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Consulting in Context: Legitimacy of Management Consultants in Public Administration and at Universities**

Abstract

Management consulting has spread to almost all institutional fields. While scholars have largely acknowledged consultants' role in implementing and legitimising decisions (i.e., legitimation by consultants), less is known about how consultants themselves gain legitimacy (i.e., legitimation of consultants). New institutionalism suggests that legitimacy building refers to the broader institutional context in which consulting takes place and will therefore unfold differently in different fields. By following this reasoning and integrating the institutional work concept, we argue that active clients play an important role in legitimacy-building processes vis-à-vis external consultants. We use data from semi-structured interviews with 38 clients and 41 consultants in two fields beyond the traditional consulting business: public administration and universities. Our analysis shows that in both fields, management consultants source their legitimacy from a broad range of institutional values and processes. In public administration, they have to adapt to a bureaucratic organisation and hierarchy, which gives rise to field-specific interpretative patterns. At universities, consultants do not only have to account for the managerial and administrative thinking of universities' administrations but also for academic perspectives and traditions in the organization. In both institutional fields, clients who are active in consulting processes co-construct consultants' legitimacy. However, the role they take as consultants' partners contrasts between the fields. This is indicated by differences in the way how the failure of a consulting project and its consequences for clients is perceived.

Keywords: active clients, consultants, higher education management, institutional work, management consulting, public sector
(JEL: H7; I1; M1; Y8)

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Introduction

Scholarship has broadly acknowledged the role of consultants in the diffusion of knowledge and practices within and across almost all of society's institutional fields (e.g., Hodge & Bowman, 2006; Saint-Martin, 2004). In many economies, the consulting industry is still growing far quicker than, on average, the general economy (FEACO, 2019). Expansion into fields beyond traditional business areas has contributed to this growth. Management consultants have, for example, become important advisors in the fields of healthcare (Maguire et al., 2004), higher education (Serrano-Velarde, 2010), public administration (Saint-Martin, 2004) and sports (Slack, 2014). These fields differ profoundly from the business sector in which consultancies and their traditional clients commonly operate. These non-traditional business fields provide different and, arguably, more challenging conditions under which consultants seek legitimacy as a credible and knowledgeable source of advice. Previous research has shown that clients often hire consultants to legitimate particular decisions or to enhance the legitimacy of organisations in general (Sturdy et al., 2009). Nevertheless, how consultants become legitimate actors in these fields (i.e., the legitimacy *of* rather than *by* consultants) is still an open question.

Directing attention to consultants' legitimacy resonates with a recent consulting studies stream that acknowledges the importance of "active clients" (e.g., Fincham, 2012; Pemer & Werr, 2013; Sturdy et al., 2009). These studies also highlight clients' enabling function as gatekeepers, brokers or partners, who play a crucial role in how consulting projects develop and succeed (Alvesson et al., 2009; Sturdy & Wright, 2011). However, how clients perform this role and contribute to consultants' legitimacy may differ between diverse institutional settings (Serrano-Velarde, 2010). Previous research on active clients did not focus on such cultural differences between institutional fields and the work related to gaining legitimacy. We, therefore, take a comparative and institutional work perspective to explore the role of active clients in consultants' legitimacy-building processes by aiming to answer the following three questions: *How do management consultants gain legitimacy? What role do active clients play in legitimacy-building processes? How are different institutional consulting settings related to the institutional work in these processes?*

To address these questions, we refer to neo-institutional theory (NIT), which asserts that legitimacy is the basic precondition of becoming an actor (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000; Jepperson & Meyer, 2021). From this perspective, the everyday creation and maintenance of meaning are key for the social construction of legitimacy (Tracey et al., 2018; Baumann & Krücken, 2019), requiring institutional work by both active clients and consultants. Our empirical work is based on a case study on consulting in two non-traditional fields of management consulting beyond the business sector, as they specifically threaten the legitimacy of profit-seeking consultancies: public administration and universities in Germany. With this focus, we also respond to calls in the consulting literature to investigate a consulting project's context in

greater detail (e.g., Sturdy et al., 2009). We use material from 79 semi-structured interviews (41 consultants, 38 clients) and compare the following three consulting keystones: the acquisition of consulting projects, especially the bidding phase; the translation of management knowledge into recipient organisations; and the communication of results (Nikolova et al., 2009). The results of our analysis show that expectations of consultants stemming from different institutional cultures and organizational processes differ. Expectations also differ when it comes to the role of active clients, for instance, regarding their involvement and responsibility for the success or failure of the projects.

In the following, we firstly discuss how legitimacy relates to institutional work in the context of consulting processes. Secondly, we develop our methodological approach and reflect on our comparison. We also provide an outline of the strategy we use to code the empirical data. Thirdly, we present our data analysis, differentiating between institutional work for public administration and that done for universities. In the final section, we merge the results and discuss how active clients are embedded in the two fields of study, i.e., how clients define their and the consultants' roles in the consulting process and how this affects the patterns of the social construction of legitimacy. We end the section with a brief conclusion.

The Role of Institutional Work in Legitimacy-Building

Legitimacy is defined as a "generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Foundational work on NIT argues that the survival of organisations depends primarily on their legitimacy rather than on their efficiency (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). These perspectives, however, focus mainly on organisations' legitimacy and not on that of individuals in organisations. Consequently, NIT has primarily discussed consultants as agents that confer legitimacy on organisations. We shift the focus from the legitimation of organisations by consultants towards the legitimation of consultants as actors, thereby focussing primarily on individuals.

