

## **To Stay or to Leave? The Views of Managers and Consultants in Management Consulting Sector**

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## **¿Quedarse o marcharse? Contraste de opiniones entre managers y consultores del sector de la consultoría de gestión**

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Résumé de l'article

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# To Stay or to Leave? The Views of Managers and Consultants in Management Consulting Sector

Rester ou partir ?

Regards croisés des managers et consultants du secteur conseil en management

¿Quedarse o marcharse?

Contraste de opiniones entre managers y consultores del sector de la consultoría de gestión

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## ABSTRACT

Retaining knowledge workers is of foremost interest to both academics and managers. This article conducts a deep analysis identifying prevailing HR retention practices and linking them to the AMO framework, which represents employees' needs in terms of abilities, motivation, and opportunities for future retention. This exploratory research relied on the contributions of managers and employees from 17 French management consulting firms. The findings show the role of interpersonal internal and external relationships in times of retention of this population. This research elucidates how the ambivalence of consultants-customers' relationships can be either facilitating or binding in such context.

Keywords: Retention, knowledge worker, AMO, qualitative research methods

## Résumé

La fidélisation des travailleurs du savoir représente un enjeu majeur pour de nombreux académiques et dirigeants. Nous proposons une analyse approfondie des pratiques de GRH existantes par l'approche AMO, à savoir l'étude des besoins des salariés en termes de capacités, de motivation et d'opportunités en vue de leur fidélisation. Cette recherche exploratoire s'appuie sur les contributions de managers et consultants de 17 cabinets de conseil en management français. Les résultats soulignent le rôle majeur des relations interpersonnelles internes et externes. Cette recherche montre l'ambivalence des relations consultants-clients qui peuvent représenter aussi bien un levier qu'une contrainte dans un tel contexte.

Mots clés : Fidélisation, travailleur du savoir, AMO, méthode de recherche qualitative

## Resumen

Retener a los trabajadores del conocimiento es primordial tanto para académicos como directivos. Proponemos un análisis profundo de las prácticas de retención de RR.HH. predominantes en el marco AMO, subrayando las necesidades de los empleados en términos de capacidades, motivación y oportunidades de fidelización. Esta investigación exploratoria se basa en las aportaciones de directivos y empleados de 17 consultorías de gestión francesas. Los resultados muestran la importancia de las relaciones interpersonales internas y externas en los tiempos de retención de esta población. Esta investigación aclara la ambivalencia de las relaciones consultores-clientes que pueden ser facilitadoras o vinculantes en dicho contexto. Palabras clave: Fidelización, retención, trabajadores del conocimiento, AMO, metodología de investigación cualitativa



Companies across the globe share a major concern for talent retention. In our globalised knowledge-based economy, the creation and transfer as well as the transformation and capitalisation of knowledge is—more than ever—a central managerial priority. One of the most formidable challenges managers encounter is ensuring that their teams secure and preserve the appropriate knowledge so they can exploit opportunities to innovate and be the most reactive on the market. Even if we can deplore the lack of studies that clearly outline and detail the current situation in Europe, management consulting firms are concerned about voluntary turnover figures, oscillating between 20 and 30% per year (Guiomard, 2019). Behind these figures lie organizational strategies (“up or out” in particular) and organizational exogeneous factors (family life, wear and tear linked to the very nature of the job) which justify the extent of these voluntary departures. For sure, not all consultancy firms seek to retain their employees, and not all consultants will be “retainable.” In other words, the success of some firms relies on the rotation of part their workforce and some consultants start their career considering these years as a temporary experience, or even a valuable springboard for their future career.

In the meantime, in companies, consultants note a discrepancy between the willingness and rhetoric of managers and the reality of the proposals put in place to involve employees and limit the scale of the costs inherent in these voluntary departures. This paper contributes new insights to the scholarship with the aim of presenting academics and professionals a better understanding of retention conditions in knowledge-intensive organizations (KIOs).

As they use their implicit and explicit knowledge of the firm, knowledge workers develop the requisite expertise and knowledge to create a sustainable competitive advantage for it: such employees therefore represent the fundamental building blocks of organisational success (Anand *et al.*, 2007; Donnelly, 2011b). In such a context, the company is responsible for designing the appropriate HR system, one “that fits with the knowledge requirements of their innovation strategy to achieve higher firm performance” (Collins & Kehoe, 2017: 309). To foster greater workforce stability, it is essential that HRM practices are vertically aligned; that is, consistent with a company’s employee retention strategy. But companies keen to retain their key knowledge workers must also make sure that their practices are horizontally aligned: they must ensure that all of their

practices are consistent in order to influence outcomes, first at the individual level and then at the organisational level.

Academic research has often focused on how to effectively define these sets of HRM practices in order to foster commitment as well as to engage, motivate and retain knowledge workers (Sajeva, 2007). Recognizing that no universal set of HR practices exists—though there are certainly various subgroups of knowledge workers—our article focuses on how the issue of voluntary turnover is tackled in the French management consulting sector. Our analysis emphasized the importance of identifying and meeting the needs of consultants by implementing HRM practices that aim to improve retention.

In light of these considerations, we addressed the following questions in this exploratory research: (a) Which HR practices would develop employee retention in such consulting firms? (b) How can we explain this effect on employee retention?

This research enlisted exploratory qualitative analysis to answer to these questions. By approximating managerial and professionals’ perceptions, our analysis presents new insights into how existing HRM practices influence consultants’ intention to leave their workplaces. To this end, we built our analysis on the ability motivation opportunity (AMO) framework to explore how HRM practices influenced consultants’ ability, motivation, and opportunities to work and, as a consequence, to stay within their company.

In addition to contributing to the literature on knowledge worker retention, this paper focused on employees’ voluntary departure behaviour and, in doing so, sought to understand the needs, perceptions, and impacts of HRM practices at the “micro” level; namely, the individual, not the organisational, level (Felps *et al.*, 2009). This tack serves to respond to current theoretical needs as most HRM work that has considered the strategic role of HR has trained its attention on measuring organisational results. Therefore, the paper also strove to present fresh scholarship to the line of research that specifically examines the impact of these practices on the attitudes and behaviours of high-performing employees (Khoreva *et al.*, 2017).

