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The relationship between consultants and clients in a tourism sector

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Abstract: Relationship between clients and consultants reveals and develops during the process of communication, for then not only do people interact, but also get to know each other. Methods of consulting should be based on information and applied in a more precise and understandable manner. Clients and consultants should discuss and argue when trying to protect their opinion, as well as to develop tolerance to the weaknesses of others. Empirical survey showed that clients consider the factors which, in their opinion, directly determine the efficiency of consulting to be more important. Consultants, similarly to clients claim that the factors of various capacities and competence are also relevant. However, factors related to the methodology of consulting are considered to be of the same importance. When assessing the influence of interpersonal factors to client and consultant relationship, both the consultants and clients indicated the importance and ability to manage conflicts as one of the important aspects of ethical conduct during a consultation. However, clients considered the factor of communication skills to be of a higher importance. They wished the consultant had tried to look from their angle and even eager for an emotional contact.

Keywords: consultation, client, consultant, relationship between clients and consultants.

Introduction

Consultation helps the clients to analyse the situation, to determine the problems and its possible solutions, to increase and deepen knowledge, develop perceptiveness, organize and direct the knowledge to the right way, gain professional knowledge, take reasonable and responsible decisions. Not only has the content of the consultation to be qualified, but also the relationship between clients and consultants has to be appropriate. A consultant must be capable of understanding the client, perceiving his feelings and personal features. Customer complaints about the work of consultants can not only affect the decision-making, but also have much influence on their relationship, whereas good client-consultant relationship and pleasing mutual interaction can definitely help to deepen of knowledge and make decisions.

From the managerial point of view, the interaction between consultants and clients is still in the stage of infancy. There is no clear definition of reasons and factors that determine the origination of certain consultant and client relationship.

The object of the research is the relationship between clients and consultants. The aim of the research is to analyse the relationship between consultants and clients in tourism sector and therefore to provide opportunities for the development of their relationship.

The methods of the research are: the analysis and synthesis of the scientific literature, comparative analysis, logical analysis, questionnaire, analysis of the statistical data and method of summarizing.

1. Role of the relationship between client and consulting company

The essence of consulting is to give a person help, which is used to receive information, master new working methods or restructure the old ones, predict oncoming activities in order to receive more efficient results and other related objectives (Melnikas, Strazdas, 1998).

Relationship between clients and consultants reveals and develops during the process of communication, for then not only do people interact, but also get to know each other (Želvys, 1995; Gayeski, 2000). When a person communicates, his aim is to understand the speaker and the problem in question, so, therefore, despite all the risk possible, he himself becomes more open for discussions. Only in such cases the communication gets meaningful (Fiske, 1998; Steele, 1999).

Consultants are seen as experts who have access to the knowledge base of a particular practice area and are able to develop solutions to problems within that area. This knowledge is not available, or at least not entirely, to a layperson, i.e. a client, which implies that consultants as experts possess an interpretive monopoly in their

respective knowledge and practice areas (Mintzberg, 1983; Stehr, 1994; Nikolova, Reihlen, Schlapfner, 2009).

“Consultants, like other specialists, occupy positions of relative power, as they are often the sole authorities on certain technical problems and their implications” (Gallessich, 1982, p. 381).

Consultants are seen as experts who have access to the knowledge base of a particular practice area and are able to develop solutions to problems within that area (Nikolova, Reihlen, Schlapfner, 2009).

The most important factor for the success of consulting projects and, consequently, for the survival of every consulting company is client-consultant interaction (Schön, 1983).

The role of the client is reduced to that of being an information supplier during problem diagnosis, without being actively involved in the creative part of the actual problem solving process. The role of the consultants is to adapt their abstract, general knowledge to the specific client situation in order to generate an adequate problem solution (Nikolova, Reihlen, Schlapfner, 2009).

Communication is a multisided phenomenon. As a matter of fact, the communication is subdivided into several types, groups and aspects. First and foremost, two types of communication should be distinguished: communication with oneself and communication with others (mutual, interpersonal) (Ковалёв, 1970; Kočiūnas, 1997).