In order to gain legitimacy, consultants have to provide information about themselves and their company and need to gain legitimacy through their interactions. However, they also rely on clients who are active in the consulting process since others have to bestow legitimacy. It is the audience that ascribes or denies legitimacy to an actor (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000; Jepperson & Meyer, 2021). By active clients, we mean clients who act at the organisational boundary and become consultants' partners (Karantinou & Hogg, 2009). Active clients co-produce knowledge and results with consultants but might also be critical counterparts who show resistance at different stages of the consulting process (Sturdy & Wright, 2011). In consulting processes, active clients are highly relevant for ascribing legitimacy to consultants. These clients are socialised into the organisational setting in their field;

they think and act within field-specific routines. Whether, how and why active clients ascribe or deny legitimacy to consultants interferes with such patterns and cannot be understood independently from them. In order to tackle this micro level of consultants' legitimation, we first build on recent research on institutional work.

Research on institutional work is valuable for our approach because it integrates the practice perspective on institutions (Hampel et al., 2017) and shifts the focus to individuals as actors in organisations (Hwang & Colyvas, 2011; Seidenschnur & Krücken, 2019). The institutional work perspective highlights the assumption of NIT that "institutions shape every facet of human existence, providing meaning and motivation to our actions, and holding together the material and symbolic structures that trigger and shape those actions" (Hampel et al., 2017, p. 563). This includes interpretative patterns, which guide the process of ascribing legitimacy to organisations and individuals. Consequently, the institutional context matters in terms of how individuals ascribe and negotiate legitimacy. Through this approach, individuals' theoretical status shifts from just being "an accomplice to social processes of institutionalization and structuration to an agent whose motivations, behaviours, and relationships are of direct, rather than indirect, interest and attention" (Lawrence et al., 2011, p. 55; see also Hwang & Colyvas, 2011). Consequently, individuals play an important role in the ongoing reproduction of institutions (Trank & Washington, 2009). They have various options to act and can make a difference with regard to either persistence or change in an institutional field.

On the above basis, we assume that legitimacy, firstly, is a precondition for consultants to change an organisation during consulting processes. Active clients can, however, deny consultants legitimacy and act as gatekeepers (Sturdy & Wright, 2011) if such consultants' appearance or actions are not compatible with the institutional values and procedures in the field. In such a situation, active clients undertake institutional work by protecting existing values and procedures and, thereby, avoiding too much organisational change. Secondly, legitimacy is gained in interactions. If active clients grant consultants legitimacy, they can undertake institutional work together by connecting visions of organisational change with existing values and procedures. In such cases, active clients become consultants' partners (Sturdy & Wright, 2011).

By analysing how consultants gain legitimacy in public administration and universities, our research contributes to literature analysing the crucial role of institutional work for gaining legitimacy. Trank and Washington (2009), for instance, analyse legitimacy as a scarce good that requires ongoing reproduction in activities and interactions in contested institutional fields, using the example of university-based business education. Lawrence and Suddaby (2006, p. 36) suggest that the institutional work of maintaining institutions "involves supporting, repairing or recreating the social mechanisms that ensure compliance." Goodrick and Reay (2010), using nurses as an example, show that gaining legitimacy is key for changing profession-

al roles. There is, however, no comparative approach that allows for identifying similarities and differences between legitimacy-building processes in two different institutional fields. Our research contributes to the institutional work literature by adding such a comparative perspective.

We further assume that the different stages of consulting processes matter for the legitimation of consultants since the arenas in which consultants and clients are embedded change when these stages do (Nikolova et al., 2009). During the acquisition phase, the clients primarily discuss and negotiate the question of which consultancy to choose. During the consulting process, consultants are more actively involved in the interactions, with legitimacy being negotiated during these interactions. Finally, once the project has been terminated, the consultants become subject to perceptions of the quality of the results. Ascribing legitimacy to consultants then heavily depends on the presentation of the results and becomes a matter of the clients' taste and perceptions. While consultants are involved in the presentation of results, they are no longer actively involved in the discussions thereafter when clients reflect on their experiences during the consulting process and ascribe legitimacy to consultants retrospectively.

Data and Methods

Comparative Approach

By means of a comparative case study of consulting in Germany, we address our research questions by focusing on two non-traditional fields of management consulting: public administration and universities. These fields are suitable objects of comparison because both have been subject to the new public management (NPM) movement, which triggered the expansion of consulting services into the public sector (Saint-Martin, 2004). NPM has prompted attempts to make public organisations and universities more business-like and, with traditional consulting markets in the private sector becoming increasingly saturated, management consultants have become important actors in both fields. In 2018, the public sector accounted for 9.3% of the overall turnover in the German consulting market (FEACO, 2019).

Both public administration and universities are public sector organisations and have certain structural and cultural similarities in terms of public values and public law. However, they also differ: in Germany, public administration is based on the traditions and routines of a bureaucratic-legalistic Weberian model (Meyer et al., 2014). Universities additionally include the logic of academia, and the academic profession with its distinct ethos and traditions plays an important role. These particularities are also reflected in specific configurations of different departments and administrative units (Frost et al., 2016; Hüther & Krücken, 2018) and make universities a distinctive institutional field, even though it may formally be part of the public sector. Consequently, our case settings enable an empirical comparison

of the relevance of diverse values, traditions, and trajectories for the analysis of institutional work in terms of legitimacy building (Seawright & Gerring, 2008).

