus lies primarily on fulfilling these commitments without measuring them in detail (interviewee 6). Secondly, the emphasis on impact: Most interviewees highlighted that the true success of a consulting project lies in the impact it creates. One interviewee explained: *"Success could take many forms, depending on the project goals, so understanding and defining the desired impact from the start is crucial"* (interviewee 1).

The literature provides a structured and measurable foundation for defining project success, often focusing on technical and short-term criteria (Jang and Lee 1998). This research, however, extends this perspective by framing success as individual, long-term, and subjective, with impact and client satisfaction playing central roles.

The analysis, based on the Gioia method, identified nine dimensions, as represented in Figure 1, that influence the success of consulting projects (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton 2012). These nine dimensions were integrated into a framework, see Figure 2, to illustrate the interdependencies between the individual dimensions. The dimensions can be categorized into direct and indirect success factors. The direct success factors are critical for project execution and include the dimensions of *"Solution Design and Development," "Implementability of the Project,"* and *"Outcome-Oriented Success Metrics."* The indirect success factors, while not having an immediate impact on the project's success, play a vital role in ensuring effective implementation, which in turn influences overall project success. These factors can be divided into four subcategories: First, the consultant side, which includes the dimension of *"Team*

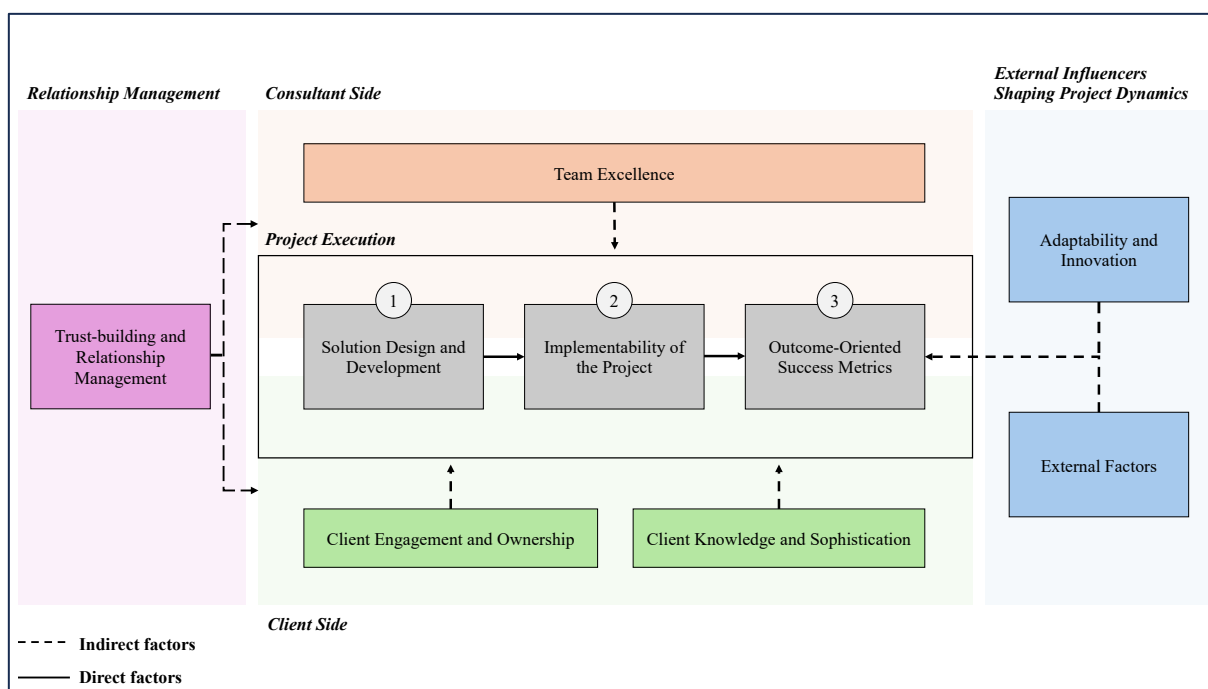
Excellence.” Second, the client side is characterized by the dimensions of “*Client Engagement and Ownership*” and “*Client Knowledge and Sophistication.*” Third, Relationship Management acts as a connecting dimension between the consultant and the client side and is described as “*Trust-Building and Relationship Management.*” Finally, external influences shape project dynamics, represented by the dimensions of “*Adaptability and Innovation*” and “*External Factors.*” This categorization highlights the diverse factors influencing the success of consulting projects and underscores the importance of the interplay between direct and indirect success factors.

Figure 1: Gioia Framework

First-Order Concepts	Second-Order Themes	Third-Order Dimensions
Start with a precise problem description and clear desired outcomes	Problem Definition and Goal Clarity	Solution Design & Development
Conduct joint diagnosis based on facts and figures		
Collaborate to define success criteria for project goals		
Align solutions with the client’s culture, identity, and context		
Ensure practicality and alignment with organizational structure	Actionable and Feasible Solutions	
Avoid theoretical solutions by focusing on actionable outcomes		
Create high-quality, data-driven solutions supported by thorough analysis		
Develop detailed execution plans with clear timelines and milestones	Execution Planning	Implementability of the Project
Regularly review and adapt project plans throughout implementation	Resource Alignment	
Secure necessary resources from both consulting and client teams		
Ensure resource allocation aligns with project goals and client priorities	Overcoming Challenges	
Address unforeseen issues through adaptive solutions and flexibility		
Conduct periodic check-ins to ensure alignment and resolve conflicts		
Use quantifiable KPIs and qualitative metrics to measure success	Performance-Based Goals	Outcome-Oriented Success Metrics
Define benchmarks and measure outcomes in partnership with the client	Continuous Feedback and Learning	
Collect ongoing feedback during and after the project		
Use client feedback to refine solutions and improve	Sustained Impact	
Stay engaged post-project to track long-term client outcomes		
Ensure results extend beyond immediate deliverables		
Motivate top-tier talent to deliver exceptional results	Motivation and Growth	Team Excellence
Provide opportunities for professional development and growth	Diversity and Complementary Skills	
Build teams with diverse expertise, profiles, and perspectives		
Match team skills to the unique demands of each workstream	Positive Team Culture	
Foster camaraderie, collaboration, and a supportive team environment		
Minimize ego-driven conflicts by focusing on shared goals and results		
Align stakeholders on goals, roles, and outcomes to ensure buy-in	Stakeholder Alignment	Client Engagement & Ownership
Engage senior leadership to prioritize and support the project	Active Involvement	
Encourage daily client involvement and shared responsibilities		
Foster ownership to prevent resistance and "not invented here" syndrome	Organizational Commitment	
Demonstrate the project’s importance through active management support		
Ensure consistent communication and collaboration across all levels		

Address heightened expectations of knowledgeable clients	Working with Advanced Clients	Client Knowledge & Sophistication
Collaborate to align expertise and maximize project value		
Ensure timely and accurate data sharing to inform decision-making	Data-Driven Collaboration	
Obtain approvals for data usage and purchases to enable project execution		
Build familiarity to understand the client and anticipate challenges	Long-Term Trust	Trust-Building & Relationship Management
Foster trust by prioritizing the client’s best interest		
Balance professionalism with collaborative openness to strengthen bonds	Professional Friendship	
Build relationships that enable mutual trust while maintaining boundaries		
Deeply understand the client’s culture, politics, and operating environment	Cultural Understanding	
Tailor solutions to reflect the client’s specific needs and expectations		
Integrate AI, analytics, and digital tools to enhance efficiency	Embracing Technology	Adaptability & Innovation
Leverage virtual tools for effective hybrid and remote work		
Adapt to changes in client needs, priorities, and market conditions	Flexible Project Approach	
Develop dynamic frameworks to address evolving challenges		
Leverage emerging trends to offer high-impact, future-ready advice	Innovative Solutions	
Address complex client needs with tailored, innovative methodologies		
Address challenges posed by competitive RFP processes and client budget constraints	Managing Competition and Constraints	External Factors

Figure 2: Framework Based on Findings



4.1. Project Execution

The framework dimensions outline the project process from conception to success evaluation: First, a solution is designed to meet specific requirements, followed by ensuring its implementability, and finally, success is measured using clear, outcome-oriented metrics.

4.1.1. Solution Design and Development

Successful consulting projects start with a tailored, data-driven solution addressing the client's core problem. The first step is a thorough understanding of the client's challenge, as *"The solution must be world-class. It needs to be distinctive, bespoke, data-driven, and substantiated, coming from all angles of the issue"* (interviewee 6). Since client briefs are often vague, significant effort must be invested upfront to uncover the true nature of the problem by asking the right questions and understanding the context. As one consultant noted, *"I go pretty deep, having a lot of conversations to really understand the culture and everything surrounding the problem—really getting to the heart of the issue"* (interviewee 6). A cookie-cutter approach, applying the same solution to multiple problems, does not work (Interviewee 4); every client's unique circumstances and needs must be addressed (interviewee 10).

Practical, implementable solutions are vital, as *"the worst outcome is when a well-designed solution is shelved with no action taken"* (interviewee 10). To ensure impact, consulting firms often stay involved beyond the design phase (interviewee 6).

4.1.2. Implementability of the Project

For the successful implementation of a consulting project, it is crucial to jointly create an execution plan and a solution (interviewee 4). To achieve this, it is essential to establish an efficient working model with clear communication, collaboration, and regular check-ins to avoid misunderstandings. Presenting findings throughout the project ensures alignment with the client's expectations and agreement on the proposed next steps (interviewee 3).

Flexibility is also key in consulting projects, as the predetermined outcome may evolve during the process due to new insights uncovered through analysis. A certain degree of adaptability allows for adjustments that address these themes effectively (interviewee 4). *"This approach ensures that we are working on what truly matters, rather than just completing predefined tasks"* (interviewee 3).

4.1.3. Outcome-Oriented Success Metrics

Delivering meaningful impact is central to successful consulting, starting with aligned, measurable Key Performance Indicators (KPI) like sales growth, margin improvement, or supply chain cost reductions linked to client goals. Beyond financial outcomes, qualitative impacts, such as improved organizational models or cultural shifts, are equally critical (interviewee 1).

A strong feedback culture is crucial to sustaining impact beyond project completion. *“We then track these outcomes by staying in touch with the client, even a year after the project’s completion, to check in on progress and see if the expected results are materializing”* (interviewee 6). This long-term engagement ensures accountability and commitment to client success.

Regular feedback mechanisms during and after the project, such as surveys, questionnaires, and personal sessions, help refine results and build trusted relationships. *“Our goal is to build a long-term, trusted advisory relationship, so if any aspect did not go as well as expected, we are committed to understanding and addressing it”* (interviewee 10). For longer projects, informal communication strengthens alignment and ensures sustainable success (interviewee 5).

4.2. Consultant Side

For the successful implementation of a project, having an outstanding consulting team is essential, one that embodies the right mindset, possesses the necessary skills and fosters a positive working atmosphere.

4.2.1. Team Excellence

The team’s motivation is a critical differentiating factor in delivering the best possible results. As one consultant noted, *“Every consulting firm has high-quality talents; ensuring their motivation is one of the differentiation factors”* (interviewee 8). A positive working environment plays a key role in maintaining this motivation. *“Interestingly, I have observed*

that people are less likely to complain about long hours when they genuinely enjoy working together, and the team functions well” (interviewee 3). Given the intensity of consulting projects, good camaraderie, and mutual respect are essential for fostering collaboration (interviewee 6). Spending time together can help create a more cohesive and supportive working environment. This also requires leaving personal egos behind: *“Maintaining a focus on the team effort over individual ego is vital for a cohesive, productive team”* (interviewee 6). Beyond teamwork, having the right team setup is important. The team must include the appropriate expertise and a mix of experience levels to meet the demands of the project (interviewee 3). Diverse teams are particularly valuable, as they bring a variety of skills to address different needs. *“Different work streams often have unique requirements—one might be highly analytical, while another is more qualitative and client-facing. Ensuring that team members have the skills that match these diverse needs is crucial”* (interviewee 6).

4.3. Client Side

A consulting team alone cannot guarantee the success of a project. The client’s active involvement, commitment, and mindset play a decisive role in determining whether the project will achieve its goals.

4.3.1. Client Engagement and Ownership

First and foremost, the client’s mindset is critical. They must be open and willing to embrace change, actively contributing to its implementation. Client involvement during creation and implementation is necessary for project success. Without collaboration, clients may feel disconnected, viewing the solution as misaligned with their needs and struggling to see themselves reflected in it (interviewees 1). Large-scale transformations often create “winners and losers” (interviewee 2), making it essential for clients to view the project as their own to ensure adoption. As one consultant noted, *“The key is for the project to feel like a joint effort,*

where the client also has a stake in the outcome and shares responsibility for achieving success” (interviewee 10).

While having the right mindset is a strong foundation, support from top management is equally essential. Senior leaders, who often initiate these projects, must invest their own time to signal the project’s importance. *“The level of senior backing significantly influences how seriously people take the work, how much time they invest, and how much attention is paid to quality”* (interviewee 3). When executives prioritize the project, their involvement sends a clear message to the organization about its significance (interviewee 4).

4.3.2. Client Knowledge and Sophistication

Not only is the willingness to collaborate necessary but the client’s data and knowledge are also essential for developing an effective solution. Clients need to have the capabilities and resources to implement and sustain the solution effectively (interviewee 8). Furthermore, clients must be prepared to share data, participate in interviews, and be available to answer questions when needed (interviewee 5). Equally important is ensuring that the quality of the data provided is high (interviewee 3). Experience with consulting projects can also be a significant advantage. When clients have previously worked with consultants, they often better understand the collaboration process, which can streamline workflows and improve outcomes (interviewee 5). Finally, it is critical that necessary approvals—such as investments in purchasing software licenses or authorizations from the Data Protection Team to use specific data—are obtained promptly. Delays in these approvals can hinder progress and impact the project’s efficiency (interviewee 2).

4.4. Relationship Management

Strong client relationships are key to the success of consulting projects. While these relationships can vary in nature and form, trust and commitment are the foundation for effective collaboration and meaningful outcomes.

4.4.1. Trust-building and Relationship Management

Trust is essential to ensure smooth collaboration and effective communication. It allows the client to avoid unnecessary micromanagement and instead focus on the strategic aspects of the project. Relationships that develop over time bring additional benefits. Long-term familiarity helps consultants understand the client's organizational structure, navigate its unique environment, and anticipate potential challenges or pain points. As one consultant noted, *"Building a genuine trust-based relationship with the client is the ultimate game changer"* (interviewee 9).

Over time, client-consultant relationships often evolve into professional friendships. This progression depends on the client's preferences, as some prefer to maintain a strictly professional dynamic. *"I think, in a good way, it often moves towards friendship. Some clients do not want that—their personality structure is different, and they prefer to keep it very professional"* (interviewee 6). Regardless of the specific nature of the relationship, trust remains the central element that allows for open dialogue and alignment on project goals.

The nature of client relationships also depends heavily on the type of project and its objectives. Transactional projects with clear KPIs may require a more formal and structured approach, while strategic projects benefit from deeper collaboration and co-creation with the client (interviewee 2). Moreover, understanding the client's organizational culture is key to aligning solutions with their values and environment. Long-standing relationships further enhance this cultural understanding, enabling consultants to navigate complex dynamics and deliver solutions that resonate with the client's unique needs (interviewee 10).

4.5. External Influencers Shaping Project Dynamics

The final dimension focuses on external factors that influence the consulting process but lie beyond the control of either the consultant or the client. This dimension encompasses factors

that have driven significant changes in consulting projects in recent years. It is divided into two categories: *"Adaptability and Innovation"* and *"External Factors."*

The *"Adaptability and Innovation"* category addresses how consultants and clients respond to external challenges and leverage them to create value. In contrast, the *"External Factors"* category includes elements that do not fit under adaptability and innovation but still have a notable impact on the consulting process.

4.5.1. Adaptability and Innovation

A key development in consulting is the increasing importance of data analytics and technology. With data now widely available, leveraging it for deeper insights has become essential. Advanced technologies like AI automate routine tasks such as basic analyses and data gathering, enabling consultants to focus on strategic, high-impact aspects of their work (interviewee 6).

Modern technology has also improved efficiency in other areas. Internal AI tools, advanced graphics, and enhanced video conferencing streamline workflows and collaboration, allowing teams to operate effectively across global projects (interviewee 10).

The evolution of analytics tools has further democratized data use in consulting. Where Excel and coding languages like Python were once essential for large data sets, today's user-friendly platforms make data analysis accessible to more professionals, increasing efficiency and fostering data-driven decision-making (interviewee 3).

The rise of remote working, accelerated by COVID-19, has established a new standard in consulting. While it has increased efficiency and adaptability, it has also introduced challenges in maintaining trustful client relationships, as in-person engagement remains central to the profession. Remote work offers greater flexibility and accessibility, enabling consultants to stay connected through virtual tools. However, as one consultant noted, *"It does not fully replace face-to-face discussions, but it certainly helps maintain a level of presence"* (interviewee 8).

Remote work has decreased in-person interactions between consultants and clients, driven by hybrid work preferences. Many clients now follow schedules that align with consultants' working styles, reducing disruptions and enabling smoother collaboration (interviewee 7).

