Work-life balance in Consulting : from individual proactivity to organisational arrangements

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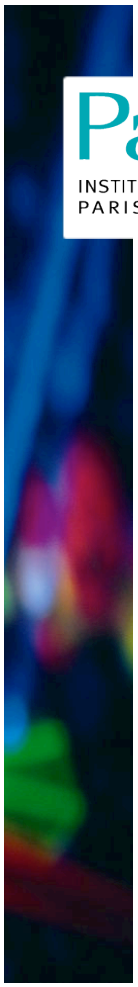

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WORK-LIFE BALANCE IN CONSULTING

From individual proactivity to organisational arrangements

EQUILIBRE DE VIE DANS LE CONSEIL

De la proactivité individuelle aux arrangements organisationnels

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À Louis

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List of acronyms

CMS: Critical Management Studies
FC: Finance Consulting
GPN: Global Professional Network
HRM: Human Resources Management
KIF: Knowledge-intensive firms
MC: Management Consulting
MPB: Managed Professional Business
P^2: Professional Partnership
PSF: Professional service firms
WLB: Work-life balance

General introduction

« Le temps de rêver est bien court
Que faut-il faire de mes nuits
Que faut-il faire de mes jours »

Louis Aragon, *Est-ce ainsi que les hommes vivent*

Professionals and other knowledge workers, like accountants, lawyers, R&D engineers or consultants, **have often been considered as privileged for the autonomy and discretion that characterise their work**. Following Karasek and Theorell's widely spread model highlighting factors of health and stress at work, occupations where psychological demands are high but so is decisional latitude are categorised as *active*, in other words as jobs that allow individuals to develop their skills and learn by giving them a lot of control over how best to handle work demands (Karasek and Theorell, 1990). When jobs have such characteristics, they argue, workers tend not only to be more satisfied at work, but also to participate more in civic and social events in their private lives than others. This conception of professional work as a source of well-being at work is in line with a long *job design* (or *redesign*[1]) tradition – from early experimentations of work enrichment and Herzberg's *two-factor theory* (Herzberg et al., 1959), to the elaboration of the *Job Characteristic Model* by Hackman and Oldham (1976), or Emery and Trist's socio-technical systems (Emery and Trist, 1960)[2]. **In this tradition, autonomy is seen as essential to the development of individual potential but also to motivation, satisfaction and performance at work**. As a consequence, professionals' working conditions (and more generally what can be labelled "white collar work") are implicitly looked at as an ideal and other – more *confined* (Hatchuel, 2008: p.43) – occupations as needing to be redesigned to aim at this ideal.

Yet, these approaches of satisfaction at work have been challenged for relying exclusively on analysis of *blue-collar* or *confined* work. And **against a representation of professional work as providing the conditions of individual self-fulfilment, a number of symptoms seem to indicate that these activities are, on the contrary, in tension**. In 2013, an intern from Bank of America Merrill Lynch died of epileptic seizure in his shower after working for 72 hours in a row[3]. Even though it is impossible to establish a direct link between his death and overwork, the media

[1] The term *job redesign* is often preferred to mark the opposition to Taylor's effort to design jobs according to the

[2] For a review, see Parker SK and Wall TD. (1998) Job and work design: Organizing work to promote well-being and effectiveness, Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage.

[3] See: *Bank intern Moritz Erhardt died from epileptic seizure, inquest told*, The Guardian, 22nd November 2013
Goldman Sachs restricts intern workday to 17 hours in wake of burnout death, The Guardian, 17th June 2015

coverage of this event raised public awareness of such work practices and led some investment banks to react. Goldman Sachs, for example, announced that they would restrict interns' workdays to 17 hours and that analysts should not work on Saturdays, as did Crédit Suisse. As far as Bank of America Merryl Lynch is concerned, they also decided, in the same period, that analysts were expected to have a minimum of four weekend days off a month.

Similar accounts of professionals suffering from burnouts or even, in rare cases, supposedly dying from overwork are increasingly reported in the media in other knowledge-intensive environments, such as consulting firms[4]. In 2010, Xavier Darcos – then Minister of Work – published a list of companies that were red-flagged by the government for their managerial practices and lack of stress management policies, in which the big IT services and consulting provider Accenture featured[5]. In popular culture as well, increasing numbers of books that are very critical of consultancies' organisation and work culture are published, such as *House of Lies* by Martin Kihn (the book that inspired the Tv series of the same name), *Consulting Demons* by Lewis Pinault or *Consulting Underground* by Dominique Julien and *L'open Space m'a Tuer* by Alexandre Des Isnards and Thomas Zuber in France[6]. These books depict a consulting world where ambition, intense individual competition and conformity with partners' expectations lead to extreme work routines and the development of very individualistic strategies, often at the expense of the client.

Professional environments have indeed been described as exemplary cases of *extreme work* (Hewlett and Luce, 2006; Granter et al., 2015), in other words as environments in which individuals feel strong working pressure, often characterised by unpredictable, fast-paced and long working hours. From a rather critical perspective, this intensity of the work is often seen as the product of high commitment from part of professionals, obtained through cultural control and the exploitation of professionals' subjectivities (Alvesson, 2004; Kunda, 1992; Deetz, 1998).

However, **in parallel, consulting firms have never been so active in communicating around work-life balance or quality of work-life, which indicates that this is a crucial management concern of theirs**. In their recruitment process, first, top-tier consultancies often put forward their will to take into account individual priorities and foster a working environment where *work* does not come in the way of *life*. At Bain, it is claimed that when consultants need a break they can "*grab a game of ping-pong or catch up on March Madness or Champions League football".* It is stipulated on the careers website that *"most of (the) offices are located in excellent downtown locations so popping out for a yoga class, going for a run, or relaxing in the local parks are all readily*

[4] See for example:
Surowiecki, J. *The Cult of Overwork*, The New Yorker, 27th January 2014
Death of a PwC employee: Concerns about work fatigue & stress in offices in China, The Economic Times, 5th June 2011

[5] The list was originally published on the Ministry of Work's website: travailler.gouv.fr and was deleted the following day because of the scandal it provoked. It can nonetheless be found here: voila-le-travail.fr/stress-la-liste-rouge-retrouvee

[6] Khin, M. (2005) *House of Lies: How management consultants steal your watch and then tell you the time*. New York: NY, Warner Business Books
Pinault, L. (2000) *Consulting Demons*, New York: NY, John Wiley and sons
Julien, D. (2015), *Consulting Underground*, Paris, Les Editions Ipanema
Des Isnards, A. Zuber, T. (2008), *L'open space m'a tuer*, Paris, Essais

available and absolutely encouraged[7]." They add that they also "*recognize that people's priorities can shift as they journey through life, so (they) offer* ***flexible options*** *to ensure that you can* ***have a long-lasting, fulfilling career*** *at Bain"*. Similarly, at McKinsey, it is argued that "*you should be able to* ***have a fantastic career*** *and* ***a full life*** *and do it in a way that works for you — now, and when you may make changes down the road*[8]*."* They go on to explain that "*flexibility"* is key at McKinsey, in a way that is "*compatible with career success"*, they insist. Similarly, at Cap Gemini, the point is made that "*consulting is a domain that demands constant alertness and an ability to respond quickly. As consultants,* ***we set high expectations for ourselves, and are driven by a desire to deliver excellence";*** but the emphasis is nonetheless put on the fact that they "***work hard*** *but also pay attention to* ***the right balance between professional and private life****. (Their) approach to maintaining work-life balance also emphasizes team spirit and fun. Consultants help each other deliver projects on tight deadlines, and enjoy what they do*[9]*."* This juxtaposition of the "hard work" lexicon with the "balance" one is quasi systematic in these firms' communication targeting young graduates applicants. This indicates a shift from the traditional *work-hard play hard* motto – which suggested that even though work demands were high, the youth of the staff and the work atmosphere were a compensation, meaning that professional and personal lives could be blended together in a satisfying way – towards the idea that if consultants work hard, they can nonetheless have enough flexibility to have a full life outside of work as well. It shows that, for these firms, there is a need to convince potential applicants that a career within their company is demanding but that it is not expected that they should give up everything else to succeed.

Concomitantly, professional service firms also dedicate a lot of time and effort to be represented in a diversity of best employer or quality of work-life types of rankings, which they can then advertise on their websites. Five of these top-tier firms are for example represented in the 2015 Fortune / Great Place to Work *Best companies to work for* 2015 global ranking (see table a below), while two of them are featured in the 2015 Sunday Times best companies ranking[10].

FORTUNE / GREAT PLACE TO WORK global ranking 2015 Best companies to work for	
Rank	**Company**
2	Boston Consulting Group
...	
63	KPMG
...	
79	Ernst & Young
...	
97	Deloitte
98	Accenture

Table 1: Fortune / Great Place to work ranking 2015

[7] https://www.joinbain.com/your-bain-career
[8] http://www.mckinsey.com/careers
[9] https://www.capgemini.com/careers
[10] see: http://appointments.thesundaytimes.co.uk/article/best100companies/

Such communications effort shows that these firms' ability to convince potential candidates that work-life balance can be accommodated has become an integral element of their attraction strategy.

In professional service firms and other knowledge-intensive companies, human resources are indeed the only assets of the organisation (Maister, 1993; Løwendahl, 1997) and these assets go down the elevator and leave the offices every night. There is thus a real risk of *cat herding*, in other words a risk that professionals will leave with their clients (sometimes even taking other consultants with them) and deprive the firm of their experience (Von Nordenflycht, 2010; Maister, 1993; Løwendahl, 1997). As a consequence, **not only is attracting the "best" candidates essential to these firms, but so is retaining them in the long term**. **This has traditionally been achieved through the display of elite organisational identities, along with a more or less strict *up-or-out* promotion model** organising a hierarchy of apprenticeship through the division of labour between partners and associates as well as ensuring the commitment of the youngest professionals by offering them prospects of partnership co-optation[11] (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006; Maister, 1993; Morris et al., 2012; Morris and Pinnington, 1998; Smets et al., 2012).

The fact that these firms' external communication is in contrast with the way HR directors and partners received my solicitations to take part in the study seems indicate that responding to work-life balance demands challenges considerably the traditional organisation of these firms. When attempting to contact consulting firms' Human Resources directors and partners in charge of Human Resources, I was indeed quickly confronted with a certain unease from part of these interlocutors regarding what appeared to be a very sensitive topic. In many cases, either requests remained unanswered or, after a first meeting, I was told that interviewing consultants on these topics would be impossible or my emails and calls were ignored.

Even though this model has evolved through the adoption of a focus on efficiency and more bureaucratic organisational features (Brock, 2006; Brock et al., 1999b; Cooper et al., 1996) – its incentive system has kept many of the features of the 19th c. Cravath law firm: a division of labour between partners and associates, competitive starting salaries and a specific form of tournament promotion system through the *up-or-out* rule and the possibility to be co-opted partner if successful (Swaine, 1946-48a; Swaine, 1946-48b). **This model thus relies on representations of what it means to be successful that are inherited from the 19th c.**, at a time when professionals' were mostly men – often coming from the gentry in spite of the development of the big law and business schools – and when the activity of these firms was growing exponentially. **The symptoms of tensions identified above seem to call for the relevance of such**

[11] A deliberately inclusive definition of professionals will be adopted here following Abbott (1988) as "*applying somewhat abstract knowledge to particular cases*". Differences between classical regulated professions such as law or accounting and "weaker" professions such as consulting will nonetheless be taken into account. Yet, given our interest in the specific forms of organisation described here, in this thesis, the term professional will rather refer to individuals working within these settings (such as lawyers or accountants) rather than other professions within independent private practices, such as medical doctors for example.

representations to be questioned, all the more that – even if diversity remains an issue within these firms and discrimination might have in fact been increasing again over the past few decades, especially in traditional professions like Law – professionals now come from a wider variety of backgrounds and include more and more women than they did in the 19th c. (Bolton and Muzio, 2008; Ashley and Empson, 2013). Additionally growth prospects are lower as competition increases, pressure on cost toughens and clients' demands become more and more sophisticated (Brock, 2006; Brock et al., 1999b; Cooper et al., 1996), which reduces mechanically the perspective of promotion to partnership.

This thesis aims at examining these tensions and how they impact consulting firms' attractiveness as well as the way they organise to maintain their retention power. The Cravath model, at the origin of contemporary firms' incentive model, was initially elaborated to organise the attraction, retention and selection of professionals all along their careers so that only the "best" and most committed would be co-opted partners[12]. The evolutions mentioned above seem to call for the foundations of this organisational model to be re-discussed by investigating how professionals engage in their work today, in particular as regards the issue of work-life balance.

As a consequence, this thesis ambitions to explore the following research question:

What does it mean to attract, select and retain the "best" today?

In order to investigate this question, this thesis ambitions to reconnect the study of professional organisations with that of professionals and their experience at work and to understand professionals' own representations of their jobs, careers and aspirations and how they impact the organisation of their firms. This approach is in line with recent calls to bring work back into the study of organisations generally speaking (Barley and Kunda, 2001), and professional organisations in particular (Suddaby et al., 2008; Muzio et al., 2013).

As mentioned earlier, this research question quickly appeared to be very sensitive, for its proximity with issues of overwork, stress and burnout – in turn questioning the image of excellence and elitism these firms' rhetoric relies on – and for opening the question of the efficiency of traditional means of retention through promotions and deferred compensation (the prospect of partnership co-optation) in professional service firms. It directly impacted the way the research field could be accessed and called for such sensitivity to be taken into consideration when approaching consultants, human resources directors and partners.
With this imperative in mind, this research was designed to take place in two phases. The first one consisted in exploring professionals' representations of their careers today, in order to better understand their expectations at work and whether they are exclusively limited to promotions

[12] This model, its original rationale and the way it has evolved are described in detail in chapter 1.

and the financial rewards associated with them, as assumed in the traditional model. As a result, this first phase aimed at answering the following research question: **(RQ1) Is there more diversity to professionals' aspirations than promotions and financial rewards?** 58 career stories of consultants were collected and analysed, within 13 different settings, with the ambition to confirm – in particular – that work-life balance is indeed an expectation for a significant portion of consultants.
Then, if the first step of the research was to confirm this diversity of aspirations at the individual level, a second question would be raised: how do consulting firms respond to these individual aspirations, especially in the case of work-life balance, which is particularly in contradiction with the current incentive model. In other words: **(RQ2) How do work-life balance demands impact the organisation of consulting firms?** To address this question, first, Human Resources directors and partners' discourse on the topic was collected and analysed, before a comparative case study could be conducted within two consulting firms providing respectively management and financial advice.

Overall, this thesis aims at investigating the current evolutions of the dominant model of organising of professional service firms, its foundations and its ability to keep attracting, selecting and retaining the "best" – at a time when new competitors organised as networks of independent consultants (a phenomenon often referred to as the *uberisation* of professional services) are entering the market and may have the power to reconfigure the field.

***

Overview of the structure of the thesis

This thesis is organised in three parts. **Part 1** aims at problematizing this research and consists in a review of the literature on professionals and their organisations, which highlights an assumption of careerism that needs to be challenged. **Part 2** calls for a reconnection of studies of professional organisations with that of professionals' experience at work. The research itinerary is detailed before the first findings are presented. These findings show that work-life balance – in particular – appears to be a concern for a significant part of consultants, which leads me, in **Part 3**, to investigate and discuss the managerial discourse and practices of several consulting firms attempting to respond to these demands.

Part 1 is centred on a review of studies of professional work, professional organisations and professional workers. It aims at unravelling an assumption of careerism from part of professionals, which is at the heart of the incentive system of most medium to large professional service firms, an assumption often unchallenged or even reproduced in the literature. It is argued that this representation should in fact be challenged in the light of a small body of recent studies that seem to indicate that work-life balance is an increasing concern in professional environments.

- In **Chapter 1**, a review of the literature on professional organisations is developed. First, the specificities of professional work are discussed and the main managerial challenges

associated with them are highlighted: quality control, dependency on human resources and the trusteeship norm. Then, to understand how these challenges have been addressed over time, a genealogy of professional organisations as a research object is developed, from the early concept of *professional bureaucracy* to the traditional *professional partnership*, the more bureaucratic *managed professional business* or the international *global professional network*. This genealogy emphasises the determinant role played by archetype theory first, and then neo-institutional theory in the understanding of change within professional settings. I show that this has recently been questioned for leaving – for the most parts – agency out of the understanding of change in professional environments. Through a historical detour by the Cravath System (the ancestor of the contemporary *up-or-out* incentive system), it is argued that this is all the more problematic that a strong assumption of widespread careerism has been imported from the 19th c. and lies at the heart of these organisations, unquestioned.

- In order to better understand whether this assumption of careerism is still relevant today, in **Chapter 2**, a review of studies investigating the nature of the experience of professionals at work is constituted. It starts by identifying the key dimensions of professionals' role, from the development of different forms of "knowledge" to "commitment". These expectations make professionals in general, and consultants in particular, exemplary *knowledge workers* and, as such, they have attracted much critical interest. A review of critical studies of consultants shows that these high levels of commitment are achieved through specific forms of control that target the subjectivities of individuals. In the face of such normative pressure, consultants are very often described as complying subjects and their careerism evoked as an explanation for this behaviour. As a consequence, it is argued in this chapter that if the critical literature on consultants is very helpful to understand how professionals are socialised into the incentive system of their firms, it still often reproduces the idea that they all end up aspiring mostly to promotions and high salaries.

- In **Chapter 3**, a number of reasons why this assumption of careerism should nonetheless be challenged are put forward. First, based on an analysis of economic trends in the French consulting industry, it is argued that – even if professionals' careerism remained unquestioned – the incentive power of the *up-or-out* system would be particularly challenged by the structural perspectives of lower growth in the industry. Then, a small body of recent studies indicating that work-life balance may be a rising concern among professional workers is reviewed, which also shows that – so far – attempts by consulting firms to address this topic have been rather unsuccessful.

  This leads to the formulation of the following research question: **What does it mean to attract, select and retain the 'best' today?** In other words: (1) Is there more diversity to professionals' aspirations than promotions and financial rewards? and (2) How do work-life balance demands in particular – if confirmed – impact the organisation of consulting firms?

Part 2 calls for the experience of professionals, in all its diversity, to be brought back into the study of professional organisations. The research itinerary followed in order to do so is detailed first, before consultants' career stories are presented, analysed and discussed.

- The overall research itinerary is presented in **Chapter 4**. First, the overall research design – combining individual and organisational case studies – is detailed. The sensitive character of the research topic in consulting firms is highlighted and its impact on the research discussed. Then, the three main stages of material collection and analysis are detailed further, from the study of 58 career stories of consultants, to the analysis of the managerial discourse on work-life balance collected through interviews with 9 HR directors and 6 partners within 9 consultancies. Then I present the comparative analysis of the work-life balance practices at play within two of these consultancies: Management Consulting and Finance Consulting.

- **Chapter 5** focuses on the analysis of the 58 career stories collected from consultants at all levels of the hierarchy within 13 different firms. First, tensions in their stories are identified, which shed light on three different (sometimes conflicting) key dimensions in consultants' careers: promotions and other financial rewards first, but also the orientation of the projects they are assigned, and work-life balance, which appeared to be a strong aspiration for a significant part of the participants. In the subsequent part of this chapter, I detail the different tactics used by consultants to fulfil their aspirations and how it can sometimes lead them to adopt very counter-normative behaviours. In these specific circumstances, I show how consultants can engage in a specific form of identity work that I label *conforming work*, which allows them to reduce the gap between their practice and expectations of compliance.

Part 3 shifts its focus towards understanding the way consultancies respond to work-life balance, in particular, which is analysed through a first stage of analysis of Human Resources directors and partners' discourse on the topic followed by the analysis of the practices in Management and Finance Consulting. This third part of the thesis ends with a discussion of the ability of new networked-actors to better tackle the work-life balance challenge.

- In **Chapter 6**, the managerial discourse at play in consulting firms is explored through the analysis of interview material collected from 9 Human Resources directors and 6 partners in charge of Human Resources in 9 consultancies. Two distinct discourses are identified: the first one consists in arguing that professionals leaving if they are dissatisfied with their work-life balance is a natural phenomenon within the *up-or-out* system and means that they are unfit for promotion. For another group of Human Resources directors and partners, being unable to retain performing consultants for work-life balance reasons was on the contrary a problem that required *vigilance*. To explore further what that vigilance implies, a comparative case study of two of these consultancies – Management Consulting and Finance Consulting – was

conducted. It highlights the role of informal idiosyncratic arrangements in accommodating individual work-life balance demands. The key role played by some micro characteristics of projects (in particular their length, location, leverage and fees) in accounting for firms' adjustment capability is discussed.

- Finally, in **Chapter 7**, the heterogeneity of the field of consulting is discussed through the lens of work-life balance. First, the phenomenon of *uberisation* of consulting services is examined to understand whether these new networked-firms are better suited to respond to both cost effectiveness and flexibility challenges. Through the description of two cases – the precursor Eden McCallum and the French new comer Experdeus – these firms' strength are highlighted but some major risks also discussed: a legal one first, but also job insecurity and the absence of knowledge management. Then, in the last part of this chapter, the contribution of the study of professional work and its micro-characteristics to understand heterogeneity within professional fields is elaborated on, through the example of work-life balance.

To conclude, the main contributions of this research are highlighted, as well as some of its limitations. Several areas for further research are finally discussed.

An overview of this thesis is presented in the following page.

INTRODUCTION

PART 1: QUESTIONING THE CORE ASSUMPTION OF PROFESSIONAL SERVICE FIRMS' INCENTIVE SYSTEM

CHAPTER 1

Genealogy of professional organisations as a research object

(1) Identification of a blind spot in the literature on professional organisations: the experience of individuals at work
(2) Unravelling of an assumption of careerism imported from the original *Cravath System* into medium to large professional service firms

CHAPTER 2

Literature review of the experience of professionals at work

(1) Dominance of critical lenses of analysis
(2) A body of literature which explains how professionals are socialised into the incentive system but also often reproduces the assumption of careerism identified in chapter 1

CHAPTER 3

Identification of two main evolutions that considerably challenge the assumption of careerism at the heart of the incentive system of medium to large professional service firms through the case of consulting

(1) Structural trends towards lower growth rates in the industry
(2) Emergence of work-life balance demands

RESEARCH QUESTION
What does it mean to attract, select and retain the "best" today?

PART 2: BRINGING THE INDIVIDUAL BACK INTO THE STUDY OF PROFESSIONAL ORGANISATIONS

CHAPTER 4

Research itinerary

Overall research design
Sensitivity of the topic

CHAPTER 5

Investigation of the experience of consultants at work through the collection of 58 career stories of consultants within 13 firms

(R1.1) Professionals do not only make sense of their careers in terms of promotions but also of specialisation and/or work-life balance, which they define in heterogeneous ways

(R1.2) They are not passive and employ a number of techniques to fulfil their aspirations

(R1.3) When they want to engage in counter-normative behaviours (as is particularly the case when work-life balance is concerned), they engage in a particular form of identity work I label *conforming work*

PART 3: FROM INDIVIDUAL PROACTIVITY TO ORGANISATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS

CHAPTER 6

Investigation of organisational responses to consultants' demands of 'work-life balance' through interviews with HR directors and partners in 9 firms and 2 case studies

(R2) There are two main managerial discourses on the issue of work-life balance within consulting firms:
a. consultants leaving for work-life balance is and always has been a *natural phenomenon*
b. there is a need to be *vigilant*

(R3.1) Firms that claim to be vigilant mostly address the issue through idiosyncratic deals
(R.3.2) Firms' ability to make these informal arrangements is directly related to:
a. managerial will
b. the nature of the advice provided

CHAPTER 7

Discussion of the impact of work-life balance on heterogeneity within the field of consulting with the emergence of alternative 'networked' actors claiming to respond to both growth and work-life balance challenges

CONCLUSION

Contributions, limitations and further research

PART 1: QUESTIONING THE CORE ASSUMPTION OF PROFESSIONAL SERVICE FIRMS' INCENTIVE SYSTEM

Chapter 1: The organisation of professionals – multiple forms of organising for an unchallenged common assumption

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Introduction

In this first chapter, the question of the distinctiveness of professional work (very debated in the literature) will be addressed so that some of its specificities and the managerial challenges associated to them can be highlighted (1.1). Then, a review of the literature on professional organisations will be presented in order to understand how these challenges have been addressed over the years on one side, but also how they have been regarded academically on the other (1.2). Through this review, I will show, in particular, that the role played by professionals in organisational changes has, for most parts, remained widely under-investigated. Finally, through a historical detour by the 19th c. Cravath Firm (at the origin of many medium to large professional service firms' *up-or-out* incentive system) I will argue that the fact that individuals' experience remains one of the blind spots of theories of professional organising is all the more problematic that the *up-or-out* system relies on a strong assumption of careerism from part of professionals, which remains unquestioned so far (1.3).

1.1 Professional work: specificities and managerial challenges

Professional work has been the object of much debate over the years, which will be reviewed in this first section in order to better understand what has driven the main choices made in professional firms in terms of organising (1.1.1). This overview of the literature will shed light on some of the key managerial challenges that professional organisations face: quality is particularly difficult to monitor, dependency upon human resources is very high – which makes the attraction, selection and retention of professionals central– and finally, the norm that clients should always come first and that, as a result, the internal management of the firm remains hidden from them (1.1.2).

1.1.1 Characteristics of professional work

There have historically been two antagonistic conceptions of professional work: a first functionalist understanding of professional work as consisting in solving problems through outstanding expertise and, another, critical understanding of professional work questioning the rhetorical nature of this expertise claim. I will first present a brief overview of these consecutive takes on professional work before I try to overcome their irreconcilable character to highlight key characteristics of professional work.

a. Consecutive sociological lenses on the specificities of professional work

In the sociology of professions, there has been considerable debate over the years regarding what constitutes professional work and its specificities. Even though developing an extensive review of this debate goes beyond the scope of this thesis, I will draw on the work of Champy (2011) to provide a brief overview of consecutive perspectives on professional work in table 1.1.

Paradigm		Main period	Main claims regarding the specificities of professional work	Key authors
Functionalist		1920-1960	▪ Mastery of a **specialised technical knowledge** base acquired through extensive training and mobilised in total autonomy ▪ Professional practice is homogeneous, selfless and guided by **professional ethos** ⇨ Both these characteristics legitimate monopoly	Carr-Saunders and Wilson (1933), Parsons (1951), Wilensky (1964), Goode (1957)
Critical	**Interactionist**	1950-1980	▪ There are **no specificities** of professional work, profession is a folk-concept ▪ These specificities are constructed through discourse by professions themselves ⇨ Monopolies are not legitimate	Hughes (1958), Becker (1963),
	Neo-marxist and Neo-weberian	1970-1980	▪ The specificities of professional work are constructed in power relations through "*professional projects*" ▪ **The so-called "knowledge base" is institutionalised** through the development of professional associations and specific schools ▪ Professional practice is not guided by the greater good but rather occurs in a relation of **power dominance with clients**	Johnson (1972), Larson (1977), Freidson (1986)

Table 1.1: synthesis of debate around the specificities of professional work, based on Champy (2011: p.13-94)

As argued by Champy (2011: p.36-47), even though the early sociology of professions was very much influenced by professionals' own discourse on themselves, the negation of any specificity in the work that professionals do through subsequent sociological lenses has reached a dead-end, making it impossible to even think about the characteristics of professional work, other than those constructed in power relations.

b. Going beyond the functionalist versus critical opposition in the understanding of professions

Champy (2011) attempts to go beyond the irreconcilable character of these approaches. He argues that critics of functionalist approaches have lost the ability to think about the specificities of professional work, in particular the kind of knowledge they mobilise, because they have stepped away from the study of what it is that professionals actually do. Drawing on the work of Abbott, and more specifically, on his very broad definition of professions as "*applying somewhat abstract knowledge to particular cases*" (Abbott, 1988: p.8), he argues that professionals are confronted with relatively complex problems, which solutions cannot easily be anticipated and require a form of *deliberation* (Champy, 2011: p.81-82), of *intellectual craft* (Gand, 2008). Champy takes the example of judges to show how the law does not always make for easy decisions: ruling requires a long deliberation process before a choice can be made – given of the ambiguity surrounding most cases – in an ethical way (Champy, 2011: p.88-89). **As a consequence, even though one should bear in mind that there is a rhetoric around professions' specific knowledge base at the heart of**

professional projects **(Larson, 1977), it does not necessarily mean that there are no specificities to professional work outside of this rhetoric**.

Beyond the question of the legitimacy of professionals' monopoly over certain jurisdictions, this deliberative dimension, which is at the heart of professional work, is key in understanding some of the main characteristics of these firms, in particular: (1) *knowledge-intensiveness*; (2) the fact that it is accomplished by a professional workforce; and finally, (3) the centrality of interactions with clients in service delivery[13].

- **Professional work is "knowledge-intensive"**

One of the primary characteristics of professional work is that it is supposedly *knowledge-intensive* (Starbuck, 1992). Indeed, the deliberation process involved in professional work relies on a mastery of a more or less formal knowledge base, such as law books for lawyers for instance. One could argue that there are consistent differences between *classical* professions like law, and *weaker* ones, like management consulting, for example, which do not rely on a formal knowledge-base and thus imply that professionals need to acquire their legitimacy through other means of persuasion (Von Nordenflycht, 2010).

I will get back to this point later, but what is of interest here is perhaps not so much the scientific validity of professionals' knowledge claims, as the fact that it relies on an "intellectually skilled" workforce (Von Nordenflycht, 2010) and that a knowledge rhetoric is simultaneously involved in professional work (Alvesson, 1993). It is indeed hard not to acknowledge the constructed character of the knowledge rhetoric involved, without denying that there is a form of knowledge or expertise involved in this type of work that is inherently ambiguous. First, the nature of the deliberative work involved is highly intangible (Løwendahl, 2005). Also, there is a considerable amount of uncertainty surrounding professional work: not only are the outcomes of the work process very difficult to predict and evaluate, but partners' ability to secure a constant flow of projects (and revenue) is also highly uncertain. Studying management consulting, Andrew Sturdy (1997) qualified it as an *insecure business* in the sense that consultants are anxious to be perceived as the experts they claim to be in front of their clients, and to secure future work – which is why they both need to reinforce clients' own insecurities so they will hire them – but also provide enough reassurance to satisfy them[14]. Finally, given the *knowledge-intensive* nature of professional work, it is also often (but not systematically) very low in capital-intensity, which means that it is very difficult for these firms to develop firm-specific capital, and that employees are the ones possessing the knowledge (Von Nordenflycht, 2010).

[13] In his review of the literature on professional service firms, Von Nordenflycht (2010) identifies three distinctive characteristics: knowledge-intensity, low capital intensity and a professionalised workforce. Here I will regroup knowledge-intensity and low capital intensity characteristics together (without however assuming that they systematically go together) and add one additional key dimension: interactions with clients at the heart of service delivery.

[14] The managerial consequences of this "knowledge-intensiveness" have been the object of much critical attention and will be detailed in chapter 2 (p. 72-76), in particular through the work of Mats Alvesson.

- **Professional work is carried on by a professional workforce**

Professional work is primarily characterised by the nature of the workforce that conducts it. Its "professionalization" is usually the result of extensive training validated through formal accreditations, such as the bar exam or chartered accountant certification; entrance to the professional job market is regulated by professional associations or the state itself[15]. As a result, especially in regulated professions, professional workers will have affiliations with professional bodies, which play a central role in defining norms and codes of conduct, in other words in determining how the work should be done. Professionals are thus often described as having a preference for autonomy in the execution of their tasks and as being adverse to bureaucratic forms of control and, and instead preferring to make decisions collegially (Lazega, 2001).

- **Professional work has a strong interactional dimension**

Another key characteristic of professional work is the role played by interactions with clients in service delivery (Løwendahl, 2005; Maister, 1993). Collaboration between clients and the professionals they hire is indeed essential to the process in most cases: for example, auditors needing accounting books, lawyers being given accurate and relevant information, or consultants accessing internal documents. However, the interactional dimension of professional work goes beyond simple cooperation. The service is very often co-constructed with clients, who are increasingly knowledgeable about the services they buy (Sturdy and Wright, 2011). Some phases in service delivery will nonetheless require more interactions than others (typically in the early phases of need specification, for example). There is thus a strong interdependence between professionals and their clients in terms of the quality of the output produced. Considerable differences between professional fields should, however, be considered. The more process-like the service, the more likely it is that interactions will play an important part in service delivery – as in the consulting industry, where it is often hard to distinguish the output of consultants from that of internal teams (Nikolova et al., 2009). On the contrary, in professions like medicine in which there is more asymmetry in the mastery of the knowledge base between doctors and their patients, the latter will be required to cooperate but will be likely to be more passive and wait for doctors to make their diagnosis.

1.1.2 Managerial challenges

Given these three characteristics of professional work (knowledge intensiveness, professional workforce and client interactions), professional organisations are confronted with specific managerial challenges regarding, in particular, quality control, their "client first" norm, and dependency upon human resources.

[15] In "weaker" professions – where the knowledge base is less formalised and less recognised as legitimate, such as management consulting – the degree of professionalization of the workforce will be lower, entrance to the field less protected and the rhetoric around knowledge even stronger.

a. Quality control

Given the ambiguous character of the knowledge involved in professional work, the intangibility of the service provided, and the uncertainty associated with its outcomes, quality is particularly difficult to control and ensure. As a result, universal evaluation criteria is hard to define, even for experts in the field (Alvesson, 1993), which is all the more problematic for clients, who struggle to assess their service providers. They thus tend to rely on other elements, such as signals of expertise, reputation, personal relationships or ethical codes of conduct (Von Nordenflycht, 2010; Empson, 2001; Løwendahl et al., 2001; Kitay and Wright, 2002). The more informal the knowledge base is, as in management consulting for instance (Clark, 1995), the more there is an imperative for professionals to manage the impressions of their clients and ensure their younger employees display the appropriate behaviour (this will be developed further in chapter 2, see p.76).

b. Attract, select and retain

Professional organisations depend highly upon their professional workforce for a number of reasons. First, even if there are methods and tools developed, and more or less sophisticated knowledge of management systems present, these need to be constantly interpreted and re-interpreted (Werr and Stjernberg, 2003). Experience and know-how remain embedded in people and constitutes their primary value for their organisation (Empson, 2001; Løwendahl, 1997). Also, professionals have personal reputations, are in control of client relationships, and often build strong personal bonds with specific clients, who often become more attached to them than to the firm (Empson, 2001).

The key role played by professionals in the development of new practices has also been demonstrated (Anand et al., 2007) and places the career system at the heart of the innovation capabilities of these firms (Smets et al., 2012). This dependency upon human resources is even higher when knowledge-intensity is combined with low capital intensity, because it means that the firms' assets do not exist outside of the professionals they employ. In other words the "*assets go down the elevator each night (…) and the firm can't control whether they come back*" (Von Nordenflycht, 2010: p.162). As a consequence, the risk of *cat herding* is relatively high: professionals have strong bargaining power and can easily leave one firm for another, or even start-up their own, and take their valuable experience, their clients and even some colleagues with them (Maister, 1993; Løwendahl, 2005). Also, professionals' preference for autonomy, consensus and self-determination makes controlling them very challenging (Kunda, 1992). The use of bureaucratic control devices, in particular, can be of little relevance and alternative incentive mechanisms may prove more efficient (Greenwood and Empson, 2003). For all these reasons, **one of the main challenges that professional organisations face is to attract, select and retain the "best" professionals** (Maister, 1993).

c. "Client first"

One of the main characteristics of a professionalised workforce is their belief in their responsibility to protect the interests of their clients, or even of society in general. This norm, which is referred to in the literature as a norm of trusteeship or altruistic service (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005; Løwendahl, 2005) can be the source of internal conflict between a professional and

commercial ethos. This conflict can result in strong defiance against external forms of ownership, which are regarded as potentially coming in the way of clients' interests (Von Nordenflycht, 2014). This tension is at the heart of professional work, when practiced within corporate settings, which explains why trustworthiness has long been judged incompatible with a number of commercial practices like soliciting a competitors' clients, advertising, and competing on price (Torres, 1991).

In addition to the trusteeship norm, the strong interactional dimension of professional work, the need to signal quality to clients, and the uncertainty associated with the lack of long-term visibility regarding future sales, imply that clients are supposed to come before internal preoccupations. *Client first* is indeed the motto of many professional service organisations, which implies that all of the challenges evoked above (signalling quality, organising decision-making, attracting, selecting and retaining the best resources through appropriate incentive schemes) need to be handled in a way that remains as invisible to clients as possible. In other words – as most of the workforce is professional and contributing to the delivery of services – issues dealing with the internal organisation of the firm or the development and management of the younger professionals need to be addressed on the side of project work (Maister, 1993; Løwendahl, 2005).

Intermediate conclusion

In this section, I have shown that, beyond considerable disagreement in the literature on the specificities of professional work over time, professional organisations are confronted with specific managerial challenges due to the intangible and uncertain nature of their work (which is reinforced when their knowledge-base is little formalised) and their high reliance on human resources. In particular, the attraction, selection and retention of professionals is key to conduct the work, retain clients and develop new services.

In the following section I develop a genealogy of professional organisations as a research object to better qualify how they have responded to these challenges over time, and how current understandings of these firms and the changes they have been subjected to have been influenced by dominant theoretical debates in the academic field.

1.2 A genealogy of professional organisations as a distinct research object for Organisation Theory

Professions and professionals have been traditionally looked at through a sociological lens. However, as noted by Brock et al. (2014) in their recent genealogy of the field aimed at defining the agenda of the recently founded *Journal of Professions and Organisations*, the sociology of professions has paid relatively little attention to the organisational settings in which professionals have increasingly performed their work since the second half of the 20th c. In order to better understand the distinctiveness of these organisations and the changes they have undergone over the last decades, I draw on several reviews of this literature (Brock et al., 2014; Malhotra et al., 2006; Morris et al., 2012; Brock, 2006; Powell et al., 1999; Pinnington and Morris, 2003; Kirkpatrick and Ackroyd, 2003; Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011; Von Nordenflycht, 2010), as well as the original studies they refer to (e.g. Hall, 1968; Scott, 1965; Montagna, 1968), in order to build a genealogy of professional organisations as a research object, with the aim of understanding how professionals have organised themselves over time in response to the managerial challenges evoked above, and finally, to shed

light on the tensions they are facing today. I will argue that – given the dominance of archetype and neo-institutional theory to understand change within professional organisations – professionals and their experience at work have mostly remained in the blind spot of this literature so far.

1.2.1 Early accounts of Professional Organisations

Although studies of professions and professionals have been longstanding (see table 1.1), interest in professional organisations *per se* only began to rise in the 1950s and 60s, as the number of professionals operating within organisational settings consistently grew (Hall, 1968; Hastings and Hinings, 1970). Most of the sociology of professions has failed to grasp the shift of professional activity from the private practice of independent professionals to their employment by private companies. However, a number of studies have emerged within organisation theory with the purpose of identifying the core distinctive characteristics of these firms (Brock et al., 2014; Powell et al., 1999) and whether there is a conflict between professionalization and bureaucratisation processes (Malhotra et al., 2006).

In 1968, Montagna, drawing on earlier studies, already mentioned the term *professional organisation* (the term itself is already employed by Smigel (1964); Scott (1965); Hall (1968) for example), and defined it as follows:

> A professional organization is here defined as an organization in which: (1) members of one or more professional groups define and achieve the primary organizational goals (as compared with a professional association – a group organized to initiate and promote general professional objectives of the entire profession or segments thereof); (2) the majority of the people in the organization are professionals; (3) the administrative hierarchy of authority lies within the firm, whereas authority in professional matters is placed in the hands of the professional associations; (4) the profession promotes norms of personal autonomy and altruistic action in all matters relating to use of the body of knowledge.
>
> (Montagna, 1968, p.139)

Very early on, the term *professional bureaucracy* was coined to describe these specific – often large – professional organisations. Litwak (1961) already employed the term to describe the blending of the "Weberian model" - in other words a bureaucratic model in which work is relatively routinized and the knowledge base more or less constant - with the "Human Relations" model - a professional model in which uncertainty is high, the activity non-routinized and new knowledge constantly developed. The term is then used again by Smigel (1964) three years later, with a slightly different acceptation: professional bureaucracies are organisations whose rules are defined externally and condition the behaviour of their employees through a long socialisation process.
At the time, scholars were particularly intrigued by one specific feature of professional organisations: the coexistence of professionalization and bureaucratisation forces. As a result, they investigated the nature of the conflicts that might be generated, as well as the way they were managed in practice. These first studies often focused on scientific or academic settings (Hastings and Hinings, 1970) and showed that the extent of the conflict varied considerably between professions (Kornhauser, 1962; Strauss, 1963), organisations (Litwak, 1961; La Porte, 1965; Blau, 1968), individuals (Gouldner, 1957) or even from role to role (Hastings and Hinings, 1970; Kornhauser, 1962).

These seminal studies led others to investigate further the distinguishing features of professional organisations as compared to traditional bureaucracies (Powell et al., 1999). Scott (1965), for

example, highlighted the extent to which – in a large American hospital – professionals benefitted from a lot of autonomy and discretion, both at the level of micro-decisions concerning patient care and the macro level of hospital policy. Montagna (1968) investigated large accounting firms and showed that professionalization was compatible with a bureaucratic organisational form in that, although decision-making was relatively centralised, a lot of autonomy was left to professionals in their work and rules were set externally by governments and professional associations. A couple of years later, Bucher and Stelling (1969) argued that existing theories of bureaucracy were not adapted to understand the workings of the professional organisations. They insisted in particular on the necessity to understand how professionals create their own roles, compete for resources and coordinate through political processes of negotiation that are very specific.

These studies converge in highlighting the following distinctive features of professional organisations: a rather low level of differentiation, considerable professional discretion, participation in organisational governance, and sharing of the administrative function among professionals (Brock et al., 2014; Powell et al., 1999; Von Nordenflycht, 2010). They prepared the ground for Mintzberg to elaborate his conception of the *Professional Bureaucracy* as a distinct organisational configuration (Mintzberg, 1979). For Mintzberg, this specific configuration is characterised by a strong and dominant operating core, constituted of professionals who determine how work should be conducted themselves, and coordinate themselves through the standardisation of their skills and knowledge base.

Overall, this body of literature led to the conclusion that bureaucratisation processes would erode professionalism and that managerial pressures would, at the very least, constrain professional work, or even create "*factory-like conditions*" for professionals (Brock et al., 2014). It explains why, even though interest in the professional/bureaucratic conflict remained, the attention shifted towards the de-professionalization or even the "proletarianisation" of professionals in the subsequent decade (Brock et al., 2014; Malhotra et al., 2006)[16]. It was only towards the end of the 1980s that research focus shifted back to professional organisations *per se*.

1.2.2 The "Professional Partnership": a well-oiled machinery

Following these early accounts of professional organisations, the debate was renewed by a turn of interest in the management of these firms as they expanded in number and in size (Galanter and Palay, 1991) and as competition over professional jurisdictions increased, towards the end of the 1980s. This converged with a growing academic interest in "*Knowledge Intensive Firms*" (Alvesson, 1995), broadly speaking and is when the idea of a specific professional archetype emerged, with the purpose of establishing further the distinctive characteristics of professional organisations (Malhotra et al., 2006).

[16] There was concomitantly an interest in power relations between professionals and clients and in "professional projects" (Johnson, 1972; Larson, 1977; Haug, 1973)

a. Identification of a specific archetype in professional organisations: the Professional Partnership

Advocating for a shift towards an archetype-based understanding of the specificities of professional organisations in order to better understand patterns of change in these environments, Greenwood et al. (1990) labelled *Professional Partnership* (P^2) the dominant interpretive scheme of professional service firms. Through the concept, they synthesised and enriched the main traits already identified by previous research.

Archetype Theory

Greenwood and Hinings (1993) define organisational archetypes as "*a set of structures and systems that reflects a single interpretive scheme*". They claim that this holistic understanding of organisational design allows one to grasp the meanings, ideas and values symbolically attached to structures and systems that are central to understanding patterns of change within organisational fields (Greenwood and Hinings, 1993; Greenwood and Hinings, 1988). Within this framework, and in opposition to Mintzberg's contingent configurations, the emphasis is put on how mutually constitutive meaning and structure are (Cooper et al., 1996). Greenwood and Hinings define organisational design as having three core components (Greenwood and Hinings, 1993: p.1054):

(1) The vertical and horizontal structures of roles and responsibilities

(2) Decision systems, or policy and resource allocation mechanisms, and finally

(3) Human resources systems such as recruitment, appraisal and compensation

They argue that structures and management systems are best understood in terms of patterns, which are the embodiment of their underlying interpretive scheme. In such a view, structures and systems are not neutral, but rather the bearers of meaning.

The underlying hypothesis of Archetype Theory is that, within similar institutional fields, organisations will share the same interpretive scheme and will tend to organise accordingly. This interpretive scheme can evolve, but it is likely to be a slow and difficult process since an alternative interpretive scheme needs to emerge and to be both more functional and coherent than the previous one (Powell et al., 1999). Change, within Archetype Theory is thus transformational. Sedimentation or hybridization are possible but are likely to be temporary given their unstable nature. The development of Archetype Theory was in line with that of Neo-Institutional Theory, and became a very influential analytical lens through which to study professional organisations.

➢ Interpretive Scheme

The term *Professional Partnership* encompasses two main beliefs in its interpretive scheme. First, its primary task of applying expertise to complex problems implies that professional knowledge is central to the service provided, that control is weak and exercised by peers given the degree of discretion needed, and that work responsibility is indivisible and that understanding clients is central to task performance. Second, these firms operate within the legal framework of a partnership, which implies that the owners of the firm are also in charge of its management and take part in operations. This fusion of ownership and control is accompanied by a strong focus on consensus and

collegiality[17], as well as a weak separation between professional and managerial tasks (Greenwood et al., 1990; Hinings et al., 1999; Powell et al., 1999).

- **Structure**

In terms of structure, professionals evolving within these organisations are described as benefitting from a certain fluidity in role creation: they are able to build their own roles and specialisations – which remain relatively informal – and operate on an individual level according to personal preferences and work interests (Hinings et al., 1999; Greenwood et al., 1990). In addition, there are few hierarchical levels. There are typically three different layers of professionals: partners, who are in charge of handling client relationships, policy making and the direction of the firm; managers, who liaise with clients on a day-to-day basis and supervise the work of younger professionals; and finally, junior professionals, or associates, who are in charge of conducting operations (Maister, 1993; Hinings et al., 1991). As a result, integration is achieved through informal face-to-face interactions between professionals and coordination is achieved through the standardisation of skills. There are very few formal rules and a weak use of integrative devices, which results in a high degree of informality.

- **Systems[18]**

Control systems are characterised by relatively weak strategic control, in the sense that careful analysis is not systematic but is combined with a consensus-orientation. In terms of market-financial control, professional partnerships use precise short-term targets, but there is a relatively tolerant accountability. Yet, long-term orientation is implicit given the partnership form of governance. Finally, operating control is rather decentralised: professionals are responsible for their own work and their own clients and there are little shared support activities. They mostly rely on *clan control* (Ouchi, 1980) rather than traditional bureaucratic forms of control (Greenwood et al., 1990; Hinings et al., 1991).

As far as Human Resources systems are concerned, professional partnerships are traditionally organised around an *up-or-out* principle (Galanter and Palay, 1991; Gilson and Mnookin, 1989). In this specific type of tournament system (Rosenbaum, 1979), young recruits are selected right after graduation from top schools and universities, and put on an apprenticeship path leading to a decision regarding their partnership co-optation. The number of rounds in this tournament can vary, but there are typically junior recruits, often also called analysts or associates, who can then join the ranks of the managers and finally hope to become partners.

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[17] Gand (2008) distinguishes between homogeneous collegiality (usually at play in medium-size collectives where all peers have similar activities), oligarchic collegiality (which is most common in medium to large PSFs and involves a small number of partners managing the firm and a division of labour between them and the associates) and extended collegiality, which is associated with democratic organisations (collegiality is not bounded by the limits of the partnership group, but is extended to the whole firm). See also Gand (2015).

[18] Even though seminal studies only explicitly refer to what is labelled here "control systems" (i.e. strategic control, marketing-financial control and operating control) under the heading "systems", I have decided to also include "Human Resources Systems", often evoked implicitly - for an exception see Richter (2008) – for they are central to the analysis.

The economic rationale behind this is simple. Current partners need time to judge the qualities of an associate and ensure that their admittance will not endanger profits *per capita,* as partners are typically remunerated through a lock-step system[19] and thus share profits equally (no matter their individual performance) and are granted tenure for life. In parallel, associates are incentivised to invest in the development of firm-specific capital (methods, expertise, reputation, etc.) and are given deferred compensation in exchange for this investment.

The fact that unsuccessful candidates for partnership are supposed to leave serves as a bonding mechanism, assuring them that they will be treated fairly and that their firm will not act opportunistically by delaying partnership promotions (Gilson and Mnookin, 1989). This mechanism reduces considerably the risk of shirking, as well as the risk of seeing senior associates leave with clients. In this respect, *up-or-out* differs considerably from typical tournaments in which the selection process usually happens much earlier on and unsuccessful candidates are generally not asked to leave but remain in their current positions. This is why Malos and Campion (1995) have argued that *up-or-out* should rather be looked at as an option-based model in which, by hiring a new recruit, partners put an option on the acquisition of future human capital, once the recruits have developed their professional competence, network, and reputation. They agree, however, that the aim of *up-or-out* is to act as a bonding mechanism and avoid shirking behaviours (Morris and Pinnington, 1998).

In practice, nonetheless, few firms have ever operated on a very strict *up-or-out* system, and its rigidity has perhaps been overstated (Galanter and Palay, 1991). Firms typically discourage associates from staying if rejected from partnership rather than formally firing them. Outplacement has always been a widespread practice, right from the birth of the system in the 19th c. in the Cravath Firm – which I will get back to later – as well has the practice of having some permanent associates, typically in areas that were low status and low profit making such as immigration for law firms (Galanter and Palay, 1991). The 1960s were nonetheless exceptional, because the *up-or-out* rule was more strict, which may have been due to intense competition and the need to maintain profitability (Galanter and Palay, 1991; Smigel, 1964).

A summary of the main features of the P^2 archetype can be found in table 1.2.

[19] In the lock-step system all partners share profits equally, while in the "eat what you kill" system profit is shared according to individual contributions.

THE PROFESSIONAL PARTNERSHIP	
Interpretive Scheme	
Governance	Fusion of ownership and control A form of representative democracy Revolving managerial tasks among the owners Local office as the centre of commitment
Primary task	Professional knowledge Peer control Work responsibility as indivisible Strong links with clients Widely distributed authority Minimal hierarchy
Structure	
Differentiation	Low level of specialisation
Integration	Low use of integrative devices Low use of rules and procedures
Systems	
Control systems	Weak strategic control, consensus orientation Marketing-Financial control: precise targets, tolerant accountability and short term focus Decentralised operating control, with the exception of standards and quality, clan control
Human resource systems	Up-or-Out system Recruitment, career and rewards based on professional qualifications and experience

Table 1.2: Core elements of the P^2 form, adapted from Greenwood and Hinings (1993), Greenwood et al. (1990) and Cooper et al. (1996: p.626)

b. Flexible workers within a constraining organisational machinery

This form of organising contains a major paradox: even though it is flexible in the sense that professionals benefit from a lot of autonomy and have control over both their work and the management of client relationships, it is also very constraining in its mechanical character. Indeed, central to the traditional partnership is the notion of leverage (Maister, 1993; Sherer, 1995), or, in other words, the ratio of associates to partners. The higher the ratio, the bigger the proportion of junior staff the firm will have and the lower the ratio, on the contrary, the more *grey-haired* the organisation is likely to be. As a result, the more standardised the service provided, the more the leverage ratio is likely to be important.

Economically, the leverage ratio sets the level of profitability of the firm, because a considerable part of professional firms' profits come from hiring young professionals at a fixed salary and billing them at an advantageous rate. This system allows partners to lower the cost of the firms' services for clients, while improving profits. As a result, there is a need to match projects with the human resources structure of the firm. Indeed, each project will involve a different mix of senior (partner), middle management and junior workers, which needs to correspond with the structure of the firms' pyramid or else a number of staff will not be assigned projects and senior work will not be properly leveraged.

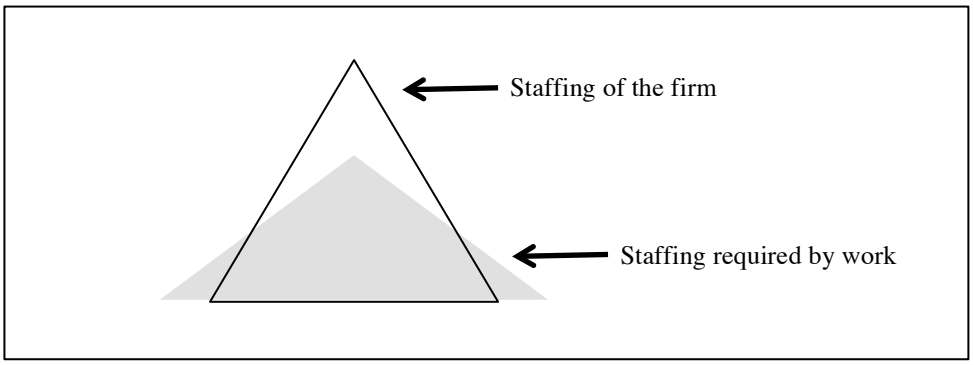

Figure 1.1: Consequences of too much procedural work, Maister (1993: p.6)

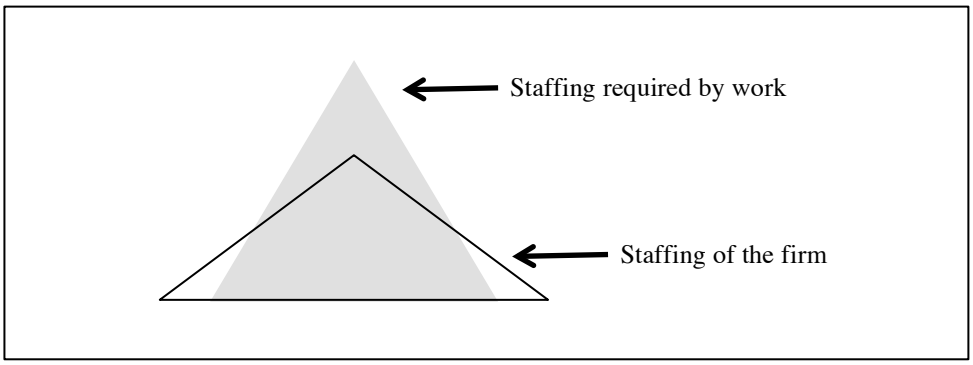

Figure 1.2: Consequences of too much brains work, Maister (1993: p.7)

In addition, Maister (1993) argues that there is a need for the leverage ratio to be cautiously managed, although there is an inevitable tendency for it to increase as the staff becomes more experienced. As more and more projects are sold, what was once a customised service becomes increasingly standardised and the firm is able to carry on similar projects with an increased amount of junior work. Letting the team structure change considerably will have a big impact on both the economics of the firm and prospects of promotion.

In parallel, as Galanter and Palay (1991) explain, the tournament for partnership often practiced by traditional professional organisations carries with it a structural injunction to grow:

> Growth occurs because, at the end of the tournament, the firm must replace not only the losing associates who depart, but also those who win and are promoted. If the firm did not hire associates to replace its newly promoted partners, then the pre-tournament partners would share their surplus human capital with fewer associates and, therefore, make less money. To maintain at least a constant ratio of pre-tournament associates to pre-tournament partners, the firm must hire new associates to take the place of those who won the tournament. By replacing promoted attorneys the firm grows by the number of promotions. If the firm fires the losers, then it must also replace them, but their replacement has the effect of maintaining the size, not increasing it.
>
> (Galanter and Palay, 1991: p.102)

This implies that traditional professional partnerships are structurally constrained in order to be able to absorb this constant flow of human resources. And if the incentive power of the *up-or-out* system is to be maintained – in other words, if the frequency of partner co-optation is to be relatively steady so that junior staff feel they will be rewarded if they work hard – then the firm has to grow at a regular speed to maintain the leverage ratio. Traditional professional partnerships, using an *up-or-*

out promotion rule, are thus condemned to ensure a certain level of activity in order to keep growing and to organise the regular mobility of their resources through the hierarchy.

1.2.3 On the bureaucratisation of Professional Service Firms

The identification by Greenwood et al. (1990) of the P^2 archetype, led to a number of studies aiming to validate it empirically. These authors aspired to verify to what extent the P^2 archetype could be observed in practice, but also to account for potential variations. As pointed out by Morris et al. (2012), archetypes are ideal-types of organisations, and the P^2 archetype aims at accounting for the distinctiveness of professional firms. As such, they are likely to be confronted with wider empirical diversity. Through various empirical studies, some authors started to see signs that professional organisations were undergoing major changes directly affecting their interpretive scheme (Morris and Pinnington, 1999; Rose and Hinings, 1999).

a. Toward a new archetype? Factors of change and organisational consequences

Beyond these initial concerns regarding the empirical validity of the *Professional Partnership* archetype, the idea that professional organisations were undergoing major changes (growing sophistication of client demands, globalisation, new technologies and deregulation, for example), was challenging the dominant interpretive scheme of the model. Driven by a need for efficiency and competitiveness, professional organisations were then thought to be the object of "managerialisation" processes, which would generate a shift towards a new archetype: the Managed Professional Business (Powell et al., 1999; Cooper et al., 1996; Teece, 2003). By shedding light on the bureaucratisation process at play, this literature somehow reconnects with earlier studies of professional bureaucracies.

➢ Factors of change

Towards the end of the 1990s, the observation was made that professional organisations had been confronted with major changes in their environments for almost two decades, due to both market and institutional pressures, which challenged considerably the dominant professional partnership form of organising.

Regulatory changes: increased competition over jurisdictions

First and foremost, the possibility to computerise an increasing number of processes has contributed to their commodification and standardisation (Hinings et al., 1999; Malhotra et al., 2006; Aharoni, 1999). In law, for example, templates were developed for recurring contracts, which meant that this work could then be taken on by less trained paralegal staff (Powell et al., 1999). This trend led to two inter-related phenomena: pressure on cost and a need to extend services beyond existing practices. Indeed, as service delivery became increasingly standardised, in particular in accounting, clients could more easily threaten to switch providers – even if they rarely did – and ask for fees to be detailed and justified prior to signing contracts (Koza and Lewin, 1999). This was made even more pressing as firms became allowed to advertise, which was unprecedented, and made clients even more aggressive because it opened the door for alternative, cheaper, players hiring less specialised staff (Hinings et al., 1999).

The second consequence of the commodification of professional services was the need to find additional sources of revenue in order to maintain growth. Indeed, in accounting firms for example, audit services dropped from 70% of fee volume within the then big 6 firms[20] before the end of the 1880s to under 50% in the 1990s (Hinings et al., 1999: p.135). In parallel, new needs emerged from clients who started to look for advice on their strategies, transactions, restructuring or even IT. Accounting firms responded by developing "special work" or "business advisory" divisions and enlarged their set of practices to other areas such as law or consulting (Hinings et al., 1999; Rose and Hinings, 1999). This was all the more necessary that these firms had a structural need to grow, as evoked above (Galanter and Palay, 1991).

In law, a different strategy was followed: new areas of practice were introduced (environmental law, for example), but rarely outside of legal services (Malhotra et al., 2006; Morris and Pinnington, 1999). This phenomenon was accompanied by professional associations themselves, that redefined their roles in line with existing trends, thus encouraging the big players to redefine their mission as providing "business advisory" or "professional services" (Hinings et al., 1999: p.136). This diversification strategy was reinforced by the merger and acquisition wave of the 1980s, which considerably reduced the client base and left a growing number of professionals faced with a decreasing number of clients (Aharoni, 1999).

Technological disruption

Beyond the computerisation of systems, which led to the commodification and standardisation of services evoked above, changes in technology also played a key role in increasing the sophistication of client's demands and expectations (Brock, 2006; Hinings et al., 1999). Indeed, with the development of the Internet, clients progressively had access to free flows of information, which resulted in their ability to directly compare offers and become more knowledgeable about the kinds of service provided. To some extent, it also enabled clients to practice self-management where they would have previously hired external support (Powell et al., 1999), pressuring service providers to be relevant, competitive and to demonstrate their value compared with in-house solutions.

Globalisation

Finally, professional organisations were also affected by globalisation since, as clients became increasingly international, they were in need of consistent and standardised services across their subsidiaries, which could only be provided by service providers who were international themselves (Aharoni, 1999). The largest firms, in particular, thus experienced pressure to globalise, which also provided them with prospects of renewed growth in a context where, as we saw, competition was at its toughest. This was, however, more the case for large accounting or consulting firms than it was for

[20] This refers to the worlds' largest providers of accounting services (which also provide a variety of other professional services such as tax, legal services, consulting, assurance, advisory or corporate finance). Originally (for most of the 20th c.) they were referred to as the "Big 8": Arthur Andersen, Coopers and Lybrand, Ernst & Whinney, Deloitte Haskings and Sells, Peat Marwick Mitchell, Price Waterhouse, Touche Ross and Arthur Young. Through a series of mergers, they then became the "Big 6" (with the birth of Ernst & Young and Deloitte & Touche in 1989), the "Big 5" (with the merger resulting in Price Waterhouse Coopers in 1998) and finally the "Big 4" after the downfall of Arthur Andersen following the Enron scandal in 2001.

other professions such as law, because lawyers rarely need to work from client offices and law remains locally specific (Malhotra et al., 2006).

➢ **Organisational implications**

As a result, professional organisations progressively emphasised efficiency and competitiveness as key levers of success, and restructured to take this new imperative into account. This resulted in the growing importance of business development and marketing as key functions within the organisation. As relationships with clients became increasingly commercial, sales targets were formalised and started playing an important role in promotions to partnership, and profits became more determinant than collegiality (Bruce, 1996; Hanlon, 1994). Bureaucratic forms of control, such as systematic performance appraisals, were then reinforced (Hinings et al., 1999). As the firms diversified, a new need for coordination arose, which led to the development of new systems (Human Resources, Knowledge Management, etc.) and new staff were hired to implement and manage them - HR staff in particular, see Gray (1999). It also led to the development of more standardised methods and tools, enabling coordination across countries and units (Cooper et al., 1998; Barretta et al., 2005). Professional Service Firms, as they started labelling themselves, had entered a new era of efficiency and managerialism, argued scholars, who began to see a shift away from the P^2 archetype toward a new, supposedly better suited one.

b. The Managed Professional Business archetype

A few years after identifying the main features of the P^2 archetype, Cooper, Hinings, Greenwood and Brown – following years of empirical research in healthcare, accounting and law – argued that the changes evoked above had considerably altered the interpretive scheme of Professional Service Firms, so much so that a new archetype could be identified: the Managed Professional Business (MPB).

➢ **Interpretive Scheme**

For Cooper et al. (1996), the main argument in favour of a progressive archetype shift lies in the fact that the interpretive scheme had changed: even though professionalism and partnership remained central to Professional Service Firms, the meaning professionals attach to them had shifted considerably with the market and institutional changes faced by these firms since the 1980s. This shift mainly revolves around the idea that professional organisations are businesses and, as such, should be efficient and competitive. This is particularly observable, the authors argued, through the importation of business language and concepts such as *productivity, competition, marketing,* and *growth strategy* (Cooper et al., 1996: p.631). This new emphasis on efficiency translates into the meanings attached to professionalism: skills and expertise were now taken for granted and what is expected from a professional is rather to add value for clients, to be responsive, punctual, dynamic, entrepreneurial and financially successful. Partnership is also impacted because efficiency is often thought to come before autonomy and collegiality. In some cases, partnership is even seen as getting in the way of efficiency because of its inflexibility, which has led an important number of firms to adopt more corporate forms of governance (Brock, 2006).

➢ Structure

As mentioned above, the main structural difference between the traditional P^2 archetype and the MPB is increased differentiation due to policies of diversification and the specialisation of professionals. Specialty groups or practices are often created, and differentiation is taken even further by the introduction of management specialists such as Human Resources or knowledge managers, even though they remain under professional control.
As a result, integration is then achieved through increased hierarchy and the introduction of new rules and procedures. Indeed, some partners are given special responsibilities and are in charge of a function, specific accounts, or a whole practice. They are thus accountable for other professionals and sometimes even other partners, being in charge of developing plans for these units and evaluating their members, for example. Also, the overall number of rules and procedures increases significantly, even though the emphasis remains on standards of quality.

➢ Systems

In terms of control systems, strategic forms of control are more emphasised as MPBs try to develop new strategies, in particular regarding international development and new areas of practice. Strategic planning is thus introduced in an attempt to see beyond a one-year horizon and even though data gathering isn't systematic yet, effort is made in that direction. In parallel, decision-making becomes more directive and centralised and less focused on consensus.

In MPBs, Marketing-Financial control itself tends to become more centralised, and along with financial targets, market targets are introduced. Tolerance around these targets decreases and partners who do not meet them may be asked to leave. The emphasis is put on profitability and client relationships are monitored, for example, through the development of client satisfaction surveys. Finally, operating control is increasingly achieved through standards and formal systems.

Regarding Human Resources systems, the main consequences of these changes are twofold and concern the introduction of dedicated teams of HR specialists on the one hand, and the loosening of the *up-or-out* rule on the other. Indeed, where the management of human resources used to be handled solely by professionals themselves, Human Resources Management specialists are increasingly hired to centralise practices and conduct HR planning and reporting (Richter et al., 2008). The introduction of standardised performance appraisals, for example, was a big step away from the informal feedback practiced in the P^2. This is nonetheless combined with a certain heterogeneity in practice within the different specialised practices or units (Malhotra et al., 2010).

In parallel, the career system is thought to have slightly moved away from a strict *up-or-out* rule. Professionals are rarely explicitly asked to leave the firm as long as they are assigned projects and clients are satisfied (Richter et al., 2008). Also, permanent non-partner positions are introduced in order to retain some key individuals, usually in areas of high technicality with little leveraging capability (Malhotra et al., 2010; Sherer and Lee, 2002; Smets et al., 2012). Staff tracks are also introduced, in law firms in particular: a "*staff attorney track*" was created by the firm Jones Day in the 1980s to keep up with the pace at which the firm was growing (and the need to recruit a constant flow of young graduates). The staff track would allow the firm to recruit high numbers of candidates, beyond the small number of graduates from elite target schools, without altering the functioning of

the *up-or-out*, for these staff attorneys would not be able to reach partnership and would be solely assigned routine and price-sensitive work (Sherer and Lee, 2002).

THE MANAGED PROFESSIONAL BUSINESS	
Interpretive Scheme	
Governance	Efficiency before collegiality
Primary task	Evolution of the meaning of professionalism: service, competition, marketing and growth, rationalisation, productivity
Structure	
Differentiation	Medium level of specialisation according to professional divisions and functional difference
Integration	Medium use of integrative devices Development of hierarchy and cross-functional teams Increase in the number of rules and procedures, even though emphasis remains on standards and quality
Systems	
Control systems	Strategic Control: ▪ Increased analytical emphasis (strategic planning is introduced, international strategies implemented) ▪ Decision-making is more centralised and directive Market-Financial control ▪ Precise financial and market targets ▪ Low tolerance of accountability ▪ Combination of short and long term orientations Operating Control ▪ Medium range of involvement regarding professional standards, quality, planning, marketing and compensation ▪ Increase in centralisation
Human resource systems	Introduction of HR specialists Loosening of the up-or-out

Table 1.3. Core elements of the Managed Professional Business, adapted from Cooper et al. (1996), Brock et al. (1999b: p.134) and Teece (2003)

➢ Reinforced organisational constraints

As discussed earlier, even though professionals benefit from a lot of autonomy in a traditional professional partnership, the organisation is also very constrained by the leverage structure. The managerial shift in these firms has somehow reinforced these constraints on two levels. First, given the increased focus on efficiency and profitability, there is considerable pressure for firms to increase the leveraging of junior resources, which implies standardising work as much as possible. Second, in parallel, and in order to optimize the cost structure of projects, there has been a tendency to increase staffing rates in order to optimise the time of professionals (Aharoni, 1999; Hinings et al., 1999). In other words, the emphasis is put on billable hours, and associates (or even managers) are assigned projects full-time or close to it, which leaves little time to handle internal projects, administrative tasks and so on. It also makes the project assignment task more difficult in that there is less leeway to match and re-match professionals and projects.

1.2.4 Is the Professional Partnership dead?

The argument made by Brock et al. (1999b) – that the P^2 archetype is slowly disappearing in favour of a more "business-like" archetype, in turn announcing the death of the traditional professional organization – has had a big impact on the research community for the past 15 years. In this section, I show how it has led to a first group of studies investigating the empirical validity of the argument, before calling for more comparative studies between and within professions. I conclude by drawing on criticism of archetype theory to argue that it has left the role played by internal factors of change in the dark, and call for the reconnection of studies of professional organisations with that of professionals and their experience at work.

a. Permanence of the traditional partnership

The strong archetype change argument made by Cooper et al. (1996) led a number of scholars to investigate the empirical validity of the managerial shift theory. Tim Morris and Ashley Pinnington, in particular, made key contributions by studying more specifically the applicability of the concept among law and architecture firms (Morris and Pinnington, 1998; Morris and Pinnington, 1999; Pinnington and Morris, 2003; Pinnington and Morris, 2002). They show that even though there are clear signs of bureaucratisation – to various degrees – among these firms (through the use of marketing experts, the centralisation of the deployment of resources, quality controls or the generalisation of standardised individual performance appraisals, for example), core dimensions of the traditional partnership model persist (Pinnington and Morris, 2003; Pinnington and Morris, 2002). In law, for example, bureaucratisation appears to mainly concern the market-facing area of the organisation, and power remains in the hands of partners whose ability to run the firm and manage client relationships stays relatively untouched (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2008; Pinnington and Morris, 2003). These authors even argue that traditional values of professionalism and partnership are reinforced by the changes they face and that they observe more continuity than change within British law firms (Pinnington and Morris, 2003; Morris and Pinnington, 1999).

Similarly, among architecture firms, Pinnington and Morris find that a P^2 mode of operating, involving strong autonomy over work and client relationships, often persists, even where firms have become corporations (Pinnington and Morris, 2002). In their study of *up-or-out* practices among law firms, they also show that firms that are using this promotion rule have often adapted to increased managerial focus and that it is not uncommon, for example, to see it combined with lateral hires or even alternative forms of employment (Morris and Pinnington, 1998; Malhotra et al., 2010). Malhotra et al. (2010) observe that these new careers often coexist with an informal *up-or-out* rule in practice, without altering its incentive power. They argue that these new opportunities that are created for a few associates do not replace entirely the *up-or-out* system and that the absence of a formal policy is a way for firms to gain flexibility on how to handle promotions, while still benefiting from the incentive power of *up-or-out*. They explain that it remains a strong norm enacted by the associates themselves, who tend to leave when they are not promoted, even if they would not necessarily have been asked to do so formally. Pinnington and Morris argue that they are witnessing an increasing managerial focus in professional firms, which is not to be mistaken for archetype change or even sedimentation:

> Introducing outside experts such as human resources managers might make the firm more "business-like" in its selection and promotion policies but unless they break the control of partners over decision-making, they do not alter the firm fundamentally away from the archetype. What we have are more managed forms of professional firms – more formalised in their evaluation systems, and with more central monitoring of work processes, thus undeniably making them somewhat more similar to other types of business organisations.
>
> (Pinnington and Morris, 2003: p.97)

Pinnington and Morris here suggest that the compatibility of the P^2 model with other (more bureaucratic) forms of control may have been downplayed in its original description since this tension was already accounted for in the 1960s literature on the professional/bureaucratic conflict (Pinnington and Morris, 2003; Malhotra and Morris, 2009). Ackroyd and Muzio even go one step further by advancing that the engagement of professionals with management is often nothing more than rhetorical and is not to be mistaken for a change of interpretive scheme. They argue that the managerial dimension is far from central to the law firms they have studied and that we are witnessing the birth of a *Reconstructed Professional Firm,* which is restructuring to deal primarily with its increase in size and the need to maintain market closure given the rise in the number of trained professionals (Ackroyd and Muzio, 2007).

These debates around the validity of the P^2 archetype led Royston Greenwood, along with Laura Empson, to wonder how to account for this relative permanence of the P^2 archetype (Greenwood and Empson, 2003). They argue that – even though the partnership form of governance itself has decreased overall among professional service firms – it remains more common than in other industries because it is more "*efficient*," in the sense that it reduces agency costs and secures status-based efficiencies. For others, this relative permanence of the P^2 is due to symbolic reasons, rather than functional ones: the use of a partnership form of governance and/or an *up-or-out* promotion system, in an industry characterised by its uncertainty and the inequality between buyer and supplier, remains a strong signal of quality (Morris and Pinnington, 1998; Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2008; Malhotra et al., 2010).

Overall, these debates led to discussions on the generalizability of the MPB beyond the specific cases that the initial argument was based on: the world's largest accounting firms and some Canadian law firms. They argue that research on professional organisations should somehow reconnect with the sociology of professions by accounting for differences between professions and how they can account for variations in organisational form (Pinnington and Morris, 2003; Pinnington and Morris, 2002; Kirkpatrick and Ackroyd, 2003).

b. Accounting for heterogeneity and variation

Following the conclusions of these studies questioning the generalizability of the MPB, a number of scholars advocated for a richer understanding of professions and how their differences might play a role in explaining organisational variation and different pathways of change. Many argued in favour of a reconnection with the sociology of professions to achieve this agenda (Pinnington and Morris, 2003; Pinnington and Morris, 2002; Kirkpatrick and Ackroyd, 2003). Concomitantly, other scholars started to shed light on some key differences within professions themselves.

➢ The argument of archetype proliferation

The argument initially advanced by the advocates of archetype theory to take into account the diversity of PSFs was that these firms were undergoing a process of archetype proliferation and that there was, in fact, a constellation of archetypes. Indeed, in 1999, Brock et al. already concluded their seminal book *Restructuring the Professional Organization* by highlighting the coexistence of several competing archetypes: the Professional Partnership of course, but also the Global Professional Network (GPN) – a more global version of the MPB – and the star form (Brock et al., 1999a). The GPN, they argue, is a form of MPB which includes multidisciplinary practices, across borders; while the star form is a rather specialist actor, hiring highly skilled and expensive professionals, operating in a niche of the market (Brock et al., 1999a; Brock, 2006; Brock et al., 2007).
Brock et al. (1999a) summarise this as follows:

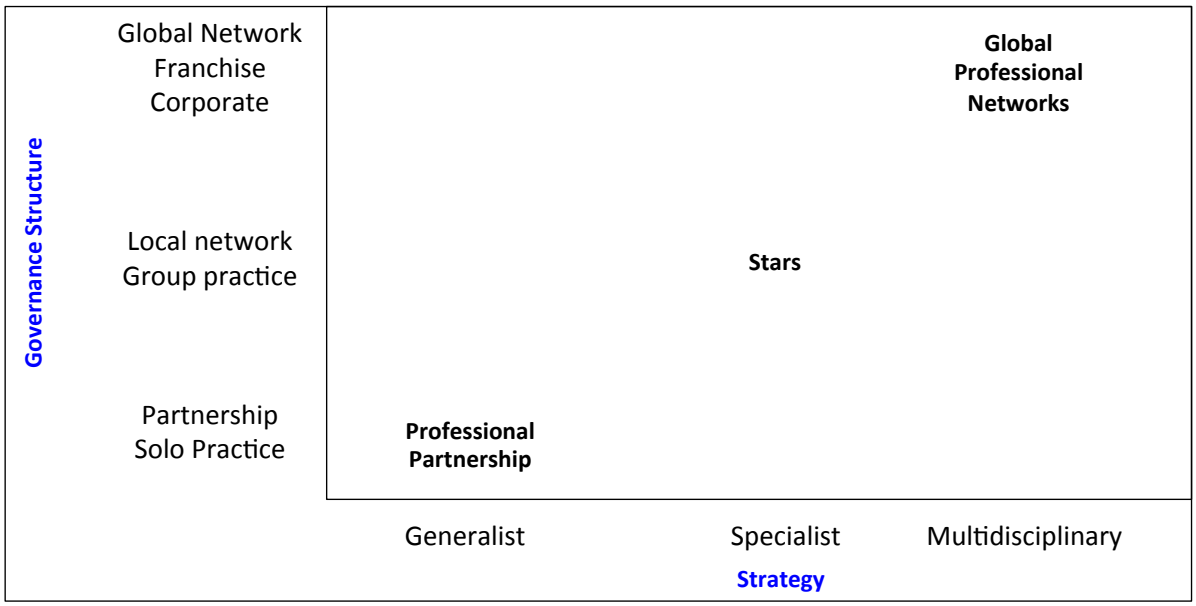

Figure 1.3: Location of clusters and archetypes, from Brock et al. (1999: p.228)

➢ Differences across and within professions

In parallel, other authors – drawing on the sociology of professions – started to argue that variation in organisational form could be explained by differences across professions. Some focused on the fact that not all professional fields underwent changes of the same nature, while others complementarily showed that differences in the nature of professions also contributed to explaining organisational disparity. Finally, others, still, contributed to this debate by shedding light on disparities related to the size and scope of firms.
The first conclusion that studies investigating the empirical validity of the MPB shift thesis led to was that more attention should be paid to differences between professional fields themselves. If there is some convergence within the field of PSF, this is mainly due to the characteristics shared by these firms: more specifically knowledge-intensity and the customisation of services to a specific client context (Von Nordenflycht et al., 2015). There are however a number of sources of heterogeneity across (and within) professional fields and what can be observed within the big 6 accounting firms is not necessarily true of UK-based law firms or architecture firms. Malhotra et al. (2006), for example, explained the differences observed in the degrees of managerial focus in accounting and law firms

through major differences in the factors of change they were affected by. More specifically, they showed that law firms were less pressured to introduce new practices outside of their initial jurisdiction, and that they were relatively protected from globalisation, since most transactions occur within the confines of either New York, English or Welsh law, and otherwise remain relatively regional languages, which explains why firms have been rather reluctant to open offices abroad. They also argue that professional norms were stronger within law firms, explaining the relative permanence of features.

In another study, Malhotra and Morris (2009) claim that organisational variation between law, accounting and engineering consulting is also due to differences in the nature of the service provided, more specifically in knowledge, jurisdictions and client relationships (including client capture and the level of face-to-face interaction). This idea is also shared by Kirkpatrick and Ackroyd (2003) who argue that there are considerable differences between professions, in particular between collegial professions and state-mediated ones, like healthcare. In an attempt to summarise existing knowledge on the sources of heterogeneity across professional fields, Von Nordenflycht et al. (2015) identify six key explanatory dimensions: jurisdiction and ideology (which they label sources of definitional heterogeneity, since the stronger they are, the more *professional-intensity* there is in the field) and knowledge, client capture, face-to-face interaction and capital intensity (which are considered as *non-definitional* sources of heterogeneity)

In addition, size and strategy are considered to be key differentiating factors within professional fields (Malhotra and Morris, 2009; Von Nordenflycht et al., 2015). Focusing on the Human Resources Management practices of consulting firms, Werr and Schilling (2011) made a similar point by advocating to distinguish between "*talent factories*" and "*expert houses.*" Yet, much remains to be said regarding the sources of heterogeneity within professional fields.

These debates around the heterogeneity of PSFs have led several scholars to attempt to map professional fields – see for example Reed (1996); Von Nordenflycht (2010) or Brock et al. (1999a). One of the most cited contributions in this regard is that of Von Nordenflycht (2010), who distinguishes technology developers from neo-PSFs (consulting, advertising), professional campuses (hospitals), or classic regulated professions based on their characteristics (in particular their capital intensity and the level of professionalization of their workforce), the challenges and opportunities they face, and their organisational responses (compensation, autonomy, governance and slack).

c. The case of Consulting: an incomplete professional project

The origins of Management Consulting are often attributed to the *Scientific Management* of Taylor and his disciples (Nelson, 1980; Tisdall, 1982), but the principles of scientific organising were rather diffused by the first efficiency consultancies created in the beginning of the 20th century, which found inspiration in Taylor's work and developed similar but competing approaches (Wright and Kipping, 2012). These pioneering management engineers, such as Harrington Emerson and Charles Bedaux and his *Bedaux System* in the Unites States, advised vast numbers of companies on the best way to improve their operational efficiency. They were the first management engineers to have built consulting firms that developed over the years and even internationally (Wright and Kipping, 2012).