Case Settings

Public Administration

German public administration is built on the "heritage of a legalistic and Weberian-style state bureaucracy" (Meyer et al., 2014, p. 865) and is a prime example of the continental *Rechtsstaat* tradition (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). This tradition gives rise to a strong bureaucratic-legalistic logic rooted in the legal profession, specifically in terms of the core administration at the federal, state and local levels. Public values such as political neutrality, correctness and equity characterise the bureaucratic logic, fostering evaluations based on duties, rights and responsibilities (Meyer et al., 2014). However, NPM principles have pervaded the German public sector and challenged the incumbent bureaucratic logic since the early 1990s (Vogel, 2012). This reform largely conforms to the NPM agenda, aiming to increase efficiency by introducing management techniques and business-like operations and by fostering decentralisation and competition in the administrative system. This new managerial logic prioritises efficiency and effectiveness, shifting attention to outputs and outcomes rather than only legitimising activities in terms of their procedural compliance with bureaucratic rules (Meyer & Hammerschmid, 2006; Vogel, 2012). Management consultants were among the proponents and profiteers of this reform because implementing NPM requires managerial knowledge and skills that public administration often lacks (Vogel, 2012).

Universities

Public universities in Germany experienced a particular historical development that resulted in strong particularities in their organisational structure. Although universities share similarities with other administrative organisations (such as the prevalence of public values; Bryson et al., 2014), they also show significant differences in terms of goals (i.e., research and education), professions and occupational groups (i.e., academic and administrative staff) as well as in structural and cultural backgrounds (i.e., decision-making processes and associated beliefs). NPM has spread also into the German university sector but developed differently. One central aspect is the increasing competition within and between universities. The Excellence Initiative and other policies that award universities with government grants on the basis of their performance reflect the increased competition (Hüther & Krücken, 2018). At the same time, attempts have been made to strengthen university leadership by not only increasing their institutional autonomy but also by limiting academic self-regulation (Frost et al., 2016; Hüther & Krücken, 2018). Owing to these organisational changes, management consultants have gained importance in strategy consulting and, to an even larger extent, in IT consulting. However, as Krücken

and Serrano-Velarde (Serrano-Velarde, 2010; Krücken & Serrano-Velarde, 2016) argue, academics have a strong professional culture and the power to block or hijack managerialism and related consulting.

Sampling

Consultants and their clients are challenging target groups for empirical research because consulting companies have strict confidentiality policies, and many projects, particularly in public administration, are politically sensitive. However, the consulting market for universities is small, and very few consultants are specialised in this field. Consequently, we chose snowballing as a sampling method (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). The final sample consisted of 79 face-to-face interviews conducted with clients and consultants from 2015 to 2017 (Appendix 1). Moreover, in gathering data from clients, we shift the focus from mere consultant-centred research to research that acknowledges active clients as key actors in consulting processes (Sturdy et al., 2009). We conducted 42 (20 consultants, 22 clients) interviews in public administration and 37 (21 consultants, 16 clients) interviews at universities (Table 1).

Table 1: Interview Partners

	Public Administration	Universities
Interview Partners		
Consultants	21	21
Clients	21	16
Size of Consultant Organization		
<50	10	13
50-500	3	2
>500	8	6

In public administration, we focussed on core administration at the federal, state, and local levels. As a result of the snowball sampling, we conducted interviews at consulting companies of very different sizes. On the client side, the interview partners came from different departments, including Economic Cooperation and Development, Social Affairs, District Administration, as well as Transport and Innovation, among others. We interviewed 5 female and 16 male consultants and 5 female and 17 male clients. In universities, the snowball sampling also led us to consultants from consulting organizations of very different sizes, including many consultants from small or big consulting companies, respectively. Medium-sized organizations are less present in our sample. At universities, the interviewed clients came from research universities and from technical universities in Germany. We interviewed people who belonged to university leadership, including vice presidents and heads of administrative units or deans, or department managers who had

participated in consulting projects. In sum, we interviewed 7 female and 14 male consultants as well as 5 female and 11 male clients at universities.

The main consulting issues in both fields were strategy consulting, organization- and process management consulting, and IT consulting. Moreover, particularly in public administration, some consultants specialize in human resources consulting.

The semi-structured interviews followed a thematic guide that addressed consulting processes, personal experiences, and reflections on institutional influences as well as conflicts in consulting projects (Appendix 2).

Data Analysis

Our comparative approach follows Whetten (2009) and combines top-down and bottom-up components in order to analyse the similarities and differences between the two fields. Top-down, we investigate how different field-specific cultural frames in which clients and consultants are embedded influence consulting processes. Bottom-up, we discuss the types of strategies consultants and clients use to actively seek legitimacy under different conditions.

Our data analysis is based on theoretical considerations, which structured the interview guides and empirical material and relate to the legitimacy concept that we elaborated on above. We included questions in our interview guides (Appendix 2) that referred to the three major consulting project phases: the acquisition of consulting projects, the consulting processes and the presentation of results (Nikolova et al., 2009). Of course, these phases are not always clear-cut, and they may be preceded and succeeded by important client-consultant interactions that might matter for legitimacy-building, too. However, as an analytical lens, the three phases provide helpful guidance through the data. We also included client and consultant communication about projects after their termination. We used an open coding strategy to answer the questions about the three phases (Mayring, 2000). Furthermore, we coded the answers to additional questions that did not directly refer to one of the stages in the interview guide just in case the interview partners referred to such a consulting process stage in their narrations.

