

An Insight into Romanian Business Consulting Organizations from an Ethical Standpoint

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Abstract. *Recent decades have strongly commanded in the public conscience the importance of considering the ethical dimension in organizations. Business ethics exceeds the ordinary compliance with the law or the choice between right and wrong. There are situations when actions are clearly right or wrong and the decision about what should be done is relatively simple, but often managers have to distinguish between shades of gray and the decision is enforced by different degrees of righteousness. Moreover, when fulfilling ethical responsibilities, businesses should consider simultaneously the economic and competitiveness pressures. Starting from these premise, the present study intends to investigate the standpoints of managers in the Romanian business consulting firms about the double rationality of their endeavors: profit versus ethics. Accordingly, twenty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted to assess the ethical dilemma. As most of the answers underline, there is a myriad of ethical issues posed by the business consultancy, especially when big contracts are scarce and the competition for clients is high.*

Keywords: *ethics, business consulting organizations, management.*

Introduction

After a romantic era when moral philosophers ignored almost completely its applications and managers did not understand what their connection with ethics is or, at best, were convinced that they control the ethical life of organizations and that they do not need a special professional competence, the various ethical contents of organizations have begun to assail consciences and compel us to new theoretical refinements. Nowadays, the economic responsibility of business stands for a consistent challenge and pressure due to global competitiveness. The dynamics of the globalized and interconnected businesses and organizations is complex and high-speed, spreading into capital, trade, technology and information markets.

As a consequence, the issue of ethics expanded during the past decades, being discussed in the business ethics literature, stakeholder theory and all works of corporate social responsibility

(CSR) and sustainability, to name just the main areas that have addressed this issue (Hagenmeyer, 2007; Visser, 2011, 2012; Promislo, Giacalone & Welch, 2012; Blundel, Monaghan & Thomas, 2013; Skouloudis & Evangelinos, 2014; Kulkarni & Ramamoorthy, 2014).

As Visser (2011, 2012) pointed out, things evolved in terms of business standards from the 1970's focus on making profit and serving shareholders interests, to the early 2000's concern for quality and environmental management, health and safety, stakeholders engagement and corporate accountability, until the nowadays "age of responsibility" that increases the business ethics impact on business sustainability, responsible competitiveness and sustainable markets.

The idea of the importance of business ethics appears even in earlier works of Joseph McGuire (1963, p.144) who stated that business "must act justly, as a proper citizen should", since "the corporation has not only economic and legal obligations but also certain responsibilities to society which extend beyond these obligations" (McGuire, 1963, p.144). Along the road of refining concepts, business ethics was recognized by all authors as a pillar of development, including Milton Friedman (1962, 1970) and his famous opinion that a business should focus on profitability while complying with the rules of law and ethics: "there is one and only one social responsibility of business - to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud" (Friedman, 1970, p.6).

Although business ethics was always considered to some extent, ethical functions have been taken a significant place only in the recent years as a result of business dynamics on the one hand and the proliferation of corporate responsibility and sustainability concepts on the other hand. In this regard, an important contribution was made by Carroll (1991, 2010) and his CSR pyramid, stating that any firm "should strive to make a profit, obey the law, be ethical, and be a good corporate citizen" (Carroll, 1991, p.43).

Thus, the business dynamics increased the importance of ethics, generating a myriad of related outputs: codes of ethics, ethics committees, audit of ethics, ethical education of staff, techniques of creating an institutional culture of moral nature, the search for cornerstones of ethical decision. Ethics has progressively become more than an ordinary compliance with the law or the choice between right and wrong, since many situations cannot be absolutely defined as right or wrong: on a common basis, individuals have to deal with gray areas and the decision is forced by different degrees of righteousness (Promislo, Giacalone & Welch, 2012; Blundel, Monaghan & Thomas, 2013).

Starting from this point, the present study intends to analyze the opinions of several managers in business consulting firms, by investigating the double rationality of their endeavors: profit versus ethics. The ethical dimensions address the respectful and responsible professional attitudes towards the clients' requirements and particular needs, the acknowledgment of the firm's level of expertise and acumen, the employees' admission of their competence limits and the proper and specialized treatment of each project independent of its scale or profit return.