In France, an elite group of engineers from *Corps des Mines*[21] constituted itself at the beginning of the 19th c. and claimed to be driven by the will to altruistically serve the state (Henry, 2006). They were referred to as *engineering consultants*[22]. Following the second industrial revolution, Henry Le Chatelier – an Engineer from the *Corps des Mines* – imported the principles of *Scientific Management*, with the academic ambition to develop a proper industrial science into this group of engineering consultants (Henry, 2000; Hatchuel, 1994). In parallel, other advisers (such as Thompson, Clark, Coutrot or Planus for example) who had either trained directly with Taylor before emigrating to France or had interrupted their engineering degrees because of World War I and taught themselves the principles of *Scientific Management*, started to compete with Le Chatelier and his followers by providing organising advice to companies and constituting themselves as a group of *organising consultants*[23] (Henry, 2006) – a less prestigious denomination for it was not associated with any official degree and implied a commercial ambition. The latter consulting organisers were the ones who built the first efficiency consultancies in France.

Efficiency consultancies thrived during World War II and in the post-war period, giving rise to a number of new actors and spin-offs from the firms built by Emerson and Bedaux and their offices around the world (Kipping, 1999). After the 1960s, though, efficiency consultancies started to decline in spite of diversification while more strategy-focused actors, such as Arthur D. Little, Booz Allen and Hamilton or McKinsey & Co., started to rise (McKenna, 2006), as production methods started to shift (with the rise of automation), manufacturing activities decreased in western economies (Wright, 2000) and the spread of the multidivisional form of organisations created new challenges for managers which could not be expressed in efficiency terms (Kipping, 2002). The first efficiency consultancies thus disappeared but the practice itself remained an important part of management consulting (Wright and Kipping, 2012). As the early strategy consultancies thrived, new actors emerged as spin-offs – this is the case of A.T. Kearney, which resulted from the split of McKinsey's New York and Chicago Offices after the death of McKinsey; but also of the Boston Consulting Group, which is a spin off of Arthur D. Little that itself generated other firms such as Roland Berger or Bain (Kipping, 1999). Then, in the 1980s, as corporations became increasingly organised as networks and as managers moved away from a focus on strategy towards a focus on the management of the value chain, new actors emerged in the form of large accounting firms – which revenues had been stagnating and were conquering new areas of practice – and IT players (Kipping, 2002).

These three main waves of evolution of the consulting industry are summarised in table 1.4.

[21] Senior branch of the civil service at Ecole des Mines, created in 1794.

[22] *Ingénieurs conseil*

[23] Organisateurs conseil

Wave	Key issues	Overall duration	Major Expansion	Pre-eminent consultancies
Scientific Management	Efficiency of workers and production	1900s-1980s	1930s-1950s	Emerson, Bedaux, Maynard
Organization and Strategy	Decentralization and portfolio planning	1930s-20xx	1960s-1980s	Booz Allen, McKinsey, A.T. Kearney, BCG
IT-Based networks	Internal and external co-ordination	1960s-xxxx	1990s-xxxx	EDS, CSC, Gemini

Table 1.4: The different waves in the evolution of the consulting industry, from Kipping (2002: p.37)

The first attempts to get consulting to be recognised as a profession took place even before World War II, as the first professional associations were created (Kirkpatrick et al., 2012; Henry, 2006) – the British Association of Consulting Management Engineers (ACME) was created in 1933, for example, and by 1914, two associations were created in France as well, the Compagnie des Ingénieurs-Conseils en Propriété Industrielle (CICPI), was created in 1884 and the Chambre des Ingénieurs-Conseils et Ingénieurs Experts de France (CICIEF) in 1912 (both merged in 1951) and the Comité National de l'Organisation Française (CNOF) was created in 1926 for *organising consultants*. Through these associations, consultants developed their professional project and started to elaborate definitions of consulting and to write codes of ethics to control the behaviour of professionals (O'Mahoney, 2010; Gross and Kieser, 2006). In the 1980s there were even attempts to do this internationally through the creation of the International Council of Management Consulting Institutes (ICMCI), an umbrella federation of national institutes. Among other achievements, it developed the certified management consultant qualification, and defined standards of excellence (Kubr, 2002).

However, it is widely agreed upon that consulting firms' professional project has failed, or is at least incomplete (Kubr, 2002). Indeed, their professional associations often have very low membership rates, have failed to obtain legal closure (or have been unwilling to obtain it to preserve their internationalisation capabilities) and do not share a universal and formalised knowledge-base nor a specific education (Kyrö, 1995: cited by Kirkpatrick et al. 2012). As argued by McKenna (2006: p.245-251), consultants' professional project has been driven more by the will to project the image of a profession than to actively control the supply of qualified labour. This is what explains that consulting firms employ discourses and images of professionalism (Kipping, 2011) and adapt similar structures to that of classical professions (in particular the partnership form and the *up-or-out* promotion rule). This is indeed partially for this reason that Martin Bower, who took over McKinsey after the founder's death, copied the organisation of law firms (McKenna, 2006).

As a consequence, consulting is often described as a *weak* or *neo profession* (Von Nordenflycht, 2010; Kirkpatrick et al., 2012; Kubr, 2002): consulting firms are more likely to display features characteristic of the *professional partnership* for legitimacy reasons, and yet is open to alternative forms of organising given the low level of barriers to entry in the field (Kipping and Kirkpatrick, 2012).

d. On the appropriateness of archetype theory to account for change in PSFs

Beyond the issue of generalizability outside of large North-American accounting and law firms, several criticisms have emerged towards archetype theory itself and its ability to account for change in PSFs (Ackroyd and Muzio, 2007; Kirkpatrick and Ackroyd, 2003; Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2008). These authors point at the functionalism at the heart of archetype theory, inherited from its roots within classical contingency theory. They recognise that archetype theory does take human agency into account through the idea that interpretive schemes are the product of negotiations of meaning between actors. However, this negotiation process is conceptualised as the mechanism through which organisations align with their environments. Forms of hybridity are, for example, considered either transitory or unstable because the assumption is that they are dysfunctional and will come in the way of organisational performance (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2008). Instead, drawing on a morphogenic approach to structure, these authors argue that structures reflect relations of authority and power and may embody unresolved conflicts, which may or may not be detrimental to the organisation. In this alternative conception, organisational forms are not necessarily coherent and are the product of agents who choose whether to respond to specific threats and opportunities in their environments (Ackroyd and Muzio, 2007; Kirkpatrick and Ackroyd, 2003). Advocates of archetype theory themselves have taken this argument into account and have, in their most recent work, pleaded for more accounts of the role played by agency in the conception and adoption of change within PSFs (Greenwood and Suddaby, 2005; Brock, 2008). This evolution has enabled the advocates of archetype theory to find grounds for reconciliation with some of the critics of archetype theory. Daniel Muzio in particular has co-ordinated a special issue of *the Journal of Management Studies* with David Brock and Roy Suddaby in 2013, focusing on professionals as institutional agents of change (Muzio et al., 2013).

Yet, one of the main difficulties with archetype theory's close links with contingency theory and neo-institutional theory is its focus on specific factors of change that are either influenced by the market or institutional pressures. Greenwood and Hinings for example often explicitly state that change is mostly driven by external factors, see for example:

> There are interesting examples in the private sector of how an organization's institutional environment shapes core values and provides prescriptions for appropriate patterns of organized activity.
>
> (Greenwood and Hinings, 1993: p.1073)

As stated above, most of the arguments about the shift towards the MPB form relied on the idea that client demands had changed, as well as jurisdictions and technologies, which led firms to adapt by developing an alternative interpretive scheme that would be more functional than the previous one in order to face these changes. Furthermore, taking agency into account when looking at processes of organisational change is not sufficient in that it continues to downplay the role of other factors – in particular changes in the internal labour markets – within organisations themselves in generating the need for change.

A few studies have, however, shed light on the role played by such factors in the introduction of organisational innovations. Sherer and Lee (2002), for example, drawing on both neo-institutional and resource dependency theories, made a key contribution by showing that when the law firm Davis, Polk and Wardell introduced a non-partner track, or "*senior attorney track*", for the first time

in 1983, it was to adapt to a shortage of resources within the firm. They explain that the aim of this organisational innovation was to retain associates with experience, usually in specialised areas where they would not be able to leverage a lot of juniors if they became partners. Similarly, Smets et al. (2012) have also shown that the role of "*professional support lawyer"*, which has existed on a limited basis for decades, has recently increased in number to accommodate the needs of young associates demanding a better work-life balance. Indeed, support lawyers are not fee earning, as such, and can manage their working hours more flexibly, but are off the career track.

In both these cases, organisational innovations were implemented in order to retain professionals, either because of a shortage of resources or to accommodate professionals' aspirations. Studies accounting for the role played by professionals themselves as drivers of change, however remain very limited in number: professionals and their work have mostly remained in the blind spot of research on professional organisations and professional workers have often been treated as a homogeneous category (Suddaby et al., 2008). Given PSFs' imperative to attract, select and retain resources, it may well be a key driver for change. This argument is actually in line with recent calls to investigate further the experience of professionals at work. Sturdy, for example, analysing the agenda for research on consulting claims that "*structural concerns with the supply and demand of consultants and with consulting careers have been neglected*" (Sturdy, 2012: p.470). Others have called for further research on the role of agency in these environments (Muzio et al., 2013), in particular in a context where – as evoked earlier – the possibilities for new careers and alternative forms of employment are opening-up (Malhotra et al., 2010).

Intermediate Conclusion

In this section, I have drawn on an extensive genealogy of professional organisations as a research object (for a synthesis see table 1.5). I have shown how professional organisations as a research object emerged in the 1950 and 60s, as professionals increasingly operated within organisational settings. I have also presented how this literature has been dominated by archetype theory for the past 25 years, which has labelled the traditional organisation of PSFs the *Professional Partnership* before arguing for a shift towards a more "managerial" organisational form, the *Managed Professional Business*. Subsequent studies have explored the wider disparity between and within professions, nonetheless pointing at a form of continuity with the traditional professional organization, in particular regarding autonomy over the work and client relationships, as well as the career system to a certain extent. This led to increasing criticism of archetype theory for its functionalism, its relative inability to take the role of agency into account and its focus on external factors of change. As a result, I have argued that professionals themselves and their experience at work have been rather neglected by existing theories of change within professional organisations.

Period	Professional Context	Academic Context	Research focus	Research Settings	Key concepts	Key References
1950s – 60s	- Rise in the number of professionals operating within organisations - Increasing scale of these organisations		- Distinctive features of professional organisations - Conflict between professional values and bureaucratic forms of authority - Autonomy of the professions	Scientists and academics at first, and then accounting and law	Emergence of the concepts of "Professional Organisation" and "Professional Bureaucracy"	Gouldner 57, Litwak 61, Smigel 64, Hall 68, Montagna 68, Hastings and Hinings 70, Mintzberg 73
1970s – 80s	Relative absence of the organisation in research focus, with the exception of the refinement of Mintzberg's professional bureaucracy (73, 89) Theories of de-professionalisation (Haug 73) and professional power (Johnson 72, Larson 77)					
1990s	- Competition over professional jurisdictions - Continued expansion of Professional Organisations	- Development of Archetype Theory - Development of Neo-Institutional Theory - Early interest in "Knowledge Intensive Firms"	- Interest shift toward the Management of Professional Organisations - Establishment of "Professional Service Firms" as a distinct research object	Classical professions (accounting and law in particular) Less focus on public organisations	"Professional Partnership – "	Greenwood et al. 90, Nelson 88 Alvesson 95
2000s	- Changes in the nature of client's demands - Globalisation - Deregulation - Technological development	- Continued interest in "Knowledge Intensive Firms" - Establishment of Professional Service Firms as a distinct research field	- The bureaucratisation of Professional Organisations - Heterogeneity within and between professional fields - Continuity with	Broadening of the set of occupations studied (ex: consulting)	"Managed Professional Business – MPB" "Global Professional Network – GPN"	Brock et al. 99, Cooper et al. 96, Teece 03, Brock et al. 06, Malhotra et al. 06, 09
2010s	- Continued technological development - Pressure on cost and fewer prospects of growth	- Criticisms of Archetype Theory	- Alternative theories of change in PSFs - New careers - Professional agency			Malhotra et al. 2010 Special issue of the Journal of Organisational Behaviour (2008) and the *Journal of Management Studies* (2013) Creation of the *Journal of Professions and Organisations* (2014)

Table 1.5: Genealogy of Professional Organisations as a research object

1.3 An assumption of careerism inherited from the historical professional organisation

> People do not join professional firms for jobs, but for careers. They have strong expectations of progressing through the organisation at some pace agreed to (explicitly or implicitly) in advance.
>
> (Maister, 1993: p.6)

As argued in the previous section, the experience of professionals at work has been very rarely taken into account when researching professional organisations. This section will develop the argument that this is all the more problematic that medium to large professional organisations have widely imported an assumption inherited from the 19th c. about professionals' aspirations. This assumption is synthesised in the quote by Maister presented above: when joining a professional firm, what professionals expect is to be promoted, earn high salaries and be granted bonuses in exchange for their efforts. In order to better understand this assumption, how it has been imported into modern professional firms and why it should be questioned, let us take a historical detour. Many of the features of current incentive systems used in medium to large PSFs – in particular the *up-or-out* rule – date back to 19th c. law offices, in particular from the firm known today as Cravath, Swaine and Moore. This section will first focus on the conditions of appearance of the "Cravath System" and will then detail its core principles. It will shed light on its assumptions regarding professionals' aspirations, which I will argue remain relatively unquestioned.

1.3.1 Genealogy of the up-or-out: the 19th c. American law office

At the end of the 19th c., law offices were facing dramatic changes in the nature and volume of the work they handled for their clients. They progressively needed to move away from a practice made of independent peers towards one of increased teamwork and delegation, forcing firms to organise the attraction, selection and retention of their staff. Although several firms implemented similar solutions to face this problem at the time, it remains known as the "Cravath System" because it took its most complete form in the system elaborated by Cravath after joining the firm today known as Cravath Swaine and Moore, in 1899. Another reason for this enshrinement is that one of Cravath's partners, Swaine, provided a very thorough history of the firm and the evolution of the US legal industry, in which he himself labelled Cravath's organizational innovation the "Cravath System" (Galanter and Palay, 1991: p.10). I will mostly draw on Swaine's work and that of Hobson (1986) to highlight the conditions of appearance of the Cravath System, and of the *up-or-out* rule along with it.

a. Law practice in the 19th century

At the end of the 19th c., the practice of law in the United-States was undergoing dramatic changes. Until then, work was mostly based on the *Common Law* and a lot of court work was involved. Lawyers tended to work as an independent collective of peers and each lawyer "*worked independently by and for himself, with his own assistants, seeking to cover all the varied problems of the particular clients with which he dealt*" (Swaine, 1946-48a: p.654). Interactions were thus

limited, and the division of labour was horizontal: each man had his own clients and dealt with all their queries from beginning to end.

b. From courts to conference rooms: the changing figure of the American lawyer

The end of the 19th century was subject to major social changes of which law firms were the first witnesses and even contributed to. First, the post-industrial revolution era saw the rise of the big corporation, with small family businesses progressively becoming publicly held corporations. In parallel, the on-going structuration of the law on corporate issues made it hard to practice without a mastery of law books, which reinforced the position of the recently created law schools[24] (Swaine, 1946-48a: p.575; Hobson, 1986: p.142). Corporate work progressively became the predominant type of work in law offices like the Seward firm, the ancestor of the Cravath firm. The practice of law shifted away from the courts towards conference rooms. This phenomenon was reinforced by the arrival of new technologies into the office (the telephone and the typewriter in particular), which made personal face-to-face interactions less frequent and relationships with clients less personal. This evolution impacted law firms in several ways. First of all, the nature of the work changed dramatically: assignments became more specialised around specific *corpuses* of law and legal needs became more recurring (Hobson, 1986: p.163). In turn, it generated a need for continuity in the handling of client work, which made it harder and harder to keep working as a set of independent peers. Also, corporate legal work came in high volumes and required more time, for it often tended to be entangled with business matters. In parallel, although it was a more profitable area of practice, corporate work also implied working at a different pace: legal proceedings needed to be concluded as quickly as possible because clients were subject to market evolutions and might suffer negative financial consequences with a delay. Swaine insists on the personal qualities required to be a corporate lawyer at the time; which involved, in particular, high resistance to pressure: "*It is not surprising that the leaders of the generation of corporate practitioners which came into prominence in the 1890's were nearly all high strung, tense and driving personalities*" (Swaine, 1946-48a: p.370-371).

As a consequence, the partners of the Seward firm appear to have frequently suffered from what Swaine calls "*overwork*" (Swaine, 1946-48a: p.361;475;490;659). In 1891, Seward – the leading partner of the firm at the time – became seriously ill and was replaced by Guthrie who, overwhelmed with work, was soon advised to take a "*long rest abroad",* leaving the third partner, Morawetz, to complain in his correspondence to both Seward and Guthrie about the "*staggering volume of work",* having to refuse new clients or not being able to take any time off (Swaine, 1946-48a: p.370). The decision was then made to hire a new partner – Charles Steele – in 1892 but, as the amount of work kept increasing both in volume and revenues, all three active partners Guthrie, Morawetz and Steele were again reported to suffer from *overwork,* requiring long absences away from the office (Swaine, 1946-48a: p.475). Other partners were thus taken in: De Gersdorff in 1895 and then Gale and De Fere in 1896. Guthrie is reported to nonetheless be

[24] 1/4th of people admitted to the bar in 1870 were law school graduates while it was 2/3rd in 1910 (Swaine, 1946-48a:p.575).

"*constantly overworked*" (Swaine, 1946-48a: p.490) and for this to have seriously impacted his health.

The solution found by the partners of the Seward firm to handle the increasing volume of work was, first of all, as evoked above, to recruit younger partners, who were given most of the routine work, under the supervision of a senior partner (Swaine, 1946-48a: p.659). Second, the practice was expanded through the hiring of experienced staff legal clerks. However, turnover was high and delegation was not properly organized yet. This is precisely when Cravath was invited to join the firm as a partner. He was first asked to help with some retainer contracts, while still working for Carter, Hornblower and Byrne, the firm where he started as an associate in 1886 and worked as a partner from 1887 to 1899. Cravath was known to prefer corporate law to court work, so he and Guthrie were assisting one another: Guthrie was handling Cravath's litigation work while Cravath took care of some of Guthrie's corporate law matters. In 1899, Guthrie formally asked him to join the Seward firm as a partner. This is where, inspired from what he had observed at Carter, Hornblower and Byrne, Cravath developed what became later known as the "*Cravath System"*. Indeed, during Cravath's early years as a lawyer, Carter had made a habit of taking one or two students from Harvard or Columbia Law Schools each year and training them before encouraging them to create their own practices. Cravath, however, took this practice further by organizing the division of labor and associating it with specific human resource management practices.

1.3.2 The "Cravath System": the division of professional work

The system introduced by Cravath after his arrival at the firm in 1899 was the first attempt at *scientific organisation* in the professional field of law (Swaine, 1946-48a: p.654). Its core principle was to divide work between junior lawyers, who were given tasks according to their experience and autonomy level, and partners, who supervised their work, handled the most complex parts, and were in charge of the relationships with clients. It was initiated after Cravath's arrival at the firm in 1899 and was progressively implemented and refined, as Cravath became the lead partner in 1906 - with the exception of the periods around WW1 and WW2, which considerably disturbed the labour market. Not all partners adhered to the system, and some of them kept working with their own staff on the side at first, until they retired or left the firm.

a. Core features and principles

- **Recruitment**

The legal staff was no longer composed of law students from the *gentry* class who did not need to work for a living and thus tended to come and go depending on other priorities (their political agendas in particular), or permanent clerks with no ambition to become lawyers. Instead, the *associates* – as they would later be called – were selected right after graduating from one of the top law schools in the country (typically Harvard, Columbia and Yale). The purpose of this practice was twofold. First, at the time, very few practitioners had a formal education in law although, as mentioned earlier, a good knowledge of law books was becoming increasingly needed in corporate law. As Swaine reports, finding competent staff was becoming very difficult at the time (Swaine, 1946-48a: p.575; Hobson, 1986). As very few law schools were established

yet, a degree from one of these universities was an easy way to ensure formal education had been completed. Cravath would nonetheless consider men from other universities, provided their grade was the equivalent of a Harvard B.

Second, Cravath also believed that anyone who didn't have such a high scholastic record was either "*not adapted for the Law or lacked purpose and ambition*" (Swaine, 1946-48a: p.657). As summed up by Swaine, the first choice was then often *a "Phi Beta Kappa man from a good college who had become a law editor at Harvard, Columbia or Yale"* (Swaine, 1946-48b: p.3). However, a high scholastic record wasn't enough to join the Cravath firm: personality and physical stamina were also taken into account because of the "*pressure*" and "*rugged character of the work*" (Swaine, 1946-48b: p.3). Cravath even explicitly insisted on this aspect in the recruitment process, as one of the partners explained in a letter to a candidate: "*as you know we do not want anyone who is not in good shape, and I warn you that you won't get many long vacations while you are with us".*

➢ Compensation

By abandoning the practice of hiring law students, who were unproductive and often left the office very quickly, Cravath needed to review the compensation policy of the firm so that the young men joining the firm could earn a decent living by doing so (Swaine, 1946-48b: p.3). Men who were recruited were then put on a salary right from the start of their training ($30 a month at first, then $50 a month with $5 bimonthly increases for two years by 1908). The purpose of this compensation was again twofold. Providing the legal staff with a salary would prevent them from having any other activity outside of the firm. Also, a good starting salary would attract the best men from the top law schools. Indeed, along with the need to recruit bright young minds on an on-going basis came the necessity to attract the best of them with prospects of good compensation packages. Very shortly, other firms adopted this practice and salaries became so competitive that soon firms agreed upon a uniform starting package.

➢ Training

Cravath's main innovation for the practice of law was to organize the division of labour between partners and associates. When joining the firm, junior lawyers would ideally be assigned a wide variety of projects, work with different partners and for different clients. They would thus remain polyvalent for several years before progressively specialising. The existence of cliques was strongly discouraged: associates needed to work with all partners, with the exception of Cravath, who would only work with associates previously approved by other partners. Whenever a junior was assigned a very long project, such as large litigations or re-organizations, apprenticeship was achieved through the variety of topics dealt with. Associates were then given small parts of the legal problem to handle under the supervision of a partner and as they acquired experience and proved themselves to the partners, they would be given more and more responsibility, until they themselves were supervising the work of younger associates:

> Under the Cravath System, a young man watches his senior break a large problem down into its component parts, is given one of the small parts and does thoroughly and exhaustively the part assigned to him – a process impracticable in the handling of small routine matters. Cravath believed the man who learns to analyse the component parts of a large problem involving complicated facts, and to do each detailed part well, becomes a better lawyer faster than the man who is not taught in such detail. Matters involving small amounts often involve difficult, complicated law problems, and a man may be misled, perhaps made

> careless, by being allowed to handle such a matter without adequate analysis and supervision.
>
> (Swaine, 1946-48b: p.6)

This process allowed Cravath and his experienced colleagues to control closely the work of associates, but also played a central role in retaining young lawyers during the preparation phase of their career. Where there tended to be a very high turnover before the Cravath System, juniors were then incentivised to stay, as long as they could acquire more responsibilities, which was central to the sustainability of the division of labour. This apprenticeship phase was nonetheless demanding, in particular in terms of engagement. It was, for example, not uncommon for associates to wait in a dedicated lounge at his house for Cravath to come back from the theatre or opera, so they could go over their assignments with him and then get back to the office to review their drafts before morning (Swaine, 1946-48b: p.4-5); or for those working with other partners to stay in the office to review some papers in the evening or on Saturday afternoons (Swaine, 1946-48b: p.124).

- **Promotion to partnership**

In spite of this hierarchy of apprenticeship, not all associates would see their responsibilities and autonomy increase with experience. Indeed, another key feature of the *Cravath System* was what would be labelled today the *up-or-out* rule, or the tournament promotion system. First, all partners would be chosen among the ranks of the legal staff from then on[25]. Second, at Cravath, all associates could expect to work for the firm their whole life, but only as long as they grew in responsibility and managed to reach partnership within less than six years[26]. If this goal was not reached then it was expected that associates would leave the firm:

> Ten years is too long for a man to remain a Cravath associate under normal conditions unless he has been told that the chances of his being made partner are still good. A man who is not growing professionally creates a barrier to the progress of the younger men within the organization and, himself, tends to sink into a mental rut – to loose ambition; and loss of ambition induces carelessness. It is much better for the man, for the office and for the clients that he leave while he still has self-confidence and determination to advance.
>
> (Swaine, 1946-48b: p.128)

Exceptions were nonetheless made for research scholars and for relevant specialists. Indeed, Swaine (Swaine, 1946-48b: p.7) notes in later studies that there was an overemphasis on the rigidity of the *up-or-out* system at the time, when it was, in fact, very rare that lawyers would be fired; someone who had been with the firm for a long time was considered to be someone of value. In most cases, associates who failed to make partner were outplaced by the partners themselves, making use of their contacts. The practice of having alumni in key positions at client companies already proved efficient in bringing in more work to the firm. Yet, as evoked earlier, a few others remained as permanent non-partners (they were usually managing clerks or

[25] Swaine reports that over the 40 first years of existence of the Cravath Firm, only three exceptions were made to this rule (Swaine, 1946-1948b: p.8)

[26] Time to partnership was on average 6 years in the 1920s and increased to about 8 years in the 1940s as the firm grew (Swaine, 1946-1948b: p.7)

specialists in an area bringing little business to the firm, such as labor or immigration law) and regarded as failures, according to Galanter and Palay (1991: p.29). As a consequence, the partners were from then on in control of the selection process and had a say in who stayed and who left.

A summary of the main evolutions of the field of law, how they impacted law firms and the organisational response developed by Cravath can be found in table 1.6.

	Change	Impact on law firms	Organisational response of the "Cravath System"
CLIENTS	- Birth of the "big corporation" - Need for more continuous or recurring legal advice	- Specialisation of lawyers - Higher volume of work and high strain on partners - Higher profits - Increasing need for teamwork/delegation - Less court work, more office work	- Systematic delegation of the work - Hierarchy of apprenticeship - Law practice forbidden outside of the firm - Clients belong to the firm rather than individual partners
LAW	Structuration of corporate law	Increasing need for specific law training	- Recruitment of Law graduates exclusively (no more students or experienced clerks) - Compensation (increasing with experience) - Co-optation to partnership only from within
LABOUR MARKET	Law schools provide unpaid law students as "office men"	High unwanted turnover	
TECHNOLOGY	Arrival of the telephone and the typewriter	Less personal relationships with clients	Introduction of file clerks in support

Table 1.6: Environmental changes in the field of law in the 19th c., organisational strain and Cravath's response

b. Diffusion within law and other professional fields

Even though the Cravath System was not embraced immediately by all partners, as evoked earlier, it was soon to be widely adopted within the field of law, for corporate work required the sort of division of labor that only "law factories" could provide (Sherer and Lee, 2002: p.207-208; Hobson, 1986). It quickly spread beyond the field of law, into accounting (Brock et al., 1999b), architecture (Pinnington and Morris, 2002) and consulting, where it was first introduced by the McKinsey firm in the 1930s in order to rationalise its activities (McKenna, 2006: p.49).

1.3.3 An underlying assumption: incentive through promotion

This description of the conditions of appearance and functioning of the Cravath System has unravelled its core assumption: professionals are mostly incentivised by a deferred opportunity to become partners. I will now detail further this hypothesis before showing that it has been imported into modern PSFs, which is all the more problematic because attraction, selection and retention are key challenges for these firms.

a. A strong assumption at the heart of the Cravath System

As mentioned earlier in this section, the changes at play in the field of law in the late 19th c. had, among other things, a major impact on the volume of work handled by individual lawyers. The main consequence was a high level of strain on the partners of the firm, who were reported to be very frequently ill or "*overworked".* It led Cravath, in his selection system, to emphasise the role of physical stamina as a key criteria. Cravath's associates were expected to work hard, long hours, under a lot of pressure and this was to be rewarded by the possibility to take part in the tournament and be co-opted as a partner one day. Under this mechanism of deferred compensation, which has since then become symbolically charged and is regarded as a signal of quality and professionalism, lies the hypothesis that what people want is to be promoted all the way to partnership (and implicitly that in order to do so, they will be ready to take on all the roles associated with partnership: management, sales and client relationship management and expert), the second best option being working for a client of the firm, if unsuccessful.

b. An assumption imported into modern PSFs

With the *up-or-out* rule at the heart of the Cravath System being one of the core elements of Professional Partnership, as identified by Greenwood et al. (1990), it is clear that it has imported along with it the assumption that professionals aspire to promotions and partnership co-optation, and that this will be enough deferred compensation to motivate them to stay. This assumption is nonetheless present far beyond pure professional partnerships using a strict up-or-out rule. Indeed, in medium to large PSFs, in spite of the heterogeneity of governance modes and organisational variation, we have seen that the need to organise the mobility of professionals for functional and leverage reasons remains. Even where formal *up-or-out* policies do not exist, we have seen that they often still operate in practice, for they remain a strong professional norm that signals quality to clients, guides the way partners believe their firms should be organised, and is enacted by associates themselves, who tend to leave when not promoted (Malhotra et al., 2010). Where alternative forms of employment have been created, they are almost always non-partner positions, which associates can only apply to once they are experienced – typically after 7 or 8 years. It means that the promotion system remains up until the point where associates who have made it up to senior levels can opt to stay, even if refused access to partnership (it usually only concerns a small number of them). Similarly, Morris and Pinnington (1998) have shown how an increase in lateral hires does not necessarily disrupt the tournament system. As far as the introduction of staff tracks are concerned, they affect the implicit rules of the up-or-out informal practice in that they reduce the number of individuals taking part in the tournament, but they do not question the idea that the elite professionals will be career professionals.

This assumption remains unquestioned and is all the more problematic in that it is at the heart of the selection and retention mechanism of PSFs. If this assumption was to be challenged, then it would mean that PSFs are not entirely in control of the output of the selection and retention system, for we could anticipate that professionals might leave not as a result of the selection process, but because their aspirations are unfulfilled.

Overview of chapter 1

This first chapter has aimed at unravelling the assumption of exclusive and homogeneous careerism from part of professionals, which is at the heart of medium to large professional service firms' incentive system, revolving around a more or less strict and formal *up-or-out* rule.

In the first section, debates around the specificities of professional work have been discussed, from historical functionalist understandings of professionals to more critical accounts of their *professional projects*. Drawing on the idea that the specificity of professional services lies within the *deliberation* involved in its delivery rather than its actual knowledge base, three main characteristics of professional work were identified: its "knowledge-intensiveness", its reliance on human resources and the high level of interactions involved; which are at the heart of the three main managerial challenges faced by these firms: (1) **quality control**, (2) **the necessity to attract, select and retain the "best"** and (3) **the necessity for all managerial and organisational matters to remain hidden from clients**.

In the second section of this chapter, a genealogy of professional organisations as a research object was developed in order to better understand how these challenges have been addressed over the years and the theoretical lenses developed to understand them. It highlighted the **dominance of archetype theory in the field**, from the identification of the ideal-typical professional archetype – the **Professional Partnership**, which emphasises collegiality and autonomy – to more recent discussions around the bureaucratisation of professional organisations – and the identification of a more managerial professional archetype: the **Managed Professional Business** – or the internationalisation of these firms. In the end of this section, I discuss how, because of its inherent focus on external factors of change, **archetype theory has however left individual agency out of the understanding of change in PSFs, for most parts**.

In the third section, I argued that this relative disconnect from the understanding of individuals' experience at work in theories of professional organising is **all the more problematic that most medium-to-large PSFs rely on a strong assumption of exclusive careerism from part of professionals, imported from its origins: the 19th c. Cravath law firm**.

Chapter 2: Understanding the experience of professionals at work: a dominant critical perspective

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Introduction

Given that, for most parts, individuals and their experience have remained one of the blind spots of theories of professional organising, it appears to be necessary to review studies that, on the contrary, have focused on the way professionals engage in their work, within the organisational settings described in chapter 1. Chapter 2 will start with a review of the different dimensions of the role of professionals to draw a comprehensive picture of the different expectations they have to manage on a daily basis (2.1). This will shed light on two core dimensions of professionals' work: knowledge and commitment, which make professional organisations (and consulting firms more specifically) emblematic cases of *knowledge-intensive companies*. As such, they are of particular interest to critical researchers, who have meticulously described these environments as highly ambiguous and relying heavily on normative forms of control (2.2). These studies are extremely precious to understand how professionals come to be seduced by an incentive system relying on promises of quick promotions and bonuses, beyond pure instrumental calculation. Yet, I will argue in the last section of this chapter (1.3) that these studies not only do not challenge that this is what professionals end up aspiring to, but also sometimes even contribute to reproducing this assumption.

2.1 Understanding the different dimensions of the role of professionals

In order to better understand the determinants of professionals' experience at work, it is necessary to first have a comprehensive representation of what is expected from them. As a result, in this section, the two core dimensions of professionals' role expectations will be detailed: "knowledge", with all its ambiguities (2.1.1) as well as commitment (2.1.2).

2.1.1 "Knowledge" as a key dimension of professional work

As discussed in chapter 1 (p. 31-34), *knowledge-intensiveness* is often described as one of the core characteristics of professional work (Von Nordenflycht, 2010) and individuals' expertise is as their primary value for their firms (Empson, 2001). It is therefore logically one of the dimensions associated with a professional role and determinant in the experience of professionals at work. Given the long-lasting debates around the notion of knowledge (see section 2.2 of the current chapter) many studies have aimed to develop typologies of the sorts of knowledge involved in professional work[27]. The distinction between what can be broadly labelled *technical knowledge* and more *relational knowledge* is recurrent.

[27] Typologies were developed, which distinguished for example between information, experience and disposition (Lowendahl, Revang et al. 2001); methods, cases and experience (Werr 2002, Werr and Stjernberg 2003); technical expertise and experience or process expertise (McKenna 2006); technical and socio-political skills (Bloomfield and Danieli 1995); or technical and client knowledge (Morris and Empson 1998, Empson 2001).

a. Technical knowledge

➢ Esoteric knowledge: a more or less formal knowledge-base

As discussed in chapter 1, in classical professions such as law or accounting for example, individuals are expected to have a formal knowledge base, often assessed through certification (Abbott, 1988). This technical expertise is said to be central to the delivery of the service. Lawyers, for example, need to master law books, auditors accounting regulation, etc. Young graduates are then expected to progressively acquire this technical expertise and how to mobilise it thanks to initial training and by progressing along the hierarchy, in turn gaining autonomy and taking on more client-facing roles (Maister, 1993: p.196). When it comes to consulting, more particularly, although the role played by consultants in the creation and dissemination of knowledge and management fashion has been the object of many studies (see Canato and Giangreco (2011) for a review), there is less insight into the way individual consultants take part in these processes. However, it is agreed upon that the knowledge base of consulting firms tends to be less formal and more organisation-specific than that of other professions (Morris and Empson, 1998) and consist in general methods and tools developed by the firm itself (Werr, 2002; Werr and Stjernberg, 2003). Such methods and tools usually provide consultants with a formalised description of the sequence of activities that should guide projects. Werr and Stjernberg (2003) explain how knowing the method and keeping up-to-date on it is an implicit requirement for consultants.

➢ An expertise developed experientially

Even though such methods and tools can be considered as a specific form of technical knowledge, it has been showed that these have a very experiential nature. They are indeed rather used as a guide for action and consultants need to constantly use their judgement to adapt it to local client needs and specificities (Werr, 2002; Werr and Stjernberg, 2003; Morris and Empson, 1998; McKenna, 2006). In order to do so, consultants refer to cases, which are documents produced on other similar projects that can be used as models, and mobilise their and others' experience, mostly through face-to-face interaction (in particular through a system of mentoring in which young associates are trained by more experienced professionals), in order to elaborate a solution tailored to the specific local context (Werr, 2002; Werr and Stjernberg, 2003; Werr et al., 1997). Other studies have highlighted the role of sector knowledge in this process (Fincham et al., 2008) or even client-specific knowledge, which involves developing knowledge of client firms, their idiosyncrasies and the issues they are facing, as well as building relationships with them (Empson, 2001).

In addition, professionals – no matter how junior they might be – are also expected to feed their experience back into their organisation by sharing it with others and contributing to the improvement of methods and tools. There are, however, numerous impediments to knowledge sharing, in particular the fact that specific knowledge is what makes firms need their consultants and that such knowledge is highly experiential and not always easy to codify (Morris and Empson, 1998; Empson, 2001; Werr, 2002; Werr and Stjernberg, 2003; Swart and Kinnie, 2003; Morris, 2001). Empson (2001), in particular, has shown how, during mergers, subjective aspects such as the fear of exploitation and contamination can come in the way of knowledge sharing.

b. Relational knowledge

The understanding of professional work as involving technical knowledge – no matter how experiential – has been questioned for overshadowing its relational or *socio-political* dimension, in particular in the case of consulting (Bloomfield and Danieli, 1995; Alvesson and Johansson, 2002). These authors argue that beyond technical knowledge, consultants need to actively manage the interaction process to convince clients of the quality of their work, maintain their reputation and that of their firm in order to secure future work. To do so, they need to provide clients with enough reassurance so that they are happy with the service while reinforcing uncertainty so they will remain needed (Sturdy, 1997). It requires the use of "*socio-political*" or "*rhetorical*" knowledge to communicate, persuade clients, do sales pitches and win contracts (Bloomfield and Danieli, 1995; Legge, 2002; Alvesson and Johansson, 2002). There is also a need for consulting firms to preserve their knowledge-intensive image, which leads consultants to orchestrate the rhetoric around the techniques they mobilise and to act in a politically sensitive way in order to generate an overall impression of high-quality service (Fincham, 2002). This is referred to by Clark (1995) as "*impressions management*" and implies learning to play scripts and to improvise to convey an image of professionalism. This perspective will be detailed further in section 2.2.

2.1.2 Expectations of commitment

In parallel, a number of studies have showed how professionals need to display a certain type of behaviour. Professional workers are indeed expected to behave *professionally* and to be strongly committed to their work and their clients, which entails a certain level of engagement in client work and in the development of the firm, as well as a form of collective orientation.

a. Engagement in the work and in the firm

Expectations of professionalism are often associated with a high level of commitment from professionals, which involves being constantly available, in particular for last-minute business trips or requests from clients, and willing to work long hours (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009; Meriläinen et al., 2004; Muhr et al., 2013; Anderson-Gough et al., 2000; Grey, 1994). In an attempt to implement a system allowing consultants to take predictable time off one night a week at the BCG, Perlow (2012: p.2) shows how unimaginable it was for consultants that such a system would work. In parallel, professionals also need to dedicate time outside of projects to the development of their own firm, which involves taking part in sales proposals, recruitment, training, the organisation of internal events, etc. (Maister, 1993: p.43). In addition, professionals are expected to learn to set the limit between commitment and breaking down, which makes endurance is an additional key element of their performance (Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006; Pedersen, 2008).

b. A collective orientation

In parallel, professionals are also expected to develop a strong collective orientation, in other words to show they are team players. This collective orientation is supposed to take two forms. First, professionals are expected to show their commitment by interacting with others when they

are in the office and taking part in the numerous social events organised by the firm (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000; Anderson-Gough et al., 2005). Second, professionals are expected to be willing to subordinate to hierarchy, standards and schedules as well (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009), which Meriläinen et al. (2004) refer to as the "*rules of the game*". Professionals are supposed to let the collective interest of the firm and supposedly of clients come first, before their own individual preferences. It implies accepting staffing decisions, the evaluation system, decisions made by partners or project managers, or having to stay late to finish a deliverable, for example.

Below is an overview of the key dimensions of professionals' role:

KNOWLEDGE	COMMITMENT
Technical Knowledge ▪ Mastery of an esoteric knowledge-base ▪ Acquisition of experiential knowledge	**Engagement** ▪ Ability and willingness to work long hours, be available and reactive ▪ Implication in the development of the firm (sales, coaching, training, internal events…) ▪ Endurance
Relational Know-How ▪ Management of the interaction process with clients	**Collective orientation** ▪ Participation in social events / networking ▪ Submission to hierarchy, standards and procedures

Table 2.1: Summary of the key dimensions of professionals' role

Intermediate conclusion

In this section, I had identified the main dimensions of the role of professionals at work, which revolve, as explained around to core dimensions – knowledge and commitment – and concern both the content of the work, professional tasks, as well as relations (see Table 2.1 for an overview).

These professional expectations have been first looked at from what will be later characterised as a rather *functionalist* perspective, emphasising professionals' autonomy, acquired through the development of outstanding expertise as well as their professional ethics and dedication to their clients. This will later be challenged by a number of more *critical* studies, with a particular interest in knowledge claims and the organisation of discipline to support the development of a consistent image of expertise and high quality. These researchers see in professional organisations forms of alienation typical of modern organisations. Because the systems of discipline at play are described as targeting individual subjectivities, they are thus particularly determinant for individuals. For this reason, this strand of literature is of great relevance here, and will be the object of the following section.

2.2 The critical perspective: an emphasis on ambiguity, identity and control

Given the characteristics of professional work evoked above, there has been a strong interest of the field of Critical Management Studies (CMS) in professional environments, which are considered to be exemplary cases of knowledge-intensive firms. This critical take on the

experience of professionals at work will be the focus of the present section. First, the reasons why professionals – consultants in particular – have been the object of many critically oriented studies will be detailed (2.2.1). Then, critical perspectives on the normative forms of control deployed in knowledge-intensive environments such as professional organisations will be described, along with their purpose and outcomes (2.2.2).

2.2.1 Consultants as an exemplary case of knowledge workers: Critical Management Studies and professional organisations

Before the rise of CMS's interest in PSFs, and in particular in consulting firms – which are looked at as exemplary cases of *knowledge work* – can be accounted for, a brief genealogy of the heterogeneous field of CMS will be developed.

Brief genealogy of Critical Management Studies

The founding milestone of CMS as a field of research was the 1992 *Critical Management Studies* book by Mats Alvesson and Hugh Willmott, following a conference held in 1989 aiming to bring together a number of *critical* researchers from Europe and North America (Alvesson and Willmott, 2003). 1992 was a "marketing" milestone in the sense that there had been a long tradition of critical research before that, but the book offered both a banner to unify them and a rationale to legitimate the existence of critical research within business school environments (Alvesson et al., 2009a). CMS was then, and remains, a very heterogeneous field of research, diverse in its empirical interest (from accounting to HRM or leadership for example) as well as in its theoretical perspectives. The Frankfurt school of Critical Theory (in particular the work of Habermas, but also Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse or Fromm) is one of the key historical influences of CMS. Yet, the label "CMS" is very inclusive and authors with a wide variety of influences (from labour-process theory to post-structuralism, post-colonialism or feminist studies for instance) claim to be part of the movement. Debates around how inclusive CMS should be and how to define it are fierce. The most cited definition is that of Fournier and Grey (2000) who argue that what is distinctive about CMS is the ambition of non-performativity, denaturalisation and reflexivity. Non-performativity – defined by Fournier and Grey as a "*stance against the subordination of knowledge production to the production of efficiency*" (Fournier and Grey, 2000: p.17) – has, in particular, been the object of much debate – see Thompson (2004), Spicer et al. (2009) who argue in favour of "*critical performativity*", Wickert and Schaefer (2014) and their concept of "*progressive performativity*", or Cabantous et al. (2015) who argue in favour of a political theory of organisational performativity). This is in line with an internal division within CMS between "purists", who believe that dialogue with managers will necessarily result in the co-optation and dilution of CMS by the mainstream, and "pragmatists", who favour positive engagement with the field and the pursuit of alternative forms of management and see cynicism and hypocrisy in the purists' stance (Alvesson et al., 2009a). In spite of these debates, there is a relative consensus around the idea that CMS is concerned with challenging dominant ideologies, institutions or interests by problematizing and deconstructing management with an emancipatory ambition (Alvesson and Willmott, 2003; Alvesson et al., 2009a; Jeanes and Huzzard, 2014).

In the case of professionals and their organisation, the interest from CMS rose consistently after a seminal study by Mats Alvesson, from the department of Organisation Studies at Lund University

in Sweden, which led to the publication of the book *Management of Knowledge-Intensive Companies* (Alvesson, 1995) and a series of articles (Alvesson, 1993; Alvesson, 2001; Alvesson, 2000) which aimed at deconstructing the concept of knowledge and its manipulation in what he then labels *knowledge-intensive companies* (KIC). Several strands of critical studies of these KIC then emerged, with a particular focus on consulting firms as will be developed below, from the study of power relationships with clients, the diffusion of management fads and the internal workings of these organisations.

a. An original opposition against functional understandings of knowledge

In line with the debates that emerged from the sociology of the professions from the 1950s on (see chapter 1, table 1.1), a critique of the so-called *functionalist* understanding of knowledge emerged from Critical Management Studies in the early 1990s – in particular through the work of Mats Alvesson – this time with a more managerial focus. This is when the concept of *knowledge economy* started to spread, and along with it the idea that modern organisations would become increasingly *knowledge-intensive* – in opposition with labour and capital intensive organisations (Alvesson, 1993). A book by Sveiby and Risling[28], in particular, had a big success in the public audience in Sweden, arguing that these firms had developed the ability to solve very complex problems through innovative solutions developed thanks to the mobilisation of outstanding expertise and were therefore models for all organisations.

Alvesson's subsequent critique of the concept of knowledge is also an explicit critique of this understanding of professions, which emphasises the existence of a formal science-led knowledge base, which, he explains, cannot be found in most of what is considered a profession today – even law or accounting, usually referred to as *classic* professions in the literature on PSFs (Alvesson, 1993: p.998). Alvesson makes a similar point to the ones made by the critical sociology of the professions by arguing that the historic accounts of professions are functionalist in nature in that they play an instrumental part in professional projects. This has been particularly emphasised in the case of consulting where a historical – functional – body of literature focused on how to foster a successful helping relationship between consultants and their clients, whom were then depicted as in control of the relationship – see Fincham and Clark (2002) or Werr and Styhre (2002) for a review. As a result, the term of professions – Alvesson (1993) argues – should be replaced by *knowledge-intensive companies* (KIC), which he defines as organisations in which intellectual skills are central in the elaboration of uncertain, situation-specific client services which are intangible and difficult to assess. This creates in turn an asymmetry with clients in the favour of the knowledge worker. KIC are also environments where authority tends to be dispersed and bureaucracy downplayed as workers self-organise and extensive communication is required for coordination and problem solving (Alvesson, 2004: p.38-39). Alvesson explains that such a "*critique of a naïve view on the professions and the adoption of a more sceptical, if not cynical*

[28] Sveiby, K-E., & Risling, A. (1986). Kunskapsföretaget. Malmö: Liber.

position is necessary, otherwise conceptions about KIFOWs[29] just take over highly idealized views about professionals and the nature of knowledge[30]" (Alvesson, 1993: p.1000).

Where Alvesson's point nonetheless differs from (or complements) that of the critical sociology of the professions, is in its **organisational and managerial focus**. Indeed, where the sociology of the professions has often focused on professional projects and claims, Alvesson's analysis also has a strong organisational and individual component (Alvesson, 2001), as will be developed in the next paragraphs.

b. Ambiguity as a distinguishing feature of knowledge-intensive firms

Even though he argues for the use of the term *knowledge-intensive*, Alvesson recognises that the concept is also problematic in that knowledge is very difficult to define, delimit and compare (Alvesson, 1993; Alvesson, 2011). Yet, he also argues that what matters is the shared belief, in these organisations, that the services they offer are highly innovative and require the mobilisation of extensive knowledge. **Knowledge, he says, operates as a rational myth** (Meyer and Rowan, 1977), given how limited the part actually played by knowledge in the work of professionals is. Given the intangibility of the work in knowledge-intensive companies, it is very difficult for clients to assess quality (Glückler and Armbrüster, 2003; Alvesson, 1993; Alvesson, 2001; Alvesson, 2000; Clark, 1995; Clark and Salaman, 1998). Indeed, there is usually no systematic communication between clients about the outcomes of their collaboration with professionals (Sharma, 1997), and it is unclear whether professionals themselves would be able to assess the outcomes of their own work since its intangibility makes it quite difficult to isolate its effects, which are sometimes very long-term (Alvesson, 2001; Kitay and Wright, 2002). This leads clients to often rely on reputation and personal relationships, as well as signals of expertise (Kitay and Wright, 2002; Sharma, 1997). In turn, knowledge workers need to convince their clients and manage their image, both at the individual and organisational levels (Alvesson, 1993; Alvesson, 2001; Clark, 1995; Clark and Salaman, 1998). This generates uncertainty on professionals' side as well (Sturdy, 1997; Kitay and Wright, 2004), which can be the source of considerable anxiety (Alvesson, 2001; Alvesson, 2000; Gill, 2013; Alvesson and Robertson, 2006; Robertson and Swan, 2003).

This ambiguity of knowledge, Alvesson argues, what is truly distinctive about knowledge-intensive companies and this imperative, in turn, gives birth to a number of rhetorical strategies from part of knowledge workers to convince others of the relevance of their knowledge claims, such as the display of a distinct professional identity and a number of organisational features aimed at reinforcing a particular professional attitude (Alvesson, 1993; Alvesson, 2001), which will be the focus of the subsequent sections.

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[29] KIFOWs: knowledge-intensive firms, organisations and workers.

[30] The perspective adopted in the present study on knowledge has been detailed in chapter 1 (see p.33) and remains unchanged: the constructed character of the knowledge rhetoric involved is acknowledged, without however denying that a form of expertise is involved in professional work, which is nonetheless inherently ambiguous. The purpose of this paragraph is to account in further detail for the emergence of the interest of CMS in professional workers and its foundational perspective on knowledge.

Consulting has often been considered an exemplary case of knowledge work. It is indeed widely agreed that it is a *weak profession* and its professional project unfinished. This reinforces consultants' need to convince clients of the quality of their service and the relevance of their claimed knowledge base. The image-intensive character of knowledge-intensive firms is thus particularly strong in the case of consulting firms and, as a result, issues around control through culture and identity regulation have been described as particularly vivid in consultancies (Alvesson, 1995; Kärreman and Rylander, 2008). This interest in consulting and consultants has been reinforced by the need to understand the critical role they play in spreading management fads and fashions.

2.2.2 Subordination obtained through an intense process of identity regulation embedded in normative forms of control

The ambiguity surrounding knowledge, described by Alvesson as central to any kind of knowledge work, is the source of a double challenge: managing both clients' impressions and professionals' loyalty; which are both addressed through normative forms of control relying on a professional ideal of over achievement.

a. The double role of control: managing both client impressions and loyalty

As explained in chapter 1 (p.34-36), two of the main managerial challenges faced in professional organisations are building strong reputations and relationships with clients and attracting, selecting and retaining employees. However, the ambiguity inherent to these organisations highlighted above sheds a new light on these issues: the need to control employees' behaviour and subjectivities.

➢ The control of behaviours to manage client impressions

The need to manage clients' impressions, display professional behaviours and mobilise symbols of professionalism and expertise give rise to a number of rhetorical strategies within broader systems of persuasion aiming at both nurturing relationships and managing perceptions of clients and developing a corporate image of elite organisational identity (Alvesson, 2001; Legge, 2002; Alvesson and Robertson, 2006; Robertson and Swan, 2003). In order to achieve this, critical researchers argue that there is a need to work towards the client orientation of employees and to guide them towards adopting appropriate behaviours (Alvesson, 2004; Alvesson, 2012). In order to do that, the development of a strong corporate image and a shared feeling of organisational identity can be a source of support for employees in providing scripts for appropriate behaviour and talk (Alvesson, 2004; Alvesson, 2012). However, if there is too big a gap between the image that employees need to display and their own sense of self, there is a risk that their behaviour will deviate from the norm. Given that maintaining appearances is so vital to sustain knowledge and quality claims, identity regulation is a key resource in the process of impression management (Alvesson, 2012: p.315; Alvesson, 2004). This need for firms to control behaviours through the manufacture of subjectivities is thus even more vivid that service delivery relies on a high proportion of junior professionals.

➢ **The control of subjectivities to foster loyalty**

Critical researchers also highlight the need to attract, select, motivate and retain employees whom are these firms' only resources and thus strategic assets, and whom also can be tempted to leave and be followed by other employees and clients (Alvesson, 2004; Alvesson, 2000; Alvesson, 2012). As evoked above, the high degree of uncertainty and ambiguity characteristic of knowledge-intensive environments is the source of major anxieties that exacerbate professionals' need to secure a stable and positive sense of identity (Alvesson, 2012: p.305; Alvesson, 2000; Alvesson, 2004).

In the literature on professional organisations, this challenge is thought to be dealt with through the *up-or-out* incentive system, which is – according to these studies – nothing but an instrumental response to the loyalty challenge that does not suffice, on its own, to retain consultants. Indeed, Alvesson (2000) argues that beyond the perspectives of partnership co-optation, there is a need to provide employees with a clear sense of direction and social integration, which relies on the construction of a distinct organisational identity and attempts to make employees identify with it – see also Alvesson (2004); Alvesson (2012). Working with normative control, he argues, is one way of strengthening common beliefs and values and ensuring that employees define themselves in a way that is congruent with the organisational identity so that they will conceive their future and that of the company as intertwined. Here, control also plays a major role in counteracting the anxieties felt at the individual level by creating a sense of self-confidence and self-esteem in line with the elite identities fostered at the organisational level (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006; Robertson and Swan, 2003).

As a result, for both impression management and retention imperatives, and given the high level of ambiguity of the service provided by professionals highlighted earlier, critical researchers argue that – beyond the instrumental function of the incentive system – firms rely on normative forms of control. They are particularly strong in knowledge-intensive environments because of their limited reliance on traditional technocratic forms of control (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2004; Alvesson and Robertson, 2006). Even though these authors acknowledge the bureaucratisation of professional organisations discussed in chapter 1 (p.44-49), they argue that socio-ideological modes of control remain at least as important as more traditional bureaucratic ones.

b. Subordination obtained through an intense process of identity regulation embedded in normative forms of control

Both the needs to manage clients' impressions and to retain the "best" employees thus legitimate the use of normative forms of control, given the relatively low bureaucratic nature of these organisations. The concept of normative control will be briefly defined before the representation of the ideal professional worker it relies on in PSFs can be qualified, its modalities described and its outcomes identified.

➢ **On normative control**

According to Whittle (2005), several strands of research – from labour process theory, enterprise discourse and culture programmes – have converged in showing that subjectivity can be a means to control employees' behaviour: through normative forms of control, individuals will act as

expected from them without coercion but rather as an outcome of a process of identification (Kunda, 1992; Willmott, 1993; Etzioni, 1961). Through normative control, values, ideas, beliefs and emotions become the targets of control and individuals are exhorted to embrace prescribed organisational identities (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009; Kunda, 1992). Indeed, when bureaucratic forms of control are downplayed (little hierarchy and few technical means of control for example), the social groups that individuals identify with become of significant importance in environments where a strong control of behaviour and attitudes is sought[31].

➢ Elite identities centred on a gendered ideal professional worker

Elite identities and the over-achiever ideal

In order to face the challenges related with impression management and retention described above, PSFs thus rely on strong elite social identities. Indeed, Alvesson (1993) argues that beyond knowledge claims, a number of personality traits of professionals are often put forward to signify the quality of the work they produce. Even though Alvesson and Robertson (2006) as well as Alvesson and Empson (2008) point out that there is considerable variation in the elements put forward by firms' management as distinctive traits of their elite identities, a variety of studies show that **a number of common traits of the ideal professional worker are often emphasised in PSFs: ambition, hard work, social skills** (which are supposed to reflect individuals' ability to build strong relationships with clients), **the ability to work in teams or stamina** for example, characterised by the ability to handle pressure and ignore any physical or emotional issue (Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006; Anderson-Gough et al., 2000; Anderson-Gough et al., 2005; Meriläinen et al., 2004)[32]. A strong emphasis is also put on **appearing impersonal, objective, predictable and reliable** (Alvesson, 2001; Clark, 1995).

This conception of the ideal professional worker, Alvesson (2012) says, encourages performance focused subjectivities. Others have described this professional ideal as encouraging over-achievement or self-exploitation (Muhr et al., 2013). Some researchers have even qualified professional work as *extreme work* (Hewlett and Luce, 2006). Extreme work, they explain, is characterised by an unpredictable flow of work, a fast-paced work under tight deadlines, an inordinate scope of responsibility, work-related events outside of regular work hours, high availability to clients, a high level of responsibility, a large amount of travel and extended presence in the office. Others have, however, distanced themselves from this initial understanding of extreme work by emphasising how difficult it is to define what is extreme, which necessarily

[31] Pezé (2012) identifies two conceptions of social identities: the first one is based on an understanding of social identities as the role based dimension of individual identities (see Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010, for example), while another stream of research which associates social identities with collective or shared identities, external to the individual but which serves as a resource for identity construction (see Watson, 2008, Gendron and Spira 2010). These social identities can be promoted by organisations for example, which is precisely the focus here. Alvesson (2012) nonetheless notes that organisational identity is often conceived following Albert and Whetten (1985) as having three main characteristics: distinctiveness, endurance and centrality, which has been criticised for essentialising identity and for failing to account for its fragmented and fluid character (Gioia et al. 2000, Brown 2006). The latter perspective is adopted here.

[32] Merilaïnen et al. (2004), nonetheless indicate that there may be disparities according to the cultural context. In the UK for example, they find that the work-life balance discourse is a form of resistance; while in Finland, the discourse of the balanced individual can rather be considered as the normalising discourse.

implies defining what is *normal* (Granter et al., 2015) and rather focus on environments where individuals have a strong sense of working pressure (Gascoigne et al., 2015; Roberts, 2007). They show the long hours and demanding role expectations faced by professionals do not derive from the nature of the work itself but rather from the occupational discourse on the ideal professional described above (Gascoigne et al., 2015). Such discourses, they claim, used to be characteristic of professional or managerial jobs and are increasingly colonizing other organisations too, in which work is intensifying (Hewlett and Luce, 2006; Granter et al., 2015).

A gendered ideal professional worker

A specific stream of studies has particularly focused on how this over-achievement ideal is gendered and contributes to the relative exclusion of women from partnership in consultancies as in other professional organisations - accounting and law firms in particular have often been the focus of attention of this small but growing body of research (Kelan, 2012). Some indeed argue that, in consulting in particular, there is a horizontal division of labour in that women are more likely to be found in advice industries constructed as more "feminine", such as Human Resources or Organisational Development (Kelan, 2012).

In parallel, others have showed that even though there is often an almost even split at the time of recruitment between male and female professionals, there is a gendered vertical division of labour which results in an under-representation of women among partners as well as inequalities in salaries, which, they argue, increase over time (Anderson-Gough et al., 2005: p.470). This phenomenon is illustrated by the table below:

Level	Percentage of women
Entry level	40%, BCG, UK 40%, KPMG, UK 46%, Cap Gemini, UK 50%, PwC, Global
Consultants overall	20%, McKinsey, global
Partner level	10%, Accenture, global 12%, KPMG, UK 15%, PwC, global 13%, E&Y, UK

Table 2.2 : Percentage of women in consultancies (Kelan, 2012 : p.502)

Even though gender studies of professionals remain limited in numbers (Kelan, 2012), several explanations have been advanced to account for this phenomenon. All point to the fact that the ideal over-achieving professional described above is constructed in a gendered way both by clients and consultants themselves. Armbrüster (2006) has indeed highlighted that clients – who are themselves often men – tend to prefer male consultants. This confirms what had already been found by Larwood and Gattiker (1985) in their survey-based study: clients believe male consultants provide a better service. As a consequence, **clients are invoked to reproduce a number of stereotypes** (Anderson-Gough et al., 2005) and their preferences anticipated by partners who are reticent to put women in risk situations, which, in turn, is a barrier to their career progression (Naschberger et al., 2012; Boni-Le Goff, 2013).

In parallel, Anderson-Gough et al. (2005) argue that, right from recruitment, the ideal professional is constructed as stereotypically masculine by a male dominated hierarchy. The importance of

being a team-player, for example, is systematically associated with the practice of team sports like football or rugby. Then, as professionals progress within the firm, illustrating oneself as a team-player and being able to network become increasingly important, because they are believed to indicate how well professionals can manage relationships with clients. The difficulty here is that they often require behaviours which are constructed as socially unacceptable for women such as networking outside of office hours (which often involves heavy drinking), "*walking the office floors*" to meet with colleagues or selling themselves in a pushy way (Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2008; Anderson-Gough et al., 2005). Given the different representations of acceptable gender roles for men and women (Collinson and Collinson, 1989), women appear to struggle to enact this very gendered ideal of the professional worker which appears to conflict with their understanding of how women are expected to behave.

➢ Modalities of normative control and the role of socialisation in identity regulation

This professional ideal is transmitted through normative forms of control, which take two major forms: an outsourcing of control to the client, and an embeddedness in HRM systems and processes.

"In the name of the client"

Client control plays an important role in the control structure of PSFs, like in other businesses, as illustrates the metaphor used by Gabriel (2005) who argues that Weber's iron cage has transformed into a glass palace in which visibility for a wide number of actors is high, increasing the necessity to manage the organisation's boundaries. This is particularly vivid in knowledge-intensive firms and can take three forms, according to Alvesson (2004). First, there can be direct and explicit requests from the client who can exercise control in a rather coercive way. Second, client feedback can be sought explicitly (through client surveys for example) and thus become a central element of the control system. Finally, and this is the focus of attention here, a more normative form of control can be exercised "*in the name of the client*" (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000). Even though clients are constructed by professionals in diverse ways (Alvesson et al., 2009b), clients' expectations are often broadly invoked in order to obtain a particular type of behaviour from employees. Beyond the fact that clients are used to legitimate requirements regarding dress or how to address interlocutors, demands (in particular in terms of working hours and reactivity) are constructed as "*client-driven*" or in line with a "*professional ethic of behaviour*" during induction and other training sessions and on the jobs, through stories for example (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000; Poulter and Land, 2008). This results in a sacrificial understanding of professionalism as the fantasy regarding the client exercises governance (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000).

HRM as the carrier of identity projects

The ideal of the professional worker is also inculcated through what Alvesson (1995) labels "socio-integrative" management. A number of HR processes play a very important part in encouraging individuals to behave according to the professional ideal. Alvesson and Robertson (2006) for example highlight the key role played by the selection process in signalling that only the best and the brightest are recruited. Anderson-Gough et al. (2000) also showed how recruitment plays a very important part in shaping future organisational membership. Similarly,

in his study of the selection procedures employed by consulting firms, Armbrüster (2004) – using a foucaldian perspective – highlights both their signalling and subjectification effects: not only do the business cases employed signal quality by being highly selective and relying on supposedly rational and objective analytical skills, but they also contribute to disciplining individuals by submitting them to technologies of the self, such as observation, measurement and assessment. Recruitment is thus described as a means for professional firms to both select applicants who appear most able to submit themselves to expectations but also provides meaning regarding the prescribed subjectivity.

Induction courses are then meant to push this process further by informing newcomers about what is considered correct socialising with both clients and colleagues (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002). Anderson-Gough et al. (2000), for example show how the induction courses given trainees in the (then) Big 6 firms involve very concrete instructions regarding how they should dress or answer the telephone. They also show how, through these courses and the general discourse held on the job, work is constructed as a priority and how *life* is systematically written out (it is never acknowledged unless evoked as a support for the career), which contributes to shaping professionals' priorities and then becomes a central element of their organisational sensemaking. Through both recruitment processes and induction courses, professionals' subjectivities are thus *prepared for work* (Poulter and Land, 2008).

The evaluation system has also been the object of much critical attention. Covaleski et al. (1998), for example, show how the management by objectives technique associated with the *up-or-out* system contributes to transform professionals (including partners themselves) into disciplined and even self-disciplining organisational members whose goals are aligned with those of the firm. Through her study of the development and mentoring practices at a global consultancy, Brunel (2008) adds that individuals internalise the idea that they are responsible of their own fate: the *up-or-out* system is perceived as providing everyone with the means to excel as a professional and any failure becomes a personal responsibility. By defining good performances as the average in ratings (meeting expectations is indeed often considered as the minimum required), individuals are exhorted to systematically surpass themselves. This phenomenon, Poulter and Land (2008) explain, is reinforced by the fact that hours are long and thus interactions mostly with peers, which contributes to the exclusion of other points of reference.

Overall, HRM is described as a source of producer and receiver identity: both managers and their subordinates are given material for identity construction when enacting HRM processes (which is reinforced by the fact that individuals are evaluated all along their careers, even after joining the partnership). HRM is thus described as carrying identity projects for individuals, in other words as a "*linking mechanism between organisational identity and individual identity regulation*" (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007: p.719). This explains, according to them, why even when practices differ from the discourse on the role of HRM in developing people and contributing to providing excellent service, employees still believe that the system is fair and performing. HRM, Alvesson and Kärreman go on to explain, generates normative ordering and provides meaning and instructions for individuals to follow.

Some authors go further and argue that neo-normative forms of control have emerged in knowledge-intensive environments (among others), which target individuals' *authentic selves*

(Costas and Fleming, 2009; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009). Indeed, because normative forms of control are accused of generating too much cynicism from employees who distance their authentic selves from the norm and because employment relationships are increasingly short-term (Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005); individuals are expected to express their authentic self, to have fun and be free to be who they *truly* are at work (Bains, 2007: cited by Fleming and Sturdy, 2009). The importance given by firms to all sorts of Best Employer or Great Place to Work type of rankings needs, according to Bains (2007), to be put into this perspective. Employees are asked to *be themselves* rather than conform to an organisationally prescribed identity. As a result, what was once protected from the organisation can be appropriated as a corporate resource (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009; Ross, 2004).

c. A homogeneous compliant response

The different forms of control detailed above are described as generating discipline and compliance from professionals. First, since demands are constructed as client-driven, they are less questioned (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000). Because professionalism is constructed as an ability to respond to clients' high expectations, professionals rarely question the role played by partners in setting budgets and deadlines, for example. In addition, the identity projects carried by the normative forms of control evoked earlier are fed into individuals' anxieties and are a source of stability, reassurance and self-confidence (Alvesson, 2000; Alvesson, 2012). This, along with the fact that it is easier to persuade clients if you are persuaded yourself, and that individuals project themselves in managing positions (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007) explains why there is a tendency among professionals to be seduced by professional firms' elite identities. This leads Alvesson to argue that "*In large consultancies characterised by the up-or-out system, hierarchical differentiation combined with careful scrutiny and evaluation of the large number of junior employees* ***contributes to the creation of discipline and the compliance of the personnel, reducing or even eliminating the possibility of 'herding wild cats'*** *in at least parts of the organisation"* (Alvesson, 2012: p.307). Compliance is thus the "logical" outcome of normative control in professional organisations. And indeed, this has been emphasised in many other studies of professionals at work as a homogeneous response to processes of identity regulation: *"consultants do not engage much in protest, sabotage or other forms of 'explicit' resistance and there are very few visible signs of resistance to the prescribed subjectivity"* (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009: p.1116) argue; and this compliance is characterised by subordination, identification and conformity they add.

Overall, professionals are thus often depicted as *willing slaves* (Bunting, 2004), who voluntarily submit themselves to a culture of overwork and the decisions made for them regarding their careers. There is nevertheless, in several cases, evidence of a form of distantiation from part of some professionals but it has been shown not to challenge compliant behaviours or even to reinforce them (this will be detailed in section 2.3).

This is not, however, without any consequences for individuals. High demands and workloads can be the trigger of both physiological and emotional fatigue, burn-out or depression (Michel, 2011; Barnes and Van Dyne, 2009) since these modes of control directly target the body (Michel 2011). To sustain expectations of commitment over time, Michel indeed shows how professionals

initially develop a "*body as object*" action role, which means that they actively and successfully control their body, before they take on a "*body as antagonist*" action role, which means that the body usually takes over. She finally describes how some professionals (40% of the bankers she followed), after a few years, manage take on a "*body as subject*" action role, which means that they listen to their bodies more and stop trying to master them, and which she says results in increased performance and creativity. Mazmanian et al. (2013) also show how professionals submit themselves to a self-reinforced norm of constant accessibility by answering emails on their smartphones outside of work, which provides them with a sense of greater flexibility although it decreases their autonomy, impacts their time off-work and, as a result, increases their stress.

Intermediate conclusion

In this section, the critical perspective on knowledge as a rhetoric has been developed, as well as the idea that – in order to manage image-intensiveness and loyalty – professional organisations rely on strong systems of normative control. These systems have two core dimensions: the mobilisation of the client through the notion of professionalism and identity aligning systems of HRM, which appear to be particularly successful in PSFs given the high level of compliance observed. As a consequence, Critical Management Studies' take on the experience of professionals at work is extremely precious in that it sheds light on the mechanisms fostering over-achievement and careerism. Yet, in the following section, I will show that careerism is widely used to explain this surprising homogeneous phenomenon of compliance, and as a consequence, the assumption of careerism identified in chapter 1 is – at least partially – reproduced by critical studies of professionals at work.

2.3 An assumption of exclusive careerism which remains unchallenged

In this final section, I will reflect upon the critical take on professional workers. First, the overall level of compliance observed within PSFs will be questioned by broader perspectives on normative control outside of PSFs, in which resistance is observed (2.3.1), before I argue that the assumption of careerism identified in chapter 1 is not only often unchallenged by critical researchers, but sometimes even reproduced by these studies (2.3.1).

2.3.1 Emancipation and the professional worker

As explained in section 2.2, professionals are usually described in critical studies as displaying very compliant behaviours. Yet normative forms of control are not totalising nor do they entirely colonise subjectivities. First, discourses frame meaning-making but they do not entirely determine how they are acted upon in a deterministic fashion (du Gay, 2000), in particular as they meet with a multiplicity of (potentially contradictory) other discourses or can even contain contradictory elements themselves (Whittle, 2005). Indeed, individuals are not just targets of identity regulation and instead engage in identity work (Watson, 2008; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Watson (2008) defines identity work as the "*mutually constitutive processes whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity*

and struggle to come to term with and, within limits, to influence the various social identities which pertain to them in the various milieux in which they live their lives" (Watson, 2008: p.129). Identity work can lead to several outcomes, beyond pure identification. Indeed, the initial purpose of studies of identity regulation and work was not to paint a view in which "*dominant discourses or practices are seen to place totalising, unmediated constraints upon human subjects"* but rather conceive identity work "*as a process in which the role of discourse in targeting and moulding the human subject is balanced with other elements of life history forged by a capacity reflexively to accomplish life projects out of various sources of influence and inspiration"* (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: p.622), thus opening up the space for forms of *micro-emancipation*[33]. Costas and Kärreman (2015) in their review of this literature identify four outcomes of identity regulation and identity work: identification of course, but also dis-identification (Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001; Pratt, 2000; Brown and Humphreys, 2006) – which is typically characterised by different forms of resistance[34] and allows individuals to construct a back-stage to preserve what they consider to be their authentic-self; ambivalence (Pratt, 2000; Kunda, 1992) – which is characterised by the embracement of certain aspects of managerial discourse and the rejection of others; and self-alienation (Costas and Fleming, 2009) – and is characterised by moments of awareness of the gap between the so-called authentic self and work practices.

Distance is thus an expected outcome of normative control, which has recently been qualified as limited in its ability to mould attitudes as employees preserve their authentic selves from prescriptions and as long term commitment relationships are replaced by a form of *market-rationality* (Ross, 2004; Kunda and Ailon-Souday, 2005).

How then do critical researchers account for the homogeneous compliance they observe in PSFs? The fact that some professionals distance themselves from managerial discourses and either experience ambivalence, dis-identification or self-alienation is in fact accounted for. Some researchers indeed report that sometimes, young professionals explain that they feel exploited for example (Costas and Fleming, 2009; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009). Others observe distancing from the firm and from the ideal professional worker when people openly talk about looking for another job with their colleagues, gossip about the management of their firm or question the methodologies (Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006; Herrbach, 2001), or when individuals use cynicism, humour, scepticism or irony as a way to resist identity regulation (Whittle, 2005; Sturdy, 1998).

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[33] Huault, Perret and Spicer (2014) differentiate two approaches to emancipation: *macro-emancipation*, which focuses on large-scale challenges to capitalism and management, and *micro-emancipation*, which rather focuses on momentary transgressions in everyday life. The literature reviewed here rather takes the latter perspective. Drawing on the work of Jacques Rancière, Huault, Perret and Spicer nonetheless argue that this dichotomy should be overcome and emancipation conceived as an attempt to actualise equality through the creation of a dissensus that interrupts the order of the sensible. In order to do so, they say, researchers should move away from the study of acts of resistance and rather investigate the critiques actually put forward through them.

[34] Kärreman and Alvesson (2009) distinguish two perspectives on power and resistance. The first one, which they refer to as the power as a restraining force perspective defines resistance as a response to attempts to exercise power over the resisting party and typically results in exit, voice, sabotage, etc. (see Ackroyd and Thompson 1999 for a review). The second one is the power as a productive force perspective, in which resistance is conceived as a process of adaptation, subversion and reinscription of dominant discourses, in which any reaction which is not fully in line with prescriptions is considered as a form of resistance (see Thomas and Davies 2005 for a review)

In his book *The World's Newest Profession*, Christopher McKenna (2006) provides a good illustration of this phenomenon: he found a collection of cartoons made by McKinsey associates in the 1960s, a time when, he argues, expectations of conformity were at their highest.

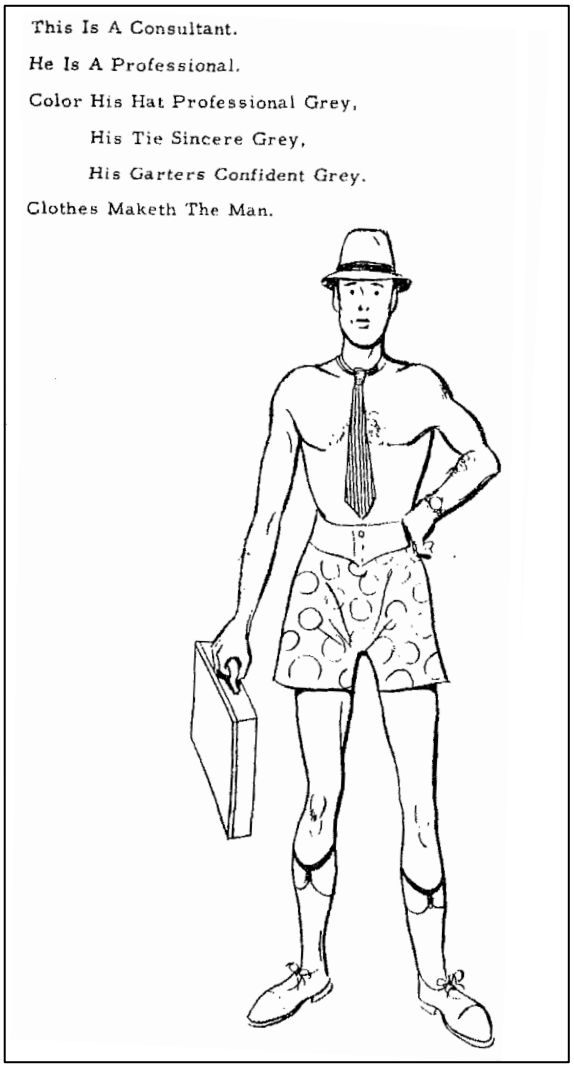

Figure 2.1: The consultants' Coloring Book, Circa 1962 (McKenna, 2006: p.148)

At a time when consultants' dress and work culture had become the basis for many jokes both outside of the consulting industry (in the media in particular) and within, the young associates at McKinsey, resisted expectations of conformity but also the culture of overwork and the social homogeneity of the partnership group through self-parodies such as the cartoons presented in figures 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3. Through these, McKenna goes on to explain, "*the consultants recognized that they had chosen to live in a gilded cage"* (McKenna, 2006: p.163).

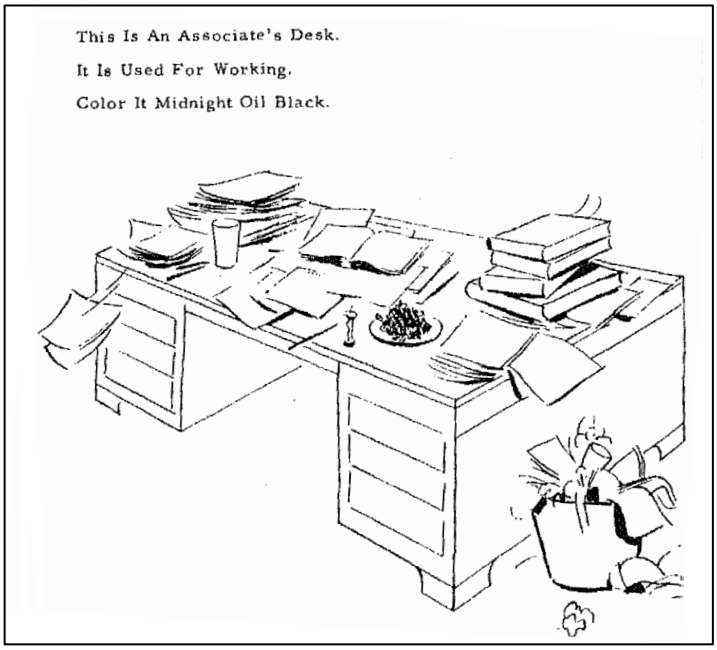

Figure 2.2: The Consultants' Coloring Book, Circa 1962 (McKenna, 2006: p.156)

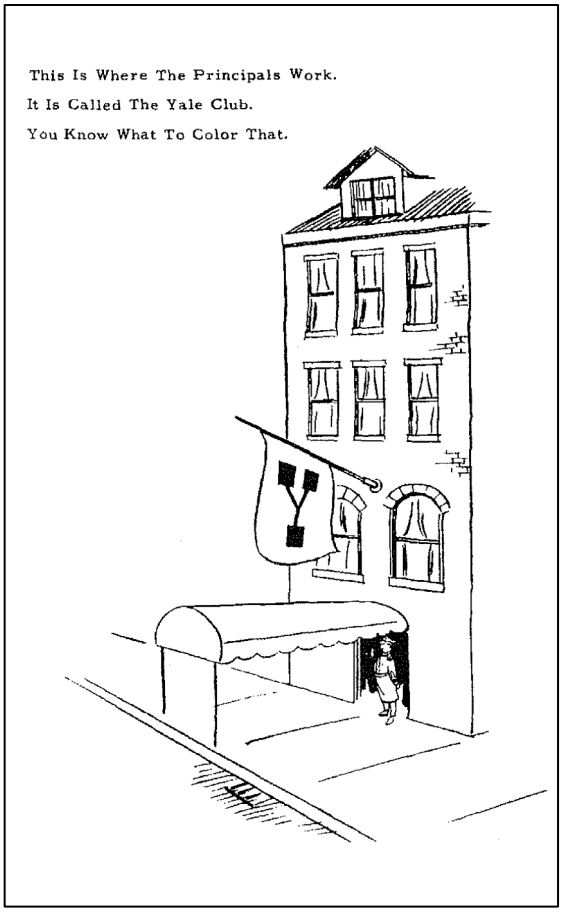

Figure 2.3: The Consultants' Coloring Book, Circa 1962 (McKenna, 2006: p.162)

Yet, what is striking is that even though the existence of diverse forms of distancing is reported, it is argued that this does not result in any disturbance of the dominant ideologies: individuals may be ambivalent, but they will adopt a compliant behaviour anyway. Whittle (2005), for example shows how management consultants still perform their role as missionaries or preachers of flexibility, even though they are very critical about the way flexibility is practised in their own firm. She explains that their contradictions remain in the back stage and that they develop a *dramaturgical self* (Collinson, 2003), which allows them to deal with contradictions. Kosmala and Herrbach (2006) similarly argue that in spite of distancing, individuals need to maintain a positive image which leads them to engage in self-justification, reinforced by the fact that they know what the benefits are for them in terms of professional development, beyond the employment relationship they have with their specific firm. This is also in line with the findings of Poulter and Land (2008) whom show that even though newcomers are cynical about what they are told in their induction courses, they nonetheless perform the role of the engaged listener they are expected to enact.

Following a different line and using a Lacanian approach, Muhr and Kirkegaard (2013) find that consultants' fantasies about off-work activities help them maintain an illusion of wholeness, of being more than just *company men and women*, which in the end contributes to reinforcing the intensiveness of their work schedule as they can fully direct their desires towards work. Similarly, Kärreman and Alvesson (2009) argue that there is indeed resistance in consulting firms, but that it is systematically counter-resisted: in other words, whenever there is resistance in the form of a re-inscription of dominant discourses (in particular in their case through a discourse of "*the autonomous subject living a good life"*, revolving around the concepts of autonomy and work-life balance) it is systematically counter-acted by the discourse of the elite worker evoked earlier (focusing instead on ambition, hard work, competence development and career).

This goes along the line of what has been argued by Fleming and Spicer (2003): distance does not prevent from performing cultural prescriptions and may even reinforce them since it provides its users with a sense of autonomy. All these authors converge in showing that, in professional organisations in particular, conformity is obtained through distance from corporate values (Poulter and Land, 2008).

