DISRUPTING IDENTITY: TRUST AND ANGST IN MANAGEMENT CONSULTING

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This chapter examines the dehumanization of management consultants though the destruction of institutional, psychological and social forms of trust. Drawing upon five years of the author's participation in the consulting industry, the paper argues that the insecure, flexible and transitory nature of consulting work can lead to 'ontological instability' and 'angst' for many consultants which may result in a self-perpetuating cycle of disrespect and dehumanization with those they encounter. It is argued that norms of performativity and flexibility in the consulting world are often achieved at the cost of the individual's humanity.

Introduction

In 1999, after finishing my PhD I joined fifteen other new hires at Zantax, a management consultancy based in the Thames Valley. Whilst there, we all experienced the boom and bust of the DotCom era, worked in multi-million pound start-ups and saw far too little of our friends and families. By 2004, when I left, only five of those consultants remained in the profession. Some had left due to nervous breakdowns, stress and exhaustion, others due to disillusionment with the corporate world but all, including myself, were shocked by what they had become in such a short period of time. In the words of one colleague "I didn't care about anyone….everything became about the project…..I wasn't human any more". This chapter attempts to illustrate how this experience results from the treatment of consultants as a performative resources rather than a social beings. More specifically, the chapter traces the ways in which the destruction of trust at a psychological and social level leaves many consultants experiencing an ontological insecurity that psychologists, sociologists and philosophers have termed 'existential angst'.

Management consulting has long been integral to both the theory and practice of HRM. As a peripheral labour-force, consultants fit neatly with the vision of post-fordist flexibility exhorted by most HR gurus, whilst the cycles of outsourcing, mergers and acquisitions, culture changes and delayering, provide a constant source of people-related issues which consultants are called in to 'solve'. Central to this depiction has been the portrait of consultants in the practitioner literature as an asocial 'resource' – geographically flexible, socially adaptive and intellectually objective, they are often depicted as independent outsiders - devoid of the social ties that 'get in the way' of economic efficiency and rational thought. The apotheosis of this image is the popular characterisation of the Anderson consultant as a 'cyborg'. The Fordist origins of the 'borg metaphor has been explored elsewhere (Gray, 1989; Wood, 1998) but for our purposes attention should be drawn the ways in which social and psychological needs are seen as at best superfluous, and at worst damaging, to the performative ideal of the consultant. However, because consultants are humans and therefore require trust and ontological security, this depiction has always been more prescriptive than descriptive. It is argued here that the resulting tensions between what is expected of the consultant and what they can actually achieve, manifest themselves in the disruption of the consultant's identity.

In contrast to many occupational groups, the identity of the management consultant has received little critical attention. Whilst in the popular literature the consultant is often caricatured as either

a saint (providing intervention in ameliorating organisational woes) or a sinner (deploying rhetoric to trick managers into paying extortionate fees), it is only recently that serious consideration has been given to the social and political contradictions that underpin consulting work (Heller, 2002; Salaman 2002; Collins, 2004; Alvesson and Robertson, 2006). Whilst these studies have made inroads into portraying consultants as more than a performative or managerial elite, few have attempted to relate the contradictions of their jobs to the difficulties consultants face when attempting to build secure identities.

This chapter attempts to illustrate the subjective experiences of management consultants under conditions that treat them as performative resources rather than human beings. It argues that this experience is characterised by an 'ontological insecurity' created through four destabilising aspects of the consulting relationship: the instabilities fundamental to consultants' flexible working practices, the uncertainty resulting from incomplete forms of learning, the low-trust relationships between consultant, client and employer, and, finally, the ways in which consultants distance themselves from the human and emotional aspects of their jobs. Using the author's experiences as a change management consultant from 1999 to 2004, the chapter argues that the insecurity experienced by consultants is directly related to their experience of low-trust relationships that contribute to what Giddens terms 'existential angst' (1990: 100): an ontological insecurity that involves the experience of meaninglessness at a fundamental level. From this perspective it is argued that the experiences of management consultants lack the ontological, moral and psychological anchors to support the basic identity stabilizers that many view as a basic human requirement (Laing, 1969). The dehumanization sketched here is, therefore, less the impact that consultants have on their clients and more the pathology of their peculiar employment relationships on their own identities. In the pursuit of economic efficiency, this relationship, it is argued, strips away the anchors of trust that are so important to the formation of human identity. In illustrating this process, the chapter draws upon the notion of angst as explicated by Giddens and other existentialist writers to relate the way in which the destruction of trust is directly related to the experience of angst and the subsequent dehumanization of the consultant.

Consulting Identities

In contrast to the extensive literature investigating and theorising the exploitation of shop-floor workers and their subjective experiences, the study of the dehumanization of management consultants has been virtually ignored by both practitioner and critical writers. Such an absence is perhaps understandable given the contradictory position of the profession in popular literature. On the one hand, consultants are portrayed as highly-skilled knowledge workers focused on developing a 'helping relationship' (Schein, 2000) with their clients. From this perspective, management consultants form a critical part of the 'flexible firm', bringing in innovative practices that enable organisational learning (Turner, 1982; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). The vast number of practitioner guides to consulting take this perspective, but it is also commonly found in guru texts and journals such as the Harvard Business Review. On the other hand, consultants are portrayed as expensive parasites, feeding off the insecurities of hard-working managers, and providing services that could have been performed by core employees. An insight into populist attitudes towards management consulting can be gleaned the titles of two recent books: '*House of Lies: how management consultants steal your watch then tell you the time'* (Kihn, 2005) and '*Rip Off! The Scandalous Story of the Management Consulting Money Machine'* (Craig, 2005).

