Full Length Research Paper

Strategy consultants doing strategy: How status and visibility affect strategizing

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Strategy consultants form a highly influential group of strategy practitioners, yet surprisingly neglected within strategy studies. Therefore, we aim to contribute our own understanding to the term, strategy consultants and discuss the characteristics of strategy work. We do this from the perspective of strategy-as-practice and direct our attention to the praxis and practices of strategy consultants. Our study builds upon extensive empirical material, including first hand observations of strategy consulting work being performed. Based upon results from a grounded theory analysis (early- and intermediate stages), we claim that strategy consulting work differs substantially depending on the roles that are constituted by the interaction and relation with the client. We suggest four metaphors to categorize these roles and discuss their characteristics and implications for strategizing activities.

Key words: Strategy, strategy-as-practice, strategy consultants, metaphors.

INTRODUCTION

Strategy-as-practice perspective has developed out of a growing discontent with much of current strategy research. The lost sight of human actors and their actions in strategy research have been acknowledged (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009). In order to understand human agency in the construction and enactment of strategy, it is necessary to re-focus research on the actions and interactions of strategy practitioners (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009). Strategy-as-practice approach has thus re-awakened the interest in who is actually doing the strategy, with an ambition to take seriously the work and talk of practitioners themselves (Whittington, 1996). These individuals, who are not always easily detected a priori, are the ones doing strategy, by initiating, formulating and realizing strategies within organizations. They bring with them their special skills, interests, ambitions and resources to do their strategy work. Within the research agenda of strategy-as-practice, three main themes of interest have been proposed: praxis, practices and practitioners (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Whittington, 2006). Strategy praxis is concerned with the actual activities involved in strategy work, such as planning, decision-making, presentations etcetera, performed either formally or informally. Strategy practices deal with the routines and norms of strategy work (Whittington, 2007) as well as the social, symbolical and material tools used to do strategy work (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009). It could be analytical techniques or technologies, as well as patterns of social activities, such as meetings (Jarzabkowski and Seidl, 2008) and strategy workshops (Hodkinson et al., 2006). Strategy practitioners are all actors, managers or non-managers, internal or external to the organizations, doing the strategy work.

In this paper, we direct our attention to strategy

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consultants as a special and influential group of strategy practitioners and to the work that these strategists do. In the S-A-P literature, strategy has been conceptualized as a 'situated, socially accomplished activity' (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). This definition is, however, so broad that it encompasses all social activity and in order to specify it we have adopted an inductive approach. We direct our attention to strategy consultants partly because they themselves claim to work with strategy, are recognized and highly paid to do so and generally represent an institutionalized group within the strategy profession. From a strategy-as-practice perspective, it is therefore interesting to have a closer look into who these practitioners are and what they do. Furthermore, strategy and management consultancy is a large and important financial industry, which has expanded significantly over the last three decades (Fincham and Clark, 2002; Jones, 2003; Ruef, 2002). It would be hard to find a 500 fortune company that does not rely heavily on some mix of outside professional services. From the board room to the shop floor in the plant, the footprints of the consultants are everywhere. As is indicated in the title of the paper, our focus lies on the subset of the management consulting industry referred to as strategy consulting. This is a segment of the industry that claims to assist its clients in 'strategic matters', a broad and allowing definition that includes several traditional strategic management issues such as strategic planning, growth, mergers and acquisitions, market positioning, competiveness, overall resource allocation, etcetera. Therefore, this group includes both individuals working in firms specializing on strategic advice, such as McKinsey and Co, Boston Consulting Group and Bain and Co, as well as individuals working in divisions focusing on strategic advice in firms that offer a broader range of management consulting services like Accenture, Deloitte and CapGemini.

Even though management and strategy consultants have been thoroughly studied during the last decade, their role as strategy workers has not yet received much attention within the mainstream strategy research field. Whittington (2007) claims for instance that Strategic Management Journal has not published one article on strategy consultants. A search in February 2011 revealed that not much has happened since then either. Jarzabkowski et al. (2007) write: 'While a nascent literature increasingly draws attention to external actors such as strategy consultants who are outside the formal structure of the firm but shape its strategy indirectly, there remains little empirical work on who those actors are and how their professional identities, relationships to, and engagement with the firm shape its strategy'. Even though the strategy-as-practice movement has explicitly drawn attention to the importance of extra-organizational actors such as consultants (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009; Whittington, 2006) as strategy practitioners, this has not yet made much impact on the strategy-as-practice literature. Empirical studies

that explicitly focus on extra-organizational actors are still remarkably few. Therefore, our ambition is to contribute, empirically and theoretically, in our understanding of how 'extra-organizational actors', that is, strategy consulting teams, work when doing strategy together with or for their client organization. We recognize strategy consultants as a significant group of strategists, potentially influential and often praised with high status, yet surprisingly neglected within strategy studies. We also claim that strategy consultants as a group of strategy practitioners differ substantially in terms of which roles they play, or are forced to play, in relationship to their client and that these roles are significant in shaping the type of strategizing activities the consultants will and are able to do with and for their clients. Our aim is therefore first to categorize different roles or positions that strategy consultants tend to end up in and discuss the dynamics of these positions. As we will se, these positions are not given by formal positions and relationships only and remain somewhat fluid and contested during a consultancy project. Secondly, we will describe and discuss the type of strategizing activities that the consultants may exercise in these different roles.

CONSULTANTS AS INFLUENTIAL STRATEGY WORKERS OR GLOSSY CHARLATANS

As mentioned above, the management consultancy industry has been the subject for several academic studies (Canato and Giangreco, 2011; Fincham and Clark, 2002; Kipping and Engwall, 2002; Sturdy et al., 2010). According to Fincham and Clark (2002) one reason for this is that: It tells us much about management itself. Consultancy is an externalized form of management – and, more than that there exists a parallelism between consultancy issues and central managerial structures and processes. The latter are often expressed in sharpened and stylized form within consultancy. A wide range of aspects have indeed been covered, such as the history of the industry, the reasons for its existence, the expansion of the industry, the concepts and management trends, dominant discourses, the relationship with clients, the management of knowledge and organizations, etc (Abrahamson, 1996; Anderson-Gough et al., 2000; Canbäck, 1998, 1999; Clark, 1995; Ernst and Kieser, 2002; Fincham, 1999; Greenwood et al., 1990; Kipping and Engwall, 2002; Ruef, 2002; Sturdy, 1997; Sturdy et al., 2010). A broad field of literature – sometimes referred to as func-tionalistic - assumes a certain level of rationality in the relationship between the consultants and their clients (Czerniawska, 2002; Kubr, 1996; Löwendahl, 1997). Why should smart CEOs hire consultants again and again if the value they bring to the table does not exceed their high fees? Authors of these texts are not seldom practicing consultants or consulting academics with an optimistic and often normative perspective on the role of consultants as skilled problem

solvers and business improvers. In this body of literature we also find early attempts to categorize different type of consultant-client relationships (Schein, 1988; Greiner and Metzger, 1983) and typologies of the tasks management consultants usually perform (De Jong and Eekelen, 1999; Turner, 1982). A second group of moderately skeptical researchers are questioning the rationality and the efficiency of the consulting market. Instead they emphasize the ambiguity, institutional factors, politics, image and rhetoric involved in order to better understand the nature of consultancy work (Alvesson, 1993; Alvesson and Johansson, 2002; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1990). A third, and even more critical cohort of authors view management consultancy as a more or less dangerous phenomenon that does more harm than good as the consultants try to peddle the latest management fads to seduce top executives. The result is often flawed change initiatives or in best case never used PowerPoint presentations (Jackall, 1988; Nohria and Berkely, 1994; O'Shea and Madigan, 1998), or in the words of Fincham and Clark (2002): 'They have been consistently portrayed as: expensive (that is charging exorbitant fees) and ineffective (that is their advice rarely works); as destroying organizations; as repacking old ideas and developing empty buzzwords; as running amok if not tightly controlled; as undermining the quality of manage-ment; as lacking independent insight; as acting in their own interest, rather than the client's, and so forth.' Here, the strongly asymmetrical relationship, with a powerful and rhetorically skilled consultant and a passive, weak, uncertain and dependent client is often emphasized (Clark, 1995; Clark and Salaman, 1996; Gill and Whittle, 1993; Sharma, 1997). But is this really the case in the modern Western business landscape, with experienced, hard-to-please clients and an over-supply of consultants (Byrnes, 2003; Czerniawska, 2002)? As Werr and Styhre (2002) write, 'the relationship between consultants and clients tends to be ambiguous and multi-facetted' (Canato and Giangreco, 2011; Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003). In this study, we will show that the characteristics of the relationship between the consultants and their clients may differ considerably, and that it is hard to generalize around who is actually sitting in the driving seat. This will probably place us close to the second category of consultancy research ('moderate skepticals'), and we will make some comments in relation to this literature in the contributions section. It is however important to bear in mind that our main purpose is not to contribute to this field, but to the one of strategy-as-practice, especially the literature that deals with 'strategizing' (in our case, by extra-organizational actors - strategy consultants) (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007).