2.3.2 An unchallenged assumption of careerism

Even though these studies are precious to explain through which means professionals are encouraged to develop performance and career oriented subjectivities, they tend not to challenge the idea that this is what all professionals end up aspiring to. As explained earlier, professionals are indeed described as homogeneously complying with the prescribed norms of over-achievement and self-exploitation. Not only are individual professional workers thought to conform, but they are also thought to do so homogeneously. Individual variations are indeed rarely accounted for and it almost seems as though all professionals think and behave in a similar fashion.

In addition, careerism is even often used to explain the homogeneous compliance described. In some instances, the assumption that professionals are attracted to these organisations because of

their career orientations is not only unchallenged, but also reproduced through the argument that such widespread compliance can be explained by individuals' willingness to be positively evaluated and promoted. Alvesson (2012: p.310), for example, explains that "*up-or-out* systems *encourage strong career orientations, which exercise a high degree of disciplinary power over people eager to be assessed positively. Extensive HRM systems (…) strengthen 'improvement' and performance-focused subjectivities*". Here, Alvesson goes one step further than simply accounting for the way a performance-orientation would be encouraged and rewarded: knowledge-workers are here described as already being attracted to these environments for their career orientations and thus conforming to expectations because they inherently want to be assessed positively, whatever it implies. Similarly, Grey (1994) explains that career is an important principle for many trainees in the big accounting firms, which in turn informs their conduct and leads them to conform so they can increase their chances of promotion. For Whittle (2005: p.1318), the lack of reflexivity from part of consultants can also be explained by careerism. Another illustration is that of Poulter and Land (2008) who explain that consultants see what the benefits of conformity are in terms of career, and thus instrumentally choose to comply.

Here careerism is thus described both as the outcome of normative control and the reason behind compliance, which is problematic in the sense that even though these studies aim at showing how careerism is fostered by normative forms of control, it ends up reproducing the idea that careerism was already here in the first place (even if encouraged) and that it is the reason why people comply more in these environments than in other normative ones.

Overview of chapter 2

Chapter 2 aimed at reviewing studies of the way professionals engage in their work.

In the first section of this chapter, **the different dimensions of professionals' role were identified**, from the acquisition, development and sharing of technical, experiential and relational types of **knowledge** to the display of a certain level of **commitment**, both in terms of workload and collective orientation.

In the second section, I showed that both these dimensions of professional work (knowledge and commitment) have been of great interest to Critical Management researchers, who have depicted professionals in general – and consultants in particular – as **exemplary cases of knowledge workers**. Critical Management Studies' take on knowledge and its highly **ambiguous** character have been detailed first, which allowed me to then describe its consequences on the management of knowledge workers. Given the need to both **manage clients' impressions** and **ensure professionals' loyalty**, adequate behaviours are thought to be obtained through **normative forms of control** emphasising elite gendered organisational identities and aiming to regulate the subjectivities of professionals. In the last part of this section, I detailed how these studies describe **homogeneous compliant responses** from the professionals who are confronted with these forms of identity regulation.

Finally, in the last section of this chapter, the totalising character of the management practices described in section 2 was discussed. I detailed how **these studies argue that even though professionals do not necessarily respond to identity regulation through identification, they nonetheless always adopt conforming behaviours**. This led me to argue, in the last part of this section, that if critical studies of professionals at work are extremely helpful to understand how individuals are socialised into the incentive system of their firms, they nonetheless fail to question the idea that this is indeed what all professionals end up aspiring to. I finally showed that this is all the more problematic that **when conformity is explained by professionals' careerism, the assumption unravelled in chapter 1 is in fact reproduced**.

Chapter 3: Questioning the assumption of careerism at the heart of professional organisations

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Introduction

In the previous chapters, an assumption of exclusive and homogeneous careerism of professionals within PSFs was unravelled, which was not challenged by our review of the literature focusing on professionals and their work. However, in this chapter, I will argue that there are a number of reasons why this assumption should precisely be questioned and debates around the nature of professionals' expectations at work (in particular their supposed ambition to be promoted quickly and earn high salaries and bonuses above all else) re-opened. In the first section (3.1), I will present economic trends in the French consulting industry, which indicate that – beyond the conjectural difficulties following the 2008 economic crisis – consulting firms may be confronted with more structural perspectives of lower growth. I show how this is a considerable difficulty for professional organisations since promotion perspectives can only be given when firms grow. In the second section of this chapter (3.2), I show that, in addition, a number of recent studies seem to indicate that work-life balance might increasingly become a topic in professional organisations, which directly questions the assumption of careerism unravelled in chapter 1.

3.1 External pressures challenging the incentive system of consulting firms

One of the first reasons why the capacity of professional organisations' incentive system to attract and retain the "best" should be questioned has to do with the evolution of the professional service market. Here, to simplify the argument, the focus will be on the consulting industry exclusively: some generic elements on the European market for consulting advice and on the structure of French consulting industry will be provided first (3.1.1), before an analysis of the sector's economic trends can be developed, shedding light on a structural trend towards lower growth rates, which challenges considerably the traditional incentive model of PSFs described in the previous chapters (3.1.2).

3.1.1 Some elements on the French consulting industry

The consulting market has expanded rapidly over the past century (McKenna, 2006). The European consulting market was worth 92,4 billion euros in sales in 2011, of which 52% were related to business consulting services (strategy and organisation), 19% to IT, 10% to development and integration, 9% to outsourcing and 10% to a variety of other services[35]. As illustrated by table 3.1 below, Germany is the primary market for consulting services in Europe, before the UK and France:

[35] Source: FEAO survey of the European Management Consultancy 2012

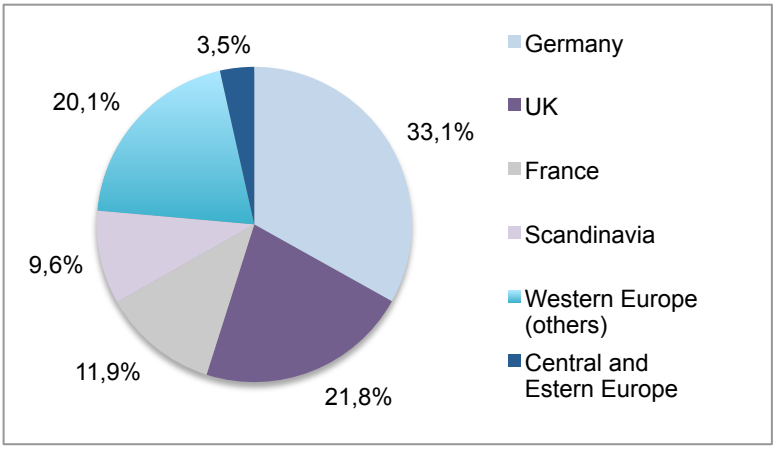


Figure 3.1: The European consulting market in percentage of total sales, source: "Le Conseil en Management", Xerfi (2014)

In France, more specifically, the consulting market was worth 8,6 billion euros in 2011[36]. Overall, Organisation and Operations[37] account for over half of French consulting services in terms of total sales, Project Management for a third and Strategy for over 10%:

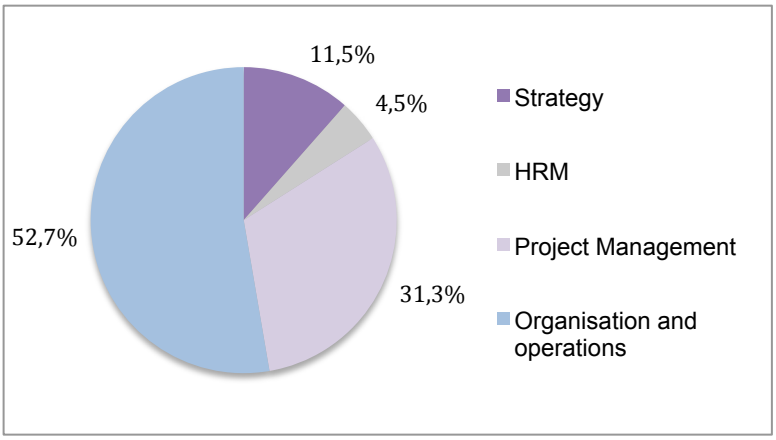


Figure 3.2: Repartition of French consulting firms according to their activities in percentage of total sales, source: "Le Conseil en Management", Xerfi (2014)

The French consulting market is dominated by French-owned companies, which represent over 80% of consulting providers in France. Yet, in terms of sales, consultancies with foreign ownership do capture over half of the market[38]. In terms of size, the French market is characterised by the dominance of very small actors: almost half of the consultancies operating in France do not reach 5 million euros in sales and less than 10% have sales that exceed 100 million euros. Similarly, half of the consultancies operating on the French market have between 6 and 50 employees and only 17% have over 200 employees. The biggest actors – even though less numerous – nonetheless capture most of the market: the 20 biggest firms represented 60% of the industry sales in 2012[39].

[36] Source: FEAO survey of the European Management Consultancy 2012
[37] Organisation and Operations consulting covers operational performance (cost-killing), management and change
[38] Source: "Le Conseil en Management", Xerfi (2014)
[39] Source: "Le Conseil en Management", Xerfi (2014)

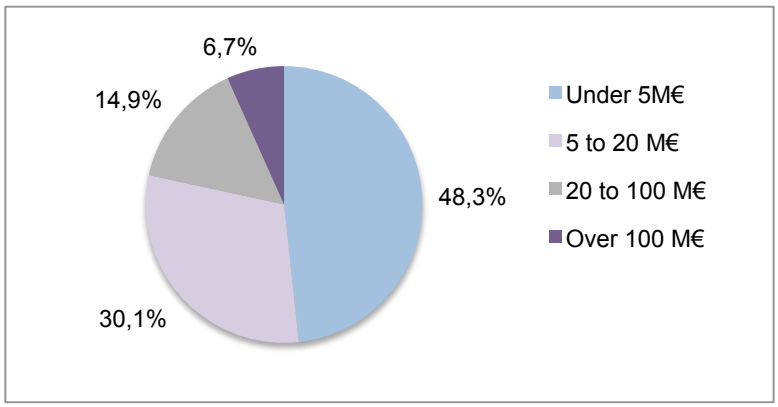


Figure 3.3: Repartition of French consulting firms according to their sales, source: "Le Conseil en Management", Xerfi (2014)

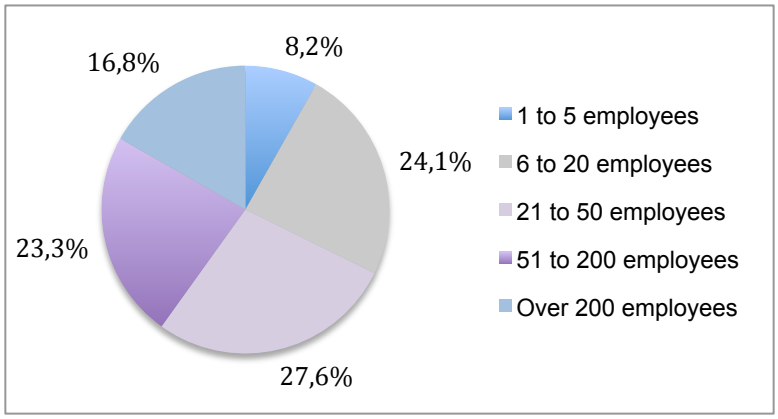
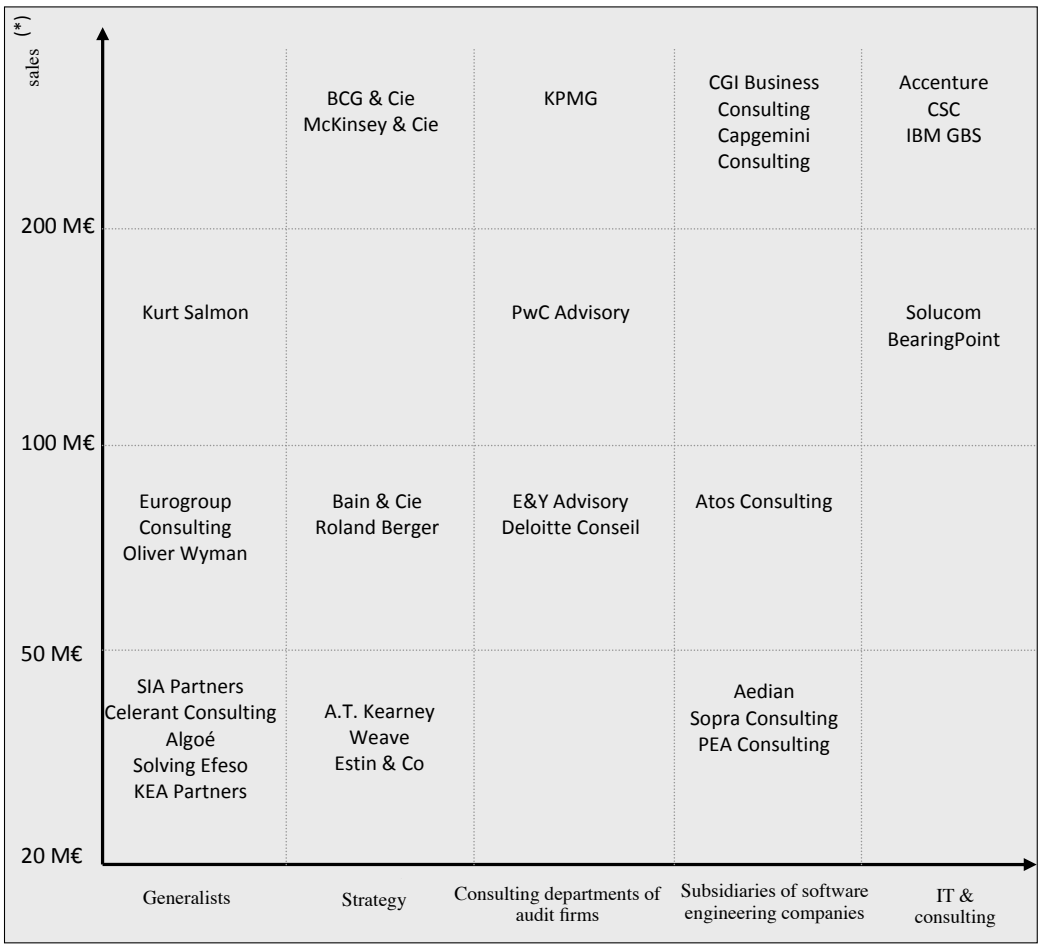


Figure 3.4: Repartition of French consulting firms according to their size in number of employeers, source: "Le Conseil en Management", Xerfi (2014)

There is a wide variety of actors operating on the French consulting market, from IT consulting firms like Accenture and the subsidiaries of software engineering companies like CGI or Cap Gemini to the Consulting divisions of the big accountancy firms such as the big four or Mazars (their French competitor), strategy consultancies (which nonetheless now take on projects that are not pure strategy) and the – often smaller – generalist players, among which some French ones such as Eurogroup, Kea Partners or Algoé (see cartography in fig. 3.5).



(*) sales in management consulting only

Figure 3.5: cartography of actors operating on the French Management Consulting market, source: "Le Conseil en Management", Xerfi (2014)

Finally, the French consulting industry is also characterised by the dominance of the Paris region, as over 80% of the consultancies are implanted there:

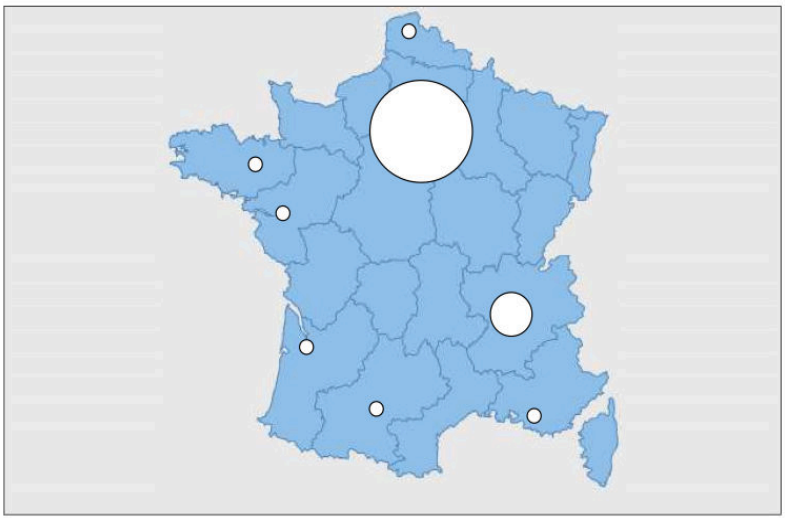


Figure 3.6: Territorial repartition of French consulting firms, source: "Le Conseil en Management", Xerfi (2014)

3.1.2 Economic trends: increased competition in a mature industry

The consulting sector has considerably suffered from the economic downturn that followed the 2008 crisis. However, a closer look at the industry figures unravels a more complex situation, which may be indicative of a more structural trend towards lower growth rates in the sector.

a. A cyclical drop in sales and growth in relation with the economic context

The economic downturn of 2008 has had major consequences on the consulting industry. As companies lowered their investments (see table 3.6), so did they reduce their use of consultancies, which impacted considerably the latter's sales. As illustrated by table 3.7 below, sales of management advice dropped by almost 1% in 2009 in France and growth rates have not exceeded 2% for the past 3 years.

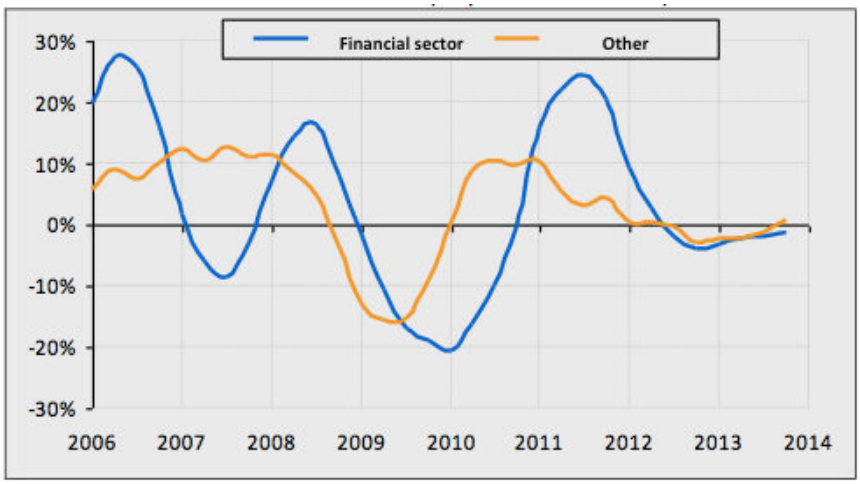


Figure 3.7: Investment in French companies (percentage of annual variation), Source: "Le Conseil en Management", Xerfi (2014)

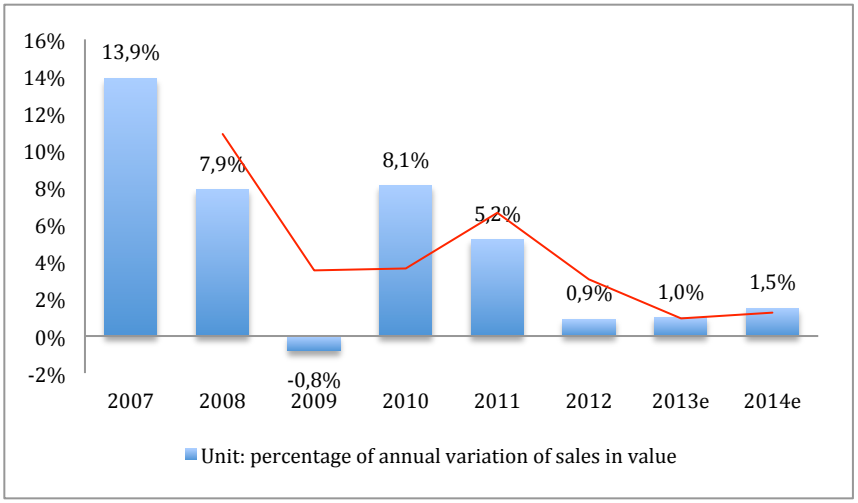


Figure 3.8: Annual variations of sales in French Management Consulting Firms, Source: "Les cabinets de Conseil en Management en France à l'horizon 2018", Precepta (2015)

This has had a direct impact on consulting firms' profits. The gross operating profit ratio has for example dropped from almost 12% in 2007 to 7,6% in 2012.

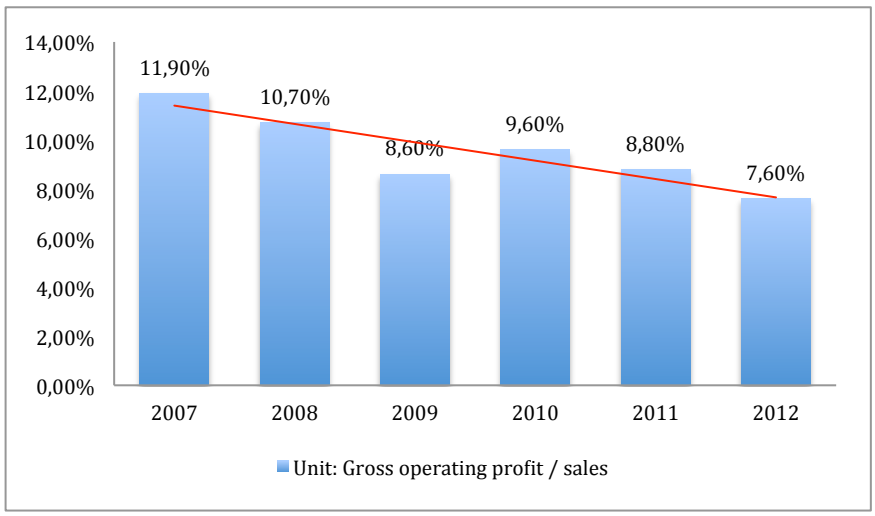


Figure 3.9: Gross Operating Profit ratio in French Management Consulting Firms, Source: « Les Cabinets de Conseil en Management en France à l'horizon 2018 », Precepta (2015)

As a result, fewer bonuses have been distributed, salaries have stagnated and recruitments as well as promotions have been put on hold. It is only in 2015 that consultancies have started hiring more consistently again – yet timidly[40].

Out of the different actors presented in Fig. 3.5, the Consulting divisions of audit firms went through the crisis relatively smoothly as they expanded the span of the services they offer, in particular by buying small strategy actors[41]. The biggest firms (over 100M€ in sales) are the ones that suffered the most, and some young French actors have grown considerably given the context (in particular SIA Partners)[42].

b. Beyond the conjuncture: a structural phenomenon?

A first line of analysis would be to consider the recent drop in sales as the consequence of the 2008 economic crisis. Yet, when considering sales variations not only in the past few years, but over the past 20 years, a different picture can be drawn:

[40] Source: Hays annual remuneration surveys 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015

[41] In 2013 Deloitte bought Monitor; in 2014 PriceWaterhouseCoopers bought Booz & Company and Ernst & Young bought the Parthenon Group.
see:
Deloitte completes acquisition of Monitor's global strategy consulting business, Press Release by Deloitte
PwC finalise l'acquisition de Booz & Company, Press Release by PwC
EY completes combination with The Parthenon Group, building on its investment strategy capabilities, Press Release by E&Y

[42] Source: « Les Cabinets de Conseil en Management en France à l'horizon 2018 », Precepta (2015)

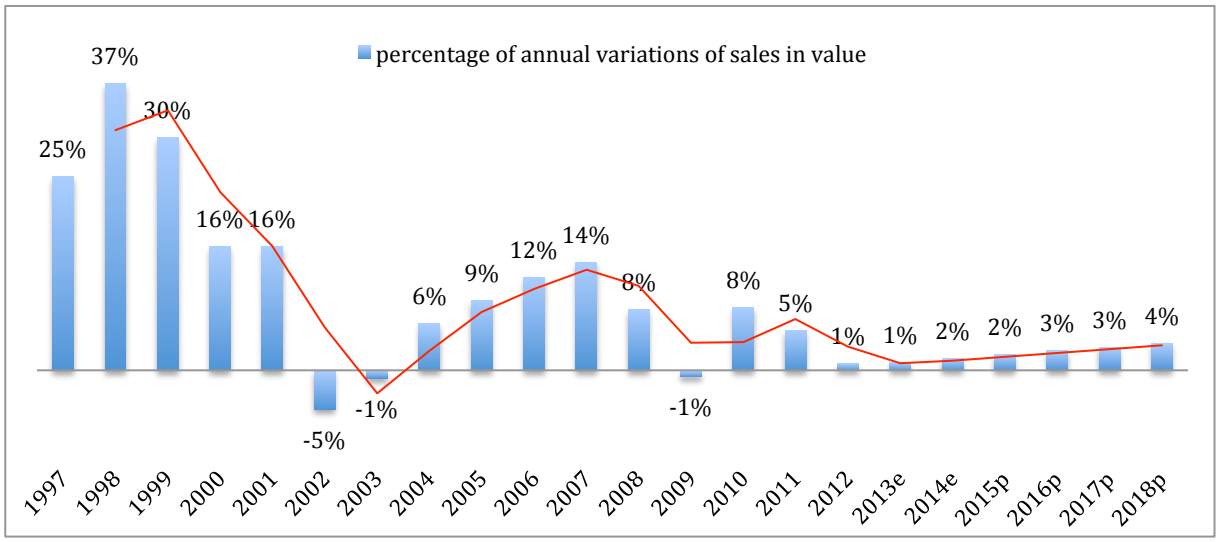


Figure 3.10: Variations of sales in French Management Consultancies, Source : Précepta « Les Cabinets de Conseil en Management en France à l'horizon 2018 »

This table confirms that the health of the consulting market is indeed linked with economic cycles: the impact of the 2002/2003 economic downturn and the 2008 economic crisis stands out. However, what appears as well is that **after each crisis, growth rates never reach their previous levels again**. This is exacerbated in the case of the current economic crisis since the estimation and previsions presented in table 3.9 do not exceed a 4% growth rate at the horizon of 2018. Consulting firms' economic situation is obviously worsened by the conjuncture, but these numbers seem to be indicative of a deeper phenomenon.

In fact, these numbers should be put in perspective with the increased managerial focus of professional organisation evoked in chapter 1 (p.44-49). These lower growth rates are also the result of a considerable pressure on cost: there is less and less asymmetry of information between clients and their consultants, which has resulted in a reduction in demand (a lot of what was previously externalised to consultants before is now carried out in-house) as well as a sophistication of clients' demands (Sturdy and Wright, 2011; Wright, 2009). Because clients have more information and are more experienced in their use of consultants, they also tend to demand increased seniority in the teams they hire, thus directly impacting the leverage model firms are structured on and increasing the necessity to retain experienced professionals (Kipping, 2002). In parallel, purchasing agents have become more involved in the buying process even if there is considerable variation in their practices (Werr and Pemer, 2007), which have resulted in increased competition and pressure on prices. Prices have indeed increased by 4,6% between 2005 and 2013 but this remains lower than inflation (which led to an increase of 13,2% in prices over the same period).

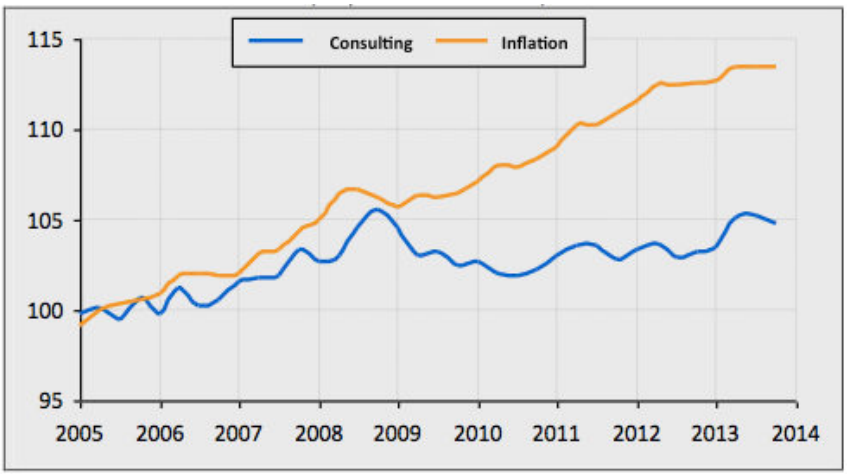


Figure 3.11: Evolution of prices of consulting services (on a 100 basis in 2005), Source: "Le Conseil en Management", Xerfi (2014)

Consulting firms have thus been particularly affected by the 2008 crisis and the subsequent economic downturn. The following paragraph discusses how that has impacted recruitments and promotions, in turn affecting the attractiveness of consulting firms on the job market.

c. An economic downturn which challenges the traditional incentive system of consulting firms

As discussed in chapter 1, lower growth rates have encouraged consulting firms and other professional organisations to adopt more managerial organisational features. In addition, if maintained over time, low growth rates considerably question the functioning of the traditional incentive system that medium to large firms usually rely on. Authors who studied the consequences of the increased business focus on the incentive system showed that commercial or *rain-making* skills have become increasingly important when making promotion decisions – so much so that lateral hires become acceptable – and that attempts to increase leverage (and thus profit) have led to a harder and longer route to partnership (Henderson and Galanter, 2008; Malhotra et al., 2010; Smets et al., 2012). What these trends imply is also that high bonuses and fast-track careers become harder and harder to promise.

This may be one of the reasons why there has been, over the past few years, a tendency for young business and engineering school graduates to turn away from consultancies for their first jobs. Even though these numbers should be put in perspective given that consultancies have also reduced their recruitments over the past few years, they may be indicative of changing trends and should be taken seriously.

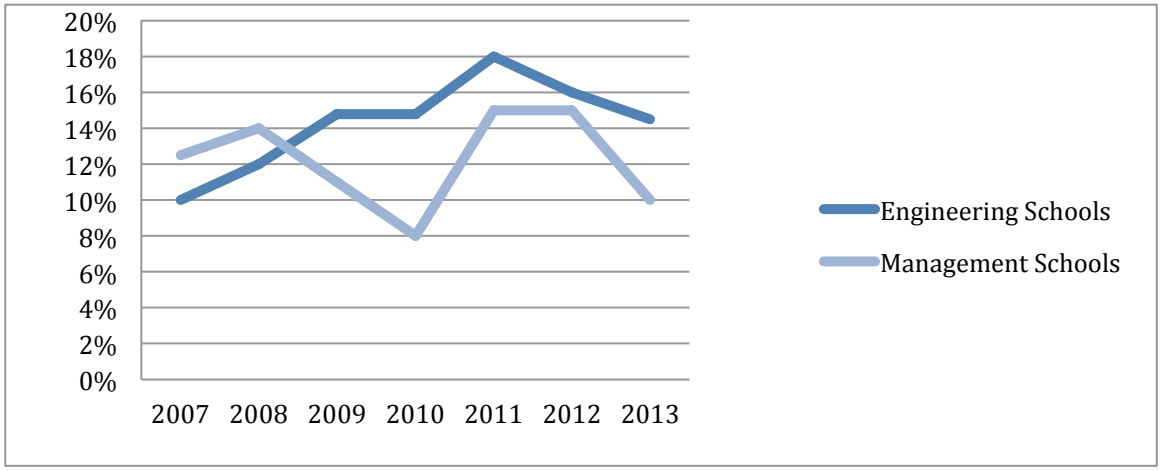


Figure 3.12: Proportion of young graduates who choose consulting as a first job, Source : Précepta « Les Cabinets de Conseil en Management en France à l'horizon 2018 »

Some researchers indeed argue that it has already become more difficult for firms to recruit because salaries and career prospects are no longer sufficient incentives (Kaiser and Ringlstetter, 2010). Given the very mechanical character of the *up-or-out* machinery, when there is little growth, either the pyramid needs to be very actively managed (and unsuccessful candidates for promotion systematically asked to leave) or professionals are asked to be patient and wait longer for a promotion (Maister, 1993). In such circumstances, partnership co-optation in particular is often linked to professionals' ability to sell enough projects to support their own promotion. As a consequence, the economic climate may also have consequences on these firms' ability to retain more experienced professionals who may, in the future, become dissatisfied with their career prospects (both in terms of bonuses and promotions) and thus decide to leave or question the level of the contributions expected from them – in terms of working hours for example (Kaiser et al., 2015).

Intermediate conclusion

As a result, even if the assumption that professionals are homogeneously driven primarily by their career ambitions was to be confirmed, it would – in the current economic context – be very problematic for professional organisations such as consulting firms. Indeed, the perspective of reduced growth rates in the long term would seriously question the functioning of the traditional incentive system as fewer professionals would be able to make it to partnership, and would do so in a longer amount of time, probably with fewer bonuses on the way. This perspective would put the attractiveness and incentive mechanism at the heart of the model in jeopardy.

3.2 The potential emergence of "work-life balance" demands as an additional challenge

In parallel, there is a need to question the dominant representation of professionals as mostly driven solely by rewards, in particular in the form of quick promotions and high bonuses. A small and emerging body of research on "work-life balance", in particular, questions the ability of the traditional incentive system to attract and retain professionals today. These studies and what they suggest regarding professionals' demands of work-life balance will be presented first

(3.2.1), before the limited ways in which these are currently accommodated by professional organisations are discussed (3.2.2).

3.2.1 Emergence of "work-life balance" as a challenging topic in PSFs

One of the reasons why the assumption that professionals are mostly driven by their careerism should be questioned is that a number of emerging studies seem to indicate that – contrary to the conclusions drawn from many critical studies – at least some professionals may want to be promoted but yet not at the cost of work-life balance. This body of literature will be presented first, before the reasons why the phenomenon may well increase in the future are discussed.

a. A small body of research sheds light on emerging work-life balance demands

Some studies have showed that non-negligible numbers of professionals say they are dissatisfied with their "work-life balance". Perlow and Porter (2009), for example, conducted a survey targeting 250 professionals and found that 66% of them felt they were facing increased pressure at work. In another survey, which was part of an experiment conducted at BCG, Perlow (2012: p.46-48) found that only 38% of consultants – within ten project teams – who did not benefit from any specific arrangement were dissatisfied with their work-life balance and yet 52% felt uncomfortable to take time off for their personal life. In a survey targeting 800 consultants in Germany this time, Kaiser et al. (2011) found that 50% of respondents considered their life more (or even *much more*) of a priority than their work and 35% thought both were equally important. Only 15% of respondents, they say, reported that work came first. These numbers are to be put into perspective since they may be entangled with consultants' awareness of acceptable social roles (it might not be very acceptable to claim to prioritise work over family in many cultures, especially for mothers, for example) but they are still indicative of a situation that is more heterogeneous than might be thought initially. In her study of investment bankers, Michel (2011) observed that 40% of the professionals she followed ended up, after several years, developing what she labelled a *body as subject action role* in order to preserve their health and limit the negative impact of their work routine (usually after breakdowns or burnouts), which means that they stopped controlling their bodies and started watching them more closely, typically paying more attention to signs of exhaustion. Other researchers, have also showed that a number of professionals were looking for flexible working arrangements such as reduced loads, for example (Litrico and Lee, 2008; Litrico et al., 2011).

Others have argued that the evolutions in the up-or-out system evoked in chapter 1 (introduction of non-equity partners, non-partner positions such as off-counsels, legal directors or permanent associates in Law firms) are not only the consequences of the "managerialisation" of these firms and a move away from the professional partnership interpretive scheme but also related to the arrival of a supposedly new generation of associates who are unwilling to "*carry the burden of partnership"* and want to preserve their leisure and family time (Kaiser et al., 2015: p.85). Smets et al. (2012) indeed note that the new positions that have been created in law firms are very often occupied by professionals (usually women) looking for a better work-life balance.

Many studies have argued that the work-life balance issues that are raised by professionals usually remain at the level of "talk" and are rarely acted upon either because they are only rhetorical or because norms of overwork and commitment are so deeply internalised that they are not resisted (Muhr et al., 2013; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009; Covaleski et al., 1998; Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006; Meriläinen et al., 2004; Muhr and Kirkegaard, 2013). Yet, through a limited and recent number of studies, it appears that – in some cases at least – these work-life balance demands are not only talked about, but also acted upon (when new roles are invested, reduce load arrangements made or *body action roles* changed). This is particularly problematic because it means that the traditional incentive system fails to target (at least fully) these individuals who may be subject to leaving (or not even be attracted in the first place), in turns meaning that firms are not in full control of the output of their incentive system. The different modalities of accommodation of these demands in PSFs identified through these studies will be developed in section 3.2.2.

b. A phenomenon which can be expected to rise

Even though studies of these "work-life balance" demands are still rare in professional organisations, and research focuses instead more on how to explain by professionals work such long hours, the phenomenon can be expected to become increasingly important for a number of reasons.

➢ Thrive of a societal discourse on "work-life balance"

First of all, the social discourse on work-life balance and the value of having a good and healthy "quality of work life" is becoming increasingly influent in our society, as is attested by the number of Best Employer or Great Place to Work rankings for example. The millennials, in particular, are thought to be particularly receptive to this discourse and to have a particular consideration for their working conditions, among which work-life balance (Twenge and Campbell, 2008). In the 2014 Universum survey, both business and engineering school students reported that their top career priority was to achieve a good work-life balance[43]. In professional organisations, as well, this phenomenon has been identified as an area requiring further research (Malhotra et al., 2010; Smets et al., 2012)[44].

➢ Feminisation of the professions

Even though women remain vastly underrepresented amongst partners in many professional firms, as evoked in chapter 2 (p.79-80), there is an undeniable feminisation of many of the professions, which may also impact the phenomenon discussed here. Indeed, the number of

[43] The survey is accessible at Universumglobal.com, exact proportions of participants ranking work-life balance as a top priority are not communicated.

[44] The way these millennials' changing expectations at work may impact the traditional professional partnership model has been – among other evolutions – the object of a recent call for papers of the Journal of Professions and Organizations entitled: "25 years since 'P2 ': Taking stock and charting the future of the professional organization"

female solicitors with practising certificates has increased by 850% in 25 years – versus 15% for men – in the UK and Wales. They now account for over 40% of the headcounts – a figure which exceeds 50% when considering professionals under 35 (Bolton and Muzio, 2008). Female lawyers are now over half of the profession's new entrants in North America, Europe or Australia for example (Pinnington and Sandberg, 2013; Walsh, 2012). In consulting, a similar process has occurred. In 1965 no women studied at HEC in France, by 1985 women had gotten in but none of them was working in consulting while in 1985 almost 14% of alumni of the school working in consulting were women, a number reaching almost 22% in 2005 (Boni-Le Goff, 2013: p.169). Now, at entry level, almost half of consultants are women in the biggest management consultancies (Kelan, 2012) – even if they are minority among partners.

As mentioned before, gender roles are reproduced in professional organisations in a number of ways, which contributes to the exclusion of women from partnership. One of the underlying mechanisms behind this phenomenon is the strong work commitment expectation associated with the ideal professional worker (usually in terms of overwork, availability and reactivity). Some have argued that there are inherently work-centred women who would be able to do what it takes to become partners given that they either have no interest in having a family or do not consider their family as a priority; and more family centred others who would favour work-life balance arrangements and thus would not be even interested in partnership (Hakim, 2002; Hakim, 2006). Against this rather essentialist view, Walsh (2012), without denying the role played by individual aspirations, shows a more complex and fluid picture, in which women aspiring to partnership often also aspire to some sort of a balanced life and believe that their promotion opportunities are higher when flexible arrangements are available. Similar findings were obtained by Pinnington and Sandberg (2013) who found that family commitments are socially constructed by both men and women lawyers as a female issue, in turn contributing to the fact that if firms do not accommodate family responsibilities, motherhood is then conceived as incompatible with partnership ambitions. This has two main consequences: first, women can self-censor and leave or opt out of career tracks. Several authors indeed note that, it is often women with children who opt for the non-career track and occupy new roles such as permanent associate or off counsel in law firms for example, or permanent non-partner positions in consulting firms (Smets et al., 2012; Malhotra et al., 2010; Boni-Le Goff, 2013; Henderson and Galanter, 2008). Second, adopting alternative work arrangements to improve one's sense of work-life balance may result in considerable anxiety for fear it may impact one's career (Donnelly, 2015; Pinnington and Sandberg, 2013). As a result, if professional organisations are to retain these women, adequate structures and practices are to be found to accommodate these demands of flexibility (Donnelly, 2015). Finding ways to make these arrangements non-gendered and equally available to men may also be a challenge for these firms.

- **Lower prospects of growth**

Finally, slower firms' growth may reinforce demands regarding "work-life balance" broadly speaking. Indeed, some observers have already pointed to the fact that it is currently more difficult for consulting firms, in particular, to recruit because career prospects and salaries are no longer attractive enough (Kaiser and Ringlstetter, 2010). Given the lower growth prospects, increasing salaries and fast promotions are very unlikely. Therefore, offering young graduates

with the perspective of a stimulating and yet "balanced" career might be an alternative for these firms to gain in attractiveness. This trend is actually already observable in these firms' communication, in particular through their websites. Another consequence of lower prospects of bonuses and promotions is that, in order to retain individuals, firms may need to offer other forms of retribution, in particular as some professionals start feeling that the level of commitment expected from them is not rewarded enough.

3.2.2 A convergent conclusion from emerging studies: work-life balance measures do not work in PSFs

The studies evoked above thus indicate that work-life balance is emerging as a topic in professional organisations and that there are reasons to believe that this phenomenon will likely increase in the future. In order to better understand how professional organisations can address these potentially growing demands, it is necessary to take a step back and review work-life balance research and the initiatives it has identified. I will then detail the findings of the handful of studies that focus more precisely on professional contexts to show that their conclusions are rather pessimistic.

a. Panorama of work-life balance initiatives

In order to understand the specificities of PSFs when it comes to work-life balance initiatives, it is necessary to start by reviewing briefly the state of research on work-life balance in other industries and to identify the different initiatives in place in other environments.

- **Overview of research on work-life balance**

Research on work-life balance (or work-life integration) has been vastly expanding for the past 30 years and now represents a wide body of research (Kossek et al., 2011; Reindl et al., 2011). This literature is, nonetheless, characterised by its heterogeneity and its multidisciplinary character, from psychology to the sociology of work, management studies or economics (Kaiser and Ringlstetter, 2010). As a result, a wide variety of terms are often employed to address work-life balance: *work-life* or *work-family conflict*, *work-life facilitation* or *integration*, *life-domain balance*, *work-life interference*, *role conflict,* etc. The term *work-life integration* is often used to avoid assuming that work and life domains should be balanced equally in terms of time, which *work-life balance* can entail[45].

According to Kaiser and Ringlstetter (2010), there are two main conceptions of work-life balance, in line with a conflict perspective and an enrichment one. In the former – dominant – conception, work and life are conceived as conflicting with one another in that they are – to some extent at least – incompatible. This conception is inherited from stress theory and theories of role

[45] Here, the generic term "work-life balance" will be used, without however making any statement about what this balance is. I adopt a rather subjective approach to work-life balance perception, in coherence with the findings detailed in chapter 5.

accumulation and implies that human energy and time are fixed and limited and, as a result, the more roles they take on, the bigger the potentiality of strain, overload and conflict (Thompson et al., 2006). This perspective is inherited from classical sociology and is rather concerned with the negative impact that work can have on employees well-being and alienation (Kossek et al., 2011). In the latter, less dominant, approach (namely enrichment, also referred to as *positive spillover* or *role enhancement*) the potentially positive interaction between different life roles is rather looked at in order to take into account the potentially positive role played by work in individuals' lives (Rothbard, 2001; Frone, 2002; Grzywacz and Marks, 2000; Barnett, 1998).

Much of this literature is focused on understanding the organisational and individual antecedents of work-life balance perceptions. In terms of individual antecedents, the role of "*critical events*" in individuals' life cycle has been highlighted (for example marriage, the birth of a child or the sickness of a relative) in accounting for their need for work-life balance measures (Higgins et al., 1994; Morris and Madsen, 2007). A considerable amount of studies have also focused on the role of personality traits, attitudes or values in explaining differences in individuals' perceptions of work-life balance (Geurts and Demerouti, 2003; Morris and Madsen, 2007). Finally, other studies focus on the impact of organisation and job characteristics on work-life balance – in particular work hours, job demands, autonomy, norms around work and non-work relationships and the existence of human resource policies dedicated to the integration of work and family roles (Kossek, 2006; Kossek et al., 2011; Geurts and Demerouti, 2003).

A second, very prolific, area of research concerns the business case of work-life balance initiatives. These studies aim at analysing the outcomes of work-life balance measures (or their absence). They show that work-life integration benefits individuals in a number of ways: they are more satisfied at work and outside of work, report higher levels of happiness and lower physical and psychological levels of strain. A negative sense of work-life balance (which can be due to the overall workload, or a struggle with the cognitive nature of the tasks involved in work) – along with other job characteristics – is indeed one of the main sources of psychosocial risks at work (Sardas et al., 2011; Sardas, 2008; Sardas, 2001). Also, some studies claim that work-life balance initiatives are highly profitable for organisations for their tangible impact on absenteeism, employee retention and turnover rates as well as their more intangible consequences on employee commitment, organisational performance and reputation – see Reindl et al. (2011) or Geurts and Demerouti (2003) for a full review of the business case for work-life balance practices.

Finally, another - comparatively small - strand of research concerns work-place practices and initiatives aimed at favouring work-life balance themselves.

➢ Work-life balance initiatives

As argued by Eikhof et al. (2007: p.326) "*workplace practices figure remarkably little in current work-life balance debate*". Some measures have nonetheless been identified, as summarised by Thompson et al. (2006: p.290) who identify four types of work-life balance organisational initiatives: time strategies, informational strategies, financial strategies and finally direct services.

(1) **Time strategies**: they mostly involve flexible working hours (individuals can adapt their schedules to their personal constraints), reduced load (through different modalities of part-time work) or take different types of leaves (leave of absence, sabbatical leave, parental leave, etc.).
(2) **Informational strategies**: they typically involve stress or time management training or regeneration methods.
(3) **Financial strategies**: financial support can be provided (through family and child bonuses for example).
(4) **Direct services**: it can for example take the form of concierge services or a company nursery.

Initiatives most put forward are flexibility either in terms of scheduling (flexitime) or location (telework and mobile offices) or in terms of amount of work (job sharing, part-time, vacation and leaves) and benefits such as child and elderly care (Kossek et al., 2011; Hill and Morrison, 2013; Leslie B. Hammer et al., 2013). Yet, Ryan and Kossek (2008) argue that much of this literature remains simplistic for it assumes these policies are universal and that the way they may be enacted in different local contexts should be further studied.

In parallel, some studies have focused on identifying success factors and have highlighted the key role played by organisational support – in particular coming from supervisors, but also from co-workers – and work culture in the implementation and adoption of work-life balance measures, or person-environment fit (Kossek et al., 2011; Reindl et al., 2011; Shockley et al., 2013; Andreassi and Thompson, 2008). Yet, Kossek et al. (2011: p.353) argue that "*to date, work–family researchers have not made a significant impact in improving the lives of employees relative to the amount of research that has been conducted*".

Some authors have even taken a more critical stance on the issue to argue that measures involving flexible working hours in fact promote more flexibility on the part of employees, to the benefit of their employers and that these are the measures most widely used, compared with more costly ones such as office kindergartens for example (Eikhof et al., 2007). They also argue that certain life domains are often considered more legitimate (caring responsibilities in particular), at the expense of others. In addition, have also showed how implicit messages surrounding the discourse on work-life balance measures can reproduce existing power relations by constructing them as a privilege rather than supporting them (Mescher et al., 2010).

b. Work-life balance initiatives in professional settings

As argued in chapters 1 and 2, studies of work-life balance initiatives in professional settings are rare given assumptions regarding their incompatibility with professional work and professionals' careerism. Kaiser et al. (2011: p.247-248) even claim that there is "*no empirical research on the use and effectiveness of these initiatives in consulting*, while *due to the complex and demanding structure of a consultant's job profile it is in question whether existing research findings are generalizable to this particular branch*". A few helpful studies have nevertheless been

conducted on the matter, taking into account the specificities of professional work regarding mobility, the project-based organisation of the work, its client-facing characteristics, the frequent importance of work in the self-definitions of professionals and the role of working hours in professional identity, which may make traditional initiatives harder for professionals to use.

Studying the websites of the 25 biggest strategy and management consulting firms in Germany, Kaiser et al. (2011) have showed that the following measures are often advertised by consultancies: work-time reductions, flexible work-times (in particular working time on trust), home office, office days (negotiating with clients that one day at least a week should be spent in the office), support for professional development and coaching, the possibility to take long leaves of absence and supportive services such as childcare services, elderly care services or health and recovery services. Yet, through complementary case studies within three firms and a survey conducted with 800 consultants, they find that office days, home office and flexible working times are actually most offered, but that work time reductions are actually not used by consultants. This draws a more contrasted picture.

The initiatives indeed most discussed in the existing literature are "*flexible working arrangements*", in particular in the form of reduced loads/part-time or flexible working hours (Litrico and Lee, 2008; Litrico et al., 2011; Pinnington and Sandberg, 2013; Walsh, 2012; Perlow, 2012; Whittle, 2005). Perlow (2012), through an experiment conducted at the Boston Consulting Group (BCG), contributed to the implementation of another form of flexible arrangement (the "Predictable Time Off") among 10 teams of consultants: at the beginning of each project, teams would have to meet and set together a schedule allowing each member of the team to plan for one night off (starting at 6pm) every week. The other members of the team would know in advance and organise themselves to take over so that the consultant in question could leave and disconnect entirely from the workplace (it was not expected that they would answer their phones or emails). Another arrangement identified the orientation of professionals who want to improve their perception of work-life balance towards alternative roles – such as permanent associates, non-equity partners or off-counsel in law firms for example (Malhotra et al., 2010; Smets et al., 2012).

Yet, most of these studies lead to rather pessimistic conclusions regarding the success of these measures in professional organisations for various reasons. First, alternative roles imply that professionals are no longer on the career track. Other measures such as the *Predictable Time Off* (PTO) proposed by Perlow (2012) remain very limited in scope: it does not allow consultants to plan for a regular activity nor does it accommodate family life. Others show that broader flexible arrangements (part-time/reduced load, teleworking, etc.) are very rarely used either because they are seen as incompatible with the professional norm (face-time and long working hours remain key indicators of performance and the norm of permanent availability through the use of technology makes the boundaries blurrier between work and life), because they stigmatise their users in terms of career advancement or because they are not supported by co-workers and supervisors (Kaiser et al., 2011). Litrico and Lee (2008) for example argue that if reduced load policies are unsuccessful, it is because partners have a lot of autonomy at the local level (they are focusing on global consultancies) and thus can resist the diffusion of firm-wide policies in practice. As a result professionals themselves are often very pessimistic about the likely positive

impact of work-life balance measures instilled at the corporate level (Pinnington and Sandberg, 2013). This leads Kaiser et al. (2015: p.86) to conclude that "*work-life balance practices do not contribute to alleviating the work-life conflict in Professional Service Firms*". They recommend that work-life balance measures, in professional organisations, be tailor-made to each individual and to ensure there is supervisor support. Similarly, Litrico and Lee (2008) suggest that local initiatives may prove more efficient than firm-wide policies to accommodate work-life balance demands.

Intermediate conclusion

It is at a time when prospects of growth have never been so low (and thus so have prospects of profits) that professional organisations – consulting firms in particular – are challenged in their ability to find new markets for their services and maintain their leverage ratios (while clients' demands are increasingly sophisticated and experienced professionals have their preferences). In parallel, a small body of recent studies seem to challenge the underlying assumptions of the traditional incentive system by highlighting emerging demands for work-life balance in these environments, in turn reinforcing the need for professional firms to question their current ways of working at a time when financial margins seem constrained to partners. Even though the characteristics of professional work (a certain level of autonomy, at least after a few years of experience) should in theory favour arrangements such as flexible working hours, existing studies are rather pessimistic and seem to indicate that formal work-life balance policies do not work in PSFs. Looking at the way demands might be accommodated in practice, through informal and local arrangements might thus be more adapted.

3.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To sum-up, in chapter 1, I developed a genealogy of professional organisations as a research object to argue that – over the past 25 years – research has been mostly preoccupied with accounting for external factors of change within these environments, in turn leaving – for the most parts – the individual out of theories of professional organising. This, I argued, is all the more problematic that a strong assumption about individuals' expectations at work lies at the heart of these firms' incentive system: namely that professionals are all primarily driven by careerism in the form of quick promotions and high pay and bonuses. This led me, in chapter 2, to review the existing literature investigating the experience of professionals at work. After drawing a broad picture of professionals' role expectations, I have argued that much of the literature interested in professionals as workers has been rather critical towards the post-bureaucratic forms of control mobilised in many of the medium-to-large professional service firms and have often depicted professionals as an homogeneous population of willing slaves. This literature is particularly helpful in understanding how professionals are socialised into submitting themselves to a very demanding work routine, but it also often reproduces the assumption that professionals are careerists and that this is the reason why they do not resist the dominant ideologies at play within their organisations. Yet, in chapter 3, I have argued that there are a number of reasons why this assumption should be challenged. First, a number of economic indicators seem to hint that beyond the negative impact of the current economic downturn, consulting may be facing trends towards lower growth rates which seriously challenge their current incentive system. In parallel,

emerging studies seem to indicate that work-life balance, in particular, may be a rising concern within professional organisations in general and consulting firms in particular, which seems to indicate a more contrasted picture than previously thought. If confirmed, this would reinforce the current strain put on the incentive system of these firms, all the more that existing work-life balance policies do not seem to be successful so far.

As a consequence, there is a need to bring the individual experience of professionals back into the study of professional organisations (and more particularly of their incentive system) in order to better understand what attracting, selecting and retaining professionals means today. Studies seem to indicate that work-life balance may be an issue, at least for some professionals, but it is necessary at this point to step back and explore what professionals define themselves as key determinants of their experience at work, why they join their firms in the first place and what later makes them stay or leave. It is only after making this first exploratory step that investigating organisational responses will be possible.

As a result, the research questions addressed in the present study can be formulated as follows:

What does it mean to attract, select and retain the "best" today?

(1) Is there more diversity to professionals' aspirations than promotions and financial rewards?
(2) How do work-life balance demands – if confirmed – impact the organisation of consulting firms?

Overview of chapter 3

Chapter 3 focused more specifically on the case of the consulting industry and aimed at showing why the assumption of careerism discussed in chapters 1 and 2 should precisely be questioned. It led me to argue that debates around the nature of professionals' aspirations at work should be re-opened.

In the first section of this chapter, the economic trends of the French consulting industry were analysed. It highlighted the existence of **conjectural difficulties following the 2008 economic crisis** but also indicated that consulting firms were facing **a more structural trend towards lower perspectives of growth**. This phenomenon was described as having **major consequences on professional service firms' ability to maintain their attractiveness** and their promises of fast careers and high bonuses without growth.

In the second section, a second source of tension for the incentive system of professional organisations is identified: **emerging work-life balance demands**. A review of a small – recent – body of studies indicating the need for professional service firms to address this topic is conducted, which nonetheless highlights the **failure of traditional work-life balance measures in professional settings**.

This led to the formulation of the following research question:

What does it mean to attract, select and retain the "best" today?

(1) Is there more diversity to professionals' aspirations than promotions and rewards?
(2) How do work-life balance demands – if confirmed – impact the organisation of consulting firms?

PART 2: BRINGING THE INDIVIDUAL BACK INTO THE STUDY OF PROFESSIONAL ORGANISATIONS

Chapter 4: Research itinerary

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Introduction

Chapter 3 highlighted the need for the assumption of homogeneous and exclusive careerism to be questioned. For this, I argue that there is a need to bring the study of professionals at work with into that of professional organisations and their incentive system. This is why the choice was made to adopt a research design centred on professionals' accounts of their experience at work, which will be detailed in this chapter. First, the general design of this research relying on both individual and organisational cases will be presented and issues of sensitivity discussed (4.1), before three stages of material collection and analysis (individual career stories, managerial discourse on work-life balance and organisational practices regarding work-life balance) can be detailed (4.2).

4.1 General research design: bringing the individual back into the study of Professional Organisations

Before the way the material was collected and analysed can be described more precisely, the purpose of this first section is to provide an overview of the general research design elaborated for this study, which aims at bringing back the experience of individuals into the study of professional organisations. First, a brief overview of the research itinerary will be provided (4.1.1) before the overall research design – which combines individual case studies with organisational ones – is described further (4.1.2). Finally, the way the sensitive nature of the research topic impacted the research design is addressed (4.1.3), as well as my previous experience as a consultant (4.1.4).

4.1.1 Overview of the research itinerary

Given the sensitivity of the research topic in consulting firms, and its connection to very taboo topics, such as stress and working conditions, the research team (made of myself and my two supervisors, who were also involved in the development of the project) anticipated that gaining access to the field would be very difficult (for further details, see paragraph 4.1.3 below). As a result, the choice was made to try and secure access as early as possible, and both theoretical and empirical works started at the same time and were used to build on one another in an abductive fashion. First, in order to better understand the experience of consultants, 63 interviews with 58 consultants of all ranks within 13 firms were conducted from spring 2011 (some interviews had been conducted before the official start of the PhD in October 2012, as part of my Master's degree project conducted in 2011) to late 2014. In parallel, 25 consulting firms' HR directors or Partners in charge of HR were contacted in order to gather their views on the topic and interviews could be organised within 9 consultancies. This material allowed the research team to gather elements on the managerial discourse surrounding work-life balance and "quality of work-life" in general within these firms.

As the collection of material on the experience of individuals within consulting firms progressed, so did the nature of the discussions with HR directors and partners. Indeed, findings around individuals' tactics to accommodate their aspirations of "work-life balance" emerged relatively rapidly, which led to some precise questions regarding organisational responses to these individual practices. Finally, in early 2014, two consulting firms agreed to take further part in the research, which enabled the

research team to complete the set of individual interviews and gather material on these two consultancies' organisational practices in terms of work-life balance.

All along this iterative process of literature review and material collection, as the analysis progressed, preliminary findings were regularly presented to the academic community – especially in the professional service firms, management consulting and critical management studies fields in particular, but also wider organisation and management communities, through participation in conferences, doctoral workshops and a visiting period at Copenhagen Business School and Lund University, see table 4.1 below. This contributed to the progressive refinement of the research question and the completion of a thorough review of existing literature, but also, and above all, to the evolution of the conceptual lenses used to analyse the material. An initial attempt to understand the experience of individual consultants was indeed framed in terms of role enactment, which was then abandoned in favour of a job crafting analytical lens (see section 4.2.1). Presenting the advancement of the project regularly also allowed me to confirm the relevance of the research question for different audiences and to obtain some preliminary forms of validation of the findings.

An overview of the research process can be found in table 4.1.

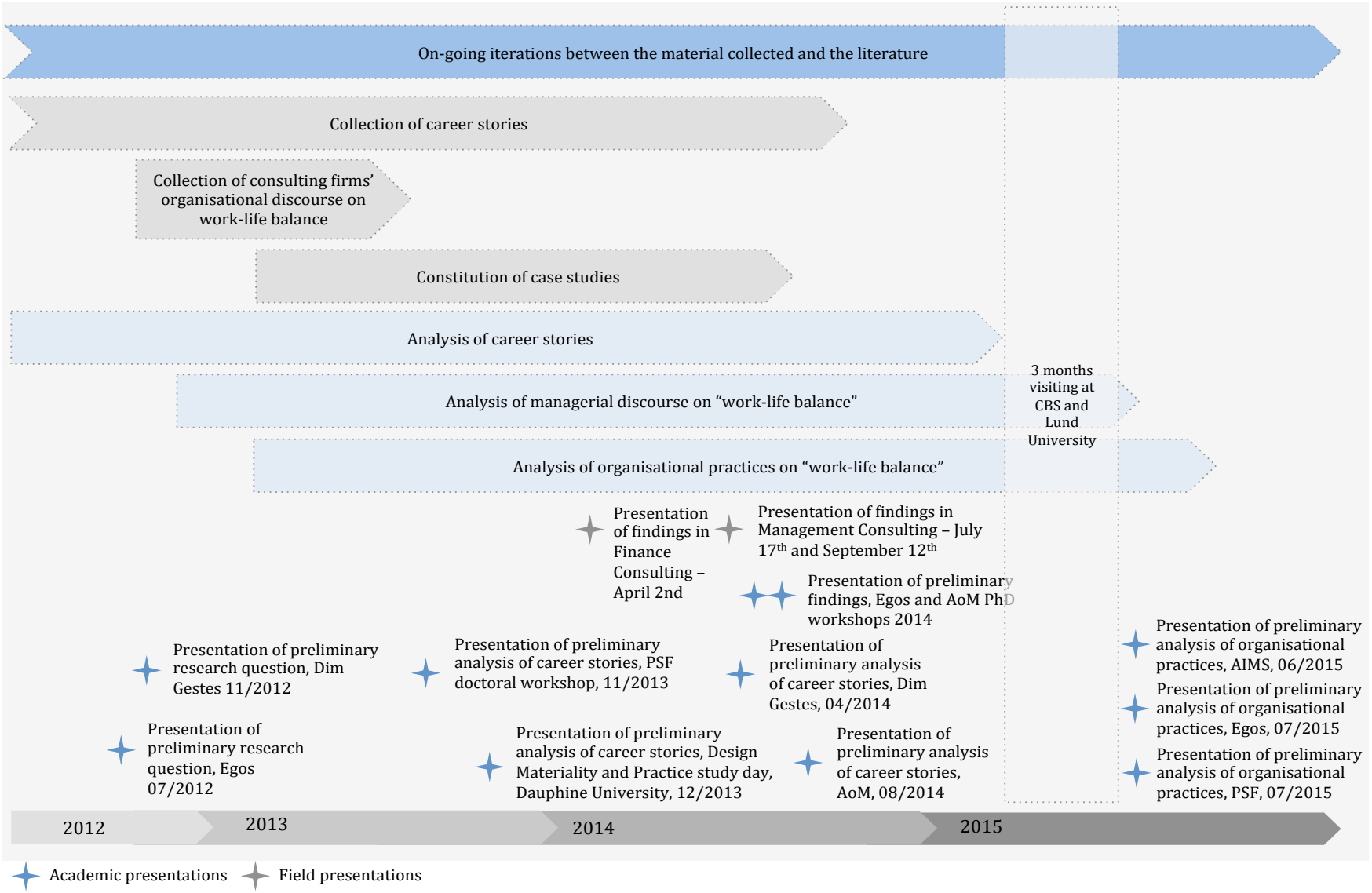

Figure 4.1: Overview of the research project

4.1.2 Research design: a combination of individual and organisational case studies

Here, the overall research design adopted for the present study is detailed further, from its exploratory purpose to the choice to combine individual and organisational case studies, as well as the role played by interviews in material collection.

a. An exploratory study

In line with the arguments developed in chapter 3, the purpose of the present study is to investigate what it means to attract, select and retain the "best" in professional service firms today, by re-opening debates around the way professionals engage in their work within these organisations. This study is thus exploratory in nature and aims to question the idea that professionals are necessarily motivated exclusively and homogeneously by promotions, large bonuses and perspectives of partnership co-optation. It is not exploratory in the sense that it is independent of prior knowledge and theories, as in the seminal paper by Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) for example. Instead, the explorative nature of this study is rather *hybrid* (Charreire Petit and Durieux, 2014), since the different members of the research team had some knowledge of the state of the literature on professional organisations and the signs that seemed to indicate the need to re-explore existing conceptions of professionals (economic trends in the consulting industry, sensitivity of the theme of *burnout* in these environments, and intensive external communication from consulting firms on the topic of *quality of work-life*, for example), before empirical investigations began.

The research process described here is thus rather abductive in the sense that patterns are regarded as emerging from a complex relationship between the material and the different semantic frames used to collect and interpret it all along the research project – see Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009: p.6-7) for a discussion of the concept. The research process thus consisted of a constant back and forth between existing accounts of professionals and professional organisations and consultants' own accounts of their experience at work.

Furthermore, in order to best grasp the individual experiences of professionals, a qualitative research design was adopted. Indeed, *qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: p.3) and qualitative research is thus particularly suited to projects that aim to apprehend the subjective experience of individuals within organisations. As will be described below, this qualitative study relied on the elaboration of both individual and organisational case studies, and privileged interviews, as a mean to access the subjectivity of individual experience.

b. A combination of individual and organisational case studies

According to Stake (2000, p.345 cited by Langley and Royer, 2006, p.8): *case studies have become one of the most common ways to do qualitative inquiry*. Yet the term itself covers a multiplicity of meanings and is subject to conflicting definitions (Ragin and Becker, 1992). The broadest definitions, such as that of Langley and Royer (2006: p.81), who argue that case studies are *the study of at least one case, a case being a bounded system,* include ethnographies, historical studies, surveys, or

historical records, thus not limiting their scope to qualitative data alone. For Stake (2005) the main determinant of case studies is that they are necessarily specific and bounded, even though it might not always be easy to determine these boundaries between case and context. Some conceptions of case studies are rather restrictive, and for example exclude historical data or single methods from the type of material on which a case study can be based (Stake, 2000: p.345, cited by Langley and Royer 2006, p.81). Cases can also have different aims, from comprehension purposes (Guba and Lincoln, 1994) to theory building or testing (Yin, 2009; Eisenhardt, 1989).

Cases can concern organisations, but also groups, individuals, or processes (Langley and Royer, 2006). Here, given that the purpose of the study is to first investigate the subjective experience of professionals at work and then to explore partners and HR directors' take on it, the choice was made to combine individual case studies with organisational ones. As a consequence, the present study has multiple units of analysis – which Denzin and Lincoln (2005: p.3) refer to as *embedded* cases: individual career stories, managerial discourse and finally organisational practices. Here, contrary to many critical identity studies of professionals (see chapter 2 – p.72-76), the purpose is not to study the way consultants receive managerial discourse (without, however, denying the role played by managerial discourse in the formation of identities), but rather to make the opposite journey and analyse how – in professional organisations – partners look at and make sense of the potentially diverse experience of individuals at work. As argued by Langley and Royer (2006: p.82), each case "*can be at least partially described as a whole through one or more stories or narratives that will constitute the main published output of the study (Stake, 2000), or at the very least, an unpublished step in the analysis (Yin, 2003)*." Narratives will indeed play a very important part in our analysis, in particular at the individual level of participants' career stories.

Case studies should be chosen according to their relevance in order to answer the research question, and many different strategies can be followed, from looking for maximum variation between cases to looking for extreme, or on the contrary, typical ones – or for cases that fit the theoretical construct examined (Miles and Huberman, 1994). As will be developed further in the following section (4.1.3), given the sensitivity of the topic and the difficulty of conducting empirical investigations of this nature within consulting firms, it was impossible to follow such guidelines, and cases were rather constituted following the principles of what Girin (1989) called *methodical opportunism*[46]: the ability to seize opportunities when they present themselves and adapt to unplanned circumstances, while nonetheless following a carefully designed research map as much as possible. This implies investigating the practices of firms that agreed to take part in the study (which gave a certain direction to the study, as these firms were confident enough about their practices to let us in) and also adapting to the access they were willing to grant us in the negotiations (little observation could be conducted, for example). This approach allowed me to build two case studies in two different consultancies, which will be referred to as Management Consulting and Finance Consulting.

[46] *Opportunisme méthodique* in French in the original text.

c. The central role of interviews in the research design

As described above, the present study relies on a combination of individual and organisational case studies composed of three different units of analysis: individual career stories, managerial discourse and organisational practices. Even though several sources of material have been used (documentation, meetings, presentations…), interviews play a very important role in this research design.

➢ Learning about individual experience through career stories

Starting at the individual level, the choice was made to collect the *career stories* of consultants. Even though this term has been used in career theory (McMahon et al., 2004; Christensen and Johnston, 2003; Del Corsoa and Rehfussb, 2011), it is not thoroughly defined. In the present study, I label *career stories* as a specific form of life stories focused on the lives of individuals at and around work. Life stories have been used since the early 1920s by the Chicago School of Sociology, in particular in the work of Plummer and colleagues, but it was only in the 1980s that its use began to spread, in line with the narrative and linguistic so-called *turns* in social sciences (Harrison, 2008). Many terms have been used (*life narratives, study of lives, personal history, oral history, narrative study of lives or life history* being the most frequent) but the term *life stories* is currently one of the most employed and is the one that will be used here to refer to "*oral, autobiographical narratives generated through interaction"* (Bertaux and Kohli, 1984: p.217). In other words, a life story is "*the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived (…) a fairly complete narrating of one's entire experience of life as a whole, highlighting the most important aspects*" (Atkinson, 1998: p.8). However, this wholeness of the life story is but a mere illusion: it is necessarily selective and aggregated, as individuals select the parts of their experience that are most meaningful to them, which is precisely what makes them interesting because they allow individuals to make the subjective links between their past experience, the way they interpret them, and their aspirations for the future (Bertaux, 1981). Life interviews, Atkinson (2007: p.233) argues, are "*what gives the clearest sense of the person's subjective understanding of his or her lived experience".* In other words "*an insiders' perspective on a life lived".* This is why they are in line with the purpose of the present study, which aims to bring the experience of individuals back into the understanding of professional organisations.

Life stories are used in a wide variety of disciplines, from history (where they are usually referred to as *oral history*) to anthropology, psychology, sociology, and linguistics, Given this heterogeneity, there is little convergence in uses and methods (Bertaux and Kohli, 1984). Here, the choice was made to follow the broad guidelines of the biographical-narrative interpretative method (Wengraf, 2001), which stipulates that interviews should occur in two phases: in the beginning, a single open question is asked such as: *Tell us your life story* (in this case: *Can you tell us about your career, from graduation on?*). This is usually followed by a second phase in which participants are probed to expand on specific aspects of their stories and more particular topics can be discussed. Further details on how this method was applied can be found in section 4.2.1.

➢ Managerial discourse on work-life balance

As individual career stories started to be collected and as work-life balance quickly emerged as an important theme in the way professionals made sense of their experience at work (see chapter 5 for

further detail), it appeared to be important to gather partners and HR managers' thoughts on the topic. As argued by Alvesson and Kärreman (2000), the term discourse has been widely used in social studies, yet with little coherence. Drawing a map of the different ways in which the term discourse can be mobilised, they have insisted on distinguishing between different levels of analysis (from very local and situated understandings of discourse to universalist ones); as well as between studies that consider discourse and meanings to be entirely – or at least tightly coupled – to those that consider discourse to be autonomous and existing outside of meaning.

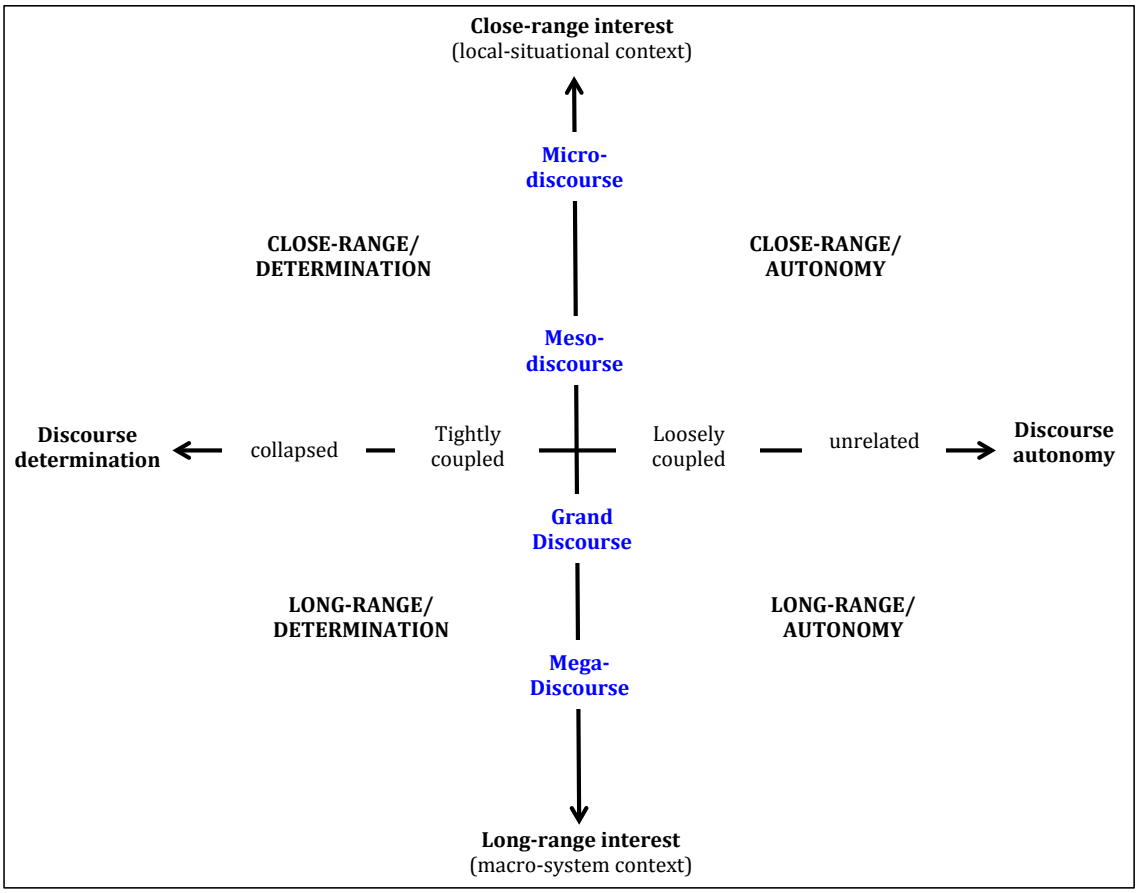

Figure 4.2: Summary of positions in discourse studies, from Alvesson and Kärreman (2000: p.1135)

My interest does not lie in the use of language *per se,* but rather on the actors' broad conceptions of professionalism, professional work and how they construct work-life balance. As a result, discourse is defined here in accordance with Watson (1994: p.113) as a "*connected set of statements, concepts, terms and expressions which constitutes a way of talking and writing about a particular issue, thus framing the way people understand and act with respect to that issue".* According to Alvesson and Kärreman's classification, this would situate the present research within the range of studies that have a rather tightly coupled understanding of meaning and discourse, not in the sense that we necessarily consider discourse to relate *true* facts, but rather in the sense that it is instructive about local constructions of work-life balance within each firm studied. The idea here is to look at interviewees' accounts not as mirrors of reality, but rather in terms of what they produce (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009). The *meso-discourse* held by each of our interlocutors (HR directors and partners), will be studied and, by meeting interlocutors in several firms, the ambition is to somehow "*climb the ladder of discourse"* (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000: p.1139) in order to draw more general

conclusions from these individual accounts and grasp the Grand Discourse (or several Discourses), on work-life balance within consulting firms. Grand Discourse are defined by Alvesson and Kärreman as an "*assembly of discourses, ordered and presented as an integrated frame"* (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000: p.1133). This will be mostly based on semi-directive interviews aiming to elicit managerial views on the broad themes of *quality of work-life* and *work-life balance* in consulting specifically to go beyond the arguments communicated through their websites. For further detail on material collection, see section 4.2.2.

- **Learning about organisational practices from the "mosaic" of individual experiences**

Finally, in order to better understand how consulting firms address work-life balance issues, the choice was made here to follow, again, consultants' accounts of their experience at work. Indeed, within Management Consulting and Finance Consulting, whenever consultants spontaneously evoked a particular tension regarding their perception of work-life-balance, they were asked how this situation was resolved, either by themselves or in accordance with others (client, colleagues, partners). This allowed us to gather information about both the formal and informal policies of these two firms from the perspective of consultants, beyond their external communication (press, websites…). As argued by Becker (1970: p.68), individual case studies are like a mosaic: "*Each piece added to a mosaic adds a little to our understanding of the total picture. (…) Different pieces contribute different things to our understanding: some are useful because of their colour, others because they make clear the outline of an object. No one piece has any great job to do; if we do not have its contribution, there are still other ways to come to an understanding of the whole"*.

In order to better understand the multiple representations developed by actors regarding the arrangements evoked, they were systematically discussed with several actors (the people benefiting from them, their colleagues, supervisors, the staffer, etc.). Formal presentations of the findings were also organised in both consulting firms to gather the feedback of partners and consultants.

4.1.3 The challenge of accessing the field: "work-life balance" as a sensitive topic in Professional Organisations

The sensitivity of the research topic, which had been anticipated, and was confirmed when attempting to access the field, was at the origin of several challenges regarding access, but also material collection and restitution. In order to overcome these challenges, the field of *sensitive research* and its contributions were explored.

a. An initial difficulty to access the research field

Even though professional organisations are very active in communicating around work-life balance externally, the members of the research team could sense very early in the research process that gaining access to consulting firms' practices on the topic would be very difficult. The initial informal contacts we had with partners and HR directors in our networks hinted that there would be

reticence to discuss the topic with us. This was confirmed when, out of the 25 consulting firms contacted[47], only 9 responded favourably to our interview propositions, of which 5 were either directly within our respective personal or professional networks or had been referred to us by someone who was. This initial observation led us to worry about the impact of the sensitive character of the topic investigated on the initial research design described above.

b. Work-life balance in PSFs: a sensitive topic?

Calling this research topic *sensitive* might be surprising. Indeed, professionals cannot be compared to populations like abused women or illegal migrants, and professional organisations are rather often regarded as privileged or elitist environments. Yet, as will be argued here, some dimensions of my research question can be referred to as sensitive, which has had several implications for the collection and restitution of the material.

➢ Sensitive research: a definition

Brief genealogy of sensitive research

For Lee (1993), one of the most cited authors in the area, along with Renzetti (Renzetti and Lee, 1993), sensitive research's heritage comes from the early Chicago School researchers, who were the first ones to direct their interest towards topics that can be considered – according to current analytical grids – to be sensitive. Many of their studies indeed required access to participants' private lives, even though they did not explicitly address the specific methodological and ethical concerns this may have raised. Then, in relation to the social changes of the 1960s and 70s, a number of studies started to focus on topics such as sexuality, domestic violence or alcoholism. In parallel, the development of an "underdog sociology" (in particular through the work of Becker and his colleagues) contributed to the introduction of sensitive objects as relevant for social research. Such topics had been rarely addressed until then and raised a number of issues in terms of data collection because of the difficulty to access research participants. According to Lee (1993), another stream of research has played an important part in the development of sensitive research: contemporary feminism which, through studies of difficult topics such as rape or domestic violence, has contributed to the development of a number of methodological principles aiming to overcome the silence of the population studied. Some of these principles are now widely spread amongst sensitive researchers, such as the establishment of non-hierarchical relations with participants or the development of a quasi-personal relationship with interviewees. Many key authors in the field of sensitive research indeed conduct what can be labelled "feminist" studies (Renzetti and Lee or Pranee Liamputtong, for example). This strand of literature has thus inherited its openly constructivist approach and reflexive stance from these research traditions, as claimed by Lee (1993).

[47] The sample of firms contacted was constructed with exploratory ambitions and was thus based on criteria of diversity in scope (from strategy to IT or HR, for example) and size (only firms with under 10 employees were excluded, and firms over 25 employees in the Paris office were favoured, for their organisational features were more in line with the tensions identified in chapter 3. Firms that were reputed in the press to be active regarding "quality of work-life" were contacted as much as firms that were, on the contrary, reputed for their supposedly bad working conditions.

There are debates in the literature regarding what can be considered "sensitive" and the nature of the studies that can label themselves as such (Lee, 1993). Overall, three different definitions have been given to the term, with three different focuses: the research object itself, the population studied or the impact of the research on both the participants and researchers themselves.

Sensitive research as the study of taboos

A first approach is to consider any study of a taboo topic to be sensitive. Citing Sabri et al. (2010: p.60), Hennequin (2012a: p.30-31) defines taboos as a "*cultural production that is either sacred or magical by nature and dictates behavioural and/or conversational prohibitions, the transgression of which is probably going to lead to sanctions due to the contagious nature of the taboo and the emotional ambivalence of individuals*[48]*"*. Typically, topics like abortion, pornography, or sexual orientation, for instance, would be considered taboo in many cultures, according to this definition. The definition appears relatively strict. Liamputtong (2007), thus attempts to widen it by arguing that even if taboos are all sensitive topics, not all sensitive topics are taboos, strictly speaking. Sensitive research could thus be more inclusively defined as studies that imply gaining access to the "*back regions*" of individual experience (Hennequin, 2012a; Dickson-Swift et al., 2008), and in the case of management studies, of organisations as well. These *back regions* are private spaces for individuals who only allow *insiders* to access them (De Laine, 2000).

Sensitive research as the study of vulnerable populations

A second definition consists of labelling as sensitive any research that targets a so-called *vulnerable* population, either characterised by its marginalisation or its distress. Definitions of vulnerability are numerous and assert, in particular, on a vulnerable populations' lack of autonomy (populations suffering from specific diseases or a handicap, or children, for example) or their belonging to a specific social group subject to a high risk (homeless people, drug addicts or prostitutes, for instance). These populations are often marginalised because of their poverty and the discriminations they are subject to, or their subordination to an abusive form of authority (Hennequin, 2012a). These are often *hidden populations*, which are particularly hard to reach.

