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Exploring the dark side of consultancies' organisation of excellence:

Individual strategies to manage contradictory expectations

Paper submitted to EGOS 2012

Sub-theme 3: Professional service organizations and knowledge-intensive work

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Abstract

In this paper, we investigate how consulting professionals handle the expectations of excellence that are coming from both their clients and their firms as well as the individual strategies they go on to develop in relation with their initial motivations to join consulting and the evolution of their career. This study is based on the in-depth analysis of 25 work histories of consultants and former consultants – from junior consultant to partner – working or having worked for 12 different consulting firms. We found that consultants make a consistent description of the system they evolve in, no matter the company, in that it appears to organise excellence through the combination of a consulting ideal, multiple contradictory expectations and constant and ambiguous evaluation. We have found that depending on their initial motivations to become consultants, individuals can develop three different strategies: competition, compromise or rupture. We have then identified patterns in professional

trajectories according to these 3 basic strategies. We finally discuss our results in terms of individual tenability and performance of the "Up or Out" system.

Introduction

Professional service firms – including auditing, law, architecture or consulting firms for example – are widely organised through a model that combines partnership as a mode of governance and the "up or out" system as a career framework (Greewood et. al., 1990, Morris & Pinnington, 1998). This model organises the selection of professionals, from entry levels all the way to partnership, through an elitist and challenging selection process. Although what such an organizational model implies in terms of individual performance evaluation and normative control has been widely studied and has shed light on how it can come in the way of individual freedom by "subjectifying" consultants (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002 ; Robertson & Swan, 2003), the question of the individual tenability of this model is still under-investigated. This paper contributes to exploring further the way the "up or out" system and its multiple adaptations (Malhotra, Morris & Smets, 2010) is enacted by professionals by investigating how individual consultants manage the expectations of excellence they are facing in such an environment. To do so, we interviewed 25 consultants and former consultants, all across the corporate ladder, in 12 different consulting firms, and gathered their "*work histories*" (Nicholson & West, 1989); as well as 4 health professionals and 5 Human Resources Directors. It has allowed us to observe a real convergence of consulting firms towards a model that has excellence at its core and produces it through the combination of a symbolic consulting ideal, multiple contradictory expectations and an evaluation process described by consultants as both ambiguous and constant. We have also analysed consultants initial motivations to join the industry (taste for challenge, will to develop an expertise, default choice) and identified the strategies they could lead to: competition, compromise and rupture. We have also been able to identify some patterns in their professional trajectories, depending on their initial motivations and strategies.

This paper unfolds as follows: we start by reviewing the concept of knowledge work and the way it is evaluated both by clients and consulting firms themselves to better understand how these firms organise themselves to produce excellent work while selecting their future partners. Doing this, we identify that the way professionals deal with such a system remains under-investigated while being at the heart of the system. We then move on to detail our

methodology before describing our findings and discussing them in the light of the current literature on professional service firms and the "up or out" system.

The organisation of 'excellence' in Professional Service Firms and the management of tension for professionals

Knowledge work is intrinsically ambiguous because of its intangible, interactive, heterogeneous and perishable nature (Alvesson, 1995; Clark & Salaman, 1998). Whether they are seeking control and lack expertise, lack resources or want to legitimise decisions they are about to make, managers use consulting providers when they are overwhelmed with uncertainty (Sturdy, 1997). This is where the ambiguity of the service – as a form of knowledge work – lies: it allows consultants to manage this uncertainty by providing reassurance or increasing uncertainty depending on their own commercial agenda. This is precisely what makes evaluating knowledge work so difficult (Alvesson, 1993, 2000, 2001): clients need to assess the quality of the expertise they do not own and, as deadlines are usually tight, formal evaluations are seen as a waste of time. It is actually very difficult to see the impact of consulting work right away as consulting services, whether it is strategic advice or long-term accompaniment, often has unforeseen long-term implications, which explains why clients assess consultants on a daily basis, giving a lot of credit to their impressions (Kitay & Wright, 2002). They do so according to signals of expertise and quality rather than by assessing expertise in itself (Starbuck, 1992). For clients, consultants' behaviours are indeed as much part of the service as the deliverables they produce. Reputation, in particular, plays a very important role in the interactive relationship between consultants and their clients and is often seen as having the potential to predict the quality of the service (Clark, 1995). And this evaluation process, as informal and subjective as it may be, is crucial to consulting firms' survival. The quality of the service itself being so difficult to assess, consultants need to constantly demonstrate expertise and rationality. This is where lies the need for what Clark (1995) has described as the "Management of Impressions". In the tradition initiated by Goffman (1959, 1967), consultants are described by Clark as actors that play an organisational script when they interact with clients. In order to demonstrate expertise, consultants are given scripts by their consultancies to be able to act as experts and learn how to improvise in front of clients when needed. Consultants are performing in the show clients are paying to see. It doesn't mean that consultants do not have any expertise but rather that

they have learnt how to show it through the assimilation of behavioural norms and the constant manipulation of symbols. These scripts begin to be internalised by consultants even before they join their consulting firms, in particular through the use of case studies that are assessed by recruiters according to this ability to understand and display the right behaviours (Armbrüster, 2004) and later through integration seminars (Poulter & Land, 2008), Human Resources practices (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) or a "socio-integrative" type of management that relies on the transmission of values and norms alongside symbolic rites (Alvesson, 1995). All of this explains why socialisation is crucial in the consulting industry, especially in the early stages of the career, and why consultants try to display and image in conformity with the expectations of the organisation and their peers (Ibarra, 1999). What is described here is the normative power of the organisation on consultants and a "subjectification" process (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Robertson & Swan, 2003) through which individual's identities are aligned and regulated via organisational control.

Behaviours that are consistent with the consulting ideal and organisational norms are then rewarded through the promotion system. A majority of consulting firms have adopted the "Up or Out" pyramidal system which finds its origins at the very beginning of the 20th century in the Cravath system (Swaine, 1946, 1948) that organised the selection of professionals – from recruitment to partnership – and was quickly adopted by all American top law firms and in other professional service firms (Galanter & Palay, 1991; Greenwood & al., 1990; Hobson, 1986). Promotion at each level of the pyramid is the result of invisible *tournaments* (Rosenbaum, 1979 Galanter & Palay, 1991) that are supposed to motivate each individual to get to the top and stimulate constant competition while selecting the best candidates for partnership. Recent studies have however showed how large professional service firms have adapted this system (Morris & Pinnington, 1998) and sometimes created alternate non-partner roles without altering the motivational power of the "Up or Out" (Malhotra, Morris & Smets, 2010).