In the German public sector, the *acquisition of consulting projects* occurs within a tight legal frame resulting from public procurement law at the European, national and subnational levels. The interview data includes narrations about the consulting organisations that clients deem appropriate for different issues. Clients gather information by attending workshops and fairs and by visiting homepages. They contact the relevant persons in their networks and collect other references, which they take into a discussion in their teams. Direct interactions with consultants occur during the presentations of their proposals in the bidding phase. However, since consultants are still only rarely present at this stage, the social construction of legitimacy is predominantly subject to the interactions of active clients among each other. Part of

these discussions is their perceptions of the image and trustworthiness of consulting companies. The data also include information on how public procurement law is enacted in the bidding phase, how clients use empty spaces to exploit rules without breaking the law and how consultants perform within this legal frame.

Within *consulting processes*, institutional work occurs in *interactions* that include both clients and consultants. In these interactions, consultants are actively involved in the negotiation of legitimacy. Alvesson et al. (2009) as well as Sturdy (1997), and Sturdy and Wright (2011) have shown the plurality of possible client-consultant interactions and described the potential roles that clients and consultants take in interactions. Active clients' legitimation of consultants plays an important role in these interactions. Further, if consultants and clients have different backgrounds, meaning must be translated from one vocabulary into another for a common understanding (Clegg et al., 2004; Nikolova et al., 2009). A successful translation requires legitimacy (Thurlow & Mills, 2015).

The product of the consulting project is ultimately delivered with the *communication of and about the results and the quality of consulting projects*. While the communication of results still involves consultants and active clients in the organisation (and usually occurs before a broader internal audience), consultants and active clients' communication and reflective remarks about a project's success or failure are often backstage communication in interactions between consultants (without clients) and between active clients taking stock of a project (without consultants). The way legitimacy is renegotiated between active clients at this stage is highly relevant for follow-up projects or for recommending the consultants in the field. We asked consultants and clients whether they remembered successful or failed cases in this respect and additionally coded the narrative parts of the interviews for reports on successful or failed projects that the interview partners reported independently.

Results

We present the results according to the three main phases of consulting projects as outlined above: consulting projects' acquisition, consulting processes, and communication of results. We successively present the results of each phase in terms of public administration and universities, subsequently concluding with a short comparison of the two fields.

Acquisition of Consulting Projects

Public Administration

Formal structures and a strong role of formalization and trust characterise institutional work during the bidding phase in public administration. The bidding phase in public administration is highly standardised, which, therefore, significantly

determines the choice of suitable consultants: *"We have a formalised procedure"*[1] (Cl 04).[2] The National Audit Office (*Rechnungshof*) imposes restrictions and regulations to avoid wasting tax money and prevent corruption, ensuring equal treatment and transparency. A standardised bidding process protects clients from potential conflicts of interest and interdependencies: *"Thank goodness! Otherwise we would have mafia structures in the ministries"* (Cl 01). In this quote, the interviewee not only highlights the importance of the bidding procedure's formality but also his concerns about opportunistic behaviour in administrations. Public administration clients often emphasise the risks of misusing public money and that they are responsible for safeguarding public interests. From the institutional work perspective, this means that these clients are responsible for the key values of public goods. Consequently, during the bidding phase, they also make sense of and reproduce existing formal structures in terms of consulting processes. By doing this type of institutional work, clients refer to public debates and to the potential personal consequences for the responsible actors: *"Immediately the opposition cries out: 'You wasted money.' (...) The National Audit Office then seeks to find those who are personally responsible. (...) 'Who made a mistake?' The press will do the same, by the way."* (Cl 04). Consulting projects are thus a sensitive issue regarding the spending of tax money. In such contexts, high costs of consulting projects and legitimisation pressure might lead clients to believe that *"consultants are bad per se, they are expensive, radiate the determination to sell you what you don't need"* (Cl 10).

It is essential for clients to trust consultants' reliability: *"A relationship of trust is, I think, what counts most"* (Cl 03). There are different signals and stakes that convey which consulting companies are perceived as legitimate. Ample projects are a signal, specifically projects that have not only produced good results but also remained within the promised budget: *"It's important to build trust and to achieve the results that have been promised within the existing budget"* (Co 11). Field experience is another relevant signal. Good marketing does not contribute significantly to consultants' success in the bidding process because building a reputation follows other patterns: *"Basically, we don't advertise"* (Co 04) and *"we don't launch image campaigns"* (Co 11). Field expertise, references and experience are more significant as signals of a legitimate actor when active clients discuss which consultancy should be chosen: *"just their experience in public service"* (Cl 04) – *"specific consulting companies that specialised in it* [public service]*; this works especially well"* (Cl 15). Consulting companies have learnt lessons and respond to clients' demands for field experience with and specialisation in public services: *"Just as* [a top consulting company]*, they once worked for free for the Federal Office for Migration for half a year, and now they're getting multimillion Euro projects because they have references that no one else has"* (Co 18). Although this strategy is common in consulting in

1 All interviews were conducted in German and fully transcribed. The authors translated the quotes.

2 Cl – Client; Co – Consultant.

other fields, in the current case, quality means having provided work that meets the institutional values and formal structures in the public administration field.

