PRACTICES OF POWER:
MEANING AND LEGITIMATION
IN INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY CONSULTING

by

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Practices of Power:
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Abstract

This dissertation describes an inductive theory of symbolic power, which was derived from an ethnographic study of an occupational community known as information technology consultants. These consultants are members of firms which provide services such as writing computer programs, designing computer systems, managing technology projects, or devising technology strategy for organizational clients in exchange for fees. Information technology consultants are a pervasive presence in organizations, yet they have rarely been studied.

Over a two and a half year period, I was a participant observer at three external consulting firms and one large internal information systems group for a multistate bank, collecting data on the interactions between consultants and their clients during consulting engagements. These four firms were selected to span a broad range of consulting services, from highly technical to strategic management services. Information technology consulting provides a near-perfect context for the exercise of symbolic power, because information technology is so ambiguous. The ambiguity provides the opportunity for consultants to create and manipulate meaning, a rhetorically-rooted activity which is the basis for symbolic power. Symbolic power has been defined by Bourdieu (1991, p. 170) as the ability “of making people see and believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world, and thereby, action on the world and thus the world itself.”

Symbolic power operates through practices. The practices consist of a collection of cultural assumptions, actions, and artifacts, which operate to subtlety reinforce interpretations, and ultimately actions, favorable to the consultant during their interactions with clients. In their operation, the practices lend the consultants legitimacy and credibility. Four of the practices are clustered around consulting activities: (1) presentation (which refers to the means the consultants use to define their services for their clients); (2) methodology (which refers to the methodologies used by consultants during engagements); (3) timelines (which refers to the planning devices which proliferate around complex technology projects); and (4) billing (which refers to the elaborate systems the consultants use to determine their fees). Another type of practice, called a pose, is associated with individual consultants. Through the use of poses (expert, healer, and partner), consultants can draw upon certain widely-known roles to gain legitimacy and credibility with clients. In this sense, consultants in information technology craft not only technical systems, but symbolic systems.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

When I first encountered information technology consultants, I marveled at the profusion of rhetorical images which accompanied the consultants everywhere. Buzzwords such as "leading edge technology," "organizational transformation," and "critical success factors" swarmed about them like bees, whether at a client presentation, at a team meeting, on a plane, or relaxing over a drink. Consultants make use of rapid-fire images and metaphors, a constant accompaniment to their work. My bemusement at what Jackall (1988) has termed "symbolic dexterity" remained with me throughout the research. Like any fieldworker, I dutifully recorded these images, but each seemed to have layer upon layer of meaning. By coding and recoding these data (Strauss, 1987; Corbin & Strauss, 1991), clusters of images emerged, which eventually led to the development of a theory of symbolic power.

This dissertation is a snapshot of a work in progress, describing an inductive theory derived from ethnographic data gathered in a study of an occupational community\(^1\) known as information technology consultants. These consultants\(^2\) are members of firms which provide services such as writing computer programs, designing computer systems, managing technology

\(^{1}\)An occupational community has been defined by Van Maanen & Barley (1984, p. 295) as a “group of people who consider themselves to be engaged in the same sort of work; whose identity is drawn from the work; who share with one another a set of values, norms and perspectives that apply to but extend beyond work related matters; and whose social relationships meld work and leisure.” See also Borum & Pedersen (1990) and Hirota (1988).

\(^{2}\)In this document, I use the terms consultant(s) or consulting to refer specifically to information technology consultant(s) or consulting.
projects, or devising technology strategy for organizational clients in exchange for fees. Information technology consultants spend long hours at computer terminals, working with the technology they help to create. Some consultants write lines and lines of software code in obscure languages such as C++ or ORACLE. Others concoct graphs and charts showing trends in systems performance, spending, and staffing. Or, at 2 AM on any given morning, a consultant may travel to a client's data center to fix a bug in a critical credit card application. All of these tasks require a technical background, but consulting work is not entirely technical or solitary. The consultants must also spend a lot of their time interacting with clients, amongst others, on the telephone (either talking with people directly or playing phone tag via voice mail), or in person, individually or in groups. Unlike hackers (Turkle, 1984) or the designers of new machines (Kidder, 1981), this group works in close proximity to clients and non-technical personnel.

Most consulting projects take place at the client site, and consulting firms charge by the hour for services provided to clients. Hourly fees can range from under fifty to thousands of dollars, depending on factors like the individual consultant's experience, the type of consulting task, the size of the firm, or the geographic location of the project. Organizations purchase large amounts of these services, despite the fact that high fees are sometimes paid for consulting recommendations that simply gather dust, or for technology that is never used.

Information technology consultants are a pervasive presence in organizations, yet they have rarely been studied (with the notable exception of

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3Kodak recently outsourced their systems organization (Wall Street Journal, August 15, 1989).
Wanda Orlikowski’s research⁴). The absence of research on information technology consultants is mildly surprising, given the variety of literatures which can be brought to bear on the topic. For example, much of the information technology literature is couched in the form of advice to consultants and practitioners, yet tends to focus on the technology, or on the “users”⁵ of the technology, rather than on consultants.⁶ In the literature for management consultants, there is a wealth of how-to books (e.g., Cody, 1986; Gallesich, 1982; Metzger, 1989), but little research on the consultants themselves. The organizational development literature, while written for consultants (Beer and Walton, 1987; McCrocl, 1983), is prescriptive rather than descriptive in nature,⁷ and does not include advice for the information technology consultant (Bloomfield & Best, 1992). For the most part, consultants have also avoided the scrutiny of sociologists and anthropologists; although Moore (1984) focused on the latent and manifest management outcomes of consulting efforts, and Czarniawska-Joerges et al (1990) studied consultants as purveyors of popular management culture.

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⁴Orlikowski’s (1988a) research focused on the interplay between work and information technology in a Big 8 information technology consulting firm, and how information technology affected the nature of the production tasks, worker expertise, and organizational process and structure. Although it was not an ethnography of information technology consultants per se, her use of ethnographic techniques yielded rich, compelling data about the work and lives of these consultants.

⁵MIS researchers and practitioners sometimes represent users “two-dimensionally, stereotypically, adversarially” (Wynn, 1982).

⁶Consultants occasionally appear briefly as actors in descriptions of systems implementations (Beath, 1986; Wilmott et al, 1990) or as part of typologies of computing world actors (Kling & Gerson, 1977). Bloomfield & Best (1992) focused on the use of power by information technology consultants, and will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

⁷The descriptive work often consists of a case study of the client problem -- the story of the success or failure of an intervention. The consultant is often the author of the study, and is therefore present in the case, but is not its focus (Frank & Hackman, 1975; Kaplan, 1978; Milstein & Smith, 1979). Other research has focused on consulting interventions (Porrás & Hoffer, 1986), or the attributes of consultants (Knoff et al, 1991). Most of this research was conducted using interviews or questionnaires, and presents a rather static view of consulting and consultants.
Given the lack of prior research on these consultants, I planned a descriptive study. I did not approach this research with preexisting theories or hypotheses to test. I have a predilection for trying to make sense of everyday life phenomena in all its confusion and complexity, and the collection and analysis of the ethnographic data provided the foundation for the development of a theory rooted in the practices of the consultants as they go about their work. The phenomena I am attempting to describe are complex, having multiple, deeply interconnected meanings. Their operation is subtle and very much taken for granted by the participants, and is much more effective for its subtlety. Being confined to a linear, textual format to explicate these phenomena tends to mask their nuances, but this kind of exposition is necessary to highlight the workings which would otherwise remain invisible.

**Consulting as Symbolic Work**

In this dissertation, I offer an interpretation of information technology consulting as a kind of symbolic work. I will argue that rhetorical displays by consultants constitute an attempt to construct and manipulate meaning in a context where meanings are ambiguous. Meanings are important because they become the basis for future conceptions or actions. To the extent that

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8Various theorists have used different terms to describe this phenomenon: social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), enactment (Weick, 1979), meaning creation (Smith, 1982), negotiated order (Strauss, 1978). In this dissertation, I use the terms "constructed," "enacted," and "created" interchangeably. I use the term "negotiated" to refer to interactions between consultants and clients with respect to meanings, and I use the term "manipulation" to indicate greater consciousness of the meaning construction process on the part of the actor.

9I use the term "meaning" loosely, in an everyday way, to refer to the things people associate with a word -- whether it be an image, object, or emotion. I use "meaning" interchangeably with terms like "interpretation," "perspective," "symbol," and, if it is a metaphor, "metaphor." There is a growing trend in both the organizational and the IT literature to focus on meanings. For example, Turner (1992) reviews the variety of types of symbols, and their implications for a symbolic understanding of organizations, and Hirschheim & Newman (1991) describe symbols and assumptions in information systems development.
consultants can control meanings, they can shape the subsequent flow of events. For example, a client who is a writer might think that a computer is irrelevant to his or her work, useful only for numerical applications, such as statistical analyses or budget calculations. If a consultant could alter the meaning of the computer for the writer, introducing it as a more efficient kind of typewriter, the computer becomes useful to the writer. The consultant might then be able to sell services related to the purchase of a word processing system. This is a simplistic illustration and the situations in which information technology consultants operate are much more complex. But by crafting and manipulating meanings in the same fashion, consultants can influence situations to their advantage.

**The Information Technology Consulting Context**

The ability of information technology consultants to perform feats of symbolic power depends in large part on the context in which they operate. Information technology consulting provides a near-perfect occasion for the construction or manipulation of meaning, because it takes place in a context where meanings are multi-layered (Boland, 1992) and emergent (Truex & Klein, 1991; Van Maanen, 1979). Three elements of the information technology consulting situation contribute to the ambiguity: the nature of information technology itself, the nature of the consulting services, and the organizational setting. First, information technology means many different things to different people. Even the term "personal computer," for example, can mean anything from a 8-1/2" x 11" Macintosh PowerBook to a powerful Sun workstation.

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I will use the term "ambiguous" in this dissertation to refer to these twin aspects of I/T services, emergence and multiple layers of meaning.
(Pfaffenberger, 1988). In addition, people can harbor different feelings about
computers - some view them as benign presences, while others view them with
a great deal more hostility. The rapid pace of change in the information
technology world adds a chaotic dimension; obsolescence of both hardware and
software, even after a few months, is taken for granted. The instability and
ambiguity of this environment causes much of the confusion about the
meanings of information technology.

Information technology services are also quite difficult to define. Unlike
convenience services, such as fast-food or dry cleaning, knowledge-based
services cannot be fully specified in advance, even with past engagements or
products as exemplars. Because each client organization is unique, services
performed at one organization cannot be automatically transferred to another.
For example, building a computer system to keep track of overdue customer
bills might sound straightforward. But a system cannot simply be copied and
imported from a different environment, since every organization has tailored its
billing process differently. Also, the client will often have different computer
hardware, and modifications must be made to the systems software to
accommodate these different computer platforms. Further, the people in the
organization who will be working with the system will view and use it differently,
to meet their own needs. This results in systems which are quite different in
implementation, if not in design, and services must be customized for each
organization.

Finally, in consulting, organizational boundaries are blurred: the
consultants are encouraged to act as members of the client organization, with
their clients' "best interests" at heart (except perhaps in the matter of fees).
Consultants are allowed to enter and make their way around client organizations in furtherance of their work, as organizational boundaries are deliberately made permeable. The client organization becomes the consultants' work organization, and individual consultants sometimes experience difficulties in sorting out the organizational interests they serve. Taken together, these features of the information technology consulting world result in a context that is ripe for the exercise of symbolic power.

**Summary of the Dissertation**

The central product of this dissertation is the development of the concept of symbolic power as it is exercised by information technology consultants. Symbolic power is defined by Bourdieu (1991) as the power of “making people see and believe,” in other words, the ability to construct or manipulate the meanings held by others. Symbolic power is a more fluid notion than that of traditional formulations of power, which focuses on its more visible trappings (such as status, prestige, control of resources, or the state). Power in its traditional forms is reified, and thought of as an attribute or object attached to a single entity or position. The contrasting notion of symbolic power is more suited to the context in which to information technology consultants operate: where situations are ambiguous, projects and organizations are less hierarchical and well-defined, and traditional, institutionalized sources of power operate only weakly.

Symbolic power is a subtle and complex phenomenon, in part because it cannot be thought of as residing in a particular individual, role, or structure. Rather, it resides in the interaction of individuals and the context in which they act. Unlike traditional concepts of power, where it makes sense to ask how much power one has, symbolic power does not lend itself to quantification. It
suffuses the discourse of cultural groups, shaping the beliefs of members through the process of their own activities.

The operation of symbolic power is often invisible because it relies on taken-for-granted assumptions. One simple example of this is a familiar question, the answer to which is accepted without challenge, as in “what is your name?” Unless you know the person (in which case you wouldn’t be asking), or unless you have reason to believe he or she is lying, you accept the answer as true without question. Another example is the question, “what time is it?” If the person who answers glances at his or her watch, and provides a reasonable response, the statement is taken as truth. But in the watch example, we are implicitly relying on certain cultural assumptions. First, we are assuming that time is important to all of us, and many of us will keep close track of it. Second, we are assuming that cheap, accurate means of time keeping are readily available, so that the particular watch is reasonably reliable. We begin to see that even simple knowledge claims rely on certain cultural assumptions that are taken for granted. Of course, consulting situations are much more treacherous. Rather than asking someone’s name, it is more like asking someone else, what is my name? And not as part of a guessing game, but as something one really wants to know. A consultant, as the saying goes, will borrow your watch to tell you what time it is.

**Practices and Symbolic Power**

Consultants exercise, or attempt to exercise,\(^1\) symbolic power through

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\(^1\)One of the problems in writing about consultants and symbolic power is that it is difficult at any point in time to distinguishing amongst individual, project team, and consulting firm “actions” (and similarly with clients). For the most part, I will be referring to the actions of individuals, but their actions sometimes take on a larger significance. For example, one individual may have responsibility for preparing a training seminar marketed by the firm. But seminar attendees (as well as other outsiders) will view this as a consulting firm
the use of what I have termed practices.\textsuperscript{12} To sustain certain knowledge claims, these consultants must do more than make bald assertions. Consultants must have some legitimate basis for their claims, much like having a watch to tell the time. Since they cannot rely on professional or other credentialed status, like doctors or lawyers or professors, consultants must depend on other means to gain legitimacy. Posing\textsuperscript{13} provides one kind of legitimacy. A consultant can strike a pose as an expert, and, by analogy, their own status as well as their utterances will be more legitimate than those of someone off the street. Of course, their claim to the expert pose is not infallible, because clients can challenge their “right” to maintain these poses. But since poses are fleeting, there will be less time to “call” them on it. Also, clients will not challenge the pose itself, since it is embedded in our organizational life. Poses build up, if they go unchallenged, and consultants can rely on this sedimentation in their own work. However, there sometimes remains a nagging suspicion that there is little legitimacy beneath that sedimentation.

In this way, cultural assumptions are used by consultants to legitimize their own truth or knowledge claims. By drawing subtle analogies\textsuperscript{14} between

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\textsuperscript{12}Practices are a bundle of different things, including actions by the consultants which both draw on and reinforce cultural assumptions. The concept of practice implies action in a context, and that the action and the context are recursively related. I am using the term practice much as Bourdieu (1990) does, to refer to the locus of activity that involves both the action and the context; neither would be fully interpretable (or even exist in recognizable form) without the other. By locating the action in the practice (rather than the individuals or the systems per se), this approach yields a very different interpretation of power. In particular, it sets up the possibility of a “decentered” theory of power, as discussed in chapter 6.

\textsuperscript{13}It is helpful to distinguish practices and poses, but analytically, posing is a kind of practice that operates at the individual level. The relationship of these concepts is explained in more detail in chapters 4 and 5.

\textsuperscript{14} I am indebted to Peter Manning for pointing out that these practices operate by analogy.
these cultural assumptions and their own work, the consultants can attempt to legitimize their claims. These analogies operate like simple logical syllogisms: “Experts speak the truth; I [the consultant] am an expert; Therefore, I speak the truth.” The consultants add to the poses/practices cumulatively through the operation of their analogies, and also rely on them, much like a structure/action duality (Giddens, 1984). Repeated poses (“I speak the truth”) begin to take on a reality of their own. This is the operation of symbolic power, where consultants seek to manipulate the meanings for their clients and legitimize their own knowledge claims. I describe three kinds of poses in the dissertation: expert, healer, and partner (see figure 1.1). The pose of the expert, for instance, is one which is quite prevalent in our society, and one from which it is easy to impart knowledge. Expert status is not as readily conferred upon information technology consultants, unlike “bona fide” experts, such as doctors or scientists. Unlike lawyers or doctors, information technology consultants have not passed licensing exams that certify their status as professionals. Unlike scientists, their claims to expertise cannot be based on an appeal to scholarly credentials or natural laws. Even the body of knowledge which forms the basis for information technology expertise is contested in this ambiguous domain. By drawing on poses such as the expert pose, consultants can reinforce certain claims to knowledge and status.
Posing is a practice that relies on assumptions about roles taken on by individuals. I also describe four practices (see figure 1.1) which do not center on individuals, but which can be identified more with artifacts, systems, and institutions. These four practices (*presentation, methodology, timelines, and billing*) rely on taken-for-granted cultural assumptions to legitimate meanings which are most favorable for the consultant. *Presentation* refers to consultants' display of their services to their prospective clients (for example, in response to a request for proposal). *Methodology* refers to the use of codified techniques in consulting engagements (for example, for systems design or implementation). *Timelines* refers to the use of graphical representations of project tasks which proliferate around complex projects (such as Gantt charts and PERT charts). *Billing* signifies the elaborate systems that consultants use to calculate client fees. These practices are not single, unitary events or actions, but rather, collections of activities that are often partially embodied in various physical artifacts, such as project proposals or timesheets, or in institutional processes, such as client billing systems or project management software. Like the poses, each of these practices relies on widely held assumptions to reinforce its
meaning and legitimacy. The billing system, for example, relies on the powerful cultural belief that "time is money." The distinction between time and value is elided, thereby reinforcing the interpretation that the consultants' services are valuable.

These practices form the bases of legitimation for consultants, albeit less visible and more contested bases for legitimation than those used by lawyers or political figures. Of course, in the conduct of an actual consulting engagement, these practices tend to blend together and reinforce each other. The expert pose is supported by the use of methodology, for example, since both of these tend to bolster the consultants' claims to knowledge. What is important about the theory presented here is not so much the particular categories or their labels, but rather their mechanism of operation. The practices build legitimacy for the consultant by referencing assumptions and roles already widely presumed to be legitimate.

Assertion of meanings by the consultants through these practices is by no means absolute. Clients come to the engagement with interpretations of their own, and clients are at least as adept as information technology consultants in meaning construction and manipulation. Meanings of information technology and services are negotiated throughout the engagement. Control of interpretations is contested and contextualized, flowing back and forth between client and consultant. This contrasts sharply with traditional concepts of power, which assume that power is held by one party or another as an attribute, and does not shift from moment to moment. There may be "resistance" by the less powerful party (Jaros, 1992), but ultimately the more powerful party is presumed to prevail.
Research Methodology

As a participant observer, I recorded in fieldnotes my observations of information technology consultants for a period of over 32 months between 1987 and 1991 (details are provided in the methodological appendix). I collected data from four research sites: three of these sites were information technology consulting firms which ranged from the highly technical firms (primarily development and modification of computer programs) to strategic firms (designing technology strategy for the client organizations). The fourth site was a large financial services organization which employed many information technology consulting firms for its projects, in addition to having a large internal information technology department. I have chosen not to undertake any systematic, pairwise comparison of these sites in this dissertation, but have chosen to focus instead on the underlying phenomenon of symbolic power that is common across all four sites. This is not meant to imply that I view the differences between the sites to be insignificant, but simply that the use of these practices is common across these sites.

Organization of the Dissertation

The presentation of the material is divided into seven chapters. The next chapter describes the research context of this study, and chapter 3 provides an overview of the research sites as well as the research method. Chapter 4 illustrates the poses (expert, healer, partner) struck by the consultants in their effort to justify their presence as well as their messages for clients. Chapter 5 details four additional legitimation practices which the consultants use in their engagements: presentation, methodology, timelines, and billing. Chapter 6 provides the theoretical foundations for the concept of symbolic power which
encompasses the construction of meaning, and the process of exercise of power and its negotiation. Finally, chapter 7 concludes with the implications of this study and a description of further research.
Chapter 2

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Information Technology

The incessant exercise of symbolic power by information technology consultants is occasioned by the context in which they operate. Symbolic power involves the construction or manipulation of meaning, and information technology is eminently manipulable. Information technology is a recent phenomenon, and it is changing rapidly. Unlike other, more familiar forms of technology, its uses are less constrained. For example, the use of computers for word processing is well-defined. But other uses, such as hypertext or videoconferencing, are still emergent. Thus, information technology has many layers of meanings, and most of these meanings are emergent, i.e., discovered only in its creation, use or performance. These aspects of information technology -- that its meanings are multi-layered and emergent -- are often masked by developers and users. Much as scientists endow science with an “appearance of impersonality, detachment and universality” (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1980, p. 270), technologists (and sometimes users) cloak technology with an aura of objectivity and simplicity. People working with technology often assume that it is readily specifiable, and that their understanding of technology is shared. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the complexity and ambiguity inherent in information technology, rendering its ambiguous aspects more visible, using examples drawn from both the literature and the fieldwork.
Computers have a dizzying variety of configurations. The prototypical computer is made up of three components: a box, (containing the processor, storage devices, and other items which make up the guts -- or brains -- of the computer), an input device (a keyboard, a scanner, a microphone) and an output device (a screen, a printer, or a synthesized voice). But deviations on this prototype abound. Notebook computers compact all of these features into one slim letter-sized box, eclipsing older and larger computers.\(^1\) Physical appearance is no longer an indication of computational power, or anything else. The advent of computational networks dissolves the physical boundaries of the computer: communication with other devices thousands of miles distant is commonplace. One computer's input device and output device are no longer mediated by a single processor, but rather by a "topology" of "servers," "gateways," and "nodes." Voicemail is another example of a variation on this theme - the ubiquitous telephone becomes the device between the user and the computer, which relays voice messages.

Physical presence, or hardware, then, is not what defines the computer. But neither does the software which runs the machine. Upon opening a software package, the purchaser will find documentation and one or more

\(^1\)Previously, physical size was indicative of computational power, as this description of the Univac I of the late 1950's indicates: "Each Univac I was a little larger than a single car garage with a flat roof. Two big cooling blowers in the base of each machine and the line of magnetic tape transports attached to each computer provided continuous background noise. The outer skin of each computer was entirely composed of hinged gray metal doors, which gave access to rows of removable chassis, aglow with the filaments of vacuum tubes . . . In the center of one of the long sides of the computer was a special door with a clear Plexiglas panel in the center. This access door allowed an engineer to walk inside the computer, to check out the wiring interconnecting the chassis or to service the memory banks. The Plexiglas panel in the door allowed the service engineers to see if anyone was working inside the machine, or, heaven forbid, if smoke was arising from the circuitry within." (Lundstrom, 1987, p. 14) The memory capacity of the Univac I was 12,000 bytes. The Macintosh PowerBook has 4,000,000 bytes of memory or more.
diskettes which contain the software. The software on the diskette consists of computer instructions or lines of code (the meaning of which is opaque to the typical software user), which guide the hardware through millions of binary operations per second. To the user, the manifestation of this software is a chess partner or a spreadsheet. The relationship between the binary states of the electronic circuits inside the computer and pawn-to-queen's-bishop-three is rarely comprehensible.

Even experienced systems people cannot specify every detail of a system in advance. Consider the implementation of a very large software package for a credit card system at Firm D. One major function of the package is to generate bills for the various accounts. For bulk mailings, the mail must be sorted by zip code, rather than sorted alphabetically by last name, or by other criteria, such as number of days which accounts are overdue. The software package, although very expensive and sophisticated, did not have a separate field for zip codes. Without a separate field (rather like a data coding category), the bills could not be sorted by zip code, and Firm D would be unable to take advantage of bulk mailing rates. Most software programs come with a separate field for zip codes; this is an expected feature for software designed for mailings. But in this case, the software was missing this essential feature, one so obvious that its existence was assumed. Making the necessary changes in the code would cost the firm dearly. The purchasers, a team of experienced software analysts, programmers, and users, did not think to even question its existence. The omission was noticed only after the software contract was signed. As the project manager complained: "you can't ask about every little detail in systems as large as that!"
Rapid obsolescence -- of software as well as hardware -- further confounds our perception of information technology, as the number of software upgrades and the burgeoning features of yearly models attest. Computers get smaller and lighter (Apple’s Newton\textsuperscript{2}), faster (processor speeds), and bigger (storage media) at an accelerated pace. So defining the computer either in terms of hardware or software provides little more than a surface understanding of the technology. It is more than an assemblage of physical boxes and a series of diskettes - more than the sum of its parts. A lucid, unambiguous definition of the computer is elusive.

Information technology has a complex character, but some who work regularly with systems persist in treating information technology as concrete and specifiable. Brad, an attorney at Firm D,\textsuperscript{3} likened it to a used car:

[A] computer is like a machine in manufacturing, and we treat it like any other manufacturing contract . . . we want a fixed price, that’s written in the contract, and fixed delivery dates -- no “best efforts”\textsuperscript{4} . . . we know exactly what we’ve got when we’ve accepted delivery of software. This smells, looks and tastes exactly like you’re buying a used car. As far as I know, we’re the only place in the country that does this; in ten years, everyone will . . . Vendors -- they don’t like it at all.

This quote was taken from a presentation made by Brad to a group of senior technology managers at Firm D at one of their regular bi-monthly meetings. The purpose of Brad’s presentation was to encourage the systems organization to “bring him in early” -- to involve him at the start of the vendor

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\textsuperscript{2}The Newton is the palm-sized “personal digital assistant” developed by Apple, with a pen-like stylus for handwritten input.