The way expectations of excellence are generated and put in place has thus been widely studied but the way professionals concretely deal with the "Up or Out" system, or more generally speaking with the tension generated by the expectations of their organisations, is still under-investigated. In addition, when previous research describes the "subjectification" of consultants, what is at stake is individual freedom. What we would like to investigate here complements these findings and rather interrogates individuals' ability to handle the organisation of excellence and its consequences on performance, on health and on well-being

at work. In this paper, we name 'excellence' the management logics driven by such organisations. It has been described in a wider context by Aubert and de Gaulejac (1991) as a system relying on ambiguous objectives, contradictory expectations, constant evaluation and the valuation of exceptional performances. Individuals must internalise expectations of constant success and perfection. In these organisations, the success of the organisation equals the personal success of individuals who constantly adapt to what is expected from them to be considered successful. Such organisations manage to generate a fusion with individuals whose ideal becomes the ideal of the organisation and who increasingly exist under the light of the organisation and its rewarding system. This model is grounded in individual quests for self-definition and accomplishment. As a result, such organisations generate a real "cult of the self" in which performance can only be attributed to individuals without any consideration for the role played by potential external factors in increasing or decreasing this performance. Brunel (2004) has later shown how insightful this framework could be to understand consulting firms and how some personal development tools could be used to spread this consulting ideal that consultants define as ambitious, energetic and efficient (Alvesson, 2011). Then the question we would like to address can be formulated as follows: ***How do individual professionals manage the expectations of excellence they are facing in such organisations?***

Methodology

Considering the fact that our research question has been under investigated and may be difficult to address directly within PSFs, we have adopted an exploratory approach and designed a methodology tailored to the specificities of the topic. In accordance with the concept of *Work History* (Nicholson & West, 1989) that defines professional trajectories as broader than organisational frontiers, we have decided to study consultants' careers outside of their specific organisational context. Considering that only individuals can establish subjective links between their past experiences, their interpretations and their aspirations for the future, we have decided to take a biographic approach (Dubar & Demazière, 1997). To do so, we have gathered multiple case studies made of individual *work histories* that we have later aggregated according to the *patterns* (Yin, 1981, 2009) we have spotted. What allowed us to do so is – in spite of the heterogeneity of the consulting industry in itself – the relative homogeneity of organisational characteristics of selected consulting firms regarding excellence. Between April and June 2011, we interviewed 22 consultants and 3 ex-consultants

in a non-directive way. They belonged to consulting firms of different sizes, operating in various industries and within a wide range of expertise (from strategy to information systems or human resources consulting). We have thus interviewed consultants operating in very different environments and whose expertise varied considerably and included for example the formalised methodologies of strategy consultancies, the technical expertise of financial consulting or the more blurry set of knowledge of management consulting (for a more detailed description of our sample please see Appendix A). All positions across the pyramid are represented but we should note that, as much as we have tried to interview consultants at all levels of the pyramid, partners are under-represented in our sample. We can note here that we managed to interview 3 directors and have gathered information about top consultants' perceptions. In accordance with the approach described earlier we have asked each professional to tell us about their work history, which has allowed us to understand their initial motivations, career paths and gather the entire subjectivity of their experience (including health issues as a marker of career sustainability).

To complete our vision of the issues and to help interpreting individual cases, we completed our data collection by interviewing 5 consulting Human Resources Directors and 2 work doctors and their teams in semi-directive interviews. Meeting Human Resources Directors (it should however be noted here that very few accepted to be interviewed on this topic) allowed us to better understand the way consultancies recruit, evaluate and promote their consultants and even their perception of health issues. Work doctors provided us with a medical and external view upon the way consulting work may or may not affect the physical and psychological health of these professionals. This approach has allowed us to investigate consultants' relation to their consulting activity and access organisational reality.

We then analysed the collected data through an emergent coding treatment.

Strategies of individual accommodation to the organisational demand of excellence

A convergent model focused on excellence production through contradictions and tensions

First of all, before we can understand how professionals handle the excellence logics, we should detail further how it is organised and what it implies. Across all interviews emerged a consistent model through which tension is made constant in order to produce excellent service. We interviewed a recruitment consultant who had been in charge of recruiting for

major consultancies for years and also spoke to Human Resources Directors about their selection methods and realised recruitment criteria attest of the existence of a consistent consulting ideal of excellence: consultants rarely have previous experience, have studied in the best engineering and business schools and ought to be dynamic, ambitious, attracted to challenges, able to handle a heavy work load under pressure, available and have records of excellence in and outside of work. The interviews confirmed this definition and showed how deeply the "consulting ideal" was integrated by consultants themselves, whether because they identified with it or because they criticised it for being who they had to be/become if they wanted to be a "fast-tracker":

> *"The consulting business model focuses on individual dynamism and all of those who are in the background or are looking for work life balance or whose development curve is below the norm, are told they do not to contribute enough, not to be punchy enough, not to stay in the race." [SM2]*

> *"I had to spend one week at school each month, but I came back each night after school and I was working from home, I had my boss on the phone in between lectures. And the client didn't know I was an apprentice so it was hard to manage but in the end I never gave up. I managed to show I was available, which is what is expected from you in consulting."[JC4]*

Not only is the consulting ideal associated to high expectations in terms of commitment and availability, but also to the ability to handle conflicting expectations legitimised through the notion of service. We found out that consultants are for example asked to be assigned to projects full-time so that everything they do can be billed to a client, but they also need to remain visible internally by organising or participating in internal events, recruitment or contributing to tender offers. They are also asked to remain in control of their trajectories, to decide what expertise they want to develop and make it happen, but one of the main tacit rules they have to respect is however to accept to be assigned to any project, no matter the location, the content nor the project team. Consultants are also expected to become experts in their chosen field but must also develop varied experience with more and more stretch. When their workload increases they also need to learn how to delegate but need to work closely with younger consultants, ensure they show the right behaviours and are accountable for any mistake they can make. Consultants should also step up and tell their managers when something is wrong, when they are struggling or when their workload is unmanageable for

example, but at the same time, it is always better not to struggle when evaluation time comes. Finally, it also appears that although consultants are asked to produce work of exceptional quality, they sometimes also need to remain indispensible to the client which can come in the way of exceptional service.

All interviews, no matter the size nor the industry of the organisations individuals were evolving in, converged in describing a system through which behaviour is subject to constant evaluation and should be consistent with this consulting ideal and the ability to handle the tension generated by contradictory expectations. Evaluation is almost always described as ambiguous and varying from project to project. As a result of this convergence towards a model that has excellence at its core, the sample appears to be particularly relevant to study the way individuals deal with tension in this specific environment.

It also appears that consultants are asked to find proactive ways to handle all these expectations and create a future for themselves in the organisation. It requires a very high level of commitment to the company, as one Human Resources Director told us:

> *"It requires full commitment to the job. It's like in sects: some people feel good, others feel bad. We ask them to be fully dedicated to the company. At first, you must be fully in it."[HR5]*

In practice, what we have noticed is that, to cope with these contradictory expectations, consultants need to adopt what can be called **deviant behaviours**. They do not necessarily see these behaviours as deviant themselves, but they can be qualified as such as they imply working around the rule and lying, whether it is to colleagues or even to clients. This topic was evoked by 13 consultants overall, who said that, for example, they often had to lie on their time allocation, either because they were working more than they could bill to the client or because they had to work on other projects while their time was allocated to a specific one; that they needed to make alliances inside their firms to make sure they get to work on projects that suited them; that they sometimes had to hide difficulties; and also evoked the need to be disloyal to the client when information needs to be given to a competitor or when a contract needs to be renewed and consultants have to remain needed.

