

Evaluation of Consultancy Engagements: The Swiss Questionnaire for Quality in Management Consultancy

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Developmental Background and Origins of the Swiss Questionnaire

Performance evaluation in management consultancy has always attracted much interest and continues to be the subject of strong debate. In every consultancy engagement there are situations or phases when the client wants to get a full picture of the consultants' performance by carrying out an evaluation. Usually at the end of an assignment there is a need for systematic assessment, both from the client's and the consultant's point of view. Taking the opportunity to learn and improve "best practice" is an integral part of a professional attitude in the service industry.

This article presents the ASCO questionnaire for the evaluation of quality in management consultancy. In the early nineties the Association of Management Consultants Switzerland established a task force named "Excellence in Consultancy" and appointed six experienced management consultants to the group.¹ Their task was to make recommendations and to develop tools, which would help to improve quality in management consultancy.

When the task force commenced their work "Total Quality Management", or TQM, was one of the dominant buzzwords in management (David and Strang 2006, p. 229 and Literature as Juran 1988, Akpolat 2004). Sensitivity to all aspects of quality was at a peak – for the first time in the knowledge-based service industry. In the USA – not least as a reaction to Japanese economic success – the government established the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award and many conferences in the western world addressed the subject of "Quality Management". Within FEACO, the European Federation of Management Consultancies Associations, its UK member association (MCA – Management Consultancies Association) tried to establish ISO guidelines for quality assurance in Europe. This was triggered by the idea that criteria for quality in management consultancy should be applied as standards across all of Europe. It should also be borne in mind that because of the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 many "new" countries, which were not familiar with the management consultancy profession, joined the European market. There had previously been no place for such a liberal profession in state-planned economies.

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The UK approach was no resounding success, because, amongst other reasons, these ISO guidelines were still driven too much by the perception of quality usually applied in industry. However, the fierce debate about quality contributed fundamentally to a higher awareness of the national consultancy associations of their role as developers and guarantors of standards.

During its one-year existence the ASCO task force “Excellence in Consultancy” developed various recommendations and tools for management consultants and for management consultancy firms (e. g. internal quality assurance), which were accepted and adopted by the ASCO board. The ASCO Questionnaire for Quality in Management Consultancy was developed as one of these tools and is described on the following pages.

Selected thoughts on the theoretical base of the Swiss Questionnaire

Here it will be shown what the base definition for the task force was. As is generally known there are different views on quality in the service industry. The perception of quality deriving from the traditional manufacturing sector looks for conformity between required and delivered specifications. Required specifications are seen as “objective” values and criteria. You simply have to set the standard of required specifications and to measure them. A very different approach is to see quality as a totally subjective “matter”. Only the client’s view, i. e. his evaluation based on his satisfaction, counts (Wohlgemuth 2006, p. 53 and p. 167).

Management consultancy is generally perceived as a typical professional service. The process of interaction between the client and the consultant is a core element of this service. Consultancy is a process, in the course of which the (joint) product of the consultancy service evolves. The task force based its deliberations on the following definition of Management Consultancy: “Management Consultancy is a project related process of interaction between people of a client system and a consultant system. The consultant system has to be independent and has to help in a professional way (with a holistic view of the problem) to optimise the success potential of the client system.” (Wohlgemuth 2001, p. 21 f. and p. 24; Wohlgemuth 2006, p. 30 f.)

In this definition the main goal of professional management consultancy is to help the client system to become more successful in its aims. An evaluation of the management consultancy services has to build on this.

The ASCO task force was also well aware of the different views on quality. They decided to use the following definition: “Quality in management consultancy consists of the level

of client's satisfaction (subjective element) and of the conformity between the required and delivered specifications of the professional service.”

The Swiss Questionnaire for Quality in Management Consultancy (promoted by ASCO, the Association of Management Consultants Switzerland)

The task force decided to develop a new questionnaire only after they had studied several dozen questionnaires. Questionnaires from various countries were made available to the task force, both by professional quality assurance organisations and by various consultancy firms. It was interesting to note that the key questions, that is, what the task force regarded as key questions, turned up in most of the questionnaires.