\textsuperscript{3}Descriptions of the research sites are provided in chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{4}Brad here is referring to a clause that sometimes appears in contracts where the vendor promises to use their “best efforts” to deliver a system by a certain date, rather than a promising to deliver without this qualification.
negotiation process. Yet involving Brad sometimes had unintended consequences: in one situation, Brad refused to agree to certain of the contract terms, which had been negotiated by the vendor and Firm D’s technology managers. This delayed the signing of the contract for months. The parties were dismayed, because their view of Brad’s role was not to “redo the deal,” but simply to “translate the deal into legalese.”5 Brad’s involvement upset the vendor, who thought the parties “had a deal,” and was eager to book the sale before the end of their fiscal year. He also angered the senior technology managers who had negotiated with the vendor. Several irate memos flew back and forth from these managers to Brad and his boss before the situation was resolved. The contract was signed over eight months later, with the vendor having begun work before the contract was signed.6 Though both the vendor and internal systems group agreed that systems implementation was not entirely within the vendor’s control, Brad wanted to ensure that all contractual risk rested with the vendor.

Brad’s role in the process was to act as a legal advisor to Firm D, so his attempt to shift all risk to the vendor seemed consistent with his role. Brad viewed computing as something tangible, with fixed attributes. Computers and systems, for Brad, were products which arrived with specific features. Even if conditions or circumstances changed, the computer system would not. His underlying assumptions about the nature of information technology are not uncommon; many systems people share these views (Boland, 1987; Hirschheim, Klein & Newmann, 1991). But information technology, even as a

5These are quotes from the internal systems procurement manager.
6As noted in chapter 4, performing services before an agreement with the client is signed puts the service provider at risk of not being paid for these services.
concrete, physical object, is not that simple. Nancy is a procurement officer for Client A, and her views reflect the ambiguous nature of information technology:7

Data processing contract law is quickly becoming a specialized area, and it will outdistance personal injury litigation before the end of the century. Sometimes, we feel more protected with 40-page arrangements than two-page arrangements . . . in the sophisticated, specialized area of data processing contracting, a company cannot completely define its needs in a 900-page document . . . What you're doing in DP is allocating risk. This is different from goods contracting. You cannot get a risk-free contract. The purpose in contracting is to maximize benefit and minimize risk. How can we be least negatively impacted by those risks? [The system] may not run, and nobody's at fault. There are so many things that can go wrong in a software project contract.

Nancy believed that information technology is inherently uncertain, so that it is impossible to specify everything in information technology projects. Both the vendor and Nancy's internal clients appreciated that her approach to technological issues, and her services were often requested by client managers. Both internal clients and external consultants agreed that her contracts provided adequate protection for both parties; when she was involved, contracts could be drawn up rapidly and with little friction.

Views of Information Technology in the Literature

The viewpoints of Nancy and Brad reflect bipolar perspectives on information technology, but there is a broad range in between. Thus,

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7There is a broad range in perceptions of procurement officers by internal clients and managers. At some extreme, some are described as detail-oriented people who enjoy obstructing the procurement process, while others are described as service-oriented people who seek to cut through bureaucratic processes on behalf of their clients.
researchers have characterized information technology as equivocal (Jones, 1990), an equivoke (Weick, 1990), a powerful symbolic system (Manning, 1991), and an evocative object (Turkle, 1984). Scholz (1990, p. 239) emphasizes the importance of the symbolic qualities of information technology in this manner: “The physical CIS [computerized information systems] attributes always have distinct symbolic values, even if we are not aware of them.” As we shall see in later chapters, the consultants capitalize on this feature of information technology.

In an effort to come to grips with this complexity, several academics have characterized information technology as a duality. For example, Zuboff (1988, p.9) argues that “information technology is characterized by a fundamental duality that has not yet been fully appreciated.” She describes the difference between “automating” and “informating” in a variety of settings, such as a paper mill and a bank. Zuboff defined as “informating” as generating information about the underlying productive and administrative processes through which an organization accomplishes its work, creating a “quality of information that did not exist before.”

Orlikowski (1992) also describes information technology as a duality, but in a different sense: as shaping and being shaped by the actors involved with the technology. The technology she studied was a computer aided software engineering system (“CASE”) used by a Big Eight consulting organization to automate the development of computer systems for their clients. The CASE technology operated as a constraint on its user/developers, but, at the same time, the technology was modified by them. Her work builds on Giddens’ (1984) theory of structuration as well as Barley’s (1986) research on the structuration of technology, but explicitly delineates the difference
between the medical CT scanning technology Barley studied and the CASE tools she studied (Orlikowski & Robey, 1991). Orlikowski’s workers were systems developers who could and did alter the technology with ease, unlike Barley’s technicians, who did not themselves modify the technology. By studying a “core technology,” Orlikowski was able to contrast the immutable and changeable features of both the technology and the organization.

Both Zuboff and Orlikowski are interested in the transformation of work processes by technology, but the character of the dualities that they describe are clearly distinguished by the aspects of information technology that they studied. Like Barley, Zuboff focuses chiefly on workers and managers who are confronted with systems which appear like *deus ex machina*; these workers and managers do not alter the technology itself. By taking the technology as given, Zuboff studied its *effects*, thus developing an informate/automate duality. Orlikowski’s work on core technologies such as CASE led to the development of an analytical duality in which the stable and unstable elements of the technology itself become salient.

These views, which problematize the technology and its impacts, run counter to most traditional views of information technology in the MIS literature (c.f., Weill & Olson, 1989; Lyttinen, 1987; Kwon and Zmud, 1987; Kling, 1987), which assume that information technology can be treated as an unambiguous object. From this perspective, the technology object exists outside of the mind of the observer, independently of his or her intentions, or interactions, or cultural values. Definitions of technology in terms of the thing-in-itself or its functions tend to perpetuate this perspective by implicitly

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8Orlikowski (1992, p. 4) defines a “core technology” as one which is “deployed in executing the primary functions of organizational units.”
taking for granted the meanings of the object. But even MIS researchers with traditional views differ in their definitions of technology. Weill & Olsen (1989), in attempting to look at the relationship between organizational performance and information technology investment, found that each previous study defined information technology differently. Bakos & Treacy (1986) argue that if common definitions of information technology were used across studies, more progress could be made in studying its impact. But common definitions are elusive because of the inherently ambiguous qualities of information technology and the context of its use.

Organizational researchers, like MIS researchers, have tended to objectify information technology. They measure the “impact” of technology on traditional organizational variables such as centralization/decentralization (Lee & Robertson, 1987; King, 1983), structure (LaBelle & Nyce, 1987; Pfeffer & Leblebici, 1977), and skilling/deskilling (Garson, 1988; Perrolle, 1986; Feldberg & Glen, 1984). Not surprisingly, these lines of inquiry have had mixed results (Kling, 1987). These mixed results stem from the conceptualization of information technology as an “independent variable” which can be specified. The same critique that Blumer (1968) made of the use of variables in traditional sociological research (namely, that they mean different things to different people, and therefore cannot be aggregated in the way statistical methods require) can be made of these objectivist interpretations of information technology.

9Computers are also associated with numbers and computation (Levinson, 1988). This connection to the mathematical, concrete, engineering world may contribute to the objectification of information technology.
Symbols of Information Technology

While this objectivist perspective still has many adherents among both scholars and practitioners, it has become increasingly acceptable to think of information technology in its social context. From Kling & Scacchi (1982) to Boland (1992), many information technology academics have taken the view that technical systems cannot be understood in isolation. These views rely on an interpretivist perspective which emphasizes the metaphorical or symbolic aspects of information technology. The symbolic quality of information technology is critical to this research, because these symbols are used by consultants in exercising symbolic power. Many different symbols, or meanings, of information technology can be layered at one point in time (Boland, 1987; Hirschheim & Klein, 1991; Hirschheim & Newman, 1991). The range of symbols associated with information technology are staggering, and the purpose of this section is to provide some idea of the diversity in the symbolism.

For example, Thorngate (1984, p. 149) has noted that computers can be “symbols of status, intelligence, and power.” Computers as “thinking machines” (Caporael, 1984) or “expert machines” (Hirschheim and Newman, 1991), contrast with images of computers as play (Starbuck & Webster, 1991). Video games, one large class of these computers-as-play, are evolving into a more and more sophisticated forms of “virtual reality” (Stewart, 1991), allowing users to physically enter a computer-generated world. A somewhat lower-tech example is a small stuffed toy (5” x 7”) called the “Smack-a-Mac.” This replica of the Macintosh Classic can be “smacked” (kissed) when the user is happy or “smacked” (hit) when the user is frustrated. And instances of user
frustration with technology are numerous. Here are two aggravations chosen from incidents periodically chronicled by Neumann (1992, p. 122):

A Vancouver woman visiting Honolulu attempted to withdraw $1,100 (Canadian) from her home bank using an automatic teller machine, which was controlled by a computer in New Jersey. The satellite delays combined with a flaw in the atomic transaction protocol resulted in her account being debited without her getting the money. On seeing her monthly statement, she accused her fiancee of theft, and had him apprehended. It took another month to sort it all out.

Hundreds of cat owners in Chicago were billed $5 for failure to register their dachshunds. Their pet vaccination database had been crosslinked with the license database in an attempt to identify unlicensed pets, and DHC had been used as a code for both Domestic House Cat and Dachshund.

For some people, computers are mysterious and arcane, creatures which do not operate predictably. The fear and loathing of computers can, in some cases, amount to a computer phobia. But other users view the computer as human. Some name their computers, while others talk to their computers (what is eerie is that some computers answer back). The computer has also been named Time's "Man of the Year" (Sproull, Kiesler, and Zubow, 1984), and the ascribed gender becomes significant in light of the association of computers with masculinity (Griffiths, 1988). Whether the arena is school (Elkjaer, 1989; Gerver, 1989; Kiesler, Sproull, and Eccles, 1985; Turkle and Papert, 1990), the office (Suchman and Jordan, 1989), or computer science as a discipline (Frenkel, 1990; Pearl et al, 1990), it is evident that there are fewer women than men in the computer world. The absence of women is not accidental; Wajcman (1991, p. 166) argues that technology itself is gendered: "technology currently reflects a man's world [and] the struggle to transform it demands a transformation of gender relations." Thus we see how
inanimate objects like computers can become implicated in the most subtle and complex of human issues because of their symbolic quality and the images we associate with them.

These images of computers are not static; negative images can be translated into positive, and vice versa. Markus (1984) has written about how “bugs” in software can be transformed into “features,” and the transformation can also work in the opposite direction. Two young project leaders in Firm D who worked on the implementation of new ATMs joked about this distinction. In one instance, a new ATM was featured by the vendor as being “very sensitive,”\(^\text{10}\) but when a customer slammed the door to the booth, the machine stopped working. This transformation of meaning can occur on a grander scale, as well. Pfaffenberger (1988) describes how innovators in the personal computer industry have attempted to manipulate the ideology around their products: Wozniak and Jobs, the founders of Apple, promoted the use of computers to “empower the people.” Their ideology has in some ways shaped the design of the Macintosh, but much of its sales growth has been generated by its use in the workplace.

The absence of meaning operates as yet another layer of meaning in information technology: Weick (1985) argues that computer representations cause the loss of meaning through the exclusion of information, and become chaotic to the user. A similar instance is that of vaporware, which is a term used to refer to (1) non-existent software which promises much but doesn’t deliver, and (2) software that disappears, along with the software company, soon after starting up (Kamm, 1990). Delivering software with new features

\(^\text{10}\)Presumably, this meant it was less susceptible to thievery.
on schedule is becoming more difficult as products become more complex; consider the recent attention given to delays in delivery of the new version of Lotus 1-2-3, as well as other popular software. The failure of technology to meet user expectations or needs is a common phenomenon.

The diversity of symbols associated with computers can also be seen in commercial advertisements. The popular and business press\textsuperscript{11} is filled with images of information technology. Information technology is associated with speed, power, and, most importantly for businesses, competitive advantage. Managers find competitive advantage irresistible: the lure of a system such as American Airlines' Sabre reservation system or American Hospital Supply's order system\textsuperscript{12} lies in an advantage so overwhelming that competitors will be vanquished. Of course, this is not often the case. But organizations find that they often must invest simply to keep abreast of the industry. ATMs are one such example: any retail banking establishment that does not offer ATM services would quickly lose customers to their competitors with better networks.

The rhetoric of change and progress is also prominent in information technology advertisement. Jackall (1988, p. 141) notes that being "fresh, dynamic, innovative, and up-to-date" is desirable in higher circles of management. The same is true of information technology. Technology, as noted above, becomes obsolete quickly. The organization that is left behind

\textsuperscript{11}Mainstream publications such as the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and Business Week have regular features on the information technology industry as well as columns for computer users. Also, entire publications have sprung up which follow the information technology trends for particular industries (e.g., Technology in Banking, Computers and Real Estate).

\textsuperscript{12}These two systems in particular provide a rationale for investment in computer systems. They have been the subject of many articles -- both scholarly and popular -- as well as of at least one Harvard Business School case.
the technology wave will lose market share; this is the implication in managerial circles (Bloomfield & Best, 1992). But there are also images of information technology as a boggy quagmire, like “throwing money into a black hole.” Managers have become leery of spending funds on technology with little visible return. Thus, even on bottom-line issues like productivity, information technology has the potential to symbolize either gains or losses, progress or regress.

**Emergence of Information Technology**

In addition to being multiply layered, information technology is ultimately fluid and emergent (Truex & Klein, 1992). Caporael & Thorngate (1984, p. 7) argue that “emergent” use is characterized by “unpredictable, exploratory forms,” some of which later become standard uses. One of the best examples of emergence in systems is prototyping. Systems analysts build a prototype of a computer system for users which is not intended for actual use, but only for purposes of specifying the actual system. Berry and Hart (1990) note:

> it should be possible to provide a complete and correct specification of the required systems before technical design or implementation take place . . . . some designers maintain that this is impractical, and users can only comment on a real (as opposed to paper) systems.

Prototype systems are an alternative to requiring that users pore over incomprehensible technical specifications. Prototyping, while expensive, is an effective means of specification because many systems are difficult for users to imagine in advance. But prototyping has its pitfalls, too. At Client B, a young developer had prototyped a management information system which tracked sales of goods for the manufacturing division. The prototype worked
so well that the developer found himself "doing a demo" for the president of the organization. The president "bought" the system, to the consternation of the systems group. As the head of the systems group explained to me: "We can't deliver!! We don't have the back end to support it!!" The information which would be needed to support the prototype resided in several separate systems that did not "talk" to each other. Therefore, the information which appeared on the computer screen could not be aggregated in the manner presented in the prototype. The system that emerged from the prototype was not sustainable in reality.

**Summary**

Although we tend to see computers and other forms of information technology as objective entities, this sense of objectivity is illusory at best. In this chapter, I have illustrated the ambiguity of information technology. One program's bug is another program's feature, as Markus (1984) has noted, and the definition of which is which varies from situation to situation. Furthermore, the process of identifying which is which cannot usually be accomplished *a priori* -- it is an emergent property of the technology in use. What seems in advance to be a simple "upgrade" usually turns out to involve all kinds of complications. I have used the term "ambiguity" as shorthand for the layering and emergence of meaning which typifies this complex collection of technologies. But this is shorthand which masks a rhetorical enterprise; as Doheny-Farina (1992, p. 29) has noted: "it is a rhetorical process through which technology is manifested in the world."

The reasons for the ambiguity and complexity of technology lies in many factors, such as the newness of information technology, its extreme
malleability by users, its influence and impact in various corners of our lives (even privacy issues must be reconsidered in light of the computer's advent), and its accessibility to a growing group of consumers. Whether this ambiguity will be resolved, and a common and simple understanding of the computer reached, or whether the transformative properties of information technology will cause it to continue to be equivocal in definition remains to be seen.

The ambiguous quality of information technology provides a critical backdrop to the theoretical argument advanced in this dissertation. As I mentioned in the introduction, if the meaning of information technology was obvious or immutable, there would little room for manipulation. But because computers are so open to interpretation, consulting engagements involving information technology provide an ideal occasion for the construction and manipulation of meaning, or symbolic power. In the next chapter, I will describe the consulting firms and engagements I studied in some detail. As we shall see, the consulting services are in many respects just as multi-layered and emergent as the technological artifacts. In this respect, the information technology consulting world is an ideal setting in which to observe symbolic power in action.
Chapter 3

RESEARCH SITES

Information Technology Consulting Firms

Some types of services are relatively well-defined, such as fast-food services or certain professional services (e.g., legal counsel in a divorce proceeding, or an anesthetic for an operation). But consulting services are a type of knowledge-based service which can be characterized as indeterminate (Boreham, 1983; Bowen & Schneider, 1988; Mills, 1986; Delamont, 1989), especially as compared to physical goods and products. The intangibility of a service means that it cannot be fully specified in advance (recall Nancy's description of information technology from the last chapter). Because of its intangibility, the "reality of a service varies according to the mind of the beholder" (Shostack, 1977, p. 42). This leads consultants to attempt to make the services more concrete for clients. One means of doing this is to present the service as akin to a good or product. A consulting engagement will always specify a "deliverable," something which the consultant promises to deliver to the client at the end of the engagement. The deliverable may range from a functioning retail banking demand deposit account (checking account) system to six pages of presentation overheads, with fewer than 20 words per slide. By

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1Whether the indeterminacy is an innate feature of knowledge or an aura deliberately created to support the autonomy and power of certain professions (or both) is a matter of debate (Abbott, 1988; Boreham, 1983; Friedson, 1986).
giving the intangible service a tangible product, the consultant provides the client a familiar artifact as an outcome of the engagement.

But despite attempts to define services concretely, the ambiguity inherent in information technology services remains. This ambiguity is reflected in the images from an InformationWEEK article (April 25, 1988), where number of views of MIS consultants were expressed by 50 MIS chiefs, consultants, and academics. Consultants were considered to be (1) a waste of money, (2) change agents,\(^2\) (3) external validation of something the client (either MIS or non-MIS executives) already knew, and (4) agents of stability after a merger. And, of course, the old saw about the consultant who borrows your watch to tell you what time it is was told more than once during these interviews. While consultants are widely used in industry, they are also widely excoriated.

Part of the reason for this may stem from the range in the variety and quality of consultants. In spite of consistently referring to themselves as “professionals,” their claims to professional powers (Freidson, 1986) are weak. Consultants are not professionals, much as they would like to be viewed as such. There is no well-defined body of knowledge, nor is there any type of controlled access for group membership. Unlike other professionals (Abbott, 1988), members of the consulting community must create their own legitimacy. Information technology consulting, as a more recent phenomenon than other types of management consulting, has even less legitimacy. Compounded with the ambiguity of information technology itself, this creates a fertile arena for the creation and manipulation of meaning.

\(^2\)“Stirring the pot” is a phrase used by Czarniawska-Joerges (1990) to describe this function.
Despite their lack of legitimacy, consultants are usually\textsuperscript{3} welcomed into the client organization. The consultant is at one and the same time an insider and an outsider. He or she is given ready access to the organization, issued a badge, provided with a space (although it may not be choice or spacious), and shown the photocopier, the coffee machine and the cafeteria. Yet the consultant is not a member of the organization; every consulting project has an end date, and the consultant knows when s/he will leave.

At best, the consultant is only a temporary resident in the client organization. Marcy, a manager at Firm C, spent much of her time on the road. “Always keep a packed bag in your trunk,” she warned me when we first met. Like most consultants, much of her work was done in the spaces and places in between her consulting firm office and her desk at the client site. The telephone was critical to her work, and any free moments, in the frequent flyer club\textsuperscript{4} at the airport, or at a pay phone at a restaurant, would be filled with calls. Voicemail, that disembodied secretary, was like a drug: “I can’t imagine how they lived without it.” These consultants have their clients’ and their firm’s interests clearly in mind, and work long hours in addition to their time spent traveling. I cannot recall meeting a consultant who worked less than 50 hours a week, and most worked much more.

\textbf{Varieties of Information Technology Services}

Types of information technology consulting firms vary widely, from the highly technical to the managerial (see figure 3.1). At the far left of figure 3.1

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\textsuperscript{3}There are occasions when a consultants is welcomed by one part of a client organization but not by another, as in the case of Firm C.

\textsuperscript{4}As part of the job perquisites, the firm paid for two frequent flyer club memberships. Much of the time was spent waiting for connections or delayed flights.
are the firms which provide clients with individual consultants possessing particular technical skills for a specified period of time. These consultants write code, or develop software specifications, or debug programs, and generally spend much of their day at their terminals. A client might hire such a consultant for skills related to computer hardware or software (for example, a person experienced with UNIX workstations, or a COROL programmer), or to an application (such as capacity requirements planning) or to an industry (such as aircraft manufacturing). Because these individuals are hired to fit a particular need, for a limited time, the firms they work for are likened to temporary agencies, and hence the rather derogatory term, “body shops.”

**Figure 3.1: Spectrum of Information Technology Consulting Services**

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5 Kling and Gerson (1978) describe the computer social world, dividing it into sub-worlds that have grown up around the varieties of technology, applications, and relationships to IBM.
In the middle of the spectrum are the consulting firms which provide systems implementation and project management services, including selecting and installing computers or developing software for particular purposes. Included here are the consulting organizations which are part of the Big 6/8 accounting firms,\(^6\) such as Andersen Consulting (part of Arthur Andersen). These types of firms have the resources to implement very large computer systems, such as online trading systems for the New York Stock Exchange, or the accounting systems for Blue Cross/Blue Shield. Another type of large information technology consulting firm is Electronic Data Systems Corp. (EDS), which has recently been newsworthy due to the presidential bid of its founder, Ross Perot. EDS, now a subsidiary of General Motors, is best known for building custom systems and providing “turnkey” information technology services.\(^7\)

To the far right of the spectrum are the firms which provide management services such as devising information technology strategies for organizations. These firms generally stay “high level”\(^8\) and do not implement the systems they may recommend, but are often affiliated with some other organization which can install any desired computer systems. Their clients are often managers at or near the top of the systems or business organization, or some combination thereof, who desire planning for systems to support their core businesses or for the systems function.

\(^6\)At the time of this fieldwork, these accounting firms were known as the “Big Eight;” mergers have shrunk them to the “Big Six.”

\(^7\)With outsourcing, or facilities and management contracts, the client turns its entire information system function over to a large firm like EDS or IBM for operation, as in the case of Kodak mentioned in chapter 1.

\(^8\)One of the more interesting metaphors prevalent in organizational consulting rhetoric is that of height, which is associated with more desirable or elite status (Low, 1992).
Naturally, there is a lot of overlap amongst the types of firms. Some firms specialize by providing particular types of services, while others advertise a full spectrum of consulting services. The three external consulting firms I studied fall across the spectrum of services in figure 3.1. The fourth site, Firm D, was the internal systems organization of a large bank. Firm D implemented and maintained retail banking applications, but also provided programmers or analysts for users and supported information technology strategic planning when required. Firm D was also a consumer of the full range of external information technology consulting services and had hired all of the firms I studied, although not necessarily during the fieldwork period. An overview of all the field sites, including the consulting firm, the client organization, and some summary information about the engagement is included in figure 3.2. Each of these sites and engagements is described in more detail in the sections that follow.
**Figure 3.2: Overview of Research Sites and Engagements**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consulting Firm</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Client Firm</td>
<td>MWE</td>
<td>AMT</td>
<td>MTS</td>
<td>not applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Consultants in the Firm</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>8000</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>2000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Consultants on Project Team</td>
<td>7-17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12-14</td>
<td>not applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original Project Cost Estimate</td>
<td>$900,000</td>
<td>$2 million</td>
<td>$5 million</td>
<td>$25 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of the Project</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>18 months</td>
<td>9 months</td>
<td>not applicable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This number includes clerks and other non-systems personnel.

**Firm A**

Firm A provides consulting services related to applications software and project management. Founded 25 years ago by its Chief Executive Officer (CEO), the firm employs approximately 1200 people at 25 branches in three areas of the country - the Midwest, the Northeast and the West. The activities of the firm are overseen by an executive committee, which consists of the head of human resources and the Chief Information Officer (CIO), as well as the CEO and the director of each of the three geographic areas. The number of branches varies from five to twelve for the three areas of the

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9In the descriptions that follow, I have changed the names, locations and dates for each of the sites, and similarly disguised the identities of my informants.
country, and the branch managers report to the director for their geographic area.

Firm A began with a small staff in the Midwest, and grew during the 1960's and 1970's in tandem with the growth of IBM by developing software for IBM mainframes, specializing in financial services and health care organizations. Like IBM, it also experienced diminished growth during the late 1980's, and attempted to devise a new strategy to counteract this trend. It started by weaning itself from its reliance on software services in financial services and health care. They also decided they needed to emulate Big 6/8 consulting firms; as one of the directors commented, "not being nationwide is a disadvantage." To remedy this situation, they acquired two consulting firms in the Northeast and West. But integrating these organizations into their own and managing across large distances was a more difficult task than they had anticipated.

The orientation video by the founder of the firm provided some of the tenets by which they do business: the first was "you can't go it alone," the second was that they are driven "not by the technology, but by the client's needs," and the third was that the "goal is to satisfy the client needs better than the competition does." Firm A often distinguished themselves from body shops, which they claimed did not care for their consultants except as a "piece of meat." They emphasized the technical training opportunities, as well as two-day orientation program ("no one else does this," claimed the founder), available to their own consultants.

Firm A also emphasized the attention to the consultants' needs: managers visited the consultants regularly at the client sites. But at times, client needs superseded consultant needs. In one instance (which was not
uncommon), a client became “attached” to a particular consultant. The client refused to “let her go,” even when the consultant made her preference for a new assignment clear. Carey had worked for six months at the client site, which had very old technology. After having to change 4 lines of code in 2500 programs (“the same four lines!!” said her manager as he described his dilemma), the consultant asked to be transferred as soon as possible. The client refused enticements from the firm, such as free consulting time and a more experienced consultant at the same rates, and threatened to stop doing business with the firm. “Why do this?” asked the frustrated manager, “they know they’ll only alienate the consultant, which is not what they want to do if they want her to stay! What do they think they’ll accomplish?” Staffing was a headache for the managers. Even with a less stultifying assignment, consultants still expressed desires to switch assignments regularly. Many consultants, after all, sought consulting jobs precisely to take advantage of the opportunities for change, and did not like “getting stuck” on a particular application, or in a particular organization, for a long period of time.