A simple x-ray of the extent of the consultancy industry in Romania brings to our attention that the number of business consulting firms exceeds any expectation in this respect – over 31,000 firms and over 13,000 employees work in this organizational sector. This fact places the consulting firms in the top three areas of activity, after the commerce and construction industries. Moreover, it proves that one out of twenty firms provides business consulting to other organizations (Matei, 2013).

The large number of consulting firms in Romania poses the question of their level of expertise and of their employees' technical, economic and financial skills. This issue is also mentioned by the President of AMCOR (the Romanian Management Consultancies Association)¹, who deems that the demand for consulting services is determined by a number of factors, the economic situation of the markets and the level of customer education being important elements. AMCOR has conducted a research for the period 2011-2012, involving almost 100 respondents from the management of consultancy firms in Romania. The results proved that the participants in the survey (51%) reported a level of income stagnation or reduction in turnover in 2012 compared to 2011 due to economic and political instability which resulted in lower budgets for consulting (Caian, 2012).

Starting from these premises, the main research questions are: 1. Are managers of business consulting firms ready to admit their employees' limited expertise?; 2. Do managers of business consulting firms treat each client with the same respect, independent of its profitability?; 3. Are managers of business consulting firms objective enough as to refuse a profitable contract when their employees lack the required expertise or the needed time to optimally fulfill the task?. In order to explore these issues, twenty-two managers in the Romanian business consultancy industry were interviewed.

Literature overview

Business Ethics – theoretical framework and performing perspectives

Nowadays, the economic responsibility of business stands for a consistent challenge and pressure due to global competitiveness. Still, when fulfilling their economic responsibilities, businesses should consider simultaneously ethical responsibilities. These responsibilities consist of practices, behaviors, activities, and policies that are not codified into laws, but are expected (in a positive sense) or prohibited (in a negative sense) by societal members. Also, ethical responsibilities cover a series of standards or expectations of behavior that reveal a constructive interest for what clients, employees, shareholders, the community, and other stakeholders perceive as right or fair (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Cohen, 2004; Forsberg, 2007; Epstein, 2008; Cordano, Marshall & Silverman, 2010; Jordan, Brown, Treviño & Finkelstein, 2013; Promislo, Giacalone & Welch, 2012; Blundel, Monaghan & Thomas, 2013; Skouloudis & Evangelinos, 2014; Kulkarni & Ramamoorthy, 2014).

At this level, consultant John Dalla Costa (cited in Carroll, 2000, p.36) underlined in his work *The Ethical Imperative* that ethics is becoming step by step the central business issue of our time, afflicting corporate profits and credibility, as well as personal security and the sustainability of a global economy. A business manager has responsibilities for their workers, their customers, their shareholders, their competitors, laws, society and environment. In order to perform these duties, business people must make decisions within a moral framework and consequently the core of business ethics is to establish what one ought to be doing, when one is doing business.

An interesting consideration in this respect is brought to light by Solomon (1993, p.36) who states that ethics in business practice does not necessarily come from the business schools that managers attend, but from some character traits - "virtues that are acquired through socialization, but also due to the environment and culture organization in which the individual

¹Member of the European Federation of Management Consultancies Associations, FEACO Brussels, and the International Council of Management Consulting Institutes, ICMCI.

is formed as manager". The author mocks economics school graduates that become Wall Street financial officers whose activity is defined as "making money". Once employed, young people will practice all the tricks learned in school and they will work to impress a manager, taking behavioral patterns valued in the company and then climb the ladder of the organization upon receipt of increasing salaries or bonuses. The author calls this phenomenon "abstract greed". It is centered on money, around the desire to simply get rich, not to get anything related to it or to prove that you possess expertise, but just for the sake of being rich. It is the most important good feeling, more important than personal dignity or happiness.

Starting from this point, we agree to Solomon's view - "We cannot tolerate any more the concept that companies should focus exclusively on the production of income and vulgarity and ignore traditional virtues as responsibility, community and integrity" (1993, p.17), while all researchers and most of the practitioners consider business ethics to be an important branch of the applied ethics. Furthermore, Solomon differentiates between three dimensions of business ethics: micro, macro and molar. "The micro level concerns the rules for fair exchange between two individuals, the macro level concerns the institutional or cultural rules of commerce for an entire society (the business world), the molar level concerns the basic unit of commerce today - corporation" (Solomon, 1993, p.359).

