

SELECTION AND ENGAGEMENT OF PROFESSIONAL CONSULTING SERVICES: DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES USED BY PROJECT MANAGEMENT OFFICES IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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Abstract: This study investigates decision-making processes used by South Australian Project Management Offices to select and engage professional consulting services. A range of published literature was examined to determine the extent to which decision-making processes and inputs have been documented to date; the review found that while the literature discusses a variety of client-consultant interactions, it is typically viewed from a post-selection context, and provides a little evidence-based examination of the decision-making factors that precede such engagements. Research into this topic was conducted by interviewing eight project management professionals from different industry backgrounds and employment arrangements. The factors and relationships described were used to develop and promulgate a decision-making framework. Client organisations are anticipated to find this framework useful when establishing the most appropriate resourcing arrangements of their projects, or in making more generalised decisions around their use of consultant services. Consultants are also anticipated to find value from this framework as it will provide a useful reference-point of client engagement motivators and processes.

KEYWORDS: PROJECT MANAGEMENT OFFICE, PMO, DECISION-MAKING, CONSULTING SERVICES

1. INTRODUCTION

The significant diversity and dynamic nature of projects typically mean the composition and nature of Project Management Offices (PMOs) are inherently diverse. A key component of this is the way in which these offices procure professional services from the marketplace to assist in the delivery of projects. While in-house capability may be present in significant ways, organisations still typically opt to engage the services of external consultancies in some capacity. Patton, McClung & Andrews (2012) state that as organisations adopt project management as a competency many seek the advice of external consultants to develop or enhance their project management capabilities and mitigate risk. The temporary and ‘uniqueness’ of projects also contribute to this and, as Nesheim & Smith (2015, pg. 256) note, necessitates “numerical flexibility and the demand of specialized competence”. This is a sentiment also supported by the PMBOK® Guide (A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge, (PMBOK® Guide) – Sixth Edition (Project Management Institute 2017) which describes advantages of flexibility and lower cost; albeit at the expense of control, communication and monitoring. These factors clearly have the potential to impact project workplaces and authors like De et al. (2008) discuss literature related to the psychological nature of temporary employment (as well as its increasing prevalence) in a broad context, while the work of Smith (2012) examines this in a project management context.

PMOs consistently require a wide and diverse range of inputs for the successful completion of projects. Because of this, it is typical to find project teams comprised of permanent employees and contracted professionals. While the underlying reasons for this engagement appear to relate to the need for numerical flexibility, lower cost and specialized competence, these explanations emerge as passing observations of the available literature rather than components of considered research. The broader context of this limited research is an acknowledged potential for project management team composition to impact project outcomes (Wen, Qiang & An 2017) and thus organisational strategy (Aubry et al. 2012). Given such wide-ranging implications, examining the decision-making behind the engagement of

external consultants are important to establish its contribution to organisational project management capability. The available literature describes and examines the impact of using external consultants typically from a post-selection context rather than examining the underlying decisions which generate these engagements. Moreover, the sources uncovered which do remark on potential factors behind this decision-making do so without explicit evidence. The introductory comments of studies like Richter & Niewiem (2009, pg. 275) support this as they note “...surprisingly little empirical evidence has been produced” in relation to client-consultant engagement decisions. Like Smith (2012), even the work of Richter and Niewiem (2009) and more recently Nesheim & Hunskaar (2015), examine client procurement decision-making through the prism of ‘knowledge sharing’ rather than a broader gamut of decision-making inputs and processes.

Accordingly, the objective of this paper is to answer the following research question:

What decision-making processes are used by South Australian Project Management Offices for selection and engagement of professional consulting services?

The study addressed this question through interviews with project management professionals of client and consultant organisations in South Australia and using their responses to develop a decision-making framework. The study thus contributes significantly to the knowledge around the use of external consultants in this region, as confirmed by the widespread use of consultants within project teams, the impact of project team composition on project success and the size of the identified knowledge gap. The research thus provides an evidence-based entry point not previously available to researchers, clients and consultants alike.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides an explication of relevant literature in the field of professional consulting services; Section 3 describes the research methods employed in this study; Section 4 presents the results and subsequent discussion; and Section 5 addresses the conclusions, limitations, and provides recommendations for further research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The PMBOK® Guide (PMI 2017, pg. 4) provides an appropriate starting point of the available literature. The role of this publication as a prominent tool of project management means the processes and methods it describes can be considered common practice and its regular revisions ensure it remains relevant to current approaches and conventions. While the PMBOK® Guide describes the changeable nature of projects and the flow-on effect this has on project team composition, this is in broad ‘Resource Management’ terms with only a cursory list of tailoring considerations. Further reference to sourcing or procurement of project team members is similarly general with the provision of a multi-criteria decision analysis of generic factors such as availability, cost, ability, experience, knowledge, skills, attitude and international factors.