Sensitive research as a risky study

A third alternative is proposed by Sieber and Stanley (1988), who suggest that the sensitive character of a research project is rather related to the impact of the study, either for the participants directly or for their community. In their seminal work, Lee (1993) and Renzetti and Lee (1993) argue that this definition needs to be clarified in order to avoid qualifying all social science research as sensitive. They claim that sensitivity implies direct threats following the research project, either for participants or for researchers themselves. As a consequence, following this definition, the sensitive character of a research project has less to do with its object *per se* than with the social context in which it is studied: a topic might very well be considered sensitive in a specific context and not in another. For example, homosexuality might not be as sensitive a topic in New York than it is in Iran.

[48] My translation.

Regarding the types of threats that participants may suffer from, Lee (1993) distinguishes *intrusion threats* from *sanctions* or *political threats*. *Intrusion threats* occur when participants are asked to share personal experiences, in particular when they are painful. When this happens, there is a real risk that the research project may hurt participants by asking them to remember or reflect upon unpleasant experiences. *Sanction threats* can occur when the research project investigates topics that may be considered deviant by society and that participants can suffer from either judiciary sanctions (illegal migrants, for example) or stigmatisation as a result of the study. These participants need to be protected and the absence of negative outcomes ensured.

Furthermore, when the study challenges powers in place, there can be political threats as well, either against participants or the researchers themselves. Sque (2000) nonetheless explains that it is very difficult to anticipate how participants will be affected by the research process and that this is a concern that should be taken into consideration all along the project.

Finally, Renzetti and Lee (1993) show that there can also be negative outcomes for the researchers themselves, whether it involves physical danger (when the study takes place in a war zone, for example), or a possible stigmatisation *vis-à-vis* their scientific community or a feeling of vulnerability when the topics dealt with have a strong emotional component.

➢ Conceptualisation of "work-life balance" in PSFs as a sensitive topic

At first, the idea that studying work-life balance in PSFs might be sensitive may seem odd. It may even be inappropriate to compare the experience of consultants – even when they are struggling – to that of a cancer patient or a homeless person. In these terms, it even seems absurd. Yet, several dimensions of the topic may very well be called sensitive and have generated some concerns close to those of sensitive researchers.

Work-life balance in PSFs: a taboo?

Firstly, if professional service firms – and consulting firms in particular – are very active in communicating the great *quality of work-life* they offer (free food and drinks, social events, access to gyms, etc.), the question of work-life balance *per se* is less open. Indeed, at the organisational level, admitting that some of the "best" consultants can be dissatisfied with their working conditions or their lifestyle, and that they can decide to resign for these reasons, consists in admitting that physical stamina may be more rewarded than competence or quality, and that firms are not in control of the output of the *up-or-out*. In addition, when discussing work-life balance, the issues of burnout and stress are never very far away and are a topic that consulting firms want to keep in their *back regions* that only insiders can access. This was all the more sensitive than at the time, in France, several inter-professional agreements had recently been made regarding psychosocial risks[49] (following in particular a series of suicides occurring in the workplace, at Renault or France Télécom more particularly, that were very mediatised) had recently been made and stipulated that psychosocial

[49] Accord national interprofessionnel sur le stress au travail, 02 juillet 2008
Accord national interprofessionnel sur le harcèlement et la violence au travail, 26 mars 2010

risks should be included in the risk assessment that companies are legally bound to produce in France[50]; which sometimes led to tense social dialogue between management and employees.

At the individual level, asking individuals to share their career stories – which implies asking them to also share their struggles and their doubts when they are used to managing impressions and always displaying a glorified image of themselves to their supervisors and clients – is a real challenge. Lee (1993) argues that research that targets the private lives of individuals, or their very intimate experiences, has a high propensity to be sensitive, even if there is great disparity in the way individuals perceive this topic, and it is likely that this will be the case for consultants, who are not used to discussing what happens when the masks are down.

A vulnerable consultant?

In parallel, sharing one's dissatisfaction with the work-life balance resulting from consulting work – or more broadly, with job expectations – might very well be considered as a confession of weakness. As discussed in chapter 2 (p.78-80), the ideal associated with professional work is one of excellence, dedication, availability and commitment and it leaves no room for struggle. As a result, not only is confessing one's doubts and difficulties a taboo, but some consultants may also fear that they will be marginalised or suffer consequences on their career progression if what they say in the interview is known by their colleagues. Even though the threat evoked here is not similar to that of illegal migrants risking to be sent back to their original country, it is no less real for the consultants we spoke to, who feared that their reputation would be tarnished. In even more difficult cases, some participants had suffered from burnout or were depressed and were, as a result, very vulnerable when discussing their careers. The process could sometimes revive some of the things they were struggling to deal with, or lead them to question decisions they had made in the past and what they were going to do in the future. Only a small subgroup of the participants were in this situation, however, and it is thus perhaps best to talk about a "*potentially vulnerable*" population than a vulnerable one *per se,* as consultants usually have the resources and distance necessary to be in relative control of their situation. With the latter consultants, however, it might be difficult to get beyond the mask.

c. Implications for the research design

According to Lee (1993), there are two specific types of difficulties with sensitive research projects. First, they often pose methodological problems such as access to the field or participants, difficulty in getting participants to talk about their experiences, or ethical concerns regarding consent and the publication of the material. A further challenge concerns the difficulties that researchers can sometimes experience in handling their own emotions throughout the research project (Cowles, 1988). In the case of the present research project, there were three challenges in particular that we were confronted with: (1) access to the research field, (2) access to the *back region* of individuals' stories, (3) the presentation of interview material in publications.

[50] See articles 4121-1, 4121-2 and 4121-3 of the French labour code

- **Access to the field**

The main suggestions made by sensitive researchers to overcome the challenge of gaining access to the research field are rather standard: participants are found by using a snow-balling sampling technique (Miles and Huberman, 1994), which implies asking participants to convince people they know and who trust them to take part in the study. Initial contacts can be made through ads in the press or by spending time in places where participants often go (Renzetti and Lee, 1993). Another suggested method is to use "gatekeepers" or sponsors who know the field and can introduce the research team to potential relevant participants (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008).

Here, the choice was made to combine these methods in order to maximise the chances of gaining access to both individual participants and organisations. Having graduated from a business school – and having had consulting experience myself – I was able to ask several consultants I knew to refer me to some of their colleagues, who then referred me on to other consultants (I will develop this point further in section 4.1.4). So did the other two members of the research team, who contacted some of the consultants they knew and believed would have interesting views on the topic. In parallel, over 100 consultants were contacted through the alumni directory of the business school I originally graduated from[51] in order to diversify the entrance point and ensure a variety of experiences, since the people I knew tended to refer me only to consultants who were dissatisfied or struggling. This method allowed me to start collecting career stories very early on in the research process, in spite of a very low response rate.

In parallel, organisational sponsors were sought in hope of gaining access to firm specific practices (typically HR managers or partners) by applying a similar method: personal networks were mobilised and HR managers were contacted directly by email when no personal connection had been identified. The HR directors of Strategy Consulting 1 and Banking Consulting 1, in particular, referred me to 7 consultants, and one of my former colleagues to 3 more.

- **Access to the *back region* of individuals' experience**

Even if other methods – such as participant observation and action research—are also used, in-depth interviews remain the privileged method in sensitive research. In particular, life history interviews are the best way to understand the depth of participants' experience (Liamputtong, 2007), (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2005), which is consistent with the chosen research design here. Yet, one of the difficulties encountered had to do with building trust with the participants so that they would feel comfortable enough to share some details of their experience that they usually keep to themselves. This is a problem frequently evoked by sensitive researchers, who suggest several techniques, such as adapting one's behaviour to participants (language, posture, tone…), conducting interviews in places where they are comfortable, and practicing active listening (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008; Liamputtong, 2007). In parallel, these authors explain – given that participants may be tempted to hide some elements or disguise reality – that it is essential to pay attention to non-verbal signals and to triangulate the material as much as possible. These suggestions are very much in line with my choice to conduct life interviews and collect people's stories, which emphasises the role of

[51] ESCP Europe

interactions between participants and researchers. In addition, in order to create a favourable environment, most interviews were conducted by a single interviewer, at consultants' convenience.

As developed further in paragraph 4.1.4, my proximity in age and education with the youngest participants often helped create a confiding environment, while my consulting experience helped convince the most senior ones that what they were saying would be understood. Also, adaptation to each individual while conducting the interview in more or less direct ways was a key principle. Yet, in the small number of cases, when, in spite of these principles, I did not manage to go beyond the surface of my interviewees' experience, I tried to draw the line between helping participants tell their story and forcing them to share what they did not want to, even at the cost of the exploitability of the material. Finally, in order to avoid the management of impressions, individual cases were discussed with colleagues, supervisors, partners or HR managers whenever possible and interpretations of the transcribed material were discussed within the research team.

- **The presentation of findings**

Very early on in the data collection process, issues around consent and the use of participants' stories emerged. It was indeed very frequent for consultants to ask at the beginning of the interview what the recordings would be for, where the findings would be published and how their accounts would be used; and we could sense that the way we were answering these questions was determining the way participants would then respond. As explained before, consultants are very aware of their own image and of what may filter through of their sentiments in publications of any kind. It was also unclear, given the iterative nature of the research process evoked earlier, how exactly consultants' career stories would be mobilised. Sensitive researchers often insist on how enlightened consent must systematically be given by the participants (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008), meaning that participants should agree formally on the conditions of their contribution to the research project: the exact nature of the project and all the potentially sensitive areas that may be covered in the interview should be divulged and participants' understanding of the possible outcomes of the research project should be ensured. Participants should also be voluntarily engaging with the project and able to consent for themselves – in the case of a patient in the last stage of a terminal illness for example (Bosk, 2002). This consent, according to these authors, should be preferably obtained in a written form, but that it is not always possible nor appropriate when it increases stigmatisation or intimidates participants (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008).

Here, given consultants' apprehensions, the decision was made not to ask for formal written consent forms to be signed because it may have increased their suspicions. Instead a *process consent* (Liamputtong, 2007) was sought: the purpose of the study and the way interviews would be conducted was explained thoroughly at the beginning of the interviews, as well as the purpose of the recording, which was to be shared within the research team exclusively. It was agreed upon that any *verbatim* quotes would be entirely anonymised, and that for any other type of use of the material (typically for their whole stories to be told) their consent would be sought again. It was also agreed that final versions of publications would be sent out to them prior to their public release and that they would be able to share any discomfort or worry they had about the way they had been anonymised, if quoted. It was also stated that they could reach out to us if they had any questions in

the meantime. This is common practice on many research projects, but the sensitivity of the topic led me to explicit my approach to reassure the participants.

Regarding the anonymisation of participants, the choice was made to systematically change names, dates, locations and anonymise firms (both consultancies and clients). This is a fairly common practice beyond this field, but there is – with sensitive topics – a real dilemma around what can be divulged and to what extent (Hennequin, 2012b). Some authors even practice self-censorship (Adler and Adler, 1993) or allow participants to select whether information can be published or not (Oakley, 1981). In any case, all agree that it is up to the research team to make choices in this respect and to arbitrate between the impact it may have on individuals and the interest level of the material. This is why, as developed earlier, the choice was made to anonymise the material with empathy and benevolence for participants, and to share final publications with them to avoid discomfort. This is, however, not ideal since some participants may be uncomfortable not with the way their accounts were anonymised, but rather with the way they were analysed.

4.1.4 Reflections on the status of the researcher

Reflexivity is emphasised as being a key component of sensitive research (Lee, 1993; Renzetti and Lee, 1993; Liamputtong, 2007), but, more generally, researchers' awareness of their own subjectivity –and how it impacts the choices made along the research process— is increasingly called for in management studies (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009; Allard-Poési and Perret, 2014). In the previous pages, some steps have already been made in this direction, but one particular aspect still has not been addressed fully and requires some attention: my previous experience as a consultant. Researchers are auto-biographers, even against their will, explains Bouilloud (2009). I have indeed cumulated three years of experience as a junior consultant in three different consulting firms[52] and I have not chosen to study professional organisations out of mere coincidence. My own experience had given me the feeling that work-life balance was indeed a topic of interest before I started my PhD. However, even though I had unpleasantly long working hours during my consulting experience in London, this is not what determined my re-orientation towards research, nor would I say that I ever identified as a consultant. Yet, over my three years in consulting I heard many of my colleagues and friends (about one third of ESCP Europe graduates choose consulting as a first job) complain about working hours, saying they would *leave as soon as (they) became manager(s)* or tell me many stories of burnout and women being marginalised after their pregnancies. These stories seemed to operate as strong myths within their organisations and I was intrigued by what they signified, even though I did not have first-hand experience of them. Reading about professionals and professional organisations helped me put this intuition into words and use it as a basis for the initial research questions that guided my early explorations. Discussing the early interviews with my supervisors allowed me to formulate the principles that would be central to my research design:

[52] To be more precise, I worked for one year as an intern for Orga Consultants' HR consulting practice, now belonging to Sopra Consulting. Then, I followed the partners of the practice who decided to create their own HR consultancy – Creac'h Consulting – and worked part time for them for one year as I was completing an MRes. I then decided to live in London for a year, during which I worked for a small consulting firm called SHM, providing research, coaching and advice to multinationals.

interviews should be left very open and assumptions about the experience of consultants should be avoided (neither expecting them to be complying careerists nor exploited victims); let them define what matters to them by themselves.

My experience as a consultant has been helpful in several regards. First, even if it was not systematically the case, mentioning that I had been a consultant or that I had graduated from ESCP Europe often helped create a bond with the youngest consultants, who probably felt more understood. (In some instances, however, it may have had the opposite effect and led some consultants to fear that we would have friends in common, or that because of the age proximity they did not free to share their experience without being judged). I was also familiar with the professional jargon, the organisation of consulting firms, and management consulting projects, which allowed me to ask questions in participants' own terms and decode some of their answers. Furthermore, because I have remained quite close to the partners of the HR consultancy where I worked, and regularly discuss the management of their firm with them, it helped me, in some cases, demonstrate to more senior interviewees that I was aware of the issues they were facing and understood their activities. Additionally, discussing the work regularly with my PhD supervisors, who had knowledge of other industries, helped bring other perspectives into my analysis.

4.2 Multiple parallel stages of material collection and analysis

Now that the choices made in terms of research design have been explicated, it is possible to describe further the different stages of the research process. Given the multiplicity of steps in analysis, the choice was made to detail the way the material was analysed as the argumentation progresses and as findings are exposed (in chapters 5 and 6). Broad rationales for how the material was analysed will, however, be provided here, and references to the exact pages where a more thorough account of the analysis can be found will be systematically indicated. First, the way individual career stories were collected and analysed will be presented (4.2.1), before the managerial discourse on work-life balance (4.2.2) and finally the organisational practices of Management Consulting and Finance Consulting (4.2.3).

4.2.1 Individual career stories

The collection of individual career stories plays a major part in the research design. As a result, and following some of the contributions of sensitive research, the first stage of research consisted in meeting with consultants from all ranks within a wide variety of consultancies in order to gather their experience in the form of their career stories.

a. Constitution of the participant base

The constitution of the participant base occurred in two phases. First, a combination of *snowballing* and *gatekeeper* techniques was used in order to gain access to the first participants. Over a hundred alumni of ESCP Europe were contacted by email (only three consultants replied

favourably), personal contacts of the three members of the research team were solicited to either participate directly in the project or to refer other consultants. Some of the HR directors who agreed to take part in the study (see paragraph 4.2.2) also referred some consultants to me. The result was the collection of 23 career stories of consultants at all levels (from junior consultants to partners, as well as former consultants) from 11 different consulting firms.

Second, when access was finally secured to Management Consulting and Finance Consulting, further data collection was conducted at the individual level within these settings. This way, two new sets of career stories could be added to the initial one (17 in Management Consulting and 18 career stories Finance Consulting). The research team made a proposition regarding who should ideally take part in the study (consultants of all ranks and situations: whether considered successful, having difficulties, feeling satisfied or unsatisfied, as well as alumni, in order to understand what pushed them to leave) and a list of names was then put together by the HR managers and managing partners of each firm. There was an initial fear that this would allow them to choose to present their firm in a certain light. However, even though some elements may have stayed in the back regions of both firms, there was a real diversity of viewpoints from the consultants who took part in the study. It should nonetheless be noted here that scheduling interviews with Management Consulting's participants sometimes proved to be very challenging, since some consultants either did not reply to solicitations or cancelled several times. When consultants did not reply they were systematically sent a reminder once and if they still did not choose to reply after that they were considered to have changed their minds about taking part in the study.

Here is an overview of the participant base:

Status	Cohort	Management Consulting	Finance Consulting	TOTAL
Junior Consultant	2 (+1)	1 – vs. 2 initially planned	3	**6**
Senior Consultant	6	3	3 (+1)	**12 (+1)**
Manager	5	4	3	**12**
Senior Manager	4 (+1)	3	2	**10 (+2)**
Director	3 (+2)	1 – vs. 2 initially planned	n/a	**3 (+1)**
Partner	1	3 – vs. 4 initially planned	5	**9**
Alumni	2	2	2	**6**
TOTAL	**23 (+4)**	**17**	**18 (+1)**	**58 (+5)**

Table 4.1: overview of the participant base (in between brackets are follow-up interviews)

Overall, 58 career stories were thus gathered through 63 interviews, within 13 different settings. For details regarding the participant base, see appendix.

b. Collection of career stories

Broadly following the principles of the biographical-narrative interpretative method (Wengraf, 2001) detailed in paragraph 4.1.2, consultants were openly asked to tell the story of their career in the first part of the interview. The interview was deliberately left very open at first to encourage individuals to formulate their own narratives of their experience as a consultant. After having been

explained the purpose of the study and where it could be published, the broad lines along which interviews would be anonymised, and having been assured – when relevant – that no individual account of interviews would filter back to the partners allowing the study, participants were typically asked the following question: *Can you please tell us the story of your career, from university on?* Then, in the last part of the interview, participants were probed to expand on specific moments in their careers and to explore further themes such as evaluation, job expectations, aspirations for the future, etc.

However, I quickly realised that not all participants were comfortable with these broad guidelines. Even though, in many cases, the question was enough to get the interviewee to talk almost without interruption for the next hour or two, in some instances, participants summarised their careers within 5 minutes and waited for more questions. As argued by Chase (2000), inviting participants to tell their own stories is not always an easy task, as participants often want to provide the researchers with responses that are relevant to their area of interest, and researchers often fail to formulate questions that encourage people to tell their own stories. Chase explains that it is often not until you realise that you get stories in response to a specific question that you know it is a good question, one that invites participants to tell their own narratives. As a result, and following the idea that life-story interviews are rather a process than a method (Atkinson, 2007) – meaning that there is no ready-made recipe on how to trigger stories and make participants comfortable enough to share their experiences – I adapted the level of directiveness of the interview to each individual participant. In parallel, I also paid attention to the specific questions, which – overall – seemed to trigger interesting accounts, in order to use them more systematically. A question such as "Have you ever thought about leaving the firm?" for example, often triggered interesting stories from individuals who had until then depicted a "perfect" image of their journey as a consultant and had evoked little struggles.

Overall, interviews lasted between 30 and 160 minutes, with an average of 80 minutes. They took place at consultants' convenience: whether in their firms' offices (systematically the case for Finance Consulting's consultants, who were allowed to take time during the day for the study) or in coffee shops after working hours, or in restaurants that were close to clients' premises over lunch breaks. Out of these 63 interviews, 12 were conducted with one or the other member of the research team and I conducted 51 by myself. The purpose of these 12 interviews was to facilitate the discussion of the material and the findings within the research team. It was, however, limited to a small number of interviews, as building a trusting relationship and comfortable environment quickly appeared to be easier with one interviewer only. 39 of these interviews were recorded. The interviews that were not recorded were either the first interviews for which the choice not to record was made due to the emerging sensitivity of the topic (after the way the material would be treated and the way the sensitivity of the topic could be handled were clarified, it felt more appropriate to ask participants if they could be recorded) or later interviews during which the participants either refused to be recorded or behaved in a way that indicated they were not comfortable with it. Whenever interviews could not be recorded, extensive notes were taken and systematically transcribed verbatim within 24 hours of the interview.

c. *Elements of analysis*

Even though this analysis was based on the narrative collected, it did not rely, strictly speaking, on *narrative analysis* – i.e. the analysis of the narrative structure of the story being told – and rather focused on a *content* or *meaning* analysis of the stories (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008: p.217-219). Yet, the first step of the analysis did consist in identifying the *tensions* in the narratives collected through the individual career stories. The interview material was then coded in order to identify all the tension points in consultants' career stories and the broad themes they seemed to refer to: promotion, project orientation and work-life balance. A further step was taken to identify the different aspirations of consultants regarding these three aspects of their careers in participants' accounts (for further detail see chapter 5, p.153-154).

At first, I thought these different tensions were associated with different ways of enacting one's role (tensions regarding promotion would be evoked by consultants who were enacting their roles in a *careerist* way, while those who were experiencing work-family conflict were enacting it in a more *balanced* way – and those experiencing tensions having to do with the content of the work were enacting it as *specialists* or *generalists*, etc.). However, as the analysis progressed, I realised that the tensions were not specific to a certain form of role enactment and that in many cases they could occur at different points in one's career or even simultaneously. Moving away from a risk of essentialising consultants and their experience, attention thus shifted towards the need to understand how consultants resolved these tensions whenever they occurred. Further analysis showed that they were often very active in trying to elaborate solutions, which led to the adoption of the job crafting framework (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001) to analyse the techniques that they employ when confronted with such situations. The interview material was then coded according to this framework in order to identify all the techniques employed by consultants to either ensure they will be rewarded for their efforts, be assigned the projects they want, or manage their work-life balance (for further detail see chapter 5 p.167-168).

Finally, the last step consisted of analysing some of the ambiguities identified in the discourse of some consultants while studying their job crafting activities (for further detail see chapter 5, p.187). As a result, "craft"[53] forms of coding were used in order to help make sense of the voluminous material collected, and to identify broad patterns in consultants' accounts of their experience at work. Yet, the choice was made to combine the presentation of the outcomes of this coding process with vignettes made of four consultants' stories, in order to get a broader picture of the way the different elements analysed play out in consultants' accounts of their experience at work and to avoid erasing these complexities in the coding process. These stories were chosen for their illustrative power regarding the three different steps of analysis (identification of tensions, of job crafting techniques in particular)

[53] "craft" coding means here that no software was used and the interview material was coded by hand. This was a deliberate choice in order to avoid disintegrating the career stories as much as possible and separating codes from the story they were extracted from.

4.2.2 Managerial discourse on "work-life balance"

The second major step of the research design (which took place a relatively shortly time the first career stories were collected) involved gathering HR managers and partners' views on the topic of work-life balance, which the first interviews confirmed was one of the three main sources of tension in consultants' stories.

a. Constitution of the managerial participant base

In parallel to the collection of career stories, HR managers, Managing Partners and partners in charge of HR were contacted in order to gather their views on the topic of *quality of work-life*, between spring 2011 (some of them were contacted during the Masters research project) and summer 2013. This broad term was deliberately chosen because the three of us thought it would evoke a more positive response than other – more direct – terms such as *work-life balance* or *psychosocial risks* (the first wave of emails sent out to contact firms did contain these terms and no response was received in return).

As detailed earlier, 25 firms were contacted. Out of these, 9 responded positively and out of these 9 participant firms, 5 were either direct acquaintances of one of the members of the research team or had been referred by someone they knew.

A description of this sample of participants can be found in table 4.2:

Firm	Size[54]	Interlocutors	Meeting/interview
Strategy Consulting 1	Large, global	HR director Partner in charge of HR	2 (individual interviews)
Strategy Consulting 2	Large, global	HR director	1
Strategy Consulting 3	Large, global	HR director	1
Banking Consulting 1	Medium, French	HR director	1
Banking Consulting 2	Medium, French	HR director	1
Operational Performance Consulting	Medium, French	HR director	1
IT Consulting	Large, global	HR director Partner in charge of HR Partner in charge of "quality of work-life" programmes	3 (individual interviews)
Management Consulting	Medium, French	HR Manager Managing Partner	2 meetings with HR Manager and Managing Partner
Finance Consulting	Medium, French – presence abroad	HR Manager Managing Partner Partner in charge of HR	2 meetings with HR Manager and Managing Partner 1 interview with Partner in charge of HR

Table 4.2: Sample of consultancies having participated in the research

54 Following the typology used by FEACO (the European Federation of Management Consultancies Associations), small here refers to actors with under 500.000€ in sales, medium to actors which make over 500.000€ in sales and large the top 20 firms.

Overall, 15 interviews were scheduled with 9 HR directors/managers and 6 partners within these 9 consulting firms.

b. Collection of managerial discourses

During these interviews, a semi-directive interview guide was used to cover the history of each firm, as well as its HRM practices (in particular regarding recruitment, selection, evaluation, promotion, development and retention) and to understand whether work-life balance was an issue for them. These interviews were systematically conducted on their premises and were not recorded for confidentiality and sensitivity reasons. However, extensive notes were taken and systematically transcribed *verbatim* within 24 hours of the interview and aggregated whenever several of the authors were present (which was the case in 9 of these 15 interviews). Even though interviews were the main source of data, other sources of documentation were used as well (in particular press articles and the web-sites of the firms in question) in order to inform our understanding of the *meso-discourse* of each firms' management of quality of work-life/work-life balance.

c. Elements of analysis

Phillips and Hardy (2002: p.87) have highlighted the craft nature of discourse analysis and have called on authors to avoid systematic methodologies in the matter. Given the small size of the data set, interviews were openly coded by hand to identify key recurring themes and regroup consulting firms according to their representations on the issue. Two types of *Grand-Discourse* (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000) on work-life balance were then identified: (1) the first one constructs consultants leaving for this kind of reason as a *natural* phenomenon, (2) and the second one as a phenomenon that requires *vigilance*. For further details regarding the analysis of this material, see chapter 6 (p.197-198).

4.2.3 Organisational practices

Finally, two case studies were constituted in order to analyse the practices implemented in two different consulting firms to respond to existing work-life balance demands. Here is an overview of the way these cases were elaborated and analysed.

a. Constitution of the case studies

Interviews with HR directors and partners served a dual purpose: collecting the managerial discourse on work-life balance in consulting firms, but also identifying firms that would agree to take part in the study by allowing us to connect their sentiments with those of the consultants they hire. Management Consulting and Finance Consulting both agreed to do so. Their characteristics and respective motives for taking part in the study will be presented briefly in the following paragraph (4.2.3.b) and detailed further in chapter 6 (p.208-225).

Initial contacts were made with both firms between February and April 2013. A first meeting took place following the guidelines evoked in the previous section on the collection of managerial discourses, after which a proposition for collaboration was elaborated detailing the purpose of the

study, what it would imply (number of interviews, topics covered, etc.) and what both management teams could learn from it. As both firms accepted, a second meeting was scheduled in order to expand on some of the topics covered in the first interview (typically the nature of the work-life balance arrangements in place and the challenge faced by both firms in implementing them), to define a list of participants and to identify a list of documents that could be useful to better understand the settings. Waves of interviews were then organised in both firms and, following a phase of analysis of the material, findings were presented.

In Finance Consulting, findings were presented in front of the Managing Partner, the partner in charge of HR and the HR manager only; while in Management Consulting the findings were first presented in front of the Managing Partner and the HR manager before they were then presented in front of the entire company. As will be developed in chapter 6, Finance Consulting appeared to have implemented some original solutions to respond to what could be broadly labelled "work-life balance demands".

Here is an overview of the way these two case studies were constituted:

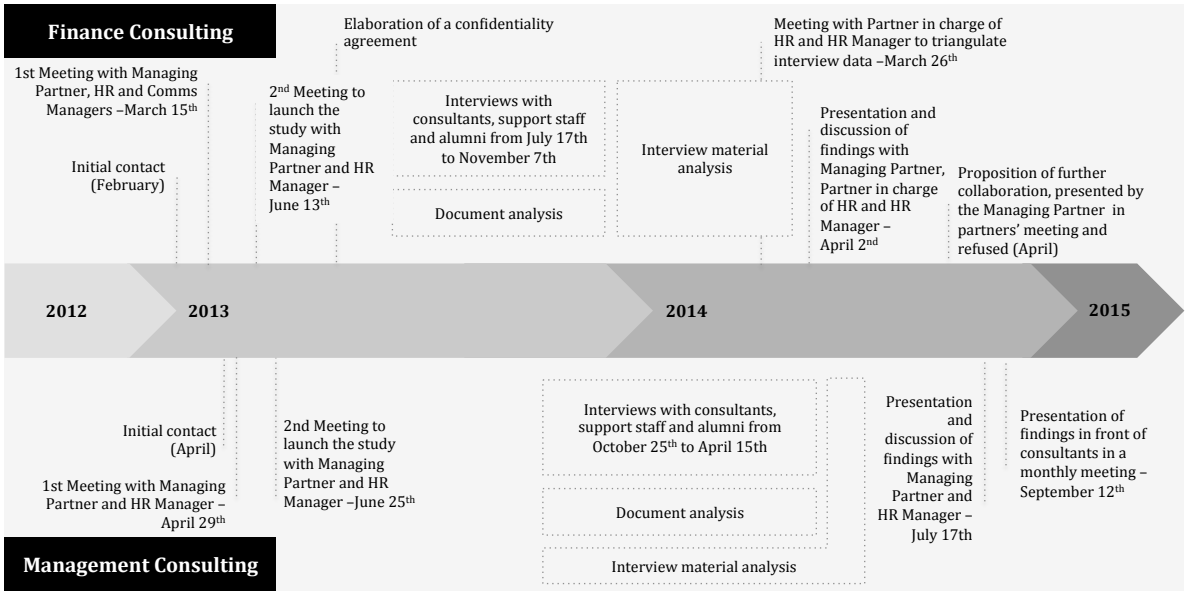

Figure 4.3: overview of the main steps in the constitution of the case studies

As a result, the two case studies were constituted based on four types of material: meetings, interviews, documents and presentations. The interviews were collected following the life-story methodology presented in section 4.1.2, even with the non-consulting staff.

Here is a summary of the interview material collected in both firms:

Status	Management Consulting	Finance Consulting
Junior Consultant*	1	3
Senior Consultant*	3	3
Manager*	4	3
Senior Manager*	3	2
Associate Director	1	n/a
Partner*	3	5
Support Staff	2	3
Alumni*	2	2
TOTAL	19	21

* These interviews were also used as individual career stories – see table 4.1

Table 4.3: overview of interview material in Management Consulting and Finance Consulting

In terms of documentation, the main source of information was both firms' *Best Employer ranking* application file. Both have indeed applied to the same ranking for several years and provided us with related documentation, which included survey results, the benchmark built by the ranking organisation, and an application file in which participants describe the entire scope of their HR practices. This completed the material collected in the interviews on the managerial discourse related to work-life balance in both firms, which could then be discussed during the interviews with consultants, and also provided contextual information. Other sources of information were the personnel figures provided by both firms, as well as the templates of their evaluation forms. Finally, presentations of preliminary findings allowed us to gather participants' thoughts on our findings, which played an important role in their refinement.

Table 4.4 presents an overview of the material collected for the elaboration of the two case studies.

Type of material	Material Collected Management Consulting	Material collected Finance Consulting	Content
Meetings	▪ 2 meetings with Managing Partner and HR Manager to initiate the study	▪ 1 meeting with Managing Partner, HR Manager and Communication Manager to initiate the study ▪ 1 meeting with Managing Partner and HR Manager to initiate the study ▪ 1 meeting with HR Manager and Partner in charge of HR	▪ Context ▪ Organisational discourse on work-life balance ▪ Triangulation of career stories
Interviews	▪ 19 interviews at all levels (consultants, partners, support staff and alumni)	▪ 21 interviews at all levels (consultants, partners, support staff and alumni)	▪ Context (in particular with partners and long term employees) ▪ Career stories ▪ Individual accounts of organisational practices
Documents	▪ Personnel figures ▪ Rating forms ▪ « Best Employer » ranking documentation o Survey results (2012, 2013) o Survey benchmark (average scores and industry scores) o Application file describing organisation and HR practices	▪ Personnel figures ▪ Rating forms ▪ « Best Employer » ranking documentation o Survey results (2012, 2013) o Survey benchmark (average scores and industry scores) o Application file describing organisation and HR practices	▪ Context ▪ Organisational discourse
Presentations	▪ 1 meeting to discuss findings with Managing Partner and HR Manager ▪ 1 presentation of findings in the firms' monthly meeting	1 meeting to discuss findings with Managing Partner, Partner in charge of HR and HR Manager	▪ Elements of validation of preliminary analysis

Table 4.4: overview of the material collected for the elaboration of the case studies

b. Brief overview of the two settings: Management Consulting and Finance Consulting

A brief overview of Management Consulting and Finance Consulting and the services they offer will be presented here. However, for more coherence in the progression of the argumentation, the two firms – their histories and organisations and the reasons why they accepted to take part in the study – will be detailed further in chapter 6 (p.208-225).

➢ Management Consulting: a generalist organisation advice provider

Management Consulting was founded in 1999 and now employs around 120 consultants and operates in 20 countries with a turnover of over 20M€. It now has offices in three countries.

Clients can turn to Management Consulting in a variety of situations, whether they are facing technological or regulatory evolutions, need to coordinate their international operations, or are merging or implementing changes to their organisations, for example. Management Consulting currently positions itself as a generalist actor, responding to these challenges through three broad offers, which can be adapted to a variety of sectors:

- **Support to top management** (risks analysis, analysis of the impact of regulatory evolutions, communication plans, organisation of events…)
- **Operational efficiency projects** (cost killing, implementation of shared-service centres, process audits, or definition of functional needs – IT in particular)
- **Change management** (project ownership assistance, project management assistance, alignment between strategy and IT programmes, and accompaniment of mergers and acquisitions, for example)

Management Consulting is broadly present in three sectors: Energy and Environment, its historical sector of expertise, but also Financial Services, as well as Public Services. The Energy and Environment and Financial Services sectors account each for about 40% of the activity of the firm in terms of sales, while the rest can be mostly attributed to the Public Services sector (health, transport, media)[55]. Recently, Management Consulting also started adapting its portfolio of offerings to each functional specialty (finance, HR, IT, procurement…).

As a result, Management Consulting's portfolio of activities is relatively broad and thus relies on generalist skills. Management Consulting's Managing Partner herself claimed that *there is no need for experts* in the firm and that the projects mainly involve what they call *human skills*. In other words, projects rely on relational know-how: being able to collect information, report on the advancement of a project, present and gather key financial information, select relevant information and data, conduct meetings and workshops, etc. Another partner even argued that they "*don't have heavyweight consultants, but rather people who are relatively good at everything and sensitive to the human dimension of organisations*". As a result, Management Consulting mostly hires business school graduates among the junior ranks. They also recruit some engineers, but explain that it is not always easy to attract them, given the relatively non-technical nature of the

[55] Source: internal documentation, 2012 data

job. They also regularly recruit more senior profiles, but explain having to struggle to integrate them into the *Management Consulting way of doing.*
When more experience or specific skills are required, Management Consulting frequently hires freelance consultants to complement their internal teams. Over the years they have constituted a pool of freelancers they are used to working with, made up of about 30 people. These freelancers are often put in management positions on projects, and are thus in charge of the younger consultants, which can prove problematic because they have no internal responsibility over their professional development.

Right from its foundation, Management Consulting has wanted to have what they call *humanist values* and, as such, to pay attention to the satisfaction of their consultants and the quality of their working conditions. However, when we met them, they were worried their consultants (especially the younger ones) were increasingly dissatisfied and they were looking for an external opinion.

- **Finance Consulting: a specialist actor**

Finance Consulting was created in 2004 and today employs over 250 consultants and has opened offices in 9 countries.

Clients typically hire Finance Consulting in the following situations: (1) when they want to transfer or acquire a business, (2) when they have to make a critical financial decision, (3) in cases of litigation or arbitration, or (4) when restructuring some part of their business. These situations may require the mobilisation of one or several of the following service lines offered by Finance Consulting: transactions and valuation, litigation, recovery and business analytics.

- **Transaction and valuation**: This first, historical, service provided by Finance Consulting is that of support to clients who want to acquire, transfer or merge businesses. It typically involves assessing the financial health and performance of a given company or a specific branch. It is often associated with valuation (which can also be required for litigation and recovery projects). Valuation consists of determining the value of specific assets (bonds, actions, etc.) or of entire companies or lines of activities. It can require the elaboration of complex financial models and simulations.
- **Litigation and arbitration**: A second major line of services offered by Finance Consulting concern litigations and arbitrations. Whenever a company is facing a dispute (the reasons for this to happen can vary considerably: from tax issues to intellectual property rights or unfair competition, for example), lawyers need financial experts to evaluate the facts from an economic point of view. Finance Consulting's services can be solicited in various ways: in the early stages of the conflict so that a pre-litigation agreement can be reached, during mediation, arbitration or before the courts. Partners in charge of litigation projects can be asked to testify and present their conclusions in court. Litigation projects are different from other projects in that they often take place in different phases over a long period of time (several years usually), as each party's lawyers respond to one another.
- **Recovery**: The recovery line of service is offered to companies in difficulty who need help analysing their financial situation internally, but also for their investors or creditors for

example. Finance Consulting's teams are then asked to conduct a thorough analysis of the firms' financial situation and future prospects, help managers re-negotiate with the banks and potentially to assist the transfer of the activity by drafting a business plan or carrying out a due diligence for the vendor. Contrary to other service lines, recovery projects typically require teams to travel to the client's site.

- **Business analytics**: Finally, Finance Consulting opened a business analytics line of services in 2009, which basically competes with strategy consulting firms on some of their offers. It involves market and economic analysis: market segmentation, identification of investment opportunities, portfolio management, business plan review, and elaboration or market modelling. Overall, the historical activity of Finance Consulting (transactions and valuation) remains the dominant one today, with a volume worth of approximately 40% of sales in the Paris office. Litigation, recovery and business analytics each account for about 20% of sales.

As a result, with the exception of litigation projects that come and go and can last several years, most projects are one-off projects and relatively short (around a month on average). The other specificity of this type of advice is that it is often solicited in emergency situations. As a result, the visibility of partners on their up-coming projects is usually around three weeks. Projects typically involve the supervision of a partner, the project management of a Manager and the work of an associate and an analyst. Partners are involved in the production of the work, given the low replicability of assignments: a tailor-made reasoning needs to be made project after project.

Finance Consulting's competition is diverse. Their historical lines of services (transactions and valuations) are still present today within the Big Four, and are also provided by the Mergers and Acquisitions departments of investment banks. Strategy consulting firms also compete with Finance Consulting, especially when it comes to Business Analytics projects and due diligence. Finally, in France, there is another consultancy operating on the same market, which is a spin-off from the same leading accountancy and competes with Finance Consulting, especially regarding transactions and valuation projects. The partners of Finance Consulting nonetheless claim that no other actor, in Europe, is able to provide their whole range of services.

In spite of the variety of projects that Finance Consulting can take on, consultants need to master a relatively common set of accounting and financial skills: making sense of a balance sheet, a P&L, and being able to calculate key ratios. This explains why the partners chose polyvalence for their younger consultants. They say they believe that the best way for consultants to acquire the portfolio of skills required to conduct projects is to work on all service lines because they become more open to the variety of situations in which financial analysis is required. Yet, they also explain that – apart from some modelling skills required for valuation projects and some parts of business analytics – the set of skills shared by all consultants is not highly technical and can be mastered within more or less two to three years. They also insist on the behavioural skills that consultants need to develop in order to be able to communicate their findings to their interlocutors, who do not always master the same technical skills, which takes longer. Polyvalence is thus expected of all junior consultants and interviewees explained that it was impossible to refuse a project once it was assigned, even though preferences could be expressed.

As a result, their consultants mostly come from the French elite business schools and have typically majored in corporate finance and done an internship in accounting or investment banking. Finance Consulting doesn't compete on the job market with other non-financial consultancies. Instead, their potential candidates may hesitate between joining them or trading companies, or the mergers and acquisitions departments of investment banks, which are famous for their long working hours and competitive working conditions (Michel, 2011). There is thus a need for Finance Consulting to attract these potential candidates, which partners say they believe cannot only be done by paying high salaries, but also by offering them an *attractive workplace.*

For this reason, offering a good "quality of work-life" has always been part of Finance Consulting's corporate project and, when we met them, they were at a moment of their history when they wanted to know how their consultants received their Human Resources policies and wondered whether they would be able to maintain them in the future given their very quick and important growth.

c. *Elements of analysis*

In order to analyse the two cases, a first intra-case analysis was conducted for each of the two firms (Miles and Huberman, 1994). From the individual career stories, the accounts of job crafting that appeared to lead to specific *organisational arrangements* to accommodate work-life balance were identified. I label as *organisational arrangements* any formal or informal adjustment that requires the modification of usual rules, procedures or routines to accommodate the individual wishes, preferences or constraints of specific consultants. Then, an inter-case analysis was conducted to compare the arrangements identified in both firms, which resulted in the identification of a gap in favour of Finance Consulting. Further analysis of the conditions underlying the implementation of these arrangements was conducted in order to account for such a discrepancy. For further details regarding data analysis see chapter 6 (p.225-226).

Below is an overview of the material collected for all the different stages of the study:

Phase	Material collected	Analysis
Career stories	▪ 58 career stories of consultants collected through 63 interviews	Analysis of tension points, see p.153-154 Analysis of job crafting accounts, see p.167-168 Analysis of ambiguities in discourse, see p.187
Managerial discourse	▪ 15 interviews with 9 HR directors/managers and 6 partners within these 9 consulting firms. ▪ Documentation: press releases, press articles, and web-sites of the consultancies	See p. 197-198
Organisational practices	▪ 5 meetings and 3 presentations ▪ 40 interviews ▪ Documentation: personnel figures, rating forms, Best Employer application files	See p. 225-226

Table 4.5: overview of the material collection and analysis

Overview of chapter 4

Chapter 4 aimed at describing the methodological choices made along this research, with the ambition to bring professionals, their experience and the way they engage in their work, into the study of professional organisations.

In the first section, an overview of the research itinerary and the main phases of the research was provided before the general research design could be described further. The choice was made to use a **combination of individual and organisational case studies** and to place interviews (and actors' own representations) at the heart of the research design, to address the research questions in three phases:
(1) The collection and analysis of 58 **career stories** of consultants at all levels of the hierarchy within 13 different organisational settings
(2) The collection and analysis of 9 HR directors and 6 partners' **managerial discourse** on work-life balance
(3) The constitution and analysis of a **comparative case study of the practices of two consulting firms** regarding work-life balance
In the final parts of this section, the **sensitivity of the research question** has been highlighted and its impact on how to access the field, conduct interviews and present findings was discussed.

In the final section, further detail was provided regarding material collection and analysis for each of these three phases.

Chapter 5: Heterogeneity among consultants - fulfilling promotion, project orientation and work-life balance aspirations

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Introduction

Following the research design described in the previous chapter, the first step of this study consisted in investigating the experience of professionals at work through the analysis of their career stories. I met with 58 consultants within 13 different settings, at all levels of the hierarchy (from junior consultants to partners). This allowed me to first confirm that there is more diversity in consultants' aspirations than in terms of careers: significant numbers of them also show strong concerns regarding the orientation of the projects they are assigned (whether they want to remain generalists or specialise into a specific line of service or sector) and their work-life balance (5.1). I additionally show that these three broad categories of tensions regarding "rewards", "projects' orientation" and "work-life balance" are associated with different discourses that attest of the variety of aspirations within consultants. In the second section of this chapter (5.2), I detail the tactics employed by consultants to fulfil their aspirations through the concept of *job crafting*. Finally, I show that in some instances, when the behaviours they engage in are particularly counter-normative (especially when achieving work-life balance is concerned), it leads them in a specific form of identity work I label *conforming work*, which allows them to reduce the gap between their practice and expectations of compliance.

5.1 Unravelling the diversity of professionals' experience at work, beyond promotion

This first section will aim at investigating the nature of the tensions evoked by consultants during their career interviews. First, a selection of stories will be introduced and analysed. Then, participants' discourses will be analysed to shed light on three key dimensions of professionals' careers: rewards in the form of promotions and bonuses, as expected, but also the orientation of the projects they are assigned and work-life balance, which consultants define in different ways.

5.1.1 Tensions in professionals' careers: emergence of project assignment and work-life balance as key additional concerns

a. 4 career stories

The stories of 4 consultants will be used to illustrate the different steps of the analysis in this chapter. They have been chosen for they are particularly emblematic of what could be heard in other interviews. More systematic presentations of the findings, based on the analysis of the entire material, will nonetheless always follow.

- **Jack's story**

Jack is a director for a global strategy consultancy. He started his career in this same firm a little under 20 years ago, at a time when the firm was still relatively small and growing very fast. He was given a lot of responsibilities on projects very quickly as growth required a constant flow of new recruits coming in and thus of promotions for those already inside the firm: *During all this period you are uncomfortable, but that's what's interesting about the job. Things are always harder*

than they used to. Yet, after a few years, he started to feel that his work was becoming more routinized: *You start feeling that you're always doing the same thing. You start managing projects and you think that it's going to take long before you can start doing something else. (…) When that happens you become more sensitive to the idea of doing something else. After 4 or 5 years you start to think that you have given a lot and it becomes harder and harder.* He thus left to work for an Internet company and, after the Internet bubble of the 2000s, he decided to join a spin-off of his previous consultancy. He stayed there for four years and became a partner until disagreements on profit-sharing made him and a few other partners leave. He says this experience however allowed him to renew his taste for consulting, so he decided to go back to his original employer. It wasn't easy at first: *After I came back, for a few years, I was only assigned projects that were… complicated. It was a little bit like hazing. I never said no, you always learn you know*. It nonetheless didn't prevent him from being promoted director and, at the time of the first interview, he was managing a number of projects of a relatively big size for the firm. However, at the time of our second interview, he had been denied partnership twice, which had provoked a real crisis in his life in spite of *sales success, beautiful projects, a lot of consultants managed* and *being ranked one of the ten best senior managers by consultants' evaluations globally*. The first time he was denied partnership, it was because one of the French members of the board had a preference for another candidate, within his own area of practice. Six months later, the Paris office seemed to be finally ready to endorse him as an official candidate for partnership. His client was asked to provide some feedback on him as part of the process but they had a difficult relationship, which he claims was due to the fact that the project Jack managed was very big and had been taken away from this particular client before Jack's firm was asked to come in and help. As a result, the unofficial feedback asked from this client was negative, which resulted in Jack losing partnership and having to exit the project, which he did not expect and was a real shock to him: *I spent a lot of time analysing this, thinking it over, I can tell you I didn't have a very good summer last year*. He nonetheless stayed and started managing other accounts until the projects he sold became very important in size and revenue again, at which point a partner took over. Following this new disappointment, Jack and his partners agreed that it would be time for him to leave. At the time of our second interview, Jack was in discussion with another firm to join them as a Director, with the possibility of becoming a partner soon after.

- **Lisa's story**

Lisa graduated from one of the top French business schools and quickly developed an interest in Corporate Finance. During her studies, she found an internship in Finance Consulting, admitting that she *didn't really know what they did* at the time. She says she was lucky enough to see a wide variety of projects during her internship and that she was very happy with this experience: *Since I didn't know anything, everything was interesting, working on transactions in particular is great because you learn very quickly. Then it becomes repetitive, but at first you learn a lot*. So when she was offered a permanent job to come back to the firm after her graduation, she accepted immediately. The first project she was assigned after coming back as a junior consultant was a project in a specific line of services. She explains why she particularly enjoyed this project: *What I like about this line of service is that you have access to the management, you see the teams on site, the accountants. When you work on transactions you are behind a screen with an electronic data room and you don't see anyone. And I also like the technical dimension of it. There's a little bit of*

modelisation involved, not a lot, you don't need to know how to code very well, but you need to understand, it's a little complex, I like that. *And you have the feeling that you are useful*. After this first project, which was on and off for over a year and a half, she explained that she dedicated a lot of effort to trying to be assigned these kinds of projects again. She said that it had been particularly difficult for her when she had been assigned other types of projects, which she found more repetitive, less interesting, but that she overall managed to be recognised as specialised into this area. She is now a senior consultant and mostly works on this kind of projects. She also reported accepting to make some concessions in terms of work-life balance because the type of projects that she likes often involve a lot of business trips, and a lot of hours. She nonetheless experienced some difficulties working on one specific project that was still on-going at the time of the interview. She explained that, on this specific project, the team had had to work late nights (leaving the office at 11pm at the earliest, sometimes between 3am and 5am, she reported) and weekends for two months. She said that no matter how interesting the project was, it had been hard for her to keep up physically and that she ended up bursting into tears in the partners' office: *It's horrible not to have weekends, not to have a life! On Sunday night I said goodbye to my husband, I knew I wouldn't see him again until the following Saturday. (…) At some point your friends stop calling you because they know you won't come, and when I did go, I was annoyed and couldn't stop complaining about my job and I wasn't very pleasant to be around. At some point, you have nothing else than this project that takes up all your time, all you do is sleep and work*. So when the opportunity presented itself, she exited the project and then was only assigned small projects which she described as *non interesting*. She says *I didn't do anything for 4 months, I was bored all day… But at least I could rest! And I was getting married so I could organise my wedding!* (…) *It wasn't very interesting, in terms of learning, of development, it wasn't very fulfilling, but it was good enough at the time.* Since then, she nonetheless had been assigned other projects and seemed more satisfied. At the time of the interview, she was however unsure of her future within the firm as she wanted to have children and was undecided as to whether she would be able to combine her work-life with motherhood.

- **Luke's story**

Luke is a Manager at Management Consulting. He graduated from an engineering school with a specialisation in transport. He says he wasn't originally very attracted to the world of consulting because he had a very stereotyped vision of what consultants do: producing slides after slides, having opinions about everything and never clearly explaining what they do. He, however, met with some consultants representing the firm in a student forum and was pleasantly surprised by the conversations he had with them, and along with considerations about pay, he decided to apply for an internship which was then transformed into a permanent contract. He says he was very happy at first to be assigned any kind of projects: *You go to a generalist engineering school, it's not very specialised, because you want to try out everything. You don't really know what you want to do. Well it's the same with consulting, there are no sectors so you don't know what you will do, you get whatever you get and that's part of the deal*. He was right away assigned a project where he was alone under the direct supervision of the client. Even though he describes this first experience as a *giant boxing match* due to the lack of internal supervision, his client was apparently satisfied since she offered him a position, which he refused because he realised he was more attracted to the motor industry. This wish to work on transport projects became even more problematic that this first project lasted over two years: *after a year and a half, you want to see other things because*

that's what you're promised… at least that's what you expect when you become a consultant, a variety of projects. He nonetheless waited and was then assigned a project within his preferred area, for a client that he was still working for at the time of the interview. In parallel, he was regularly promoted and became Manager very quickly. When asked about the future, he replies that he wants to keep developing offers in the transport sector, but that he regularly accepts interviews with head-hunters to see what he is worth on the market and the kind of offers he could get.

- **Victoria's story**

Victoria works for one of the big accounting firms in France, in an audit of IT systems business unit. She originally graduated from one of the elite French business schools. After an internship in marketing, she decided to apply to her current firm for a business unit which was under creation at the time and which mission was relatively unclear then. She has been very happy with the variety of the projects she worked on and with the life-style that went with it: *80% of the time, your deadlines are very short-term, and then for two weeks you have nothing to do. You go to the office, you have fun, you don't do anything. When you don't have any personal constraints this is fine, if you have to work in the evening you don't mind and you take time where it is.* Relatively quickly though, she decided that she wanted to have a hobby and that she would be part of a theatre play. So twice a week, she attended rehearsals that started at 7:30pm and required that she left the office at 6:30pm. She says: *it was very naïve of me because no one else was doing it! (…) But people got used to the idea that on Tuesdays and Thursdays they wouldn't be able to reach me between 6:30 and 11pm. But the partner knew that he could call me and he did*. She maintained that rhythm for about two years. At the same time she kept being highly rated in the evaluation process, was promoted manager in advance after only 4 years and even learnt from word-to-mouth that her name was on a high-potential list. She claimed that she tried to make clear that she wouldn't work longer hours in exchange and that she warned everyone that she was getting married and hoped to get pregnant very quickly after that: *I thought, let's put all my cards on the table, this way everyone knows. I keep working the same way, if you have liked me before, you will like me tomorrow*. She did get married and came back from her honeymoon already expecting a child. Upon her return from maternity leave though, she found out that all her projects had been taken away from her, that her bonus had been reduced and that she had been assigned a project which required travelling for a couple of weeks. She says she realised she had no role model within the firm to figure out how to combine motherhood with her work, without hiring babysitters on a daily basis. She complained to the HR director of the firm whom told her she was a potential candidate to partnership in the eyes of the partners, helped her get some of her projects back and endorsed her to impose her schedule on both teams and clients. When asked about the future, she says *I will stay until they kick me out!*

b. Rewards, project assignment and work-life balance as key concerns for consultants

When telling their career stories, Jack, Lisa, Luke and Victoria's narratives all revolve around a number of different tensions, of critical moments (sometimes recurring) in their careers characterised by a certain level of anxiety, conflict or struggle. For Jack, a first tension point concerned his lassitude of project management along with the impression that it would take

longer for him to be promoted to a different role, which led him to leave the industry. Then, after a few years and some corporate experience, he returned to consulting by joining a spin-off of this first firm, in which he eventually became partner until he was in conflict with the other partners on how to share profits. Yet, without any doubt, the most determinant tension evoked by Jack is his recent experience of the partnership co-optation process, which he failed twice. Here, the tensions in Jack's narrative are very much in line with what one could expect: they are either related to promotions or bonuses. This is, however, not systematically the case in the rest of the stories. For Lisa and Luke, even though they do evoke their evaluations and the speed of their promotions, the content of the projects they are assigned seems to be at least as big a concern to them. Similarly, if Victoria insists on how she has been identified as a high potential and has *jumped*[56], most of her story is rather centred around the difficulties she has encountered after having her first child to combine her personal and professional lives:

	Tensions
Jack	- Fear of boredom and impression that the speed of promotions would decrease - Disagreement with other partners on profit sharing - Assignment of difficult projects - Partnership co-optation refused twice
Lisa	- Wish to be assigned recovery projects - Exhaustion due to the workload on one specific project
Luke	- Wish to exit a long-lasting project - Wish to be assigned projects within the transport sector
Victoria	- Making room in the work schedule for 2 weekly theatre rehearsals - Reduced bonus following maternity leave - Projects "stolen" after maternity leave - Need to impose personal constraints (leaving at 6pm) in the work schedule

Table 5.1: Tensions in Jack, Lisa, Luke and Victoria's stories

A similar analysis was systematically conducted to analyse all the interviewee's stories and to obtain a consolidated list of the tensions identified in consultants' narratives (for further details regarding the composition of the sample, see chapter 4, table 4.1 p.133).

Methods: identification of tensions in career stories

In order to identify the causes of tensions in consultants' stories I proceeded in 4 phases:

(1) I read each interview transcript several times with the aim of identifying moments of tension in their career stories. As explained above, these moments of tension are typically characterised by a certain level of anxiety, conflict or struggle reported by consultants in their stories. Typically, these revolved around moments of anxiety, conflict, disappointment, etc. It allowed me to list all the key events, which had been evoked by participants and, for each transcript, to make a thematic list of these tension points. Overall 160 tensions were identified in the 58 stories (career stories containing between zero and eight tensions at most, with an average of a little under 3 tensions in each story).

(2) A reduced list of these tensions has been established by aggregating similar cues together. Only a few tensions seemed to be very specific to one consultant's experience (for example Jack's

[56] Used in English in the original interviews, signifies "being promoted in advance"

disagreement on profit sharing was only found in his story as most other participants did not create their own firms) and those were thus excluded from these broad categories.
(3) Drawing on this list, I could aggregate similar tensions together. By doing so, I found that tensions in consultants' career stories were systematically associated with three broad themes: promotions and bonuses first, but also projects' orientation (wanting to remain generalist or on the contrary to specialise) and work-life balance.
(4) Finally, in order to get a better understanding of the different perceptions of these themes amongst participants, I went back to the original transcripts and analysed the broader discourses associated with each theme to identify variations around each one of them, reflecting different aspirations of consultants.

16 different types of tensions in consultants' career stories were identified, which all seemed to refer to three broad themes, already present in our 4 stories: promotion – or more widely speaking rewards (promotions but also bonuses et positive feedback) – of course, but also projects' orientation and work-life balance:

Main tensions identified in consultants' career stories	Occurrences	Key career dimension
Difficulty on one specific project (client relationship, specific task, relationship with other members of the team, project unlikely to succeed…)	**26**	**Promotion/reward (58 occurrences)**
Promotion: delayed or denied	**12**	
Difficulty or unwillingness to meet sales expectations	**8**	
Bonus/pay rise: lower than expected	**6**	
Negative evaluation or feedback	**6**	
Assignment of projects outside of preferred area	**12**	**Project orientation (44 occurrences)**
Boredom	**11**	
Evolution of the nature of project (in line with the evolution of the firm's strategy or the firm being bought by another actor) in contradiction with individual preferences	**6**	
"On the beach": long period of time without any project assigned	**5**	
Assignment of similar projects several times in a row	**5**	
Difficulty to exit one particular project	**5**	
Difficulty with the overall workload (in particular in relations with family constraints)	**25**	**Work-life balance (58 occurrences)**
Difficulty with the workload on one specific project	**17**	
Difficulty to make room for a hobby or voluntary work	**7**	
Burnout/depression/exhaustion	**6**	
Difficulty to make room for non-project work (management, internal projects…)	**3**	

Table 5.2: Consolidated list of tensions identified in consultants' career stories

It is noteworthy, though, that for some consultants tensions were rare and their career seemed to unfold in a very natural way: they had always been happy with their career progression, been assigned projects they liked and didn't see work-life balance as a particular concern. This remained, however, relatively rare (only 6 career stories did not contain any tension).

The tensions identified in consultants' career stories reveal three fundamental dimensions of their careers: promotions and other forms of rewards, the nature of the projects they are assigned and work-life balance. When consultants describe their struggles with a client, a supervisor or a subordinate, when they explain suffering from negative feedback (or fearing it) or a promotion being denied or delayed, not managing to meet sales expectations or not receiving the bonus they expected, for example, it confirms that promotions and other types of rewards (from a simple positive feedback from a partner to bonuses and pay rises) are indeed one key preoccupation of consultants.

Yet, when consultants evoke moments in their careers when they were dissatisfied with the projects they were assigned, either because they were not in their preferred area, or too repetitive, involved tasks they found boring, when they had to wait a for a long time before being assigned a new project or feared the nature of the projects taken on by the partners would evolve in relation with the strategy of their firms (usually after a merger with another, bigger consultancy), it shows that the nature of the projects they are assigned is also a key concern for consultants.

Finally, when consultants evoke their difficulties in handling their workload on one specific project or more regularly, either because they wished they could spend more time with their family or be able to practice sports regularly, or make commitments outside of work (typically being involved in voluntary work) and when they explain having experienced moments in their careers when they struggled to make room for other tasks, outside of project work, and have felt so overwhelmed with work that it has led them to experience exhaustion, depression or even burnout, it highlights the importance of questions of work-life balance in consultants' careers as well.

Yet, as will be developed in the following section, not all consultants share the same aspirations regarding these three core dimensions of their careers.

5.1.2 Heterogeneous aspirations regarding promotions, specialisation and work-life balance among consultants

Through the analysis of the tensions in consultants' career stories, three key dimensions their careers were identified: promotions and other rewards, projects' orientation and work-life balance. However, several discourses can be identified in consultants' accounts regarding each of these themes, which attest of different aspirations. The discourses identified (two opposite discourses on each of these three dimensions) here define the two extreme poles of consultants' representations and aspirations on these topics.

a. Promotions and other rewards: "fast track" vs "career cycles"

First of all, the interviews did confirm that promotion is and remains a key concern for consultants (36 percent of the tensions identified in consultants stories revolved around promotions and bonuses), at all ranks within the hierarchy, male or female. Promotion seemed to be the ultimate reward, and consultants did pay attention to positive feedback and bonuses, but only so far as it was eventually translated into a promotion, which validated somehow all these

other indicators of performance and satisfaction from the partners. However, tensions related to promotions generated two types of discourses.

The first one consisted in saying that the ideal type of career within consulting was a "*fast-track*" career, in other words a career in which promotions would not only happen very regularly, but also quicker than average. In this discourse, promotions and bonuses are a symbolic reward attesting of their performance on projects and valuing their commitment to the job and are, as such, a key concern of theirs. This discourse reveals aspirations of promotions that are very short-term driven and do not tolerate slowing down.

A second opposite discourse, on the contrary, revolved around the idea that career is made of many different periods of one's life in which priorities shift. The central element of this discourse is that, as a junior consultant learning the job, individuals would dedicate themselves to their careers so that they acquire some skills and are promoted regularly, while, after they have children, they can slow down a little and then get back into the competition when they are more autonomous. This second discourse illustrates aspirations of promotions and reward, which are in line with personal commitment and conceived in the long term.

Below are two illustrations of these two distinct perspectives on promotions and financial rewards:

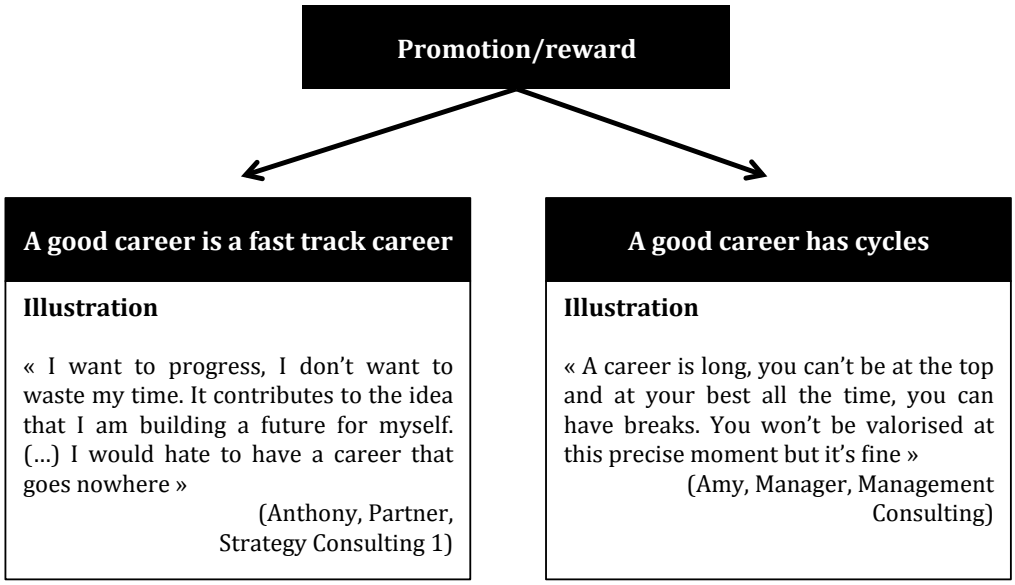

Table 5.3: discourses on promotions and other rewards

It is noteworthy, though, that no participant said that promotion did not matter at all and that they could picture themselves stagnating in terms of promotions. Indeed, even in the second discourse, the idea is that one can alternate between periods focused on being promoted and others where doing a good job should be enough, but that it cannot remain like this forever, or else they need to leave. This confirms the idea that the *up-or-out* often remains enacted by consultants themselves (Malhotra et al., 2010) and that the *up-or-out* career script still dominates in medium to large consulting firms.

b. *Project orientation: "generalist" vs. "specialist"*

The issue of consultants' project orientation seems to be a very important source of tension in their stories (28 percent of the tensions had to do with project assignment), and there are two very distinct discourses on what it can entail.

A first discourse revolves around the idea that it is better to be a generalist. This discourse implies a negative understanding of specialisation: consultants join consulting to see a variety of projects, become polyvalent and develop an ability to adapt to any situation, which are the first qualities of a professional and precisely what clients expect. This discourse is triggered in particular when there have been tensions around boredom on a project or having been assigned similar projects several times in a row.

A second discourse, on the contrary, stipulates that project assignment is only satisfactory when providing the conditions to become a specialist: expertise in a specific area is at the heart of consulting job and only this specialised knowledge can bring the kind of legitimacy that clients pay for, whether in terms of service line or sector.

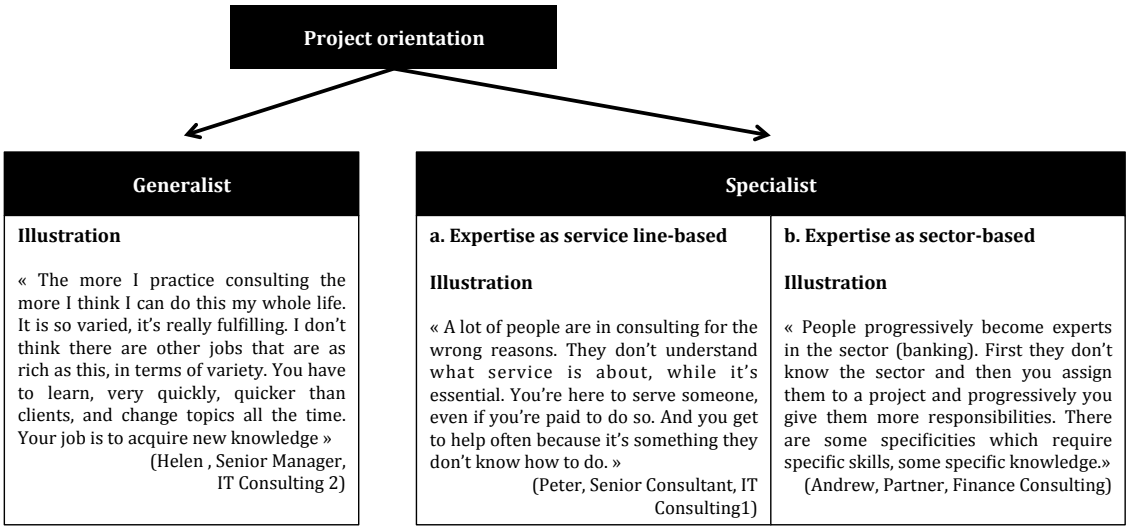

Table 5.4: discourses on project orientation

c. *Work-life balance: "acceptable workload" vs. "flexibility"*

Finally, 36 percent of the tensions evoked by consultants also concerned what can be broadly labelled "work-life balance". There were, once again, two distinct discourses associated with this concept, revealing different aspirations of consultants.

The first discourse revolves around the idea that achieving a "good" work-life balance depends on the overall workload. Even though each consultant might have a different understanding of what constitutes an acceptable workload, in this discourse, the amount of work induced by a specific project and to the accumulation of tasks outside of project work (management tasks such as the evaluation of younger consultants or career meetings, internal projects, training or sales for

example) are conceived as the main sources of tension in terms of work-life balance. There were, however, two sub-discourses conceiving this overall acceptable workload as achievable (and thus possible to aspire to) or incompatible with consulting (and not necessarily sought).

An alternative discourse conceived work-life balance as coming from flexibility, which seemed to be more easily perceived as compatible with project work. Indeed, in this discourse, the mobile nature of the work is emphasised and described as accommodating some form of flexibility. The variability of the work implies that even though some phases might be characterised by overwork, others are not, which allows consultants to organise themselves accordingly and enjoy these quiet periods. In addition, the mobility of the work task autonomy (in particular amongst the most senior ranks), allows consultants to benefit from some form of flexibility in arranging their own schedule.

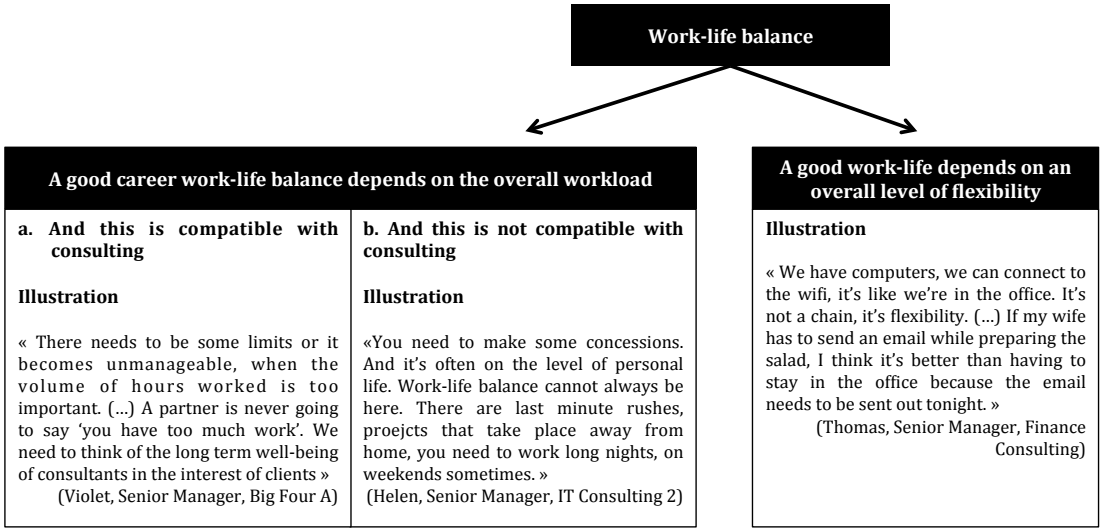

Table 5.5: discourses on work-life balance

Intermediate Conclusion

In this first section, by analysing the tensions in consultants' career stories, two additional aspirations – beyond rewards in the form of promotions and bonuses – have been identified: being assigned projects in line with individual orientations (whether it aims at remaining generalist or specialising) and work-life balance (whether defined as an overall acceptable workload, or as the ability to benefit from a certain level of flexibility in organising one's own schedule). Through this analysis, the heterogeneity of consultants' aspiration was shed light on. Bearing this heterogeneity in mind, let us take a closer look at the way that consultants go about solving these tensions and fulfilling their aspirations in terms of promotions, project assignment and/or work-life balance.

5.2 Individual tactics to achieve promotions, project orientation and work-life balance in line with aspirations

Not only do consultants have different aspirations, beyond promotions, bonuses and the perspective to be co-opted partner one day, but they also often act on them. Indeed, what emerges from the interview material is that consultants don't seem to be passively complying to their firms' expectations, and instead dedicate a lot of effort to trying to remain in control of their careers, in line with their aspirations. The extent to which they might be able to do so will be discussed later. This section starts by going back to the stories of Jack, Lisa, Luke and Victoria show how the proactive dimension of consultants' discourse emerged, before identifying job crafting as a relevant analytical framework to understand these accounts. This is then followed by a detailed account of the job crafting techniques employed by consultants to either try to be rewarded in the form of positive evaluations, promotions and bonuses (whether they want a fast-track career or ensure their effort are rewarded when they feel they have been particularly dedicated), to become more or less specialised or to improve their sense of work-life balance (whether to achieve a certain workload overall or work flexibly).

5.2.1 Emergence of a proactive discourse in consultants' accounts of their careers

Before conducting a more systematic analysis of the interview material, let us start by going back to the stories of Jack, Lisa, Luke and Victoria, to better understand how these 4 consultants dealt with the tensions identified earlier in their narratives.

a. Back to consultants' stories

- **Jack's story**

Jack solved the first two difficulties he encountered (lassitude of project management and disagreement on how to share profits) by leaving each time: he first decided to leave his strategy consultancy for an Internet company and then left the spin-off of this firm to go back to his original firm. Then, after he realised he was systematically assigned projects that were doomed to fail or would never lead to new contracts, he says it was *hard to refuse these projects* so he *decided to work only on projects (he) sell(s) (him)self! And it's paying off*. He ended up being in charge of very large projects and a potential candidate for partnership, until his co-optation was first refused by one of the partners. After that, he explained he realised he had not been visible enough so he *had to convince him*. He says: *I spent time with him, to explain what I did, for six months… I didn't only do that! But to make sure that the next round would work, I did spent a lot of time with him*. As a consequence, in the following election round, he was told he would be the official candidate for the Paris office, until his client was asked unofficially and, according to him, behind his back, to provide feedback on his performance. Even then, after having to exit his own project, losing the account to another partner and being refused partnership co-optation, he held on to his hope of becoming a partner of this firm. He asked for a coach to accompany him and help him understand what had happened, and to be given smaller projects to manage: *I came back and I asked to be helped by someone, because in this world we have no one to talk to. I had to understand*

what had happened, because all they said was 'you were unable to create a relationship with the client'. And they said 'there are other accounts, go play with them.' He did so and ended up selling follow-ups, which turned into very big and expensive projects for the firm. At that point, when it was decided that another partner should be transferred the project, Jack understood that he would never be made partner and started negotiating his departure from the firm.

➢ Lisa's story

As evoked previously, there were two specific kinds of tension points in Lisa's story: her on-going will to remain assigned recovery projects, expressed each time she had to be assigned a new project and even more strongly when she was assigned one outside of this line of service; and her experience on the project which required that she should work late nights and weekends over a long period.

She reported actively trying to deal with both these situations, in particular as regards the assignment of projects. Indeed, she reports having *fought to stay within this line of service*, to the point that she has succeeded to be *identified as doing mostly that*. To achieve this, she says she has put a lot of effort into trying to convince the partner in charge to assign her his up-coming projects: *At first I went back and forth between recovery and other lines of services, but each time I went to see the partner in charge of recovery and I told him 'Take me back! Please take me back!' You have to ask, I asked at the end of each career or evaluation meeting, I went to see the staffer to tell him*. The biggest challenge, she felt, was the fact most partners would consider junior or senior consultants as necessarily polyvalent and that it was hard for her to fight this idea: *It was mostly hard to convince other partners, because he (*the partner in charge*) knows I wanna do this, but the others they say 'She can do other projects too'. (…) It's not going to be served to you on a platter. Partners are all mighty so you have to go cry to the partner in charge and say 'Can you not keep me? Don't you have a project starting soon? Can you not switch me with someone else?' There's a lot of negotiation involved.* She insists on how important it is not to do this too overtly because it is not acceptable to refuse a project openly, which would imply that there are less interesting projects than others and that consultants can freely choose. So one of the things that she has had to accept, she says, is to accept some projects that are not within the scope of what she would want once in a while and to be ready to do absolutely any kind of project within her preferred service line.

As regards the resolution of her situation on the very busy project she was working on, she dealt with it in a less deliberate and proactive way: she simply told her partner that she was overwhelmed with work and needed to rest, cried in his office and in the middle of the project team several times, so the partners jointly decided to take her out of the project whenever possible and she explained this decision by the fact that she *had said it more loudly than others*.

➢ Luke's story

In Luke's story, as discussed earlier, the main challenges revolved around exiting his first longlasting project, but also around ensuring that his next projects would be within the automobile sector. He explains further how he faced this situation: *I told the client I wanted to leave the project, to see other things. She was ready to give me the projects I wanted, at least to say*

'what do you want? Take it and do it.' So it lasted for a while like this. He explained how frustrating it was that his client would not accept to let him leave while, at the same time, it helped him build a strong reputation for himself within the firm. He says he kept telling his *coach*[57] and other relevant interlocutors: *You tell your coach, the project manager… (…) and I was told 'Yes, you will leave the project, you will leave the project, don't worry, the client is aware'. But then you start to become impatient and let people know you really need to exit the project. So you need to ask how the situation is progressing, show you are a little annoyed, that you need some perspectives.* Overall, it took a little over a year before the actual exit from the project and his replacement could be organised. But Luke says that waiting was in his own interest: *It's a world in which you have to be very careful what you say and how you use your last shot. If I had said "If I don't exit the project in the next three months I quit" they would have given me another project which I might not have liked and then…* He believes that his good reputation, due to his handling of project work on his own, without any supervision, and the very high level of satisfaction of the client, helped him a lot because managers wanted him on their projects. So he could let some people know within the transport sector know he wanted to exit his project and they would organise his transfer to a new project for him. Since then, he has tried to be recognised as a legitimate expert in the field of automobile. In particular, he got very involved in the development of a community of practice within the sector, which involves conducting business intelligence work, attending relevant conferences, making studies in partnership with a major engineering school, writing articles, etc. on the side of project work. He says that he benefits from the *image of the community, people are recognised for what they do within this arena*. He now believes that he no longer needs to worry about staying within the industry and is working on duplicating the service he is providing his current client for other ones.

- **Victoria's story**

When Victoria told her story, she insisted on 3 specific challenges she had had to face: being able to attend her theatre rehearsals without damaging her reputation at work in the very beginning of her career, then realising her bonus had been reduced and her projects *stolen* after her pregnancy and finally being able to leave early enough to pick up her child from the nursery. She explained how, for her to be able to combine her work with the constraints of the rehearsals, a lot of negotiation was involved: *The partner knew he could call me after 11pm and he did. He called me to say 'I saw your thing' or he sent an email because he knew I would check. It worked pretty well. (…) And with others it was like 'Oh, I'm sorry, you know, I have my rehearsal…' And I invited them to the show! It wasn't like going to the gym*. She insists that she never meant to claim that she had any right to a hobby, she says: *It wasn't like 'I want to preserve my personal life', it was very naïve. It wasn't militant! I just thought I wanted to do that and if it hadn't worked I would have stopped*. She believed that this first experience helped her when she had to organise her work routine after having had her first child. She used the fact that she had been identified as a *high potential* to let partners and the HR director know that she was very unhappy about her bonus and the fact that her projects had been taken away from her: *I met with the partners, I said 'Let's go have a coffee!' and they said 'So how are you?' and I replied 'Yeh… I'm ok… but I don't know… I'm a little surprised…*

[57] A more experienced consultant acting as an adviser regarding his career

I figured out that…' I learnt how to do that along the years! And I ended up having a call from the HR director asking to see me to discuss the situation. It is too late to change her bonus but he directly asked partners to assign her good projects and told her to come back to him if anyone assigned her anything that required full-time presence on site, and to impose her own schedule on her teams. She took his advice. First, she started taking her constraints into account when scheduling meetings: *I schedule meetings myself whenever I can. And if not, instead of saying 'I'm free on Thursday afternoon', I say 'I am free from 2 to 5pm' And no one actually cares! It makes no difference. And if there's an emergency, I can meet people over lunch, it happened just last week. They wanted to meet between 7 and 8pm and I said 'what's the point? Let's meet tomorrow over lunch, it won't change anything. And it was fine.* Second, she says she tries to respect this schedule, even with clients: *It's completely crazy, but when you are going over time, when it's about 5:45pm I start closing my computer and I say 'I'm sorry but I need to go', well no one cares! (…) Either someone stays or we cut short or finish the following day. We don't save lives!* She explained one of her clients was even extremely happy because he managed to go home earlier than usual. She said she was aware of the risk that one unhappy client could call the partner in charge and fire her, but she said it was a risk she was willing to take and that her priority would always be her child. She nonetheless reports making some concessions in exchange: *You have to be flexible and reactive in exchange. Every week, I need to organise myself with my husband. (…) Last week I learnt on Thursday that the following day I needed to fly at 6 in the morning. What do I do with my child? Well I'm not going to be stuck in my ways either. I had anticipated, I knew it could happen. So I had a plan B, I had asked a friend. You need to be organised. But you also need to stand up and say no when the meeting is scheduled at 5:30*. Reflecting on her situation, she said that she was surprised that it worked out but that she is very happy with the way things were and that she was willing to stay as long as she was not asked to change.

b. An element of proactivity in consultants' discourse

What emerges from these stories is the idea that consultants are not simply passively complying to decisions made for them about their careers, whether it concerns promotion, project assignment, exiting a project or the work schedule for example, as is the case in these stories. In Jack's case, for example, it is obvious that he tried to implement a number of tactics – even though unsuccessful – to try to be co-opted partner: he developed a sales strategy, trying to make himself indispensable to the firm by selling very big projects compared with the typical projects of the firm, tried to be visible to relevant decision-makers, worked on his image as a good manager and even when he failed, tried to show he was willing to learn by working with a coach and accepting to start from scratch on new projects which he tried to develop. As far as Lisa is concerned, she clearly explained how she had tried her best not to submit herself to staffing decisions by anticipating as much as possible, letting relevant actors know about her staffing preferences, developing relationships with colleagues of her preferred line of service and doing her best to convince them to work with her. Dealing with the project on which she felt she was overworking however seemed more challenging for her. She nonetheless did let partners and colleagues know of her wish to exit the project. Similarly, Luke – even though he waited a long time before he could actually exit his project – did not wait passively. He let relevant people know about his wish to exit the project and to join the transport practice, prepared his client to this idea and remained informed about up-coming projects so that he would leave at the right time to be assigned the

project he wanted. After that, he tried to ensure that he would be identified as an expert in that field so that he would not be assigned a project in another area again. Finally, Victoria's story shows how she has actively tried to negotiate with her colleagues when starting to act in a theatre play and how, later, once she had become a parent, she started to try to impose her own schedule on others.

