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Creating the ‘right’ impression: Towards a dramaturgy of management consultancy

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Accepted version

Abstract

The activities of management consultants are examined in terms of the dramaturgical metaphor. This is a useful framework within which to illuminate their activities since a number of service characteristics combine to create a context within which the key task of management consultants is to convince clients of their quality and value. Impression management is therefore a core feature of consultancy work. In this sense management consultants are viewed as systems of persuasion creating compelling images which persuade clients of their quality and worth. This argument is illustrated with reference to the activities of executive search consultants.

This article adopts a novel approach by examining the activities of management consultants in terms of the dramaturgical metaphor. This is a useful framework within which to illuminate their activities since a number of service characteristics combine to create a context within which the key task of management consultants is to convince clients of their quality and value. Impression management is therefore a core feature of consultancy work. In this sense management consultants are viewed as systems of persuasion creating compelling images which persuade clients of their quality and worth. This argument is illustrated with reference to the activities of executive search consultants.

In contrast to previous commentators [e.g., Holmstrom, 1985; McGivern, 1983; Mitchell, 1994] this article argues that service characteristics rather than restricting the growth of the management consultancy industry are central to gaining a better understanding of its recent expansion. It is argued that such characteristics create a context within which the consultant has to convince the client that they have something of value to offer. If service characteristics, particularly intangibility, imply that a client will have difficulty in determining the quality of a seller's service ex ante then there is scope for the consultant to construct a reality which persuades clients that they have purchased a valuable and high quality service. Therefore, the key to an understanding of consultancy work and its success is to appreciate that successful consultancy, in its methods at least, recognizes, and indeed stresses, the active management of the client-consultant relationship. If consultants are to persuade clients of their quality, and convince them of their value, they must actively manage and manipulate the interaction process in order to create favourable impressions of their service. Hence, the art of impression management [i.e., the manipulation and regulation of images relating to client perceptions of the service delivered] is at the core of consultancy work. Indeed the rationale for management consultants existing and their economic success are

dependent upon the extent to which they can make credible [i.e., project] to clients their claim to offer something special, i.e., a high-quality service which will be valued.

In pursuing this argument this article portrays the activities of management consultants in terms of the dramaturgical metaphor. It is argued that this is the most appropriate metaphor for understanding and analysing the activities of management consultants since it focuses on the core feature of consultancy work - the creation and maintenance of a compelling illusion which persuades clients of their quality and value. This metaphorical conception of consultancy work is illustrated with reference to the activities of executive search consultants (colloquially known as headhunters).

The article is structured as follows. It begins by examining the implications of four characteristics of services. The implications of these characteristics for the client-consultant relationship are then discussed. The main elements of the dramaturgical metaphor are then elaborated. In the final section the dramaturgical metaphor is applied to the activities of executive search consultants in order to illuminate how these consultants manipulate and regulate impressions of their service.

IMPLICATIONS OF SERVICE CHARACTERISTICS FOR THE CLIENT-CONSULTANT RELATIONSHIP

Management theorists have argued that services share a number of common characteristics which differentiate them from goods [see, for example, Berry, 1981; Flipo, 1988; Greenfield, 1966; Lovelock, 1981; Marshall, 1988; Oberoi and Hales, 1990; O'Farrell and Hitchens, 1990; Shostak, 1977; Walker, 1985; Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry, 1985]. Although these writers do not produce identical lists of service characteristics, and the relative importance of each feature for different types of service is a matter of controversy, a review of this literature suggests that the most commonly identified characteristics are intangibility, interaction, heterogeneity and perishability. In the discussion which follows we seek to examine their impact on the way in which management consultancy services are delivered to clients. Table 1 summarises the key implications of these service characteristics for consultants and their clients.

In the management consultancy industry intangibility is a major source of quality assurance problems [Clark, 1993; Mitchell, 1994]. This implies that services, such as management consultancy, are low in search qualities attributes which can be ascertained prior to purchase [Nelson, 1970]. Since these services do not take on a complete physical form there is little which can be directly evaluated beforehand. Hence, ascertaining the quality of a consultancy's service at the pre-purchase stage is a major problem for clients since whereas the supplier may know the level of service quality, the buyer often does not. This arises because clients are unable to observe and measure service quality at the outset and thereby distinguish between the relative quality of alternative consultancies. Since clients are able neither to sample nor test a service prior to purchase, thereby determining its appropriateness, they are asked to buy what essentially amounts to a promise - a promise of a certain level of quality [Levitt, 1981: 96]. This inability of clients to determine the characteristics of consultancies at the pre-purchase stage means that they have considerable difficulty in differentiating between high- and low-quality suppliers. In these circumstances clients will tend to view consultancies as perfectly substitutable since high- and low-quality suppliers appear identical [Akerlof, 1970].