Specific studies of project teams like Anantatmula’s (2016) ‘Project teams: a structured development approach’ provide a more in-depth discussion, though it is from the perspective of team dynamics, identity and relations. Additional works related to project management teams provide means of classification (Zhou, Cheung & Hsu 2017), characteristics of integrated teams (Aapaoja et al. 2013) and examinations of relationship variables (Henderson, Stackman & Lindekilde 2016). Broadly these speak to a focus on human resource management, which is a well-examined facet of project teams that intersects naturally with elements of human capital (Vicentini & Boccardelli 2014), organizational culture and leadership behaviour (Yukl 2012). While valuable to the project management body of knowledge, this research generally does not address the underlying decision-making that drives the engagement of externally employed project team members.

Given the wealth of human resource-related project management literature available it is understandable that research focused on procurement/employment arrangements of project team member’s preferences elements of knowledge sharing. Examples of this include Nesheim & Hunskaar (2015) and Nesheim & Smith (2015) who describe effective knowledge sharing as integral to enabling information flow and improving the quality of project outcomes, and Evans et al. (2020) who discuss the criticality

of trust and collaboration among stakeholders as a contributor to success in partnering projects. These studies primarily examine the impact of different employment arrangements in relation to this concept but also include considerations that mirror the multi-criteria decision elements described by the PMBOK® Guide, such as trust, motivation, education and experience. The conclusions reached in relation to these considerations are useful in a general sense but in both cases examine them from a post-selection context, rather than as components of a decision-making process.

This post-selection context is a common focus of much of the literature available. De et al.’s (2008) literature review examines the psychological impact of temporary employment and provides a detailed conceptual model of considerations; albeit from the perspective of employee relations and socio-economic concerns. Project management-focused works are considerate of these factors, but the finite nature of project work shifts focus from the psychological effects of employment to their effects on the outcome of projects. Nitithamyong & Tan (2007) describe twelve factors of success for the performance of external project management consultants and note the underlying motivation of these engagements is generally to supplement existing capabilities. Wen, Qiang & An (2017) draw similar conclusions related to the need for additional capability but provide a useful summary of the literature around key client and consultant capabilities. The observed capabilities that overlap consistently between these two groups are technical, coordination, and decision management dimensions and this feeds the authors’ self-described theoretical contribution to a process-based model of client-consultant governance—which is not inconsistent with a general shift in PMO orientation toward corporate project governance models, as described by Kadenic and Tambo (2021). Such models are, again, directed towards clarifying or defining the relationship between project participants rather than determining its necessity.

The question of the necessity of external consultant engagement is described by studies like Wen, Qiang & An (2017) in terms of a “make” vs “buy” decision (i.e. in-house production or acquisition from the outside). Richter and

Niewiem (2009, pg. 276) makes a similar connection but describes this classification as over-simplifying the nature of the relationship noting “The commercial aspects of their [the consultants] transactions are embedded in a web of relationships that provide safeguards against the risk of opportunistic behaviour”. This point interlinks with the previously discussed focus on knowledge sharing but also illustrates the significant breadth and diversity in these relationships. Importantly, the conclusions of Richter and Niewiem’s (2009) work substantially evidence several of the decision factors described by the PMBOK® Guide (such as ability, experience, knowledge and skills) and provide insight into the importance of existing in-depth relationships influencing selection.

Discussions around the relationship between clients and consultants inevitably touch on some of the team dynamic considerations identified by Anantatmula (2016) but also the practices involved in this interaction. Nikolova, Reihlen & Schlapfner (2009) identify and examine three major practices that characterise this interaction (shaping impressions, problem-solving and negotiating expectations) using identified theoretical models and empirical investigation. While this examination (again) primarily works from a post-selection context it provides a useful distillation of the complexity and influence of these relationships. Further work by Nikolova, Möllering & Reihlen (2015) emanates from the same context but provides ‘aggregate themes’ of trust building in the client-consultant relationship. These themes of ‘signalling ability and integrity’, ‘demonstrating benevolence’ and ‘establishing an emotional connection’ are evidenced as key components of consultant selection (though not explicitly the choice to engage external consulting services). While it is clear relationships play an exceptionally important role in client-consultant engagements there remains ambiguity in how this relates to the decision-making process and some of the more measurable criteria that have been previously identified such as ability, knowledge and experience.

