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Consulting – a Creativity-Intensive Process? Insights from an Exploratory Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Creativity is an important predecessor of any innovation and a competitive factor in many industries. However, only little is known about the management of business processes that are coined by creativity. The theory of managing creativity-intensive processes provides an analytical perspective for the understanding and management of these processes. Consulting processes, at first sight, seem non-creative but show strong parallels to creativity-intensive processes (CIP). In this paper we confirm the validity of the theory's core concept and its properties with data from a multi-case study within the consulting industry. We contribute to the qualitative empirical validation of the TMCP and thus support the generalization of the theory. Moreover, the TMPC contains strategies that organizations can employ in order to manage CIPs. In showing that consulting processes are CIPs, these strategies can be transferred, as a practical contribution, to the management of consulting processes.

Keywords

Creativity, Business Processes Management, Consulting, Case study

INTRODUCTION

Creativity in business processes is normally associated with industries such as TV and film production, computer game development, advertising or the classical arts such as painting. However, it is a competitive factor in several other industries (Florida 2002; Paulus 2000) since it is an important predecessor for innovation. Consulting does not belong to the creative industries but there are strong parallels between a typical consulting process and a typical creativity-intensive process (CIP). For instance, most clients, who engage consulting firms, expect novel and valuable solutions for their particular problems (Hargadon and Bechky 2006). These solutions are often drawn from the combined knowledge and experiences of the consultants. This combination of existing knowledge to create something novel and purposeful is often defined as creative act.

The daily work in a consulting firm is normally executed in goal-oriented creative group processes. Individual group members bring in their creative potential to solve the problems at hand. Creative work in groups allows for mutual inspiration, enabling the group members to leave the beaten tracks and find new ways to approach a problem (Briggs et al. 2003; Finke et al. 1992).

The theory of managing creativity-intensive processes (TMCP) (Seidel 2009) addresses the area of conflict between unpredictable CIPs and Business Process Management (BPM). TMCP's underlying research question is on how creativity influences BPM. As such, the TMCP is a theory for analysis and description (Gregor 2006). It is a substantive theory (Neuman 2002), which was developed with data from the Australian VFX-production and confirmed with data from the German TV and film production industry (Becker et al. 2011). In order to broaden the scope of the theoretical concept of CIP, we transfer the approach to another, at first view, non-creative business area,

namely the consulting industry. We chose this domain since we see strong parallels between a consulting process and a CIP. Against this background we strive to answer the following research questions:

RQ 1: In how far can a consulting process be characterized as a creativity-intensive process?

RQ 2: In how far can the TMCP contribute to a better understanding of the management of consulting processes?

Our contribution is twofold: For the IS body of knowledge, we aim at the generalization of TMCP by conducting an empirical replication in another industry, distinct to the one it has been developed in (Yin 1994). Furthermore, the TMCP contains strategies that organizations can employ in order to manage CIPs. In showing that consulting processes are CIPs, these strategies can be transferred, as a practical contribution, to the management of consulting processes. The paper is structured as follows: chapter 2 gives an overview of the relevant literature and introduces core elements of the TMCP. Chapter 3 describes our multi-case study and in particular our research methodology, while chapter 4 presents the qualitative case data. In chapter 5 we discuss our findings according to the research questions and derive a model of TMCP in the consulting industry. In chapter 6 we indicate limitations of our study as well as possible future research.

RELATED WORK

Consulting is one of the major business sectors in western countries (Niehaves and Becker 2006). Companies and organizations hire consultants to find solutions to their specific problems. Consulting can be roughly divided into four areas: management consulting, strategy consulting, IT-consulting and industry specific consulting. Although a large share of the market is covered by IT-consulting, research on consulting so far mainly addresses general management, strategy or industry specific consulting (Kubr 2002). This mismatch between research and practice is also due to the general different paradigmatic views on consulting. While researchers aim at building and justifying theories and discussing their assumptions in the scientific community, consulting practitioners aim at practical efficiency, best practices and a consensus with the client (Niehaves and Becker 2006).