TABLE 1
 IMPLICATIONS OF SERVICE CHARACTERISTICS FOR MANAGEMENT
 CONSULTANTS AND THEIR CLIENTS

Service characteristics	Implications for management consultants	Implications for clients
Intangibility	Nothing to show clients <i>ex ante</i> except third-party reports, or direct experience of past service	Quality difficult to determine <i>ex ante</i> and <i>ex post</i>
	Impression management important since possibility of creating a reality which persuades clients of value and quality	
Interaction	Outcome dependent upon quality of interaction with clients	Outcome dependent upon quality of interaction with consultants
	Management of interaction process offers possibility of convincing clients of value and quality	Experience of interaction informs pre- and post-purchase evaluations of quality
		Quality difficult to determine <i>ex ante</i>
Heterogeneity	Considerable discretion over delivery of the service	Quality variable
Perishability	Service destroyed during consumption. Therefore difficult to replicate; hold stocks and expand output during periods of high demand	Unable to purchase the same service at later points

Furthermore, to paraphrase Levitt [1981], intangibility implies that clients do not know what they have purchased until they receive it; it remains an unkept promise. In these circumstances, according to Alvesson [1994: 544], clients rely on images or ‘mental pictures of the phenomenon [i.e., service] concerned’. Since clients are not fully cognisant of the nature of the service they have purchased there is an opportunity for consultants to create and project a particular image of the service they are supplying by controlling and managing the way in which it is delivered (i.e., the interaction process). In other words, intangibility enables consultants to take command of the process by which images, impressions and perceptions of their value and service quality are created. Clients then use these tailored and controlled images as the basis on which to evaluate the value and quality of the service they have received. In this way consultants are able to convince clients that they are delivering a service which is both of value and high quality. The assignment process therefore allows the consultant ample opportunity to persuade clients of their high-quality based on their special expertise, talents and skills. This implies that impression management is at the core of much consultancy work’ and that consultants ‘might be seen, par excellence, as “systems of persuasion”‘ [Legge, 1994: 6].

The ability of clients to assess the quality of services purchased is made more difficult since, as Starbuck [1992: 731] notes, they

often consult experts because they believe their own knowledge to be inadequate, so they cannot judge the experts' advice or reports mainly on substance. Clients may be unable to assess experts' advice by acting on it and watching the outcomes: the clients do not know what would have happened if they had acted otherwise and it is frequently obvious that outcomes reflect uncontrollable or unpredictable influences. Clients may not understand what their expert advisers are saying. Many experts - with awareness - use jargon that obscures their meaning.

As a result of these problems Starbuck argues that clients tend to make their judgements as to the value and quality of the service on the basis of 'generic symbols of expertise'. They therefore rely on signals or symbols of a supplier's competence and quality. These include the qualifications of the experts, the quality of data and use of impressive statistical computations, credibility of the analyses, and experts' dress, confidence and general demeanour, etc. Hence, according to Starbuck, if we are to truly understand the success of management consultancies we must 'pay attention to their symbolic outputs' [p.731]; that is, how they create impressions of their quality and convince clients of their value. According to Jackall [1988: 132] management consultants are 'virtuosos in symbolic manipulation'.

The importance of impression management is further reinforced by the characteristic of interaction, which implies that management consultancy services are high in experience qualities - attributes which can only be discerned following purchase or consumption [Nelson, 1970]. Like a bottle of wine, a restaurant meal, or a book, the quality of a management consultancy service is determined during enactment/consumption. This indicates that the outcome of a consultancy service is highly dependent upon the quality of the interaction between client and consultant.

For clients this service characteristic reinforces the difficulty of identifying the quality of a management consultancy service prior to purchase. There is nothing to evaluate until the client and consultant interact to produce the service. This suggests that at the pre-purchase stage there will be a tendency for clients to emphasize the quality of interaction over other criteria. Hence, when choosing a supplier clients are more likely to stress factors such as their, or others, previous experience with a particular consultant or consultancy in preference to other factors such as fee levels, the quality of the written proposal and the size of a consultancy [Clark, 1995; Dawes et al., 1992; Mitchell, 1994]. This arises since it is the interaction between the client and consultant which creates the service. The collaboration, or interaction, between the two parties is both the central and consistent feature of a consultancy service. This implies that a client's experience of this, and the way in which it is managed by the consultant, will be an important factor in the initial selection decision and subsequent evaluation of service quality. Quality assessment is therefore based on a client's experience of using a particular consultant or consultancy (namely, their experience of the interaction process). In essence, clients make a judgement with regard to how they view their relationship with a particular supplier following a period of interaction. This evaluation then becomes a central feature of their information banks on different service suppliers.