Universities

Universities are also aware that the amount of money available for consulting services is limited. Consequently, clients cannot employ consultants if their costs exceed the budget: *"financial criteria play an important role"* (Cl 13). Consultants confirm that *"quite naturally, everything is too expensive"* (Co 12) and that *"cost pressure is a very important selection criterion"* (Co 16). As in public administration, financial aspects limit the range of consulting companies that seem suitable; consequently, they too need to find the right balance between quality and price to gain legitimacy. Clients at universities, just like those in in public administration, repeatedly emphasise the importance of consultants' work experience in the field: *"We are always terrified of people who don't know universities"* (Cl 14). Consequently, university clients search for signals that guarantee consultants' familiarity with the field in order to trust them sufficiently in advance, turning subsequently into legitimacy.

Signals of credibility differ with regard to the type of consulting project. In respect of more technical consulting projects that focus on IT processes, such as the implementation of campus management or accounting software, clients ascribe legitimacy to consultants who have previously implemented such software at other universities: *"We introduced the criterion of experience and selected providers with experience in the field instead of well-known consulting companies"* (Cl 4). Companies competing for university consulting projects hire field experts to support their teams if they themselves do not have experience in the field: *"You need to have an experienced actor on your team (…) just like you would need a pharmacist if you consult for a pharmaceutical company"* (Co 14). Consequently, since consultants have to prove their work experience at universities as a sign of their credibility, large and well-known consulting companies profit less from their brand and overall status compared to other fields like public administration.

Yet, compared to public administration, universities have fewer concerns about potential scandals and attempts to find experienced consultants with field knowledge lead to a different group of actors being selected, especially in strategy consulting. In the latter respect, consultants possess legitimacy if universities regard them as having a high reputation and status as peers. Clients accept them as colleagues if they change academic organisations only according to the prevailing institutional values: *"There are former university executives working as consultants. (…) It's those consultants who know the academic system from the inside out, who have a real advantage"* (Co 2). It is comparably easy for universities to hire such strategy consultants because strategy-consulting projects often have a lower budget. In these cases, public procurement law often does not require extended tendering processes.

University clients often already know such consultants personally or through their peers: *"In such cases, it's about knowing people and using your networks"* (Cl 5). From a legitimacy perspective, this selection by means of a network is another example of the role that credibility signals rather than interactive performances play. Active clients ascribe legitimacy to external consultants according to their origin and their role in the field at universities rather than to their role in consulting, interpreting their biographical cues as signs of their credibility and professionalism, and their commitment to the prevailing institutional values.

Comparing Legitimacy in the Acquisition Phase

Providing management consulting services in public administration and universities has strong similarities but also profound differences (Table 1). When doing institutional work, clients ascribe legitimacy according to the structures, routines and interpretative patterns in the acquisition phase. On the whole, legitimacy is ascribed on the basis of signals of credibility (Alvesson & Empson, 2008), which active clients identify and discuss in their selection committees. Consultants' institutional work is of lesser importance in this phase compared to the work that active clients carry out. However, field knowledge and consultants' adaptation strategies are important in both fields. While consultants working within public administration have to signal their trustworthiness to concerned clients who fear the consequences of exploding costs, possessing legitimacy is slightly different for those at universities. Especially when providing strategy consultation services, consultants have to not only prove their field knowledge but also need to have peer status and to have proven their competencies as academics or higher education managers.

Table 2: Similarities and Differences in the Acquisition Phase

	Public Administration	Universities
Finances	A standardised bidding procedure and cost pressure in both fields.	
Formalization	High	High in IT consulting, lower in strategy consulting.
Ascription of Legitimacy to	Consulting companies with references in the field that signal their trustworthiness.	Consulting companies with field experience in IT consulting; consultants with field experience in strategy consulting.

Consulting Processes

Public Administration

Consultants need to be aware of bureaucratic structures and values in their consulting processes. Since consulting is a knowledge-based domain, they have to translate their approaches: *"Do not take regard methods one-to-one, but translate them"* (Co 08). The rigor of formal structures and legal restrictions makes public administration find itself within a stiff corset: *"Public administration has to adhere to the legal*

framework" (Cl 03). Owing to this corset, consultants try different strategies of institutional work when adjusting their managerial tools and consulting processes to formal bureaucratic structures. If these strategies fail, consultants fail to link their approaches to the public sector's field structures and consequently do not gain legitimacy. In fact, they lose it: *"What you mostly hear from public executives who have been in the job for a long time: 'Mrs. X, I have already survived others, I will survive you, too'"* (Co 13). This quote demonstrates that in order to achieve change in an organisation, it is necessary to link such change to the pre-existing structures and values.

In line with this observation, consultants have discovered that in order to avoid losing their legitimacy in public administration, a basic precondition for institutional work is learning and using the appropriate vocabulary. From the client's perspective, the incorrect use of vocabulary demonstrates unfamiliarity with public issues and a lack of experience in the field: *"You'll notice this immediately. Sometimes it's the language that's light-years away from the way you speak and feel"* (Cl 16). From their perspective, neglecting the strongly institutionalised administrative vocabulary casts doubts on whether consultants sufficiently acknowledge public organisations' mission. However, emphasising this mission is a precondition for negotiating legitimacy successfully. This emphasis can be concluded from statements by clients who had interacted with consultants who had failed in this regard: *"'A business case' for this or that. (...) With such phrases you just make a fool of yourself. There is no 'business case' for children who are beaten at home!"* (Cl 11).