METHOD

Access is frequently mentioned as a challenge in studies of management consultants. This is especially true when it comes to

the actual client – consultant interaction, which is not surprising since integrity and client confidentiality always have been vital parts of the aura around management consultancies. Therefore, as researchers, we have been somewhat 'opportunistic' in our approach and used a broad set of practices for empirical data generation, such as interviews, observations, document studies and self-ethnography (Alvesson, 2003; Bryman, 1989; Silverman, 2001).

We have followed the Swedish branch of one of the world's leading management consulting firms during the last decade. Strategy consulting is a vital part of the firm's total service portfolio. In total 55 interviews with 48 persons have been conducted, covering a wide spectra of the organization, including the CEO, partners, consultants of different seniority, support staff etc. The interviews have been fairly open in order to allow for 'the voice of the interviewees', emergent themes, nuances, richness, potential contradictions and different interpretations (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000). The interview questions focused on broad themes such as client-consultant interaction, work processes and organization, corporate culture, evaluation- and reward systems. Especially, the parts of the interviews that discussed the client-consultant relationship have been used in our analysis. Observations includes following a project group during two days, various internal meetings and training sessions. The document studies have mainly been focusing on internal and external company descriptions, training material and project methodology. In this paper, the interviews and document studies described above should be seen as secondary and supporting material, since most of the empirical material actually used, analyzed and discussed is primarily derived from direct observations of two strategy projects (projects labeled as 'strategy work' by the involved parties). The first project covers a typical assignment with a pre-study followed by an implementation phase at a heavy equipment manufacturer. The other case describes a pure strategy assignment together with a major telecom operator. The two project/cases are described in the empirical section of this paper. This focus is partly a consequence of the fact that one of the authors was fortunate enough to participate as an 'observing participant' in those two projects. This research approach, sometimes labeled 'self-ethnography' can be defined as (Alvesson, 2003):

'A study and a text in which the researcher-author describes a cultural setting to which s/he has a 'natural' access, as an active participant, more or less on equal terms with other participants. The researcher then works and/or lives in the setting and then uses the experiences, knowledge and access to empirical material for research purposes'.

Self-ethnography is therefore clearly related to auto-ethnography (Chang, 2008), even if the latter tends to focus more on the author's own subjective experience rather than the beliefs and practices of others. These differences should however not be exaggerated, since it is impossible to fully 'eliminate' oneself and the own experience from the process of understanding others, especially in an observation situation where the researcher to some extent is supposed to more or less actively participate (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000). Still regarded as controversial by skeptics, auto-ethnography is gradually becoming an accepted and established method within qualitative organizational research, indicated by an increased number of special issues on the theme, such as Culture and Organization (Vol 13, No 3, Summer 2007) and Journal of Contemporary Ethnography (Vol 35, No 4, August 2006). Other examples of social science journals that recently have published research based on self/auto-ethnography are Journal of the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interactionism, Journal of Contemporary Ethnography and Journal of Humanistic Ethnography. In short, the interest and acceptance for this type of method is growing, even if

the actual usage is still limited outside traditional 'ethnographic' outlets. Self-ethnography implies certain advantages as well as disadvantages, in particular the tradeoff between utilizing closeness to empirically rich situations and avoiding the closure following from being a part of what is being studied (Bartunek, 2006). Other advantages with the method are good research economy (in comparison with more conventional, time consuming ethnographic approaches) and the opportunity to facilitate the production of rich empirical accounts. Rightfully, Alvesson (2003) also warns us of substantial difficulties, such as excessive idiosyncrasies, closed mind, blind spots, politics, etc. Chang (2008), positive to the method at large, warns auto-ethnographers of pitfalls that need to be considered; a) excessive focus on self in isolation from others, b) over-emphasis on narration rather than analysis and cultural interpretation, c) exclusive reliance on personal memory and recalling as a data source, d) negligence of ethical standards regarding others in self-narratives, and e) inappropriate application of the label auto-ethnography. Therefore it is suggested that the method is used as complement to other methods, such as interviews and text studies and calls for 'a more reflective approach in which data management matters less than revealing, insightful account and interpretation (Alvesson, 2003). Therefore, we have also had short follow-up discussions with one of the client project leaders as well as two of the consultants in order to develop and complement our initial perspectives on the empirical material. The empirical material from the self-ethnography was then compared and enriched with the interviews (see Data analysis: categorizing strategy consultants for more details on how this was done).

When it comes to the methodological status of the two cases, there are some important differences between them. Case 1 is based on a project that took place approximately five years before it was used scientifically as 'data' and transformed to input in our analysis, while Case 2 is based on data that already from the beginning was aimed at research and was transcribed and analyzed within days after the actual events took place. Case 1 is therefore based on project documentation such as meeting minutes, working notes, project reports, presentation material, internal project files, etc, combined with how one of the authors that participated recalled the whole project and the critical events that occurred. This was synthesized and documented as a narrative description (appr. 30 pages) of the project from its start to its end. When it comes to Case 2, the situation was quite different. Since that observation from the start was part of our research endeavor, the participating author continuously took field notes (appr. 50 handwritten pages), selected parts that seemed relevant and/or interesting for transcription (appr. 30 pages). Selected parts of that transcription (that we found relevant for our argument) are presented as data in the empirical section. The data were analyzed largely in line with the ideals of inductive grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). For a description of the key characteristics of that method and how we turned 'data into findings', we refer to the section 'Data analysis: categorizing strategy consultants'. As mentioned above, one of the authors has been acting as an 'observing participant' in both projects/cases. In Case 1, his role was the one of a junior consultant responsible for the as is-analysis of the supply chain strategy, industry benchmarks and preparation of reports and presentations. His involvement in the assignment lasted for approximately nine months. During the project described in Case 2 (covering five weeks of intensive work), he acted as senior consultant with responsibility for the day-to-day project operations and development of the overall recommendation (including development of final report/presentation). Since he by that time (spring 2003) had started his PhD project the observation was planned and designed in order to provide empirical material associated with the themes of his project (that is research proposal). That implied a special focus on power relationships, client-consultant dynamics and business ideology. That focus colored the perception, scope and the documentation (field notes)

during these five weeks.

As discussed above, associated with this type of research there are obvious risks of personal bias such as idiosyncrasy, blind spots etc. In our case that is evident when it comes to selection of cases, selection of events to observe, selection of relevant/important events to document and transcribe. All these critical choices are highly dependent on the judgment of the participating researcher. However, in order to mitigate the risk of further idiosyncrasies regarding what to include/exclude in the analysis and how to interpret the data, we followed the ideas of Bartunek (2006) and tried to shift between an insider (the observing author) and an outsider (the non-observing author) perspective. This dynamic dialectic has helped us combine close-up observations and understanding, with a more distanced analysis and interpretation of the empirical material.