This discussion suggests that when evaluating the quality of a service, pre- or post-purchase, clients will tend to stress the quality of their experience with a particular supplier. This is based on the nature and quality of the interaction between the two parties. This means that in order to create the impression of a high-quality service (i.e., convince clients of their value) consultants must focus their efforts on the active management of the interaction process with clients. This emphasises the importance of consultants managing the expectations and overall experience of the client in order to foster and convey the impression that they are delivering a high quality service. Alvesson [1993: 1011] argues that service organizations, such as management consultancies, are

essentially 'systems of persuasion'. At the core of their work is the creation and management of impressions, that is, convincing clients of their 'know how' and that they have something of value to offer. Indeed, he suggests that their long-term survival is dependent upon the extent to which they are able to convince clients of their value. They must therefore establish themselves as obligatory passage points in the eyes of clients (i.e., make themselves indispensable to clients). This is achieved through a process of 'translation':

By translation we understand all the negotiations, intrigues, calculations, acts of persuasion and violence, thanks to which an actor or force takes, or causes to be conferred on itself, authority to speak or act on behalf of another actor or force. 'Our interests are the same', 'do what I want', 'you cannot succeed without going through me' [Callon and Latour, 1981: 279]

Translation is achieved through 'problematization' [Callon, 1986] whereby one actor (a management consultant) 'enrols' another actor (a client) by convincing them that their interests coincide - 'I want what you want' - by redefining the 'problem' in terms of a solution owned or within the orbit of the former. Thus management consultants do not seek to project themselves simply as experts in computers, IT systems, culture change, organisations and so on, but more crucially as the owners of the particular solution which is necessary if the client is to achieve their objectives. Put another way, they convince clients of their worth by saying 'come with me because I have what you need'. In this way consultants convince clients of their indispensability.

Their ability to do this is further enhanced by the heterogeneity of services. Management consultancy suppliers are not able to deliver a standardised service. This stems largely from the central role that the client plays in the production and delivery of a consultancy service. Put simply, the interaction between clients and consultants ensures that no two assignments are the same. As a consequence each transaction between a client and consultant is unique. For consultants this leads to the possibility that each assignment represents a new start with a client. They are able to start again and use their considerable discretion to meet the particular requirements of each client and manage the interaction process so as to create further favourable evaluations of their service quality. This is possible since services are especially 'plastic' [Alchian and Woodward, 1988] That is, a service supplier has a high degree of discretion when fulfilling the terms of a contract; they are not constrained by a strait-jacket. They are free to tinker with, adjust and customise the various parts of the service they offer in order to meet the particular needs of each client and at the same time convey the 'right' impression. This leads to the possibility that a highly individual and idiosyncratic service can be delivered in order to meet, and deal with, the particular requirements of each client.

The point being developed here is that each assignment provides consultants with an opportunity to project their special and distinctive competences to clients by 'bringing home' distant events, places, people. This is achieved: (a) by rendering them mobile so that they can be brought back; (b) by keeping them stable so that they can be moved back and forth without additional distortion; and (c) making them combinable so that they can be cumulated, aggregated and manipulated [Latour, 1987: 223]. Legge [1994] writes that this is precisely what management consultants do 'when they make the experience of [distant] forms accessible and combinable through the development of [in Latour's terms] equations or packages such as McKinsey's decentralisation package, HAY-MSL's job evaluation package or even Peter's eight rules of excellence' (p.3). But she also notes that in order for these packages to achieve marketability and impact they need to be made credible to existing and potential clients. She identifies this issue as fundamental to the work of consultants. Understanding how consultants achieve impact is the focus of the next two sections.

THE DRAMATURGICAL PERSPECTIVE

How then are we to understand and analyse the key task of management consultants - the way in which they convince clients of their expertise, quality and value? We wish to engage with this question by using a metaphor which focuses on the active management of the client-consultant relationship. The main strength of the dramaturgical metaphor is that it emphasises the nature of client-consultant interaction and draws attention to the fact, and the ways in which, this is manipulated by consultants in order to convey an impression of quality and value to clients. The most useful metaphor with which to view the work of consultants is therefore one that focuses on consultants' attempts to create and manage meaning within the client-consultant relationship. It must capture how consultants seek to demonstrate their expertise, value and quality to clients when these services are characterised by high levels of intangibility, interaction, heterogeneity and perishability.

The work of management consultants can therefore usefully be understood in terms of the general rubric of theatre. Consultants seek to create and sustain a reality that persuades clients of their value in the same way that actors seek to create a 'theatrical reality'. Therefore the principles of theatre - actions, settings, scripts, etc. - undergird the way in which consultants seek to manage their relationships with clients and how we come to comprehend this.