On a general view, the subjects of business ethics are principles and moral problems that arise in a business environment. As stated by Crane and Matten (2007, p.7), business ethics is the study of business situations, activities and decisions in which issues of "good" and "bad" are taken into account in relation to different situations and points of reference. The authors understand good versus bad as immoral (or incorrect) versus moral (or correct) in relation to terms of good or bad from a strategic, financial or commercial point of view. When referring to business ethics, it is not simply about companies, but about all the actors who share the goods and services - companies, universities, professional organizations or NGOs, banks and political parties.

The authors make a distinction between ethics and law, on the assumption that although both aim to distinguish between right and wrong, they are not equivalent. What is regulated by law, for example the right of way (not something moral in itself) is followed by the fact that the streets are run safely. On the other hand, to be loyal to a good friend is a moral thing, but there is no legal provision that punishes disloyalty.

Regarding business practices, when their necessity came to a consensus, they were sanctioned by law, for example, the minimum wage. At the same time, however, other activities of the company are yet undetermined, in a sort of cognitive dissonance or conflict between values, and they still lack legal regulations. For instance, the company is obliged to make profit for its shareholders while people working in the company are the ones who contribute to the profit and keeping them motivated and loyal by paying high wages can continue to ensure the market positioning (Cohen, 2004; Crane & Matten, 2007; Visser, 2011; Kulkarni & Ramamoorthy, 2014).

Still, high wages mean less profit for shareholders. The company may act in a particular community, but they pollute the environment and over time the health of the community deteriorates, however the local taxes paid in that community were used to build a cultural center (Mitra, Dhar & Agrawal, 2008; Epstein, 2008). The question is - in the first case - if the profit should return to employees as bonuses or the obligations to the shareholder must prevail, and in the second case the question is whether the company acted morally when it decided to start operating in the community - because in that area environmental regulations were less strict. Such questions do not have a simple answer, because there are no predetermined recipes, or any calculations or mathematical procedures that apply similarly all over the world. There are

only decisions and business ethics can help in making the best decision in a given set of circumstances.

At this point, Jeurissen (2005) has spoken about ethics in management aiming at improving decision processes, procedures and organizational structures, so that the activities of the organization are linked as much as possible to ethical principles. The instruments used are ethical codes, ethical audit and other “strategies leading the organization towards compliance with morality”. It is all about managers’ actions to stimulate the moulding of a moral conscience and an ethical sensitivity capable of covering all aspects of organizations. It is, in short, the promotion and maintaining of a strong ethical culture at work.

Business ethics paradoxes or the ethics dilemmas in management

Discussing the interplay between business / management and ethics, Vallini (2007) has summarized four paradoxes which characterize the management framework and the business environment nowadays. The author has pointed out that the consulting firm interests can be seen as lucrative, strategic or motivational and the only way to manage the ethical risks consists in the decisive settlement of ethical basics which should be treated with respect during the collaboration with different clients.

Although the profit-making, the strategy and the subjectivity of consultancy are daily pressures for the consultancy industry, there can be underlined several principles of action in order to maintain a proper ethical organizational conduct. First of all, a consulting firm should accept a project only when having enough information and experience to completely fulfill its promise. Also, the contents of the suggestions should not be directly conditioned by remuneration or other interests and should bring to light all the identifiable risks for the client. The consulting firm’s actions or recommendations should not undermine a third party, should not be contextualized to relative ethical coordinates, but to an overall exigency of ethical behavior. In other words, the ethical behavior of the consulting firm should not be limited to the relationship with a certain client, but, on the contrary, it should be treated in a holistic manner.