Each branch at Firm A was comprised of three groups of professionals.\textsuperscript{10} The first was a set of managers who oversaw the work of the branch, which includes hiring and firing of consultants, deciding who worked at which client site for how long, and billing the clients for services rendered. There were several levels of managers, and the more senior managers tended to handle the more problematic client or employment problems. Junior

\footnote{As noted above, and in Orlikowski & Baroudi (1989) and Orlikowski (1988b) there is some debate about whether people who do work related to information technology can be categorized as “professionals.” I use the term here not to indicate my belief in their professional status, but as a convenient term of reference to distinguish them from the clerical and support staff. In Firm A, I use it to refer to managers and salespeople as well as the consultants themselves.}
managers regularly visited the client sites assigned to them to talk to the consultants and clients about their concerns. In this organization, most of the managers had “risen” from the ranks of the consultants, although most consultants preferred technical tasks, and sought to avoid the administrative burdens that accompanied the managerial role. The managers at Firm A were distinguished by their years of experience, rather than their training. Few held advanced degrees, such as MBAs.

The second group of professionals were the consultants. Their job titles, which ranged from associate programmer (someone who recently completed their undergraduate education, with little or no experience) to project manager, generally determined their billing rates. Firm A hired programmers and analysts, who either worked on consulting teams or as “standalones”\textsuperscript{11} at client sites. These consultants mostly held undergraduate degrees in computer science or some related discipline, although some older ones (particularly the women) were liberal arts majors who had moved into the computer industry for a second career (former elementary school teachers were not uncommon). Of all the consultants, this group was closest to the “nerd” stereotype. While they too dressed in the somber suits and white shirts (and the women in their sartorial equivalent), there were a few tell-tale signs that set them apart: tie pins that were unusual shapes (animals and Santa Clauses and computers, for example), socks which did not quite color-coordinate with their suits, ties that were slightly more colorful, and haircuts that evidenced $8 supercuts rather than $25 upscale salon trims.

\textsuperscript{11}This term refers to a consultant who works at a client site as the sole representative of the consulting firm. The use of standalones represents Firm A’s overlap with “body shops,” which operate primarily in this mode.
The consultants rarely set foot inside the branch office. When they were not at work at their assigned client sites, they were either in training, on vacation, out sick, or "on the bench." Consultants become quite anxious about the possibility of being on the bench, and would sometimes pester managers about finding assignments. Since they got paid whether they were on the bench or not, I asked why they couldn't relax and enjoy the spare time. Upon hearing this question, all of them would stare at me in disbelief. Being on the bench implied that they were not in the starting line-up, and that the best players were out there playing ball.

Even when they were on the bench, consultants seldom visited the office (paperwork was picked up weekly by their managers, and paychecks were mailed). The branch management called the consultants if an assignment materialized, or the consultant would call into the branch if they had been away from their telephone. There was no room for consultants at the branch offices, which were quite small -- there were only one or two conference rooms in addition to the offices of the managers and staff.

Turnover was quite high; one branch manager's estimate of turnover was 30-40% a year, similar to that of their competitors. With the permeability of organizational boundaries, there were ample opportunities for consultants to move into their client organizations, or into other consulting organizations, since they met other consultants at client sites. Information

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12 "On the bench" (or "on the beach", as those closer to a coast referred to it) is the term used when consultants are idle and not doing work which could be billed to a client project.
13 See chapter 4 for the managers point of view in this situation.
14 As Ginzburg and Baroudi (1988) indicate, high turnover is not unusual for MIS personnel.
15 There was some indication that this was perceived to be a type of piracy, but others dismissed this as part of the process.
about desirable work or opportunities was freely exchanged in their world. In addition, consultants frequently receive calls from headhunters. Jumping from job to job was the only means of guaranteeing substantial raises in salaries, which then anchored their next salary increase. Moving up\textsuperscript{16} within a single organization was a slower route to promotions and raises.

The third set of people at the branch were the salesmen,\textsuperscript{17} who were responsible for selling the services. Their activities included calling on clients,\textsuperscript{18} making sure that the firm was considered for suitable openings or engagements, keeping track of potential follow-on work at client sites, and soliciting feedback about the progress of engagements. Most of the salesmen did not have the same level of technical skills or experience as the managers or consultants. Borum & Pedersen (1990) have noted that sales and systems are two distinct subcultures, and this is consistent with what I observed. The most visible difference between the two groups in Firm A seemed to be rhetorical: in comparison with the systems professionals, the salesmen used many (usually trite) metaphors and similes when talking. Firm A was the only one I studied which isolated the sales function to a single group. At other firms, the higher levels (partners) of the organization combined the selling function with their technical and managerial functions. This reflected the differences in the organizational structure and reward systems, as well as the

\textsuperscript{16}Managers sometimes responded to offers from others by matching the salary figure, but never spontaneously gave large increases.

\textsuperscript{17}There happened to be no women.

\textsuperscript{18}In this they seem quite persistent. Project leaders, managers, and human resource generalists at Firm D were contacted frequently by salesmen from firms like Firm A. Voicemail allowed these Firm D members to screen these calls, but they also called in person, usually leaving their card. During the start-up phase of a large project, a project leader at Firm D had a seven inch high stack of cards which wobbled precariously each time his door would slam. A contest was held to guess when it would fall.
nature of the work. Firm A’s structure was similar to that of software vendors, where the developer function is separated from the sales function. Also, the other firms were partnerships, rather than a firm closely held by the founder. Finally, the nature of the work was deemed to be “less professional” and “more productized.” A product may be harder to characterize as intellectual, specialized skill, but is easier to sell to clients, because it is much more concrete.

The Firm A Client Engagement. The Firm A project client was Midwest Electric (MWE), a large public utility in the Midwest. The billing department at MWE sought a consulting firm to modify and install a software package it had purchased for collection of overdue accounts (Overdue Account Tracking System, or OATS). The internal systems department at MWE wrote a preliminary design document for modification of OATS, intended to convey information about the nature of the work required. In conjunction with the MWE billing department, they contacted four consulting companies, including Firm A, and asked them to submit a proposal for the work.

For Firm A, this was a new client opportunity. Don, the salesman on the account, “spent hundreds and hundreds of hours on this [the proposal] - it had more detail than anyone else’s.” His proposal document was 80 pages in length, and contained a greater proportion devoted to technical specifications than the other proposals. Don’s background, which included many years of experience as a systems manager and analyst, aided him in preparing a technical proposal. This proposal process is described in more detail in chapter 4.

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19 In this case, as in many others where consulting firms are used, Client A did not has the resources in-house, nor did they wish to hire people to do this work, one of a kind.
The project team, which consisted of one on-site manager, two analysts, and four programmers, began work in August 1988. The project was delayed almost from the first week on site. As the project dragged on, and it became apparent that they would not meet their first deadline, up to ten additional people (who were technically on the bench) were brought in to work at the site. The project, which had originally been scheduled for completion in six months, took well over one year.

**Firm B**

Firm B was the management information systems consulting group for a Big 6/8 accounting firm, with offices in most major cities in the United States. Like most large accounting firms, it was a partnership consisting of managing partners, partners, principals, managers, consultants, and associates, in descending order. Those at higher levels in the hierarchy, had greater responsibility for “rainmaking,” or bringing in client business. Few made it to this exalted level,²⁰ but there was high turnover for consultants and outside job opportunities were plentiful.²¹ Until the early 1950’s, there was no consulting function at all at Firm B. Thereafter, a decision was made to establish a consulting organization to support the audit clients; since then, the consulting group has also developed its own client base. The groups are split both by technical as well as by industrial specialties. For example, a consultant might be a member of the banking group, as well as the minicomputer group, depending on his or her individual experience. Some

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²⁰ When one manager joked that he was new to consulting firms, and “didn’t know that partners are one step from God,” a partner replied, “we’re not that far.”

²¹ Again, consultants at Firm B regularly received recruiting calls from headhunters and job information from other consultants and clients.
consultants were members of many different groups; of course, these
designations were often for the benefit of persuading clients that the firm had
a great deal of "depth" on the bench. Technical and industry groups crossed
geographic boundaries; some offices (New York, for example) had many
banking specialists, while others (Seattle) might have none.

There is a long-standing friction between the consulting and audit
groups of the Big 6/8 firms. Stevens (1981, p. 114) notes that "Big Eight
consultants are a different breed from their auditor brothers." But the clash of
occupational cultures is not the only reason for the tension. As Stevens
states, "Auditing is the Big Eight's foot in the door . . . Once he is functioning as
a part of the family - as a trusted confidant and advisor - one service leads to
another and another and another . . . " (p. 9). Auditors supposedly hired for
their independence are wedded to large consulting firms which tinker with the
very systems the auditors are paid to evaluate objectively. But the conflict of
interest is ignored.

Another reason for the tension between the groups came to light in a
recent series of incidents at Arthur Andersen. Arthur Andersen sued six top
Andersen consulting partners who left to form a new group backed by Saatchi
and Saatchi (Wall Street Journal, November 1, 1988). The Wall Street
Journal (December 7, 1988) reported

> [C]onsultants in recent months have been complaining
that they don't get sufficient pay or clout at accounting
firms run by auditing and tax partners, while unfairly
sharing in liability settlements resulting from suits
involving faulty audits.
Arthur Andersen was restructured so that the consulting group had a separate organization and income pool. But this did not solve the issue - a recent article reported that the firm failed to withhold state taxes for employees, and were being sued by the state of Colorado for taxes, penalties and interest. The suit was settled, but the Wall Street Journal reported:

> Ironically, the problem stemmed from Andersen Consulting's rapid growth... it lacked enough staff and had to shift them from state to state to work on big projects.

The firm was embarrassed by the incident, since former consultants claimed “supervisors led them to believe they could get away with cheating on their Colorado income taxes.” The firm denied this was sanctioned in any way.

While Big 6/8 accounting firms in general have a rather staid image, the MIS consultants did not have the same conservative standards. They tended to be slightly more flamboyant (in dress, for example) than their auditing counterparts. One characteristic of Firm B was its preference for hiring experienced industry professionals into its management consulting practice. This contrasted sharply with its closest competitor, which hired newly graduated MBA's, preferring to mold them to the appropriate standard.

The project team for the engagement I observed came from the Dallas office of Firm B. The Dallas MIS consulting group was considered one of the premier Firm B groups in the country, with a large and varied practice, and leading edge projects (hereafter, unless otherwise indicated, Firm B will be used to refer to the MIS consulting group of the Dallas office). Each consultant was

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22This undoubtedly reflects the growth in the percentage of revenue from the consulting practice from 26% in 1982 to 44% in 1992 (New York Times, April 9, 1989 & August 6, 1992).
assigned a carrel at their branch office (some managers had small offices, and partners had large offices with windows), but the expectation was that they would rarely be there. Turnover, as in Firm A, was quite high; two years after the end of the engagement, all personnel on the project had moved to other firms.

**The Firm B Client Engagement.** In an effort to aid the Canadian economy in the mid-'80s, the Canadian government subsidized foreign companies to do business in Canada in target industries. After soliciting bids from transport plane manufacturers, the Canadian government received proposals from five manufacturers. The contract was awarded to AMT, a U.S. government contractor headquartered in Texas. Despite the fact that the Canadian oil industry on the western Canadian coast is the only consumer of these types of planes, the company, called AMT Canada, was located in Quebec. This decision was not entirely without rhyme or reason; Quebec's economy was quite depressed, and there was a very high rate of unemployment. However, one of the companies which lost the bid was a French company, which made the choice a very unpopular one in Quebec. Local newspapers wrote scathing editorials, and the situation was exacerbated by a variety of small incidents. For example, the Canadian government posted a sign outside the plant which stated that 3,000 new jobs would be created by AMT Canada. This sign had to be taken down when it was explained that only 800 new jobs would be available, and those would not be available immediately, but over a two to three year period.

Part of establishing AMT Canada required that systems be implemented to support the manufacturing process. Some of the systems were to be imported from the U.S. organization, while other systems would be
purchased from a software vendor. Not only did all the systems have to be modified to reflect differences in the country contexts, but the interfaces between the systems had to be created or modified. Firm B was first hired in Dallas to help choose the software vendor, and was later awarded the systems implementation work.

Like Andersen Consulting’s consultants, the Firm B consultants were quite used to moving to another state for the duration of a long project. But international engagements were unusual, and unexpected issues cropped up during the engagement. The high Quebec unemployment rates required justification for importing human resources from the United States, and the Canadian work permit paperwork took so much time that the team began work illegally in Quebec and only later obtained their work permits. Housing and transportation in Quebec was difficult. Three rental cars were provided for the ten consultants, who all lived in one downtown apartment building. Each day at 7 AM, the consultants gathered in the lobby, and then made their way down to the basement garage for the 45 minute ride to the suburban client site. The fact that all the consultants lived in one apartment complex simplified the carpooling and the expenses, but also seemed to engender a feeling of living in a fishbowl. In Dallas, the consultants rarely socialized with other members of Firm B. In Quebec, however, they felt they were constantly in each other’s company. Few of them had the necessary accoutrements to cook, and dining out alone night after night seemed odd to them. But the forced socializing led to uncomfortable groupings of persons which would not naturally occur in Dallas.

Friction between the consulting and audit divisions was evident on this project. The Firm B partners felt the need to “sell” the project not only to the
client, but to their own tax/audit partners as well. In fact, the Firm B partners were considered the tougher sell. "Audit clients are like annuities for them [the tax partners]," two consulting partners explained to me, "they don't want anyone messing with them." If the consulting project were to fail or embarrass the audit partners in any way, this might jeopardize the relationship between the audit partners and their audit clients. The audit partners would prefer not to have the consulting partners doing business with their audit clients.

The distance from home also caused some difficulties. The task of moving ten consultants back and forth from Dallas to Quebec required extra strategy meetings. Many of the consultants had families with school-age children back in Dallas, and flew home most weekends. Others with toddlers and stay-home spouses, along with the single consultants, preferred to remain in Quebec. Certain administrative dealings with the Dallas Firm B office were also strained due to the distance. Mail (personal and business), for example, was forwarded once a week via Federal Express. Mail for U.S. destinations was also sent to the Dallas office via Federal Express for mailing. When questioned about the efficiency of such a practice, the consultants averred that "mail never gets there from Canada." Telephone connections were just as inefficient: often, the telephone would ring 20 or more times before it was answered. (One of the client managers, upon experiencing firsthand the Dallas office's failure to answer the telephone, threw the telephone against the wall.) But when expense sheets, time sheets and weekly reports were due, the Firm B office seemed to be in constant telephone contact.

Relationships with partners atrophied somewhat; this was viewed with particular dismay by those on a partnership track, since high visibility is
necessary for advancement at Firm B. The consultants felt that they were ignored by the partners, despite the fact that their project was a clear success and money maker. According to the team, the partners descended on Quebec en masse when it was time for vacations with spouses to see the fall colors or the division of partner shares at fiscal year end. Even then, the partners took the project team out for dinner, but did not have time to listen to the consultants’ concerns about their future projects or performance evaluations. They also fretted about missing all the action (and gossip) at the office. This increased the prospect of their being "on the beach" in future months, and those consultants hired specifically for this project were the most vulnerable. They were particularly worried about their lack of exposure to other partners and managers. The consultants sometimes likened being in Quebec to being at a jungle or missionary outpost.

Firm B was very pleased with this project because it was quite lucrative (more details follow in chapter 4). The business itself was another matter: the model of the plane which was to have been manufactured in Quebec had not moved from the experimental to the manufacturing stage, as scheduled. In fact, the model AMT-88 field trials went so poorly that the plane barely flew.23 Consequently, little or no work was done at the plant, and state-of-the-art systems could not be completed by the consultants due to the lack of clarity about what was to be produced.24

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23 Jokes abounded which emphasized its resemblance to the Spruce Goose, the legendary creation of Howard Hughes that flew only a few hundred feet.
24 Again, jokes were rampant. Contests were held to describe the new systems, and entries ranged from toasters to helicopters.
Firm C

Firm C was founded by a former faculty member of a prestigious business school. Based on research published in a best-selling book by the founder, the firm developed a methodology (Information Technology Efficacy Methodology, or "ITEM") which measured the efficacy of information systems and their management in organizations. Rather than providing technical or hands-on experience, the firm dealt in strategy and concepts, and emphasized the ability to communicate with managers. The preferred mode of presentation was one based on graphics rather than written management reports. The norm for their consulting product was a presentation with more graphics than text. Over the last ten years, the firm had built a practice based on applying ITEM to organizations in the U.S. and Asia. The firm markets its strategic services primarily to senior technology managers in large organizations.

Headquartered in Palo Alto, Firm C was located in a four story office building owned by the founder which also housed other commercial tenants. In addition to the head office, the firm had offices in the Northeast and Midwest and several Pacific Rim cities. It typically hired MBAs with some information technology training or experience, making use of these relatively young consultants by steeping them in the firm's methodology. As a partner explained:

...most companies don't take to 24 to 35 year olds being 'expert,' they got defensive when they told the clients what was wrong. So, instead of the consultant getting the flack from the client, the data is interposed

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25 There were five ITEM classes which consultants could take.
between the consultant and the client. The consultant still has to tell the clients which things are wrong. But by pointing at the data, they can defuse the situation much more readily.

Not only did the methodology "take the flack," but the rationalization of the work process allowed the firm to use more junior consultants to do the work. This meant a higher billing multiple (Maister, 1982) and greater firm profit (Schmenner, 1986).²⁶

The structure of the firm was like that of many other professional services firms, with the founder at the top, then the partners, and the senior managers, managers, senior consultants, and consultants (in descending order of billing rates). However, unlike accounting firms, which are legal partnerships where partners share equally in profits and losses, Firm C began as a solely owned organization. The founder owned the entire firm and "partners" received a share of the profits at the founder's discretion.

The firm was recently acquired by a Big 6/8 consulting firm, which delighted the Firm C partners. They had expectations that their shares in the profits would increase, due to the change in structure. Partners from the acquiring firm hoped that Firm C's strategic consulting would lead ultimately to more implementation as well as strategic consulting work. Prior to the acquisition, Firm C emphasized their objectivity as an advantage. Unlike many of the large consulting firms, which were affiliated with vendors or other information technology-related entities,²⁷ Firm C did not have any such associations. Their recommendations were "neutral" in the sense that they

²⁶ More detailed descriptions of ITEM appear in chapter 4.
²⁷ Indeed, a consulting firm might be affiliated with so many vendors that the relationships become quite confusing. The relationships, sometimes referred to as "strategic alliances," range from informal referrals to full ownership interest of one firm in another.
had no financial incentive to recommend one type of technology over the other, except when something merited recommendation. After the acquisition, a recommendation by Firm C to implement certain systems might be suspect because they would be biased towards creating sales opportunities for their new parent, thus compromising their objectivity. The partners, however, heralded the acquisition (which they called a “merger”\textsuperscript{28}) with enthusiasm. Rationalizations about “objectivity” were replaced by another: “Companies today expect a full-service firm.”

Aside from the consulting division, there was a research and education division at Firm C. This R&E division brought together different client organizations interested in exploring a current technology issue, such as imaging technology, or how to organize the systems function, calling the group a “technology work group.” The findings of these groups were accumulated in “working papers,” which were disseminated to potential and current clients. There was also an executive training function, as well as an internal training function, which provided classes in Firm C methodologies (and then “certified” the consultants of the acquiring firm). These were both regarded as effective means of marketing services, as well as independent sources of revenue. The heavily academic/research origins of the firm were emphasized in their frequent use of research terminology as applied to their work.

\textit{The Firm C Client Engagement.} MTS, a large telecommunications organization, contacted Firm C and requested a proposal for consulting services which would “position its Information Systems Organization to

\textsuperscript{28}I am still not sure whether this was an error on their part (that they misunderstood the legal nuances of the arrangement), or whether they used the term “merger” to emphasize the equality of their status. Prior to the “merger,” certain Firm C members had “looked down” on those who “got their hands dirty” by doing implementations.
support MTS's business strategy in the 1990's." The proposal document was
unique in that it was a lengthy (37-pages) written document with graphics
interspersed throughout the text; the norm for Firm C proposals was a
graphical presentation where the text consisted mainly of headings and
phrases rather than sentences. There were no competitors for this project,
although there were many rival consulting firms who had worked with Client C
in the recent past. Firm C viewed their selection for this prior work as an
indictment of the work of their rivals.

Identification of relationships and stakeholders was vital to this project
in several ways. Trudi, the director of research in the Corporate Information
Function (CIF) at Client C, was quite active in academic circles, and had a
long-standing relationship with one of the partners (another former professor)
in the R&E division at Firm C. He referred her to the partner in charge of the
consulting division in the same Firm C office. Rob, the head of CIF (and
Trudi's boss), was concerned about the information technology department for
one of the largest units at MTS. Rob asked Firm C to evaluate the
information technology department using ITEM.

The project was divided into systems and human resource portions,
with a Firm C manager in charge of each. The Firm C consulting team started
with eight consultants total. The project took place at a time when the client
company was downsizing for the first time in its 25 year history, and the
evaluative aspect of the project was quite traumatic for client company
members. The project was delayed due to complaints by the client managers
about the trauma to the organization. The project estimate was originally
four months, but was completed in nine months. The project ended with the partner in charge making his presentation to a level of management one higher than anticipated, which was a source of jubilation for the consulting team. There was talk of a large follow-on project, only a small part of which later materialized.

**Firm D**

Firm D is the only site in my research that is not a consulting firm. Firm D was one of the largest banks in the Southeast and one of the ten top superregionals in the U.S. Headquartered in Atlanta, acquisitions over the past several years had given it a retail banking presence in five states: North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Florida. “Cautious and deliberate about integrating our resources,” Firm D had recently begun to combine the acquired entities with the Atlanta organization in the areas of banking products, operations, and technology. Retail banking was their core business, although Firm D provided a broad range of other financial services.

**Structure of the Firm D Information Systems Organization.**

Every internal information system (“IS”) organization faces the issue of centralization or decentralization of IS resources (Dixon & John, 1989; Eason, 1988; Lee & Robertson, 1987; King, 1983): should there be a single IS function

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29Abbott (1988) notes that high-status professionals who serve high-status clients receive some reflected glory.

30The consultants basked in reflected glory; by presenting to a higher level of management, they were scaling new organizational heights.

31This is quite a difficult and complicated task (Smith & Wield, 1987). For example, consider the Automated Teller Machine (ATM) network. At some point after the acquisitions, the ATM networks must accept the acquiring bank’s cards in the acquired banks’ ATMs, and vice versa. This is only one of many systems, such as demand deposits and savings accounts, which must be modified and integrated to some extent.
to take advantage of economies of scale and greater technological integration possibilities or should each business unit control its own IS resources? The structure of Firm D's IS organization has shifted over the years to reflect the tension between these two positions. A Corporate Information Management (CIM) unit reported into the firm's senior executive. Its responsibilities have varied with the hiring of each new CIO: the current CIO had centralized the IS function, but the previous CIO had decentralized the function. Prior to that, the function was centralized.

During most of the period I was at Firm D, the IS function was decentralized, and lines of business controlled their own technology function. The largest of the technology organizations was Retail Information Systems (RIS), which provided technology resources for the retail banking business of the largest retail bank, located in Georgia. Smaller technology organizations supported the retail banking business of the acquired entities. During this time, there was competitive pressure to begin to integrate the systems of the bank. Customers, for example, wanted an integrated monthly statement which would not only include activities of their checking and savings accounts (traditionally, these are two separate systems due to historical and legal vagaries), but also details of their other banking transactions. Also, the ATM networks of the different banking entities would operate more efficiently if they were placed on a common hardware and software "platform." From a business viewpoint, senior management determined that a more integrated approach to the products of the retail banks would be beneficial, and the process of integrating the acquired entities into one large bank began.

*The Firm D Common Software Project.* The project was quite large in scope - over 200 applications in the five states would be modified or
replaced. This project was not primarily the work of external consultants. Rather, it was an effort on the part of the internal systems organizations, with help from individual consultants (hired from body-shops) and from a Big 6/8 consulting firm about the direction which the implementation effort should take.

Management anticipated that the project would take two years to complete, with staggered implementations in each state. This was referred to as "little bangs" rather than a "big bang" (the latter would involve implementation of all systems in all states at one point in time). The initial planning phases of the project lasted one and one-half years. The necessary software was selected and, in some cases, acquired, and the initial technical specifications were prepared by the systems organization with the help of the appropriate user groups. Dates for the first two banks were scheduled for the end of the year (dates were selected based on holiday weekends so that the systems could be tested without the stress of handling normal business activity). As the implementation dates approached, an announcement about the hiring of a new CIO was made by the CEO. While project tasks were carried forward, the announcement boded ill for the implementation effort, and the implementation dates were canceled. After several months had elapsed, the CIO consolidated the IS organizations under CIM, putting a halt to the common software effort. As of the end of my fieldwork, this implementation effort was still halted. Officially, no decision has been made to discontinue the project, but rumors about its demise continued to circulate.
Summary

This chapter describes the variety of the activities at the four research sites, ranging from the systems modification project at Firm A to the large integration project at Firm D. These projects provide some indication of the scale, complexity and ambiguity of information technology consulting work. In the next two chapters, I will discuss the practices which stand out against this backdrop of consulting engagements.
Chapter 4

LEGITIMIZING POSES

Clients often describe consultants as "slick;" consultants even describe each other this way. But what is "slick?" Responses from people in the field pointed vaguely in the direction of consultants' rhetoric as well as appearances; expensive jewelry or clothing, cool under pressure, a neat turn of phrase -- these were all mentioned frequently. Jackall (1988, p. 137) writes at length about management consultants as "virtuosos in symbolic manipulation," and my preoccupation with slickness led me to focus on how consultants presented themselves to clients: in slippery, yet seemingly authentic ways, characterized by metaphors, similes, and overwhelming verbiage. As I sat through many client/consultant interactions, I began to sort the rhetoric by the underlying pose the consultants used in speaking to clients. Three poses recurred throughout the engagements: expert, healer, and partner.¹ The first two of these poses correspond to readily recognized consulting models described by Schein (1987b): (1) the expert model; and (2) the doctor/patient model. The third model described by Schein is the process consultation model, which reflects an increasingly relevant ideal for information technology consultants that is rarely achieved in practice. I did not observe any of the consultants adopting this model, although some of the Firm C consultants were aware of it.