For some time, the critical academic community has leaned towards the more negative of these caricatures, portraying the consultant as functionally, if not morally, defective in their interventions (Hilmer and Donaldson, 1996; Micklethwaite, 1997; Monbiot, 2001). These and other studies criticise both the process and outcomes of consulting interventions, suggesting that

many projects undertaken by consultants were unnecessary and, in any event, were most likely to fail. Recent studies, however, have attempted to move the debate from castigation to critique, arguing against the caricaturing of both extremes and focusing upon the social, psychological and political aspects of the consulting relationship (Heller, 2002; Salaman 2002; Collins, 2004; Sturdy, 1997). Such writers often appear to share a concern with Giddens (1991), Sennett (1998) Jackall (2000) that in equating exploitation with low pay, traditional analyses of exploitation at work often marginalise white collar experiences that can be equally (albeit differently) manipulative.

One emergent theme in recent critical literature has focused on the construction of consulting identities by examining how consultants harness rhetorical and cultural devices to more effectively engage their clients (Merilainen et al. 2004; Robertson and Swan, 2003; Alvesson and Robertson, 2006). Such analyses, often drawing on post-structuralist thought, have emphasised the technologies of surveillance and control utilised by different programmes (e.g. HRM, BPR or TQM) and the rhetorical and discursive methods by which consultants legitimate their practices. Whilst this literature has done much to highlight the devices which consultants employ to persuade clients to buy their wares, the presentation of consultants as salesmen (Sturdy and Gabriel, 2000), magicians (Fincham, 2000), missionaries (Wright and Kitay, 2004) or preachers (Whittle, 2005) defines the consultant too strongly by their sales discourse and portrays clients as relatively impotent. As Clark and Salaman argue (1998: 156), 'they define the [client] manager as a passive, uncritical, vulnerable and exploited consumer of guru ideas' rather than representing client organisations as proactive and potent environments that may destabilise and challenge the identity construction of consultants themselves. This view of consultants too readily buys into the practitioner representation of the consultant as a performer and defines them by what they do rather than what they feel and experience. Thus, whilst much of the critical literature highlights the insecurities of management as a key reason for the use of management consultants (Huczynski, 1993; Jackall, 1988) "there is little recognition of the pressures and insecurities experienced by consultants themselves" (Sturdy, 1997: 393).

It is easy to understand the absence of instability, insecurity and anxiety in studies of consultants as many writers might find it difficult to empathise with workers earning over £70,000 that routinely advise and implement the delayering of organisations. However, if a commitment to the humanization of the workforce is to be taken seriously, then money cannot be the only measure of exploitation. The insecurities and stresses inherent in post-fordist workplaces have increasingly been identified amongst professionals (Sennett, 1998; Jackall, 2000) and commented upon in the consulting literature (Barley and Kunda, 2004; Berglund and Werr, 2000). What for the moment remains under-theorised, is the emotional and psychological experiences of management consultants in relation to their clients: how the contradictions of the consulting role undermine the human need for secure identity and how the effects of this unstable relationship are reproduced in the workplace. In order to conceptualise these tensions inherent in the consulting relationship it is important to understand the dynamics between the experience of social instabilities and the subjective experience of individuals. Below, Giddens and others are drawn upon to argue that trust and its opposite, angst, are central to understanding how secure identities are created and destroyed in the workplace.

Angst, Trust and Identity in the Workplace

Giddens (1991; 1996), Fukuyama (1995) and Misztal (1996) argue that organisations provide an anchor of trust for human identity in an increasingly unpredictable and changing world. Trust and knowledge, therefore, are key properties of institutions which allow humans to develop 'trust in impersonal principles, as well as in anonymous others' (Giddens, 1996:113). Trust is inextricably

entwined with the formation of secure identities that provide an ontological shelter against the insecurities of modern society:

> "...ontological security refers to the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action. A sense of the reliability of persons and things, so central to the notion of trust, is basic to feelings of ontological security; hence the two are psychologically related" (Giddens 1990: 92.)

It is important to recognise that the concept of trust, as Giddens uses it, also applies to distrust – distrust provides the individual with forms of knowledge that are fostered in habitual rules and social norms (Elster, 1989). Indeed, many workplace studies have also highlighted the effectiveness of *dis*trust in providing opportunities for individuals to develop stable identities: where organisations fail to achieve their goals of ideological or cultural forms of identity control, various forms of distrustful attitudes in employees have also been identified as forms of resistance. Thus in distrusting, workers adopt a recalcitrant identity defined by an oppositional stance that has variously been described as 'acting out' (Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 1990), 'role distancing' (Kunda, 1992: 163), 'dogged mimicry' (Hope and Hendry, 1995) and 'resistance through distance' (Collinson, 1992).