In exchange, consulting firms promise rewards, may they be financial (salary raises and bonuses), statutory (promotions) or symbolic (mainly through rituals). This is part of the psychological contract signed between the company and their consultants and the best reward

individuals can get in exchange for their effort is a quick promotion across the pyramid and the reputation of being a "fast-tracker". This is organised through a predominant evaluation system that functions as an incentive to excel. Each assignment involves a formal evaluation for the project team – sometimes more when the project is long – which will be later used at a unit or sometimes company review committee to assess the entire workforce at each level and compare performances before deciding who will be promoted. What is particularly ambiguous here is that people involved in the latter committee can sometimes never have worked with the individuals they will assess. In addition, many consultants reported that although there are some formal criteria to assess performance, they feel like the outcomes vary considerably according to who their manager is in that specific project team and that their behaviour is evaluated as much as the quality of the deliverables they produce. According to the rating tools that are used in this process, meeting objectives is considered average and only exceptional performances are truly rewarded, in particular considering that evaluation does not only depend on each individual's performance but also on other consultants' success. Once promotion has been agreed, consulting firms often organise rituals to promote the success of the chosen individuals in the company.

Entering the career: Consulting as a dominant default choice

First of all, let's try to understand what motivates young recruits to join consulting in the first place. We have observed three different – sometimes combined – motivations for individuals to become consultants: a taste for challenge, a default career orientation and a will to become an expert in a specific field. Three consultants explained how they were originally looking for **challenges**, which they felt only a competitive industry like consulting could provide them with. Some of the consultants we met told us they were looking to have responsibilities very quickly, were afraid of being bored in a steady job, were perfectionists who wanted to be confronted with difficulty and wanted to have access to decision-makers in spite of their youth.

> *"I wanted to face challenges. I think when you are young what is important isn't to enjoy but to face challenges. It contributed to the impression that I was building a future for myself."[SM3]*

For two thirds of consultants, however, it was a clear **default choice**: they didn't know what to do after graduating and thought consulting would give them interesting opportunities for the future and broaden their horizon while very promising in terms of promotion. In many cases, they saw it as in continuity with their degree, since consulting firms were regularly present in their business schools or universities.

> *"I knew very early I wanted to get into consulting. First I had a brother who had done consulting and he said he had learnt a lot, he had learnt ways of working as well. And I didn't have any calling so consulting was something open for me. I could see different projects, different sectors…"[EM1]*

Three people who chose consulting by default also admitted having a very naïve vision of the job and perceived it to be "the best" entry to a successful career. Three of them also associated consulting to prestige, especially for strategy consulting.

> *"I was very immature at the time, the offices used to be Avenue d'Iéna, in a very luxurious building, company cars were A3! And I had been told: when you become a manager you get a company car. I liked that!"[M2]*

Then, only 6 of the 25 consultants we spoke to explained how consulting appeared to be the best way for them to develop **expertise** in a specific field. A career in consulting would indeed allow them to work on multiple projects, in diverse organisations.

> *"I was into HR more than consulting in the first place. I wanted to work on the people dimension of organisations, but also to be really involved in the work. But consulting was an opportunity to do so more than anything else."[JC4]*

It is interesting to note here that there is in our sample a **clear overrepresentation of people having chosen consulting by default** – 16 consultants in our sample appear to have followed this path – as this default choice shows no initial positive definition of a professional identity and makes it easier for consultancies to seduce new recruit with the ideal of the Fast-Tracker. Consultants then try to fit in this system to confirm they made the right professional choice.

Individual strategies to handle excellence expectations

We then went on to analyse all of our interviewees' individual strategies to face the demands of system described above, starting from their recruitment. We have identified three main individual strategies: competition, compromise and rupture.

- Competition

First of all, 16 consultants initially developed what we call a competition strategy. They choose to conform themselves to what is expected from them as long as they progress rapidly. They have long term objectives and are ready to suffer if it can enable them to achieve them, quicker than others if possible. According to them, this is the price to pay if they want to achieve excellence:

> *"I have progressed very quickly. I have worked a lot, more than others and as a result I have progressed in the company. I went very far, beyond limits, I thought to myself that I preferred to give it all I had for one year than making efforts but for a few years because it doesn't make such a big difference leaving at 5 in the morning or at 11 at night, your night is ruined anyway. And I have achieved every step of the career; I have just been elected director, so just before partner. In seven years, this is shorter than the average."[SM3]*

As long as their physical investment pays back, these consultants consider the contract as satisfying and sacrifices as good investments for the future. To them, the value of their job actually lies in the fact that it requires efforts and suffering.

> *"We are condemned to suffering either because of the project or because of the lack of perspectives. In this respect, consultants are permanently unsatisfied. (…) It is not a job you do if you're looking for comfort."[SM3]*

It is interesting to notice here that although consultants are knowledge intensive workers, there is a highly physical dimension to the work they are doing. Such a commitment to the job seems to mobilise the entire body and mind and many consultants told us they were aware of the physical dimension of their professional activity but even when they tried to remain balanced, they often ignored potential signals their body might send them. For these consultants, their body and their mind become the object of this excellence quest. The closer they get to the "Fast-Tracker" ideal, the more invincible they believe they have become. Some

do not even see these signals in the first place and realise they were there once it is too late, as we will see later.

- Compromise

Second of all, six consultants have developed what can be defined as a compromise strategy. These consultants appear to be very critical and have perfectly understood what the contradictions of the system are but either have a specific field of interest and believe consulting is the best way for them to develop their expertise in that field or they want to gain experience and increase their employability on the job market. They sometimes manage to remain independent from their firm and work very closely with partners who have the same interests and want them to develop this particular expertise. When the point is to increase employability, individuals may accept to conform to expectations, but only as long as it allows them to reach their goal and does not require sacrifices they do not want to make. They are well aware of what is expected from them, either because they have experienced it or close colleagues have:

> *"What is asked of consultants is to be in the system and being in the system means meeting expectations, being ready for assignments with more and more stretch, accepting to come back late at night for a proposal even if you have 2 hours of transports afterwards to please a partner that may or may not remember it and being involved in internal processes like training, organising events, advertising the company in business schools. It is being always proactive, joyful and happy."[D1]*

They manage to find their balance thanks to this awareness and are ready to lower their expectations regarding the speed of their progression or their symbolic status in the organisation. They take pleasure in the content of what they work on rather than on achieving records, like people with a competitive approach do.