Concerning the consulting process, different ways of subdividing it, ranging from three to ten phases, can be found in literature. According to Kubr (2002), the consulting process consists of the following five phases: *entry*, *diagnosis*, *action planning*, *implementation* and *termination*. After a first contact with the client, a preliminary problem diagnosis takes place in the entry phase. In the second phase, the diagnosis, an in-depth purpose and problem analysis is conducted. Here, the consultant and the client cooperatively identify the sort of change required (technological, organizational, strategic etc.). In the third process phase, the action planning is done which comprises the development of solutions, the evaluation of alternatives and the proposal of those to the client. The following implementation phase includes the actual change process as well as e.g. employee trainings. In the final phase (termination) the overall process gets evaluated and plans for follow-ups are made. During the whole consulting process, the consultant relies on assistance of the client. Thus, consulting can be seen as a service process. This continuous interplay between client and organization is a first hint to a CIP and its properties.

Difficulties of managing creativity in organizations were already stated by several authors. For instance, Amabile (1996) states six basic management challenges for managing creativity in organizations and Davenport (2005) develops recommendations for managing knowledge workers. However, theories in this context so far mainly focus on parts where creative behavior or creative products occur or how creative outcome of an organization can be enhanced (Amabile 1990; Guilford 1967; Rubenson and Runco 1992; Williams and Yang 1999). Those theories see creativity as an outcome rather than a process. Accordingly, the TMCP examines creativity from a new, more holistic view since it tries to find the influencing factors of creativity on business processes and how these processes have to be managed (Seidel 2009). Different roles are identified that are involved in a CIP to achieve the common goal of the creative product fulfilling the requirements of customers.

The TMCP is analytic and descriptive in nature (Gregor 2006) and provides a theoretical lens on business processes in creative industries. It states that CIPs are carried out as interplay between artists, creative supervisors, clients and organizational resources. This categorization can be transferred to the consulting process. Typically, a consulting process starts with clients, who bring in their understanding of the requirements with regard to a particular creative product. Artists - in our case consultants - may be members of a creative group. They bring in their process expertise and skills. Creative supervisors, respectively project managers of consulting projects, manage CIPs by applying various strategies in communicating with clients and in internally managing the process. As project managers are responsible for both process and product, they consider operational as well creative process performance. The categories form a working group in that they are all involved in the core category of the theory, namely the CIP.

CIPs have creative products as an outcome and are associated with process performance and risk (creative and operational). In order to fully understand and manage the process, one has to have a good understanding of its properties that vary on a dimensional range from low to high. Table 1 gives an overview on these properties (Seidel 2009).

Different subjective opinions of stakeholders or ill-defined requirement specifications may lead to uncertainties with regard to outcome, process structure and required resources. Furthermore, CIPs comprise of well-structured (non-creative) parts and often unpredictable (creative) parts. This led to the notion of creativity-*intensive* process instead of creative process. CIPs are also characterized by creative risk as well as operational risk. Creative risk is closely connected to uncertainty with regard to outcome and different subjective perceptions of this outcome, i.e. the occurrence of unwanted consequences like dissatisfaction. Operational risk denotes the probability of the occurrence of process-related errors, i.e. the capabilities of the creative organization do not match with the requirements of the creative product.

