Project Management Practices at the Front-End of Management Consulting Projects

An exploratory study of the perspectives of Swedish management consultants

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Student
Umeå School of Business
Autumn semester2011
Master thesis, one-year, 15 hp

Dedications

To my family, who are always my support and inspiration.

Jaime Adrián Millán Leyva

To my late grandmother - Selena:

Thank you for your support and understanding. Rest in peace.

Vladimir Matović

Abstract

The present investigation looks at management consulting engagements through the project management lens, and explores what practitioners do in the initial stages of their projects.

In the understanding that the front-end of the project is a very critical and important stage, this text begins by examining the literature on management consulting and on the definitional phase of projects, and demonstrates that the situations encountered in both domains are quite similar. For this reason, this study explores the project management practices that Swedish management consultants employ in the initial phases of the consulting projects. Particularly, it focuses on the practices that reconcile possible gaps in perspectives and expectations that often exist between client and consultant when this relationship is being formed.

The study had an inductive character and is cross-sectional in terms of time-horizon, focusing on the previous experiences of management consultants. In collecting the data, a survey strategy was usedwith semi-structured interviews involving nine Swedish management consultants from eight different consultancies. The process of analysis implied the use of template analysis, which provided researchers with enough flexibility to code, categorize, and interpret necessary findings.

The results show that consultants favor practices that revolve around communication and interaction with the client, including interviews, workshops, and meetings, among others. In addition, they stress the importance of the use of documentation in order to reach an agreement on what the project is about. Moreover, these practices were often clearly connected to the issues that they, as project managers, must resolve at the front-end of projects. Interestingly, the results indicate that these challenges, identified by the management consultants, mostly match the ones identified in the project management literature. There is indeed a connection between project management practices and management consulting, from which both fields can benefit.

Keywords: *project definition phase, project management, management consulting, practices, project front-end*

Acknowledgement

First and foremost, we would like to express our gratitude to our Supervisor, Professor Ralf Müller, whosehelp and guidance throughout the process of writing this thesis was indispensable and valuable.

Additionally, we would like to thank the European Commission, who made this 17-month journey possible. Also, we thank the directors and coordinators of this program, alongside professors and supporting staff of all 3 participatory institutions: Heriot-Watt University, Politecnico di Milano and Umeå University. Their work and support helped us in our professional growth. And of course, thank you to our fellow MSPME classmates, who have shared and supported this life-changing experience.

Furthermore, we would especially like to recognize the nine management consultants that took some of their valuable time to participate in this research. Their contribution was essential and is much appreciated.

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1. Introduction

For some time now, project work has enjoyed a growing trend in all kinds of industries and sectors, particularly beyond its traditional origins in the construction and engineering context. Organizations of all sorts are opting to achieve their objectives by means of projects and programsand are at the same time institutionalizing project management standards and practices.The fact is that literature inthis field of management reveals a number of characteristics such as their ability to flexibly respond and to adapt to changing environments, that make projects—in contrast to business as usual—appropriate to be vehicles to implement strategy, to develop new products, and to carry out continuous improvement and business transformation (Srivannaboon & Milosevic, 2006, pp. 493-495; Winter, Smith,et al., 2006, p. 638). They are seen as a unique instrument that delivers "higher levels of performance and productivity"(Van Der Merwe, 2002, p. 410). It is perhaps for this reason that the world is experiencing the phenomenon of the projectification of organizations as many companies had proved to be able to build competitive advantage through the use of projects or through the integration of project-like principles into their organizations (Maylor et al., 2006, pp.663-664).

However, the most common and dominant approach of project management is that of a *hard* system that is focused on a deterministic, rational, and universal model that seeks to maximize performance (i.e. the performance paradigm). A strong emphasis and interest is placed on planning and control while the emergent and *soft* aspects of project management are consistently ignored(Winter, Smith, et al., 2006, p. 645). Thiry (2002) argues that there are in fact two aspects that project management needs to be able to address: uncertainty and ambiguity. On one hand, uncertainty refers to the lack of information which is easily manageable with traditional, operational,*hard* tools. On the other hand, ambiguity is defined as a lack of understanding, subject to multiple and possibly conflicting interpretations. These *softer* issues are most likely to be related to achievement of benefits,stakeholdersmanagement, and communication, and even though these might seem somehow 'esoteric', it is recognized by organizations that they represent real problems(Thiry, 2001, p. 73; 2002, p.222).

Winter, Andersen, et al. (2006, p. 700) talk about the emergence of what they call "business projects",the kind of projects and programs that shift the focus away from a *product-centric* view (e.g. the traditional engineering view) towards a more *value-centric* view. This implies focusing on the ways value and benefits are created for stakeholders through projects, rather than concerning on tangible outputs of a project such as capital assets. The authors claim that these types of projects are much broader in purpose and scope as they are not limited to discrete product creation. More often than not, the outcomes of these projectsare an intangible which by itself makes it more difficult in meeting stakeholder expectations (Nogeste &Walker, 2005, pp. 56-58). Finally, because of the involvement of diverse partakers, discontinuities are very likely to happen when translating general requirements into project specifications (Alderman et al., 2005, p. 381).

In Whelton and Ballard's words (2002, p.3), the former are what he coined as "wicked problems". The term takes root in Simon's work (1984, cited in Whelton & Ballard, 2002) where it is described as "an ill-structured problem [or] as a problem whose structure lacks definition in some respect" (p.2). Moreover, they add that the only way

to handle these types of problems is by exploring, investigating and integrating multiple perspectives of the stakeholders involvedduring the initial stages of projects.

In general, it is acknowledged that, regardless of the industry, this initial stage is both a complex challenge and a critical determinant influencing the success of a project(Cano & Lidón, 2011, p.530; Williams & Samset, 2010, pp. 38-41).Not surprisingly, project management practitioners by far recognize that the most critical factor for project success ishaving clear goals and objectives(Fortune et. al, 2011, p. 561; White & Fortune, 2002, p. 7). Kähkönen (1999) echoes this statement by stating that "the project definition process has great potential to improve significantly the success of the whole project" (p. 625), whileWhelton et al. (2002, p.198)partially confirm this with the fact that up to 80% of the project output can be specified in this early phase.

Nevertheless, mainstream project management literature "tends to under-emphasize the front-end, definitional stages of the project, the stages that are so crucial for successful accomplishment"(Morris & Pinto, 2007, p. viii).Notably, Winter, Smith, et al.(2006)have found through a research network, that the field of project management has a "need for new thinking in the areas of project complexity, social process, [and] value creation"(p. 641). Practitioners recognize that projects are indeed subject to forces of political, social, behavioral, and even psychological nature(Englund & Graham, 1999, pp. 62-63; Winter & Szczepanek, 2009, p. 58), so that failure of projects can be attributable to the "failure to address people issues"(Thiry, 2002, p.222).

It can be argued that consultancy services are delivered in the form of projects and accordingly they are subject to similar difficulties. Consultancy is the service involving two contracting parties, the external consultant and a client organizational system, who work together to identify, analyze and recommend solutions to complex business problems(Kakabadse et al., 2006, p. 419). More specifically, management consulting is defined as an expert service provided by an independent consultancy to an organization requiring professional advice on their business problems(Appelbaum & Steed, 2005,p. 69). Two important features have to be emphasized: the independence and the temporal nature of consulting. The first refers to the detachment that the consultant has to have in order to objectively assess and recommend what the client system needs. The latter denotes the fact that clients require the consulting service for a limited period of time only(Kubr, 2002, pp. 7-9). As such, consulting engagements can be understood as projects since they effectively constitute "a temporary endeavor to create a unique […] service, or result"(PMI, 2008, p. 5). In this context, the consultant playsthe 'role' of project manager as he or she, among other things, manages and controls the assigned project(Appelbaum & Steed, 2005, p. 77; Jang & Lee, 1998, p. 68).

That been said, consultancy services are projects in which project complexity and transactional uncertainty play a critical role due to the information asymmetries present in the client-consultant transactions(Gluckler & Armbruster, 2003, p. 270). The complexity of this context is the productof several factors that are specific to the industry. To begin with, a consultancy project is agreed between two or more contracting parties that not only belong to different organizations (each one with its own agenda) but also represent separate systems whose members work under a certain understanding of common objectives, but at the same time they play specific and distinct roles that change and are continuously negotiated(Checkland, 1999, pp. 110-111; Lundberg, 1997, p. 196). It is therefore an environment where social and human relationships might have a more important role than the traditional logic used in

management, and thus, the issue must be addressed in view of managing the resulting vague, unstructured situations(Checkland, 1999, p. 13).

At the same time, the contracting parties work under the assumption that they understand the perspective and expectations of the other side. This implies a shared vision of what the outcomes of the project are expected to be, and thus expectations play a very critical role in consulting since project quality will be evaluated on the differential of these (expectations) and the perceived outcomes(McLachlin, 1999, p. 397). Understanding expectations is by no means a straightforward process(Jang & Lee, 1998, p. 69) especially due to what is called transactional uncertainty. This term refers to a type of information asymmetry that is typical to the client-consultant transactions that denotes the uncertainty resulting from issues such as concerns about the confidentiality of information, the intangibility of project outcomes, and the interdependent and interactive character of the co-production of consultants and clients (Gluckler & Armbruster, 2003, p. 275). Additionally, Chelliah (2010, p. 137)argues that managing implicit expectations, and not only the explicit ones, is a determinant for success in consulting. Implicit expectations include the so-called "psychological" contracts, which refer to the unwritten and unofficial, but yet valid contracts that "fundamentally drive expectations and govern the corresponding gaps between parties" (Martin, Jr. et al., 2001, p. 144).

Concerning these "gaps", Martin Jr. et al.(2001, pp. 143-144) argue that there are four opportunity interfaces/stages, or moments of truth, where extensive interaction takes place in consulting and where the gaps can occur: (1) entry and contracting, (2) data collection and diagnosis, (3) feedback and decision to act, and (4) implementation. In particular, it is during the first stage that the scope of the consulting service is shaped, usually under a legal contract. This stage deals with the initial definition of the management consulting project. In spite of the ambiguity and vagueness of implicit and explicit expectations, it is only through an improved definition of project outcomes that a shared vision can be clearly and effectively communicated and understood by the project team(Appelbaum & Steed, 2005; Jang & Lee, 1998; Nogeste & Walker, 2005).

In consideration ofall the above, the research objectives are stated in the following section.

1.1 Research objectives

The main objective of this research is to explore, describe and analyze the perceived nature of project management practices used by Swedish management consultants in the project definition phase,and therole that these practices have in reconciling the client-consultant ontologies.

The central objective can be thereafter split in the following sub-objectives:

1) To identify, from the available literature,project management practices used during the definition phase of projects that ensure a shared vision among project stakeholders.
2) To explore, from the perspective of management consulting practitioners, the type of project management practices used during the initial phase of consulting projects in order to bridge the client-consultant expectation gap.

3) To uncover some of the specific challenges that these practices tackle in this phase related to reconciling the client-consultant views.
4) To investigate how project definition phase and its importance is understood by management consultants.

1.2 Research questions

Bearing in mind the aforementioned research objectives, the following research questions have been defined as the central focus of this research:

> *What is the perceived nature of project management practices employed in the project definition phaseand their contribution in reconciling the client-consultant perspectives?*

Supporting questions that contribute to the understanding of the main research question are as follows:

- What is the understanding of project definitionphase in the management consulting environment?
- What are the most common project management practices used for project definition by Swedish management consultants?
- What are the specific issues and considerationsthat these practices address to bridgethe gap between client-consultant expectations?
- What significance do management consultants give to the project definition phase?

1.3 Unit of Analysis

Unit of analysis can be defined as "the level of aggregation of the data collected during the subsequent data analysis stage" (Sekaran, 2003, p.132),or else, as the "heart" of the study or a case that is being inspected for the purposes of answering the research question. It is supposed to help the researcher in clearly setting what will be inspected (inside of the boundary) and what will not (outside of the boundary; Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.25). Sekaran (2003, pp.133-134) categorizes units of analysis based on the level of inspection: *individual*, *dyads (two-person groups)*, *groups*, *divisions*, *industry* and *country*. Miles and Huberman (1994, p.26), however, state that unit of analysis can also be a *role*, *an event*, *a process* or even *a period of time.* They go on to argue that there can be more than one single case, and that multiple cases can help researchers get an even better insight.

For the present research, the units of analysis are the project management practices, understood as the events or processes occurring over a specific period—the period being the project definition phase.

1.4 Relevant definitions

The present section is concerned with certain terms and concepts that are used broadly throughout this text. It is therefore useful to define them with the objective of reaching a clear understanding of how these concepts are used in the context of this research.

Practices

Practices are defined here similar to the projects-as-practices approach, where the term *practices* is understood asthe various norms, routines, traditions, and rules guiding the behavior of the practitioner in certain situations(Blomquist et al., 2010, p. 9; Jarzabkowski, 2003, p. 24). However, this approachrequires defining other concepts like *practitioners* and *praxis* as it sees them as inseparable.

Practitioners are the people performing the actions(Blomquist et al., 2010, p.9), in this case, management consultants. These actions are not only dependent on the practitioner's*habitus*—his/her previous experience, educational background and personal situation (Bourdieu, 1984, cited in Blomquist et al., 2010, p.9)—but also on the general organization and industry practices.Praxis are those actions performed in a particular context, which are ultimately built on both practices and habitus (Blomquist et al., 2010, p.9), or as Cicmil(2006) defines it, "a form of action that is fundamentally contingent on context-dependent judgment and situational ethics" (p. 30).

With that in mind, the focus of this research is not on observing and noting situational actions taken by consultants (i.e. praxis) but on general practices employed by consultants in their day-to-day life, whether they are the product of organizational practice or of the individual's habitus. Therefore, in this dissertation the concept of *practices* functions as an umbrella term that covers tools, techniques, models, methods, methodologies, processes, or whatever practitioners do or employ to perform their work.

Project management practices

Likewise, *project management practices* encompass what practitioners do or employ while managing they projects. Here, every *practice* suggested by project management literature can be considered, not limited to those originally developed within the project management discipline (e.g. PERT), but also including those borrowed from other fields of knowledge (e.g. SWOT).

Management consulting

Literature provides a wide range of definitions of what management consulting is, and consequently it is risky to generalize about the topic. On the other hand, consulting does present common principles and methods which are so fundamental that these are used by the majority of consultants (ICMCI, 2002, p. 15; Kubr, 2002, p. xvii). With that in mind, management consulting is defined as "an independent professional advisory service assisting managers and organizations to achieve organizational purposes and objectives by solving management and business problems, identifying and seizing new opportunities, enhancing learning and implementing changes" (Kubr, 2002, p. 10).

The scope of the services that management consulting covers is on pair with the areas developed by management and business, and thus cover areas like strategic management, information technology, financial management, operations management, company transformation, among others (Kubr, 2002, pp. 39-40). On top of that, the sophistication of the industry in the last decades has caused a trend where managing consultancies are redefining their product offerings by incorporating professional services of other sorts, such as accounting or information technologies(Jang & Lee, 1998 p. 67; Kubr, 2002,p. 27).

1.5 Significance of the study

The selection of the topic and context of the present research was not only motivated by the interest of the authors, but also by the acknowledgement of some areas of opportunity in the field of project management and consulting services seen as projects. The major reasons as of why there is a need for further insight in these areas have been already implied in the previous sections.

A summary is outlined as follows:

(1) The front-end of projects is a stage that tends to be largely underestimated by mainstream project management literature and yet its criticality to project success is rarely disputed (Alderman et al., 2005; Morris & Pinto, 2007; Whelton et al., 2002; Williams & Samset, 2010);

(2) Project management's*soft* aspects need to be further researched in view of finding new ways of coping with "wicked problems" such as project complexity, value creation, outcome intangibility and social aspects(Cicmil, et al., 2006; Nogeste & Walker, 2005; Thiry, 2001, 2002; Whelton & Ballard, 2002; Winter, Andersen, et al., 2006; Winter, Smith, et al., 2006);

(3) Given that projects are having stronger associations to other areas of management (e.g. strategic management, operations management, change management), project management mainstream literature has to be complemented by other disciplines(Winter, Andersen, et al., 2006);

(4) Research in project management has lately followed a more practice-oriented trend focusing on what "people do in projects" with the idea of understanding practitioners' practices and praxis(Blomquist et al., 2010; Cicmil, 2006; Whittington, 2002);

(5) To the best of our knowledge, not many studies focus on the application of project management-related practices in the management consulting industry.

1.6 Delimitation of the study

This research is concerned with project management practices employed by Swedish management consultants. The scope has been reduced to one country only, since it is believed that by including more countries, results might be less relevant as the elements of national culture could play a significant role and thereby diminish the significance of the study. Furthermore the research conducted is of a cross-sectional sort, meaning that data collected is from a single point in time. Therefore, instead of collecting data on a long-term basis, research relies on the perceptions of respondents based on their experiences.

It is also important to note that we are aware of the different areas of specialization in which management consulting companies operate (e.g. information technologies, accounting, human resources), and that the nature of their business may to some extent affect the practices of consultants.Nevertheless, in the understanding that management consulting has shared principles and methods regardless of the specialization, we see it

as valuable to explore the practices used in the management consulting industry as a whole.

Data collected from practitioners will be done through semi-structured interviews that will be conducted in one of three ways: face-to-face, via phone or by Skype, largely depending on the consultant's convenience. Having that in mind, certain issues in data quality regarding reliability, validity and generalizability as well as different forms of bias(Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009)are acknowledged and addressed in Chapter 3.

1.7 Disposition of the study

The present chapter has introduced the general background of the study and has presented the motivations that informed the selection of the topic. The main objectives and research questions, together with the unit of analysis, have been specified.

Chapter 2 provides the theoretical frame of reference that will serve to analyze the findings of the empirical exercise. This chapter surveys relevant literature concerned with management consulting, the definition of projects at their front-end and the practices that assist in reconciling client-consultant perceptions of the project.

The next chapter, Chapter 3, starts off by evidently stating our methodological choices, explaining the chosen, underlying philosophical and scientific approaches of this study, as well as the reasons for why those particular choices were made. Additionally we compare our study to other relevant project management research in regards to the methodological choices made.The chapter further discusses the suitability of the methodological choices, addresses concerns about the validity and reliability of the study, and discourses ethical considerations.

In Chapter 4, the process followed for collecting and analyzing data is described, and the empirical results from the study are presented.Later, in Chapter 5, these findings are analyzed against the theoretical framework and in line with the objectives of the study.

Lastly, conclusions are derived in Chapter 6 where the research questions are revisited in light of the new findings. Also, the implications and limitations of the study are discussed, together with managerial and theoretical implications and possible courses for future research.

2. Literature Review

The present chapter has the objective of examining the relevant literature to form a solid base for identifying the issues that this research is concerned with. The first part of this literature review provides an overview of the field of management consulting with special emphasis on those characteristics that cause the need for reconciling the client-consultant ontologies in projects. The second part reflects on several important aspects in terms of the project definition phase from the project management perspective. This includes providing an overview of: the relevant literature on what is considered a project definition phase, as there are different interpretations to it; the issues, challenges and problems affecting this stage of the project lifecycle and how they affect the overall project performance; some of the most prevalent approaches and frameworks employed in this stage; and finally, the importance of this stage on the project success as witnessed by different authors.

The review of the literature permits the identification of a gap which is made explicit. At the end of this chapter, the theme of project management practices is first introduced before a list of relevant practices is retrieved from the literature that will allow the comparative analysis of the empirical findings. This chapter represents the theoretical frame of reference that will lead the rest of the study (Figure 1).

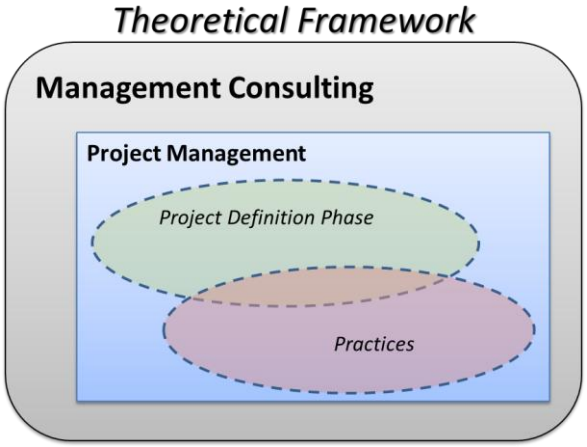

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework.

2.1 Management consulting

A definition of management consulting has already been provided in the introductory chapter with the objective of delineating the understanding that this term has for the purpose of this research. However, it has to be emphasized that while screening the literature in this subject matter, numerous definitions have been encountered such as the one provided by Greiner and Metzger (1983) that states that "management consulting is an advisory service contracted for and provided to organizations by specially trained and qualified persons who assist, in an objective and independent manner, the client organization to identify management problems, analyze such problems, and help, when requested, in the implementation of solutions" (p. 7).

In spite of the existence of numerous definitions, there are essential attributes that are common to all that characterize the nature of any management consulting engagement. To begin with, at its simplest form, consultancy comprises at least two human systems:

the client organization and the consultant organization. The former believes that some sort of external support is needed, while the latter is in position of providing that support (Lundberg, 1997, p. 196). A second trait is the fact that the consultant system should remain "objective and independent", which implies a financial, administrative, political and emotional autonomy from the client. Even if the consultant belongs to the same organization (i.e. internal consultant), he or she is to stay independent from the serviced organizational unit or department (Kubr, 2002, pp. 7-8). A third essential characteristic acknowledges that a situation of concern triggers the need for the consultancy service. It is generally agreed that this problematic situation emerges from uncertainty, which refers to the condition in which the client is incapable of evaluating possible outcomes in a given situation. Thus, it can be said that the essence of consultancy is the reduction of uncertainty (Kakabadse et al., 2006, p. 437; Lundberg, 1997, p. 194).

More specifically, the purpose of consultancy can cover different objectives. Kubr (2002, p. 10) argues, for example, that every consulting engagement falls under at least one of the following generic purposes: (1) achieving organizational purposes and objectives, (2) solving management and business problems, (3) identifying and seizing new opportunities, (4) enhancing learning, and (5) implementing changes. More often than not, the purpose of a consulting project will be a mix of two or more of the cited purposes.

In regards to what makes a consulting project successful, the sophistication of tools and techniques in present-day organizations is pushing consultancies to provide more innovative product offerings. But the determinants for success in a consulting engagement are said to be three, which are: the competence of consultants, the consultation mode, and the client organizational characteristics (Jang & Lee, 1998, p. 67). The competence of consultants is the consultant's ability to use knowledge and experience by means of his or her role as expert, manager, researcher, counselor or politician. Consultation mode includes considerations such as clearly defined goals, methodological compatibility, standardization of processes and the overall clients' participation. Characteristics of client organizations are concerned with the overall support of the client to the consulting project and the expertise of the supporting staff assigned to the project (Jang & Lee, 1998, p. 68).

2.1.1 Types of consultancies

In the present days, the variety of types of management consultancies is very extensive as they vary in terms of size, sector, type of services provided, degree of specialization and so on. The industry covers as many areas as there are areas in the field of management and business, ranging from traditional strategic management to relatively newer areas like social responsibility and sustainability (Kubr, 2002, pp. 39-50). Consultancies can have the form of the stereotypical general management consultancies, looking at a problem by inspecting all parts of the client company, or be specialized. In general, the type of specialization is classified in terms of function (e.g. IT, HR, Strategic planning, Operations) or in terms of sector (e.g. Financial, Aerospace, Marketing, Governmental, Private, Internal) (ICMCI, 2002, p. 15); the former provides expertise in one or more related areas (implying the need for state-of-the-art knowledge and technology) while the latter serves specific "industries" in terms of the uniqueness of the help required. One other classification can be made in terms of geographical

coverage (i.e. local, regional, international) which main advantage is staying close to the market and to the customer they serve (Chickillo & Kleiner, 1990, pp. 26-27).

At the level of the individual, people doing management consulting normally fall into one of three categories; they can be full-time consultants working for an established organization, professors doing consulting complementary to or as part of their academic work, or executives who do consulting on a part-time basis or once they are retired (Chickillo & Kleiner, 1990, p. 27). Perhaps a special type of consultants that deserves being described further is that of internal consultants. Within organizations, internal consulting units are sometimes established with the objective of providing its services to other units in the same organization. However, there are critics who claim that this type of service does not deserve being named management consulting as independence and objectivity are more easily compromised (Kubr, 2002, p. 50).

2.1.2 The consulting process

A consulting engagement is said to be comprised by a series of activities through which the client and consultant progress in view of attaining the desired purposes. This is commonly known as the *consulting process* and even though it could be argued that there is a clear beginning (client-consultant relationship starts) and end (consultant leaves), literature in the field provides many ways to delimit the overall process and to subdivide it in minor stages (Kubr, 2002, p.21; Turner, 1977, p. 120).

The most common approach, however, is the one that considers the consulting process as a sequence of chronological phases. Chickillo and Kleiner (1990, p. 29), for instance, argue that in spite of the differences, business consultants will always engage in a four-step approach that can be altered if needed. The first step is to define the problem which requires getting the client involved. The second step consists of gathering information by means of research, interviews and other investigation techniques. The analysis and conclusion of the problem is the third step, which should include qualitative and quantitative considerations. The last step of this approach is recommending action plans and assisting in the implementation.

In turn, the International Council of Management Consulting Institutes (ICMCI, 2002, pp. 6-8) describes in its Common Body of Knowledge a much more comprehensive consulting process that encompasses the following components:

1) Engagement management, which runs in parallel to the rest of the stages, takes the controlling and monitoring role of program management as it oversees that deliverables effectively comply with requirements such as time and quality.
2) The prospecting and marketing stage is concerned with identifying and engaging potential clients in view of convincing them of the consultant's capabilities and professionalism.
3) Clarifying needs is aimed to guarantee that the consultant and client agree on what is needed. This stage eventually results in a proposal from the consultant where the scope and general approach to the engagement is specified, and an estimate of the time and fees is provided.
4) The next stage, proposal development, has as its main objective to produce a proposal that will secure the consultancy project; this being achieved, the consultant is to determine the best approach for the intervention. In doing so, diagnostic and analytical methods to evaluate the client's position are important to ultimately delimit the problem and to formulate a hypothesis for future action.