> *"Rationally, I choose some contracts that are not good for me – in terms of volume or billing – but I treat myself, it's a kind of "delicacy"! There are some strategies that consist in defining what is on the meal. A young consultant has less space to do so though."[D1]*

- Rupture

Three consultants have initially developed a rupture strategy: They understand what is expected from them but they cannot commit to the organisation as they are looking for something else than promotion. If consultants that are eager to develop expertise or gain experience, in particular, and are assigned to project they judge unsatisfactory right away, then they quickly develop such a strategy. They are not ready to make sacrifices if they are not getting any control over the expertise they are asked to develop in exchange. They find it very hard to project themselves in the company:

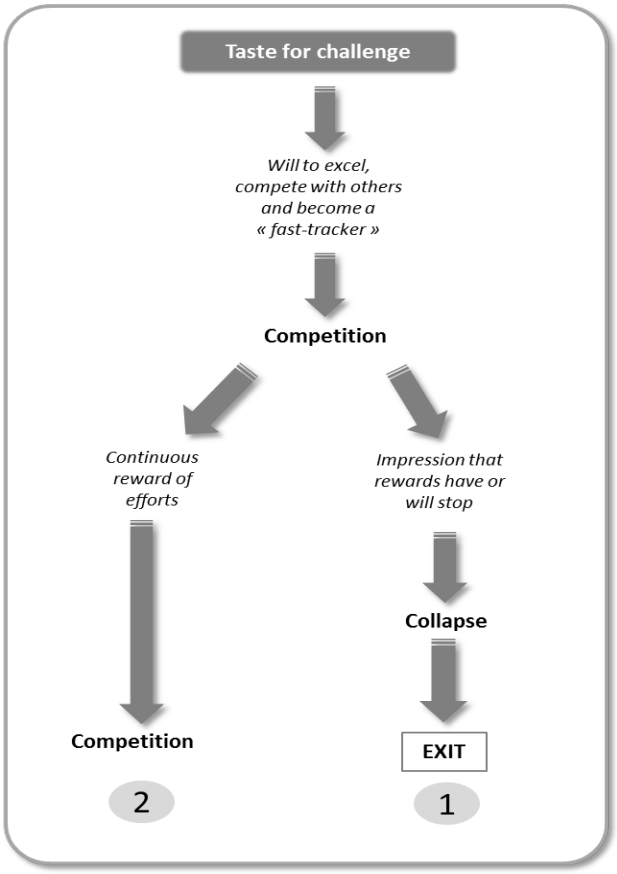
> *"I wondered if I wanted to be like partners and they were all divorced or had a drinking problem, came back to work during their holidays, on weekends, at night. There was one partner I liked because he was more human but others I didn't particularly appreciate them."[EJC1]*

These individuals are very critical towards the excellence logics. Although they sometimes find it hard to formulate alternate professional projects, the rupture strategy is in any case an exit strategy. No matter how long it may take them to actually leave their consultancy, as we will see later, they know almost immediately that their professional trajectory will shift.

The evolution of individual strategies all along consultants' careers

Through the analysis of consultants' work histories, we have noticed patterns in the way these strategies evolve all along their consulting career (in spite of changes in organisations), either because of a shift in individuals' motivations or due to the evolution of their careers. Out of the 25 people we interviewed, 19 have always worked for the same company though. These strategies should however be studied in the wider context of the consulting career rather than constrained to the frontiers of one single organisation. We have mapped the evolution of these strategies according to consultants' initial motivations. The map that follows represents all the possible paths we have observed. We will later go on to map all the possible paths consultants can follow.

First of all, individuals who are motivated by a considerable taste for challenge always develop a competition strategy. We have noticed that the three consultants who had **a taste for challenge associated with a competition strategy followed two different paths**.



As long as efforts are rewarded as expected and that progression is satisfactory, individuals have no reason to change strategy. This is the case for two of these consultants. They maintain their competition strategy as long as it remains successful. One ex-consultant, for whom the competition had become a major part of her life when she was working in consulting, even compared this feeling of success to a drug:

> *"There's a real addiction to adrenaline. When the project is interesting, you switch on the autopilot mode and you give it all! The more you want it, the more you give!"[EM3]*

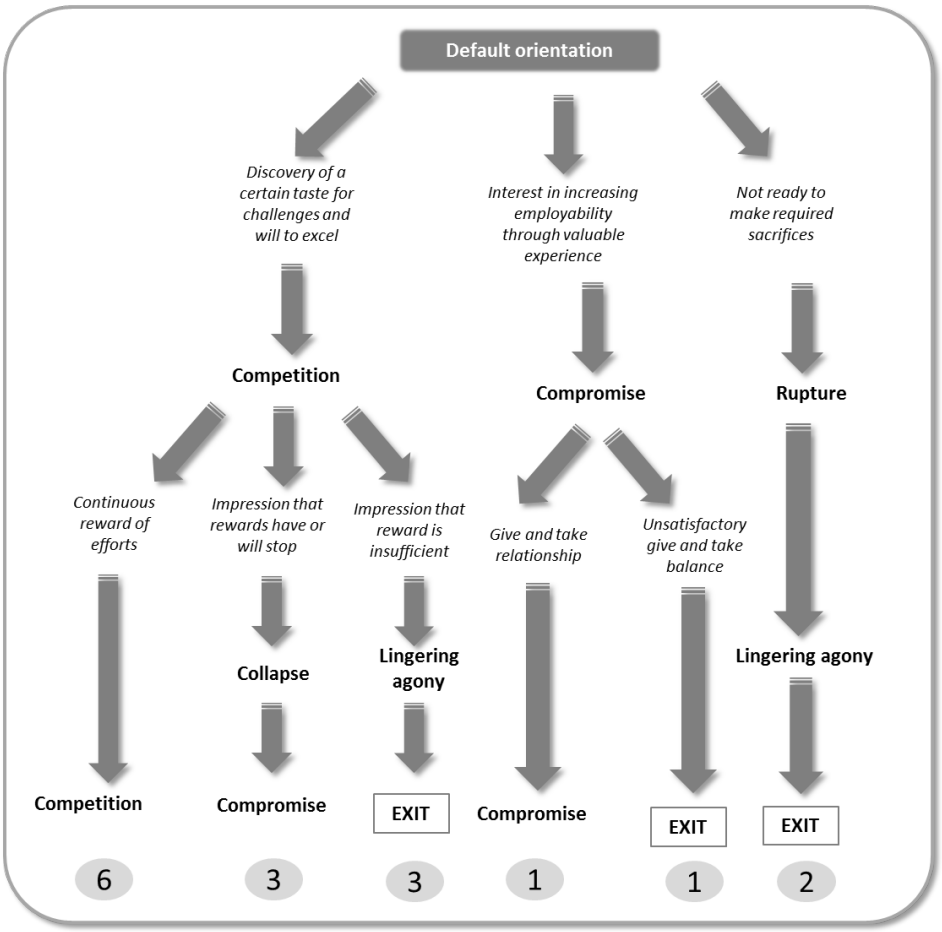
> *"Consulting means new challenges all the time! And it's positive because I'm a winner; I always want to be the best! The most awesome moments of my life have been in consulting!"[EM3]*