The literary critic Kenneth Burke in his book *A Grammar of Motives* [1945] developed a methodological approach to social life which he termed 'dramatism'. He argued that social action is inherently dramatic in that human beings express themselves and relate to one another in much the same way as actors do when playing roles on a stage. For Burke drama is not a mere analogy for social action - it is at the very heart of its generation and interpretation. However, it was not until the publication of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* [1990; first published in 1959] by Erving Goffman that the dramaturgical metaphor entered into the mainstream of sociology and social psychology. In this book Goffman seeks to understand everyday social life and social intercourse in terms of the crafting of theatrical performances. His approach is openly theatrical. As he states in the Preface:

The perspective employed in this report is that of the theatrical performance; the principles derived are dramaturgical ones. I shall consider the way in which the individual ... presents himself and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kinds of things he may or may not do while sustaining his performance before them. [p.9] By pursuing the dramaturgical metaphor beyond the commonplace notion of 'putting on an act' he creates an analytical structure which emphasizes two basic notions: (a) performances must be addressed to an audience, and that the part played by the audience is critical; and (b) any performance is comprised of two regions - a 'front-stage' and a 'back-stage'.

Goffman [1990: 32] defines a performance as 'all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers'. Any performance is a 'dramatic realization' in which the performer seeks to convey a certain impression in order to evoke a certain response from the audience. In this sense a performance is a managed event in which the performer constructs his/her behaviour so as to make an impression upon other social actors (i.e., the audience). Goffman's social actor is not determined and controlled by circumstances and the situation but seeks to determine and control. As he writes:

Regardless of the particular objective which the individual has in mind and of his motive for having this objective, it will be in his interests to control the conduct of the others, especially their responsive treatment of him. This control is achieved largely by influencing the definition of the situation which the others come to formulate, and he can influence this definition by expressing himself in such a way as to give them the kind of impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with his own plan. [p.15]

Thus Goffman draws attention to the creation and management of impressions as an important element in the successful 'bringing-off' of consultancy work. However, this does not imply, as Mangham [1996: 32] argues, that 'social actors are for the most part seen as duplicitous, deceitful and fraudulent beings who hide their purposes from others as they act; beings who use props, costumes, gestures, words, settings to manage and manipulate the behaviour of others'. Schlenker and Weigold [1992] have labelled this rather instrumental view of impression management the 'restrictive position'. This contrasts with the 'expansionist position' which suggests that there is 'nothing nefarious or superficial about impression management. It involves packaging information in ways designed to lead audiences to a particular conclusion' [p.137]. However, this distinction is not as clear-cut as these authors would have us believe since whatever the intentions of the individual, whether these are perceived as positive or negative, people manage impressions in order to control the images that others have of them. In other words, each episode of interaction offers the opportunity for an individual to mould the situation to their own ends; whether these are ultimately viewed as positive or negative is an important but separate issue.

Goffman, in constructing appearances to meet the demands of each social encounter the individual is an institution managing a whole set of roles and social selves. According to Burns [1992: 107], Goffman presents the individual as 'a series of selves, one "inside" the other, after the fashion of a Chinese box, or Russian doll. There is an inner self lurking inside the self which is present, or presented, to the outside world of others.' This division of selves contains the possibility that during an encounter an individual may function as playwright, director, audience, and critic. As playwright the individual fashions a script thus determining the overall setting and script headings within which social intercourse takes place. As director they assist both in the initial construction and interpretation of the roles that the players will act as well as orchestrating the nature of their interaction (i.e., the movement of the actors on stage). As an audience an individual is aware of the performances given by others, whilst as a critic they monitor and evaluate these.

The second feature of Goffman's dramaturgical schema is the distinction between the 'front-stage' and 'back-stage' activity of every performance. According to Alvesson [1994: 558] symbolic resources are generated in the 'back-stage' of the service supplier's organisation and then 'utilized in direct, "front stage" encounters with customers'. The 'front-stage' region refers to that part of the performance which is visible to, and at which the audience is present. This is the permanent, or fixed, part of an individual's performance which defines the situation for the audience. Burns [1992:112] notes that 'some time and space [is needed] for the preparation of procedures, disguises or materials, essential to the performance, or for the concealment of aspects of the performance which might either discredit it or be somehow discordant with it'. This is the 'back-stage' region. In this region the audience is excluded enabling the performer to relax 'drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character' [Goffman, 1990: 115]. The conduct of any performance is therefore characterised by a considerable degree of risk, danger, uncertainty. Should the veil drop and the 'back-stage' be revealed to the audience, the performer is exposed with the consequence that the audience may reconceptualise the role of the performer.² Hence, all performances involve risk since a crack may appear at any moment which permits the audience a glimpse of the back-stage. To use a theatrical example, there is a constant danger that the scenery may collapse at any time to reveal the back-stage crew working the pulleys, trapdoors and other mechanisms which are used to maintain a sense of reality and the quality naturalness. This point suggests that a key aspect of successful consultancy work is the successful management of risk, promise and opportunity within a particularly highly demanding situation which carries the potential of total and public failure or acclaim.