The consistency of client and consultant interactions is well-documented and, in many ways, an essential component of project management as it provides clients valuable opportunities to develop or enhance in-house capability

(Patton, McClung & Andrews 2012). Despite this, the literature reviewed consistently shows a bias towards the post-selection context of consulting services and typically focuses on elements of knowledge sharing, success factors and relationships. While these aspects are highly likely to play roles in the decision-making process of client’s explicit evidence is generally lacking. This shortage is acknowledged by Richter and Niewiem (2009, pg. 286) in the concluding remarks of their empirical study into client decision making, stating that “surprisingly little research has been done on this topic so far...” and “future research should seek to develop a conceptual model of the clients’ process for procuring and buying consulting and other professional services”. Subsequent studies examine facets of this recommendation (such as purchasing formalisation - Perner, Werr & Bianchi, 2014), but do not provide a rounded view of decision-making inputs and processes related to consultant engagement.

Given the limited extent of available research, a preliminary list of decision inputs still needs to be identified. While elements of the PMBOK® Guide’s multi-criteria decision analysis of availability, cost, ability, experience, knowledge, skills and attitude are broadly validated by the available evidence it is far from exhaustive. Other elements, such as the role of existing relationships, the coordination between both parties and expectations around performance, clearly play important roles in consultant engagement decisions. Further research is necessary to identify and report on the decision inputs, considerations and influencing factors that are driving the engagement of professional consulting services. From this research, a framework should be developed to enable interpretation and promulgation of the data, perhaps in conjunction with a framework for knowledge management in PMOs, as espoused by Thang Le et al. (2016).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The nature of the research topic is fundamentally suited to qualitative methods because of the observed ambiguity around decision-making processes and inputs of consultant engagement. Qualitative techniques are a well-established and appropriate means of achieving this as they provide an avenue to describe relationships, process and settings in

ways that allow contextual interpretation (Peshkin 1993; Leedy & Ormrod 2010). Many studies in the project management body of literature meet this criterion and as a result, quantitative research methods (particularly interviews) are common. Clegg et al. (2018) describe several such studies and advocate the value of ‘practice and practice-based research’ in highlighting the common disjoint between rational assumptions and project reality.

3.1 Research Process

The findings of the literature review revealed a limited inquiry into the decision-making of PMOs regarding consultant engagement with much of the narrow information available suffering from a distinct lack of clarity and synthesis. In their descriptions of quantitative methods Leedy & Ormrod (2010) advocate the use of interviews to yield useful information that can encompass a range of objective and subjective elements within a consistent setting. Given this, and the stated aim of identifying decision inputs, considerations, and influencing factors, the preferred means of data collection for this study was via 8 to 10 face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with project management professionals.

In addition to being an appropriate method of data collection, the use of interviews is also in-keeping with much of the relevant literature, enabling a useful basis of comparison and contextualisation. While the literature review identified several potential decision factors, the linkage or interaction between each remains unclear, indicating the importance of establishing the context in which factors interact. To this end, interviews provide a means of comparing theory with reality in a practice-based approach which is useful to “explore the wider context of project management practice” (Clegg et al. 2018). The use of interviews in this study also mirrors the work of similar studies like Richter and Niewiem (2009), who selected from a cross-section of consultant and client organisations with preference given to individuals with direct experience of the service procurement process.

Finally, the broader academic literature is also used to guide the creation and promulgation of a decision-making framework, which is based on the collected data. The nature of this research seeks to generate a theory based on findings and data (rather than to test a single theory, which would potentially disregard context) that is then analysed, synthesised and drafted into a framework (see **Figure 1**). This inductive approach (i.e. seeks to create an empirical generalisation; Ketokivi & Mantere 2010) is comparable to the work of Fernandes, Ward & Araújo (2015), whose research provides a relevant reference point and template.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The interview format of this research has been designed to provide participants an opportunity to describe the decision-making processes they are familiar with when selecting and engaging professional consulting services. In keeping with this, interview questions were generated based directly on the stated research objective. Interviewees were selected from a diverse range of industries and employment backgrounds to generate a range of views within different contexts. Once a participant was initially contacted, briefed and had agreed to an interview, they were supplied with a formal introductory letter (based on the provided UniSA ‘Participant information sheet template’; refer Appendix C), consent form (refer Appendix D) and question list.

The data of this research study was sourced from interviewees chosen from the local project management environment. At the commencement of each interview the participant was re-briefed on the aim of the study, notified of the intent to record all answers and informed of the intended future usage of their answers. A semi-structured format was used to elicit a greater depth of response and explore pertinent areas of discussion. To enable a contextual comparison and triangulation of answers with the literature, the professionals selected were evenly split between client and consultant organisations. Additional details such as level

of experience, industry and job description were also recorded.