P1	Uncertainty with regard to outcome
P2	Uncertainty with regard to process structure
P3	Uncertainty with regard to required resources
P4	Varying levels of structure
P5	Creative risk
P6	Operational risk
P7	Creative potential

Table 1. Properties of the core category creativity-intensive process

However, high levels of uncertainty are not only associated with high levels of creative and operational risk but also lead to high creative potential of a CIP. This means that ill-defined requirements are not necessarily unwanted because they allow for high degrees of freedom in the process and therefore more creative potential. The creative potential of a CIP denotes the capacity of generating products that are truly novel and original.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to address our research questions, we conducted two exploratory, in-depth case studies. The multiple-case design was chosen in order to suit the need for comparison (Yin 1994) and to allow for more profound analysis (Benbasat et al. 1987) as well as for a higher generalizability of the results (Lee and Baskerville 2003). Our goal was to collect qualitative data as a basis for confirming the TMCP and its core category in the consulting industry. Thus, we opted for two structurally different settings within this industry and selected one global player (CONSULTING) and one locally operating firm (INPRACTICE).

CONSULTING represents a total of 8 consulting firms within a group of companies (15 locations worldwide; 460 employees; turnover more than 54 Mio AUD). Over the last years, CONSULTING pushed horizontal integration to be able to provide fully integrated consulting services in the areas of civil engineering, project management, construction and infrastructure, and environmental services. INPRACTICE on the other hand is a comparatively small consulting firm (41 employees; turnover 6.5 Mio EUR) which operates from two locations in Germany and focuses on IT and management services for a variety of different industries including financial services, public sector, real estate and public utilities.

A total of 11 semi-structured expert interviews were conducted, pre-informed and structured with the help of a prior literature analysis. Our interview guideline incorporated questions on past and present operational processes as well as on planned future developments that would influence our theoretical perspective. Furthermore, the interviews included an open discussion on the topic and were as well open to other related aspects that the interviewees brought up. A detailed description of the data collection procedure is shown in Table 1. To achieve triangulation of data and insights, we conducted a minimum of four interviews in each firm, each with a participant from a different

functional department (Jick 1979; Yin 1994). In addition, we also incorporated documentary resources such as process models and descriptions, technical tool specifications, press articles and organizational charts into our research. For INPRACTICE, interviews were performed in German and later on translated into English. However, for the case of CONSULTING, interviews were conducted with international executives and thus were completely in English. In the following chapter, the seven properties of the CIP are compared against findings in the consulting industry.

	Number of Site Visits	Number of Interviews	Departments and Functions Covered by the Interviews	Interview Time (Min.)	# of Words Transcribed
ConsultingGroup	6	7	IT, Quality Management, Project Management, Finance, Civil Engineering, Human Resource Management	385 minutes	29,622 words
InPractice	1	4	Board Member, CEO, IT Consulting, Partner	245 minutes	23,735 words
Total	7	11	-	630 minutes	53,347 words

Table 2. Data Collection Fact Sheet

CASE DATA

P1. Uncertainty with regard to outcome

As mentioned before, a CIP aims at creating a product that is both novel and purposeful. In the case of consulting, the product is a service, e.g. a change within the client's organization. As in most service industries, the outcome varies based on the type of consulting project and the individual client's needs. Hence, in the entry phase of a consulting process the uncertainty with regard to outcome varies on a dimensional range from low to high.

"It is often the case that ideas are generated by a client [...] who wants to implement a product. The client has rough ideas, an approach, which is communicated together with a deadline and then we work on implementation variants." (Board Member, InPractice)

As a consequence, there is no definition of the clients' postulated outcome. Oftentimes there is only a 'rough idea' of how existing problems within the organization can be addressed during the change process. In some projects, however, rather clearly defined outcomes can be observed. Especially with regard to IT solutions, standards are commonly used for both, the general implementation process and the adaption to particular client needs. For instance, INPRACTICE generally aims for implementing standard software with pre-defined reference processes. They additionally opt for a rather unstructured adjustment of these standards to the individual situation.

"There are defined standards and explicit process models within the software and we try to implement best solutions considering the given process models [...] as a general rule the existing processes within the client's organization are the basis for the decision how to implement them within the system as best." (Partner, InPractice)

Accordingly, a consulting process contains uncertainty with regard to outcome. The dimensional range of uncertainty differs among clients due to their individual needs and requirements and the type of project wherein the consulting process is conducted. Thereby, the property P1 is confirmed.