To sum up, Case 2 is based on more recent, detailed and richer primary data than Case 1, which is to a significant degree based on older, secondary data (originally structured and documented for other purposes than our research). This is also the reason why we do not include any quotes in Case 1 as we do in Case 2. Therefore, it seems fair to say that the empirical material in Case 2 is of higher value (from a traditional source criticism-perspective) than the material presented in Case 1. Due to the rareness of empirical cases covering strategy consulting projects, we nevertheless decided to include it in our study. The people observed in Case 2 were aware (and gave us their consent) of being part of a research project, while in Case 1, this was obviously not the case. Both cases are however anonymous regarding the consulting company, the mentioned individual consultants as well as the client companies. We turn to the two cases now.

Case 1: The manufacturing project at Division Heavy Machines

In this case, the client was a small but fast growing division within an international heavy equipment manufacturer. The division at hand, Heavy Machines (HM), expected strong growth but faced a challenge when it came to productivity and production capacity. The initial phase of the project dealt with an external assessment of the demand for a few of the divisions key products and given the estimated demand, came up with a recommendation on the critical make or buy decision in order to be able to meet the market requirements. The mission was hence to create a Master Plan for the division that included a market assessment that estimated demand 5 years ahead and the implications for the division's production capacity. After a few weeks of analyses it was clear that the current plant capacity would not be enough to meet the expected demand. It was therefore decided to continue with another phase that was expected to last for approximately six months, where the joint client/consultant-team should come up with a more detailed plan on how to increase the manufacturing capacity in order to meet the forecasts.

The consulting team consisted of three people: Eric, the project manager, John, a senior consultant and Martin (author), a junior consultant. The buyers and main sponsors were the Vice President of the division and his Chief Operating Officer (COO). They appointed Ivan, a senior, highly regarded production planning manager, as project leader and made him responsible for the outcome. He was a long timer within the organization and knew most of the other key stakeholders within manufacturing and logistics very well. The actual project work, consisting of planning, interviewing, analyses, documentation etcetera, was mainly conducted by the consultants. Ivan and Eric acted as co-project leaders, while John and Martin were responsible for developing solutions according to agreed scope. Several key stakeholders from the client were included in workshops as well as on an ad-hoc basis. Ivan, Eric and the COO formally reported progress to the Vice President and his management team bi-weekly. Neither the

buying clients nor the client's project leader were used to work with consultants. As a result, most of the client personnel treated the consultants with a mix of respect, curiosity and superstition. The consultants, on the other hand, tried to fit in and adapt to the blue-collar environment by leaving the dark suits at home and trying to use a plain, straightforward language. The assignment was clearly specified by the Vice President and his team and the project continuously delivered according to plan. However, at a few occasions, Eric - the project manager, was called upon for separate discussions with the Vice President. Surprisingly, these conversations were only partly about the production capacity-project. The main reason for the Vice President to have these informal chats was to hear Eric's point of view on several other, more or less project related, management issues. Therefore, Eric had the possibility to influence several important decisions around the strategy and the organization of the division. At one occasion the consultants initiated one of these 'out-of scope' discussions. During the project, the team discovered that an overwhelming share of the components was manufactured in-house, that is by HM themselves. Was there a good reason for HM to produce these components or would it be more beneficial to source the material externally? This make-or-buy issue was discussed in a manage-ment meeting where the consultants presented their findings and their ideas. The management team's perspective was that this was an important question and something that needed to be further analyzed. However, since the key people already were heavily involved in the ongoing project, this initiative had to wait a few months.

The consultants came up with several ideas on how to increase productivity based on management concepts such as BPR, JIT, TQM, Kanban, etc and lessons learned from top performing plants around the globe. Ivan and selected people from manufacturing modified the ideas and made the concepts more applicable for HM. The new processes were first tested in so called pilots and after that modified, if needed, and fully implemented. From a praxis perspective, the 'strategy work' at hand therefore consisted of interviewing key stakeholders, performing benchmarks by retrieving and comparing relevant industry data from the consulting firm's extensive network of experts and databases, making sense of the information and orally and in written form (PowerPoint) commu-nicating the implications and recommendations to senior management. These recommendations were then translated into applicable small-scale change initiatives in the form of new production and production planning processes. The change initiatives were treated as learning experiences and modified on a nearly daily basis in order to make them more feasible and to reach intended objectives. One major finding was that even if the new processes significantly improved productivity within current facilities, it would not be sufficient to meet expected demand. Therefore, the project also developed a plan for a brand new and larger manufacturing plant next to the old one.

The actual outcome of the project hence consisted of a detailed plan for a new, improved plant and implementation of a few modified production- and logistics processes with marginally increased productivity as a result at the end of the project. From a short term business perspective, this resulted in somewhat increased productivity, fewer stock-out situations, less capital tied up in excess safety stock, and a more 'structured' and 'clean' working environment for the people working with procurement, manufacturing and production planning. Long term, as result of the new plant, the division dramatically increased its production capacity, and hence was able to capture a significant share of the projected growth within its business segment. At the final management meeting, the consultants also presented suggested next steps, including unresolved or recently identified issues as well as a detailed implementation plan. Despite the COO's more or less explicit appeal for additional support, the consultants made it clear that from now on it would be better for HM to manage the changed

journey without external parties involved. This might seem a little bit odd, but the consultant's Client Partner who was responsible for the commercial relationship with the parent company saw a limited potential for growth and had decided to use the three consultants elsewhere. The Vice President and the COO accepted Eric's arguments regarding the importance of 'hand-over', 'knowledge transfer' and 'client ownership'. The last day on the project was celebrated in the dining room in the old plant. Cake and coffee was served and all staff, blue collar as well as white collar, was invited. The Vice President and the COO praised the joint accomplishments and seemed very optimistic about the future. Eric and Ivan responded by giving credit to all involved for their enthusiasm and contribution. The Vice President ended the ceremony by inviting the consultants to come back to visit the new plant in 24 months in order to see the concepts and ideas in action.

In sum, the consultants did a lot of hands-on process improve-ments, ranging from abstract PowerPoint presentations to actually rearranging the machines and production lines in the plant, according to a specified project plan with milestones and scheduled deliverables, but at the same time served as the Vice President's general strategic advisors. From that position they exercised significant influence on the top management agenda. Another aspect of how the consultants controlled the situation was how they, based on internal business objectives, chose to end the commercial relationship even if the management team more or less explicitly asked them to continue their work. This case seems to give some support to critical ideas around how consultants blaze a seduced client with the latest management fads and the relevance of Clark's (1995) dramaturgical metaphor where the consultants act as directors, puppeteers, and key actors in front of an impressed client. But as we will see in the next case, this is not an undisputable way of portraying the consultant-client relationship.

Case 2: The customers' segmentation project at Telco Ltd

The assignment was with one of the leading European telecom operators, providing fixed, mobile and Internet solutions to consumers as well as business customers. The consulting firm won the deal in open competition with two other major strategy con-sulting companies, where they were asked to present a preliminary high-level solution to the clients' problem. This was the clients' first experience with the consulting firm even if they were frequent buyers of consulting services. The mission was to assist the client in developing a customer segmentation framework covering the Small Medium Enterprise (SME) market.

The project team consisted of three people from the firm – Carl, the project manager; Martin (author), senior consultant and project member; Andrew, a half-time project member and subject matter expert and John, a junior consultant and from the client side Lars, the COO and project leader, Jürgen, a market analyst, as well as ten other part time project members serving as representatives for different business units and functions. Lars had a reputation within the company as a fast track trainee and an effective trouble-shooter. At the beginning of the project it was clear that he took full responsibility for the overall outcome of the project. He made a project scheme with deadlines, milestones and deliverables and organized a kick-off meeting with all people involved in the project. Based on the outcome of the kick-off meeting Lars developed a project plan the next day, in which the assignment was very clearly specified. However, after a few days it became very clear that this document was more of a starting point rather than a strict contract covering what should be achieved and when. At several times, Carl received late phone calls from Lars, where Lars asked for additional analyses and increased the scope of the assignment. Since they had not worked together before and because the client was billed per hour, Carl (and his team) tried to be as obliging as possible in order to ensure a positive working relationship.