5) Contracting stands for the formal (i.e. legal) or informal acceptance of the proposal.
6) Execution/implementation is defined as the stage where the benefits are realized for the client. According to the ICMCI, this phase includes both the development of the plan of implementation and the actual implementation of actions.
7) Disengagement is the final stage of the client-consultant relationship which includes making sure the client can continue without the consultant, in addition to evaluating and closing the project.
8) The final stage in this framework is learning from consulting engagements which is basically conceived as a continuous improvement process for the consulting organization.

In the International Labour Organization's professional guide, edited by Kubr (2002, pp. 20-24, 153, 179, 229), a five-phase model is preferred consisting of entry, diagnosis, action planning, implementation and termination. The entry phase (1) is when the consultant and client have their first encounter and when the relationship is established. The consultant learns for the first time what the client aims to achieve. A preliminary diagnosis is carried out at this stage with the objective of producing a proposal that will set the foundations, plans, and approaches for the next stages. If accepted, a formal contract might be negotiated and signed so that the consulting project can continue through the rest of the phases. Proper diagnosis (2) is performed during the second phase. The consultant and client work together under a clear framework "to examine the problem faced and the purposes pursued by the client in detail and in depth, identify the factors and forces that are causing and influencing the problem, and prepare all the information needed to develop a solution to the problem" (p. 179). The focus of this phase is then to synthesize the findings and to reach a conclusion that will serve as input to the following phase. The third phase, action planning (3), is concerned with developing an array of possible solutions to the situation previously diagnosed. The client is to evaluate and make a decision regarding the actions to be taken so that an appropriate implementation plan can be drafted. The phase of implementation (4) consists on the execution of the proposed changes. This is the last phase where clients and consultants are working together, and along the way, the original plan will most likely be corrected in response to the contingencies faced. In the final phase of termination (5) the performance of the overall project is evaluated by both the client and the consultant. The project finalizes with the withdrawal of the consultant from the client organization.

Lastly, Turner (1977, p. 121) considers that a more useful way to subdivide the process is not chronologically but considering the purposes of the engagement and, with that in mind, he argues that there are eight fundamental stages: (1) providing information; (2) solving a client's problem; (3) making a diagnosis, possibly resulting in problem redefinition; (4) making recommendations based on the diagnosis; (5) assisting the implementation of recommendations; (6) building consensus and commitment around proposed actions; (7) facilitating client learning for the future; and finally, (8) improving organizational effectiveness. In the author's view these are arranged hierarchically, as lower numbered objectives need to be achieved before the consulting effort can move to higher objectives. He adds that typically, stages 1 through 4 are considered legitimate work of management consultants while the rest of the purposes are less likely to be explicitly requested by clients.

The following diagram (Figure 2) compares the abovementioned and some additional management consulting process definitions proposed by several authors (Appelbaum & Steed, 2005; Martin, Jr. et al., 2001). Whatever the view of the consulting process is, it has to be emphasized that definitions have to remain flexible as stages will often overlap, run in parallel, iterate, or even be omitted if necessary (Kubr, 2002, p. 22). In fact, a consulting engagementdoes not necessarily comprise each and every phase of the (complete) consulting process. For example, a consultant might be hired only to perform a diagnosis or to produce a plan of action (excluding implementation altogether). This will depend on the particular needs and preferences of the client who will determine the scope of the consulting service(Kubr, 2002, pp. 24-25). In any case, the usefulness of defining a process, or cycle, is to explain what practitioners actually do in consulting projects.

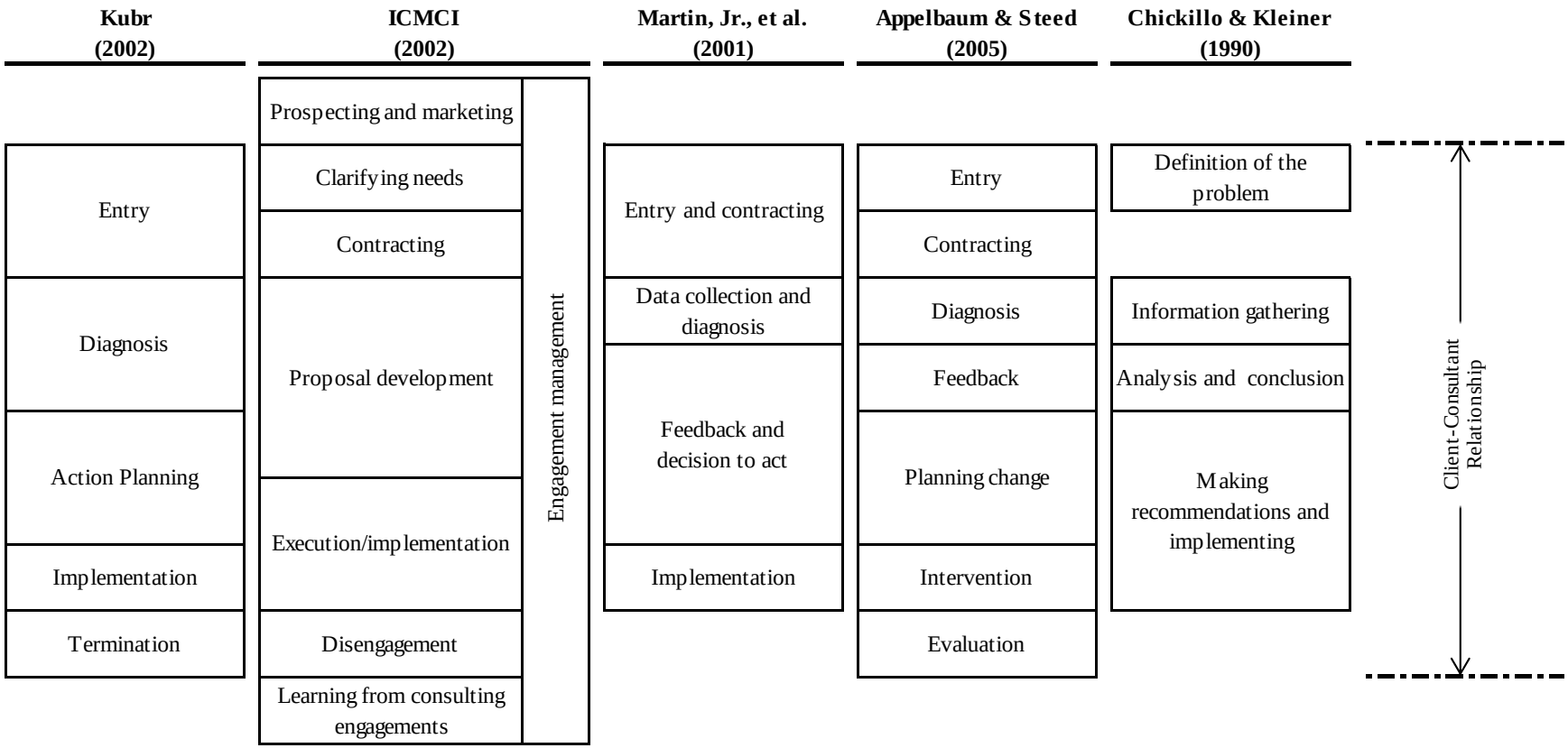

Figure 2. Management Consulting Processes.

2.1.3 The challenges of the management consulting

Throughout the consulting process the practitioner will face challenges of many sorts. A survey by Burke et al. (1984, pp. 67-68) identified specific contributors to project success and failure associated to the different phases of the consulting process. For instance, during the entry phase it is important to consider the power of the client and his or her commitment to change. In terms of contracting, clarity is paramount for both written and unwritten commitments. Regarding the diagnosis phase it is very important, for example, to have access to organizational resources and to apply a clear framework for diagnosing. Flexibility is essential during the planning phase, while client's management style and rewarding systems play an important role during the implementation phase of the consulting project.

Kipping and Engwall(2002, p. 2-4), however, suggest that in order to better understand the challenges that the field of management consulting faces it is helpful to recognize that literature in the subject deals with issues on three so-called "levels of description": the consultancy industry, the consultancy firm, and the consultancy project. The first and highest level has to do with the traditional analysis of an industry, with firms acting as the main actors of the system. This level is concerned with the structural conditions that allow consultants to interact with and compete for clients. In the second level, the firm itself is the system while the employees constitute the basic units that play within. The focus of this level is the dynamics of employees' cooperation and competition, and how it all results in the processing of knowledge within the firm. The third level is concerned with the project-level issues of management consultancy, meaning, the ways in which consultancies are able to transfer management knowledge to the client. Considering a project as a system, basic units at this level of description are project relationships between consultants and their clients, which is of interest to this research. Unlike the upper levels of description, where the interaction is based on cooperation or competition, at this level the interaction of project relationships is based on trust.

It follows then, that the client-consultant relationship is of extreme importance to fully understand consulting projects and the challenges they face. Clients and consultants interact extensively throughout the entire consulting process (Martin, Jr. et al., 2001, p. 143), however the contact in the initial phases is considered as the most relevant one since it is at this point in time when the client's initial expectations are formed and the consultant assesses the gap between those expectations and reality (Kakabadse et al., 2006, p. 428). With this in mind, the section that follows expands on the elements that characterize the project relationship between the client and the consultant, bearing in mind that it is within this context that expectation gaps occur.

Without question, a very important factor to ensure the success of a consulting engagement is a clear agreement between the client and the consultant in terms of the purpose of the assignation and the expected outcomes to be achieved by the project (Kubr, 2002, p. 63; McLachlin, 1999, p. 397; Turner, 1977, p.120). Yet, literature suggests (Appelbaum & Steed, 2005, p. 76; Kubr, 2002, p.180) that the insufficient clarity in this respect is the foremost source of conflict in client-consulting relationships. This inadequacy is the result of a number of factors such as poor communication, failure to identify the real problem, promising too much, disagreement in roles, and different interpretations on the terms of the contract, among others. Moreover, the situation is even riskier as one problem or misunderstanding can easily lead to another one of greater magnitude that in turn would further generate other problems in a snowball

effect. Initial misunderstandings or uncertainties will hardly "work themselves out". In view of that, it is essential to rationalize the complex interactions of the management consulting encounter to better understand the sources of such misunderstandings (Martin, Jr. et al., 2001, p. 147).

As obvious as it may seem, an initial "source" that complicates the client-consultant project relationship is the indistinctness about who the client actually is. In the widest sense, the client is the organization that hires the consulting service but the term can also be used to refer to individuals or groups within the organization (Kubr, 2002, p. 64). The concept of client is not straightforward since there are, in fact, many kinds of clients in the consultancy process who have different expectations, needs, degrees of influence and participation. Schein (1997) observes that contrary to the general belief, "the question of who actually is the client can be ambiguous and problematic" (p. 202). Evidently, the view that the consultant has about who the client is will inevitably affect the consultant's understanding of the client's requirements and expectations, and possibly generate conflicts that would ultimately damage the project. The author proposes a model where six basic types of clients are noted as follows:

> (1) Contact clients – the individual(s) who first contact the consultant with a request, question, or issue.
>
> (2) Intermediate clients – the individuals or groups who or which get involved in various interviews, meetings, and other activities as the project evolves.
>
> (3) Primary clients – the individual(s) who ultimately "own" the problem or issue being worked on; they are typically also the ones who pay the consulting bills or whose budget covers the consultation project.
>
> (4) Unwitting clients – members of the organization or client system above, below and laterally related to the primary clients who will be affected by interventions but who are not aware they will be impacted.
>
> (5) Indirect clients – members of the organization who are aware that they will be affected by the interventions but who are unknown to the consultant and who may feel either positive or negative about these effects.
>
> (6) Ultimate clients – the community, the total organization, an occupational group, or any other group that the consultant cares about and whose welfare must be considered in any intervention that the consultant makes
>
> (Schein, 1997, pp. 202-203)

Even if the client system is clearly identified, an additional concern is that commonly, clients are not very clear in what they actually want or need. It was stated before that it is the client's uncertainty about a certain situation that triggers the need for consultancy in the first place, so fundamentally the client "is uncertain as to what the specific nature of his [or her] problem really is" (Kakabadse et al., 2006, pp. 420). The literature actually addresses quite often the confusion that clients undergo regarding their expectations (Kakabadse et al., 2006, p. 437; Ojasalo, 2001, p. 202). Stumpf and Longman (2000) remark that "unlike the customer, the client is not always right, what they say they want is not necessarily what they really want" (p. 128). Continuing in this

line of thought, McLachlin(1999, p. 397) has found that the most substantial reason for dissatisfaction of the consulting projects is the imprecision of the client when evaluating the very need for a consultant.

It is not strange that the client and the consultant would look differently at expected outcomes of the consulting assignment and the way they are to be accomplished (Kubr, 2002, p. 61). In the case of clients' expectations, Ojasalo (2001, pp. 202-203) has classified them in three types: fuzzy, implicit and unrealistic. Fuzzy expectations are imprecise ideas that the client has about the outcome of the service (i.e. the consulting project). Even though this only means a rather unspecific idea about the nature of the change, if it is not materialized by the end of the intervention the client will regard the service as unsatisfactory. In turn, implicit expectations are defined as those elements that are so obvious in the eyes of clients (i.e. taken for granted) that they do not think about them consciously nor are explicitly concerned about their realization. These expectations will usually only emerge once they are not met, thus, revealing these at an early stage will increase the probability of high client satisfaction. Finally, the third and last type refers to the unrealistic expectations which, as the term suggests, groups expectations that are unlikely or even impossible. The more unrealistic client expectations are, the lower the possibility that they will actually be accomplished.

In this line of though, an important aspect in management consulting literature that has lately been addressed more frequently is that regarding psychological contracts (Appelbaum & Steed, 2005; Bergholz, 1999; Chelliah, 2010; Kakabadse et al., 2006; Kubr, 2002; Martin, Jr. et al., 2001). The fact is that the client-consultant relationship has a psychological dimension as well, that must be considered when describing the relationship between both parties (Kakabadse et al., 2006, p. 425). Kubr (2002) even argues that "the formal legal side of contracting is *not* the main one" (p. 178), recognizing that there is another type of contract which is not documented and therefore is not easy to define. Under the psychological contract, the client and the consultant work under the understanding that the work of the other party is the best for the success of the consulting project. These contracts "fundamentally drive expectations and govern the corresponding gaps between parties" (Martin, Jr. et al., 2001, p. 144) particularly in what is concerned with the other's roles and responsibilities. Consulting engagements that consistently ignore or fail to understand this dimension can often compromise project success (Kakabadse et al., 2006, p. 425; Martin, Jr. et al., 2001, p. 147).

Psychological contracts are "drafted" at the beginning, when the client-consultant relationship is established. At that time, the generation of expectation gaps occurs naturally given that psychological contracts are not detailed explicitly (Martin, Jr. et al., 2001, p. 147). Chelliah(2010, pp. 136, 138) has categorized clients' expectation in three levels that he terms: technical competency, professional contribution, and personal style. Technical competency, which refers to the consultants' ability to perform technically, is seen as an unvarying prerequisite in the industry that can easily be undermined when failing to address the expectations in the other two levels. The second level, professional contribution, is the expectation that the consultant will be committed to 'run the extra mile' in addition to what is formally agreed. Lastly, personal style is about the ability of the consultant to fit in the client's environment, which requires things like being enjoyable, listening and empathizing.

The author summarizes the last two expectation levels in the following way:

> Professional contribution
>
> - Maintaining perceptions, self-esteem, and status of the client
> - Ability to coach through assertive persuasion
> - The need for balanced decisions
> - Knowledge transfer
> - Organizational citizenship
>
> Personal style
>
> - The reliance on embedded personality to engage clients versus the effectiveness of learned behaviors in achieving the same outcome
> - Social acceptance – the importance of liking or being liked
> - Trust that allows the consultant to enter the inner circle and achieve close-confidant status
>
> (Chelliah, 2010, p. 143)

One other issue that is typical in the management consulting business, which was stated in the introductory chapter, is that understanding expectations is problematical due to what is termed "transactional uncertainty". This concept describes a type of information asymmetry, typical of the client-consultant relationship, that originates from the fact that management consulting not only delivers an intangible—as services often do—but is also a service produced simultaneously by both the consultant and the client (Gluckler & Armbruster, 2003, p. 275).

Being a professional service, and more specifically, a knowledge-intensive service, management consultants have to deal with two issues very distinctive of this industry. First, service delivery processes—i.e. service production and service consumption—are inseparable and simultaneous. Second, the outcome of the service is generally an intangible, which brings the problem of specificity, and of assessing and comparing something that is not only unique but also has no physical output (Gluckler & Armbruster, 2003, p. 276; Martin, Jr. et al., 2001, pp. 139, 142). On top of that, quality of a professional service can only be measured by the differential between the client's expectations and the client's perceptions of the service (McLachlin, 1999, p. 397; Ojasalo, 2001, p. 200). It is evident that both expectations and perceptions denote a high degree of relativeness.

Furthermore, management consulting is said to be coproduced by the consultant and the client since it is a process where mutual cooperation is a requisite and where consultant-client interaction is inevitable. The involvement of the client ultimately defines the quality of the service, as he or she is at the same time responsible for the success of the project as the consultant is (Kakabadse et al., 2006, p. 433; Martin, Jr. et al., 2001, p. 142). "The complexity is that clients not only receive and consume a service offering, but also serve as components in its production and delivery […] including specification of the service, the specification of the nature and level of service offering" (Martin, Jr. et al., 2001, p. 137). This two-way interaction turns the process non-transparent since it becomes highly reliant on the agendas, strategies and goals of each of the parties involved, and on their ability to cooperate with each other (Gluckler & Armbruster, 2003, p. 277).

In regards to cooperation, the very fact that involved parties belong to different organizations is a factor that characterizes the client-consultant relationship. After all, the consultant is a stranger to the client organization and thus uncertainty, mistrust and anxiety might be present (Kubr, 2002, p. 153). However, it has been said that independence is actually an essential characteristic to the concept of management consulting. Such a reality results in having two separate systems of people that may differ in a number of aspects, such as in performing styles and working cultures (Martin, Jr. et al., 2001, p.143).

McLachlin (1999, p. 399) states that at the very least "a decent match" is needed between the client and consultant in terms of management style, beliefs systems and personality, in view of preventing consulting projects from being doomed to failure. Additionally, the coproduction nature of the consulting project signifies that a joint team—a team of consultants and clients together—work towards a common goal as a single entity. This temporal and inter-organizational entity must incorporate the different cultures of their parent organizations (i.e. the client's and the consultant's) not only to truly be able to reach a clear common vision, but also to enhance creativity and the understanding of strategy. This level of effectiveness can only be reached with the appropriate "fit", which is mainly achieved by overcoming the following key issues: (1) heterogeneity of backgrounds and working styles, and (2) client personnel not being used to most consulting firms' open culture (Martin, Jr. et al., 2001, pp. 151-153).

Sometimes a "dramaturgical metaphor" is used by authors to elucidate that there are, in reality, onstage and backstage actors from both the consultant and client organizations. The onstage actors are those that are visibly interacting in a consultant-client relationship, while the backstage actors represent the unseen system (i.e. the client and consultant organizations) that alter the development of the service encounter in an explicit or an implicit manner. At the end of the day the idea is to conceptualize the actions of both the consultant and the client without undermining the fact that they are inadvertently being controlled by more than just their own personal motivations; agendas, policies, directions, practices and procedures are imposed by their parent organizations before the consulting transaction even begins (Martin, Jr. et al., 2001, pp. 139-142). As such, there is an emphasis in understanding the roleplaying as it is presumed "that expectations are the major generators of roles, that expectations are learned through experience, and that persons [can be] aware of the expectations they hold (Kakabadse et al., 2006, p. 438). This means that it has to be realized that those involved in the client-consultant relationship have extensive backstage operations that have an important say when agreeing on the purpose and objectives of a consulting engagement.

All in all, it is clear that "management consulting is a socially and culturally contextualized business" (Gluckler & Armbruster, 2003, p. 290). There is a presumption for human factors such as thoughtfulness and social awareness where even sociopolitical struggles will have to be addressed by the most politically acceptable solution. The consulting practitioner has to be able to adapt and to work in different cultural spheres (Chelliah, 2010, p. 140). This includes realizing that the client's personal preferences, together with culture and politics, will affect the decision-making process. After all, because of the different backgrounds, the consultant's conception of rationality may differ from that of the client (Kubr, 2002, p. 227).

Because of the qualities described before, expectation gaps naturally occur at several points within the client-consultant relationship. Martin, Jr. et al.(2001, p. 145) have proposed an "expectation gap model" that shows five points where those potential gaps may be generated. The model acknowledges backstage operations and does not fail to recognize that gaps may occur between 'onstage' actors of the same organization as well (Figure 3).

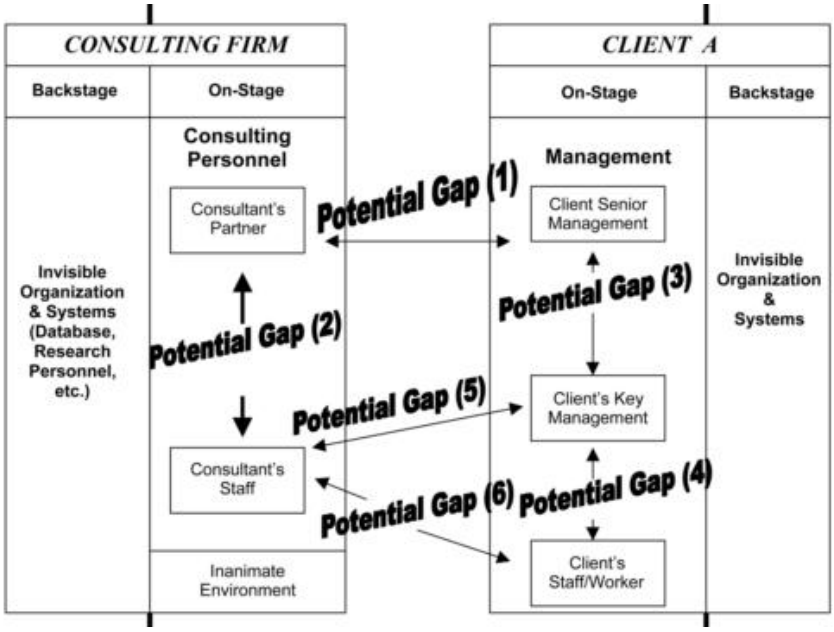

Figure 3.Expectation gap model.Source: Martin, Jr. et al., 2001, p. 145.

The efforts to reconcile the views of the client and the consultant, with the objective of bridging the expectation gaps, have to cover two streams: the explicit and the implicit expectations. Again, explicit expectations are not always straightforward but there are definitely easier to elicit than the implicit ones. The model proposed by Chelliah(2010) in Figure 4 recognizes the need for these two streams of effort. In any case, as suggested by Kubr (2002, p. 63), consultants need therefore to adopt a proactive approach and think further ahead than their clients.

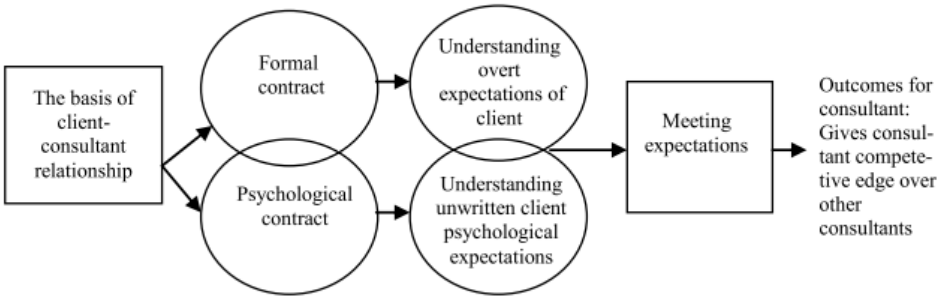

Figure 4.A Holistic Model for Achieving Client Success. Source: Chelliah, 2010, p. 146.

This first section of the literature review explained in general terms what management consulting is about, the general process it follows, and the challenges that practitioners of this discipline encounter, especially in the setting of the client-consultant relationship. For one thing, understanding the generic process that consultants may

follow is particularly important for us to decipher what practitioners consider the front-end of their consulting projects, which is crucial as this research is centered around this phase. Additionally, recognizing the issues that management consultants face in the initial phases of their assignments is valuable not only because it will allow us to relate them to the typical problems of the front-end of projects in general, but also because it facilitates pinpointing what practitioners actually do in order to cope with them. The following section is devoted to explore the front-end of projects, this time from the perspective of project management literature.

2.2 Project Definition Phase

The first step in getting an understanding of what project definition represents is by trying to define it. This has proven to be more difficult than previously anticipated, as many authors take different approaches to it. This is due to the differences in understanding of what this phase represents or due to the industry-specificity from which the authors are coming from. Another factor that contributes to the difficulty of defining it, is the fact that literature is in disagreement over the name of this phase, as some refer to it as project definition (Cano & Lidón, 2011; Morris, 1997; Neal, 1995; Whelton, Ballard, & Tommelein, 2002), others as initiation phase (Besner & Hobbs, 2006a) or even as the front-end (Williams & Samset, 2010; Winter, Smith, Morris, & Cicmil, 2006). The use of this terms is habitually interchangeable. Later on in this section, the issues, challenges and problems affecting this stage of the projects will be discussed, together with certain relevant frameworks concerned with this phase and the importance of this stage in the eyes of different authors.

2.2.1 Defining project definition

In trying to get a better grasp of the topic, the approach taken by the Project Management Institute (PMI) in the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) (PMI, 2008, p. 14) is inspected. Firstly, from the perspective of project life cycle, PMI divides every project no matter the size or complexity, into four stages of life cycle: *starting the project*, *organizing and preparing*, *carryingout the work* and *closing the project*. Conversely, in terms of the number of actual phases, which PMBOK defines as "divisions within a project where extra control is needed to effectively manage the completion of a major deliverable" (PMI, 2008, p. 19), this varies from project to project, and there are some projects that are comprised of only one phase, while others may have many. Furthermore PMBOK states that the names and deliverables of the phases may vary depending of the project type. Going one more level in detail, project processes are explained as a "set of interrelated actions and activities performed to achieve pre-specified product, result or service" (PMI, 2008, p. 37) and every phase is comprised of several types of processes. Moreover, PMI groups the processes depending on their purpose and the relation between them. In this regard, *initiation process group* and *planning process group* are the ones of interest to this thesis, however not throughout the project lifecycle.