P2. Uncertainty with regard to process structure

As with CIPs, the required process steps and number of iterations as well as the process flow within the phases of the consulting process are often not known in advance:

“Surely, there are cases where the tasks in the projects are quite fuzzy and diverse.” (IT Consultant, InPractice)

During the entry and the diagnosis phases, the interaction with the client is a central aspect. Furthermore, the client’s role in supplying input with regard to documented processes and organizational structures of the organization is an inevitable part. Thus, the process structure or the required process steps of a consulting process depend, to a great extent, on the clients’ input. This input, might be subject to several changes during the runtime of a specific consulting project.

“It’s not that you’re winging it all the way, but things happen; clients will change their mind [...]. And then you have to adjust to suit that. So there are dynamics. [...] It is not a set process.” (Project Manager, Consulting)

Based on the clients’ acceptance of the presented ideas the number of iterations and the process flow are more or less unpredictable. In some cases, the presented change within this organization is accepted after the first presentation. In most cases, however, several adaptations are needed and a lot of iterations are conducted.

“I would say they [the consulting processes] are adjusting almost on a continuous basis. The projects are dynamic in the sense that things are changing all the time, even though you have a set scope of work, client issues and as you go through the process, you’ll find that things aren’t really working out or maybe they are working out. [...] Construction and the design of construction in my opinion is a dynamic process. It generally evolves as you go along.” (Project Manager, Consulting)

Accordingly, the consulting process and its particular steps cannot be predicted in general. Oftentimes, a lot of iterations are needed and the process is defined by a circular execution of tasks. Like in a CIP, an uncertainty with regard to process structure exists. Thus, the property P2 can be confirmed.

P3. Uncertainty with regard to required resources

The required resources depend on input of the client and also on the process on how to achieve the expected outcome. If there are uncertainties with regard to outcome and process structures, then one cannot exactly state which resources are needed to get there. Adapted to consulting, the requirements are not exactly defined prior to the main implementation phase of the consulting process. The existing requirement specifications given by the client oftentimes consist of ill-defined ‘rough ideas’. In the consulting industry, these resources may refer to manpower and know-how on the one hand, or artifacts like tools or IT infrastructure on the other hand. An inaccurate forecast of resources is thus not uncommon and may lead to resource lacks. Asked for major problems within the process, one interviewee replied:

“It’ll be the lack of knowledge. You don’t know how to do the projects. [This] would be the reason to bring somebody in and sometimes a lack of resources as well.” (Group IT Manager, Consulting)

Thus, the lack of a priori knowledge about necessary resources requires consulting companies to adapt during the processes. This even includes the integration of competitive consulting firms. Depending on the type of project different resources are needed. In some cases the know-how of the consulting firm is not enough to fulfill the clients’ need. Sometimes a strategic part within the project is stipulated. In this case, INPRACTICE makes use of a partner firm that concentrates on strategic consulting.

“It is more a question of handling the topic and the question whether we are able to handle this topic in a better way or does it make more sense to cooperate with corresponding partners.” (Partner, InPractice)

It may also be the case that the client only wants to have support during a release of the implemented standard software. In this case the dimensional range of uncertainty with regard to required resources is low, based on the experience of the firm gathered at completed projects. Hence, the property P3 can be confirmed for the consulting process.

P4. Varying levels of structure

Some parts of the CIP have a pre-determined structure whereas other parts do not. On the one hand, the consulting process in general is pre-determined by the phases described above. On the other hand, there are some specific parts within these process phases that are more unstructured and depend on the individual project and the client needs. In the entry and diagnosis phase of the consulting process a periodical interaction with the client is conducted. By the use of meetings and workshops the main implementation is discussed and prepared.

“Often the traditional situation is that a meeting is called where the client and we periodically synchronize, inform him about the project status and discuss topics like interfaces with suppliers and where information are presented, which need to be shared.” (Partner, InPractice)

As an IT consulting firm concentrating on the implementation of standard software INPRACTICE acts in a pre-determined way during the implementation phase.