Lars: 'I know it sounds like we [the client organization] are out of control here, but this is how we are used to work in this department. I know it is late, but can you fix it until tomorrow?'

Carl: 'Yes, of course we can. No problem! I will ask John to take care of it immediately.'

The working relationship was a little bit unorthodox, since Lars asked the consultants to work mainly from their home office instead of working side by side at the client site. Instead, Lars had bi-daily follow up telephone meetings with the consultants and weekly status meetings in the consultants' office. Later, the consultants realized that this was because Lars' boss, Terry, had ordered Lars to keep a low profile with the fact that they used consultants, since their kind was more or less banned in the organization at the moment.

The clients mostly used the consultants for number crunching, market statistics, external benchmarks, meeting administration and documentation. The bi-daily checkpoints gave Lars the feeling of control he demanded. The consultants on the other hand felt that their control over the situation was limited. They did what had been agreed upon in the project plan, but at the same time they had to be prepared for repeated scope increases from Lars. In one of the Friday status meetings, Lars and Jürgen concluded the session by asking the consultants to complete the analysis and the documentation over the weekend in order to have a finalized deck Monday morning. Jürgen added: '…this is what you are good at and paid to do, guys'. Carl and his team accepted and delivered as they were asked to do. When they met with Lars and Jürgen Monday morning, Lars said: 'Sorry guys, but I talked to Terry [his boss] yesterday and he suggested some changes in the presentation and that we also categorize small customers in a slightly different way…'. This indicated that a lot of the work done during the weekend was wasted and had to be reworked. It became clear to the consultants that even if Lars was a strong project leader with lots of ideas of his own, he had to answer to his boss, who was not a formal member of the project, more or less on a daily basis and Terry had at least as many ideas on content and form of the deliverables as Lars. The result was a steady stream of new ideas along the way, with a lot of rework as a consequence, and time consuming iterations outside the formal project group. John, one of the consultants, argued that since Terry was such an important stakeholder, he should perhaps be included in the project formally 'in order to enable us to do the right things from the beginning'. However, Lars decided that they should continue as before and include Terry when needed. Even if the consultants, in particular the seniors Carl and Martin, at some occasions acted as 'trusted advisors' to Lars and partly influenced his decisions, it was no doubt that he exercised more control than the consultants over the process as well as over the outcome and used the consultants as it suited him.

Lars: 'I am the only project leader here and you guys are part of my team [referring to Carl's claim of responsibility as project manager].'

It was clear that he demanded much more from them compared to the other team-members from his own organization, both in terms of workload, flexibility, analytical skills and creativity. The consultants felt frustration over the lack of control over the situation, but at the same time they felt that their achievements were appreciated by the client.

Andrew [addressing Carl and Martin]: 'We have to take control over the situation. Otherwise, this circus [referring to the frequent u-turns and scope changes] will continue as long as we are here. On the other hand, the feedback he gave us today was without doubt a clear recognition of our hard work the last three weeks.'

That feeling was enforced when Lars at the end of the project praised them in front of Terry and the fact that he rehired the team for another project three weeks later.

The actual outcome of the project was a PowerPoint-report describing Telco's overall competitive situation within the segment, shortcomings with current segmentation method, global 'best practices', a proposed new segmentation framework based on 'customers' equity', that is, a sophisticated quantification of the customers' potential value to Telco. Based on this information, marketing strategy and related execution in terms of, for instance, customers' acquisition efforts, retention activities and add-on selling could be optimized. The proposed framework was, however, never fully implemented, due to Telco's limited system support. Instead, Telco implemented a simplified version of what the consultants proposed, but nevertheless later admitted that the proposed model left the organization with a solid 'idea' to strive for, and that it helped to reveal several important shortcomings with the old customer strategy and the associated way of working with segmentation. Market success is always a reconstruction after the event and a consequence of many factors, but two years after the project ended, at least Lars claimed that the project was an important part of Telco's success in gaining additional market share within the Swedish SME-segment, since it helped them to better prioritize their customer's activities.

Compared with the other case at Heavy Machines, this case shows us a very different and more active client. Here, we do not find a poorly informed, manipulated client with severe agency-problems (Sharma, 1997) or a passive bystander, watching the consultants acting as directors or puppeteers (Clark, 1995; Clark and Salaman, 1996). Rather, we find the consultants working more or less hidden from the client organization with well defined, yet labeled 'strategic', tasks under conditions where they are unable to plan neither their working day nor their weekends. This picture challenges our understanding of consultants as highly influential, manipulating stage performers and the client as a passive, easily seduced victim of the consultant's impression management activities.

DATA ANALYSIS

Categorizing strategy consultants

Our overall inspiration and guiding principle for analyzing data has been inductive grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990), where the first step is data collection through a variety of (in our case, qualitative) methods. From the data, key points are marked with a series of codes. The codes are then organized into similar concepts in order to make them more workable. Based on these concepts, so-called categories are formed, which in turn constitute the basis for creation of models and theories. The data analysis began with a thorough and systematic reading of all the field- and memory notes regarding the two cases. The primacy given to the cases was due to their illustrative value of strategy consulting practice and to the rareness of this type of empirical material. We especially looked for incidents (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) that seemingly related to how the consultants were doing strategy with and for their clients. In this open coding procedure, we also moved between the two cases, noticing similarities and differences that could enrich our understanding of the consulting practices. These codes formed the

Table 1. Transcripts concerning status in relation to the client.

Codes	Illustrative quotes
Equality and mutual respect	… I sometimes feel inferior (in relation to the client) and sometimes superior. When I feel superior it is satisfying for me, but then the customers feel inferior, and that is not good (Analyst).
	The client is more knowledgeable compared to me regarding how they do their business, so to speak. But I am more knowledgeable in certain areas that I know they need help with (Consultant).
	If I do not listen to the client in order to understand their business, [and] to be able to apply my knowledge to this specific company, then you will not succeed (Consultant).
	Sometimes you have to have some courage… to be able to say 'no, we should not do this, it will be no good' (Manager).
Advisor or seller? Inferiority and instrumentalization	The independent advisor and the one that would like to sell my project, yes, that is probably a dilemma (Associate Partner).
	The client expects me to answer every question. To be the expert I have been sold as… To deliver. To always be available. You are an around the clock slave. You are expected to have no life but work (Consultant).
	In my first assignment I did not have much of a clue… I was like a drafted soldier ordered to do my tasks and to report when I was done (Manager).
	Sometimes you get the feeling that 'you are the consultants, you do your thing and we [the client] do other stuff'… Sometimes the client brings in consultants [just] to relieve themselves (Manager).

foundation of concepts and after further analysis, two dimensions emerged as very interesting: the status characterizing the relationship with the main client and the visibility of the strategy consultants within the client organization. The status dimension could be illustrated in the first case by the joint project leadership between the consultant project manager and the appointed client manager as well as the informal discussions between the project manager and the client vice president. In the second case, the relationship was quite different, which can be illustrated by the quote stated by one client manager to the group of consultants:

'I am the only project leader here and you guys are part of my team.'

The second dimension, visibility, is in the first case represented by the open interaction between the consultants and the client organization personnel as well as the joint public celebration at the end of the project. Also, here, the second case is very different, which could be illustrated by the reluctance to let the consultants do their work at the client's office, an arrangement that is usually considered more efficient.

The second phase of our data analysis consisted of confronting our two preliminary dimensions with the vast empirical material generated by the 55 interviews. These interviews were conducted with a wider scope of interest, covering many aspects of life within a consulting firm. Our approach could therefore be described as selective coding (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), whose goal is to confirm and refine our two preliminary dimensions with the help of more empirical data.