However, as many writers have pointed out (Berger and Luckman, 1967; Lewicki et al., 1998) both trust and distrust are based upon forms of knowledge or, at least, habit. For a worker to decide that their organisation is trustworthy or otherwise they must first have knowledge of that organisation, either through information that is reflexively monitored or through habitual familiarity. It is for this reason that Schwartz suggests that (whether good or bad) 'social institutions..specifically work organisations, develop an ontological function' (1997: 329). However, this paper attempts to challenge this notion by arguing that consultancies often actually *cause* ontological instability through the destruction of trust and as such have damaging consequences for individual identity. Giddens identifies the consequences of this process when he suggests that 'the antithesis of trust is thus a state of mind which could be best summed up as existential angst' (1990:100).

The roots of 'angst' are to be found in the early twentieth century phenomenological reactions against the totalising discourses of Kant and Hegel. Existentialist philosophy stresses the *potential* freedom of humans from external forces such as religion, the heroic code or social norms whilst advocating the authenticity of being promoted by Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Whilst this chapter does not intend to use the entire ontological inheritance of existentialist thought[1], the use of 'angst' is intended to reflect something more significant than mere anxiety. Angst differs from anxiety in that it is concerned with an *ontological* meaninglessness resulting from the inability (or refusal) to trust unreflexively in cultural identity-stabilisers. Anxiety, on the other hand, is a worry or concern, usually defined with regard to future uncertainties. Angst is generated through the (intentional or otherwise) rejection of habits that encourage an 'inauthentic'

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1 This exclusion is not just for the sake of convenience. Existentialism was always a movement more united in culture than in dogma. Kierkegaard used angst to describe humanity's relationship and responsibility to God, a long way from its literary colonization by Sartre and Camus. Associated definitions can be defined as 'abandonment' (Heidegger), 'despair' (Kierkegaard), 'absurdity' (Camus) and 'nausea' (Sartre)

identity[2], especially those formed by social stabilizers such as morality, religion, class or gender. As such, angst involves the rejection or disruption of what has come to be trusted: 'without the development of *basic* trust... people may experience existential anxiety, and lack of confidence in the continuity of their self-identity and the constancy of their environment' (Misztal, 1996: 91).

It is this concept that provides the basis for much of the existential thinking about workplace identities. Existential sociology is by no means a new project (Douglas and Johnson 1977; Kotarba and Johnson, 2002). Several writers have drawn on existential thought when describing the identity-seeking behaviour of individuals in overcoming the ontological insecurity associated with consciousness, death and uncertainty (see, for example, much of the work of Knights and Willmott). These insecurities are not simply those economic and social changes identified by Sennett (1998) and Cappelli (1999), but also the lived ambiguities experienced by all reflexive humans in the difference between the self as subject and as object. Contrary to Giddens, who argues organisations can provide identity stabilisers in an increasingly uncertain world, Knights and Willmott suggest that 'insecurity is an existential condition that cannot be avoided and attempts to do so are likely to be self-defeating' (Collinson, 2003: 533). This chapter follows a median point between the two approaches, suggesting that insecurity is contingent upon the social and structural formations of trust that humans find themselves occupying, being neither fundamental to the human condition nor simply avoidable through the occupancy of institutions or cultures. It suggests that the destruction of trust through the instabilities and contradictions of consulting work (Alvesson, 2001; Whittle, 2005; Berglund and Werr, 2000) can lead to the experience of angst and the subsequent destabilisation of the consultant's identity. This not only affects the consultant but also, it is argued, their relationships with those around them. Whilst much of the existing literature highlights the insecurities of management as a reason why management consultants are extensively used in modern corporations (Huczynski, 1993; Jackall, 1988), this paper agrees with Watson, who argues that "consultants do not simply manipulate managerial insecurities, but experience similar anxieties derived in part from relationships with clients and their own labour process." (1994: 405).

Management Consulting at Zantax

Personal Reflections

The material presented below is not the result of a planned research project but a personal reflection on five years of my life which were immersed in the management consulting world. As such, a formal methodology would appear out of kilter with the rest of the chapter. Although the PhD I had previously undertaken primed me to notice interesting social and psychological tensions within the consulting world, there was no time to reflect upon and write up my thoughts in any detail. Instead, the research here draws upon a detailed diary I kept at the time (which was important for any consultant in case of legal wranglings with clients), meeting notes, emails and various documents that were circulated at the time. In some cases I later contacted relevant individuals to clarify any ambiguities in my recollections or to better understand why they acted the way they did.

The long hours, unstable conditions and instrumental relationships took their toll on me and many of those I worked with in consulting. It was common for young consultants leave to through

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[2] Existential writers provide differing conceptions of 'authenticity'. Kierkegaard uses the concept to describe the potentialities of man's relationship to God, whereas Sartre equates the achievement of authenticity with freedom - the liberation from society's fetters.

exhaustion or nervous break-downs. Whilst I avoided the extremes of some of my colleagues, the stress of the work and a deteriorating relationship led to a period on anti-depressants and an increasing detachment from those closest to me. It was an experience from which I have only recently recovered. Talking to other consultants, both at the time and now, indicate that my experience was not an unusual one. It was common, as one mentor I had put it, for inexperienced hires to be "thrown in at the deep end to see if they would float".

The research presented below does not attempt to provide a complete overview of the culture at Zantax. It attempts, instead, to illustrate the manner in which the destruction of trust at a personal level leads to the an 'ontological insecurity' culminating in the experience of angst at an individual level. The paper demonstrates the destruction of trust through four related themes: the ways in which 'flexible' working practices destroy routine, that incomplete forms of learning led to uncertainty and stress, that performative ideals resulted in low-trust relationships between consultants, clients and employers, and, finally, that their experiences leads many consultants to distance themselves from the human and emotional aspects of their jobs. Through these processes it is argued that trust is destroyed and ontological insecurity is created thus both destabilising and dehumanizing many management consultants.