Despite these advancements, physical presence plays an important role in consulting. Being on-site helps foster strong relationships, solve complex problems, and understand interpersonal dynamics essential for team cohesion and project success. *"Now, I believe it is rebalancing. Being physically present as a consulting team, both internally and with clients, is invaluable for relationship-building, problem-solving, and understanding interpersonal dynamics that are often critical to team cohesion and project success"* (interviewee 3).

In addition to these shifts, younger generations are reshaping the consulting profession with new priorities. They place a high value on purpose, work-life balance, and flexibility: *"A lot of younger consultants now ask about the larger meaning behind a project and the client's purpose"* (interviewee 6). These changes are also reflected in expectations around travel and work arrangements, with younger consultants favoring models that support their desire for flexibility (interviewee 7).

The consulting landscape has undergone significant changes as clients have become more sophisticated and demanding. Today's clients are better equipped, more experienced, and have significantly higher expectations. They now have access to new tools, available technologies, and advanced methods that allow them to handle certain tasks independently. As one consultant noted, *"Clients have greater access to tools and information, which raises the bar for consultants to add real value. For instance, where it might have once been enough to provide data on a competitor's revenue trends, today's clients expect much deeper insights and impact"* (interviewee 5).

To meet these heightened expectations, consulting firms had to diversify their offerings and specialize their teams. Increasingly, they are incorporating roles such as software architects,

data scientists, and designers to provide the technical expertise necessary for addressing modern challenges (interviewee 3). This evolution enables firms to deliver tailored and impactful solutions that go beyond traditional strategy work.

As one consultant explained, *“It is not enough to just focus on strategy or organizational work; today, the large firms do not just focus on strategy or organizational work—they also cover operations, technology, deep marketing, and more”* (interviewee 1). By broadening their services, consulting firms can meet a wider range of client needs, from operational projects to integrating advanced technological solutions. This diversification has become crucial for keeping pace with the rapidly evolving demands of the consulting industry.

Moreover, clients now expect actionable, high-impact advice rather than theoretical reports or generalized research. As one consultant emphasized, *“Consulting firms are now expected to provide more actionable, high-impact advice rather than just producing “point of view” reports”* (interviewee 2). This marks a clear shift away from traditional strategy consulting toward operational and implementation-focused projects that deliver tangible results.

4.5.2. External Factors

The rise of formal “Request for Proposal” (RFP) processes, particularly among younger chief executive officers (CEO), has made consulting engagements more transactional, often reducing the opportunity to build deep, trust-based relationships (interviewee 1). When consulting is treated as a commoditized or easily replaceable service, such as through rushed RFP timelines, consultants are often landscape.

5. Discussion

This work demonstrates that, in addition to the success factors already established in the scientific literature, there are new factors shaped by an evolving environment. The appendix includes a table comparing the success factors identified in existing frameworks and highlights the new dimensions of the developed framework that are not covered by the existing ones ([Appendix I](#)).

The reviewed literature and the three frameworks agree that understanding the client's problem is essential for creating a unique, value-adding solution. Kumar's framework emphasizes the quality of work as the most important determinant of project success, alongside clear project goals and well-defined processes (Kumar, Simon and Kimberley 2000).

All frameworks also emphasize the critical role of client involvement, commitment, and support in providing a robust data foundation. Bronnenmayer highlights the importance of high collaboration intensity in reducing misunderstandings, mitigating information asymmetry, and resolving conflicts of interest post-contractually, as informed by Principal-Agent Theory (Bronnenmayer, Wirtz and Göttel 2016). Jang's framework further identifies top management support and the presence of a dedicated "sponsor" on the client side—an individual who champions the project—as crucial for success (Jang and Lee 1998). Additionally, Bronnenmayer notes that strategic organizational changes, such as staff reductions or role reallocations, often lead to resistance, which consultants must anticipate and address (Bronnenmayer, Wirtz and Göttel 2016). The frameworks also align in highlighting the need for consultants to understand and adapt to the client's organizational culture.

However, this study introduces five new dimensions that expand upon the established frameworks: The first new critical success factor is the concept of "sustained impact," which emphasizes the importance of staying engaged post-project to ensure long-term success. Unlike

traditional frameworks, this approach recognizes that project outcomes must extend beyond immediate deliverables to remain effective in the long run.

The second new factor focuses on the trustful relationship between the client and consultant, described as a “game changer” (interviewee 9). Trustful relationships facilitate smoother collaboration by reducing unnecessary friction and alleviating client concerns about consultants acting against their interests.

The third new success factor suggests that clients today are more sophisticated and possess a deeper understanding of their needs and the consulting process. Many former consultants now hold leadership roles on the client side, leading to a deeper understanding of consulting processes. This familiarity has demystified the industry, with clients accepting only targeted services. Traditional strategy work, which once dominated the industry, now accounts for only 20% of its focus (Christensen, Wang and van Bever 2013).

The fourth dimension identifies the consultant’s side as a critical factor in project success. This study highlights the importance of team performance, emphasizing the need to motivate top-tier talent, foster professional growth, and assemble diverse teams with complementary expertise. Effective teamwork ensures that consultants can deliver exceptional results, even if clients focus solely on the outcomes rather than the processes behind them.

The fifth point focuses on external factors influencing project dynamics, particularly “Adaptability and Innovation” and “External Factors.” Advancements in technology, shifting client expectations, and changing workforce priorities have redefined what is needed for successful consulting projects. AI and data analytics streamline workflows and enhance access to data, enabling consultants to focus on high-impact tasks. Remote and hybrid work models bring new opportunities and challenges, reshaping collaboration and client engagement. To meet growing client demands, consulting firms are diversifying their expertise and providing

tailored, results-oriented solutions, moving beyond traditional strategy consulting to deliver practical, high-value outcomes.

In conclusion, this study expands upon existing frameworks by introducing new dimensions that address the complexities of the modern consulting landscape. By highlighting sustained impact, client-consultant relationships, evolving client dynamics, consultant team performance, and external influencers, it offers a comprehensive understanding of the factors driving project success today.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study has introduced a framework identifying the key factors essential for the success of consultancies. While the framework provides valuable insights, it has certain limitations and offers opportunities for further enhancement and refinement through future research.

6.1. Managerial Implications

The framework underscores the dimensions clients should prioritize to ensure successful consulting projects. Firstly, consulting firms need to adapt their practices to address the rapidly evolving challenges of today's industries. Flexibility and expertise in crafting data-driven, client-specific solutions are vital. By leveraging advanced technologies such as AI and analytics tools, firms can enhance operational efficiency and deliver actionable insights to their clients. Building trust remains a cornerstone of consulting success despite the increasingly transactional nature of client relationships due to the standardized RFP processes. Consultants must prioritize transparent communication, foster collaboration throughout all project phases, and maintain long-term engagement to develop strong, enduring client-consultant relationships. Aligning actions and objectives with all relevant stakeholders is critical, as is involving clients throughout the project lifecycle to minimize misunderstandings and secure their buy-in.

Moreover, fostering team diversity should be a strategic priority for consultancies. Diverse teams, defined not only by gender but also by a variety of skills and qualifications, improve decision-making and stimulate innovation, enabling the creation of more effective solutions.

Finally, consultancies should emphasize sustaining long-term impact. This can be achieved through post-project follow-ups and continuous client engagement, ensuring that the value delivered extends beyond the project's immediate scope. A sustained focus on long-term impact is essential for ensuring enduring value creation.

6.2. Limitations

However, this study is subject to several limitations. First, the findings are based on a limited sample of ten consulting partners, which may restrict the generalizability of the results. By exclusively interviewing partners, the study overlooks valuable perspectives from clients and junior consultants, whose insights could contribute to a more holistic understanding of consulting project success. Additionally, the relatively short interview durations of 20 to 40 minutes may not have allowed for an in-depth exploration of nuanced factors.

The regional focus on Europe, particularly the German market, further narrows the applicability of the results to other regions where consulting practices and industry dynamics may differ significantly. Lastly, the findings related to gender dynamics remain inconclusive, leaving a critical dimension of consulting project success insufficiently addressed and signaling an opportunity for future research to explore this aspect more thoroughly.

6.3. Future Research Implications

Future studies should address several areas to build on these findings. Research focusing on the client's perspective could provide complementary insights to consultant-focused studies, enabling a more holistic understanding of success factors, especially since this study only interviewed partners. Additionally, including consultants with varying seniority levels, qualifications, or industry specializations could offer a more nuanced view of consulting

dynamics. Investigating the integration of emerging technologies like generative AI and their influence on consulting frameworks is also critical. Furthermore, examining how cultural factors shape consulting success across different regions could enhance the global applicability of success models. Lastly, longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of success factors over time would yield valuable insights into how consulting adapts to an ever-changing business landscape.

6.4. Conclusion

This study explores what makes consulting projects successful and introduces a framework combining insights from literature and interviews. It highlights both established factors, like clear solutions and measurable outcomes, and newer elements, such as the importance of sustained impact, evolving client-consultant dynamics, and the role of technology and generational shifts.

While the findings provide valuable guidance, limitations like the small sample size, regional focus, and lack of exploration into gender dynamics leave room for future research. Expanding on these aspects could offer deeper insights into consulting success across different contexts and industries.

This framework gives consulting firms, clients, and researchers a practical tool to understand and improve project outcomes. By addressing both short-term goals and long-term impact, it provides a roadmap for thriving in the ever-changing world of management consulting.

7. Bibliography

- Ansoff, H. Igor. 2019. *Implanting strategic management*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Appelbaum, Steven H., and Anthony J. Steed. 2005. *The Critical Success Factors in the Client-Consulting Relationship*. *Journal of Management Development* 24, no. 1.
- Bronnenmayer, Matias, Bernd W. Wirtz, and Vincent Göttel. 2016. *Determinants of Perceived Success in Management Consulting*. *Management Research Review* 39, no. 6.
- Clayton M. Christensen, Dina Wang, and Derek van Bever. 2013. *Consulting on the Cusp of Disruption - The industry that has long helped others sidestep strategic threats is itself being upended*. *Harvard Business Review*.
- Corbin, Juliet, and Anselm Strauss. 2008. *Analyzing Data for Context*. *Asics of Qualitative Research* (3rd ed.): Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory, 2008, 229–46.
- FEACO. 2024. "FEACO (European Federation of Management Consultancies Associations) Survey of the European Management Consultancy Market 2022/2023." January. <https://www.feaco.org/consulting-in-europe/annual-survey/>.
- Freeman, R. Edward. 2018. *Strategic management: A stakeholder approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gabbianelli, and Pencarelli. 2022. *The impact of covid-19 on the client-consultant relationship: a multiple case study*. *International Journal of Business and Administrative Studies*.
- Gioia, Dennis A., Kevin G. Corley, and Aimee L. Hamilton. 2012. *Seeking Qualitative Rigor in Inductive Research*. *Organizational Research Methods* 16, no. 1.
- Glaser, Barney G., and Anselm L. Strauss. 1967. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Routledge.
- Hubbard, Graham, and Paul Beamish. 2015. *Strategic management thinking, analysis and action*. Melbourne, Australia: Pearson Australia, 5th edition.
- Jang, Young, and Jinjoo Lee. 1998. *Factors Influencing the Success of Management Consulting Projects*. *International Journal of Project Management* 16, no. 2.
- Kaplan, Robert S. and Norton, David P. 1992. *The Balanced Scorecard--Measures That Drive Performance*. *Harvard Business Review*.
- Kubr, Milan. 2002. *Management consulting: A guide to the profession*. International Labour Organization.
- Kumar, Nirmalya, Louis W. Stern, and James C. Anderson. 1993. *Conducting Interorganizational Research Using Key Informants*. *Academy of Management Journal* 36, no. 6.
- Kumar, Vanya, Alan Simon, and Nell Kimberley. 2000. *Strategic Capabilities Which Lead to Management Consulting Success in Australia*. *Management Decision* 38, no. 1.
- Lippert, Helge, and Victor Dulewicz. 2018. *A Profile of High-Performing Global Virtual Teams*. *Team Performance Management: An International Journal* 24, no. 3/4.
- MCA. 2021. *MCA*. 1st July. Accessed December 5, 2024. https://www.mca.org.uk/press-releases/consulting-sector-expands-4-5-as-industry-supports-clients-to-recover-and-build-back-from-the-pandemic-and-exports-double?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

- McKinsey. 2024. *Technology Trends Outlook 2024*. McKinsey Digital.
- McKinsey. 2024. *The state of AI in early 2024: Gen AI adoption spikes and starts to generate value*. McKinsey & Company.
- McLachlin, Ron. 1999. *Factors for Consulting Engagement Succes*. *Management Decision* 37, no. 5.
- Morten T. Hansen, Nitin Nohria, and Thomas Tierney. 2013. *What's Your Strategy for Managing Knowledge?*. *The Knowledge Management Yearbook 2000-2001*.
- Oertig, Margaret, and Thomas Buergi. 2006. *The Challenges of Managing Cross-Cultural Virtual Project Teams*. *Team Performance Management: An International Journal* 12, no. 1/2.
- Păvăloaia, Vasile-Daniel, and Sabina-Cristiana Necula. 2023. "Artificial Intelligence as a Disruptive Technology—a Systematic Literature Review." *Electronics* 12, no. 5.
- Penrose, Edith T. 1972. *The theory of the growth of the firm*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Basil Blackwell.
- Pianese, Tommasina, Luisa Errichiello, and Joao Vieira da Cunha. 2022. *Organizational Control in the Context of Remote Working: A Synthesis of Empirical Findings and a Research Agenda*. *European Management Review* 20, no. 2.
- Ross, Stephen A. 1973. "The Economic Theory of Agency: The Principal's Problem." *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 63, No. 2 134-139.
- Schaffer, Robert H. 2002. *High-impact consulting: How clients and consultants can work together to achieve extraordinary results*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Turner, Arthur N. 1982. *Consulting is more than giving advice*. *Harvard Business Review*.
- Vivian Hunt, Sara Prince, Sundiatu Dixon-Fyle, and Lareina Yee. 2018. *Delivering through Diversity*. McKinsey & Company.
- Werr, Andreas, and Torbjörn Stjernberg. 2006. *Exploring Management Consulting Firms as Knowledge Systems*. *Organization Studies* 24, no. 6.

8. Appendix

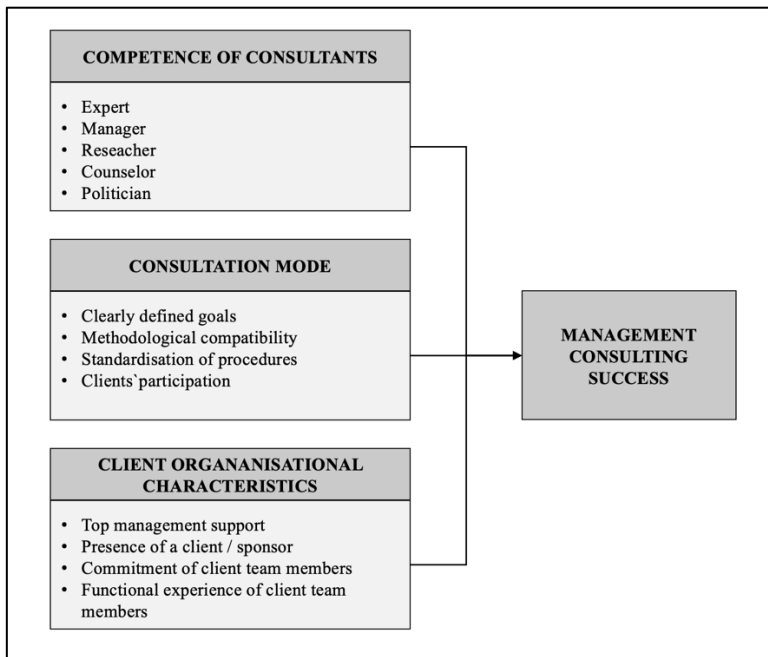
Appendix A – Table of Contents

Abstract	1
1. Introduction	2
1.1. Problem and Relevance	2
1.2. Objective and Outline.....	3
2. Theoretical Frameworks	4
3. Methodology of Empirical Research	7
3.1. Research Design	7
3.2. Data Collection and Interview Design	7
3.3. Data Analysis	8
4. Results	10
4.1. Project Execution	12
4.1.1. Solution Design and Development.....	13
4.1.2. Implementability of the Project.....	13
4.1.3. Outcome-Oriented Success Metrics	14
4.2. Consultant Side	14
4.2.1. Team Excellence	14
4.3. Client Side	15
4.3.1. Client Engagement and Ownership.....	15
4.3.2. Client Knowledge and Sophistication	16
4.4. Relationship Management.....	16
4.4.1. Trust-building and Relationship Management.....	17
4.5. External Influencers Shaping Project Dynamics.....	17
4.5.1. Adaptability and Innovation.....	18
4.5.2. External Factors.....	20
5. Discussion	21
6. Conclusion and Implications	23
6.1. Managerial Implications.....	23
6.2. Limitations	24
6.3. Future Research Implications.....	24
6.4. Conclusion.....	25
7. Bibliography	26
8. Appendix	28
Appendix B – Table of Figures	28
Appendix C – Framework 1 (Jang and Lee 1998)	29
Appendix D – Framework 2 (Kumar, Simon and Kimberley 2000).....	29
Appendix E – Framework 3 (Bronnenmayer, Wirtz and Göttel 2016).....	30
Appendix F – Interviewee Overview	30
Appendix G – Interview Guide	31
Appendix H – Detailed Framework Based on Findings	32
Appendix I – Comparing Success Factors Across Frameworks in the Literature	33
Appendix J – Interview Transkripts	34