Through this approach, our understanding of our emerging categories could be developed further. The status dimension reflects issues of superiority or inferiority relative to the client, something that has been discussed within the consulting literature (Alvesson et al., 2009; Fincham, 1999; Sturdy, 1997; Sturdy et al., 2001). Some interviewees confirmed the equality and mutual respect (Table 1) that often exist and are preferable. A dilemma of being an 'independent' advisor and at the same time selling new projects was mentioned. The informal discussion between the client manager and the consultant in the first case should be understood also as an opportunity to pave the way for new projects. Other interviewees confirmed the inferior status that the consultants sometime experience, expected to take the role of a hard working resource, performing well defined task to 'relieve' the client.

Regarding our second category, visibility, our understanding was somewhat nuanced by the confrontation with the interviews. Several interviewees stressed the importance of legitimization, that is, that the consultancy project and the presence of consultants has support from key actors and has been communicated within the client organization. The consultants otherwise face the risk of being included into and negatively affected by internal political struggles, an issue the consultants often try to manage from the beginning of a project (Table 2). Legitimization also has to do with securing necessary resources and access to key personnel, which is considered a paramount issue for efficient strategy consulting work. One such resource, which is of importance also for legitimacy, is the ability to be placed closely to and move freely within the client facilities. Without physical proximity, the feeling of *outsidership* increases, communication suffers and more energy must

Table 2. Transcripts concerning the legitimacy and visibility at the client site.

Codes	Illustrative quotes
Legitimization	I expect that there is a decision that has been communicated in the [client] organization that we are going to be there. That we have the legitimacy to be there and do our job (Associate Partner).
	When we enter a project, we usually help arranging the political landscape… How does the sponsorship and support for this change [project] look like in the organization (Manager)?
Physical proximity	There is a difference sitting there as a resource, compared to working together with people from the client… In a small project that has not been communicated [within the client organization] you might feel like an alien… You need to constantly tell people why you are there (Manager).
	What made it hard was the distance. If they had been closer… you would have had direct feedback. If you sit on a distance it takes two days before you talk to each other… (Manager).

be devoted to establishing necessary relations with client personnel.

The status of the consultant: equal partner or bullied resource?

The first dimension, grounded in our empirical material, is the status of the strategy consultant in relation to the main client and other significant persons within the client organization. This relates to the dimension of power distribution between the consultant and the client, which has been thoroughly discussed within the management consultancy research field (Werr and Styhre, 2003), focusing on whether the consultant or the client is in control of the relationship. Our empirical material supports the significance of this dimension as such but furthers the discussion from the three dominant schools of thought described earlier. In these, the more functionalist consultancy literature usually depicts the buying client managers in control, as opposed to the critical (as well as parts of the moderately skeptical) literature, where the consultant often is assumed to be in control, utilizing his/her rhetorical and impression management skills. Our empirical material illustrates various status relationships between the consultants and clients, which implies the relevance of both perspectives. The status relationship at hand is an important factor which together with our second dimension – visibility - shapes the roles that the consultants play in the strategy process. This is further discussed and illustrated.

In our empirical material, we have seen in Case 1: Heavy Machines that at least one of the strategy consultants had direct access to top management in the client organization, discussing with them in confidence issues both related and unrelated to the decided task at hand. The status of the consultant could here be described as an equal partner to the client manager, where

the manager appreciated the overall judgment of the consultant and where the consultant gladly contributed also out of scope of the project at hand, perhaps with the possibility of further consulting projects in mind.

In other cases, however, the main client and other significant persons used the consultants as an extra resource for doing mundane and almost routine work, yet referred to as 'strategic'. The atmosphere towards the consultants in Case 2 for example was openly demanding, with references to the fact that the client had bought the consultants time and that they had full right to their services, also after normal business hours. Here it is clear that the client manager expected control over the relationship and used the discourse of seller-buyer relationships to claim and maintain that control. The relationship between consultant and client was also further complicated by different expectations and input from the client COO and his boss. This caused some frustration within the consultant group, related to their conviction of how consultancy work is performed most efficiently, to their identity of being strategy consultants and to the effect it had on their personal lives when they were expected to work on holidays on a short notice. Nevertheless, the consultant felt the need to comply with the expectations of the client. The result was a very different distribution of status within the consultant-client relationship compared to Case 1, forming very special characteristics of the strategy work performed by the consultants, as will be discussed further.

The visibility of the consultants: strategy work as open or covert operations

The confrontation of our preliminary dimension 'visibility' with the interview material forced us to nuance and broaden our understanding of this dimension. Visibility should be understood both as legitimized and clearly

communicated or not, as well as open physical presence at client premises or not. This latter meaning we see as very interesting, since the spatial dimension (where the strategy consultancy work takes place) must clearly be an important issue within the strategy-as-practice agenda. From our empirical material, it is obviously clear that the work of strategy consultants differ depending upon how visible the consultants are towards the members of the client organization. In some cases, the consultants are clearly distinguishable; either celebrated for their good work as partners, or, as it is sometimes described, used as scapegoats for making unpopular decisions such as lay off people or close down plants. Consultants may also take on the role as 'certifiers of rationality' in the eyes of internal and external stakeholders (Ernst and Kieser, 2002). In other cases, the assistance of the consultants is not shown to other than the major cooperating partners within the organization. Such situations could for instance occur when top management within the client organization banned the use of external consultants to save expenses, but middle managers nevertheless saw the need for external help. The variable of visibility resembles what Clark (1995) has described as the front stage – back stage (Goffman, 1990) in his theatrical metaphor of management consultants. But when the description of consultancy in terms of back stage depicts different forms of preparations in order to act on stage in front of an audience, we use the term visibility to depict whether the consultancy work is performed openly and in free interaction with a larger group of audience or if it is performed in a secluded setting, reporting only to an exclusive group of client members. In our study, visibility is therefore not a binary variable like front stage – back stage, but rather a continuum with different degrees of openness, legitimacy and physical visibility towards different audiences.
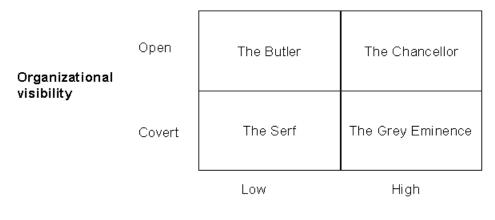
Strategy consultancy work in the open is clearly apparent within the Case 1 at Heavy Machines. The ending of the project was manifested by a celebration, including not only the closest co-operation partners, but the whole staff. Mutual praises and expressions of satisfaction were exchanged in front of the gathered staff by the vice president and the project manager of the consultants. A cake was served to everyone present to symbolize that this really was something to celebrate. The second situation is more apparent within the Case 2 at Telco. The COO and project leader wanted the consultants to work from their home office and not at a temporary set up at the client site. This is most often not a desirable situation for the consultants. During the initiation of a consultancy project, the consultants often devote a lot of effort to ensure necessary resources and commitment from the client. This also includes the access to an office at the client from where they can work. Apart from practical gains in the form of easer access to key personnel and information, it also helps the consultants to get access to informal information, such as

expectations from powerful actors which can be used in relation to the current project and to maximize client satisfaction in order to sell further projects in the future (Ernst and Kieser, 2002). But more importantly for the sake of the visibility variable, a designated office within the premises of the client organization improves the legitimacy of the project and the consultants themselves, something that is seen as important from the consultants' point of view in order to face anticipated resistance to change (Armbrüster and Kipping, 2002). The client organization often hosts different opinions, something that was expressed both in the project underlying Case 2 but also in other consultancy projects within Telco that we have followed. Sometimes, the use of consultants is preferred to be hidden from others than those directly involved because of ongoing cost cutting programs and/or direct ban of using consultants initiated from the top management. Another reason sometimes suggested within the management consultancy literature is that the use of consultants can inflict damage to the identity of the responsible manager or organization, signaling incompetence to handle the situation by themselves. This latter interpretation, discussed by, among others, Werr and Styhre (2003) can however be questioned. There are also signs that an entourage of consultants can enhance the status of a manager, an interpretation that we will discuss further.