¹Note that these examples are not intended to exhaust the types of poses which can be taken by consultants. Rather, these were poses that recurred in all the relationships I studied.
I chose the term *pose* to emphasize the fleeting nature of these bits of consulting drama. These poses were assumed by consultants for only brief moments in time, much as a model would strike a pose for the photographer’s snapping camera. Because the poses changed so quickly, the consultants could assume different poses in rapid succession. Imagine a play in which there are three roles, and the actor or actress adopts all three roles, changing their voices or posture slightly to indicate a change of role. Consultants similarly strike poses for their clients: discarding one and taking up another at will to accomplish a given effect. The rapidity with which a consultant changes poses can, however, have a negative effect in that the consultant can appear inauthentic and changeable at a moment’s notice. In this chapter, I illustrate the use of poses by consultants during their interactions with clients after describing the three poses in detail. I then compare the notion of poses to other dramaturgical concepts.

*Poses and Symbolic Power*

The use of poses is a practice though which the consultants exercise symbolic power. As mentioned in the introduction, it is difficult for consultants to make a bald assertion that will be accepted without question by the client (particularly assertions like, “it will cost $3,000,000 to upgrade your computer systems”). As described in chapter 2, information technology is so ambiguous that it is not yet identified as a well-defined body of knowledge. An information technology consultant has not attained the status of an expert or a healer, whose assertions are more readily accepted. Since there is no licensing or other means of demonstrating competence, expert or healer status is difficult for the information technology consultants to establish. So the consultant does his or her best to approximate a preferred status. The consultant does
this by referencing a familiar role, e.g., by talking or otherwise acting like an expert. By adopting one of the poses, such as that of an expert, the consultant not only justifies his or her presence, but also legitimates the truth of his or her assertions. All three poses are so common in our society that most of us share assumptions about: (1) how someone would act upon assuming the relevant pose; and (2) how to interpret what is said. The consultant can then “appear” to be an expert, by analogy. By adopting these poses, the consultant gains greater credibility. Through this subtle analogy to familiar cultural roles, which are described in greater detail in the following sections, the consultant can more readily construct and manipulate meanings for clients.

**The EXPERT Pose.** Experts are ubiquitous in today’s society; what an expert says about his or her particular area of expertise is generally accepted as true. For consultants, a situation in which the client accepts their assertions without question is ideal. For example, one consultant gleefully described the Firm B engagement as follows: “Firm B is defining the scope [of the project], and [the client’s] just along for the ride.” As experts, consultants can define the engagement in their own terms, telling the client, for example, that they need this and that service, for a specified fee. Thus, the expert pose is one that is used with great frequency during client/consultant interactions.

But whether or not information technology consultants can be considered experts is difficult to determine for two reasons. First, information technology as a body of knowledge is a contested domain, in part because the varieties of information technology are so bewildering. The basis for a particular body of expertise is thus difficult to discern. For example, someone
might be an expert in a particular technology, such as SYBASE\textsuperscript{2}, or in a functional area, such as hospital patient tracking systems or lights-out manufacturing. It is not clear whether this expertise would be applicable or even helpful outside these narrow domains. Moreover, with the rapid obsolescence of information technology, one does not remain an expert for long unless there is a continuing (and expensive) effort to keep up with technological developments.

Second, evidence of a particular consultant's expertise is even more difficult to evaluate. Training or education may serve as a prerequisite, but is not necessarily sufficient to establish expertise, since it is the application of the technology in particular industries and organizational setting which is the focus of information technology consulting. In spite of this, some organizations are impressed by credentials; the consulting firm will submit resumes of degreed consultants for the approbation of the client. Other clients are not impressed by credentials: as one client manager noted: "papers you can hang on the wall don't mean you're an expert - he might have taken the classes, but he can't do systems analysis or coding."

Experience is critical in information technology, but also difficult to evaluate. One common yardstick of experience is the length of time spent doing technology work, but years of experience are not necessarily an asset in the information technology world. Too many years on one application may indicate a "dinosaur" in a world where obsolescence is rapid. Some experience is preferred -- as one consulting partner notes: "most companies don't take to 24 year olds being expert and telling them what's wrong -- they got defensive."

\textsuperscript{2}SYBASE is a client-server relational database system.
But working on an application for a lengthy period is also not desirable;\(^3\) as one junior consultant in Firm A noted, “being good means being trapped because the client likes you.” There are numerous examples of consultants who have gotten stuck working on an older system critical to the organization which breaks down repeatedly.\(^4\)

Rather than years of experience, one preferred indicator is the number and variety of organizations or technical contexts in which a consultant has worked. Project hopping is preferred by clients as well as consultants.\(^5\) As one consulting manager put it, “the advantages [of being a consultant] are that they do not get stuck as “experts” on a particular system long-term.” Since even packaged software must be modified for the client’s unique hardware platform and organizational processes, a variety of experiences fitting the technology to an organization is valuable for the consultant.

While seasoning and training meld in the creation of a technical expert, establishing one’s reputation is more difficult. Expertise is often established in absentia -- resumes, as well as word of mouth descriptions, often precede the actual work. But what do these written and oral descriptions actually mean? References are often used to “sell” particular consultants to clients, but are

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\(^3\)Once a system is installed, it must be maintained, but systems people do not like software maintenance work (Stinchcombe & Heimer, 1988; Swanson & Beath, 1990) because of their preference for “sexier” work.

\(^4\)Often these older systems are not replaced because the cost of implementing a new system is so high for core computer systems, such as demand deposit accounts for a bank, or switching systems for a telecommunications company. Not only is there a substantial dollar investment which must be made with new technology, but also time and cost estimates for implementation may be off by an order of magnitude. For core systems, this may be too risky an endeavor. One senior manager, describing a 20 year old application central to the business, said: “it burps once in a while, and it may not be the sexiest platform around, but it runs fast and cheap.”

\(^5\)Like sowing proverbial wild oats, this allows the consultant to experience a variety of settings before “settling down” to one organization.
not proof of expertise. As one Firm A consultant pointed out, laudatory “letters from clients don’t mean much, because the salespeople are supposed to ask the clients for them.” Even with the best “credentials” or reputation, expertise is not necessarily helpful. One client manager commented after meeting a much-touted technical expert from a consulting company: “they gave us Pat, but at the last meeting, he spent so much time pontificating, and showing us what he knew, that we got nothing done.”

Another example of contextual expertise occurred during Mike’s first appearance at the client organization. “All consultants have to learn new systems within days,” the Firm A consultant told me confidently. He was familiar with DEC mainframes, but not the IBM system used by the client. He tested the system together with a member of the client organization. Unable to recall the command for exiting part of system, Mike had to reboot repeatedly (by turning the computer off and on, rather than typing in the appropriate command) to exit. He did not want to “look bad” in front of the client, and acted as if shutting off the terminal were a normal means of exiting.

Some consultants readily establish their expertise in client organizations. Some technical experts have been known to “walk on water” in given organizations. For example, one programmer in Firm D had a reputation for being able to unerringly spot the source of bugs in code. This ability was spoken of with awe by clients and other consultants, who maintained the

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6The need to appear expert extends to other team members as well as consulting competitors. Firm C consultants, for example, grudgingly indicate other worthy competitors, but when reviewing a frequent competitor’s handiwork at Client C, one of the partners remarked: “[The competitor] was underwhelming - there were lots of weird things [in the document.] They were not specific about what to do.”
programmer "did it by smell." His status as technical expert was never in doubt.

Being an expert justifies the presence as well as the price of the consultant in the client organization, and in addition, legitimates what they say. But the expert pose is not always one they wish to maintain at all times. As Keen & Scott-Morton (1978, p. 198) note: "Argyris . . . highlights the fact that analytical specialists quite simply scare many people -- they operate in an alien fashion, are outsiders, and think and feel in different terms." So other, more reassuring poses (for example, the healer or partner pose) are employed for these situations. Examples of each of these poses in operation will be given later in the chapter.

The HEALER Pose. The most familiar healer figure in our culture is that of the doctor, who diagnoses and presumably cures the sick. When the consultant adopts the healer pose, the assumption is that the client is sick or broken, and the consultant will heal or fix what is wrong. The healer pose is similar to the expert pose, in that both assume greater relative knowledge or ability on the part of the consultant. However, the expert is often detached from devising the solution to the problem. An expert's involvement may end with explaining to the client what is wrong. The healer, on the other hand, is more like a medical practitioner or an engineer -- not only does he or she impart knowledge, but will also participate in the problem's solution. The healer pose is sometimes preferred over the expert pose by consultants, since a common client complaint about consultants is that they "take the money and run." As one client put it: "of course, this is true -- it's ultimately not their [the consultants'] problem . . . there's not a lot of accountability for results."
By rendering advice and overseeing its implementation, the healer consultant is seen as less of a detached person, insensitive to the consequences of his or her advice. The healer pose promises both diagnosis and cure, but sometimes there is a diagnosis but no cure, or the cure recommended is “unsuccessful” (i.e., does not heal the client). In some cases, the consultants may not want to be responsible for results that are beyond their control or negative in consequence. The consultant may blame the client for not following the prescription (i.e., how do you expect to get well if you keep drinking?) or the client may blame the consultant for a faulty diagnosis or cure. For example, a consulting firm recommended that Firm D computer systems be decentralized in order to be more user-responsive. These systems, which were based on personal computers, tracked the performance of the branch banks for certain branch incentive programs. But part of the consequences of decentralization would be to disband a small group of Firm D internal technical consultants who had built and maintained the system. These Firm D employees grumbled that the external consulting firm was looking for “big hits,” actions that would result in budgetary dollar or head count savings, rather than taking a longer-term view. “They tried this [decentralization] three years ago,” grumbled an internal Firm D consultant, “and we had to train new people all over again because no one wanted to take care of it.” This was the first engagement at Firm D for this particular consulting firm, which was perceived as doing a “hit and run.” Approximately eight months after the group was disbanded, they reassembled a team of internal consultants for maintaining the branch incentive system. Several new members were trained in the system software (attending training classes and seeking out others to explain the system). The external consultants I spoke to claimed that Firm D “didn’t do it right,” explaining that they had not
properly “prepared” the users for the disbanding of the support group. The Firm D members asserted that the users had no incentive or desire to do their own maintenance, and that they had no control over the users. The external consulting firm in this instance appeared to Firm D members to be insensitive to the consequences of the recommendations they made.

Because the information technology function is often distinct from the business function in an organization (akin to the staff/line distinction), one “healthy” part of the organization may hire a consulting firm to fix another “sick” part (Hirschhorn, 1988). For example, Client C’s new CIO hired Firm C primarily to find out what was wrong with the systems organization (“SO”) of the manufacturing group. In the proposal document prepared by the consulting firm, there are many references to the “broken” SO: “bring [SO] at least to par with reference to technology” was a typical phrase. The first stage of the project consisted of a “diagnosis” of SO, and criticisms of the organization were plentiful. There was general agreement amongst the consultants that SO was “sick.” At the team meetings, the consultants spent several hours making remarks like the following: “People at the top have flaky ideas,” “it’s a boneyard,” “a bunch of non-performing turkeys,” “[they’re] living on the glory days, like the last days of Pompeii.” For the client, the consultants transformed this message into something more palatable: the head of SO was told that he had “a talented group of people”, but the organization “lacks a business direction.” The blame, by implication, lay with the business management rather than the systems organization. At first, the clients eagerly concurred in the diagnosis, but as the engagement progressed and the criticisms continued, their responses ranged from “you have no true
appreciation of how bad it is” to “it’s bullshit -- you’re being sucked right in [by the other part of the client organization].”

Thus, the client eventually becomes weary of being the “sick” one, so a healer pose cannot be maintained over the course of the entire project. Another reason the healer pose cannot be used continuously is that the consulting firm is never without problems of its own. These will often become apparent to the client during the engagement, and the client will pounce on these in an effort to right the sick/healthy imbalance in their relationship. For example, one client manager found a Firm C junior consultant calculating questionnaire response data with pencil, paper, and a calculator. After angrily asking his billing rate, the client called Firm C “a bunch of arrogant people who don’t update themselves in the latest technical things happening in the software arena!” “Physician, heal thyself” is applicable to consultants; as one client grumbled, “if they can’t even get their own shop together . . .”

There are some mystical variants of the healer pose, which seem more like a magician or a religious leader than a medical doctor. For these poses, the agency for the fixing or healing is attributed to some mysterious or invisible or supernatural means. These poses share the same basic inequity in status between the client and consultant as the healer. A more egalitarian stance is described in the next section.

The PARTNER Pose. The partner pose is one which is appealing to both client and consultant because the underlying assumption is that each side is equal in the relationship. The legal definition of two partners in a partnership includes an equal division of both profits and losses, the good and the bad. This pose counteracts the inequalities inherent in the expert and the healer pose, so the consultants make numerous rhetorical claims to partner
status. Firm A describes how it “partners the clients to help them transform their systems,” Firm B notes that “the power comes from the client,” and Firm C states that “a client/consultant partnership is the key to project success.” Most consulting firms make similar statements. But this pose, too, is difficult to sustain. While consultants generally pride themselves on their ability to adapt to the client’s organization and way of doing things by “living the problem of the client” or “partnering with the client,” in many situations, it is clear that this rhetoric is far from the reality. Consultants have a strong tendency to rely on their own ways of doing things, especially in uncertain technical environments. The following example of the Firm A and Client A “partnership” illustrates one such failure.

The contract drafting process between Firm A and client was long and drawn-out -- “nit-picky” according to one of the consulting firm managers. The original request for proposals in early February by Client A contemplated an April 1st start date for the engagement. But it was not until April 30th that Firm A received their acceptance letter, and it took over two months thereafter to get the contract signed. I was told (much later) by Client A systems people that this was a relatively expedited process from their perspective, but the Firm A consultants were impatient to get started on the “real” (i.e., technical) task, and not waste time on these unimportant details. When they spoke about the delay, they attribute it to “other” entities in the organization - “higher up” or “legal” or “accounting.” With hindsight, preoccupation with “nit-picking” and “unimportant details” would be a feature of the Client A way of doing business. But Firm A was unaware that this would form the basis for many future frustrations and misunderstandings.
“Let’s make this project a Firm A showcase!” trumpets a branch management memo just before the start of the engagement.

During the engagement, there were many incidents where Firm A was concerned about the technical details and Client A was concerned about non-technical details. The incidents escalated to such an extent that each party began communicating by memo, each more pointed than the last. Even minutes of meetings resulted in one version authored by the consultants and a different version authored by the clients. By the middle of the engagement, one of the memos stated: “the recent proliferation of memos would likely result in an unhealthy relationship and would be a waste of time.” The consultant and client agreed that they should co-author memos and otherwise cooperate whenever possible. But this did nothing to resolve the situation, or Firm A’s frustration. By the end of the engagement, Kevin, the Firm A project manager, was saying things to team members like “I’m sick of this project,” and “I don’t want to talk to her [client team member].” Kevin had worked 20 hours or more per week in unpaid overtime during the engagement, and, in the words of his boss: “bleeds little red A’s [the Firm A logo].” Kevin summed it up by saying “what hurts is not being trusted to do a good job.”

For Firm A, the technical task was more important than these non-technical details. The Firm A team each worked 60 to 80 hours per week, and felt that non-technical project details could be ignored in rushing to meet the project deadline set by the client. In direct contrast, the client felt that the non-technical details were as if not more important. One additional example of such a detail was rejected deliverables. Late in the engagement, Linda, a Firm A programmer, and I were going through a pile of deliverables rejected by John, the client manager. Our task was to puzzle out which flaw had caused
its rejection, and fix it. These deliverable packages consisted of 1) a
descriptive cover sheet with the name and number of the module, 2) a flow
chart for the module in the program, and 3) a list of detailed specifications for
the module (the last two documents also listed the name and the number of
the module across the tops of the sheets so that the cover sheet was not
strictly necessary). By this time, we knew that none of the Client A team
members read these documents, so it was not their technical content that had
caused them to be rejected. In some packages, spotting the flaw was easy:
the cover sheet was missing, the flow chart objects (rectangles, circles,
triangles, diamonds) were different sizes, or figures were not centered on the
page. For the final package, we were both stumped. Finally, Linda indicated a
faint coffee stain on one corner of the cover sheet. Kevin jokingly growled:
"John probably did this." We printed out a new cover sheet, and gave the
deliverable packages to John. Later, Linda and I laughed together as Kevin
duly received the acceptances from John for all the deliverable documents we
had fixed.

If Firm A had done things the way that Client A had preferred, paying
more attention to non-technical detail, would that have solved the partnership
problems? For most of the project, all of the Firm A team members felt they
did not have time to pay attention to the cosmetic details and still meet the
deadline. In addition, these consultants wanted to be recognized for their
technical skills and overtime efforts, which were ignored by the client. By the
end of the project, the managers involved, with the exception of one branch
manager, were all bemused by what had happened, and unable to pinpoint
what had "gone wrong with the partnership." By providing quality systems
service, they thought they had been a terrific partner, but this perception was not shared by the client. The Firm A consultants felt "wronged" by the client.

Consultants are hired for their skills and methodologies (described in the next chapter), so when they are asked to modify these in a partnership, they are at a loss for how to behave. A "partnership" often reverts to an unequal relationship, with the consultant sometimes "educating" (or attempting to educate) the client in a manner that bears a greater resemblance to an expert pose. The next section describes the way poses are used in interactions by the consultants to sustain certain effects.

**Consultant/Client Interactions**

These descriptions of the poses do not capture the fleeting way the poses are used by the consultants during client interactions. What follows are two brief interactions taken from two different points in time during the Firm C/Client C engagement that illustrate poses in use. As described earlier in this chapter, the CIO (who reported to the president, see simplified organizational chart in figure 4.1) hired Firm C in part to evaluate the "broken" systems organization (SO), which is the technical organization attached to the manufacturing division. The first of these two interactions were excerpted from a day-long Firm C/Client C meeting, held at the offices of Firm C, which occurred about halfway through the year-long engagement. The purpose of this meeting was to review the project for Jack, the VP who "owned" SO.7 This was the first formal meeting between Jack and Firm C, although Jack had previously spoken briefly to several consultants at Firm C.

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7SO reported to Mark, who in turn reported to Jack, who managed several support functions in addition to the technical organization.
The meeting took place in a large conference room. At the head of the table was the overhead projector, projecting the transparencies which formed the basis for the presentation. The consulting partner in charge and one of the managers flanked the projector. The clients sat on the partner’s side of the table, and the rest of the consultants faced the clients across the table. Present at this meeting were five consultants: two partners (Tom and Ray), two managers (Ted and Sarah), and a consultant from a related consulting company who had worked with this client previously. Four clients were also present: the CIO, two members of his staff, and Jack. This excerpted interaction occurred toward the end of the day, after Tom (the partner in charge) and Ted had reviewed the project scope, content, and schedule for Jack and the rest of the clients. The elapsed time was just a few moments, but this interaction was representative of other exchanges which took place throughout the day. After each line of consultant dialogue, the poses referenced appear in brackets.
Line 1 Consulting partner: We have a lot of discovery still ahead of us. These are our hypotheses. But with your help we can see if these are corroborated . . . <partner>

Line 2 Client VP: This is a good review opportunity for us.

Line 3 Consulting partner: We only have so long to get it together, but with your help, we'll be empowered to make effective changes. <partner>

Line 4 Client VP: Let's fix what's broken and get into the 21st century . . .

Line 5 Consulting partner: By looking at strategic linkages -- this may revolutionize the service that's conducted . . . <expert>

Line 6 Client VP: We need answers that will take us into the future.

Line 7 Consulting partner: That matches our orientation. <healer>

Line 8 Client VP: What level of recommendations will you give? Will you have observations about specific systems?

Line 9 Consulting partner: The level of recommendations will allow you to take the next step forward. <healer>

Line 10 Client VP: With our paralysis, maybe you can choose for us -- on second thought, not at your rates!

Line 11 Consulting partner: We'll tell you -- this is what you have -- it's not the moon, not blue cheese -- but what you have here is not a rocket ship, it's a kiddy car. <expert>

Line 12 Client VP: I need that . . . we're change junkies -- it's the flavor of the month!

The prevalence of images of the future, and of change, were persistent throughout this brief exchange, and throughout the day. These images were also consistently used in other consultant/client discussions of client expectations for projects which I observed. As noted in chapters 2 and 3,
information technology is often associated with competitive advantage in organizational contexts. The references to the “21st century” (line 4), “strategic linkages” and “revolutionize” (line 5), “the future” (line 6), “a rocket ship” (line 11), and “change” (line 12), all emphasized the prevalent managerial orientation. Those organizations that were able to transform themselves, and do so rapidly, were the ones which would, in the perception of their managers, be able to succeed at the expense of their competitors. This is the characteristic and promise of information technology that managers such as Jack would like to harness for their own organizations.

The hopeful, almost wistful note which pervaded this particular interaction is not unusual in discussing expectations for client engagements. The interaction began when Tom, the partner in charge, solicited the help of the client, Jack, in the consulting engagement. Jack reinforced this cooperative, or partnering, perspective, in offering his view of the engagement as a “good . . . opportunity” for the client, also. This pair of exchanged sentences illustrated the mode where the client concurs in the pose proffered by the consultant. In line 3, Tom again indicated that both would share in the effort to make the engagement successful. This reinforced the partner stance, with the client and the consultant participating jointly in the engagement.

At the beginning of line 4, Jack stated “let’s fix,” still sustaining the partner cooperation with the word let’s. But with the shift to “broken,” and his reference to “we need answers,” Jack paved the way for Tom to adopt the healer pose. The tone of voice Tom adopted during this interaction was assured, almost avuncular, in providing the reassurances in lines 5 and 7. Jack asked for more specific details on the types of recommendations the consultants would provide (line 8), and Tom assured him of answers that would
help them “take the next step forward” (line 9), albeit devoid of any of the specifics Jack requested. Jack, seemingly satisfied with Tom’s reply, mused about having Firm C “choose for us,” again colluding with Tom’s healer pose. Adding "not at your rates," Jack brandished a weapon of his own over the consultants, reminding Tom who paid the bills. But Jack’s final reference in this exchange was to being a “junkie," implying that the client organization was unable to help itself, needing the type of assistance afforded by a doctor or healer.

Like a subtle, nuanced dance between client and consultant, Tom took up the healer and expert poses which were conducive to service provision. The poses in operation are quite subtle, yet unmistakable. It is often a matter of phrasing and tone of voice. Tom had a tall, commanding presence and deep voice, and could deliver reassurances with great aplomb. The client in this case, Jack, was content to be broken, ignorant, paralyzed and needy with the exception of the reference to billing rates. In this exchange, it appeared that the client adopted poses corresponded to the consultant poses. For the expert pose, there is the novice counterpart; for the healer pose, there is the patient counterpart; for the partner pose, the partner counterpart. Jack adopted these counterparts in response to and sometimes even prior to the poses of Tom, the consultant. It is clear that the client colluded with the consultant in posing upon occasion. But there were other instances in which the client was not content to adopt the corresponding poses, such as the following dialogue indicates.

I will now turn to an excerpt taken from near the end of the same engagement, another day-long meeting of Firm C and Client C when the preliminary results were presented to the client. The meeting, held at Firm C,
began at 9 AM, and had consisted of data on overhead transparencies presented by several different consultants on a variety of different applications. Copies of the material presented were contained in massive (5") three-ring binders opened in front of each person present. The general finding was that the performance of SO "needed improvement," since SO lacked a "coherent technology strategy." There was some suggestion that the reason for the lack of technology strategy lay in the lack of overall business strategy for the manufacturing division, thus directing the blame for the problem away from the SO and toward SO's management, but the overall results reflected badly on SO. During most of the presentation, the clients had sat silently, speaking only to ask brief questions about data presentation, or to chat about lunch and the weather.

Five members of the client organization were present at this meeting: the CIO, Jack, his direct report (Mark, the director of SO), and two members of the CIO's staff. Four members of the consulting firm were also present: Ray (one of the partners), the two managers (Ted and Sarah), and a manager (Scott) who has been asked to do this part of the presentation. Scott, who began at about 2:20 PM, was a relatively new member of the consulting firm, brought in at a senior manager level. He had evaluated the integration of two of the SO computer systems -- one older and one still under development. Standing by the head of the table, Scott placed his title transparency on the overhead projector.

Line 1  **Client Director**  Why are you doing this [presentation]?

Line 2  **Presenting Consultant:** Because of requests from this group and [the client president].
[Scott quickly arrived at a controversial transparency which stated that the
two client systems were not well "integrated."]

Line 3 **Client Director:** [Those systems] integrate perfectly.

Line 4 **Client VP:** One’s the front end and one’s the back end. I’m the
organizational sponsor for both... I just want to make sure
we’re addressing the right issues and not spooking.

Line 5 **Consultant Partner:** This is a question that [the client president]
has raised... There is a certain lack of common perception...
. Time and energy is wasted in miscommunication. <expert>

Line 6 **Client VP:** Nobody told me we were going down this detour. You
should at least talk to the people with a different viewpoint.
All you’re doing is adding fuel to the fire.

Line 7 **Consultant Partner:** We’re real concerned. <healer>

Line 8 **Client VP:** Nobody’s talked to me and nobody’s talked to Mark, and
I hope to Christ you didn’t talk to [the president]. I wish you
had the courtesy to talk to me before you made this
recommendation. SO will tell you by navel size who’s
working on what where.

Line 9 **Consultant Partner:** We’ve seen diagrams [of the system]... We
know there’s a lot of dollars and cents going in, year after year
... <expert>

Line 10 **Client VP:** You spent from 9 to 2 [the earlier part of the meeting]
bitching about how we have no strategy. Now we have a
strategy, and you’re down on us...

Line 11 **Consultant Manager:** We feel we have missed a connection here --
let us think a little more about the issue, and try to figure it
out.

Line 12 **Client CIO:** This is supposed to be a working session - why are you
two so riled?