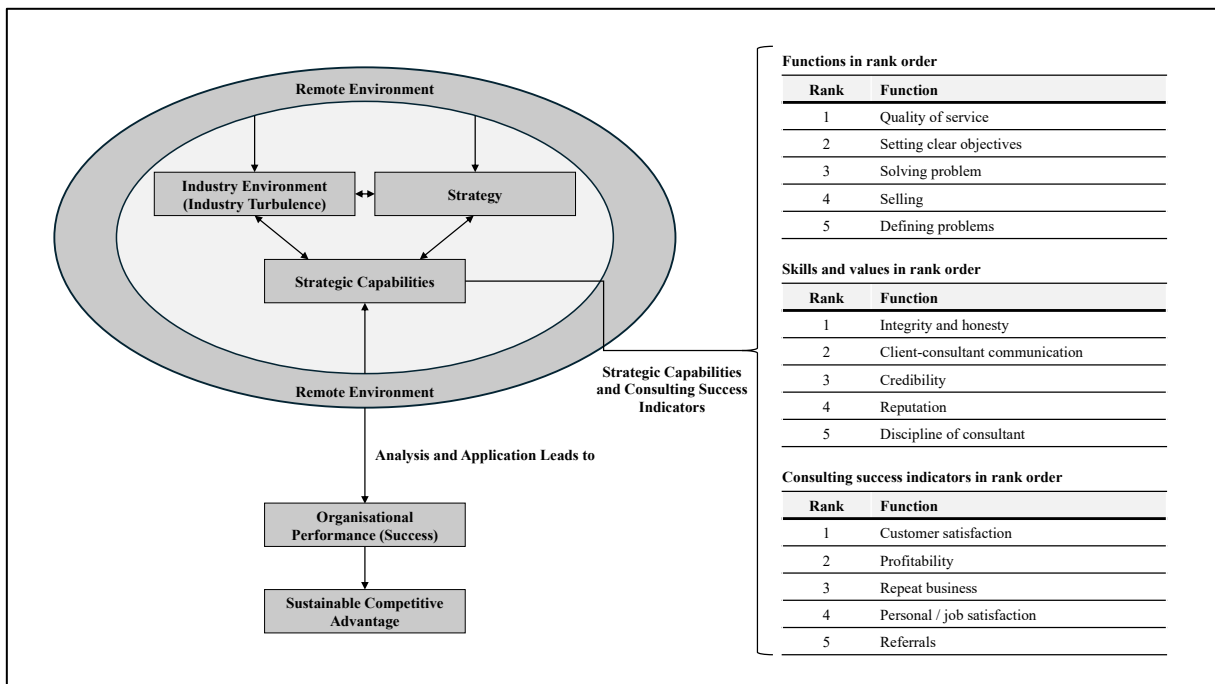
Appendix B – Table of Figures

Figure 1: Gioia Framework	11
Figure 2: Framework Based on Findings	12

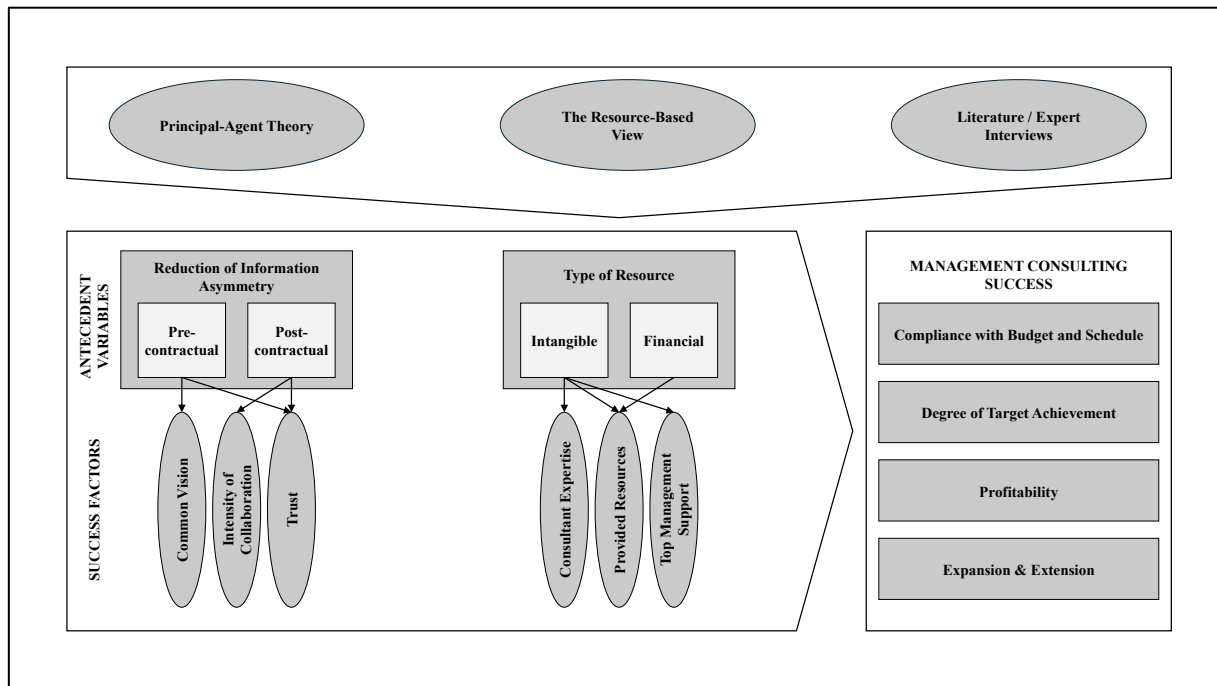
Appendix C – Framework 1 (Jang and Lee 1998)



Appendix D – Framework 2 (Kumar, Simon and Kimberley 2000)



Appendix E – Framework 3 (Bronnenmayer, Wirtz and Göttel 2016)



Appendix F – Interviewee Overview

	Position	Experience in Consultancy	Country	Gender
Interviewee 1	Senior Partner	22 years	Germany	Male
Interviewee 2	Partner	12 years	Spain	Male
Interviewee 3	Partner	11 years	Germany	Male
Interviewee 4	Senior Partner	23 years	Germany	Male
Interviewee 5	Partner	11 years	Sweden	Male
Interviewee 6	Senior Partner	15 years	Germany	Male
Interviewee 7	Partner	11 years	Germany	Female
Interviewee 8	Partner	8 years	Spain	Female
Interviewee 9	Partner	14 years	Austria	Female
Interviewee 10	Partner	13 years	Germany	Female

Appendix G – Interview Guide

Part 0: Professional Background

1. How long have you been (or were you) a partner, and in which industries or sectors have you primarily worked?

Part 1: Determinants of Perceived Success in Consulting Projects

Defining Success

2. In your experience, what are the most critical factors for a consulting project to succeed? Why do you consider these factors important?
3. How would you describe the relationship with your clients?
4. In your experience, what contributions or requirements from the client are necessary to ensure the success of a consulting project?
5. What is important for team success?
6. How do you measure whether a consulting project was successful or not?

Change in Consulting

7. What significant changes have you observed in consulting that impact project success?
8. How have these changes influenced your approach as a partner?

Role of a Partner

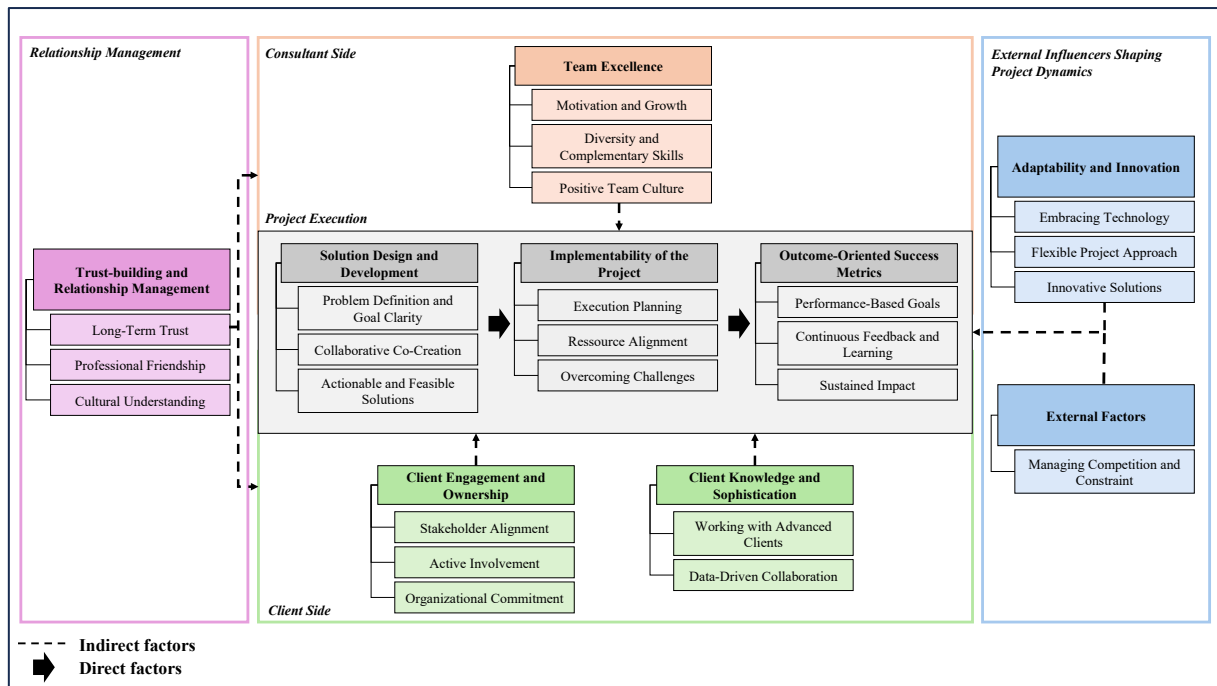
9. What do you see as the primary responsibilities of a partner in ensuring the success of a consulting project?
10. What key skills and capabilities should a partner possess to fulfill these responsibilities effectively?

Part 2: General Reflection on Gender and Success

10. In your opinion, are there any gender-related factors to the partner that particularly contribute to or hinder the success of the project?
11. Have you employed specific strategies to overcome gender-related barriers? What were the outcomes?
12. Have you observed any shifts over time in how clients perceive female consulting partners, particularly in terms of project success?

Appendix H – Detailed Framework Based on Findings

including Third-Order Dimensions and Second-Order Themes



Appendix I – Comparing Success Factors Across Frameworks in the Literature

High-level Category	Third-Order Dimension	Second-Order Themes	Framework 1 (Jang & Lee, 1998)	Framework 2 (Kumar et al., 2000)	Framework 3 (Bronnenmayer et al., 2016)
Project Execution	Solution Design and Development	Problem Definition and Goal Clarity	x	x	x
		Actionable and Feasible Solutions	x		x
	Implementability of the Project	Execution Planning	x	x	x
		Resource Alignment	x	x	x
		Overcoming Challenges	x		x
	Outcome-Oriented Success Metrics	Performance-Based Goals		x	x
		Continuous Feedback and Learning	x	x	x
		<i>Sustained Impact</i>			
	Consultant Side	Team Excellence	<i>Motivation and Growth</i>		
<i>Diversity and Complementary Skills</i>					
<i>Positive Team Culture</i>					
Client Side	Client Engagement and Ownership	Stakeholder Alignment	x	x	x
		Active Involvement	x		x
		Organizational Commitment	x	x	x
	Client Knowledge and Sophistication	<i>Working with Advanced Clients</i>			
		Data-Driven Collaboration	x		x
Relationship Management	Trust-building and Relationship Management	Long-Term Trust			x
		<i>Professional Friendship</i>			
		Cultural Understanding	x		x
External Influencers Shaping Project Dynamics	Adaptability and Innovation	<i>Embracing Technology</i>			
		<i>Flexible Project Approach</i>			
		<i>Innovative Solutions</i>			
	External Factors	<i>Managing Competition and Constraints</i>			

Appendix J – Interview Transcripts

Transkript I

Interviewee 1	Senior Partner, Germany, male
Date	conducted on October 15th, 2024

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you very much and welcome. My first question is about your professional background. How long have you been a partner, and in which industries or sectors have you primarily worked?*

Interviewee 1: Yeah, sure. I have been a consultant for 22 years. I have been a partner for probably 15 years, and a senior partner for eight years. I would say the primary industry I have worked in is about 90% retail.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *In your experience, what are the most critical factors for a consulting project to succeed, and why do you consider these factors important?*

Interviewee 1: Yeah, I have obviously given this some thought, and I think there are a couple of key factors. The first thing most people would mention is that the quality of the concept needs to be good. This means that there is typically a question you need to answer, which requires thorough analysis to come to a clear conclusion. The client does not want multiple options—they ultimately want to know whether to go left or right. So, concept quality is essential, and it obviously needs to be fact-based and well-considered. That is the first point. This is very important and leads directly to the topic of your master's thesis: Will the client really implement it? This depends on a range of factors. It is very important not to work on this alone without the client, as that would make it a theoretical, dry concept that the client might not accept. This is my approach, and I have often heard that it is considered as a strategy. It must closely align with the clients' needs.

This brings up the question: Who are the clients? They need to see themselves reflected in the solution, right? This can vary depending on who the client is. You could assume that the client

is the most important person in the room. If it is a CEO, they need to be satisfied. But that is only part of the answer, as the Chief Executive Officer alone will not succeed with the concept. If the rest of the organization does not see themselves reflected in it, it will not work. That leads to the next success factor: involving the organization appropriately.

In a consulting project, the better firms typically try to reflect the client's structure within their own teams. This means younger team members work with the less senior client employees, while top consultants collaborate with the Chief Executive Officer. The middle layers also interact accordingly. I would say these are the three main factors. Let us leave it at that for now, but we can go into more detail if you would like.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you very much. I have one question regarding the intensity of collaboration and the transfer of the relationship with the client. How important do you consider that factor for success?*

Interviewee 1: That is a very difficult question because it would be easy to say that having a great collaborative relationship is very important, but that is not always the case. In principle, of course, it is true, but there are some projects where a large part of the organization may not want the project, and this does not always relate to obvious things like cost-cutting. Sometimes, a large portion of the organization simply does not want change. Consulting projects are typically about change, so you will always encounter resistance. There are, of course, various ways to overcome this resistance. The question is, can collaboration be the right approach? It might not always be.

It is like the famous distinction in German between “du” and “Sie.” Many people say that ideally, you should have a fantastic relationship with the clients, and the best relationship is one where you can say “du.” I do not fully agree with that. That is one dimension of the relationship, but it is not everything. I know clients who would say “du” to me, but I do not trust them at all. I also have clients who would prefer “Sie,” and I have a fantastic relationship with them.

However, it is not always possible to collaborate with the entire organization, as what you are doing will often involve some level of change.

And yes, you always have winners and losers. Let's face it, that's the reality.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you very much. In your experience, what contributions or requirements from the client are necessary to ensure the success of a consulting project?*

Interviewee 1: An absolutely key factor is having a counterpart on the client side. You can bring the perfect concept, but if no client fully supports and endorses what you are saying, then simply forget it. You should stop immediately. This resistance can vary widely. It could be resistance out of principle, or perhaps people are afraid something might surface where they didn't perform as well as they would like, and they do not want that to be exposed. It may be fears of losing something, or perhaps there is someone within the organization who is seen as a fantastic talent, but certain people do not like them. There can be multiple, varied reasons.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *How do you measure the success of a consulting project?*

Interviewee 1: Ultimately, I would say the primary measure of success is the impact—whether the objectives of the consulting work have been achieved and realized. In some consulting projects, this is relatively straightforward, such as aiming to reduce indirect costs by 10%. You can simply check if those savings have been realized. Ideally, the impact should also be sustainable, meaning it continues beyond a single year and does not revert back.

However, impact is not always monetary. It could also mean a shift in how the organization approaches certain issues or a change in mindset. Success could take many forms, depending on the project goals, so understanding and defining the desired impact from the start is crucial.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Would you say that after finishing a consulting project, you typically check back a few months later to see if it was truly successful, or do you consider the project complete once it is finished?*

Interviewee 1: That is the first question we ask ourselves. If you just complete the work and consider it done, you are unlikely to work with that client again—unless they are very transactional. Ultimately, you want the client to be happy and successful with the results, so it is essential to follow up and check in. I would say this is extremely important, and it is a significant factor that sets apart those who truly invest in client relationships.

Consulting firms refer to their clients as 'clients' rather than 'customers' or 'accounts' for a reason. A customer or an account is simply someone who pays for a product or service, but a 'client' implies a deeper, more personal relationship.

In consulting, viewing someone as a 'client' rather than a 'customer' reflects a commitment to their success. If you are a Microsoft customer and do not like the product, it is easy for them to move on to the next customer. But in consulting, it is different: good consultants think of their clients as partners, genuinely caring about their success and striving to make an impact. Just as a good lawyer's success is measured by positive outcomes for clients, a good consultant is focused on creating lasting impact.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *What significant changes have you observed in consulting that impact project success, such as remote working or technological advancements?*

Interviewee 1: There have been several significant changes in consulting that impact project success. First, clients have become increasingly sophisticated, which means consulting firms have also had to become more advanced and diversified. Today, the large firms don't just focus on strategy or organizational work—they also cover operations, technology, deep marketing, and more. Thirty years ago, no one expected that level of specialization from a consulting firm, so this shift marks a major change.