In the next section, we review literature to disentangle knowledge workers and consultants’ specificities and to show the relevance of the AMO framework in analyzing KW retention. Then, we outline research methods used with the two populations, directors/managers and consultants. Results show how HR practices can contribute to consultants’ retention, enhancing their ability, motivation, and

opportunities to perform in their company. In addition, our findings highlight the role of interpersonal relationships in retention issues. Finally, we discuss our final suggestions, inductively generated, and cite future key issues for both practitioners and academics concerned by knowledge workers' retention.

## Review of the Literature

### Defining Knowledge Worker and Consultant Populations

#### Knowledge Workers

Before we go further into our research purpose, it is necessary to outline the definition of "knowledge workers" (KW). The emergence of the knowledge economy in the last century and its formidable expansion in the nineties, created a new breed of worker. The changing economy has drawn the undivided attention of the business community and employment markets to the value of the intangible assets and knowledge-based capital held by individuals, such as information, know-how, and knowledge. Among the initial studies conducted on this group, some attempted to define the profile and contours of this category of worker by examining their occupation, what they do, or their behavioural characteristics (Donnelly, 2008)—largely because the definition of knowledge worker remains to be fully articulated.

The extant literature initially defined knowledge workers (KW) as people who deal with information and knowledge in their day-to-day life (Davenport, 2005; Drucker 1993). Reed (1996) refined this broad definition, seeing them as a group of experts not to be confused with liberal professions (lawyers, for instance) or organizational professions (such as managers or administrators). Indeed, Reed (1996) explained that knowledge workers "specialize in complex task domains which are inherently resistant to incursions by the carriers of bureaucratic rationalization and control" (p. 585). May *et al.* (2002) added that they rely on their "portable knowledge and skills and [as a consequence] are not tied to one particular organization" (p. 778).

While the debate about precisely whom should be considered as a knowledge worker has generated considerable interest, company directors are clearly recognising that retaining employees with this profile is a major issue (Horwitz *et al.*, 2003). Because their work is more focused on problem solving than on routine tasks, these workers develop specific skills, knowledge, and expertise

after many years of working on projects, usually in teams. An organisation's success depends on this intangible capital, which can leave the organisation at any time. Retaining knowledge workers is both an issue for organisations and a challenge for firm directors and managers. These "free workers" are known for having the skills that knowledge-intensive organisations consider particularly valuable: a formidable personality, an interest in personal growth and continuous learning, and a strong need for autonomy as well as for being more committed to their profession than to their organisation (Horwitz *et al.*, 2003; Sajeve, 2007). These characteristics determine and complicate the effort to define effective sets of HRM practices that would improve the commitment and retention of knowledge workers. A final point is that such workers are easier to manage when the organisations in which they operate agree to question traditional terms of employment and make be more supportive of new working arrangements set by knowledge worker practices—an approach that leads to the hybridisation of the employment relationship (Donnelly, 2009).

#### Consultants

In this context, the literature has highlighted the value of examining the retention issue by segmenting knowledge workers into clusters according to their characteristics and main needs (Sutherland & Jordaan, 2004). Consultants represent a type of KW that scholars have approached as professionals in knowledge-intensive organizations (KIOs) (Donnelly, 2008). Consulting firms exemplify such KIOs in that they count on their intellectual or human capital to produce their product or services (Starbuck, 1992) and, more precisely, rely on converting their human capital (knowledge, skills, and abilities) into intellectual capital (product and service offerings) (Swart, 2006). Given the human capital they hold and the time they can spend outside of organisational boundaries, these KWs have become a rich and complex subject for analysis and research (Olsen *et al.*, 2016). For organizations, the risk of their voluntary departure can be considerable (Gonzalez, 2016). Surprisingly, much of the scholarship has been more oriented toward their commitment (Swart *et al.*, 2014), with less concern for how HRM practices can serve to limit their intention to leave (Yalabik *et al.*, 2017). Even if commitment is one of the closest antecedents of turnover intentions (Vandenberghe & Bentein, 2009), more research is clearly needed to understand the impact of HRM practices on consultants' intention to leave.

Consultants are workers who operate in a liminal organisational space: because their work is project-based, they are neither insiders nor outsiders (Sturdy *et al.*, 2009). Boundaries are not clearly cut (Wenger, 1998). These boundaries of practice are “not simple lines of demarcation between inside and outside but form a complex social landscape of boundaries and peripheries that open and close various forms of participation” (Sturdy and al., 2009: 40). Considering this particularity, consultants may have to deal with complexities in their employment relationships, which can be another source of individual turnover decisions (Newell *et al.*, 2009). This constellation of issues in management consulting represents but one area of research that demands further attention in order to fill gaps in understanding the decisions and behaviours of this body of workers (Donnelly, 2011a).

## Positioning Consultants’ Specificities in Knowledge Workers’ Turnover Literature

### Theoretical Background

Theoretically, the need to study the voluntary departure behaviour of these atypical profiles returns us to the world of strategic human resource management so often referenced in this stream of empirical research (Delery & Roumpi, 2017). From the 1970s onwards, and especially in the 1990s, research in Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) proliferated in an attempt to explain the strategic dimensions of the potential offered by human resources but also the positive effects of human resource management on organisational competitiveness (Guest *et al.* 2003; Syed & Kramar, 2017).

More precisely, according to resource-based view (RBV) advocates, an organisation develops a sustainable competitive advantage through its valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources (Barney, 1991). If Barney (1991) identified all “assets, capabilities, organization processes, firm attributes, information, knowledge” (p. 101)—in other words physical capital, human capital, and organizational capital—the literature has presented diverging positions about the source of competitive advantage and the limits of such positions. Some scholars have identified HRM practices as the main levers of human capital resources while others defend the strategic contribution of human capital and its isolated mechanisms (firm specificity, social complexity, and causal ambiguity) (Delery & Roumpi, 2017).