As Baršauskienė under the observations of other researchers states, terms “interaction” and “communication” can be used as synonyms (Baršauskienė, 1999; 2003).

Consultants and clients make influence on each other by sharing information, emotions and feelings (Block, 2000). As a matter of fact, it forms particularly diverse and complex consultants-clients relations, which can be determined as the transfer and reception of information for finding the best solution possible, for making influence on each other, changing attitudes, feelings and behaviour in the process of consultation. These relations influence the moral state of both consultants and clients when interacting as well as the efficiency of consultant activity (Adamonienė, 2006; Barvydienė, 2003).

The communication takes place in two levels:

- content/business,
- emotional/interpersonal (Van Den Ban, 1999).

Factors that have much influence on operational relations are estimated by the objectives of operational communication that Baršauskienė subdivides into four categories: to find out, to inform, to convince and to keep attention (Baršauskienė, 1999). In order to reach the before-mentioned objectives in the process of consulting, the main factors determining the operational communications are to be assessed (Chreptavičienė, 2005).

In order to impress their clients and gain their business, consultants rely to a very high degree on rhetoric, images, metaphors, and humour (Greatbach, Clark,

2002). Consequently, consulting companies are via series of success narratives that act as substitutes for consulting company's ambiguous and vague knowledge base. Such narratives "define the managerial role" (Bäcklund, Werr, 2001; Clark, Salaman, 1998b) regarded as "systems of persuasion" (Alvesson, 1993, p. 1011) that communicate with clients (Nikolova, Reihlen, Schlapfner, 2009).

Interpersonal communication mostly refers to informal communication of people. It usually lasts for a longer or a shorter period of time and reflects the certain intellectual or emotional closeness of the communicating actors. Although it is not possible to draw a strict boundary between personal and operational communication, the exclusive features and goals of such communication lead to specific differences of these forms of communication (Savanevičienė, 2005). Above the four most important aspects of operational communication (to find out, i.e. to get additional information about the goods or services in question; to inform, i.e. to convey the positive, negative or neutral information; to convince the client that the decision is beneficial; and to manage keeping his attention) the human factor is also of significant importance. Therefore, the development of interpersonal relationship requires attention to a number of factors which can direct this relationship to a positive or rather negative direction. There are three main factors determining the efficiency of business relationship, such as ethical behaviour, conflicts and communication skills (Bowman, 1987).

A successful client-consultant interaction requires that clients and consultants jointly diagnose clients' problems and develop problem solutions, thereby leading to a balanced form of their interaction (i.e. with neither side dominating the relationship) (Nikolova, Reihlen, Schlapfner, 2009).

Schön and Schein emphasize that clients and consultants often speak "different languages" and have difficulties in communicating with each other. Thus, successful proposals to handle a problem require that clients and consultants make their interpretations clear to each other and commit themselves to a reflective investigation of their positions and interpretations. They need to develop "a common set of assumptions and (...) some common language" (Schein, 1999, p. 203; Schön, 1983).

This empirical research analyses how the main factors influence the operational and interpersonal relations between consultants and clients.

2. The results of the empirical research

The aim of the research is to assess the factors that mostly determine there-relationship between consultants and clients, as well as the influence of such factors on operational and interpersonal relationship of both the consultants and clients.

The survey method for the research was chosen. The questionnaire was made under the information provided in the scientific literature. Two different

questionnaires (forms) were used. One questionnaire was given to consultants and the other one was given to clients who used the service of consultants. Both groups of respondents had to evaluate the influence of the same factors to relationship in the scale of five (Likert scale). The research was performed by selecting consultants and their clients from three institutions that are as follows: *UAB Kauno Grūda*, *UAB Baltic Clipper* and *UAB Best Travel*.

In total, the survey included 15 consultants and 85 clients, i.e. 6 consultants and 35 clients from *UAB Baltic Clipper*; 5 consultants and 25 clients from *UAB Kauno Grūda*; as well as 4 consultants and 25 clients from *UAB Best Travel*.