Once all interviews were transcribed and organised, responses were reviewed and distilled using thematic analysis to identify or ‘code’ the main topics of each answer and initially establish the key inputs behind the decision-making to engage consultant services. From this the broader circumstance, depth and immediacy of answers were considered to establish a basic weighting of the described topics. This enabled simple analysis of responses to identify common decision-making inputs, considerations and processes adopted by South Australian PMOs.

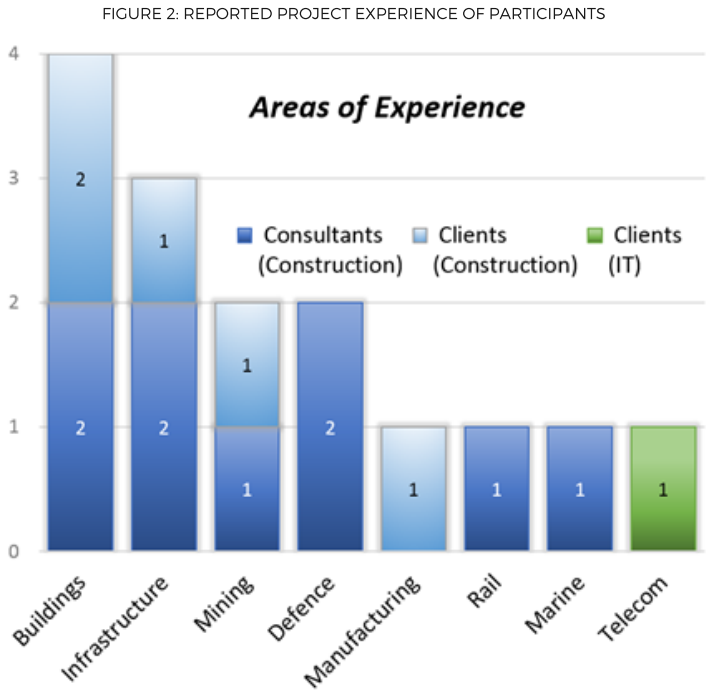
The impact of influencing factors underlying South Australian PMO decision-making processes was examined by asking interviewees to describe how the noted considerations were incorporated into a process, the formality of this and its perceived suitability. To contextualise these responses, follow-up questions were also asked to determine the underlying organisational or project factors which may impact or influence this decision-making. This facilitated a considered understanding of why and how PMOs in South Australia were deciding to engage consulting services and informed the development of a framework.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of eight professionals were interviewed with each interview averaging 25 minutes and 4,000 words once transcribed. While evenly distributed between client and consultant organisations, respondents were significantly weighted towards construction industry project experiences. It should be noted that the data from the single IT industry respondent provided a consistent point of difference in response. **Figure 2**, below, illustrates the distribution of experience reported by the interviewees (noting many reported project experiences in more than one sector, particularly the consultants).

The positions held by the respondents ranged from Project Managers through to Directors with the majority (6 out of 8) operating in large organisations (more than 200 employees). All interviewees were employed directly by the private sector, though many noted ongoing engagement with public sector organisations.

Despite appropriate introductions and briefing on the topic materials, several of the participants appeared to initially misunderstand the avenue of inquiry. A common misunderstanding amongst the chosen consultants was the assumption that consultants should solely talk in terms of



their engagement of other sub-consultants, rather than why they themselves would be engaged. Discussions of selection criteria and even post-selection performance evaluations also provided periodic digressions.

The research and results of this study are varyingly reflective of the broader body of literature. The qualitative interview approach and thematic analysis techniques are both highly consistent with the relevant research (particularly Richter and Niewiem 2009 and Fernandes, Ward & Araújo 2015), enabling confidence in the comparability of the findings. In contrast to this, however, is the construction industry background of most participants, who's answers were relatively homogenous in comparison to the IT-based participant. Additionally, the noted tendency of several interviewees to discuss consultant engagement from a post-selection context mirrors much of the existing research (such as Nikolova, Reihlen & Schlapfner, 2009 and Nikolova, Möllering & Reihlen, 2015). This focus implies the observed bias in the literature may be reflective of a general bias amongst project management professionals.