Introduction to Zantax

I joined Zantax, one of the UK's largest consultancies, during the write-up of my PhD in 1999. I had been doing some simple contracting work since 1996 and believed consulting would be an excellent route to both repaying my student loans and getting useful experience and training. After sending my CV out to over one hundred companies, I was called to interview by twelve consultancies and accepted by ten. Zantax offered the most, not just in terms of salary, but also in terms of the variety of companies they worked with. My interview with the Head of Department, Julie, was surprisingly brief and not particularly searching, though she made clear to me that my doctorate in management studies would enable a premium rate to be charged to clients. My hesitancy in pointing out that my (fairly theoretical) doctorate may not be the greatest use to Julie's clients was matched by her reluctance to feel that this should be a cause of concern. It also became clear at the interview that my recruitment was not prompted by a business need for more consultants but primarily because Julie's section was being merged with another company. Her recruitment of additional consultants would, she believed, give her "a bigger slice of the cake" after the merger took place.

My induction to the company consisted of being pointed towards a 'hot desk' which I was told "may, nor may not, be free" – no-one, bar directors, had their own desks. The company induction was minimal, I was told, because I wouldn't be spending much time there. True enough, within one year of arriving I had worked on projects with British American Tobacco (BAT), Energis, Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS), Barclays and a telecoms start-up called 'Three'. The department I was working for was called Maximus, which specialised in culture change, but would often get involved in e-business projects. My business cards simply named me as a 'consultant' so to provide an ambiguity that would allow maximum flexibility when it came to selling me into different roles. The team comprised around 30 consultants working under four different senior consultants who 'leased' us out to different account managers who ran the consulting projects.

The methodology of most projects followed the standard consulting cycle of introductions, proposals, signing a contract and then actually doing the work (usually defined as analysis, solution definition, implementation and evaluation). However, in reality, individuals would usually only be involved in part of the cycle, usually implementation. As standard practice, senior

consultants sold and initiated projects and were then replaced with less experienced hires as time passed. This provided Zantax with a way of improving efficiency (freeing up more experienced consultants to bring in more clients) and a method of providing free training (by allowing less experienced consultants to work on demanding projects). However, despite being a relatively inexperienced consultant, the research skills (ostensibly) developed during my doctorate allowed me to experience both ends of the consulting spectrum, bidding for contracts and implementing business 'solutions'.

Flexibility or Instability?

Although many projects could last up to two years or more, most consultants were used for around 4 – 6 months before being moved on to other clients. This prevented consultants getting to familiar with the routines of one client and allowed exposure their to many different environments. Most projects were based in London and the Thames Valley but many were located abroad, where one would be provided with hotel accommodation or, if the project were for more than three months, a flat (shared with other consultants). As a rule of thumb Zantax consultants were expected to be in by 8.30am and leave around 6.30pm. However, on a new or especially demanding project hours could be 7.30 – 7.30 and if deadlines were tight, we would often be called on to work through the night or at weekends. The travel, especially around London, could easily add another three or four hours to the day. We were encouraged to travel by plane and train because this meant we could work whilst travelling.

This geographical flexibility, whilst exciting for the first few months, was often cited by many consultants as their primary complaint about the work. Home, for many, became little more than an abstract notion. I was rarely home and even when I was there, I was generally asleep or working having eaten, exercised and socialised at the client site. However, this situation cannot simply be blamed on consulting work - the geographical flexibility mentioned above should also be seen against the backdrop of a life-style in which many young professionals move houses regularly, rarely know their local communities and neighbours and change jobs every two to three years. Relationships amongst these professional flexible workers were often strained to the point of breaking by the combination of absence, stress and long working hours. The vast majority of my (consulting) colleagues were male and unmarried and though this did change as they progressed up the hierarchy, it was always clear that time for family had to come second to the projects. Partners, including my own, were often from similarly stressful jobs, which often meant that there was no check to the excessive demands placed on individuals. The habit of being in new places for short periods of time meant that it was often impossible to build up routines that could provide a framework to an uncertain lifestyle. Correspondingly, it is important to note the extent to which such instabilities impinge upon one's ability to develop routines of identity: Knights comments that the demands of these lifestyles 'render individuals uncertain and insecure [so that] the sense of what we are (that is, identity) can no longer be taken for granted' (Knights, 1990: 321). The consequences of this detachment are noted by Misztal: 'Without the development of *basic trust* (initially with parents, family, friends) people may experience existential anxiety, and lack of confidence in the continuity of their self-identity and the constancy of their environment' (1996: 91).

Unlike many workers who are surprised when they are made redundant or when their employers backtrack on promises made, most consultants are fully aware that their contract is a precarious one and the financial recompense for this instability would be high. For most of us, our dismissal was a question of when, not if. This meant that most consultants, especially in times of recession, were constantly applying for new jobs, testing the market and networking with key decision-makers. I checked the main consulting websites every week and usually had an application

underway just in case I got the call from head-office. The meeting of colleagues at competitor's selection days was so frequent that it quickly became more humorous than embarrassing.