The task force also had long discussions about the psychological aspects of management consultancy and the relevance of the consultant's behaviour and social competence vis-à-vis the client. As the subjective element (the client perspective) was felt to be very important in the assessment of quality it was necessary to design the questions accordingly. Of course there are also many unexpressed client needs in subjective assessments of consultancy services. It is important to be aware of these, for example, “personal appreciation”, “understanding of the client’s situation”, “reliability” or “confirmation that the consultant has control over the task”.

The aim of the task force was to develop a general questionnaire, which would cover many management consultancy situations. The questionnaire should be “generic”, so that it would act as a tool, which could be adapted to the specific needs of the individual ASCO member. To allow for individual tailoring, the questionnaire contains more questions than are necessary in each case. The questionnaire will typically be completed by a diverse group of persons involved in the consultancy project (person hiring the consultancy firm, member of the client's project team, person(s) primarily affected by the project, project manager, partner of the consultant etc.). The timing of the use of the questionnaire is also quite flexible. In principle, the questionnaire is meant to be completed at the end of an assignment (ex post). But most of the items can also easily be assessed at any checkpoint of the assignment and, if needed, such preliminary results can be compared with a final evaluation.

The questionnaire comprises the following six sections:

- Professional Knowledge and Expertise
- Professional Conduct and Behaviour
- Project Management

- Implementation To-Date
- Economics of Consultancy
- Additional questions

The questions or items addressed under the above section headings were selected on the basis of the practical experience of the task force members (expert knowledge) with particular relevance to quality in management consultancy.

The section “Professional Knowledge and Expertise” contains not only the common questions, but also factors in the code of conduct for management consultants (ICMCI) (see ICMCI (<http://www.icmci.org>) and ASCO Certification Committee (<http://www.asco.ch>)). One item (1.5) shows whether the consultant is aware of his limitations and whether he behaves professionally in line with the code. “Professional Conduct and Behaviour”, the second section, includes many relevant “sensitive” factors in the process of interaction. Elements from the code of conduct also played a role here. The section “Project Management” mainly contains the organisational aspects of an assignment. In the section “Implementation To-Date” all important items are integrated, making it possible to see to what extent the goals agreed at the beginning were attained through consultancy. Of course a complete questionnaire also contains items concerning the “Economics of Consultancy”. As the use of technical facilities (ICT, presentation means etc.) can be a significant expense factor, an item about this is added here. The question of the appropriate task splitting between the consultant's and the client's resources is again based on the code of conduct for management consultants. The “Additional questions” are deliberately open, because they add to the structured sections of the questionnaire. These are general questions, which are especially designed to improve professional “best practice” and learning processes on the part of the consultant. It is strongly recommended that these questions be discussed verbally (exclusively or additionally).

The rating scale (“to measure the items”) has been made deliberately easy. Of course, there must be an option to state that there is no basis for evaluation of an item. Then, if an evaluation is possible, there are three categories to choose from: requires improvement, adequate/acceptable, above average. The mark in the middle means that the service quality was as expected and gives no reason for complaint. The marking possibilities on the left and on the right of this can highlight criteria, which stood out significantly – in both positive and negative terms. These are the items, which must be the subject of additional review and discussion.

Questionnaire for Quality in Management Consultancy

Project name:	Project objective:
Consultant:	

Questionnaire completed by: (name) _____	Role in the project:
Date/place: _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Person hiring the consultant <input type="checkbox"/> Member of project team <input type="checkbox"/> Person affected by the project <input type="checkbox"/> Partner of the consultant (peer review) <input type="checkbox"/> (other) _____