As a behavioral value, ethics in management depends on relationships with people who are different in terms of interests and goals, in terms of culture and of attitudes toward pursuing and defending their interests. The emergence of a universal ethics is almost impossible to achieve as every country, nationality or mentality has its own patterns and perspectives. At this level, business ethics is by nature relative – even laws vary across different countries and nationalities. It is quite utopian to settle definite ethical standards and to apply them unconditionally in the business processes. Ethical principles are often the driving forces for a specific organizational environment, but when the social and cultural boundaries are infringed their validity raises multiple questions. In other words, although businesses are global or globalized, business ethics depend on geographical and cultural realms and contexts of relationships (Bouckaert, 2002, 2004; Frank, 2004; Luijk, 2004).

Given the aforementioned circumstantial nature of what is ethical and what is not in a certain area or situation, standards of social responsibility such as ISO 26000 (2010) provide only guidance for organizations. As the International Organization for Standardization states, ISO 26000 is not a management system standard, but just a voluntary International Standard that provides guidance on how businesses and organizations can operate in an ethical and transparent way that contributes to the health and welfare of society. “It is not intended or appropriate for certification purposes or regulatory, or contractual use” (International Organization for Standardization, 2010, p.3). ISO 26000 does not contain requirements. It is intended to promote common understanding in the field of social responsibility, and to complement other instruments and initiatives for social responsibility, not to replace them. In

applying ISO 26000, it is advisable that an organization take into consideration societal, environmental, legal, cultural, political and organizational diversity, as well as differences in economic conditions, while being consistent with international norms of behavior (International Organization for Standardization, 2010, p.3).

In any business, the interests of the actors are interconnected and therefore a natural conflict of interests emerges when it comes to the distribution of the value created. For example, by reducing a price, the customers' needs and interests are met, but at the same time this action triggers a value reduction for the suppliers, banks, shareholders and even employees. The real challenge for a businessman appears when he has to do his best both to generate value and to fairly distribute it. The competition on the value is quite an intricate process which decides winners and losers, causing management difficulties in application of ethical standards.

One of the most important aspects in ethics is to respect other interests, but when doing business, this (these) interests are often unclear. Measuring the expectations and the objectives of the counterpart is a hard task to perform as this assessment comprises various possibilities of combination. Every firm has its own strategy and aims at strength positions liable for yielding economic value and sustainability. This strategy may influence or afflict other strategies applied by other economic actors. In this case, the relationships between a business and its counterpart is hard to be unequivocally assessed in its ethical value, in this respect prevailing the idea "first mine and then the others and only if I can".

The economic self-centered behavior is frequently a counterpart to ethics within a firm. Still, this type of behavior is the source of value and economic efficiency for the firm and for all its entities. As it was shown by Carroll and Shabana (2010), there are four types of expectations placed on the corporation by corporate stakeholders and society as a whole: economic responsibility, legal responsibility, ethical responsibility and discretionary / philanthropic responsibility. But the economic category stands at the bottom of the corporate social responsibility pyramid, since profitability represents "the foundation upon which all others rest" (Carroll, 1991, p.42).

Businesses are prone to satisfying and providing the proper response to the increasing interests of their stakeholders and the challenge of harmonizing interests can be approached only when a firm is really efficient. At this level, the value creation-distribution should be motivated and applied by considering the good of the entire social system.

Materials and methods

Participants

Twenty-two managers from Romanian business consulting firms participated in the study. The selection of managers as participants to the study was determined by two main reasons: (1) to test the hypotheses by investigating the approach of the decision-makers and (2) to conduct the interviews with the firm policy-makers who set the ethical parameters when establishing collaborations and closing deals. The participants were selected using a snowball sampling. Also, the participants were chosen taking into account their seniority within the organization. Two main criteria of selection were followed: (1) respondents should have occupied this position for at least two years and (2) their firms should have had at least ten concluded contracts. The sample comprised individuals aged between 32 and 47 (15 males and 7 females).

Procedure

In order to generate detailed and in-depth descriptions of the participants' experiences we chose to use phenomenological interviews. The interviewees' observations, perceptions and understandings were investigated by employing a semi-structured in-depth interview based on open-closed questions. This option catalyzed the opportunity to discuss some topics in a more detailed manner and the descriptions were further explored through 'probes'. We considered individual interviews more valuable in order to provide detailed information about the meaning of the situations and of the social contexts to each participant in the setting. In line with this objective, we resorted to face-to-face interviews as the best way of collecting high quality data and rendering a greater degree of flexibility.