It was rare, however, to be fired whilst working at a client site – the most common scenario for dismissal was when one has been 'on the bench' for too long. As the 'rest' period 'between clients' when consultants were expected to work on 'internal projects' at home, the bench was both loved and loathed by consultants. Whilst it provided a much needed break for those exhausted by the pressures of travel, learning and long hours, it was also known as 'death row': a secure environment where, if you stayed for too long, you were likely to be dispatched. I was put on the bench twice as a consultant, but never for more than a fortnight. Although one was generally safe for a month or so (this depended on seniority, experience and the economic climate) those weeks were very disconcerting. Partly as a result of this insecurity, the first thing one does when put on the bench is to start looking for jobs outside the consultancy. This creates low trust relationships in two ways, first because one expects to be fired and second because Zantax is fully aware that you will be applying for jobs. Perhaps because of this, and perhaps because of the fear of guilt through association, many colleagues contact consultants less when they are on the bench making it both socially and professionally a disconcerting place to be.

For many, including myself, exhortations to temporal and geographic flexibility combined with high levels of insecurity did not just mean increased stress and less time with friends but also that it was impossible to build up a routine. The disruption of patterns of social interaction, habits and familiarity is integral to the failure of many consultants to be able to *trust* in personal, social and organisational structures that provide what Giddens calls 'identity stabilizers'. In existentialist terms: the 'system [of habit] is the basis of our action. If we do not know the nature of a danger, we make an assumption. Without such an assumption, we cannot act …man neither knows what he could nor what he should do' (Riezler, 1960: 152). Disruption to routine has long been accepted as a key contributor to stress, anxiety and psychiatric disorders (Schultz and Schultz, 1994; van Tilburg and Vingerhoets, 2005) but in consulting the performative ideal that is promoted by both employers and clients is one that embraces these instabilities rather than avoid them.

Limits to Learning

In practitioner literature training is usually presented as a sign of good HR practice. The model of learning promoted by most professionals follows similar cycles of learning new skills, practicing the skills so they become habitual and then developing expertise through continuous improvement. The ultimate aim is to have become so proficient that the practice of 'excellence' is both instinctual and subconscious. However, in the consultancy world, the need to meet the varied demands of new projects often means that consultants have to learn skills excessively fast and never achieve proficiency, let alone expertise is any skill-set. It is suggested here that this practice is not only stressful but also leaves the individual in a state of uncertainty as partial learning leaves the consultant reliant upon the interventions of others and unable to trust their own knowledge.

Much of the work I undertook at Zantax was highly specialised and ranged from running training seminars and putting together 'culture change' proposals, to gathering requirements for new computing systems and designing web-pages. The method of business development at Zantax was to bid for projects and then 'shoe-horn' existing resources into whatever skill sets were required rather than to propose projects based upon what skills their employees currently possessed. The short-term nature of many projects meant that many skills had to be learned from scratch in a short period of time. For the uninitiated, undertaking systems analysis, learning the

nuances of different software packages or designing a corporate strategy proved both demanding and stressful, often pushing the brain further than it was capable. The effects of this were both exhaustion and a constant feeling of uncertainty (and guilt) as one's skills were rarely adequate to the task or indeed what the client had been told to expect.

A fairly typical example of learning on a new project was on Boxing Day, 2002. Simon, my (new) boss phoned me close to midnight to tell me about a new client. The conversation contained the following exchange:

Boss: "What do you know about 3G?"
Me: "Nothing, why?"
Boss: "You've got an interview tomorrow morning in Basingstoke with a client starting a new 3G company. I'll email you some websites to read tonight."

I was awake until 3.00am reading the relevant documents about 3G radio networks and then left at 6.00am to get to Basingstoke for my interview at 7.30am. After the interview, Simon informed me that he'd rewritten my CV to make it more "amenable" to the interviewer. In effect, I had been sold into Three as a (senior) Business Analyst. Surprising I got the job. Now, Business Analysis requires a very specific skill set. At its simplest it involves the translation of the business needs of a project into technical structures for systems analysts and technical architects. As such, one needs to be able to communicate with product and marketing teams regarding costs, quality and usability and to turn this information into useful requirements for the I.T. department. Often complex computing languages and systems methodologies would have to be learned to communicate effectively with different parties and tools such as crash courses in metadata, class diagrams and systems requirements would need to be undertaken in one's own time. At the time I not only had no idea what these phrases meant but had also been placed in charge of two teams of employees who had been doing business analysis for some years. Regardless of the issues regarding integrity and honesty (which are discussed later), it was made clear to me by Simon that aside from the thirteen hour days (often 6 and 7 days a week), I should also be undertaking a crash course in these disciplines.