Line 13 **Client VP:** [Those two systems] are my priorities! It’s a credibility
issue, a professional issue -- at least a phone call to check, for
courtesy!! If you want to talk about your recommendations
after a more professional analysis...
Up until this point, the consultants maintained their expert and healer poses without challenge from the clients. In their expert poses, the consultants presented “data” on the transparencies to the clients for hours. In their healer poses, they had documented how the systems organization, with its poor performance, was “sick” and in need of healing. Only when it came to this particular part of the presentation did the clients begin to object to the findings of the consultant, and they objected loudly. Jack and Mark first asked why Scott was addressing this application. By invoking the president, a higher authority, Scott was safe, but for only a moment. Jack and Mark then challenged Scott’s finding (lines 3 and 4), attempting to re-negotiate the definition of the systems that were not well integrated (“I just want to make sure we’re addressing the right issues”). The challenge was escalated (line 6) by assertions that the consulting team had not spoken to all the right people. Now it was not simply a matter of a mistaken impression on the part of the consultant, but an implication that Scott had not done his work properly. By not talking to Jack or to Mark (line 8), Scott and the firm had acted “unprofessionally” (line 13). Ray attempted to soothe the client with a “concerned” healer pose (line 7). When this did not work, he attempted an expert pose (“we’ve seen diagrams . . . we know there’s lots of dollars . . . going in, year after year,” line 9).

Then Jack and Mark used what the consultants had asserted against them earlier in the day (“you [were] bitching about how we have no strategy,” line 10), in an attempt to change the meaning or evaluation of the systems from ones that did not integrate to ones that had clear strategies (“now we
have a strategy, and you're down on us," line 10). The client CIO even attempted to pour oil on troubled waters, inquiring what was "riling "Jack and Mark (line 12), and calling the meeting a "working session." All such efforts at appeasement were useless, however, and Jack and Mark cast the problem not only as one of "credibility, " (line 13) but also one of courtesy (line 13 -- not only were the consultants inept, but they were rude to boot). Ray tried a theatrical gesture (tearing out and balling up the offending page, and chucking it at a nearby wastebasket), but this was not successful at mollifying Jack and Mark.

The consultants repeatedly attempted to reacquire poses (lines 5, 7, 9), but Jack and Mark remained unconvinced. They then give up on the poses, simply attempting to repair the relationships at any level (lines 11 and 14). But the relationship with Jack and Mark was irrevocably damaged, and the consultants were no longer able to talk as frequently or freely with them. Firm C's relationship with the CIO, who hired Firm C to "fix" Jack and Mark's systems organization in the first place, remained intact.

**Poses and Dramaturgy**

In the examples above, I have shown that the poses used both successfully and unsuccessfully by the consultants are fleeting, taken up and discarded very quickly and opportunistically. The poses called upon roles that are familiar to all the parties, so the consultant does not need any time to "get into" the pose. One pose may last for only one sentence's duration. ⁸ Once it is

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⁸That these poses are not maintainable for appreciable lengths of time is consistent with the literature. Etzion's (1979, pp. 372-3) research shows that

[C]lients demand a certain balance between personal support and understanding, on the one hand, and expert guidance and decisiveness on the other. When the situation is loaded with one
used and its effectiveness has passed, the consultant will turn to other poses. The concept of poses can be fruitfully compared with dramaturgical concepts such as roles (Biddle, 1966) and lines (Goffman, 1967).

Poses differs markedly from roles. As Biddle (1966, p. 68) has described, role theory began with a theatrical metaphor:

If performances in the theater were differentiated and predictable because actors were constrained to perform “parts” for which “scripts” were written, then it seemed reasonable to believe that social behaviors in other contexts were also associated with parts and scripts understood by social actors. Thus, role theory may be said to concern itself with a triad of concepts: patterned and characteristic social behaviors, parts or identities that are assumed by social participants, and scripts or expectations for behavior that are understood by all and adhered to by performers.

Rather than elaborate scripts or parts, poses are like garments that are quickly and readily discarded. Roles are often quite large, such as parenting and working (see Coverman, 1989), while poses are quite narrow. The consultants can be thought to be assuming certain roles, but rather than taking them on for periods of time, and developing their use, consultants simply reference them by analogy. Consultants use poses to legitimate their claims or influence their clients, rather than developing a role; inconsistencies in the poses create no role conflict for the consultants. Once these poses have

of these elements, the clients’ satisfaction, their readiness to act, and their enthusiasm are, in part, determined by the presence of the other element. In other words: consultants who can supply their clients with both elements at the same time will produce more satisfaction and more eagerness to follow recommendations.
served their purpose in legitimating the consultants, they can be readily discarded.

Poses are also a slight variation on "lines," which Goffman (1967, p. 5) defines as "a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which he expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself." But lines, Goffman (1967, p. 11-12) notes, are sustained throughout an encounter: "Once the person presents a line, he and the others tend to build their later responses on it, and become stuck with it." The poses of the consultants are used in rapid succession throughout encounters.

Young (1972, p. 25) offers a distinction between "short takes" and "long takes" that can be used to help sort out the distinction between roles, lines, and poses.

If one is involved in the role for but a brief time -- four years or four months or four hours -- then it is coded as a short take. In conjunction with time, if one can enter and leave the social role with little fuss or bother, a simple farewell or less, it is operationally construed to be a short take. If the role requires a rite of passage or other public ceremony before enactment then it is probably a lifelong take. If one really believe that he is such a thing, it probably is a long take. . . . A third important aspect of a short take is the range of behavior it encompasses. Short takes evoke as few as one or two specific unit acts -- purchase of a ticket and attendance, a signature and periodic check writing, a nod and a brief conversation. Sometimes the short take involves a complex series of unit acts as in the example of a "patient" or a "guest." Sometimes short takes involve a contract in which specific but restricted acts are called forth. In all events, the range of behavior involved is much smaller than that of a long take.

One can create a continuum based on Young's long and short takes, as shown in figure 4.2. Roles may be considered the longest takes, line are short takes, and poses are very short takes (four seconds instead of four hours).
Figure 4.2: Roles, Lines and Poses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Roles</th>
<th>Lines</th>
<th>Poses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Longer Take</td>
<td>Shorter Take</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Much agility is displayed by consultants in assuming and discarding these poses. While poses occur in rapid succession, they recur repeatedly throughout day-long meetings between client and consultant. To the extent that the client does not challenge every assumption of the pose, the consultant maintains a rather grainy, even pointillist version of the role, thus gaining a form of legitimacy.

Poses should not be confused with individual quirks. Some consultants prefer certain modes of interacting with clients. For example, Don (the Firm A salesman) and Kevin (the project manager) have different ways of interacting with clients. Kevin was most comfortable in a teaching or coaching role, while Don enjoyed taking people to lunch, and schmoozing about his various deals. Sam, a Firm A analyst, had an altogether different style, and could often be found joking with a group of clients during a coffee break or lunch. But each could instantly assume all three of these poses with their clients when they deemed it necessary.

Summary

As illustrated in this chapter, consultants use poses by referencing well-known cultural roles, “borrowing” some legitimacy by posing in these roles. This allows them to sustain status and knowledge claims in front of clients.
Practices, as we shall see in the next chapter, operate in a manner similar to poses in that they too rely on familiar cultural assumptions. But practices are more impersonal, while poses become a part of the repertoire of the individual consultant; the “slickest” consultants may be the ones who are the best at posing.
Chapter 5

LEGITIMIZING PRACTICES

The purpose of this chapter is to describe four practices (presentation, methodologies, timelines, and billing) used by consultants in their exercise of symbolic power. These practices serve the same function as the poses described in the previous chapter: to legitimize the consultants and their work. But unlike poses, which operate by analogy to familiar cultural roles, the practices introduced in this chapter revolve around systems and structures.¹ The power in these practices relies on the cultural assumptions which undergird them (see figure 5.1). As mentioned in chapters 1 and 4, the consultants can draw on these assumptions almost invisibly to reinforce their assertions. For example, the billing system is an elaborate collection of artifacts, activities, systems and structures that relies for its efficacy on the assumption that time is money, which represents the value of the services. Consultants need not prove in every instance of charging for one hour of work that the rates they charge are justified. In this manner, consultants use these practices to help buttress the meaning of their own actions and systems. Each of these practices and the corresponding assumptions are discussed in detail in subsequent sections of this chapter.

¹Practices are a collection of diverse activities, artifacts, structures and systems. For example, a client invoice is an artifact of the billing practice. But the invoice derives its meaning from a collection of things such as the activities of the consultants (i.e., hours they bill), the billing systems (i.e., the billing data and the paper and computer systems which manipulate the data), and structures (i.e., the organizational hierarchy which maps organizational status to hourly rates). Thus, all of these activities, artifacts, systems and structures are implicated in the billing practice and reinforce its operation. Because they are so closely interrelated, I refer to these collectively as a practice and use this as a catch-all reference.
The consulting activities related to a practice can occur at different times during an engagement (for example, billing often takes place on a periodic basis throughout an engagement, presentations may occur before, during, or at the end of an engagement, and so on). Since these practices are collections which include not only the actions of the consultants but the cultural assumptions which underlie these actions, it is difficult to locate their actual operation or effects at any particular point in time.

**Figure 5.1: Legitimizing Practices in Information Technology**

**Consulting**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practices</th>
<th>Assumptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presentation</td>
<td>The “right” technology provides competitive advantage/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>consultants can provide the “right” technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodologies</td>
<td>Method is science/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>science is truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Lines</td>
<td>Tasks can be represented/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>representation is reality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billing</td>
<td>Time is money/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>money is value</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that the illustrations of the practices provided here are drawn from the various sites. I chose examples that threw these practices, which often operate quite invisibly, into the sharpest relief. Thus, there are not examples of each of the practices from every site. In some cases, I do not have the data for each site. For example, I did not observe the opening client presentations for the Firm A, B and C engagements, although I did observe presentations for other engagements. Another caveat is that by attempting to be as clear as
possible about the operation of these practices, their operation is somewhat simplified, and some of their complexity and subtlety are lost.

**Presentation**

In this section, I illustrate two types of presentational activities by consultants. The first is intended for prospective clients and can be further divided into two types: (1) promotional materials, including brochures, newsletters, and media advertisements, created by the consulting firm to convey impressions and information, and (2) "symposia," conferences organized around information technology topics of current interest. This first type of presentation is intended for future clients and has, of necessity, a more general focus. The second type of presentational activity is more narrowly focused on a particular project for a particular client. An example of this type of presentational activity is the RFP (Request for Proposal) process, and two illustrations are provided from client engagements to describe the client/consultant interactions.

The consulting promotional materials and symposia attempt to define the services that consultants will provide. As described in chapters 2 and 3, information technology services are ambiguous in the extreme, and the presentational practices allow consultants to provide meanings which will entice clients to hire the firm. Consider the following excerpt from Firm C's promotional literature.

Business is changing. Competition is more complex - it is global; it is faster. The role of computer technology has moved onto center stage. To survive the 1980s and beyond, executive management must use technology as a strategic business tool.

This excerpt from Firm C's promotional material was typical of information technology consulting rhetoric. It called upon images which appeal
to managers, such as rapid change and competitive advantage. Consulting firms pandered to the desire of managers to win out over their competition. For example, Firm A’s brochure also implied that “industry leadership can be yours” should the client avail themselves of the consulting firm’s services, as Bloomfield & Best (1992) have also noted. The competition imagery was sometimes war-like; as one consultant said, “Technology is like an F-16. The challenge to the designer is to do it so the user can control it and use its power to the maximum effect.” The client was often portrayed as doing battle with its competitors and the consultants were allied with the client.

Promotional materials sometimes masqueraded as “research” or “informational” reports. Firm D received an “Executive Summary” authored by one consulting firm which, through the process of interviewing CEOs and other executives at “banks and other organizations that are generally recognized in the business community as leaders in the successful application of technology.” Graphic images supported a futuristic orientation - red arrows shot off to the right of the page, and the “21st century” was emblazoned on the masthead. The 10-page study identified “success factors” which made the leaders different; two brief paragraphs were devoted to each of the following five factors: leadership, culture, innovation, implementation, and quality. The introduction and the conclusion were devoted to framing the issue in this way:

The gap between successful financial institutions and the rest of the industry is widening rapidly . . . technology is a resource for executing top management strategy and meeting the needs of the customer in an increasingly competitive industry.

By implication, those organizations which were not on the “leading edge” would lose customers to their more sophisticated competitors (who had presumably prudently availed themselves of the consulting firm’s services). Many internal information technology consultants jokingly referred to the
leading edge as the "bleeding edge." There are costs associated with being on the "bleeding edge," as reflected in the "rule of zero," which states that one should never buy a software product with a version number that ends in zero, such as "3.0". This indicates that the version has been newly released, and that the bugs have not been worked out of the software. Higher numbered versions, such as 3.1 or 3.2, are preferable because the bugs have presumably been discovered and fixed.

Even negative aspects of information technology can be turned into presentational capital by consultants. Andersen Consulting ran a series of advertisements in the major business media (Wall Street Journal, Business Week, Fortune) which became the focus of a Wall Street Journal article (September 27, 1990) on the new advertising trend in consulting services. One of the advertisements in the series depicted a computer "mouse" caught in a mousetrap, with the following caption:

Eeeek! In theory, information technology is supposed to set a company free. But in practice, many organizations find that technology investments increase their costs without increasing their productivity. Andersen Consulting can help keep your organization out of this dangerous trap.

Here, the ad juxtaposed the image of computing as something powerful with the reality many organizations experienced: that information technology was costly, with little measurable benefit to the organization. Many organizations had invested heavily in information technology only to discover that competitive advantage through technical systems was as elusive as winning a

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2 See chapter 7 of Pentland (1991) for a more detailed discussion of the "bleeding edge" in the context of software support hot lines.

3 In addition, they ran television ads during the half-time of a major bowl game. The Wall Street Journal (September 27, 1990) reported that Andersen Consulting budgeted $10 million for ads that year.
Publisher's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes. But, the ad continued, Andersen Consulting can solve the problem for the client: “Using our combination of business and technology skills, we can offer solutions that directly link your information systems to your corporate strategy.” Andersen Consulting stood ready to fill the perennial gap between the systems and business.

Thus, consulting firms were portrayed as having the solutions whether the client wanted to “move into the 21st century” or “get things under control.” Peat Marwick (one of the Big 6/8) sported a “runaway systems” group. This group of consultants specialized in containing systems development or implementation efforts which have gone well beyond time or money estimates (Business Week, November 7, 1988).4 “It’s risky,” admitted one Peat Marwick consultant in discussing the runaway systems group, “they’re just waiting for us to screw one up.” But this identified the consultants as a group which could provide the client with the proper answer for runaway systems.

Consulting companies also sponsored conferences to entice clients and create favorable impressions. At these conferences, a number of invited speakers as well as consulting firm members appeared on the roster. Consultants used the opportunity to meet potential clients and gather valuable background information about the client organizations (the identity of the CIO, the nature of the internal information technology organization, the amounts and types of technology spending, etc.). I attended several of these conferences; they were located, not surprisingly, at vacation resorts, which provided additional reasons for attendance.

4Some clients have gone so far as to sue the consulting firms which have created runaway systems (Business Week, April 3, 1989).
A great deal of time and money were expended by the consulting firms on these conferences. One Firm B conference, held at a luxury resort in Palm Springs, boasted attendance of 200 for the $3000 three-day conference. The conference was attended by CIOs or senior managers of the systems functions of large (Fortune 500) organizations. The program featured three keynote speakers well-known in the business world, as well as consulting partners who addressed the assembly. The remainder of the three days were spent in "breakout sessions," smaller discussion groups on a variety of technical topics led by partners and former and current clients of the firm, and "social activities," such as meals and cocktail hours.

The importance of the event was underscored by the number of partners and managers in attendance. Partners spoke to each other or circulated amongst the clients they knew. Managers were in charge of the "logistics" for the meeting, and fretted about administrative details such as the noise in the halls which permeated the rooms in which break-out sessions were held, the lack of promotional materials (more were being sent by express delivery but would not arrive until later that morning), and how the overheads were not clearly visible from the back of the room due to the lighting. The managers were the junior-most people at the conference, although there were one or two non-consulting assistants who were available to hand out name tags and literature.

It was not clear, however, if these conferences had the desired impact on prospective clients. Opinions of the conference varied by attendee. At the first session, an attendee told me: "by the third session, there'll be a lot of empty chairs, and you'll know everyone's on the golf course." The first two sessions, which featured speakers well-known for their best-selling business books, were quite well attended, but after lunch, there were many empty chairs. One
experienced manager grinned and waved his hand at the pool visible through the
plate glass windows when I asked him why he attended these conferences. One
new CIO felt it was a good way to meet fellow CIOs as well as sample the firm's
consulting services. One very senior manager, with over 25 years of experience
in internal information technology organizations, said “it's good to keep abreast
of new developments.”

**Assumptions Underlying the Presentation Practice.** The
assumption upon which these early, diffuse presentational practices relies is
that the “right” information technology will provide the client organization with
competitive advantages which will reap years of benefits, as in the case of
American Airlines Sabre reservation system. The choice of the “right"
consultant will presumably provide the client with these benefits. In this
scenario, the question of exactly what the clients needs are, and what kind of
consulting firm might be able to meet them is completely up for grabs. The
open-endedness of the situation makes it essential that either the client or the
consultant (or both) define what the needs are and what kind of solution might
be appropriate.

Both sides of the equation are subject to manipulation. Client needs can
be redefined to match more closely the apparent capabilities of the consultant.
Alternatively, if the client is sure of what they need, the consultant can still
redefine their capabilities to match. In either case, consultants will attempt to
create the impression of a fit.

At this pre-engagement stage, the consulting firm is able to proffer
favorable images with little challenge from clients because there is little
interaction between the parties.\(^5\) Once the parties begin to focus on a project,

\(^5\) Competitors may indirectly challenge others in their promotional literature. For example, one consulting firm emphasized their ability to implement the recommendations they make
however, the clients offer their own interpretations or meanings of the events. During the initial presentation to the client, the consultants and client can begin to engage in meaning construction with the consultant.

**Beginning the Engagement.** It is often difficult to pinpoint the event which marks the beginning of a client engagement. Initial contacts may be quite informal: a referral may come from another client, the client may read about the consulting firm in a trade publication, or a member of the client organization may call someone he or she knows at a consulting firm.\(^6\) Thus, networking is critical to consultants. Informal contacts may provide the information which begins a client referral or recommendation.

While the initial contacts with clients are often informal, there is a point before the engagement begins when the consulting firm is called on to make a more formal presentation to selected members of the client organization. This generally consists of a meeting during which partners and other managers make an oral presentation, and provide written materials which support the oral presentation. This is an opportunity for the consultant to "anchor" the engagement - an occasion for the consultant to define the services in a way that favorably influences the client's selection process. This formal occasion is often preceded by a series of less formal interactions between consultant and client (either face-to-face or by telephone) about the type of project the client desires. These interactions provide guidance for the consulting firm in

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\(^6\) For Firm B's engagement, it came through an audit client. For Firm C's engagement, this is precisely how the initial contact was made: a member of the internal information technology staff at Client C called someone he had previously worked with at Firm C.
estimating the costs, specifying the system’s details, and structuring the presentation.

A more formal means of selecting a consultant is the RFP process, where the client provides specifications and solicits written proposals from consultants interested in doing the work. The RFP process has been taken to a high and elaborate art by the government, but a less formal version occurred with Firm D, where I had the opportunity to participate in the consultant selection process from the client perspective.

**Firm D Presentations.** The information technology group at Firm D (RIS) began searching for a consulting “partner” for the Common Software Project during its planning phases. The goal of this consulting project was to provide a “white paper” for Firm D, providing criteria for evaluating the various technology alternatives for integrating the systems. This was only the first stage of this project, but all parties were cognizant of the fact that the consulting firm selected would likely continue for the entire engagement.\(^7\)

The executive committee for the Common Software project consisted of eight senior information technology managers from within and without RIS. They asked one of the younger managers to call several consulting firms in the area and ask them to submit proposals. Four consulting firms competed for this job; one of the firms (which was quite small) dropped out after the first round. Each consulting firm had several meetings with the executive committee before taking three weeks to prepare their proposals. The firms

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\(^7\)When a consulting firm wins the bid for the initial phases, it is generally the case that they will also be engaged in the follow-on work unless they fail miserably. The investment in learning the client’s technology and organization is quite high; replacing even a small team with strangers would be costly. An unusual instance of a “run-off” occurred during a different client project. Firm B was asked to compete with another consulting firm for a very large project. Both firms were asked to perform (and were paid for) the work for the planning phase of the project. The results from this initial phase were compared, and the winning consultant selected on this basis.
were each allocated 90 minute time slots for presentation of their proposals to the executive committee.

The interesting aspect of this presentation process had to do with the ways in which each competitor characterized the engagement. Each firm had what they considered to be a different “competitive advantage” vis-a-vis the other firms, and would alter the definition of the project to highlight their “strong points.” One firm ("Firm 1") was the largest in the industry, and was the only competitor who had done several projects on the scale which Firm D was contemplating. As Firm 1 saw it, the goal of the project was to define the “technology direction,” based not only on the “business strategies” of Firm D, but also on the “experiences of other major banks, their successes and pitfalls.” Few banks had undertaken projects of this magnitude, and this consulting firm had worked on several of these projects. The names of these clients were prominently displayed in their presentation materials, and the senior management counterparts were liberally name-dropped during their presentation. Two senior consulting partners made the presentation, and were dubbed “the ferret and the silver fox” by the members of the Firm D executive committee. The “silver fox” -- silver haired and silver tongued -- knew little of systems implementation but was there to make the senior people “feel comfortable,” while the technology partner was “the ferret” due to his darting head motions when he talked.

The second consulting firm ("Firm 2") was the management consulting arm of the Firm D auditors. Their formulation of the problem focused on the need to include input from the “senior management level of the bank,” to which they purported to have access as a result of being the auditors for Firm D. They also emphasized the “improvement of controls at all levels” as an outcome of their participation in the project, which, of course, was of
paramount importance to the bank audit. Firm 2 personnel included the audit partner (presumably to remind the systems managers of the audit relationship and the repercussions should Firm 2 lose the bid), the head of the banking practice, and the technology partner, as well as the manager who would be in charge of the project. Knowing that Firm 1 would capitalize on their experience with large clients, Firm 2 began their presentation by stating that they had done “more consulting for financial service clients in their geographic area.” The Firm D managers, however, were not satisfied with this generalization and pressed for more references from larger client organizations.

The third firm, a smaller Big 8 consulting firm, had no competitive advantages - at least from the perspective of the Firm D executive team. However, the consultants made an excellent impression on the Firm D managers because they were “hungry.” As one Firm D manager stated: “At least there was a little passion - some depth of thinking.” For example, one of the advantages of this consulting firm listed in its written materials was “having a very deep bench,” which the Firm D managers translated as: “we can have anyone in the consulting firm we damn well please for this project!” For the Firm D managers, this attitude contrasted sharply with that of Firm 1. “They [Firm 1] think they have it in the bag,” said the senior manager of the team, “I’m not overwhelmed [by their presentation].” Their opinion of Firm 2? “[They] were bad,” stated one manager as everyone nodded agreement.

Eventually, after some debate, the job was awarded to Firm 1. They, as one of the managers put it, were the “brand name,” and on a project which would affect almost all of the technology systems of Firm D, the decision was made to select Firm 1. In this situation, in spite of attempts by Firm 2 to redefine the nature of the project, there was little disagreement about the nature of the project or the competing consulting firms. The consensus was
that this was a large, risky project for Firm D, and only Firm 1 had experience with similarly large, risky projects. There was only one choice in consulting firms which would “fit” the project. The fact that the largest consulting firm was chosen came as little surprise to the other firms,\textsuperscript{8} or to other members of Firm D’s systems group.

\textit{Firm C Presentations.} In the preceding example, although the competing consulting firms attempted to redefine aspects of the project, these efforts had little impact on the client. Neither the nature of the project nor Firm 1’s competitive advantage was in dispute. However, in other situations, redefinition of the client problem is more successful. During a training session at Firm C, one of the partners illustrated this technique for other consultants, drawing on an example from his own experience. As the partner described it, during the presentation stage of an engagement, he convinced the client that what they needed was not another implementation project, but one which would evaluate the client organization, and provide it with a comparison against other firms in the industry. This highlighted the “competitive advantage” of Firm C, which was “strategic” decision-making in information technology, rather than implementation of systems. By recasting the client’s problem as one of evaluation rather than implementation, the consultant was able not only to construct the definition of the situation, but also to create client project for himself. Later, I met with one of this client’s managers who explained, “we didn’t even know we needed it!” The redefinition of this project not only led to

\textsuperscript{8}Even though their systems experience did not compare favorably with that of the winning firm, the auditing/consulting firm was quite miffed at losing the bid. The senior-most members of the Firm D committee ruefully acknowledged that this decision would require them to “masage” several partners in Firm 2, as well justify their decision to their own senior management.
the successful evaluation project for Firm C, but several follow-on projects in
different divisions of the same client company.

During the introductory phase, the consulting firm has an opportunity to
adhere to the project definition the client provides or to redefine the nature of
the project. But if the definition differs too markedly from that of the client, the
consulting firm will be deemed by the client to be an inappropriate hire.9 At
this point in the relationship, should the consulting firm misinterpret the client
situation, the client, rather than negotiating the definition, might simply choose
not to hire the consulting firm. As described above, the audit consulting firm
(Firm 2) did not address Firm D's questions about providing consultants with
experience of a large and risky banking integration project. It was not that
Firm D managers did not care about Firm 2's strengths (controls and
relationships with senior management), but experience was the major issue.10
However, once consultant and client embark upon an engagement, the
opportunities for negotiation between them are much enlarged.