However, for one of these consultants, it became more and more difficult to meet expectations and although she was very committed and had made a lot of personal sacrifices to progress in the organisation, she felt like she had not been rewarded enough and suffered from a severe case of burn-out. She spent several months in the hospital, while she was pregnant, and never got to take her job back. She explains how it had become obvious to others that she was not well but that she refused to see any of the signs:

> *"Very regularly, I had like mini burnouts, like small nervous breakdowns. So I took a few days off, took some medicine and went back to work. I didn't question anything. I*

was seeing a therapist and she was telling me it was wrong. I'm responsible for what happened because I never looked for help."[EM3]

She now works for one of her former clients but is however considering getting back to consulting one day as she says she "*misses the adrenaline*" but is aware that she is not ready to do so yet. [EM3]



Secondly, when consultants have chosen their career without any strong convictions, they can follow very diverse paths. Overall, **we have identified six different paths followed by those who explained choosing consulting by default.**

When consultants are attracted to the career opportunities offered by their consultancy, have discovered a certain taste for challenge or realise they do not exclude becoming a partner one day, they develop a competition strategy. It was the case for 13 of the consultants we interviewed. As for consultants who were looking for challenge, as long as they are happy with their evaluations and the speed of their promotions, the contract is respected by both parties and consultants have no reason to question their career choice:

"It's a firm I know and where I am valued. I am not an adventurer! I am happy where I am: as long as I like what I do and I get rewarded for it, it's enough for me!"[M3]

The same way someone compared the impact of success to the effect of drugs, someone in this sample compared the first few years of her career – when promotion was regular and

raises important – to "*Disneyland*" [EM1]. However, three of them showed a sense of competition that was somewhat less intense and mainly motivated by the fact that they succeeded and could see themselves working in consulting all their lives rather than a real will to beat others.

> *"Talking about the future, I think I want to try being a consultant and having kids at the same time, even if it means organising my time differently. I'm sure it's possible. I think I could see myself do that. I really like what I work on!"[SC1]*

However, the same way this strategy led someone who wanted to be confronted to challenges to collapse, three consultants also told us here about their difficult experiences, two of which had suffered from a case of burn-out as well. Sometimes, it appears that consultants invest so much of themselves that when they don't get the expected results out of it (whether it is their actual performance or the reward they expect in exchange for their effort), the situation becomes unbearable. What makes this situation particularly risky is, as we already saw, the fact that they are absolutely unable to identify the signs that their bodies are sending them.

> *"I was sick on the train platform every morning. (…) When I was staying in hotels, I was telling the team I had work to do just so I could stay alone in my room. It should have turned my alarm bells off, everything was going wrong already." [M2]*

> *"I started to feel like something was wrong psychologically speaking, I didn't want to go back to work, and this exhaustion… I had never experienced that in my entire life. At 8pm I was completely exhausted. I couldn't go out in the evening. On New Year's eve I was so exhausted I fainted before midnight. And on the 3rd of January when I went back to work I started to feel ill and I fainted in the restaurant, they had to take me to the hospital. (…) Then started the depressive phase. I didn't want to leave my house, first because I was exhausted but also because it was too hard and I was scared I wouldn't manage to do it."[JC1]*

Work doctors confirmed the number of incidents of this type were very frequent and even had the feeling they were more frequent in auditing and consulting than elsewhere. Overall, they observed a tendency for consultants to adopt unhealthy behaviours such as inappropriate diets resulting in weight gain, a sustained lack of sleep and more importantly to refuse to take sick leaves, including maternity leaves, which attests of how far competitive consultants are willing to go. When collapse occurs, there are two possibilities: consultants either leave or get

back to work with a different approach. In this case, none of the consultants we interviewed decided to leave consulting for good. They all decided to get back to work as soon as they could. These individuals seem to persist because they feel responsible for what happened, that they failed whether because they did not delegate enough, didn't manage to talk about their problems early enough or were too committed. All of them explain how, when they were on sick leave, they were obsessed with failing. However, when they do come back, they have changed and learnt from this traumatic experience. They are much more aware of what they are giving to the organisation and what they want to get out of it. They then develop a strategy that is like the compromise strategy we have described earlier: they are aware of what competition can generate and, as much as they still want to perform and progress in the company, it no longer is their top priority and they are not willing to put their health at risk for it.

> *"I have decided not to offer my help all the time anymore, to delegate more as well. When there's something I know is going to take me four hours, I just check if there's an analyst available to help. I have a better work-life balance too. I try to avoid projects that require leaving at 5am on Monday mornings. I want to work less, it has changed my relationship to work" [M2]*

In three other cases, consultants got the impression that – at some point – reward started decreasing or that it was no longer worth the sacrifices it required. It often seems to take place after consultants become Managers, since – as one of our interviewees explained – that is where the promotion curve slows down:

> *"I've had a very quick progression until I got pregnant. Until then, I had always been above the curve. But the thing is: when you reach 75% of the objectives for managers, the curve takes a downturn. It gets slower. So I got pregnant during the project and everything was going well, I even asked for more responsibilities! Even the client was worried! But it went really well. I took my leave 1 month before the evaluation committee (...). I had real hopes for it, but when I came back I found out my promotion had been frozen."[M1]*

For these consultants, it appears to be impossible to then develop a compromise strategy as it is almost "too late" for them to do so. They have identified themselves so much to the consulting ideal that having a different kind of relationship with the organisation is intolerable. As a result, they enter a phase we have called lingering agony. Consultants then

often start developing signs that show something is wrong: sometimes they have trouble sleeping, suffer from anxiety, have eczema, are regularly sick, take days off at the last moment. They however become progressively aware of these signs, even if it can take them some time to react. Some of them even mentioned crying every morning before going to work.

> *"It took me about two years to leave. In the end I think I was close to having a burn-out. I really worked a lot. I was interested in what I was doing but I was constantly afraid I would fail, that I wouldn't manage to do it."[EM1]*

> *"Just the thought of going to work in the morning and I started crying. That was not normal! But I refused to take it into account for a long time, I thought I had to manage it. But I was crying, I was feeling some kind of oppression in my chest, I can't describe it… I had palpitations as well, and eczema on two fingers." [SC4]*

They progressively stop believing in the consulting ideal and are bound to leave the organisation. However, how quickly they will manage to do so will depend on their ability to accept to leave consulting, formulate alternate professional projects and find other job opportunities. If they find themselves lost and unable to decide what they want to do next, they might end up more and more critical towards the system and present the same characteristics as people who have developed a rupture strategy, until they finally leave the organisation.