None of these consultants pictured themselves as passively submitting to decisions and rules about their careers. Whether they aspire to quick promotions, being assigned specific types of projects or work-life balance, they did not seem to accept to revise their ambitions nor to want to leave when things did not come naturally.

c. Job crafting as a relevant analytical lens to understand consultants' role in shaping their careers

In order to grasp better these accounts of agency in trying to accommodate partners' and clients' expectations with individual aspirations, let us turn to a specific stream of literature on Job Crafting. I will now review this literature briefly before detailing why it is particularly appropriate to the understanding of consultants' experience at work, in spite of some of its limitations.

Genealogy of research on job crafting

The experience of individuals at work has been traditionally investigated through the development of work design theories (Hackman and Oldham, 1976). Work design research has provided considerable insight into the way work affects individual performance, job satisfaction, motivation, stress, burnout or even mortality – see Grant et al. (2011) for a review of job design theories. However, these approaches have traditionally thought of individuals as passive when confronted with job prescriptions. They aimed at designing the best job features to maximise both the experience of employees at work and organisational performance, rather than determining how to make jobs fit individuals' specific needs, motives and aspirations (Wrzesniewski et al., 2013).

Nonetheless, recent studies have rather focused on how employees can be very active in shaping their own jobs (Grant and Ashford, 2008). Research on role innovation (Katz and Kahn, 1966; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979) and role as resources (Nicholson, 1984) have directly inspired more recent accounts of proactivity in the workplace, which have been described as taking three different directions (Grant and Parker, 2009). The first is role adjustment (Clegg and Spencer, 2007), which looks mainly at the reciprocal nature of the process of job design. The second strand of work has been developed around the concept of idiosyncratic deals (Rousseau et al., 2006), which are made when employees have rare skills or unique life circumstances which require special arrangements regarding working times, methods or locations. Finally, another growing stream of research has been developed around the concept of job crafting (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001), which envisions employees as active crafters of their job boundaries.

➢ The concept of job crafting

Crafting at the level of tasks, relations and cognition

In their seminal paper, Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) envision employees as active crafters of their jobs, following the model presented in fig. 5.1 below:

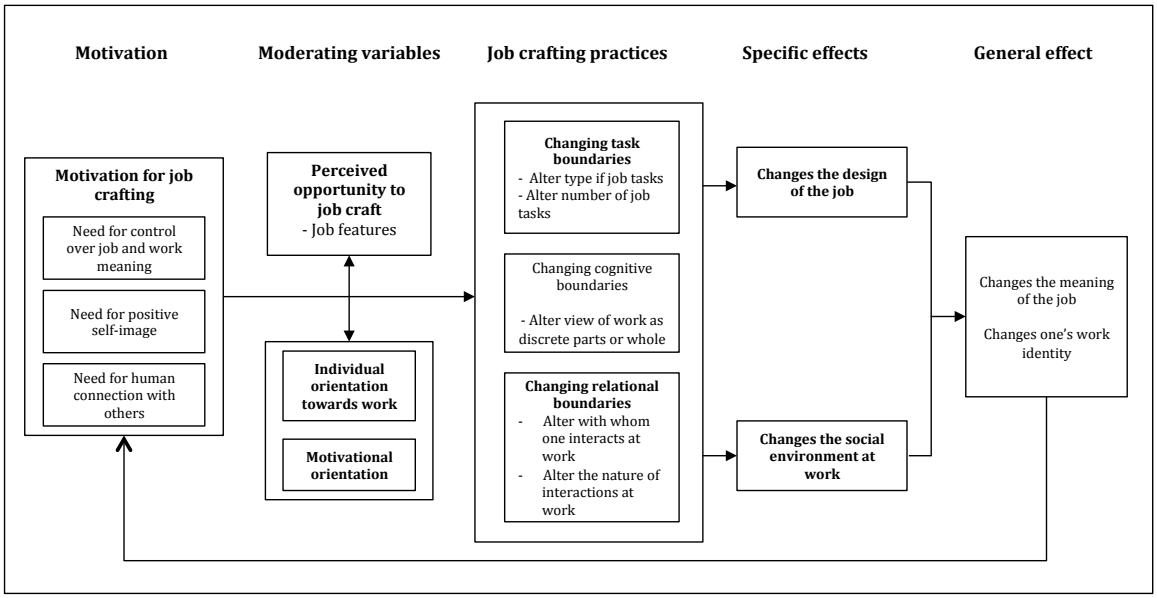

Figure 5.1: The model of Job Crafting, reproduced from Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001: p.182)

They define job crafting as the activities that individuals engage in so they can play a role in shaping the existing boundaries of their jobs – whether they are physical, relational or cognitive – which, in turn, affects both the meaning of work and individuals' self-definitions. First, employees can shape the boundaries of their tasks by either taking on fewer or additional tasks, or by changing their content. Second, they can alter the relational boundaries of their job by redefining the nature of their interactions at work or with whom they interact. Finally, employees can also engage in activities aimed at changing the meaning of their jobs.

Antecedents and outcomes of job crafting

Consequently, individuals may want to engage in job crafting all the more that they are looking for more control over job tasks, for a positive self-image at work and increased interactions with others. This seems to fit the description of routinized jobs. However, job crafting, as Wrzesniewski and Dutton explain, can happen at all levels of the hierarchy, provided individuals perceive opportunities to engage in it, which is likely to increase with autonomy.

Through these techniques, job crafting provides individuals with a way to realise their « *desired future work selves* » (Strauss et al., 2012), and as such, it serves as a means to finding positive meaning and identity expression at work (Berg et al., 2010a; Wrzesniewski et al., 2013; Rosso et al., 2010). Some studies even go as far as to argue that job crafting contributes to work-engagement, individual well-being and work performance (Bakker et al., 2012; Tims et al., 2014; Tims et al., 2013a; Tims et al., 2013b; Petrou et al., 2012).

Empirical illustrations

In their original paper, Wrzesniewski and Dutton provide a wide variety of examples analysed a posteriori as illustrations of the phenomenon, in particular among hairdressers (Cohen and Sutton, 1998), engineers (Fletcher, 1998), nurses (Benner et al., 1996; Jacques, 1993), information technicians (Star and Strauss, 1999) or restaurant kitchen employees (Fine, 1996). In the case of engineers, they show, for instance, that what design engineers do to enable the success of their projects involves a non- negligible amount of task and relational crafting, in turn affecting their view of their job and who they are at work. The validity of the concept was later confirmed by further studies among childcare educators (Leana et al., 2009), assembly workers and special education teachers (Ghitulescu, 2007), nurse midwives (Caza, 2007) and salespersons (Lyons, 2008).

- **Job crafting techniques**

Overall, many job crafting techniques have been identified. For example, by task crafting, employees can emphasise some tasks and expand their job by adding others that are more related to their interests (Berg et al., 2010a). They can also develop their personal skills (Lyons, 2008). Using relational crafting, employees can reframe their role (Berg et al., 2010a). In the context of service work, they can tailor relationships to better serve specific beneficiaries or to reprimand or dismiss others (Berg et al., 2008). They can also advance relationships, make tactics choices, and choose to maintain other relationships (Lyons, 2008). Some studies have identified similar crafting techniques employed by individuals to shape leisure time and work-life balance. For instance, Berg et al. (2010a) showed that, when people have unanswered callings, they tend to craft their leisure time so that they can enjoy other people's participation in activities related to the calling in question (for example by attending concerts if they want to play music, or see exhibitions if they want to paint) or by pursuing it actively in their own hobbies. In her study of the techniques used by young professionals to manage work-life balance, Sturges (2008) sheds light on a wide range of crafting activities aiming at shaping their work-life boundaries, such as temporal crafting or locational crafting. These include choosing a job according to work-life balance expectations, decreasing travel time between home and work, defining work life balance in a way that is achievable, prioritising work over other activities, making compromises, and managing work and out-of-work relationships in order to facilitate work-life balance.

- **Challenges encountered by job crafters**

Using rank as a proxy for power and autonomy, Berg et al. (2010b) have shown that, for higher-rank employees, the main challenges faced while attempting to craft one's job stem from their own understanding of how they should spend their time. First, these employees say that they feel they have to use all their time and energy to meet the general goals their job design prescribes. As a result, even though they do have the autonomy to craft their jobs, they have the feeling that it is impossible to dedicate time to something other than what they consider necessary to meet their general objectives. Also, they report seeing encroaching on others' roles and responsibilities as an additional challenge. When confronted with these challenges, individuals tend to make three different adaptive moves: they either force themselves to focus on opportunities to engage in job crafting in order to overcome the sensation of being limited in their options, revise their expectations of job crafting to be satisfied with less, or pursue their job crafting orientations outside of the workplace. Berg et al. (2010b) conclude that these results seem to indicate that, in

normative environments, job crafters need to make adaptive moves all the more that their job crafting is counter-normative. They nonetheless call for further investigations of this phenomenon.

- **Appropriateness of job crafting as an analytical operator to understand consultants' experience at work**

The job crafting framework is relevant to understand consultant's career stories, especially given that the three levels it takes place at (tasks, relations and cognition) are very much in line with the core job expectations of consultants which, as developed earlier, reside mainly in their ability to use, develop and share specific forms of knowledge to undertake project work at the task level, to manage and enlarge a given portfolio of clients and to display a specific identity at work to convey an impression of professionalism. It can thus be expected that consultants will try to exercise some influence over these job expectations in order to fulfil their aspirations.

There are nonetheless two limitations to the concept of job crafting as it is currently mobilised, which need to be addressed before going ahead:

1. Job crafting is exercised at all ranks, but studies focus mostly on line employees
2. Job crafting is perceived as having mainly positive outcomes
3. Job crafting assumes proactivity

(1) The first problem with the job crafting literature, is that even though it states that job crafting can happen at all ranks and that all employees craft their jobs (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001: p.187), it remains mainly focused on line employees. On of the reasons for this is the focus on formal job descriptions as a basis against which to craft. As a result, many "*white collar*" workers, such as consultants, remain seen as benefiting from a considerable amount of autonomy and discretion and thus their job crafting practices as unproblematic. Even though the argument is not here that consultants' jobs are as constrained as that of an employee on a production line for example, I nonetheless argue that looking at job expectations rather than formal job prescriptions and how employees might craft against norms may bring back some of the complexities of knowledge work in and account for how problematic job crafting might be within these occupations.

(2) Another reason to distance the present study from some existing studies of job crafting lies within its implicit assumption that job crafting is inherently good. This is especially true of a parallel stream of research on job crafting (Tims and Bakker, 2010), which proposes to operationalize the concept of job crafting by using the Job Demand-Resources model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001), in particular to conduct quantitative studies. In this approach, individuals are thought to craft their jobs so that they can increase or reduce job demands (such as high work pressure, demanding interactions, work overload, etc.) and job resources (for example: pay, career opportunities, support, autonomy, skills, etc.). The idea that the job characteristics, which individuals attempt to change, might be better mapped in terms of demands and resources is interesting. However, these authors often appear to focus on the positive outcomes that job crafting can lead to, not only for the individuals who are then described as more engaged, and happier at work (Tims et al., 2014; Bakker et al., 2012) but also

for the organisation since job crafting is thought to favour self-efficacy, performance and innovation (Tims et al., 2014; Demerouti and Bakker, 2014). This has been qualified as problematic by Oldham and Hackman (2010) who call for more studies of the potentially negative consequences of job crafting (such as, for example, employees pursuing personal goals instead of collective ones or favouring some tasks at the expense of others). The purpose of this study is thus not to advocate for job crafting but rather to use job crafting as an analytical framework to describe a specific phenomenon.

(3) The third, and most important, difficulty with the concept of job crafting is that it fails to take into account the rhetorical strategies of individuals who tend to present themselves as proactive and exercising agency. These concerns have been addressed in two ways. First, whenever possible, individual cases were discussed with colleagues, partners or HR managers of the consultants. Second, the choice was made to adopt a more interpretive take on job crafting, in order to not only look at the job crafting techniques developed by consultants but also to complement it by taking into account the rhetorical role played by job crafting as a discourse.

5.2.2 Three sets of job crafting techniques used by consultants to achieve rewards, project orientation and work-life balance in line with aspirations

Looking at the material again with a Job Crafting lens shed light of three different sets of job crafting techniques mobilised by consultants in order to either be rewarded (whether for a quick career progression or to see one's effort be rewarded), to become more or less specialised in a specific sector or line of service or on the contrary to remain generalist and to improve their sense of work-life balance (whether in terms of overall workload or flexibility).

Methods: identification of job crafting techniques

After going back and forth between the material and the literature and identifying Job Crafting as a relevant analytical lens to account for consultants' attempts to resolve the tensions they are confronted with, I decided to code the interviews in order to have a complete understanding of the job crafting techniques that consultants mobilise. I proceeded in 5 phases:

(1) I re-read all the interviews to identify where job crafting was present. For the purpose of this section only, the choice was made to focus on interviews that explicitly mentioned episodes of job crafting, which reduced the number of interviews analysed from 58 to 49. Interviewees who did not provide any account of job crafting were usually partners with whom we mostly discussed the functioning of their firms, with their own trajectory evoked too briefly to go into the micro-level details of job crafting. There were also young consultants, male and female, who seemed to be struggling with their jobs and eventually left their firms. Since the theme of job crafting emerged in an inductive fashion after the interviews were conducted, it did not necessarily imply that these consultants had never attempted to shape their jobs.

(2) The choice was made to use crafting accounts as a unit of analysis. I consequently used the remaining interviews to identify all the accounts of job crafting that could be found in participants' narratives. By "accounts of job crafting", we refer to Berg et al. (2010b: 163), who define accounts as the "*explanation and interpretation of an event*" following Orbuch (1997) and

job crafting accounts as "*participants' descriptions of a proactive change to the formal task, relational, or cognitive boundaries of their job and the perceptions and experiences that they associate with this change*". I was careful to avoid all interview extracts in which participants made claims such as "*It is important to be proactive*" or "*You have to raise your voice*" but which did not refer to any concrete event of the sort. In total, 334 concrete and precise episodes of job crafting were evoked by 49 of the 58 consultants interviewed, with an average of 7 accounts per consultant.

(3) I first identified whether the job crafting episode was related to promotion, the orientation of projects or work-life balance. I then undertook a first round of coding to identify recurring patterns in the job crafting accounts and then obtain a list of first order codes, which I subsequently reduced from 85 to 49 by regrouping them according to similarities. Codes that only had one or two occurrences were set aside such as "choosing to work from the office when work needs to be done on weekends", which only one participant reported.

(4) A small sample of interviews was then double coded by one of my supervisors to reinforce the robustness of the codes and to make sure their definitions were shared among the team and discuss all accounts of job crafting that were ambiguous or difficult to code (for details regarding data structure see tables 5.2a, 5.2b and 5.2c).

(5) Finally, I regrouped the accounts of job crafting into a small number of job crafting techniques, which allowed me to identify three sets of job crafting techniques at the task, relational and cognitive level, depending on whether they were related to job crafting episodes regarding promotion, project orientation or work-life balance.

a. Crafting one's job in line with aspirations to be rewarded

Out of all the participants interviewed, 34 reported 163 accounts of job crafting aimed at shaping their jobs so they could more easily get rewards, either in the form of quick promotions, high bonuses or simply positive feedback. They report using at least one of the following techniques: looking for challenge in projects, prioritising work over personal time, managing endurance to sustain high levels of commitment over the long term, managing out-of-work relationships to ensure availability for work, managing work relationships to reduce uncertainty regarding both evaluation and promotion processes, and finally, defining consulting in line with aspirations of quick promotion through high levels of commitment.

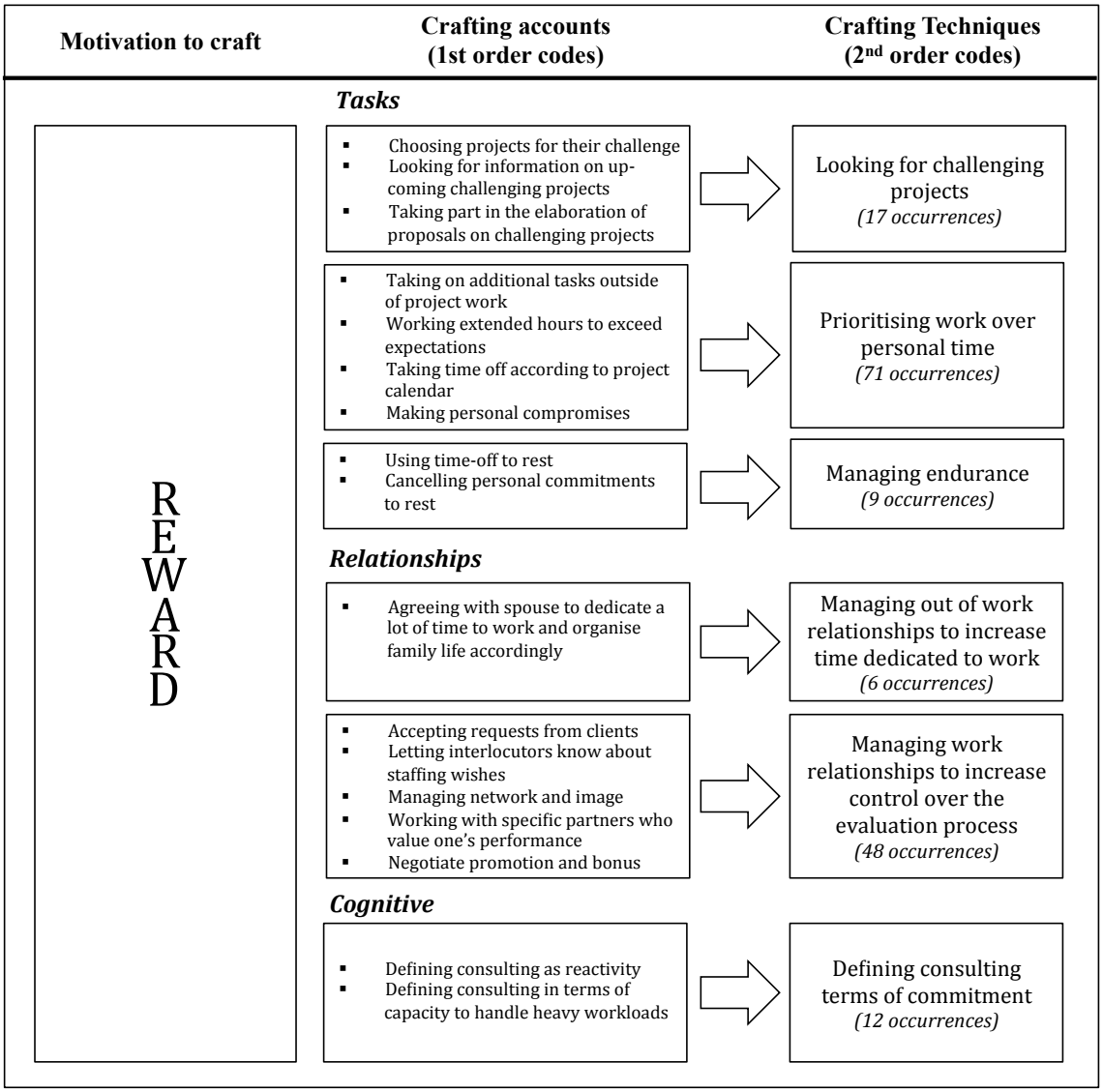

Figure 5.2a: Data structure

➢ Looking for challenging projects

17 consultants reported engaging in forms of job crafting aimed at influencing the project assignment process so that they could work on projects they consider challenging, and so there is always a step-up between their current project and the next (in order to avoid boredom and in the hope to be rewarded for their performance). Charlotte, for example, explained how she was attracted to one specific project, which she found particularly challenging:

> I don't mind taking part in the [T] community. I don't mind because I think it's interesting to think about it, how to develop the offer, etc. But working specifically on [T] projects, it's not my thing. I told them after my last project, that I didn't necessarily want to keep working on it. Then I found out about an opportunity in the [F] sector so I pushed for it. (...) I liked this project; it was something I really wanted to do. I liked the client, too, because all the consultants who had worked for [Y] before had all told me they had loved it. It was also an international project, everything had to be done in English and I thought it was a great opportunity to get back to it because I was a little rusty. And the topic was great, too. I think that – intellectually speaking – it's interesting to work directly for a CEO at the time of an IPO. These are things I knew nothing about and it's always great to learn new things.
>
> (Charlotte, Manager, Management Consulting)

Part of ensuring they are assigned such projects can include seeking out information on upcoming projects, offering to take part in proposals for projects which seem to fit their criteria, or selling their own projects, depending on how advanced these consultants are in the hierarchy. They also say that it involves dedicating a considerable amount of time to getting up-to-date on the relevant clients, sectors or issues each time they start a new project in order to adapt as quickly as possible.

- **Prioritising work over personal time**

31 consultants also reported 71 episodes of job crafting aimed at prioritising their professional time over personal one. They report working late nights, frequently working on weekends, and rarely taking time off, like Nicolas for example:

> I haven't taken days off in 3 years. I took holidays in July and it was my first holiday since I started working. I'm different. Other consultants would never manage to do that. Me, I'm never tired. Doing 100 hours isn't a problem for me. I do it. There's some kind of adrenaline, an interest. Doing a good job is a real satisfaction; work has a real value to me. I really enjoy my job. It's really important to me.
>
> (Nicolas, Senior Consultant, Finance Consulting)

And when they do, they explain taking project constraints into account first:

> There are projects that are hard. When that happens I don't make plans for dinner! It's clear! But usually, if you make dinner plans in the beginning of the week, you have to be very unlucky to have to cancel. Honestly, I haven't had to cancel many things since I've arrived. But I've been late many times!
>
> (Owen, Junior Consultant, Finance Consulting)

There is undeniably a strong identity component to these claims. They explain it as a compromise they must make if they want to be proud of their work and experience the adrenaline they claim to feel when a deadline is met, a report handed out or a recommendation presented and followed. They also report dedicating a lot of time to a wide variety of tasks outside the scope of project work in order to take part in the commercial and structural development of their firms. Such tasks include: recruitment, training, organising internal events, coaching younger consultants, taking part in the development of commercial proposals, and making contacts with new clients or formalising offers. It can even mean implementing novel initiatives, such as organising new team-building activities, developing new tools or building a new line of services from scratch:

> As far as the rhythm was concerned, it wasn't imposed on me, I was imposing it on myself. But, I was working a lot. Maybe too much. On my [client] project, I arrived at 8 in the morning and left at 8 in the evening, and I only had a sandwich for lunch to avoid wasting time. I was really committed to what I was doing and also I was starting to get more and more involved in sales. I helped write proposals, for example. I also became a coach and brought the MBTI technique to the firm.
>
> (Jodie, ex-Manager, Management Consulting)

- **Managing Endurance**

A smaller group of 8 consultants also explicitly evoked 9 episodes of job crafting aimed at actively managing their endurance in order to sustain high levels of commitment over time. They reported, in particular, using time off to rest and regain energy so they can compensate for the intensiveness of their work routine. Some of them, for example, practice sports regularly in order

to remain in good shape and avoid being tired at work, while others explain that they organise their sleep in order to work longer hours while maintaining an endurable level of fatigue. Anthony, for example, who is the director of a world-renowned strategic consultancy, explains how he handles this:

> There are mistakes to avoid. I know I can handle sleep deprivation for a while. If I go to bed at 5am three nights in a row, then sleep normally for the following two nights, I can do just fine. I know I work better in the evening, so when I leave at 5am, I have no problem coming in at 11am if I need two more hours of sleep. Others have their own tactics. Some people do better in the morning. They arrive at 6am and they leave at 8pm, but no one is there to see they are here at 6am! It's really important to know yourself and find the rhythm you can sustain in the long term.
>
> (Anthony, Director, Strategy Consulting 1)

Others also evoked regularly cancelling personal commitments so they can rest and be efficient the following day. For these consultants, time off seems to be frequently subordinated to their capacity to handle heavy workloads and resist stress, which they say is their priority. This type of job crafting appears not to be easy to take on, although it is crucial in terms of endurance, since four of the consultants we met told us they had experienced burnout or depression.

- **Managing out-of-work relationships to increase time dedicated to work**

In parallel, 6 consultants claimed to organise their private life to accommodate these choices. For some of them, the choice was made that they would be the main providers for the family, while the other one would make different choices in terms of career to allow them more time to dedicate to work. It is the case for Neil for example:

> It's possible for me because it's a life-choice I made with my family. But younger people don't necessarily make this choice. (...) She works part time. If you want me to be very concrete, let's say I have absolutely no responsibility for my children during the week. From time to time of course, I can... I can organise myself so I can pick-up my daughter somewhere, but it's like once a month, an evening at 7pm, it's very rare.
>
> (Neil, Senior Manager, Management Consulting)

Yet, in other cases, on the contrary, they reported having chosen to share their life with someone who has made similar choices in order to have their own life-style be understood.

- **Managing work-relationships to increase control over the evaluation process**

27 consultants also reported making efforts to ensure that their commitment would be acknowledged and rewarded and mentioned 48 episodes of job crafting. This involves trying to influence the project assignment process by letting partners, human resources managers, coaches or project managers know the type of projects they would like to be assigned and negotiating with both clients and partners to organise their exit from current projects in order to suit this plan. It also implies making sure that their performance is recognised, which is why some consultants report often working with specific partners, who value their performance or can even mentor them. Owen, for example, explains how comfortable it can be for him to work with the same project manager:

> When a project ends, there are not 40 000 projects starting exactly at the same time, so usually all the project team is available at the same time and others aren't, so you have a tendency to – at least partly – end up working with the same people on the same topics. (...) I

> have worked a lot with the same manager, I have worked with him on three or four different projects. But I think it's a good thing, when you have worked with someone and it's gone well, there's a certain comfort in working with them again. You don't have to prove anything to them anymore, there's trust. It's not the same with a new team, they work differently and they don't know if you're good or not. It's more comfortable to work with the same people.
> (Owen, Junior Consultant, Finance Consulting)

Others insisted that a crucial part of the job involves building a strong network of peers and actively managing one's own reputation within the firm so that others know of them, have a positive image of their work and understand what their ambitions are:

> Unofficially, what happens is that people who have understood (project managers, or consultants) act according to their common interest. So you need to look for information, know what projects are coming up, make yourself known, let people know you are interested in this or that project and make sure you will be warned once the project is about to start, so you can organise yourself to leave your current project earlier, if need be. But not everybody understands that.
> (Catherine, Manager, IT Consulting 1)

It can involve going to all internal events, taking advantage of all opportunities to exchange with others, especially partners, or finding oneself a mentor. In some cases, consultants also explain how managing one's image can also involve hiding difficulties from others, for fear that it may hinder evaluations and promotion outcomes. As a result, this form of relational crafting also includes negotiating promotions and bonuses in exchange for specific efforts. These consultants typically accept to be assigned very difficult projects (short in resources, with tight deadlines or a demanding client), or projects involving a lot of travel, in exchange for the promise of a promotion.

- **Defining consulting in terms of commitment**

Finally, 12 consultants complementarily reported engaging in cognitive crafting by attaching their own definition of what it means to provide consulting advice:

> I worked in the evening, I worked from home, and whenever I had classes I would call my boss at the break. My client didn't know I hadn't graduated yet, so it was hard, but I never gave up. I showed I was available and reactive, which is what consulting is about.
> (Alison, Junior Consultant, HR Consulting)

> How much you work is part of the job. When a client calls, it means there's work to do! That's what being a service provider is all about, especially high value service. Qualified resources have a certain cost. So, clients need to get what they paid for, and it implies content, but also commitment. (...) And consultants need to adapt because there are always going to be small surprises, sometimes big ones. You need to be able to adapt.
> (Leonard, Partner, Management Consulting)

When talking about their jobs and what they mean, for example, they report that consulting is about committed and reactive to clients' demands. Some of them even explain that, given the amount of money clients are billed for their time, they cannot but try to go the extra mile for them, which is often translated into the amount of work they put in.

b. *Crafting one's job for project orientation in line with aspirations*

Overall, 24 consultants mentioned 66 episodes of job crafting aimed at being assigned projects in line with their aspirations, whether to become specialised into one particular area, like in Luke and Lisa's stories, or to – on the contrary – remain as generalist as possible. This type of job crafting involves attempting to influence the assignment process in order to work on projects with specific orientations. Some of these consultants also often claim to engage in a considerable amount of relational crafting by attempting to shape work relationships so that they can succeed in being assigned such projects and be recognised as specialists, especially in firms where polyvalence is the rule, or on the contrary as adaptable consultants and fast-learners. Finally, consultants concomitantly defined consulting as involving expertise or on the contrary adaptability to new topics.

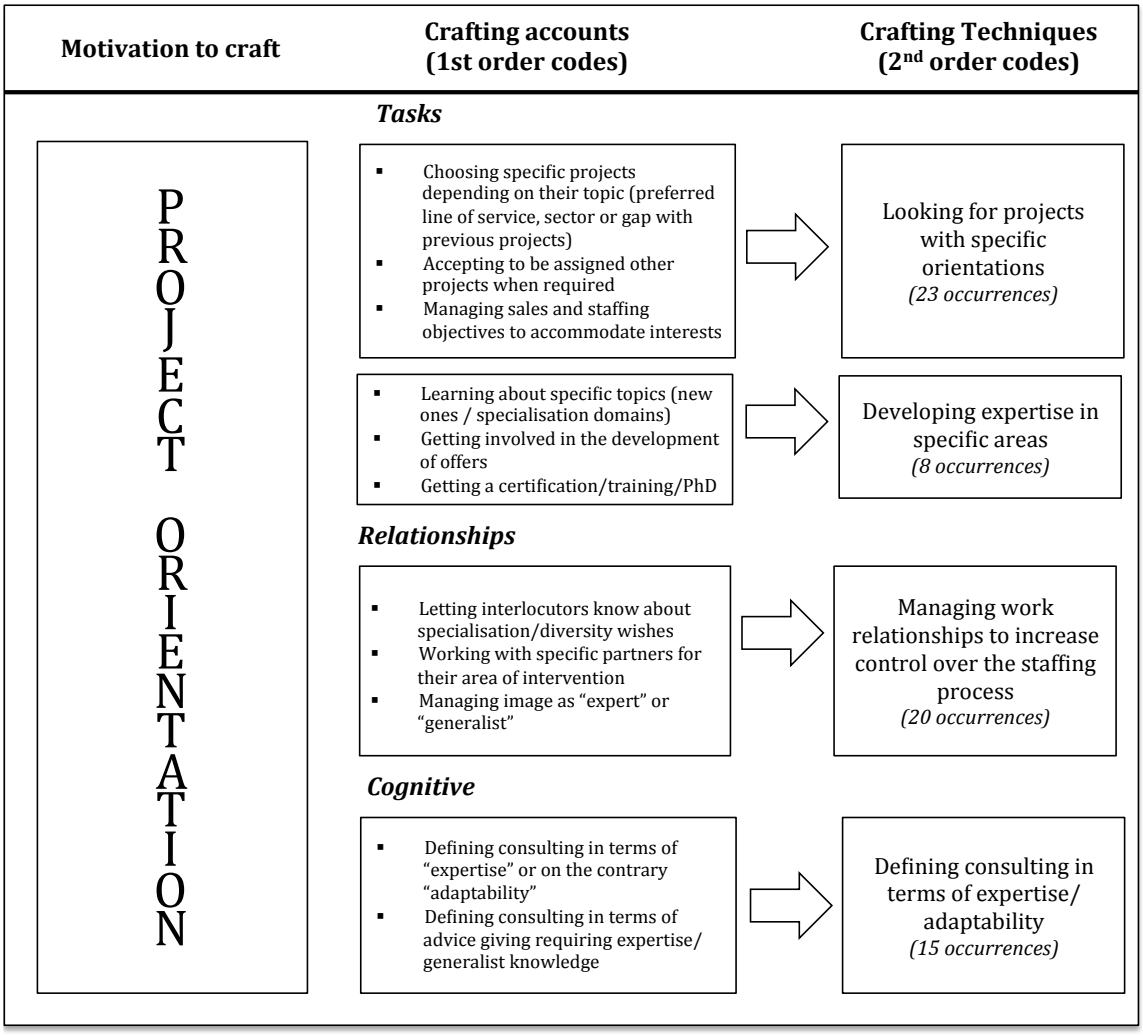

Figure 5.2b: Data structure

➢ Looking for projects with specific orientations

18 consultants provided accounts of job crafting aiming at enabling them to work on specific projects that fit their preferences and general orientations. For specialised senior professionals it involved looking for their own clients and projects, with these orientations in mind. George, for example, a director at a large IT and management consulting firm who is also a sociologist, reports

managing his sales objectives by finding the right mix of projects with important sociological dimensions and bigger projects with more leverage:

> Personally, I rationally choose some contracts that are not good for me, I mean in terms of volume or billing rates. But I offer myself a sort of treat. There are, let's say 'meal composition' strategies. I will take this project even if it means I have to do another, bigger one to compensate.
>
> (George, Director, IT Consulting 2)

Younger consultants will rather invest a lot of effort in gathering information about up-coming projects in their preferred area and to ensure that they are available whenever they start.

In return, many of these consultants explain accepting to be assigned to other projects whenever the smooth functioning of the business is at stake. They unanimously insist on how crucial it is to never refuse a project, but rather to attempt to influence the staffing process beforehand. Estelle, for example, told us how she refused a project because it wasn't in line with her specialisation aspirations, which resulted in her feeling stigmatised for not having the firms' interest at heart:

> I had to work on an internal project on processes. It was fine; I learnt how to do that. It's something a consultant needs to know how to do. So ok. Very well. But then I was presented a project that was all about processes, for a whole year. I wasn't into it at all! I came there to do marketing! So, I told them. After that, it was really urgent for me to find a project, so I went to find a marketing one. You need to find your own projects. It's very political.
>
> (Estelle, Senior Consultant, IT Consulting 3)

- **Developing expertise in specific areas**

Eight consultants provided accounts of job crafting aimed at building expertise in specific areas either because it contributes to an overall wish to specialise or because it is required in order to be operational on a project on an entirely new topic. They reported doing so by reading books or studies, looking at what has been done on other projects in the area or going to conferences. Amy, for example, explained how she tried to become legitimate within a new sector by dedicating some of her personal time to learning about the topic:

> The [Y] sector privileges people who have formal training in this sector, which is not my case. So, I had do make some personal effort and invest some time because I didn't know anything about this sector. So I had to do a lot of reading, of research, because it's not intuitive. But it was a big satisfaction.
>
> (Amy, Manager, Management Consulting)

For the consultants who want to remain generalists, this ability to learn about specific topics quickly is all the more necessary that they ambition to adapt very quickly to all kinds of projects. Others also mentioned taking part in the development of an offer, like Damian, a senior manager:

> Obviously we're accumulating references on the topic of [F]. So, I am trying to formalise all our competences on this topic into a document. Because the more you work on it, the more you forge yourself convictions, you build a discourse on the topic... It's like a company that becomes very good at plastic injection and then thinks... 'well, we might as well sell it right?'
>
> (Damian, Senior Manager, Management Consulting)

➢ **Managing work relationships in order to increase control over the staffing process**

In order to ensure that they could keep working in their preferred area of practice, 10 consultants mentioned 20 episodes of job crafting in which they were simultaneously trying to influence the staffing process. First, many explained letting either their partners, coaches, project managers or human resources managers know about their aspirations in terms of project orientation. They said they informed them - either in the course of the project before it ended - so that their wishes can be taken into account during the partners' staffing meeting. Another technique they evoked was to try to work with specific partners, especially for those who wanted to become experts and tried to convince specialised partners to allocate them projects. Ann, a senior Manager for Finance Consulting, for example, explained working frequently with one specific partner:

> Information travels fast. So when you've worked in a specific line of service with a partner... Partners as specialised a little. Some only to [S], others do a lot of [L]. The partner I've worked with does everything, but he still does a lot of [L] so he knows my history with [L] and there are a lot of chances he will say 'Ann worked on that project, perhaps it's smart to give her this one too'. It's a little informal you know. Partners know all the projects, but they also know our history with different topics.
>
> (Ann, Senior Manager, Finance Consulting)

Finally, in parallel, some consultants with specialisation aspirations also reported trying to make sure they would be identified both internally as well as by clients as experts in their preferred area, by building a community of experts (as was the case for Luke for example), publishing reports and articles or even teaching; while the others attempted to make sure they would be seen as quick learners with experience in diverse areas.

➢ **Defining consulting in terms of expertise/adaptability**

In parallel, 15 consultants concomitantly reported engaging in cognitive job crafting to define consulting in line with their project orientation. The consultants with specialisation aspirations insisted on the fact that consulting is essentially about providing clients with expert advice. They say they believe their job is about understanding the needs of their clients and giving them the best advice based on expertise acquired from experience, rather than answering short-term needs or coming in to do the job the clients' staff don't have time to do - which they say they are not comfortable with:

> "Let's say that if you want to have a career, there's stuff you need to manage. But, that's not was I was looking for, it's not what I'm about. Me, I'd rather develop a project for a client, provide the client with my expertise, in line with their needs, to address their problems. The firm, it should come after. It's not what consulting is about."
>
> (Ethan, Manager, Banking Consulting 1)

Some even say that they are willing to compromise in terms of career progression if it means they can protect the nature of their activity in exchange.

There others, however, rather insisted on how consulting requires generalist knowledge and for consultants to be very adaptable, fast-learners and that this diverse experience is precisely what enables them to provide value for their clients:

> "To me, there are two crucial things in consulting : questioning yourself and keeping up-to-date. You need to take risks. Learning is a challenge. Keeping your expertise up-to-date means staying in the same sector, and becoming fossilised. You can't stay an expert for 20 years, some things remain stable but technologies evolve! I define myself as someone who can reach a certain level of expertise quickly, and I think I'm good at it! I enjoy talking to people and taking what they know to learn quickly."
>
> (Daniel, ex-Manager)

c. Crafting one's job for work-life balance in line with aspirations

Finally, 18 consultants reported 105 episodes of job crafting aimed at improving their sense of work-life balance, as was the case for Victoria. To achieve this goal, consultants reported trying to make specific arrangements - either regarding when or where to work - and attempting to limit the perceived impact of their job on their sense of work-life balance. Some of them also explained how they were managing out-of-work relationships in order to maintain a certain level of flexibility, while simultaneously managing work relationships to make these arrangements accepted. Finally, some consultants also appeared to engage in cognitive crafting by defining consulting as long-term support.

➢ Engaging in temporal crafting

14 consultants reported 24 accounts of job crafting involving having taken a sabbatical leave, working part time, taking more days off, leaving earlier than others or arriving later either to accommodate a hobby like going to the gym, dedicating time to a non-profit, or picking-up children from school:

> I go to the gym in the morning so I never get to the office before 9:30am. It's my thing, I need that. I always let people know in the beginning of a project. And if it's not convenient, I can change. I go in the evening instead. But I need to make sure I can go! Because originally I decided to go in the morning because it seemed more convenient, in the evening there's always something coming up at the last minute. (...) It can happen that I have to cancel, you need to remain flexible, it's what you're paid for. You need to make an effort. But, you also need to have things about which you know you will never make compromises. For example, on Thursday nights, I don't work. Even if I'm not done, it will wait until Friday morning. This way I know I can see my boyfriend, meet friends, etc. You need to remember no life depends on our job!
>
> (Rachel, Senior Consultant, Strategy Consulting1)

> I fight with others in the firm because a lot of people like to have a little chat, take their time, but I say 'the meeting is from 7pm to 8pm. At 8pm I won't be here anymore.' It's a little radical and it annoys them, but it's what allows me to have dinner at home with my wife. So we have dinner at 9:30, but I can see my children 3 nights out of 5 during the week. (...) And I try to be as efficient as possible. I've been reproached a few times, because it makes me less... creative perhaps.
>
> (Damian, Senior Manager, Management Consulting)

All of these consultants seemed to organise themselves to do their work on a different schedule. Whether they choose to arrive at work later or leave earlier, they report working again later in the evening, usually from home. Typically, parents who report leaving work earlier than others to pick up children from school, very often say that they finish what they have to do once their children are in bed. They also report trying to be as productive as possible during their time in the office, by condensing their workday and limiting lunch and coffee breaks. However, they all insist

that the main condition for them to be able to benefit from these flexible arrangements is to be able to find emergency solutions whenever they need to stay in the office or with their clients.

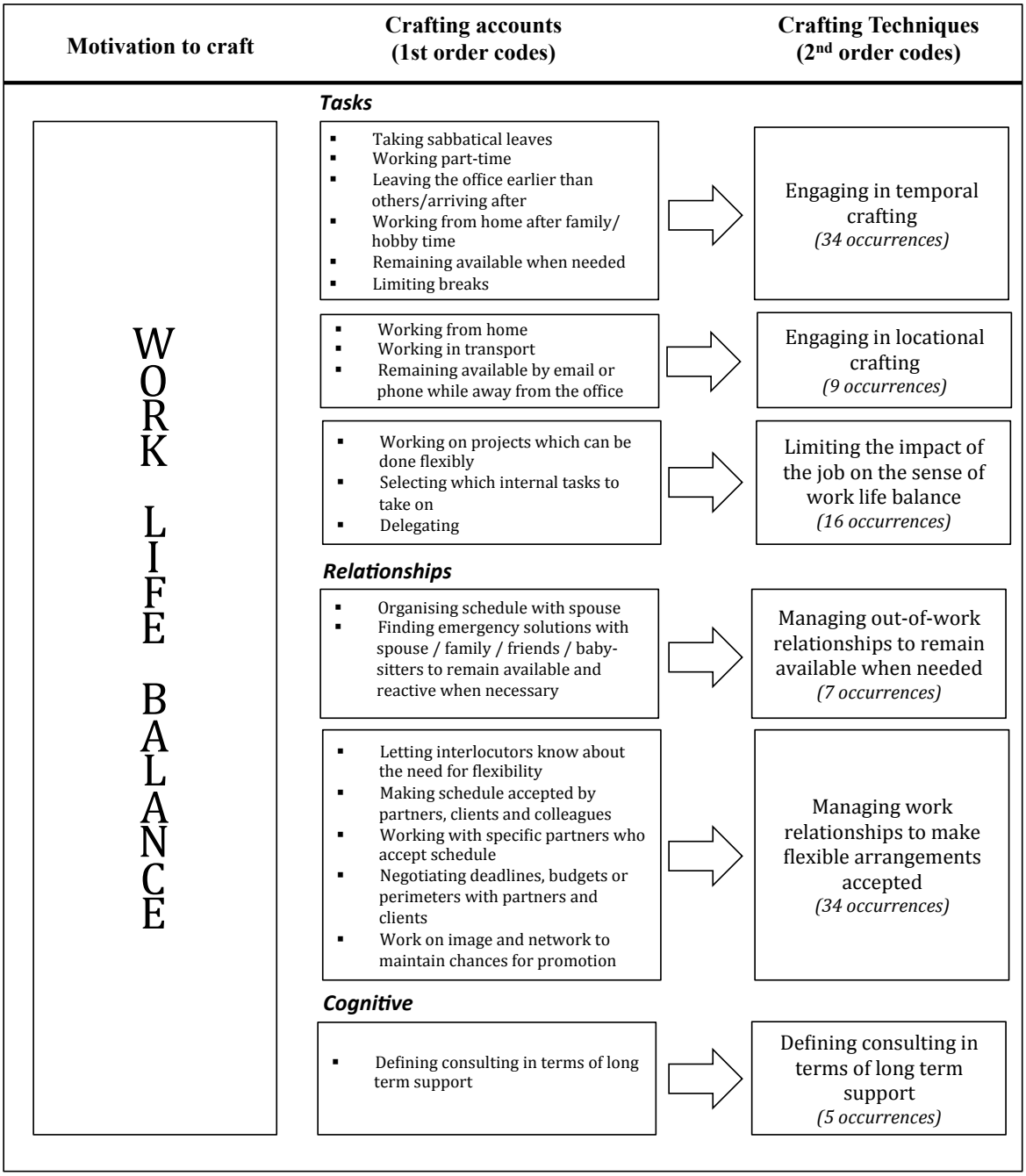

Figure 5.2c: Data structure

➢ Engaging in locational crafting

9 accounts of job crafting also revolved around working from other locations when it could accommodate their personal life (if a child is ill, for example, or if they need to re-work after picking up children from school or going to a gym class):

> When it's sunny outside and I'm expecting an email at 8pm, I'd rather go pick-up my daughter from kindergarten, take her to the park, feed her, and then deal with my email, rather than wait for it in the office. I know I can do it after. (...) You need to leave early to

> pick up your children. Well, you need to go. And if you need to work later from home, well, you do it!
>
> (Thomas, Senior Manager, Finance Consulting)

> I told them, 'I'm going to move to a different city, but I will take the 7am train which gets in Paris at 8:40, which makes it 9:20 in the office, and in the evening I will leave at 7pm, to take the 7:50 train.' Sometimes there are meetings of course. Sometimes... it's tough! And I work on the train, of course. They said 'ok, but you know the job, you know the constraints' and for it to work, I thought I had to have one day of teleworking. Ideally, it's Wednesday, because it allows me to have a break from the train in the middle of the week. But if it doesn't work it can also be Tuesday or Thursday, and if it doesn't work again, Monday or Friday. And there are some weeks when I can't take it at all. But mostly it works out. (...) And we anticipate. If we anticipate there's going to be a lot of work on a project and it requires my presence, I can take a hotel and I work late nights with the team here. But it's not frequent. It's very rare.
>
> (Alice, Manager, Finance Consulting)

The most senior consultants, as well as junior ones who worked for small consultancies, also sometimes said they chose to do some work from home because it allowed them to focus on a deliverable without being interrupted by colleagues. Consulting seems – to some extent – to favour such occasional forms of crafting, since consultants are itinerant by nature: depending on the type of advice their firms provide, they usually are mobile and have all the equipment they need to work from home or even in transport. Given the high level of interaction among project teams, they explained that, for this to work, they needed to remain reachable either by phone or email so that colleagues could contact them whenever they need. They also explained they needed to remain flexible and work from the office or from clients' sites, even if it is not convenient, when project work requires it and that, when that happens, they need to be able to find solutions very quickly.

- **Limiting the impact of the job on the sense of work-life balance**

In order to facilitate such practices, 11 consultants reported 16 accounts involving actively trying to work on projects that would fit their schedule either because the client is known to be accommodating or because it is usual in their industry to leave work early. It could also be that these types of projects have other attractive features: they may involve a lot of work from the office rather than from clients' sites and require little transport, the deadlines may not be particularly tight, or the budget may be comfortable and thus the project team big enough, for example. David, for example, explained having tried to work for certain types of clients when his children were young:

> After a while, once you're manager, or after, it becomes part of your own objective to be able to sell your own projects, so it means looking for your own clients. And then... let's say... you're going to make more or less effort to find a certain type of clients than others. It's natural. Everyone has a different driver.
>
> (David, Partner, Management Consulting)

Along the same lines, these consultants also reported trying to avoid projects that they anticipated would affect their work-life balance, either because they involve a lot of transport, tight deadlines, an under-staffed project team (to reduce the price of the project, or to increase profit) or because they know the partner or client in charge impose long hours of presence. Ann, for example, explains such a choice implies accepting not to be assigned to the most exciting

projects because those often require a very high degree of availability and reactivity, and involve pressure and tight deadlines:

> I think I'm not assigned the same projects I used to before I had my children. But I mean, I'm very happy about it! Because calls at 10pm, it has never been my thing! With or without children. I'm not a big fan of working over hours. I'm on projects... when it's projects that are... I say 'it's not going to work out for me!' I can work at night for a week, ten days, but at some point I'll say 'stop!' So, it's better to assign these projects to young men without children, or with children, actually, but men. I'm on projects... not the ones that make the headlines!
>
> (Ann, Senior Manager, Finance Consulting)

Improving one's sense of work-life balance will also, for some, imply selecting carefully which internal tasks to take on outside of project work depending on their visibility, reputation or personal interest. Finally, some of these consultants also reported trying to delegate in order to be more efficient and reduce the workload as much as possible.

- **Managing out-of-work relationships to remain available when needed**

For these practices to be accepted – or at least tolerated – consultants said they needed to remain available whenever absolutely required by clients, project managers or colleagues. They say it is key in showing that clients do come first and that they are willing to compromise whenever needed, in spite of personal commitments. This could be particularly problematic for consultants with children who then explained needing to find emergency solutions whenever they either needed to stay in the office or go abroad for a project:

> I take my son to school in the mornings and my husband picks him up in the evenings. So, he thought I was the one always leaving him! It was a big drama! I was sick about it! He wouldn't talk to me anymore, he didn't want to see me, he didn't want to be in my arms! He only wanted his father. So I said 'stop.' Now I go pick him up at least once a week. And I switch with my husband. He's more flexible. Even if I have to hide in the office when I leave, I go pick him up!
>
> (Amy, Manager, Management Consulting)

> I have four children, and I come back early in the evening because I am in charge of reading bedtime stories. So, I understand constraints! But I work afterwards, I find ways, I work during weekends if I have to. But the job will be done. Or I will organise myself with my wife if I really need to stay late occasionally. That's it.
>
> (James, Partner, Finance Consulting)

These consultants also often reported developing a network of baby-sitters they could contact at the last minute when needed.

- **Managing work relationships to make arrangements accepted**

An important part of these consultants' crafting activities is related to making their practices accepted and ensuring they have a limited impact on their image and reputation. 16 consultants reported 34 accounts of job crafting aimed at actively managing their work relationships with this intention in mind. They explained, more particularly letting their partners, coaches, human resources managers, project managers or clients know about their need for flexibility at some point. This was particularly important for them to ensure it would be implemented (for example when part-time hours or telecommuting are involved, which require a change in employment

status) or simply tolerated, for more informal arrangements. It was also crucial to ensuring that projects would be assigned with this information in mind.

These consultants also engaged in a lot of relational crafting to make their arrangements acceptable to partners, colleagues or clients. They reported making their schedule acceptable to others by explaining their constraints and discussing how work should be organised. They provide many accounts of discussions with partners and clients to get them to accept their work routine, like Ann who explained how she needs to negotiate with partners who want to meet just before she needs to go pick up her children:

> It has been difficult with some partners, because they come at 6:45pm and they say 'let's read the report!' and I have to say 'Sorry I have to go', they say 'Oh really? You can't stay? Your husband isn't here?' so I say 'Yes, he is, but I want to see my children and the report is only due in 3 days…' So it's been a bit difficult and there are some partners with whom it's a bit hard and well… I just don't work with them anymore.
>
> (Ann, Senior Manager, Finance Consulting)

Negotiations be all the more difficult that consultants are junior and lack autonomy or are supposed to spend most of their time on clients' sites. Other consultants, like Victoria, reported following a different strategy by pretending to have other work commitments and simply are not available during the slots they want to protect, which they argued avoided having to justify themselves. For some consultants, working with specific partners facilitates this process considerably. Indeed, they explained that when they knew some partners understood their constraints and were willing to accommodate them it was simply easier for them to work with these partners again and to avoid those they considered less understanding. Rose, for example, explained how the support of a specific partner saved her from suffering the negative consequences of having been fired by her clients due to her working hours:

> I was fired from a project by a client once. I refused to be available from 7am until midnight. So he decided I should leave the project. I was protected because I knew people who knew the quality of my work, so it was ok. But, I don't think it could have happened twice in a row...
>
> (Rose, Director, Strategy Consulting 2)

Also, some consultants reported often needing to negotiate deadlines, perimeters or budgets with partners or directly with clients, whenever they believed they were not given the appropriate means to fulfil their objectives. In parallel, these consultants also often reported working on their reputation to ensure that they would remain seen as willing to compromise whenever clients needed to come first. They said this was essential if they did not want their chances for promotion to be undermined. Collaboration with team members also appeared to be very important for them to make their arrangements work.

- **Defining consulting in terms of long-term support**

In parallel, some of the consultants tended to define their jobs as being about providing clients with long term quality support:

> You need to know your limits and make them accepted. You need to send people back to their own responsibilities. We have an image of consultants who cannot say a word about anything, but if you pressure your employees, there's a real risk they will break down or leave. You need

> to think about long term well-being. You need to manage it, in the interest of the client. There can be emergencies sometimes, but then you need to negotiate the perimeter, do the minimum.
> (Violet, Director, Big Four A)

This was explicitly opposed to the discourse of the committed, available and reactive professional that should always accept requests from clients. To them, on the contrary, consulting is or should be about thinking of the interest of the client in the long term, which cannot be done without regulating and negotiating the workload with clients.

d. Overview of job crafting practices among consultants

An overview of the job crafting techniques used by consultants can be found in table 5.6 below:

	Crafting for rewards	Crafting for project orientation	Crafting for work-life balance
Tasks	▪ Looking for challenging projects ▪ Prioritising work over personal time ▪ Managing endurance	▪ Looking for projects with specific orientations ▪ Developing expertise in certain areas	▪ Engaging in temporal crafting ▪ Engaging in locational crafting ▪ Limiting the impact of the job on the sense of work-life balance
Relations	▪ Managing out-of work relationships to increase time dedicated to work ▪ Managing work relationships to increase control over the evaluation process	▪ Managing work relationships to increase control over the staffing process	▪ Managing out-of-work relationships to remain available when needed ▪ Managing work relationships to make flexible arrangements accepted
Cognition	▪ Defining consulting in terms of commitment	▪ Defining consulting in terms of expertise/adaptability	▪ Defining consulting in terms of long term support

Table 5.6: Overview of the job crafting techniques employed by consultants

It appears that no matter why consultants attempt to craft their jobs, some of the techniques they use are similar.

Indeed, influencing project assignment appears to be a central technique employed by consultants, whether it is because they want a particularly challenging project, to work in a specific sector, with a specific partner for their expertise, or their work-style. This will to influence project assignment is very often associated with relational crafting in that it requires consultants to build a network of benevolent peers in order to access relevant information about projects, and to make sure they will be assigned to them.

One complementary transversal crafting technique is to work on their image and reputation within the firm and with clients so that either they are perceived as high potential, good reliable professionals or experts in a specific field.

Finally, cognitive crafting seems to also play an important part in all cases in that it helps consultants define their job in a way that is consistent with their own aspirations. It implies that

the uncertainty at the heart of the service (Sturdy, 1997) is actually – even though a source of anxiety (Gill, 2013) – also a potential resource for individuals.

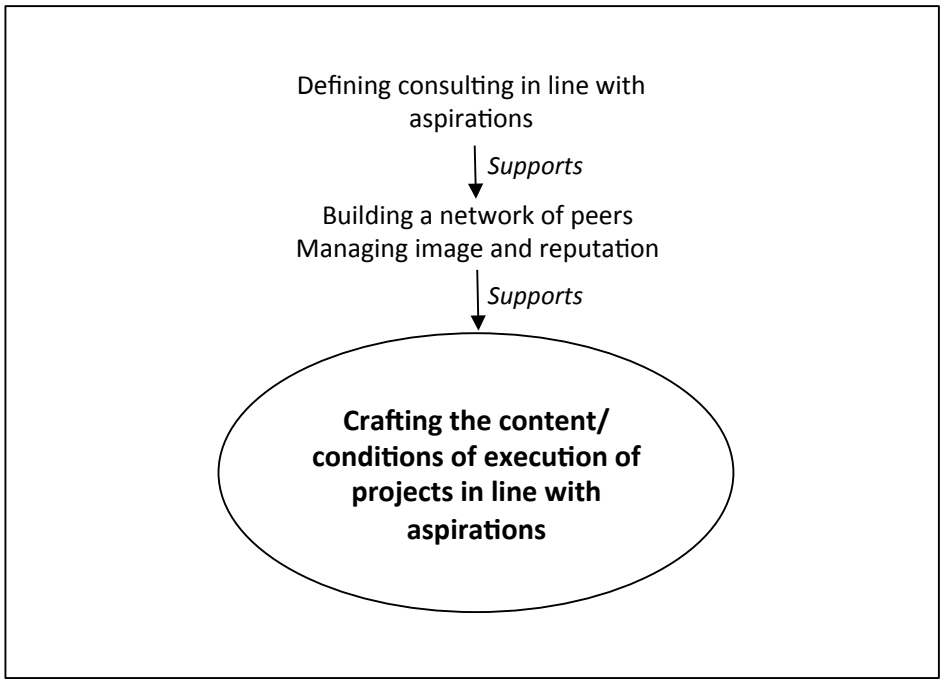

Figure 5.3: Job Crafting in Professional Service Firms

5.2.3 On the limitations of individual proactivity

Even though consultants appear to dedicate a lot of effort to trying to shape their jobs according to their own aspirations, considering that the techniques they employ are always successful would be a mistake. Several factors explain the challenges encountered by consultants when attempting to craft their jobs: first, the experience of junior and senior consultants are quite distinct; second, it appears that some job crafting techniques can be difficult to combine sustainably in the long term, and finally, consultants are very limited in the initiatives they take by either the will of partners to accommodate them or by organisational constraints.

a. Job crafting at different ranks

Many participants – in particular among senior levels – said that they could try to have some influence over their job boundaries but that it would be absolutely impossible for junior consultants:

> Managers are in charge of their own schedule. They organise projects and they have a moral contract with the partner and the client, if the work is done it doesn't matter how. Younger consultants don't have enough experience, they are not autonomous. (…) Being a Manager gave me the legitimacy to do this and to come in to the office later. When I was a junior consultant I had to be there at 9am.
>
> (Alice, Manager, Finance Consulting)

It is true that the more senior consultants are, the more they can exercise their discretion over who they work with, the projects that they take on, when meetings are set up, etc. They can even start to sell their projects themselves so that they have more influence over their topic, the budget and how the project team will be composed and organised. They are more rarely expected to work full-time on site for one single client which gives them more leeway in organising their own schedule since they are no longer expected to be available by default. They also benefit from the reputation they have already started to build for themselves: they are more trusted, and may need to prove themselves a little less than junior consultants do.

Job crafting accounts were nonetheless presents at all ranks, even if necessarily expressed slightly differently. Junior consultants seem to rely even more on relational crafting in that they have little autonomy to define their own tasks and assign themselves their own projects. Their portfolio of crafting techniques are thus less varied, and they rely strongly on making themselves heard by relevant actors (such as the staffer, the HR director, their project manager or specific partners) and for their claims to be considered legitimate to fulfil their aspirations.

b. I want it all and I want it now: are job crafting techniques compatible?

More significantly, consultants seem to be experiencing difficulties when they want to have it all, in other words when they want to choose which projects they get to work on because of their interest in a specific area, protect their sense of work-life balance and still be on the route to partnership. In some cases, one set of techniques seems to be subordinated to another one. Typically, choosing one specific sector can serve aspirations of promotions when this sector is particularly visible and bears demand for large lucrative projects for example. This is the case for Tim, for instance, whom explained in between the lines that he specialised into a specific sector because it is prestigious and there are possibilities to develop a successful offer, which has the potential to bring the firm a lot of projects. In such cases, compatibility will not really be an issue since crafting for specialisation will systematically come after crafting for rewards and promotions.

In other cases, however, consultants genuinely have all these concerns at heart, which may lead to some tensions. Sometimes, it is harder to combine interest in specific topics and promotion for example. Indeed, in many firms, experts have a negative image and remain seen as unable to sell projects and make partnership. In addition, wanting to specialise in a specific area can sometimes come in the way of work-life balance since, as Lisa explained, all projects have different characteristics which might or might not be compatible with a chosen work-life balance:

> I know that by doing this type of projects, in general it involves going on business trips, and not in the nice suburbs and a lot of hours. I am happy with it but I think a lot of people find that really annoying and don't want this kind of projects. You need to make a choice.
>
> (Lisa, Senior Consultant, Finance Consulting)

Also, consultants seem to have indeed internalised the *up-or-out* rule since, even though they could very well stay within their organisation without climbing the ladder, they rarely seem to think of it as a viable alternative in the long run. And when they actively try to accommodate it, to the point that they have specific working conditions (either very formal through reduced loads for example, or more informal when they either arrive later or leave the office earlier), it can be

difficult to combine, in the long term, with the will to be promoted and eventually co-opted partner. Rose, for example, has been working for a big strategy consultancy for over 10 years. After she had her children she decided to work with a part-time arrangement. She says that it allows her to limit overwork rather than have a "good" work-life balance: *You have to understand that 60% doesn't mean 40h a week. But you buy yourself some flexibility. You earn less and you progress less rapidly but I could see the benefit for my husband and my children.(…) I've always wondered: Can you work full-time under 90hours?* In spite of this, she tried to remain in the competition for partnership but she nonetheless explained how difficult it was for her to compete with other consultants who did not have the same constraints and were available and willing to accept everything she could not: *The promotion, you have to prove you want it. You're at 60% so people think you don't want it, that you can do more. And I am compared with two colleagues who work 90h a week and say yes to everything because their wives don't work. They say yes and I have to say no*. Not very long after we interviewed her, she found out that she would not be made partner and had to leave the firm. Many of the participants who had similar kinds of arrangements reported wondering about the future and not knowing how long they would be able to sustain them. Staying forever without career progression did not seem to be an appealing alternative to them. In some other cases, one way to make career progression and work-life balance compatible was to dedicate specific moments in the career to one or the other. David, for example, explained that he negotiated an informal annualised part-time arrangement with his firm when he had his children, so that he could spend all school holidays with them. Yet, when they grew older he progressively started to reduce the number of days that he took off and he is now partner at Management Consulting.

c. Individual proactivity versus organisational constraints

Beyond the issue of the compatibility of techniques and aspirations, consultants appear to be constrained and their ability to craft their jobs limited. Indeed, the number of projects available at one particular time is limited and may or may not fit consultants' preferences, which partners may or may not want to consider. Similarly, the way that projects are sold and managed is determinant upon the workload that consultants will face (even if they can try to influence it or re-negotiate it). Finally, the way partners are willing to tolerate or even facilitate some arrangements (either in terms of specialisation or work-life balance) appears to be determinant.
Another issue is consultants' ability to make their job crafting practices accepted, which seems to depend as much on their own ability to legitimise them as on the willingness of people around them to facilitate them. Estelle, for example, tried to influence the staffing process so she would be assigned marketing projects instead of the process oriented projects some partners had in mind for her. She, however, did so in a relatively critical way, arguing that she had marketing experience prior to joining the consulting industry and that she had not come to the firm to work on process projects. It did not go unremarked and Estelle ended up without any project, having to find her own by herself, which she eventually did, until she was refused a promotion, at which point she decided to quit. As a consequence, some of the participants who seemed to have unsuccessfully tried to craft their jobs, ended up resigning. These consultants often even blame themselves for not having been successfully able to remain in control of their careers since it appears to be often left to consultants to "*organise themselves*" or "*take control over their careers*", as participants often said, reproducing their firms' organisational discourse.

Yet, not all consultants appeared to be ready to engage in the difficulties associated with job crafting in the first place. Among the participants, 5 had already left the industry, 3 of whom did because they were unsatisfied with their work-life balance in particular, or had planned to start a family, but never tried to raise the problem with their bosses and colleagues and assumed that leaving was their only option. This is the case of Nina, for instance, who decided she was ready to start a family and was convinced right from the start that it would be incompatible with her consulting job and thus resigned for a corporate position.

Intermediate Conclusion

In this section, the job crafting techniques employed by consultants at all levels to fulfil their aspirations of rewards, project assignment and work-life balance have been examined. Even though the techniques consultants employ differ considerably depending on their motivations to craft, they very often involve redefining what consulting is about in a way that supports job crafting, building a relevant network of benevolent peers and managing one's reputation in order to influence the assignment and evaluation processes (see table 5.6).

Yet, individuals' ability to shape their work remains constrained by the support they may or may not receive from their partners and appears to be sometimes difficult to sustain in the long term. The main challenge these consultants face is their ability to make their practices accepted, in particular when they are counter-normative, as is the case when consultants are supposed to remain polyvalent and still want to specialise or with work-life balance in general.

5.3 Consultants as resistant conformers: the contribution of the concept of "conforming work"

Some of the practices that consultants develop through job crafting appear to be particularly counter-normative in their specific firm, and sometimes in the industry as a whole. Leaving the office earlier than others, for example, is a typical example of what seems to be widely considered to be counter-normative in the whole industry in France. How, then, does this minority of consultants manage to make these practices accepted? This section will focus on the discourse of compliance that is almost systematically associated with these practices, making it unclear whether these consultants are conformists or resisters. I will argue that they engage in a specific form of identity work, which I label "conforming work", aiming at reducing the gap between counter-normative practices and compliance, through discourse. This allows them to make their practices accepted, but also in some cases to reduce the anxiety associated with this gap.

5.3.1 A discourse of proactivity entangled with a discourse of compliance

This co-existence of discourses of counter-normativity and compliance initially emerged very clearly from some of the stories, which led to a more systematic analysis of this phenomenon in the rest of the interviews.

a. Back to the stories

➢ Lisa's story

In Lisa's story, for example, a duality in her discourse is easy to perceive. Indeed, she explained how she had a strong preference for one particular line of services, for a number of reasons, and how she dedicated all her effort to trying to be assigned only these kinds of projects. She insisted strongly on how atypical this was within her firm:

> Other types of projects are very long, you never see the end, for others the client just needs you to write a report but doesn't really care what's inside. Some projects are really annoying, the work you have to do, the clients, the people you work with… (…) So **all my life as a junior consultant I have tried to do recovery. I'm the only one** that has specialised this early. **They don't want you to be specialised** unless they hired you especially for that

And yet, at the same time, and in spite of all her efforts to try and convince the recovery team to take her on their projects as often as possible, she explains that she submits herself to the assignment allocation process and that she accepts whatever project she is given and that this is "*normal*":

> **I don't really have the choice**, if I am assigned a project I don't like I can't… But it's impossible, **you can't say "I don't want to do this project"** but **it's normal** or else there are some projects no one would want.

This example shows that even though Lisa dedicates a lot of time and effort to trying to influence the staffing process, this needs to remain relatively secret so that she appears to submit herself to the rule and the decisions of the partners in this matter. She has understood that refusing a project was a taboo, in that it would implicitly suggest that some of the projects are not interesting, which cannot be said out loud without challenging the positioning of the firm.

➢ Victoria's story

Victoria's story provided us with another example of this ambiguity in consultants' discourse. Her decision to commit herself to attending two theatre rehearsals a week when she was only a junior consultant went against the norm, as she explains:

> **Twice a week, I went to the theatre for rehearsals that started at 7:30pm** so twice a week, during the week I mean, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, I left the office at 6:30pm to attend my rehearsal from 7:30 to like 10:30 or 11pm. (…) It was very naïve of me to do so as a junior, it seemed almost normal to me, but **no one else did it**.

However, at the same time, she insisted that she never did this as a claim of work-life balance, that it was always very "*naïve*" and that she definitely would have stopped if needed:

> But I could re-work after, **everybody knew that I reworked after**. (…) And it wasn't like a claim, it wasn't like saying 'I believe I have the right to preserve…' no, it was very naïve. (…) **It wasn't militant**! It was more like 'I wanna try and if it doesn't work out I will stop.'

This shows that, while she had decided to do something very counter-normative, she felt the need to justify herself – even several years later – by arguing that she was no less efficient, that she could re-work if needed and that what she was doing was not intentionally counter-normative.

b. A tension between counter-normative practices and the injunction of compliance

After a more thorough examination of the interview material, it appeared that this ambiguity was perceivable in more than Lisa and Victoria's cases.

Methods: Analysis of the ambiguity in consultants' discourse

The ambiguity between accounts of counter-normative practices and compliance in discourse emerged inductively from the examination of some specific cases, while looking for an element of surprise in the material (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011). Indeed, this ambiguity was surprising in two regards. First, given the dominance of critical accounts of consulting work in the literature and their insistence on conformity among this population, such accounts of counter-normativity in the interview material was not expected. Second, once these supposedly counter-normative practices had been evoked, I was expecting them to be followed by a rather critical or cynical discourse on norms and how things should be different, in other words, I was expecting it to be accompanied by a discourse of resistance. I thus decided to examine this ambiguity more thoroughly by following the following steps:

(1) All the interviews in which counter-normative forms of job crafting were evoked were identified (11 out of the 58). The choice was made here not to define what is or is not counter-normative and rather to focus on what participants themselves described as counter-normative within their own organisations.

(2) In these interviews, I identified what consultants described as particularly counter-normative (for example arriving at work after 9am) and how they would talk about it in the interview. Following an approach similar to that of Costas and Kärreman (2015) I identified a coding pair (counter-normativity vs compliance) by confronting passages in which consultants insist on the counter-normative character of their practice with others in which they downplay it.

(3) Finally, three different components (hiding, making concessions, developing a discourse of reinforced professionalism) of this complying discourse could be identified, which were analysed through the concept of identity work (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Watson, 2008) and labelled "conforming work".

Following this methodology, I gathered more evidence of the ambiguity often found in consultants' discourse. Some examples are gathered in the following table:

COUNTER-NORMATIVY DISCOURSE	COMPLIANCE DISCOURSE
I asked to **work part-time when I had my son**. (…) Some partners are very traditional, so it's a real challenge because you risk being **ill-perceived**. And they say 'When I was your age I didn't say anything'. (…) **You have to know your limits and make them accepted**. (Violet, Senior Manager, Big Four A)	To be able to deal with a part-time arrangement, you need to be **organised, flexible, communicate, anticipate, make efforts**. (…) Sometimes you have to say you 'I have a meeting' rather than 'I work part-time'. **You shouldn't claim it too much**. (Violet, Senior Manager, Big Four A)
I have a child and sometimes I pick him up from school so I leave at 6pm… **This is really early**! (…) **I am very transparent**! Sometimes I ask my boss and **I just work from home**, there's no problem for him, but for others... (Amy, Manager, Management Consulting)	People don't know what I do at home! They don't know **I turn on my computer again and I keep working**! (…) In people's mind someone who works well is someone who works a lot. But it's completely stupid! There's a question of proactivity! We all know people who stay late but spend all day chatting. (…) Me, from time to time **at the lunch**

	break I have a sandwich in front of my computer. I have an ability to concentrate that allows me to work a lot over a short period of time. I don't see why I should stay later if I am done and I can be with my family. (Amy, Manager, Management Consulting)
I love my job but **I am not willing to sacrifice everything**. For example, my family lives abroad so once a month either they come either I go. I can cancel once, but if I have to cancel twice, **I will quit**! Also I go to the gym every morning. So **I never come into the office before 9:30**, it's my thing, **I need it**. I always tell the team in the beginning of a project so we can find solutions for it to work (Rachel, Senior Consultant, Strategy Consulting 1)	**I have cancelled sometimes**, it has happened. **You need to be flexible**. This is **what we are paid** for after all! You have to make some effort. (…) I manage to conciliate everything **without affecting my performance**. And people say that it's nice to have someone **in good shape, I am sportive, dynamic, in good mood. So clients love this**. (Rachel, Senior Consultant, Strategy Consulting 1)
I fight with others in the firm because a lot of people like to have a little chat, take their time, but I say 'the meeting is from 7pm to 8pm. **At 8pm I am gone.' It's a little radical** and it annoys them, but it's what allows me to have dinner at home with my wife. So we have dinner at 9:30, but I can see my children 3 nights out of 5 during the week. (Damian, Senior Manager, Management Consulting)	It's a personal **rigour**, it takes a lot of **energy**. You have **to dare** say that the meeting needs to end at 8pm! (…) But I think it's easy to find things to do not to come home early, to come back after children are bathed and all. You can organise yourself differently. We have all the technologies that allow us to turn the computer on from home, to have dinner, see your children, and **then turn the computer on again from home**. (Damian, Senior Manager, Management Consulting)
I don't live in Paris. So I have to take an early train to arrive at 9:30 and leave at 7pm. (…) And for it to work, I need to work from home one day a week. **No one else is doing that. Never before, never since.** But we thought we would give it a try. (Alice, Manager, Finance Consulting)	I work, I mean sometimes I rework from home in the evening. Anyway I always work in the train, **if I have to work all the time I work all the time.** (…) and if I know that there is a lot of work on a project, I book a hotel and I spend the night with the team in the office. (Alice, Manager, Finance Consulting)
I decided that I would leave work at 7pm to pick up my children from the nanny. (…) It has been a little difficult at first because here, normal working hours are more like… people leave at around 8:30 or 9pm. (…) **I was the first one to do something like that**. (Ann, Senior Manager, Finance Consulting)	I can connect to the network, I have everything I need at home, everyone does. (…) But when there's a rush, you need to know… Typically with my current project… **I haven't seen my children much in the past 10 days,** but I knew it**. That's what makes it work**. At some point **if I always say "at 7pm I'm done", deadlines will not be met.** If I hadn't stayed later the past 10 days, **we wouldn't have handed out a good report to the client**. (…) I have never been a unionist, but **I organise myself. I have very condensed days, I don't send personal emails, I don't have personal phone calls. I perhaps have 10 minutes off during the day**. (Ann, Senior Manager, Finance Consulting)

Table 5.7: Ambiguity regarding counter-normativity and conformity in consultants' discourse

Even though some consultants might advance that they are not willing to sacrifice everything and still do the opposite – as is the case in Muhr et al. (2013) study of the aspirations of workload and fun of consultants who nonetheless work over hours - considering that this is what is systematically behind the ambiguity of their discourse is problematic. Indeed, as evoked earlier, in many instances I also talked to these consultants' colleagues, partners or HR directors who evoked their specific situations, which confirms that there is more than just rhetoric to their arrangements and that they are not simply talking about having a life outside of work to feel better about themselves or present themselves in a better light.

Still, when they evoke their practices and explain how counter-normative they might be in their own firm (usually insisting on how they are "*the only ones*" or "*the first ones*" doing what the do, or on the gap with others' practices, or more explicitly with the norm or traditions), they almost systematically seem to follow with a discourse very much in line with the dominant discourse on what it is to be a good professional. They for example insist on how efficient they are, how willing they are to re-work in the evening if needed, or to cancel their personal commitments, etc.

This ambiguity raises the following question: how do these consultants manage the tension between wanting to act differently and still belonging to a group within which social norms are very strong and behaviours homogeneous? It is indeed unclear whether these consultants are fighting against the norms imposed upon them or on the contrary reproducing them (and even reinforcing them) through discourse. Research on resistance has focused on processes of "*adaptation, subversion and reinscription of dominant discourses*" (Thomas and Davies, 2005: p.687) whereby all actions that are not in line with the prescribed subjectivity can be considered as resistance. Recent accounts have often focused on daily actions such as irony, scepticism, humour or sabotage (Fleming and Spicer, 2003). These forms of resistance are often hostile or vindictive, which is definitely not in line with what can be observed here. But then again, considering these consultants simply as conformists bears the risk of erasing the complexities of their actions.

5.3.2 Resolving the tension between resistance and conformity: the role of "conforming work"

In order to understand better this apparent contradiction in consultants' discourse, I propose to label "conforming work" the specific form of identity work, which aims at reducing the tension between counter-normative practices and an injunction of conformity.

a. The contribution of the concept of "conforming work"

We define "conforming work" as a specific form of identity work (Watson, 2008; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) that individuals engage in when they want to keep an appearance of conformity while having counter-normative practices. In the case of consultants and work-life balance, conforming work seems to have three main dimensions: hiding practices, making concessions and developing a discourse of reinforced professionalism.

- **Hiding**

One of the first elements associated with conforming work has to do with how consultants' report hiding some of their counter-normative practices. They will, for example, lie when scheduling a meeting by arguing that they already have a meeting with a client or an important conference call when in fact, they have planned to leave early enough to go to the gym or pick up their children from school. It can also involve literally hiding from others. Amy, a Manager at Management Consulting, for example explained taking the stairs rather than the elevator when she leaves earlier than her colleagues to avoid remarks. This form of conforming work can even take place at the client's when – in order to handle project work and other tasks (administrative work, management tasks, sales bids, internal projects…), consultants report dissimulating what they do.

➢ **Making concessions**

Another key dimension of the conforming work of consultants is their – at least apparent - willingness to make concessions and compromises. Whether they report having put in place specific arrangements to arrive later or leave earlier, work part-time or from distance, they always explain that they are willing to cancel or make alternative arrangements when either the good functioning of the team, or the quality of client delivery are said to be at stake. Ann, for example, insists on how when she feels that the quality of the report the client will be delivered may be hindered by her decision to leave the office at 7pm, she anticipates it and organises herself to ensure the project runs smoothly. What is at stake here, is these consultants' ability to demonstrate that, in spite of their specific circumstances, clients always come first and that they remain good team players.

➢ **Developing a discourse of maintained/reinforced professionalism**

Finally, the last component of consultants' conforming work is their insistence on how – in spite of their counter-normative practices – very good professionals. Making concessions contributes to this by showing how they understand professional imperatives and make them come first. They, in addition, systematically insist on how the work is always done and how that is what matters, rather than how, when or where it has been done. They nonetheless frequently feel the need to say that they do re-work from home in the evenings or whenever projects require it and that their specific work-style would never come in the way of quality.

In some cases it goes even further since they explain how their practices, no matter how counter-normative they might be, make them even better professionals than they would otherwise be. When Rachel, a senior consultant working for a strategy consultancy, explains that even though she arrives later than others in the morning because she goes to the gym, it is in the end favourable to clients who prefer to see someone who is healthy, energetic and smiley, in opposition to her unhealthy workaholic colleagues. When Ann, Damian, Alice or Amy explain that because of their constraint to leave the office earlier than others, they are more efficient and productive than others who supposedly spend a lot of time chatting or on coffee breaks, they also present themselves in a favourable light.

b. An issue for women in particular

A majority of the examples of conforming work identified were found in women's discourse. Indeed, conforming work seems to be one of the ways that women deal with the paradoxical injunction to be both good professionals and good mothers. Engaging in conforming work might be a way for these women to conform to both these grand discourses. They indeed insist on how they are "*pioneers*", "*the first ones*" to try to combine work and motherhood, which helps them present themselves in opposition with previous generations of women consultants who supposedly did not see their children and hired many babysitters to take care of them. It allows them to tell a story in which they have to fight to remain both independent working women and good mothers.

Yet, one of the main reasons why conforming work seems to be most commonly found amongst women is also that they seem to remain more in charge in charge of the household then their male

counterparts. However, when men engage in counter-normative practices such as leaving the office in time to pick up or even just see their children, conforming work may take even stronger forms, not for it is a way to reconcile professionalism and parenthood, but for the counter-normative character of their practices is even harder to deal with. It is for example the case of Damian, who used to come back home late every night and dedicate all his time to his work, until his wife asked him to change. Since then, he has been trying to come back home for dinner every night, which has triggered intense conforming work in the sense that he insisted a lot in the interview on how that forced him to be more productive than others, nonetheless reporting how some other consultants may make fun of him or describe him as "*non creative*".

Overview of chapter 5

The aim of Chapter 5 was to investigate how consultants make sense of their work and what their aspirations are through the analysis of 58 career stories collected from professionals at all levels of the hierarchy within 13 different settings.

In the first section of this chapter, I started by **analysing the tensions in consultants' narratives**. 16 recurring tensions were identified, which shed light on three core dimensions of professionals' careers:
(1) **Promotion and other forms of rewards**, as expected in the literature
(2) But also **the orientation of projects that consultants are assigned**
(3) And finally **work-life balance**
In the last part of this section, I identified competing discourses in consultants' accounts related to these three dimensions, which attest of heterogeneous aspirations from part of professionals.

In the second section, I show how consultants – far from passive – engage in a number of activities to fulfil their aspirations. After arguing that job crafting is an appropriate analytical lens to understand such accounts of proactivity, I describe **the different sets of job crafting techniques employed by consultants to achieve rewards, projects and/or work-life balance in line with aspirations.**

Finally, in the last section, I discuss how – when consultants engage is counter-normative forms of job crafting – they manage the gap between their practice and their will to belong to a social group in which expectations of conformity are high by engaging in a specific type of identity work that I labelled "***conforming work***", which involves hiding, making concessions and developing a discourse around how their atypical practices in fact reinforce their professionalism.

The findings developed in this chapter nonetheless highlight how much **individuals are limited in their attempts to create a space for themselves,** in line with their aspirations, **by the willingness of their partners and colleagues and the constraints of their organisations**.

PART 3: FROM INDIVIDUAL PROACTIVITY TO ORGANISATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS

Chapter 6: Informal idiosyncratic arrangements to accommodate work-life balance

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Introduction

In the previous chapter, I showed that not only did many consultants aspire to more than promotions, but also that they were usually not passive about it and engaged in a number of job crafting technique to fulfil their aspirations regarding either the orientation of the projects they are assigned or work-life balance, sometimes even leading them to adopt particularly counter-normative behaviours. They nonetheless appeared to be limited in their attempts to craft their jobs by the willingness of their HR directors, partners, colleagues or even clients, to accommodate their wishes. The following step of this research thus consisted in gathering managerial perspectives on work-life balance demands and job crafting attempts (from consulting firms' HR directors and partners). The choice was made here to focus solely on work-life balance (rather than project assignment as a whole) because it appeared to be the most problematic topic for firms and individuals to handle. In the first section of this chapter I analyse the interview material collected with 9 HR directors and 6 partners within 9 consultancies to show that even if considering that work-life balance demands are not legitimate and should not be responded to is a widespread discourse, a number of HR directors and partners still believe that they need to act on them in order to retain their consultants (6.1). Two of the firms within the latter group (I refer to as Management Consulting and Finance Consulting) accepted to open their doors to the research team to investigate further how they handle this in practice. I start by presenting both firms in further detail (6.2) before I describe their work-life balance practices, which mainly revolve around negotiating specific informal arrangements with key individuals (6.3). This chapter ends with a discussion of the adjustment capability of consulting firms, which appears rather limited so far (6.4).