Summary of the Presentation .Practice. While this section focused
on client presentations which occurred at the beginning of an engagement,
presentations for status reports and follow-on work can occur at any time
during a consulting engagement. For example, the dialogues excerpted in the
previous chapter were taken from client presentations near the middle and end
of the engagement. While each of these occasions requires a slightly different
focus, the general practice of framing the client's needs or the consultant's
capabilities to create the impression of a fit is constant. The consultant is
attempting to present the firm as the "right" one for that client, much as Firm

9"Dinged" is how one irreverent project leader at Firm D referred to this.
10As described in Chapter 3, Firm 1 won the bid for the first phase of the project (the white
paper), but the project was abandoned by the client.
1 appeared the inevitable choice for Firm D’s project. Of course, the more history the two parties share, the more possible interpretations are influenced by their shared experiences. Nonetheless, there is room for a consultant to label an engagement as “successful” even when the client has received little tangible benefit.

Methodology

Each of the consulting firms had a methodology used in their consulting work which varied both in scope and focus. At Firms A, B and C, each of the consultants had to attend at least one of the training sessions on the Firm’s methodology during their first several months at the firm. These initial training sessions were approximately one week long. After attending these sessions, the consultants were equipped with the vocabulary, forms and thick 3-ring plastic binders that symbolized the methodologies of each of the firms.

The best-known methodology in information technology consulting is Modus, the well-established methodology of the information technology consulting firm studied by Orlikowski (1988a). Modus was a detailed systems development methodology which consisted of four stages (planning, design, implementation and systems support). A variety of “productivity tools”\(^{11}\) were developed to aid in the systems development process, packaged as two software products: Designer (a designer’s development workbench\(^{12}\)) and Builder (an programmer’s development workbench). Modus, as described by Orlikowski (p. 145), was encased in “ten, thick, three-ring binders.” Firm A's Productivity Management Method (“PMM”) was also a methodology for the

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\(^{11}\)These are generally known in the computer industry as CASE (Computer Aided Software Engineering) tools

\(^{12}\)“Workbench” is a term used metaphorically to indicate a set of related software tools, much like a carpenter’s bench would present an array of carpenter’s tools.
development of software systems, but had a much smaller scope (it was 200 pages long). Firm B’s systems methodology, like Modus and Productivity Management Method, was also focused on systems development. By contrast, Firm C’s Information Technology Efficacy Methodology (“ITEM”) evaluated the client’s internal information technology organization.

Members of Firms A, B and C asserted that methodologies provided a “competitive edge,” or served to “distinguish their services from other [rivals].” Indeed, as Orlikowski notes (p. 171), Modus served this unintended function for the firm she studied: “at a time when formal standardized systems development methodologies were not common . . . [Modus] served to distinguish the Firm externally as a unique player in the field.” Modus, as one of the first, and certainly the largest, was very well-known. But information technology consulting firm methodologies having similar sounding names\textsuperscript{13} have proliferated, and a methodology no longer distinguishes consulting firms. Many have more than one methodology: the number of “strategic alliances”\textsuperscript{14} with hardware and software vendors, as well as other consulting firms, meant that many methods or products could be found under one organizational roof. Each of these entities had its own “product” or “methodology,” and it was often difficult to sort through the names to determine which set belonged to which allied firms. I experienced a great deal of confusion about these “alliances” at one point early in the fieldwork, and asked consultants and clients about

\textsuperscript{13}In one case, there was a deliberate attempt to copy a successful competitor, as in the case of a rival of Firm A’s, which named their methodology “Productivity Manager.” Some of the senior level managers shrugged their shoulders, saying they should be flattered, but others were quite miffed. Firm A’s product was “more” than mere “project tracking software,” as the Productivity Manager was deemed. Firm A’s Productivity Management Methodology was a set of “high-level management techniques” which could “really be used in the fast-paced, real world of software projects.”

\textsuperscript{14}This term can mean anything from some degree of ownership interest of the consulting firm in the allied entity, or simply a mutual agreement, formal or informal, to refer clients to one another.
which products went with which set of firms. Both consultants and clients assured me that there was no way to match the right methodology with the right firm, since the names were so similar.

While the use of methodologies may not provide the competitive advantage that consulting firms lust after, there were several functions that are well served through the use of methodologies. Since there were many ways to complete a given systems task, it is not evident how the consultant will perform the service for the client. Methodologies helped define the deliverable, often by specifying steps in the process used to achieve the desired outcome. By so doing, the consulting firm could assure the client of at least a minimal level of certainty about the project and its outcomes. The amorphous service was reified, a “product” or a “deliverable,” which had substance. Of course, even methodologies as detailed as Modus could not completely specify the outcome of an engagement (recall the software program with the missing zip code field in chapter 2), or even the process (Orlikowski, 1988a). Some consultants thought of a methodology as a framework from which to launch the specifics of a particular client engagement. But there were cases when the methodology was somewhat of an illusion, as we shall see.

Another useful function of a methodology was to standardize the vocabulary and concepts used by consultants in a given firm. By using a specialized vocabulary, the consultants could reinforce two notions. First, as one consultant put it, “we can all be singing off the same song sheet when presenting to clients.” Projects were staffed with consultants from all over the country, with very different levels and types of experience. By standardizing the vocabulary, they could provide the impression that they possessed specialized knowledge. By appearing more uniform, they could reinforce a “professional” aura. Firms could also substitute one consultant for another
with greater ease. For example, junior consultants were generally provided with training when they entered the firm. But given that client work was far more valued (both from their individual standpoints as well as the firm’s billing standpoint), their training was postponed if there was any client work. Even without the methodology training, by memorizing a few key phrases, new consultants could sound experienced. For more senior consultants, there was less need for preparation for any given client presentation, since they could rely on the forms and vocabulary to look and sound prepared. Entire 100-page packets of client materials could also be prepared at very short notice simply by pasting the client’s name and logo onto standard materials.

**Assumptions Underlying the Methodology Practice.** Having a methodology allowed consulting firms to legitimize their services. As Jackall (1988, p. 138) notes, “an appeal to scientifically derived knowledge” is often part of a management consulting program. Methodology allows consultants to draw on science to buttress their (rather fuzzy) claims to scientific status - both for themselves, and their services. Science is thought by lay people and scientist alike to have among the strongest claims to “truth” (Bazerman, 1988); as Brown (1992, p. 69) notes:

> The power of science in our culture is also demonstrated by the persistent faith in expertise as superior to common sense in shaping our visions of what is both desirable and possible.

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15 Absenteeism at the training sessions was an indication of this. While many consultants registered for training, there were always quite a number of absences -- for the most part, due to assignment to client projects. I asked the training administrators at both Firms A and C about absenteeism, and they agreed that it was quite high, and planned for this eventuality. Excess food, for example, was a typical problem (books and other materials could be saved for future sessions), and they explained that food disposal had become part of their training routine: a cocktail party was usually held for people in the training office late in the afternoon.
Scholars in the sociology of science (Woolgar, 1988; Latour & Woolgar, 1982; Knorr-Cetina, 1981) have demonstrated that scientists have used rhetorical and other devices to constitute a science. Aggar (1989, p. 3) describes one aspect of the objectification of science:

If successful, methodical science appears purely to reflect the world without presuppositions; the muddying presence of the author is expunged from the text, the text is buttressed by its affiliation to discipline, and the data are displayed in the midst of the text as the world’s sheer presence.

Scientists do more than simply describe nature, or reflect an objective reality “out there.” Even the strongest scientific appeals to method can be interpreted as rhetorical devices, consistent with the core argument of this dissertation.

By relying on methodologies, consultants attempt to import these cultural assumptions into their own context. Downey (1988) describes how cultural assumptions about the status of scientific claims as truth and the elite status of scientists can be used to legitimize what scientists say. Similarly, consultants attempt a construction which would render at least that portion of the consulting activity as having some independent validity, free from the judgments of the client as to its efficacy. Not only does the process appear more “reliable” if there is a methodology, but the outcome appears more “valid.” A side benefit is that the consultants, as the purveyors of the methodology, become akin to scientists, experts and speakers of “truth,” and providers of and “recommendations” based on “findings,” (the use of methodologies reinforces the expert pose, as described in chapter 5).16

16 Other people have noted the impact of models on the public policy process. Dutton (1987, p. 183) argues that “computer models play a role in defining reality by “changing the language, subjects and process of political negotiations and bargaining.” Greenberger, Crenson & Crissey (1976, p. 332) note that modeling “produces an explicit and (through simplification) highly accentuated representation of reality.”
However, in actual usage, these methodologies, relying as they do on underlying claims to science and truth, were sometimes negotiated within the client context. The clients sometimes challenged the consultant's knowledge claims, noting that methodologies were not as scientific as they appeared, or, even if they were, that they did not produce the "truth" in their particular instance (as Jack and Mark attempted to do in the dialogue with the Firm C consultants). At other times, consultants' claims were accepted without negotiation by the client. Here are two examples of methodologies used both successfully and less successfully.

*Information Technology Efficacy Methodology: Firm C.* ITEM, marketed by Firm C, involved an elaborate set of instruments which collected data on many aspects of information technology work. I found over 70 forms in the files, including questionnaires, interview guides, consultant evaluation forms, and charts and graphs for summarizing data about systems applications. It is from this set that consultants selected forms for use during any given client engagement. Some of these forms were used to collect data from clients. The data were then tabulated and used to generate graphs and charts. Clients liked ITEM; as one manager described it, "it gives us facts." The distinguishing feature of ITEM was its benchmarking. Benchmarking is prized by U.S. organizations (Spendolini, 1992; Benwell, 1975), perhaps because it is a means of measuring effectiveness. Systems groups in particular have taken to benchmarks since they are a familiar concept in engineering work. The ability to "measure" the effectiveness of a system or organization is critical. Systems are notoriously difficult to measure in terms of costs and benefits, and an internal staff functions are also difficult to measure, since there are few market mechanisms which demonstrate their effectiveness.
ITEM provided a benchmark which was purportedly calculated using data from the database of clients it had built up over the last 20 years. Unfortunately, the appearance of the benchmark belied the reality. Firm C's benchmark database existed only in very crude form. Early data were collected by the firm using very different instruments, and every project team modified the instruments at will, to reflect the unique features of the client organization. Therefore, the data were not comparable across sites. The client firm might have a large quality assurance function (like Lotus Development) or yet another customer service function (like the GE Answer Line), which would require different questions. Also, not surprisingly, different organizations did things differently, so that the data were different. As noted in chapter 2, systems have changed at a dizzying pace over the last 15 years, and there are few systems which are comparable on any meaningful dimension. For example, questions which referred to the number of days it took to generate month-end figures were no longer relevant, since newer computers could complete these calculations in minutes rather than days. Finally, much of the data was contained in individual client files. As noted in chapter 3, there was little reward for doing non-billable work. Cleaning up a client file after the end of the project, sorting the data so it was clearly marked and organized, and putting the data into a database would not be billable to the client. If there is any other billable work to do, no consultant would clean up the file. So the data would be "there," but were not accessible except when someone manually paged through original questionnaire responses. The data were not aggregated, let alone made into a viable database.

\[17\] Through the magic of the Macintosh and a very large graphics department, the forms can be edited to include questions reflecting the client's organization, as well as the client's logo.
Given the difficulties in finding comparable data, the project manager or other senior members of the team, in consultation with each other, often created a benchmark, which consisted of drawing a line on a graph representing the aggregated questionnaire responses. Depending on the type of message the team wished to deliver to the client, the line was drawn at different places on the graph. If, in the judgment of the team leaders, the client was doing well in a particular area, the benchmark was drawn low relative to client scores. If, on the other hand, the client was deemed to be doing poorly, the benchmark was moved upward relative to client scores. Admonitions from partners and managers not to make too many claims about the basis for the benchmarks in front of clients floated around the network of consultants, and these lines were relabelled “Firm C expectations” rather than “benchmarks.” In this way, the benchmark reflected the collective experience of senior people working on the team, although different from the one the client was led to expect.

Many of the junior consultants in Firm C complained that they were not told about the amount of “grunt work” involved in using the ITEM methodology. As noted above, while part of the methodology is automated, much of it is not. The more junior consultants on the project wound up doing most of this grunt work because it was the most “efficient” way to bill these services.

As mentioned above, Firm C used the methodology to “take the heat” when delivering a negative message. The consultants “knew” the benchmark was often not what it seemed, but both consultants and clients solemnly swore by its efficacy. The practice of using a methodology in consulting work helped to legitimize consultants assertions about the client organization. Consultant claims such as, “your application developers have not received adequate training” or “hardware spending is too high” are much more acceptable if the “data” supported these claims. While the methodologies were not themselves
scientifically rigorous, the appearance of rigor and the association of “questionnaire” and “data” with science and truth provided a means of legitimation for the consultants knowledge claims.

Productivity Management Method: Firm A. PMM was developed by the founder of Firm A, with the aid of “consultants from [a nearby illustrious university].” The methodology consisted of eight steps which were memorialized into terse phrases for ease of recall. For obvious reasons, none of these steps can be reproduced here, but they consisted of axioms familiar to those acquainted with information technology project management. The wording of these axioms was quite general, for example: “overcome user resistance.” By following these steps, the reader/client could supposedly manage any software development or implementation project effectively. This methodology was used in every Firm A consulting project. In addition, Firm A had published\textsuperscript{18} a book which detailed this methodology, and offered a training seminar for non-Firm A persons, either to individuals or to groups from one organization. Several classes were offered each month, and I was told they were quite popular.

I will focus on the use of PMM during the Client A engagement. Many forms were required by PMM, including project task forms, project progress forms, time sheet forms, and billing forms. These were collected into a project binder, maintained by the project manager. One form used only in special circumstances was the “scope change” form, used to document changes in the “scope” or definition of a project. “Scope” was a term which is also used in other consulting engagements, and was usually specified before an information technology project began, to determined which tasks were to be performed (and

\textsuperscript{18}By a well-respected publisher.
paid for) by the client, and which were not. But the usage of this word at Firm A went beyond that of most other consulting firms: it was often used as a verb - i.e., “did you scope them?” would mean, did you inform the client of the change in scope?

About three weeks after the kickoff meeting\textsuperscript{19} which marked the beginning of the project, the Firm A team held one of their regular consultant team meetings. Present at this weekly meeting were four consultants, the project manager, the systems analyst, the assistant branch manager, and the human resources manager for the branch. At this meeting, Kevin, the project manager, informed everyone about a delay in the first stage of the project: baseline testing.\textsuperscript{20} In this instance, the software would not run properly because files containing sample data necessary for the system test were lacking. Various client personnel who might have known where these files were had been unavailable or on vacation, so the files could not be located. Kevin was concerned about looking stupid in front of the client. If he complained about the missing files, and, due to his unfamiliarity with the environment or the system, someone from the client organization pointed out that they are right where they should be, Firm A’s team would begin the project by appearing ignorant. He had called the vendor repeatedly, and the vendor claimed the file tapes had been sent. Were they missing? Or were they there? Or was Kevin supposed to generate the data files himself? As was typical, the software documentation was less than completely informative.

\textsuperscript{19}Kickoff meetings, held to mark the beginning of an engagement, were not uncommon for Firm A. I was not present at this particular meeting, but the notes indicate that individuals from the client and consultant organizations introduced themselves, and the project manager, Kevin, as well as the internal information technology manager, spoke briefly to the group about the project.

\textsuperscript{20}Baseline testing is done at the beginning of a project to ensure that the software is running properly on the hardware for which it is intended.
Eventually, Kevin discovered that the files were missing, and could not be generated because the code was also missing. The client, as part of the contract, had promised to deliver a baseline system that worked. Since one week of Kevin's time had already been wasted trying to test an incomplete system, the consulting team decided to "scope" the client, or submit a "change of scope" request, asking that the client pay for the amount (one week of Kevin's time) which was "outside the scope" of the contract. The time spent in determining why the tests would not work, and searching for the missing files, was not included in the initial contractual definition of the work. In anticipating the client's reaction, the project manager didn't think "the client is so worried about the dollars," but the branch human resources manager said, "with a fixed cost contract, believe me, the client thinks that they have spent their last dollar on the project, so they'll raise a stink."

As the human resources manager predicted, the client head of information technology reacted with suspicion, wondering if this would be the last of the cost increases in a fixed price project. The client argued that Firm A did not notify them before they did the work, and, further (using the legal rhetorical device of arguing in the alternative), argued that the work fell under the scope of the original contract. The client queried hypothetically whether the costs would have gone down if a new software release had caused the consultants to do less work. The consultants were frustrated and angry; as Kevin remarked: "the relationship is no longer good-faith -- it's gotten adversarial." After a series of rather heated meetings with the client, the firm decided\textsuperscript{21} to drop the request for a scope change. The consultants felt that their integrity had been challenged, and were quite hurt that the clients could

\textsuperscript{21}This decision was ultimately reviewed by the head of the consulting division.
have the wrong impression. Later, I talked to Fred, the Firm A regional manger, who said:

[Firm A] did screw up, because they went ahead and did the work without getting the okay for the change of scope. They still should've gotten the change, but the client was now ready to fight them all the way - it was not worth it. . . This is a tough situation, because it is a user-driven project, which means that the technical people don't want to sign off, and neither do the users.

In this instance, the firm touted the methodology as something which would allow projects to be managed successfully. However, of the six attempted scope changes during this project, only one was successful (a short program for changing a small letter-generating module). The project manager, in following one of the eight rules of PMM, brought about a situation in which the client's definition (the work was within scope) clearly prevailed over the consultant's definition (the work was outside of scope and required the payment of additional fees). The failure to manipulate the meanings successfully had disastrous results for Firm A. They failed to obtain the appropriate consulting fees, making the project look like a money loser from its inception. Also, Firm A had annoyed the client at the beginning of the engagement. Later, one of the senior Firm A managers speculated that if there were no formal PMM rules on scope changes, the issue might have been dealt with in a less formal way, and the exchanges would have been less heated. The ultimate result, he speculated, probably have been the same -- the client would have gotten the work done "for free." But the relationship between consultant and client might have been less difficult.22 Although these methodologies seek to provide some sort of scientific certainty or unassailability, they often fail in the application. Firm A's project

22But the differences in the cultures of the two organizations would probably have manifested themselves in other difficulties, as discussed in later sections of this chapter.
**Figure 5.2: Sample Timeline**

### Gantt Chart

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provides an example of a situation in which PMM did not succeed, although the OATS system was eventually modified and used by the client.

**Summary of the Methodology Practice.** The Firm A engagement contrasts sharply with the use of methodology by Firm C. Firm C was successful in sustaining the interpretation that their methodology was scientific, and the findings unassailable. They were able to align themselves most closely with scientific values. The taken-for-granted assumptions were very powerful: the claim that methodology is scientific was never negotiated with clients - only the success or failure of the consultant's ability to legitimize his or her claim to doing methodology was negotiable.

**Timelines**

The device used by consultants to capture the progress of the engagement as a whole is the project timeline. This is a chart which consists of a timetable for measuring the progress of a consulting engagement, an example of which is provided in figure 5.2. Every systems implementation project I observed had a chart that was referred to by various names, including “Gantt chart,” “milestone chart,” “implementation chart,” “project timeline,” and “PERT chart.” Symbolically, this is emergent meaning at its finest - this graph represents a picture of the engagement or performance before it exists or is performed, giving project participants a means of discussing tasks which have not yet been executed.

The timeline is a relatively recent invention. The forerunner of this type of project management chart was the Gantt chart, developed by Henry Gantt, industrial engineering consultant, during World War I (Rathe, 1961). These first charts were a means of measuring the actual vs. planned progress of an activity (such as delivery of goods) over time. The Gantt chart, however, did
not provide a means of highlighting interdependent tasks and resources -- something which became more and more critical as coordination became problematic with the advent of the second world war and the postwar industrialization. In the late 1950’s, the U.S. Navy Special Projects Office, in conjunction with Booz, Allen, & Hamilton and Lockheed, designed PERT - Project Evaluation and Review Technique (Marks, et al, 1966). PERT was first used to coordinate the development of the Polaris nuclear submarine project, which involved 250 contractors and over 9,000 subcontractors (Lewin & Kirkpatrick, 1964). The PERT chart indicates which tasks must be completed before the next stage can be begun.

Everyone who has worked on a systems project knows that the deadlines so clearly printed on the crisp, clean charts are never met (Brooks, 1976). During the planning stages, these charts became a handy way for the consultant and client to discuss the various aspects of the engagement, and any issues which either party might want to discuss. During the engagement, these charts were revised constantly. Almost from the minute they are created, they are “wrong.” One project manager showed me project management software that takes this into account - those timelines which shoot past the deadline were symbolized by a line of banana peels.

At some point in the project, these symbolic measures are no longer needed, and the charts are tossed aside. For one client project, this tossing of the charts coincided with their inability to meet the first deadline.

**Assumptions Underlying the Timeline Practice.** One of the assumptions underlying this practice is that complex tasks can be represented in a linear, discrete fashion. In actuality, the technical tasks rarely conformed to the neat units which were laid out on the page. For example, one Firm D project was to install new software for the retail checking (Demand Deposit
Account, or DDA) application. One of the early tasks was to coordination with the vendor about software features. Yet the vendor was notorious for not returning phone calls, and being tardy with their promised new software modules. The team allocated six weeks for this task, which was on the “critical path” for the project. Attempting to represent this task as one which was well-defined and could be completed by a preordained deadline was completely unrealistic, as everyone on the team knew. Yet in order to “manage” or “control” the project, the task was represented. Eventually (after six months), the task was completed, but many new timelines had to be recreated to accommodate the incomplete tasks and missed deadlines. In the following two sections, two illustrations of the use of timelines by Firms A and D are provided.

**Firm A Timelines.** At Firm A, a software system for project management was used to generate the project management chart. This was a new system for Firm A, and there were many glitches in its use. Since Kevin was unfamiliar with the software, the chart first produced was unreadable (the print was literally too small to see). Kevin's managers were horrified, and had him redo the chart. The newer version was only slightly more readable, but allowed him to discuss the project plan with the three consulting firm managers he reported to weekly. The project report consisted of three parts. The first part summarized the tasks which had been completed the previous week by the consulting team, and highlighted any anticipated problems or issues to be discussed with the client. The second part consisted of the project timeline, with interdependent tasks and timetables displayed across the page. The final part totaled the actual hours spent by the consulting team on each phase and task of the project, as compared to the projected hours used to estimate the fixed price for the entire project. Only the first and second parts of the project report were shown to the client, since this was a fixed price engagement. The
third section revealed the actual time spent on each of the tasks, as well as the firm's earnings from consulting fees.

The client, upon viewing the chart at the first weekly status meeting, insisted that it be revised because their managers were unable to understand it. The chart flowed over four pages, and the different symbols (/ , = , ^ , † , enlarged to 8 point type) were still indistinguishable. The task descriptions were quite terse, so much so that the parties became confused about what task was being referenced, and the numbering for the tasks on the first and second parts matched in some but not all instances. But there was little time for revisions -- Kevin was already falling behind, trying to find missing system files previously discussed.

After the first week, the consulting team was 40 hours behind schedule, primarily due to the missing files. Kevin doggedly continued to update the chart, despite the fact that the chart only documented the project falling further and further behind each week. During the weekly status meetings, the client and consultants would stare at the chart and its moving deadlines. By the time they were finished with 40% of the engagement, the project manager stopped updating the chart. Also, the client began creating their own list of tasks, which did not correspond with either (1) the timeline list of project tasks; or (2) Kevin's personal list of programming tasks to be completed, which corresponded to modules of the software program. Each of the tasks was numbered differently on each list, so every time that the consultants and clients referred to a task, its numbering had to be clarified. After several months of this confusion, the client insisted that the project manager merge the lists and it took the project manager and myself the greater part of a day to produce such a list.
In spite of this, for the first half of the engagement, the timeline gave the client as well as the consultant some sense of progress. The most visible sign of activity were the number of consulting bodies around the floor; but this represented more of a coordination muddle and problem in space management than tangible recognition of project progress. The modules of software code being produced were not visible to the client, so the timeline allowed both parties to follow the progress of the tasks in an apparently concrete way. While the client and consultant project managers faithfully produced lists of tasks each week, the client members left these lists in the conference room, taking only the timelines with them. These were carefully posted on their bulletin boards above their desks.

The Firm A project illustrates a particularly troubled relationship, but each of the other consulting engagements I observed used their timelines in a similar fashion, revising them radically each week as deadlines were missed, and then discarding them approximately halfway through the project. Timelines did allow the parties to confront realities about foreseeable events which potentially interfered with the project schedule -- events such as summer vacations, or end-of-fiscal-period deadlines. Timelines also gave them an illusion of “management” or “control” of the project. By having a representation of all the tasks in an orderly fashion (even though these might not conform to reality), both the consultant and client could discuss tasks as if they were well-defined. Like a security blanket, these timelines allowed both parties to “see” the progress of the engagement, even when events made it seem as if little progress was being made.

**Firm D Timelines.** Firm D provided another example of project timelines. The timeline for the Common Software Project (CSP) was over 40 pages in length, since at least 30 applications in each of the states were
affected. Planning took much longer than expected, so the original “kickoff
date” (project commencement date) was off by four months. When the project
manager of the largest state was introduced at the kickoff meeting, another
manager joked: “aren’t you already four months behind schedule?”

Coordination for this project was the greatest difficulty. Each state had
become accustomed to their own set of software, some of which had been
developed in-house, tailored to their own use. The project manager for each of
the states had to persuade the business managers to adopt the changes in time
for them to meet their project deadlines, which in turn affected the deadlines of
others. One senior manager was appointed solely for the purpose of
coordinating and distributing all the schedules for the states.

Because each of the states’ projects were so large, the timelines were
streamlined so that many tasks were represented in one line. This caused
further confusion for people from different states, since, for example, tasks that
were included in the “implementation” category for one state would be included
in the “testing” category for another. Attempting to discuss these tasks or
coordinate with the vendors was quite difficult given these differences.
Although the timelines allowed the project managers to discuss common tasks
with their counterparts in other states, the simplification which these
representations allowed sometimes masked fundamental issues.

**Summary of the Timeline Practice.** The power of the timeline is the
ability it gives the consultant to manipulate the images of project progress, and
to allow for discussion of such slippery things such as modules, testing, and
implementation. These phenomena are so abstract as to be incomprehensible
until they are completed. During the engagement, the timelines provided one
means of charting their progress and legitimizing their efforts (or, more
importantly, to charge for them, as becomes evident in the next section).
Without having a way to symbolically represent their service, these intangibles would be difficult to measure.