Two consultants quickly thought it would be worth investing for a few years (whether they would actually stay only for a few years or longer), and then opted for a compromise strategy, which relies on a "give and take" relationship with the organisation. What is then going to influence their future career as consultants depends on whether this give and take relationship is judged as fair and balanced or not. As soon as it becomes perceived as unbalanced – whether because personal circumstances have changed, or because they do not get the rewards they want anymore, or also because an external job offer has been made to them – these consultants will look for other opportunities outside of the consulting world and leave the company thanks to the valuable experience they have been able to add to their CV. It happened to one of the consultants we interviewed, who saw opportunities for growth in consulting but left after a few years during the internet boom to benefit from these new opportunities. He has however, since then, decided to get back to his consulting career.

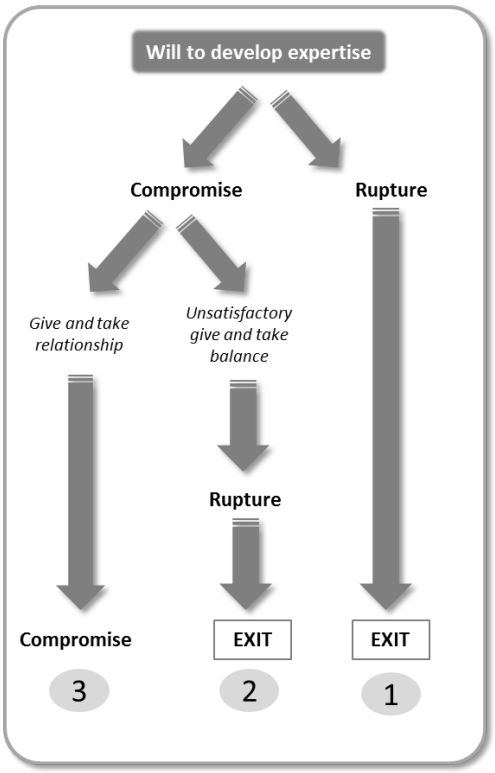
"It was incredibly rich for a junior because the growth of the firm allowed us to have a lot of responsibilities very quickly. But I left after 5 years because I had gained experience but I was still affordable for a firm. I was seduced by other opportunities."

However, if they manage to maintain a satisfactory relationship with the organisation and are happy with the projects they get to work on and the way they are considered by their managers, they can stay in the company indefinitely.

In addition, two of the consultants who joined the industry by default very quickly realised they were not interested in the perspective of becoming a partner, or even to join for a few years only, as they believed what was asked from them was excessive and they refused to commit to it. What is problematic for consultants in this situation is that, as they never committed to the consulting ideal, they never gave full satisfaction and, if defining what they want to do next takes time, they often end up with a low self-esteem and the conviction that they cannot perform in the corporate world. And unlike individuals who want to become experts, they don't have a clear view of what they are interested in and what they could become, which makes it even longer for them to leave the company and can result in lingering agony, with symptoms such as depression for example.

"Others knew I had nothing to do… I was told I could work on a project so I was regularly asking if there was any news about that. But nothing was happening. So either there really was nothing, or… I mean they knew I was bored. So I started becoming paranoid, I was thinking "they think I'm too stupid so they don't want to keep me". But at the same time, what other people were doing didn't appeal me…I never thought "I'd love to be in this guy's shoes!", I'm really not into it so it doesn't help…" [JC3]

Finally, people who are originally motivated by an interest in **developing expertise and gaining experience in a specific field can follow three different paths**.



We saw that all four consultants in this situation went on to develop a compromise strategy. Because their main focus isn't promotion but rather acquiring experience, they opt for a "give and take" relationship with the organisation, just like individuals who want to acquire valuable experience to later increase their employability. The same way, they will stay if they believe the relationship is fair and they get what they expect out of it. In these circumstances, they can spend their entire career in consulting and maintain their compromise strategy – as did three of the consultants we interviewed – but are very unlikely to become partners. They will rather become independent directors with a specific expertise. One consultant did make it to a partner role, but only by creating her own Human Resources consultancy with other colleagues. As soon as the relationship becomes unbalanced, more specifically because resourcing practices come in the way of building expertise, these consultants will be likely to consider leaving consulting, as is the consultant we met that was in this specific situation. Two other consultants happened to be, after years, in a situation where they felt the balance had become unsatisfactory. We could notice an approach close to rupture in both their discourses as they were very disappointed with the way things were working in their consulting firms. They mentioned the political dimension of their job as a factor they were not ready to accept, especially when it implied deviant behaviours towards clients. One of them had already left consulting and the other one was considering it seriously.

When, from the start, these individuals are however not given the opportunity to develop the expertise they were looking for when they were recruited - often because resources are needed elsewhere and young recruits are supposed to be flexible – then they quickly develop a rupture strategy, as we saw earlier. One consultant was in this specific situation and explained how she understood quickly it would become impossible for her to control the assignment process. She joined consulting after some operational marketing experience and wanted to acquire skills in this field. Very quickly she was asked to work on projects that were far away from marketing and refused once. After that, she was no longer given the possibility to refuse and had to work on projects she wasn't always happy with. She said she had the feeling she