Despite the fact that research represents only the relationship between consultants and their clients from the institutions that took part in this survey, the assumption can be applied to the tendencies dominating in all the companies providing consultation services.

The factors that influence the consultant-client relationship have been analysed pursuant to the classification of factors described in the scientific literature. In order to assess the influence of these factors to operational and interpersonal relationship between consultants and clients, the respondents (consultants and their clients) were asked to classify the importance of each and every factor in the scale of five. The relevance of one factor is described by several variables. Afterwards, scores of each variable and factor were calculated.

The process of consultation normally begins with the explanation of consultation goals and the determination of controversial issues. In this stage, the most important aspects are: to know whether a consultant is capable of listening to the client, and whether the client hears what the consultant is saying. These three variables form the ability to identify the problem (the factor). However, the assessment of this issue slightly differs from the consultant and client point of view, for the key element to clients is the ability listen ($M = 4.98$), whereas to consultants this element is less important ($M = 4.18$).

The opinion of both the consultants and the clients was mostly different when assessing the factor of consulting methodology. It consists of three variables such as: the application of methods used for providing information, the correctness of the information transmitted and assurance of feedback. If consultants consider the feedback and the application of consulting methods to be the most important variables, then clients pay most attention to the correctness of the information transmitted (see Figure 1).

The consultants and clients relations on this and also on critical perspectives on the management point of view analysed R. Fincham and stressed that the consultancy process contains no 'necessary' structures¹. Instead the consultant-client

¹ Which may be implied by pairings such as the dependent client and indispensable consultant, or alternatively the resistant client and vulnerable consultant.

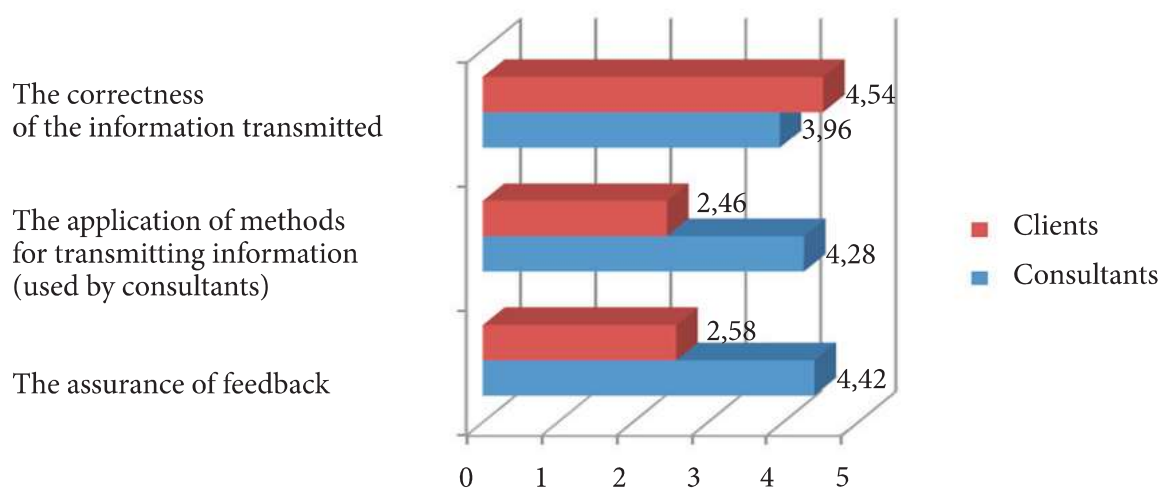


Fig. 1. The importance of consulting methods (factors) in numbers
Compiled by authors under the research results

relationship is best regarded as part of an overarching managerial structure and a contingent exchange that assumes a variety of forms (Fincham, 2006).