For purposes of our research, we assumed that an organisation whose human resources met fundamental strategic criteria tends to work to retain them. Indeed, if such knowledge, skills, and abilities inherent to the individuals are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and cannot be substituted by other internal assets, then the organisation will invest in these human capital resources and develop the practices and strategies necessary to maintain them. In that respect, this research also values the crucial responsibility of top managers in designing coherent combinations of HRM practices regarding the necessary horizontal and vertical fit of these practices to develop human capital in their company. Investing in HR practices to attract and retain employees is, above all, an activity that furthers the development of the organisation’s competitive advantage (Delery & Roumpi, 2017), which is even more the case for companies such as consultancies, which almost wholly depend upon the input of their employees.

However, as explained, studying the case of consultants requires taking into account the hybrid nature of their employment relationship and, as a consequence, to go beyond the internal focus of the RBV theory and open analysis up to the environment of consultancies. The triangulated relationship characteristic of consulting firms creates synergies but also produces ‘conflicts of interests’ in the form of tension among consultants, consulting firms, and clients (Donnelly, 2011a). As this intermediate situation may be awkward for consultants, managers who want to retain their most important assets should also be concerned with consultants’ perceptions and, in response, design a set of HR practices aligned with their expectations and needs. If not, client organizations may become a formidable potential rival for consultancies. Taking into consideration these issues and their implications, this research tackled consultant retention issues, including their needs and perceptions of the HR practices currently being implemented in their companies.

### Focus on Empirical Studies

Among all the available research conducted on employee retention, few studies have focused on identifying HRM practices that are relevant to the needs and expectations of knowledge workers. As early as 1997, Lee and Maurer bemoaned that traditional theories did not provide an adequate framework for understanding knowledge worker retention and proposed an analysis based on the “unfolding

model of turnover.” According to the authors, when such employees planned to move to another company to further their career, strategic staffing incitement served as a key retention practice. If employees were attracted by external opportunities, it was in the company’s best interest to provide “technical career ladders” rather than ineffective certifying qualifications. Finally, Lee and Maurer pointed out that for employees who were dissatisfied and already seeking other opportunities, none of the HR practices is recommended because company directors would be embarking on a strategy they could not sustain over time.

Later, Alvesson (2000) explained that one of the key challenges for managers of knowledge workers keen to retain them is to build and shape their social identity. Alvesson recommended implementing attractive compensation and benefits alongside other practices more likely to foster motivation and long-term retention, such as a “clear career structure, involving pay rises, promotions and perhaps partnership” (Alvesson, 2000, p. 1115). Previous research has confirmed the value of acknowledging performance through promotion and development opportunities (Horwitz *et al.*, 2003) and considered other practices to be important sources of motivation and commitment such as good working conditions and autonomy whilst still having the support of directors (Horwitz *et al.*, 2003; Sutherland & Jordaan, 2004).

Focusing on the job itself, proposing interesting assignments and challenging work is a major retention lever for knowledge professionals (Alvesson, 2000). Other research has underscored that failing to offer opportunities to for knowledge workers to develop skills and build experience can lead to dissatisfaction and thus trigger searches for new external opportunities (Tillou *et al.*, 2015).

Such findings in the KW retention literature show that the most effective HR practices aim them motivated to carry out assignments successfully, and to provide the environment and support they need to exploit new opportunities. The results of research on knowledge worker retention echo the contributions of the AMO framework (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2000).

### The Contribution of the AMO Framework

To better understand the effects of HRM practices on consultants’ intention to leave, we reviewed the existing literature using the Ability, Motivation and Opportunity (AMO) framework (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2000). This framework

completes the internal focus of the RBV theory as it encourages researchers to identify HR practices and to design HR systems that develop employees’ abilities, motivation and opportunities to participate so that this workforce represents a source of sustainable competitive advantage for the company (Guthrie, 2001). More specifically to our research, such HR systems facilitate not only employees’ discretionary effort and organizational performance (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2000) but also their commitment, their retention (Macky et Boxall, 2007) reducing dysfunctional turnover rates (Shaw *et al.*, 2005).

According to a study by Trullen *et al.* (2017) managers did their best to limit consultants’ turnover by proposing HR practices that enhanced consultants’ abilities, motivation, and opportunities to perform better and, as a consequence, to remain in the organization. Work on retention factors among knowledge workers confirms that these three factors in the AMO framework should be taken into consideration. As shown by Sajeve (2007), the main motivators identified by empirical studies are continuous learning, autonomy, challenging and meaningful work, and personal growth, which are very similar to the factors in the AMO framework.

By analysing individuals’ knowledge, skills and abilities, motivations and internal and external opportunities, the AMO framework offers a better mechanism for identifying what sets of HRM practices are needed as well as the skills and behaviours HRM practices generate, such as voluntary departure behaviour. Such insights support the current study as the HRM practice systems built on this framework encourage employees to engage with the organisation, and thus can increase their retention by reducing dysfunctional turnover rates among employees (Shaw *et al.*, 2005). Drawing on the AMO framework, we examined the impact of HRM practices that strengthened perception of the support received from the organisation in the form of new career prospects and new opportunities that encourage consultants to thrive, and therefore stay in the company.

Very little research has been conducted using the AMO approach to analyse knowledge workers’ intention to leave. This analytical framework is particularly appropriate because given the demands of their jobs, consultants are driven by continuous development of their expertise, being recognised and staying motivated as well as by the search for new opportunities via the support of their professional environment.



## Methodology

The collection of data was carried out in two stages, separated it into that gathered from a managerial perspective and that of consultants as employees. This exploratory research was conducted with the support of SYNTEC Conseil en Management<sup>1</sup>, the national association of French management consulting firms.

### Data Collection and Research Method Used for Managers (Managerial Perspective)

Seventeen French management consulting firms participated in the study. Given its particular interest in the subject of this research, SYNTEC CM agreed to circulate an invitation to participate to all its members. Repeated requests from us to take part enabled us to increase our sample size to 30 participants.