More specifically, the initiation process group embraces processes that "define a new project or new phase of an existing project by obtaining authorization to start the project or phase" (PMI, 2008, p. 44) while the planning process group is more concerned with processes that delimit the scope of projects, define and redefine objectives and the actions needed in order to achieve those objectives (PMI, 2008, p. 46). However, it is important to note that these processes are not phase specific. On the contrary, they can

be found in almost any phase of the project, meaning that there can be initiation processes in the execution phase or even in the closeout phase, as every phase requires some sort of initiation. Therefore, there is a certain level of ambiguity and confusion in PMBOK when it comes to separating initiation phase and initiation processes. Besner and Hobbs (2006a, p. 45) and Smyth and Morris (2007, p. 424) reinforce this opinion by criticizing PMBOK for the use of the same word (i.e. initiation) and argue that using it for both the processes and phase actually undermines the importance of this phase. They even go on to argue that PMBOK does not include project initiation phase as part of most projects and disapprove of it as PMBOK does not consider this phase being part of the project management's jurisdiction (PMI, 2008,p. 39).

There are authors, however, who have a different approach to the PMI's in defining the project definition phase. Sometimes the definitions elaborate on the purpose and the actions this phase entangles, or what aspects need to be considered and who needs to be involved. Regardless of the approach, all authors concur on the lack of investigation in this area of project management, but more on that topic will be discussed later. Due to the topic being under-explored there is only a handful of researchers that have dealt with this matter, mostly coming from the engineering background. Nevertheless there has been a shift from the "hard" to "soft" elements of project definitions. This will be presented in the following part of the chapter.

Morris (1997) was one of the first authors to shed light on the delicate topic of project definition stage in project management and many that followed his footsteps acknowledge and build on his insights. In terms of project definition, Morris (1997, pp. 218-219) argues that there are multiple things that need to be considered and developed in this phase: (1) objectives, standards, technical base and general strategic planning; (2) how project's definition affects and is affected by the external environment; and (3) the need of having positive attitudes of all crucial project stakeholders. Freeman (1984, cited in Littau et al. 2010) defines stakeholders as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (p. 17) while PMBOK (PMI, 2008) sees them as "persons or organizations (e.g. customers, sponsors, the performing organization, or the public), who are actively involved in the project or whose interests may be positively or negatively affected by the performance or completion of the project" (p. 23).

In chronological terms, Whelton et al. (2002, p. 199) and Kähkönen (1999, p. 625) see project definition as the process that encompasses all actions and decisions prior to the final investment decision. Additionally, Whelton et al. (2002, p. 198) use this term to embed activities that lead to designing a concept or a solution while Ballard and Zabelle (2000, cited in Whelton et al. 2002) contend that it is "the first phase in project delivery consisting of three modules: determining purposes (stakeholder needs and values), translating those purposes into criteria for both product and process design, and generating design concepts against which requirements and criteria can be tested and developed" (p. 198). This is similar to the definition provided by Williams and Samset (2010) who include all activities from "the time the idea is conceived, until the final decision to finance the project is made" (p. 39). Crawford and Helm (2009, p. 725) see it as a launching point for project initiation, as the confirmation of project definition is needed for the start of project delivery.

In essence, all of the aforementioned authors agree that the project definition is a learning process where knowledge is generated and shared. Argyris (1999, cited in

Whelton & Ballard 2002) states that learning is achieved "when there is a match between intentions and outcomes, and secondly when a mismatch is identified and corrected and turned into a match" (p.9). With that in mind, Whelton et al. (2002) define it as "a collaborative process, one in which knowledge is shared and acquired, and it significantly relies on the collective knowledge of individuals" (p. 203). They believe that it is through this collaborative learning that value for the client is created by not only addressing the explicit needs of the client but also by uncovering the latent and implicit ones and see project definition phase as the most favorable phase to do so (Whelton et al., 2002, p. 210).

Kähkönen(1999) sees the phase as "a learning process where those involved are trying to achieve a shared opinion and understanding about the problem and its possible solutions" (p. 626). In addressing this matter, Kähkönen (1999) proposes a model for project defintion phase that was developed based on a 2-year study that will be elaborated and detailed in the following sections of this chapter.

The aforementioned definitions of the project definition phase may differ to a certain degree taking different angles, but nevertheless have at least one commonality—all of the authors who forged them have a predominantly engineering background. This is not to say that their definitions are incorrect or only applicable in the engineering area, but it shows that their background has heavily influenced the view on this topic which might not be completely applicable in today's world of project management. Morris (1997, pp. 273-274) best depicts this by stating that although modern project management's most paramount paramaters used to be engineering and urgency, in the future other factors and trends, such as environmental challenges, political changes, transformation in social and demographic structure along with economic and financial pressures will play a crucial role in the discipline.

Neal (1995, p. 5) concurs with this observation and argues that it is the understading of the political and social context and thataddressing these factors in the inception phase of the projectis vital for project success. He continues by noting that the traditional approach of generating and understanding requirements from the clients is no longer sufficient and that project managers need to forsee and plan for issues that may emerge in the political, social and economic spheres.

This is reflected in the works of Englund and Graham (1999) and Winter and Szczepanek (2009) who recognize that projects are indeed subject to forces of political, social, behavioral, and even psychological nature.

Another characteristic that describes this phase is the fact that projects often lead to intangible outputs that are by default, harder to measure. Nogeste and Walker (2005, p. 58) contend that these are not expressed in project specification, or stakeholder requirements, and that this often leads to failure in meeting stakeholders' expectations. It is therefore necessary to try to translate these intangible outcomes into some sort of tangible outputs (Nogeste & Walker, 2005, p. 56).

All in all, the proposed definitions for the project definition phase converge in two aspects:

1) It includes all actions and decisions until the final decision to finance the project is made.

2) It is a knowledge process to achieve a common understanding—by all stakeholders—about the problem and solutions, and to translate intentions into objectives.

2.2.2 Problems in project definition phase

The definition of the project definition phase is accompanied by issues, challenges and problems. Again, as in the previous section, there are certain differences in how researchers go about it. Nonetheless all of the authors agree that the problems concerning this phase are rather complex.

Whelton and Ballard (2002, p. 1), in line with their view of project definition—which is defining stakeholders' needs and values, translation of those into certain criteria, and evaluation of design concepts against that criteria—assert the notion of the necessity of solving issues and challenges that may be intertwined or conflicted in the project due to different needs and perspectives of stakeholders. They state that this phase is troubled by what is called "wicked problems", which is a concept introduced by Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber (1973). They define wicked problems as problems that are ill-defined and complex and whose structure lacks definition in some respect. The solution for these problems are not prescribed or known upfront while the means of coming to the solution are unknown and changing. In terms of project definition phase this can be traced back to the acknowledgment that projects and project definition phase are understood differently by different stakeholders, which is in effect the outcome of different facts, beliefs, backgrounds, values and personal agendas that each of them have (Whelton & Ballard, 2002, p. 3). Whelton and Ballard (2002, p. 200) base these ideas on both empirical research as well as on the literature concerned with project definition by referring to problems affecting this stage as existing barriers to effective collective knowledge management.

One of the issues described in the literature is actually understanding what the problem that needs solving really is (Kähkönen, 1999, p. 626; Whelton & Ballard, 2002, p. 4). This, in turn, often requires eliciting and uncovering stakeholders' latent needs that are frequently not expressed explicitly (Whelton et al., 2002, p. 198). Whelton and Ballard (2002, p. 4) also contend that this is not a straightforward process and requires learning whilst interacting and communicating with relevant project stakeholders. They also argue that understanding the problem is crucial as they directly relate it to envisaging the solution. Additionally, Williams and Samset (2010, p. 39) add that the focus in this stage should be on choosing a concept or an alternative, rather than only defining one.

Another observation from the authors concerned with problems of this phase seems to be identifying and harmonizing different stakeholders' views (Cano & Lidón, 2011, p. 534; Neal, 1995, p. 7; Whelton et al., 2002, p. 206), which in turn, is closely related to understanding the problem. Whelton et al. (2002, p. 198) explain this more thoroughly by stating that it is not only identifying the needs and requirements of stakeholders, but also properly translating them into a satisfactory solution is fundamentally important in this phase. Williams and Samset (2010, p. 41) refer the issues related to differences in understanding between stakeholders, to dissimilar understandings of the problem, and to different backgrounds as 'wicked messes'. Thiry (2002, p. 222) has looked into IT projects and concluded that failing to address people's issues and concentrating only on the technical and performance parameters is a primary cause of the failure of projects.

Williams and Samset (2010, p. 40) go on to point out that an additional issue in this phase that is often overlooked, is the alignment of the goals that the project is supposed to fulfill regarding the strategy of the organization. By choosing the wrong concept, a solution that does not address the problem effectively, or only does so partially, may lead to new problems and result in what the authors call 'the strategic failure', which translates into project not delivering its value. Whelton et al. (2002, p. 208) support this outlook claiming that the only way one understands the purpose, defined in the project definition state, is by understanding the strategy of the client organization. Teague and Cooke-Davies (2008, cited in Williams et al. 2009, p.110) concluded from their research that more than half of the organizations they surveyed were not selecting their projects based on how they fit their strategic objectives. They further explain that one of the underlying factors for it is due to the involvement of many individuals and groups that have different understanding of the organizational strategy or are just interested on a certain aspect of it (2008, cited in Williams et al. 2009, p. 111).

Problems outlined in this section are not the only ones affecting this project phase, but they are certainly the most ubiquitous, as suggested by the literature. These problems are interconnected and very often they overlap. Nonetheless, these issues are important aspects of the project definition phase-a phase that sets the tone of the entire project.

2.2.3 Project definition frameworks and approaches

Researchers concerned with this area of project management offer certain postulates and models to solve and tackle issues, challenges and problems particular to the phase in question. Of course, these models and frameworks are based on the beliefs and perspectives of respective authors. Bearing that in mind, Whelton et al. (2002, p. 198) provide a conceptual framework based on the collaboration between stakeholders to manage the collaborative process more effectively. Through this framework, several models are presented, each concerned with different aspect of the project definition phase, but at the same time leading to a facilitation of managing the outcomes of the phase. The models are presented below:

- *Activity model*, which is supposed to manage group action, is based on applying multiple perspectives and paradigms that were developed by Woodhead (1999, cited in Whelton et al. 2002, pp. 203-204). Additionally, numerous strategies, policies, methods, tools, and techniques through which conversation between stakeholders is produced underpin these paradigms. Whelton et al. (2002, p.203) also emphasize the importance of information channels that need to be designed in such a way that supports the project definition process, but also acknowledge that it depend on different stakeholders organizational decision practices.
- *Spiral development model* illustrates how project definition is iterative, instead of a one-time process. As project purpose is defined, it also needs to be validated, and authors suggest 'reflection points' in this phase as points in time where new knowledge is shared based on the decision and realizations made. They are in place in order to achieve that new developments are understood and validate by all stakeholders (Whelton et al., 2002, p. 207).
- On top of that, the authors introduce a *moderator role* that should enable effective conversations during project definition as well as a *cognitive mapping approach* that models the dialogue in the network of conversations between stakeholders. In regards to this, the authors state that a 'project definition language' needs to be created in order have a shared understanding of what is

discussed and to support the decision making between different organizations involved in the process. For this purpose they refer to Brown and Duguid (2002, cited in Whelton et al. 2002, p. 206) who advise having a translator and a mediator role, someone who is able to assist in conveying one stakeholder's perspective and interests in the language to the other one, in order to achieve a common understanding.

Kähkönen(1999) has also defined, what he calls, a *multi-character model* for the purposes of defining projects. Although set in the construction industry, his contribution is relevant as he broke away from traditional views of that time, in terms of how project definition process is performed. This traditional view, according to Kähkönen "put[s] too much emphasis on conventional representation of various phases and their sequence" (p. 629). He contends that project definition model needs to be flexible enough along with being simple in order to adjust to dynamic nature of the project definition phase (Kähkönen, 1999, p. 628). The model consists of four groups of viewpoints or characteristics:

- *Factors* that affect the activities of project definition
- *Subjects* on which the work in project definition phase is concentrated on
- *Processes* that are part of more detailed stages that constitute the entire project definition phase
- *Stages* that determine the level of detail and amount of information needed for it to be understood

Recently, the Logical Framework Approach (LFA), although originally developed in the 1960's, has gained traction and has been recognized as a valuable approach in trying to resolve issues of project definition, so much so, that it is being used by organizations such as the UN-system, German GTZ, Canadian Cida, USAID, Norwegian NORAD and Sida (Örtengren, 2004, p. 5). Regardless of its potential contribution in the initial stage, its authors emphasize and advise on using the approach in all stages of the project development. It is described as an objective-oriented tool, meaning that the starting point of project development is the problem analysis that translates problems into objectives and consequently defining the choice of activities that lead to those objectives. The LFA method consists of 9 steps: analysis of the project's context, stakeholder analysis, problem analysis/situation analysis, objectives analysis, plan of activities, resource planning, indicators/measurements of objectives, risk analysis and risk management, analysis of the assumption. It is important to note that these steps are interrelated and that the process is not strictly sequential, depending on the needs of the project and only some of the steps might need to be completed.

There are other authors who believe that although methods as the ones stated above involve the customer and try their best in recognizing the real issues by detecting true requirements of the stakeholders, still do not put enough emphasis on the social, political, economic, and environmental influences during project definition phase. Neal (1995, pp. 6-7)in this respect proposes a model that follows the process of selecting viewpoints, constructing tabular data for each customer showing its requirements, and finishing off by reconciling the data. In selecting viewpoints he refers to taking into consideration perspectives of all the users of the project, and by users he means both the customer of the project but also all that are involved in the project in a way that can affect it. In order to identify who the real users are, he proposes using a method that originated in the aerospace industry, called the "core", which poses questions aiming to

answer who is affected by the project, who will perform the job that needs completion, along with who makes decisions in the project.

Once the viewpoints are established, they are taken into consideration in all subsequent decisions that need to be made. Consequently, when rating the success of a project from different viewpoints, three categories of criteria are considered:

- *Essential* – the criteria that must be met in order for the project to be considered successful
- *Required* – the criteria that are important for the success of a project
- *Luxury* – the criteria that are desirable to have, but are not essential to the successful outcome of a project

Neal (1995, p. 7) goes on to admit that often, through conflicted viewpoints, clashes of interest are possible, but once detected, he believes that a consensus can be reached through discussion.

In reconciling the data the goal is to understand it, or better said, to understand the needs of the identified stakeholders. In doing so, Neal (1995, p. 7) and Winter and Szczepanek (2009, pp. 101, 117) suggest using Peter Checkland's Soft System Methodology (SSM) which highlights the existence of differences between real world and concept world, and only by matching these, a project can be successful. Only after (1) looking at what the current situation is, through the investigation of data obtained in previous steps, (2) analyzing what the situation needs to be achieved at the end of the project, and (3) defining activities that help bridging possible gaps, the implementation part of the project may start. For Neal (1995), requirements exits in the real world, while plans that are supposed to achieve them reside in the concept world. In reconciling the two worlds he advocates Checkland's (1999) seven-stage process. These stages are as follows:

- *Stage 1:* The acknowledgment about requirements exits and the need to have them addressed is recognized.
- *Stage 2:* These requirements are then translated into certain parameters that, if poorly expressed, can be modified along the way. Stage 1 and 2 are what Checkland (1999, p. 165) refers to as the 'expression' stages whose purpose is to reflect on the expressed problem presented in the requirements, and it is often found to be difficult in practice.
- *Stage 3:* The outcome of this stage should be a 'root definition'. Checkland (1999, pp. 166-167) explains 'root definition' by choosing the 'human activity systems' that are relevant to the problem and elaborating on the nature of the systems selected. It is this 'root definition' that forms the fundamentals for the concept model. Checkland also describes human activity systems as systems whose members work under a certain understanding of common objectives, but at the same time individuals play specific and distinct roles that change and are continuously negotiated (1999, pp. 115-116). When building a root definition, the following elements, also known as CATWOE, need to be included:
    - *Customer* – Ones most affected by the project, either positively or negatively.
    - *Actors* – Ones responsible and accountable for carrying out the project.
    - *Transformation* – Processes responsible for converting input into output of the project

    - *Weltanschauung ('world view')* – The number of views depends on the number of relevant 'human activity systems' identified as they all may have different understanding of the project along with different type of influence on the project.
    - *Owner* – One who ones the project.
    - *Environment* – Context in which the project is taking place accompanied by constrains it may place a project under.
- *Stage 4:* In this stage a concept model is created, with elements from the root definition built into it. However, there are several concept models that can be built in this stage, as there should be many options or alternatives to choose from. The model essentially should contain the objective of the project as well as the actions on how to get to it.
- *Stage 5:* In this stage models from stage 4 are benchmarked against the defined customer requirements in finding the one that addressees them in the most suitable way.
- *Stage 6:* One of the models is chosen as the most appropriate one.
- *Stage 7:* Once it has been selected, the model is used and implemented.

Alderman et al. (2005) suggest the use of sense-making—from which soft system methodology stemmed—as a tool useful for the project definition phase. Sense-making, according to Alderman et al. (2005, p. 381), serves for making sense of meanings by deconstructing and reconstructing them, negotiating and discussing them and arriving to a common understanding. They argue that sense-making is necessary in order to get a better realization of what the project represents for multiple project participants and stakeholders, by focusing on different meanings and particular perspectives of the stakeholders (Alderman et al., 2005, p. 382).

Last but not least, the approach presented by Winter and Szczepanek (2009) is in line with both Checkland (1999) and Neal (1995) in terms of having to look at the project from different perspectives. Winter and Szczepanek (2009) do not focus on the project definition phase exclusively, but their views can nevertheless be applied to the project definition phase since it is an integral part of a project lifecycle. Their work has been inspired by the seminal work of Gareth Morgan (1998), "Images of Organizations". In the understanding that projects are basically a continuous flux of social events with different stakeholders viewing projects differently, several 'images' of a project are suggested. They promote an intentional use of these images as they can help understand the underlying assumptions, believes, and patterns that different project stakeholders have, resulting in better overall understanding of the project and what it represents to different stakeholders. They define seven core images: *social, political, intervention, value creation, development, organizational* and *change* (p.8). They also accentuate the fact that the images presented should not be used as alternatives between themselves; rather all of them should be used if possible, even though certain projects may not require all. The intention of these images is to serve as triggers to different kind of thinking about the projects, and they should be applied according to the role a stakeholder assumes in the project. Put differently, "different images will be relevant to different people in different situations" (pp. 8-9).

For example, they (Winter and Szczepanek,2009, p. 97) suggest that projects, as a whole should be seen as intervention processes (Figure 5), specially "in messy front-end situations". Unlike the mainstream understanding of projects which start with a specific

objective to be achieved, the intervention *image* of projects begins with a problematical situation to be improved, as objectives have not yet been set. By problematical situation, the authors refer to such situations where there are different opinions and little or no agreement on the issues and actions needed, akin to Whelton and Ballard's(2002, p. 2) concept of "wicked problems".

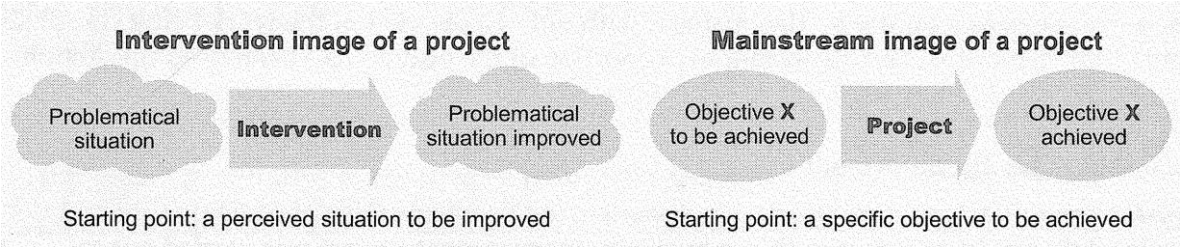

Figure 5. Intervention image compared to mainstream image. Source: Winter & Szczepanek, 2009, p. 97.

Frameworks and approaches elaborated above portray the shift in focus from hard elements to more soft elements of the project by focusing more on people, and involving social, economic, political and environmental factors, as opposed to the strict engineering-based approach that was mostly concerned with aiming to deliver the project in respect to 'the iron triangle'. Nogeste and Walker (2005, p. 55) confirm this as they argue that parameters comprising this 'iron triangle' (time, cost, and quality of project outputs) are being complemented by more intangible outcomes that result in added value for the project stakeholders.

2.2.4 Importance of project definition phase

Morris (1997, p. 219) was again one of the first to call attention to the importance of the project definition phase, pointing out that if objectives are not set clearly enough or the strategic planning is underdeveloped, the project is in grave danger of experiencing serious problems along the way. In this view, the "early definition stages set the strategic framework" (Morris, 1998, p. 5) from which the project develops.

Känkönen, (1999) supports Morris in this by stating "the project definition process has great potential to improve significantly the success of the whole project" (p. 625). Poor definition can mean that the end result does not live up to the expectations of the stakeholders while (Cano & Lidón, 2011, p. 525) argue that project definition presents one the most influential phases to project success. Whelton et al. (2002,) are on the same page, as they deem early phases critical due to the fact that up to "80% of a product can be specified" at that time (p. 198). Williams and Samset (2010, p. 38) confirm this criticality by implying that the choice of project concept, which takes place in the early stages of the project, is of critical importance to the overall success of it. They go on to argue that this is likely due to the consequences in the later stages that are the result of the decisions made in this phase, however, noting that it is precisely in these early stages of the project when the amount of information is the lowest (Williams and Samset, 2010, p. 39). Similarly, in PMBOK (PMI, 2008, p. 17), cost of changes and the stakeholder influence and overall uncertainty follows the opposite trajectories, which shows that decisions wrongly made in project definition can end up affecting the project severely (Figure 6).

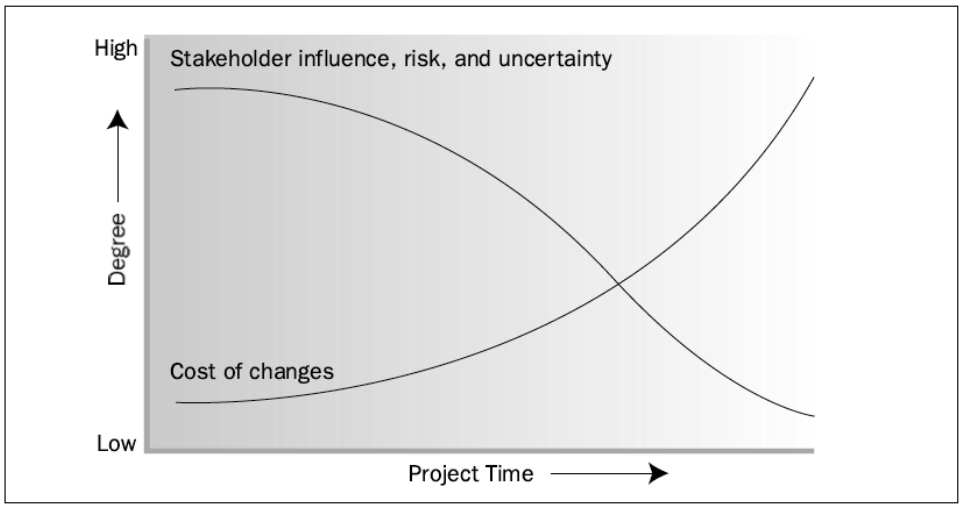

Figure 6.Impact of Variable Based on Project Time. Source: PMI, 2008, p. 17

Ironically, these same authors acknowledge that the early phases of the project have received less attention in the project management literature, and are therefore poorly modeled especially compared to the later stages (Cano & Lidón, 2011, p. 39; Kähkönen, 1999, p. 626). Besner and Hobbs (2006a, p. 47) also reason that PMI is partly to blame for this situation, and promote the idea of including the initiation phase in the project management domain due to the influence it poses for ultimate project success. Ashmore's argument (1997, cited in Williams et al. 2009, p. 126) is that the most open and in-need-of-research field in project management is the front-end of a project as he stresses the need of developing and implementing "soft" methodologies (e.g. sense-making, soft system methodology) in this phase of the project.

In this section of the literature review, the concept of project definition as seen from different perspectives and by different authors has been presented, ranging from the ones that regard it only in terms of hard elements of the project to newer perspectives that take into consideration the soft elements and wider context of the project. Depending on the authors' view of this early phase, different issues, challenges and problems concerned with this stage are identified and elaborated on. These are the affairs that project managers need to address in the early phases, and even though several models that help dealing with these are revealed in this section, authors take different angles on tackling these issues. Nonetheless, the relevance of this phase is deemed as highly important, if not crucial, to the overall project success, and this is the one point where all authors agree. At the same time, they concur that this is one of the least investigated topics in project management and encourage researchers to probe it and to shed light on it as their contribution to the project management field. As stated before, this has to some extent informed our choice of the topic.

2.3 Project definition phase in management consulting

It can be seen that all of the problems plaguing this phase are closely related to the stakeholders involved in the project, therefore anticipating these, is vital in addressing these issues. This is certainly also the case when talking about the major challenges encountered in the client-consultant relationship. After all, the client system and the consultant system comprise the most relevant stakeholders in any management consulting engagement. Both management consulting and project management literature

suggest that practitioners—as consultants and project managers—are obliged to deal with all this, but the focus has not been on the particular things they do. On one side, management consulting literature focuses on the importance of the client-consultant relationship, and though it recognizes its relevance, the attention, as seen in this chapter, is more on understanding the sources of these conflicts. It indeed suggests having these in mind when managing the initial phases, but they fail to suggest what practitioners might do in more hands-on terms. On the other hand, project management literature recognizes the importance of the front-end though it deems it as under investigated. General frameworks are proposed, nonetheless, to ensure the success of the early phases.