“[...] in all SAP-projects are technical concepts, IT concepts and operational sequence descriptions [...]. Well, in almost all projects processes are developed with the client, described with the client and partially implemented with the help of the client.” (Partner, InPractice)

Based on the clients' requirements and the given IT landscape of the organization some adaptations of the standard software implementation are needed. Hence, especially the implementation phase varies in the levels of structure depending on individualizations. In all phases of the consulting process pre-determined as well as unstructured and hard-to-predict parts can be identified. With this combination of well-structured and rather creative sections the property P4 is confirmed.

P5. Creative risk

The creative risk depicts the probability of the occurrence of an unwanted consequence based on different subjective perceptions of the client and the consultant and is closely related to the uncertainty with regard to outcome. The process implemented within the organization differs from the particular expectations of the client. Thus, the employees' acceptance of a new way of working is often affected. One interviewee stated:

“Sometimes employees tell us after implementing a new process within an organization: ‘Oh, we do not have the time for realizing that’ [...] or ‘that won’t work’. A lot of politics, a lot of intuition is needed, you have to talk a lot and try to convince at the end.” (Consultant, InPractice)

Furthermore, the requirements specified by top management and their realization within the operational day-to-day business of an organization may incorporate creative risk.

“[...] you start a new innovation or you start a process and it can backfire on you and turn out to be damp squib and you've gone down a road that you perhaps shouldn't have. So there is risk. But where ever there's high risk there's high return and there's also a low return.” (Project Manager, Consulting)

Especially the innovativeness of consulting solutions comes along with high risk. In general, new and untested ideas are more likely to fail, thereby not only impacting the particular process, but the whole customer business. On the other hand, high risk usually involves the potential for higher returns, which is why many customer firms opt for innovative solutions. With regard to this, the property P5 can be confirmed.

P6. Operational risk

Operational risk denotes the probability of the occurrence of process-related errors. Process-related errors deal with the operational consulting process, e.g. the mismatch between the requirements of the creative product and the consulting firm capabilities. As stated before, INPRACTICE sometimes uses resources of other consulting firms for different purposes. This cooperation can lead to different process-related errors as one interviewee stated:

“There exists a classical professional and monetary conflict of goals, when one works together with several partners. [...] due to a poorer quality of a partner one can end up in a risk situation, [...] which can lead to a longer project duration and therefore rising costs.” (Partner, InPractice)

Moreover, different unexpected failures may occur e.g. due to communication problems. As stated before, there are situations where the information flow between the consultant and the client is flawed. Due to the uncertainty with regard to outcome, the consulting companies under investigation experience high levels of error probability within their projects.

“I think one of the benefits that the corporation can provide to all of our clients, is that we're prepared to take some major risks and be innovative and come up with new ideas.” (Project Manager, Consulting)

Thus, the consulting industry is characterized by comparatively high risk affection. Companies oftentimes contract consultants because they are specifically looking for innovative approaches to their internal problems. This goes hand in hand with the risk of project failure. Thus, property P6 can be confirmed.

P7. Creative potential

The creative potential denotes the capacity of a process to generate products that are truly creative. In the consulting industry, the product is oftentimes the implementation of a changed or completely new process within the clients' organization. Here, every project is individual and depends on both the individual needs and the infrastructure of a client. Moreover, every process consists of both standardized and individualized steps as mentioned in the discussion of P4. For instance, INPRACTICE as an IT-consultancy primarily focuses on implementing software solutions within the clients' organization.