The interviews took place at the managers' offices and were conducted during April – May 2014. Questions were asked in a relaxed informal manner so that the interview appeared more like a discussion or conversation. The managers were explained the purpose of the interview and were encouraged to co-operate. Still, they were not given too much detail that would have biased their responses. During the interview, both the interviewer and the interviewees were given the possibility to clarify questions, correct misunderstandings, offer prompts, probe responses, follow up on new ideas and on any comments meant to add something to the understanding of the setting. The objective was to uncover the widest range of meanings held by the participants in the setting. The respondents were assured of their confidentiality and anonymity in the aggregate findings.

The structure of the interview followed Seidman's (1998) three-phase qualitative interview: focused life history (the respondents' experiences were put in context, by asking them to provide as much information as possible about themselves, in relation to the topic of the study); the details of experience (concrete details of their present experience in the research topic area); reflection on the meaning (reflection on the meaning of their experience, how they make intellectual and emotional connections with the experiences that are the subject of the research topic). The answers to the interviews were categorized by carrying out a *thematic* analysis as a systematic way of identifying all the main concepts which arose in the interviews, and of developing them into common themes.

Findings

The first question of the interview regarded the description of the Romanian business consultancy market from the managers' point of view. At this point, all the interviewed managers insisted on the fact that in spite of the large number of business consulting firms, the Romanian market is still incipient as many clients are skeptical about the profitability of resorting to their services. *"The Romanian small and medium-sized companies are not accustomed to search for professional solutions provided by experts; their entrepreneurs try to find answers on they own. The argument is quite simple – why spending money on professional advice when the firm has so many other relevant expenses to take care of"* (Ciprian, 39 years old). This perspective is also shared by Elena (32 years old) who believes that *"most of the Romanian clients are not ready yet to pay for business consultancy services and the main explanation is related to the old-school managers who do not understand and acknowledge the importance of benefiting from actual expertise"*. Moreover, Octavian (41 years old) added that *"a particular case is represented by the local subsidiaries of business consulting corporations which provide services for a larger number of clients as they are credited with a higher degree of professional skills both by the Romanian and multinational companies"*.

Even from this point, several articulate opinions emerged, marking out the business ethics dilemma. Ștefan (38 years old) describes the industry as *“still a developing market, with little culture and little transparency. Little culture means that many customers and many consultants do not really know what to ask for and what to provide, respectively. Little transparency means that there are no professional circles or publications where professional experience and best practices can be shared. Best practices and benchmarks are practically non-existent. As in any developing market, highly-skilled, highly-experienced consultants co-exist with outright frauds, and it is often hard for the inexperienced customer to make the difference. However, some business consultancies have constantly helped their clients achieve significant business success, so the market cannot be discounted as a whole”*. As an ethical verdict, Maria (35 years old) posits that *“business consultancy market is full of compromises* while Adrian (40 years old) speaks about *“a mix of professionals and amateurs that make clients feel a great risk in collaborating with any consultant before having some recommendations from their close acquaintances”*.

From a bird's eye view, almost all the interviewed managers admit that business consultancy is a fast-changing market dominated by consultants that are moving from one company to another. This situation makes customers either follow their fellow consultant from one company to another, or feel insecure enough as to quit the idea of using consulting companies in favor of employing a professional for a limited period of time in their own company.

The second question of the interview addressed the types of services provided on a regular basis by the business consulting firms. As eighteen out of the twenty-two subjects posit, the most frequent demand concerns the preparation of projects in order to access European funding (with transfer to project management in the implementation phase). In Eugen's (47 years old) opinion, *“this situation has led to a major focus on this component. It is a genuine example of adaptation of supply to demand, and of surpassing of the scarce complex demands”*.