Before moving forward, and having reviewed the literature in management consulting and project definition phase, it is helpful to integrate both to foresee where the front-end of project lies within the process of management consulting. Figure 7 aligns the mainstream concept of projects with a broader concept that includes the project definition phase—the latter being our preferred concept of projects. Then, these are compared with a typical management consulting process. Although several versions of this process are introduced and compared in this chapter, we have taken that proposed by Kubr (2002, p. 21) given its recognition as a seminal body of knowledge by the Swedish Association of Management Consultants. Based on the concepts and definitions studied, the front-end of the project in management consulting would typically constitute the phases of Entry, Diagnosis, and partially, Action Planning.

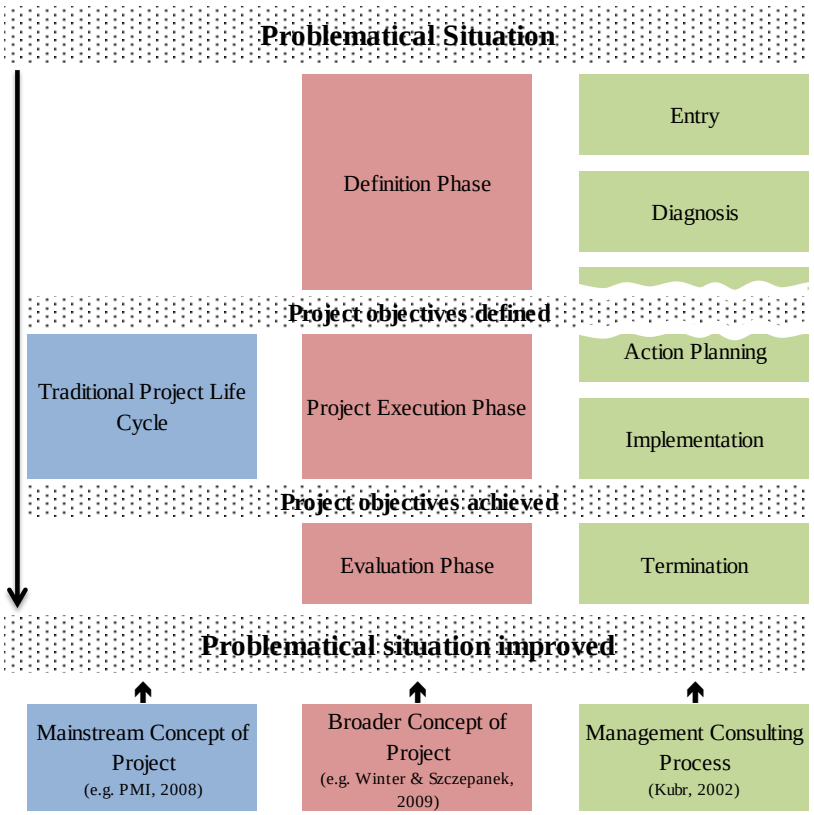

Figure 7.The front-end in the management consulting process. Source: Developed from the Literature review by the authors.

The preliminary diagnosis and the main diagnosis of the situation occur in the phases of Entry and Diagnosis, respectively. Hence it is during this period that the consultant

learns what the client is aiming at and what the problem faced truly is. Note that high-level plans and approaches to be followed are indeed proposed during the Entry phase; for one thing the client's decision accepting the overall engagement (usually in the form of a contract) happens at the end of this phase. Even so, the diagnosis effort continues during the second phase and only by the end of this, the information needed to develop a solution to the problem is presumably in hand. At this point the uncertainty and ambiguity of what has to be solved has been handled, leaving only the issue of how to go about it. This is the main matter of the third phase, Action Planning, where alternatives of solutions are generated and suggested to the client. Once the client makes a decision on the path to follow, then the objectives of the project are finally set and only then an implementation plan can be drafted. This last point (i.e. planning specific tasks for implementation) might as well be already part of the planning processes in the project execution phase. For this reason, we do not include Action Planning phase entirely in the front-end of the project.

We believe that the project management discipline provides hints and suggestions of how to go about the challenges of these early phases of projects. To further explore this, the concept of practices has to be introduced and developed.

2.4 Practices

Throughout project management history, numerous tools, techniques and methods have been developed or introduced—sometimes from other fields of knowledge—to cover the different aspect of the management of projects (White & Fortune, 2002, p. 1). As a consequence, a very wide array of techniques and tools exists in today's project management practice that is discussed in academic journals, textbooks and bodies of knowledge (Besner & Hobbs, 2006b, p. 337). Since the particular interest of this research is to explore the practices used to reconcile stakeholders' perspectives at the front-end of projects, this section focuses on the tools, techniques, models, methods, and methodologies particular to the mentioned phase and purpose. For simplicity reasons, and because definitions vary in the literature, the terms tools, techniques, models, methods and methodologies are sometimes used interchangeably in this thesis. For our purpose, all of these terms are contained in the concept of "practices" which, as specified in the introductory chapter, refers to what practitioners generally do in their day-to-day life when managing projects.

Project management has a multidisciplinary nature that trespasses the boundaries of innumerable areas of knowledge—from natural to social sciences (Smyth & Morris, 2007, p. 424). Yet it is argued that project management is fundamentally generic since its principles are applicable to various industries (Wirth, 1992, cited in Besner & Hobbs 2006b, p. 337). The PMBOK Guide is a perfect example of this, as it emphasizes that "project management processes apply globally and across industry groups" (PMI, 2008, p. 38). This contradiction might represent a problem in trying to differentiate the practices that are relevant to a specific phase, industry and purpose, mainly because this largely depends on how practitioners integrate practices to the project management process (Thamhain, 1998, cited in Besner & Hobbs 2006a, p. 38). Attempts have been made (Besner & Hobbs, 2006a, 2006b, 2008; Fortune et al., 2011; White & Fortune, 2002) to explore to which extent these tools, methods and techniques are actually being used by practitioners, together with the area of application and the purpose they aim.

Paradoxically, Besner and Hobbs's(2006a, p. 348; 2006b, p. 44) findings suggest that the overall project management toolbox does not vary much across different contexts—since the tools are based on a generic practice, such as PMBOK—while, at the same time, differences are indeed observed in their degree of use depending on the level of organizational maturity and the type of project. For example, business services projects, compared to IT and engineering & construction projects tend to undermine traditional project management tools for planning and control to focus more on team building and on the strategic front-end.

This leads to questioning the variations of the use of project management practices throughout the project life cycle. It is believed that all kinds of projects go though some sort of generic sequence of *distinct* phases. Nevertheless there is a great deal of controversy over when a project precisely starts, when it finishes, and the number and nature of the phases in which the project is divided (Wideman, 2004, pp. 1, 20). The study by Besner and Hobbs(2006a) looks into the perceived value of tools and techniques with regard to the project life-cycle. In spite of the blurriness in the character and boundaries of the project phases, they have found statistically significant differences from one to another. In particular, "the most obvious observation […] is that the initiation phase is very different from the other phases [as] the activities of this phase are quite specific" (p. 45). This partly supports the relevance that this investigation claims to have.

For the purpose of our research, it is important to identify the *project management practices* employed during the definition phase of projects to ensure a shared vision of those involved. By project management practices we do not imply exclusively those originally developed within the project management discipline (e.g. Work Breakdown Structure), but also any tool, technique, model, method or methodology suggested by project management literature regardless if the practice in question has been borrowed from another field of knowledge (e.g. brainstorming). Considering this, a stepwise approach (Figure 8) has been followed to:

(1) extract the practices generally suggested by project management literature; and
(2) discriminate, by means of a specific set of criteria, those potentially used to reconcile the views and expectations of stakeholders.

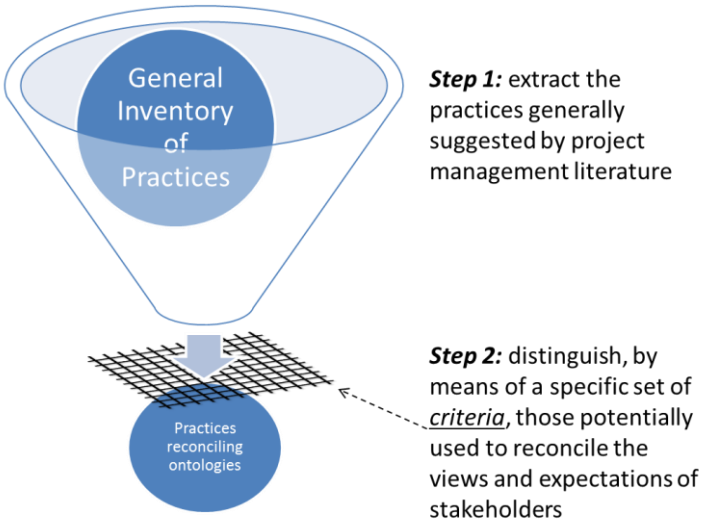

Figure 8.Stepwise approach for discerning of project management practices.

2.4.1 Project management practices in general

The first step of the mentioned approach requires a survey of the literature in order to extract and build an inventory of practices. This inventory of all project management practices that we have identified can be found in Appendix 1. The main sources for this are discussed next.

To begin with, the Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMI, 2008, p. 37) states that the application of project management requires the management of appropriate processes. A process is composed of (1) inputs, (2) outputs and (3) tools and techniques that transform the first into the second. The guide suggests and describes briefly the tools and techniques for each of the 42 project management processes.

Fortune et al. (2011) looked at the "the 'real world' experiences of people active in project management [to] determine the extent to which those involved in the management of projects actually made use of the methods and techniques that were available" (p. 553). Built on a previous study (White & Fortune, 2002), their survey includes practitioners from Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom. In a particular section of the questionnaire, methods, methodologies, tools and techniques are presented to respondents with the objective of evaluating the frequency of use and other variables. More than 60 options were pulled out from standard textbooks on project management, "chosen for inclusion because it was known they were in widespread use in one or more of the three countries" (Fortune et al., 2011, p. 562). They were grouped in the following categories: PM methodologies, PM software, PM tools, decision making techniques, risk assessment tools, and information communication technology (ICT) support tools.

In a series of studies, Besner and Hobbs (2006a, 2006b, 2008) selected 70 project management tools and techniques with the intention of better understanding project management practice. The list was formed from PMI's PMBOK Guide and other sources, and it includes only project-specific tools and techniques (like WBS and project charter) and not general processes (such as training programs). Similar to us, these authors "considered tools and techniques to be those things that project management practitioners use to 'do their job' and to 'execute a process'" (Besner & Hobbs, 2006b, p. 339).

In the book "Images of Projects", Winter and Szczepanek(2009) address the complex reality of projects and use the concept of 'root images' as means to make sense of projects and programs. The section concerned with the project definition phase in this chapter explains this in detail. Here, it is only important to highlight that, in the authors' view, project management mainstream tools and techniques support a traditional image of projects—originated in engineering and construction—that no longer satisfice the reality of the other kind of projects that are strongly embedded on a 'flux' of social events, such as organizational transformation projects or educational programs (pp. 5-7). The book develops each of the seven core images (perspectives) of projects and relates them to specific tools, frameworks, models and techniques from areas such as project management, change management, operations management, strategic management and organizational development (p. 33). A total of 30 options are outlined explicitly while some other approaches can be found within the text. Though it is believed that there is no *right* image but only *relevant* images to any given situation, they do suggest that the use can depend on the phase of the project life cycle—for

instance, when conceptualizing the outcomes and outputs of a new project in its initiation phase (pp. 38-39).

In several of his works, Thiry (2001, 2002, 2007) suggests that Value Management (VM) is an effective methodology that can be applied to project management in view of ensuring the realization of benefits. "Whether in programmes or projects, VM is used to achieve 'best value-for-money' and to increase the achievement of stakeholder expectations" (Thiry, 2001, p. 71). The VM process is grounded in the concept of sense-making which, in this case, is prompted by considering *function* as a frame of reference (i.e. functional analysis). For this, a functional analysis 'toolbox' is suggested that comprises the techniques that the value practitioner will use to elicit stakeholder expectations and to construct a shared vision of the desired situation (pp. 74-75).

The rest of the practices were selected from various other sources (Alderman et al., 2005; Kähkönen, 1999; Neal, 1995; Whelton et al., 2002; Örtengren, 2004) that have already been previously discussed in this chapter, specifically in the section examining the Project Definition Phase.

2.4.2 Project management practices that reconcile stakeholders' perspectives

The inventory on project management practices resulted in a list of more than 100 practices (Appendix 1). However, our second step requires discerning those that are potentially used to help tackling specific problems that address the reconciliation process between stakeholders, during the definitional phase of projects. Even though there is not one, agreed view on the meaning of the project definition phase, in order to be able to identify and compare the practices from the literature to what is actually being used in the real world, it is necessary to take a stance on what the most used practices in this phase are. Whether or not the literature explicitly states that the practices are used in this particular phase, the selected practices comply with the criteria that have been developed for this purpose. The criteria, which will be presented now, stem from the literature. After careful consideration, these have been developed based on the most prevalent problems affecting this phase.

Project management practices that we believe help reconciling different stakeholder perspectives, and are potentially used in the project definition phase, are the ones that serve at least one of the following purposes:

1. Identifies and defines the problem
2. Identifies the stakeholders
3. Identifies the needs, requirements and different perspectives of the aforementioned stakeholders
4. Harmonizes the different views/perspectives of the stakeholders
5. Takes the strategy of the (client's) organization into consideration
6. Translates the (intangible) needs and requirements into (intangible or tangible) concepts and solutions
7. Acknowledges the wider context (e.g. political, economic, social, technological or other factors) of the project
8. Defines and sets the objectives

Please note that harmonization of different stakeholders' views (point 4) is only part of the process of reconciliation of client-consultant ontologies, rather than the same thing.

The criteria proposed encompasses some of the relevant challenges that literature points out that need to be resolved in this project definition phase. Of course, depending on how project definition is looked at, some of the abovementioned points might not be considered. Regardless of this, we believe that this provides a comprehensive and relevant list of points that practices employed in this phase need to address. Although they are based on the problems and challenges, they clearly serve several purposes. Moreover, it is important to note that practices do not exclusively serve only one of the aforesaid activities, but can actually be used in several.

After identifying and consolidating project management practices from the said sources and filtering them by applying the criteria developed above, the resulting list of project management practices used in the project definition phase has come down to 60(Table 1).

List of project management practices that potentially help reconciling stakeholders' perspectives	
1st and 2nd level thinking	Milestone planning
1st and 2nd relationship model	Mind maps
Activity Model	Moderator-Facilitator Role
Agile Board	Multi-character Model
Bid Documents	Observations
CATWOE analysis	Outputs-Outcome Alignment
Cause and effect diagram	Product Breakdown Structure
Client acceptance form	Project Charter
Cognitive Mapping Approach	Prototypes
Cost/benefit analysis	Quality Function Deployment
Database of lessons learned	Questionnaires and Surveys
Decision analysis	Requirement Analysis
Decision tree	Responsibility assignment matrix
Delphi Method	Rich pictures
Expressed preferences	Scope Statement
Facilitated workshops	Sense-making
Feasibility study	SMART
Financial measurement tools	PM Software
Focus groups	Spiral Development Model
Functional Analysis	Social Network Diagram
Gap Analysis	Soft Systems Methodology
Group Creativity Techniques (Brainstorming, Nominal Groups Technique, Idea/Mind Mapping, Affinity diagram)	Stakeholder Analysis
	Statement of work
	SWOT
Group Decision Making Techniques	Team building event
Iceberg model	Tribal interests model
Interviews	Value analysis
Joint Application Development (or Design)	Value Chain
Kick-off meeting	Voice of the Customer
Lesson learned/post-mortem	Work Breakdown Structure (WBS)
Logical Framework Approach	Workshops

Table 1.Project management practices that potentially reconcile stakeholders' perspectives

We would like to point out that this does not mean that the practices that are not listed above are not used in this phase, nor that the one listed cannot and are not used in other phases of the project. It simply means that based on the literature reviewed and complying with the criteria underpinned by the literature, we believe that the aforementioned practices are or might be performed in this stage of the process and help reconcile different ontologies that may exist between stakeholders involved in a project (e.g. client and consultant). Also, we acknowledge that some of the practices are similar or overlapping to a certain extent.

This chapter has overviewed the topics of management consulting and project definition phase, in hope of clarifying how the latter is a concern of the former. Issues and challenges from both fields have been discussed making evident that the sort of problems that management consultants face in the early stages of their assignments, are in effect analogous to the matters addressed by the definitional phase of projects—ultimately, the reconciliation of stakeholders' ontologies. Additionally, we have shown that the front-end of projects can be mapped to the early phases of the management consulting process. Still, there is little indication of what management consulting practitioners routinely do to deal with this phase. In view of exploring this, relevant project management practices—that potentially serve while defining a project—have been distinguished with the objective of completing the theoretical frame of reference that would assist us on answering our research questions. All subsequent chapters of this study are informed by the content of this literature review.

3. Research Methodology

In this chapter, the research methodology governing this thesis will be explored. This implies the explanation and justification of the research philosophy, the approach, the research strategy, the research choice, the time horizon of the study, along with the techniques and procedures regarding the data collection and data analysis. The chapter concludes by addressing the reliability and validity of the research, as well as the ethical considerations that need to be taken into account.

3.1 Positioning of the study in project management research

We believe that it is significant to explicitly state the stances that we, as researchers, have taken in writing this piece of research. From an epistemological stance this research employs *interpretivism*, as we aim to understand the meanings and interpretations that management consultants attach to the events in the explored context, as well as the actions that are consequences of those interpretations. From an ontological point of view, we adopt *constructionism* as we believe that understanding the actions taken by social actors depends both on management consultants who represent the focus of this research, but also on ourselves, the researchers, as we try to make sense and interpret their actions. In terms of research design we employ a *cross-sectional research design*, as we are interested in getting to know the views and perspectives of respondents in one point of time, but from more than one case (organization/consultant). In other words, we will employ a *survey research strategy*, collecting the data via a mono method—*semi-structured interviews*. We will focus on the *qualitative data* collected, as our goal is to explore the problem and context previously presented. This is in line with the *exploratory research strategy* that we have embraced for the purpose of this thesis. Semi-structured interviews allow us to focus on the questions that help answering the research questions best, but at the same time are flexible enough to allow asking additional questions probing the area even further, when necessary. All of our choices along with the reasons that informed these choices are presented and elaborated more thoroughly in the following sections of this chapter. Additionally, a graphical representation of the choices made is given in Figure 9.

This thesis focuses on the perceptions of Swedish management consultants of the practices, problems, and importance and meaning in the early phases of consulting engagements. For this purpose, management consulting engagements are looked at as projects and management consultants as project managers, regardless of the existence or lack of formal education in project management.

When compared to other project management studies, where a largely positivist approach is dominant (Bredillet, 2008, cited in Biedenbach & Müller, 2011, p. 82; Smyth and Morris, 2007, p. 426) our study is different, as it takes an interpretivist approach. However, our research is in accordance to the new results, presented by Biedenbach and Müller (2011, p. 95) who after studying the works presented at the IRNOP conferences in 1994, 2000 and 2007, came to the result that the most dominant epistemology is interpretivism and that the prevalent ontology is subjectivism, with a clear reliance on qualitative methods and data.

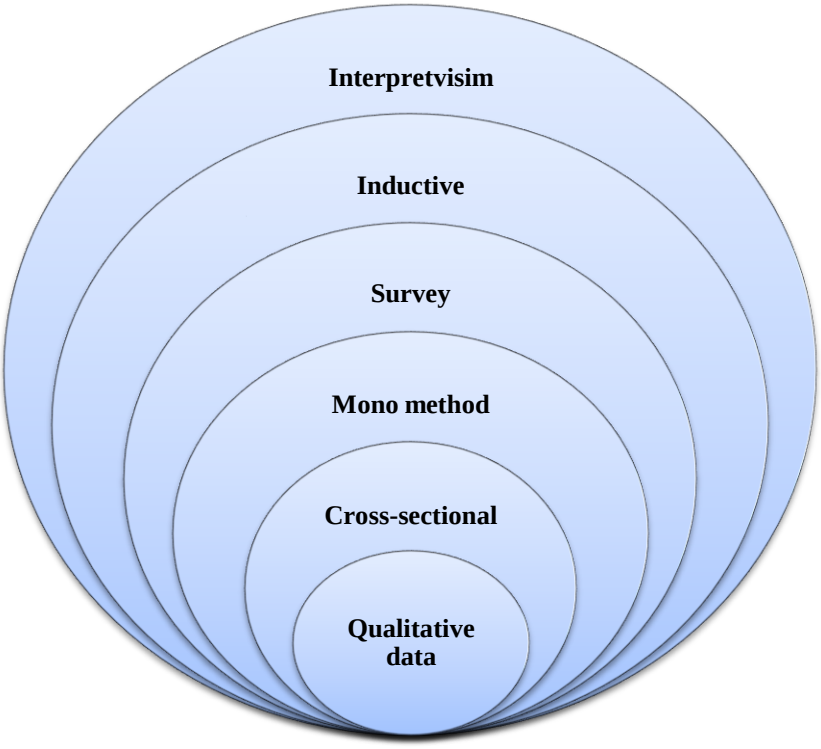

Figure 9.The research onion adapted for the purpose of this thesis

3.1.1 Research philosophy

The fundamentals of any social research can be found in defining the philosophical views that researchers adopt, by considering and embracing the most suitable philosophy that informs how researchers view the world or how they believe that knowledge is developed (Saunders et al. 2009, p. 108). They view it as a critical one, since it determines all following aspects of the conducted research.

Both Saunders et al. (2009, pp. 113-116) and Bryman and Bell (2011, pp. 15-17) agree on the three possible research philosophies: *positivism*, *realism* and *interpretivism*.

Interpretivismdisagrees that objects in social science studies can be examined in the same way as in the natural sciences and that researchers involved in social science research need to understand the "subjective reality" of social interaction (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 16). This involvement of researchers in understanding the relations and roles and their attachment to the object of study is seen as a cornerstone of the interpretivist approach (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 116; Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 8). This implies that researchers themselves have their own understanding of concepts and therefore influence the way research is conducted. This epistemological view is supported and adopted for the present thesis as we believe that it is the most suitable for understanding the complex world of management consulting.

In terms of ontology, there are two distinct streams that are identified: *constructionism* and *objectivism*. Objectivism implies that "social phenomena and their meanings have an existence that is independent of social actors" (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 22) while constructivism infers that "social actors […] may place many different interpretations on the situation they find themselves [in]" (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 111). We think that

taking a constructivist view—that is, understanding the different interpretations of situations, the actions driven by those interpretations, and the different meanings social actors attach to these actions while interacting with their environment—would serve us best by relying on the management consultants' views, the roles they take, the relationships they forge and the meanings they attach to relevant concepts. Ultimately, the contributions provided by consulting practitioners represent their own interpretation of reality.

3.1.2 Research approach

Having defined the research philosophy underpinning this research, it is necessary to define and adopt a certain research approach. In essence, there are two that can be followed: *deductive* and *inductive*(Saunders et al., 2009, pp. 124-126; Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 11).

Inductive research entails the creation of theories from findings and observations gathered from data. As Bryman and Bell denote (2011, p. 13), inductive approach produces theory as an outcome of research, instead of it being a starting point in which hypotheses generated from the theory are meant to be proven in a new or different context, as used in deductive approach. Induction requires from researchers to first observe social phenomena of interest and derive conclusions, and to produce theories based on the collected and analyzed data (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 124; Sekaran, 2003, p. 27). Walliman (2005, p. 191) argues that this approach is useful when researchers' main concern is the context in which social phenomena take place, along with suggesting that a smaller sample is more appropriate. Thus, we have deemed inductive approach as the most suitable primary option for the purpose of this paper.

Moreover, it should also be noted that inductive approach usually follows interpretivist philosophies (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 126), making an additional point in why we have decided to adopt this approach.

3.1.3 Research strategy

Before going into research strategy, it is necessary to define and explain the research purpose since the choice of strategy is related to the purpose the research is to achieve. Saunders et al. (2009, p. 118) tie the purpose with the nature of the research question highlighting three possible types: *exploratory*, *explanatory* and *descriptive.*

As elaborated in the introductory chapter, this research aims to explore the different practices used in the initial phase of consulting projects and the nature of these practices. Two of the three principal ways of conducting exploratory studies, as identified by Saunders et al. (2009, p. 140) will be used—search of the literature and interviewing subject matter 'experts'. An exploratory study allows researchers to change the direction of the study as new data emerges and new insight is gathered, however, it does not imply an absence of direction but rather that the focus of the study gets narrower as the research progresses (Adams & Schvaneveldt, 1991, cited in Saunders et al. 2009, p. 140; Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 393).

Regarding research design, Bryman and Bell (2011, p. 53) state that cross-sectional design implies collecting data from more than one source and in one point in time by collecting quantitative or qualitative data, aiming to detect patterns. Furthermore, they

argue that researchers employing cross-sectional design are interested in variation in respect of people, organization or countries. Saunders et al. (2009, p. 155) support the idea of cross-sectional research, as many researchers are time-constrained in their research endeavors. The goal of the researcher is to try and examine the relationship forged between variables designed in the research. However, clear definition of causality is not possible by applying this research design as it focuses solely in a specific point in time. Nevertheless the establishment of relationships is certainly possible (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.54).

Although cross-sectional studies often involve surveys, which are closely related to collection of quantitative data, they may also entail the use of qualitative methods, such as interviews conducted over a short period of time (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 155). Since we are more interested in the collection of qualitative data, semi-structured interviews within cross-sectional design will be employed. This was also found as a predominate method in a research conducted by Bryman (2006, cited in Saunders et al. 2009, p. 153).

Still, Bryman and Bell (2011, p. 54) do acknowledge the issue of internal validity that is entangled by applying this research design. This issue will be discussed in the following sections of this chapter.

In regards to the research strategy, we believe that the most appropriate strategy for this thesis is a survey strategy. According to Saunders et al. (2009, p. 144) survey strategy is usually employed in exploratory research such as ours, as it is concerned with asking a general array of questions—who, what, where how much and how many questions—which is especially helpful when the existing knowledge in the area of study is limited. They also argue that it is one of the most common strategies used in business and management research. Bryman and Bell (2011, p. 54) actually relate the term 'survey' to a research that uses a cross-sectional design, and uses either questionnaire or structured interviews for obtaining data. Although our choice of data collection diverges, our study is a survey since it "is a procedure used to collect primary data from individuals" (Hair et al., 2003, p. 130).