“When you implement software, for example SAP transactions, [...], we try to implement best practice processes together with the new software. There is an opportunity to change the processes when you implement the software and our clients expect us to do this at this point.” (Board Member, InPractice)

Therefore, even IT consulting usually implies the realization of process changes. However, the individual part of the implementation is usually smaller compared to management consulting projects. CONSULTING, for instance, does not apply any standardized solutions to the client, but offers a fully customized consulting approach:

“We haven't got standard batch production processes. Our advantage is that we can offer full support in all areas of civil engineering.” (Quality Manager, Consulting)

Hence, the creative potential of the consulting process depends on the particular type of consulting. However, the individual part of the process can always be characterized as non-standardized. It shows a strong need for alignment to the particular situation and therefore for a creative approach. As a result, the property P7 can be confirmed. In the following chapter, we will discuss our findings and relate it to the process phases of the consulting process.

DISCUSSION

The presented cases offer rich insights into the different creative aspects of consulting processes. All seven properties as developed by Seidel (2009) could be confirmed for the two cases under investigation. Furthermore, a high interdependency between the properties could be detected within the consulting sector. To answer research question 2, both the verification of the fundamental properties as well as their interdependencies will now be discussed in detail. Here, we will focus on the reference point of a specific property i.e. the point where that property is particularly visible within the consulting process. The described sub-elements of the overall process are derived from case data.

Within the investigated cases, the entry phase of the consulting process was not investigated in detail and will be left out here. Within the diagnosis phase, the primary objective of both companies was requirement identification i.e. determining the main problems within the clients' processes. Here, the property 'uncertainty with regard to outcome' could be verified. The initial requirements of the client are perceived by the internal management of the consulting firm. This perception, however, might be subject to errors. On the one hand, requirements are oftentimes not stated clearly by the clients. On the other hand, the personal interpretation by the managers might differ from what was actually described by the customer. Therefore, communication problems in the diagnosis phase are a major determinant of P1.

Within the action planning phase, the cases revealed a focus on project work. Most consulting jobs in both IT and management consulting were conducted as projects. Thus, project planning with tasks like process definitions and resource allocation were primary elements in this phase of the process. One interesting aspect mentioned by several interviewees related to problems concerning requirement refinements by the client. It was stated, that clients are likely to change their initial requirements throughout the implementation process, which leads to several uncertainties. It is usually not possible to accurately specify processes or needed resources a priori. Thus, unexpected changes in requirements can be considered the primary determinant of both uncertainty with regard to process structure (P2) and uncertainty with regard to required resources (P3).