We highlight the importance of small firms in terms of the distribution of consulting companies. According to Table 1, 42.9% had fewer than 50 consultants. The breakdown shows the exact same proportion of firms with between 50 and 800 consultants, and that more than 14% of the sample consisted of companies with more than 800 consultants.

In terms of interviewees, the majority of the population consisted of HR professionals (46.6%), followed by executives (36.6%), and managers (16.6%). The distribution of functions represented here may explain the gender distribution. Because we were able to identify only one male human resources director out of a total of 14, the strong female representation in this role brought the proportion of women participating in these qualitative, exploratory interviews to over 53%. In addition, our sample contained participants with longstanding experience within their firms (9 years and 3 months, on average). They had considerably shorter experience in their respective functions (5.5 years on average), but this number is still quite high compared to the sector's norms.

The average length of audio recording for an interview was 1 hour and 15 minutes. The 30 semi-directive interviews were fully transcribed. We drew on these primary data sources, supplementing them with notes taken during the interviews.

1. The association is now known as Consult in France.

**TABLE 1**  
**Characteristics of the Sample**

Main Characteristics		N	%
Company size (N = 21)	Fewer than 50 employees	9	42.8
	Between 50 and 200 employees	6	28.6
	Between 200 and 800 employees	3	14.3
	More than 800 employees	3	14.3
Interviewee's role (N=30)	Director	11	36.6
	DHR	14	46.6
	Manager	5	16.6
Sex (N = 30)	Men	14	46.7
	Women	16	53.3
Length of service with the company (N = 30)	Fewer than 5 years	5	16.6
	Between 5 and 10 years	11	36.6
	More than 10 years	14	46.6
Length of service in current role (N = 30)	Fewer than 5 years	16	53.3
	Between 5 and 10 years	9	30
	More than 10 years	5	16.7

### Data Collection and Research Method Used for Consultants (Operational Perspective)

Our use of focus groups deepened our research on the topic, as we employed a method that complemented semi-directive, individual interviews and enabled us to engage an audience whose views had not previously been sought. We therefore created a new research sample specifically for the focus groups.

For this step, three consulting firms agreed to participate in three separate focus group sessions. A total of 29 consultants took part in these groups. To be exact, there were 8 consultants from a firm of fewer than 50 employees, 9 consultants from a firm of fewer than 200 employees, and 12 consultants from a regional office of a firm of more than 1,000 consultants. At each of these sessions, we made sure that all the participants were at the same level of seniority to limit sources of bias within the groups.

A semi-directive interview guide allowed us to lead a debate on themes related to our research—namely the effects of HRM practices on voluntary departure behaviour. Following the discussion generated using this interview guide, we gave all the participants the time to fill out a questionnaire. This document included open questions that returned to the interview themes: consultants' expectations of the firm, the effect of interpersonal relationships, and the factors that explained their desire to stay with or leave the firm.

We carried out a thematic content analysis and thus a categorisation of the elements that corresponded to the identified themes and subthemes (Bardin, 2003). Using NVivo software, we coded the whole of the original corpus (during the “decontextualization” and “thematization” phases) and then analysed the groupings by theme or subtheme (in the “recontextualization” phase).

## Findings

We present our findings confronting the managerial and the operational perspectives following the ability, motivation, and opportunity framework. Table 2 presents verbatims to illustrate managerial and operational feedbacks and contributions to this research.

### Enhancing Consultants’ Abilities to Perform

According to respondents in the directors and managers group, one of the main retention levers is the training provision available to consultants. By creating opportunities for consultants to develop their skills, the firm recognises their development potential as well as enhancing their employability on the market. Firms are thus valuing and nurturing their key resource and the reason for their success.

However, providing training to consultants can be complicated for directors because it also means that they have to do without them while the course is underway, as one HRD explained: “What is often emphasized is training, because a lot of learning takes place at the field level, but because this job is very demanding, it can be difficult to allow people to stand back and get training” (DHR in a firm of fewer than 50 consultants). However, even if training and development presents challenges (time-consuming) and a degree of risk for the managers (higher employability), they acknowledged that a lack of training and recognition for individuals and their efforts could be extremely harmful for the company and, in fact, be a reason for consultants leaving. As such, the need for training emerged early in the interviews with consultants.

According to the consultants, training provision was one of the HRM practices that needed to be clearly communicated to them; although we had not yet addressed training in our interviews. Skills development represented a key career progression and employability factor for consultants: they not only expected training as recognition of their performance, but also maintained that such opportunities should be available to all employees.

Based on the interviews with directors and consultants, our first suggestion for organisations seeking to retain consultants is to consider skills development, as follows:

***Suggestion 1: The organization can limit consultant turnover by deploying and communicating on training and development programmes and increasing formal and informal learning opportunities.***

### Enhancing Consultants’ Motivation to Perform

Among the retention practices mentioned most often by directors was compensation. By providing an attractive pay package, directors are granting the financial recognition consultants often expected in return for performing well. However, the directors insist that this practice was not essential—or at least not enough—to retain consultants: “The best way to keep them is offer a competitive salary; but it’s not just about that” (director of a firm of fewer than 50 consultants).

Consultants clearly expressed this need for recognition. Compensation is thus one of the main incentives for staying with a company. But consultants need organisations to acknowledge their work in other ways as well. They stressed how important it was to them that their commitment be recognised throughout their career path. As highlighted in the interviews, recognition is expressed in various ways, “from acknowledging the work done to simply being paid enough for it” (Consultant in a firm of more than 1,000 employees).

Company directors and consultants therefore agreed that other forms of appreciation should be offered. Interviews conducted with directors and managers showed that successful integration, the availability of stock options, and guaranteeing a high degree of autonomy at work were all important factors. In this respect, they were aware that they should take care of consultants from the beginning of their tenure in the company and continue to cater to consultants’ expectations and their need to be acknowledged. “To keep people, you have to think about the very first link in the chain: the process of integration. Whether that’s formalised or not” (DHR of a firm of fewer than 50 consultants). Far from simply financial considerations, consultants sought to identify with the values conveyed within and outside the organisation. This enables them to feel more connected to both the firm and their colleagues.