3.1.4 Data Collection

Data collection process, or data generation as referred by Mason (1996, p. 35), is an integral and a critical part of the research process. Researchers can choose to apply either one or multiple data collection techniques. Saunders et al. (2009, p. 152) refer to this as *mono-method* or *multiple-methods* choices. Moreover, within multiple-methods they differentiate mixed-methods (when both quantitative and qualitative data is collected) from multi-methods (when only quantitative or qualitative type of data is collected). For the purpose of this thesis the focus will be on collecting, or generating, qualitative data by conducting interviews. Thus, a mono method will be utilized.

Interviews were chosen as the most appropriate instrument since they allow researchers to probe a certain area of interest thoroughly. Saunders et al. (2009, p. 320) categorize interviews into three classes: *structured*, *semi-structured* and *unstructured interviews*. The most used in qualitative research are semi-structured and unstructured interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 465), such that King (2004, cited in Saunders et al. 2009, p. 320) refers to them as 'qualitative research interviews'.

More specifically, semi-structured interviews are deemed as the most adequate ones for the purpose of this work. Cooper and Schindler (2008, cited in Saunders et al. 2009, pp. 323-324) encourage the use of these 'qualitative research interviews' when an exploratory study is performed as they allow interviewers to ask interviewees to explain meanings that they attach to events and actions. Furthermore, the choice of words by interviewees and the possibility to probe them in order to understand what they mean is facilitated by using these types of interviews, which is in line with the interpretivist epistemological stand that we have taken.

Semi-structured interviews are characterized by:

- Informal style
- Topic-centered or narrative approach
- The assumption that data are generated in interaction between interviewee and interviewer

(Mason, 1996, p. 38)

Mason (1996, p. 40) also considers them flexible as they allow interviewers to tailor-make interviews to a certain extent, depending on the "specific dynamics of each interaction", as data collected may be contextual or interactional. This flexibility in semi-structure interviews is evidenced by the possibility to ask questions beside the ones that were determined prior to the interview (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 467). Semi-structured interviews are most suitable when questions are either complex or open-ended and where the order and logic of questioning may vary form one interview to another (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 324). It should also be stated that sometimes categories of data collection will not be strictly distinctive and a certain degree of overlap is to be expected (Walliman, 2005, p. 270).

3.1.5 Sampling

Sampling implies selecting from the entire population a certain pool, or segment of population, that will be used for the purposes of obtaining data. Sampling is seen as necessary when collecting data from the entire population is impossible or impractical. This is useful as it can save money and time for researchers embarking on data collection. However, this is by no means an unstructured and undefined process, as certain guidelines need to be followed depending on the sampling technique chosen. There are two main options: *probability or representative sampling* and *non-probability or judgmental sampling*(Saunders et al., 2009, p. 213).

Non-probability sampling implies that probability of each case being selected is unknown, and that the researchers' subjective judgment is used in purpose of selecting the sample. This means that there is no possible way of statistically generalizing the findings when using this type of sample, but that it is not to say that generalization in its own is not possible (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 213). Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 27) state that qualitative samples need to be purposive instead of random and promote non-probability sampling approach in qualitative research.

Therefore, for the purpose of this research, we have chosen to use the *purposive* sampling. Saunders et al. (2009, p. 238) suggest *purposive sampling technique* because, as the term suggests, it allows the researcher to use his own judgment in selecting the

most suitable respondents. They argue that when selecting this type of sampling technique, the focus should be on selecting the ones that help answering the research questions.

This is in line with Mason's (1996, p. 93) theoretical sampling who explains it as the sampling technique that helps to answer the theory in question.

In terms of sample size, we will strive towards getting as many interviews as possible with one important thing in mind, theoretical saturation. However, as noted by Miles and Huberman (1994) "qualitative researchers usually work with small samples of people, nested in their context and studied in depth" (p. 27). As Saunders et al. (2009, p. 235) explain theoretical saturation is reached when no or few new insights of relevance are obtained in interviews.

3.2 Data Analysis

According to Sapsford and Jupp (1996, cited in Kakabadse et al. 2006, p. 449), some authors consider the process of analyzing data as the most difficult and cumbersome part of qualitative research. Usually, when involving interviews this is a two-step process: *interview transcription* and *data categorization.*

3.2.1 Interview transcription

Saunders et al. (2009, p. 485) state that the process can turn out to be very cumbersome for researchers as interviews are usually audio recorded and afterwards transcribed into words. However, they go on to state, that it is not just what is said, but also how it is said, that requires additional time and concentration on the researchers part. Silverman (2006, p. 114) states that many authors use interviews because it allows them to investigate interviewees' voices and experiences. Byrne (2004, cited in Silverman, 2006, p. 117) argues that these are not real facts but actually just representations of an interviewee's beliefs and perspectives. Nevertheless, Holstein and Gubrium (1997, cited in Silverman 2006, p. 130) stress the concern over both what the meanings of the representations are as well as how they are represented. They go on to state that this is a result of the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee, which is in line with the constructionist view that these authors employ. Saunders et al. (2009, p. 485) also advise that transcription should be performed as soon as the interview is finished as the researchers' memory of the interview is still fresh and helps avoiding work overload, especially when acknowledging their estimate of six to ten hours to transcribe one hour of audio recording.

3.2.2 Data categorization

As part of the qualitative analysis we will use processes for summarizing and categorizing data (Saunders et al., 2009, pp. 490-492). Summarizing helps in outlining the main topics or themes that have emerged during the interview, while categorizing is done in order to have a better structure and organization of the topics, which in turn helps in clarifying and identifying meaningful relationships between them. In helping with the categorization of data, certain pre-established categories will be used in order to answer the research questions and achieve research objectives. Template analysis, as outlined by Saunders et al. (2009, p. 505), combines both inductive and deductive approach to qualitative analysis as codes and categories can be both pre-determined

(based on the literature reviewed) as well as additionally added (as they emerge from interviews). These new categories will be developed as the interviewing process is conducted. Afterwards, the process of 'unitizing' the data will be performed, which requires attaching relevant pieces of information to pre-established categories (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 493). Similarly, this is what Miles and Huberman (1994) call "data reduction process" which is concerned with "selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming data [from] field notes or transcriptions […] in such a way that conclusions can be drawn and verified" (p. 11).

We see template analysis as appropriate since it allows the data to be coded and categorized in predefined categories, which in addition can be sorted hierarchically, but also because it is flexible enough to allow new codes and categories that have arisen during the interview to be created. Besides, in addition to new codes, old ones can be discarded if found unnecessary or the scope and the hierarchical level of the code could be changed accordingly to reflect the findings from the interviews (Saunders et al., 2009, pp. 505-507)

3.3 Validity and reliability

Validity and reliability are concepts that are closely tied to the quality of quantitative research, but their relevance to the field of qualitative research has been a matter of many discussions (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 394). Saunders et al. (2009) state that reliability "refers to the extent to which data collection techniques or analysis procedures will yield consistent findings" (p. 156) while validity is defined as "the extent to which data collection method or methods accurately measure what they were intended to measure" (p. 157).

LeCompte and Goet (1982, cited in Bryman & Bell 2011, p. 395) divide both concepts and define them as follows:

- External reliability - the extent to which a study can be replicated, which is complicated to achieve considering that social settings cannot be "frozen".
- Internal reliability - questions about the existence of differences in what members of the team see and hear.
- External validity (generalizability) - deals with the extent to which generalizations are acceptable outside the research setting.
- Internal validity - explores the fit between the empirical observations and the theoretical framework of the research.

In the context of qualitative research, some authors advocate that external validity is disputed (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 158) due to the fact that, by its very nature, "qualitative findings tend to be oriented to the contextual uniqueness and significance of the social world being studied" (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 398). However, there are different levels of generalizability, according to Firestone (1993, cited in Miles and Huberman 1994, p. 279): from sample to population (which is quite hard to accomplish in qualitative studies), analytic (theory-connected) and case-to-case transfer. Schofield (1990, cited in Miles and Huberman 1994, p. 279) offers a similar classification by distinguishing between: "what is", "what may be" and "what could be". Silverman (2006, p. 304) argues that, although generalizability is not always a term coincided with qualitative research, researchers should not avoid achieving it. He goes on to argue that qualitative researchers can come closer to being able to generalize, to a certain extent,

their research by choosing an appropriate sampling technique. This is precisely how external validity is addressed in the case of this thesis as sample technique employed ensures that respondents chosen help in answering the research question by developing and testing the theory and hypothesis, as suggested by Mason (1996, pp. 93-94).

Internal validity aims to ensure that findings of the study make sense, that they are answering what they were supposed to and that they are credible to both respondents involved in the research as well as to independent readers (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 278). Literature screening has revealed that there is a heated debate on this topic and the existence of two main sides taken by LeCompte and Goetz (1982, cited in Bryman & Bell 2011, p. 395) who promote the idea of adapting reliability and validity with little change to meaning from quantitative research, while the other stance offered by Guba and Lincoln (1994, cited in Bryman & Bell 2011, p. 395) assert the notion of offering alternative ways of measuring reliability and validity. Hammersley (1992, cited in Bryman & Bell 2011, p. 399) lies somewhere in the middle as he argues that although researchers can access the social reality this is done in such a way that makes the researcher part of the representations and constructions of that world. Therefore, he believes that qualitative research field should be mainly concerned with 'plausibility' and 'credibility'. In regards to that, prevalent ideas in ensuring this seem to be by using data triangulation and/or respondent validation (Silverman, 2006, p. 291; Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.396). Bryman and Bell (2011) state that 'credibility' is achieved by following "the canons of good practice and submitting research findings to the members of the social world who were studied for confirmation that the investigator has correctly understood that social world" (p. 396). Moreover, Silverman (2006, pp. 294-295) offers additional options for researchers who are convinced of the aforementioned methods: analytical induction, constant comparative method, deviant-case analysis, comprehensive data treatment and using appropriate tabulations. Creswell (2003, p. 196) bids eight different strategies that can be used in order to check the accuracy of the findings and advises on discussing and applying one or more of them: triangulate member-checking; rich, thick description of the research; clarify the bias of the researcher; present negative and discrepant information; spend prolonged time in the researched context; use peer debriefing and use an external auditor. In our case, the internal validity is addressed by presenting a thick description of the researcher, by clarifying the concepts under investigations (in Chapter 1 and in Chapter 2) as well as by consulting with our research supervisor which to a certain extent, can be seen as an external auditor.

Reliability represents another highly debated concept in qualitative research. The concept of reliability is rooted in quantitative research (Silverman, 2006, p. 282). Its significance in the field of qualitative research field is questioned due to the characteristics and differences between the worlds quantitative and qualitative research are concerned with—natural and social worlds, respectively. Guba and Lincoln (1994, cited in Bryman & Bell 2011, p. 398) propose dependability as the parallel to reliability in the qualitative research area and argue that in order to achieve it, researchers need to keep detailed records of all phases of the research and make them accessible to other peers—a notion shared by Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 12). However, they argue that this auditing approach has not gained popularity among business and management research. Going more in depth, Silverman (2006, p. 283, 287) reviews reliability in terms of the methodologies used by the researcher: observations, texts, interviews, transcription of audio and video recording. Concerning interviews he emphasizes the importance of ensuring that all interviewees understand the question in the same way

and by making the data as verbatim as possible. This is done through tape-recording the interviews, careful transcription and presenting the long extracts in the research paper. Marshall and Rossman (1999, cited in Saunders et al. 2009, p. 328) also advise researchers to retain notes and underlying methodologies and research philosophies that can be of help to other researchers in understanding and reanalyzing data. It is exactly by tape-recording the interviews, careful transcription and keeping detailed records of the research process that we think of, at least to a certain extent, addressing reliability of our research.

3.4 Ethical considerations

Saunders et al. (2009, p. 168) state that the topic of ethics has been a prevalent one in discussions in the research community in the last decade. Many parts of the research process are subject to ethical considerations and it is therefore of great importance to be aware of the concept of ethics and the role it plays in conducting research.

Saunders et al. (2009) define ethics as the "appropriateness of your behavior in relation to the rights of those who become the subject of your work, or are affected by it" (pp. 183-184). Sekaran (2003) sees it as "a code of conduct or experienced societal norm of behavior while conducting research" (p. 17).

Diener and Crandall (1978, cited in Bryman & Bell 2011, p. 128) classify ethical principles in four categories: harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy and deception. Denzin and Lincoln (2011, p. 144) conclude that major scholarly associations have all adopted their own codes which often overlap, but are in essence broken down into following four: informed consent, deception, privacy and confidentiality and accuracy.

In ensuring that this study follows ethical standards, there are several actions that are undertaken:

- Identities of interviewees remain anonymous throughout the research, as well as the organizations to which they belong. Their data is not traceable back to either them or their organization. This is achieved by removing the personal information before the analysis of the data is performed. By maintaining the confidentiality of records and anonymity of accounts, we consider that the issue of harm to the participants as well as the issue of deception is addressed.
- All the research subjects (respondents) used in this study were informed about the nature, use and purpose of the research in which they were involved. Additionally, interviewees had the possibility of refusing to give consent or discontinue their involvement in the research at any point, thus ensuring that the issue of lack of informed consent is avoided. Also, respondents may have chosen to refuse to answer any particular question during the interview, in case they saw it as invasion of privacy or that it could be closely related to their role or to the organization.
- As for data management, interview transcripts or any other materials that can be closely related to the respondents' identity and organization are not published. Also, as Bryman and Bell (2011, p. 140) suggest, personal data from the actual content of the interview has been separated, in an effort to increase security of the data.
- All sources of secondary literature used in this paper will be acknowledged by

using proper citation and referencing, complying with the strict guidelines of the Umeå School of Business.

From the points made above, it can be concluded that the relationship based on trust, between interviewee's and researchers' needs to be established and maintained during and post-research period.

In this chapter we have set the foundations of our research methodology and elaborated on the reasons for which the choices that make up these foundations are seen as suitable. We have also established theoretical basis on how data will be collected and analyzed and tried to establish how reliability and validity of the findings will be achieved. Last, but not the least, we have elaborated on the ethical considerations necessary for any relevant academic research. In the following chapter we proceed with the actual data analysis and elaborate on everything that this encompasses.

4. Data Analysis in Practice

In this chapter the emphasis is put on the analysis of the empirical data collected. However, before diving into the analysis, we illustrate the process including participant selection, participant description, together with the structure and the protocol of the interview process. Furthermore we demonstrate the application of the template analysis, providing both predetermined and new codes that emerged during the process of interviewing. Moreover, we present the main findings of the analysis, presenting them in the same order our research questions follow. This way, we set the tone and the structure of the following chapters thus facilitating the flow both for our analysis and discussion, and for the reader's understanding.

4.1 Participant Selection

In order to explore the project management practices, we have focused on the Swedish management consultants, in an effort of to reduce the cultural effect that might be present of we would have included consultants from various countries.

In total, 33 potential respondents were contacted in hope of conducting an interview with, out of which 9 interviews were actually conducted. This represents a 27% response rate. Five interviewees have been reached through referral, other two through personal connections and the remaining two through LinkedIn. All of the interviewees were contacted via e-mail or LinkedIn which was followed by arranging the most suitable time and place for conducting the interview. Three interviews were conducted face-to-face while the other six via Skype. Also, out of 9 respondents, only two are working for the same consultancy, resulting in 8 different companies being represented in this thesis. In addition, all the consultants are external ones, meaning that they are not employees of the client company, but a separate consultancy. In terms of size of the company, 6 out of 9 consultancies are so-called 'one man shows', meaning that the consultancy is consisted of only one person. Out of the other three, two are small companies (up to 50 employees), and the remaining one is a large company with more than 1000 employees around the world. Regarding the particular specialization of the consultant, there are 5 areas represented—three consultants are IT consultants, one specializes in supply chain solutions, two have declared themselves as strategy consultants, two project managers and one as an HR and marketing expert. In addition, we found important to find out whether the consultants in question had any project management or consulting certification, as it may proveuseful in detecting patterns of practices used. To portray this in a more visual format, we provide Table 2below.

Last but not least, it is essential to note that data saturation has been reached as we believe that the content of the 9 interviews conducted is satisfactory and pursuing more interviews would result in little additional information.

Interviewee	Size of the company	Project Management background	Type of Management Consultancy
Interviewee 1	1	M.Sc., Project Management	Supply Chain
Interviewee 2	~1300	-	IT
Interviewee 3	1	PMP Certificate	IT
Interviewee 4	20	-	Project Management
Interviewee 5	1	-	IT
Interviewee 6	1	-	HR and Marketing
Interviewee 7	20	IPMA Certificate	Project Management
Interviewee 8	1	-	Strategy
Interviewee 9	1	CMC Certificate	Strategy

Table 2. Respondent information.

4.2 Interview design

The questions used for interviewing management consultants can be found in Appendix 2. The interviews consisted of three distinct parts. First, in order to set up the atmosphere, the interviewers presented themselves and elaborated on the topic to be discussed during the interview. Also, respondents were familiarized with the fact that all of their answers would strictly be used for educational purposes and that their names and organizations will not be published in the thesis, ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of data. Moreover, permission for recording was given by all 9 interviewees. The intention of this part was to gain trust between interviewees and interviewers, which should provide a basis for getting sincere and honest answers from the consultants.

The second part of the interview consisted of questions that related to the main topic of the thesis. These questions were decided on the basis of the theoretical framework reviewed in Chapter 2. A total of 14 questions were arranged in a way that they explored the wider context (i.e. the consulting process in general) in the beginning, but with time, narrowed down to specific problems and issues that consultants confront and the specific practices that they use in order to address these issues. This is illustrated in Figure10.

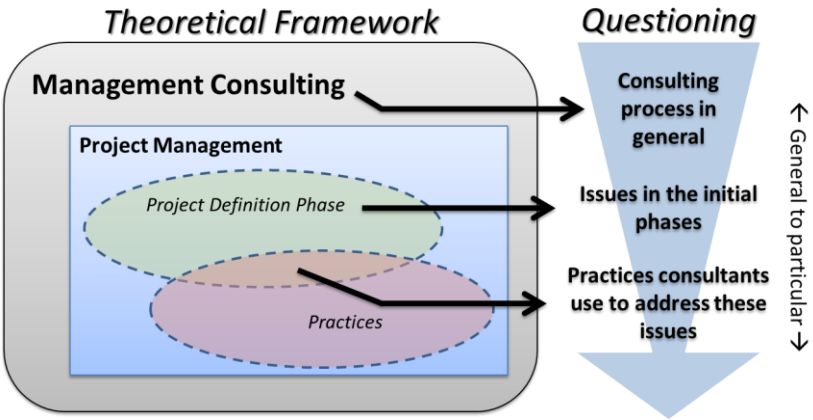

Figure 10. Question generation for interviews.

The third and last part of the interview consisted of questions that aimed in collecting basic information about the consultant and the organization (e.g. years of experience as a consultant, size of the organization, position in the company).

4.3 Interview transcription

After every conducted interview, the transcription process took place. It was a time consuming one, but in order to avoid piling up and a backlog of work, every interview was transcribed in the same day it was conducted. The interview schedule enabled this, as interviews were mostly conducted with a day of separation, when possible. Whenever there was no conflict in interview schedule, both researchers conducted the interview—this happened on 7 out of 9 occasions. Therefore, both interviewers were almost always able to take separate notes reflecting opinions of the interview that helped gain additional insight by recording details and reactions of the interviewee while still fresh in memory.

With all 9 interview transcripts and notes collected, the process of data analysis begun, starting with the categorization process.

4.4 Categorization process

Categorizing data is seen as an essential process, as we needed to reduce the initial amount of data by extracting what was seen as valuable information and put together in different chunks, or categories. In line with the selected data analysis technique, which in this case was template analysis, as elaborated in Chapter 3, some of the categories were predetermined based on the insight gathered from literature review. All of the categories were allocated with names representing the topic or theme of interest. Additionally, every topic has several subtopics attached that were identified as important and that aggregated information accordingly. This initial template, based solely on the topics and subtopics identified in the literature, is graphically depicted in Table 3. Please note that for space reasons we do not show the complete list of codes here. The third section of codes (i.e. Practices) originally includes the 60 project management practices that potentially reconcile stakeholders' perspectives. These can be found in Chapter 2(Table 1).

It has to be mentioned that Berg's (2004, p.269)coding strategy was found useful and appropriate for the purpose of coding the interviews, as he proposes *manifest* and *latent* content analysis. This has enabled us to analyze both what has been said outright by the interviewees (i.e. surface information) and what was meant implicitly. This has been pivotal to our study as large portion of practices elicited were detected from the descriptions provided by the interviewees and the deeper understanding of their meaning.

As the coding process over interview transcripts and notes progressed, new codes were introduced to categorize new findings. Additionally, some of these codes were clustered in view of facilitating the analysis of data. Miles and Huberman(1994, p. 249) explain that clustering is a meaning generation tactic that can be applied to qualitative data in order to better group and conceptualize objects that have similar characteristics. These clusters or classes may exist beforehand but can also arise from data. In our case, clustering has been utilized to aggregate practices into broader classes. These have been inductively formed considering the way interviewees use the practices as the main categorization variable. We recognize that there are drawbacks to the use of this tactic. Nonetheless it also solves two issues encountered: (1) different interviewees have different choices of words (e.g. "interviews", "meetings", "discussions", "workshops") to what we believe is in essence a very similar (if not the same) practice; (2) about half

of the detected practices were mentioned only once by a single interviewee, even though similar practices in nature were referred by others.

1. MANAGEMENT CONSULTING	2. PROJECT DEFINITION	3. PRACTICES
1.1 Phases: -Entry -Diagnosis -Actions Planning 1.2 Types of expectations: -Fuzzy -Implicit -Unrealistic 1.3 Psychological contracts: -Trust -Professional contribution -Personal style 1.4 Co-production 1.5 Intangibility 1.6 Different performing styles and working cultures 1.7 Backstage operations 1.8 Human & Socio-political issues 1.9 Potential Gap Model	2.1 Investment decision 2.2 Learning process 2.3 Identifying/ defining the problem 2.4 Identifying stakeholders 2.5 Identifying needs and requirements & perspectives 2.6 Harmonizing 2.7 Considering strategy 2.8 Translating needs and requirements into solutions 2.9 Acknowledging wider context 2.10 Defining and setting objectives 2.11 Importance of the Phase 2.12 Iterative and continuous process	60 practices identified in the literature (Table 1)

Table 3. Initial template.

These classes of practices represent an important cornerstone in our data analysis and are therefore explained in detail:

Context/Communication

Practices belonging to this class are the ones that provide a context for the consultant and client to communicate and interact. They heavily depend on the discussion and interaction between participants. These are the practices that require active participation of all sides.

Formalization

Under formalization are all the practices that help clarify and put the outcomes of discussions more concretely. These are generally documents (e.g. contracts, proposals, etc.) or even electronic ones such as PowerPoint slides or Excel sheets.

Interaction/Discussion facilitators

This category encompasses practices that help understand opinions expressed or issues raised either in a more visual way (e.g. mind maps, agile board, post-its) or by making participants question their ways and beliefs (e.g. 1st and 2nd level thinking, or facilitator discussion) and internalizing these new findings (e.g. role playing and experience based learning). They aim to spur the discussion between participants and let the conversation

flow easily and openly, helping to get to know better all sides of the project. Commonly, practices from this category go hand in hand with practices from the Context/Communication category.

Data gathering

Here, practices are used to facilitate the gathering of data without the presence of a dialogue (e.g. observations, documentation inspection).

Analysis/Information processing

Practices from this class serve for analyzing the data gathered with the help from some of the practices previously explained. The aim of these practices is to get a more structured view of the situation (e.g. SWOT, WBS) or a more profound understanding of the data gathered (e.g. stakeholder analysis, tribal interest model, iceberg model).

Exemplification

Practices employed here help exemplify the concepts that need to be elaborated on. These are in some cases tangible models (i.e. prototypes) or simply past experiences that help put things into perspective (e.g. story-telling, case-based examples).

Methodologies and Frameworks

Practices seen as methodologies or frameworks imply that they are used on a higher level, in a sense that they represent a different take on things and constitute the view that a particular methodology promotes.

Again, we emphasize that this classification is based strictly on our own interpretation. We are aware that some of the classes overlap to a certain extent but are portrayed in such a way that corresponds to the context in which the respondents were speaking about.

The new and final template, including new codes and categories, is shown in Table 4. New codes are marked in red while the classes are colored in green for easier demonstration.

1. MANAGEMENT CONSULTING	2. PROJECT DEFINITION	3. PRACTICES
1.1 Phases: -Entry -Diagnosis -Actions Planning 1.2 Types of expectations: -Fuzzy -Implicit -Unrealistic 1.3 Psychological contracts: -Trust -Professional contribution -Personal style 1.4 Co-production 1.5 Intangibility 1.6 Different performing styles and working cultures 1.7 Backstage operations 1.8 Human & Socio-political issues 1.9 Potential Gap Model 1.10 Selling factor 1.11 Client adaptation 1.12 Consultant's Role	2.1 Investment decision 2.2 Learning process 2.3 Identifying/ defining the problem 2.4 Identifying stakeholders 2.5 Identifying needs and requirements & perspectives 2.6 Harmonizing 2.7 Considering strategy 2.8 Translating needs and requirements into solutions 2.9 Acknowledging wider context 2.10 Defining and setting objectives 2.11 Obtaining Information/ Information access 2.12 Benefits identification 2.13 Importance of the Phase 2.14 Iterative and continuous process 2.15 Scope Creep	3.1 Context/ Communication: -Workshops -Interviews -Kick-off meeting -Team building event -Training (Education, Coaching) -Discussions (meetings) 3.2 Formalization -Scope statement -Documentation 3.3 Interaction / Discussion facilitators: -Facilitator Role -1st and 2nd level thinking -Agile Board -Mind maps -"Experience Based Learning (e.g. Role-Playing)" -Post-its -Hope and Fear 3.4 Analysis/Information processing -Responsibility assignment matrix -Stakeholder Analysis -SWOT -WBS -Tribal interests model -Gap Analysis -Social Network Diagram -Cause and effect diagram -Cost Benefit Analysis (business case) -Iceberg model -PDCA -PENG Analysis -Balance Scorecard 3.5 Exemplification -Story-telling & case-based examples -Prototypes 3.6 Methodologies and Frameworks -Program-Project framework -Images of Projects -Rational Unified Process -Competitive Strategy/Red Ocean Strategy -Blue Ocean Strategy -Disruptive Innovation 3.7 Data Gathering -Questionnaires and Surveys -Observations -Documentation inspection

Table 4. Final template.