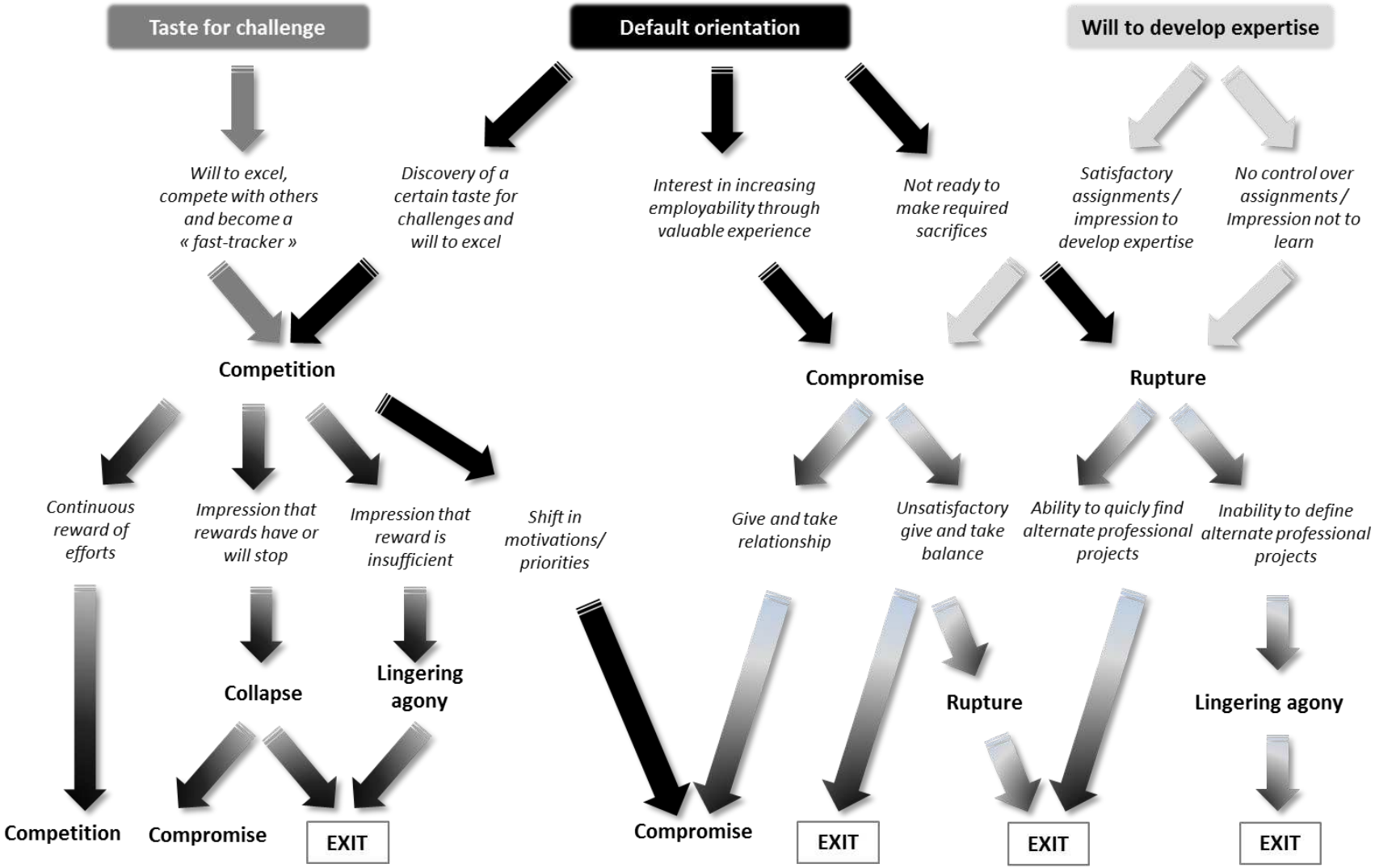
couldn't learn in such an environment. She entered a lingering agony phase as well, and became highly critical towards the excellence logics yet without being able to escape it:

> *"That's the spirit of consulting: staffing is a constraint. Even in terms of HR, it's not a priority, evolution, learning are not really considered. The priority is the turnover, the rest comes after. So either you accept it to progress within the company and hope you will be able to have more choice after a few years. For me it was out of the question."[SC2]*

She is currently planning to leave consulting and go back to operational marketing.

Combining these observations with other cases evoked by consultants, work doctors and Human Resources Directors in our interviews, we have been able to draw a map of all trajectories consultants can follow. One other configuration was described in this material: sometimes, often because of a change in personal circumstances, individuals' priorities shift. When that happens, consultants who had developed a competition strategy can then move on towards a compromise strategy. Their work is no longer the most important thing in their lives. Something similar can also be observed when consultants have seen some of their friends go through collapse or agony and understand it could happen to them if they don't change their relationship to work.

Overall, we observe a clear over-representation of individuals who follow a path associated with the competition strategy. It is the path valued by the company as it is the only one allowing consultants to be promoted quicker than colleagues – without guaranteeing it – but it is also the only path leading to collapse. Other paths only lead to lingering agony when individuals want to leave but cannot make it happen. We can also notice that only six individuals were initially motivated by the will to develop an expertise, which is relatively small in relation with the fact that consulting is a knowledge intensive industry. Also, when consultants on other paths explained what they enjoyed in their jobs, they never told us about what they had learnt nor the content of their projects – or very vaguely. Instead they rather mentioned enjoying consulting life: being given responsibilities, mobility, fast-pace environments...


Taste for challenge
Default orientation
Will to develop expertise
Will to excel, compete with others and become a « fast-tracker »
Discovery of a certain taste for challenges and will to excel
Interest in increasing employability through valuable experience
Not ready to make required sacrifices
Satisfactory assignments / impression to develop expertise
No control over assignments / Impression not to learn
Competition
Compromise
Rupture
Continuous reward of efforts
Impression that rewards have or will stop
Impression that reward is insufficient
Shift in motivations/ priorities
Give and take relationship
Unsatisfactory give and take balance
Ability to quicly find alternate professional projects
Inability to define alternate professional projects
Collapse
Lingering agony
Rupture
Lingering agony
Competition
Compromise
EXIT
Compromise
EXIT
EXIT
EXIT

Discussion, conclusion and further research

Predominance of the competitive path and tenability of the excellence logics

We believe the overrepresentation of individuals having followed a competitive paths in our sample is an interesting finding in itself. While our sampling was designed as exploratory in order to elaborate patterns of individual strategies, it may mean that it is impossible for many people in the organisation to distance themselves from the excellence logics: they are fully committed to the organisation and none of the people we interviewed who were in this situation showed any signs of cynicism. It is however possible for others to be or become more critical and consider the "up or out" system for what it can give them (whether it is experience, expertise or a relative independence) but manage to set some limits. Some of them enter consulting with distance, either because they already know consultants or because they are critical and not seduced by the consulting ideal as much as others. Others will develop it all along their careers, as they learn from colleagues' experiences or as their priorities start to change.

In terms of individual tenability, what the material we have collected – in particular with work doctors – shows is that this contradictory system, when it doesn't enable individuals to distance themselves, is potentially dangerous. As we saw earlier, work doctors observed a tendency for consultants to adopt unhealthy lifestyles. They also report that the number of burnout cases is higher than in other industries, along with accidents in the home. We were surprised by the amount of people in our sample who told us either about their burn-out experiences or the signs of possible nervous breakdowns. Individuals that are very successful within the system are precisely those that are in danger of developing health problems, which is consistent with the excellenge logics as it is described by Aubert and De Gaulejac (1991).

These results could then have a predictive – and hence preventive – dimension in career management and orientation. In this respect, we think a specific attention should be paid to individuals who demonstrate a real thirst for challenges and competition early in their career since, although they may become the highest profiles in the company, they are also at risk. The position of Manager, in particular, appears to require specific attention as, according to most evolution curves, this is where progression within the company starts to get slower and more difficult. This is when the lack of reward is often beginning to be felt, possibly resulting in agony and the future loss of talent for the organisation.

More generally speaking, our findings call for a better understanding of individuals' perceptions of performance. As we saw, it is in many cases less the lack of performance than the impression that performance is lower or reward insufficient that generates problems of health within the organisation. This phenomenon is reinforced by the fact that tension is constant and there are very little moments for introspection. As a result, our findings also call for attention to the signs of a potential collapse and agony: sickness, manifestations of unusual stress, tendency to take days off at the last minute, lost enthusiasm, etc. These signs should be paid attention to, in particular in times of evaluation, as we saw that in many cases problems had been triggered by disappointments regarding an expected promotion.