Even later in consultants' career, directors and managers explained that they had to offer new options to make sure that consultants could identify more closely with the company, feel that they were key members of the company, and that they had a genuine sense of ownership. Consultants also valued a diverse range of recognition practices, any gestures that could burnish their image of and bolster their self-esteem.

By affording consultants autonomy, directors seek to make the environments in which consultants performed often-demanding jobs as comfortable as possible. Managers often emphasized the need to take into account the fast-paced work environment, the stress generated by assignments, and its possible impact on the working atmosphere and team cohesion within the company. "We have to offer them the things they're looking for when they choose this profession; things like autonomy. That's what it's about . . . giving them plenty of autonomy" (DHR of a firm of fewer than 50 consultants).

For consultants, higher levels of autonomy are also seen as a sign of recognition of their unique competence and the demands of the job. But they also link it to the need for good working conditions. Fatigue and stress are among the main job-related factors causing consultants to leave their positions. The consultants all emphasized that besides time spent with clients and working on assignments, they spent a considerable amount of time travelling on the job. This commitment strains their work-life balance because the demand to provide quality of service is often in tension with what they perceived as management's indifference about their quality of life.

In summary, to consider remaining in the company, employees need to feel their efforts are being recognised, and to feel motivated by such extrinsic and intrinsic factors (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Discussions with firm directors and consultants led us to formulate our second suggestion, which is that organisations explore retention pathways based on enhancing consultants' motivation.

***Suggestion 2: The organization can limit consultant turnover by offering an attractive compensation policy, performance recognition programmes (rewards and benefits), ensuring quality working conditions (work/life programs), and promoting shared values within the organization.***

### Enhancing Consultants' Opportunities to Perform

Alongside training and good working conditions, the career path inside the company is a key incentive used by the directors interviewed to encourage their consultants to stay. They believe employees need to move up the ladder fast—essentially, to see new opportunities for development so that they would not consider other opportunities on the market. The goal is for them to "feel that they had a future in the company" (Director of a firm of fewer than 50 consultants). Tailoring career paths to individuals requires strengthening line management, an option that directors are not always able to provide.

Consultants expressed a strong need for internal opportunities to be communicated clearly and transparently. They wanted to be clearly informed about their contractual arrangements, especially those that could influence their career prospects inside the firm. Consultants often mentioned the quality of evaluation systems, given that "progression in the firm is very dependent on regular evaluation systems used to announce changes in grades, salaries, and positions within the firm" (consultant in a firm of more than 1,000 consultants).

For directors and managers, providing personalised career paths is also a way of fulfilling consultants' need to be continuously challenged in their work. Assigning employees to high-quality jobs and/or assignments that empowered them is often essential for them to flourish at work.

Consultants greatly appreciate the value and diversity of the projects with which they are entrusted. Their intention to stay is stronger when they can enjoy professionally challenging tasks and have access to well-known and high-quality clients. Consultants value learning opportunities that come with new challenges—ones that allow them to expand their field of expertise, forge new relationships both internally (and with new clients), and increase their market value.

We found that firm directors should implement retention measures that allow consultants to identify strong career and personal development opportunities within the consulting firm.

***Suggestion 3: The organization can limit consultant turnover by offering challenging missions to consultants, clear and transparent performance evaluation systems, and plans for personalized career paths.***

These findings shed new light on knowledge worker retention because they enable us to understand the impact of HR practices on the three levers of individual performance; that is, the consultants' ability, motivation, and opportunity to perform. In addition to identifying these practices, the interviews carried out with the two target groups (directors and consultants) highlighted a key aspect of retention, which is the quality of perceived support and inherent interpersonal relationships, be it with the organisation, mentors, colleagues, or even clients.

### The Facilitating Role of Interpersonal Relationships

#### Deficit of Organizational Support

When they addressed interaction issues, directors and managers considered that relationships established with a mentor and management representatives were major influencing factors. These relationships represent above all not only a link between two members but also the need for identification with that person. Closeness fulfills the consultants' initial expectations for consideration in their working environment, which in turn fosters greater commitment to these representatives.

Consultants view all types of encouragement they receive from managers and directors as support from the company and not from individuals. In that respect, most of the data collected during the interviews referred to the effects of a lack of support from the firm or management. More specifically, consultants bemoan the lack of support they receive given their dedication to their work. They indicated that they could get physically and mentally exhausted because of the fast work pace. They see this dearth of support as an indication that the firm holds different values than they do, reflecting a discrepancy that lead them to invest less energy in their work. Not only they acknowledge that they stopped putting new ideas forward but they also tried to put a greater distance between themselves and company demands.

As examples of effective supportive actions in such conditions, they offered how important it was to them to be properly supervised during assignments, to identify someone they could ask for advice in the organisation, and to have good relationships with colleagues.

Some directors thus make an effort to create or strengthen "all possible forms of attachment" to encourage people to stay. In such a context, it is obvious that other types of relationships created by consultants in their professional

environment play an essential role, both inside and outside the company. This finding lead us to turn our attention to the role of interpersonal relationships in consulting work.

#### The Moderating Role of Mentor and Team Support

According to consultants, identifying a formal or informal mentor helps them perform better in their assignments. The ones who did not have an official mentor identified by the firm said that the demands of the job led them to approach one or more people for specific skills or for access to the wider experience they were lacking. The directors were well aware of this issue and explained that consultants needed to feel attachment and to identify with individuals to plan their future in the company.

In the same way, directors emphasized the importance of team cohesion. Getting along well with colleagues is key to the knowledge professionals we interviewed. Even though consultants are sometimes regarded as solo operators, their relationships with colleagues create the atmosphere and cohesive environment they need to be committed to their work. We noted that this kind of relationship was more frequently mentioned by consultants, whether these bonds were forged through team cohesion or perceived support from colleagues.