4.5 Findings of template analysis

This section presents the results of our empirical study. First, the topic of defining what the project definition phase is from the perspective of management consultants is addressed. Next, the topic of practices, exploring the nature of their use is explained, followed by the general importance attributed to the front-end of projects.

4.5.1 Defining the project definition phase

Our findings showed that various names are given to describe this phase, which largely depends on the practitioner or on the organization they belong to. These terms include: *pre-study*, *inception* and *elaborationphase*, *initiationphase*, *diagnosticphase*, *sellingphase*, or *entry* and *diagnosisphases*. Regardless of the term preferred, we did find commonalities on the specific features that characterize this phase from the perspective of the interviewees. These include the five elements that are presented below:

(1) It is a phase where the main issue is the uncertainty and ambiguity of what has to be done next

Interviewees concur on this. Largely they stated that there is a vague idea that initiates the need of the consultant, habitually expressed as a problem from the side of the client. The main concern during this phase is mainly *"to understand the possibilities of the situation"* (Interviewee 4) and to decipher matters like what can be done, what can be achieved, how it would be achieved and even considerations of cost. Mainly they spoke about understanding the problems. For one thing, respondents said they carry out problem diagnoses during this period. In general, for all consultants, there is an element of uncertainty and ambiguity, in an effort to uncover or figure out something, and ultimately knowing what the project is going to achieve. Not surprisingly, during this phase there is a lot of data gathering, as a first attempt to reduce uncertainty.

Interviewee 7:*"[The phase is to] get the grip of the patient. Where does it hurt? [And] to see from where this problems origin. [The client] might say this is where we are having the problem [only to] realize that is just the tip of the iceberg".*

(2) It is a phase where some preliminary actions are planned

In this respect, interviewees agree that some kind of preliminary action planning is usually done in this phase, though this is not strictly necessary in all cases. Yet, in most of them an exposed problem is accompanied by actions for improvement, proposing their clients how to reach their goals. Ultimately, the client expects not only having his problem revealed but also expects suggestions on how to go about it. This is considered a major determinant in securing the contract, which is a topic that will be addressed shortly.

Interviewee 8:*"If we [client and consultant] pretty much agree on what the actual issue is, the definition of what you are going to do and to delivery follows, together with the details on the time and exact content. There has to be an agreement on what will be the end state of this project."*

Nevertheless, the degree of detail certainly varies. For instance, some mentioned that this phase requires developing detailed work plans and even detailed budgets, whereas others conceive it differently:

Interviewee 7:*"[The phase] might be clearly defined or might be unclearly defined. It might be defined in a way that we have a sort of framework [of action] but we haven't agreed on all the specific actions yet".*

(3) It is a phase where relevant decisions about the allocation of resources are made

In every case this phase is considered as a prerequisite for a decision to continue with the project, even though the decision points themselves can be many and not necessarily placed at the end of the phase. For example, the client might allow the consultant to go ahead and perform a diagnosis after receiving a positive preliminary study. Later on, after the diagnosis is completed and under the advice of the consultant, the client will make a second and possibly final decision on the approaches to tackle the situation. It is said that decisions are connected to the assignment of resources in the sense that they authorize further work by the consultant (e.g. contracting) or by allocating personnel from within the organization to the project. Whether substantial resources are at stake or not, by the end of this phase there is a clear agreement with the client to continue with the assignment.

Interviewee 5:*"[The end of this phase is] the most critical, because that decision needs to resolve:'do we want to commit to a large investment to make this happen?'"*

Interviewee 7:*"If a negotiation [with the client] reaches an agreement, then OK, we have a clearly defined next phase."*

(4) It is a phase when selling to the client occurs

Partially related to the assignment of resources (i.e. the previous point), an aspect that appeared consistently in our findings is the fact that this phase is often a selling phase as well. By selling we do not exclusively mean securing an assignment (by means of a contract, for example) but also the effort of getting the initial 'buy-in' and commitment of the client to what the consultant is proposing. This is an effort that happens in tandem to all other activities in the project definition.

Interviewee 8:*"[A] problem is that you are usually trying to figure out this while you are still in the sales phase as well. Defining the problem is part of selling your work through the solution."*

(5) It is a phase that precedes the operational part of the project

From the perspectives of the consultants interviewed, the definitional phase of their projects generally comes before the *"phase when you actually do the work"* (Interviewee 5). This post-definitional phase—labeled sometimes by interviewees as implementation or construction phases—constitutes the more operational part of the engagement. In fact, some of the interviewees refer to this phase as "the project", making statements such as the following when referring to what we consider the post-definitional phase:

Interviewee 4:*"We form a working team and start the project […] The project part of it, is the simple part!"*

Interviewee 3:*"Let's say you have the proposal, before the project starts. Then the project starts and now you have to do some detailed planning because prior you have some high-level planning"*

From the previous remarks, it is interesting to note how practitioners interviewed have different understandings of where the project actually starts. Some (as Interviewee 2) seem to exclude the planning altogether, while the last statement (from Interview 3) recognizes some sort of planning during and after the definitional phase.

Overall, the five elements presented before constitute the essential characteristics that were present across all interviews when defining the front-end of the consulting projects. Certainly there was not an absolute agreement and the concept of project definition phase still remains disputed. For instance, from the perspective of Interviewee 7, there is in fact more than one point during the initial phase of the consulting process when there is clarity about what has to be done.

Interviewee 7:*"Typically what is defined very early is to make a pre-study, with some sort of a report. That's clearly defined: going to a part of the organization, [generate] a report with main problems and suggested improvements. That is very defined. During this job [pre-study] we ourselves suggest the definition of the next step, of the next phase. So typically you have a clear definition of the pre-study, the first phase, and during that study we make a suggestion for the definition of the next phase [i.e. implementation of actions]."*

This last statement provides a new insight in that it suggests that the pre-study is by itself a project to identify a problem, followed by another project intended to determine the actions to solve the diagnosed situation of concern.

After shedding some light on how project definition is perceived by the consultants, we now explore what they have said about the importance of the phase, the main issues and challenges presented in this phase, along with different facets that characterize it.

4.5.2 Iterative nature of the project definition

An additional finding about this project phase is that management consultants stressed the importance of going back and revisiting the project definition phase. Overall, as per our interviews this seems to happen for three main reasons: (1) to remind the team members of the scope of the project and reflecting on what has been done and how it influences the rest of the project, (2) to modify and adjust the objectives and scope of the project in response to new findings and eventualities, (3) as a mechanism to ensure that the client and consultant reach the same understanding of the project.

Interviewee 4: "*Normally we have to present this in several iterations and refine it…yeah, you can say you go backwards for two separate reasons at least. One is to remind people about the conclusions because they are lost…and the other is that improvements are made, so along the way maybe obstacles are no longer obstacles anymore. And then we have to refine it to be able to take the next decision."*

Interviewee 5: *"One way of dealing with this is to make all stakeholders around the project understand that there is a version 1 of the project, and it will be followed by version 2 most likely, and we are working now on version 1…if you come out with new ideas during the course of the project, we will deal with those in version…"*

Interviewee 3: *"The proposal writing is an iterative process of writing. The client may reply I don't understand this formulation, so you correspond couple of times back and forth, and always sit down with the client, not just via e-mail, you need to complement by explaining the things that are written in the proposal, because otherwise you can always interpret differently."*

4.5.3 Practices employed in the project definition phase

When we set out to find the most common practices used by management consultants in Sweden, it was expected that there would be more practices than just those which would be explicitly expressed (i.e. called by a formal name). Our intention was also to "read between the lines" since we anticipated that our respondents might not employ or label the practices in the same form as in the academic literature. These assumptions have been confirmed in the interviews, probably even more so than we had expected. This is probably best depicted in the following extract:

Interviewee 6: *"It is not the case that you usually perform a formal, academic analysis. It is more like taking a few things from a few analysis or models. So, no, not academic models, at least not in their pure form."*

Another interviewee confirms this, stating that experience plays a significant role:

Interviewee 2: "*But we are not working really formally with this toolbox; it's also about the experience, from our consultants."*

One other interviewee seems to believe that no matter the name or the method they use, they are all based on the same principles:

Interviewee 3: "*It's like in project management there are always, there are different methods but they always have same ingredients. It's just that you have different designs on them…you are still working with the same ingredients****."***

Additional insight is gained from two more interviewees who correlate this with the size and the ability of their companies:

Interviewee 9: "*I have developed myself, process work that we do, it is formularized to an extent, but being a single practitioner like myself there is a lot of flexibility and space for us to adapt the processes to the clients and their needs. Unlike McKinsey or BCG which have a much more rigorous process…"*

Interviewee 8: *"I never had a method for doing it [...] They [larger consultancies] might have methods, but I just try to figure it out."*

From similar extracts and our previous assumptions, we have identified what the respondents were implicitly saying about a certain practice, or *something* that accomplishes the same thing. We consider important to portray the way in which this

has been done and hence provide an example, in which one practice is articulated in a clear way, and another in an implicit one.

Example: *"What we do is that we contact the client, and the client typically says, either we have a project portfolio where we are not totally in control of, or we have a situation where all the projects are running late, or we have a lot of conflicts within project teams… that sort of stuff. So basically what we do is to try to get the grip of the patient. Where does it hurt? Which means typically doing quite a number of* ***interviews*** *with the client, and try to pinpoint one or two or three areas where they have problem, and step back to see from where this problems origin. They might say this is where we are having the problem, and when you've done some interviews* ***you realize that is just the tip of the iceberg****, it's something else."*

Explicit: Interviews

Implicit: Iceberg model

In the example above, even if the interviewee does not state that he or she explicitly uses the model, we believe that there is an awareness of the fact that there is much more that lies beneath the surface (requiring further investigation), which is what the Iceberg model suggests. This process was conducted to the best of our abilities. We believe that this is adequate because, as stated in the Chapter 3, the type of research methodology chosen for this research depends on both the meanings and understandings of consultants but also on how these are interpreted by researchers.

Both implicit and explicit practices have been counted in order to see which ones are the most used by management consultants at the front-end of projects for the purpose of reconciling the views of stakeholders. Only the Top 10 practices are portrayed in the Table 5, while the complete list can be found in the Appendix 3.

No.	Practice Name	No. of interviewees using it.
1.	Documentation	9
2.	Interviews	7
3.	Discussions (meetings)	7
4.	Scope statement	6
5.	Workshops	5
6.	Kick-off meeting	4
7.	Questionnaires and Surveys	3
8.	1st and 2nd level thinking	3
9.	Training (Education, Coaching)	3
10.	Images of Projects	2

Table 5. Top 10 practices listed in decreasing order of use.

We can observe that 9 out of 9 respondents use some sort of documentation in this phase for the purpose of reconciling the stakeholder views of the project. Interviews and discussions (meetings) closely follow as 7 out of 9 interviewees stressed their use in this phase. Scope statement is separated from the general documentation for two reasons: first, it was identified separately in the project management literature; and second, it was distinctively recognized by most interviewees. Similarly, kick-off meeting was

excluded from the general discussion (meeting) group for the aforementioned reasons. Additionally, workshops are used by half of the consultants interviewed. However, due to similarities of some of these practices and the terms in which the consultants expressed themselves, it was impossible to always correctly distinguish what they inferred. This is when the classification of practices, developed in the coding phase, comes in handy, as it tries to group practices with similar purpose and characteristics. Hence, the order in which the types of practices are used is presented in the Table 6.

Classes of Practices		No. of interviewees using at least one of the practices from a class
1.	Context/Communication	9
2.	Formalization	9
3.	Analysis/Information processing	9
4.	Interaction / Discussion facilitators	6
5.	Data Gathering	5
6.	Exemplification	3
7.	Methodologies and Frameworks	3

Table 6.Classes of practices in decreasing order of use.

We continue by displaying some of the examples of different practices used by participants in this survey. With this we hope to gain more insight in which way these types of practices are used and finally, to be able to relate them directly to some of the problems affecting this phase.

Context/Communication based practices

Consultants' preferred and most widely used practices in project definition phase are the ones that fall in the context/communication and formalization categories. Here, we will discuss the context/communication ones only. We would like to remind that this category contains the practices that have in their essence the conversation and interaction between the parties engaged in the project. However, not all of these practices are used in the same manner. For example it can be inferred that kick off meetings and workshops serve mostly to 'get the pulse' of the client and the business, while interviews assist consultants to get a deeper understanding of the problem. Additionally, training and coaching appear as part of the process, which was to some extent surprising, as we did not expect to encounter it in preliminary phases of the project.

Interviewee 7: *"...in the first meeting, the client explains the problem from his or her point of view, and typically is rather easy to spot some sort of pattern. So then I put forward: 'Alright, I would like to talk to this sort of people'."*

These practices aim to get a better understanding of the customer usually to comprehend the problem that the customer is facing. This seems paramount for consultants as they all raised the issue of identifying and defining the problem. The views expressed show that more often than not, clients are either not able to express their problem correctly or are unaware of the true origin of the problem.

What was particularly interesting is that many consultants seem to be taking on the role of the 'doctor' and perceiving the client as the 'patient' in these situations. This was

either explicitly expressed in the interviews or implicitly inferred due to the language consultants used. This included words such as "remedy", "symptoms", "pain", "hurt" or others. Other thing that led us to believe in this is the need of trust that has to be established in order for the client to "open up" to the consultant, similarly to the doctor-patient relationship.

Interviewee 8: *"Trying to understand the problems is a bit like being a medical doctor, the company comes with a lot of symptoms and maybe they even say we want to have this solution, but you need to go back because usually they need another solution or have a slightly different problem than they think so you need to ask why do you need this solution, what would be different if you had, if I took this away what would happen then."*

Interviewee 2: *"I think, one thing is to have the relationship with the customer so they actually dare to tell us about their problems, that they should be really open about their problems…the challenge we are spending the most time on is building the relationship so we know that the customer will tell us everything."*

Another issue where context/communication practices can significantly help is in finding who the stakeholders are. The feeling is that consultants generally differentiate between two classes of stakeholders:

- Formal stakeholders are the ones who have the decision-making power and the authority to pay for the project and these are, naturally, of particular interest to the consultants.
- Informal stakeholders with informal power—or as one interviewee calls them, the "super users"—are the ones who are actually hands-on with the problem or the future solution.

However, often the type of stakeholders they interact would depend on the size of the organization or the size of the project. Nevertheless, the importance of involving both types is expressed and the need to clearly define their roles is seen as pivotal for the success of the project, or as one interviewee (Interviewee 2) puts it: *"…as soon as possible we try to involve more people also because we know just the diagnostic together with the management that will never be a successful project in the end…"*

Interviewee 5: *"You also decide who decides, who does this high-level decisions. That should also be defined during this elaboration phase…first of all, the person who has the money. Secondly, people who have something to add. In most cases the idea of doing something does not come from the one who has the money, but sometimes, preferably sooner than later, you need to identify who is going to pay for all these. If it is a big project, then maybe it is the CEO or the Board of Directors. But you need to decide early who in the end has the budget to do this."*

Interaction/Discussion facilitating practices

Practices employed here are actually mostly tools or techniques that consultants use in order to facilitate the discussion with their clients. They can be visual aids or thinking incentives, or even games that promote the interaction between discussion participants. We have discerned that there are a wide variety of tools and techniques used for this purpose.

Interviewee 3: "*One way of doing it, but not the common one, is to bring in the third party, who will facilitate a session, who will act as devil's advocate, and ask difficult questions."*

One of the major reasons that these practices are used alongside with the context/communication practices, is to help facilitate the process of getting to 'the bottom of the problem'. It is seen as paramount to identify the needs and requirements as well as the different views that stakeholders might have. Put differently, it is significant to pinpoint what is behind the problem, or what drives it. Some consultants go to the extent of relating the failure of properly identifying stakeholders' needs and perspective to the failure of the project, and mention that misunderstandings of the project are not an uncommon problem.

Interviewee 2: *"So we make general orientation that's the first one and then the next step we try to find out what are their aims, what are they aiming to do, why did they contact us, why did we contact them, what aims do they have… they want us to act a bit stupid and ask but why are you doing this, what is the purpose of this, why are you doing it."*

The step of identifying and acknowledging the needs of various stakeholders is a prerequisite before aligning and harmonizing the views of the consultant and the client. A major practice that stood out was the use of documentation (either electronic or hardcopy), as almost all of the respondents stressed the importance of having that harmonized view of the project 'on paper'. In addition, one interesting finding was that some of them engage in a sort of a role-play with the client in order to harmonize different views, as it seems to help realize the implications of different approaches in a better way by putting them in a context. However, a precondition to all of this is a clear and continuous communication with frequent meetings occurring with project stakeholders.

Interviewee 7: *"Sometimes you can use Experience Based Learning which means that we go deeply in some sort of situation trough a game or role-play and then you feel something; you're frustrated or happy or something. And then you try to step back and say: "ok, this feeling/emotion, where did it come from?" And then you can analyze that and say, "Alright, that was it! Does that have any logical connection with my everyday job? Yes it has!"*

Interviewee 9: *"…it is extremely important, because sometimes clients express their needs in a way that it is not consistent what the management consultant thinks the company needs…and you need to square that early on because otherwise you cannot contribute to the value of the project… we need to be 110% aligned on how we view the mission, the assignments, before making a contract."*

Data gathering practices

Although some of the practices previously explained could also fall in this category, here we only include the ones whose sole purpose is gathering data without any direct dialogue between the client and consultant. Nevertheless, they help in tackling the issues presented so far, such as identifying and defining the problem, identifying the stakeholders and identifying stakeholders' needs, requirements and views. The two main practices in this category are: questionnaires, that are either predetermined or

adapted to the client; and observations, that help the consultant get the 'look and feel' of the company and the culture of the client.

Interviewee 2: *"So then it's mostly about the set of questions that we have… before every workshop what kind of questions we want them to prepare, so we have a questionnaire…"*

Formalization practices

Practices from this class generally represent a way of articulating in a more formal way what was previously found and gathered. Therefore, it is not surprising to find writing u documents as one of the most used practices in terms of defining the objectives. It was noteworthy to find that whenever the topic of objectives setting would be touched upon, interviewees would often bring the issue of scope creep into the conversation. One of the respondents even referred to this as the "consultant's worst nightmare", giving us a hint about the importance they actually assign to performing this phase properly.

Even though consultants provide different names for the documentation they use (e.g. pre-study report, assignment specification, scope statement), it all serves to clarify what will be done in the project, to set roles and responsibilities, and to lessen the possibility of scope creep or general misunderstandings.

Interviewee 8: *"Yes, you specify that [the common understanding of project definition] in the agreement, written agreement, as good as you can."*

Interviewee 1: *"I do the assignment specification as part of the pre-study report. There what will be done is defined, along with what will not be done. However, there is always a scope creep and the assignment specification changes in this phase."*

Analysis/Information processing practices

In order to establish the objectives and targets, one must engage in the analysis of the information received from the client. There is a fan of practices to choose from. This is to be expected as consultants need to perform extensive analysis in order to gain significant insight and make sense of the situation. Moreover different analyses cover different aspect of the identified problem. These include, but are not limited to, identifying and analyzing stakeholders, spotting where the gap lies, determining how much something will cost and what benefits it will bring, identifying different interests and politics in the organization, among others.

Interviewee 3: *"WBS is one of the most fundamental planning tool and to some extent it is already in the proposal…and you need to do it to some level, not the most detailed level, but a couple of levels already when writing the proposal"*

Interviewee 9: *"Full alignment on what is the problem, how are we going to address it and what will be the particular role of each and every person on the strategy team…2nd sub step is the preliminary problem diagnosis and that is actually having listened to the client and what it reveals and discloses you go back home to your office, you sit down and form your first opinion and hypothesis."*

Furthermore, consultants have pointed out two emerging findings that are somewhat related to the analysis practices. Firstly, they often mentioned the need of obtaining as much information as possible in order to get a better feel of the problematic situation, but the client would not always be in the position of providing it easily. This was often in relation with information of strategic importance. Consultants have expressed, in several instances, the need of knowing the client's strategy in recognition of the importance of it to the project, so it is a bit paradoxical that the client is not always willing to disclose it. In any case this seems to depend on the level of trust and the type of relationship existing between the client and consultant.

Interviewee 6: *"You, as a consultant, get to little or way too much information, but usually the prior."*

Interviewee 2: *"Sometimes they don't want to tell us strategies but that will affect the project also…but we try to understand, make the customer trust us, so they can tell us as much as possible about the strategies. [Because] If we know everything about the strategies, we can make this project much better together with the customer."*

The second important revelation was in regards to the identification of benefits in this process. It is important to emphasize the difference between benefits and objectives that a project aims to achieve. Some consultants see it as an additional step and sometimes even a more important thing to recognize.

Interviewee 3: "*…if you go straight into defining the project without understanding the benefits, than you might as well define the project really well be 100% well defined but if there is a mismatch what the project will deliver and what is the actual need of the customer it will not be a successful project…they must be able to understand the benefit of the project or they won't take it, you as a consultant have to do some initial calculations which help explain the cost and the benefit."*

Exemplification practices

This is a category of practices that consultants use in order to help illustrate a concept or a solution that the client or the consultant has in mind. An additional purpose of these practices is to help in harmonizing stakeholders' needs as well as translating the identified needs into different concepts and alternatives. When it came to translating these needs, consultants tended to make them as concrete as possible, typically by using numerical values.

Interviewee 6: *"Story telling helps a lot, case-based examples as well, as they put it into context. This is significant in the process of communication with the client as it paints them a picture."*

Interviewee 3: *"If you can put numbers, numerical value that is good."*

Methodologies and Frameworks

Methodologies and frameworks represent guidelines that envelope many different tools, techniques and methods. We have chosen to portray them in this way, rather than breaking them down into more specificpractices, due to the importance they represent for the consultants. In practice, methodologies and frameworks inform consultants' choices for approaching many of the challenges faced in this phase.

Interviewee 9: *"If it is a traditional company I use the framework and methodology developed by Michael Porter called "Competitive strategy" and that is one school of thought…there is also 'blue ocean strategy' and that is very popular methodology and it is another school of thought in strategy …and my third methodology…is "disruptive innovation strategy" and that is for companies, which want to jump into existing industry but really do this with a game changing approach."*

4.5.4 Client adaptation

A point that was highly regarded by interviewees is the necessity to adapt what they do to the specific situation they encounter. The approaches and practices used depend on an array of situation-specific factors. From the interviews we have resolved that these mainly are:

- Size and nature of the problem
- Size of the client organization
- Maturity of the client organization
- Whether it is a new client or not (relationship maturity)
- Client preferences on personal style
- Client's working style and culture
- Organizational level addressed
- Size of the consultancy
- Scope of the consulting assignment

Interviewees would stress the need of adaption based on the above-mentioned characteristics. We can see that they depend not just on the client organization, but also on the consultant side as well. Some tailor a basic set of questions according to different client needs, while others, according to the size and maturity of the client need to adjust to the level of formality of the organization. However, this level of formality can also change depending on the maturity of the relationship with the client. In general, as this relationship progresses the work becomes more informal and more flexible. Of course, this level of flexibility and adaptation also depends largely on the size of the consultancy, given that bigger organizations tend to be stricter in their processes. Additionally, in terms of the scope of the consulting assignment, consultants sometimes stressed the differences in the approach depending on what the consultant is actually contracted to do—the entire or part of the consulting process.

Interviewee 6:*"However it is not always better to have the objectives and targets measurable especially if the same consultant is not in the implementation part of the project."*

Interviewee 9*: "…being a single practitioner like myself there is a lot of flexibility and space for us to adapt the processes to the clients and their needs. Unlike McKinsey or Boston Consulting Group which have a much more rigorous process."*

Interviewee 7: *"Before starting these interviews, we have a basic set of different questions that we then adapt to different clients."*

4.5.5 Role metaphors

Something noted during the interviews was a recurring use of a metaphor comparing the role of the consultant to that of a medical doctor. We consider this important as metaphors are rich and complex means people use to make sense of their experience, which can be used by us as data-reducing and pattern-making devices (Miles & Huberman, 1994, pp. 251-252). Not all interviewees use the doctor metaphor, but those who use it seem to imply that their role as consultants is to interpret the symptoms of the patient in order to prescribe the right medicine that would cure a pain.

Interviewee 8: *"Trying to understand the problems is a bit like being a medical doctor, the company comes with a lot of symptoms"*

Contrasting this, other respondents take a much more pragmatic stand as if the situation of concern is really not deducing a hidden problem, but implementing a solution that is generally less abstract than in the doctor's case. In the following quote, for example, the word *idea* is used—rather than *problem*—to describe the concern of the front-end. Put it differently, the disease is known so that the concern of the consultant if mainly on the remedy—the scope of the assignment is differs.

Interviewee 5: *"The starting point of a project is usually an idea that someone has come up with within the organization [...] my job then is to expand on this initial idea"*

We have chosen the term *expert*, as opposed to *doctor*, as the metaphor to describe this other role we perceive management consultants play (Figure 11). Of course they are not mutually exclusive and sometimes it is tricky (*unclear*) to assign them in one category or other. In any case, we try to describe a pattern based in the language they used and the priorities they communicate.

Interviewee	Role
1	"Expert"
2	"Doctor"
3	"Doctor"
4	Unclear
5	"Expert"
6	Unclear
7	"Doctor"
8	"Doctor"
9	"Doctor"

Figure 11.Interviewees' metaphorical role

4.5.6 Importance of the front-end

One of the main goals of this thesis is to investigate how important management consultants perceive this phase of the project and the reasons for this. Predominantly, everyone agreed that the phase is important but not everyone affirmed that it was more important that the other phases. Some stated, for example, that there is really not much at stake in a financial sense as few resources are consumed compared to those used in other phases, such as in project implantation. Others expressed that the phase is of paramount importance in the sense that if not done properly, the rest of the project will be achieving something unintended—something that in the view of an Interviewee 3, is

what most often goes wrong in consulting assignments. A third opinion was that all the project phases are equally important.