The performance of the "Up or Out" system in question

At an organizational level, we argue that the "up or out" system does not translate an active selection process. It is rather a passive decision since consultants that leave – deliberately or at a breaking point – are not necessarily underperformers, but either are consultants in compromise that no longer find their balance or competitive individuals that feel they are investing more than they receive or experience a burnout. What is interesting here is that the "up or out" system seems to play a very active role in generating these collapses and lingering agony phases, and thus in pushing performing individuals to leave. The promotion curve is such that it gets competitive individuals used to being promoted very frequently in the first years of their consulting lives. As we saw, some people compare this to drugs and say they were high on adrenaline for the first years of their careers. So when the promotion curve eventually slows down, it comes as a shock to these competitive individuals who have made a lot of sacrifices for their career and find it unexpected and unfair, resulting either in agony when they progressively understand the situation has changed, or in collapse when they realise all of a sudden that they won't be promoted.

In addition, the fact that the competitive path is highly predominant also means that expertise is not a driver of consultants' careers. Where permanent non-partner alternative roles (Malhotra, Morris, Smets, 2010) had been created – either officially in firm L where an "expert" role had been created, or in practice to retain individuals who do not necessarily want to become partners remain in an associate/director position indefinitely - we noticed that these roles were perceived negatively. Expert paths were perceived as the failing route taken by consultants who were not good enough to become partners. This description supports the

idea that the performance system of consulting firms relies on endurance more than it rewards expertise. As such, perhaps it should be described as an "Out or Up" system, in which consultants that manage to stretch and handle disappointment are promoted. This system bares a major risk: eliminating expertise, while expertise is at the very heart of Knowledge-Intensive Firms such as Professional service firms (Greenwood, Suddaby, & Megan, 2006). It is even more an issue since Professional Service Firms, consulting firms in particular, have been subject to major changes since the 1980's (Gand, 2008): not only has the demand become more and more complex and sophisticated (Powell et. al., 1999), but increasing financial pressure on their client firms has also led to an intensification of competition (Galanter & Palay, 1992; Matthews, 2006, Powell et al., 1999; Stumpf et al., 2002; Malhotra et al., 2006), resulting in professional firms'need for a wider range of expertise (Gadrey, 1994; Malhotra et al., 2006), increased specialisation (Gardner et al., 2007) and cost efficiency. With the industry facing such an acceleration of the activity, time dedicated to learning had shrunk considerably, while professional environments have always been characterised as stable and presenting long learning curves (Greenwood, Hinings, & Brown, 1990; Mintzberg, 1989). So the issue of expertise, its development and capitalization is currently crucial for the survival and adaptation of professional service firms. However, what our findings suggest is that, in spite of potential alternate roles, here is only one successful way to progress in consulting firms, which is predominantly through the ability to compose with contradictory expectations and develop commercial skills. As a consequence, we argue here that health issues and the considerable opacity of consulting firms on the topic may be the symptoms of a much deeper cognitive crisis. The possibility of really different trajectories, as in science-based environments (Debackere, Buyens, & Vandenbossche, 1997; Katz, Tushman, & Allen, 1995), remains an open issue in consulting firms in order to sustain long-term performance and legitimacy.

Limitations and implications for further research

Our research was carried out in a French environment and, although most consultancies studied were Anglo-Saxons, our results are subject to national specificities, notably as regards the particularities of the French Grande Ecole competitive system and its influence on professional projects. Our ambition here was to shed light on a grey area of research on consulting firms and this first step has to be followed by extra field works and theoretical

elaborations. First, we believe the individual strategies and career paths we have identified should be investigated further, especially in other professional service environments such as law or auditing firms. In particular, it would be interesting to investigate partners' views and strategies as we didn't have a full access to the highest spheres of the pyramid for our research.

Also, we have argued that the issues of health we have identified here should be treated as the symptom of the much deeper crisis which causes should be investigated. In the light of recent literature and our findings, this crisis is likely to be a cognitive crisis but there is a strong need for further research in order to test this hypothesis. Such research would then imply looking at the possibility of alternative positive career paths in consulting firms. As we saw, career paths are very standardized in that – although alternate non-partner roles exist – only the partnering route is truly valued in order for the "up or out" system not to lose its motivational power. As a result, there appears to be a lack of focus on expertise which leads these key individuals to become, more than others, tempted to leave. To ensure expertise is kept within the organisation and valued, defining alternative paths for these individuals would enable them to contribute to the performance of the firm in a way that would be valued internally and externally.

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Appendix A

Interview	Position	Sector	Firm	Size	Length	Motivation	Strategy	Evolution
D1	Director	Organisation	A	Major	55 mins	Expertise	Compromise	
JC1	Junior Consultant	Finance	B	Major	60 mins	Default	Competition	Collapse, Compromise
JC2	Junior Consultant	Financial communcations	C	Big	50 mins	Default	Competition	
JC3	Junior Consultant	Marketing	D	Middle sized	45 mins	Default	Rupture	Lingering agony
M1	Manager	Organisation	A	Major	70 mins	Default	Competition	Lingering agony
EM1	Ex Manager	Organisation	E	Middle sized	70 mins	Default	Competition	Lingering agony, Exit
JC4	Junior Consultant	Human Resources	F	Small	80 mins	Default	Competition	
SM1	Senior Manager	Recruitment	G	Major	70 mins	Default	Competition	Collapse, Compromise
EM2	Ex manager	Information systems	H	Middle sized	75 mins	Expertise	Compromise	Exit
P1	Partner	Human Resources	F	Small	90 mins	Expertise	Compromise	
SM2	Senior Manager	Information systems	I	Major	60 mins	Challenge	Competition	
M2	Manager	Strategy	J	Middle sized	65 mins	Default	Competition	Collapse, Compromise
EM3	Ex Manager	Training and Human Resources		Middle sized	70 mins	Challenge	Competition	Collapse, Exit
D2	Director	Strategy	J	Middle sized	75 mins	Default	Compromise	Exit, Return, Compromise
D3	Director	Financial communcations	C	Big	65 mins	Expertise	Compromise	
M3	Manager	Organisation	E	Middle sized	60 mins	Default	Competition	
SC1	Senior Consultant	Information systems	I	Big	50 mins	Default	Competition	
SC2	Senior Consultant	Information systems/ Marketing	K	Middle sized	80 mins	Expertise	Rupture	Lingering agony
M4	Manager	Finance	L	Small	80 mins	Expertise	Compromise	About to exit
SC3	Senior Consultant	Strategy	J	Middle sized	55 mins	Default	Competition	
EJC1	Ex Junior Consultant	Financial communcations	C	Big	90 mins	Default	Rupture	Lingering agony, Exit
SC4	Senior Consultant	Information systems	I	Major	95 mins	Default	Competition	Lingering agony
SC5	Senior Consultant	Information systems	I	Major	105 mins	Default	Competition	Compromise
JC5	Junior Consultant	Strategy	J	Middle sized	30 mins	Default	Competition	
SM3	Senior	Strategy	J	Middle	55 mins	Challenge	Competition	

Manager	sized