The analysis of consultants and clients of different consultation companies showed that the consulting methods applied by the consultants of *UAB Baltic Clipper*, *UAB Kauno Grūda* and *UAB Best Travel* were easily understood by clients, whereas the assessment of methods used by the consultants of *UAB Best Travel* were not as good as the before-mentioned ones'. All the consultants of the companies aim at ensuring the feedback from clients. For this particular reason, various methods are applied, such as asking to fill the evaluation form (*UAB Best Travel*); to express opinions and to put it into "the opinion box" (*UAB Baltic Clipper*).

However, the term "consulting methods" generally refers the mechanism of the connection between subjects, its form, communication for transferring information, channels and, therefore, is rather used when analysing activity of an organisation (Strazdas, 1995).

Referring to the results of the research, the retention of focus, the application of innovations and methods for making influence to human behaviour is much more important to consultants than to clients. The difference of the evaluation of the above-mentioned factors is slight (3.22 and 4.1). There is no doubt that all consultants try to keep the attention of clients; nonetheless, the number of successions is not total, especially when collective methods for consulting and training are applied. In order to maintain the focus of client(s), it is sometimes necessary to use the method of his/their knowledge manipulation, not to reject the client if his knowledge in a particular field is insufficient. The consultants of *UAB Baltic Clipper* and *UAB Kauno Grūda* usually work with clients individually.

In order to determine the influence of factors to business and interpersonal relationship between consultants and clients, respondents (consultants and their

clients) were asked to evaluate the importance of factor in the scale from one to five. Thereafter, the averages of these estimates were calculated. The aggregated evaluations of business factors are provided in Figure 2.

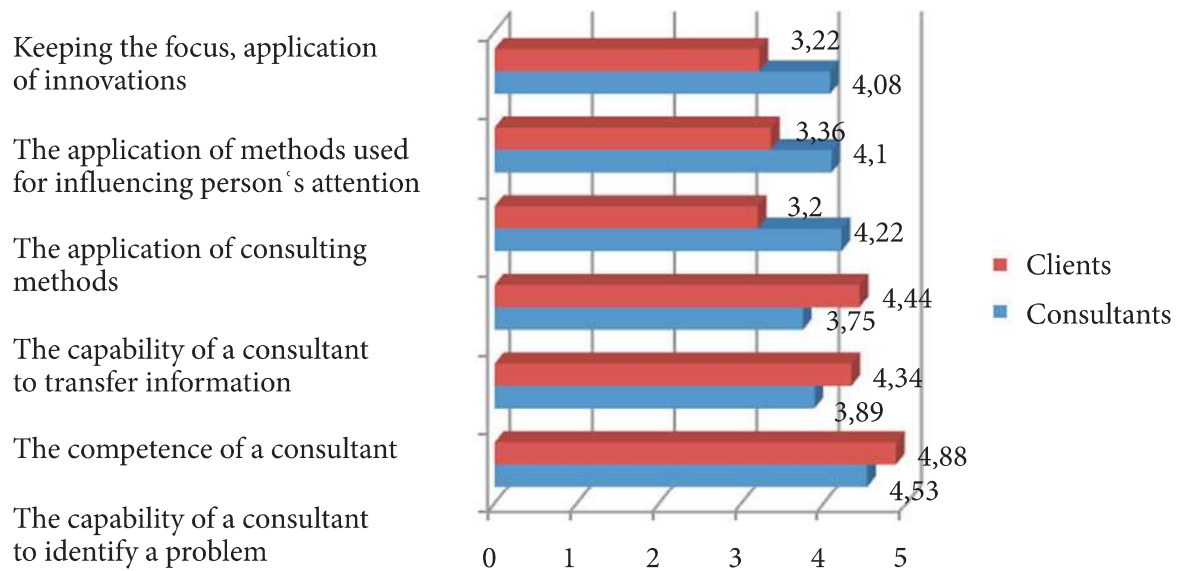


Fig. 2. The influence of business factors on the relationship between consultants and clients
Compiled by authors under the research results