Although the respondents were selected from a diverse range of organisations, the design of the study was intended to identify specific differences between client and consultant observations, by selecting an equal number of each. While this was certainly achieved, and has allowed a greater depth of analysis, it was not anticipated that the consultants would also have simultaneous experiences acting as consultants and clients through the engagement of sub-consultants. This underscores the notes of Richter and Niewiem (2009) regarding the complexity of relationships, which are exemplified by most participants providing examples of previous consultant and client relationship dynamics shaping the prospect of future engagement. Nikolova, Reihlen & Schlapfner's (2009) three 'major practices' and Nikolova, Möllering & Reihlen's (2015) 'aggregate

themes' are largely endorsed by these examples. When combined with the broader content of the interviews, this provides some insight into how relationship factors relate to some of the more measurable aspects of consultant engagement decisions.

4.1 Common Decision-making Inputs, Considerations and Processes

Question 1 of the interviews prompted subjects to identify common decision-making inputs and considerations when deciding whether to engage external consultants on a project. Most participants had an initial response of at least two factors they considered key, with subsequent discussions establishing a more diverse variety of answers. The thematic analysis of these answers yielded 13 distinct factors of decision making. These noted factors were then weighted as either 1 (major/significant) or 0.5 (minor/less significant), as seen in **Table 1** below.

The data produced by this exercise demonstrates a straightforward hierarchy of factors and a relatively even distribution of weightings between clients and consultants (with the possible exception of risk mitigation). It is pertinent to note that the answers provided by the single respondent from an IT project management background yielded two of the lowest answers (Internal network and Conflict of interest). The majority of interviewees (6 out of 8) considered personal experience as the basis of the described decision factors.

The spread of considered decision-making factors validates many of the factors identified in the literature. Given the PMBOK® Guide's (2017, pg. 332) multicriteria decision analysis makes available a concise list of these factors, which was broadly validated by the wider literature, it provides an appropriate starting point of research comparison. The criteria of 'availability, cost, ability, experience, knowledge and skills' are conceivability represented by the data, with the more ambiguous 'attitude' partially addressed by the relationship-related or contextual comments of the interviewees and 'international factors' not specifically identified at all. **Table 2** below compares the criteria discussed by the PMBOK® Guide with the factors identified by the research:

Factor	Description	Responses		
		Consultants	Clients	Total
Capability (internal skillset)	Available skillset of personnel in the client organisation	3.00	3.00	6.00
Internal capacity	Workload of personnel in the client organisation	3.00	2.00	5.00
Risk mitigation	Transferal of responsibility for project delivery	3.00	1.00	4.00
Specialist knowledge	Specific knowledge offered by consultants	1.00	2.00	3.00
Objective 3rd party	Opinion free from organisational influence	0.50	1.50	2.00
Flexibility	Ability to engage and un-engage as necessary	1.00	0.50	1.50
Outcome orientation	Client prioritization of achieving an end goal irrespective of employment	0.50	1.00	1.50
Track record	Experience and ability to deliver project outcomes	1.00	0.50	1.50
Project complexity	Level of complexity necessitating consultant input	-	1.00	1.00
Cost Efficiency	Cost savings associated with utilising consultant resources	1.00	-	1.00
Timeframe	Additional resources to meet a specific deadline	-	0.50	0.50
Size of the client	Size of the client organisation behind the project	-	0.50	0.50
Internal network	Awareness of relevant client personnel	-	0.50	0.50
Conflict of interest	Appropriate use of consultants in positions of authority	-	0.50	0.50

TABLE 1: WEIGHTED SCORING OF RESPONSES TO QUESTION 1

PMBOK Guide Criteria	Research Factor	Response Weight	Notes
Availability	Internal capacity	5.00	Clear and straight-forward alignment. <i>PMBOK</i> criteria does not distinguish between internal or external capacity.
Cost	Cost Efficiency	1.00	Clear and straight-forward alignment.
Ability	Track Record	1.50	Responses generally considered Track Record a combination of experience and ability (length and quality of the track record).
Experience			
Knowledge	Specialist Knowledge	3.00	Clear and straight-forward alignment.
Skills	Capability (Internal skillset)	6.00	<i>PMBOK</i> criteria does not distinguish between internal or external skills.
Attitude	-	0.00	No specific/comparable factors were identified.
International Factors	-	0.00	No specific/comparable factors were identified.