Another change I have observed is in the nature of client relationships. In the past, personal relationships with leaders, like CEOs, were central. A strong relationship often meant you would be trusted to handle a variety of tasks, sometimes even beyond the formal scope of

consulting work, based on a mutual understanding or ‘gentleman’s agreement.’ However, compliance rules and a more transactional culture have made these personal connections less common. Today, many projects require a formal RFP (Request for Proposal) process with multiple firms bidding, and younger generations of CEOs often seem more transactional and less inclined to build deep, trust-based relationships.

Of course, remote work has also impacted consulting, making it easier to work digitally but harder to build meaningful relationships. While digital tools allow for efficient collaboration, it is challenging to foster the kind of connection that in-person interaction provides. Building trust and rapport requires more than just verbal communication, which is why in-person presence is still valuable in consulting.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *And with younger CEOs placing less emphasis on trust-based relationships compared to older CEOs, how have these changes influenced your approach as a partner?*

Interviewee 1: One significant change is the need to participate in more competitive pitches against other consulting firms. I have never really enjoyed this process because it feels like a beauty contest or speed dating, where people might exaggerate or misrepresent things to stand out. I do not believe this is ideal, as it often leads to more time spent on proposals rather than truly understanding the client’s needs and building a solid foundation for a lasting relationship. In response to this shift, I have adapted by segmenting clients. I assess which clients are worth investing in for a deep, personal relationship and which ones may not be. Over time, I have had some difficult experiences with certain clients, even feeling betrayed at times. While this is part of the job, it has taught me to be more selective in where I invest my energy and focus on relationships that have the potential for genuine collaboration and trust.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *When it comes to your role, what do you see as the primary responsibilities of a partner in ensuring the success of a consulting project?*

Interviewee 1: The partner plays a crucial role, likely the most important, in ensuring a project's success. At our company, for instance, the partner is often called the 'Engagement Director,' which reflects their leadership role. While the project manager handles many day-to-day aspects, the partner is ultimately responsible for the project's success and serves as the primary face of the firm to the client and other stakeholders. This makes the partner's role vital in guiding the project and maintaining strong relationships.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *What key skills and capabilities should a partner possess to fulfill this responsibility effectively?*

Interviewee 1: A partner needs several key skills to fulfill their responsibilities effectively. First, strong problem-solving abilities and conceptual thinking are essential, along with a deep understanding of the industry. Empathy is also crucial, both for understanding the client's needs and connecting with colleagues who may have diverse perspectives and work styles.

Leadership is perhaps one of the most critical qualities. This means having the courage to stand up for one's own opinion and not simply agreeing to everything. Unfortunately, as the consulting industry has grown, there's been an increase in 'yes men'—individuals who agree with the client on everything, which can ultimately undermine a consulting project. Often, the CEO is in a very isolated position, similar to the tale of 'The Emperor's New Clothes,' where they're surrounded by people who only affirm their views. A good consultant, especially a partner, must have the stamina to speak the truth—even if it is uncomfortable—and the CEO may only accept that truth from an external advisor who's not subject to the same power dynamics within the organization. This makes a partner's role in providing honest, unbiased insights invaluable.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *In your experience, do you think gender dynamics—such as a male partner with a female client, or vice versa—influence how trust, collaboration, or*

communication unfold during a project? Are there any particular challenges or advantages you've observed in these scenarios?

Interviewee 1: Of course, there are challenges when it comes to gender dynamics in consulting relationships. Anyone who says otherwise may not be considering the full picture. First, having a diverse team—not only in terms of gender but also including ethnic, technical, and economic diversity—is essential. This diversity helps reflect the client's organization, as few client organizations are exclusively one demographic. A diverse team can bring in varied perspectives, and there is research showing that more diverse teams often produce stronger, more comprehensive solutions. Different backgrounds prevent us from operating solely within our own 'echo chambers' and provide a broader, more balanced view.

However, in consulting—where trust is key—these dynamics can present challenges. For example, if the CEO is a 65-year-old male with a more traditional mindset, there is likely to be a natural rapport with a consultant who shares similar traits, such as a male partner of similar age. This familiarity can make trust-building easier, as people often connect more naturally with those who are similar to themselves.

On the other hand, a diverse consultant could bring invaluable perspectives, but the client must be willing to embrace these differences. A 28-year-old female consultant, for instance, might offer unique insights, but the traditional CEO may have a harder time establishing trust.

Additionally, there are different 'codes' of trust-building. For example, with male clients, it might feel natural for a male consultant to suggest grabbing a beer together—a small gesture that builds rapport. For a female consultant, this could feel more complicated, not for any rational reason but because of social norms that sometimes add a layer of complexity.

This is one reason why female consultants benefit greatly from female role models, who can demonstrate effective ways of building trust that may differ from male counterparts. Role

models offer young female consultants examples of how to navigate these dynamics authentically and successfully.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Would you say that women today can be as successful as men in a partner role, or do they still face disadvantages?*

Interviewee 1: I have never thought that a female partner would be inherently less successful than a male partner. I cannot think of a single reason why that would be the case.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Just based on what you mentioned before about this 'code of trust,' sometimes it's easier for two men to find similarities and build trust than for a man and a woman. I am curious about your experience with this.*

Interviewee 1: That is true. There are more female client leaders than there are female partners and senior partners, and this can be attributed to a variety of reasons. For one, the partner role is not exactly family-friendly, and we still live in a society where women are more likely to take on primary caregiving responsibilities. This structure leads many women to drop out, especially as they reach higher levels in consulting, where the demands can conflict with family life.

I would not say that women are any less capable or commercially successful as partners. The partner role involves selling projects, which is a critical skill, but I have not noticed any gender divide here. There are male partners who struggle with sales, and many women excel at it. So while there are challenges in terms of balancing work and family responsibilities, I do not believe gender impacts a partner's commercial success or capability.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Do you think women face any different challenges than men in being a partner, or would you say the challenges are similar?*

Interviewee 1: As more women move into senior positions, it is becoming easier for female consultants to find mentors and clients who may relate to them. Interestingly, I would argue that this shift may actually make it more challenging for some male partners, who may need to

adapt their approaches—moving beyond traditional male topics like football and beer, to use a black-and-white example.

For me, the core challenge for women in consulting lies in the job's demanding nature. Consulting often requires 100%, if not 120%, commitment, and I have noticed that fewer women are inclined to work at this level of intensity, often for valid reasons, like family commitments. The idea of a part-time consultant sounds ideal, but it is very difficult in practice because client relationships demand constant presence. If something critical happens on a Friday, a part-time arrangement may not be feasible.

There is also a cultural factor. While there's historically been 'male talk' and some lingering bias, I believe it is becoming less common. However, there is also a social concept called *Seilschaft*, or 'alliance,' which refers to informal networks where individuals help others from similar backgrounds. This phenomenon can be seen among various groups—like in certain professional communities where individuals from specific backgrounds support one another. For example, in the U.S. pharma industry, there is a strong presence of Indian professionals who often mentor and help others from the same background.

Interestingly, women tend not to form these alliances as strongly as men or other minority groups do. Jean-Paul Sartre noted this, and there is research suggesting that women may not network in quite the same way, at least on a broad scale. While there are exceptions, this lack of a strong support network can be another unique challenge for women in consulting.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you very much. Could you try to wrap up your opinion about gender-related factors at the partner level in consulting projects in two or three sentences, as a conclusion?*

Interviewee 1: These days, consulting—including partner roles—is as much a female job as it is a male job, thanks to increasing acceptance and success across genders. However, two factors still pose challenges for women. First, societal expectations around childcare make consulting's

demanding nature less family-friendly. Second, women tend not to support their gender as actively as men or other minority groups do, which can impact networking and mentorship opportunities. Interestingly, women tend not to form these alliances as strongly as men or other minority groups do. Jean-Paul Sartre noted this, and there is research suggesting that women may not network in quite the same way, at least on a broad scale. While there are exceptions, this lack of a strong support network can be another unique challenge for women in consulting.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you very much for all the insights.*

Transkript II

Interviewee 2	Partner, Spain, male
Date	conducted on October 16th, 2024

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you very much and welcome. My first question is about your professional background. How long have you been a partner, and in which industries or sectors have you primarily worked?*

Interviewee 2: Right out of college, I went into consulting. After that, I was an entrepreneur for six years. Now, I have been for another six years in consultancy, three of which have been as a partner.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *In your experience, what are the most critical factors for a consulting project to succeed, and why do you consider these factors important?*

Interviewee 2: I believe the first priority is internal alignment within the client organization. Every stakeholder on the client side needs to view the consulting project as valuable and support it, as we always need resources and cooperation from the client's team. Consultants can accomplish very little—aside from high-level strategic work—without the client's support and engagement. So, internal alignment from all relevant stakeholders is crucial.

The second priority, I would say, is expertise. Having industry-specific, topical, or technical expertise is essential. Consulting work is not an exact science, so having experience in different countries and geographical contexts can make a significant difference. Having a knowledgeable client also helps, as they know what needs to be done and can execute it more quickly.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *You already mentioned that internal alignment is very important. In your experience, what other contributions or requirements from the client are necessary to ensure the success of a consulting project?*

Interviewee 2: The first key factor is people. Typically, people need to be assigned to the engagement—the consulting engagement.

The second factor is approvals. Often, you need the necessary approvals to move forward, such as getting the OK from the Data Protection Officer (DPO) to leverage certain data or getting approval from purchasing to buy a license for software or similar needs.

Finally, when investments are required—for example, if we are advising them to invest in X—the client needs to actually approve the investment based on our recommendations. So, people come first, and approvals and investments follow.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *How do you determine whether a consulting project was successful?*

Interviewee 2: The way we measure success depends on the nature of the engagement. For strategic engagements, the immediate KPI is client satisfaction. Beyond that, it is valuable to track whether our recommendations are actually implemented, though this type of engagement is becoming less common.

More often, we are involved in impact-focused engagements, sometimes with variable fees linked to specific outcomes. In these cases, success is tied to clear KPIs, such as sales growth, margin improvement, EBITDA, or churn reduction. The key is having a well-defined metric that aligns with the client's goals.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Switching topics to client relationships—how important do you consider the client-consultant relationship to be for the success of a consulting project?*

Interviewee 2: I think it is definitely relevant, although it depends on the nature of the engagement. For impact-driven projects with clear KPIs—like increasing sales, for instance—the metric speaks for itself. If sales go up, the project is successful.

However, for model development, conceptual work, or strategic projects, the client-consultant relationship becomes very important. Most of our strategic engagements are co-created with clients, so we are not just working in isolation and delivering a PDF at the end. Having a strong relationship makes the co-creation process more effective and productive.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *What changes have you observed in client preferences, such as what they now value more in consulting services?*

Interviewee 2: At least in my firm, we have noticed that clients are increasingly seeking 'at-risk' engagements. They want consultants to put skin in the game and share in both the potential profits and losses. This shift reflects a desire for consultants to be more invested in the outcomes alongside the client.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *I spoke with another partner who mentioned that the market is more saturated now, making it more challenging to compete. Given this, are there any factors that you consider more relevant or essential in today's competitive landscape?*

Interviewee 2: These days, the market has shifted away from paying consulting firms to create theoretical reports, such as a general paper on cloud computing. I doubt we will see a return to that type of work on a large scale. Consulting firms are now expected to provide more actionable, high-impact advice rather than just producing 'point of view' reports.

The strategic work that remains valuable typically includes areas like developing comprehensive strategic plans or creating internationalization strategies for companies entering new markets. However, clients are no longer interested in paying for purely academic papers or general research—they expect tangible, applied insights.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Focusing on your role as a partner, what do you see as your primary responsibilities in ensuring the success of a consulting project?*

Interviewee 2: The responsibilities of a partner depend on their specific role in the engagement. If the partner is the Engagement Director—the leading partner for the project—then they need to be highly involved, either physically or mentally, almost every day. This means regularly checking in with the engagement manager or senior associate to ensure that the project is progressing according to plan. The partner should have a clear overview of the entire

engagement timeline and weekly objectives, tracking any deviations from the plan and addressing them promptly.

If you're in the role of a content director, the focus shifts to sharing your expertise with the team. This involves holding sessions to impart knowledge, providing guidance on specific topics, and ensuring that the team has the insights needed to address complex project challenges effectively.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *When it comes to winning a proposal or securing follow-up projects after a project is completed, what would you say are the main responsibilities of a partner?*

Interviewee 2: In some firms, follow-on projects are crucial and are considered from the very beginning of an engagement. At our company, we are generally less commercial in that sense, but in firms where follow-ons are actively pursued, securing these follow-ups is a core part of the partner's responsibility.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you very much. What key skills and capabilities should a partner possess to fulfill these responsibilities effectively?*

Interviewee 2: A partner needs strong interpersonal skills and the ability to synthesize information effectively. Additionally, good people skills are essential—they should act as stress dampeners, not stress amplifiers, and be effective motivators for their team.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *In the next part, I would like to take a closer look at gender influence. In your opinion, are there any gender-related factors at the partner level that particularly contribute to or hinder project success? For instance, does it make a difference if the client is female or if a female partner is working with a male client?*

Interviewee 2: Honestly, I have never really thought about it before. I suppose it depends on the nature of the engagement. My projects are typically very content-driven—I focus on digital growth, data, marketing, and sales—and in these areas, it is absolutely irrelevant whether I'm

a woman or a man, or whether the client is male or female. Perhaps in more modern, conceptual engagements there might be differences, but in my experience, I have not noticed any.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Have you observed any shifts over time in how clients perceive female consulting partners, particularly regarding project success? Or would you say there has not been much change?*

Interviewee 2: I guess it depends a lot on the specific individual. I have seen women with a very tough interface and others who have a more typical approach. So, no, I would not say there is a consistent shift—it really varies from person to person.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Okay, so you would say there are no specific differences between female and male partners—they are basically the same?*

Interviewee 2: I am currently in an engagement in Germany with a female partner from Düsseldorf, and there is absolutely no difference in our collaboration. That said, it would be interesting to study a larger sample size—I am sure that with more data, notable differences could emerge. It would be fascinating to learn more about them.

It is just that some aspects differ. For example, I do not relate to football, unlike some other partners, and I avoid having one-on-one dinners with clients, which male partners may feel more comfortable doing. However, I do not rely on these informal settings because my content is strong—I offer a product that many clients are interested in. My approach is straightforward: I show them how I can increase their sales and take a share of the incremental sales. I do not need to invite them to dinner to build interest. You might want to talk to more traditional partners to get insights on different approaches.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Yes, it is also interesting to recognize that there are people like you who do not rely as heavily on deep client relationships. Instead, the focus is more on the value of the product, straightforward selling, and delivery.*

Interviewee 2: Exactly. I am a content-focused partner. You will need to talk to traditional partners for a different perspective.

Transkript III

Interviewee 3	Partner, Germany, male
Date	conducted on October 22nd, 2024

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you very much and welcome. My first question is about your professional background. How long have you been a partner, and in which industries or sectors have you primarily worked?*

Interviewee 3: I have been a partner now for about 3 years. And I have worked almost exclusively in the consumer industry.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *In your experience, what are the most critical factors for a consulting project to succeed, and why do you consider these factors important?*

Interviewee 3: The first priority for me is to have a clear scope. This means defining precisely what needs to be done and ensuring both the consulting team and the client have a shared understanding of what successful delivery and outcomes look like.

The second priority is to have the right team in place. It is not always about having more people, and not everyone can handle every project equally well. Experience in the specific industry and field—what I would call 'muscle memory'—is incredibly valuable in consulting. The team should have the appropriate level of expertise and a balanced mix of skills across roles. This includes having the right profiles and seniority levels to meet the project's demands effectively. The third priority is establishing a functional and collaborative working model between the consultancy and the client. This means creating a system for ongoing communication to address issues as they arise and to check in on progress. By contextualizing the findings with the client's own knowledge and experience, we can improve the project's quality along the way.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *And how would you describe your relationship with the client?*

Interviewee 3: That depends a lot on the client, so I think, again, it varies. Typically, we strive for—and I personally strive for—a trust-based, counseling relationship.

What does that mean? In my view, it means being very frank and direct, even with difficult topics and challenging findings, but always focusing on how to solve them. It is not about making someone look bad; it is about bringing the real issues to light and finding a way to solve them together.

As such, I think relationships evolve over time, and some even develop into friendships, while others remain professional. Because you work closely together, this intense, feedback-driven process can result in building quite close, personal relationships over time. In other cases, it stays more transactional, especially when you do not work with certain people as often.

Ultimately, I think it is like in all areas of life: some people you connect with, and others you are happy not to see again.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *In your experience, what contributions or requirements from the client are necessary to ensure the success of a consulting project?*

Interviewee 3: I think the most important factor is having senior-level interest and backing for the project. In my opinion, the best projects—programs, as some might call them—are typically those where the CEO or a senior leader just below that level is genuinely excited about driving the project.

When senior leaders dedicate time to the project, help shape its content in the right direction, and actively drive it forward, it sets the tone. This senior engagement is critical because, despite some firms claiming to be non-hierarchical, you often find that the level of senior backing significantly influences how seriously people take the work, how much time they invest, and how much attention is paid to quality.