Four categories of strategy consultants

The third step in our analysis is to combine our two variables and out of that construct four categories of strategy consultants, or, to be more precise, metaphors that describe four different roles as externally hired strategists. Each category was again confronted with the empirical material, especially the cases, in order to test their validity and empirical support. Together, these categories form a typology that we will use to further investigate the possibilities and type of strategy being performed by the consultants. Strategy consultants distinguish themselves as a group of strategy practitioners because of their extra-organizational status in relation to their client firms (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009). This status is characterized by a formal and commercially based client-partner relationship with their principals, even though more informal, personal relationship sometimes develops over time. The consultants' influence on organizational strategies is more or less indirect, even though sometimes substantial. Their relationship to their principals forms different roles of the consultants, roles that influence both their identities as strategists as well as the type of strategy work being performed. We think it is necessary to build upon this relationship in the investigation of both the different categories of strategy consultants as well as the nature of their strategy work.

As the advisors and/or servants to their principals they

```
                                    ┌──────────────┬──────────────┐
                          Open      │  The Butler  │ The Chancellor│
          Organizational            │              │              │
          visibility                ├──────────────┼──────────────┤
                          Covert    │  The Serf    │The Grey Eminence│
                                    └──────────────┴──────────────┘
                                         Low            High
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Consultant's status in relation to the client

Figure 1. Four metaphors for the role of strategy consultants.

might be understood; we have chosen to label our four categories according to four indicative metaphors to illustrate their differences (Figure 1).

The chancellor

This metaphor implies a highly trusted, influential strategic advisor with a more or less official, grand role in the organization. The title traces its origin back to the Roman Empire and has been used in various ways in different countries since then, but usually it indicates a senior minister or officer position with various degrees of dignity such as Lord Chancellor in contemporary UK. A famous historical example is Axel Oxenstierna from seventeenth century Sweden who totally and openly dominated the government domestically and represented the country in foreign affairs after the violent death of King Gustav II Adolf.

In our empirical material, the role of Chancellor can be illustrated by the project manager in Case 1: Heavy Machines, when he, side by side with the Vice President of the client company, praised their joint accomplishment. No apparent difference in status between the consultant and the client is expressed, at least not explicitly. Even though the consultant is formally an outsider to the client organization, attention is directed to their cooperation and the product of their joint effort, thereby blurring the boundaries between the two organizations. The consultant takes on a role as a trusted partner and advisor who is openly given credit for the quality of his contribution.

The grey eminence

This term originally referred to a Capuchin friar named Francois Leclerc du Tremblay (seventeenth century

France), who served as Cardinal Richelieu's right-hand man. The phrase 'grey' emanates from the friar's simple brown/grey robe. Since then, the term is used to describe a powerful advisor who operates 'behind the scene', secretly or unofficially.

The consultant role of Grey Eminence can be identified in the relation between the Vice President and project manager in Case 1: Heavy Machines. Here the consultant project manager acted as an informal advisor and discussion partner to the client Vice President. This role is characterized by an equality of status, manifested by the fact that both parties initiated the discussion and that the discussion was not limited by the scope of the current project. The buyer-supplier relationship, often depicting the client in control of the relationship is here nuanced, but without explicitly putting the consultant in the driving seat. The relationship is rather characterized by mutual respect and understanding.

The Serf

The serfs, from Latin servus, had a specific place at the bottom in the feudal society and worked harder than the others, and was the worst fed and paid. But unlike a slave he/she had his/her own land and property, which however could not be abandoned or sold without permission. The serf often worked with the simplest and hardest tasks within the household or out in the fields and woods. In many circumstances they were not seen as real people, totally dependent on the good will of their master and were supposed to keep in the background and do whatever they do without being noticed.

The role of the Serf can be seen as somewhat controversial, especially since strategy work normally is depicted as something more important and frivolous than this metaphor implies. But this role was the most obvious one within the Case 2: Telco. Here the consultants were

clearly governed and controlled by the client manager, who had a clear agenda and confidence over the relationship. Firstly, the client manager exercised substantial control over the consultant work content, reducing the strategy consultant work to quite mundane tasks with clear limitations in scope, however important to the client. Secondly, the client manager controlled the consultants' time schedule, not limited to normal working hours but rather stretching into 24 h a day, 7 days a week. Thirdly, the client manager controlled the spatial dimension when he decided that the consultancy work mainly should be performed out of sight of the client organization at the consultants' home office. These three areas of control caused frustration with the consultants, both from a professional and from a personal perspective. They wanted instead a more official, visible role within their client organization, where their presence, legitimacy and access to different resources should be clearly and explicitly acknowledged. Related to our four metaphors, the consultants strived for a role closer to the butler which we describe below, a role that probably suited their identity as strategy consultants better, as well as their professional view of strategy consultancy work than the role of the serf that they were more or less forced to play.

The butler

The image of a butler is usually a distinguished senior servant in a large household. The butler is a trusted resource whose manner, looks and performance reflect upon his, or more unusually her master's status. Therefore, the butler acts openly, yet discretely, in order to fulfill the wishes of his/her patron. Famous fictional examples are Stevens from The Remains of the Day and Jeeves from P.G. Woodhouse.

The butler is not particularly distinguishable in our two empirical cases. It can, however, be logically deduced from the combination of our two variables. It can also be indicated by the consultants' strive for a more official and visible position within Case 2: Telco. The consultant tried to move from the role of the Serf, a role that probably was not preferable neither to their identity nor to their view of how strategy consultancy work was best performed, to the more open and official role of the butler. The status variable was not an issue for the consultants; their subordinate role to their master seemed to be taken for granted and to be generally accepted. Subordination and a strong client orientation are often strongly fostered by the large multinational consulting companies (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009). But the totality of the control exercised by the client manager, especially regarding the lack of clear commitment to resources and an official and visible (physical) position within the client organization caused some disturbances within the group of consultants. The role of Butler can, however, be identified in other consultant projects that we have followed. In one

of these, also taking place within Telco, the client manager took a more legitimizing role towards the consultants, at least in relation to the client personnel that would be most affected by the project:

Lars [client manager]: 'My role is primarily to start this up and contribute with my thoughts. The guys that you need to contact are also in my box [referring to his organization]. When you are up and running and I feel convinced about the general ideas I will back away.'

The quote stresses the importance of trust and confidence, something that is obviously implied in the butler metaphor. This confidence is also part of what the consulting companies offer. When new projects are discussed, it is essential for the consulting companies to convince the client that the challenges or problems being discussed have been solved before by the firm. The goal is to convince the client that they are in good hands and that the consultants know how to deal with their problems. A good butler should know about the needs and wants of his master, preferably before he/she realizes it him/herself. As mentioned earlier, the butler metaphor implies that the existence and good performance of a butler could reflect favorably upon the status of his master. To be surrounded by consultants, especially well dressed, good performing professionals from highly regarded consulting firms could therefore reflect also favorably upon the hiring client manager. This is actively enhanced by the consultants who often try to 'put their sponsors in a favorable light' (Ernst and Kieser, 2002).

THE CONTESTED AND FLUID POSITIONS OF STRATEGY CONSULTANTS

As we have seen in the two cases, there seems to be significant variations in the consultant's roles in different assignments. One might expect that the character of the assignment play a significant role in how the interaction between the consultants and clients is constituted. It seems logical to expect that if the consultants are hired as strategic subject matter experts they have a better platform to act as highly influential and trusted advisors than if they are brought in as hard working resources in a well defined implementation project. However, the two cases indicate that this is not always the case. The segmentation project at Telco was from the beginning a pure, 'white-paper' strategy assignment, but the consultants soon ended up as micro-managed providers of fragmented information to a determined and dominant client executive. At the implementation project at Heavy Machines, on the other hand, the consultants had a strict and well-defined implementation plan to follow but could exercise significant strategic influence on the Vice-