TABLE 2 COMPARISON OF PMBOK® GUIDE FACTORS TO RESEARCH RESPONSES

It should be acknowledged that the factors listed by the respondents are generally from a less neutral perspective than the PMBOK® Guide, and this is likely to be due to the PMO reference of the research question (and subsequent interview questions). Aside from the non-aligned factors noted above, one of the more critical differences in this comparison is the risk mitigation factor. The notable omission of risk mitigation from

the PMBOK® Guide's criteria is presumably because an entire knowledge area is devoted to this consideration. Despite this, and in the context of risk mitigation being the third-highest weighted factor of this research, the methodology does not delve into the use of external parties to manage risk in any serious detail. Similarly, the wider literature only acknowledges this factor in passing, which may be because of a recognised separation of project

management tools and risk management (Rodney et al. 2015). Beyond the PMBOK® Guide's criteria, several of the additional factors noted in the literature review are validated by this research. The ability to coordinate between both parties (a factor derived from the research of Nesheim & Hunskaar, 2015 and Nesheim & Smith, 2015) is represented by the 'internal network' factor, and to a lesser extent 'flexibility', given this characterises the general coordination of engagement. In addition, Wen, Qiang & An's (2017) observed capability of decision management, which is somewhat comparable to the 'project complexity' or 'specialist knowledge' factors, which describe the contribution of consultant knowledge to specific areas of decision making. Factors that were not found amongst the literature were 'Objective 3rd party', 'Outcome orientation', 'Timeframe', 'Size of the client' and 'Conflict of interest'. The identification and weighting of decision-making factors provide important validation of much of the literature's described criteria and introduce several additional factors. The collection of these factors through qualitative means is consistent with the methods employed by the comparable research and enables professionals and researchers alike a previously unavailable source of evidenced information around consultant engagement decision-making.

4.2 Impact of Influencing Factors underlying Decision-making Processes

Questions 2 and 3 were formulated to establish and examine the impact of influencing factors underlying South Australian PMO decision-making processes. Respondents broadly described a process of varying formality at the initial stage of projects where a scope would be primarily described and the need for consultants (based on the factors previously noted) also identified. When asked to consider the appropriateness of these systems interviewees noted a range of trade-offs related to the processes they described. Formal processes were considered appropriate from governance and risk assessment perspectives but still liable to bias, pre-judgment and inflexibility. Conversely, less formal processes were characterised by flexibility and knowledge sharing but were considered less value in reduced timeframes and liable to conflicts of interest when not properly implemented. Participants responses regarding the underlying organisational or project factors that impact or influence decision making varied more significantly than other answers. Although wide-ranging, within the context of each interview these responses established three key themes amongst client organisations and their engagement of consultant services, which are summarised in **Table 3** below.

TABLE 3: IDENTIFIED THEMES OF NOTED UNDERLYING ORGANISATIONAL AND PROJECT FACTORS

Theme	Description	Response Notes
Methodology governs engagement	Client <u>organisation's</u> capability and positioning plays heavily into consultant engagement decisions	- Noted reduction in employed personnel amongst construction project client <u>organisations</u>. - Client project managers were <u>characterised</u> as internal 'stakeholder' managers. - Methodology closely tied to a willingness to upskill/train existing personnel versus import.
Risk mitigation and transfer	Both clients and consultants consistently strive to balance risk/reward trade-offs	- Participants consistently alluded to, or mentioned directly, the impact of poorly considered risk management in monetary and reputational terms. - Client-employed respondents were comparatively less conscious of risk than consultant-employed respondents. - Perceived complexity (technical or otherwise) was implied to drive the engagement of consultants as a way of managing risk.
Relationships shape ongoing engagements	Consultant knowledge of client processes and personnel drives engagements and perceived value.	- Personal preferences, personalities and informal pre-judgements play substantive roles in the decision to engage. - Participants highlighted the need for consultants to understand client processes in order to validate their engagement value.

Finally, when asked to evaluate the organisational or project factors outside of their own organisations, client respondents were inclined to simply reiterate what had previously been described. Consultants also made similar restatements but several also considered the nature of consultant-to-consultant engagements and provided contrasting opinions on the ability of one consultant to manage another the other; particularly in comparison to a client. Establishing the environment of client-consultant engagement decision-making processes is important to examining the interaction of specific factors and broader contexts. The three key themes provided by the research results mirror and support the importance of the three 'major practices' of shaping impressions, problem-solving and negotiating expectations (identified by Nikolova, Reihlen & Schlapfner, 2009) and three 'aggregate themes' of signalling ability and integrity, demonstrating benevolence and establishing an emotional connection (provided by Nikolova, Möllering & Reihlen, 2015). While the third identified theme of the results ('Relationships shape ongoing engagements') aligns most obviously to the literature's practices and aggregate themes, the remaining two provide elements of comparison. Examples of this include the signalling of ability and integrity of consultants playing a role in validating the methodologies which preference the use of consultants over employed staff. Similarly, the theme of risk mitigation and transfer sees elements of negotiation of expectations and shaping of impressions as consultants navigate the risks of a given project. As noted earlier, risk mitigation and transfer is sparingly mentioned by much of the literature that surrounds consultant engagement decisions. Wen, Qiang & An (2017) do provide a commentary on the need to allocate risk between clients and consultants but this is primarily from the perspective of reducing risk by best aligning capabilities (they do not consider risk one of their 'key capabilities'). While these comments were partially supported by the research, the diversity of responses around this theme implies a more multifaceted approach to risk which incorporates elements of flexibility, reputation and monetary consequences. This is perhaps the most obvious departure of the research in comparison to the literature and implies that the noted independent application of project

