Launching Consulting Skills for 2030

by Mick James

March saw the publication of Consulting Skills for 2030, a major research project (sponsored by Sheffield Haworth) which sought to tap into the views of clients, consultants and other stakeholders on the key skills consultants will need to operate in the future.

The launch event attracted an equally varied audience, ranging from the head of training at a Big Four firm to consultants at the start of their careers. Lead editor and independent consultant Chris Sutton said he was delighted by discussion that followed:

"We got a good debate going, it was quite provocative but was glad that the conclusions were in line with my thinking".

One of the most surprising findings was that cybersecurity came out as the skill which would have the most impact. But seen in the context of risk management—a topic which informed a lot of the discussion—this made a lot more sense. Cybersecurity is such a massive potential roadblock to all the other developments that consultants will need to match and address boards' concerns to realise the benefits of other technologies such as robotics and AI.

More controversial was the disagreement between clients and consultants over the impact of these technologies—clients believe they will require a far more radical shift in consultancy sills, while consultants think they can take it in their stride.

A point raised in discussion was that clients feel that consultants are too often reprofiled rather than reskilled—in future the ability to validate skills will be vital.

This led to a re-examination of the debate between the T-shaped and the I-shaped consultant—is it more important to possess deep skills or to be able to translate client needs across a wide-range of expertise?

Consultancy business models will also be impacted by these changes, with AI potentially taking the away the need for a pyramid of junior consultants, with only the biggest firms with the deepest pockets being able to invest in these technologies. But in that case what happens to their talent -2-pipelines? Where will the senior consultants with the variety and depth of experience, the "scars"—come from? And what will these firms have to offer those who are starting out?

An alternative vision would see clients focusing narrowly on outcomes and ROI and turning instead to independent consultants and networks, without necessarily feeling the need of the wider resources of a Big firm to underwrite the risk.

One thing that all could agree on was that the so-called "timeless" consultancy skills—relationship building, change management--have at least another decade or two left to run.

Indeed, it was argued that consultants will have to focus even more on the "soft skills" in future: technical expertise may make a project possible, but it is soft skills that make it successful. As Tom Forrest MD of consulting solutions at Sheffield Haworth pointed out, consultants will need to build a "personal brand" whatever context they operate in.

John Corneille, Master of the Worshipful Company of Management Consultants, said he felt the debate opened up the possibility of further research, into the value of the consultancy firm:

"We need more work on the economics of the consultancy industry in the year 2030," "How will consultancies make money: what are the skills needed to run a consultancy firm in the future?"

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