The results of the research suggest that the influence of business factors to both the consultants and clients is extremely relevant. Clients particularly appreciate the competence of a consultant, his ability to identify the problem ($M = 4.88$) and to transfer information ($M = 4.44$). Nearly 87 per cent of all the respondents (clients) of the survey would like to see a consultant who is capable of identifying the problem quickly, correctly, who would understand what advice to give and provide a complete and competent answer to questions. Namely these factors were ranked as important and very important. Clients listed the capability of keeping the focus, applying innovations when consulting ($M = 3.22$) and the factors of invoking various consulting methods ($M = 3.22$) as less relevant. The influence of these factors was considered to be more important for consultants, since the importance of these factors was evaluated by more than 4 points in the scale. Such distribution of opinions was mostly determined by different experience of consultants and their clients. Consultants that have greater experience in consulting are familiar with the appropriate selection of consulting method for it leads to the succession of the work, which is, as a rule, not appreciated by clients.

The analysis of factors that have influence on interpersonal relationship reflects its almost equal importance to both the consultants and clients. The ethics of conduct is significantly important for both the consultants and the clients ($M = 4.54$ and $M = 4.74$ respectively). The clients wish the customers to act confidentially and the relationship to be based on universally acceptable principles and values. The consultants

understand that the assurance of confidentiality can help to guarantee a long-lasting communication and to achieve other goals of operational cooperation.

Both groups of respondents rated the capability of overcoming and solving complex situations as well as ability to behave calmly and kindly to be of the same importance.

The biggest difference of client's and consultant's opinions in the group of interpersonal factors appeared to be the evaluation of communication skills. This factor is extremely important for clients ($M = 4.54$), whereas consultants consider it to be of the less importance ($M = 3.45$). Approximately 75 per cent of clients think that consultants should try to look from the client's perspective, sensitively react to their feelings and emotions. However, consultants do not pay much attention to this factor and are tending to provide full information regarding the issue in question and avoid close connection. Both groups of respondents positively rate the respect that consultants show to clients.

In addition to the factors determining the relationship between consultants and clients, much influence has the experience of a consultant, his/her knowledge and skills.

The data received in all three consultation companies were quite similar, for both the clients and the consultants treated the process of consultation favourably. The analysis of the data showed that the assessment of clients in the consulting company *UAB Kauno Grūda* were more positive than in *UAB Baltic Clipper*, *UAB Best Travel*. Moreover, the consultants of the latter company were less self-confident as well as less eager to evaluate their relationship with clients.

The consultants of *UAB Baltic Clipper* indicated that they place dependence on their knowledge and information as well as the opportunity for clients to express their opinion. Despite the fact that consultants are quite flexible, they lack feedback. What is more, it was also noted that there are clients whose behaviour is improper. According to the consultants of *UAB Best Travel* and *UAB Kauno Grūda*, not all of them rely on their knowledge and information; not always do clients get an opportunity to express their opinion; sometimes there is a lack of flexibility; much effort is put to ensuring the feedback; consultants behave appropriately and confidentially.

Conclusions

1. Empirical survey of the importance and influence that professional factors have to the client-consultant relationship showed that clients consider the factors which, in their opinion, directly determine the efficiency of consulting to be more important (for example, consultant's ability to identify the problem, to transmit information as well as his competence).

2. Consultants, similarly to clients claim that the factors of various capacities and competence are also relevant. However, factors related to the methodology of consulting are considered to be of the same importance.
3. When assessing the influence of interpersonal factors to client and consultant relationship, both the consultants and clients indicated the importance and ability to manage conflicts as one of the important aspects of ethical conduct during a consultation. However, clients considered the factor of communication skills to be of a higher importance. They wished the consultant had tried to look from their angle and even eager for an emotional contact.
4. Consultant's ability to identify a problem has to be prompted by improving and developing their skills and competences in trainings, training courses leading to qualifications, seminars, long-term and short-term internships and permanent interest in the changes and innovations of this particular professional field. Consultants should also be encouraged to create consultant's memo.
5. When training a consultant to become an expert of his field, the system for competence development and refreshment of knowledge should be created. Not only would it provide a consultant with the latest information, but also motivate him to improve.
6. Consultants should encourage the feedback; listen to the suggestions and opinions of a client carefully and respectfully.

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