In the course of this study, we found that while consultants were independent, self-directed individuals, they valued team support, particularly the support of more senior members to other people in the team, as evidenced by the buffalo metaphor. By being protected by more senior members, consultants feel reassured and able to face the challenges of their job. This cohesive spirit is often encouraged by firms, which might have specific work conditions or internal arrangements that help develop such relationships. The consultants highlighted the importance of flexible organisations. Some mentioned open working spaces while others spoke of participation in internal projects, which strengthened connections between people.

The consultants acknowledged that team and mentor support had an impact on their personal well-being in that the help received allowed them to share experiences or find solutions to difficult situations. On the one hand, these relationships allow them to improve their skills, save time on assignments, and be more responsive to clients; on the other, support received from colleagues

TABLE 2

## Verbatims illustrating managerial and operational perspectives

	Verbatims
<b>Enhancing Consultants' Abilities to Perform</b>	"We build retention, we give them even easier access to a training course that allows them to grow faster and have more career mobility... Because they're people who love to develop... they're very curious by nature most of the time, and so we also give them access to support with MBAs or specific courses at HEC; things like that." (DHR of a consulting firm of more than 1,000 consultants)
	"I would say about training that we are providing intellectual services based on sciences that can be a little slack sometimes and it is really important for us to mark significant turning points in our careers by developing our skills." (Consultant in a firm of more than 1,000 employees)
	"It is a contractual requirement as well. I got my contract one year and a half ago, and the contract requires it. We are expected to be at our best at all times. My job description explicitly states that I have to get training to have the necessary skills to do the job I am asked to do and that I am responsible for my own training." (Consultant in a firm of fewer than 50 employees)
<b>Enhancing Consultants' Motivation to Perform</b>	"It's a real issue and you don't just try to keep people with money, because that doesn't work. When we see them leaving when they have just had an increase, or when they know they'll get one soon, we realise that it's not about that, that's not why people leave." (DHR of a firm of fewer than 50 consultants)
	"I think that at XXX, the people who are hired by XXX are highly motivated, they are there for a reason..how shall I put it? They have something in common and you can feel it: human values. (Consultant in a firm of fewer than 50 employees).
	'After appraisal time, the CEO and I will discuss the best bits, mainly so that we can make a note of the things other than their bonus . . . to let them know that we really are very happy, we hope they're with us for a long time, and, more particularly, to look with them at the things that would make them want to stay long-term at Consultancy X.' (DHR of a firm of 50 to 100 consultants)
	'Besides compensation, taking positive steps along with events and gifts can flatter people's egos and help create the feeling of being worthy of respect. It helps develop their sense of belonging through a feeling of worth.' (Consultant in a firm of more than 1,000 employees)
<b>Enhancing Consultants' Opportunities to Perform</b>	'If someone joins us because they want to work abroad, we have to give them the opportunity to do it. We had one consultant who left after two years because he'd joined us to work on foreign projects and always ended up working in France. So there came a point when he was pretty hacked off with that and he left; and it was someone very good, that we wanted to keep, so that's a failure in people management. We didn't know how to listen properly to his needs—what he'd asked for.' (DHR of a firm of fewer than 50 consultants)
	It's about always having engaging work; I mean consultants join the company to be challenged, to work on interesting projects . . . so we take a little care with some people in terms of what assignments we'll be able to give them. (DHR of a firm of fewer than 50 consultants)
	'We'll try to position them in the organisation in a place where they can build a reputation; where they can express themselves; give them a role, and find out, really, what's important to them' (DHR of a firm of 100 to 200 consultants).
	'We are all looking for new opportunities in terms of assignments because we need to feel stimulated and because we know that we spend so much time with our clients that we cannot afford not to be developing our skills and moving forward etc.' (Consultant in a firm of over 1,000 employees)
<b>The Deficit of organizational support.</b>	'If you feel a lack of support, speaking for myself, I tend to keep things to myself when I have . . . if I feel that nobody wants to know when I bring up these things, when I feel there is no support, I just keep quiet and get on with my life. It's like self-censorship.' (Consultant in a firm of fewer than 50 employees)
	'Consultants often have many supervisors: they change assignments and clients... and it's often very difficult for them to have someone to consult when in need. We often have several people we can refer to and they are not necessarily the right ones.' (Consultant in a firm of more than 1,000 consultants)
<b>The moderating role of mentor and team support.</b>	'Besides what they earn, people stay because they have a mentor in the company. You stay in the company because you have identified someone there you want to be like because this person is a model you admire and who helps you graciously so that you can acquire their skills, talents, and personality traits. I believe this is an essential factor . . . The proof of what I'm saying is that many people leave because they don't have that possibility. And many colleagues also follow their bosses so to speak, from company to company, it doesn't matter which. They're like following their leadership panache. So, there is a strong relationship between two individuals. It's a learning relationship, a relationship similar to people's pillar relationships in life.' (HRD in a firm of 50 to 100 consultants)
	'I don't know if individuals are valued, but they are quickly acknowledged. Not by their superiors, but more by colleagues: we like to work with this or that person.' (Consultant in a firm of more than 1,000 employees)
	When we come back from client assignments, it's a pleasure to see colleagues again with whom we can share our work problems or doubts, and in an atmosphere without rivalry. They remind me of a herd of African buffaloes, because African buffaloes are wild animals that can't be tamed. They can change into rhinos or elephants if they feel threatened. And the biggest, those with the largest horns protect the herd, they protect the others. (Consultant in a firm of fewer than 50 employees)

or a mentor provide reassurance. This finding illustrates consultants' strong need for connection. They expressed appreciation for the team cohesion and the good spirit that came with solid relationships in the consulting firm and felt motivated to become more engaged.

These results on interpersonal relationships leave no doubt about their importance to the development of consultants' abilities, motivation, and new career opportunities within the company. Such attentive responses were even more important when consultants felt left behind by their managers.