Of course, there are many other important factors—like data quality, availability of people, and their openness to work collaboratively. There are also foundational elements related to the collaboration model and processes. But, honestly, if I boil it down, when there is strong senior backing, everything else tends to fall into place.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *OK, perfect. Thank you. And how do you measure whether a consulting project was successful or not?*

Interviewee 3: There are several ways to assess success, which I would view through three lenses. The first is a ‘hygiene’ lens: have we delivered on the basic commitments agreed upon at the start? While this is important, it is more about meeting requirements than truly measuring success.

The core criterion for me is impact, which can take many forms. Impact might mean rolling out a new performance management system to 5,000 employees, implementing a new organizational structure by a specific date, or achieving financial targets, such as growing the business or improving margins. Impact can be measured through both quantitative and qualitative milestones or financial metrics, as well as operational KPIs, like increased customer satisfaction.

Ultimately, the key is setting a clear objective at the outset and holding ourselves accountable for delivering on that impact metric

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you. Have you observed any significant changes in consulting that affect project success?*

Interviewee 3: I have been in consulting for about 11 years, and I have observed several significant changes impacting project success.

First, remote work has been a major shift, especially during COVID, when everything moved online. Initially, it seemed that virtual work could sustain long-term. But now, I believe it is rebalancing. Being physically present as a consulting team, both internally and with clients, is invaluable for relationship-building, problem-solving, and understanding interpersonal dynamics that are often critical to team cohesion and project success.

Second, data and analytics have evolved tremendously. When I started, Excel was the primary tool, and handling large data sets required specialists skilled in coding languages like Python.

Today, we have easier access to richer data sets and more user-friendly tools. However, despite these advancements, not all teams are fully equipped with the right capabilities to leverage this data effectively, and organizational structures do not always fully support data-driven approaches.

Finally, I have noticed a significant increase in diversity within consulting teams. The range of profiles has expanded to include specialized roles like software architects, which did not exist when I first joined. There is also been progress in gender diversity, especially in junior roles, though there is still work to be done at senior levels. It is a journey that takes time, but the shift toward a more diverse team environment is well underway.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you. What do you see as the primary responsibilities of a partner in ensuring the success of a consulting project?*

Interviewee 3: For me, the primary responsibilities of a partner include scoping the work effectively, ensuring focus on the right topics, reviewing the quality of outputs, and leading essential discussions with the client. It is about balancing both internal and external mandates. A key focus is to support the team in working as efficiently as possible, providing content guidance so they know what ‘good’ looks like and which direction to take. Without this steering, the work can quickly become inefficient, so setting clear expectations and direction is critical.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you. Speaking of diversity, in your opinion, are there any gender-related factors at the partner level that particularly contribute to or hinder the success of a project? For instance, does it make a difference if the client is male and the partner is female, or vice versa? Do you think any factors might impact project success in these scenarios?*

Interviewee 3: I have had very good relationships with both male and female clients, so I find it difficult to generalize. It’s a highly individual matter. In some industries—especially in Germany—the senior levels are still quite male-dominated, and I can imagine it may sometimes

be more challenging for women to be seen as equals or to build the same level of rapport. However, personally, I have not experienced any challenges working with female clients; if anything, I have had many female clients due to my industry and international focus, and I have never found that gender differences hinder project success.

Where I do see a difference is within team dynamics. I find we achieve better results with a healthy gender mix because diverse perspectives bring different approaches and reactions. While it may sound simplified, I believe gender can influence behaviors, and having a balanced team can enhance project outcomes. For instance, my current team consists of all women, and while I appreciate the skills they bring, I feel that a more balanced team would offer a stronger mix of profiles and perspectives. Achieving this balance is not always easy, especially in industries like fashion, where there may be a higher interest from female consultants, while other sectors may skew more male. Nonetheless, I think it is important to strive for this balance.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you. You just mentioned team success—maybe one last question: what do you consider the most important factors for ensuring your team’s success?*

Interviewee 3: I think the key factors for team success start with clarity—clarity on overall scope, each person’s role, and their specific contributions. Another critical factor is a well-functioning collaboration model, where team members work smoothly together.

Work-life balance is also important, particularly in terms of manageable working hours. Interestingly, I have observed that people are less likely to complain about long hours when they genuinely enjoy working together and the team functions well. In contrast, if the team dynamic is poor, issues like long hours can become a major point of contention.

So, for me, success comes down to a team that understands its purpose, has complementary skills, and collaborates effectively with each other, as well as with partners and clients. When these elements are in place, the setup usually leads to strong outcomes.

Transkript IV

Interviewee 4	Senior Partner, Germany, male
Date	conducted on October 22nd, 2024

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *How long have you been or were you a partner and which industries or sectors have you primarily worked?*

Interviewee 4: I was a partner for 14 years, including six years as a partner and an additional period as a senior partner. I focused on apparel, fashion, and luxury, which fall under the consumer sector.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Perfect. Thank you. In your experience, what are the most critical factors for a consulting project to succeed and why do you consider these factors as important?*

Interviewee 4: That is a great question. It probably starts with a proper, problem description. So what is the the exam question that you try to answer? And, in my experience, that is where the whole thing starts. In a few cases, clients have a question that is precise enough or a problem description that they would like to solve. That is also the benefit of not having a structured pitch process where you only get a request for a proposal because then the problem description is given. The process typically does not allow you to refine the question. And in many cases you do not have enough, exchange with the potential client to debate what the question is. And the result is that several consulting firms will come back with a proposal. Some will stay close to the question. Others will be, a bit more creative. And I do nor think that that is the best way to organize. So from a consultant's point of view, you do not like, completely structured processes. From a client point of view, you could have the conviction that you know exactly what you want and that they should just, make a proposal, which is, which is a transactional way of dealing with it, which is not necessarily what I would recommend, but it starts with a problem description, and a very clear understanding of the starting position of the, you know, problem to solve of the aspired end products so that the consultant is in a position to make a tailored proposal, not a cookie cutter. That is the next one you do not want to have a solution that

searches for a problem. You want to have, you know, a tailored solution that is built on institutional experience and the involved consultant's experience. And then I think you want to have a very collaborative working approach. So it is not the consultants sitting somewhere in the ivory tower, but, co-creation. Which typically starts with a joint diagnosis, and facts and figures based. And then you want to provide sufficient, space for the consultant to work on the problem and to be unbiased because that is the next issue is a lot of consultants will have a preconception of what the answer is. And in my humble opinion, it's not the job of a consultant to reconfirm what they thought anyway but to provide an independent perspective. And that means that the consultant, you know, you need to have some independent characters, and you want to avoid a certain commercial pressure that, could lead to behavior that is very pleasing but is not providing, you know, the best answer to the problem you have. And then finally, jointly with the project team, come to a solution of the problem and to an execution plan, a detailed execution plan that also allows you to implement, the solution to the problem, and in an ideal world, the consultant is involved in the execution or at least provides some guidance and check-ins on the way of implementation. That is to me, the the perfect consultant project. If you have a long-term relationship, your consultant has not only a deep industry understanding, but also a deep understanding of the organization, because that allows you to take into consideration not only what is technically the best solution, but also to understand who are the acting individuals, what are the political, pitfalls. And, you know what is actually really executable, because otherwise, you run the risk that you produce some paper that nobody is, necessarily implementing yet.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *And how would you describe your relationship with your clients?*

Interviewee 4: I think in the ideal world, it's a trust-based relationship. In particular, if you do top management consulting, I think you need to have a personal, you know, you need to have an I always call that a professional friendship. It is not not a private friendship, but it is more

than just a technical commercial, exercise. It is a trust-based relationship with the decision maker and his team, which allows to have, you know, the required level of openness about the problem, about the political situation, about the different motivations, because there is typically there is trade-offs and challenges. And, but it is not a close friendship. It is not like, oh, we we go on vacation together, but it is also more than just, a quarterly meeting and office.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *And do you have the feeling that this, that the type of relationship is changing over time?*

Interviewee 4: You mean in general or like compared to ten years ago?

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Compared to ten years ago.*

Interviewee 4: Yeah, I think there is. I'm not sure. I think the individual relationships that I have built over the years and that's also something, a lot of those relationships have to grow over a longer period. Many of these relationships need time to develop. I think my relationships with executives are as strong now as they were ten years ago. What has changed, however, is that consulting has, in many respects, become more of a commodity. It is relatively accessible, with a wide range of providers. The major consulting firms have grown significantly, with many consultants, partners, and experts. Companies are now much more skilled and sophisticated in sourcing and managing consulting services. And let is not forget that consulting firms have produced hundreds of thousands, even millions, of alumni, many of whom are now clients or hold roles such as chief of staff, head of strategy, or procurement functions. So, the whole field has become somewhat commoditized. However, in my view, this also leads to the misconception that consulting is merely a commodity service. In reality, if you provide a clear description and test for certain technical skills, you may assume you're buying a commodity—but that is not the case.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Okay. Thank you. And in your experience what contribution or requirements from the client are necessary to ensure the success of a consulting project?*

Interviewee 4: I think that is what I try to explain. I think part of that is a description of the problem, but also the openness to discuss whether that is an accurate description and whether that is really the description or only the phenomenon, not the underlying root cause. Secondly, besides the financial means to afford a proper consultant, it is also the time investment not only of a project team but also of, you know, the executives. I think it needs to be a priority. Also, the project teams will recognize whether it is a priority or not. And the willingness to accept facts and figures and, to collaborate. Yeah. I think is, you will not avoid that. A project is just reconfirming what people expected. Anyway. Do you want to avoid that? This is a fig leaf exercise for decisions that already have been taken. And therefore you need to have an open approach and experience on how to use consultants on the client side.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *And how do you measure whether a consulting project was successful or not?*

Interviewee 4: Ask the client. Yeah, that is the first question. So, you know, and it is also pretty common nowadays that you have satisfaction-based fees or that you have a certain indicator. So in an ideal world, you would have, you know, check-ins during the course of the project and after the project with all the respective, you know, with all the involved clients and you collect the feedback. I think that is the one thing. Do they believe that the problem was solved and the right problem was solved and that, you know, the level of concreteness, granularity, execution plans, etc? And then the other one is I think most projects can also translate into expectations, aspirations, and KPIs. And you know, that is why I said earlier, you would love to stay close and you would love to be involved during the implementation because that also shows you whether it really creates impact and whether it is successful. And I think it is an important reference loop also for the consultants to improve their own performance.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Okay. Thank you. We have already talked a little bit about change, but have you seen other significant changes in consulting that impact project success?*

Interviewee 4: I think in general, the industry and functional expertise of the consultants have massively improved over the years. I think also technical expertise. And if you look at MBB, the big ones are able to provide a one-stop shop service. I think all of that definitely has improved. Consulting has moved from diagnostic and strategy development to or at least consultants trying to become impact partners, which is a different role. So they would also be involved during implementation or at least partially, they would be incentivized through performance-based arrangements, to not only think about delivering the agreed end product but also to ensure that you have a true impact. And, yeah, it also has become a much more global and digitized service. So I think the degree of sophistication that you can get today is significantly higher. But on the other hand, the clients are also, better equipped, much more experienced, and also have significantly higher expectations than they had ten, 15, or 20 years ago.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *And how have these changes influenced your approach as a partner?*

Interviewee 4: I think, in all the ways we discussed before, it is. You have a broad range of topics to work on, access to a wide range of experts to consult, and technical resources that are vastly different from what we had 20 or even 30 years ago when I first started. So, but it also has changed a bit. I think the service offering that we had, you know, more from a strategy consultant to an impact partner and to also an execution partner. A lot of what we do today or what I've done until recently, we wouldn't have been able to do 20 years ago.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Okay. What do you see as the primary responsibilities of a partner in ensuring the success of a consulting project?*

Interviewee 4: Well, I think it depends a bit on the company structure that you have, but I think if, you know, I think if you are the responsible partner, you have to ensure that the project is set up in the right way. You have to do typically the financial negotiations, which also means that you have the resources or you can afford the resources that are required to deliver what is asked

for. You have to ensure that the team and the experts and the whole, you know, back office function is working and that you can execute the project plan while everybody knows that you will never execute exactly the project plan, you will always adapt throughout the course of doing it. And then you have to deliver the end products and you ideally ensure that, and the work also leads to impact, that is, gets executed and works.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Okay, thank you very much. I would now like to move on to gender differences. In your opinion, are there any gender-related factors to the partner that particularly contribute to or hinder the success of the project? Like for example, does it matter if you as a male partner have a female, client or the other way around?*

Interviewee 4: I am a bit, a bit surprised, Elena because I would have expected from your generation that you would have much more than just men or women. Yeah. And I think that it would be about diversity. And I think my first argument would be that if you have a more diverse team, you will get a better result. And that's independent of whether that is men or women. But it is also as an ethnicity it is experience background, it is age, it's industry expertise versus your brain power. So you want to have if you just have, you know, if you just have experts for the topic and the industry and they are all middle-aged white men, you will not get the same result as if you have a more diverse. So it's not about diversity as such, but you want to have a broader range of, backgrounds, expertise, experience, and knowledge. And you want to foster an environment that is properly, I think it is called meritocracy. The best argument wins. And in that sense, of course, you also want to have a proper blend between male and female. And I think the big consulting firms have made big progress on that one because they realized that and also pushed to get more consultants in or more male in particular, more female consultants in while I think you see that you almost have parity, at the recruiting stage, but you have a clear disparity when it comes to partner level. So I think nowadays maybe it is 30% or whatever. I think I am sure there is some data on that. But so it improved from 15% to 35%

maybe. You do not have a 50 over 50, parity or balance on partner level and definitely not on senior partner level, but that is driven by many reasons. We are not talking about, family plans and whatever. But of course, as long as women get the babies, it will be difficult to get full parity, but, so now the problem is really about stereotypes. And, I think the perception and I need to want to be careful in how I phrase that, the perception is that, women are, you know, more problems for problem-focused, less ego focused, that they are a bit more integrating versus, you know, going for conflicts, which could also then be a disadvantage, that you must have a better team atmosphere, blah blah blah. So it is very hard to say, is that a proper attribution? And I could show you a lot of women that are more alpha male than most men and the other way around.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Very interesting. And, for example, considering networks: some interview partners prior mentioned that there are “old boy” networks where it is more difficult for women to enter. On the other hand, women also have close networks within consulting firms where they support and push each other. Do you think these different network dynamics could also have an impact?*

Interviewee 4: Well, I could relate to that. I think it depends on the industry. If most of the decision-makers are male, then you could argue that male consultants have a competitive advantage. On the other hand, there are a lot of CEOs who like to work with a female senior partner. I think it is in my view, that is all to stereotype. And you would need to get into some proper research.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you. You have just mentioned the perception of women, and perhaps certain stereotypes. Have you observed any shifts over time in how clients perceive female consulting partners?*

Interviewee 4: I think it is much more common today. And I think it also depends on the industry. So in my industry, it was quite common to have, a balance, if not more women than

men. Because fashion is interesting and attractive for female consultants. On the other hand, if you look at the client side, most boards are male-dominated, even in the fashion industry. And, I am not sure, I think things have definitely changed because you have a higher share of female consultants and partners, high performing, and of course, the consulting firms have made big efforts to get more female partners elected and into decision-making positions.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you very much!*

Transkript V

Interviewee 5	Partner, Sweden, male
Date	conducted on October 28th, 2024

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you very much and welcome. My first question is about your professional background. How long have you been a partner, and in which industries or sectors have you primarily worked?*

Interviewee 5: Well, I have been a partner for three years. I have been with the company for 11 years, mostly working within the consumer sector.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *In your experience, what are the most critical factors for a consulting project to succeed, and why do you consider these factors important?*

Interviewee 5: We may give a somewhat generic answer, but of course: The IT project needs to be well-defined and well-scoped, with clear objectives aligned between the consultants and the client. Objectives should be similar, and close collaboration is essential. I think it's important that both sides bring the right capabilities, skills, and expertise to the table.

In terms of collaboration, it is crucial to have the right interaction setup, with frequent and effective communication. Real cooperation is usually where the best projects thrive. Perhaps the more interesting answer is related to Gem's question.

I think it is difficult to say definitively, but based on the projects I have worked on, it is hard to conclude that mixed-gender teams are always better than non-mixed teams, as the outcomes vary. However, I have seen internal research where we looked at hard metrics—like project extensions, time until the next project with the client, or client feedback scores—and compared these metrics with team gender mix. The findings actually showed that mixed teams performed statistically significantly better.

The improvement with gender diversity in teams was evident, with better scores on these hard metrics. This suggests that diversity is important, particularly for team performance.

It is a broad question, but a good atmosphere, clear leadership from the partners, and strong experience in high-performing project managers are all key. There are many factors at play, so it is challenging to answer without sounding too generic.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *How would you describe your clients' relationships? And how important do you think is this relationship with the client for the project success?*

Interviewee 5: I think it is very important. It is much easier to ensure a project's success when there is a strong relationship. Trust is based on working together before the client fully trusts you to deliver high-quality work. With trust, there is less stress—it becomes less about impressing the client and more about focusing on the impact rather than the details.

The nature of the relationship varies a lot. Sometimes it is a completely new client you have never worked with and do not know well, while other times it is a client you've worked with several times over many years, and you know them very well. Sometimes the relationship is quite transactional; other times, it is very good and informal, which is ideal but not always possible. A strong relationship is always better.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *In terms of changing dynamics, would you say that the client relationship has evolved over time? For example, is it more transactional nowadays, whereas a few years ago, it felt more interpersonal and important?*

Interviewee 5: I think I have not been around long enough to give a personal perspective on this, but I do hear things and pick up on trends.