More recently Mangham [1978, 1986, 1990, 1996; with Overington, 1983, 1987] has argued that life is not like theatre, but life is theatre. In applying the theatrical analogy to organisational life Mangham [1978: 25] argues that 'The dramaturgical model of man is based upon the idea that man improvises his performance within the often very broad limits set by the scripts his society makes available to him.' This definition emphasizes two further features of any dramaturgical model of social action - script and improvisation. Much of what passes as everyday

social intercourse, he argues, regardless of the context, is structured around the interplay between different types of scripts. He distinguishes between three types of script:

1. Situational scripts occur when the situation is clearly specified, where several actors have interlocking roles to follow, and where each of the actors shares an understanding of what is supposed to happen. Thus, actors 'assume and enact relatively clearly defined roles within the confines of the anticipated sequence of events' [Mangham, 1978: 34].
2. Personal scripts occur when a performance is constructed to achieve some personal goal. A personal script generally exists solely in the mind of its initiator. Unlike situational scripts the actors may not share an understanding of what is supposed to happen.
3. Strategic scripts arise where an actor is seeking to initiate certain behaviours from those with whom they are interacting. These are particularly manipulative in that the performer is only too well aware of what they are trying to achieve. The actor consciously attempts to influence the response of others by planning and then invoking a strategic script. Such performances differ from personal scripts in that the actor is pursuing a private agenda rather than a personal goal. Examples include a manager attempting to persuade colleagues, a therapist questioning patients, etc.
4. Mangham [1978] argues that improvisation is also critical to the achievement of any performance since a script is a 'detailed set of instructions for putting on a performance' [Cole, 1975: 6]. Whilst a script is the basis for a performance it 'has nothing more than potential: the performer's text is an abbreviated and necessarily incomplete version of a possible work of art' [Mangham, 1990: 107]. It is the performer's task to bring this text to full realisation and in so doing 'give it the finished and concrete form in which it can be felt by an audience' [Jenkins, 1970: 205]. This is achieved through a process which begins with the actor studying [i.e., 'reading'] the text. On the basis of this, and maybe also the influence of their experience, fellow actors, the director and the expectations of the audience, they arrive at an interpretation which, through a process of trial and error during rehearsal, becomes embodied in their actions on the stage.

In summary, what is meant when we say that the work of management consultants is inherently theatrical (i.e., dramatic). Whilst concurring with Goffman's definition of performance there is a need to go beyond this more explicitly. He defines performance in terms of the presence of an individual before a group of observers which has an impact on the observers. In doing so he draws attention to those techniques used by performers, as well as the features of a dramatic performance, which enable a social actor to create, transform and maintain impressions. These include the performer's appearance, general demeanour and manner in addition to their 'back-stage' preparation and 'front-stage' realisation. Mangham builds on this view of performance by suggesting that if we are to fully appreciate how performances are achieved, structured and realized then account must be taken of the types of script in use and the way in which actors improvise within a broad set of script headings (i.e., employ personal and strategic scripts within the confines of a situational script). In emphasising these two features of performance Mangham seeks to highlight the active role of the audience (the other interactants or Goffman's observers) in the creation and achievement of any social performance. For Goffman whilst the role of the audience is important it is there to be controlled and manipulated by the performer. By defining the situation a performer is able to successfully 'convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey' [Goffman, 1990:16]. Mangham argues that this is too simplistic a view of interaction. He suggests that in reality all interactants are performers seeking to bring into play personal and strategic scripts within the general framework established by a situational script. He emphasises the way in which 'meanings, identities, definitions, purposes and intentions...are modified by negotiation and through interaction' [Mangham, 1978: 27]. Thus, whilst both

parties seek to exploit and manipulate impressions, interaction, for the most part, proceeds on the basis of negotiation and compromise. It is not a one-sided process.