6.1 Investigating the managerial discourse on work-life balance within consulting firms

The first section of this chapter aims at investigating the managerial discourse of consulting firms' HR directors and partners on the issue of work-life balance. It draws on interviews with 9 HR directors and 5 partners within 9 firms, which confirm that consultants do raise work-life balance demands, and that these have an impact on retention (6.1.1). Two distinct organisational discourses on the issue are identified: the first consists of saying that losing people because of the pace of work is a natural means of selection in the *up-or-out* system (6.1.2), and the second focuses on how there is a need for firms – on the contrary – to address it; otherwise high performing individuals may leave the firm (6.1.3).

Analysis of interviews with HR directors and Partners

The research team met with 9 HR directors and 6 partners in charge of HR in 9 firms. These interviews were informed by material found in the press and on the firms' websites about their HR policies. The material collected was analysed by conducting thematic coding. Interviews were first of all analysed to answer this specific question: "are these firms confronted with expressed work-life balance demands, and, if so, what are they?" Then, given the small size of the data set, the material was openly coded by hand to identify key recurring themes and regroup consulting firms according to their standpoint on the issue. Such themes were, for example: unwanted turnover, reasons evoked by consultants when leaving the firm, demands of flexibility/work-life balance, relationship between

partners and HR, etc. This allowed for two distinct *Grand Discourses* (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000) to emerge: a first one stating that consultants resigning for work-life balance reasons is a natural phenomenon within *up-or-out* settings and a second one stating, on the contrary, that it poses retention problems and needs to be addressed.

6.1.1 Confirmation of the existence of expressed work-life balance demands

Interviews with HR directors and partners confirmed that not only do many consultants attempt to craft their jobs by themselves in order to improve their sense of balance, but many also voice their work-life balance aspirations (whether in terms of overall workload or flexibility). There was indeed a consensus, among the sample interviewed, on the existence of such demands and on their impact on retention.

a. A consensus on the existence of work-life balance demands

First of all, the Human Resources directors and partners we met unanimously reported being confronted with what can be broadly labelled as "work-life balance issues." For some of them, it was very evident, in particular as far as the so-called millennials are concerned:

> They (consultants who leave) say they have had a great opportunity but if they have agreed to meet with a recruitment consultant this time, even though they have been contacted 5 times before and never did, you can wonder why they said 'yes' this time? Sometimes they lose the passion, but more fundamentally, it's about the lifestyle. Consultants don't manage their own time, they travel a lot, they feel like they live inside a washing machine.
>
> (HRD, Strategy Consulting 1)

> There are more and more demands of this type. There's a new generation, I think, that is less committed. It's positive in a way because they want control over their lives and they say no more than before. If a project is one hour and a half away from their house, they will refuse it. We have to take it into account, especially concerning children and sports.
>
> (Partner, IT Consulting 4)

For other HR directors, however, it was slightly more difficult to admit and the discourse was more ambiguous. They usually started off saying that when consultants quit, they do so to leave the consulting industry as a whole. They often said they believed it means that their consultants do not hold anything against them – because they would leave to work for the competition if they did – and that they are simply fulfilling aspirations to take on more operational roles. Nonetheless, when going deeper into the reasons why consultants quit their jobs, **they all admitted that work-life balance was one of the main causes underlying consultants' departures** (along with their wish to take on more operational roles and disappointment regarding the speed of promotions).

b. Repercussions on retention

If all HR directors and partners did admit that some consultants they would have liked to retain had left for work-life balance reasons, as evoked in chapter 1, this means that these firms are not entirely in control of the output of the *up-or-out* system: they do not always decide who stays and the criteria for selection is not solely performance. Some, however, insisted that they usually only learnt

about the problem once consultants had already decided to leave, because normative pressures regarding availability are so high that these demands are difficult for consultants to express.

> It's rare that consultants come and talk to me about this, because either they think "it's part of the job" or they think other people are dealing with the same things and they're tired too, so they're not going to complain about it. They only talk about it when they leave.
> (HRD, Strategy Consulting 3)

For others, some demands regarding work-life balance did surface regularly and seemed to revolve mainly around the overall workload of a specific project, flexibility, the lack of predictability of the work and wishes not to travel due to specific circumstances (a sick parent, or young children, for example).

6.1.2 Identification of two distinct standpoints on work-life balance

Not all interviewees, however, regarded these demands in similar ways. There were two very distinct managerial discourses on how to respond to them among our small sample. A first group of 4 HR directors considered these demands relatively incompatible with consulting and that the departure of the consultants concerned was *normal;* while the other 5 considered losing people for such reasons as problematic and thought their firm needed to be *vigilant* and take action.

a. Out for work-life balance: a natural phenomenon

A first group of 4 HR directors explained that people leaving for work-life balance reasons was a *natural phenomenon* in consulting firms, because of the inherent incompatibility between work-life balance and service jobs like consulting, as well as the *up-or-out* rule. In these firms' managerial discourse, a transfer of HR responsibilities from the firm to the client is perceivable and will be discussed at the end this section. This discourse was a surprise to the research team, because it did not involve any form of decoupling: we would have expected these firms' HR directors to tell us how much they cared about work-life balance and that they had implemented many solutions to preserve it; but instead they were very open about not welcoming these types of demands at all.

➢ A supposed inherent incompatibility between work-life balance and consulting

These 4 HR directors' discourse revolves around the idea that consulting is incompatible with work-life balance and thus the topic is irrelevant because client constraints are so strong that raising work-life balance issues would be at the cost of professionalism. They explained that this is a clear deal between the firm and its consultants right from the start, and not what consultants look for in their jobs, anyway. In this section, the way that these firms' managerial discourse produces a relative impossibility for consultants to voice their work-life balance concerns before they lead them to leave is discussed.

Client constraints before individual demands

These four HR directors explained that the constraints inherent to the consulting business were not compatible with work-life balance, in the sense that consultants are paid to be flexible and available enough to respond to clients' demands, no matter what. To them, this level of *commitment* is central to the job:

> You know what consulting is like, this (work-life balance) is not a priority and the turnover is structurally high. So you'll always hear that this is part of the job and if you are happy with it you stay and if you're not then you can just go.
>
> (HRD, Strategy Consulting 3)

> The job requires consultants' complete commitment. It's a little like a sect. We ask them to be fully committed to the firm. In the beginning they need to be fully in. It's true they work a lot on projects, and on top of it they owe time to the firm, time that is not accounted for, personal time. And it gets harder and harder as they progress. But, in general, they know they are going to work a lot.
>
> (HRD, Strategy Consulting 2)

More precisely, they claim that professional ethos means being able to take on heavy workloads when required for the sake of the client and to be readily available whenever required, as explained by Banking Consulting 2's HRD:

> We need committed consultants. It has to do just as much with the level of expectations on projects than with the culture of the firm. You are here only if you are fully committed. (…) Our consultants know that to work on projects, they need to work long hours. This is the only way, you need to be able to respond to clients' demands and be flexible.
>
> (HRD, Banking Consulting 2)

The form that this commitment takes, beyond constant availability and willingness to work for the development of the firm outside of time dedicated to project work, remains relatively vague. The rhetoric at play here invokes professionalism to justify the potentially long working hours and unpredictability of the work: it is only if you do so that you are a good professional. Intertwining the discourse of flexibility with that of professionalism allows these HR directors to claim confidently that their *business constraints are not politically correct* (HRD, Banking Consulting 2). Invoking clients here – as observed by Anderson-Gough et al. (2000) in their study of how the client is mobilised in the socialisation of trainee accountants – allows HR directors and partners to discourage any questioning of the current ways of working, since it is considered unprofessional to do things any other way.

It is noteworthy that all of these HR directors have been consultants before taking on HR responsibilities. They have thus been socialised into this organisational discourse long before taking on their present roles. Two of them, nonetheless, suggested that this was mainly the conviction of the partners and that they were simply acting on what had been decided elsewhere, as the HRD of Banking Consulting 1 explained:

> You have to impose yourself on a daily basis. I had a certain HR ideal when I arrived, but in reality this is very hard. Their vision is very different.
>
> (HRD, Banking Consulting 1)

This raises the question of HR directors' role within professional service firms (Bévort and Poulfelt, 2015), which appears here to be subordinated to the vision of partners.

A supposedly clear psychological contract

The quotes presented above also show that, beyond the supposed incompatibility with the work itself, work-life balance is also judged incompatible with the *up-or-out* rule: as soon as consultants become unhappy with their work-life balance they are expected to go, and this is judged as

inherently part of the normal functioning of the *up-or-out* system. These HR directors go on to explain that the contract is clear right from recruitment, and that consultants know that if their aspirations change, they will need to leave. They imply that when consultants no longer want to be as committed as before, then they are not able to remain good professionals anymore. The rhetorical shortcut they take by identifying consultants in search of work-life balance with uncommitted and unprofessional ones is, however, problematic: even though these HR directors present this as a natural phenomenon, it means that people do not only leave because they are not good enough to keep being promoted, but because they choose to for other reasons, which do not necessarily imply that they are not doing a good job on projects and that their clients are dissatisfied.

Not what consultants want anyway

In parallel, these HR directors emphasized the compensation consultants receive in exchange for their commitment. First of all, they believe their consultants are very well paid and compensated through high bonuses when they work a lot. They also argue that the work environment is ideal because of the material conditions (beautiful offices in the centre of Paris, latest technology, the possibility to claim expenses, etc.), the internal events organised all around the world, and the young and friendly atmosphere:

> We organise convivial internal events, with champagne and presentations, seminars that take us abroad for several days, it's like a giant party!
>
> (HRD, Banking Consulting 1)

> This is a very young environment, and you always have the best tools, a Blackberry, you can call abroad… These firms compensate the workload and the commitment with great working conditions. And everything is like this. No one is going to annoy you for receipts you don't have. It's like an open bar!
>
> (HRD, Strategy Consulting 2)

Yet, this group of HR directors argued that, even though work-life balance and consulting are not compatible *per se*, consultants are not looking to have both, anyway. They argue that people who choose consulting are career driven, over-achievers by nature, who be bored if their job was any different. The HR director of Banking Consulting 2 for example explained:

> This is the mentality of people who join us, they want to have an impact on the client, and also inside the firm. They are presented with a number of work-streams they can contribute to internally. They are very committed, they get involved in the firm, this is the contract right from the start. These are people who want to commit, they are entrepreneurs through and through.
>
> (HRD, Banking Consulting 2)

Similarly, when asked about the existence of part-time arrangements in her firm, she added:

> This is not at all in line with their career dynamics. They wouldn't be happy like that. They know it's a tough job, that it requires to be able to take a new look at yourself regularly, that it's up-or-out. They would never ask for anything like that! Sometimes they have kids, a family, so their initial ambition changes a little, but it's rare, it doesn't happen that frequently.
>
> (HRD, Banking Consulting 2)

Here, the gendered professional ideal described in chapter 2 (p.79-80), and along with it the assumption of careerism identified in chapters 1 and 2, are reproduced through these HR directors' discourse, leaving the door relatively closed to the expression of any other aspirations than being confronted with challenges, becoming a *fast-tracker* and contributing to the development of the firm.

This explains why these HR directors describe only learning about people's dissatisfactions regarding the workload once they had made up their minds to leave. Consultants are supposed to be career driven professionals interested in being promoted and receiving high bonuses in exchange for commitment and dedication. Any individual with different claims is then depicted as not belonging to the system.

➢ A transfer of HR responsibilities to the client

One of the consequences of this refusal to consider work-life balance demands as legitimate, and thus to accommodate them, is a transfer of some of the HR responsibilities of these consultancies to their clients, who are then left to decide whether they are willing to accommodate specific demands or not, in turn playing a considerable role in the retention system.

A refusal to handle unexpressed needs

As a consequence of considering work-life balance demands as incompatible with consulting, they are not officially dealt with. The HR director of Banking Consulting 2, for example, explains that they *cannot take everything into account when assigning projects.* This policy seemed even more systematic in Strategy Consulting 2, since its former HR director explained that not only did they choose not to accommodate individual wishes, but they even went as far as to do the exact opposite:

> Some people have good reasons not to want to be assigned a specific project. So they come to see you and say 'I would like to avoid travelling for a while' or 'I would like this type of project' and we're going to do the exact opposite without explaining. They need to have a certain capacity to play the game. It requires full commitment.
>
> (HRD, Strategy Consulting 2)

Another HR Director (in Strategy Consulting 3) explained having to hide from consultants the fact that they are entitled to an eleven-hour daily rest. This discourse is extreme, and not representative of what was said in the other interviews, but it shows that, in these organisations, individuals can attempt to craft their jobs on their own, but their effort will not be supported by the organisation. As a consequence, how these firms typically respond to work-life balance demands is to offer individuals training on how to better manage their time or handle their stress.

An issue managed directly by the client

Given the time spent by many of these consultants' at their clients' sites, the support of consultants' attempts to craft their jobs for more work-life balance is often left for clients to deal with:

> Some women (with children) are lucky and they are assigned projects that cause no difficulty for them. Others try to handle the situation. But you know, very often, clients understand. But clients manage this, we don't. Our business constraints aren't politically correct. Someone with this kind of problem is going to struggle to survive here, we're not the kind of firm that can afford that (...) I try to find solutions when there is a problem, but I am not going to take care of things that are not explicitly asked or I will generate a need. (...) Our business constraints are strong, clients don't ask for our opinion.
>
> (HRD, Banking Consulting 2)

Here, the HR director of Banking Consulting 2 is explaining that if consultants have a specific need, whether to be more punctual or more regular, they will not be able to make an arrangement with their partners or project managers and this will not be discussed internally but, instead, they will

need to negotiate directly with their client. It leaves them two options: either they are lucky and they are assigned projects that can accommodate their personal preferences, or they need to make their specific work arrangements directly with their clients. In turn, this means that some of these firms' HR responsibilities are transferred to their clients. In other words, the strategy described by these HR directors goes far beyond preaching absolute dedication *in the name if the client* (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000) since a very strategic part of human resources having to do with retention is literally outsourced to the client, which is very significant in terms of power play and may attest of a different side of the "managerialisation" coin, which – along with the sophistication of demands and pressures on cost – might put some power back in the hands of clients.

b. Out for work-life balance: a need to be vigilant

A second group of 5 HR directors and 5 partners had a different take on the subject. They explained that it was not easy, but they needed to address work-life balance demands of all sorts in order to retain some key individuals who would otherwise leave. The measures they report using are detailed further below, from raising consultants' self-awareness on how to manage their stress and their time, to organisational adjustments.

➢ Work-life balance demands need to be addressed to retain some of the "best" consultants

This group of actors explained that even though consulting work is hard and often comes in the way of personal commitments, losing good professionals for this reason is problematic and measures should be taken whenever possible to try to prevent this from happening.

Consulting is demanding but overwork should not be the norm

Overall, like the first group, they all agreed that consulting is a demanding occupation and that heavy workloads and long working hours are part of the deal. Yet, the difference here is that they did not believe that it should be regarded as *normal,* nor that it should always be the case:

> People work a lot, but what's important is that they don't work a lot thinking this is normal. If they do, what is the achievement?
>
> (HRD, Strategy Consulting 1)

> In consulting the workload is important, we all know it. And we tell consultants [this] when they are recruited. But if there's a problem we should talk about it! Either with me, the coach, a partner… whoever. (…) The work pace isn't easy but, again, what is important is that it shouldn't be like this all the time. People are very demanding with themselves, but it shouldn't be like that all the time.
>
> (HRD, Operational Performance Consulting)

They highlighted the need to make consultants understand that they should be able to distinguish the occasional rush from an overall overload of work, and that they need to feel comfortable enough to raise the issue with any of their usual interlocutors, whether the HR directors themselves or their project managers, their coach or simply a partner they feel close to.

The cost of departures related to work-life balance

One of the main reasons for these HR directors to consider work-life balance demands as worthy of consideration is that they first of all believe that they are losing good people for this reason. Many insisted on the cost of this retention problem, in terms of time and money spent on recruitment to replace them, but also in terms of the experience and knowledge they lose. They argued that their *only richness comes from people* (Partner, IT Consulting 4) and that their ability to grow relies solely on their human assets and the firms' ability to retain them.

> It's important in terms of retention. We hire a lot of consultants and it costs us a lot of money, we spend a lot of time on it. Each consultant that leaves costs us thousands of euros. It has a real cost.
>
> (HRD, Strategy Consulting 1)

> Among the consultants who leave, some are very good. They often leave to work for a client, but we need to watch the turnover because if it becomes too high then we lose important skills.
>
> (HRD, IT Consulting 4)

In addition, they often explained that organising the replacement of consultants on projects was very problematic and had long-term repercussions on their relationships with their clients. They explained how once a project gets a negative reputation, no one wants to work on it and only *bad resources* (Partner, IT Consulting 4) can be assigned, in turn endangering the project and the reputation of the firm.

➢ Work-life balance demands and responses

This group of HR directors and partners evoked a number of work-life balance demands emanating from their consultants, which will be detailed in the first part of this section. In the second part, the way they report handling these demands will be detailed. Two distinct types of measures were identified: self-awareness initiatives and organisational adjustments.

The nature of work-life balance demands

These HR directors and Partners mostly discussed two different types of work-life balance issues raised by consultants: occasional ones, usually related to a specific project, and more regular ones (typically constraints induced by parenthood).

Occasional demands are typically induced by specific projects, which – according to them – can be either short on budget or resources, impose a very tight deadline, or too unspecified. All of these conditions, this group of HR directors claimed, can lead consultants to compensate through overwork. Occasional demands can also emanate from consultants themselves, who may, from time to time, want to go to the theatre, attend a concert or dine with friends.

More on-going demands were evoked by this group of HR directors and partners than the previous one, who mainly described consultants wanting to work from home when possible (in particular, but not exclusively, when children are sick), work part-time, leave the office earlier than others to pick up children from school or practice sports, for example, or to avoid being sent away from home to work on projects. This is in line with the way consultants talked about work-life balance themselves:

either as a problem related to an overall level of overwork or as a flexibility issue (see chapter 5, p.157-158).

First level of action: individual self-awareness

As regards being vigilant in practice, the solutions discussed by this group of HR directors and partners were heterogeneous. In four of the firms, the typical response involved self-awareness programmes: training individuals to learn how to better manage their time, and often their health. Strategy Consulting 1, for example, developed a training module based on sports so that their managers would learn how to improve their endurance and maximise their *intellectual, emotional,* and *physical* resources:

> We have a training module for our managers that is co-facilitated by a sports coach who developed a whole model based on sports. We can learn a lot from sports. In a way, in consulting, we have professional athletes so they need to learn how to listen to themselves, manage their own resources. There are three elements: the intellectual one, the emotional one and the physical one. These are three batteries if you like, and you can only go as fast as the lowest battery allows you. So we try to raise their awareness on the topic, and explain that we all have limits.
>
> (HRD, Strategy Consulting 1)

In IT Consulting 4, the response to the phenomenon goes one step further and lies in a programme they were experimenting with to promote *vitality.* The HR director and the partners in charge of both HR and this *vitality* programme, explained that they wanted their consultants to increase self-awareness regarding sleep, nutrition, sports and stress, so that they can maximise their resources and improve their quality of life. Basically, this programme involved a web platform in which consultants would be able to gather advice on how to manage their sleep (take *micro-naps* for example, so they can *perform more*), what to eat at lunch, how to avoid cholesterol (because *people forget their parents' advice over time*), how to practice sports during their work day, and how to diagnose their own level of stress and risk of burnout.

In parallel, they said, consultants would be able to attend workshops or training sessions to learn how to follow these rules daily. In spite of organisational discourse stipulating that work-life balance should be to some extent accommodated, these firms' responses mostly rely on making consultants feel responsible for their own work-life balance, their lack of sleep, their stress and even their burnout; and in turn not questioning the responsibility of their organisation.

Second level of action: organisational arrangements

Nonetheless, HR directors or partners within four of these firms mentioned (or also mentioned for some who combined both solutions) trying to find responses at the organisational level. The first step, which all of them mentioned, is to organise some formal and informal opportunities for consultants to raise their concerns and for them to be heard. These arenas can be formal evaluations with coaches or project managers, kick-off meetings or internal events, as well as informal lunches and coffee breaks:

> We have lunch all together once a month, there are drinks every Friday and I organise internal events, dinners, etc. And I attend them so there are lots of moments to talk. When ten people are having a drink, there's less pressure, people start to talk.
>
> (HRD, Strategy Consulting 1)

They also explained trying to pay attention to external signs of dissatisfaction, such as mood swings and tired looks, or even simply trying to see who is still in the office when they leave, when consultants don't work on client site. When a concern is raised punctually, they often explained being able to allocate extra rest days, either in the course of the project or at the end, and trying to bear this information in mind when assigning the next project, assigning extra resources or even organising consultants' exit from a project when they believe their health is at stake.

Addressing on-going needs, however, seemed more problematic and was not really discussed by the participants in the interviews. They only evoked monitoring the overall workload through pulse-check surveys and activity reports, allowing sabbatical leaves and not penalising consultants who need to work from home when their children are sick. Strategy Consulting 1's HR director also insisted on the role of kick-off meetings in addressing consultants' specific concerns through the self-organisation of the team.

- **A limited reach**

In spite of these efforts, this group of HR directors stated that their impact was rather limited for several reasons: first, they said they were not always supported by partners and responses rarely systematised; and second, they felt they were contributing to limiting the negative impact of the job on work-life balance rather than actively promoting a positive one.

The support of partners is not systematic

The first limitation to what these HR directors can do, according to several of them, is the willingness of partners to move in the same direction. They argued that the arrangements they can find for individuals depend considerably on the perceptions partners have of that specific consultant: consistent effort will be more easily made for consultants who are considered promising and they wouldn't want to see quit. In addition, they explained that granting specific needs in terms of flexibility, workload, or project assignment can sometimes be in contradiction to economic imperatives, and go against the way partners believe the job should be done, or may simply challenge existing client relationships:

> When a consultant's workload is excessive, or they've had to travel a lot or whatever else, then you can think that if you have the choice between several projects, you'll try to make the next one quieter. Sometimes even during the project, if the workload is very important, you can try to help the consultant take on less work or even help them exit the project in cases of emergency. It's not easy but you can try. It's hard because usually partners don't like that too much, because they need to explain the situation to the client.
>
> (HRD, Operational Performance Consulting)

> If I want to allocate someone extra rest days, I have to negotiate with partners. Their approaches are variable. Some say « when I started there was no computer and we had to make all modifications by hand » or « I had 4 projects at a time when I was a manager.» And others say they love the job and it's not necessary to suffer if it can be avoided. So there's conflict sometimes!
>
> (HRD, Strategy Consulting 3)

What often seems to make it harder for these HR directors is their frequent absence from meetings where decisive questions (such as project assignment in particular) are discussed, which limits their ability to ensure that extra rest days or individual wishes can be enforced, for example. This is very

much in line with the observation made by Kaiser et al. (2011) as well as Litrico and Lee (2008) that supervisor support (in other words partner support) is essential to the success of work-life balance initiatives.

A focus on limiting the negative impact of the job

In addition, this group of HR directors explained that these practices involve a lot of case-by-case treatment and adaptation to the personal situations of consultants. This "*individual negotiation,*" in the words used by one HRD, will depend upon the constraints of the firm at a given time (availability of other consultants, needs on projects...):

> We listen. We're not going to say that it's easy to manage, or promise anything, like no business trips for example (…) but we talk, we try to find an arrangement. It's not always easy.
> (HRD, Operational Performance Consulting)

These practices mainly aim at limiting the negative consequences of the activity on work-life balance as much as possible, rather than to actively accommodate it. One HRD summarised how many of them said they felt:

> Every three or four years, we have a work-life balance work stream. And if you look at it, every time the same things are said. So we don't revolutionise the system... We try to make people understand the organisation is one system, but there are other systems (…)We can adapt a little, but the business isn't going to change. It's always going to be a sector with pressure and a heavy workload and first class interlocutors.
> (HRD, Strategy Consulting 1)

At this stage, it appears that the HR Directors who aim to respond to their consultants' concerns about work-life balance can mostly do so by treating issues on a case- by-case basis. They report struggling with organisational constraints, such as the very low level of availability of their consultants imposed by staffing targets (which prevents them from allocating extra resources when needed, or granting people's wishes in terms of project allocation). They also report struggling with contrasting perspectives on the issue from partners, who are more or less willing to discuss individual cases and find solutions.

Overall, participants' standpoint on the issue of work-life balance can be summed up as follows:

	"A natural phenomenon"	"A need to be vigilant"	
Firms	Strategy Consulting 2 Banking Consulting 1 Banking Consulting 2 Strategy Consulting 3	Strategy Consulting 1 IT Consulting Management Consulting	Strategy Consulting 1 Operational Performance Consulting Finance Consulting Management Consulting
Existence of work-life balance demands	Yes	Yes	
Existence of a related retention problem	No	Yes	
Responses	None	Individual self-awareness	Organisational arrangements

Table 6.1: overview of managerial discourses on work-life balance among the sample

Intermediate conclusion

The first stage of the analysis at the organisational level confirms that "work-life balance" is an increasing concern among consultants, that consultancies are confronted with a variety of demands of this type (flexibility, predictability, reduced work-load, sabbatical leaves, etc.), and that it is one of the main reasons driving consultants to resign at some point in their careers. There were, nonetheless, two distinct ways to look at the problem among our sample of firms (see table 6.1 above for a summary): for a first group of HR directors, not being willing to endure the rhythm of the job implies not having what it takes to become a partner and is thus a natural way of culling candidates for partnership. For others, however, the inability to retain these consultants was problematic. Two typical sets of responses were then evoked (and sometimes combined): raising the self-awareness of individuals, and identifying potential organisational adjustments.

It remains, however, still unclear how these organisational arrangements are implemented in practice, what they entail, and whether they are actually used or not, beyond the discourse of HR managers and partners. This will be the focus of the following section, in which the practices of two participant firms will be discussed in detail.

6.2 Work-life balance practices: presentation of the research settings

In order to better understand what HR managers mean by *vigilance*, it appeared necessary to investigate further how these firms dealt with work-life balance demands in practice, beyond formal policies. Two firms agreed to take further part in the study: Management and Finance Consulting. Before detailing both their standpoints and practices regarding work-life balance in section 6.4, I will start by providing broad descriptions of these two firms, their histories and organisational structures.

6.2.1 Management Consulting

The first firm to accept to take part in this study will be referred to as "Management Consulting"[58]. Management Consulting is a generalist management advice provider that is often described in the professional press as one of the success stories of the French consulting industry. In a little over 16 years, Management Consulting has become a firm of 150 consultants operating in over 20 countries. In this section, its complex history will be detailed, as well as the choices made by the partners over the years in terms of organising. Finally, the reasons behind the partners agreeing to take part in the study will be discussed at the end of this section.

[58] The description of Management Consulting is based on formal interviews conducted with the managing partner and another founding partner of the firm, as well as experienced consultants who have witnessed the different phases of development of the firm. Their accounts were completed with informal discussions with consultants who witnessed the creation and development of Management Consulting from outside, as well as internal documentation and information found on the firms' website and in press articles.

a. A historic tension: humanist values vs. economic realism

Created in 1999 to invest in the web-related advice market, Management Consulting repositioned its activities after the burst of the Internet bubble in early 2000 and became a generalist management advice provider that is worth over 20 M€ in sales today. In order to better understand the organisational choices it made along this path, in particular regarding its incentive system, it is necessary to understand how and why it was created.

➢ Birth of Management Consulting: the transformation of Alter Consulting

All three "historical"[59] partners of Management Consulting worked for Alter Consulting, a spin-off of Andersen Consulting (today known as Accenture), which had the ambition of *practicing consulting differently*[60]. Alter Consulting was initially explicitly created against the model of Andersen Consulting, as one of the partners of Management Consulting explained: *Basically, you took the methods and the high expectations of Andersen, you applied that to a French medium-sized company and, on the other hand, you didn't do the same as Andersen, pressurising people with the up-or-out. It is not new today, but it was at the time* (Philip, historical partner).
More generally, Alter Consulting aimed to differentiate itself from the big 5 at the time: hierarchy was very low (only partners had a different status than the rest of the consultants, no matter their seniority), conviviality, collaboration within and between teams, and humility in client relationships were central elements of the organisational discourse. Social events were regularly organised, such as afternoon teas or annual seminars abroad. The partners of Alter Consulting also wanted to fight against what they considered to be the overwork culture at Andersen Consulting and insisted that the number of hours put in should not become an indicator of success. Part-time was not uncommon at Alter Consulting, and one of the historical partners of Management Consulting was actually benefiting from this kind of arrangement while she was working there.

After a few years though, in 1999, Alter Consulting was bought by Ernst & Young, which was looking to expand at the time. Very quickly, there were signs that Cap Gemini was contemplating buying the consulting activity of Ernst & Young and the deal was made the following year, in 2000. The historical partners of Management Consulting were then afraid that the nature of their work would change. They believed that working for Cap Gemini was a *different job* (Philip, historical partner) and that its structure was everything that Alter Consulting was supposed to stand against and its model would eventually be lost, they feared. They were looking for more autonomy and the ability to take initiative. Thus, they decided to leave in 2001 and join one of their former colleagues, who had created his own consultancy that was focused on web projects. After the burst of the Internet bubble in early 2000, the firm had to restructure its activities and focus back on its classic management consulting operations. This is when the founding partner left and sold his shares to the other three partners, for the firm had deviated too much from his original project.

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[59] They will be referred to as "historical" partners of Management Consulting rather than "founding" partners because they were not, strictly speaking, its founders. Another partner created the structure before they joined him 2 years later. He left the firm a couple of years later, leaving the three more recent partners as full owners of the consultancy.
60 Practicing consulting differently was the official motto of the firm.

➢ Early beginning and growth

The first few years, Management Consulting remained a generalist provider of assistance to project owners, and also offered transformation and change management services. Originally, the partners were in charge of the account of a big energy provider at Cap Gemini – Ernst & Young. Energy thus remained their historical sector of intervention, and still accounts for 40% of sales today. At the time, teams were occupied by a few relatively big projects, from the transformation of a big energy provider's network to the merger of Euronext with the New York Stock Exchange, for example. Very quickly, the necessity to sell enough projects to allow the firm to live well and grow led the partners to develop their assistance to project ownership service, like many other management consulting firms at the time. This strategy imploded when the operational merger of two information systems between two major actors of the insurance sector who were integrating their activities, was brought to the firm. This project, which I will refer to as "Insur IT," ended up being very operational (closer to what the business advisory departments of software engineering companies would do) and the deadlines were very difficult to meet, which created a lot of strain on the teams, who were under-supervised because, for budget constraints, few managers had been assigned the project.

The "Insur IT" episode created a real trauma among the teams, and was mentioned in almost all of the interviews, either because people had suffered on this project, had been scared to be assigned to this project, or had seen their colleagues and friends quit the firm following this project. It had indeed become the biggest project of the firm and almost half of the consultants had worked on it at one point or another. Many consultants thus felt there was a gap between what they had been told in the recruitment process and what they actually ended up doing on projects, and the way they were supervised. Following alerts from the consultants themselves and their coaches[61], as well as from the work council, the historical partners decided that one of them would conduct an audit of the project and make recommendations on how to resolve the situation. The study led to the departure of the partner in charge and a will to reposition the firm towards transformation and change management projects.

In spite of the "Insur IT" project, Management Consulting remains a generalist actor and it is only recently that partners started to formalise their lines of services and the sectors in which they operate, for more clarity. It has been growing considerably since its foundation and its sales are regularly around 20M€, in spite of a decrease in 2014 numbers.

[61] "Coach" is the term used in Management Consulting to refer to the career advisors. Their role will be detailed further below.

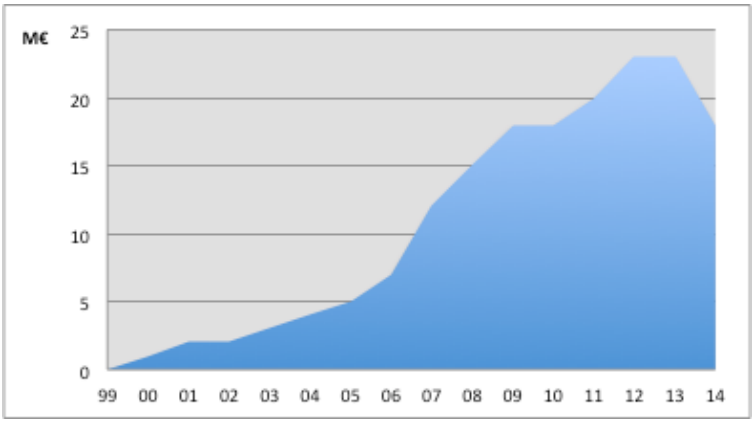

Figure 6.1: Global sales 1999-2014 – Management Consulting

In parallel, the firm grew regularly in numbers of employees and now employs over 150 consultants.

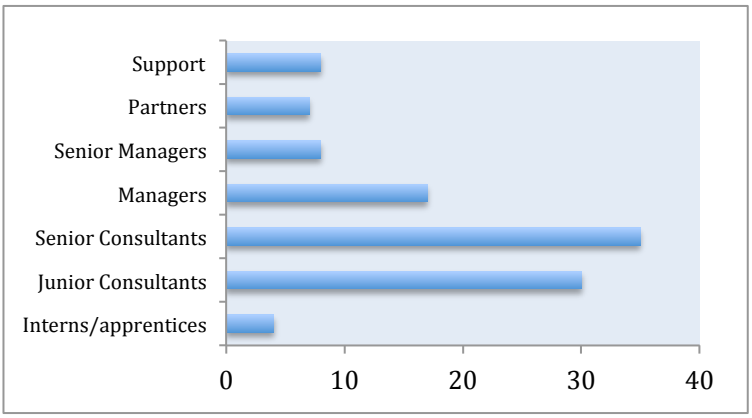

Figure 6.2: Personnel figures 2015 – Management Consulting

Management Consulting regularly operates abroad: projects have taken place in over 20 countries over the years. It has developed partnerships with three firms in New York, London and Hong-Kong to support its international operations. Yet, it was not until 2012 that the firm officially expanded its practice abroad by opening an office in Tunis. Then, in 2015, the partners decided to invest in a small firm of under 10 consultants in Montreal and are now considering opening another office in Dubai. In parallel, Management Consulting is aiming to surf on the digital wave (and take up again its original interest in web projects) by developing a partnership with a small start-up in the domain.

➢ Ambition: combining humanist values and business imperatives

Management Consulting's partners explained that the ambition for the firm needed to evolve over time. Philip, one of the historical partners, labels the ambition at the heart of the initial entrepreneurial project a *humanist* one: the idea was to build a consulting firm dedicated to change management that would defend humanist values both on clients' sites and within the firm. The will to practice consulting differently was still very present and a lot of practices were indeed imported from what the partners had known at Alter Consulting: no hierarchy at first, the Friday afternoon tea, the bi-annual seminar abroad, etc. Yet, with time, the partners had to sell projects that did not exactly fit their positioning and increasingly assigned their consultants' assistance to project owner types of projects, as evoked above. Philip says they have *had to adapt to sell and keep people happy*. Yet, the

organisational discourse of the firm on their positioning has always remained that of organisational change and operational strategy. The partners all claim that they do not do operational IT, at least not anymore. They now have the ambition to reposition their consultancy higher in the market: away from assistance to project owners and towards the management of complex change programmes. The only thing they need to develop to compete with the most successful management consultancies is reputation, they said.

b. A tension between professional and managerial organisational features

In terms of organising, Management Consulting has tried to reproduce some of the key features of Alter Consulting. Yet, one major change in its governance structure a few years ago has raised a lot of questions amongst the ranks of consultants. In this section, the specific features of Management Consulting in terms of governance, structure and systems will be detailed further.

➢ Governance

Management Consulting was originally created as a Société à Responsabilité Limitée (SARL) and transformed into a Société par Action Simplifiée (SAS) in 2005[62]. After the departure of the founding partner, the three historical partners were full-owners of the firm. As they needed to expand their activities, they recruited other partners from outside the firm. Out of the 6 partners recruited this way, only one remains. In addition, three directors were given the opportunity to join the partnership as associate directors, with fewer shares of the firm. There are thus now 5 partners and 3 associate directors.

In 2008, though, the decision was made to transfer 67% of the capital to a software company, reducing the capital owned by the partners and the associate directors to 30%, the other 3% belonging to a few so-called *high potential* employees. This external private investor is for now silent and the partners remain in charge of the management of the firm. The agreement is that this software company will sell back some of its shares as Senior Managers become Associate Directors. Yet, this choice has had important consequences on the incentive system of the firm. Indeed, not only has it reinforced consultants' fears about the evolution of the activities of the firm, but many consultants today also feel that there is no room for new partners to be co-opted and even that partnership is not so attractive anymore because it only entails a very small percentage of the ownership of the firm.

➢ Structure

Consultants at all levels are supposed to be polyvalent and specialisation into sectors is rather informal and left to the consultants themselves. Partners usually specialise in one or two specific sectors and/or functions, and are in charge of specific client accounts. They can be assisted by younger consultants, who are willing to contribute to the development of these offers, in particular through their involvement in *the sectorial college of experts* that partners coordinate (these colleges

[62] Both SARL and SAS are variations around an equivalent of the British Public/Private Limited Company.

aim at gathering market information, conducting studies and reports, writing articles, attending conferences, etc. on a specific sector). Partners assign consultants projects during the weekly partner's meeting, according to the budget agreed upon with clients (in terms of days and consultant profiles). This staffing is nonetheless rather stable: it is decided at the beginning of a project and rarely reviewed unless the clients are extending the contract beyond the existing scope of the project, in which case extra consultants will be assigned to the project. In spite of the length of projects, organising one consultants' exit from a project usually takes time (it rarely happens before one and a half or two years spent on a project).

The composition of project teams can vary considerably depending on the characteristics and budgets of the projects. Ideally, a Manager will always supervise young consultants but, as evoked above, it is not entirely uncommon for them to be managed either directly by clients or by a freelancer. Regarding the rhythm of work on projects, it is unclear how successfully the message that the numbers of hours put in shouldn't matter has been passed on to other partners and managers, as several consultants reported that there was an *overwork culture* in Management Consulting. One Senior Manager told us an anecdote about how he spontaneously replied that he was *super busy* when asked, even though he was in between projects and had been watching tv series all day. Another one explained going through the back door when wanting to leave *earlier* to pick up her son from school. Overall, consultants reported that the workload could vary depending on projects, clients or phases of projects, but they usually agreed that leaving before 7pm was uncomfortable. Finally, over the years, Management Consulting has made efforts to formalise its own internal processes (HR, knowledge management, administration…) and has thus developed its support services by building a small team of under 10 people in charge of these processes.

Few bureaucratic integrative devices are used. Instead, integration is obtained through socialisation. Management Consulting moved into new offices a few years ago, in a fancy area of Paris, and the partners wanted to take this opportunity to review the design of the offices to favour interactions: the furniture is very colourful, there are several convivial spaces and rooms for consultants to meet, as well as reading spaces, small open plan offices, and individual offices. In addition, a number of events are organised over the years for consultants to meet and for information to be shared. This is all the more important because consultants are often working at a client's site full-time and as a result rarely have opportunities to socialise, share their experiences and get a sense of belonging to Management Consulting. Once a month, an afternoon tea is organised in the offices – on a Friday at 6pm to make it easier for consultants to join - in order for newcomers to be introduced, important news to be shared and informal conversations to be facilitated. A seminar gathering the entire company abroad for a few days and combining team-building events and workshops to reflect upon the strategy of the firm (ex: *How to grow without losing the soul of the company* or *Management Consulting 2020*) is organised once every two years. A quarterly seminar is also organised for the management of the firm. Also, heads of sectors are in charge of organising social gatherings every quarter, and project managers are in charge of organising end of project dinners. Finally, another opportunity for consultants to work together in a different context is the possibility for them to get involved in *pro bono* work.

There are few rules at Management Consulting, beyond the tacit need to respect project assignment decisions. As the firm grew, it concomitantly started to formalise its processes – in particular in

terms of HR managements, as will be developed below – and reporting (activity reports need to be filled in by consultants on a regular basis).

➢ Control and HR systems

In terms of strategic control, consensus orientation is relatively strong among the partnership. Yet, many consultants mentioned a difference in status between the historical partners and the younger ones, or those hired from other firms. Another key question for the future is how long the partners are going to remain in full charge of the management of the firm, given that they now own a minority of the shares. As far as market-financial control is concerned, practices remain relatively informal and there is a certain tolerance over targets, with a rather short-term focus. Finally, operational control is relatively decentralised and remains in the hands of each project manager (usually managers or senior managers) and account holders (usually partners). Most operational control is achieved through peer control, as in traditional PSFs. This is reinforced by an emphasis in partners' discourse on the need for their consultants to be autonomous and to develop entrepreneurial skills.
Two exceptions to the decentralisation rule can nonetheless be noted. First, regular client surveys are conducted in order to gather information about client satisfaction. Second, a regular audit of projects has been implemented since the "Insur IT" project: several times a year, partners decide jointly with coaches and directors which projects should be audited, and then a partner – other than the one in charge of the account – is asked to review the project and its advancement, management, and value, and to propose an improvement plan. Finally, another way for Management Consulting to monitor the overall level of satisfaction of their employees is to take part in one of the *Best Employer*[63] rankings in France, for which a survey is sent out and results are fed back to the firm, with a benchmark made of other applicants' responses in a number of areas, such as transparency, management, equity, climate or workload.

In terms of HR systems, Management Consulting has made the choice to pay their consultants within the average of the industry. They follow the regular benchmarks conducted by their professional association and update salaries accordingly, if need be. Regarding recruitment, they follow two different processes. For graduate recruits, they organise a collective session in which candidates have to analyse a case study and present it, before being interviewed twice, by two consultants each time. All consultants can take part in the process, from senior consultants to partners, and the Managing Partner is systematically present in the last interview. Regarding more experienced consultants, head hunters are usually hired and three interviews conducted, with two (relatively senior) consultants present each time.

Management Consulting operates on an informal up-or-out rule: consultants who are not considered performing are told the area in which they should improve and a discussion follows on how Management Consulting can help them do so. Consultants are usually warned several times when their performance is judged insufficient, so that they either understand they won't be promoted and decide to leave on their own, or, if the situation doesn't improve, are asked to look for another job.

[63] For anonymity reasons, the exact name of the ranking in question cannot be provided.

Promotions at each level of the hierarchy directly depend upon the growth of the firm. Overall, consultants usually remain junior consultants for two to three years, then senior consultants for another two to three years, managers for about four or five years, and senior managers for several years before partnership co-optation is considered. Judith, the Managing Partner, explained that *candidates for partnership should create a space for themselves,* meaning that they should sell enough projects to generate the growth that will allow their co-optation. As evoked earlier, it appears that there is little incentive for younger consultants to attempt to become partners, as 70% of the shares are owned by a Software Company.

The evaluation process differs for junior/senior consultants and for managers/senior managers. The younger consultants have, theoretically, at least one evaluation every trimester. Given that projects usually last longer than 3 months, it allows consultants to receive feedback on their work regularly, and before a project ends. Typically, the project manager will fill in a rating form once every trimester. These rating forms value the quality of both deliveries and client relationships on projects, as well as their involvement in other activities of the firm. Partners explain paying particular attention to consultants' involvement in the firm's activities (presentations during the Friday afternoon tea, the sector meetings, the organisation of internal events, participation in the development of relations with engineering and business schools, involvement in the *colleges*, publication of articles in the professional press, or organisation of round tables, for example). Then this rating form is discussed with the consultants and systematically transmitted to the *coach*.
Each consultant is indeed assigned a *coach,* who is a more experienced consultant – having attended a specific internal training – and is in charge of gathering feedback from operational managers and discussing consultants' work, progression and career aspirations with them. Coaches are supposed to meet with the consultants they follow informally on an on-going basis. Then, twice a year, all coaches meet and discuss the performance of the junior and senior consultants in order for partners to determine promotions, pay raises and bonuses. They then meet with the consultants again to discuss the outcomes of this meeting. Consultants, however, explain that *de facto* evaluations often take place twice a year, before the meeting of coaches.

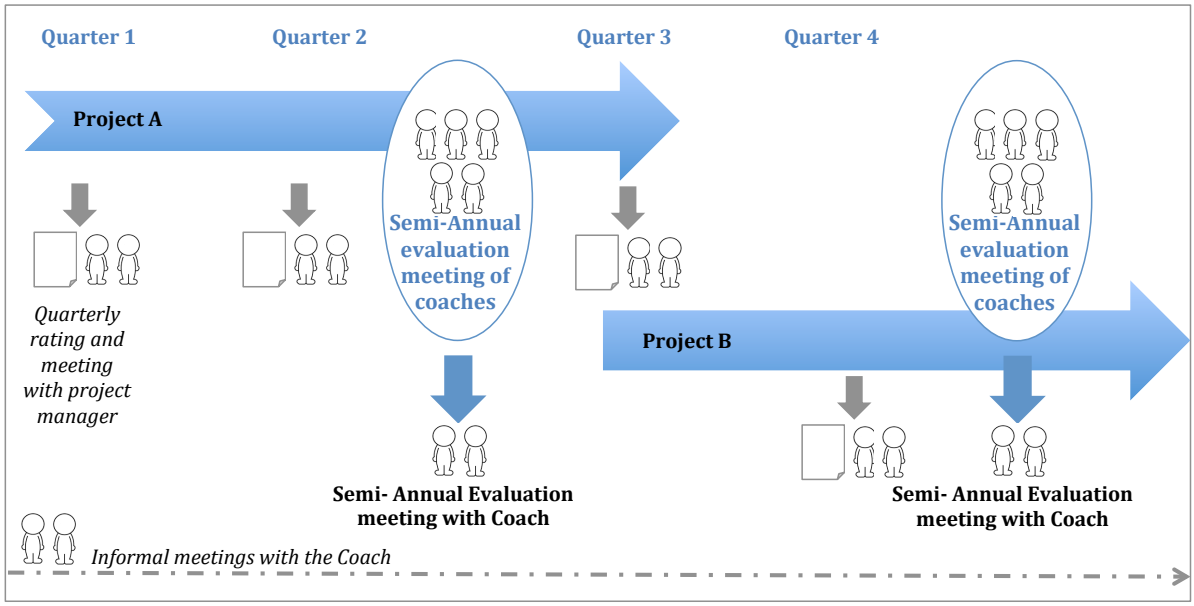

Figure 6.3: Individual evaluation process at Management Consulting

If it is agreed that they need to make some progress in one of the areas evoked above, they can choose to attend a number of training sessions organised with both internal and external providers (MBTI training, stress management, leadership, conflict management or public speaking, for example). In some cases, Management Consulting can also provide consultants with individual coaching sessions with a professional.

Regarding Managers and Senior Managers, a meeting is organised between partners and associate directors in order to discuss their performance, and evaluation meetings are held with their Coach (who belongs to the management team) afterwards. Rituals are organised to celebrate the promotion of a consultant to the managerial ranks (Manager or Senior Managers): a dinner is organised for the new managers in a nice restaurant by the partners.

Here is a summary of Management Consulting's main organisational features:

MANAGEMENT CONSULTING	
Governance	Partnership 67% of the shares owned by a software company
Task	Low claim of expertise Strong links with clients (consultants integrated on client site)
Differentiation	Low level of specialisation (sector-based)
Integration	Low use of integrative devices Integration through socialisation Few rules and procedures
Control systems	Strategic Control: consensus orientation Market-Financial Control: tolerant and short-term focused Operating Control: decentralised peer control, with the exception of client surveys and project audits
HR systems	Pay in line with market practices Informal up-or-out Emphasis on commercial skills and commitment in evaluations/promotions

Table 6.2: Summary of Management Consulting's key organisational features

c. Reasons for taking part in the research project

When the research team met with Management Consulting's Managing Partner and HR director, they had several reasons for wanting to collaborate with us. A long-lasting concern of theirs had to do with their ability to combine what they described as their *humanist* ambitions with the necessity to win projects and maintain growth. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, when Management Consulting reached 100 consultants, the workshop of the bi-annual seminar was already entitled *How to grow without losing one's soul* and aimed at gathering consultants' thoughts on how to keep partners' attention on each consultant in a workplace of over a hundred employees.

In addition, Management Consulting had been applying to one of the *Best Employer* type of rankings in France for several years and, recently, its place in the ranking had dropped considerably. It still remained among the top 25 firms but had lost many places. For the first time, senior consultants, in particular, appeared to be dissatisfied. A number of areas of improvement had been identified and new work streams created (professional development, training, transparency of evaluations and pay, need for a community of senior consultants). The results were, nonetheless, relatively inconclusive and the following year (shortly before we met them for the first time), not only had the satisfaction of senior consultants not improved, but they were being joined by junior consultants. The partners were struggling to understand this sudden disaffection and unexplained feeling a change in the atmosphere, which they said was becoming too *serious,* and *not creative,* and that this was preoccupying them. In addition, they had already collaborated with a PhD student from the Sociology research centre at Mines ParisTech and had a favourable *a priori* when I contacted them.

6.2.2 Finance Consulting

The second firm that agreed to take part in the study will be referred to as "Finance Consulting"[64]. As indicated by its alias, this firm provides a wide range of advisory services related to financial analysis. It was created a little over ten years ago and now employs 250 consultants in 9 countries. In this section, an account of the firm's history will be provided, as well as a description of its main organisational characteristics. This section will conclude with further details regarding Finance Consulting's reasons for agreeing to take part in the study.

a. The birth of Finance Consulting: seizing the opportunities generated by the separation of consulting and audit

In a little over 10 years, Finance Consulting made the most of the separation of audit and consulting activities following the Enron scandal (in September 2001) and created a new actor in the French market, dedicated only to financial advisory services. From transaction projects only, Finance Consulting built a diverse range of product offerings around financial analysis, with the ambition to become the *McKinsey of figures*. Before focusing on its organisational choices, the history of the firm will be detailed in order to better understand how it became a consultancy worth over 50 million euros in sales globally today.

➢ Birth of the entrepreneurial project: the fall of Big5[65]

Unlike Management Consulting, the founding partners of Finance Consulting all came originally from the world of auditing. They were all working for Big5 France at the time of the Enron scandal. They were either Partners or Senior Managers then and experienced the fall of Big5, from the first

[64] The description of Finance Consulting is based on formal interviews conducted with the managing partner, the partner in charge of HR and two other founding partners, as well as experienced consultants who have witnessed the different phases of development of the firm. Their accounts were completed with informal discussions with consultants who witnessed the creation and development of Finance Consulting from outside, as well as internal documentation and information found on the firms' website and in press articles.

[65] The firm the founding partners of Finance Consulting used to work for will be referred to as "Big5" to preserve their anonymity, it was one of the top 5 global accountancies at the time.

rumours of implication in the Enron scandal to the actual bankruptcy of Enron and the quick departure of most of Big5's clients. Within a few months, Big5 France was bought by another leading accountancy and all employees were transferred. This had two major consequences for the future founders of Finance Consulting. First of all, they were all working mostly on what was labelled at the time *special projects*, which were not technically auditing projects, but had advisory dimensions (typically having to do with transaction operations). The Sarbanes-Oxley Act (2002) stipulated – among other things – that audit and consulting activities should remain separate, and was transcribed into French law through the Loi de Sécurité Financière in 2003.

The takeover by the other leading accountancy was a real cultural shock to them. Even though they were aware that Big5 had the reputation of being a firm of *cowboys,* the founding partners of Finance Consulting still had very positive memories of their time there. They did acknowledge that Big5's professionals' behaviour was sometimes borderline or risky, but they claimed that they had still always been extremely professional and that the very entrepreneurial culture of Big5 allowed its accountants to bring higher value to their clients. In opposition, they felt the post-merger organisation had become more bureaucratic and hierarchical and they missed this entrepreneurial spirit: when absorbing Big5, the new entity employed more than 6000 people in Paris, which – in their own words – *transformed the role of partner into that of a top manager*. Both regulatory evolution and the takeover created the conditions for the founders to transform the running joke that they would one day create their own consultancy to leave it all behind into an entrepreneurial project.
After the takeover, seven of the ex-Big5 – some partners and some senior managers – started discussing the idea of creating a structure that would be fully independent (not providing audit services) and providing financial advice only. They named the project *Brutus* and effectively left a year after they started discussing the project, bringing with them 5 younger consultants (two of them were recently promoted partner at Finance Consulting). Their departure was a real surprise to their new employer and remains a strong founding myth for Finance Consulting. Initially, the announcement of their departure made interactions very difficult, but the founding partners of Finance Consulting nonetheless negotiated to be able to make offers to hire specific people on the condition that their employer could make counter-offers. Five consultants chose to follow them and Finance Consulting was born. Finance Consulting is not the only spin-off from this leading accountancy since other members of the *special projects* teams left to create their own firm, today a competitor of Finance Consulting.

The founding partners' shared experience at Big5, and of leaving their firm after the takeover, has been a determinant in building Finance Consulting. Many of its key features are actually inspired by what the founding partners had enjoyed at Big5. The insistence on ethics in their managerial discourse, for example, is clearly linked with the way Big5's accountants' ethics were doubted after Enron went bankrupt. Organisationally, several concepts were imported, such as the *school*, for example, which is a two-week training event for all new recruits. The *school* usually takes place abroad and young consultants attend training sessions that are organised by their colleagues. Then they are given mock projects to work on (usually involving late nights) before presenting in front of the partners, who pretend to be clients.

The entrepreneurial spirit of Big5 has also been imported into Finance Consulting: personal initiatives are welcome and often supported financially (ideas for seminars or to develop a partnership with a non profit, etc.). Sports, in particular, play an important role in the firm: there is a football team, small groups of people run together or organise hikes, and there is a gym inside the firm. An incubator for start-ups has also been created and the young entrepreneurs that are selected can be hosted on the 4th floor of Finance Consulting's building and receive advice on their business plans.

This strong connection to Big5 can, however, be relatively excluding, as one later partner explained: *The partners come from Big5, which had the reputation of being made of cowboys, but with a great reputation. And it disappeared from one day to the next. They all experienced this trauma, it impacted them very much. It created some form of solidarity, a common way of thinking, it crystallised the fact that Big5 alumni… well, there aren't new ones anymore. It's a small club that is necessarily closed. It created a caste, relatively solidarity, they know each other, have their codes, their habits, they are very close. (…) It's not always easy to be part of this when you don't belong to the club* (James, Partner).

One way that Finance Consulting's founding partners did want to differentiate themselves from Big5 concerns what they call *the long work hours culture* that they saw there. All insisted that they tried not to reproduce that and consultants did unanimously agree that there was no pride in staying in late in the firm. Yet, consultants agreed that the average end of the day in the office took place between 8pm and 9pm and some consultants mentioned that leaving before 7pm was considered very early if done on a regular basis.

- **Early beginnings and growth**

Given the nature of financial advice clients (typically multinationals and big investment funds), the small size of Finance Consulting proved to be problematic very early on, Finance Consulting needed a big and stable investor to reassure its clients, which it found through partnership with a major insurance actor. It remained a silent partner, offering Finance Consulting office space, but was limited in its influence by a strict confidentiality agreement.

Finance Consulting started off mainly with transaction and valuation projects for the first two years. In 2006, the recovery line of service was launched. By the following year, the litigation line of service had expanded considerably. Finally, by 2009, the firm opened a new line of services dedicated to business analytics. As a result, the firm grew both in sales (from 6 million euros the first year, to over 40 million euros five years later) and in size (from 12 people the first year, to 250 consultants and 37 partners worldwide in 2014). By 2013, Finance Consulting had annual sales of over 50 million euros and was beginning to receive signs of interest from some potential acquirers, so its partners decided to buy the external investor out to be in full control of the firm. A first step had already been taken in 2005, when the partners decided to move in their own offices.

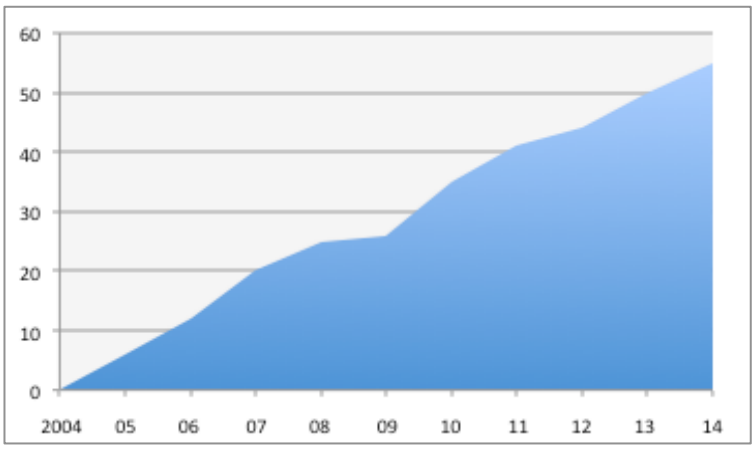

Table 6.3: Global sales 2004-2014 – Finance Consulting[66]

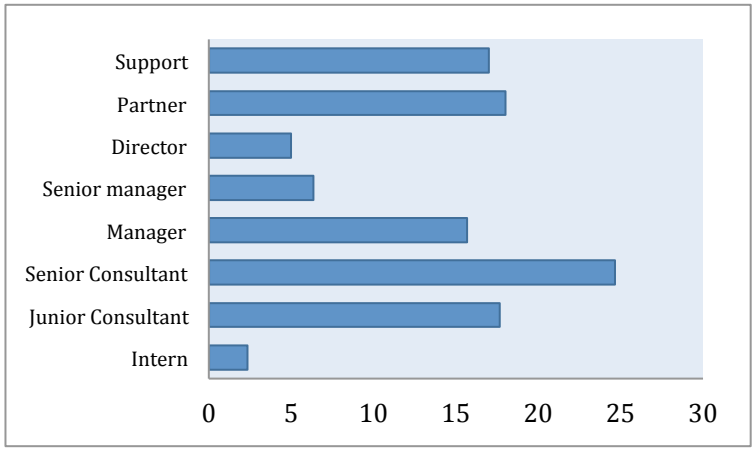

Table 6.4: Personnel Figures 2014 – Finance Consulting Paris Office[67]

In parallel, Finance Consulting started opening offices abroad, in Europe at first, and then in India. It now has 12 subsidiaries in 9 countries. The choice was made to systematically open offices from scratch instead of buying already existing consultancies. They are now considering opening offices in the Middle East, Asia and South America.

➢ Ambition

When asked about their ambitions for their firm in the future, the partners of Finance Consulting explained that they wanted to become the *McKinsey of figures.* In other words, they envision Finance Consulting as a global firm, with offices around the world, which would be an obvious reference when it comes to financial advice, with a top-of-the-market fee and billing practice. They say they *copied law firms more than the fat 4* (James, Partner). They also see McKinsey as the ideal *one-firm* type of consultancy, which means a company with a great level of consistency in decision-making at the firm level – in spite of the existence of multiple offices – team spirit, homogeneity in behaviour and great commitment to the organisation (Maister, 1993). Being able to maintain the coherence and

[66] Source: Finance Consulting activity report 2014
[67] Source: internal documentation

unity of their organisation globally is indeed one of the main concerns of the Managing Partner, who would ideally want to supress country based P&L to only have one global P&L for the whole firm, after each subsidiary has proved its profitability and financial stability.
In parallel, the founding partners explained their intention to reach this goal by combining high expectations of quality with a benevolent attitude towards their consultants[68].

b. A partnership form of organising with a twist

Finance Consulting's choices in terms of organisation oscillate between traditional (one firm, partnership, up-or-out…) and atypical features (collective promotions in the early years, shared office spaces…), as evidenced by its choices in terms of governance, structure and systems.

➢ Governance

Legally, Finance Consulting is a *Société par Actions Simplifiée* (SAS). From the initial 7 founding partners, Finance Consulting has grown to include 30 others worldwide (20 in Paris). Since the initial external investor was bought out in 2013, the partners have been the sole owners of the firm. At that time, the decision was made that shares should be non-transferable[69]. As a result, partners can enjoy dividends during their mandate, but if they retire or decide to leave, they cannot sell their shares and make any profit out of them. Partners, no matter whether they are founding partners or not, have equal voting rights[70]. In addition to the management of the firm, partners are in charge of the commercial activity of the firm and are the official heads of projects. In Finance Consulting, two partners are systematically assigned each project according to their specialties (projects are not necessarily given to the partner who brought it in).

➢ Structure

Managers and Partners are usually specialised into one or two lines of services (they say they have a *major* and a *minor* specialty), while the younger consultants remain polyvalent. The only exceptions made are for some segments of valuation and business analytics, which require some advanced modelling (or even coding) skills and thus an early specialisation. The consultants recruited for these positions often have different profiles (they usually graduated from engineering schools rather than business schools). In order to enforce this polyvalence rule among the younger consultants, and avoid the formation of *chapels*[71], on principle, teams are made and re-made on a project basis. This is meant to contribute to the development of a portfolio of skills common to all members of Finance Consulting.

Project assignment is handled directly by partners in collaboration with a staffer. Every Monday, based on the information provided by the staffer regarding the availability of staff and any other relevant information (for example, wishes from some consultants to be assigned projects in a specific

[68] They refer to this as exigeance bienveillante in French, which they translate by stewardship in English.
[69] Source: Finance Consulting articles of association
[70] Source: internal documentation
[71] It refers to the existence of informal teams of consultants systematically working with the same partners on projects.

area), partners review all projects one by one in order to assign new projects to their team and to ensure both the optimisation of the workforce and the quality of the delivery for on-going projects. Finally, the work is made easier by a team of professionals providing personal assistance to the partners, IT support, communication services, accounting and HR.

In terms of integration, one of the main devices is the arrangement of office space. Indeed, from the beginning the choice was made for partners to share their offices with consultants. As a result, young associates share their office space with senior managers and partners and have assigned desks[72]. Whenever a project team needs to work, they can book empty *staff rooms* for the duration of the project. There is also common space in which consultants can have coffee breaks and casual conversations and enjoy free drinks and fruit.
Opportunities for consultants to gather are numerous. There are monthly corporate meetings, in order for the partners to share information about the firm and up-coming projects, *Thursday meetings* happen twice a month, during which consultants share a drink after the presentation of a project by one of the teams; breakfasts organised by the Managing Partner in small groups (around 10 consultants) of people of the same rank; an annual seminar for the whole company, as well as another one specific for each rank; as well as *family dinners*[73]. Every two months, a conference is also organised over a lunch break on a general knowledge theme (ex: *How was Europe constructed?* or *Was Arthur a good King?*). The *School* is also an opportunity for all new recruits to meet (also with recruits from other subsidiaries). Other opportunities for consultants to socialise are the regular meetings organised by the alumni association of the firm. Finally, exchanges in between subsidiaries are also organised and it is possible for consultants to ask to spend several months or a year in another Finance Consulting office.

There are few formal rules and procedures at Finance Consulting. Similar to Management Consulting, consultants need to report on their monthly activities. Also, some HR processes have recently been formalised, such as the evaluation process, in particular (see below).

➢ Control and HR systems

Strategic control is exercised exclusively by the partners and through consensus. As mentioned earlier, all partners have equal voting rights and strategic decisions are systematically discussed in the weekly partners meeting. In terms of market-financial control, targets are relatively short-term oriented and accountability is tolerant. Even though partners' commercial efforts are taken into account in their evaluations, there is no individualised P&L, and profits are shared equally among partners. The ambition is to have a global P&L for the firm. Finally, operational control is decentralised: responsibility for the quality of delivery is that of partners in charge of the projects, but tasks are delegated all the way down the project team; appropriate work and behaviour is obtained through socialisation and peer control.

[72] This is unusual in an industry where younger consultants usually sit in open plan offices with consultants of the same hierarchical rank.
[73] Junior Consultants have more experienced mentors who themselves have a partner mentor (who is then the Super Mentor of the younger consultants, according to Finance Consulting's vocabulary). All the consultants who have one specific partner as a Mentor or a Super Mentor are called a family.

Regarding HR systems, the choice was made by Finance Consulting to pay their consultants above the average of the industry. Entry salary is equalised among all new recruits and both pay raises and bonuses are fairly similar during the first years of the apprenticeship. In terms of recruitment, the candidates have to go through four rounds of interviews with two interviewers each time, either senior consultants or partners. The final interview is systematically conducted by the Managing Partner. Each interviewer has a veto right and can decide to reject a candidate, even if all other interviewers are ready to offer them a position. The partners argue that this is the best way for them to ensure "fit" between new recruits and the culture of the firm.

Finance Consulting operates with an informal *up-or-out* rule. Promotions all the way to manager positions are fairly systematic as long as evaluations are good. During the junior years, there will be very little differentiation between consultants, who are all recruited at the same salary, promoted collectively and granted relatively similar bonuses until they become Managers. Given that growth has been constant, Finance Consulting has not had to use quotas to manage its pyramid. Usually, consultants remain junior consultants for two years, then senior consultants for two to three years, then managers for three to four years and then senior managers for three to four years again. However consultants who are not considered to be performing well enough are asked to leave. Most of the time, they will be given some time or even helped to find another job.

The evaluation process was formalised in 2009. First, junior and senior consultants are evaluated on projects (systematically conducted at the end of each project by the project manager: both the evaluated consultant and the evaluator fill in a rating form, which is later discussed in a meeting). These ratings are formally based on the following criteria: technical skills (with an emphasis on autonomy, prioritisation, the ability to provide feedback on the advancement of the work, and work capacity), commercial skills (which does not only involve proper commercial activity, but also evaluates the consultants' behaviour during all client facing activities, with a focus on consultants' ability to be convincing orally, to handle client pressure and to take initiatives), and finally, personal skills (which emphasise the ability to take negative feedback and to be a team player).

In the interviews, consultants explained that what mattered the most during the evaluation process was the appreciation of the quality of the work by their supervisor. A report of all ratings is sent to consultants' mentors at the end of each month. Mentors are supposed to meet informally with their *mentees* on a regular basis, and to be available to listen to any specific requests they may have. At the end of each semester, an *appraisal general meeting* is held during which each individual's performance is discussed with all consultants of a higher rank (for example, for a junior consultant, all senior consultants, managers, senior managers and partners will be present at the meeting to discuss each junior consultant's performance). Finally, a semi-annual interview is held, during which all consultants meet with their *mentors* and *super mentors* to formally discuss their performance, ratings, promotions and bonuses.

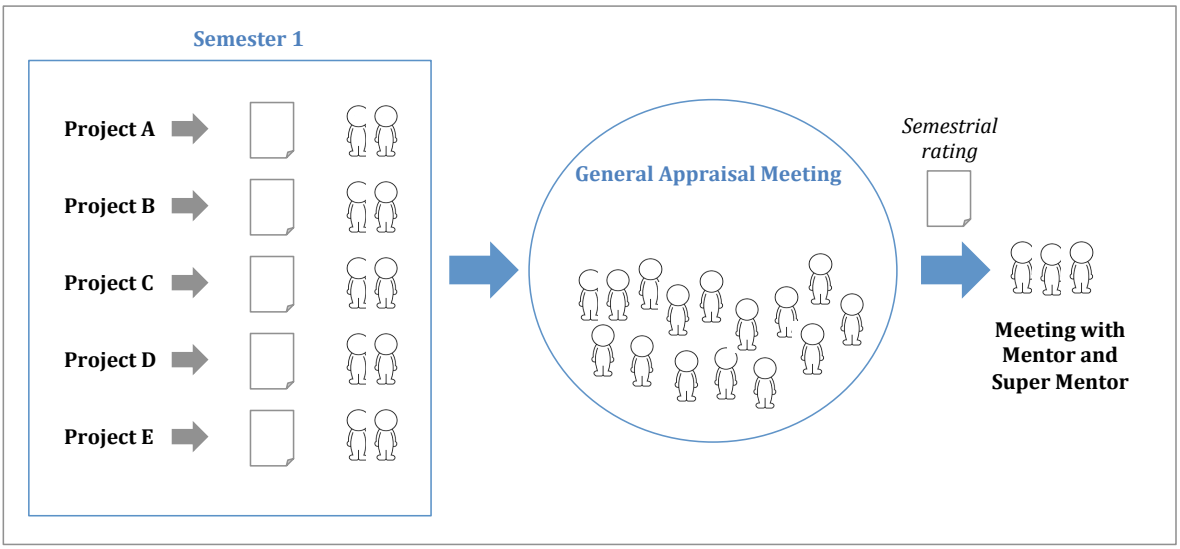

Figure 6.4: Individual evaluation process at Finance Consulting

This process only concerns junior and senior consultants. Senior Managers do not receive formal ratings based on their project work, but rather meet with their partners and mentors informally.

Here is a summary of Finance Consultings' main organisational characteristics:

FINANCE CONSULTING	
Governance	Partnership Limited transfer facility of shares
Task	Accounting and financial expertise Strong links with clients (but presence on site rare)
Differentiation	Medium level of specialisation (service based, after several years)
Integration	Low use of integrative devices Integration through socialisation Few rules and procedures
Control systems	Strategic Control: consensus orientation, centralisation of decision-making in the Paris office Market-Financial Control: tolerant and short-term focused Operating Control: decentralised peer control
HR systems	Pay above market average Informal up-or-out Emphasis on quality in evaluations/promotions

Table 6.5: Summary of Finance Consulting key organisational features

c. Reasons for taking part in the research project

At the time when our research team met with the Managing Partner, Partner in charge of HR, and the HR Manager of Finance Consulting, they had several reasons to take part in the study. Even

though Finance Consulting had been on the podium for one of the *Best Employer* type of rankings[74] for several years, they still always got their worst score on work-life balance (less than 65% of respondents believed that they were encouraged to maintain a good work-life balance in the last survey). The partners said that they believed they were doing as much as possible to favour work-life balance, and to take individual circumstances into account, but were curious to know what we would hear in the interviews. They explained that they were aware that the only adjustment variable to make sure a client is happy on a project is the consultant himself or herself, and that they needed to reflect upon the ways to ensure that consultants would not be in a constant state of overwork.

One of the main challenges the partners thought they were facing was the growth of their firm, which they thought would make it increasingly difficult to pay attention to individual wishes and circumstances. Also, they had concerns about their ability to replicate what they called their *model* in their subsidiaries. In Spain, in particular, even though the firm had been relatively successful in spite of the 2008 financial crisis, the *Best Employer* ranking scores were considerably lower than in other offices, and some partners did not respect the guidelines given by Paris (partners wanted their own offices, for example). It had led the French partners to exclude two of the Spanish partners from the partnership and they thought reflecting on the practices of the Paris office would also help them handle this situation.

6.3 Comparative analysis of work-life balance practices in Finance Consulting and Management Consulting

In this section, a case study of the practices of Management Consulting and Finance Consulting will be developed (6.3.1), before a comparative analysis can be conducted. The section ends with a discussion of the role played by the nature of the advice in accounting for the gap in the adjustment capabilities of the two consultancies, in favour of Finance Consulting (6.3.2).

6.3.1 Work-life balance practices in Management and Finance Consulting

Before conducting a comparative analysis of the means employed by both consultancies to address the demands of work-life balance they are confronted with, a case study of each firm's practices will be developed in order to better understand each of their standpoints on the question and the specificities of their initiatives.

Methods

As evoked in chapter 4 (p.124), the choice was made to analyse organisational practices from the individual perspective. First, intra-case analyses were conducted for both Management Consulting and Finance Consulting. The individual career stories of consultants working for both firms were mobilised once again to identify – for all consultants engaging in job crafting activities aimed at

[74] The exact name of the ranking in question cannot be provided for anonymity reasons.

increasing their perception of work-life balance – whether any organisational arrangement was implemented as an outcome of this job crafting activity. Any account of modified working conditions was thus identified (for example, adjustments with colleagues to allow someone to leave earlier on a specific occasion, a part-time work agreement, not being assigned certain projects, etc.). All of these arrangements were listed and re-grouped together when similar, in order to obtain a list of 13 organisational responses to work-life balance demands, either aiming at accommodating specific circumstances, or at limiting the negative impact of some specific projects on consultants' perception of work-life balance. They were then ordered into four broad categories following what these arrangements touched upon: either time, location, project assignment or client relationships.
Next, a second round of analysis was conducted across cases: a table was built to compare both firms' organisational arrangements and a gap was identified between the two firms, in favour of Finance Consulting, which appeared to have implemented more adjustments. I then went back to the original accounts in which these arrangements were initially identified to understand the underlying conditions of their implementation (for example, acceptability of the practice for partners, availability of projects fitting individual requirements, etc.) or factors facilitating them (for example, project work conducted from the firms' offices, generous budget, etc.). Many of these conditions and facilitating factors appeared to be related to the nature of the advice provided, which allowed me to build a framework accounting for the main factors and explaining firms' adjustment capabilities regarding work-life balance.

a. Work-life balance in Management Consulting

Before going into detail on the measures taken by Management Consulting to respond to work-life balance demands, it is necessary to detail further their particular standpoint on the issue. In section 6.1, Management Consulting was described as being part of a group of actors who considered work-life balance as an important topic. As will be developed here, further interviews with the historical partners show a more contrasting view. Finally, a panorama of the initiatives taken by the firm will be detailed further.

➢ Ambivalence in discourse

Even though the partners of Management Consulting all agree that the well-being of their consultants has been, and remains, a key concern of theirs from the start, given the legacy of Alter Consulting, there is some ambiguity in their discourse in terms of the way they regard work-life balance initiatives.

A historical concern

As detailed in section 6.2, the historical partners of Management Consulting share a common past at Alter Consulting, which was created in opposition to the Big Four. Part of this opposition was the will to pay attention to each individual consultant and provide them with a convivial work environment. When creating Management Consulting, the idea was to try to reproduce, at least partly, this environment and it remains palpable in the discourse of all partners today (even those who came on later). All agree that this is very difficult to combine with business imperatives and that it challenges the current business model of the industry. The Managing Partner sums it up by arguing that Management Consulting *is an organisation and management consultancy which aims to conciliate*

economic and human imperatives, even though the notion of balance has been problematic in the consulting industry for 25 years. The role of clients, in particular, is seen as problematic regarding how to handle this question:

> All our clients don't treat our consultants the same way, and it's not the same if you work for a bank or a hospital. (…) It's a challenge for us but also for our clients. And we depend on our clients and the way they manage their own resources, and as a consequence ours. It's a very important point to understand this question. (…) If it's me there's no problem, but for a junior, for example, clients would never want to pay if they can't see them. It's a job with a lot of freedom but our only constraint is the client.
>
> (Judith, Managing Partner)

> The problem we've always had is that we are a service provider, so we are obliged to show some reactivity and some obedience to the client, and it can come in the way of personal planning. It's always been true but today it's tougher because we have [fewer] solutions and less leeway to fight that. Projects are shorter, more… like in commando mode, there's less space to do that.
>
> (Philip, historical Partner)

Here, clients are not invoked to justify not implementing measures and leaving the issue to be handled by them according to their own wishes, but are rather cited as one of the main difficulties encountered when wanting to address work-life balance demands. Yet, all agree that they need to find a way to address these concerns. Alex, one of the associate directors, explained that the fact that consultants look for balance in their life is completely understandable, given that billing rates have dropped considerably in the last 20 years - as the consulting market has become more mature - and with them the prospects of rapid promotions and high earnings. The Managing Partner concluded:

> We are trying to think about how to accommodate this. But I do not have the solution, a new model needs to be invented and it's complicated. No one has invented it so far. I do not have the solution, but looking for it is essential.
>
> (Judith, Managing Partner)

This sense that some sort of work-life balance must be possible is reinforced by the fact that two of the historical partners benefitted from some kinds of arrangements themselves: they had an annualised part-time arrangement for a certain period of time while their children were young.

An ambivalent discourse

In spite of this wish to find novel ways to address work-life balance issues, there were paradoxes in some of the partners' discourse on the topic. Philip, for example, said that even though he had the *humanist* ambition of his firm at heart, and that he himself tried to accommodate the needs of the consultants he worked with, he was afraid that our study would open Pandora's box:

> Many employees are easily influenced and the more you will tell them that work-life balance is the ultimate goal in life, the more they will hear they have to practice sports, eat apples and be home at 5pm, the more difficult not being able to do it will become. (…) When you are about to start a boxing match and go on the ring, is it smart to tell the boxer 'you know, it's not normal, the guy is hitting you and I think you should have 5 hour-breaks in between each round instead of 3 minutes and you should have more protection.' The road to hell is paved with good intentions.
>
> (Philip, historical partner)

In addition, even if these HR directors and partners understand why there are these demands of work-life balance, some of them sometimes feel that consultants are asking for things they would never have asked for when they were in their place:

> Managers now want to take sabbatical leaves. You can imagine how it makes us feel. When you are promoted Manager this is exactly when you are told the firm counts on you! I can tell you I would never have even thought about doing that!
>
> (Alex, Associate Director)

> When I started working, it was the 90s – it was the crisis already. So I took a 6-month contract for a carmaker company, and it was renewed once. And I was under the supervision of people from Alter Management there, so they spotted me and asked if I wanted to take another short-term contract, but working for them this time. (…) And then they hired me with another 6 months probationary period. So that's 24 precarious months overall. But it never came to my mind that I wasn't treated well! It was very hard, from 7:30am to 9:30pm doing only acceptance tests, but I was very happy!
>
> (Philip, historical partner)

Sabbaticals, in particular, are regarded by the partners as something they *would never have done* (Judith, Managing Partner). Yet, they agree that when people come back from a sabbatical leave, they are more committed than ever and feel lucky to work for the consultancy. Alex says that they *behave less like divas* after they come back. Another source of ambiguity comes from the difference that is made between what are considered to be legitimate demands (typically taking care of one's family for young mothers) and others. The Managing Partner indeed told us how a man taking a parental leave would be *ridiculed in front of his team,* for example, for it is not what is expected of a team leader.

Interviewing more actors provided a more complex picture than the one the research team had found in the first place. If the legacy of Alter Consulting is still present and palpable, it is clear that compromises have sometimes, according to them, needed to be made between economic imperatives and their *humanist* values, as they label them. Even though they do put a lot of emphasis on their ambition to pay attention to individual needs, they appear to be afraid of generating a phenomenon they might not be able to respond to if demands become generalised.

➢ Practices

Two types of practices could be identified in both partners and consultants' accounts: arrangements that aimed at answering specific work-life balance demands on one side, and measures that aimed at limiting overwork on specific projects on the other.

Practices aiming at answering work-life balance demands

In spite of the ambivalence regarding work-life balance measures, some practices have been developed over time to try and address some consultants' demands. First of all, even though partners regard them as privileges, **sabbatical leaves** are regularly granted. This is quite easy to accommodate, given the project-based nature of consulting work, and provided it is anticipated long enough in advance and the consultants do not have unique knowledge or experience.

Also, several consultants benefit or have benefitted from **annualised part-time arrangements**. This practice appears to be very accepted within the firm and two of the historical partners (including the

Managing Partner) as well as one associate director have used this kind of arrangements in the past (two women and one man). They explained that this was very easy to combine with project work, given that it simply means that some consultants can take more days off than others. Consultants handle it directly, since projects are longer and conducted on site, and time off is negotiated with clients. One partner of Management Consulting, for example, explained that when his children were younger, he used to take days off during school holidays so he could be with them and that he would warn his client far in advance, to ensure that this would not be prejudicial to the project and that it could be managed smoothly, given the length of the project (several years) and the relationship he had managed to build with his client. These consultants typically take most school holidays off so they can spend time with their children, which are often quiet moments for clients anyway. If annualised part-time is well accepted, it is not the case for other part-time arrangements (either having one fixed day off a week or a reduced load on a daily basis), which they say they have tried but did not work out because this prevents consultants from being flexible and reactive enough to respond to clients' demands.

Another usual practice is that of trying to respect a **no travel policy** for mothers of young children. Consultants who are mothers are usually not assigned projects involving a lot of business trips away from home after they come back from maternity leave. The Managing Partner of the firm nonetheless insisted that this policy can only be sustained within the limits of staffing constraints and for a limited period of time. This is indeed difficult for them to organise because their projects are long and their staffing objectives are very high, so they usually have few consultants available when a project is about to start and few projects starting at the same time, which limits the number of options when considering consultants for a given project. Other types of preferences (in terms of work team, client, content or sector, which can directly impact work-life balance) are usually not considered in Management Consulting because of this staffing constraint. As a result, even though consultants try to let relevant interlocutors know about their wishes (in particular, project managers and coaches), they know they cannot always be granted, which leads to informal staffing strategies: consultants try to influence decisions by mobilising their internal network and trying to get specific partners to assign them to their projects, depending on their line of service, their work-style, their clients or their sectors.