management and risk management (Rodney et al. 2015) may be more present in the literature than in practice. Similarly, the prevalence of consultant consciousness around risk was also not anticipated by the reviewed literature, but this is innately logical given the expectation and consequence of managing significant portions of project risk. Beyond the perception of risk, the capability and positioning of organisations fundamentally impacted the engagement of consulting services. Most of the respondents identified some client organisations have a preference towards the engagement of consulting services for bulk of the required project work. In these instances, client project managers were characterised as 'stakeholder managers': necessary for managing the interaction of the project and relevant parties, but not automatically the project work itself. While this was not anticipated by the literature review in relation to the use of consulting services, this characterisation is consistent with the work of Koops et al. (2016), who associate it with more public sector-based project managers. While this association is partially reflected by the data (more participants associated with public sector organisations made this characterisation) it is only through general observation and is not explicitly evident. It is unclear from where these preferences for or against engaging consultants for project work originate as organisations in favours of both were represented in a variety industries by the data. The singular interviewee to provide reasoning for this was the sole IT project manager, who implied the uptake of an Agile methodology was the key driver away from the use of consultants. It is difficult to corroborate this with the available literature, which suggests a limited value in outsourcing for IT projects generally (Sutherland et al. 2007) and acknowledges project consultants within IT must develop diverse competencies to be effective (Ravi & Narayana 2013) but does not appear to make a methodology-related connection. More broadly, the literature simply does not make an explicit connection between underlying organisational positioning/methodology and consultant engagement and the available data does not provide significant clarity to this. The examination of the impact of influencing factors that underlie the selection and engagement of consulting

services presents a useful distillation of three key themes. These themes are present in the available literature in a general sense but are not found specifically in a consultant-engagement context. Because of this, this avenue of inquiry presents researchers a significant opportunity for further study and project professionals a contextualisation of their own experiences.

4.3 Selection and Engagement of Professional Consulting Services

The collected evidence identified the decision-making inputs related to client engagement of consulting services and established the underlying and influencing factors of organisations as well as the formality of their setting. The combination of these results is a sufficient basis to produce a theoretical framework of decision-making. The combination of establishing the decision-making factors of consultant engagement and the identification of the underlying themes enables a reconciliation of the two and the creation of an evidence-based decision-making framework. This conceptual framework has been generated based, in part, on the methods of Fernandes, Ward & Araújo (2015) and incorporates the organisational context of decision-making, the use of informal or formal processes and the consideration of evidenced decision factors. These elements are arranged by the framework to provide a clear mapping of their sequential contribution to project team composition and consultant engagement (see **Figure 3**).

The created framework considers the identified components of engagement decision-making and makes specific acknowledgment of the varying degrees of formality within which they are incorporated. Project management professionals can use this framework to consider their own experiences and to evaluate the nature of their organisations engagement process. The framework also creates a model for researchers to appraise their own understandings and shape more detailed consideration of the interaction of each component.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The review of available literature clearly identified a deficit in the existing body of research related to the selection process of professional consulting services. While a range of potential inputs and factors of influence were identified, it was unclear in what processes they are utilized or how they interact and impact consultant selection. Based on this finding, the purpose of this research project was to identify and report on decision-making processes used by South Australian Project Management Offices related to the selection and engagement of professional consulting services. Eight interviews with project professionals (four consultants and four clients) provided an appropriate qualitative dataset to conduct a thematic analysis and derive decision-making inputs, examine underlying influencing factors and develop a framework. These interviews confirmed many of the factors

recorded in the literature and provided a measure of their relative importance to one another. The top three most important factors were identified as capability (internal skillset), internal capacity and risk mitigation. Of these three, risk mitigation was not specifically identified by the literature and was considered of more importance amongst consultants than clients. This finding is a validation of the separation between risk management and project management noted by Rodney et al. (2015) and implies consultants are more conscious of risk management when being engaged than clients.