Nevertheless, the majority seems to put a lot of emphasis on this phase, as this is where both expectations and foundations of the consultant-client relationship are made, setting the tone for the remainder of the project.

Interviewee 6: *"This is where the expectations are set, but it is not more important than the other ones, they are equally important."*

Interviewee 2: *"…so that's why this initial phase, the analysis that we make together with the customer is really, really important cause the foundations for how we work together with the customer…in our view it's the most important part because there are many methodologies on how to implement the system…I mean you can choose and you can always do a project in a good management way also, but this initial phase is important."*

Interviewee 3: *"it is in this phase where you set objectives and scope definition… If I think that objectives and scope definition is vague than you can always be certain that this smells trouble, because if there is a vague scope definition it can always lead to conflicts where I interpret the scope in one way and the client interprets the scope another way. This is actually often when things go wrong in consulting assignments; this is the reason that you have not been very clear and explicitly in describing the objectives and describing the deliverables."*

The present chapter exhibited the empirical findings obtained from the interviews, together with the process and outcomes of the analysis. Results have been aggregated to give an insight on the perspectives that management consultants have about the definitional phase of their projects and the practices they employ to reconcile the ontologies of stakeholders at this early phase. The following chapter discusses the findings in relation to our theoretical frame of reference and in line with the research questions of this study.

5. Discussion of Finding

In this part we will reflect on the findings presented in the data analysis chapter. These findings will be related to what has been investigated in our literature review part and will aim to answer our proposed research questions. First we will be looking at how management consultants define and understand the project definition phase, continuing with the discussion of the kind of project management practices they use to address the challenges of this phase, and finishing off with the consultants' perception of the importance of this early stage of projects.

5.1 Defining the project definition phase

It is necessary to first comprehend what practitioners in management consulting understand as the front-end of their projects. Supporting research question in Chapter 1 addresses this issue, and seeks to clarify what management consultants understand as the 'project definition phase' and at what stage of their consulting process this occurs. Knowing this is essential, given that our investigation focuses solely on this phase. For this reason, literature defining the general management consulting process and the definition phase of projects was revised beforehand as part of our theoretical framework. The aim here is to reflect on the understanding that practitioners have about the phase in relation to what the literature states.

There is a general disagreement on the terms used by project management researchers to refer to this phase. Some would simply call it project definition (Cano & Lidón, 2011; Morris, 1997; Neal, 1995; Whelton et al., 2002), while others use alternative names such as initiation phase (Besner & Hobbs, 2006a, 2006b) or the front-end of projects (Williams & Samset, 2010; Winter, Smith, et al. 2006). In a similar way, we expected that interviewees would use different terms to designate this phase, especially due to their management consulting background. It was mentioned in the previous chapter, that interviewees referred to this phase by means of terms such as *pre-study*, *inception* and *elaborationphase*, *initiationphase*, *diagnosticphase*, *sellingphase*, or *entry* and *diagnosisphases*. In order to ensure that interviewees were in fact talking about the phase of our interest, we devoted the first part of the interview to understand their views about this definitional stage of projects. Altogether, their observations converged in that the project definition phase is the phase:

(1) where the main issue is the uncertainty and ambiguity of what has to be done next
(2) where some preliminary actions are planned
(3) where relevant decisions about the allocation of resources are made
(4) when selling to the client occurs
(5) that precedes the operational part of the project

How we arrived to these conclusions is presented in the previous chapter.

The first element of this definition, which refers to the uncertainty and ambiguity of what has to be done, is perhaps the most representative characteristic of this phase. Recall that the former term refers to a general lack of information, while the latter describes a lack of understanding, usually attributable to multiple and conflicting interpretations (Thiry, 2001, p. 73; 2002, p. 222). For this reason, authors concerned with the front-end of projects (Kähkönen, 1999; Morris, 1998; Whelton & Ballard,

2002; Whelton et al., 2002) argue that this is the phase when knowledge has to be generated and shared. Argyris (1999, cited in Whelton & Ballard 2002, p. 9) explains that learning happens when intentions and outcomes are matched. In this view, interviewees' first attempt is in fact to understand what the client intends in any given assignment. Words such as "understanding" and "diagnosing" appear consistently in the interviewees' phrases, which indicates the effort of learning in the sense of acquiring knowledge about the situation. This is in reality achieved through what Whelton et al. (2002, p. 203) calls "a collaborative process", which in the case of management consultants, is a process with the client organization to define the project and to "achieve a shared opinion and understanding about the problem and its possible solutions" (Kähkönen, 1999, p. 626).

It can be seen that this learning process invariably talks about outcomes and solutions, which brings us to the second point of the definition, that is, the existence of some preliminary planning. Even though detailed planning (in terms of time, content and resources) is done comprehensively in another phase of the project, at this point interviewees expressed the importance of having some sort of high-level idea of what the project is going to do (and what it is not going to do)—typically how to resolve a problem. But preliminary planning is not something project management literature includes at the front-end of projects, and yet all practitioners stated the importance of doing so. For the interviewees, the common issue at this point seems not to be planning per se, but showing to and agreeing with the client what the project is going to do and to achieve. After all, this shows that the client requires reaffirmation in order to approve and accept the engagement. It cannot be forgotten that ultimately the consultant is a stranger to the client organization and thus uncertainty, mistrust and anxiety play a relevant role in the transaction (Kubr, 2002, p. 153). In a way, suggesting preliminary actions also denotes the process of *translating* problems into solutions (Kähkönen, 1999, p. 626) and intentions into outcomes Argyris (1999 cited in Whelton & Ballard, 2002, p. 9). In any case, all this is necessary if the project is to be approved, which takes us to the next point of the definition.

Among all interviews, there is a shared understanding that some kind of important decision is made during the front-end of projects. The most basic decision is clearly the clients' approval to continue with the project, which ultimately implies the assignment of resources in one way or another. This is partly supported by several authors (Whelton et al., 2002, p. 199; Kähkönen, 1999, p. 625; Williams & Samset, 2010, p. 39), who agree on defining the project definition phase as everything that happens prior to the decision to finance a project. We say *partly* supported because in some cases interviewees explained that decisions occur at several points of this definitional stage and not only at the end of it. The contract, for instance, which is regarded as the clearest evidence of the client's decision for investing, can be secured before the project is really completely defined. We found some conflicting views about this regard, which will be discussed further later.

Closely related to this, an interesting point that came out in most of the cases is that the project definition of consulting projects is at the same time a selling phase. One of our interviewees even termed this phase as such. Another one stated that selling is in fact the mayor challenge of this phase, as it has to be done at the same time all other activities for defining the project are happening. We deemed this characteristic as important (and separate from characteristic number 3) as we believe this is something particular to the context of management consulting, as the consultant, by definition,

remains an alien to the client organization. Selling then, is again a process of reaffirmation to the client, in view of coping with the mistrust and anxiety of the operation (Kubr, 2002, p. 153). Additionally, consultants are often evaluated on a not yet finalized front-end of the project, rather than on a finalized project proposal with specific objectives.

Very often our interviewees would make allusion to the operational part of their projects which turned out to be helpful in making sense about where the front-end really lies. Phrases such as *"[the]phase when you actually do the work"* (Interviewee 5) or "*the project part of it is the simple part"* (Interviewee 4), for instance, suggest that there is a clear distinction in their minds on where the definitional phase ends to make way for the rest of the project. Again, the main difference appears to be that the level of uncertainty and ambiguity lessens during the operational parts of the projects, as practitioners have a better understanding of what has to be done. This relates closely to what we discussed in the first element of the definition.

We had mentioned already that one of our most surprising recognitions was the fact that some interviewees use the term "project" to define what in our view constitutes only the post-definitional part of the project, and not necessarily the whole project. This made us realize that practitioners interviewed have different understandings of where the project actually starts. After all, literature in project management does not concur on this either, as "there has been considerable controversy over when a project actually starts and, surprisingly, when it finishes" (Wideman, 2004, p. 20). The PMBOK Guide (PMI, 2008) vaguely addresses the front-end of projects hinting that this is an area out of mainstream project management. Others (Alderman, Ivory, Mcloughlin, & Vaughan, 2005; Besner & Hobbs, 2006; Morris & Pinto, 2007; Smyth & Morris, 2007; Whelton et al., 2002; Williams & Samset, 2010) disapprove of this claiming that the initial phase of project is a concern of project management of paramount importance. Yet a disagreement prevails on where the project actually starts. Morris (1998) recognized this long ago stating that "too many people see project management as beginning when the project is set up [disregarding the] time spent up front in defining needs, exploring options, modeling, testing, and looking at different business benefits" (p. 5). Our interviewees indeed spend time dealing with front-end issues, but mostly regard this as not being part of the project.

Table 7 summarizes the discussion above and shows the similarities and differences found on the definition of the front-end of projects, from the perspectives of interviewees, compared to that extracted from the literature review.

Defining the Project Definition Phase			
Project Management Literature		***Interviewees' perceptions***	*Remarks*
Learning process: - to achieve a common understanding—by all stakeholders—about the problem and solutions - to translate intentions into objectives	**Strong similarity**	The main issue is the uncertainty and ambiguity of what has to be done next	The "learning process" intends to bring clarity to what has to be solved and what has to be done, which addresses the uncertainty and ambiguity of the front-end.
All actions and decisions until the final decision to finance the project is made	**Partial similarity**	Relevant decisions about the allocation of resources are made	As per management consultants, this decisions (more than one) are not made exclusively at the end
(Not mentioned)	**Difference**	Some preliminary actions are planned	Reaffirming actions for clients, due to nature of client-consultant relationship (trust and co-production)
		When selling to the client occurs	
		Precedes the operational part of the project	Even though it is not mentioned, it is essentially the same.

Table 7. Defining the project definition phase.

Additionally, we reconfirm our assumptions on where the front-end of the project lies in terms of the management consulting process. Previously, in Chapter 2 (Figure 7), we put together these two conceptions in view of understanding where the front-end could possibly rest in terms of management consulting phases. We concluded that this is in the phases of Entry, Diagnosis, and partially, Action Planning. The following table (Table 8) correlates our assumptions of the definition of the project definition phase to that construed from the interviews:

Defining the Project Definition Phase	
Front-End in Management Consulting Process *(as per Kubr, 2002)*	***Interviewees' perceptions***
Entry / Diagnosis / Action Planning: problems and solutions are not clear until Implementation	The main issue is the uncertainty and ambiguity of what has to be done next
- ***Entry:*** assignment is accepted (Contract) - ***Action Planning:*** decisions on actions	Relevant decisions about the allocation of resources are made
- ***Action Planning:*** solutions are developed and action plan is drafted	Some preliminary actions are planned
- ***Entry:*** in securing the assignment (contract) - ***Diagnosis/Action Planning:*** getting buy-in from client	When selling to the client occurs
Before the ***Implementation*** Phase	Precedes the operational part of the project

Table 8.The Front-end in the management consulting process.

In our view, there is an appropriate fit in this comparison and goes in line with the five characteristics expressed by our interviewees about what they perceive as the definitional phase of their projects. We now recognize that this is more evident when the entire management consulting process is followed. However, as stated in our literature review, it is not unusual that a management consultant would be hired

exclusively to perform a diagnosis and possibly propose actions, or to manage the implementation of already predefined actions, that is, having a different scope of the consulting assignment(Kubr, 2002, pp. 24-25). As a matter of fact, a couple of our interviewees said to be usually employed to design and implement solutions to problems that have already been diagnosed, either by the client organization itself or by another consultancy. In this case, the front-end still exists but is more concerned with how to solve a problematical situation, and not what needs to be solved. If a practitioner is only hired to implement actions because of a distinct competency (say, IT or Organizational Development), then his or her role is that of a project manager in the traditional sense, and the definitional part of the project possibly play a minor role—still a role, nonetheless.

5.2 Project management practices in use

When we embarked on the journey of writing this paper, the main goal was to find out and recognize some of the project management practices that consultants employ in their consulting engagements. Although these have been presented in the data, due to its pivotal importance they deserve being further discussed. This elaboration includes our thoughts about the practices as well as a comparison of what the literature has stated in regards to the purpose they are used for.

The overall feel is that consultants do not usually use formal academic models, although this is not always the case and should not be taken as a generalization. Nevertheless, in many cases, opinions expressed implied that consultants were not aware of the similarity of the practices they are using with the academic models or tools that exist in the literature. Looking back at the data collected and interviews transcribed, it is hard to find more than a few times when consultants actually named a model, tool, technique or a method that they used in their consulting endeavors. This was reinforced by one consultant when he/she stated that models and methods developed in academia are an exception in the industry:

> ***Interview 9:*** *"I would say that I am an outlier, and not many management consultants have this approach [referring to three academic methodologies that he/she uses], they would lack the depth of thinking and understanding that are acquired over time."*

Regardless, we were still able to recognize more than enough, at the same time relating them to the purpose they were fulfilling or the issue they were addressing. The Table 9,shownbelow, provides the basis for the discussion that we are about to immerse ourselves in, and serves as part of the theory that will be established as a result of the empirical findings. The building blocks of this table are the data presented in the previous chapter.

Project Definition Aspects	Context / Communication	Analysis / Information processing	Data Gathering	Exemplification	Formalization	Interaction / Discussion facilitators	Methodologies and General Frameworks
Identifying/ defining the problem	6	4	2	1	3	2	2
Identifying stakeholders	4	2	1	0	2	0	1
Identifying needs, req's & perspectives	5	3	2	0	1	3	3
Harmonizing	6	1	1	2	5	4	2
Considering strategy	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Translating needs/req's into solutions	1	1	0	1	2	0	2
Defining and setting objectives	2	3	0	0	4	0	2

Table 9.Relation between types of practices and challenges of project definition phase.

In an effort to explore the nature of the practices used by management consultants, the table aboveintends to relate the type of practices revealed in the interviews to the specific purpose they serve when used to reconcile the client-consultant ontologies. The numbers in the table indicate the number of interviewees that denoted using specific practices in relation to a given issue of the project definition phase. Of course we cannot generalize that this is the use in absolute terms and we are aware that this numbers can be ambiguous. For instance, the number tells how many intervieweesmadethis correlation but not how many individual practices they said they used. However, we believe that when examined column by column, an indication of how practices are generally used compared to other uses can be observed—the color scales intend to portray this relative usage. For example, practices that provide context for communication are largely related to the identification of the problem, needs and requirements of stakeholders, and to a less extent to the definition of objectives. A similar pattern is observed in the practices used to facilitate discussions, which is not surprising given that these are mainly used in the context of communication. Formalization practices, in turn, appear to be used more widely across the definition phase, with practitioners continuously reporting and presenting findings and agreements to clients. Methodologies and general frameworks are also dispersed throughout, which probably indicates how these inform the choices and approaches at every stage of the phase. In the case of exemplification practices, they appear only related to certain issues when there is a need for explaining. Overall, it can be noted that there is a tendency over the initial stages of the definitional phase and less towards the end.

Having laid out the general findings we now present an in-depth analysis of each and every category of practices in trying to find the possible reasons for using them, as one of our research questions is to investigate how particular practices help in reconciling consultant-client ontologies.

One of the consultants' preferred and most widely used practices in project definition phase are interviews, meetings and workshops. These practices, as explained in our categorization, directly relate to the type of practices whose pillar is the conversation and interaction between the parties engaged in the project. Going more in depth, we

wanted to identify what is specifically done during these conversations or whether it was just an unstructured dialogue taking place. We found a range of practices such as the use of post-its (or similar visual aids) and mapping techniques (e.g. agile board), but probably the most interesting findings were the practices that required clients to question the way they think or understand something. This would usually happen by engaging into a role-play, by reflection, or by making clients question their ways of working and going about things.

Certainly, one of the aims of the aforementioned practices is some sort of data gathering and understanding of what is needed in order to proceed with the analysis. In that sense, questionnaires and observations are used as well, but to a less degree as they seem to either not be flexible enough (as in the case of questionnaires) or simply do not prove to be efficient enough due to the lack of interaction with the client (as in the case of observations).

Although many consultants expressed the need of adapting to client's specific situation, we found that practices used for identification of problems, stakeholders and their needs do not seem to change much; for example, interviews, workshops, frequent meetings and discussions still prevail in all of the interviews we have conducted. However, what does vary quite a bit, are the practices used for analyzing the gathered data. Consultants use a variety of tools for different results, some of which are the analysis of stakeholders, taking into consideration politics and culture of the organization, as well as who the end-users and main beneficiaries of the project are. Having touched upon beneficiaries, one topic that emerged during the interviews was actually the need to understand the actual benefit that the customer was getting, not just the objectives the project was there to deliver. We found that quite interesting, and it was something that has not been emphasized in the project management literature concerned with project definition phase of projects.

What was attention grabbing, were some of the methodologies and frameworks that consultants mentioned they used. The reason for mentioning them here is because they relate to some of the books that informed the choice of the topic of this thesis. Additionally, we found them important as methodologies usually mean a completely different way of looking at things and promote an integrated view in approaching a problem or a situation of concern.

One of the participants stressed the use of a methodology called Rational Unified Process (RUP) even stating *"that [it] is really the basis for most project methodologies used today, even though it is not the most popular, but still is the one everyone bases their project model on."* After investigation, we have found that the methodology is widely used in the IT industry, which made sense as the respondent was working on projects in the IT area. Other methodologies included "blue ocean strategy", "competitive strategy" and "disruptive innovation". Particularly, it was interesting to note how the respondent said he/she used it: *"So those are the three frameworks I would have in the back of my mind when I sit at the interview trying to my preliminary problem diagnosis with the client"*. This supports our previous statement about how methodologies and general frameworks inform ones choices of looking at things and determines the overall approach.

An additional framework that we have identified, which served as an inspiration for this thesis, is the idea of looking at projects from different perspectives, or as Winter and

Szczepanek (2009) call it: different images of the project. We provide extracts from both the interview and the book in order to portray the similarities:

Interview extract:*"…but actually we know that maybe the IT system will be 20% of the solution, and 80% of the solution will be the way the customer is organized, or the way they are working in…the customer maybe just wants to have a suggestion for an IT system to solve their problem, but our system is not just an IT system, [this] could be 20% of the solution but 80% could be other things, changing the processes, changing the organization, and so on…"*

Extract from "Images of Projects":*"For example, seeing the project as an IT system development project would lead to a different set of activities to say those associated with viewing it as a service development project, or a quality of life improvement project. In all cases, the main focus of the project is different: the first perspective focuses on the development of an IT system, the second focuses on the development of a new service, and the third focuses more broadly on improving the quality of life…"* (Winter & Szczepanek, 2009, p. 16)

We now move on to investigate, in relation to the literature review, what the main challenges of project definition phase are as identified by consultants, and how they were addressed in terms of the things they do—i.e. their practices.

Both Kähkönen (1999, p. 626), and Whelton and Balard (2002, p. 4) pinpointed that one of the major 'stumbling stones' is finding out what the actual problem is. Moreover, there can be disagreements between the client and the customer over this, as suggested by Stumpf and Longman (2000) who state that "unlike the customer, the client is not always right" (p. 128). This issue has emerged in our conversations with consultants, and one of the noteworthy ways in which the consultants deal with it is by engaging themselves in a role of a 'medical doctor' which means building the relationships and establishing trust to uncover more than just superficial issues, and finding out the sources of the problem and the problem itself. Schein (1998, cited in Kakabadse et al., 2006, p. 459) introduced this notion of 'doctor-patient' role-play and argued that consultant-client relationship can somewhat be like the one between a doctor and a patient.

As mentioned, identifying the problem of the client was accompanied by the need to investigate what was behind it and what the drivers for clients contracting consultants were in the first place. Whelton et al. (2002, p. 198) argue that this is not an easy thing to achieve, as their hidden needs and expectations are often not elicited. Ojasalo (2001, pp. 202-203) went even deeper and classified them into fuzzy, implicit and unrealistic. Once again, consultants agreed on this issue and a quote that probably depicts best the importance of this is the following:

Interviewee 3: *"…if there is a mismatch what the project will deliver and what is the actual need of the customer it will not be a successful project."*

A precondition to performing an appropriate and exact analysis of stakeholder needs, requirement and perspectives, is actually identifying the stakeholders themselves. Neal (1995, p. 6) argues that it should be the first thing in defining objectives in the project definition by asking the question 'who are the customers?'. Kubr (2002, p. 64) concurs with this by stating that it is not just the organization that hires the consultant that

should be referred as ‘the client’ but also people and departments within. Schein (1997, p. 202) argues that the process of identifying the client can actually prove to be quite tricky and proposes a model, differentiating between different kind of clients. While all this is true, a supplementary observation from the interviews that deserves mentioning is that it is not just the identification of stakeholders that matters but also the role they play in the project. Consultants, as already explained, usually divide stakeholders into formal and informal. Regardless of the consultant, most of them stressed the need of satisfying the ones who provide the financial benefits for the consultant, but at the same time not neglecting the lower levels of the organizational hierarchy, as they are crucial to the success of the project.

Having identified the stakeholders and their needs, the next step and one of the most important parts of reconciling client-consultant ontologies, is actually harmonizing these different views. This is an essential step before considering possible concepts and alternatives as part of the solution. Williams and Samset (2010, p. 41) name the notion of having different views of the project as ‘wicked messes‘ while Whelton et al. (2002) suggest looking into these is a pivotal part of the process of learning and knowledge sharing. More practically, consultants appear to address this by reiterating project definition phase. This is exactly what Whelton (2002, p. 207) promotes when speaking of ‘the spiral development model’ stating the need of reiterating group meetings whenever new knowledge springs up. Moreover, consultants concur on the importance of documentation, as it seems to be the prevalent method in ensuring that the project is properly understood between project stakeholders. Nevertheless, a plethoraof meetings and different forms of communication are a prerequisite to good documentation.

Another step in reconciling the consultant-client ontologies is the process of translating these needs into concepts or solution. Whelton et al. (2002, p. 198) explain that when translating the needs and requirements, after having harmonized them, is important to develop more than one concept or satisfactory solution. In the real world, consultants usually do this by trying to put as many things as possible into numbers, as it seems to be more comprehensible for the clients. One other way of doing this translation of needs into solutions is by means of programs. As one of the consultants stated, there is one superior program benefit that the organization is trying to achieve that is later broken down and managed through smaller and discreet projects, with their respective objectives.

Furthermore, once objectives have been identified they are to be broken down to smaller ones since it provides a more comprehensive view of what the solution envisions. In addressing this, consultants use documentation extensively. Again, as in the case of harmonizing, having it written down is often necessary in order to clarify things as much as possible. It can be interpreted that almost all the steps in the project definition phase require participation of both the consultant and the client, and as stated in the literature review part, according to Gluckler and Armbruster (2003, p. 277) this can turn out to be ‘messy’ with some of the transparency lost in the process. Therefore, documentation serves as the next best thing in tackling this issue of non-transparency.

Additionally, as outlined by Whelton et al. (2002, p. 208) the importance of client’s strategy needs to be born in mind when coming up with solutions. Teague and Cooke-Davies (2008, cited in Williams et al. 2009, p. 110) even go so far to state that the primary cause in having different takes on the project is due to differences in comprehending the strategy. Consultants usually second that but at the same time they

pointed out that access to strategic information and documents is not always accessible, sometimes due to the lack of client's trust.

Probably one of the rare findings that differed from what the literature suggested is the acknowledgment of the wider context when considering projects taken up by consultants. Morris (1997) spoke about how "a project's definition both is affected by and affects its external environment" (p. 231) focusing the most on the political and economic factors. Barely anyone has touched upon this topic in the interviews, let alone elaborated on it.

As a last point in this chapter we give an overall comparison of the considerations that project management literature deems important in dealing with project front-end compared to what consultants have said (Figure 12). We show this using a Venn diagram, as we believe that it portrays best the differences exhibited and helps provoke thinking on why they exist.

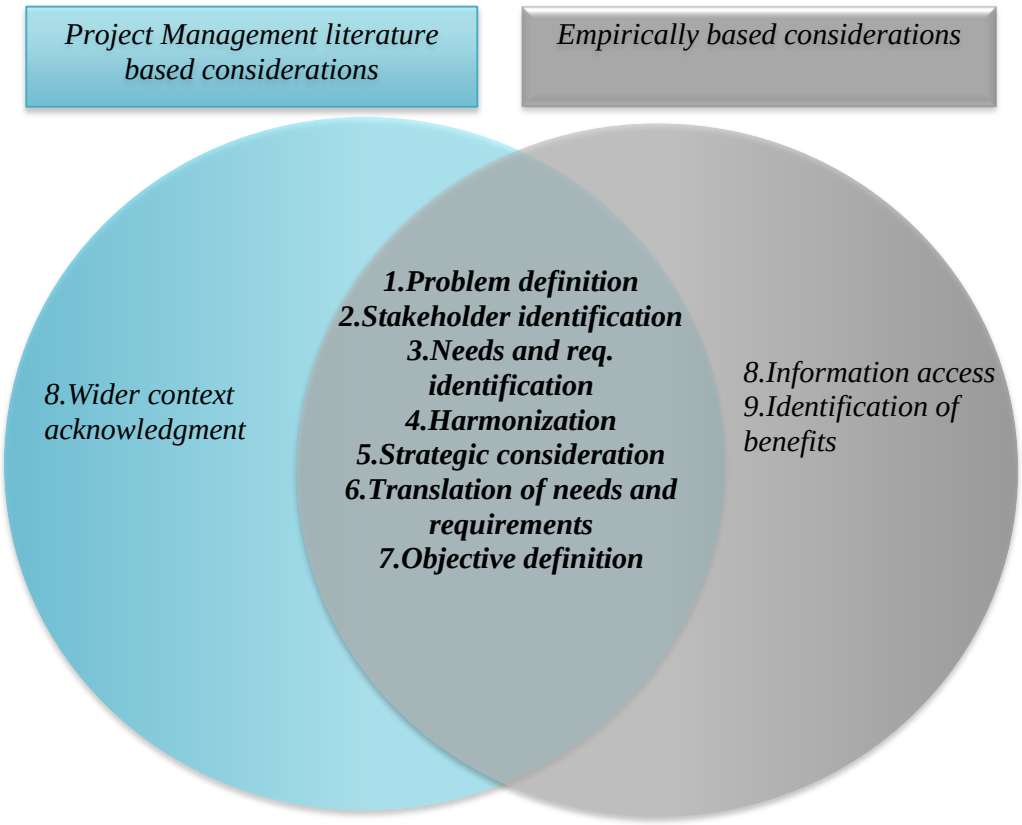

Figure 12.Project definition phase: project management literature vs. empirical findings

Project management literature based considerations are basically the criteria developed at the end of the Chapter 2, and encompass all the relevant considerations that need to be taken into account in project definition phase from the perspective of project management. When comparing these with what the consultants have identified, we can see that the majority of them are shared. That tells us that consultants have truly encountered with almost all the considerations that the literature proposes. Additionally, consultants have identified two more: the need to identify benefits—as these are different from the objectives of the project—and the issue of accessing information that proved to be troublesome for some of them. Also, as previously stated, the consultants

that we have interviewed did not mention the consideration of the wider context in their engagements.