Similarly, Gina (34 years old) mentions that *“there is a common pattern among the business consulting firms to insist on the most wanted services and to treat other tasks as marginal”*. When it comes to their firms, the respondents underline that the business consulting industry is very modular and support the idea of their firm's multilevel competence. For example, Vlad (34 years old) states that *“our firm is prepared to meet multiple business challenges. As a well established consulting company, with very competent and experienced consultants, we provide a complete range of services, according to the clients' requirements. Our range of services includes accounting, financial consulting, business strategy, marketing, EU funds etc.”*

As a common characteristic, most managers mention that their firms are able to provide a wide spectrum of services starting with financial accounting and accessing European funds, project management and implementation, automations for improving process efficiency, ERP and related IT applications and continuing with brand consultancy services - audit/analysis and strategy (brand definitions, brand architecture, brand management plans) to implementation (verbal and visual identity design, promotional material design) and training.

As most of the interviewees appraise, there are many cases where clients demand various services which exceed the standard level of complexity. In most of the times when this situation occurs, as Andrei (36 years old) relieves, *“we are asked to deliver complex reports meant to determine the firm's decision to go international, to assess major projects based on an elaborate financial and economic analysis etc.”* The same approach is embraced by Vlad (34 years old) who asserts that *“most of our clients come up with complex requests and are looking for sustainable development. We always do our best to deliver complex services and reports keeping in mind the actual usefulness of the reports”*. Only two respondents pointed out that they were only asked for support in accessing European funds for small and medium-sized enterprises.

A similar approach was traced among more than half of the subjects, namely the eagerness of consultants to win contracts, letting the clients believe that the so-called professionals will make more than they actually offer. Generally speaking, the interviewed managers have distant attitudes towards similar firms, the evaluation not including their own organizations.

The fourth question was intended to investigate the managers' approaches on the expertise of the human capital. Although respondents had between seven and twenty-six employees, their attitudes were very much alike. All of them assumed that they have highly competent business consultants ready to satisfy the clients' various requirements, from accessing European funds to performing complex financial, economic and risk analysis and conducting macroeconomic and sectoral studies etc. At this level, Vlad (34 years old) confirms the general trend – *“Our employees have a rich experience in the field and are rotated among different departments in order to develop their skills and to help the clients as much as possible. Our team has supported many companies in developing their activity using EU funds, and with some of them we even completed two or three projects”*. Also, Laura's (45 years old) position is indicative of the attitudinal coordinates expressed by all the respondents, as she brings to the fore one prominent approach – *“it is unlikely for any firm to have high expertise on all the business consulting activities. This is why whenever we encounter a challenge, we try to do our best to deal with it. It is obvious that we have better skills and resources than our clients, so our solution would be more pertinent”*. In other words, Cătălin (41 years old) stresses *“we are seven people with economic studies, specialized in certain tasks, but we can replace each other when it is necessary”*.

The fifth item in the interview regarded the respondents' availability to accept several projects simultaneously when they are already overstrained. Once again, a large majority of the subjects (sixteen out of twenty-two) declared that they have enough resources to have things done in an optimal manner. According to their answers, a client is too valuable to be refused and this kind of attitude would cast a shadow of doubt on the professionalism of the firm. As Eugen mentions, *“a refused client may become a negative advertiser on the market because he may spread the idea that we are not competent enough. We prefer to take several projects simultaneously and then decide on the best approach for each. Unfortunately, we are not in the position to say no to any client – we have employees and bills to pay...”*. A similar perspective is delivered by Ciprian (39 years old) who explains: *“Our resources are allocated per project and we avoid overloading the employees only when there is no realistic chance to deal with them. Once lost, a client will never return. Because of our history, we are used to working in more projects at the same time and we have always delivered the expected results”*.

Adrian (40 years old) concludes the basic idea - *“sometimes we have too many projects, and other times few. We just work harder to compensate. This is our biggest problem. A lot of client requests come simultaneously and we need to borrow staff from partner companies at least 3-4 months / year, or to manage with extra-hours and external collaborators. Unfortunately, it is often a question of finding the solution in after-hours and in the lack of vacations”*.