These decision-making inputs were then considered within the organisational and process contexts they operate. The research revealed a significant diversity of responses related to context and established the formality of the processes being used. From these answers three themes were established: methodology governs engagement, risk mitigation and transfer and relationships shape ongoing engagements. The identified theme related to relationships was found to be most directly supported by the literature described in the initial review. The remaining two themes were not identified in the relevant consultant-engagement literature but were able to be more generally validated by previously unrelated literature. The presence of these themes and the limited nature of any explicit support in relation to client-consultant engagement decision-making highlights that while factors outside of relationships dimensions are clearly present they remain under-researched and highly variable.

Finally, using the interview results and subsequent discussion, a conceptual framework was developed and promulgated. This framework incorporates the identified themes, processes and decision-making inputs into a sequential model which recognises the varying formality noted by respondents and establishes the contribution towards project team composition. Given the limited scope of existing academic inquiry, this study provides a significant contribution to a topic that is currently addressed through relationship or knowledge-sharing dimensions. It is anticipated that future researchers will be able to use this study as a basis of further inquiry regarding the themes of risk mitigation, client methodology or further evaluation of decision-making factors. Practicing

professionals will generally benefit from a previously unavailable clarity provided by the framework regarding the interaction and identification of underlying themes and the decision-making factors that motivate consultant engagement. Consultants specifically are provided an insight into the value clients perceive in their services. Client organisations are anticipated to find this framework useful when establishing the most appropriate resourcing arrangements of their projects, or in making more informed decisions around their use of consultant services.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

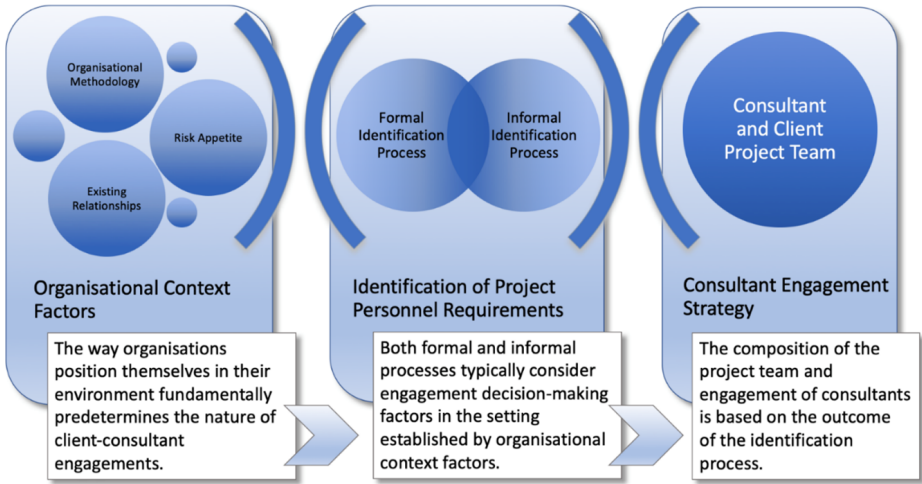
This study is limited by a range of factors related to the nature and extent of the data collected. Firstly, the sample size of eight, while carefully selected, is quite small and limits the validity of extrapolated themes and factors to broader contexts. In addition to this, the majority of organisations were large/over 200 personnel, meaning the idiosyncrasies of these entities are more likely to be emphasised. While not compellingly identified within the data as a differentiating factor, the majority of respondents coming from construction industry project management is highly likely to have increased the homogeneousness of results given the single IT respondent provided several differing points of view. Lastly, the use of thematic analysis techniques to produce quantitative data from qualitative methods is likely to have partially obscured some of the nuances of provided answers.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study has consistently highlighted the significant lack of evidenced literature related to the decision-making processes of PMO's to engage consultants. The collection, analysis and discussion of the research have identified the following opportunities of additional investigation:

- What are the most important decision-making inputs used by South Australian Project Management Offices for selection and engagement of professional consulting services?
- How does project management methodology effect decision-making to select and engage professional project management consulting services?
- How do risk mitigation and transfer affect decision-making to select and engage professional project management consulting services?

FIGURE 3: FRAMEWORK OF ENGAGEMENT DECISION-MAKING



- What are the interdependencies and interrelationships of Project Management Organisational capability, capacity, risk management on the selection and engagement of professional consulting services?
- What are the interdependencies and interrelationships of Project Management Organisational size, location, and project sizes on the selection and engagement of professional consulting services?
- What are the framework(s) of decision-making used in different project management industries for the selection and engagement of professional consulting services?

Clarification of the above questions would be best provided by triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data alongside the available literature.

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