Additionally, gaining legitimacy becomes even more complex in public administration since many different stakeholders are involved in the decision-making processes: *"The administrative board, the top management, and the staff are included in this political component. It's common for politics to have a direct impact on agenda setting"* (Co 08). Consequently, *"juggling a wide range of stakeholders"* (Co 06) inside and outside the client organisation means that institutional work implies addressing a variety of field-specific audiences and their different values. Consultants also have to recognise which of these audiences are crucial for gaining overall legitimacy through the consulting process. Seeking and *"working with key actors"* (Co 03) play a crucial role. Such actors can be identified in the official hierarchical structure that facilitates top-down decision making in public administration. But consultants also report the relevance of detecting hidden key players: *"It is, of course, important to talk to the right people. You have to develop a sensor system for identifying power centres where you can find informal decision makers"* (Co 19).

Universities

At universities, consultants' success in achieving legitimacy in terms of interactive processes is highly dependent on finding a specific solution for a particular case rather than on implementing one-size-fits-all approaches. Clients regard their or-

ganisation as a large body that includes different, not hierarchically structured, individual departments. Institutional work also means valuing this specific character of academic organisations. Clients consider it highly important that consultants should take such organisational characteristics and idiosyncrasies into account: *"We have this one consultant who really knows the field; she worked at universities for such a long time, knows the people and gives us ideas for strategic opportunities"* (Cl 11). While the latter quote demonstrates that clients assume that insiders will take the uniqueness of the organisation into account, the following quote is an example of legitimacy being denied to those who are not familiar with the field: *"Some of them come with a construction kit of standard solutions. They maintain that doing more than this is unprofitable. But it's really necessary to get deeper into the organisation. Not to do so is arrogant"* (Cl 3).

As in public administration, clients at universities require consultants to demonstrate their command of the university's language to be accepted: *"I have hated nothing more than consultants presenting their tools in a kind of managerial English, and have no idea of what a 'Regelstudienzeit' [prescribed period of study] is"* (Cl 4). In addition, consultants' performance in university committee meetings is especially important. Decision-making processes at universities differ from those in companies and in public administration; consequently, in such committees, consultants need to address the heterogeneous character of academia needs: *"It is challenging that decision making allows much more participation than companies do"* (Co 15) – *"you have to move closer to the bottom of the hierarchy, which requires conversations between equals"* (Co 17). The result of this discursive culture is that consultants become subject to intra-organisational frictions: *"There is always friction between academics and administration, and a lot needs to be done so that they can face one another in a more relaxed way"* (Cl 8).

Consequently, consultants need to undertake related institutional work and become moderators between different groups and clients' interests as well as negotiate their legitimacy in this difficult situation. This role is especially important with regard to strategic issues. Although IT consultants are, for example, less often present in committees and let active clients do the translation: *"My colleagues and I go to the departments and discuss the results"* (Cl 14). In contrast, strategy consultants have to perform well during committee meetings in order to negotiate their legitimacy. This performance is challenging but becomes easier if consultants have already worked at universities and are familiar with such processes. The latter is another reason why clients often hire former professors, vice-presidents, or heads of administrative units as strategy consultants for universities.

Comparison of Consulting Processes

Our data show the similarities and differences between the way active clients and consultants create legitimacy in interactive processes by undertaking institutional

work (Table 2). The way active clients and consultants adjust to regulations and political audiences in public administration and the way they perform during universities' academic committee meetings show that these institutional contexts constitute different arenas in which consultants struggle for legitimacy. Within the interactive processes, active clients in public administration ascribe legitimacy to consultants who actively show their understanding of the organisational hierarchy and political concerns as well as the public values. At universities, active clients highlight the importance of organisational uniqueness, and consultants have to adapt their performance in academic committee meetings that are part of a more bottom-up approach to decision making. Beside these differences, consultants are also required to use field-specific vocabulary in both fields to gain legitimacy in interactions.

Table 3: Similarities and Differences in Achieving Legitimacy in Consulting Processes

	Public Administration	Universities
Adjusting to Institutional Vocabulary	Strong need to adjust the vocabulary in order to gain legitimacy in both fields.	
Legitimation in Different Formal Structures	Achieving legitimacy within top-down decision-making processes.	Achieving legitimacy within many bottom-up decision-making processes.
Adjusting to Different Cultures	Adjust to norms of law and bureaucracy and take political issues into consideration in order to gain legitimacy.	Adjust to universities' fragmented organisation and to the discursive culture in academic committees in order to gain legitimacy.

Communication of Results and Further Reflections on the Project

Public Administration

At the final stage of a consulting project, institutional work is primarily concerned with the negotiation of the project's success or failure, from which legitimacy might, or might not, spill-over to consultants. Both consultants and clients engage in storytelling and stress how the organisation has benefitted from the application of managerial knowledge, "*a huge gain in performance, effectivity, efficiency … well, it's enormous*" (Co 10), but also in terms of reaching goals: *"in order to implement new political measures, a management consulting was very useful to develop a time-action plan"* (Cl 23). Shaping the perception of a project's success is thus not only important for consultants but also for clients, as successful projects matter for their own performance.