5.3 Importance of the front-end

None of the interviewees denied the importance of the front-end of their projects, even though some of them regarded it as important as any other phase—in the words of an interviewee, *"the chain is as strong as its weakest link"* (Interviewee 5). Those who believe that the initial phase of the project is the most significant explain that this is because at this point the general goals and objectives of the project are determined. The implication of not doing this properly is that the project might end up doing something that is unintended and that does not help to solve the problematic situation. The phase has to be conducted in an appropriate manner, as the objective is *"giving the patient the right treatment"* (Interview 7) and not something else. This idea is reaffirmed by (Morris, 1998) when he lucidly says that choices at the early definition stages set the tone for the entire project. "Get it wrong here, and the project will be wrong for a long time – perhaps forever. Get it right, and you are half way there. (Defining the problem is half the solution; 90 percent of the outcome is defined in the first 10 percent of the project.)" (p. 5).

This has to do with the fact that wrong choices during the front-end of projects—which are low-cost to solve at this stage—result in expensive consequences downstream the project. A similar notion is presented in the PMBOK Guide (PMI, 2008, p.17; and in Figure 6 in Chapter 2) where it is showed that the cost of changes (in scope, for example) increases as the project progresses, while influence of decisions, risk and uncertainty behave inversely. On the contrary, those who deemed the project definition phase as important as any other phase said that their concerns are mainly the challenges on the implementation phase.

When relating the interviewees' opinion to their metaphorical role introduced in the previous chapter (Table 10) we see that those whose role has an emphasis of discovering the problem, are more prone to regard the project definition phase as very important.

Opinion	***Interviewees***			***Example Quote***
The front-end is important	**#2**, **#3**, **#7**, **#8**, **#9**	**#4**	**#1**	"It's extremely important, extremely important that the analysis is correct; giving the patient the right treatment." (Interviewee 7)
The front-end is <u>not</u> the most important		**#6**	**#5**	"This is where the expectations are set, but it is not more important than the other ones, they are equally important." (Interviewee 6)
	"Doctor"	Unclear	"Expert"	
	Role			

Table 10.Importance of the phase relative to the role.

Across all interviews, there is a general understanding that the results of the project definition phase are subject to change and to be revised when contingencies are faced—something that is rather typical. As per the interviewees, this may happen for three main reasons: to reinforce on the project team the direction that the project has to follow, to

ensure a common understanding with the client, and to address new issues that have emerged. We will focus here on the last reason that implies the modification of the project objectives and scope while the project is already being implemented—the other two reasons have been discussed elsewhere. As stated by the Interviewee 2 (referring to the definition phase), it might be a *"large and complex process and we cannot have every question answered"*. Therefore, it appears to be that there is a question over considering projects as having a linear, time-based lifecycle. Wideman (2004, p. 15) explains that this is something that long ago was realized by the software development industry, to which progressing iteratively is essential. Ever since, there have been several attempts to integrate this iterative nature into the project lifecycle. Presumably, this is why PMBOK Guide argues that its process groups can be used at any stage of the project life-cycle; for instance, initiation processes are not only used to define a new project, but also a new phase within an existing project (PMI, 2008, p. 44).

In this chapter we discussed the empirical findings in relation to our theoretical frame of reference and in line with the research questions of this study. Some important observations and findings have been pointed out, ultimately resulting in several comparisons with the literature. The next and final chapter will use this broad discussion to specifically give answer to our research question.

6. Conclusions

In this chapter we come back to our research questions and answer them following the general discussion of findings from the previous chapter. After this, we revisit reliability and validity in light of the conducted empirical research. The chapter ends by discussing some of the strengths and limitations of our study, before suggesting possible further research directions.

6.1 Answering the research questions

- ✓ ***What is the understanding of project definition phase in the management consulting environment?***

Literature explains that there are many different names and understandings of the project definition phase and this is reflected in our empirical findings. Management consultants use an array of different names and explanations of what needs to be done at this point of their consulting engagement. Nevertheless, there are visible 'patterns' or indications that all consultants share; despite the variances in the words and phrases they use to describe it. As Whelton et al. (2002, p. 206) suggest, this phase is all about learning, or better yet, collaborative learning, which certainly seems to be the case in consultancy. This need of collaborative learning has been conveyed many times, as consultants stress the importance of understanding client's organization, pinpointing the sources of uncertainty and ambiguity by analyzing the problematical situation and proposing possible solutions.

Although not the main concern of this phase, some preliminary planning of the actions that need to be taken is conducted. This is necessary as client and consultant work together in agreeing on what needs to be done, and how a problematic situation will be fixed. This is another example of collaboration, or a representation of the co-productive nature of this knowledge-intensive service, as consultants stressed that it is necessary for the client to agree on whatever is presented in this phase if further actions are to happen. Maybe this is why many consultants have called or insinuated that this phase has a lot to do with selling. By selling, we refer to the consultant selling its services to the client and securing the assignment (e.g. a contract). However, it is important to state that the contract, for example, is not seen as the final output of this phase and that there are quite a lot of important decisions to be made both prior and post contract. Regardless, all management consultants agreed that this phase ends before any operational actions take place.

Interestingly, just as the literature disagrees, so do the consultants in terms of when the project starts. There were several occurrences when respondents would state that the project starts after this project definition phase is completed. This is somehow contradicting, since they deal with what are clearly project definition challenges and yet do not see this process as being part of the project. Presumably, their understanding of projects is that of traditional, mainstream project management literature, and not the boarder concept that we support.

- ✓ ***What are the most common project management practices used for project definition by Swedish management consultants?***

The most common project management practices are:

- Documentation,
- Scope statement, and
- Practices that heavily rely on communication such as interviews, discussions, meetings and workshops.

Documentation has a two-folded purpose. Firstly, delimiting what will be and what will not be done by the project, which is why scope statement is of paramount importance to the consultants as it serves as an instrument of keeping the project stakeholders in check on what needs to be done. Secondly, documentation assists in clarifying several aspects of the project such as what the problem is, who the stakeholders are, what their needs are (including harmonizing them), as well as what the project aims to achieve. There are several documents and different names that consultants use to achieve all of the aforementioned goals; still the purpose of them all is to clarify what the project represents. We should add that under documentation, we imply both the inspection of client's documents that gives insight for the consultant, but also the write up of documents that a consultant makes (e.g. assignment specification, proposal, contract) either on its own or in coordination with the client.

Communication based practices, could be looked at as means that lead to the generation of documentation. Interviews, meetings and workshops provide a context for consultant and client to interact and establish a relationship that should allow a free flow of necessary information, as this is a precondition to proper understanding of the project. In order to assist these practices, several communication facilitator practices (i.e. post-its, mind maps, third-party facilitators) are used to help generating and stirring the communication in the right direction.

Additionally, we would like to stress the importance of using different methodologies and frameworks in this phase. Although these were not identified as the most used practices they still significantly influence the way in which a consultant approaches a project and shapes it accordingly, during and beyond the project definition phase.

- ✓ ***What are the specific issues and considerations that these practices address to bridge the gap between client-consultant expectations?***

Consultants recognized most of the issues and considerations that were identified in the literature. It is interesting to note this, since project definition is seen as an area of project management that was overlooked, and the authors who have dealt with it mostly come from the engineering area. Nonetheless, the challenges represented in this phase remain the same and include the following:

- Accurately identifying and clearly defining the problem of the client
- Proper and comprehensive identification of stakeholders and their role in the project
- Elicitation of stakeholders' needs, requirement and views that infer them
- Harmonization of conflicting or unaligned stakeholders' views
- Bearing in mind client's strategy

- Fitting translation of stakeholders' needs and requirements into multiple concept solutions
- Precise definition of objectives and aims of the project

Notably, the only consideration that we were not able to match with the one identified in the literature is the consideration of the wider project context. By this, we mean taking into account the political, economic, social, legal, environmental and technological factors that affect or are affected by the project.

However, there were two more interesting pieces of information that were raised in the interviews in regards to issues and considerations of this phase. Firstly, consultants were sometimes limited in accessing the necessary information from the client, often involving strategic ones. Secondly, some of the consultants emphasized the importance of identifying the benefits that a certain project bears for the client, which are not to be confused with the objectives of the project, which are always identified and defined.

✓ ***What significance do management consultants give to the project definition phase?***

The importance of project definition phase is held in high regard with all of the consultants interviewed. The majority of the consultants have expressed that it is the most significant phase in the project, while other equaled it with the importance of other phases. Nonetheless, the implications of this phase are undoubtedly significant, as suggested by the literature, and consultants confirm this as they accentuate that this phase sets the tone for the rest of the project and provides foundations for the client-consultant relationship. Moreover, an additional reason for this perception can be found by considering that it is here when the scope of the project is delimited. Respondents would consistently refer to scope creep as the "worst nightmare" of a consultant, therefore reassuring the importance of this definitional phase.

6.2 Validity and reliability revisited

We revisit the notions of validity and reliability in view of showing whether what had been previously written has been held until the end of this study.

External validity, or generalizability, is concerned with the possibility of generalizing the information from the sample we have inspected to a broader one. Although this is not the main concern of an exploratory study, such as ours, we do argue that some of the realizations made in this thesis could potentially be generalizable. This is supported by our sampling techniques, which allowed us to choose a purposeful sample, in this case Swedish management consultants, which was necessary in order to answer our research questions. Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 27) and Mason (1996, p. 93) acknowledge this method as a valid one in qualitative research, and refer to it to purposive or theoretical sampling, respectively.

Internal validity aims to ensure that what we want to find out or 'measure' is indeed achieved. In that regard, the interview questionnaire we used in all the semi-structured interviews was constructed in such a way that it provided pieces of information necessary to answer our research question. It is important to remember that the questions developed for the purpose of the questionnaire have been based on the

literature reviewed, therefore ensuring that adequate coverage is achieved in terms of content. Saunders et al. (2009, p. 373) refer to this as content validity.

We move on to the concept of reliability, which is concerned with whether the research is replicable and whether the results are consistent. In our case, as suggested by various authors (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, cited in Saunders et al. 2009, p. 328; Silverman, 2006, p. 283), clear and transparent overview of the research protocol and research decision is provided. In Chapter 4 we have detailed the research protocol and choices, while in Chapter 1 and 2, concepts that have been empirically inspected were theoretically delimitedfor the use of this thesis. Therefore, we argue that reliability, at least to a certain extent, has been achieved.

6.3 Managerial implications

At this point, we present some ideas that have resulted from this study, which could be considered areas of opportunity for the management consulting practice:

- Even if management consulting and project management are viewed as a distinct and separate disciplines, mutual contribution can be made from one field to the other. Management consultants should understand that project management is not limited to the operational and straightforward part of projects, but instead covers a much broader area. Tools, methods, methodologies and frameworks from project management can feasibly facilitate the consultants' efforts—for instance, using programs to deliver intended benefits through smaller and more manageable projects.
- Management consultants' success as practitioners might not depend on the formality of their practices, however we believe that knowing the formal (textbook) concept is advantageous as knowledge from the academic world would usually come in this form. Even though the "by the book" application of practices might be unpractical or even unreasonable, conscious understanding will always serve to attain conscious competence, particularly for less experienced practitioners. This is ever more important, given that the same issues and challenges described in the literature are found in the world of management consultants.
- Although results of our study are not prescriptive, we have still highlighted the main issues addressed during the front-end of projects and how the consultants interviewed go about them. This is valuable for practitioners as a checklist for ensuring that all aspects are indeed covered. In particular three aspects—translating needs into solutions, considering strategy, and considering the wider context—appear to be addressed in a lower degree, according to our empirical findings. We cannot affirm (nor suggest) that these issues are ignored, but we propose using more formal practices, in an attempt to rationalize these complex situations to guarantee the efficacy and clarity of the process.

6.4 Theoretical implications

The present study has placed project management inside the context of management consulting and proved how a broader concept of project is more and more significant in this kind of environment. In this respect, the field of management consulting, which traditionally has specialized in unstructured and ill-defined situations, can potentially keep shedding light into research of the definitional phase of projects. This can be seen in factors characterizing management consulting setting (such as co-production,

intangible outcomes and being a knowledge-intensive service) which provide additional considerations, apart from the ones already stated in the project management literature, that require special attention in the front-end. Additionally, by looking at what practitioners do (i.e. practices) we can understand and describe what the priorities and activities of management consultants as project managers are. Hopefully, our research has provided some theoretical foundations in this sense and calls for additional research in this area.

6.5 Strengths and weaknesses of the study

The intention of this research was to perform an initial exploration about what management consultants do in their day-to-day activities with the objective of reconciling their ontologies with those of their clients. In line with the project as practice approach, which focuses the activities that project actors carry out, our research contributes with an initial description of what management consultants do as project managers, rather than confirming project management best practices in the distinct context of consulting. With that in mind, at this point we would like to discuss the strengths and limitations that the present study has in achieving these objectives.

The inductive approach together with the chosen research and data collection strategies are considered strengths of this study as they allowed the researches to have the flexibility of exploring this rather unfamiliar and ambiguous environment.This is especially due to the interviewees' informal descriptions that mostly concentrated on the nature of the issues encountered at this initial phase, but not as much of the specifics of how to cope with these issues. Evidently, we were not expecting to get textbook-like descriptions of these practices, but at times the answers would be as broad as stating that this is done through, for instance, conversation. It was our role as researchers to dig in and try to elicit the underlining purpose that those conversations were aiming to achieve in order to relate them to a specific practice from our framework.

One other strength of this research is precisely the theoretical frame of reference that assisted us to discern the specific practices used and the purposes they were fulfilling. As stated before, our objective was not to confirm project management practices but rather to explore what practitioners do. Nevertheless, the theoretical framework served as a baseline todiscover how interviewees go about this initial stage of their projects. Likewise, the categorization that inductively emerged while analyzing data allowed us to cluster practices into groups based on how practitioners use these practices. This not only helped us to discern patterns but also allowed us to better describe the nature of these practices.

In addition, the realization that a broader understanding of projects is necessary to address the complex world of social sciences became evident in our study. Addressing unstructured situations (such as in management consulting) makes it increasingly necessary to pay special attention to the front-end of the projects. We have shown that problems and challenges represented in this phase both in project management and management consulting literature, along with what management consultants spoke about, were very similar. Therefore, we believe that the strength of our research is that these fields can mutually benefit from these findings, especially when knowing that the early phases of project management have been under-investigated.

At the same time, we do recognize some shortcomings of our study as we strongly believe that more practices would have been realized if the approach had been different. For one thing, the time available for interviewing was rather short so that the topics addressed would stay at a very general level and details would be reached very late in the conversation.

One other weakness is that the whole study is based on perceptions and interpretations, both from the interviewees and the researchers. While we believe this is an appropriate approach for the present research, we also acknowledge some of its limitations. For example, it can easily be argued that the inputs gotten from interviewees represent their 'espoused theories' and not necessarily their 'theories-in-use'. On the other side, our lack of practical experience might have limited our ability to understand and interpret the empirical information properly. Certain findings might have been overlooked, for instance, due to the different language used by management consulting practitioners and the vagueness of terms such as "problem", "meeting", "solution", and even "project".

Lastly, the rather small sample of interviewees made it quite difficult to identify significant patterns resulting from context factors such as the type and size of the consultancy and the educational background of the respondents. We realized this is because our sample ended up being a very diverse mix compared to its size, meaning that we had too many context categories (e.g. five types of consultancies) relative to the total number of respondents (i.e. nine).

6.6 Suggestion for future research

Without a doubt the front-end of the projects, and more in general, the broader concept of projects requires further investigation. In relation to our study, and based on the limitations discussed above, we propose supplementary research with the following considerations:

- Alternative data collection methods are suggested in order to ensure a better awareness of the practices that management consultants carry out as project managers. Active interviewing is presumably still a valid method but only if applied during longer periods of time to reflect on "the experiences of project practitioners [and] generate alternative understandings of what goes on in project practice" (Cicmil, 2006, p. 36). Yet, other strategies such as ethnographic methods, action research and phenomenology would me more ideal (Blomquist et al., 2010, p. 8; Cicmil et al., 2006, p. 687; Smyth & Morris, 2007, p. 427), as they would also help discerning 'espoused theories' from 'theories-in-use'.
- Our study focused on a relatively small number of interviewees, so future research could consider a larger sample in order to identify context-related patterns and possibly focus on a narrower type of management consultants, in terms of function, sector, size, etc.
- As an exploratory and cross-sectional study, we only looked for patterns that would relate the specific practices to the issues they tackle at the front-end of projects. A longitudinal study could perhaps look into the causal dynamics of these practices and explain their overall effect in project success.
- In most cases, the input from our respondents focused on the expectation gap between the client and the consultant. Future research should additionally examine possible intra-organizational and inter-organizational gaps more thoroughly, considering the different functional and organizational levels of both the consultant

and client; furthermore, giving more insight on the perspectives from the client side.

- Initially our research did not consider the role of consultants as a relevant factor, but some notions of how this affect the importance they assign to the definitional phase were revealed. The role of the consultant could possible also inform the choice and use of practices. Supplementary investigation could examine this.
- Comparison of the practices used in this phase in the management consulting industry with those of IT or engineering and construction industry can be performed. This, in turn, can help in understanding better the differences and similarities of these areas, improving the understanding of projects that encompass several industries.

With this study the authors believe that new light has been shed on the two areas that have not been investigated together in the past, i.e. project definition and management consultancy. Besides bringing together the theoretical backgrounds of these two fields, we are assured that our results, although modest, can help both practitioners and scholars in expanding their views and gaining new insight on these topics. In spite of the differences in languages of practitioners and scholars, we have identified without a doubt, that the challenges faced are virtually the same. Our hope is that with this research we have "scratched the surface" of areas that have a lot of potential for further research and that can be mutually beneficial both for scholars and management consultants.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – General inventory of project management practices (methods, methodologies, tools and techniques) in alphabetical order

@task
Activity list
Activity Model
Affinity diagram
Agile (Methodology)
Agile board
Baseline plan
Benefits dependency network
Bid documents
Bid/seller evaluation
Bidders conferences
Bottom-up estimating
Brainstorming
CA clarity
Cash flow analysis (CFA)
CATWOE Analysis
Cause and effect diagram
Change kaleidoscope
Change process
Change request
Client acceptance form
Cognitive Mapping Approach
Communication plan
Complex responsive process
Configuration review
Contingency plans
Control charts
Cost/benefit analysis
Critical chain method and analysis
Critical path method (CPM) and analysis
Cultural web
Customer satisfaction surveys
Database for cost estimating
Database of contractual commitment data
Database of historical data
Database of lessons learned
Database of risks
Decision tree
Delphi method
Earned value management
ESCO Model
Facilitated workshops
Observations
Open plan professional
Oracle
Organizational capabilities model
Outputs-Outcome Alignment
Parametric estimating
Pareto diagram
Personal interests model
PM software for cost estimating
PM software for monitoring of cost
PM software for monitoring of schedule
PM software for resources leveling
PM software for resources scheduling
PM software for simulation
PM software for task scheduling
PM software multiproject scheduling/leveling
PMBOK
Political tactics framework
Power and influence framework
PowerPoint
Primavera
Probabilistic duration estimate (PERT)
Product breakdown structure
Programme evaluation and review technique (PERT)
Progress report
Project charter
Project communication room (war room)
Project goals charter
Project management software developed in house
Project place
Project Web site
Projects in controlled environments (PRINCE)
Projects in controlled environments 2 (PRINCE2)
Prototypes
PSO Model
Quality function deployment
Quality inspection
Quality plan
Questionnaires and Surveys
Ranking of risks
Rationale unified process
Re-baselining

Feasibility study	Requirements analysis
Financial measurement tools	Responsibility assignment matrix
Focus groups	Rich pictures
Functional Analysis	Risk management documents
Gantt chart	SAP
Gap Analysis	Scope statement
Graphic presentation of risk information	Self-directed work teams
Group Creativity Techniques	Sense-making
Group Decision Making Techniques	SMART
In house project management tools	Soft Systems methodology (SSM)
Interviews	Spiral Development Model
Joint Application Development (or Design)	Stage gate approach
Kick-off meeting	Stakeholders analysis
Learning curve	Statement of work
Lesson learned/post-mortem	Strengths weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT)
Lessons learnt (project reviews/project audits)	Structured systems analysis and design methodology (SSADM)
Life cycle cost (LCC)	Team member performance appraisal
Logical Framework Approach	Team-building event
Managing successful programmes	The dialogue model
Methodology developed ‘in house’	Top-down estimating
Microsoft project	Trend chart or S-curve
Milestone planning	Value analysis
Mind maps	Value Chain
Moderator-Facilitator Role	Visio
Monte-Carlo analysis	Voice of the Customer
MS excel	Work authorization
Multi-character Model	Work breakdown structure (WBS)
Network diagram	Workshops
Nominal Groups Technique	Wysocki’s adaptive project framework (APF)

Compiled from: Alderman et al., 2005; Besner & Hobbs, 2006a, 2006b, 2008; Fortune et al., 2011; Kähkönen, 1999; PMI, 2008; Neal, 1995; Örtengren, 2004; Thiry, 2001, 2002, 2007; Whelton et al., 2002; White & Fortune, 2002; Winter & Szczepanek, 2009.

Appendix 2 – Interview Questionnaire

1. Question: What do you do exactly or please describe your job? What kind of projects do you (your company) do?

2. Question: Could you explain the general consultancy process in your company?

3. Question: What do you consider as a defined project and at what point of the consulting process does that usually happen?

4. Question: What is the general result (outcomes and outputs) of the initial phase?

5. Question: Who in the organization is involved in the initial phase (are they the same ones who do the actual consulting engagement or somebody else)?

6. Question: What are the actual activities, methods, tools and techniques used in the initial phase?

7. Question: What are the main challenges that you encounter in this initial phase? (In particular, the interest is on the ones contributing to different vision of the project.)

8. Possible additional questions: Do the following things (that are consultancy-specific) contribute to the challenges in the initial phase:
    - The fact that the two involved organizations have different working cultures and styles (heterogeneity of members' backgrounds)
    - The fact that it is a service based process, therefore harder to measure, it being intangible and everything
    - That the outcome is the result of coproduction between the client and the consultant
    - That the problem is not clear sometimes it the client or that he/she does not express it properly
    - Considering psychological contracts between the client and consultant
    - 5 places where potential gaps may occur

9. Question: Which of the practices mentioned before are most valuable in helping to reconcile the views of the client and the consultant? What are the most-used? Do they vary from project to project or there are some standard ones?

10. Question: How do you ensure the common understanding of the definitions and objectives in this phase?

11. Question: Do you consider project definition as something that is done only at the beginning of the project or you go back to it (iterative process) after realizing that there was a misunderstanding?

12. Question: How important do you consider this phase? Why?
13. Question: What is the importance placed on managing the perceptions and status of the client in relation to the outcome of the project itself?

Demographical questions

14. What is your educational background?
15. What is the type of consultancy?
16. What is the name and size of the organization?
17. What is the your position in the organization?

Appendix 3 – List of practices according to usage

No.	Practice Name	No. of interviewees using it
1	Documentation	9
2	Interviews	7
3	Discussions (meetings)	7
4	Scope statement	6
5	Workshops	5
6	Kick-off meeting	4
7	Questionnaires and Surveys	3
8	1st and 2nd level thinking	3
9	Training (Education, Coaching)	3
10	Images of Projects	2
11	Tribal interests model	2
12	Experience Based Learning (e.g. Role-Playing)	2
13	Observations	2
14	Social Network Diagram	2
15	Cause and effect diagram	2
16	Cost Benefit Analysis (business case)	2
17	Story-telling & case-based examples	2
18	Post-its	2
19	Mind maps	1
20	RAM	1
21	Facilitator Role	1
22	Stakeholder Analysis	1
23	Agile Board	1
24	SWOT	1
25	WBS	1
26	Team building event	1
27	Prototypes	1
28	Gap Analysis	1
29	Iceberg model	1
30	Program-Project framework	1
31	PDCA	1
32	Rational Unified Process (RUP)	1
33	Hope and Fear	1
34	PENG Analysis	1
35	Competitive Strategy/Red Ocean Strategy	1
36	Blue Ocean Strategy	1
37	Disruptive Innovation	1
38	Balance Scorecard	1

Appendix 4 – "Request for Interview" template

Dear Sir or Madam:

We are postgraduate students doing a Masters in Strategic Project Management at Umeå University. We are currently working on our master thesis and looking extensively for good contacts to possibly conduct an interview as part of the empirical research for our thesis. The aim of the thesis is to explore the practices that consultants employ in the early phases of their consulting projects, in the understanding that the initial phase is important for the overall consulting engagement.

We assure you that the interview would not take much of your time, as we understand the value of it. However the input that you would provide to us is paramount for our research. The interview would be held by telephone (or by Skype, if possible), and of course we will adapt to your schedule. Confidentiality and anonymity is guaranteed as per our School's Academic Ethics Guide.

Thank you in advance for your attention and time. Please be kind in letting us know if you would like to participate or if you could possibly refer us to someone else in your organization who might be interested.

Yours sincerely,

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