**Billing**

Before leaving work on Friday afternoons, the consultants of Firm A could be found at their desks, filling out timesheets. The members of Firms B and C hand in similar timesheets every Monday morning. These forms are part of the paperwork which plagues consultants, who must also complete weekly expense reports and project update forms, or work-in-progress reports. But although there was much grumbling about completing expense or progress reports, there were few complaints about doing timesheets. These are the lifeblood of consulting, and if there is one routine to which the consultant will adhere, it is submission of these forms. As one secretary noted: “This [Monday morning] is the only time you can count on reaching them, unless they’re on the road first thing. Even then, you might get them by phone, because if they’re not here to turn them [the forms] in, they have to call them in.”

Consultants “billed” time by recording the hours they spent working on a client project each week. The time of the individual consultants was aggregated with those of other members of the firm. These hours were multiplied by the hourly billing rates for each consultant, determined by that person’s position in the organization (partner, manager, consultant, etc.). Persons higher in the organization were billed at higher rates, presumably due to the greater value of their time. A variety of monthly reports were generated, used for different purposes. Each consultant received a summary of the hours billed by the consultants in the branch each month, which included totals for previous months, as well as year to date and previous year to date comparisons. Project managers received reports which totaled the time billed by anyone in the firm.
for the project, and included incidental expenses (travel, telephone, photocopying) as well. Project billing reports were also used by the partner in charge to prepare a client invoices for services rendered. In addition, partners received billing reports for other projects they were involved in, such as accounts receivable reports showing which clients had paid and owned what amounts. Finally, branch management received reports which summarized activities for the entire branch.

Preparing and submitting weekly timesheets were part of the consultant’s routine, and the process, from timesheets to reports to invoices, appeared automatic and mundane. Through this transformation, time became money: the consultant simply recorded the number of hours worked, and this was automatically translated into a dollar amount. The regularity of the billing process obscures the critical transformation of hours into value. The consultants’ ability to readily translate their services into something with measurable value is a means of legitimizing their services.

**Assumptions Underlying the Billing Practice.** Today, time is measured precisely with the flick of digitized numbers. But it was not always this way: at the time of Chaucer, the length of the hour varied according to the time of day, the time of year, and latitude (Macy, 1989). Only over the centuries was time gradually rationalized.\(^{23}\) Time, over time, has “come to be viewed as a commodity” (Zerubavel, 1981, p. 54),\(^{24}\) in “standardized, invariable units” (Adam, 1990, p. 117). Viewing time in units eases its translation into units of currency. A consulting firm’s billing rate schedule determines the

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\(^{23}\) During the industrial revolution, this process was greatly accelerated.

\(^{24}\) Zerubavel traces the roots of this development back to the monasteries, describing the Benedictine orientation toward time as unidirectional and irreversible, with time as a scarce resource which use should be optimized.
“price” of an hour of a particular consultant’s time, and this rate is multiplied by the number of hours worked to determine the cost of the service. Thus, the billing process translates time directly into dollars, masking the messy determination of the worth of a particular task. For not all tasks are equal. The first time a task is performed, it may take several hours. The next time the same or a similar task is performed, depending on the details of the task, it may not take as much time as the first (and so on, as the consultant becomes more experienced). In the case of Firm B, their delight at the client’s selection of a particular software product was due to the fact that they would have the opportunity to learn a leading edge technology at a client’s expense. Training classes, as well as valuable experience, would benefit the firm as a whole as well as the individual consultant. Of course, there were attempts made to be “fair” in pricing, but the problem remained.25

One underlying premise for this practice is that time is standardized such that units are equal. But units of time are not fungible - one hour of one consultant’s time is certainly not equivalent to one hour of a different consultant’s time. For that matter, two different hours of the same consultant’s time are rarely equivalent. Discrepancies like these are smoothed away by the operation of the billing system, allowing the consulting firm to dictate the value of the services, itself a form of symbolic power.26

The individual consultants at each of the firms practiced some creativity in billables. Tips on how to bill were passed on to newcomers, and some of the rules are inconsistent. “Never bill in increments of less than 15 minutes,” was

25 These types of billing systems are similar to those used for other professional services, such as law. The fairness issue was highlighted in a recent lawyer practice article (Freeman, 1990), but the article’s author noted that, despite its problems, lawyers are not yet ready to do away with these types of billing systems.

26 As one law client noted: “billing [seems to be] the art of seeing what charges you can get the client to accept” (Schonbrun, 1991).
one manager’s firm rule, while others maintained, “never bill in increments of more than seven minutes.” Managers would trade stories about which consultants were “soft” billers -- those who tended to “pad” their hours were not considered the highest quality consultants. Other consultants would cut their hours if they felt they had not accomplished what they “should” have in the appropriate time. “I shoulda caught that bug a lot sooner,” confided one very junior systems analyst, in explaining why he had billed only ten hours when he had worked from 8 AM until 10 PM on a particularly knotty problem. Another systems programmer later that month told me, “that [task] would have taken somebody else a lot longer,” although she did not bill for the extra time. “Double billing”27 was a practice often discussed, but which no one admitted to doing. Consultants even joked about the possibilities of triple billing.

Competition to bill the most hours during a given period was rampant amongst consultants, who were often recognized for billing consistently high numbers. Firm A gave pins, Firm B provided free lunches, Firm C awarded engraved plaques hung in their front lobby, Firm D rewards ranged from clocks with the firm logo to team outings, and all firms rewarded the high billers with year-end bonuses.

Competition amongst consultants for billing the highest numbers each month was fierce. Consultants often traded stories about consultants who had billed the most hours in a day, week, or month, and some stories reached mythic proportions. Those who consistently billed high hours were viewed with awe. After branch billing reports were distributed, big billers were

27The practice of billing the same hour to both client 1 and client 2. For example, if a consultant was traveling on client 1's behalf, and doing client 2 work at the same time, he or she could theoretically bill to both clients.
congratulated, while those who had small billables made sure to broadcast a justifiable reason for their performance (illness, birth of a child, etc.).

**The Meanings of Billables.** Billables are a measure of the performance of the individual consultant as well as of the profits of the firm. The higher the number of hours spent working on a consulting engagement, the more valuable the consultant was to the organization. If billable work exists, all consultants will have the opportunity to bill high hours. But consultants believed that high billables also reflect quality: the better the quality of a consultant's work, the more in demand that consultant would be. Partners would request the consultant's services, and that consultant would work more. Billables become a proxy for quality of work. Theoretically, those who do better quality work will bill more hours, because the consultants believe that, over time, those who do better work will be more in demand.28 Those whose services are not in as great demand will not be selected to work on as many projects. The system worked to reinforce this belief, since those who are in demand are often deemed to be better quality consultants simply by virtue of being in demand.

The billing system allowed the consulting organizations to control the work by measuring the rate of consultant utilization, profits, etc. The billing system also allowed for time to be categorized and the qualities differentiated. Zerubavel (1981) discusses the distinction between weekends and weekdays, the sacred and the profane. The billing system likewise created a hierarchy of types of time. For consultants, some time was more valuable than others. Time spent billed to a client was clearly the most valuable. Time spent drumming up business ("rainmaking") was also valuable, if the consultant

28Billables played a large part in the consultants formal performance appraisal.
eventually received suitable credit.\textsuperscript{29} Last in value was time billed to administrative tasks, which included training, preparing time sheets and expense reports, and personnel-related items (vacations, sick days, performance appraisals).\textsuperscript{30}

Consultant and client sometimes contested the value of the work, in a more macro sense. In this section, I will provide three examples of situations in which the definition of worth and work came to be a topic which was negotiated by consultant and client.

\textbf{Fixed Price: Firm A.} The project for Client A was fixed price, which, as the salesman for Firm A remarked: “is not the way we like to do it.” But since this was the first opportunity to work with Client A, and in hopes of follow-on work, the consulting firm acquiesced. From the beginning, the project was fraught with difficulties, such as the missing files (discussed above), and the heart attack of the senior analyst during the first month of the project.\textsuperscript{31} The project fell further and further behind, and the problem with the interface (between the modified OATS application and the existing accounting system for Client A) grew larger and larger, as it became apparent that a lack of early specification would cause more and more difficulties.

\textsuperscript{29}Actually, the partners did most of this. Non-partners did not usually bring in business, since there is little reward for doing so until they are close to partnership. There are elaborate systems for crediting partners for their rainmaking ability. The amount and type of partner compensation was a subject of much speculation amongst the consultants.

\textsuperscript{30}Orlikowski (1988a) noted that the firm in her study created a billing code for her so the consultants could bill their time. I find it difficult to believe that this time was billed to a client, so it must have been considered administrative time.

\textsuperscript{31}This situation illustrated the cost of getting a new analyst on board. Although the new analyst was very skilled and experienced, the project still “lost” the familiarity the former analyst gained from spending three weeks working on the system. Also, this type of information is kept in the consultant’s head and not communicated on paper, since he assumed he would be on the project until it ended.
The project management chart carefully totted the hours which were slipping away, and the third section (not shown to the client) included dollar figures for consulting time. This figure grew and grew, and the amount began to approach the fixed price for the contract. As the deadline drew nearer, the firm brought in ten people (thus tripling the size of the team) who were “on the bench,” whose time was theoretically “free,” to work on the project.\footnote{For the consultants, the time spent working on Firm A's project was not billable, so that their numbers would suffer. But in spite of the fact that the time was not billable, they were very ready to help out. The time they spent on the project would be duly noted by their peers as well as branch and senior management. Of course, they still receive their salaries. These consultants included people who were in unusual situations; one consultant was scheduled for an operation in three weeks time, and could not begin a new project. Another had just joined the firm, and was not yet assigned to work on a project.}

The original team members had worked overtime from the second month of the project. George, a systems analyst at Firm A, did not see the point of working that much overtime without any recognition. At one point, late in the project, Kevin began yelling at George, who was billing the time he was actually spending working. Kevin argued that George should bill only eight hours a day, but “work until you get the job done.” As project manager, Kevin was working until midnight every night, and was on call often early in the morning. George worked what he considered to be a "reasonable" amount of overtime (he generally worked until 7 PM), but felt he "had a life" outside of work, and did not wish to work any more overtime.

The clients never expressed or acknowledged appreciation for these extraordinary efforts by the consulting firm, something which rankled all those associated with the project. They were resigned to losing money, but were bruised by the lack of appreciation. Other client organizations, in similar circumstances, were more understanding. One manager at Firm D, confronted with a similar problem, stated, “they need to make a decent profit on the deal,”
and granted a request, which he deemed reasonable, to provide more funds for a fixed price consulting engagement.

Time, then, in this circumstance, is not money. The project, in the eyes of Client A, was worth $900,000, and they were not spending any more,\textsuperscript{33} no matter what additional effort was made. This illustrates the difficulty with the fixed price contract -- the project must be completed, despite any losses on the part of the consulting firm. With “T&E” (time and expenses), the consulting firm can approach the client for additional money for completion of a project. The risk is shared by both parties. The next section illustrates a situation in which the client bears the entire risk of additional costs.

\textbf{Billing the Canadian Government: Firm B.} The Canadian government paid for the establishment of the subsidiary, which included payment for the costs of the technology implementation. In this situation, the “client,” the parent to the Canadian subsidiary company, was responsible for the implementation, but were not paying the bill. Firm B charged by the hour for all the work done by a team of ten consultants which spent over one year in Quebec. This resulted in enormous fees for Firm B (each consultant billed 40 hours a week, although many worked more than 40 hours at various periods when there were deadlines to meet). For this project, since the Canadian government was paying the bill, the client felt less pressure to manage costs carefully. The client managers in Quebec were also well aware of the hardships suffered by consultants living in a foreign country, since they were suffering the same hardships. For partners who visited periodically but did not have to commute to Quebec, this project was a “boondoggle” in the irreverent words of one junior consultant. He was referring not only to the perquisite of the visiting

\textsuperscript{33}What is ironic here is that this client did not pay their bills promptly even when invoiced, which also aggravated those at Firm A who knew of this problem.
partner in charge, who was able to vacation with his spouse at a romantic site over the weekend, while billing the client for his travel time and costs, but also to the client project as a whole. The consultants did not have to justify their fees at all, even though the goal or the completion of the project was never clear due to the problems with the development of the client's plane.

Negotiations occur not only between consultants and clients, but between members of the consulting firm. A billing dispute arose between the Quebec Firm C partner and the consulting team. The Quebec partner had been promised a “slot” on the consulting team by the Dallas partner in charge. This meant that one of the team positions would be filled by a consultant from the Quebec rather than the Dallas branch. But, according to the team, the Quebec office consultants were not “qualified,” because they did not have the appropriate systems experience. The team members were angry that they were “carrying” a consultant who was not as “good” as they were. But the partner in charge had promised the slot to the Quebec partner to forestall any claims that the Dallas partner should “share” the credit for the client billings (which would reduce the partnership share of the Dallas partner). The team members, although they were aware of this justification, were not mollified, and snubbed the Quebec consultant, who worked the minimum hours and appeared oblivious to the snubs.

**Cutting Hours: Firms C and D.** Firm D had a project which involved the purchase and implementation of new hardware (as well as new software) in imaging. This was a new technology, and two competitors were attempting to get the work: one a staid, well-established computer company, the other a

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34 This is a new type of technology which consists of replacing documents with computer images (some refer to this technology as one that will result in the “paperless” office, c.f. Roth, 1992).
brash, young company. Each company wanted to do business with one of the largest banks in the area, since they could then use this as a sales pitch for garnering consulting work with other large financial institutions in the U.S. Over the course of six months, each company slashed their costs to such an extent that the bids became less than 20% of the original price quoted. The startled manager, who had begun the bidding war by inviting each to cut their costs for the opportunity to be the first to implement this system, was shocked at the extent of the cost cutting: “is this a rape or do they not know what they are doing?” he asked. Alternatively gleeful and disbelieving, the manager finally accepted one bid, but queried both companies about the extent of their losses. Later, one of the company’s salesmen ruefully admitted to me: “we needed to drop the price, but not look like a drug merchant doing it.” Another “sales trick” given by a Firm C partner (reputed to be one of the top rainmakers at the firm): “figure out how much they spend on computing a day, and tell them the consulting will cost them less.”

Cost-cutting is a common practice in these firms. They either discount the amount per hour at a give rate for “preferred” clients (this often means whatever it takes to close the deal) - such as 10% or 15%, or they might cut costs at the invoicing time. Yet this has ramifications not only for partners, whose compensation is determined in part by the amount billed, but for all the members of the consulting firm. For example, Firm C was in the midst of a firm monetary crisis in the middle of the client engagement. The firm had been having trouble adapting to the parent company’s billing system, and thus had been losing their “float” on accounts receivable, and were paying stiff interest penalties on client bills not yet collected. As a result, the entire firm was “encouraged” to bill as much time as possible to client accounts. Client C’s account was one of the largest in the firm at that time, and the project
managers were bombarded with requests for work. Tony would lock her door and turn out her lights, pretending she was not in. We met in her office during this period, and the knocking was persistent. Her voice mailbox would be filled with pleas for work from consultants after several hours. Clients called to complain about getting the message, “Sorry, but that voice mailbox is full. Please try again.”

The Client A team members who had been personally “encouraged” to keep their hours low (given that the project was beginning to go over budget) began billing mightily, and the hours for that particular client skyrocketed. Tony and one of the partners on the project had regular disputes about billing and cutting hours. The partner had to cut the number of hours billed to the client, a practice frowned upon by fellow partners. The team members were again quietly urged to curtail their billing efforts somewhat, but the project ended close to 60% over budget.

Some managers will try to “look good” by asking consultants who work on their projects to “cut” the hours that they report. This way, the cost of the project to the client would be close to the estimate, rather than 100% or more over the budget. This practice, however, caused great resentment on the part of consultants, because their work would not be properly recognized. While some consultants would do this as a favor for certain partners, others steadfastly refused to do so, sometimes causing friction amongst members of a team.

**Summary of the Billing Practice.** The definition of time, as well as the amount of the invoice that is eventually sent to the client, is thus something which changes radically with events and factors determined by the context. In this situation, the ability to maintain the appearance of value of
the services while hours are being amassed and cut by consultants is a feature of the symbolic power inherent in the operation of the billing practice.

**Summary**

Presentation, methodology, timelines, and billing are four practices that consultants use to legitimize aspects of the services that they provide. At a client presentation, the consultant can “set the stage” before the engagement or “anchor” the engagement by defining the relevant meanings. The use of specific methodologies such as ITEM or PMM helps to legitimize their services, which can be aligned closer to science and can provide validity for the consulting frames (even if the frames are meaningless in themselves). Timelines fill in the consulting picture by allowing the consultant and client to speak of future tasks as if they were specified and complete. Billing practices ensure that the consulting services have uniform value, even where the realities of such belie the uniformity. In each of these practices, the consultants rely on taken-for-granted cultural assumptions. In addition, the consultants, through their use of these practices, contribute to the credibility of these underlying assumptions. Considered on a macro scale, these meanings add to the legitimacy of existing cultural assumptions and structures through micro, almost instinctual, acts by the consultants. By shaping and legitimating those meanings which are most useful to the consultants, they exercise symbolic power. In this next chapter, I will examine this concept in relation to existing organizational theories of power.
In the preceding two chapters, I have illustrated the ways in which consultants seek to create or manipulate meanings in a highly ambiguous arena. I argue that the practices used by consultants are a form of symbolic power. Consultants manipulate meanings through the use of practices in order to gain and maintain control over the definition of situations in their relationships with their clients. Working from the field phenomena I studied, I inductively developed a theory of symbolic power to explain how the consultants manipulated and constructed meaning in their interactions with their clients. The purpose of this chapter is to provide the theoretical underpinnings for the concept of symbolic power. I begin by reviewing the prevailing perspectives on power in organization theory, and then describe how the writings of Foucault and Bourdieu provide theories on power that are more suitable for the consulting context, allowing for a more fluid notion based on rhetoric, knowledge, and relations. The goal in this chapter is to develop a theoretical perspective that is useful in understanding the phenomena that occur throughout the consulting engagements.

Mainstream Organizational Theories of Power

In the preface to his Power in Organizations, Pfeffer (1981, p. x) wrote, "[t]he literature on power is not particularly large, and the empirical study of
power and politics is unfortunately a rare event."\(^1\) Unlike other social science disciplines, where Clegg (1989) and Daudi (1987), among others, have noted the proliferation of treatises on power, the organizational literature has come to be dominated by a few perspectives on power. Resource dependency and strategic contingencies are two of these, and have been seen as “variants of each other,” (Astley & Zajac, 1991; Pfeffer, 1981). Indeed, there are a number of similarities between them, such as the unit of analysis (either organizations, or organizational sub-units) and method (questionnaire measures of perceived power). The explanatory variables, however, differ. From the resource dependency perspective, the power between organizations is based on the exchange of resources (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), and depends on the ability to control access and use of resources upon which others depend (Pfeffer, 1981). To the extent that “resource dependencies” are created, a group will gain influence (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1974); and if a group can reduce dependencies, it can enhance its power (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). The research that introduced this popular notion is that of Salancik & Pfeffer, who studied inter-departmental power in universities. They found that the power of an academic department was strongly related to the amount of outside research grants and contracts it brought in.

The strategic contingencies perspective, proposed by Hickson, et al (1971), suggests that power is based on a subunit’s ability to deal with three factors: 1) its ability to cope with uncertainty; 2) its centrality to the flow of information and work in the organization; and 3) its non-substitutability, or

\(^1\)Pfeffer, in his 1992 book on how people can implement goals from the perspective of power and influence, argues that "ours is an era in which people tend to shy away" from the task of understanding organizational politics (p. 8). He cites Kanter (p. 13) for the proposition that "power is America’s last dirty word."
the difficulty in finding a substitute for the work performed by the subunit. Control of these contingencies is related to the subunit's power (Hinings, et al, 1974): the greater control a subunit has over these three contingencies, the greater its power relative to other subunits.

Both these approaches have spawned much literature, and are frequently cited in leading journals. For example, Saunders (1990) noted that the Social Science Citation Index listed 197 articles which cited the Hickson & Hinings ASQ articles from 1975 to 1985. Perhaps part of the reason for the popularity of these approaches resides in their simplicity: by identifying several factors, one can presumably predict or explain a group's power. Power is attached to a group or individual across a number of contexts, and is seen as an explanation for a variety of organizational outcomes (Lachman, 1989; Saunders, 1990; Skinner, Donnelly, & Ivancevich, 1987). But this very simplicity is problematic: Staw (1985) has questioned the definition of the power variable in Pfeffer & Salancik's study:

They operationalize power, in part, by representation on committees that control the resources in the organization, using the organization's actual allocation of resources as their dependent variable. A conceptual problem with the study is that we are not sure whether resource dependency should be included as an outcome variable or a measure of departmental power itself.

In these approaches, power is reified as an attribute or object, attached to a particular organization or subunit. It is portrayed as monolithic, in that a person or group either possesses it, or doesn't possess it. Also, in studies of this type, power is viewed as static -- measured at one or at most two moments in time. Subtle shifts in power which may occur from incident to
incident, or meeting to meeting, are not captured. Power becomes objectified, as well as atomistic.\(^2\)

That these approaches share a point of view which reifies power is not surprising -- the theoretical focus of the notion of power which they endorse has more to do with organizational structure and design. By focusing on the structure of organizations, power becomes a variable which must be taken into account, and can be objectified to a certain extent. But my concern here is with the interactions of the consultants and their clients as they go about their work, and the modes of influence which they bring to bear on each other. It is true that power is perceived as reified or objectified -- the greater the perceived power, the more it is objectified. The practices of symbolic power that I have described are much less visible. It is the invisibility of these practices of symbolic power which makes them even more effective in their operation. In the consulting contexts, reified concepts of power will be less useful in understanding what goes on.

**Information Systems Theories of Power**

Several researchers have emphasized the importance of power in systems implementation. Pettigrew (1973), Mumford & Pettigrew (1975), Markus (1979; 1983), and Markus & Bjorn-Anderson (1987) have focused attention on power and politics in systems organizations, detailing the stakeholders and their interests for several different implementation projects.

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\(^2\)Likewise with smaller units of analysis, such as the individual level, power is reified. A recent example is a network study by Krackhardt (1990), which looks at how knowledge of friendship and advice networks relate to the perceived power (as rated on a five-point Likert scale) of the respondents in a small entrepreneurial firm. Again, the same problems attendant on the other two perspectives apply here; the assumption is that power resides in particular individuals in the network at particular points in time.
Gash (1987) has studied changes in organizational boundaries and politics by chronicling the negotiation of various groups over the use and control of personal computers. These researchers have done excellent portraits of the complex politics surrounding large systems implementation projects. However, they have retained, at least implicitly, the static, objective assumptions about power just discussed. Though they write about the dynamics of power, they are wedded to the notion that power is based in objective, reified features. Bloomfield & Best (1990) have proposed a "sociology of translation," based on the work of Callon (1986) and Latour (1987). They examine two examples of situations in which technology problems are translated, or redefined, in terms of existing solutions. This is similar to the situation described in the section on presentation practices in chapter 5, where the consulting firms vying for Firm D's engagement were attempting to redefine the engagement in terms of their own perceived areas of expertise. Bloomfield & Best (p. 555) argue that "the definition of an organisation's problem, together with the proposed solution, is an exercise of power which takes place through the medium of various translations." In this regard, they are not dissimilar to some of the organizational researchers who have proposed interpretivist theories of power.

*Interpretivist Theories of Power*

Some organizational researchers have proposed more fluid notions of power. Conrad (1983) and Bradshaw-Camball & Murray (1991, p. 382) define an interpretivist notion of organizational power which "suggests that the parties involved exert influence by constructing the meaning of what others experience." According to Bradshaw-Camball & Murray, this perspective tends to focus on a deeper structure, made up of the meanings and
interpretations of organizational members. These are not overt, but can be detected through the symbols and other expressive artifacts which reveal the assumptions held by organizational members. An example is Bradshaw-Camball’s (1989) study of a hospital, in which the administrators define their fiscal situation as a grave budget deficit, to obtaining funding from the provincial agency. Their control over budgetary information allowed them to sustain this illusion in front of other organizational members, even though the financial situation was not serious. This interpretivist perspective begins to focus on the manipulation of meaning as a type of power. However, it is interesting to note that the administrators in Bradshaw-Camball's hospital have some of the objective features of power identified by Salancik & Pfeffer (1974). They control a critical resource (information), as well as having organizational status. So although the administrators exercised power over meaning, and the research introduced an interpretivist notion of power, it does not appear to challenge more orthodox theories. The same situation can be explained by reverting to a resource dependency perspective on power. A similar line of argument can be found in Smircich & Morgan (1982, p. 269), also cited by Bradshaw-Camball (1989): “Leaders, by nature of their leadership role, are provided with a distinctive opportunity to influence the sense making of others” If one assumes that power is associated with leadership roles, then it is consistent with the resource dependencies perspective. Indeed, Pfeffer (1981, p. 185) himself claims that the task of political language and symbolic activity is to rationalize and justify decisions that are largely the result of power and influence. He argues that these are subsequent to power, used to make the exercise of power more palatable to those without:
It is also necessary to consider under what conditions political language and definitions of situations will be accepted... Anyone can assert claims for competence and importance. What language-based analyses of power fail to answer is how these competing claims become resolved. Clearly, the organization's history and culture are important. However, those units which can provide resources, or resolve problems that are more critical for the other subunits and for the organization as a whole, are more likely to have their definitions of the organizational situation accepted.

The problem with this formulation is that it assumes that the symbols are effectively used only by people who already possess power. But in contexts where the operation of traditional power is less overt, where traditional bases of power are less visible, a more fluid, dynamic notion of power, which is not attached to status, role, or individual, and which is not simply the manipulation of meaning by people who already possess power, is more appropriate.