Some clients have told me that, in a sense, the relationship has become more mature and transactional, which they view as a positive development. Consulting firms now compete more against each other, and there is more shifting between firms instead of sticking with one firm in a relationship-driven way. I also hear that some clients prefer to have the flexibility to choose between different providers.

Some clients like to negotiate and prefer shifting between firms to ensure they get the best results, which drives competition. I understand that this dynamic tends to fluctuate.

For instance, our company might hold a strong position with a client for four or five years, but then leadership changes, and perhaps people become tired of our company. They might shift to another company or make the relationship more competitive by alternating between firms. So, individual clients can indeed shift in these ways over time.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *What would you say are the biggest concerns clients have before selecting the consulting firm they want to work with?*

Interviewee 5: They want to ensure that the consulting team truly understands their objectives and brings the right approach, along with unique skills and expertise that the client may not have internally. It is important for the consulting team to offer distinctive capabilities and insights that add genuine value.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you. In your experience, what contributions or requirements from the client are essential to ensure the success of a consulting project?*

Interviewee 5: Clarity on scope and objectives is crucial; clients need to know what they want to achieve and be ready to share insights and information. This includes allowing consultants access for interviews and data gathering within a reasonable timeframe.

It is also important for clients to stay engaged throughout the process and be open to adjusting course as needed. I find that a flexible approach is more effective than a rigid checklist. Instead of simply ticking off a list of tasks, it is better to focus on aligning objectives and then directing resources toward the areas with the most potential for impact. This approach ensures that we are working on what truly matters, rather than just completing predefined tasks.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *And how do you determine if a consulting project was successful?*

Interviewee 5: It is quite challenging to measure success precisely, but we do have several approaches. First, we send feedback surveys to clients, allowing them to rate various

dimensions of the project. Informally, we also stay in contact with clients to hear their impressions and gauge their satisfaction. In some cases, though not always, we can track the client's results to see if there is a clear impact on their business—especially in longer implementation or transformation projects. Occasionally, we also work with performance-based arrangements, where our fees are tied to specific KPIs, which offers a built-in measure of success.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *What significant changes have you observed in consulting that impact project success?*

Interviewee 5: In terms of changes in consulting and client relationships, I have observed that clients are much more advanced now than in the past. They have greater access to tools and information, which raises the bar for consultants to add real value. For instance, where it might have once been enough to provide data on a competitor's revenue trends, today's clients expect much deeper insights and impact. There is also been a shift from pure strategy consulting to more operational projects. Now, consulting teams often include not only business strategists but also data scientists, programmers, and designers, allowing for a broader range of capabilities and solutions.

These changes have influenced my approach as a partner. Consulting now requires more innovation, bringing in various specialized capabilities to meet clients' needs. As a partner, I find myself acting more as an orchestrator, ensuring all the necessary expertise is assembled to provide comprehensive solutions, rather than just focusing on traditional strategy work.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you very much for the information so far. I would now like to move on to the gender-related section. In your opinion, are there any gender-related factors at the partner level that particularly contribute to or hinder the success of a project? For example, does it make a difference if the client is female, or vice versa—if the partner is female and the client is male? Do you think this dynamic could impact the success of a project?*

Interviewee 5: Not in isolation, no—I do not think so. There is nothing specific I would have identified. But I do think there is value in diversity, as it brings a broader set of perspectives to the team. I also believe clients value diversity. If a team is made up of five men, for instance, some clients might view that negatively.

In terms of individual partners, I would not say there is a direct difference. However, I think a strong male bias on a team can be harmful to the impact of a project.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Some previous interview partners mentioned that while they do not see specific factors that directly hinder or contribute to project success, the “old boys’ network” can sometimes make it harder for women. Do you share this opinion, or do you have a different perspective?*

Interviewee 5: Yes, I share that opinion. However, I think it is more of an internal issue. It can be harder for women to find success within consulting firms because they do not get as many senior sponsors. Men may have easier access to informal networking opportunities, like going out for drinks, which can lead to more sponsorship. Internally, there are still many factors that make it harder for women to succeed, though this does not necessarily impact individual projects.

In some cases, clients may be more challenging if they have a very male-dominated culture, but I have not personally observed a situation where a male bias at the client level has significantly impacted project success. Overall, I think this issue is more about internal networking, where it might be easier for men to connect and get sponsored.

However, it is important to separate success within consulting projects from success in a consulting career. Those are two very different things. In terms of projects, I do not see significant gender-based differences. However, when it comes to career progression, there are substantial barriers for women.

Networking and sponsorship are one factor, but another is family responsibilities, including maternity leave. It is interesting to note that even in Sweden—a country known for its gender equality—there is a very low proportion of female partners at our company, much lower than average. This has been the case for a long time. My hypothesis is that the family culture in Sweden makes it more difficult for women to advance. In countries like the U.S. or the U.K., career-oriented women might take only a couple of months off for maternity leave and then return to work, whereas in Sweden, there is a societal expectation that women should take at least nine months to a year for maternity leave. Once children are born, it is less common to hire full-time help, making it harder for women to balance family with a demanding consulting career.

Taking a year off—especially if done multiple times—can make it challenging to re-enter at the same level. If you are working as a partner or junior partner and leave for an extended period, someone else may take your client relationships and responsibilities, and it is challenging to regain that ground upon returning. This issue is significant when considering why it is harder for women to build long-term careers in consulting, particularly at the partner level, rather than succeeding on individual projects.

To clarify: I believe that women have the same chances as men to be successful in consulting projects. Perhaps networking is sometimes harder for women, given that consulting is still male-dominated, but that primarily impacts career progression rather than project success. When it comes to winning projects, building client relationships, and establishing credibility, I think our society is now open-minded enough that gender plays less of a role—at least in the Nordics. In fact, some clients may even prefer female consultants. While this may not be true in every culture, I have not observed it to be an issue in my region.

The real challenge lies in building a successful consulting career while balancing family responsibilities. I know several talented female colleagues who could have become great

partners but found it difficult to return to the firm after having children. This is a very clear pattern.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *One last question on an interesting point you just mentioned: have you observed any shifts over time in how clients perceive female consulting partners?*

Interviewee 5: Not really. I think we have matured as a society over the last 10 years. People are generally more aware of biases and more mindful of treating women fairly and avoiding stereotypes. We are not fully there yet, but I think there has been significant improvement in the last decade.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you very much for answering all my questions. I really appreciate it. It was great meeting you—thank you again! Take care, and goodbye!*

Transkript VI

Interviewee 6	Senior Partner, Germany, male
Date	conducted on October 28th, 2024

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you very much and welcome. My first question is about your professional background. How long have you been a partner, and in which industries or sectors have you primarily worked?*

Interviewee 6: I have been a partner for eight years and a senior partner for the past two years, so six years as a partner and two years as a senior partner. I focus on two areas: one is consumer goods and retail, where I am a generalist. The second area is large organizational transformations, where I work across various industries.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *In your experience, what are the most critical factors for a consulting project to succeed, and why do you consider these factors important?*

Interviewee 6: OK, let me walk you through the value chain of a consulting project. I believe the very first element is developing a deep understanding of the client's context and the challenges or opportunities they face.

I like to over-invest in this stage: Where is the client coming from? What is the context of the organization? What are its capabilities? What's the starting point? I go pretty deep, having a lot of conversations to really understand the culture and everything surrounding the problem—really getting to the heart of the issue.

This phase is all about going really deep. You could call it the diagnostic and context phase, beginning from the first conversation, and much of this happens before the project officially starts. Typically, you would meet with a C-level executive five to ten times, conduct workshops, and so on to gain this understanding. Only if the client feels that you've truly invested in this understanding do they often grant access to the next stage.

The next phase is the actual project, where you design a solution to the problem at hand. The solution must be world-class. It needs to be distinctive, bespoke, data-driven, and substantiated,

coming from all angles of the issue. The solution must also be feasible—no "ivory tower" problem-solving, but something actionable that really digs deep into whether it can be implemented and realized.

The third element is making it happen—implementing the project and delivering results. Often, this involves transitioning from strategy consulting to handing the project back to the organization. These days, we rarely leave after the design phase, but we also do not always stay until the very end. Sometimes, implementation takes one to two years, typically led by the organization while we stay on as a sparring partner or thought partner.

In my view, being distinctive at each of these three steps is crucial to operating in the world-class space of management consulting.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *And how would you describe your relationship with the client?*

Interviewee 6: I am very close, very close. I mean, it sometimes depends on the personality of the client, but I have many clients who have become close friends. If you go through these three steps, you spend a lot of time together. In the most intense phases of the project, they sometimes spend more time with us than with their families.

[Interruption due to a call]

Interviewee 6: So, I think we were talking about the relationship between consultant and client, right?

Yes. I think, in a good way, it often moves towards friendship. Some clients do not want that—their personality structure is different, and they prefer to keep it very professional. But in many cases, if you go through the three steps I mentioned, you develop a pretty close relationship.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *And would you say that the relationship with the clients have changed over time? How do partners approach relationships nowadays compared to, I do not know, five to ten years ago?*

Interviewee 6: Yeah, I think it is less formal now. I mean, everything has become less formal, right? People wear sneakers to work and are sometimes on a first-name basis.

So, I think the relationship has become less formal once the project starts. However, before the project begins, it has probably become more formal because you go through the professional procurement organization. There is now a standardized process to source consulting projects, whereas in the past, it was more like you knew the person, and then you would just start working together. It is more formal in some companies.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you. In your experience, what contributions or requirements from the client are necessary to ensure a consulting project's success?*

Interviewee 6: It is essential for the client to be closely involved. The days when a consulting team could sit in isolation and work on a project are long gone. What is needed now is the client's time, commitment, and willingness to engage with bold decisions. Consulting projects are most valuable when they drive significant change rather than minor optimizations. If it is only a small adjustment, the return on investment for consulting may not justify the effort.

Also, openness and a readiness are needed to make impactful decisions crucial. Sometimes, this requires organizational or personnel changes, and clients need to be prepared for that. In my view, this willingness to embrace bold, value-creating change is the most important factor.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *How do you evaluate the success of a consulting project?*

Interviewee 6: In the proposal letter, we typically outline a joint understanding of the objectives, which can be either quantitative or qualitative. Quantitative objectives might include metrics like revenue growth, profitability, or market share, while qualitative objectives are often more capability-driven, such as implementing a more effective organizational model.

We then track these outcomes by staying in touch with the client, even a year after the project's completion, to check in on progress and see if the expected results are materializing. If they are

not, we open a discussion on how we can support further to ensure the desired impact is achieved.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *What significant changes have you seen in consulting that impact the success of projects?*

Interviewee 6: One significant change is the increasing importance of data and analytics. With data now widely available, leveraging it for better insights has become crucial. AI plays a role here, helping to automate tasks that aren't particularly value-adding, such as simple analyses or gathering insights. This allows consultants to focus more on strategically important dimensions of the project.

Another major shift is the evolving preferences of the newer generation in consulting, particularly Generation Z. Unlike previous generations, they often prioritize purpose, work-life balance, and flexibility over financial rewards alone. Consulting used to operate on a rigid model—on-site with the client at 8:00 am on Monday, staying through Thursday night or even Friday. Now, we are adapting to a more flexible approach. For example, a younger colleague recently asked to work from home on Monday mornings and join the client site in the afternoon. We discussed this with the client and made it work, enabling him to stay engaged and productive. This kind of flexibility is increasingly essential to attract and retain talent in today's consulting landscape.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you. You mentioned that the newer generation values things like purpose. When you start a new project, how would you say this influences your approach?*

Interviewee 6: A lot of younger consultants now ask about the larger meaning behind a project and the client's purpose. For example, I recently had a team member turn down a project because he was not convinced the client had a strong purpose, even though, to me, it was quite clear. At our firm, consultants have the freedom to decline projects, so we had an open conversation about the client's mission and impact. Though he ultimately decided not to join,

it showed me how important purpose has become for the newer generation. These conversations are becoming more common, and I have found it valuable to address purpose upfront when introducing a project.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *What do you see as the primary responsibilities of a partner in ensuring the success of a consulting project?*

Interviewee 6: I think it is about leadership across all three key dimensions. First, the partner needs to lead the effort in truly understanding the client, spending significant time diagnosing their needs. The partner should also lead on big content ideas. While the project manager handles the problem-solving process, the partner, along with the team, adds a layer of “magic” by drawing on their industry knowledge, competitor insights, and market trends to create a distinctive solution.

Additionally, the partner is responsible for ensuring the project’s impact. Throughout the engagement, they need to check in with the client, conducting “10,000-foot checks” to assess whether the project is on track and achieving its goals.

Lastly, the partner manages the team, fostering a cohesive environment, addressing any concerns, and removing roadblocks that may arise. Challenges often land on the partner’s desk, and it is their role to ensure obstacles are cleared so the team can move forward effectively.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you. You mentioned team success and leadership—what would you say are the most important factors for achieving team success?*

Interviewee 6: I think the key to team success lies in complementary skills. Different work streams often have unique requirements—one might be highly analytical, while another is more qualitative and client-facing. Ensuring that team members have the skills that match these diverse needs is crucial.

Secondly, camaraderie plays a huge role. Consulting projects can be intense, often involving six to eight weeks of focused effort, and working through that together fosters a strong team

spirit. Ideally, team members get along well, and I have rarely seen significant conflicts arise because everyone's committed to a shared goal.

Finally, it is essential to leave the ego at home. With such high-performing individuals, it is easy for competitiveness to creep in, but success requires focusing on the work, not individual accolades. I remember a moment when two associates were comparing achievements—a jet pilot and a black belt—until I had to step in and say, “Let’s get back to the task.” Maintaining a focus on the team effort over individual ego is vital for a cohesive, productive team.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *In your opinion, are there any gender-related factors at the partner level that particularly contribute to or hinder the success of a project? Could you also speak to how this might apply across the three different stages of the value chain?*

Interviewee 6: Do you mean at the partner level specifically, or are you also referring to potential gender-related factors at the team level?

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *At the partner level, are there any gender-related factors that particularly contribute to or hinder the success of a project? Could you also address how these factors might play out across the different stages of the value chain?*

Interviewee 6: I have not observed any differences in outcomes, to be fair. I have worked with both female and male partners, and in each group, there are standout individuals as well as those who are solid but more typical performers.

I am curious about this as well. Beyond some stereotypical traits—like whether women might listen more—I am not sure there is a clear distinction at the partner level. At the team level, I do believe there is value in diverse teams versus single-gender teams, which can impact dynamics. But at the partner level, I have not observed significant content or approach differences. I have worked with men and women who had similar traits: some who could not listen, some who were too rushed, and others who were truly distinctive. So, no, I would not say there is anything systematic in terms of gender-based differences.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Does it make a difference for you if your client is female rather than male?*

Interviewee 6: Not really. I was just considering whether there might be a difference if you have a female partner with a male client—such as whether they are more or less respectful of each other. But no, I do not think so. Even going back to when I started in 2006, I have not observed these typical stereotypes, like a man listening less to a woman. The kind of dynamics you see in shows like *Mad Men* do not reflect what I have experienced in real life.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Some of my previous interviewees mentioned a “men’s network” within consulting firms, noting that it can sometimes be more challenging for women to be part of it. Have you experienced anything similar?*

Interviewee 6: No, I have not experienced that, and I am not even sure such a “men’s network” exists. In my experience, the women’s network is incredibly strong. For instance, there is a Women’s Day at the firm where female colleagues come together. In a male-majority company, minority networks can be very powerful—they genuinely support and help each other.

Personally, I do not have a network of just male colleagues; my network consists of both male and female friends, reflecting the firm’s gender balance. I have also never heard any male colleague speak in a way that suggests they would sponsor women less than men. If anything, there is a conscious effort to support women more to increase their representation at the firm. Just out of curiosity, was it women who mentioned the existence of a “men’s network,” or did men bring it up?

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *And it was actually men who said that. Yeah, yeah.*

Interviewee 6: Yes, many clients today will say they will only hire us if there are female consultants and partners on the team. The reasoning is clear: half the population is female, and having a diverse team ensures we understand and represent that perspective. For instance, when I work on consumer projects, it is essential to have both men and women on the team. Without

that balance, we risk missing out on a deep understanding of half the population, which can limit the quality of our work.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *And at the partner level, have you experienced any issues related to this?*

Interviewee 6: No, it is all good. For example, if I am a male senior partner working with a male partner, I would still want a balanced team with female representation, and vice versa. I have not observed any challenges with clients being concerned about a female partner. In fact, I think there is a growing acceptance and even expectation for diverse teams.

Transkript VII

Interviewee 7	Partner, Spain, female
Date	conducted on October 31th, 2024

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you very much and welcome. My first question is about your professional background. How long have you been a partner, and in which industries or sectors have you primarily worked?*

Interviewee 7: I am since 3 years a partner and I work primarily in the chemical and the consumer goods industry.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *In your experience, what are the most critical factors for a consulting project to succeed, and why do you consider these factors important?*

Interviewee 7: One of the most critical factors is clear alignment in terms of scope and expectations. What do I mean by this? It is important to know whether the project is competitive—that is, if the client is considering multiple consultancies or just one.

A project brief is typically not extremely specific initially, so you need further discussions with the potential client to fully understand what they are looking for and what would make the project successful for them. Establishing very clear alignment on content, scope, and deliverables is likely the most important factor, even before the project officially starts.