Accommodating individual job crafting when consultants want to shape their work schedules according to their own personal constraints (if they want to play sports, for example, or pursue another hobby, like theatre) is also sometimes accepted, but appears to be very dependent upon partners' will. Philip, for example, explained that in order to retain a consultant who wanted to practice theatre with her friends and needed to leave every Tuesday at 6:30pm, he tried to negotiate directly with the client: he introduced the consultant to the client and only after the client chose her did he mention that she had to leave at 6:30 on Tuesdays. He said, *Once it is sold, once the client really likes the profile of the consultant, you can manage it. Then, once in a while, there will be a rush or something, but it doesn't become a habit*. He said that when consultants' needs are very concrete, then they can try to accommodate them. However, no other arrangement of the sort was mentioned in any of the interviews with consultants, which makes this case a very isolated one.

Partners, as well as many managers and senior managers, also explained that accommodating work-life balance for more than a minority of individuals with specific needs, requires on-going concern

from the management of the firm. They explained, for example, encouraging people to take vacations and to leave the office earlier than usual in the quieter phases of projects, or when work is done. They said this is essential in making people understand that overwork would not be rewarded *per se* and that even though work demand is high during certain phases of projects, the most should be made of the calmer phases. This, however, did not prove to be as successful as they would have wanted, since a majority of younger consultants felt a lot of peer pressure to leave the office after 8pm.

Practices aiming at limiting overwork

A practice frequently evoked by consultants is to allocate **extra-rest days** after a particularly tight deadline has been met or after a particularly difficult project ends. This is relatively easy for Management Consulting to organise. The only difficulty is to ensure that consultants actually take the time off and that they can do so when they need to rest and not several months later, when the project is over.

If there is a high level of strain on a project, then it is possible to **assign extra-resources**. Typically an intern can be assigned to the project so that some straightforward tasks can be delegated to relieve the team of some pressure. Consultants are nonetheless a little wary of this sort of measure because they say that it often takes them longer to keep someone new up to date on a project than to carry out the tasks themselves. They say it is even more difficult when it is an intern or someone with less experience, because then they also need to supervise and review the work. In any case, this practice appears to be rather limited because partners tend not to assign extra resources if the budget doesn't allow it, unless there are some unoccupied consultants in the office. When necessary, this measure can be accompanied by an **exit from projects** of consultants if they are about to break down. This has, however, only been evoked by the management of the firm and not experienced by any of the consultants we met.

In extreme cases, partners can even engage in **contract renegotiation** to redefine either the deadlines, the scope of the tasks, or the budget and be able to assign more resources to the project. This practice is relatively rare, but since the "Insurance2020" project, partners seem to be more favourably inclined to this idea. Indeed, after coaches and members of the work council alerted the partners about work overload on the project, and after several consultants decided to quit the firm because of it, they decided to send in another partner to audit the project and realised that it had been considerably under-budgeted. They re-negotiated the contract, and in the long run, it resulted in the departure of the partner originally in charge. On a more daily basis, many managers did evoke informally negotiating the scope of tasks or deadlines with clients, on the basis of the existing contract.

b. Work-life balance in Finance Consulting

At Finance Consulting, the situation was quite different: all of the partners that the research team met agreed on the importance of accommodating work-life balance demands as much as possible, for personal convictions as well as for business reasons. It was only when talking to consultants that a gap appeared between the discourse of the founding partners, and what other partners coming from

outside might preach. In spite of this, a number of arrangements were identified, which will be the focus of the last part of this section.

➢ Discourse

In Finance Consulting, all of the partners that the research team met agreed that the well-being of their consultants, and as a result their overall work-life balance, was a key concern of theirs from the start. Yet, it appeared along the course of the research project, and through consultants' stories, that there was a lack of consensus among partners on the importance of addressing this issue.

Well-being at the heart of the identity of the firm

As evoked in section 6.2, even though the founding partners of Finance Consulting were inspired from their experience at Big5 when creating their own consultancy, there was one element they did not want to reproduce: the relationship to time, as explained by Nathan:

> We were very concerned with… I mean the founding team, we really wanted a balanced rhythm. We are demanding, our clients are too, so there is a requirement to deliver, but we wanted something balanced in the sense that there needs to be some sort of balance between professional and personal lives and we really wanted to avoid the 'I have nothing else to do but I stay for fear I may have a bad reputation' phenomenon. It was true at Big5, it's the disease of banks, leaving before 10pm means you took the day off. It there's a rush, then stay, but if work is done and it's 6pm, please leave, do not stay just for the sake of staying.
>
> (Nathan, Founding Partner)

This was confirmed by the managing partner who said that *it does not mean that there is no overwork and that people do not stay late, but at least they do not do so artificially, which is already quite an improvement.*

Beyond this notion of time, partners all explained that taking into account the specific circumstances of their consultants was something they tried to implement whenever possible. The rationale behind this is that they are aware that the job can be very demanding at times and that if they want their consultants to project themselves into the long term, it is important to give something in return for both ethical and retention reasons:

> They know we ask a lot, but we can also give a lot. It's not just about having foosball tables or team building activities. It's about long-term projection. This is essential to me. (…) But there are two perspectives: either you pressurise them and once they're done they leave or you lie fallow. Instead of producing a maximum of wheat, with a maximum of fertilizer (with cash, pay, bonuses), the other solution is to ask yourself: 'what does the field want?' Sometimes, it needs to rest, to change production. Some will travel the world, others do voluntary work, others have children.
>
> (Patrick, Founding Partner)

The partners, however, all agreed that this is sometimes very difficult to do, for a number of reasons. Appropriate staffing must be found to match each individual's specific requests and needs or projects may need to be organised in a different way. In other words, it adds variables to the list of already existing requirements when assigning projects. Patrick, for example, explained that his natural reaction when someone tells him about a specific need (in this instance, a female consultant announcing her pregnancy) is to think that it is going to make things more complicated for him and his colleagues. This does not mean he should go for the *easy option*, he explains, which would be to

fire her or, more realistically, to refuse to take her personal circumstances into account and let her eventually quit:

> Operationally, in the short-term, this isn't great (when someone has a specific demand), it annoys me! On one project, I have a collaborator who says, in the middle, 'I am going to be on maternity leave.' The first reaction isn't to say 'oh great!' Well yes, but honestly the first reaction is 'shit, how am I going to deal with the end of the project?' (…) But in the long-term, you are rewarded, at least you can tell yourself 'I tried, I didn't go for the easy option and fire her with a check.' People who don't understand that don't stay here very long.
>
> (Patrick, Founding Partner)

As far as mothers are concerned, Franck – the partner in charge of HR – even claims that there are almost no requests, because they are systematically anticipated, even though it poses a number of difficulties in terms of organising:

> There are no requests, almost never, because we try to make sure that women with children are never sent away for two weeks. It's problematic internally, very problematic because some consultants believe that they are not treated equally, that some people are protected, it's a difficulty we have. Another problem is how to deal with increasing numbers. We've had 4 women having children this year, and we already have 7 or 8 with children. 3 or 4 years ago, it was like one or two.
>
> (Franck, Partner in charge of HR)

The partners claim that if individual demands can be met, then they should be, no matter if the consultant is one that they want to retain or not: *As long as we can allow ourselves to meet demands, we do it. We don't think about that, we discuss the situation and if we can do something about it we do it,* said the Managing Partner.

A lack of consensus

In spite of this apparent consensus on the necessity to address work-life balance for ethical and retention purposes, a more complex situation appeared through the research process. Although all consultants did agree that individual circumstances were taken into consideration whenever possible, those benefiting from specific arrangements (part-time, for example, or leaving the office at 6:30pm to pick-up children from school) often explained working with some partners rather than others, who were not so willing to accommodate their work schedule.

➢ Practices

Similar to Management Consulting, two types of practices could be identified among both those aiming to find long-term answers to specific work-life balance demands, and those aiming at limiting the negative impact of specific projects on work-life balance at a given time.

Practices aiming at answering work-life balance demands

In Finance Consulting, there is to some extent an **individualisation of the staffing process**: individual wishes and personal circumstances are taken into account whenever possible. For example, projects that are compatible with flexible arrangements will be assigned to consultants who have requested it in order of priority. It implies that consultants need to make their preferences known either directly to the staffer, to their coach, their project manager or partner, who will then discuss it with the staffer and other partners.

As in Management Consulting, Finance Consulting's partners allow their consultants to take **sabbatical leaves** to travel or do voluntary work. One of the founding partners explained that they had everything to win in exchange: *They want to leave for 6 months? I say go! If I say no they will leave anyway, and if they don't come back after they would have left anyway. And if they come back, they're very happy!* Elizabeth, a senior consultant, for example, explained that when she informed her partners of her wish to do voluntary work abroad for several months, not only did they allow her to do so, but they also funded the project. In exchange, she agreed to organise her departure according to project constraints and left one week after the delivery of an important report.
One condition for this to work seems to be polyvalence, so that consultants can be replaced easily. Indeed, another consultant we met, Nicolas, asked for a sabbatical leave, which was accepted, but then kept getting postponed because he was one of the only consultants with very specific competences in one area. The firm had to recruit someone new and train them before the leave could be granted, which in turn led Nicolas to abandon the firm before he could be replaced.

Annualised and non-annualised part-time work could also be observed in Finance Consulting. Annualised part-time is particularly adapted to the nature of the work since projects are short and it is easy for the staffer, in coordination with consultants, to organise some time to be left in between projects. The consultant in question simply appears as unavailable for new projects in the staffing meetings, and availability can be negotiated if there are particular staffing constraints. Weekly part-time work – to a limited extent – could also happen, but all agreed that it made the organisation of work challenging. An athlete was employed by Finance Consulting at the time of the interviews. Given his sports training schedule, he could only work for Finance Consulting from 9am to 4pm every day and had one full afternoon off every week. Although we were not able to talk to him directly, several consultants who had worked with him agreed that it made the organisation of the work very challenging because what he could not finish had to be transferred to other members of the team and resulted in increased workload for them. They nonetheless explained that it was probably so because he was a junior consultant and was not yet autonomous enough, and that it probably would have been different if he had had more experience.

In addition, the partners we met seemed to be supportive of consultants who were trying to craft their jobs in order to have a **flexible schedule** (those who do not benefit from any arrangement like part-time or reduced load, but who try to organise themselves flexibly enough so that they can leave the office earlier than others – see chapter 5, p.176-181). Indeed, they described not paying attention to how and where the work was done – as long as it was done – and even making it possible for consultants to go home earlier when necessary. One partner, for example, told us that one of his Managers needed to leave at 7pm to pick-up her children. So whenever there was a conference call after 7pm he told her he would lead it alone so she could leave. The flip-side, they said, was for consultants to be able to remain available whenever they were really needed in the office. This practice appeared to be nonetheless subject to the acceptability of other partners, and consultants reported working with specific partners rather than others in order to make it work.

Regarding **teleworking**, a limited number of exceptions can be made for consultants who live far away, provided it only involves one day a week and consultants remain reachable. Alice, a Manager, for example, reported working from home at least once a week but agreeing for this day not to be fixed so she could decide what day was best to take off each week, with project constraints in mind,

and how many interactions would be needed to accomplish a specific task. Teleworking, however, proved all the more difficult because she was a Manager and had to supervise the work of more junior staff. She was unsure of how long she would be able to sustain this routine.
In parallel, a **limited travel policy** has also been implemented for mothers, which implies that projects involving travel are assigned to other consultants. The consultants we met who benefited from this informal policy reported travelling very rarely, but agreeing to make compromises whenever no other arrangement could be found by the staffer, either because other consultants were not available or did not have the experience required. Consultants themselves referred to it as a *mummy friendly policy* and the partner in charge of HR himself claimed that mothers were somehow *protected.* This policy, although informal, was subject to criticism by some consultants who were single and did not have children. One of our interviewees, in particular, Emma, explained having left the firm because she was systematically assigned projects that weren't work-life balance friendly or was the only one to stay late in the office while others went back home to take care of their families.

Finally, an arrangement for projects involving more than 3 weeks away from the office is currently being explored: **duplicate teams**. A first team is sent to the client site before the other one takes over for the second half of the project. It implies assigning two teams to the same project for a few days so the project can be transferred from one team to the other, while billing the client for one.

Practices aiming at limiting overwork

Extra rest days, like in Management Consulting, are also allocated after a difficult project phase. It is, however, here as well, dependent upon project needs and the availability rate: if the availability of resources is very low then there might be needs on another project or a new assignment may be coming right after the end of the previous one, which prevents consultants from using these extra rest days. If availability is a little higher, then there are usually more options in terms of which consultants to assign to which project and when.

Next, the **assignation of extra-resources** to support a team struggling with a heavy workload is also possible. It is even more systematic here than in Management Consulting: projects are reviewed weekly and resources re-allocated when necessary without re-negotiating fees with the client. Every Monday, during the partners' meetings, partners discuss all projects and whether resources should be re-allocated between them to re-equilibrate the workload, if needed, and ensure that deadlines can be met.

As in Management Consulting, the partners regularly practice **emergency exits** from projects whenever a consultant is at risk. If they get the sense that a consultant is struggling because of the workload to the extent of putting their health at risk, either because the consultant said so, or because the project manager or team mates have warned relevant interlocutors, then they can be replaced by another consultant. It is, however, quicker for Finance Consulting to find a replacement than for Management Consulting to do so, because of the differences in availability rates exposed above. It is also less necessary, because even when there is an overload of work on a project, it is only for a few weeks before a new project can be assigned.

When required, the conditions of projects can also be the object of **renegotiation**. Whenever considered necessary, the perimeter, budget or deadlines can be re-discussed between partners and their clients. This practice, however, seems to be partner-dependent, and may also vary depending on the nature of the relationship with the client in question and how important they are for the firm. In addition, the partners believe that the fact that they are involved in all projects operationally facilitates this process in that mistakes in how to handle a project (typically the methodology to follow) can be spotted very early on, and when there is a problem in the sizing of a team, for example, it can be rectified quickly.

Finally, when the partners believe a project cannot be done under what they consider to be acceptable conditions or if their consultants are already very busy with on- going projects, they **set too high a price** so that other firms will be more competitive and win the project. It allows them to regulate the workload without their reputation being affected. However, they admit that they do not allow themselves to do so with every client.

6.3.2 Comparative case study of work-life balance practices in Management and Finance Consulting

Now that both firms' work-life balance practices have been described, it is possible to conduct an inter-case study. This section will start from the observation that there is a considerable gap beween the practices of Finance and Management Consulting. Then, the second part will aim at unravelling the conditions of the higher adjustment capability of Finance Consulting beyond managerial will. A framework of analysis of the role played by the nature of the consulting advice provided will finally be proposed.

a. A gap between the practices of Management and Finance Consulting

All of the arrangements observed fit into four categories: they either concern time and location, as in usual work-life balance initiatives, but also project assignment or client relationship management, which appears to be more specific to PSFs. Here is an overview of these arrangements in both firms:

ARRANGEMENTS		Finance Consulting	Management Consulting
Time	Sabbatical leaves	✓	✓
	Extra rest days	✓	✓
	Annualised part-time	✓	✓
	Non-annualised part-time	✓	
	Flexible schedule	✓	Difficult
Location	Teleworking	Limited	
	Limited travel policy for mothers of young children	✓	When possible
	Duplicate teams	Currently experimenting	
Project Assignment	Individualisation	✓	Difficult
	Assignation of extra resources	Yes, no renegotiation of the contract needed	In extreme cases, renegotiation of the contract needed
	Exit from projects	✓	Takes long to organise
Client relationship Management	Renegotiations	Depending on partners	Depending on partners
	Prices adapted to availability rates	✓	

Table 6.6: comparative work-life balance practices in Finance Consulting and Management Consulting

As the table shows, although both firms intend to take work-life balance demands into account, it appears that Finance Consulting has implemented more arrangements, or can go further in implementing them, than Management Consulting. Indeed, if some measures are shared by both firms (and according to their HR directors, by some other firms in the original sample) such as sabbatical leaves, granting extra rest days or letting a consultant exit a project when they are overwhelmed, others are only found at Finance Consulting. The practice of deliberately losing projects, for example, was not evoked at Management Consulting, where freelancers are hired when the internal workforce isn't able to handle a project due to the existing workload. Cases of projects being under-budgeted have been evoked several times in the interviews with Management Consulting, which never came up in the Finance Consulting interviews. Also, more individual cases of organisational arrangements were reported to us in the case of Finance Consulting.

b. Accounting for the gap

This striking discrepancy in both firms' practices raises a new question: how can this gap between the two firms be accounted for? A first obvious line of explanation is managerial will. Further analysis will show, however, that beyond managerial will is the question of the nature of different types of consulting advice in enabling firms to make adjustments more or less easily.

➢ A matter of managerial will?

A first explanation can be found in the fact that Finance Consulting's founding partners appear to be sensitive to this topic on a personal level, and seem to be convinced that consultants do a better job

when they are happy, which implies, among other things, protecting work-life balance when possible. Even though there seems to be a lack of consensus among the latest partners on this issue, it has without any doubt helped to shape an environment in which work-life balance demands are acceptable. This is reinforced by some institutional factors, such as the characteristics of their labour markets, since consultants who joined Finance Consulting rather than investment banking often explained that they chose consulting because they wanted a better work-life balance. As a result, Finance Consulting uses their individualised management approach as an argument in the recruitment process, along with the fact that promotions are rather collective during the first years, which shows that individual arrangements are not prejudicial to career trajectory, at least at first.

In Management Consulting, the will to favour the well-being of consultants was present, but was not as openly claimed as in Finance Consulting, and many arrangements, such as sabbatical leaves, were looked at as inevitable rather than actively sought. This managerial will to address work-life balance issues and how rooted it is in the organisational choices made by the firm directly impacts two core elements of the arrangements that consulting firms can offer: client relationship management and project assignment. Indeed, for some arrangements to be implemented, partners need to be able to make clients accept them. It is, for example, not a given that clients will spontaneously accept to have two teams handle their projects because the firm is duplicating them. This is all the more unusual because in professional service environments clients always come first and internal management issues are usually hidden from them (Maister, 1993). And, as described earlier, the will for partners to take on this negotiation work with clients is more limited in Management Consulting. Also, the role of partners is key in the project assignment process because they always have the last word concerning resource allocation, and without their will to take individual wishes and constraints into account, very little can be achieved.

- **The role played by the nature of the advice in accounting for discrepancies in practices**

Managerial will is thus key in explaining why some consulting firms embrace work-life balance arrangements more than others. However, managerial will alone cannot account for the discrepancies observed between Finance and Management Consulting. Indeed, a number of more contingent factors appear to explain the margins firms have when addressing work-life balance demands from their consultants:

Characteristics	Finance Consulting	Management Consulting
Key elements	Creation: 10 years ago French firm with international offices About 200 consultants worldwide Growth: between 10 and 20%	Creation: 10 years ago French firm, operating abroad About a 100 consultants Growth: between 10 and 20%
Governance	Partnership, shares with limited transfer facility	Partnership + private owners
Type of advice	Financial advice	Management and Organisation advice
Leverage	High proportion of senior profiles	Relatively high proportion of senior profiles, yet less than Finance Consulting
Staffing rate	High all the way to senior manager	High all the way to senior manager
Billing rates	High	Pressure on cost
Average length of projects	3-4 weeks	Between 6 and 18 months
Location of projects	Variable between service lines, usually from the offices	Usually from the clients' premises

Table 6.7: Comparative description of Finance Consulting and Management Consulting

Billing rates

First, billing rates are considerably higher in the finance advice industry than in the management one. In addition, Finance Consulting has adopted a top-of-the-range strategy, which reinforces this gap. In parallel, management and organisation advice has been subject to increased competition, pressure on costs and has been facing the tendency from clients to develop management advice teams in-house (see chapter 3, p.99). The fact that margins are relatively high in Finance Consulting facilitates the attribution of extra rest days, the allocation of extra resources, or the use of duplicate teams, for example. These practices obviously impact profits, and could not be implemented without managerial will, but are easier to offer consultants when margins are high.

Leverage

Second, there are also differences in leverage: finance advice involves slightly more senior work in the delivery of services. Even though partners do not work full-time on projects and dedicate a lot of time to client relationship management and business development, they are very often directly involved in the production of financial analysis, usually by contributing to structuring the reasoning of each case and controlling the rigour of the results, in particular given how tailor-made reasoning can be. In Management Consulting, the composition of project teams can vary, but it is very rare for partners to work on site with their teams full-time. The leverage characteristics of Finance Consulting, and the nature of the work, facilitate work-life balance policies in that there is also more proximity between partners and their teams, which helps consultants raise specific concerns regarding the workload, or let relevant interlocutors know about any personal constraints they might have. It also helps partners remain in direct control of the way the project is managed. Also, if a higher proportion of workers are relatively senior, they are more autonomous and can more easily benefit from flexible arrangements regarding work location or time.

Length and location of projects

Finally, the characteristics of the projects themselves differ: finance projects are usually short (3 to 4 weeks on average), while management projects rarely last less than six months. Since Finance

projects do not last very long, it costs consultants less when their wishes cannot be granted or when they have to make a compromise. Also, it means that there is a faster rotation of projects and project teams, so there are more options to match projects and individuals. Finance projects are also very often conducted from the consultancy's offices, given the relatively low interactive nature of the work between consultants and clients, while Management projects are often – at least for junior and senior consultants – conducted via full-time presence on clients' sites and require constant interactions. This is a considerable difference when it comes to work-life balance arrangements in that working from the consultancy's offices limits travel and, above all, frees consultants from having to manage clients' impressions (Clark, 1995; Clark and Salaman, 1998) by enacting expectations of reactivity, availability and hard work (Alvesson, 2001). It also prevents partners from having to negotiate specific arrangements with clients: service delivery occurs *back-stage* (Clark, 1995), which allows for a number of practices that would otherwise be considered counter-normative, such as part-time work, teleworking or flexible schedules. This is reinforced by differences in the nature of the service itself, which is particularly intangible in Management Consulting (Sturdy, 1997), and explains clients' needs to remain in direct control of consultants, and consultants' needs to manage impressions of professionalism (Alvesson, 2001).

On this basis, an analytical framework of work-life balance adjustment capability in professional service firms has been built, highlighting the role played by the nature of the service provided in firms' capacity to handle such demands (see Fig. 6.7).

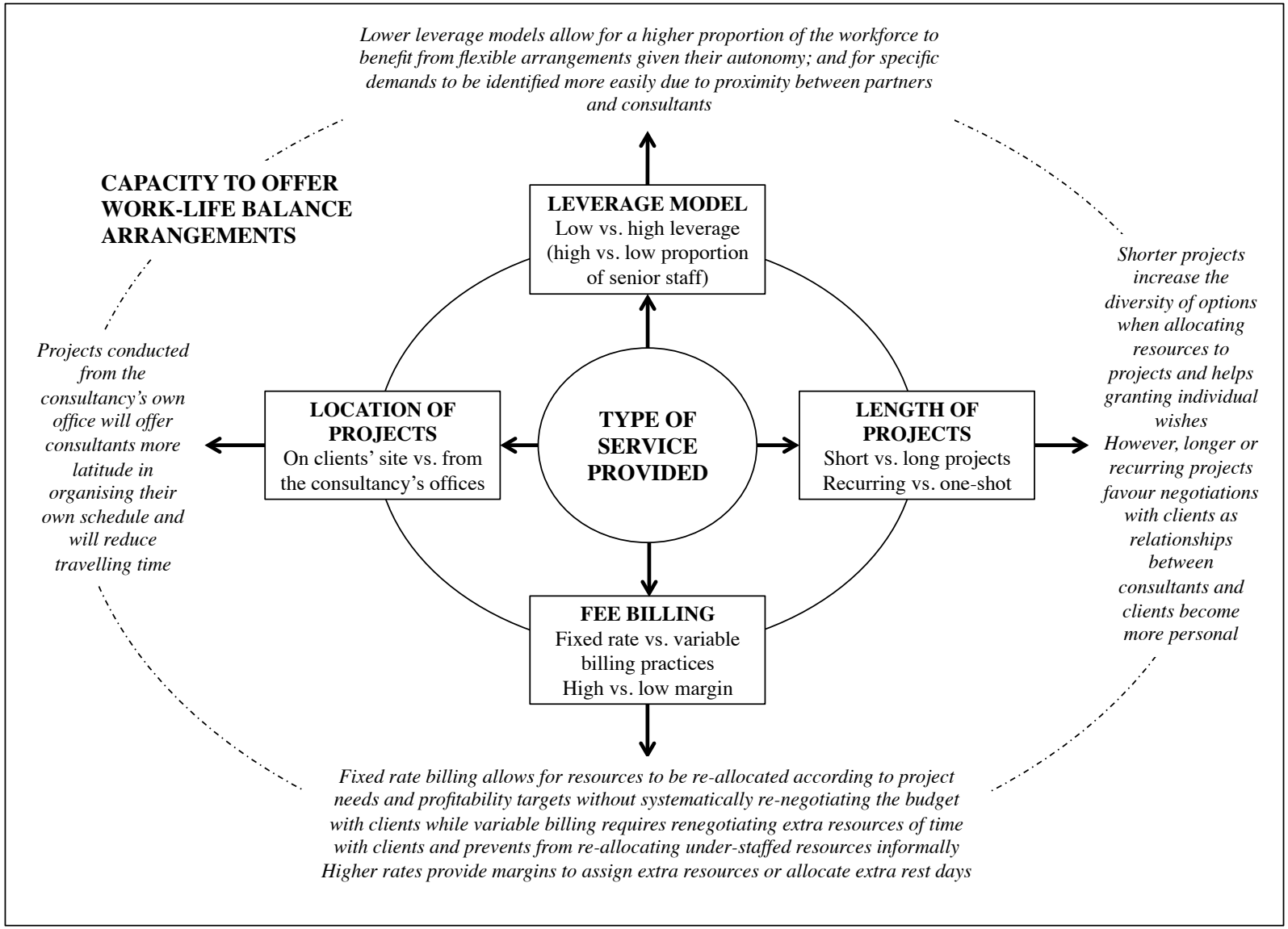

Figure 6.7: framework of analysis of PSF's work-life balance adjustment capability

As a result – following the argument made by du Gay and Vikkelsø (2014; 2013), who argue that the nature of tasks should be brought back into discussions around organisational design – consideration of differences in the nature of the advice provided is called for when considering the adjustment capabilities of PSFs. These findings argue against the existence of *a one best way* of organising professionals. This will be expanded upon in chapter 7 (p.261-262).

Intermediate conclusion

In this section, both Management Consulting's and Finance Consulting's standpoints on work-life balance and their practices have been analysed. A gap has been spotted between the practices of the two firms, Finance Consulting having implemented more work-life balance arrangements, in variety as well as in depth (i.e. how much these practices affect profitability in the short-term). This observable gap has been attributed to managerial will, but also, and above all, to substantial differences in both the environment of their firms (labour markets in particular) and the nature of the advice that they provide. Yet, even at Finance Consulting, the reach of these arrangements appears to be rather limited and several questions emerge at this stage: could these practices be extended to bigger numbers of consultants? Could they be formalised into HR policies? How much could they be generalised? These questions will be the focus of the following, and final, section of this chapter.

6.4 Can the professional organisational machinery be loosened?

In the final section of this chapter, the question of the generalisation of existing arrangements (or at least their extension to increasing numbers of consultants) will be addressed. The first sub-section will aim to show that, even though the arrangements identified earlier are restricted to a small portion of consultants, they already challenge considerably the traditional ways of working at the firms in which they are implemented. This will raise, in a second sub-section, the question of the potential generalisation of these arrangements to a wider proportion of consultants, which calls for organisational innovations.

6.4.1 Existing arrangements as idiosyncratic deals

The way that the work-life balance arrangements identified in the previous section are currently implemented appears already to be significantly challenging the way consulting firms are organised. Even though they remain limited in number and remain informal, they already put a certain level of strain on the project assignment process and question existing norms regarding evaluations and promotions.

a. A limited number of idiosyncratic deals

So far, the number of individuals benefiting from these arrangements remains limited – even at Finance Consulting, where they are usually exceptions to the rule. As evoked in chapter 5 (p.185-191), the consultants concerned by these practices still refer to them as counter-

normative, as being the first ones to benefit from them, and having to invent a new way of practising consulting.

The arrangements we have identified are usually implemented on a case-by-case basis: individual consultants let relevant interlocutors (HR directors, partners, project managers, or coaches) know about their wishes to either work flexibly, have a reduced workload, work with certain clients, avoid travelling, avoid mediatised projects (which usually imply heavy workloads, pressure and tight deadlines), etc. Then, the HR director/ staffer and the partners will discuss whether the specific demand can and should be granted, given business constraints, project needs, and the risk of losing this particular consultant. This process is far from systematic and involves one-off negotiations.

In parallel, other people still censor themselves and decide to leave before they are in need of specific arrangements and the belief that consulting is incompatible with "work-life balance" still prevails. Within Finance Consulting, for example, even though there are as many females as males within the junior and senior consultant roles, it is no longer the case among management ranks since many women leave after they have children – or even before they have children, as was the case with one of the participants, Nina, who did not think her wish to have a baby would be compatible with the job. Out of the 17 partners of the Paris office, only one is a woman. As a result, the number of women asking for arrangements allowing them to either work part time or flexibly remains relatively limited so far.

As a consequence, the arrangements in place are far from widespread and are usually idiosyncratic deals (Rousseau et al., 2006) made for specific individuals with potential rather than entirely novel Human Resources policies. Rousseau et al. (2006: p.978) define idiosyncratic deals – or I-deals – as "*voluntary, personalized agreements of a non-standard nature negotiated between individual employees and their employers regarding terms that benefit each party".* I-deals are described as individually negotiated, heterogeneous (they differ from standard work employment conditions), benefitting both parties (especially considering the value to the employer of the individual benefiting from the I-deal) and varied in their scope. This definition fits the description of the arrangements evoked by consultants and partners. Indeed, the work-life balance practices described above entail a form of individualisation of Human Resources, by which – in order to retain their consultants – partners agree to take known individual preferences and circumstances (which are subject to change) into account when assigning projects. By doing so, they are transforming the nature of the project assignment process, from a standardised process assigning projects to available – almost anonymous – resources, into a means of retention. Furthermore, the job crafting efforts of consultants described in chapter 5 can thus be conceptualised as attempts – on the parts of individuals – to make those idiosyncratic deals. In some cases these efforts are responded to and accommodated by (at least some) partners, and thus successfully turn into I-deals. In other cases, they remain job crafting practices conducted by individual consultants without organisational support.

b. Arrangements are informal in nature

Not only are the solutions deployed by both firms to address emerging work-life balance demands limited in numbers, but they are also very informal in character. Indeed, contrary to what has already been studied in the literature (see chapter 3, p.105-109), here – apart from some exceptions – most measures are the outcome of a very individualised and informal process of negotiation.

As discussed above, the arrangements identified are best described as idiosyncratic deals rather than work-life balance initiatives or policies. Yet, not only are they limited in number, but they are also usually very informal. Apart from the adjustments that involve amending the work contract (for part-time work arrangements, for example, or long term leaves of absence like sabbaticals) none of these arrangements are the object of written, formal policies that apply to everyone. Most of the time, as detailed above, the arrangements are the outcome of an individualised process of informal negotiation, which requires consultants to ask for them. To a great extent, the responsibility is left to consultants themselves to manage their own work-life balance and find their own way to get their demands accepted.

6.4.2 Towards generalisation? A model in tension

In spite of their currently limited adjustment capability, both Finance Consulting's and Management Consulting's managing partners fear the number of demands regarding work-life balance will grow in the up-coming few years, given that consultants who are currently benefiting from specific arrangements may act as role models for younger consultants, who may then consider possible a behaviour currently looked at as counter-normative (Ibarra, 1999). This section aims at addressing the questions that this raises regarding the capacity of consulting firms to handle a potential generalisation of demands of this nature, given that existing practices already challenge the organisation of these firms considerably.

a. An organisation already challenged by existing practices

While the arrangements identified in section 6.3 remain very limited in number and informal in nature, they also appear to be relatively complicated to handle. Not only do they challenge the project assignment process, but they also question existing career practices and raise questions of organisational justice.

➢ Strain on the project assignment process: the Rubik's Cube metaphor

One way to look at the organisational impact of these work-life balance arrangements is to consider the characteristics of the service provided as determining a certain level of *slack* (Cyert and March, 1963) that PSFs can make use of in order to retain consultants who demand "work-life balance". Yet, this slack is not infinite and Finance Consulting's HR manager, who is also in charge of operationally running the project assignment process, said he was already under high strain and described this process as a *giant tetris game* for having to match available individuals and their special circumstances (potential work-life balance demands, but also their specialisation wishes, their previous experience, and so on) with projects at a given time. Yet, upon reflection,

this matching process is even more complex than a two-dimensional tetris game. Indeed, not only does the staffer need to match individuals' wishes and experience with projects, but they also have many other variables to take into account.
Let us take an example to illustrate this idea. For a parent of a young child to be able to leave at 6:30pm, for instance, and to be spared projects that involve travelling abroad for a long period of time (over a week, for example), it is necessary that at least one project should meet that criteria, in terms of its spatial (travel, location close enough to the consultants' house so they don't need to leave earlier than the agreed upon 6:30pm, for example) and time characteristics (determined by project length, but also by the way budget and scope are agreed upon with the client in the contract). It is also necessary that the project is in line with their previous experience and/or specialisation. Then, when the client has a say in the composition of the project team, they have to be satisfied with the profile of this consultant and not choose another one over them, and to be receptive enough to their specific circumstances to at least accept them. Finally, the partner in charge of the project must also trust this consultant to be fit for the job and be receptive enough to the specific requests of the individual in question for it to work. All of this taking into consideration that only a certain number of consultants are available at the same time and that only a certain number of projects start approximately at the same time.

As a consequence the staffer does not have to match individuals with projects but rather clients and projects with individuals and partners – and replicate this process for each individual consultant. The Rubik's Cube seems to be a more appropriate metaphor than the tetris game to describe this process: all the variables related to the projects, related clients, the teams and individuals' specific circumstances or explicit requests need to match for work-life balance arrangements to succeed.

- **The career system in question**

In environments like PSFs – relying on a formal or informal *up-or-out* practice, the emergence of I-deals is a revolution. By introducing heterogeneity to the population of consultants, it challenges the existing career systems in which consultants are supposed to be directly comparable and can be ranked against one another with a Gauss curve. If working conditions are individualised, then it becomes difficult to compare performance across the population of consultants. So far, the individuals benefitting from these idiosyncratic deals believe that it may have consequences on their career progression if they maintain the situation over the long term. When work-life balance arrangements are conceived as a phase in one's career that will eventually end (typically when children are older) then – even though career progression might be slowed down – it is unlikely that it will have an impact on consultants' chances for partnership, at least at Finance and Management Consulting. However, when sustained over time, these arrangements considerably challenge the way that consultants' performance and level of commitment are compared.

- **A problem of equity**

Another, related concern, is that of organisational justice. Indeed, as it appears, introducing differences in the treatment of individuals can also be the source of perceived inequalities, which may lead some of the consultants who do not have any work-life balance requests to leave because they feel ill-treated or unrewarded.

Work-life balance arrangements as a perceived source of privileges

One of the biggest problems posed by these idiosyncratic deals is a perceived inequity in the treatment of individuals by partners. In their seminal paper, Rousseau et al. (2006: p.978) explain that "*because I-deals create differences among co-workers in conditions of employment, failure to recognise and attend to I-deals can exacerbate the injustice their existence might engender, eroding trust and cooperation in the organisation".* Indeed, as described in chapter 1, the incentive system relies on a tournament in which the best and more deserving are supposed to be promoted, and career paths are standardised. All candidates belong to a homogeneous population and are supposed to believe in the ability of the system to allow them to be treated equally and fairly on the basis of quality and commitment. These new practices challenge considerably this belief. Indeed, individualising work conditions for a limited portion of the population may generate the feeling that there is a privileged group within the rows of consultants. As the interview with Emma (who left Finance Consulting because she felt she was given all of the difficult projects because she did not have any children) indicated, some consultants might feel as though some people's private lives are protected because they have children and that this is unfair. Undeniably, someone needs to be assigned those projects that are not favourable to work-life balance, and the consultants who do not have particular requests regarding work-life might not consider this fair treatment, or may even feel that they should be entitled to more in comparison because they are doing more than others (more pay, more bonus, quicker promotions). In addition, as mentioned earlier, some people would rather leave for work-life balance reasons and those who do not voice their specific concerns or needs may feel that this system favours those who dare to speak up.

Formalisation as a form of stigmatisation

Given the challenges induced by the informality of existing practices, one obvious step would be to consider these I-deals as early-stage formations of formal work-life balance policies like those described in chapter 3 (p.105-109), which would provide clarity over exactly who can benefit from which arrangements and how it will impact one's career. Yet, what our findings show is that – even though they generate questions around equity— the fact that arrangements remain relatively informal avoids categorising individuals as not belonging to the population of consultants that are still in the game for promotions (and eventually partnership, for some of them). As some participants said, it is possible to be very dedicated and put in a lot of hours at some points in one's career, then stop for a few years and stick to satisfying clients only, before going back to full-dedication. As a result, one of the problems with solutions such as creating permanent positions like off-counsel or the non-equity partner (Malhotra et al., 2010; Smets et al., 2012) is that they act as signifiers of some form of otherness. Formalising these arrangements would imply building two distinct categories: the elite consultants who can achieve partnership, and the rest.

One of the conclusions from our literature review of formal work-life balance initiatives in Chapter 3 was that these policies are described as rarely used and rather unsuccessful (unless they are used by partners themselves). Litrico and Lee's conclusion, in particular, was that the decentralisation of power in PSFs allowed local entities not to follow company-wide policies (Litrico and Lee, 2008). Even though our findings do confirm that the decentralisation of operational control plays an important part in explaining why some arrangements can be sustained with some specific partners and not others – who are less supportive of the consultants

attempting to implement them – they also provide other interpretations for the failure of formal work-life balance policies in PSFs.
Following the previous developments, it is possible to formulate two complementary hypotheses to account for the lack of adoption of formal work-life balance policies within PSFs:

(1) Formal policies may be disconnected from the inherent constraints of the activity, which might make them very difficult to organise in practice at the department or even project levels, as discussed in the previous section and giving each consultant an opposable right to work-life balance arrangements may make it difficult to manage in practice.
(2) The fear of being marginalised and categorised as uncommitted or a non-candidate for partnership (or at least promotion) might prevent consultants from applying to take part in these initiatives.

b. The challenge of extending existing arrangements to a wider population

As argued above, Finance Consulting's adjustment capability appears to be relatively constrained. As a consequence, considering the extension of existing arrangements to a wider population – which is a rather realistic concern, given the rise in demands that can be anticipated – is problematic. Widening the size of the population benefiting from these agreements would indeed require more "slack." To some extent, Finance Consulting already tries to increase the level of slack related to the nature of the advice they provide, through specific organisational and managerial choices, such as systematically reviewing needs of re-allocation of resources on each project every week. Yet, for these arrangements to be more systematic and offered to a greater number of individuals, Finance Consulting would probably need to actively manage the level of availability of their consultants in order to facilitate the allocation and re-allocation of resources. They may also need to revise their recruitment policy: for projects that are more demanding in terms of workload because of their deadlines, media coverage, clients, location or budget to remain attractive, the workforce has to be sufficiently diverse in terms of work-life balance aspirations so that the work-life balance of some consultants isn't achieved at the expense of others' and that the fairness of these practices isn't questioned. Also, if they were to generalise these practices, Finance Consulting would probably need to reflect upon their impact on the functioning of the informal up-or-out rule. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, the incentive system PSFs rely on is traditionally based on the internal competition of consultants, and on comparability of their performances. However, generalising work-life balance arrangements may question the nature of the implicit commitment evaluation criteria at the heart of the model and whether consultants should benefit from the same career advancement if they do not have the same level of commitment in terms of availability, reactivity and capacity to handle heavy workloads.

Overview of chapter 6

Chapter 6 aimed at investigating the way consulting firms' partners and HR directors respond to the individual demands of work-life balance identified in chapter 5. The choice was made to focus on work-life balance exclusively for it appeared to be more sensitive and difficult for both individuals and their firms to handle.

In the first section, I analysed the managerial discourse on work-life balance in 9 consultancies. I showed that if **all confirm that they are confronted with individual demands regarding work-life balance**, there were two distinct discourses on the issue. **A first group of interviewees claimed that work-life balance was incompatible with consulting and a *natural* means of selection within up-or-out environments**: only the most committed should stay. I showed how, in these firms, not only is the client invoked to legitimate not responding to individual demands, but the management of work-life balance is also outsourced directly to the client. **A second group of HR directors and partners, on the contrary, explained losing consultants they would have liked to retain and thus needing to be *vigilant* and take action** to address the topic. They reported taking two types of measures: initiatives aimed at raising consultants' self-awareness (time or stress management training for example) as well as organisational adjustments.

In the second section of this chapter, both **Management Consulting and Finance Consulting** – the two firms that accepted to take further part in the research – are described, from their history to their structures and systems and the reasons why they agreed to take part in the study.

In the third section, the organisational arrangements implemented in both firms to respond to individual demands of work-life balance are identified, which mainly consist in **individual arrangements which require the adjustment of usual rules and processes regarding the location of projects, time, project assignment and client relationship management**. I went on to analyse the gap observed in the practices of the two firms, in favour of Finance Consulting, which I argued was mainly due to **inherent differences in the nature of the consulting advice they provide and the characteristics of their projects regarding their length, location, leverage and fee billing practices**.

Finally, in the last section of this chapter, **I discussed the overall adjustment capability of consulting firms, which appears to already rather limited so far** and – should the number of demands increase – it can be expected that the model these firms rely on would be under considerable strain.

Chapter 7: Towards a more heterogeneous consulting field?

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Introduction

In chapter 5, the diversity of consultants' aspirations was unravelled, beyond promotions and bonuses and it was explained how work-life balance, in particular, appears to be a primary concern for a significant part of professionals who try to actively organise their work accordingly. In chapter 6, I analysed the practices implemented in two consulting firms to accommodate work-life balance demands in the hope of retaining professionals and showed that these were rather limited overall for two reasons: a relative ambivalence from part of many partners (especially in Management Consulting) and a low adjustment capability (in particular in Management Consulting where projects are long, often conducted on client site and pressure on prices is high).
This last chapter will aim at reflecting on the results presented in the previous chapters in two ways. In the first section (7.1), I will discuss the ability of new actors – organised as networks of independent professionals – to better respond to individual work-life balance demands and how their rise in numbers may impact traditional firms. Then, in the following section (7.2), I will reflect on the contributions of this research to understand heterogeneity within professional fields themselves, through the specific case of work-life balance arrangements.

7.1 Up-coming rationalisations in professional organisations: the end of the 'professional organisation man'?

In this first section, I will reflect upon low adaptation capability and willingness in traditional consulting firms to respond to the work-life balance demands of some consultants unravelled in chapter 6 by asking whether the new network-based actors emerging in the field may be better suited to tackle the individual needs of consultants. If they were, then professionals might be increasingly operating outside of the usual confines of professional service firms, which could announce the end of Smigel's 'professional organisation man' (Smigel, 1964). Also, such a success would mean that, in time, traditional PSFs would probably be forced to change further to remain competitive both in terms of prices and on the job market. I will start by summarising the tensions that professional organisations are facing (7.1.1), before I can present two examples of such consultancies and discuss their ability to respond to these tensions and the risk of increased job insecurity they may bear (7.1.2).

7.1.1 A double-sided tension at play

In the first chapter of this thesis, through a review of the literature on professional organisations, a first tension was identified: a trend towards the "managerialisation" of professional service firms, which is due to market deregulation, technological changes and considerable pressure on cost in relations with the sophistication of clients' demands and the increase in competition, among other factors (Brock, 2006; Brock et al., 1999b; Cooper et al., 1996). This has led many firms to focus more on profitability, to increase their leverage ratios by standardising work as much as possible and to put financial targets forward in recruitment and promotion decisions.

What this study has shed light on, is a second tension, on the internal labour market of these firms this time. Henderson and Galanter (2008) as well as Ackroyd and Muzio (2007) had already discussed how the exponential growth of law firms has made the tournament more *elastic* and thus the promotion to partnership longer and even more selective (a phenomenon reinforced by the recent downturn in sales). What was unravelled in chapter 5 is that the up-or-out system and the norm of over-achievement it relies on have lost some of their incentives and retaining power because of this increased elasticity of the tournament system, but also because it has relied on simplified understanding of the experience of professionals at work. What chapter 6 showed is that the vast majority of consulting firms were not willing to address this issue of work-life balance and that those that did had implemented rather limited or experimental adjustments so far. The existence of this double tension coming from both the environment of these firms and from within has driven alternative networked-players – attempting to respond to both challenges through a new business model – to emerge. If they turn out to be successful in offering cheaper and yet high quality services and to retain consultants in the long term, then there may be substantial pressure for change in these firms, which would call for organisational innovations beyond the informal adjustments identified in chapter 6.

7.1.2 Is the uberisation of professional services the answer?

A new phenomenon (emerging in the beginning of the 2000s), often labelled in the professional press the *uberisation of the economy*[75] (also referred to as the *on-demand economy*), is gaining in importance – in professional services as in other service sectors – and increasing numbers of networked consultancies have been entering the market for the past ten years or so. These firms claim to address both tensions evoked above: clients wanting control over the content and the cost of professional services on one side, and professionals looking for employment conditions which take their personal circumstances into account.

a. The rise of alternative network-based players

New technologies and the increasing liberalisation of work relationships have enabled the rise of new actors with entirely new business models – the most famous of which is Uber[76] – that use technological platforms to put independent workers and prospective clients in relation. These new players are at the centre of much economic and social debate. For some, these new actors embody a new form of work in which individuals are able to work when and where they want, the way that they want, without any hierarchy, which emphasises collaboration[77]. Others, often acknowledging the potential advantages of working for these firms, nonetheless recognise that

[75] See for example: Workers on tap: the rise of the on-demand economy poses difficult questions for workers, companies and politicians, The Economist, 3rd of January 2015; Employers tap 'gig' economy in search of freelancers, The Financial Times, 15th September 2015; or also Miller and Miller (2012) The Rise of the Super Temp, Harvard Business Review, May Issue

[76] Uber is a company founded in 2009 that offers technological solutions to connect independent drivers with private users.

[77] See for example the manifesto published by the collective OuiShare: Filipova et al. (2015) Société Collaborative, fin des hiérarchies, Editions Rue de l'Echiquier

they may be thriving through unfair competition (their workforce being subcontracted, these firms do not pay any payroll tax and thus have lower costs and do not contribute to the maintenance of the welfare system), and that these new forms of work bear a risk of increasing job insecurity[78]. Professional Services, like other sectors, are concerned by this phenomenon: it is now possible to download applications enabling patients to talk to a doctor, or clients to hire the services of their lawyer, with whom they will be in touch virtually (Breunig and Skjølsvik, 2015). Some of these firms are *virtual* in the sense that the only contact between clients and the independent workers they hire takes place via the platform; others are rather *network-based*, which means that the initial contact will be made through the platform, but the service will then be conducted in person.

In consulting as well, new actors have begun to emerge: Eden MacCallum in the UK is one of the earliest and most mediatised experience of network-based consulting, along with Business Talent Group in the United States (Christensen et al., 2013; Miller and Miller, 2012). Similar organisations are beginning to appear in France, through firms such as Experdeus, Louer un Sénior[79] or ExperTeam[80].

➢ Two examples of network-based consultancies

In order to better grasp this new business model, let us first examine two cases: a precursor, the British Eden MacCallum, and a new comer, the French Experdeus.

Eden MacCallum: the precursor[81]

Liann Eden and Dena MacCallum met when completing an MBA at INSEAD and then again while working as consultants for McKinsey. By 1999, MacCallum had become the director of strategy and planning at Condé Nast while Eden was still working for McKinsey. This is when they both decided to build a business together and officially launched their firm in 2000. Both had had experience both as consultants and buyers of consulting services and realised that on the one hand clients were in demand of increasing control over the services they purchased (either because they had previous consulting credentials, MBAs or enough experience to know exactly what they were looking for) and facing budget cuts; while consultants were leaving their firms, they thought, not for the lack of interest in the work but for the lifestyle. That's how the idea of creating a network of independent consultants emerged.

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[78] See for example: The dark side of "sharing-economy" jobs, The Washington Post, 16th December 2014; Gaudard, J.P. (2013) La fin du salariat, François Bourin Editeur; Et si l'économie du partage annonçait la fin du salariat? La Tribune, 8th June 2015
In France, the impact of the digitalisation of the economy on work and employment has been the object of a ministerial report handed out by Bruno Mettling, the HR Director of Orange, to the Minister of Work Myriam El Khomri on the 15th of September 2015. Regarding freelance work in particular, this report highlights the need to integrate further these new forms of work into the social system.

[79] "Rent a senior"

[80] See www.Experdeus-experts.com; www.louerunsenior.com; www.experteam.fr

[81] This case was built via secondary sources of information: Eden MacCallum's website, press articles, Christensen, C.M. et al. (2013) Consulting on the Cusp of Disruption, Harvard Business Review October Issue; and two harvard business cases (Eden MacCallum: A Network-Based Consulting Firm A and B) authored by Heidi Gardner after a close study of the firm.

Eden MacCallum's business model is the following: partners are in charge of nurturing relationships with potential clients, securing projects and ensuring their satisfaction afterwards through client surveys and feedback. Originally, this was taken on by Eden and MacCallum themselves, but they since then have been joined by 16 other partners who were hired laterally from other firms through a majority vote of existing partners. Once the firm has received a proposal for a project, a team of consultants is put together from the "talent pool" and several proposals are made to clients whom can choose the individual consultants they want to hire. These are independent consultants whom are not employed directly by the firm. They are freelancers recruited by the partners through a selective interview process (only one in ten applicants is selected on average). From a network of 14 consultants in 2001, the firm now has a pool of over 500 consultants: about half work primarily with the firm and have a priority on projects signed by Eden MacCallum. The other half punctually works with the firm and is made of consultants who work with other providers or find their own projects or individuals with a very specific expertise that is required on projects from time to time. Over half of these consultants are alumni of BCG, Bain or McKinsey and almost all have a consulting background. The consultants being freelancers, they only get paid when they are working on an Eden MacCallum project, not when they are "on the beach" as consultants say[82]. They receive around two third of the fees billed, which are determined according to a banning system (the more experienced consultants hired are, the higher the fees billed), the other third being perceived by the firm. The advantage for consultants is twofold: first of all, they do not need to take on the commercial work themselves, which is highly time consuming, a source of uncertainty and anxiety and which some consultants do not enjoy very much. Second, given that they earn two third of what they are billed; they can make a living without working full-time. One of the claimed value-added of this business model is that, contrary to a simple network of subcontractors, a central staff (employed by the firm this time) is in charge of nurturing relationships with this pool of consultants. Freelancers can define their employment conditions (the sectors they may want to work with more specifically, the days or months when they are available to work on projects, travelling constraints, etc.). This central staff is thus in charge of fitting consultants, taking into account their expertise and personal requirements, with projects.

Another specificity of this business model is that the firm is not proprietary of any tools or methods, which is usually what consultancies sell their clients. Instead, the firm makes a selection of consultants susceptible to match clients' needs (compared with other emerging actors in the field, they have the specificity to not only offer the services of independent consultants but also to make them work together in teams) and the freelancers themselves present clients with their approaches and methodologies so clients can choose who they would like to work with.
Even though Eden MacCallum worked at first with non-competition agreements stipulating that both clients and consultants should always go through the firm to work together, they abandoned it quickly as they realised that both were looking for longer-term working relationships with the firm and thus were not trying to make deals on the side.

[82] In between contracts

Eden MacCallum is now the second biggest strategy consulting firm in the UK after McKinsey, has conducted over 1500 projects for 300 clients over 90 countries and opened an additional office in the Netherlands.

Experdeus: the French new comer attempting to establish itself[83]

Another, more recent example, is that of Experdeus which was launched in February 2015 and was inspired from the experience of Eden MacCallum but operates on slightly different principles. The diagnostic originally made by Ibrahima Fall, the founder of Experdeus, is very similar to that of Eden and MacCallum: there is considerable pressure on consulting prices (reinforced by the 2008 crisis), clients are increasingly mature (in particular given the number of consulting alumni in top managerial positions, they have very sound knowledge of what they want from consultants and how to get it) and even though consultants do like their jobs, they are often not ready to sacrifice their personal lives for it.

In light of the success of Eden MacCallum in the UK or Business Talent Group in the US, Ibrahima Fall decided to create a similar actor for the French Market. He, however, thought that such actors did not make the most out of the possibilities offered by IT. Eden MacCallum indeed claim that one of the key to their success is the fact that relationships with clients and consultants remain personal and the central staff is dedicated to nurturing them, as described earlier. In the case of Experdeus, the choice was made to develop a web platform based on an algorithm able to analyse the content of the brief made by clients to send it out to the relevant independent consultants.

Experdeus has three main service lines: consulting, training and studies and its network gathers 325 consultants (of which 85% are independent consultants, 1% top managers and the rest Business School professors taking on consulting assignments on the side). Contrary to Eden MacCallum, a simple Internet or phone check is sufficient for consultants to be registered on the platform. They are then free to respond to the client briefs they receive or not. Given that the firm was created very recently, a lot of effort is dedicated to attracting experts in all domains susceptible to be of interest to clients.

The business model is simple: any client can send a brief to Experdeus for free and a selection of three profiles of consultants is presented to them (without any contact details). Then, if clients want to hire them, they can either subscribe to the service for a certain period of time, for a certain number of briefs or for unlimited use of the service (from 2500€ for one project to 15000€ for a 2 year subscription). Then, a percentage of total fees – determined by consultants and not by the firm itself – goes to Experdeus (under 10%). In order to increase the firms' visibility and convince clients to send their briefs to the firm, contracts have been made with some independent consultants who have relations with potential buyers and can bring in more work than they could take on by themselves. A forum was also launched allowing anyone to ask a business question to be answered by the experts of the network.

[83] The description of Experdeus and its business model is based on an interview with its founder, Ibrahima Fall, conducted by the three members of the research team in July 2015. The interview lasted over 3 hours and was recorded.

Since February 2015, over 10 projects have been launched through the platform. Yet, Ibrahima Fall explained that, to his mind, the main challenge to develop his firm on the French market would be threefold: overcome the strong influence of business and engineer schools networks, which leads buyers of consulting advice to make conservative choices; the difficulty to control the quality of the service provided by the freelancers and finally the lack of a brand which prevents buyers who need decisions to be legitimised by external actors to use his services.

Following these two descriptions, a number of key features of this new business model can be identified: the network of freelancers, commercial activity managed by the firm and not the sub-contractors, fees perceived by the consultancy on each contract, and the possibility for consultants to determine when they want to work on the projects they are proposed. Their model can be summarised as follows:

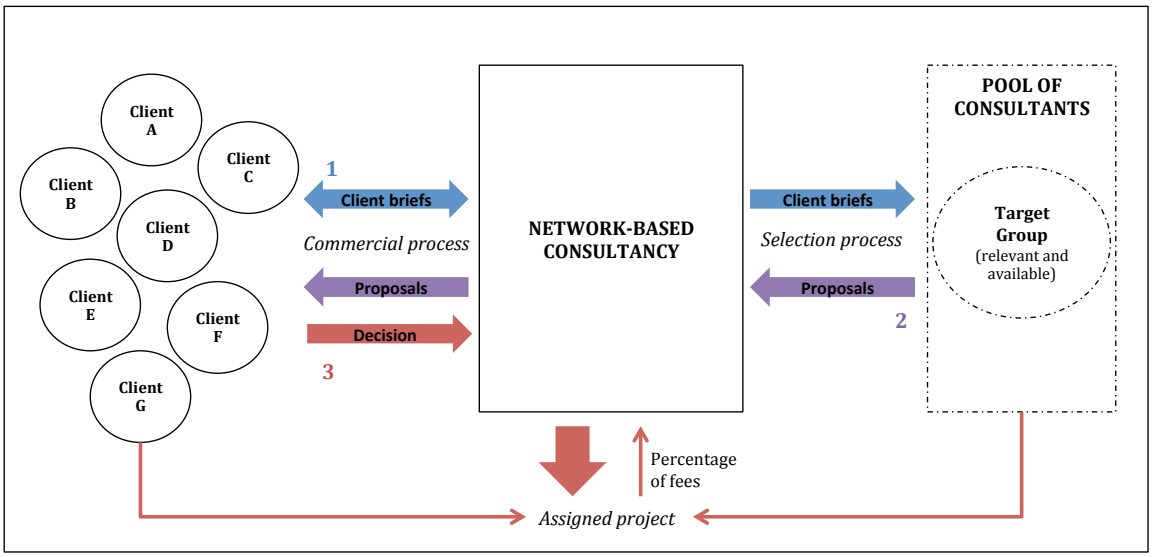

Figure 7.1: The business model of network-based consultancies

The description of these two consultancies has also highlighted some heterogeneity in the choices made by these firms. In particular, there is more or less control over quality from part of the firm (over recruitment, the selection of consultants presented to clients, or client satisfaction in particular). Also, in Experdeus, the client briefs are automatically sent out to consultants through the algorithm while Eden MacCallum has chosen to constitute their own staff to take on this activity. This also explains why Eden MacCallum can constitute entire teams of consultants and be positioned on the strategy and management market, while Experdeus instead assigns individuals and also takes on briefs that involve training and studies.

➢ New actors with the potential to reconfigure the field

At first glance, these new actors seem to have found a new business model allowing them to solve both the tensions evoked in the beginning of this chapter: pressure on cost and demands from some consultants' to improve their sense of work-life balance. On the one hand, subcontracting freelance consultants allows these firms to avoid paying payroll taxes, to reduce personnel cost to a minimum when sales target are not met and to avoid having to manage their pyramid of

consultants according to growth previsions. In addition, overhead costs are limited to a minimum as only small offices need to be bought or rented and firms do not own any methods nor software and have very little operational costs. As a result, they are able to offer their clients prices that are around half of the prices of the biggest consulting firms.

In parallel, demands of work-life balance are addressed through flexibility: if firms do not pay consultants for their time "on the beach", in exchange, consultants are able to set their own working constraints and decide when they want to bid for a project or not, depending on its characteristics (its topic but also its geographical location, its time constraint or the period of the year for example). Sometimes, as in the case of Eden MacCallum, they are even able to make their constraints and preferences clear to the staff that will then take them into account when proposing projects. What is different here from the adjustments observed in Finance Consulting is that, in the absence of any career system, consultants can freely choose their projects without fearing any negative impact on their image, reputations and promotions. Also, relying on a network of freelancers considerably increases the slack in handling the assignment process. Also, given that consultants earn between two thirds and 90% of the fees directly paid by the clients – depending on the model chosen – they can afford to work less and yet maintain their earnings. Finally, working with these networked firms allows them to save a lot of time that they would dedicate to finding new projects and nurturing commercial relationships if they were purely independent consultants.

By addressing these two tensions, these new actors have the potential to reconfigure part of the consulting market. Indeed, these consultancies are moving away from a consulting model relying on formal standardised methodologies and tools as well as brands and reputations and a high leverage ratio. Instead, they assign usually highly experienced resources who offer tailor-made solutions that they develop themselves. By doing so, they somehow revive the old way of organising of professionals: as a network of independent and usually experienced peers (whom, however, have here no collegial control over the strategic decisions made by the management team of the consulting firm).

The leaders of Eden MacCallum nonetheless claim that they are not direct competitors of the big consultancies and that they could not survive without them: they indeed need their alumni to survive, and often target mid-sized companies or units of big corporations which would otherwise not have the budgets to hire the biggest firms.

b. Is networked consulting the future of the industry?

At first glance, this new model thus seems to address perfectly the two main challenges faced by consulting firms: costs and work-life balance. Yet, they are associated with a number of legal, social and management risks.

➢ A legal limbo

There is considerable uncertainty surrounding the sustainability of this business model given the legal limbo in which these firms are. Over the past few months, Uber has indeed been sent to court by several of its drivers[84] and seen the relationship between the firms and its drivers qualified as an employment relationship. Indeed, even though Uber's managers claim that the drivers they work with are fully independent (they are free to use other platforms and are in full control of their work schedule), the Superior Court of the State of California decided otherwise in June 2015 for several reasons. First, Uber's activity relies entirely on the work of its drivers. Second, drivers are directly paid by Uber, which determines – through its application – what they are supposed to earn and the percentage perceived by the company (25 percent) without any negotiation. The drivers are thus not in capacity to decide how much they should bill clients for their services. Finally, Uber directly controls the tools that drivers use to work (the smartphones and the application on the one hand, but also sometimes the cars and licenses on the other) and can suppress drivers' access to the application if their evaluation by users is not judged sufficient, which in turns consists in firing these drivers from the network. The Superior Court of the State of California decided that these elements combined were characteristic of a subordination relationship, thus granting drivers the same right as lawful employees of the firm.

Even though this judgement is unbinding and only concerns the state of California so far, it highlights the uncertainty surrounding the legal status of Uber's drivers, and along with it of the other independent workers following a similar model in other service industries. Regarding the consultants working with (or for) firms like Eden MacCallum or Experdeus, their status might thus prove all the more problematic in the future that they rely exclusively on these firms to provide them with project work, than the consultancies fix the prices of their services and evaluate the quality of their work through diverse client surveys or feedback sessions, with an impact on consultants' status in the network. Eden MacCallum has, however, successfully operated on this model for over 10 years now and even if the legal status of the employment relationship between the firm and the consultants it works with was to be specified for all the reasons mentioned above, it is unlikely that it would question their business model entirely.

➢ A potentially increased job insecurity

As mentioned earlier, the freelancers working for these network-based consultancies can save a significant amount of time and effort by letting these firms' staff handle commercial work. They can also benefit from a high level of autonomy in the elaboration of their methods and in the determination of their work schedule. Yet, it is unclear whether these networked-firms are based on a model facilitating independent work or instead promoting work on demand and thus contributing to reinforcing job insecurities in the sector.

[84] The most mediatised case was that of Barbara Berwick who took Uber to court and asked for her professional expenses to be covered by the firm. The Superior Court of the State of California ruled in her favour, deeming her an employee of the firm. Uber has appealed immediately.

First of all, consultants are not necessarily in control of the time that they spend in between projects. If the firm is either not solicited or does not manage to find projects in their area then they may spend longer than they would like to "on the beach". It is the case as well if clients, several times in a row, do not choose the solution they offer. Also, in case of an overall economic downturn, they may well be the first victims of the slowdown in sales. Following the 2008 economic and financial crisis, for example, Eden MacCallum did resist very well, but many of the freelancers within its network suffered from the insecurity of not being able to anticipate how long time in between projects would be. In some countries, such as in the United States, this is even more problematic that freelancers do not always have access to good (and affordable) health coverage.

As a consequence, even though professionals working within these networks are in theory in control of their work-schedule, they might very well end up taking every project they are offered for fear that they would not be able to control how long they can take in between projects; or projects that do not fit their personal preferences (topic, location, schedule…) because they need to work. In addition, in the absence of an employment contract, it is very hard to regulate the activity of these independent workers, which may, on the contrary, increase overwork[85]. This may very well result in a dual system: consulting "stars" (the happy few with a reputation or an elitist CV with previous experience at McKinsey, BCG or Bain) would be able to indeed work independently and choose the conditions of their work, while others would have to choose between traditional firms or high insecurity. In a way, these new models of consulting take image and rhetoric intensity further, by bypassing the organisational or branding level and individualising it even more.

- **The collective dimension of professional work and development in question**

Another, final, question raised by these new models of professional service work has to do with the individualistic posture of these actors. Indeed, they claim to put clients in relation with appropriate individual consultants but from an agnostic perspective in terms of content. This means that these firms have a responsibility in assessing the professionals they work with, but not in their work itself. In most cases, the professionals of the network will hardly ever meet[86]. This means that professionals cannot share their experience with others or discuss their projects and thus cannot learn from one another. It also means that if consultants (in particular the younger ones, but not exclusively) are evaluated by their clients as lacking some specific skills or knowledge in a specific area, then it is left to them to organise themselves to develop these skills. This challenges considerably the *hierarchy of apprenticeship* (Gand, 2008) at the heart of the development of professionals. By moving away from the traditional model, professionals do leave the career system and its competitive component, but they also loose a system organising their professional development along projects and along the years, which is a concern networked-consultancies deliberately choose not to handle by claiming to be *agnostic*. These networked

[85] This is one of the points of attention raised by the "Mettling Report", which suggests to regulate the workload of these workers, see note 77.
[86] At Eden MacCallum they do meet on a regular basis in meetings where the partners inform them about the level of activity of the firm and up-coming projects, but not officially to exchange on the work that they do.

consultancies do depend on more traditional firms to train the consultants that they then subcontract. They also benefit indirectly from the reputation acquired by the consultants when working for these bigger consultancies (Eden MacCallum's communication relies heavily on the fact that most of the consultants within its network have worked for Bain, McKinsey or BCG for example).

Some authors have highlighted the collective dimension of knowledge development and the stability of employment relationship required to develop innovative products and services (e.g. Segrestin and Hatchuel, 2012). This collective project of corporations, they argue, is considerably challenged, as relationships within organisations are increasingly temporary, as careers become "nomadic", activities managed through temporary project structures, or outsourced to external providers for example. These evolutions are often attributed to the increasing role played by external owners and their short-term profit focus (Segrestin and Hatchuel, 2012; Favereau, 2014). Here, these new modes of organising of consulting work indeed raise a number of questions regarding these firms' ability to first of all sustain a flow of qualified resources in the long term, but also to be sources of service innovations if they do not build any mechanism for sustainable cooperation within their networks.

The next decade will determine whether these new forms of work – in consulting and beyond – can be sustainably integrated into the welfare state and if they lead to a genuine independence or to increased insecurity for on-demand professionals who would be subjected to clients' demands (in turn reversing the power relationship in favour of clients). The rise of these new actors is nonetheless likely to increase the pressure on traditional actors to change and position themselves on this changing market.

7.2 The contribution of the study of work to understand heterogeneity in the field of PSFs

Even though a number of factors (namely individual demands, economic trends, technological evolutions and the rise of new actors) may increase pressure for traditional professional firms to change, the findings presented in chapter 6 seem to indicate that we are still at a very early stage of this process. I will now argue that these results nonetheless contribute to understanding organisational variations around this change process and call for a more systematic focus on professional work and the experience of individuals in studies of professional organisations. First, I will remind the reader of the initial ambition of this research, in line with several calls to bring work back into organisation studies as a whole, and the study of professional organisations in particular (7.2.1). I will then highlight the contributions of the present study to understand heterogeneity between professionals as well as across and within professions (7.2.2).

7.2.1 A research which aimed to bring work back into the understanding of professional organisations

One of the ambitions of the present study was to respond to several calls to bring work and the diversity of the experiences of individuals back into the study of organisations broadly

speaking, and professional organisations more specifically. Indeed, 15 years ago, Barley and Kunda (2001) argued that even though work (in particular the shift from agricultural and craft work to more bureaucratic kinds of work in factories or offices) was at the heart of the classical work of Weber, Marx or Durkheim, it has – in the past 50 years – drifted to the background of organisation studies and been left to other disciplines such as the sociology of work or industrial psychology for instance. Given that *organisational structures are, by definition, descriptions or templates for on-going patterns of action* (Barley and Kunda, 2001: p.76), and that new – post-bureaucratic – forms of work have emerged in the past decades, in particular in the so-called knowledge-intensive environments, there is a strong need for organisation theory to re-integrate work. Following this call, there has been a *turn to work* in organisation studies in the past 15 years (Phillips and Lawrence, 2012), through the development of research areas such as identity work (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), institutional work (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006) or boundary work (Kreiner et al., 2009) for example, which all focus on the social-symbolic dimension of work.

Following a different line of argumentation to that of Barley and Kunda, Vikkelsø and du Gay nonetheless recently made a similar point (du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2014; du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2013). They argue that in the past few decades there has been a tendency for organisation studies to move away from organisation as a practical object and a tendency for researchers to take a *metaphysical stance*, or in other words to argue for a particular way of organising, which would be fundamentally better than others on principle. The primacy of innovation and the widely spread idea that exploration is more important than exploitation, is one example (du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2013). This trend, the authors claim, has led to a return of the *one best way of organising*, without any account of the specificities of the actual activities involved in the work, of the *situation at* hand (du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2014). Against this trend, du Gay and Vikkelsø argue for a return to an *empirical stance* and the development of *empirical concepts* in order to describe the organisation as a practical object, with a consideration for the *situation at hand*.

In the field of PSFs, also, several calls to bring work back in have been made (Muzio et al., 2013; Suddaby et al., 2008; Brock et al., 2014; Sturdy, 2012). Suddaby et al. (2008), in particular, have argued that – given the interest of the research community in highlighting the unique traits of professional organisations and their belonging to a common *family* (Suddaby et al., 2008: p.992) – very little attention has been paid to the differences across and above all within professions and between professional workers themselves. They claim that, in order to do so, the study of professional organisations should be reconnected with organisational behaviour. This is all the more necessary that debates around organisational forms in PSFs have often focused on ownership and governance and have less frequently looked at the internal workings of these firms.

7.2.2 Perspectives on variation among professional workers and within professional fields

By questioning the assumption of homogeneous extreme careerism among professionals, this study has unravelled some of the complexities and tensions surrounding the experience of professionals and how they impact professional organisations. Then, by looking at some firms'

responses to these demands, some key dimensions of professional work – beyond characteristics of the profession – appeared to play a very important role in accounting for organisational variation within the field of consulting.

a. Heterogeneity among professional workers

In line with calls for the study of work and individual agency in organisations, and within the field of professional service firms in particular, the initial aim of this study was to question the assumption that professional workers are a homogeneous category looking for excellence in their work, rewarded primarily through promotions and bonuses.

In chapter 5, I showed how consultants' aspirations – beyond caricatured careerism – could also revolve around specialisation and work-life balance for a significant portion of my research participants, which sometimes generated great tensions at some points in their careers that they tried to resolve with different strategies. What chapter 6 unravelled, is that this diversity at the individual level, poses great managerial challenges. Indeed, when these aspirations are unfulfilled, it can generate retention difficulties and there is thus a strong injunction for partners to respond to these individual wishes. Yet, taking these individual requests into account challenges considerably the standardised career paths associated with the *up-or-out* and call for organisational innovations. This imperative can nonetheless vary from firm to firm depending on how pressing these demands are. In Management Consulting, for example, requests of work-life balance were less openly expressed than in Finance Consulting because, in the former, partners were less inclined to openly embrace work-life balance arrangements and because a significant part of consultants were dissatisfied with their project assignment (reinforced by the fact that projects were often very long), which seemed to come before concerns with work-life balance in many cases. The imperative to respond to specific individual aspirations will also be all the more important that unfulfilled requests will lead professionals to leave, which can vary depending on how much they are satisfied in their firm on other levels, on the existence of alternative employers (some professional firms can provide very specific types of service or offer very specific working arrangements) and on the attractiveness of their profile on the external job market. Finally, the necessity for firms to actively respond to individual wishes also depends on how much individuals have the discretion to shape their own working conditions, in other words on how much they are satisfied with the outcome of their job crafting activities. In most cases, however, job crafting has strong implications for the way individuals, project teams and even project assignment or evaluation processes are organised. As a consequence, heterogeneity among professional workers indeed appears to be an important dimension of professional organising that has remained a blind spot of theories of PSFs.

b. Heterogeneity within professions

The second ambition of this study was to investigate the implications of heterogeneity among professional workers on the organisation of PSFs. What was unravelled then was the importance of micro characteristics of professional work to understand differences within professional fields themselves.

- **A literature mostly focused on homogeneity and heterogeneity across professional fields**

As detailed in chapter 1 (p.50-52), the traditional explanation for empirical variation in organisational forms in PSFs is that professions operate with different market and institutional pressures (Malhotra et al 2006). Several authors have, in parallel, insisted that some explanation for heterogeneity across professional fields could also be in the characteristics of the professions themselves (Pinnington and Morris, 2002; Malhotra and Morris, 2009; Von Nordenflycht et al., 2015). In his famous taxonomy of PSFs, Von Nordenflycht (2010) for example argues that differences in levels of capital intensity and degrees of professionalization of the workforce impose different managerial challenges on firms which then adopt different organisational responses. With the explicit ambition to reconnect professional work and organising, Malhotra and Morris (2009) also make a significant contribution in this respect. They draw on the sociology of the professions to analyse the impact of the three main characteristics of professions (namely their knowledge base, jurisdictional control and client relationships) on organisational form and make a number of propositions in this regard:

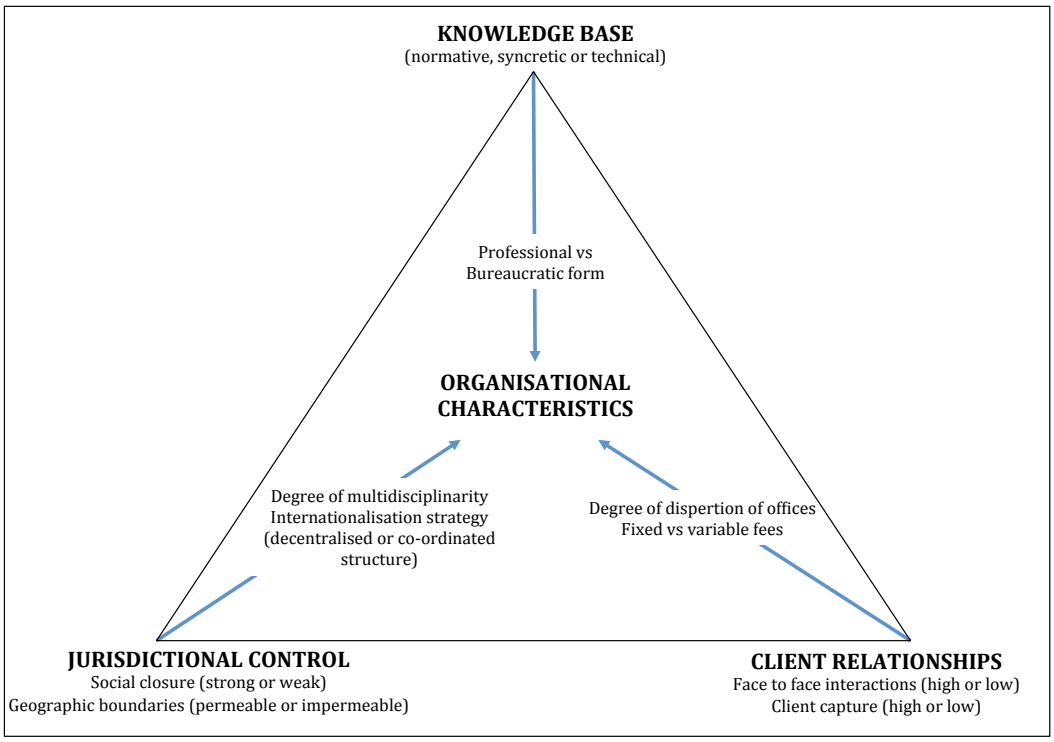

Figure 7.2: Summary of the propositions made by Malhotra and Morris (2009) on the relationship between characteristics of professions and organisational forms [87]

They claim that the more technical the knowledge base (as in engineering consulting for example), the more likely it is that the organisation will be bureaucratic and that more normative

[87] This representation is inspired from Malhotra and Morris (2009) but does not bind the authors.

knowledge bases (as in law for instance) tend to be associated with professional forms of organising. Then, they argue that strong social closure will tend to lead to a small number of specialisations while weak social closure will lead to more multidisciplinary organisations. Similarly, impermeable geographic boundaries will tend to lead to internationalisation strategies that involve decentralised federation structures while more permeable boundaries will tend to lead to more integrated network structures. Finally, regarding client relationships, they argue that high degrees of face to face interactions will tend to lead to widely dispersed offices while low levels of face-to-face interactions will usually imply smaller numbers of offices. Degrees of client capture will then have an impact on the fee billing system (fixed fees vs. variable fees): the higher the degree of client capture, the more likely it is that firms will rely on fixed-fees, imposed by their clients. To these three dimensions, Von Nordenflycht et al. (2015) add ideology, customization and capital intensity, which are likely to impact ownership and the degree of autonomy of professionals. Yet, sources of heterogeneity within professional fields remain to be investigated for most parts, beyond size, national jurisdictions and strategy (Von Nordenflycht et al., 2015).

➢ Micro-characteristics of projects as a key determinant of heterogeneity within professional fields

Micro-characteristics of projects as determinants of organising

The characteristics of projects handled by specific firms are highly determinant when it comes to understanding the internal workings of professional service firms, beyond differences in ownership forms. The length of projects, for example, determines how often professionals are assigned new projects which has a direct impact on the way professional development can be organised. When projects are short, it is somehow easier to organise the diversity of assignments which enables young professionals to acquire the whole set of skills they will need to become autonomous. Yet, this will make project assignment a very recurrent task and increase the volume of work associated with it (which can in turn call for the recruitment of dedicated staff members whom, in line with partners recommendation, will handle the planning process). When projects are longer, they can be more easily managed informally in the partners' meeting but partners then need to either ensure that young consultants get to work on a variety of tasks on the project they are assigned or that there can be some form of rotation on projects so that they see more than one type of project, work with different colleagues, for different clients and develop the appropriate range of skills. This necessity can be reinforced by the fact that longer projects will also tend to generate demands from part of professionals themselves to be replaced so they can work on different assignments since variety is often what they are looking for when they decide to become professionals.

Then, whether projects are conducted on-site or in the consultancy's offices will also determine how much discretion professionals have in organising teamwork. This is directly related to the *client relationship* dimension of Malhotra and Morris' model but here I argue that if the level of face-to-face interaction does have an impact on the dispersion of offices, it also has a more micro impact on the condition of execution of projects: the more professionals work on client site, the more they need to manage clients' impressions and thus tend to adapt their working hours to clients' ones and have to justify themselves when they need to work from somewhere else. It also means that they spend very little time mixing with other professionals from their firms, which has

implications in terms of integration and coordination. On the contrary, when at least parts of project work is conducted from the consultancy's offices, working conditions can be more easily individualised and specific arrangements can be made (working from home occasionally is then easier, for example, provided it is accepted by colleagues). Given the rise of new technologies, it is very likely that a lot of the work that is today conducted from clients' premises may well be conducted in-house in the future (with the generalisation of video conferences for example, or the access to electronic data rooms to share information and documents for example). Yet, the more interactional the nature of the service provided, the less likely it is that firms will benefit from such evolutions.

Leverage, also, is an important determinant of professional organising. Indeed, the profile of the project team (and indirectly its size) determines how much supervision will be needed and the level of interaction necessary, this time not with the client but within the team itself.

Finally, the nature of the work involved, the level of seniority required and how tailored the service will be to one specific client will determine fee billing practices. Whether fixed or variable, their level (top-of the range strategy vs. commodified service) will directly impact the assignment process, determine how teams are constituted and how much "slack" they will have to adapt to unexpected situations and individual circumstances.

These characteristics of projects are dependent on both the nature of the tasks taken on (which will take more or less time, require more or less interaction, more or less important teams and a certain level of experience) but also of a number of choices made by the partners (the more firms choose to offer tailor-made solutions, the higher the seniority of team-members for example, and how expensive the services are going to be is also partly the outcome of a managerial choice).