The structural conditions that lead to such pressures come, in part, from the exposure of consultancies to economic cycles. During boom periods (such as from 1998 – 2003) consultancies cannot hire enough experienced people to meet demand and are forced to 'upsell' their relatively new hires into positions that they may not be prepared for. Many of my colleagues reported similar experiences: having to present proposals to clients having been given a days' preparation, having their CVs rewritten at short notice before an interview, or having to learn the language and skills necessary for the role whilst on the job. One of the first projects I worked on was the presentation of a communications proposal to the board of a major UK bank for a joint-venture. For this project I was being sold in as a "communications consultant" and was working with a "senior communications consultant" who was actually an expert in enterprise software. We had worked on the proposal for about a week previously which meant not only creating the presentation and handouts, but also learning what a 'communications proposal' looked like, the language that would be expected and the basic skills required, such as handling media enquiries, designing press releases and the foundations of libel law. As one of my first experiences, the presentation was embarrassing, awkward and unsettling. Although the presentation was reasonably successful (we were asked back a few weeks later) I felt duplicitous and completely out of my depth, not knowing either what to say nor understanding much of what was being discussed. This form of uncertainty, not being able to trust our own knowledge, was a constant feature of consulting for the first few years and one that caused many young colleagues of mine to leave to profession through disillusionment as well as stress.

Regardless of the time constraints and stress involved, learning new skills and keeping them up to date are essential for consultants given the job insecurity they are exposed to. As many writers have noticed, fashions change frequently in the consulting industry (Collins, 2004; Newell and Robertson, 2000) and it is vital for consultants to keep abreast with new developments. However, given the pressures of being a 'fee-earner', training as a consultant was much less frequent than many of us would have liked. The pressure to learn quickly and the incomplete nature of much learning left me frequently feeling undermined, not being able to trust in my own competence and constantly lacking the knowledge necessary for action. In existential terms, this insecurity of knowledge is fundamental to the inability to develop the levels of trust that are necessary for secure identities (Giddens, 1991). However, contrary to Giddens' arguments, the organisation (in this case) acts not to 're-embed' trust but instead to undermine it. The partial nature of the consulting performance did not simply undermine the consultants' trust in their own actions but also, as we discuss below, the trust between themselves and the client.

Trust and authenticity

These temporal and geographic forms of pressure not only affected consultants while at work but also disrupted the architecture of home life through more than simple absenteeism. The common practice for consultancies to provide employees with perks such as gym membership, discounted tickets and reductions off restaurants and bars near clients meant that any social time was monopolised by venues near the client organisation. This was especially so as consultants were required to socialise with clients both develop an impression of *bonhomie* and to befriend decision-makers that might later be deciding upon their services. An example of this, in which I was involved, was in 2001 at BAT's stunning headquarters in Temple, London. Here, smoking was possible anywhere in the building as, at this time, the company was still denying the link between passive smoking and chronic disease[3]. As I had asthma, I asked my boss if I could be moved to another project or simply work from home on 'back office' duties. His refusal was not based upon the fact that my skills would be missed but that I had "built up a great relationship with" one of the key stakeholders at BAT and that my absence might damage the relationship between Zantax and company.

These relationships are key to the structure of the consultant / client interaction. Whilst the textbooks rarely talk of the social aspect to contracting, it was seen as crucial by all consultancies I worked with. Consultancies would often go to extremes to befriend key decision makers such as joining their local golf club, spending thousands on complimentary trips for their families and in one (possibly apocryphal) case renting a flat next door to their own. Whilst consultants often get criticised for such practice, what is rarely considered is the effect of the duplicity on the consultant involved. In existentialist literature, false personas and relationships lead to an experience of what existentialists term 'inauthenticity', an acting out of 'being' that results in one's dislocation from what one is feeling. A commentary by the philosopher Bryan Magee argues that 'we go back into the kind of conformity which is required of everyone if they are to be intelligible. We do what one does and talk as one does but we use these norms to flee unsettledness. We become conformists. We can try desperately to shape up to the norms to pronounce things the right way, dress the right way et cetera. That's how one flees into inauthenticity' (1987: 267). A good example is provided by Sartre in his earliest novel, Nausea,

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[3] "The science on ETS and chronic diseases, such as lung cancer and heart disease, is in our view not definitive and at most suggests that if there is a risk from ETS exposure, it is too small to measure with any certainty": www.bat.com (March, 2006).

'let us consider this waiter in the café. His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too quick…his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer… he gives himself the quickness and pitiless rapidity of things…the waiter in the café plays with his condition in order to realise it' (1965: 22).

Due to the rapid movement between projects and the intense internal competition in consultancies, trust between consultants was minimal and relations were often artificial and inauthentic. I didn't trust other consultants with personal information and did not expect to be trusted myself. It was made clear to me by the Head of Department at Zantax that "you are very much on your own out there….but you'll get paid for bringing the money in". Success required that clients would keep me on when they were sacking others which in turn required me to compete with other consultants both in terms of performativity, politics and socialising. At the same time, I could hardly distrust information that was given to me by members of my own team, especially when it was necessary for operational decisions. I personally was, for some time, at a disadvantage at Three, knowing next to nothing about business systems but having to run teams that were responsible for them. This paradox of not trusting but being unable to completely distrust one's own colleagues made both personal relationships and operational 'normality' virtually impossible. This contradiction is reminiscent of a scene in Laing and Esterson's *Sanity, Madness and the Family* (1970) in which the mental patient Maya Abbott perceived her parents to be conspiring against her, and for very good reason:

> 'her mother and father kept exchanging with each-other a constant series of nods, winks, gestures, knowing smile, so obvious to the observer that he commented on them after twenty minutes' (Laing and Esterson, 1970: 40).

However, one source of Maya's instability was in her inability to trust either what she perceived to be the case or to distrust her own parents. In effect she was incapable of distrusting or trusting:

> 'Much of what could be taken to be paranoid about Maya arose because she mistrusted her own mistrust. She could not really believe that what she thought was going on was going on." (Laing and Esterson, 1970: 40).