Another important aspect is the way of working. I strongly believe that, while we can do a lot virtually or in a hybrid model, there is great value in meeting in person. Being able to clarify topics face-to-face is often much easier than trying to communicate remotely. Spending sufficient time together in person can help foster a strong working relationship, making the team feel unified rather than separated into “client” and “consultant” roles.

The final aspect is bringing together a team with open-minded and diverse perspectives. This diversity can be in terms of gender, professional background, or other attributes. For example, if you have three people who all studied business administration at the same university, you are not likely to have a wide range of opinions. A diverse set of perspectives is essential for success.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Ok, thank you. In your experience, what contributions or requirements from the client are necessary to ensure the success of a consulting project?*

Interviewee 7: Some elements are always important, in my view. First, the organization needs to see it as their project, not just a consulting project. It truly has to be their project, with the consultant serving to enable, accelerate, or support it. This mindset shift is crucial—they need to want the change, the improvement.

Otherwise, you often encounter the “not invented here” syndrome. People do not accept solutions or proposals because it was not their idea. They do not identify with the project, the problem statement, or the work itself. This leads to the question: are you working as one team with the client, or is it a closed environment where the consultant does the work and simply presents it to the client?

Both the mindset and teamwork are critical. It needs to feel like the client’s project, and ideally, you have an integrated team. You do not always need dedicated resources, but you do need sufficient time from supporting roles and management commitment. If the management who initiated the project does not spend time on it—apart from attending steering committee meetings—it is unlikely to succeed.

Management also needs to signal to their organization that this project is important, extending beyond the engagement with the consultant. There is a saying that we consultants leave when the hard work begins. But if the organization never picks up that hard work because the solution is only on paper, you will never achieve buy-in.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *How do you determine if a consulting project was successful?*

Interviewee 7: I think client relationship plays a role in how we measure project success, particularly through fostering an open feedback culture during the engagement. This allows us to gather insights throughout the process and check in at the end or even a bit later. As a partner, it is my responsibility to directly seek this feedback from clients.

At the firm level, we also have a structured and systematic approach to collecting feedback post-engagement, often through surveys. By combining these methods, we can assess both quantitative impact—such as cost savings or top-line growth—and qualitative feedback from those involved, giving a fuller picture of the project’s success.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *What significant changes have you observed in consulting that affect project success?*

Interviewee 7: I think the most significant change is the working model on both sides. Younger consultants now have different expectations around travel and work arrangements. While it used to be normal to be on-site with the client Monday through Thursday and in the home office on Fridays, newer consultants often prefer a more flexible schedule, such as traveling on Monday evening or Tuesday instead of Monday morning. This shift can sometimes impact project success since teams spend less time together in person, and there is reduced time with the client.

Interestingly, we are seeing similar trends with clients, who are adopting more flexible schedules. Many clients now work from home on Mondays and Fridays, and come into the office mid-week, which aligns with the consultants’ preferences and can minimize disruptions. On the positive side, technology like Zoom and Teams has significantly improved accessibility and efficiency. While I still value in-person collaboration, these tools make it possible to conduct effective meetings without needing to travel for one-day sessions. They are especially helpful when bringing together global expertise; rather than flying in an expert from Asia or the U.S. to Europe, we can connect virtually, allowing us to gather the best knowledge and insights more efficiently.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you. How have these changes influenced your approach as a partner in terms of ensuring project success?*

Interviewee 7: The most recent changes have likely made things more flexible for me. Previously, depending on where you were in the world, certain meetings might have been out of reach. Now, it is much easier to manage multiple commitments across time zones; for example, I can connect with a client in India while based in Europe within the same week. Additionally, I now spend more time working from home, which has shifted how I approach collaboration. Although in-person time remains valuable, the ability to stay connected remotely has expanded my options in balancing client and team interactions. Those are probably the two main adjustments that have influenced my approach as a partner.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you very much. Now, let's move on to the topic of gender. In your opinion, are there any gender-related factors at the partner level that particularly contribute to or hinder project success? For instance, do you think it makes a difference if the client is male and the partner is female, or vice versa? Does this impact project success, or does it not really matter?*

Interviewee 7: I do not think this applies only to partners; it affects the broader team setting as well. In general, a diverse team—especially one mixed in terms of gender—tends to have more success with clients. Diversity allows us to pick up on different things, understand various perspectives, and notice nuances that others might miss, and gender is part of that diversity, whether we acknowledge it or not.

At the partner level, there are still some old habits and social dynamics that can make it more challenging for women. For instance, classic networking at the bar with male clients can be less comfortable for women, and they often avoid these scenarios. I completely understand that, as it is not my preference either. In one-on-one situations, mixed-gender settings can sometimes feel less comfortable, making it a bit harder for female partners to build these relationships. This goes both ways, though senior female clients are still less common due to a historically male-dominated field.

Additionally, there is often an unconscious bias where, as the only woman in the room, a female partner may not be immediately assumed to hold the senior role. People may assume she is the consultant, while a male team member is mistaken for the partner. These biases do not directly hinder project success but highlight an area for growth as we work to change perceptions over time.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Would you say, for example, that the networking at the bar you mentioned earlier could be a factor that creates a disadvantage for female partners, particularly in terms of winning new projects?*

Interviewee 7: To a certain extent, yes, but it is not just about winning new projects; it's more about building relationships. While dinners can work for networking, if people go for drinks afterward, women tend not to participate, which can make relationship-building more challenging for female partners than for their male counterparts.

As for strategies to overcome gender-related barriers, I have always held to the principle that I do not want any special treatment for being female. I believe in applying the same evaluation standards across the board. Additionally, I make an effort to support female colleagues by staffing at least one woman on my teams whenever possible. This is not necessarily to make my own role easier, but rather to support others, allowing them to see successful female role models within the firm and recognize that it is achievable.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you. You mentioned unconscious biases earlier—have you observed any shifts over time in how clients perceive female consulting partners, particularly in terms of project success?*

Interviewee 7: It's interesting—there is significant respect for someone being a partner, regardless of gender. However, there may be a bit more surprise from clients when the partner is female rather than male, as they often expect it to be a man. But I have not seen anything indicating that gender affects project success directly.

With ongoing discussions about diversity and board quotas, I think clients have become more conscious of gender representation. Some clients now have diversity requirements for consulting team setups. They may not specifically request a female partner, but they expect at least one female team member to reflect their own organization's push for gender diversity. Ten years ago, no one asked about this, so it is a notable shift. In fact, if a client has this expectation and there is no female on the team, it could be a make-or-break factor for securing the engagement.

Transkript VIII

Interviewee 8	Partner, Spain, female
Date	conducted on October 31th, 2024

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *In your experience, what are the most critical factors for a consulting project to succeed, and why do you consider these factors important?*

Interviewee 8: Ok, so I would say: The most important factor, in my opinion, is to have full alignment with the client and all relevant stakeholders. This includes alignment on the project's goals, the detailed project plan, the activities, and who needs to be involved. Often, projects are less successful when there is misalignment among stakeholders, whether they are different stakeholders on the client's side, varying perceptions between the client and the consulting firm, or even internal misalignment within the consulting firm.

This misalignment can lead to tension and rework, which can be costly. So, for me, this would be the first priority.

The second priority is ensuring you have the necessary capabilities to deliver the project successfully. This means thinking ahead: What expertise is required? Which experts need to be involved? Are additional partners needed? What capabilities must the client have in place? It is crucial to consider these elements from the beginning and to secure them early on.

The third priority would be motivating the team. Generally, consulting firms have high-quality talent, and motivation is a key differentiating factor in effective execution. It is essential to keep the team aligned with the mission, ensuring not only that the project is done well but also that team members are growing and achieving their individual goals—both personal and professional. Keeping the team motivated is vital to sustaining this growth and ensuring project success.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *And how would you describe your relationship with your clients?*

Interviewee 8: So, I would say that commitment is crucial. And I would also consider, for example, whether the relationship with the client is one of the success factors you need, or if it is less relevant.

No, I mean, I think it's extremely important. I think it comes down to trust and commitment. It's about becoming a person who is trusted by the client, someone they know will always prioritize their impact or the company's impact above all, and will never overstep boundaries. I think this is essential, so they don't have to be unnecessarily involved in the day-to-day aspects of the project.

We do not typically operate with a micromanagement mindset, so if there is no trust, it is hard to work effectively. Also, as projects often shift slightly from the initial idea to final execution, new topics may arise that were not initially in scope but are very relevant.

The more the client opens up about what they want to achieve, the reasons behind it, and other elements to consider, the more successful the project is likely to be. Commitment means ensuring that they know you will deliver 100% on what you've promised. You are committed to their success, both as a company and as individuals, and you will find a way to make it happen.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *What significant changes have you observed in consulting that affect project success?*

Interviewee 8: Yes, I think the personal aspect of the client relationship remains a key differentiator, even with the rise of remote work. While 100% virtual work can't replace the depth of human relationships, remote work does make it easier to stay connected. Previously, you would have to travel to be present in person, but now technology allows you to be virtually available even across distances. It does not fully replace face-to-face discussions, but it certainly helps maintain a level of presence.

Another change is the diverse mix of profiles within consulting teams. Previously, consulting was primarily business-focused. Now, there is a broader range of expertise, including digital, analytics, and specialized hires, which aligns well with the evolving needs of companies in today's world. This diversity in skills helps us better address the real-world challenges our clients face.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *What do you see as the primary responsibilities of a partner in ensuring the success of a consulting project?*

Interviewee 8: The partner responsible for the engagement is ultimately accountable for the project's success. While many elements contribute to that success, the partner holds the final responsibility in all dimensions—financial outcomes, team well-being, and client satisfaction. If something is not working, it is up to the partner to find a solution and make necessary adjustments to ensure the project's success.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you. In your opinion, are there any gender-related factors at the partner level that particularly contribute to or hinder project success? For example, does it make a difference if the partner is male and the client is female, or vice versa? Do you believe that the gender dynamics between a male partner and a female client—or the reverse—play a role in project outcomes?*

Interviewee 8: I think it depends; I would not consider it a set rule. In the past, most leaders in companies were men, but today we see much more gender parity among clients, though there is still room for progress.

Personally, I have not noticed any major issues due to gender differences. There are some nuances, though—many conversations happen in social settings outside the office. It is important to find ways to be part of these conversations in a way that feels authentic. For example, while I would not go to a football game with a client, I could find another opportunity, like a business breakfast instead of a dinner.

Another factor is lifestyle and flexibility. For instance, I have priorities at home, and I want to ensure I dedicate time to them. This might mean adjusting my work hours to find a sustainable balance that works with my personal life. This isn't only about gender; it is also about individual personality and personal circumstances. Ultimately, each person—regardless of gender—needs to find a balance that works for them.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Thank you very much, that is very interesting. One last question—have you observed any shift over time in how clients perceive female consulting partners, particularly regarding project success? Do you think clients perceive female partners differently?*

Interviewee 8: No, I do not think there's a difference in terms of project success itself. However, part of a partner's role is to become a trusted advisor to executives, helping them shape their agenda and identifying opportunities that benefit both the client and their company. This relationship often goes beyond the specific project, and traditionally, building this level of trust has been more challenging for women.

Historically, there were more male executives and male partners, and relationship-building often followed a familiar, male-oriented pattern. Women partners have had to find their own ways of building these connections authentically, aligned with their personalities and unique approaches.

The mindset is shifting, but it still varies by company. Some clients are still very male-oriented at the executive level, which can mean that establishing a relationship takes longer, simply because they are not as accustomed to working with female partners. However, in companies where more women are in leadership, it can be easier to find common ground and establish trust more quickly.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *So would you say that female partners sometimes face challenges in building trustful relationships when the client is male?*

Interviewee 8: I think it is difficult to generalize. In my overall experience, it has probably been the case that female partners face additional challenges, but this could also be due to the fact that most of my colleagues and clients were male. Being among the first women in these roles may have contributed to this dynamic, but again, it's hard to make a blanket statement.

Transkript IX

Interviewee 9	Partner, Austria, female
Date	conducted on November 5th, 2024

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *So, how long have you been a partner, and in which industries or sectors have you primarily worked?*

Interviewee 9: Yes, I joined the company in 2011, and I was elected partner starting in 2019. I was officially elected in 2018 and began working in the partner role in 2019, primarily focused on consumer and retail.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *In your experience, what are the most critical factors for a consulting project's success, and why do you consider these factors important?*

Interviewee 9: That's a big question, but I would say the most critical factor is truly understanding what the client is looking for and tailoring the solution to fit their specific context. Cookie-cutter solutions, where the same approach is applied across multiple clients, usually do not work well. Instead, it is essential to grasp the client's unique situation—their questions, needs, and challenges—and adapt our solutions accordingly.

To achieve this, we need a strong consulting team with the right expertise, the appropriate level of seniority, and a good match with the client. This includes not only technical skills but also alignment in communication style and relationship-building, which can be enhanced if we have team members who have worked with the client before.

Additionally, a diverse team with varied backgrounds adds value, but it should still be carefully tailored to the client's needs. Alongside our team's expertise, we must bring the best knowledge, tools, and approaches at our disposal, ensuring we can offer well-informed insights. Establishing an effective way of working together is also crucial. The best solution will not help if we cannot communicate and collaborate effectively with the client. The worst outcome is when a well-designed solution is created but then shelved, with no action taken. So, it's essential

to make the solution implementable and meaningful for the client. Ultimately, it needs to be a joint collaboration, not something we develop in isolation.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *In your experience, what contributions or requirements from the client are necessary to ensure the success of a consulting project?*

Interviewee 9: In my opinion, the most successful projects are those where we truly work together. For example, I really value joint team rooms, where our team is integrated into the client's office, and the client's team members also sit alongside us. Even though things are more hybrid now, it is still essential to find ways to interact daily at different levels.

The key is for the project to feel like a joint effort, where the client also has a stake in the outcome and shares responsibility for achieving success. This means dedicating adequate resources—not just assigning a single project manager to check in occasionally, but involving people across the organization who are relevant to the project.

Additionally, openness is crucial. The more open and collaborative the client is, the better we can work together as a unified team.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *How would you describe your relationship with your clients?*

Interviewee 9: To be honest, my relationships with clients are built over time, which makes a big difference. In many cases, I have had the opportunity to work with the same organization repeatedly over a long period, and this familiarity really helps. It allows me to understand the organization's structure, navigate its unique environment, and anticipate potential challenges or pain points.

My goal is to establish trusted relationships where clients feel I am not just a commercial consultant pitching projects but someone genuinely interested in their company and invested in helping them succeed. I try to show this through open and honest communication—for example, advising against certain requests if I don't believe they're in the client's best interest. This builds trust and ensures that my approach is seen as supportive rather than purely commercial.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *How do you evaluate the success of a consulting project?*

Interviewee 9: There are different ways we measure project success. Often, we establish a specific target, such as identifying key levers to increase sales by a certain percentage, like 6%. This provides a clear, measurable objective, allowing us to quantify the levers and validate the approach with the client. This is perhaps the more straightforward part of evaluating success. Beyond that, we also assess client satisfaction with the project experience and the practicality of implementing our recommendations. To do this, we send surveys and questionnaires during and after the project, giving clients an opportunity to provide structured feedback. Additionally, as partners, we make it a priority to have personal conversations with clients, asking if they are satisfied or if there is anything they feel is missing—whether it is related to the project content or the working relationship.

We take this feedback very seriously, combining both quantifiable metrics and personal insights. Our goal is to build a long-term, trusted advisory relationship, so if any aspect did not go as well as expected, we are committed to understanding and addressing it.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *What major changes have you seen in consulting that affect project success?*

Interviewee 9: Since I started in 2011, a lot has changed in terms of tools and support within the firm. For example, we now have internal AI solutions that help with specific queries, and our graphics and video conferencing capabilities have become much more efficient. When I began, we only had basic conference calls with no video, which made it difficult to connect personally. The new technology and tools have brought us up to date with industry trends and allowed us to operate more effectively.

Regarding client relationships, it is a bit hard to pinpoint changes since my role has evolved significantly over time. However, one clear shift since the pandemic is our ability to build relationships in remote or hybrid settings. Previously, I felt that in-person meetings were

essential to establish a strong connection, and while I still believe they're invaluable for certain interactions, I have seen that effective relationships can now also be built through video conferencing. It's not always necessary to be on-site for every meeting, and video calls have transformed the way we maintain connections, providing a much better alternative than the older conference calls.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *What do you see as the primary responsibilities of a partner in ensuring the success of a consulting project?*

Interviewee 9: Good question. I see it as a broad and comprehensive responsibility that covers several areas. First, in terms of content creation, I feel it is my obligation to ensure that we develop the best possible solution for the client. This involves guiding the team through sessions to refine our approach and make sure we have truly found the optimal answer.

Additionally, a partner is responsible for the well-being of both the internal team and the client. We have discussed the importance of managing client relationships, but it is equally crucial to support our team. As partners, we have a dual mission: not only to serve our clients but also to develop our people. This means providing them with opportunities to grow, setting up projects where they can gain valuable experience, and ensuring they don't feel overwhelmed but rather feel supported and engaged.

I believe it is essential for each individual on the team to contribute, but as a partner, I want to oversee this process, ensuring there is a healthy balance and that everything is moving in the right direction.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *What do you think is important for team success?*

Interviewee 9: For team success, it is essential to have the right mix of roles and a team size that matches the project's scope. This includes having the necessary experts involved and setting up the team structure early on, with regular evaluations to ensure everything is aligned as the project evolves.