Earlier in the article it was noted that management consultancy services are highly intangible. Since clients are not aware of what they have purchased until they receive it there is an opportunity for consultants to create a reality which structures the way in which clients evaluate the value and quality of the service delivered. This implies that clients invariably determine the quality of management consultancy services in terms of the 'images' created by the consultant. These 'images' result from careful management of the interaction process by the consultant. In these circumstances Goffman's view of performance seems particularly relevant. Consultants seek to manipulate the consultancy script (i.e., a situational script) by bringing into play their personal and strategic scripts and so ensuring that these create a dominant and carefully structured and controlled image of the service they deliver.

THE DRAMATURGY OF EXECUTIVE RECRUITMENT CONSULTANTS

In this section we apply the dramaturgical metaphor to one type of consultancy activity - executive search - in order to illuminate how these consultants create impressions of their service by controlling and managing the interaction process. This analysis emanates from a programme of research which has sought to analyse the increasing use of external consultants by organizations of all kinds. This work originated in an examination of the development and role of executive search consultants [see Britton et al., 1992a, b; Clark, 1993, 1995]. More recently it has focused on the role of management consultants and management gurus [Clark and Salaman, 1996a,b]. The programme of research has been founded on a series of questionnaire surveys of clients and consultants [see Clark, 1995: 19] in addition to 132 semi-structured interviews with consultants and their clients. The subsequent discussion draws upon a recent study which sought to examine and illuminate the nature of the clientconsultant relationship within the executive search industry. This research was based upon detailed interviews with 15 executive search consultants and five clients.

The role of executive search consultants is to find suitable and appropriate candidates for senior level organisational roles by direct and personal contact. They do not identify candidates via recruitment advertisements. Clark and Mabey [1994] report that these consultants are primarily used to identify directors and specialist staff. In other words, executive search consultants are used to target a candidate population which is small (i.e., usually no more than 50 persons) and difficult to access either because they are unlikely to respond to an advertisement or there is need for considerable discretion. The latter may arise for a number of reasons, such as: the organization does not wish to signal its move into new markets to competitors; or there are implications for the share price; or the incumbent may be unaware that a replacement is being sought.

The results of a survey of personnel directors in The Times Top 100 Companies,³ conducted by one of the authors, suggest that when evaluating the quality of an executive recruitment consultant clients emphasize, in order of importance, the quality of the candidate appointed (93 per cent), the quality of the overall short list (85 per cent), the detail of the search (67 per cent), the quality of the candidate reports (53 per cent) and overall management of the process by the consultant (47 per cent). This suggests that in the case of the executive recruitment consultants their quality is determined primarily on the basis of the candidates introduced to the client. As one consultant stated: 'I am assessed in terms of the quality of the candidates I present to my clients. My success is achieved through the candidates ... How good they are at the interview and after that how they perform in the job reflects on me ... What my clients think of my candidates is how good I am.' Making the same point another consultant stated: 'My candidates are a living testament to the quality of my work ... Their ongoing performance in a client is critical to future relations.'

The recent growth in the use of executive search consultants is linked to their skills as impresarios to the key event - the assembling together of potential members of the cast (the candidates) and managing the meeting between the sponsors and backers (the clients) with members of the cast. These consultants are able to convince clients of their value and quality by effectively managing the 'back-stage' processes that lead up to this crucial event. Since client evaluations of quality are based, in the main, on the quality of the candidates presented, the focus of their activities is on preparing candidates so that they are able to display their mastery of the organisational role at the final interview.

In seeking to understand the activities of executive search consultants in terms of the dramaturgical metaphor we begin by borrowing an idea from Cole [1975]. We live, he claims, between two kinds of truth, neither of which is entirely satisfactory. Imaginative truth satisfies 'our longing for coherence, but is only an envisioning, cannot be there' (p.3) and present truth, that which can be there and is seeable and graspable but lacks the coherence of imaginative truth. He quotes Sartre: 'the real and the imaginary cannot coexist by their very nature ... to prefer the imaginary ... is not only an escape from the content of the real (poverty, frustrated love, failure of one's enterprise, etc.), but from the form of the real itself, its character of presence' (p.5). Despite this dilemma, Cole claims that theatre is the one place which provides an opportunity of experiencing imaginative truth as present truth. 'In theatre, imaginative events take on for a moment the presentness of physical events; in theatre, physical events take on for a moment the perfection of imaginative form' (p.5). In this sense a key skill of the executive search consultant, similar to that of an outstanding actor, is to render imaginative truth present, or, as Heidegger [1993: 184] puts it in his essay on the origins of the work of art, it is to bring forth an essence into the present so that it is unconcealed in its appearance.

For the executive search consultant the imaginative truth, or essence, brought forth is the organisational script. As one consultant stated:

Describing the organization as fully as possible is critical. We have to inform the candidates not only of the details of the role but also the nature of reporting relationships, the team, the client's strategy. We are asking them to make a major decision. Without the complete picture they cannot make the decision which is best for them.