President's agenda - within as well as outside agreed upon scope.

It seems further hard to generalize around who is the dominant part in a client – consultant relationship. The first case is well in line with what Gill and Whittle (1993) and Clark (1995) describe (a client dominated by the consultant), but in the other case, we find an active, informed client who more or less controls the strategy consultants' agenda on a day-to-day basis. This picture challenges our understanding of strategy consultants as highly influential, manipulating stage performers and the client as a passive, easily seduced victim of the consultant's impression management activities. We also think it is somewhat confusing to talk about the consultants as a homogenous group that shares the same interests and behavior. The hierarchical differences in the consulting teams were very evident, as in most Anglo-Saxon consulting firms, and the priorities and roles are very different between the project manager and the junior consultant. While the issues around power and control in the client relationship are primarily a matter for the project manager, the junior consultants are more occupied with making the project environment stable in terms of a positive working relationship with the client and a predictable demand on deliverables, even if this means total subordination in relation to the client project leader. And certainly, there is a strong relationship between your formal hierarchical position in the consulting team and the likelihood to end up in one of the four positions described above. It would, however, be somewhat naïve and simplistic to just relate the four positions to the formal hierarchical positions, that is, that junior consultants are determined to do serf-like jobs while the senior consultants are decided to end up in a more grand roles as chancellor or grey eminence. As illustrated in the two cases, even a senior project leader ends up in very limiting and covert situations as in Case 2, while the more junior consultants in Case 1 could act relatively open as trusted advisors.

Strategizing and the strategy consultant's roles

In this paper, we are interested in strategy consultants as a particular group of strategy practitioners: how they act and interact with their clients and how they contribute to shaping the activity we call strategy (Jarzabkowski, 2005). Together, practitioners, praxis and practices constitute the 'doing of strategy', that is, strategizing (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). In order to illustrate and analyze the strategizing activities performed by the consultants and the significance of the four identified roles, we draw upon the framework developed by Jarzabkowski (2005). She identifies two predominant ways in which practitioners tend to shape strategy. The first is called interactive strategizing, which 'involves direct, purposive, face-to-face interactions between top managers and other actors' (Jarzabkowski, 2005). The second is called procedural strategizing and involves the 'use of formal administrative practices, such as plans, budgets and trend analysis and their associated committees and procedures'. Even though the focus of interest in Jarzabkowski (2005) is university top-managers, both of these forms of strategizing can be identified also in the strategy work of consultants. We claim that which of the two types - procedural or interactive strategizing - that is dominating the strategy consultants' work and how this work is characterized depends at least partly on which of the four positions they end up in. The roles bring different expectations when it comes to strategy praxis and different possibilities to utilize strategy practices.

Interactive strategizing could very well be performed by consultants in all four roles. But the possibilities to do so and the actual praxis involved is influenced by the differences in visibility and status in relation to the clients which constitute the roles. Consultants in the positions we call Chancellor and Grey Eminence have extensive opportunities to access other key actors in the client organization and tend to spend a majority of the time in different types of social interactions. Formal and informal meetings between the consultant and the client provide opportunities to frame meaning upon certain information and activity (Jarzabkowski, 2005) and where the consultants' frameworks are drawn upon in acts of sense making and sense giving (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). The consultants are looked for to give advice and interpretations in relation to certain situations and the available, most often fragmented and ambiguous, information. In order to create a shared understanding, social interaction and conversation is required. Ernst and Kieser (2002) state that consultants often help to strengthen managers' confidence by pointing at the strength of the client organizations on which it can build. The possibility to frame the situation (Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996) and to get actively involved in sense making processes (Weick, 1995, 2001) together with client actors is thus substantial for these two roles. This possibility is also accentuated by the fact that the Chancellor and the Grey Eminence sometimes act as spokespersons for a larger groups of consultants who might play other roles in relation to the client. The information produced and compiled by other consultants in the team is thus interpreted and suggested a certain meaning through face-to-face interaction with client managers by consultants acting in the roles of Chancellor and Grey Eminence. It is also through interactive strategizing that consultants might help the client to justify change, including controversial ones like layoffs or outsourcing (Jarzabkowski, 2005).

The Chancellor, as well as the Grey Eminence, makes most of their agency to successfully perform interactive strategizing through their access to and knowledge of benchmarks and 'best practices' from different industries,

a resource that is seldom available to the client. This resource underlies the consultants' function and status as 'sector specialist' (Fincham et al., 2008) and 'supra-experts' (Ernst and Kieser, 2002). From a sense making perspective, the consultants thereby provide the clients with an idea to strive for and a sense of direction, a quality that lies in the heart of strategy. More generally, the consultants help their clients to interpret experienced events and thereby to establish a relation between cause and effect (Ernst and Kieser, 2002) which is an essential element in sense making (Weick, 1995). They help client managers to regain their sense of control vis-à-vis a perceived ever more complex environment and help them foresee threats of the future. The differences in visibility and relative status influence however the consultants' possibilities to engage in interactive strategizing. The Chancellor has, because of his/her more or less equal partner status and direct access to the client managers and senior executives, substantial possibilities to influence the strategy making of the client organization. The Grey Eminence might have a similar access to some client managers but is nevertheless less able to do interactive strategizing, at least with a larger group of client organizational actors, compared to the Chancellor since they are expelled from some organizational scenes and arenas where interactive strategizing can be performed. If the consultants on the other hand end up in a position close to what we label as Serf, the possibilities to exercise interactive strategizing is limited, except perhaps indirectly, through interaction with consultant colleagues occupying other roles. This is due to the Serf's position related to both variables presented in this text. Interactive strategizing, involving attempts to frame meaning, is a social process where power relations play a considerable role. Power asymmetry and the legitimacy of formal hierarchical position are acknowledged to favor managers' interpretations over others in an organization (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Smircich and Morgan, 1982). In a corresponding way, the lower status of the Serf in relation to the client manager could inhibit the possibility of the consultant to shape strategy by framing meaning. Furthermore, the restricted access to important arenas due to lack of physical access and to the more covert consulting work impedes the possibility to engage in face to face interaction with significant client personnel.

The butler 'suffers' from the same limitations to do interactive strategizing due to unequal power status like the Serf. Both of these roles often have more explicit buyer-seller relation, causing the consultants input to the strategy to be more reactive to the needs and wants of the client and/or more senior consultants in the team. However, the open and official status in the client organization provides some opportunities for interactive strategizing, even though in a more informal and indirect way. As mentioned in the case of Heavy Machines, a considerable amount of the 'strategy work' of the consultants consists of interviewing key stakeholders in the client organization in order to collect information. During these talks related to the consulting project, it could be expected that the consultant directs attention to certain key issues, labeled as 'strategic', as well as influences the interviewee's understanding of the issue. This could be understood as interactive strategizing, even though it is not "purposive" as it is defined by Jarzabkowski (2005).

When it comes to the possibility to perform procedural strategizing the situation is quite another. The goal of procedural strategizing is to structurally embed activity and therefore 'enable its persistence without active managerial attention' (Jarzabkowski, 2005). Procedural strategizing often deals with formal administrative practices (plans, budgets, analytical frameworks etc) that become locally institutionalized, and through these 'strategy is coordinated, documented and formally embedded within an organization' (Jarzabkowski, 2005). By providing 'structural legitimacy', they direct activities within the organization. This could be seen in the Telco case, where the consultants were part of a project to construct a segmentation framework that would provide guidelines for future actions within the client organization. Also in the Heavy Machine case, procedural strategizing played an important role. The methods for strategic logistics that were recommended and implemented in the new plant were carefully documented and intended to be used by the client organization in the future. Generally, it seems fair to say that external strategists, such as strategy consultants, often are hired just to contribute to some kind of procedural strategizing, such as providing the client with tools and techniques that enable rigor and scientific basis for strategic management decisions. Legitimacy is also gained through referring to 'best practices', partly customized to the specific client needs, which ensure situated relevance as another important condition for procedural strategizing (Jarzabkowski, 2005). Later on, these procedures might become institutionalized within the organization and thereby providing structural legitimacy to certain praxis. But, even if procedural strategizing is the 'core' of many consulting assignments, our four positions differ somewhat when it comes to if and how they can choose to perform this form of strategy work. Due to limitations in terms of status and access to key stakeholders the Serf is more inclined to perform procedural strategizing than interactive strategizing, as illustrated in the Telco case, where the consultants, juniors as well as seniors, contribute with statistics, 'best practices' retrieved from the consulting firm's databases and with PowerPoint-presentations that describe the proposed solution and how it should be used. This material is thereafter often used in acts of interactive strategizing, performed by different client actors inside or outside the organization. Even though limited in scope, this contribution to strategy should not be neglected. Facts and numbers provide a sense of rationality (Denis et al., 2006) and nicely structured in a