Additionally, setting up the team to work efficiently with the client is key. This means spending time with the team, being present, and working together on a regular basis. It is also important to be accessible and reachable, offering support whenever needed. For me, a successful team is one that has the right structure, clear communication, and a collaborative working environment.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Perfect, thank you. Now, I would like to move on to the topic of gender. In your opinion, are there any gender-related factors at the partner level that particularly contribute to or hinder the success of a project? For example, does it make a difference if the client is male or female, or the other way around?*

Interviewee 9: It is difficult to say it is just about gender. What I focus on is reviewing the stakeholders we have on the client side and considering who would be the best counterpart on our team to work with them effectively. Sometimes, it is not only about gender—it is more about matching personalities, expertise, and backgrounds.

In my experience, diverse teams on our side—with various genders and backgrounds—tend to perform better. I have found that bringing in a diverse team often results in a better match with client profiles and improves overall project success. So, while it is hard to say if it is purely about gender, I believe that diversity generally leads to better outcomes.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *At the partner level, would you ever decide not to take on a project because you feel you are not a good fit with the client?*

Interviewee 9: Well, it is not that I would say I'm not a good fit because I am a woman, but sometimes it is immediately apparent that another partner might be a better fit—perhaps due to a specific area of expertise, personality, or industry knowledge. In these cases, it is very natural to suggest that the other partner take on the project instead of me.

In our partnership, we aim to find the best fit for each situation, without competitiveness or pushing others aside. Instead, we prioritize who is best suited to lead. Sometimes, gender does

play a role; there are situations where clients specifically ask for a female partner, and in these cases, we may need to consider who on our team is the best match for the client and the project.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Ok, interesting. Have you observed that it's sometimes more challenging for you to build trustful relationships with a male client compared to a female client? Or have you found it more difficult to build trustful relationships with a male partner versus a female partner?*

Interviewee 9: No, I would not say it is more difficult. I have many male clients with whom I have built strong, trustful relationships over the years. However, I do think there are times when working with female clients can make it easier to connect on certain topics. For example, in industries where there are not many women, there is often an immediate sense of camaraderie when two women meet, creating an easier path to building a relationship.

In these situations, there is often a shared understanding that encourages connection and even a bit of informal networking, simply because there are not as many women in the field. So, while it is not that I find it difficult to relate to male clients, I do think that a woman-to-woman connection can sometimes open certain doors.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Would you say it is similar for men when working with other men—for instance, that they can bond over topics like beer and football, making it easier for them? Do you feel at any disadvantage in that regard, or would you say you have not noticed any of these dynamics?*

Interviewee 9: I actually discussed this recently with a group of female colleagues. Our conclusion was that while there may be certain situations—like bonding over football or having a drink—where it seems easier for male colleagues to connect, these are just stereotypes. In some ways, these dynamics may make it easier for them initially, but when it comes to addressing core issues or building deeper relationships, we do not feel at a disadvantage. In fact, we often find that clients are more open with us than they might be with a male counterpart.

So, while we might be perceived differently—perhaps not as much for football or after-work drinks—clients often value other aspects of our personalities, which can lead to different but equally strong connections. Ultimately, the relationship may look a bit different, but it is not any less valuable.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Ok, interesting—thank you. One last question: have you observed any changes over time in how clients perceive female consulting partners?*

Interviewee 9: I have only been a partner for the last five years, and I was on leave for some of that time. Even so, I have never experienced any disadvantages or situations where I felt excluded or not taken seriously as a female partner. It is always felt very professional.

One change I have noticed, which may not be the focus of your work, is a greater openness toward flexible working models. After returning from maternity leave and working part-time, I have observed that people are generally more accepting of different work arrangements. A few years back, it might have been more challenging to say, “I cannot join this afternoon,” or to work part-time without feeling like I was not fully available. This shift may be part of my own journey, but it also feels like there is a broader acceptance of these flexible models now.

Transkript X

Interviewee 10	Partner, Germany, female
Date	conducted on November 18th, 2024

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *How long have you been a partner, and in which industries or sectors have you primarily worked?*

Interviewee 10: Okay, I have been a partner for five and a half years. I am working in the automotive industry, in the building sector machinery, but also their broader basic and building materials. Yeah. Also sometimes with a focus on private equity. But that is depending a bit on the subject. But I would say classical B2B industrials.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *And in your experience what are the most critical factors for a consulting project to succeed? And why do you consider these factors as important?*

Interviewee 10: Okay. So let me start with the first one I think. Of course, still, expertise is important. And I think that is especially something that, still a top consultancy discriminates from like smaller boutique consultancies just sometimes because just the breadth and the depth of expertise that we at our company but also our competitors can bring to the play is much different than what others can do. So that is one fundamental belief plus also of course, especially for the larger clients. Like for example, when you look into the DAX clients in Germany there it is really important to bring top-notch expertise. This is what discriminates you also and what gives a clear value add of a consultant versus someone doing it internally. Secondly, I think expertise is increasingly tied to being rooted in technology, meaning whatever we do should not be only a nice solution on a nice sheet of paper anymore, but needs to be hardwired into the tech solutions of the client. So, for example, in my case, I'm doing a lot of growth work there. Of course, you must bring the approaches, and the solutions that you develop together with the client also into, for example, their CRM system into their pricing engines, or for example, their CPQ engine that they anyhow have, and so on. So that I think, is the second key success factor in getting increasingly now important over time. The third factor

I'm also a strong believer in is the whole people dimension, working with people for people. And over the last years, I have more and more sort of experience that having a true trust-based relationship with your client is the key game changer, not only because then of course, they're working with you because they fully trust you and they think, okay, you are the person that they can rely on. But also with regards to the quality of the solution that you get out of this. So, having the right relationship with the client, but also ensuring that you have the right people in your team, of course, is really important. On both sides, they should not only get along well but also complement each other effectively in terms of skill profiles. So diversity of the teams is also super important. Is something that I am a true believer in and, and see as very important to the overarching success. So these sorry. Go ahead.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *No, no. Please continue.*

Interviewee 10: These I would really see as the top three success factors. Of course, a fourth one is and that is hopefully linked to all three of them, I would call it a "bias to action". Yeah, because I think we still, as consultants, are sometimes in a trap where the client is considering something to be a classical consultant project that is linked to strategy. And it is good that we are doing a lot of very meaningful strategy work. But with that, of course, always the danger comes that when it then gets into execution things got either lost in translation or not executed at all or whatever. So, I see the tendency that we, as consultants, are more and more also involved in what we call impact partnerships or performance-based partnerships with our client, meaning that we really sit for two or three years in the same boat and try to just work on a topic or, for example, develop a business together. Yeah, or cut costs in a certain, division or resort or for example, working on the pricing levers that you have across, but doing that over the course of one to three years just to ensure that it really gets translated into action. And of course, then linking it to a joint performance target also helps because then both sides really do have

an incentive and the obligation to achieve this target. So that would be for me a bit the core factors, but happy to go deeper on some of them or if you have follow-up questions.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Perfect! Yes, thank you. You just mentioned that the right relationship is important with the client. How would you describe your relationships with the clients?*

Interviewee 10: Yeah, I think it really depends. I mean, some of my clients are really my friends. I mean, really close friends. Yeah, they are. I would say it is really a mutual trust on both sides. And it is clear that of course, you want to help the institution. You also want to help sort of the the project, slash the content that you're supporting, but on the same page you also want to help that person specifically. And I think it is a good mix because that makes it just easier to get along. That makes it easier to sort of really also have a straight talk about things, for example, that are important or that don't work that well. So really having this trustful relationship I think is important, and I think there are different areas of doing that. So as I said, some of my clients are really my friends. Other clients are just that I really trust them in a sense or we trust each other in the sense that we know that from a professional content perspective, we think in the same direction and that we believe that also the other's professionalism. Meets a certain standard and allows us to find common ground to collaborate based on shared values and a mutual understanding of what is right and wrong. Of course, and this should not be the case, but there are unfortunately, of course, also some relationships that tend to be a bit transactional and that we would love to change because some clients still are just sending RFP or asking you for, okay, here, dear consultants, please reply within two days or whatever and still are very yeah, they see it just as a service that to a certain way is commoditized slash replaceable. And that is, I think, a very dangerous trap because of course, you cannot really bring the best of you or the best of the firm to that situation if it's that tiny and that, let me say commoditized. It is like for example, yeah, a one-star restaurant, but you just would have

someone who would prefer to go to McDonald's because it is cheaper there. Then, of course, there is a certain mismatch that it's not easy to circumvent or to overcome.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Okay. Perfect! Thank you! And you also mentioned that the right people are important for you. What would you say is important for team success?*

Interviewee 10: I would say it is a mix of different skills and I'm always trying to add, and intrinsics to be honest, and I am always trying to set up the teams in a way that they are mixed with what they bring to the table. I think one is really you need a strong orchestrator, so someone who is really holding the strings together and doing that in a nice but very resilient and a bit pushy way, but, forming a strong team and sort of aligning everybody against the agenda and the deliverables, that is important. The second thing is also in a team, it is important that the right expertise is there. So whoever you bring to the team, of course, either has to play this orchestrator role and or of course, the more junior folks then have a clear work stream. So clear analytical tasks that they should fulfill. But then on a broader level, someone also needs to have this expertise that you can really pull from. And that is, yeah, broad and deep enough to actually come to a good solution in the whole project setup. And then last but not least, what I am also trying to do in many cases is to bring in something special. So I can give you an example, for one of my last client, a large automotive OEM, we are in a transformation of their retail setup. So they are going more direct and they're changing their go-to-market model. And there I just brought someone who had formerly worked in a creative agency. And yes, you could debate whether this is the classical profile that you want to bring to such a project setup. But it resonated quite well because this person was so creative and thinking about very new approaches to solving problems, that this really brought the sparkle to the team. And of course, then you have others who basically said, are managing the process or orchestrating it very well and so on. So it is really the question is how to best complement each other.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Okay. Interesting! Thank you! And in your experience, what contributions or requirements from the client are necessary to ensure the success of a consulting project?*

Interviewee 10: That is a pretty broad question. So with regards to team setup, I would first of all say what is always important, what we define together with the client is not only what our team thinks is needed to make this a success, but also, what is the client team that we think is needed? Normally we would like to act in tandem and we always say for every person on our side, ideally, we do have a client counterpart, so that when we leave someone can take it over and that this has continuity over a certain period of time. So client team is important. Then of course, what we also need from a client to make this a success is what we always call a "top-level mandate." So a strong client sponsor rather higher in the organization normally is helpful because with that you can ensure that you have in key board meetings or key decision committees always a seat on the table. And when it comes to important decisions, then of course a certain governance structure for the project. And so that we say, who is in this vehicle? When is this vehicle? How does it happen? How do we make decisions and so on and so forth? And that is normally an important prerequisite. And now getting a bit technical of course, honestly, also certain data from the client. Because without having a clear understanding of where do we stand? We do not come to good solutions. So that is important that we have also the chance and opportunity to understand a bit where the client really stands and what meaning, for example, in my case for M&A projects, often we are asking for transactional data from the past, from the last one year, two years, whatever the horizon is. To really sort of understand the situation and set this up in a meaningful way. Sometimes we also then go into contexts, of course, where we say from the client side, we would have the liberate, skill sets that we need, for example, analytic skills, data science skills, I don't know, IT skills, whatever that. We then also need to ensure that this is part of the project from rather early on. What else do we need? Yeah. Then it

depends, of course, really on the project setup. If you are going more into an M&A thing, then of course you need different things. But I would say for a standard project this is most probably it.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Okay. And how do you measure whether a consulting project was successful or not?*

Interviewee 10: That is a very good question. I think, as always, there are different dimensions of success, right? Of course, you could say the first question is whether your key sponsors, who have asked you for support are happy with the outcome. So satisfaction more or less did sort of the end product meet their expectations? Yes or no? But of course, this is a bit too simplistic and I would always have the prerequisite to my work that it goes far beyond that. And that means also having, of course, a significant economic contribution to the client and also going forward. And there we always tend to apply a certain rule, what we call fee to impact ratio. So we would assume that we really get a certain impact multiplier out of the projects that we are supporting depending on the size of the project. And we have some rules of thumb for that. So economic contribution but of course also I would call it contributions in the broader ecosystem, so either social contributions or environmental contributions. So for example, when we're working on sustainability projects, of course, this is a key pillar that we are sure to get this right. Also, impacts, the employees of the client. So what about culture? Company health? How are the employees feeling about the impact or the results of the joint work that we did? Is it also good for them? Does it help them? So I think it's just much more than just looking at is the client happy and do we meet economic numbers.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Okay. And as you say, you want to measure the impact of the economic contribution. How do you actually do that?*

Interviewee 10: That also depends on the project, because you can say that, for example, for a classical cost cutting, of course, you would look at the costs that you saved. For example, in my

case, I am working a lot on growth marketing and sales projects. We often look at the top line. So there we say, okay, how much is the sales volume uplift in which of the categories? Also, what is the margin uplift that we could achieve and therefore net maybe what is the resulting EBIT that we created out of the work that we did? Similar to when you, for example, look at business building projects, when you're going into new segments and trying to build up with the client, new businesses, then you would also look for example, at the EBIT number. So it really depends on the type of project which KPI you would take.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Okay. Perfect. And what significant changes have you observed in consulting that impact project success?*

Interviewee 10: So I think in general there is ... let me say a tendency to discriminate more between consulting projects. In the past we tend to say, okay, everything is solvable with a project lead plus two consultants in 12 weeks. So the classical standard consulting project, this is not the case anymore. So there are things that, as said before, where we really totally change the approach, work side by side with the client, and performance-based partnerships over one, two, three years. Also bring it into their tech solutions, really to hardwire the things that we're doing. And there are also things where we just say, let's do a strategy sprint in two weeks, very small but very senior team, very focused just on, some single questions that are at the surface and that we try to solve. So I think this shift towards there is no stereotype consulting project per se anymore. But there is a huge range of different types of support that we provide to our clients. It's really one of the key things that that has massively changed over the course of the last five, or 15 years.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *And also, for example, remote working. Does this, for example, also influence how you, manage your relationships with the client or your team?*

Interviewee 10: Yeah. Right. I think yes, of course. And I tend to forget about this because it already feels so natural and so much ingrained into what we are doing, but definitely, so I can

still remember my calendar, like, I do not know, seven years back or so when you had a classical week, you were at two or three different locations. You had like one or two hours meeting blockers for all those locations where you just met your core clients, and that was basically it. And then you had some phone calls in the evenings where you just have centered around some documents and you try to dial in with your iPhone or even BlackBerry at the beginning. And everybody was asking, did you get the pages? And now we are just connecting pretty flexibly via Zoom or Teams. Of course, this is a totally different dynamic. I think honestly, of course with regards to the speed of the collaboration and the diversity also from the client side, but also from our side that you can bring. Of course, this is helping slash benefiting it a lot. On the other hand, side, what I am sometimes a bit concerned about is let me call it the attention span. There is only a certain degree of multitasking that all of us can do, and trying to always multitask all the time and do all the things in parallel, just does not help. So sometimes you just have to focus on something that is really important. And my, experience is still that true relationships do not come out of Zoom calls. So you still need to or you still should go to dinner with that person, to lunch to meet them in in-person meetings to truly exchange. Because only then do you really get to know someone.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Okay. Very interesting. Now I would like to move on to the gender part. In your opinion, are there any gender-related factors to the partner that particularly contribute to or hinder the success of the project? For example, does it matter if the client is male and you are female, or vice versa? Or if the partner is male and both you and the client are female, do you think that plays a role?*

Interviewee 10: That is a tough question, honestly. So I would not say in general, I would rather say the individual matters, of course. So it's not that I do not know the majority of my clients are female or the majority of my clients are male just because they're male. No, definitely not. I would rather say it is still the question of which personality traits and also, of course,

moments in a career, whether there is a good fit. Yes or no. I know that some, sectors still have a bit of the reputation of it is not so easy to be there for females and so on and so forth. But I can only tell you, I mean, I am serving the automotive sector, I am serving the building sector, and I am serving machinery. So, there is, of course, a certain truth in it, but it's not impossible. So I would really say it depends on with whom you are really working and on the context and on the individuals much more than on, on gender these days. Yeah.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *And have you observed any shifts over time in how clients perceive female consulting partners?*

Interviewee 10: Honestly I think that clients never, at least in the last 15 years that I had the pleasure to observe it, really had a huge problem with that. I think it was also a bit, if I may say, that we on the consulting side did not really manage to set up sustainable operating models for females to be successful in consulting. And, this is different in some geographies. I can just pick one in Europe, France for example, where of course everything is very much centralized in Paris. Of course, it is much easier to set up a sustainable operating model for someone, for example, who is having three kids. And of course, still, it is unfortunate for the good and for the bad, the case that in most families, of course, the female part or the mother plays an important role in childcare or also elderly care, so in family per se. And of course, this is then when it is about working models where you have a bit of a more geographical split that you need to consider. This is getting tougher. So I think we are improving in consulting to sort of set us up sustainably and to make that happen. And with that, we can bring also more female senior leaders to our clients. And with that, the whole thing will change. But it is not that our clients were not ready for that.

Elena Gonzalo Saul: *Interesting. Thank you very much for your time!*