Low trust relationships were exacerbated with client employees who were suspicious (often rightly so) that consultants were being bought in to downsize the operation. There was also inevitably a certain amount of jealousy of people "doing the same work for double the money" as one client employee told me. This, more often than not, meant that employees treated consultants badly. In one company, a re-engineering exercise I was involved with suffered badly from all the usual forms of sabotage from client employees towards consultants: information was withheld, software and hardware was lost or damaged, confidential documents were leaked and relevant meetings weren't communicated. Whilst this behaviour was entirely understandable, the instinctual reaction of many consultants, including myself, was to react in kind. Trouble makers were identified and briefed against, processes were designed to minimize the power of awkward managers and useful information was hacked out of networked servers.

Clients also experience this 'angst' of not being able to trust but not being in the situation where they can distrust: clients usually call consultants in because they require expertise that they cannot find in-house. However, this lack of expertise places clients in a vulnerable situation in dealing with consultants as they are often in a weak position to judge the utility of the advice they were being offered. Of course, all clients know that consultants will attempt to sell as many services as

possible, however, they do not necessarily know the implications of what they are buying for their future dependency on the consultancy. For example, it was common to be called into a client organisation to undertake some for of Business Process Re-engineering, only to inform the client that for this to be done effectively, some form of 'data cleaning' would need to take place to ensure that all forms of data are consistent. Following this, a consultant might suggest an Enterprise Resource Planning system such as SAP or Oracle which would automate and speed up operational processes. Naturally, the client is wary of consultants selling more than is strictly necessary (or the client can afford) but does not always have the skills to decide which services they need.

One of the first projects I worked on was researching the business case for the purchase of a 3G UK telecoms licence for a large company. I dutifully did the research which indicated that spending upwards of £14bn on an unproven technology would be a significant risk that only a cash-rich and speculative investor should undertake (which the client was not). The eventual proposal that was presented by my manager, however, promoted the opposite point of view: that the purchase would make sense both strategically and financially. On questioning my manager it became clear that the reason for the change was not just that Zantax would be ideally placed to offer their services to support the new project but also that he personally would be ideal for a senior position rolling the project out. What surprised me most (at this early stage) was the complete disregard of any factors other than corporate and individual gain. Critical literature on consulting has consistently found this form of duplicity to be common in the consulting profession, however few writers have pointed out the effects on the *consultant* of being encouraged to become amoral in their working relationships. Authenticity and distrust is not just generated though the relationship with the client (as many observers have pointed out) but also because the consultant is acting out the role of a consultant rather than be honest both with themselves and with the client. The angst that many consultants experience, is, I believe, a direct result of acting both without the moral frameworks and trust that many workers take for granted. The destructive forces of these forms of distrust is noted by Casey in her study of a culture management programme, when she notes that that 'the general effects of the new culture [of the Hephaestus Corporation] in its half-hearted form are ambivalence. The psychological effects of the new culture encourage repression, anxiety, stress and neurotic compulsions. What is normal and encouraged at work is not in normal life' (1995: 156).

Cycles of emotional damage

On first joining Zantax, it surprised me how dismissive and critical many of the consultants were of the client employees. Regardless of whether we were bought in to sack people or to train them consultants held a derisory view of clients. Client employees were often described as "muppets" or "monkeys" regardless of any knowledge consultants had of them. The assumption of many consultants was that the client had called us in simply because their people weren't up to the job, rather than seeing our services as a specialism that most organisations had no need to maintain a permanent resource for. At British Airways, a colleague of mine got rebuked (by Zantax) for sending round a picture of massed ranks of zombies entitled "BA training seminar 2002".

Whilst in the first couple of companies I consulted at I was eager to please and fit in, this became less and less important as time went on. I noticed this change at the time and wrote in an email to a friend:
> *"after you've got up a 6.00 only to find that they* [the client team] *wander in at 9.30 you start to think: you deserve everything you get. But then you think 'well, if the boot was on the other foot'.....but to be honest I'm too tired and too sick of this to care any more…."*

This attitude in me, and others around me worsened, not just because client employees were (unsurprisingly) often rude, aggressive and unco-operative with us but because I actually started to care less and less about the personal and emotional impact my actions were having on other people. I felt like I was being treated like a robot and became increasingly comfortable in treating people the same way.

The violence of the language used for these encounters was often expressed in sexual or military metaphors. When sacking people, the most common term consultants used was to "fuck" them and it was not uncommon to walk in on a discussion of someone being "shafted" or "screwed" only to discover this referred to a particularly adept piece of politics on behalf of the consultant concerned. Similarly, expressions of "annihilation", "destruction" and "slaughter" would be used, especially in reference to process re-engineering when entire departments would disappear under the direction of the consultant. Whilst the violence of consulting rhetoric has been noticed by other commentators (Grint and Case, 1998) who argue this rhetoric fits with nationalist discourse, from my perspective it is more a result of with the dehumanization of the consultants themselves who cease to see individuals as humans. This disrespect for client employees is part of a morally destructive dependency between consultants and clients. Clients need the consultant but cannot trust them to act ethically whilst the consultant needs the client but is treated like a mere resource without the psychological, emotional or moral relationships necessary to live as a human. The result of this contradictory relationship is often that consultants respond by dehumanizing those they work with.