This is necessary since for a large part of the assignment the client remains in the shadows and so is distanced from the candidates. Clients and candidates generally do not meet until the final interview, although clients will have access to detailed reports on each candidate which are written and prepared by the consultant. Candidates, and the client, are therefore heavily dependent upon the consultant's abilities to convey the nature of the opportunity and the organisation. For candidates the organization remains, until the final interview, an abstraction; something which is imagined and not fully known or comprehended. As one candidate stated: 'The identity of the organization was such a secret during our first few conversations that I knew it only as "a European-based FMCG."' However, at the final interview candidates must show they always wanted to play Hamlet, and are fully prepared to do so; but the final qualification is that they are able to play Hamlet in a scenario which is unfamiliar to them but is daily enacted, largely unknowingly, in the recruiting organisation. In these circumstances the crucial skill of the head-hunter is to manage the 'back-stage' processes that lead up to the final interview so that candidates are able to present themselves effectively in terms of the role demanded by the organisational script.

As with any performance it is a process and has a pattern, development and direction. According to Jenkins [1970: 205] this process consists of two stages. As in the theatre candidates have to work from a script. A performance therefore begins with a script which is a set of general guidelines and has nothing but potential. The first task of an executive search consultant is to become familiar with the organisation script so that it can be realised by the candidates at the final interview. Having been awarded an assignment, the consultant must first

conduct a detailed study (i.e., 'reading') of the organisation in order to determine the nature of the post being filled and its role within the organisation. The importance of this task is indicated in the following quotations:

We begin by examining all aspects of the post. This is more than just developing a detailed person specification with the client. We endeavour to meet those people who report to the post. Where possible we also talk to as many members of the board as possible. Our aim is to develop as comprehensive a picture as possible ... at the beginning of any assignment we may spend two or three days in the client organization.

Another consultant stated:

The person specification influences the rest of the assignment. It is therefore important that we get it right. Our aim is find out exactly what the client wants so that there are no misunderstandings later on. This means conducting a detailed study of the client's organization which goes beyond the normal job description. We need to find out what is expected of the person? Who do they report to and what are they like? Who reports to them and what are they like? How does it fit into the future plans of the organization? We need to get as rounded and detailed picture as we can in order to identify relevant candidates and answer any question they may have.

Drawing on a further idea developed by Cole [1975] a script can be encountered or 'made present' in two distinct ways. He does this with reference to the activities of shamans and hungans.⁴ Both make the script (i.e., imagined truth) present in different ways. It is accessed through trance by shamans and through possession by hungans. Cole suggests that any performance has both shamanistic and hunganic aspects. He writes that 'The actor-as-shaman is the audience's envoy to ... the script ... The actor-as-hungan is the script's envoy to the audience' [Cole, 1975: 14-15]. Linking this to the current discussion, the executive search consultant is the candidates' envoy to the organization script and in this respect is a performer-as-shaman. The candidates in rendering the script intelligible to the audience [interview panel] are performers-as-hungans. It is this hunganic aspect which is the second stage of the performance process identified by Jenkins. [1970]

The next stage involves preparing shortlisted candidates for the final interview so that they are able to display themselves in terms of the organisational role required by the selectors, showing mastery of themselves under trying and unfamiliar conditions, mastery of the situation and most importantly mastery of the organisation's script (a situational script in Mangham's terminology) they aspire to join. Mastery, in short, of a role whose features they must portray competently and thoroughly. In these circumstances the second key task of the head-hunter is to ensure that the candidates at the final interview with the client organisation are able to bring this text, and in particular their role within it, to full realisation. They must therefore prepare candidates in such a way that their portrayal of the role is in harmony with the audience's own conception of the same role. In other words, as one executive search consultant stated: 'We are to some extent modern-day marriage brokers. We have to ensure that the two parties "hit it off" and have a long life together.'

In this part of the performance process the focus is on the assumption of the role in accordance with the intentions and limitations of the organisation script. The consultant and candidates work together to create a compelling illusion which persuades the client of the candidates' expertise at playing the role according to the demands of the organization script. In essence, what they are seeking is to achieve is a high level of spontaneity and naturalness. As one consultant put it: 'What I want to present to the client is a candidate who 'feels right'. It's as if the post was created specifically for them; no one else could do it...We have to provide them with the candidate'. Executive search consultants manage this through a careful process of 'back-stage' coaching, preparation and stage management. They conduct mock interviews, hold intensive briefings on the client organisation, and via

detailed research into the candidate's career history determine the extent to which the client's requirements and the experience and future career aspirations of the candidate match. In short these consultants seek to develop the 'character' of the candidate in such a way that at the interview they are able to 'sustain the appearance of a coherent, enduring authoritative impersonation of the role' [Hofl, 1995: 54]. Through considerable rehearsal (i.e., via practice and repetition) the candidate is able to give a flawless performance in which slips, fluffs and gaffes are eliminated. In this way they are able to give the impression of spontaneity and naturalness. This suggests that 'spontaneity' has a double meaning [Roach, 1985]. The candidates rehearse their performances to the point where their actions appear to be spontaneous. In performance, however, the actor's (i.e., candidate's) experience is of a 'sequence of reflexive mechanisms, that is, spontaneous in the sense of mechanical automatism: reflexive without intervening thought' [Roach, 1985: 152].