Criteria for quality	Please review the project from the beginning to now and evaluate the consultancy services delivered by means of the following questions (items):
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	no basis for evaluation	requires improve- ment	adequate, accep- table	above average
1. Professional Knowledge and Expertise				
1.1 Professional competence of the consultant in his or her areas of expertise	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
1.2 Industry specific competence/understanding of the specific characteristics of the company	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
1.3 "Soundness" of the professional input and the recommendations (viewed from current perspective)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
1.4 Performance as a generalist (i.e. taking a holistic view of the problem; "strategic" thinking; recognising interdependencies)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
1.5 Awareness of limitation in unfamiliar professional areas (if necessary facilitates access to other experts)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
1.6 Innovative impulses of the professional knowledge and expertise for the client	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Professional Conduct and Behaviour				
2.1 Reliability, adherence to project scope and to agreed consultancy processes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.2 Personal commitment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.3 Consultant sets high standards for him or herself	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.4 Consultant's motivation and persuasion is used to benefit the project	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.5 Psychological aspects of the project are considered	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.6 Co-operation with client's project team members	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

./ Please turn over!

Fig. 1. The Swiss Questionnaire for Quality in Management Consultancy (part 1 of 2)

	no basis for evaluation	requires improve- ment	adequate, accep- table	above average
3. Project Management				
3.1 Quality of the project planning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.2 Meeting schedules/deadlines	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.3 Project organisation (structure), in so far as this can be influenced by the consultant	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.4 Management of project team members	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.5 Clearance/co-ordination with other projects of the client, to the extent necessary	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.6 Clearance/co-ordination with other consultants working for the client, where necessary	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Implementation To-Date				
4.1 Successful implementation of improvements to date	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.2 Did the consultant do everything he or she could to assure successful implementation?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.3 Acceptance of improvements by senior management (usually top management/executive board)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.4 Acceptance of improvements by other management staff	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.5 Acceptance of improvements by non-managerial staff	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.6 Chances for the successful implementation of further changes proposed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Economics of Consultancy				
5.1 Cost-benefit ratio of the consultancy services delivered in total (client's point of view)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.2 Reasonable use of technical facilities (ICT)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.3 Appropriate division of tasks between consultant's and client's resources	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.4 The consultant pursued project objectives in an effective and efficient manner	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Additional questions	Please note the answers on a separate sheet of paper or discuss them.			
a) Moments of truth in the consultancy support (situations/elements which were crucial for the client)?				
b) Most important lessons learnt by the client from the co-operation with management consultants?				
c) Suggestions for improvements/further development of the consultancy services?				
d) From the client's point of view: would we recommend the consultant?				
e) Further remarks, suggestions?				
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Fig. 2. The Swiss Questionnaire for Quality in Management Consultancy (part 2 of 2)

The questionnaire can be processed statistically (co-operation over time, between clients etc.). In a bigger assignment with several management consultants and many assessors a dozen or more questionnaires can easily accumulate. Of course the questionnaire can be prepared in digitalised form, so that it can be completed on-line. This allows for results to become available quickly and to be followed up by further comparison and evaluation. Consultant and client specific analyses can also be made very easily. In order to visualize the results the five sections of the questionnaire can be shown graphically as five dimensions in the form of a circle. The various items within a section can also be weighted. ASCO has put such an option into practice with the tool “ROC” (Return on Consulting; see <http://www.asco.ch/download> (ROC Scorecard)). In most cases the questionnaire will be mailed after the final invoice for a project has been sent to the client. The results may be made available to all partners of the management consultancy firm.

Concluding Remarks

The original questionnaire has been made available to all members of the Swiss association. The questionnaire presented here has been improved slightly compared to the original version (The original German version is printed in Wohlgemuth 2006, p. 176 f.). ASCO has not kept track of its application. However, the task force knows that several member firms have used the original questionnaire or have used it as a basis for developing an evaluation methodology of their own. As the task force deliberately concentrated on the key questions of quality in management consultancy, the items are still up-to-date and of continuing significance today.

The basic idea of the task force was to create a practical and useful tool for a frank and fair assessment of consultancy performance. This is based on the awareness that the quality of management consultancy depends not only on the consultant, but also on the client. Therefore, this process foregrounds neither incentives nor rewards but simply aims at increasing the effectiveness of the consultant and his firm, as well as the quality of interaction with the client.

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Further Readings

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