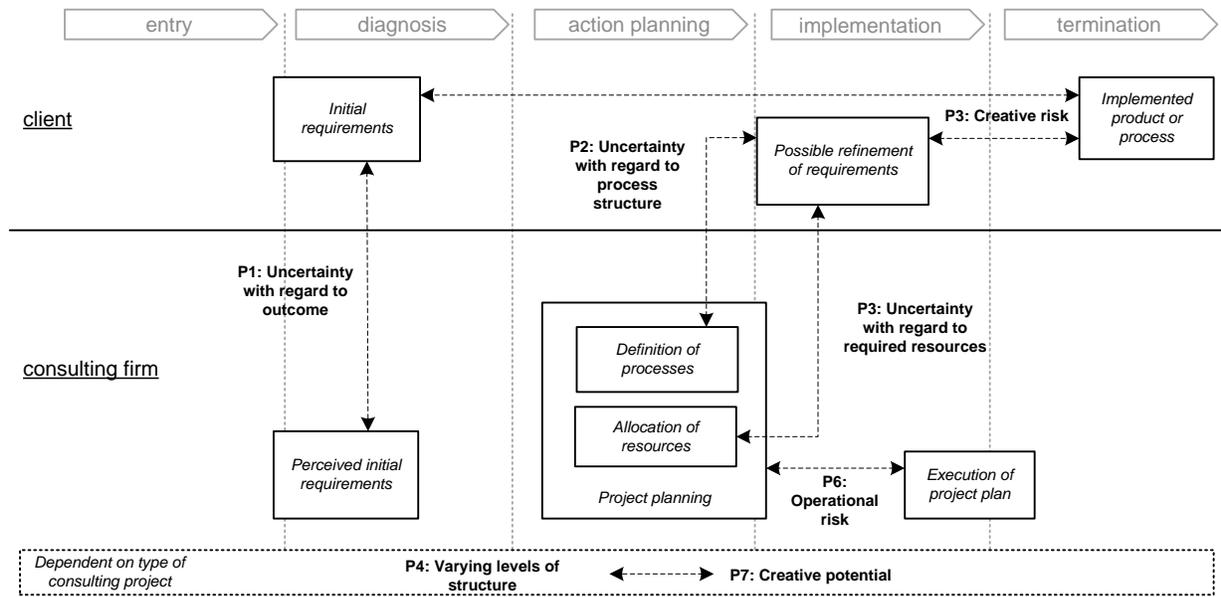


Figure 1. Reference points of creativity properties within the consulting process

These uncertainties also influence the operational risk (P6) of the overall consulting process. The project plan as developed in the action planning phase is executed within the implementation phase. However, due to the described uncertainties, the actual execution oftentimes requires a different amount of resources. This is problematic because the consulting firm is held responsible for resulting time lags or financial overhead. Thus, a mismatch between planned and realized project steps might lead to an increase in operational risk (P6).

At the end of the consulting process either a new product like e.g. a software component or a new process is implemented at the client’s site. The cases revealed that especially due to the different types of uncertainty (P1-P3) this end-product might not comply with the initial or even the refined requirements. Thus, in some cases, it may happen that the client is not satisfied with the result. In consequence, creative risk (P5) is a constituting element of the consulting process and especially visible in a possible mismatch between requirements and final implementation.

The final two properties ‘varying levels of structure’ and ‘creative potential’ could not be integrated into the general consulting process framework since they highly depend on the particular consulting type. Furthermore, they also influence each other i.e. even partly address the same concept. While management consulting usually involves a higher amount of unstructured activity due to its focus on individualization, IT consulting oftentimes utilizes standardized and thus re-usable steps within the process. Per definition, unstructured elements of a process can be seen as creative in most cases (Seidel 2009). Therefore, a higher ratio of unstructured parts within a consulting process goes hand in hand with a higher creative potential of this particular process. All discussed reference points of the different properties are depicted in Figure 1.

CONCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The data analysis of our multi-case study exposes striking congruence with the core category CIP. All seven properties of the CIP could be confirmed. From a theoretical perspective we broadened the empirical basis of TMCP and, in addition, developed a detailed relationship model of the CIP properties. Within this model it became evident, that both creative and operational risk can be traced back to the different forms of uncertainty within the process. Furthermore, we were able to show that the consulting type (IT or management consulting) has a strong impact on the ratio of unstructured parts within the consulting process and, thus, also on the creative potential. From a management perspective one can say that the awareness of the validity of these properties of CIPs for consulting processes leads to a better understanding of the processes, which in turn leads to a better understanding of the management challenges in the consulting industry. The TMCP itself contains strategies that organizations can employ in order to manage CIPs. These involve e.g. strategies in communicating with the client (Seidel 2009). In

showing that consulting processes are CIPs, these strategies can be adopted for the management of consulting processes. Furthermore, Becker et al. describe detailed avoidance and mitigation strategies for managing creative risk in business processes (Becker et al. 2008). These can also be taken into account by process managers when thinking about risk avoidance and mitigation in consulting processes.

A limitation of our contribution can be seen from a qualitative research critic's view. We have contributed to confirm and extend the theory with comprehensive data from a multi-case study. Nevertheless, as inherent to qualitative research, the interpretation of the data is subject to the researcher's individual interpretation.

Future work could include further case studies in different creative and also non-creative domains to further confirm and probably extend the TMCP. Furthermore, regarding other research areas, an interesting question in the scope of service engineering could be if the change processes of CIPs have to be creative or creativity-intensive themselves.

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