Beyond the individual level, the success or failure of consulting projects is also relevant for the reputational competition at the organisational and inter-organisational level: *"I also want to shine. I want to say, 'look here, we have a result that sets us, the administrative department, apart from the rest'"* (Cl 07). Once successfully

completed, consulting projects advise other organisations in the public sector on best practices: *"Our customers exchange experience. The city X in eastern Germany then calls the city Y in southern Germany. This means the success of the project sometimes defines the success of the project at another place"* (Co 02). Since competition between public agencies is still largely symbolic with little consequence regarding the allocation of financial resources, the exchange of knowledge between public organisations is more intense than in the business sector, where a competitive advantage brings economic profit. Consequently, it is relatively easy to detect failed consulting projects. Colleagues from other administrative units and organisations check and test consulting projects particularly regarding how they relate to institutional rules and values. This evaluation has consequences for how consultants and clients present and discuss the results.

Even when consulting projects in public administration are obviously about to fail, it is difficult to cancel them: *"In public administration, we generally don't take back a decision that has been made. There are many reasons for this"* (Cl 09). Formal reasons are important here: *"Contracts with a public administration are written in keeping with public tendering law; cancelling such a contract is difficult"* (Co 16). Once tendering processes have been launched and expenditures authorised, it requires considerable effort to reverse the contract with external consultants. Political reasons might be even more important: since public administration spends taxpayers' money on consulting services, clients are accountable to political bodies and the general public for the successful completion of expensive projects. Consequently, they fear media reports on wasted money due to failing consulting projects. Cancelling a project would not only reduce consultants' legitimacy but also put considerable pressure on clients: *"When I cancel a consulting process (…), I basically have to take the blame"* (Cl 17). The strong culture of risk aversion in public administration emphasises the need to avoid blame: *"When you are doing a good job in the public service, you will be lucky to get a friendly pat on your back. But when you are doing a bad job, then you jeopardise your career, your retirement and your reputation"* (Cl 04). Based on the high priority to avoid being blamed, window dressing and more ceremonial legitimation become a more natural option of institutional work in order to 'polish' project results.

Universities

At universities, clients highlight both positive and negative cases when they talk about their perception of consulting projects, both cases being important for their institutional work. In positive examples, they refer to the value that results of consulting projects have for organisational development and for reaching related goals: "*they have written a great paper and today we still refer to this paper when, for example, we discuss the size and future of our IT department*" (Cl 9). However, in contrast to public administration, university clients are not concerned about potentially serious career damage when consulting projects fail. In fact, clients frequently and

openly report on failed projects. In this sense, consulting projects' termination can be regarded as institutional work by clients who highlight their responsibility to protect the organisation's cohesion and existing values: *"The report was sent out and caused huge trouble, especially for the research department's management; thereafter we had to deal with it. (…) We tried to talk to everybody, to explain, to find a consensual strategy …"* (Cl 13).

Based on these observations, clients at universities do not only play the role of consultant partners (Sturdy & Wright, 2011) who share the fame but also have to shoulder the blame if the project fails – just like in public administration. They are also observers who regard themselves as university representatives responsible for spotting projects in danger of derailing as early as possible. The academic logic apparently fosters a more open attitude to discussing consulting projects' results: *"If a project fails and does not achieve what it had promised, the consultants have a problem and there are cases where universities engaged another consulting company"* (Cl 2). This quote demonstrates that clients accept failure as a 'natural' aspect of working with consultants. Clients in universities do not feel responsible for the success of the consulting project to the same extent as clients in public administration. Rather, they attribute responsibility to the consultants: *"They came with big promises and, in the end, job cuts were only minimal, which has discredited these consultants until today"* (Cl 7). In such cases, the dismissal of consultants can also appear as reasonable action: *"The decision was crucial. The consultant I fired didn't do a good job in the committee meetings. (…) He didn't work with the members, he didn't stand up to the committees"* (Cl 13). Terminating projects is, therefore, easier at universities than in public administration; universities also have a culture that failure is 'natural' instead of one of blame avoidance.

Comparison of the Communication of Results and Further Reflections on the Project

Our findings show that consultants and clients doing institutional work adapt to different institutional characteristics when they interpret and communicate failure (Table 3). While institutional work in public administration involves sense-making processes in terms of accountability towards the public, which leads to a culture of blame avoidance and to the readjustment of results, institutional work in academia fosters a different type of sense-making, in which active clients act as gatekeepers of institutional goals and values. In public administration, the perception of consultants' legitimacy occurs according to whether the project can be framed and told as a success story. At universities, failure appears to be more 'normalised,' with clients being less responsible for the results. Consequently, terminating a consulting project is an available option for university clients. The circumstances under which clients socially construct consultants as legitimate actors, therefore, differ between the two fields.

Table 4: Similarities and Differences in the Communication of Results

	Public Administration	Universities
Success	Perceptions highlight the project's positive effects.	Perceptions highlight IT consultants' expert knowledge and peers' experience with strategy consulting.
Failure	Active clients view themselves as being responsible for the project`s outcome. This leads to a culture of blame avoidance. Legitimacy is only attributed if the project can be communicated as a success.	Perceptions regard failure as a more natural aspect of the organisation. Active clients are not per se responsible for failed projects; they can, however, blame the consultants.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study focuses on institutional work in relation to consulting projects. It shifts attention from legitimacy *by* consultants to the legitimacy *of* consultants and explores this issue in two non-traditional management consulting fields, in which consultants' legitimacy is a particularly delicate issue. Since legitimacy is an important precondition for consultants to be acknowledged as credible and knowledgeable agents of change, they have to link their planned changes to pre-existing structures and values. It is surprising that previous research largely neglected this perspective. Our analysis demonstrates that institutional work and the social construction of consultants' legitimacy are not universal but depend strongly on field-specific settings.