In correlation with the previous question, the sixth item addressed the respondents' readiness to refuse a client when the employees of the firm lack expertise on a certain business matter. Most of the participants to the study confirmed the aforementioned attitude – things can be learned during the process of dealing with a new task. The objectives of the firm are related to obtaining profit and, implicitly, specific projects should not be rejected. As Vlad (34 years old) posits, *“in our business, we have to be competitive and ready to embrace the unknown although at first it may scare us. We are forbidden to turn our backs to a client as this would mean an imminent profit loss”*. In her turn, Gina (34 years old) expressed a similar opinion – *“Since we started this company, the team was created to cover all the main areas of consulting. When we encountered new challenges, our team has done a thorough research regarding that matter. The human resources represent the main asset of this company and we are always prepared for new*

challenges". Radu (36 years old) highlighted a common issue - *"We usually work for multiple projects simultaneously. This is an industry norm in Romania, and cases when a consultant only runs one project at a time are very rare"*.

More radical views were expressed by Eugen (39 years old) and by Maria (35 years old). *"No way! We always find a solution, respectively "No refuses. We have to manage all requests!"* As opposed to this outlook, the only ethical standpoint was brought to the fore by Ștefan (38 years old) - *"We believe it is a proper business conduct to turn down new deals when we are fully loaded with work. We have never compromised the quality of our work by overloading ourselves, and will never do it. Sometimes we are approached for projects that would be better served by a business consultant or an advertising agency. We always advise the client accordingly, whenever that is the case"*. Seven managers indicated the fact that they had to refuse clients when they lacked employees (because of the personnel mobility – resignations, dismissals etc), but they have always devised a contingency plan to avoid losing profitable human assets.

The next item tackled an issue that is often discussed from an ethical standpoint, namely the recurrence of standard solutions in order to respond promptly and satisfy the clients' demands. The answers of the interviewed managers leveraged the idea that standard solutions are a common practice whenever they met similar requirements. For example, Costi (32 years old) believes that *"there is no harm in using the same principles and acting in the same manner when dealing with similar patterns. Once a certain project category is marked out, the following projects may very well rely on the settled basis"*. A more diplomatic approach is revealed by Octavian (41 years old) – *"Every endeavour starts by offering the standard solution and the basic information to our clients so they can understand the situation better and the actual framework of their problem. If the client understands the need of going forward, we advance to the most complex analyses and have them ready within a reasonable period of time"*.

It is worth mentioning that seventeen out of the twenty-two subjects asserted that whenever it is necessary, the standard solution may be presented as the best way to act, as there is not always enough time to elaborate on the business analyses. Among the radical views in this respect, there were the opinions of Adrian (40 years old) – *"We always begin from standard solution, but we customize some parts if it is necessary"* and of Eugen (39 years old) – *"Standard solutions are verified and we think that they stand for the best option"*.

Still, only one out of the twenty-two interviewed subjects expressed an ethical approach, stressing that *"We never use ready-made solutions for our work, be it strategic, creative or training. Everything we do is custom-made. However, work procedures, principles, concepts and other professional tools are shared among projects"* (Ștefan, 38 years old).

The eighth question referred to the managers' practice and willingness to invest in their employees' education and literacy. Only three participants in the study admitted having sent their employees to international thematic trainings and workshops, underlining that they have learned that this is one of the most important and effective things they can do to stay competitive and relevant in the market. From Cătălin's (41 years old) standpoint, *"it is natural that each member benefits from opportunities of trainings, knowledge update, from the company's and colleagues' support. We sell our expertise and we must invest in ourselves"*. Also, two moderate views were traced. Maria (35 years old) argues that *"we have internal trainings and a kind of apprenticeship system: new colleagues learn from the elders"*, while Adrian (40 years old) posits that *"the best way of getting expertise is practicing. They have the chance to practice and learn from each other"*.

The other respondents adopted the opposite position. In their opinion, if the business consultants want to serve better the firm, the professional development should be their own

priority, and not the firm's concern. As Vasile (37 years old) mentions, *"the desire of being better must come from the person himself/herself, and such persons are rare, because a lot of work is needed: practice and study. People in this business don't like hard work"*.

Moreover, they are sure that they selected the fittest persons for the job and they are not forced yet to think of improving their acumen. As Ciprian (39 years old) noted, *"at the present moment, the business consulting market is populated by many wannabe advisers and we have a clear competitive advantage due to our employees' economic studies"*. The general trend is very well voiced by Elena (32 years old) who deems that *"as many blanks as we may have, we are always more prepared to find a pertinent solution than our clients. This is one of the main reasons why we are covered"*.