This detachment to human concerns is a phenomenon noted in many professions requiring high levels of reflexivity and 'acting out' (Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 1990). In their study of consultants and contractors, Barley and Kunda's note that 'contractors learned to disassociate their definition of self from the immediate context of their technical practice….' (2004: 217) and go on to illustrate some of the less human forms of this disassociation. Whilst this phenomenon is not normally identified as exploitation by organisational analysts, the detrimental affects on the humanity of the individual should not be underestimated: 'the identity protecting device of 'cool alternation' [is]… a syndrome that is no less crippling in its impact upon human existence than doggish devotion to a deified individual' (Willmott, 1990: 539). However, this intensely emotional experience is rooted in a structural relationship that encourages the treatment of consultants as machines, devoid of emotional or social needs. The objectification of the consultant that results from the conditions of their employment necessarily results in their own objectification of those they work with as well as their own perception of themselves. It was remarkable the number of consultants who believed that it was they who had failed by not being able to match the performative ideals of both clients and consultancies.

Conclusion

In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus tells us of a man that 'had lost his daughter five years before and he had changed greatly since and that experience had 'undermined' him. A more exact word cannot be imagined. Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined' (1955:12). It is the undermining of trust through consulting work that this paper argues results in the experience of ontological insecurity. At the core of the consulting relationship is a paradox that consultants experience in their day to day lives. They can neither be trusted by their own companies, their clients or their own colleagues, however, in order to function in any way they are forced to trust. This contradiction, I believe, produces angst which partially explains the high levels of stress and employee turnover in the profession. Contrary to Schwartz who suggests that work organisations perform an ontological function to keep the individual 'free from anxiety at the level of identity'

(1987: 333), the consulting relationship produces both personal and institutional insecurity and anxiety. Neither clients nor consultants can afford or achieve the high-trust relationships that the HRM literature often argues characterises highly skilled professions. However, neither institution nor individual can afford to completely distrust those they are working with. The characteristics of consulting work serve only to support this inconsistency: the consulting engagement is so fleeting that by the time bad advice or duplicity has been discovered, the consultant will usually be working for a different client and possibly for a different consultancy.

Consultants must be inauthentic whilst appearing authentic. They must appear friendly whilst being instrumental and must appear competent whilst often being the opposite. They are encouraged to act instrumentally, without loyalty or morality and befriend clients so be harder to remove. Often these tensions produce an ambiguity and inconsistency that many writers have identified. However, unlike many jobs where some form of acting out or habit allows individuals to produce secure identities, the consultant is always insecure and incapable of trusting or being trusted. At worst, this not only produces a deep seated angst with regard to the consultant's own being but also powers a cycle of damage between consultant and client employees that dehumanises both.

A consequence of not being trusted and not trusting is the treatment of employees and colleagues as objects. The ideal of consulting practice is, perhaps necessarily, amoral and inhuman. To succeed, all forms of psychological and social relationships must be externally exploited and internally suppressed. Clients are deceived, colleagues are undermined and the employer can only be trusted to be untrustworthy. A common way of theorising this in the organisation studies literature is to use Goffman's front-stage / back-stage framework. However, this concept of a consulting performance (e.g. Clark and Salaman, 1996: 104) in some ways under-estimates how the front-stage pressures undermine and dehumanize the back-stage self. The existential model, however, places an emphasis on how 'human beings are required to make their own identity, yet lack access to the moral resources that are critical for fulfilling this requirement' Willmott (1990: 539). The geographical, social and psychological instability encountered by consultants on a daily basis provides them with little to trust in, but the extent of their individualisation does not give them the luxury of distrust either.

There is, of course, some irony, in professing sympathy with workers who routinely earn over £70,000 and are in the profession voluntarily. However, two key points need to be made with respect to this charge. The first is that the profession of consultancy is highly addictive: one quickly gets accustomed not only to the money but to the reputation, the change and, in some cases, the stress. I personally had much difficulty in adjusting to the frameworks of morality and trust that are much stronger in the academic profession. Secondly, this raises a challenge for what academics term exploitation. In a world where organisational controls over identities, values and cultures are as common as those over time, motion and output, should we be seeking to move away from the identification of the wage as the key component in exploitative practice. The biggest threat to the new forms of labour prevalent in the brave new world of consulting is not, I believe, the lack of money but the absence of humanity.

Despite the rather pessimistic tone of this paper it should not be assumed that all consultants suffer from the existential conditions that have been described here. Many of my friends still in the industry love the job, thrive on the pressure and believe they are more than adequately compensated for the personal difficulties they face. The exposure I had at Zantax was more extreme than that faced by most consultants, many of whom will stay with clients for years, building up routines virtually indistinguishable from that of client employees. However, many admit that the experience has made them less trusting and more distanced from social

relationships. Such an observation raises difficulties to finding an answer for the question of "what should be done?". Unlike traditional accounts of exploitation where improvements to wages or basic working conditions can be recommended the consequences of interventions in such an industry might outweigh the symptoms identified in this paper. When graduate populations are higher than ever and competition for skilled jobs increasingly rare, it is difficult and perhaps unwise to convince debt-laden students that they should be more concerned with their identities than with their bank-balance. However, this is perhaps one of the emerging challenges of the post-industrial world.

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