In parallel, these four characteristics of projects appear to be very determinant to understand what constrains organisational choices, in particular when it comes to offering work-life balance arrangements. It is only within the set of possible organisational adjustments that individual arrangements can be offered. An attempt to synthesise what has been already highlighted in the literature as playing a major part in defining this set of possible organisational arrangements (namely institutions, the market and the characteristics of the profession) and the contributions of this study (namely the role played by the internal labour market in driving organisational change, and differences in the nature of project work – beyond characteristics of professions as a whole) is presented below:

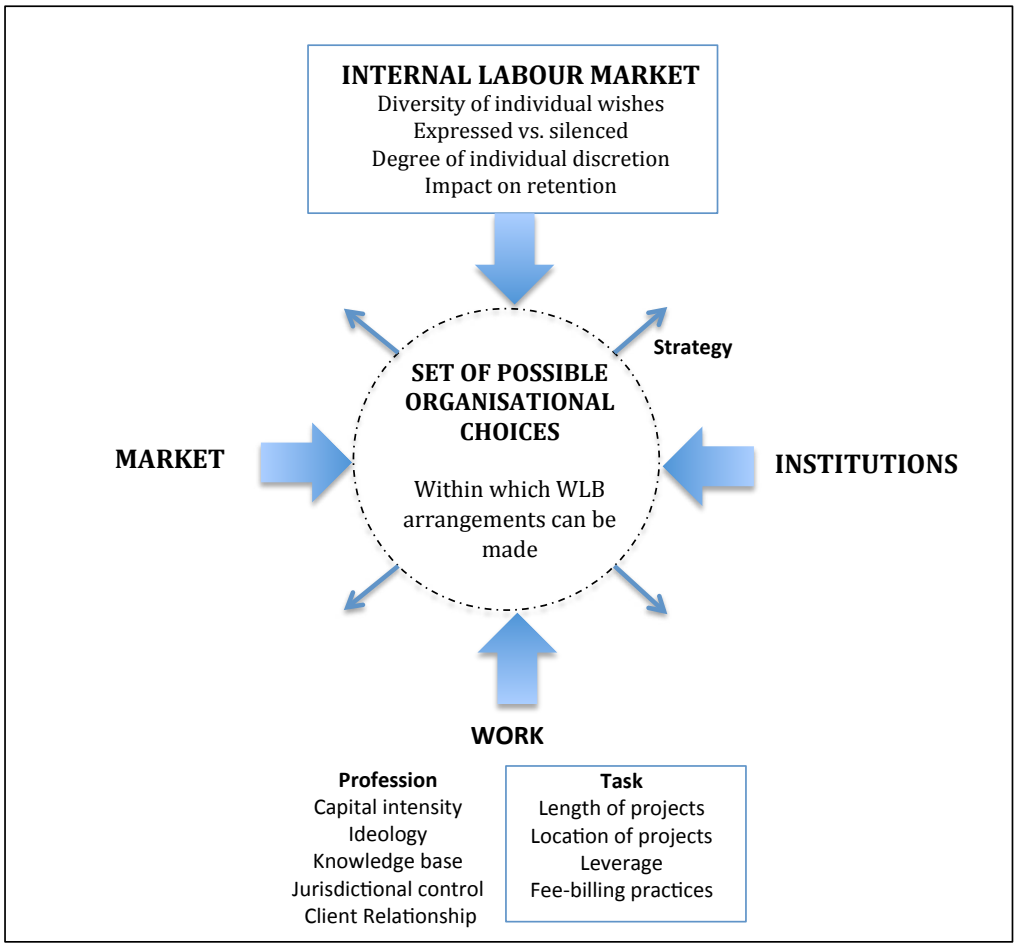

Figure 7.3: determinants of work-life balance arrangements in PSFs

Even if all these four dimensions each have a direct impact on organising, it is worth noting here that they are obviously inter-dependent as well. First, as argued above, some of the characteristics of the tasks are directly in line with the characteristics of the profession as a whole (the level of face-to-face interactions for example, or the knowledge base which can require more or less seniority). Similarly, the ability for individuals to express their un-fulfilled aspirations will depend upon the existence of exit options (Hirschman, 1990) and thus on external labour markets, as well as on the potential acceptability of these requests given professional norms. What can be done to organise alternative working arrangements does not only depend on individual requests for them and their fit with the characteristic of projects but also directly on the availability of relevant technological solutions for example (the possibility to share on-line documents, use video-conferences solutions instead of meeting face-to-face, or to access electronic data rooms to access relevant information for instance).

Variability across projects within professional fields

Understanding these micro-characteristics of the projects that professionals take on – at an even higher level of granularity than that of the profession as a whole – is particularly fruitful to understand variations across but above all within professional fields. Beyond the characteristics of professions detailed above (the type of 'knowledge' involved or the degree of face to face interaction involved for example), there can be some great disparity within professions

themselves when it comes to the characteristics of their projects regarding the four dimensions detailed above: length, location, fee-billing practice and leverage. This disparity can be due to key differences in the different service lines within a single profession. There is, for example, great disparity overall between the projects handled by Finance Consulting (which are on average rather short, conducted from their offices, billed at rates that allow partners to define the size of teams in line with project load and involve an important proportion of senior – autonomous – work) and Management Consulting (which on the contrary tends to work on longer projects, conducted from the clients' premises, with pressure on cost and a high proportion of young consultants on projects).
Even within firms, there is disparity in the conditions of execution of projects within service lines and from project to project. In Management Consulting for example, the way change management projects were executed could vary considerably across sectors and across clients (for instance: in the health sector, clients rarely have offices for their consultants because of the lack of space in hospitals, which leads consultants to work in-house more than on other projects).

As a result, at a time of deregulation when PSFs are increasingly multidisciplinary (Malhotra and Morris, 2009; Trebilcock and Csorgo, 1999; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001), differences in the nature of the projects taken on may increase significantly differentiation within these firms, in turn reinforcing the idea that there may not be a one best way of organising in PSFs.

Work-life balance in consulting firms: towards increased heterogeneity within the field?
Given the great disparity of projects within the field of consulting (and even within consulting firms, depending on their service lines), there is great variation as well in firms' ability to respond to individual demands regarding work-life balance.
For Kaiser et al. (2011), "patchwork" forms of consulting (in other words projects in which consultants can work from where they want, including from home, and with part-time arrangements) are best suited to respond to work-life balance issues:

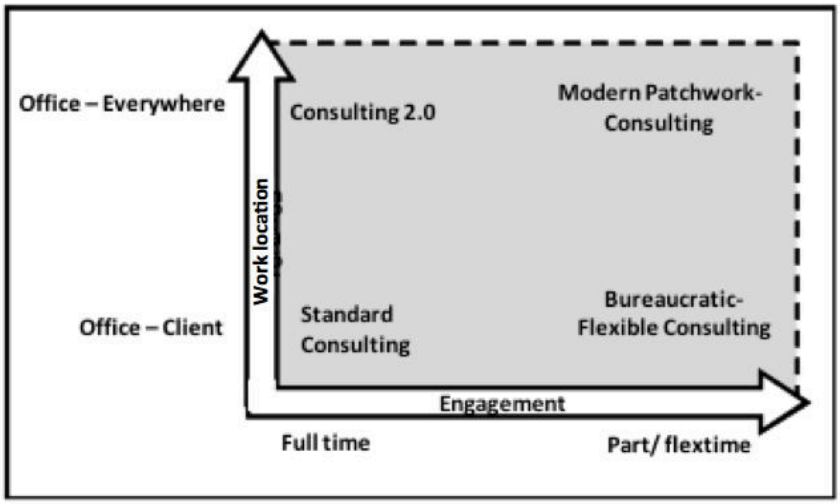

Figure 7.4: new forms of consulting supporting WLB issues, Kaiser et al. (2011)

Kaiser et al. (2011), recognise that this *modern patchwork-consulting* is not easy to implement on all projects and suggest reaching this goal in a two-step process: first, they recommend that only

parts of the consulting process should be concerned with implementing flexibility (which would result in allocating the consultants who want to work flexibility the parts of the project which can be done that way, while other consultants would still work from the clients' office). Second, they also suggest that project portfolio should be diversified so that some projects at least are adapted to consultants suffering from work-life balance conflict. Through these recommendations, Kaiser et al. recognise the diversity that exists across projects and how these play a major part in accommodating work-life balance demands, but do not provide any insight on how to account for this disparity and which variables to look at to understand projects' work-life balance friendliness *a priori*, which the framework developed in this thesis does.

This also leads me to question networked-consultancies' ability to better respond to individual work-life balance demands in a universal way. Indeed, if these new forms of work do allow individuals to define when they want to work, they do not go along with a transformation of work itself. As a result, depending on the characteristics of projects, consultants may end up dealing with the same constraints than in traditional consulting firms (a demanding client, tight deadlines, changing demands, strong norms regarding on-site presence, etc.). As a consequence, it might still be easier for a consultant to craft their job for a better work-life balance (even without any organisational arrangement to accommodate it) in a traditional consulting firm like Finance Consulting, within a specific industry rather than in networked-consultancies.

This confirms the necessity, once again, to take the different components of work into account when trying to understand work-life balance in consulting. It, furthermore, opens up the space for a number of questions regarding how firms can act on the work dimension to increase their ability to tackle work-life balance issues. For example: how can consulting firms act on the location dimension? It appears necessary for firms wanting to increase possibilities for their consultants to work in-house or even from home, to develop new ways for clients to control work, beyond on-site presence. This could involve developing new technological tools for clients to see work in progress, for example, or even increasing the overall seniority of teams to increase clients' trust and consultants' autonomy in organising their own work. Another complementary possibility could, in parallel, be to act directly on the level of margins by billing clients for more tailored and experienced services. Other solutions could, on the contrary, involve an even stronger division of labour where the most repetitive tasks would be delegated to non-consulting staff, as is already the case in some law firms through the introduction of staff attorneys or professional support lawyers (Sherer and Lee, 2002; Smets et al., 2012).

Overview of chapter 7

The aim of this final chapter was to discuss the findings presented in chapters 5 and 6 in the light of the emergence of new actors organised as networks of professionals, which claim to address the issue of work-life balance directly and to have the potential to reconfigure the field of consulting.

In the first section, **I discussed the potential of the *uberisation* phenomenon that professional services are facing to reconfigure the field of consulting** by describing two networked consultancies: the precursor Eden McCallum and the French new comer Experdeus, which both claim to respond to the two main tensions that traditional consulting firms are facing: **pressure on cost** (along with a sophistication of clients' demands) and **work-life balance demands** from part of professionals. I argued that even if these firms' business model indeed allows them to minimise costs and to offer some flexibility to the professionals who choose to operate within their networks, **they nonetheless bear major risks in terms of legal uncertainty, job insecurity and the absence of collective knowledge development**.

In the second section of this chapter, I discussed the contribution of this thesis to understand heterogeneity within professional fields themselves. I started by arguing that **bringing professionals and their work back into the study of professional organising allowed me to shed light on the heterogeneity of professionals' aspirations**, beyond promotions and other forms of rewards. Then, I discussed how **understanding the micro characteristics of projects and work tasks could shed a complementary light to existing theories on the factors of heterogeneity with professional fields themselves**.
I concluded this section by discussing how **the necessity for consultancies to manage their professionals' work-life balance might result in increased heterogeneity within the field of consulting**.

General Conclusion

To conclude, I will summarise the main contributions of this thesis before I can discuss some of its limitations and outline the main research perspectives that have emerged from its findings.

Contributions of the research

1. A problematic assumption of careerism unravelled and challenged

Through the description of the Cravath System at the origin of the incentive system of many medium to large PSFs', **an assumption of homogeneous professional careerism** (in the common sense of a personal ambition to be quickly promoted and rewarded financially for one's effort) **was unravelled in chapter 1**. This assumption has been imported into contemporary professional organisations and if the literature investigating the experience of professionals at work – often taking a very critical lens – is very helpful to understand how individuals are socialised into displaying all the features of extreme careerism, it nonetheless also contributes to reproducing the idea that this is what all professionals end up aspiring to, as discussed in **chapter 2**. Yet, I argued in **chapter 3** that this assumption needed to be questioned for two reasons: (1) even if this assumption was justified, structural trends towards lower prospects of growth would considerably challenge the ability of professional organisations to respond to individual expectations of promotions and bonuses; and (2) a small body of recent studies in parallel appeared to hint that work-life balance could be an increasing concern for professionals.

The findings presented in **chapter 5** indeed confirmed that the assumption of homogeneous careerism among professionals could be challenged. Through the analysis of the 58 career stories collected from consultants within 13 firms, **more diversity in consultants' experience was shed light on**. If promotion and other rewards were indeed something that most consultants did aspire to, their stories unravelled two additional sources of tension for a significant number of them: specialisation and – as could be expected – work-life balance. In addition, consultants did not appear to be passive in the face of these aspirations and I showed that they instead implement a variety of techniques in order to either be rewarded for their work and their commitment, to be assigned specific projects or to preserve their sense of work-life balance. In some instances, it even led some consultants to adopt what they themselves described as *counter-normative* behaviours and to engage in what was labelled *conforming work* to reduce the gap between their practice and their appearance of compliance, make their behaviour accepted, and reduce their anxieties. This was particularly unexpected given critical accounts of knowledge workers homogeneous compliance.

2. An unequal will to respond to individual work-life balance demands in consulting firms

This wider diversity of aspirations at the individual level has a direct impact on the relevance of the traditional mode of incitation through promotions, bonuses and the perspective of partnership co-optation. This is particularly the case when professionals who have always been considered to perform are driven to leave their firm if their work-life balance demands are not met. This first series of findings led me to investigate consulting firms' HR directors and partners' reactions to this phenomenon by studying their managerial discourse on the topic in **chapter 6**. Even if all participants agreed that they were confronted with increasing work-life balance demands and that these had an impact on retention, **two distinct standpoints on the issue of work-life balance were identified**. A first discourse consisted in arguing that work-life balance had always been an issue in consulting firms but that an ability to handle heavy workloads and norms of availability and reactivity were strong requirements for consultants to be able to do their job *professionally*. As a consequence, through this first discourse, work-life balance is constructed as incompatible with professionalism and for consultants and clients to manage between themselves. In this perspective, professionals leaving when they are dissatisfied with their work-life balance is considered as a *natural* means of selection. The second discourse consisted, on the contrary, in saying that the departure of some consultants precisely for reasons associated with work-life balance was costly for their firms on several levels and needed to be addressed. The measures they mentioned involved, more specifically, raising consultants' awareness regarding how to manage their stress and their time on one side, and organisational adjustments (such as modifying project allocation rules or attributing extra rest days for example) on the other.

3. The nature of work as a key determinant of firms' ability to embrace work-life balance

Overall, the measures evoked by the HR directors and partners who participated in the study appeared to be rather limited, which led me in **chapter 6** to investigate further what the practices were in two firms: Management Consulting and Finance Consulting. Overall, **both firms proved to handle individual demands through a limited number of informal idiosyncratic deals** negotiated with consultants they wanted to retain (regarding the location of project work, time arrangements, project allocation and client relationship management). A gap in practices was nonetheless identified in favour of Finance Consulting. **This bigger adjustment capability was attributed to two elements: (1) managerial will** to embrace the topic – influenced by the institutional context and the market; and **(2) key differences in the nature of the consulting services provided**. In particular, the level of expertise and seniority (and along with them the level of leverage associated with projects), the level of prices (beyond the fixed or variable nature of fees), the length and duration of projects (including how recurring they are) appear to play a very important part in enabling the arrangements negotiated at the individual level on one side, but also how much individuals can craft their jobs in the hope of a 'better' balance even outside of specific deals made with partners.

Yet, overall, this adjustment capability remains rather limited, which may open up the space for new networked-actors with claims of maintained quality, lower costs and increased flexibility for consultants. In **chapter 7**, I discussed the ability of these new players to actually respond to the work-life balance challenge and highlighted some of the risks they bear, from legal evolutions to potentially increased job insecurity and unknowns regarding these firms' ability to foster the collective development of innovative solutions for their clients in the long term.

Overall, this research has highlighted the decisive role played by the nature of the service provided in the way PSFs organise and calls for further studies aiming to reconnect the experience of individuals with the study of professional organisations.

Below is an overview of the main contributions of this study:

<table>
<tr><td rowspan="5">Literature Review

An assumption of homogeneous careerism (in terms of promotions and bonuses) in professional organisations is unravelled</td><th colspan="2">General Research question: what does it mean to select and retain the "best" today?</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">RQ 1: Is there more diversity to professionals' aspirations than promotions and other rewards?</td><td>R1.1: Professionals do not only make sense of their careers in terms of promotions but also of specialisation and/or work-life balance, which they define in heterogeneous ways</td></tr>
<tr><td>R1.2: They are not passive and employ a number of techniques to fulfil their aspirations</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">RQ 2: How do work-life balance demands – if confirmed – impact the organisation of consulting firms?</td><td>R1.3: When they want to engage in counter-normative behaviours (as is particularly the case when work-life balance is concerned), they engage in a particular form of identity work: conforming work</td></tr>
<tr><td>R2: There are two main managerial discourses on the issue of work-life balance within consulting firms:
a. consultants leaving for work-life balance is and always has been a natural phenomenon
b. there is a need to be vigilant and find ways to address individual demands of work-life balance</td></tr>
<tr><td>R3.1: Firms that claim to be vigilant mostly address the issue through idiosyncratic deals

R3.2: Firms' ability to make these informal arrangements is directly related to:
a. managerial will
b. the nature of the advice provided and the tasks involved</td></tr>
</table>

Table 8: summary of research questions and findings

Limitations

First of all, **this research was bound by the sensitivity of the topic of work-life balance in consulting firms**. This had two major consequences: (1) the impossibility to conduct observations and (2) the reliance of the analysis on two organisational case studies only.

(1) The material collected through consultants' career stories and interviews with HR directors and partners was very rich. It allowed me to gather information on practices that are by definition impossible to observe since idiosyncratic deals are negotiated in the *back regions* of

organisations and consultants put a lot of effort into trying not to disturb the normative order. It was also essential in understanding how consultants themselves describe their work experience and project themselves in the future. Yet, as trust builds over time, it is likely that all the complexity of consultants' experience could sometimes not be shared fully through one-shot interviews and calls for the participants of this research to be followed more longitudinally, as much as possible. Also, combining several sources of material collection (in particular interviews and observation) can allow to link more directly events with how individuals make sense of them (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008: p87). As a consequence, combining the collection of career stories with some observation would allow to identify attempts to craft one's job in the stories (which may be all the more difficult to spot through observation that they are entangled with conforming work) and then to observe how these are implemented as well as the reactions they generate from colleagues and supervisors. Reciprocally, it can also be interesting to discuss very concrete job crafting situations observed by the researcher with consultants afterward to gather more insights into the micro-processes of job crafting, beyond the broad techniques identified here.

(2) In addition, the difficulties I encountered to access the field resulted in a limited number of case studies. Even if considerable insights can be drawn even from single case studies if they are carefully chosen (Flyvbjerg, 2011), the boundary conditions of this study need to be highlighted. Finance and Management consulting were two contrasted cases, which was determinant to spot the role played by core differences in the nature of their work and the projects they conduct in their respective ability to accommodate work-life balance demands more or less easily. Yet, they are not representative of the wide variety of consulting services, which may have very different characteristics too. This means that consultants can be confronted to very different difficulties and work-life balance accommodated in different ways. The fact that career stories were collected within 13 different organisational settings provided some preliminary comparative elements and for example seemed to hint that strategy projects (which are themselves very diverse) can for example tend to be very short-term and be conducted in-house, but can also have a more international dimension, while IT projects would tend to last several years, require very large teams of young consultants working on platforms on client site or HR projects be mid-term projects which are rarely full-time (which implies that consultants often work on several projects at a time), involve interactions but rarely full-time presence on site. As a consequence, a more systematic scrutiny of these differences and how they impact how work is conducted is required. Efforts to gain access to more consulting firms should be maintained to enrich the framework developed in chapters 6 and 7 (see fig. 6.7 and 7.3 p.240 and p.266).

In addition, the findings presented in chapters 5 and 6 were built on material collected within the consulting industry and one should be very careful **not to over-generalise the conclusions of this research beyond the specific professional field of consulting**. Some of the dynamics highlighted in chapters 5 and 6 are relevant beyond the specific case of consulting, for other professions and even more widely speaking for all work environments characterised by their *extreme* character (Granter et al., 2015; Hewlett and Luce, 2006). However, it is clear that as a non-regulated profession, consulting is subject to a wider diversity of organisational forms (Kipping and Kirkpatrick, 2012) and that what can be observed in terms of organisational arrangements, might not be relevant in other professional fields, where the strict *up-or-out* norm may be stronger for example.

Furthermore, it has been showed that there could be some **variability across different national contexts in terms of norms surrounding work-life balance** (Meriläinen et al., 2004). When I presented preliminary research findings in international conferences or workshops, some dimensions such as the acceptability of work-life balance demands in work contexts or even what work-life balance meant to individuals appeared to be potentially subject to great variability while others, such as the tendency to outsource the management of work-life balance to clients found a larger echo. Investigating further these differences and similarities across national contexts thus appears necessary, in particular in a context where PSFs are increasingly transnational (Greenwood et al., 2010; Greenwood and Miller, 2010) and human resources need to be managed not only across disciplinary practices but also across borders.

Research perspectives

Despite these limitations, this research opens up several areas for further research on three different levels: (1) advancing the experience of professionals at work, (2) understanding further how consulting firms (and PSFs in general) may change in the future to handle work-life balance demands better, and (3) following the evolutions of network-based professional service firms.

1. Deepening the understanding of the experience of professionals at work

Along the different chapters of this manuscript, I have argued that through the understanding of individuals' experience at work, much could be revealed of the internal workings of organisations and the tensions they face. This, I believe, calls for further studies.

First of all, collecting participants career stories over several years would allow to **study longitudinally how job crafting techniques unfold over time** by going beyond the retrospective recollection of events by consultants at one point in their careers only by instead collecting stories about present job crafting efforts at several moments in time. This has been done with a small number of consultants (four of them) and provided very rich material on the evolution of professionals' aspirations over time, depending on their personal circumstances and their professional development and their careers (who they worked with or for, on which topics, who they met, outcomes of the evaluation process, conditions of execution of projects, etc.), and systematising it would allow for patterns in these sequences of job crafting activities to unfold. A

longitudinal study would in fact be likely to deepen our understanding of the antecedents and outcomes – including very negative ones, such as burnout or exhaustion for professionals who are actively trying to become fast-trackers for example – of job crafting in professional organisations and beyond. This was the case for Jack's story for example, detailed in **chapter 5**. In Jack's case, following him over time allowed me to see that his job crafting strategy had failed and not only did not allow him to become partner but also led him to be asked to leave the firm, which I did not expect at all when I first saw him. Collecting more stories like Jacks' would allow me to start identifying patterns in the success or failure of job crafting strategies. Also, it would help understanding better how job crafting practices impact organisations and the mechanisms through which individual job crafting turns into organisational adjustments (or at least idiosyncratic deals, even if they do not require proper adjustments).
Another modality to gather longitudinal material could consist in following students who specialise into consulting before they graduate along their careers. I am currently teaching in a Master's programme for consulting apprentices[88] in which "reflexivity seminars" are organised for the young consultants/students to discuss their respective experience with each other and two members of the pedagogical team. Combining the material collected during these seminars[89] with follow-up interviews would allow me to overcome some of the limitations identified above, as a trust relationship could be built with them during the seminars and the evolution of their representations right from the start could be followed.

Secondly, through the analysis of consultants' career stories in **chapter 5**, an unexpected phenomenon was identified: professionals reported engaging in what they described as counter-normative behaviours and implementing a number of solutions to make them accepted, which I proposed to analyse through the concept of *conforming work*. It was not the purpose of this study to focus solely on the way individuals handle expectations of conformity, but I believe this concept is promising to understand the dynamics allowing individuals to change the normative order within their organisation and to overcome the opposition between conformity and resistance. **Investigating further the mechanisms of conforming work**, within consulting settings and beyond, would thus contribute to understanding forms of emancipation that do not rely on open contestation movements nor consist in micro forms of subversion through cynicism, humour or irony.

[88] This programme is new and was created in 2013 at CELSA. The young consultants are in class from September to December full-time and then work for their consultancies from Monday to Thursday and are in class on Fridays from December on.
[89] Students from the first promotion (2013) have already agreed for the content of the sessions to be used for research purpose.

2. Investigating pathways of change for traditional PSFs to respond to work-life balance demands further

A second area for further research concerns professional organisations themselves. The findings presented in **chapter 6** and discussed in **chapter 7** raised a number of questions regarding PSFs ability to address work-life balance demands in the future.

In **chapter 6**, the point was made that some characteristics of the work that professionals do (which can vary from project to project, beyond characteristics of the profession as a whole) were determinant to understand how firms could respond to individual work-life balance demands. **Researching work-life balance adjustments in consulting firms providing different types of advice** (such as strategy, HR or IT for example) **and other professional fields** (in law, accounting or architecture for example) would help to enrich the framework proposed in this thesis to understand firms' ability to offer work-life balance arrangements by confirming the relevance of the dimensions of work already identified (namely length and location of projects, fee-billing practices and leverage); and perhaps even by identifying others. The next step would also be to develop a sound understanding of the relationships between work/tasks and other determinants of the set of organisational choices that partners can make to accommodate work-life balance (namely the profession, the market, institutions and firm-specific strategy). For example: presence on-site has been described here as required on certain types of projects (which can vary even within the same profession) but how much is presence on site concomitantly the consequence of a certain level of face-to-face interaction imposed by the characteristics of a profession itself, the fear of the client not to control the execution of projects or the materialisation of a professional norm, imposed by existing technologies or a strategic choice of partners?

In addition, this research has been mainly focused on understanding existing arrangements within consulting firms and what constrains their adjustment capabilities to handle work-life balance challenges. One area for further development would, however, be to **investigate further what shape alternative pathways of change could take within professional organisations** if partners were to look at enlarging the set of organisational possibilities and along with it firms' ability to respond to individual requests in terms of flexibility and project assignment (including specialisation requests, which were not addressed *per se* in this study). As discussed in **chapter 7**, such alternatives could take a variety of forms and involve for example findings ways to increase client control beyond on-site presence, lowering the average leverage ratio of firms, taking work-life balance into account in commercial activities or even reinforcing the division labour for example. All these hypotheses however remain to be investigated.

3. Following the evolution of networked-firms and their impact on the field in time

In **chapter 7**, the rise of new network-based actors such as Eden McCallum or Business Talent Group and their ability to offer their clients cheaper services and consultants more flexibility was discussed. Understanding further all of these dimensions of networked

professional firms is crucial to evaluating their power to reconfigure different professional fields. Yet, available data on these new actors can mainly be found in the professional press only and for most parts, **the internal workings of networked professional organisations and the experience of the professionals they sub-contract remains to be researched.** Collecting career stories of consultants who work with these kinds of firms would provide considerable insights into their ability to respond to actual work-life balance and flexibility demands. Even though, on principle, these firms are supposed to allow consultants to define they working conditions, it is not clear to what extent this is actually the case. It is for example possible that some consultants, given the lack of visibility over future projects – and thus revenues – take whatever project they are offered, in spite of their personal preferences. It is also possible that – even if consultants can in fact decide when they want to take on a project or not – their work-life balance when they are indeed working for clients is not better than in traditional firms.

Beyond the issue of work-life balance addressed in this study, the rise of these new actors raises a number of other questions regarding the service that they provide itself. It is indeed possible to wonder whether these new forms of consulting can be adapted to all service lines and how it may impact consulting work itself. More specifically, is it adapted to large change projects requiring teams of consultants to be constituted and work together? So far, most of these firms only assign individual freelancers to their clients' projects and in the case of Eden McCallum, no information is available regarding how the teams they put together function. Finally, the *agnostic* nature of these firms when it comes to the solutions their consultants offer also raises a number of questions regarding their ability to help consultants share their experiences and expertise and to foster innovations outside of conventional (stable) employment relationships. More fundamentally, if the absence of such knowledge sharing and development proved to be unproblematic, this would be very likely to feed into critical theses regarding the deskilling of professionals, consultants in particular – see for example (Costas and Kärreman, 2015) – and the overemphasis on the knowledge component of knowledge work (Alvesson, 1993; Alvesson, 2001; Alvesson, 2004; Alvesson, 2011).
Finally, a more systemic understanding of how these firms – if successful in attracting increasing numbers of consultants who would be leaving traditional firms for this model – might come to reconfigure the field of consulting by forcing traditional actors to rethink their offers and push them towards inventing innovative ways to handle work-life balance.

« *Je finirai mon livre parce que les blancs entre les mots me laissent une chance* »

Romain Gary, *Pseudo*

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Résumé en français

Les professionnels et autres « travailleurs intellectuels », tels que les comptables, avocats, ingénieurs ou encore les consultants ont longtemps été considérés comme privilégiés du fait de l'autonomie dont ils bénéficient dans leur travail. Selon la grille d'analyse classique de la santé au travail de Karasek et Theorell, par exemple, sont qualifiées d'actives les activités professionnelles dans lesquelles les demandes psychologiques ainsi que la latitude décisionnelle sont élevées. Ces activités, expliquent-ils, permettent aux individus qui les exercent de développer leurs compétences et d'apprendre par l'exercice de leur jugement ; et par conséquent d'être plus satisfaits au travail, voire même plus impliqués dans la vie civique et sociale (Karasek et Theorell, 1990). Cette conception du travail professionnel comme source de bien-être au travail est d'ailleurs en ligne avec une longue tradition de job design ou redesign (Parker et Wall, 1998). L'autonomie y est vue comme essentielle au développement du potentiel individuel, mais aussi de la motivation, de la satisfaction et de la performance au travail. Les conditions du travail professionnel sont par conséquent, dans cette perspective, un idéal vers lequel tous les autres métiers doivent tendre.

Pourtant, en opposition avec une conception du travail professionnel comme source incontestable de la réalisation de soi, **un certain nombre de symptômes semblent indiquer que ces activités seraient, au contraire, en tension**. En 2013, un jeune stagiaire de Bank of America Merill Lynch est décédé des suites d'une crise d'épilepsie après avoir travaillé 72 heures d'affilée sans repos. Bien qu'il soit impossible d'établir un lien direct entre son décès et son rythme de travail, la médiatisation de son histoire a mis en lumière les pratiques des grandes banques d'investissement en la matière. Les médias font de plus en plus échos de tels récits de décès ou de burnouts en lien avec le travail, notamment dans les cabinets de conseil. En 2010, Xavier Darcos, alors ministre du Travail, publiait pour quelques heures seulement une liste rouge d'entreprises pointées du doigt par le gouvernement pour leurs pratiques managériales délétères et leur absence de politiques relatives à la gestion des risques psychosociaux. Accenture, le géant du conseil informatique, figurait alors en tête de liste, avant que celle-ci ne soit retirée.
Les environnements professionnels ont en effet été décrits comme des cas exemplaires de « travail extrême » (Hewlett et Luce, 2006 ; Granter et al. 2015), en d'autres termes des environnements dans lesquels les individus ressentent une forte pression et qui sont souvent caractérisés par des horaires de travail imprévisibles, intenses et de longue durée. Ce caractère extrême serait à son apogée dans les services professionnels, mais coloniserait de façon croissante tous les autres pans de notre économie. Dans une perspective plus critique, cette intensité du travail est décrite comme le produit d'un engagement particulièrement fort de la part des professionnels, obtenu par un contrôle de type culturel et l'exploitation de la subjectivité des individus qui se soumettraient à une forme d'esclavagisme volontaire (Alvesson, 2004 ; Kunda, 1992 ; Deetz, 1998 ; Bunting 2004).

En parallèle, **les cabinets de conseil n'ont jamais été aussi actifs dans leur communication autour des questions d'équilibre de vie et de qualité de vie au travail, ce qui indique combien il s'agit d'un enjeu managérial fort pour eux**. Que ce soit sur leurs sites dédiés aux potentiels candidats ou dans le processus de recrutement lui-même, l'adage « work hard play

hard » - lequel a caractérisé ces entreprises depuis la fin du 19ème siècle et met en avant l'idée que la jeunesse des équipes et l'atmosphère conviviale rétribuent l'implication personnelle et que l'accomplissement personnel peut être trouvé au travail - a été remplacé par l'idée que bien que l'on travaille dur dans le conseil, cela n'est néanmoins pas incompatible avec un accomplissement total dans la sphère privée et qu'il n'est pas attendu des jeunes professionnels qu'ils abandonnent leurs engagements personnels pour être consultants. En outre, les entreprises de services professionnels dédient un temps considérable à tenter d'être représentées dans un certain nombre de classements sur la qualité de vie au travail (*Fortune/Great Place to Work best companies to work for* ou *Sunday Times best companies* par exemple), ce qui est devenu un élément central de leur stratégie d'attraction. Des cabinets tels que le Boston Consulting Group, Deloitte, Ernst & Young ou PriceWaterhouseCoopers y sont représentés régulièrement depuis plusieurs années.

Le fait que les questions d'équilibre de vie soient devenues un tel enjeu s'explique en partie par la grande dépendance de ces entreprises envers leurs ressources humaines. Dans les entreprises de services professionnels et autres entreprises intensives en connaissances, les individus sont les principales ressources de l'organisation (Maister, 1993 ; Løwendahl, 1997). Or, ceux-ci peuvent à tout moment quitter leur cabinet pour rejoindre un concurrent, s'établir en tant qu'indépendant ou bien monter leur propre structure et emporter avec eux leurs clients, leur expérience, voire même certains de leurs collègues (Von Nordenflycht, 2010; Maister, 1993; Løwendahl, 1997). Par conséquent, **non seulement est-il essentiel pour ces organisations d'attirer les "meilleurs", mais également de parvenir à les retenir sur le long terme**. Pour atteindre cet objectif, les entreprises de services professionnels ont traditionnellement utilisé un système de promotion en "*up-or-out*", organisant une hiérarchie d'apprentissage par la division du travail entre associés et salariés moins expérimentés et assurant l'obtention d'un certain niveau d'implication de leur part en leur offrant des perspectives de co-optation au sein de la partnership (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006; Maister, 1993; Morris et al., 2012; Morris and Pinnington, 1998; Smets et al., 2012).

Bien que l'organisation traditionnelle des entreprises de services professionnels ait évoluée au fil du temps, notamment par l'adoption de systèmes et procédures plus bureaucratiques et orientés vers l'efficacité (Brock, 2006; Brock et al., 1999; Cooper et al., 1996), son système incitatif a gardé de nombreuses composantes héritées du cabinet d'avocat américain Cravath au 19ème siècle: division du travail entre associés et autres professionnels, des salaires attractifs à l'entrée et une forme de tournoi spécifique à travers la règle du up-or-out, avec une possible cooptation associé à la clé (Swaine, 1946-48a; Swaine, 1946-48b). **Ce modèle repose donc sur des représentations du succès et de la carrière qui sont héritées du 19ème siècle**, une période où les professionnels étaient principalement des hommes d'un milieu social privilégié – malgré le développement récent des « law schools » américaines – et où l'activité connaissait une croissance exponentielle. **Les symptômes de tension identifiés plus haut semblent appeler à questionner la pertinence de telles représentations aujourd'hui** et ce d'autant que – bien que la diversité reste un véritable sujet dans ces environnements – les professionnels viennent aujourd'hui d'horizons plus divers, se féminisent (Bolton et Muzio, 2008; Ashley et Empson, 2013) et que les perspectives de croissance s'affaiblissent à mesure que la concurrence se renforce, que la pression sur les coûts devient plus important et que les demandes des clients deviennent de plus en plus sophistiquées (Brock, 2006; Brock et al., 1999; Cooper et al., 1996).

Par conséquent, en lien avec ces évolutions, **cette thèse s'interroge sur ce que signifie attirer, sélectionner et retenir les « meilleurs » aujourd'hui**. Pour répondre à cette question, nous avons pour ambition de ramener les professionnels et leur expérience au travail au cœur de l'étude des organisations professionnelles afin de mieux comprendre comment leurs représentations de leur travail, de leur carrière et leurs aspirations peuvent impacter l'organisation de leurs entreprises. Cette approche est en lien avec des appels récents à ramener l'étude du travail au cœur de l'étude des organisations plus généralement (Barley et Kunda, 2001 ; Vikkelsø et du Gay, 2013, 2014) ; et des organisations professionnelles en particulier (Suddaby et al. 2008 ; Muzio et al. 2013).

De façon plus générale, cette thèse a pour objet **d'explorer les évolutions contemporaines du modèle d'organisation dominant des entreprises professionnelles, de ses fondations et de sa capacité à maintenir ses capacités d'attraction, de sélection et de rétention des « meilleurs », dans un contexte où de nouveaux concurrent organisés en réseaux d'indépendants font surface** (un phénomène souvent qualifié d' « *uberisation* » des services professionnels) et revendiquent leur capacité à reconfigurer l'industrie.

1. Une hypothèse de carriérisme au cœur du système incitatif des entreprises de services professionnels en question

1.1. L'organisation des professionnels – de multiples formes d'organisation pour un présupposé commun

De nombreux débats ont entouré – au sein de la sociologie des professions – la question de la spécificité du travail professionnel, des travaux historiques fonctionnalistes mettant en avant les connaissances formelles nécessaire à l'exercice du travail professionnel et le rôle essentiel joué par les professions dans le maintien de l'ordre social; aux perspectives plus critiques qui mettent l'accent sur la nature construite de cette même base de connaissances et l'existence de *projets professionnels* menés dans le cadre de relations de pouvoir. Afin de dépasser la question de l'existence ou non de connaissances spécifiques légitimant le monopole des professions sur certains pans de l'activité économique, nous mobilisons le travail de Florent Champy (2011) et la notion de *délibération* nécessaire à la production des services professionnels pour mettre en avant trois caractéristiques du travail professionnel : sa nature « intensive en connaissances » au sens d'Alvesson (1993), sa dépendance envers les ressources humaines et le degré d'interactions qu'il requiert. Ces trois caractéristiques sont à la source de trois principaux défis managériaux rencontrés par ces entreprises :

(1) la difficulté de contrôler la qualité du service produit
(2) la nécessité d'attirer, sélectionner et retenir les « meilleurs »
(3) l'impératif de garder les questions d'organisation et de management cachées des clients

Cela nous amène à élaborer une généalogie de l'organisation professionnelle en tant qu'objet de recherche, et ce tout d'abord afin de comprendre comment ces défis managériaux ont été adressés

historiquement, mais aussi afin d'identifier les grilles théoriques successives mobilisées pour les analyser. Ce travail nous permet de mettre en avant **le rôle clé joué par la théorie des archétypes** dans le champ de recherche dédié aux entreprises de services professionnels, depuis l'identification de l'archétype professionnel – le **Professional Partnership**, lequel met l'accent sur la collégialité et l'autonomie des professionnels – jusqu'aux discussions plus récentes autour de la bureaucratisation des entreprises professionnelles et l'identification d'un archétype plus managérial – le **Managed Professional Business** – ou de l'internationalisation de ces organisations. Cela nous permet ensuite de discuter la capacité de la théorie des archétypes à prendre en compte de potentiels facteurs internes du changement (en particulier l'agence des acteurs) pour rendre compte de l'évolution de l'organisation professionnelle.

Or, cette incapacité de la théorie des archétypes à prendre en compte les facteurs internes du changement est d'autant plus problématique que le système incitatif de la majeure partie des entreprises de services professionnels de taille moyenne à grande repose sur un présupposé fort de carriérisme de la part des professionnels. Nous mettons en avant l'existence de ce présupposé en retournant aux sources de ce modèle incitatif : le système connu sous le nom du « *Cravath System* » mis en place au sein du cabinet d'avocats du même nom entre la fin du 19ème siècle et le début du 20ème et dont les principales caractéristiques étaient de diviser le travail entre « *partners* » et « *associates* » et d'organiser l'attraction, la sélection et la rétention des « meilleures » recrues des récentes « *law schools* » par un tournoi en « *up-or-out* » et la promesse d'une possible cooptation associé. A travers les témoignages de l'époque, il apparaît que la conviction qui anime alors Cravath est que l'incitation que représente le possible passage associé et les salaires attractifs permettent d'exiger des plus jeunes une implication et une capacité de travail très élevées. Or, cette hypothèse a été importée dans les entreprises de services professionnels modernes et sans que sa pertinence, dans le contexte actuel, ne soit questionnée.

Etant donnée l'absence de la prise en compte des représentations individuelles dans cette littérature, et l'existence d'un présupposé aussi fort, **cette généalogie appelle à une plus grande prise en compte de l'expérience des professionnels dans l'analyse de ces organisations et de leurs évolutions**.

1.2. Comprendre l'expérience des professionnels au travail – prédominance de la perspective critique

La dimension individuelle étant oubliée des travaux portant sur l'organisation du travail professionnel, il semble essentiel de mener dans un second temps une revue des travaux existants sur les professionnels et la façon dont ils s'engagent dans leur travail ; question qui a notamment fait l'objet de nombreux travaux critiques mettant en avant la pression normative à laquelle les travailleurs dits « intellectuels » font face. Cela nous permet d'identifier deux dimensions clés des attentes liées au rôle de professionnel : **la « connaissance »** - qu'il s'agisse de l'acquisition, du développement et du partage de formes techniques, expérientielles ou même relationnelles de connaissances (développement de relations avec certains clients, adoption d'un comportement reconnu comme professionnel, etc.) - et **« l'implication »**, que ce soit en termes de quantité de

travail effectué (sur mission et en dehors, pour l'entreprise elle-même) ou bien en termes d'investissement de soi au sein de l'organisation (l'animation de séminaires ou la participation aux événements internes au cabinet par exemple).

Or, chacune de ces deux dimensions (connaissance et implication) a fait l'objet de nombreuses études critiques en management, lesquelles ont souvent fait des professionnels – et des consultants en particulier – un cas exemplaire de « *knowledge workers* » ou « travailleurs intellectuels » (Alvesson, 1993, 2000, 2001, 2004). La perspective critique sur la question des « connaissances » et de **leur caractère hautement ambigu** est détaillée dans un premier temps, ce qui nous permet d'en décrire les conséquences managériales par la suite. Etant donnée la nécessité pour ces entreprises « intensives en connaissances » de **gérer les impressions de leurs clients** en s'assurant que leurs ressources humaines adoptent des comportements « professionnels » et appropriés tout **maintenant leur loyauté**, elles mobilisent des techniques de contrôle dites normatives qui reposent sur la mise en avant d'identités organisationnelles élitistes et genrées dont l'objectif est de réguler la subjectivité des individus (Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006; Anderson-Gough et al., 2000; Anderson-Gough et al., 2005; Costas and Grey, 2014). Ces études ont pour caractéristique de faire le portrait de professionnels conformistes et soumis passivement à ces formes de régulation de leur identité.

Cela nous amène à discuter le caractère totalisant des pratiques managériales mises en lumière par la littérature critique sur les travailleurs intellectuels. Notre première observation est que ces travaux n'avancent pas que les professionnels répondent nécessairement aux prescriptions par l'identification. Il y est en effet fait état de nombreux exemples de distanciation, notamment par l'ambivalence, le cynisme ou l'humour mais, toutefois, cela ne semble jamais – selon ces auteurs – générer une remise en cause de l'ordre établi et n'empêche pas les professionnels de se conformer à ce qui est attendu d'eux. Cela nous conduit à défendre l'idée que **si ces travaux sont essentiels pour comprendre la façon dont les professionnels sont socialisés dans le cadre du système incitatif en *up-or-out*, ils ne questionnent toutefois pas le fait que tous professionnels in fine aspirent tous à être promus et obtenir des primes**. Cela nous semble d'autant plus problématique que dans un certain nombre de cas, ces travaux reproduisent ce présupposé en expliquant que c'est bien parce que les professionnels sont carriéristes qu'ils sont aussi conformistes.

1.3. Vers une remise en question du présupposé de carriérisme au cœur de l'organisation professionnelle

Nous argumentons que cette hypothèse de carriérisme doit précisément être remise en question, et ce pour plusieurs raisons. Tout d'abord, si l'analyse des principales tendances économiques du secteur du conseil français met en lumière **l'existence de difficultés conjoncturelles des cabinets de conseil**, liées à la crise économique et financière de 2008 ; elle indique également **l'existence de tendances plus structurelles vers des niveaux de croissance de moins en moins élevés**. Ce phénomène est décrit comme ayant **des conséquences majeures sur la capacité des entreprises de services professionnels à maintenir leur attractivité**, leurs promesses de carrières rapides et de primes élevées en cas de croissance faible prolongée.

En outre, l'émergence de demandes liées à l'équilibre de vie semble en parallèle à la fois remettre en question le présupposé de carriérisme uniforme des professionnels et mettre en tension l'organisation des cabinets de conseil. Un petit corpus récent de travaux met notamment en avant **la nécessité pour les entreprises de service professionnels de se positionner sur ces questions émergentes d'équilibre de vie** mais fait toutefois état de **l'échec des mesures mises en œuvre pour le moment** (Kaiser et al., 2011, Litrico et Lee, 2008 ; Perlow, 2012).

Cela nous amène à formuler la problématique suivante : **Que signifie attirer, sélectionner et retenir les « meilleurs » aujourd'hui ?**
Cette problématique générale se décline en deux questions de recherche. La première étape de ce travail de recherche consiste à explorer l'expérience des individus au travail à travers la question suivante : **(QR1) Y a t'il plus de diversité dans les aspirations des professionnels qu'en seuls termes de promotions et de récompenses financières ?**
Si la première partie de cette recherche venait à confirmer l'existence d'une plus grande diversité d'aspirations chez les professionnels, cela soulèverait un certain nombre de questions quant à la capacité des cabinets de conseil à y répondre, et ce tout particulièrement dans la cas de l'équilibre de vie qui est en contradiction avec le modèle incitatif actuel. En d'autres termes : **(QR2) Comment les demandes d'équilibre de vie des professionnels impactent-elles l'organisation des cabinets de conseil ?** Cette question est traitée à la fois par une analyse du discours managérial en vigueur dans les cabinets de conseil et une analyse des pratiques mises en œuvre dans deux cabinets : Management Consulting et Finance Consulting.

2. Replacer l'individu au cœur de l'étude des organisations professionnelles

2.1. Itinéraire de recherche

Le design général de la recherche adopté a pour ambition de mettre en lien l'étude des professionnels, de leur expérience et de la façon dont ils s'engagent dans leur travail avec celle des organisations professionnelles. Pour ce faire, cette thèse repose sur la combinaison de cas à la fois individuels et organisationnels et accorde une place prépondérante aux entretiens (et par conséquent aux représentations des acteurs) afin de répondre à nos deux questions de recherche en trois temps :

(1) La collecte et l'analyse de **58 récits de carrière** de consultants à tous les échelons hiérarchiques et ce dans 13 cabinets de conseil différents
(2) La collecte et l'analyse du **discours managérial** de 9 DRH et de 6 associés sur les questions d'équilibre de vie
(3) La constitution et l'analyse comparative de **deux études de cas** sur les pratiques mises en œuvre par les cabinets de conseil pour répondre aux enjeux d'équilibre de vie

Par ailleurs, il est apparu rapidement – du fait de la difficulté d'accès au terrain – que nos questions de recherche étaient particulièrement sensibles. En nous appuyant sur le courant de la recherche sensible (Lee, 1993; Renzetti and Lee, 1993), nous montrons en quoi l'étude de

l'équilibre de vie des professionnels peut être un sujet à la fois tabou pour des associés qui communiquent activement sur ce sujet sans pour autant parvenir à répondre à ces enjeux en interne, autant que pour leurs salariés mus par un idéal d'excellence permanente, notamment lorsqu'ils sont en difficulté soit dans leur parcours professionnel soit dans leur vie personnelle. Ce caractère sensible de notre recherche nous a amenés à prendre un certain nombre de précautions à la fois dans la conduite des entretiens, et dans l'anonymisation et la restitution des résultats.

2.2. Hétérogénéité parmi les consultants – des aspirations en termes de promotion, d'orientation des projets et d'équilibre de vie à satisfaire

Nous commençons donc par explorer la façon dont les consultants font sens de leur travail et la nature de leurs aspirations à travers l'analyse de 58 entretiens de carrière collectés auprès de professionnels à tous les niveaux de la hiérarchie dans 13 organisations différentes.
Notre analyse des **tensions dans les récits de carrière des consultants** met en lumière 16 types de tensions récurrentes, lesquelles se rapportent systématiquement à trois dimensions clés de la carrière de professionnel :

(1) **La promotion et les autres formes de rétribution** (notamment financières), comme identifié dans la littérature
(2) Mais également **l'orientation des projets** qui sont assignés aux consultants (qu'ils souhaitent rester généralistes ou bien au contraire se spécialiser)
(3) Et enfin **l'équilibre de vie**.

Cela montre bien que, contrairement aux représentations dominantes des professionnels tant bien dans la littérature que dans la culture populaire, les consultants ont **des aspirations plus hétérogènes que la rapidité de leur progression de carrière** qui – si elle reste une préoccupation importante – n'en est pas pour autant systématiquement prédominante et des enjeux de spécialisation ou d'équilibre de vie peuvent prendre les devants chez un certain nombre d'individus.

Nous montrons ensuite que les consultants, loin d'être passifs, expliquent mettre en œuvre un certain nombre de solutions pour satisfaire leurs aspirations. Nous développons l'idée que le « job crafting » ou « façonnage de l'activité » (Wrzesniewski et Dutton, 2010) est une grille d'analyse pertinente pour analyser ces témoignages de proactivité et mobilisons ce concept pour décrire **trois ensembles de techniques de job crafting mobilisées par les consultants pour obtenir des récompenses, projets ou un équilibre de vie en ligne avec leurs aspirations**.

Cela nous amène à discuter le fait que – lorsque les consultants développent des pratiques qu'ils décrivent eux-mêmes comme contre-normatives via leurs activités de job crafting – ils gère l'écart entre leurs pratiques et leur volonté de faire partie d'un groupe social au sein duquel les attentes de conformité sont très fortes par une forme spécifique de travail identitaire que nous appelons **le « conforming work » (ou « travail de conformation »)**. Ce travail de conformation implique notamment de cacher un certain nombre de pratiques, de faire des concessions et de développer un discours justifiant les pratiques en question par leur capacité à renforcer le professionnalisme.

Il apparaît néanmoins que les consultants se trouvent limités dans leurs tentatives de se créer une marge de manœuvre, un espace de liberté, en ligne avec leurs aspirations, et ce notamment du fait du manque de coopération de leurs associés et collègues et les contraintes liées à l'organisation de leurs cabinets, ce qui nous pousse à explorer plus en avant la façon dont le management de ces entreprises se saisit de ce phénomène, souvent invisible.

3. De la proactivité individuelle aux arrangements organisationnels

3.1. Des arrangements idiosyncratiques informels pour répondre aux demandes liées à l'équilibre de vie

Nous commençons ici par analyser le discours managérial sur les enjeux d'équilibre de vie dans 9 cabinets de conseil. Nous montrons que si **tous confirment être confrontés à des demandes concernant l'équilibre de vie**, il y a néanmoins deux discours distincts sur ce que ces demandes signifient et la façon dont elles doivent être traitées. Pour un premier groupe de DRH, **l'équilibre de vie est incompatible avec le conseil et un moyen de sélection *naturel* des consultants** dans un univers en *up-or-out* très exigeant en termes d'engagement au travail : seuls les plus investis peuvent rester et être promus. Nous montrons que, dans ces organisations, non seulement le client est-il invoqué pour légitimer le fait de ne pas répondre favorablement aux demandes concernant l'équilibre de vie, mais la gestion de ces questions est même directement sous-traitée aux clients. **Pour un deuxième groupe de DRH et d'associés, au contraire, le fait de perdre des consultants qu'ils auraient souhaité fidéliser rend nécessaire une forme de *vigilance* et la mise en place d'un certain nombre d'actions** pour répondre à ces enjeux. Dans leur discours, ceux-ci mettent avant tout en exergue deux types de mesures : les initiatives visant à responsabiliser les consultants eux-mêmes sur ces sujets (notamment via des formations de gestion du temps ou du stress), mais également des ajustements organisationnels.

Parmi ces dernières entreprises, deux cabinets - **Management Consulting et Finance Consulting** - ont accepté de participer plus en avant à cette recherche. Toutes deux sont françaises mais opèrent internationalement, sont relativement jeunes (elles ont été fondées au début des années 2000), de taille comparable (entre 150 et 200 consultants), mais opèrent sur des marchés différents avec des formes de gouvernance également différentes (le cabinet de conseil financier étant un pur partnership alors que le cabinet de conseil en organisation et management a lui fait le choix de vendre une grande partie de ses parts à un actionnaire privé il y a quelques années).
A travers nos entretiens à la fois avec le management et les équipes de consultants, il apparaît que ces deux cabinets ont mis en place un certain nombre arrangements organisationnels pour répondre aux demandes individuelles d'équilibre de vie sont identifiés, lesquels consistent principalement en **des arrangements idiosyncratiques (Rousseau et al. 2006) requérant l'ajustement des règles et procédures usuels concernant le lieu de réalisation des projets, l'organisation du temps, l'allocation de projets et enfin la gestion de la relation client**.

Nous poursuivons en analysant l'écart observé entre les pratiques des deux firmes, en faveur de Finance Consulting, que nous attribuons principalement à **des différences inhérentes à la nature des services produits dans les deux cabinets et les caractéristiques de leurs projets, en particulier en termes de durée, de situation géographique, de leverage et de pratiques de facturation**.

Il apparaît par ailleurs que **la capacité d'ajustement globale des cabinets de conseil est d'ores et déjà relativement limitée** alors que seul un faible nombre de consultants sont pour le moment l'objet d'arrangements spécifiques. Nous argumentons que, en cas de généralisation de ces demandes, ces cabinets de conseil seraient soumis à une véritable tension de leur modèle organisationnel.

3.2. Vers un secteur du conseil de plus en plus hétérogène ?

Nous discutons cette faible capacité d'ajustement au regard de l'émergence de nouveaux acteurs organisés en réseaux de professionnels, lesquels réclament à la fois mieux répondre aux enjeux d'équilibre de vie et de compétitivité que les cabinets traditionnels et pouvoir reconfigurer l'industrie du conseil.

Le potentiel du phénomène d'ubérisation des services professionnels à reconfigurer le champ du conseil est tout d'abord discuté. A travers le cas de deux cabinets de conseil en réseau – le précurseur Eden McCallum et le nouveau venu français Experdeus – lesquels revendiquent leur capacité à répondre aux deux tensions principales auxquelles les cabinets traditionnels sont confrontés : **la pression sur les coûts** (allant de pair avec une sophistication de la demande des clients) et **l'équilibre de vie de leurs professionnels** – nous défendons l'idée que si le business model de ces entreprises leur permet en effet de minimiser leurs coûts et d'offrir une certaine flexibilité aux professionnels qui choisissent d'opérer au sein de leur réseau, **leur activité reste néanmoins associée à un certain nombre de risques, en particulier en termes juridiques, de précarisation du travail professionnel et liés à l'absence de production collective de savoirs**.

La montée en puissance potentielle de ces nouveaux acteurs du secteur nous amène à nous interroger sur l'impact des enjeux d'équilibre de vie sur l'accroissement de l'hétérogénéité des pratiques des acteurs. Si **la prise en compte des professionnels et de leur travail dans l'étude de l'organisation professionnelle nous a permis de mettre en lumière une certaine hétérogénéité parmi les professionnels eux-mêmes**, nos résultats sont également riches d'enseignements pour notre compréhension de l'hétérogénéité des pratiques et des formes organisationnelles au sein du champs des services professionnels même. En effet, il apparaît à travers nos deux études de cas que **les micro-caractéristiques des projets et des tâches liées au travail professionnel sont déterminantes dans la capacité d'ajustement des entreprises de services professionnelles,** ce qui constitue un apport fondamental par rapport aux théories existantes du changement et de l'hétérogénéité des organisations professionnelles, lesquelles se concentrent principalement sur des facteurs externes du changement (évolutions technologiques ou du marché par exemple) ou bien sur les caractéristiques de la profession dans son ensemble (degré d'interaction client, régulation du marché, etc.).

En conséquence, il nous semble que de **la nécessité pour les cabinets de conseil de gérer l'équilibre de vie de leurs professionnels peut résulter en une hétérogénéité croissante des formes organisationnelles** dans le champ du conseil en management, voire une différenciation croissante entre lignes de services et/ou équipes sectorielles au sein d'une organisation donnée.

Contributions de la thèse et perspectives de recherches

Contributions de la thèse

La première contribution de cette thèse est de mettre en lumière une hypothèse forte et non questionnée de carriérisme au cœur du système incitatif des organisations professionnelles traditionnelles et d'identifier une plus grande hétérogénéité d'aspirations chez les professionnels. A travers la description du système Cravath à l'origine du modèle incitatif de nombreuses entreprises de services professionnels de taille moyenne à grande, nous faisons émerger l'existence d'un présupposé de carriérisme des professionnels (au sens commun d'ambition personnelle à être rapidement promu et à progresser dans la hiérarchie de l'organisation tout en étant récompensé financièrement pour ses efforts). Nous montrons également que si la littérature s'intéressant à l'expérience de ces professionnels au travail – souvent critique – nous permet de comprendre comment les individus sont socialisés au sein de ce système incitatif, elle ne questionne toutefois pas l'idée que les professionnels, in fine, aspirent tous bien uniquement et de façon homogène à une carrière rapide et la cooptation associé. Or, nous expliquons que ce présupposé doit justement être questionné, et ce pour deux raisons : (1) le secteur du conseil est aujourd'hui confronté à des tendances structurelles vers des niveaux de croissance à la baisse qui mettent considérablement en tension la capacité des cabinets à proposer des promotions et des bonus à leurs consultants ; et (2) un certain nombre d'études semblent indiquer que l'équilibre de vie, notamment, soit un sujet de plus en plus important pour les professionnels.

Nos résultats confirment en effet qu'il y a matière à remettre en question cette représentation de la façon dont les professionnels s'engagent dans leur travail : en effet, si ceux-ci aspirent effectivement pour la plupart à être promus et reconnus pour leurs efforts, leurs récits ont fait émerger deux sources additionnelles de potentielles tensions dans leurs carrières : la spécialisation et l'équilibre de vie. En outre, ces consultants ne nous sont pas apparus comme étant passifs face à ces différentes aspirations, et au contraire ont fait état d'un certain nombre de techniques mises en œuvre soit pour obtenir des récompenses symboliques ou financières, pour être assigné certains projets plutôt que d'autres ou pour ménager leur équilibre de vie. Nous montrons également que, dans certains cas, cela les amène même à adopter ce qu'ils qualifient eux-mêmes de comportements contre-normatifs à d'effectuer un *travail de conformation* (« conforming work ») afin de réduire l'écart perçu entre les attentes de conformité et leur propre pratique. Cela était d'autant moins attendu que la littérature sur les consultants fait état d'une forme de soumission aux attentes comportementales particulièrement forte chez cette population.

L'impact de cette hétérogénéité des aspirations sur la rétention est certain, tout particulièrement lorsque des consultants qui ont toujours été considérés comme performants sont amenés à partir pour des questions d'équilibre de vie. **La deuxième principale contribution de cette thèse porte sur la mise en lumière d'une véritable hétérogénéité au sein des cabinets de conseil dans leur volonté de prendre en compte ces enjeux**. Bien que tous les directeurs des ressources humaines et associés interrogés dans les 9 cabinets qui ont accepté de répondre à nos questions fassent tous état de demandes croissantes concernant l'équilibre de vie de la part de leurs consultants et d'un impact certain sur la rétention, deux discours très distinct sont identifiés sur cette question. Le premier discours consiste à défendre l'idée que l'équilibre de vie a toujours été un sujet dans les cabinets de conseil mais qu'une capacité à gérer des quantités importantes de travail, à se montrer disponible et réactif en toute circonstances est essentielle au professionnalisme d'un consultant. Dans ce discours, l'équilibre de vie est construit comme incompatible avec le professionnalisme et la responsabilité de le gérer est laissée aux consultants et cette dimension de la politique de gestion des ressources humaines pourtant stratégique pour ces cabinets est sous-traitée entièrement aux clients eux-mêmes. Dans une telle perspective, le départ de consultants pour des questions d'équilibre de vie est vu comme un moyen de sélection « *naturel* ». Un deuxième discours a néanmoins pu être identifié, lequel consiste plutôt à expliquer que la perte de consultants pour des questions liées à l'équilibre de vie est très coûteuse et doit être évitée. Les mesures mentionnées par ces cabinets consistent soit en une responsabilisation des consultants à travers divers programmes de gestion du stress ou du temps, ou bien en un certain nombre d'ajustements organisationnels (comme le fait de modifier les règles d'allocation de projets par exemple, ou d'attribuer des jours de repos additionnels).

Enfin, **la dernière contribution principale de ce travail consiste en la mise en avant du rôle joué par la nature du travail professionnel et des caractéristiques spécifiques des projets sur lesquels les professionnels sont amenés à travailler dans la capacité des cabinets de conseil à mettre en place un certain nombre d'arrangements organisationnels pour prendre en compte les demandes individuelles d'équilibre de vie, par delà le soutien social et la volonté managériale**. Les deux cabinets de conseil avec lesquels nous avons travaillé traitent la question à travers un nombre très limité d'arrangements idiosyncratiques négociés directement avec les consultants qu'ils souhaitent garder (qu'il s'agisse de la situation géographique des projets, de l'organisation du temps, de l'allocation de projets ou bien de la gestion de la relation client). Il est toutefois apparu à travers notre analyse que Finance Consulting était en mesure de mettre en place de plus nombreux arrangements que Management Consulting. Cette plus grande capacité d'ajustement a été attribuée à deux éléments : la volonté managériale de répondre aux demandes individuelles – influencée par le contexte institutionnel et le marché – mais aussi et surtout à des différences clés dans la nature des services fournis par les deux cabinets en ce qui concerne leur leverage, leurs taux de facturation, la durée et les conditions d'exécution des projets (leur situation géographique et leur récurrence notamment). Cette nécessité de comprendre la nature du travail et des projets pour comprendre la capacité d'ajustement des cabinets constitue une des contributions majeures de ce travail, à la fois dans le champ des entreprises de service professionnel et dans celui de la recherche sur les enjeux d'équilibre de vie, qui tendent à mettre en avant des enjeux de soutien social plutôt qu'à se focaliser sur la variable travail. Cette capacité d'ajustement est toutefois apparue comme étant relativement limitée, ce qui peut ouvrir la voie à de nouveaux acteurs reposant sur des réseaux

d'indépendants et revendiquent d'offrir des prestations de grande qualité à moindre coût tout en permettant aux consultants de définir les conditions de leur propre travail. Nous avons toutefois montré que ce phénomène d'uberisation des services professionnels comportait un certain nombre de risques légaux, de précarisation des travailleurs professionnels ainsi qu'en termes de développement de savoirs collectifs et de services innovants pour les clients sur le long terme.

Le tableau ci-dessous résume les principales questions de recherche et contributions de cette thèse :

<table>
<tr><td rowspan="5">Revue de littérature

Une hypothèse de carriérisme homogène (en termes de promotions et de bonus) au cœur des organisations professionnelles traditionnelles est identifiée</td><td colspan="2">Problématique générale de la thèse:
Que signifie attirer, sélectionner et retenir les "meilleurs" aujourd'hui?</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">QR 1: Y a t'il plus de diversité dans les aspirations des professionnels qu'en termes de promotions et de récompenses financières ?</td><td>R1.1: Les professionnels ne font pas uniquement sens de leur carrière en termes de promotions mais également de spécialisation et/ou d'équilibre de vie, dimensions auxquelles ils associent diverses représentations</td></tr>
<tr><td>R1.2: Les professionnels ne sont pas passifs et emploient un certain nombre de techniques pour répondre à leurs propres aspirations</td></tr>
<tr><td>R1.3: Lorsqu'ils souhaitent adopter des comportements contre-normatifs (notamment en ce qui concerne l'équilibre de vie), ils s'engagent dans une forme particulière de travail identitaire : le travail de conformation</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">QR 2: Comment les demandes d'équilibre de vie, si elles sont confirmées, impactent-elles l'organisation des cabinets de conseil ?</td><td>R2: Il y a deux grand discours managériaux sur la question de l'équilibre de vie au sein des cabinets interrogés :
a. le fait que des consultants partent pour cette raison est un phénomène « naturel »
b. il est nécessaire d'être « vigilant » et de répondre aux demandes individuelles concernant l'équilibre de vie</td></tr>
<tr><td>R3.1: Les cabinets qui se disent vigilants répondent aux demandent individuelles par des arrangements idiosyncratiques</td></tr>
<tr><td>R3.2: La capacité des cabinets de conseil à offrir de tels arrangements est directement liée à :
a. la volonté managériale
b. la nature du service fourni et des tâches qu'il requière</td></tr>
</table>

Ce travail comporte toutefois plusieurs limites, lesquelles portent sur deux points principaux: l'impossibilité de conduire des observations et la difficulté à étendre nos études de cas au delà des deux cabinets qui ont accepté de participer à l'étude.

Le matériau collecté auprès des consultants à travers leurs récits de carrière et auprès des directeurs des ressources humaines et des associés en charge des RH est particulièrement riche. Il nous a permis de collecter un certain nombre de données sur des pratiques qui sont par essence impossible à observer car les arrangements idiosyncratiques étudiés ici sont négociés dans l'ombre et les consultants font de nombreux efforts pour qu'ils ne remettent pas en question l'ordre normatif. Toutefois, il serait intéressant de suivre ces consultants dans le temps de façon longitudinale et il semble important de pouvoir **combiner plusieurs sources de données** (en particulier de mettre en lien des données issues d'entretiens et d'observation) afin de mieux mettre en relation certains événements et la façon dont ils ont été vécus par les individus.

De plus, les difficultés que nous avons rencontrées pour accéder au terrain ne nous ont permis que de mener deux études de cas. Bien qu'une étude de cas même unique si elle est bien choisie puisse tout à fait fournir un matériau très riche, **il est néanmoins important de ne pas généraliser nos résultats au-delà de ce que nos deux cas nous permettent**. Management Consulting et Finance Consulting sont deux cas contrastés, ce qui a été déterminant pour identifier le rôle joué par la nature du service fourni dans la capacité d'ajustement et de prise en compte des enjeux d'équilibre de vie. Toutefois, il serait mal avisé de généraliser notre propos au delà du secteur du conseil sans que de plus amples études soient menées. Certaines des dynamiques évoquées dans cette thèse sont pertinentes au delà du conseil, dans d'autres professions voire même dans un certain nombre d'environnements plus généralement caractérisés par leur caractère « extrême » (Granter et al., 2015; Hewlett and Luce, 2006). Toutefois, il est évident qu'en tant que profession non régulée, le conseil est sujet à **une plus grande diversité organisationnelle que d'autres professions** (Kipping and Kirkpatrick, 2012), et ce que nous avons pu observer en termes d'arrangements organisationnels pourrait tout à fait ne pas être pertinent dans d'autres champs professionnels où le *up-or-out* peut être plus strict par exemple. Enfin, **il a également été montré qu'il existe une très grande variabilité quant aux normes régissant les questions d'équilibre de vie selon les contextes nationaux** (Meriläinen et al., 2004). Explorer plus en avant ces différences et ces similarités par delà les contextes nationaux apparaît donc nécessaire, notamment du fait de l'internationalisation croissante des PSFs (Greenwood et al., 2010; Greenwood and Miller, 2010) et du fait que les ressources humaines doivent de plus en plus être gérées non seulement entre practices disciplinaires mais également par delà les frontières nationales.

Perspectives de recherche

En dépit de ces limites, cette thèse ouvre plusieurs pistes de recherche pour le futur, et ce à trois niveaux différents : (1) avancer notre compréhension de l'expérience des professionnels au travail, (2) mieux comprendre comment les cabinets de conseil (et les PSFs en général) peuvent être amenés à changer à l'avenir pour mieux se saisir des enjeux d'équilibre de vie et enfin (3) suivre les évolutions liées au développement de cabinets de conseil en réseau.

(1) Dans cette thèse, nous argumentons que **comprendre l'expérience des professionnels au travail est un révélateur puissant de l'organisation interne des cabinets de conseil et les tensions que ceux-ci traversent**. Cet aspect requiert selon nous d'être approfondi.
Tout d'abord, recueillir les récits de carrière des consultants de façon plus longitudinale nous permettrait d'étudier la façon dont ils façonnent leur travail au fil du temps et à mesure qu'ils gagnent en expérience et en légitimité, et ce par delà le regard rétrospectif des consultants à un point donné de leur carrière. Cela a pu être réalisé avec un petit nombre de consultants (quatre d'entre eux) et nous a permis de collecter des données très riches sur l'évolution des aspirations des professionnels au fil du temps, en fonction de leur situation personnelle et de leur développement professionnel. Systématiser cette collecte longitudinale des données sur l'ensemble des participants nous permettrait d'identifier des récurrences dans les séquences de « job crafting ». Cela nous permettrait également d'approfondir notre compréhension des antécédents et conséquences (notamment négatives, comme des burnouts par exemple) de certains ensembles de techniques de job crafting et de comprendre pourquoi certaines stratégies

individuelles sont couronnées de succès là où d'autres échouent. Cela nous permettrait également de renforcer notre compréhension de la façon dont le job crafting individuel impacte l'organisation des cabinets de conseil et les mécanismes par lesquels le crafting individuel se transforme en ajustements organisationnels.
Une modalité possible de collecte de données longitudinales pourrait consister dans le fait de suivre des étudiants qui se spécialisent dans le conseil depuis l'obtention de leur diplôme. En tant qu'intervenants dans un master en apprentissage sur les « métiers du conseil » au sein duquel nous animons des ateliers de réflexivité ayant pour objet de suivre les étudiants et de les amener à échanger sur leurs expériences respectives. Combiner le matériau collecté lors de ces ateliers avec un suivi de ces jeunes consultants dans le temps pourrait nous permettre de suivre l'évolution de leurs représentation dans le temps.
Deuxièmement, à travers l'analyse des récits de carrière, un phénomène inattendu a été identifié : le fait que les professionnels rapportent adopter des comportements qu'ils décrivent eux-mêmes comme contre-normatifs et mettent en place un certain nombre de solutions pour les faire accepter, ce que nous avons proposé d'étudier à travers le concept de « conforming work ». Ce n'était pas l'objet de cette thèse que de se focaliser sur la façon dont les individus gèrent les attentes de conformité dont ils font l'objet mais nous pensons que ce concept est prometteur pour étudier les dynamiques qui permettent aux individus de changer l'ordre normatif dans leurs organisations, tout en dépassant l'opposition habituelle entre conformité et résistance. Explorer plus en avant les mécanismes sous-jacents du travail de conformation, dans les cabinets de conseil et au delà, pour comprendre les formes d'émancipation qui ne reposent ni sur la contestation sociale ni sur des micro formes de subversions par la cynisme, l'humour ou l'ironie.

(2) **Une deuxième voie de recherche concerne les organisations professionnelles traditionnelles elles-mêmes et leur capacité à traiter les demandes individuelles d'équilibre de vie dans le futur**, en particulier si elles continuent de croître si faiblement. Nous avons montré que les caractéristiques du travail sur projet (lequel peut varier entre types de services professionnels mais également d'un projet à l'autre) sont déterminantes pour comprendre la façon dont les cabinets peuvent répondre aux demandes d'équilibre de vie. Aussi, élargir nos recherches à d'autres cabinets de conseil mais également à d'autres champs professionnels (comme les cabinets d'avocats, ou d'architectes par exemple) nous permettrait d'enrichir les modèles proposés dans cette thèse pour comprendre la capacité d'ajustement des organisations professionnels et la nature des arrangements qu'elles peuvent proposer. Une autre piste de recherche pourrait également consister à développer notre compréhension des relations entre le travail et la nature des tâches réalisées par les professionnels et l'ensemble des choix organisationnels possibles, notamment pour accommoder l'équilibre de vie (en particulier : quel lien avec les caractéristiques de la profession, du marché, des institutions et de la stratégie ?).
En outre, cette recherche s'est principalement intéressée à comprendre les arrangements existants dans les cabinets de conseil et ce qui contraint leur étendue. Aussi, une autre piste de recherche consisterait à explorer plus en avant les voies de changement que pourraient prendre les organisations professionnelles à l'avenir se les associés venaient à élargir l'ensemble des possibles organisationnels pour mieux répondre aux demandes individuelles. Il pourrait par exemple s'agir de trouver des moyens innovant d'accroître le contrôle des clients par delà le présentiel, de diminuer les ratios de leverage, de prendre en compte les questions d'équilibre de

vie dans l'activité commerciale ou encore de renforcer la division du travail. Toutes ces pistes restent à explorer.

(3) **Enfin, une troisième voie de recherche consiste à analyser plus en avant la capacité des nouveaux acteurs réseaux tels qu'Eden McCallum ou Business Talent Group à offrir à leurs clients des services à la fois moins chers pour une qualité maintenue et plus de flexibilité pour leurs consultants**. Mieux comprendre ce phénomène nous permettrait d'évaluer le potentiel de ces nouveaux acteurs à reconfigurer le marché du conseil, et plus largement le champ de services professionnels dans leur ensemble. Pour le moment, la plupart des informations disponibles sur ces acteurs est principalement disponible dans la presse professionnelle et dans une large mesure, le fonctionnement interne de ces organisations et la nature de l'expérience des consultants indépendants avec lesquels ils travaillent restent inconnus. Collecter les récits de carrière de ces consultants nous permettrait de mieux comprendre leur capacité effective à mieux répondre aux enjeux d'équilibre de vie et de flexibilité. Bien qu'en principe, ces entreprises soient supposées permettre à leurs consultants de définir eux même leurs conditions de travail, il n'est pas évident que ce soit effectivement le cas en pratique.
Par delà la question de l'équilibre de vie étudié dans cette thèse, la montée de ces nouveaux acteurs pose un certain nombre de questions concernant la nature du service qu'ils délivrent lui-même. Il est en effet possible de se demander si ces nouvelles formes de conseil sont adaptées à tous les types de conseil et comment ce nouveau business model impacte l'exécution des projets. Plus spécifiquement, est-ce adapté aux grands projets de changement qui nécessitent la mobilisation d'équipes conséquentes de consultants ? Jusqu'ici, ces cabinets se contentent le plus souvent d'assigner des indépendants individuellement à des projets clients requérant des besoins spécifiques. Eden McCallum est une exception, mais pour le moment aucune information n'est disponible sur la façon dont les équipes sont composées et dont elles fonctionnent. La nature agnostique de ces cabinets en ce qui concerne la nature des solutions proposées par leurs consultants soulève également un certain nombre de questions quant à la capacité de ces entreprises d'organiser le partage de connaissance et de savoirs de leurs consultants et de permettre le développement de solutions innovantes dans un autre cadre que celui de relations d'emploi stables et conventionnelles. Plus fondamentalement, si l'absence de partage de connaissance et de construction de savoir communs s'avérait non problématique, cela renforcerait très fortement les thèses critiques selon lesquelles la dimension liée aux connaissances n'est pas centrale dans le travail de consultants et qu'il y a d'ailleurs une composante très forte de routine et d'ennui dans ces environnements - voir par exemple Costas et Kärreman (2015).

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Appendix: participant base

Name	Status	Firm	Length
Julian	Senior Consultant	IT Consulting 2	105 minutes
Peter	Senior Consultant	IT Consulting 2	50 minutes
Sophia	Manager	IT Consulting 2	95 minutes
Helen	Senior Manager	IT Consulting 2	60 + 90 minutes
Eleonore	Junior Consultant	Strategy Consulting 1	30 minutes
Rachel	Senior Consultant	Strategy Consulting 1	55 minutes
Oliver	Manager	Strategy Consulting 1	65 minutes
Jack	Director	Strategy Consulting 1	55 minutes + 120 minutes
Anthony	Director	Strategy Consulting 1	75 + 60 minutes
Emily	Alumni (junior consultant)	Big Four A	90 minutes
Violet	Senior Manager	Big Four A	65 minutes
Lea	Senior Consultant	Big Four A	50 minutes
Ethan	Manager	Banking Consulting 1	80 minutes
Estelle	Senior Consultant	IT Consulting 3	80 minutes
Alison	Senior Consultant	HR Consulting	80 minutes
Sandra	Partner	HR Consulting	90 minutes
Catherine	Manager	IT Consulting 4	70 minutes
George	Director	IT Consulting 4	55 minutes
Hugh	Junior Consultant	Big Four B	60 + 55minutes
Rose	Senior Manager	Strategy Consulting 2	80 minutes
Victoria	Manager	Accounting 1	70 minutes
Daniel	Alumni (Manager)	Banking Consulting 1	75 minutes
Max	Senior Manager	Recruitment Consulting	70 minutes
Charlie	Junior Consultant	Management Consulting	90 minutes
Jessica	Senior Consultant	Management Consulting	70 minutes
Lily	Senior Consultant	Management Consulting	110 minutes
Alexia	Senior Consultant	Management Consulting	120 minutes
Luke	Manager	Management Consulting	95 minutes
Charlotte	Manager	Management Consulting	85 minutes
Gregory	Manager	Management Consulting	100 minutes
Amy	Manager	Management Consulting	60 minutes
Neil	Senior Manager	Management Consulting	95 minutes
Rupert	Senior Manager	Management Consulting	130 minutes
Damian	Senior Manager	Management Consulting	85 minutes
David	Director	Management Consulting	65 minutes
Alex	Partner	Management Consulting	160 minutes
Philip	Partner	Management Consulting	115 minutes
Leonard	Partner	Management Consulting	65 minutes
Jodie	Alumni (Manager)	Management Consulting	70 minutes
Keith	Alumni (Senior Consultant)	Management Consulting	90 minutes
Owen	Junior Consultant	Finance Consulting	60 minutes
Gabriel	Junior Consultant	Finance Consulting	75 minutes
Mark	Junior Consultant	Finance Consulting	50 minutes
Lisa	Senior Consultant	Finance Consulting	90 minutes
Elizabeth	Senior Consultant	Finance Consulting	50 minutes
Nicolas	Senior Consultant	Finance Consulting	120 + 75 minutes
Alice	Manager	Finance Consulting	80 minutes
Eve	Manager	Finance Consulting	60 minutes

Name	Status	Firm	Length
William	Manager	Finance Consulting	90 minutes
Ann	Senior Manager	Finance Consulting	75 minutes
Thomas	Senior Manager	Finance Consulting	75 minutes
Patrick	Partner	Finance Consulting	120 minutes
James	Partner	Finance Consulting	80 minutes
Nathan	Partner	Finance Consulting	115 minutes
Andrew	Partner	Finance Consulting	60 minutes
Franck	Partner	Finance Consulting	85 minutes
Emma	Alumni	Finance Consulting	90 minutes
Nina	Alumni	Finance Consulting	45 minutes

Equilibre de vie dans le Conseil : de la proactivité individuelle aux arrangements organisationnels

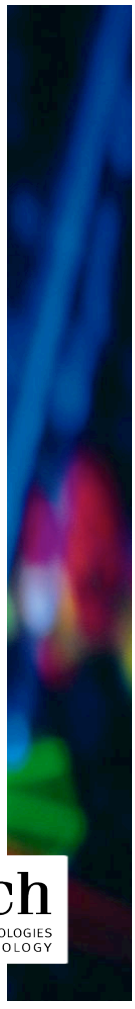
RESUME : Cette thèse a pour objet d'étudier les tensions que traversent les activités de services professionnels (audit, conseil…) depuis une trentaine d'années, à travers le prisme des enjeux d'équilibre de vie. Alors que ces entreprises sont mises en cause dans les medias pour leurs pratiques managériales encourageant leurs salariés à se dépasser sans cesse, elles n'ont jamais été aussi actives dans leur communication sur les enjeux de qualité de vie au travail. A travers l'analyse des travaux existants, nous montrons que le système incitatif en *up-or-out* des organisations professionnelles repose sur le présupposé que les professionnels aspirent principalement à être récompensés de leurs efforts par des bonus et des promotions. A travers l'analyse de 58 récits de carrière de consultants, nous identifions deux autres dimensions clés de leur expérience au travail : la nature des projets qui leurs sont assignés et l'équilibre de vie. Nous explicitons les techniques qu'ils mettent en œuvre pour tenter de répondre à ces aspirations. Dans un deuxième temps, après avoir analysé le discours managérial en vigueur dans 9 cabinets sur ces questions, nous décrivons - à travers l'étude comparative de deux cabinets de conseil – les ajustements qu'ils mettent en place pour mieux les soutenir. Nous discutons l'ampleur de la remise en cause du modèle d'organisation traditionnel de ces entreprises par ces évolutions, dans un contexte où elles sont de plus en plus menacées, que ce soit par une faible croissance de leurs activités, une pression sur les coûts, la sophistication de la demande des clients ou par un phénomène d'*uberisation* qui touche de façon croissante les services professionnels.

Mots clés : Entreprises de services professionnels, entreprises intensives en connaissances, cabinets de conseil, équilibre de vie, carrières, design organisationnel

Work-life balance in Consulting: from individual proactivity to organisational arrangements

ABSTRACT: This thesis aims at studying the tensions that professional service firms (audit firms, consultancies…) have been facing for the past thirty years, through the lens of work-life balance. While these firms are increasingly questioned in the media for their managerial practices that encourage their employees to excel themselves; they have never been so active in communicating on quality of work-life. Through a review of the literature, I show that the *up-or-out* incentive system of professional organisations lies on the assumption that professionals all mostly aspire to see their commitment rewarded by bonuses and promotions. Through the analysis of 58 consultants' career stories, I identify two additional dimensions of their experience at work: the nature of the projects they are assigned and work-life balance. Then, the techniques they use to fulfil these aspirations are described. Second, after studying the managerial discourse on work-life balance in 9 consultancies, through the comparative case study of two firms I analyse the adjustments they have implemented to accommodate individual needs. I discuss the extent to which these evolutions challenge the traditional organisation of professional service firms, at a time when they are increasingly threatened by low levels of growth in the industry; pressure on cost; the sophistication of clients' demands and the *uberisation* of the economy, which has also reached professional services.

Keywords: Professional service firms, knowlegde-intensive firms, consulting firms, work-life balance, careers, organizational design



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