Firstly, the results highlight the role of active clients undertaking institutional work by means of consulting processes. The institutional settings in a field provide interpretive patterns to which both consultants and clients refer when undertaking institutional work. Consultants hired to bring about change in public administration or at universities can only do so by adhering to and reproducing their core institutional values. Accordingly, clients, who are socialised into these values, play an active role in the legitimacy process, rather than merely being passive recipients of managerial advice. This finding regarding clients' role supports previous studies demonstrating active clients' importance for the success and failure of management consulting (Alvesson et al., 2009; Fincham, 2012; Pemer & Werr, 2013; Sturdy et al., 2009; Sturdy & Wright, 2011).

Secondly, the findings show that the way legitimacy is ascribed and institutional work is undertaken differs in the three stages of consulting. In the acquisition phase, clients decide in their project groups which consultants or consulting companies best fit their field and organisation. Clients then ascribe legitimacy to consultants on the basis of the latter's image, their offer and their company. During the consulting process, legitimacy is actively negotiated in the interactions between the consultants and active clients. This process is open to consultants' and clients' strategic legitimation work. In this respect, it is important that consultants manage

to adapt to the field-specific processes and vocabulary, for instance, in the way they adapt to unfamiliar decision-making processes in the field or in the way they also consider public values when providing managerial advice. The communication of and about results reflects what happened in the project and conveys to what extent it was processed according to the institutional goals and values and if it is perceived as success or failure. This negotiation of legitimacy often takes place between clients in the organisation (Nikolova et al., 2009; Suddaby et al., 2017). The fact that active clients can become partners of consultants results in different cultures of dealing with failure in both fields: On the one hand, failure de-legitimates consultants and clients at administrations alike. On the other hand, failure is an unwanted but still legitimate outcome for consulting projects at universities.

Thirdly, we argue that the institutional setting defines the roles that are appropriate in a specific framing and the strategies that these roles use for institutional work. Active clients act as consultants' partners, brokers, or gatekeepers, therefore becoming key players in consulting processes (Sturdy & Wright, 2011), but these roles differ between institutional settings. Acting as the consultants' partner appears more appropriate for university clients when consultants are former peers who were once socialised into their institutional setting. This familiarity enables them to connect to the institutional processes and thinking, even though the project needs to makes changes. In contrast, partnering with consultants who only have a background in business administration is less common at universities. In public administration, active clients are more directly pushed into the role of partners (even if they are 'pure' business consultants) because they take joint responsibility for the success of consulting projects (Saint-Martin, 2004). An important element of institutional work at this stage is to actively incorporate existing institutional values into the results of consulting projects.

University administration clients often assume the role of brokers between consultants and the departments' academic members, particularly in respect of IT consulting. Such projects can create situations in which clients have to translate between the two groups (Reay & Hinings, 2009; Tracey et al., 2018). Furthermore, active clients also act as gatekeepers and are responsible for ensuring that the consultants' work remains within the boundaries of the institutional rules and values. In public administration, this role becomes important for protecting prevailing hierarchies and decisions based on public law. Active clients at universities act as gatekeepers of the academic world when, for example, dealing with discursive decision-making processes in universities' more fragmented organisation. When undertaking this kind of institutional work as gatekeepers, clients at universities also have more opportunities to terminate consulting projects without having to fear being blamed by internal and external stakeholders.

Our study advances the understanding of how active clients and consultants undertake institutional work by analysing how legitimacy is ascribed to consultants and

how client roles relate to the institutional context. Institutional thinking and evaluation criteria influence clients' sense-making strongly when ascribing legitimacy to consultants. Discussions of who should be selected according to these interpretative patterns reproduce institutionalized ways of balancing interests. Clients acting as gatekeepers can protect institutional values and processes in the interactions within the consulting process. Nevertheless, active clients and consultants also have to connect their plans meaningfully and sensitively to pre-existing institutional settings with regard to achieving change through a project. Managerial and bureaucratic logics are examples of how institutional characteristics are expressed in public administration, both of which are important (and often conflicting). Other examples include classic Weberian beliefs in formal structures and hierarchies (Meyer et al., 2014) as well as public values (Bryson et al., 2014). At universities, there is a constant struggle between managerial and administrative orders, on the one hand, and academic values, on the other. This struggle dominates many (but not all) organisational units and is difficult to resolve. Consultants have to adapt to these different expectations in order to gain legitimacy and achieve changes.

Although our study offers various insights into the legitimacy-building of consultants, it is not without limitations. Firstly, it focuses on Germany, which reflects the continental European public sector model (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Meyer & Höllerer, 2016). This might limit the transferability of the results to other countries or systems where managerial thinking is more common in the public sector, and consultants are not likely to struggle with legitimacy issues to the same extent. Secondly, our empirical analysis is limited to interview data. Although we interviewed consultants and clients, further insights could be gained from direct observations of consultant-client interactions in consulting processes. However, due to confidentiality issues, such observations were not feasible. Thirdly, and for the same reason, we could not attain 'matched' data from consultant and clients dyads. Future research might have such an opportunity, which would make focus group discussions with consultants and clients a fruitful addition to one-on-one interviews.

In spite of these limitations and the need for further research, this study contributes to the discussion by combining the active client concept in consultancy research with neo-institutional insights into the role of legitimacy and institutional work. Adding the institutional setting as an element that influences expectations and the set of available roles for active clients and consultants affects the modalities according to which the latter gain legitimacy in an institutional field.

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