The last item approached the clients' complaints regarding the quality of the services or deliverables provided by the firm. None of the respondents admitted having experienced their clients' dissatisfaction related to the output of the collaboration. Still, Eugen (39 year old) mentions that *"we received complaints from potential clients in the negotiation phase. But clients are satisfied"* while Cătălin (41 years old) who is mainly interested in accessing European funds, notices *"some people are frustrated when they can't access European Funds, and consequently, they are complaining"*. Moreover, Ștefan (38 years old) added *"We have received suggestions for improvement or adjustment, and we have always discussed them thoroughly with our clients, and then implemented them as jointly agreed. We have never received complaints following this process. We also haven't received any complaints for lack of professional conduct or for any other kind of misconduct"*.

At this level, Vlad (34 years old) concludes that *"it is difficult for the clients to objectively assess our work or solutions as most of them either are middle-aged undergraduates, or lack economic studies. If they had possessed analytical skills, they would not have come to us for help. However, it is not our job to make them millionaires, our mission is to give them valuable directions and to guide them towards their targets"*. When discussing the issue, Gina (34 years old) added *"the only client dissatisfaction I have ever noticed was associated with price-negotiation-related"*.

Discussion and conclusions

The exploration of the respondents' answers marks out the fact that the Romanian consultancy industry poses various aspects to be discussed in what concerns the ethical issues. As consultancy unfolds at the interaction between the consultant and the client, two sets of ethical principles and standards meet each other. It is only a matter of ethics for the business consulting firm to decide which approach is more suitable for serving its interests - consultancy as a profit driver, as an intellectual product or as a professional service.

The forces which drive consulting as a business can be summed up as follows: profit making, strategy and subjectivity. Firstly, profit making refers to the need of turnover and to turnover continuity as a prerequisite of a consulting firm's survival. Therefore, consultancy firms function according to their financial and economic logic which triggers a certain pressure on the application of entirely ethical ways of acting. For example, the imperative of profit often relativizes the ethical threshold when a consulting firm accepts a specific job without having a clear competence in that field, when it recommends standard solutions that are not necessary at a certain point.

Secondly, a consulting firm is focused on creating and maintaining an image of a competent expert in order to preserve the client's favorableness or loyalty. Moreover, in order to achieve the desired reputation and various portfolio of clients, the organization may accept new clients

when it is fully engaged or it is not experienced enough, promising more than what it will actually be able to deliver.

Thirdly, due to the fact that consulting is a 'personal job, some ethical limits may be infringed when consultants get emotionally involved or they overestimate their capabilities and their knowledge, tending to ignore details and being ready to offer the same classic solution to different problems or within different contexts. As proven by the subjects' statements, there are many situations when the search for profit has led to products that were trying to adapt better to the evaluation criteria without taking into account the actual feasibility of projects. The immediate result consisted in low professionalism services and in the lack of expertise in certain fields of business economics.

An intriguing issue concerns the managers' attitudes towards investing in their personnel professional development and education. As the answers show, managers operate a clear transfer of responsibility from the firm to the employees themselves. Thus, the firm does not take the responsibility for initiating or enrolling in coherent training programs that would be beneficial not only for the consultant, but also for the firm itself.

Still, several limits of the study should be taken into account. On the one hand, as a signally qualitative research, the study cannot be generalized to the overall population working in the Romanian business consultancy. Although the sample is representative for this population category, the research does not benefit from statistical significance, as the quantitative survey would provide. On the other hand, although the questioned managers were open to answer to all the items, we have tried to keep the interview as short as possible as the business consulting firms passed through a overloaded period during the research, especially due to the inquiries for accessing European funds. As a consequence, we chose to focus on the nine questions which are included in the appendix.

All things considered, building "organizations of integrity in a very dynamic and competitive business arena can be regarded as a utopian way of approaching reality. Still, starting from the premise that ethics is first of all an expression of self-respect, it can be assumed as a behavioral value and landmark for the businessman acting in a social system. In order to preserve an outward ethical behavior, the inward ethical behavior has to be coherent and consistent with the objective ethical standards, settled beyond contexts and subjective factors.

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