However, this coaching is not simply limited to candidates' verbal and physical actions but also extends to their appearance. Several of the executive recruitment consultants interviewed mentioned that particular clients would not conceive of employing an individual who in one case wore a striped tie and in another brown suede shoes. In this way these consultants seek to achieve complementarity between appearance and actions.

Finally, in preparing candidates for the final interview a further important task for executive search consultants is to manage the inherent volatility and danger in the assignment process. Most of the danger attaches to the candidates: they are frequently of a level of seniority where their continuing public mastery of their senior roles would be seriously damaged if it were known that they had been rejected elsewhere. Poor reviews affect a performer's confidence; they also affect the confidence of others around them. Given the fragile nature of senior executive reputation, public rejection would impact on their future capacity to carry off their roles with conviction. Hence, another essential feature of the head-hunter role is that they limit this danger.

Thus, in executive search activities the consultant manages the performance process to minimise the risk to candidates not simply by coaching and preparation but also in a sense by ensuring that the entire process remains back-stage - hidden. For those who fail the process, it never occurred - character and reputation remain intact. Their confidence, and that of those around them, will not be affected. Hence, a critical feature of the consultant role is 'the creation and management of impressions' [Mangham, 1978: 28]. The executive search consultant's impression management is so total that there is no, or very little, public awareness of the event at all. The candidate's current employer, for example, is unaware of their participation in the recruitment process. Indeed, the process remains hidden from all except the active participants (i.e., candidates, consultant and client). Telephone calls and correspondence relating to the vacancy are commonly directed to the candidate's home. Meetings are often held after work or at the weekend.

In summary, when viewed in terms of the dramaturgical metaphor, executive search can usefully be seen as a 'back-stage' activity in which the interaction process with clients is managed indirectly. They seek to create impressions of their service by carefully managing the meeting between the client and candidates. The consultants themselves can be viewed as impresarios, arranging and directing a certain sort of audition performance, managing impressions, and limiting the dangers associated with 'risking character' - the candidates' and their own.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the inability of clients to determine the quality of individual suppliers means that management consultancies must convey in some way to their clients that they have something valuable to offer. Because clients do not know what they are getting until they get it, consultants are able to take control of the process by which impressions and perceptions of their service are created. By managing the creation of these

images consultants are able to persuade clients of their value and quality. Management consultancies are therefore 'systems of persuasion' par excellence and impression management is not external to the core of their work but is at its core.

The article also sought to illuminate the work of consultants, in particular the activities of executive search consultants, in terms of the dramaturgical metaphor. Executive search is seen as a 'back-stage' activity in which the interaction process with clients is managed indirectly. They seek to create impressions of their service by carefully managing the meeting between the client and candidates. This arises since clients evaluate the value of an executive search service in terms of the quality of the candidates presented to them. Executive search consultants therefore have two key tasks. The first is to 'read' the organisational script so that it can be enacted by candidates when they meet the client at the final interview. Second, they must prepare each candidate so that their 'appearance', 'manner' and performance resonates with that demanded by the organisational script. Through careful and supportive coaching, directing, rehearsal and stage management the executive search consultant prepares each candidate for the 'first night'. At the audition (i.e., the final interview) candidates are then able to convey and demonstrate mastery of the organization and the role being sought. At the same time by ensuring that the whole assignment processes remains covert they manage the risk which attaches to candidates if they should fail. For those who fail it never happened.

NOTES

1. Giacolone and Rosenfeld [1989] and Rosenfeld, Giacolone and Riordan [1995] have sought to apply the notion of impression management (i.e., the process by which individuals seek to regulate and control the image others have of them) to a wide range of organisational processes.
2. Mangham [1978] argues that the role of the consultant is precisely to help managers uncover the scripted nature of their performances and to expose mutually hidden back-stage areas.
3. This achieved a 72 per cent response rate. More than one response was possible to this question.
4. A shaman is a religious figure whose distinctive activity is going into a trance. 'Hungan' is a Haitian term for a priest of a possession cult.

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