***Suggestion 4: Mentor and team support compensate for the lack of support perceived from the organization, meaning a low perception of HR practices that develop abilities, motivation, and opportunities to perform in the organization.***

### **The Moderating Role of Customers' Support**

The main difference between this type of support and those already mentioned is that some of the consultants are working on one-time assignments. In other words, consultants explained that they could not expect the same relationships with clients as they had with people from their organisation because they were aware of the contractual and short-term nature of the relationship. However, out of all possible types of missions, long-term ones outside the firm were the most complicated and shed the most light on the risk of losing their sense of identification with the firm. As one consultant remarked, "Long-term missions at the client's premises are really the worst. Because we get [name of the consulting firm]? All you lot care about is how much you get paid. It's very disturbing, very disturbing indeed" (Consultant in a firm of more than 1,000 employees).

Assignments taken on by employees can make them lose their sense of who they were, in some cases "asking the client if they could take the manager's place and provide feedback on the steps taken" (Consultant in a firm of more than 1,000 employees). Because directors and managers highlighted the high numbers of people leaving to work for clients, it is worth noting that, in the case of long-term assignments, consultants are at risk of becoming completely disconnected from the consulting firm.

Besides the desire to leave the organisation to start a new life or leave the consulting world altogether, consultants said they transferred the demands they

should have placed on their superior to their clients, looking for encouragement and advice from them instead. The relationship with the client compensates for the lack of a relationship with internal management. While consultants leave firms to work for clients for reasons that have nothing to do with the organisation, in some cases they leave because of internal management failures.

***Suggestion 5: Customer support compensates for the lack of perceived support from the organization—meaning a low perception of HR practices that develop abilities, motivation, and opportunities to perform in the organization—and can turn into a threat for consultant retention.***

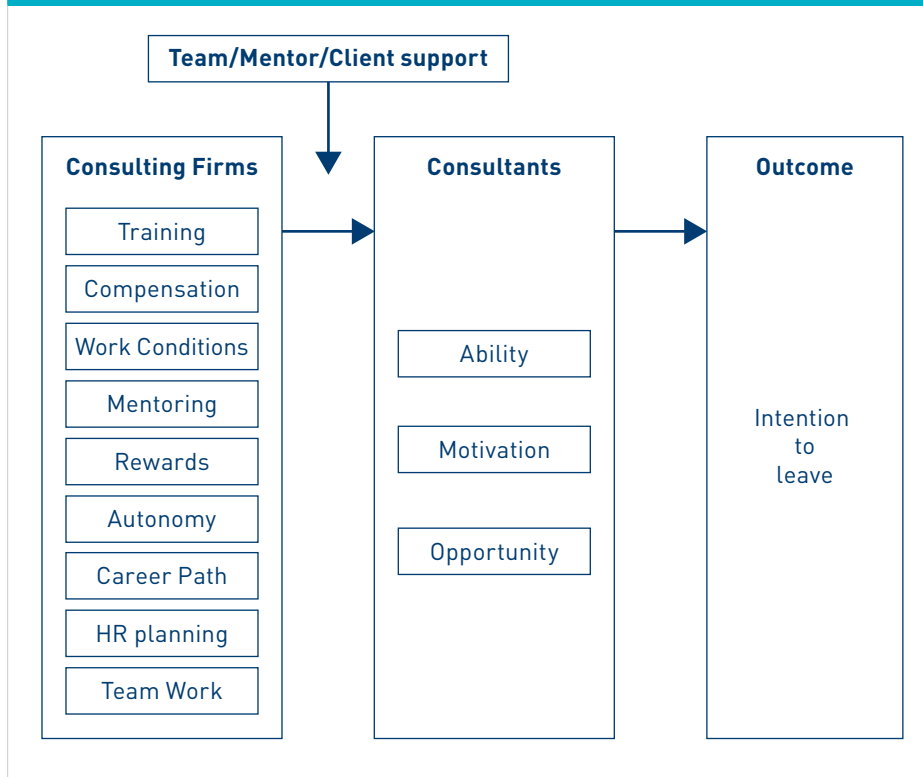
## Discussion and Conclusion

### Theoretical Contributions

First, this research assessed issues with knowledge worker retention, extending the field of analysis to their ability, motivation, and opportunity to perform better in the consulting firm. Research conducted on knowledge workers to date has brought new insights by identifying the most effective practices to attract, motivate, and retain these employees (Horwitz *et al.*, 2003) and has measured their impact by looking at their effects on key antecedents of the intention to leave, such as engagement or a sense of belonging (Alvesson, 2000). By choosing this theoretical approach, we took the research a step further, increasing understandings of how proposed HRM practices in companies contributed to the development of employees' potential by growing their ability, motivation, or opportunity to undertake tasks and be fully engaged in their work.

To examine the effects of HRM practices on the voluntary departure of knowledge workers, we joined and compared the perceptions of firm directors and managers to the needs and perceptions of consultants. By comparing managerial and operational perceptions, this research identified contingent factors as well as appropriate, effective, and sustainable pathways for increasing retention (Haesli & Boxall, 2005). Our work also revealed that the lack of some of these HRM practices or support was likely to cause employees to leave the company. Figure 1 shows the final emergent model that sums up our inductively generated explanations of such HR practices and social supports.

**FIGURE 1**  
**A model of the HR practices contribution to consultants' intention to leave based on the AMO framework**



Another key contribution of our research is to highlight the major role of interpersonal relationships in retaining knowledge workers. Studies conducted to date have confirmed that in such jobs, social relationships and colleague support are essential to promote employee retention (Delery & Roumpi, 2017). According to our results, consultants relied on relationships created with

colleagues, a mentor, or clients to improve their learning and well-being at work and to develop a sense of pride in the work they did. Interactions based on formal mentoring or co-working relationships enhanced professional, organisational, or task-based learning, and more informal levers, including informal mentoring relationships or informal friendship interactions, were useful for internal career management or problem-solving situations.

Our model highlights the moderating influence of such social networks, as relationships established with internal and external actors compensated for the perceived lack of support from their own organisations. While consultants may initiate such relationships informally, directors and managers can also use the positive effects of these sources of support by implementing appropriate HRM practices (teamwork, organisation of internal events, long-term assignments, mentoring programmes, etc.) to achieve organisational objectives.