Post-Structuralist Theories of Power

Any modern formulation of power must consider Michel Foucault's work (Wolin, 1988). Foucault, in describing the goal of his work over the previous 20-year period, makes it clear that his goal "has not been to analyze the phenomena of power," but "to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects" (1980, p. 208). He admits, however, to becoming "quite involved with the question of power" (p. 209). For Foucault, power is "not an institution, nor structure, nor a possession" (1983, p. 93). This conception of power differs markedly from a traditional belief wherein power in its most legitimate form is derived from the state (Wartenberg, 1990; Wrong, 1988). Power is much more fluid in Foucauldian
terms, and moves throughout a system of relations, as the following excerpt describes:

Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. (Foucault, 1980, p. 98)

With this formulation, power is not something which a person possesses as an attribute, like charisma, or something which a group in an organization might wield. Neither is it something which is associated with a particular hierarchical position, or status. Rather, power operates in terms of a system of relations. It is not located at a specific place in an organizational hierarchy, nor does it repose in an individual. Instead, power can be thought of as moving in and about a network of relationships. Instead of one member wielding power over others solely by virtue of position or status, power can be seen as non-local, and members of a network can be both the targets and articulations of power. In short, power is highly contextual, and not objectified. This is an apt description of the consultants, who are constantly articulating power through their practices, always, of course, subject to negotiation with clients.

How is this done? For the consultants, the roots of power are rhetorical. While Foucault offers a conception of power which crosses long sweeps of history (Foucault, 1979), Pierre Bourdieu's formulation of symbolic power is much more localized. Bourdieu suggests that the ability to influence meaning through discourse is a fundamental source of power. This view is also highly
contextual, but it contrasts with Foucault's general perspective by pointing to a specific means of constructing or enacting power in social interaction.

Symbolic power . . . is a power of constituting the given through utterances, of making people see and believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world, and, thereby, action on the world and thus the world itself, an almost magical power which enables one to obtain the equivalent of what is obtained through force (whether physical or economic), by virtue of the specific effect of mobilization . . . it is defined in and through a given relation between those who exercise power and those who submit to it . . . What creates the power of words and slogans, a power capable of maintaining or subverting the social order, is the belief in the legitimacy of the words and of those who utter them. (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 170)

Here we can see that power is inextricably tied to meaning. Through meaning, the vision of the world can be "confirmed or transformed," and this, in itself, can be a form of power. Power can be found in a system of relations, which suggests that at a particular point in time, in a particular context, power might be contested or negotiated, ebbing and flowing between the parties.

Another researcher who is working with similarly contested notions of power is McGuire, who has studied religious groups. She describes a world which is eerily similar to that occupied by information technology consultants - where the situation allows for much more ambiguity in a number of dimensions, where power is "up for grabs":

Of particular interest is the nature of power of religious groups in pluralistic societies, where many of the mechanisms of control and force characteristics of monolithic situations are lacking. Similarly, we need to examine more closely situations in which power is "up for grabs" - where
groups are openly contending for power. While the literature has some descriptions of the culmination of this process, we need to analyze it step by step - as though competing groups were engaged in a dance and it is up to us to discover the patterns of choreography. (McGuire, 1983, p. 5)

As I have attempted to describe, the world inhabited by information technology consultants is peculiarly ambiguous - and the typical structures of hierarchy and power, such as professional status or position within traditional institutions, are less salient, and the services which they provide have little form or precedent. The relationships between the consultants and clients indeed look more like a dance, in which the parties are not certain of the choreography, although they both at times take turns in manipulating meaning and contending for symbolic power. That this happens through the rhetoric of the engagement makes it much more slippery to chart than tabulating questionnaire responses, and a more fluid conception of power is much more appropriate in this context. McGuire describes this process in terms of one of the religious groups:

The particular symbols of empowerment vary from group to group . . . The imputation of power and authority is, thus, the result of a complex and ongoing process of negotiation, in which the would-be leader proffers a symbol of power, the group accepts or rejects it, the leader holds out another symbol to which the group responds, and so on . . . (McGuire, 1983, p. 7-8)

In the information technology consulting situation, power, formulated as the ability to negotiate the meaning of a given context, seems to ebb and flow between the client and consultant. The parties seem to negotiate power, in a manner very similar to that described by McGuire with respect to religious leaders and followers. As illustrated in chapter four, the meanings of
technology or the engagement are proffered by the consultant, and these meanings are either accepted by the client, or negotiated between client and consultant. Power is thus something which is contested, and which can ebb and flow between the parties over time.

Downey (1988), who studied nuclear scientists, noted that credibility of particular scientists was quite context specific, in spite of the elite status of science and scientists in our society. In order to gain credibility with a particular audience, a scientist had to show that his work had appropriate scientific content, and lacked political content. Consultants cannot claim elite status of the scientists. But they can attempt to position themselves or their work as closely as possible to taken-for-granted cultural assumptions. For example, consultants take advantage of the fact that methodology (whether it is valid or not) is identified with science. Clients are unlikely to challenge the validity of a scientific method. Likewise, for billing systems practices, the consultants can take advantage of the “time is money” assumption, and use this belief to support their own claims to the value of their services.

Summary

The practices used by consultants are forms of symbolic power, which uses language and rhetoric to manipulate meanings. Because consultants operate in an arena where power and meaning are “up for grabs,” and because they lack more traditional sources of power and legitimacy, their reliance on rhetorical devices is especially vivid. This does not imply that traditional sources of power disappear completely from the information technology consulting scene. Client presidents have greater status than client managers, and the same applies to consultant partners and managers. These differences
are perceived and operate effectively in the consulting context. But given the nature of the ambiguities inherent in this world, traditional sources of power are less salient. These other, less visible and more subtle, workings and practices of power are no less potent for their invisibility.
Chapter 7

FUTURE RESEARCH

This dissertation began as an ethnography of an occupational group that has received almost no prior attention from researchers. Although there is a plethora of prescriptive, how-to literature on consulting, information technology consultants as a group have gone virtually unanalyzed. Due to the technical nature of their work, one is tempted to cast information technology consultants as technicians or engineers, but, as we have seen, to do so would be to miss critical aspects of their work. Not only are information technology consultants involved with making technology work, but they are also “merchants of meaning” (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1990), who create not only technical systems, but symbolic systems. In this respect, they are like the “creatives” at advertising agencies (Hirota, 1988) who proffer bright and shiny images for the edification of the consumer, yet they are also involved with making machines work.

This characterization naturally leads one to ask how information technology consultants do symbolic work. The answer offered here is that consultants craft and manipulate the meanings of their work via a set of practices, which rely on assumptions and beliefs that are taken for granted in our culture: assumptions such as “technology provides competitive advantage,” and “time is money.” These practices form links between the consultants' work and these cultural assumptions, providing credibility and legitimacy to the
consultants. The consultants create for themselves useful sources of power and legitimacy.

As I mentioned in the introduction, this dissertation is a snapshot of a work in progress, representing compromises between theory and description, problematizing and simplifying everyday life phenomena, and among issues of reflexivity and authorship. As a result, there are a number of research issues which were not developed in this document which should be explored. I have argued that consultants exercise symbolic power, which in this case operates through the practices I have described herein. But how does the empirically-derived concept of symbolic power fit with other social science writings on power? Clegg (1989), in his recent review of writings on power, has traced the concept from one which was vested in the sovereign to the more postmodern notions of power. One of the critical debates concerns the "existence" of power -- whether it can operate in potentia, or whether it exists only in its exercise. What are the implications of this debate for symbolic power? The philosophical debate seems largely irrelevant to the symbolic power argument presented here, perhaps because the latter was developed inductively and grounded in empirical observations. Nonetheless, it would be interesting to explore the implications of the theory and data presented here. Theories on power have often been developed through hypothetical scenarios: "Imagine a king with no kingdom . . ." The intriguing thing about symbolic power is that, to some degree, it is always available as a resource to anyone, be they king or peasant, client or consultant. The exercise of symbolic power is subtle, almost invisible, yet quite undeniable. Persuading a client to adopt one's viewpoint on a particular computer system would have broad ramifications: it might mean getting a $25 million engagement, or reorganizing an entire organization.
This dissertation also raises the familiar issue of the relationship between power and knowledge, both of which have a common foundation in rhetoric. Sociological studies of laboratory science (e.g., Latour and Woolgar, 1979; Knorr-Cetina, 1981; Woolgar, 1988) and in the rhetoric of scientific writing (Bazerman, 1987; Brown, 1992) have shown that "findings" are the product, in part, of the careful use of rhetoric. I have shown that information technology consultants also rely heavily on rhetorical devices to construct and manipulate meanings that legitimize themselves and their work. The use of rhetoric allows the consultants, by analogy, access to more traditional sources of power and knowledge, and yet they are not by any means close to them. This makes consultants a theoretically interesting category because, unlike some professional groups (Friedson, 1986), they do not control their specialized knowledge. Further exploration of the relationship between power and knowledge in consulting would help draw the linkages more clearly. One means of explicating these linkages would be to view information technology consultants as a profession in its infancy. Tracing its growth or lack thereof may shed some light on how occupational groups develop into professions with more visible trappings of power.

As we have seen, consultants rely on macro-level, structural assumptions, such as the inherent scientific validity of methodologies, to exercise power in their micro-interactions. At the same time, their use of these assumptions adds weight and meaning to the cultural structure. But I have only begun to explore the ways in which this micro-macro linkage is accomplished. The argument is implicitly structurationist (Giddens, 1984), and data on these and similar phenomena speak to issues raised in the debate on the micro-macro link (Fielding, 1988; Knorr-Cetina, 1988).
I have generated this inductive theory in the context of an information technology arena, one which is inherently ambiguous. The business world is likewise rapidly moving in this direction and away from traditional, well-defined hierarchical formats, where understandings of the world are shared, or, at least, perceived to be shared. The internationalization of business mixes many different cultures, and even within the United States, people of different cultures enter the workforce in increasingly greater numbers. Customers and markets, domestic or international, are also becoming more varied. This clashing of cultures and assumptions is bound to result in ambiguities similar to those in the information technology arena. To the extent that this is true, the dynamics of power which I have described here will be much more relevant than the traditional forms of power. Rendering the dynamics of rhetoric and power more visible will become necessary for coping in this world.

Rhetorical displays will not disappear from the business world; if anything, they will become more prevalent. A recent cover story in Business Week (August 31, 1992, p. 45) highlighted the “tenets” of the new gurus (“the learning organization,” “reengineering,” “core competencies,” “organizational architecture,” and “time-based competition”). As Newsweek notes (September 7, 1992, p. 48), management plans (such as “TQM,” or “Total Quality Management,” the focus of their article) have the “shelf life of cottage cheese.” I would argue that in spite of their disgust with “the flavor or the month,” managers as well as consultants are quite comfortable with such rhetorical displays (see Jackall, 1988). It will become more and more important to develop a means of sorting out these rhetorical displays, and talking about them in meaningful ways.
Thus, this dissertation raises questions about the contours of a theory of power in general. As we move to a world where traditional forms of power become more attenuated, will more fluid forms of power become more prevalent? Will power be “up for grabs?” Static, atomistic notions of power are insensitive to the dynamics of power that arise through interactions and relations, which are deeply embedded in the cultural context. If so, this suggests that our traditional methods of conducting research on power will fail to capture significant aspects of this phenomenon.
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Appendix A

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This appendix describes the methodology used to conduct this research. It begins with a discussion of how the project evolved and took on its current shape. I then discuss how the data were collected, and, for each of the four field sites, I describe access, my role, and exit.

Chronology of Data Collection

The choice of methodology and research sites was an evolutionary process. It is helpful to think of the data collection as taking place in two phases. The first phase consisted of as an exploratory study of Firm B. During this phase, I began learning about information technology consultants, and developed my clinical fieldwork style. During the second phase, I expanded the scope of the project to include two additional external consulting organizations (Firm A and Firm C), and a client/internal consulting organization (Firm D).

Getting started. I was part of a research team headed by Professor Max Bazerman which studied service sector negotiations, including information technology consulting services. I was struck by the complexity of the negotiations between consultant and client. Negotiations sometimes began even before the consultant and client met (via telephone), and continued throughout the engagement -- and sometimes, even afterwards. It
seemed impossible to define the boundaries of the negotiation, let alone analyze it. At the same time, information technology consultants were intriguing: here was an occupational group that worked in nearly every large organization, helping to shape its infrastructure, but which had received almost no research attention. I decided on an ethnography of information technology consultants, and started with a team of consultants at Firm B who were working on what they perceived as a successful client project.

I visited the team five times over a period of six months, for one to two weeks at a time. During these visits, I followed the consultants around. If we arrived at the airport together, we went through customs together and rode together in the taxi to the hotel apartments. Each morning, I went to the client site with them in their rented cars. At the client site, I assisted them with simple support tasks like filing or copying, but most of my time was spent chatting with members of the team and the client organization about the project, their work, and their lives. I took copious notes in long-hand (I did not have a typewriter or a personal computer available to me on these trips).

The consulting team was large (12 members), and working in a foreign country was difficult (see chapter three). As I got to know them, the consultants began to complain to me about other team members. There were "personality conflicts," as they termed them, and competition among the team members. I found that as I talked with these consultants, rather than passively listening, I began questioning them when it seemed appropriate. For example, consultant A would complain to me about something that consultant B had "done" to them, and tell me what they planned to do about it. I would say, "What about person B? I'm not saying that your way of
seeing things isn’t legitimate, but person B may have their reasons for doing what they did. Will your actions have the effect you desire?” Most of the time, person B would also come to me with their side of the story. Nobody got angry with me or resented my involvement; quite the contrary, all the team members appeared to value my presence.

This way of interacting with the team members was comfortable for me, but it seemed quite different from the type of fieldwork described in some of the research manuals (Spradley, 1977; Miles and Huberman, 1984). At first, I tried to maintain the role of a more detached observer, but I found that I was drawn into the interpersonal processes of the team. More importantly for my research, I learned about things that I would never have learned if I had simply listened and not questioned the assumptions of the consultants I spoke to. Ultimately, I decided that this type of intervention was not something that I needed to apologize for. I began to see it as a skill that others valued that gave me access to data that I could not otherwise have obtained. Consequently, I conducted the rest of my research as a process consultant (Schein, 1987), and spent a great deal of time and effort in developing this skill further.

**Expanding the scope.** In the second phase, I wanted to expand the research to include a different type of consulting firm. My initial plan was to select one additional firm to create a contrast with Firm B. I approached several different firms, based on conversations I had with various M!T information technology faculty members such as Professors J. Rockart and M. Treacy. For the most part, these firms expressed interest in my research, but seemed too busy to make the necessary arrangements (which made sense because I was not likely to lead to new business for them, nor was I then seen
as a billable resource. I had what seemed like an especially promising
contact at Firm C (see below), but they were initially unresponsive to my
calls. I then pursued other firms, and one (Firm Z) had agreed to particpate.
After several long months, I found Firm A, which readily agreed to
participate but experienced delays in starting the project (see chapter three).
During this same period, Firm D had approached a member of my committee.
My contact at Firm D was quite receptive to my research, and they agreed to
participate. In the meantime, Firm C took a renewed interest in my project,
as described below. So although I had been trying for months with no success
to gain access to a single firm, I suddenly had access to four.

I could see immediately that Firms A and C were very different and
that they would provide a valuable contrast both with each other and with
Firm B. It seemed obvious that it would be important to keep both of these
firms in my sample. Also, I could also see that there was no possibility of
getting a client perspective from the consulting firms. If I was viewed as one
of the consultants by the client organization, there would be no way of
gaining the trust and access needed to establish any relationship with them.
In addition, Firm D had a large internal consulting group which I knew from
the literature and from experience were perceived to be very different than
external consultants.

At Firms A, C, and D, I kept a consultant's hours and travel schedule.
My day began at the client site (whether at the consulting firm or client site)
at 7:30 A.M. and lasted until at least 7:00 at night, and often until 10:00 P.M.
(not including travel time). As a result, I juggled three field sites for ten
months. I scheduled activities at each of the sites as carefully as possible,
and my "clients" ruled my life. There were constant conflicts and schedule
changes. The necessity of traveling to and from the sites outside of Boston made this process particularly grueling. I kept it up as long as I could (about seven months), until I became tired and ill and was forced to cut back my schedule.

**Data Collected**

The core of the data I collected, like that of any fieldworker, were my fieldnotes, which recorded the activities of my day as well as notes of my talks with people and group meetings. In my role as a process consultant, people frequently sought me out with problems and would often schedule meetings around my availability. As a result, there was very little dead time during the day when I could record field notes.

In response to this problem, I developed three basic strategies for taking notes: shorthand notes taken in real time, notes written while on site and notes written in the evening. At Firm B, I did not have access to a typewriter or computer, so I did my notes in longhand, both during the breaks in the day and in the evenings. At the other sites, I either had a portable computer with me, or I had access to a computer. This allowed me to type up some notes during the day, and expand on my notes during the evenings. For events like meetings, I developed my shorthand skills so that I was able to transcribe portions of the dialogue verbatim, in real time. After analyzing data from Firm B, I realized that the exact wording during meetings was critical.

At Firm B, I accumulated about 400 pages of field notes. At the other sites, I accumulated an average of 1000 pages per site. I collected a variety of other documents, including proposal documents, project memos, procedures

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and policies of the firm, promotional material and newsletters, and any relevant newspaper and magazine clippings. Altogether, the documents from all four sites (excluding the fieldnotes) fill a five drawer file cabinet.

Details of the Four Field Sites

The following sections outline the details of my access, role and exit at each of the four field sites. Figure A.1 summarizes the dates on which I first gained access at each site, started working on the client engagements (as described in chapter three) and finally exited the site. Note that these dates are not exact; “entry,” like “exit,” is not a distinct moment in time, but a process that stretches out over several months. To illustrate this, the discussion of the entry process at Firm A. a more detailed chronology of the process, as shown in figure A.2. The process was similarly drawn out at all of the other firms.

Figure A.1: Chronology of Data Collection at Four Sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Entry</th>
<th>Client Engagement Started</th>
<th>Exit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Firm B</td>
<td>6/87</td>
<td>5/86</td>
<td>12/87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firm A</td>
<td>4/88</td>
<td>8/88</td>
<td>7/89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firm C</td>
<td>5/88</td>
<td>9/88</td>
<td>5/89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firm D</td>
<td>8/88</td>
<td>not applicable</td>
<td>3/91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Figure A.2: Detailed Chronology of Entry at Firm A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Type of Contact</th>
<th>Contact Person</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1/25/88</td>
<td>Meeting</td>
<td>MIT Faculty member</td>
<td>Provided several consulting firm contacts for potential research sites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/28/88</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>Head of consulting</td>
<td>Set up meeting date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/4/88</td>
<td>Meeting</td>
<td>Head of consulting</td>
<td>Agreed to allow access to a Firm A project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/19/88</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>Branch manager 1</td>
<td>After phone tag, spoke to one branch manager to set up a meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/25/88</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>Branch manager 2</td>
<td>After phone tag, spoke to another branch manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/4/88</td>
<td>Meeting</td>
<td>Branch manager 1</td>
<td>Discussed potential projects at branch 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/7/88</td>
<td>Meeting</td>
<td>Branch manager 2</td>
<td>Discussed potential projects at branch 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/14/88</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>Personal friend</td>
<td>Provided name of head of training at Firm A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/17/88</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>Head of training</td>
<td>Set up meeting date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/21/88</td>
<td>Meeting</td>
<td>Head of training</td>
<td>Proposed training and orientation sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/24/88</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>Branch manager 2</td>
<td>Identified client project; scheduled start date 4/1/88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/11-15/88</td>
<td>Training session</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/9-13/88</td>
<td>Orientation session</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/20-24/88</td>
<td>Training session</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/6/88</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>Branch Manager 2</td>
<td>Contract signed as of 7/1/88, made arrangements for client site visit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/17/88</td>
<td>Meeting</td>
<td>Team manager</td>
<td>First visit to client site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/89</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>Team manager</td>
<td>System installed and running problem free</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Firm A

Access. Firm A was suggested as a potential research site by an information technology faculty member. The head of the consulting area at Firm A, an MIT graduate, agreed to help with my research at our first meeting. He introduced me to several branch managers, who were assigned the task of finding an appropriate client project. After several weeks time, they decided on a new project which had just been awarded to Firm A. The project was scheduled to begin on November 1, but as discussed in chapter three, the contracting process took much longer than expected, and it was several months before the project actually began.

Through a friend, I met the head of the training department, who was also interested in my research. While I waited for the client project to start, I had the opportunity to observe several different training and orientation sessions for Firm A. I helped the trainers plan some of their materials, and gave them feedback about the training sessions. Eventually, the client contract was signed and I was able to begin work on the project. The details of the entry process are shown in figure A.2.

Role. Once the project began, I accompanied the consultants to the client site. This was a technical project, so my contribution was to undertake administrative tasks that would free the consultants to focus on technical tasks. I helped them with systems documentation, as well as with preparation of the training materials for the users. Both of these tasks, while part of the project deliverables, did not directly aid in meeting deadlines for systems implementation. So the consultants were grateful that I took these necessary but tedious requirements off their hands.
Each day, I made an effort to talk to all of the consultant on site, as well as the members of the client organization involved with the project. I attended project meetings (consultant as well as client-consultant meetings), which typically focused on the management and status of the project as a whole. I also attended ad-hoc user/designer meetings, which were usually one-on-one, and focused around a particular technical task.

From the very beginning, the Firm A team had problems with the staffing of the project, and I spent time with both the team manager and members discussing these issues. Firm A did not develop a good client relationship, but they did not realize the extent of their problems until later in the project. Their internal team dissension and the systems deadlines prevented them from focusing on the client relationship until it was too late.

**Exit.** The project continued until the system was installed and running. By that time, there was only one consultant at the client site. He was frequently awakened at three in the morning to fix the system, which blew up regularly when it was first installed. By the time the project was winding down, he was exhausted so we kept in contact mainly by telephone. I would occasionally run into members of other consulting firms who knew the team members of Firm A, and we used these contacts to keep track of each other, from a distance.

**Firm B**

**Access.** Firm B, a research site for Professor Max Bazerman’s study of negotiations in the service sector, was very supportive of my research. A well-regarded partner at Firm B found the project site which I visited, a highly unusual one in several respects (see chapter three).
**Role.** As previously mentioned, my role at Firm B evolved over the course of the fieldwork while I attempted to balance observation and participation. Initially, I restricted my activities to interviews and observation. But as described above, this role became increasingly difficult to maintain, and shifted to becoming more involved in working with the team with their process issues.

**Exit.** Leaving the field was easy at Firm B because the visits were discrete periods, scheduled well in advance. I said good-bye to the team and clients during my last trip. This type of exit is common among consultants, who work on a project of set duration, and say their good-byes at the end. After the last visit, I maintained telephone contact with the team leader until the end of the project (for about six weeks). This telephone contact was not out of the ordinary, since I had kept in touch with them throughout the engagement between visits. Most of the Firm B consultants on this engagement now work for other firms, and I saw several of them after the end of the project.

**Firm C**

**Access.** A member of my committee was working with Firm C on a project and gave me the names of several partners to contact. I called, and left voice mail messages, but my calls were not returned. Given this lack of response, I attempted to gain access at other firms. One of these (Firm Z) was quite receptive, and was in the process of arranging for me to be assigned to an engagement. In the interim, I met a senior manager from Firm C at a conference at MIT. He suggested that I contact the founder of Firm C, who agreed to meet with me to provide me with general background on
information technology consulting. During the interview, I spoke of my research, and he suggested I take advantage of the firm's fellowship for researchers. Within two days, two partners had contact me to make the arrangements.

I was then confronted with the problem of choosing between Firms C and Z. There were several reasons I chose Firm C. First, as my chair pointed out, the difficulty I had in gaining access was important data. Second, I had already met or known a number of former Firm C consultants. Third, the particular nature of Firm C's methodology made it seem a good contrast to Firms A and B.

Once I gained access to Firm C, several things happened. As at Firm A, I waited for several months to be assigned to a project. Interestingly, I was now viewed as a billable resource, and various groups within the firm were suddenly interested in my time. I was finally assigned to the partner in charge of a branch, who suggested that I wait for a large project that I could work on right from its inception. While I was waiting for such a project, I attended orientation and training sessions in the Firm C methodology.

**Role.** At Firm C, I was treated as a member of the consulting team. Since almost all Firm C consultants are MBAs from schools like Sloan, I was not perceived as very different. Members of the client organization knew that I was a graduate student at MIT, but most seemed indifferent to the distinction. Over and above the usual consultant tasks, the team used me as a process consultant in two ways. First, I spent more time than most of the consultants helping them analyze client/consultant interactions. The client was downsizing for the first time in their history, and it was causing a great
deal of strain in their interactions with the consultants. Second, I worked on issues that involved internal team politics. Due to a sudden downturn in business, there was an unusual amount of pressure to increase billables. This conflicted with the need to control costs on this project, which was over budget early in its lifetime.

Exit. About two months before the project ended, I became sick and was unable to continue to work at the same pace. The project managers were angry with me and felt that I had let them down. After I recovered, I spoke to them, and they apologized for their behavior, citing the amount of stress they were under to complete the project with insufficient resources. I stayed spoke to them several times a week until well after the project ended. After the final client presentations, the project managers moved to new projects. Many of the consultants I knew at Firm C have moved to other firms, and I have seen them occasionally, or hear of them through other consultants.

Firm D

Access. Firm D was suggested by a member of my committee, who received a visit from the head of the corporate information technology organization under the auspices of the MIT Industrial Liaison Program. He suggested that I contact Firm D because of their interest in organizational development. Firm D was trying to create a matrixed information technology organization, with process consultants for each of the matrix units. Firm D was very interested in my research, and the internal OD staff was pleased to have an extra colleague in this effort, so I entered as a process consultant/researcher.
Role. In my capacity as a process consultant, I worked initially with the corporate information technology function. In the course of the work, I met all the managers of the other information technology functions in Firm D. I gradually gravitated toward the largest information technology function, and worked with many of the people there. I was involved with several projects, the largest of which was the Common Software Project, described in chapter three. This projects created a need for external consulting services, and allowed me to see how a client goes about selecting and working with external consultants.

Exit. I stayed at Firm D much longer than the other firms because the Common Software Project was so unusual. Eventually, a variety of organizational changes precipitated my exit. Several of the managers of the information technology functions left, and the organization was restructured. The common software project stalled, and I left the firm.