Table 3. Strategizing and the four roles.

	Chancellor	Grey eminence	Butler	Serf
Interactive strategizing	Extensive and direct, due to widespread interaction with the client.	Extensive but limited in scope, due to restricted interaction with the client.	Direct or indirect but usually non-purposive, due to status asymmetry in relation to the client, but with extensive visibility and access within the client organization.	Limited, due to status asymmetry, lack of interaction and low visibility within the client organization.
Procedural strategizing	Extensive opportunities in line with project objectives and scope, but often downplayed in favour of interactive strategizing.	Extensive opportunities in line with project objectives and scope, but often downplayed in favour of interactive strategizing (even if the interaction is restricted).	Extensive opportunities in line with project objectives and scope, and a common way of strategizing due to status asymmetry in relation to the client.	Extensive opportunities in line with project objectives and scope, and often the only option due to the very limited possibilities to perform interactive strategizing.

neat presentation it can significantly affect the strategy process without extensive face-to-face interaction between the consultant and the client. The other three roles have, as described earlier, more choices and degrees of freedom when it comes to whether to engage in procedural- or interactive strategizing. Given the nature of many strategy consulting assignments (with the scope at least preliminary defined by the buying client), even the Chancellor with his/her high status and access within the client organization and high ability to perform interactive strategizing, is sometimes engaged in procedural strategizing. The Grey eminence and the Butler are also in a better position than the Serf when it comes to choices, but are more limited compared to the Chancellor in terms of access and status respectively, which makes them more inclined to exercise their influence through procedural strategizing than the former. Summarizing our analysis in Figure 1, we see that the position in which the strategy consultants, more or less temporarily, end up in significantly affecting what kind of strategizing they can perform in relation to their client. Their ability to perform interactive strategizing is heavily affected by their relative status and visibility/access within the client organization. However, even the Serf, whose position related to our two dimensions is unfavorable, has substantial possi-bilities to affect strategy through procedural strategizing. Their contribution therefore needs noticing. Furthermore, even though the status dimension has been acknow-ledged within the consulting literature, we think that what we call visibility deserves more of our attention. Physical access, as well as legitimized status, greatly affects the possibility to do interactive strategizing and therefore needs to be taken into consideration. The discussion above regarding the ability to perform interactive and/or procedural strategizing is summarized in Table 3.

CONTRIBUTION

Several categorizations of consultants illustrating the client-consultant relationship have been presented in earlier research. Many of these focus on what role the consultant plays in relation to the client, emphasizing what kind of service the consultant provides for the client. Our categorization is founded upon empirical obser-vations of the dynamic nature of the client-consultant relationship and how this relationship forms different consultant positions vis-à-vis the client. These observations constitute an empirical contribution, since the strategy practice of consultants has not yet been properly presented and where empirical studies prove considerable challenges due to access (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009). With our categorization, we provide a somewhat unorthodox interpretation of the dynamics in the client-consult relationship. The traditional image of the strategy consultant as a powerful, esoteric advisor needs to be supplemented with one that to a larger extent let us see all the variations in the dynamic and complex relationship between the client personnel and the consultants, as the roles are constituted and reproduced in terms of status, politics and power (Alvesson and Johansson, 2002; Alvesson et al., 2009; Sturdy et al., 2010; Werr and Styhre, 2002). These dynamics are important not only in forming the different roles that strategy consultants take on, but has also considerable impact on what form of strategizing activities they are able to perform and thereby on the possibilities of influencing the strategy of the client organization. In this

study we recognize the substantial work being done characterizing the consultant-client relationship in terms of power and status, but combine this dimension with the related but underdeveloped dimension of 'visibility'. Together with the status dimension, issues of visibility showed to be of great importance to the consultants and highly influential on their strategizing activities. Through our dimension 'visibility', we would therefore like to highlight the spatial dimension of strategizing, not often mentioned within strategy studies. Not only do physical arrangements such as rooms and other arrangements constitute important examples of strategy practices, but the general issue of where the strategy work is actually performed needs to be explored within the strategy-as-practice agenda in order to understand strategy as an also physically situated activity. How visibility can be understood, as well as its impact on strategizing activities, most certainly deserves further research. Also from a more general perspective, visibility at the client's site and its effects on agency is something we see as important for all forms of management consulting (that is not just strategy consulting) and hence is something we think deserves more attention also in this broader vein of literature.

Finally, we see our categorization as a way to nuance what activities that are understood to be included in the idea of 'strategy work'. The strategy discourse often implies that strategy consists of grand ideas, deep analysis, important decisions influencing the long term success of the whole firm and as such necessarily the job for top management executives (Knights and Morgan, 1991) or perhaps in this case highly experienced and acknowledged consultants. Ironically, this idea is often also fuelled by the consultants themselves. According to Jarzabkowski et al. (2007), an activity could be considered 'strategic' if it is 'consequential for the strategic outcomes, directions, survival and competitive advantage of the firm'. In this study, we would like to highlight the mundane and sometimes trivial activities (example, compiling and sorting data, preparing presentations, validating assumptions, etc) that are nevertheless performed under the label strategy work: strategy with a small 's'. This might raise a concern that we are stretching the concept of strategy to far, including too much and thereby making the concept meaningless. But instead of understanding strategy in the terms of how 'great' and 'important' the consequences of certain activities are, the strategy-as-practice perspective urges us to consider the very activities being performed. We claim that the perhaps mundane activities mentioned could very well be consequential for the direction of the firm. Furthermore, the consultants exercising these activities possess agency, meaning the possibility to make strategic choices (Child, 1972) and to influence the strategizing activities of others, consultants and/or clients, based on these choices due to their access to and utilization of institutionalized strategy consulting practices. The sometimes limited scope of these choices

should not disturb our understanding of the nature of the activities. This groundwork of strategy (mostly performed in the roles we have called Serf and Butler) has been ignored within strategy studies (Whittington, 2007) and is important to highlight both to give credit to these essential but neglected activities, as well as to demystify the idea of strategy as a solely 'grand activity'.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Because of the scarcity of studies on strategy consultants (especially empirically rich ones) from a strategy-as-practice perspective, we have only been able to scratch the surface of a significant and potentially very rewarding research area. More studies on strategy consultants, as well as other extra-organizational strategy practitioners (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009) are needed. We therefore look forward to more studies on strategy consulting practice, for example focusing the established and institutionalized practices utilized within the strategy consulting profession and the implications of these practices both in terms of organizational outcome and of how these practices provide agency and legitimacy to the consultants (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). In addition to this, the distinctiveness, relevance and usefulness of the four metaphors presented in this paper could be further explored, for example by taking a significant number of consultants and clients' own views into consideration (via a survey or more standardized interviews and a quantitative analysis), as the next stage of the inductive grounded theory method used in this paper. Finally, we also suggest more studies looking into the sometimes routine, mundane and dull aspects of strategy work, something that has been neglected within the broad field of strategy studies but may have substantial implications both on organizational strategy and the strategy practitioners. The strategy-as-practice perspective seems to offer considerable opportunities for this, which could significantly further our understanding of strategy work.

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