All such relationships can help develop the consultants' ability, motivation, and opportunity to perform better at work and remain in the company. If internal HRM practices do not meet consultants' expectations, they find motivation and essential connections in these other relationships, thereby increasing their commitment to the company. Relationships with colleagues or a mentor enable consultants to acquire tacit knowledge and create new knowledge beyond the more straightforward learning available through in-house formal training or professional development (Collins & Kehoe, 2017; Haesli & Bowall, 2005). These professional relationships also create a context that promotes attachment and identification with the group, which are necessary for individuals to do their best and be motivated to perform better for their own benefit and for that of the group. Also, colleagues and mentors often have a high level of expertise, which means consultants can discuss new opportunities with them, which will enable them to develop professionally and fulfil their potential. Through internal support, feedback, and informal knowledge sharing, consultants not only suggest more effective solutions—saving time and gaining expertise in the process—but also potentially benefit from new development or career opportunities. These connections within the organisation are therefore major levers for retaining consultants.

On a more general note, this research highlights the importance of organisational learning in employee's commitment and retention. This paper initially based on an individual perspective clearly invites researchers to consider and to understand the construction of the collective dimension, of interactions and



thus, to think commitment through theories oriented towards the organization itself such as the Resource Based View theory and organizational learning theories (Barney, 1991; Cyert & March, 1963, Dierkes and al., 2001). Indeed, as social interactions play an crucial role in shaping employee's attitudes and behaviors, sharing and exchanging knowledge and competencies are strong levers of retention -which confirms this organizational competence. In other words, as shown by researchers as Wilkens and his colleagues (2004), such relationships illustrate the need of consultants to integrate, participate and benefit from knowledge processes and organisational learning -such exchanges that feed individual expectations and commitment are also at the source of dynamic capabilities and core competencies and help organization to engage and retain key employees.

Our analysis of client relationships yielded different results in that clients proved to be both a source of learning, motivation, and support, and potential future employers for consultants. The results of our research therefore show the value of good relationships with clients, while also highlighting the danger of considering a source of support that is external and therefore different from the entity to whom the results measured apply (i.e., the organisation). From a theoretical and conceptual perspective, our conclusions resonate with the work of Lavelle and colleagues (2007) for whom "multi foci social exchange variables associated with more proximal targets such as team members and supervisors appear to do a better job in predicting employee performance to more distal targets such as organization" (860). Since the job of a consultant is based on assignments, mentors (or clients in the case of long-term assignments) may be more suitable targets than superiors because of their closeness to consultants.

### Managerial Implications

This qualitative research was conducted in order to enlighten both academic and professional players on the retention conditions for these knowledge workers—the "talent" in the management consulting sector. This research also reflects recent findings by Khoreva and colleagues (2017), who noted that, to develop the commitment of employees and, in particular, the best performers, managers must invest in, and communicate about, practices that employees have perceived as effective. This emphasis on the need for close working and recognition, a sentiment shared by the consultants, offers a reminder of the foundations of psychological contract theory and social exchange theory (Blau,

1964). The risk of relational breakdown lies in the conditions of contractual reciprocity going unfulfilled (Rousseau, 1995).

Moreover, by highlighting the strength of the relational links sought by the consultants, this study suggests that a contagion phenomenon may be at the origin of the loss of knowledge and competencies in organisations (Felps *et al.*, 2009). Support from colleagues and mentors compensates for the lack of close working relationships and connections with colleagues in consulting companies. The risk lies in the departure of these sources of support as well as in the quality of the relations they have with client companies. Managers understand this dilemma and see relationships with clients as both a need and an organisational threat. However, managers often seem to lack an adequate response to this issue, and are sometimes resigned to its consequences, since, according to them, a decision to leave is more likely to arise from a desire for a different way of life, or a new job, than from dissatisfaction with the organisation. More concretely, even though managers have clear awareness of the factors that impel consultants to leave, we noted that the HRM practices designed to address consultant dissatisfaction are often inadequate.

If the aim is to pursue ways of improving practices that encourage employees to stay, these findings suggest a need for a greater focus on developing the close working relations required to understand consultants' needs, before making any attempt to meet them. In other words, consultants need to have confidence, esteem, and emotional attachment if they are to go beyond (normative) contractual commitments and develop the most important factor: emotional commitment. The first task is to enact practices that will simplify and clarify hierarchical relationships. The most useful practices will be those that position superiors as sources of support who can connect to consultants by recognising the sacrifices they make, and as colleagues who can convey their value to the management team. According to the managers, professional self-esteem is an important consideration, given that consultants are a group with particularly strong needs in this area. In this sense, professional self-esteem can limit consultants' perceptions of the ways that companies try to address their needs. Implementing such practices also means that top management must consider line managers as real players in HR management, and that they are listened to and given recognition for the successful implementation of such initiatives.



## Limitations and Future Research

This research has some limitations given the size of the sample for the group sessions and its focus on the case of consultants in France. If it seems essential to shine a light on group specificities within the knowledge worker population (Benson & Brown, 2007), we admit that our study reveals these specificities based on a specific country.

From a theoretical and managerial perspective, we encourage future research that uses the possibilities of this inductive approach to elucidate the role of these practices. Future work could identify the impact of HRM practices in the field that target this group and verify the extent to which they can influence consultants' perceptions of organisational attractiveness and job embeddedness, on the one hand, and market perceptions, on the other. Moreover, this research would no doubt be useful for identifying new obstacles to mobility and would further contribute to the literature on employee retention in knowledge-intensive firms. Considering the exploratory dimension of this paper, future research is needed to refine our analysis and our suggestions and highlight knowledge workers specificities- analysing differences due to consultants' individual characteristics (age, gender, years of experience) or to contingent factors (nature of the job, size of the company, its location, countries' economic situation) for instance.

Additional studies should also be carried out to improve our understanding of the role of interpersonal relationships in the mechanisms underpinning consultant retention. Entire teams of consultants leaving or consultants leaving to follow their mentor or be hired by the client should be studied in this context—both from a theoretical perspective and using information from the field. Among other things, conducting further research on the role of working patterns, looking at the duration of assignments or the time spent outside the organisation, for example, would be a productive line of inquiry.

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