Crossing Thresholds:

An Exploration of the Transitional Processes of New Entrant Management Consultants

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfilment

of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Management Studies

at

The University of Waikato

by

Garth Tunnicliffe

2020

Abstract

Despite the prominence of the management consulting industry and the appeal of roles within it, the recruitment and onboarding experiences of New Zealand management consultants are largely undocumented in existing academic literature**.** Research has shown new consultants face multiple challenges when becoming a competent consultant, including transitioning to the role; gathering required knowledge; constructing and aligning identity; and, coming to terms with both the ambiguous nature of consulting and the pressures generated by different tasks, firms and clients. This thesis explores how firms and individuals navigate this process by addressing the question: How might individuals and organisations improve the recruitment and onboarding of new entrant management consultants? In this context, the individuals are aspiring, incoming and relatively recent consultants, and the organisations are consultancy firms. This research gathers the stories of new management consultants via semi-structured interviews and utilises appreciative inquiry, analytical autoethnography and action research frameworks. In searching for ways to improve new management consultants' experiences during recruitment and onboarding, the researcher analysed their responses. In addition, this study identifies how Covid-19 impacted some acculturation process associated with entering those roles. The results suggest that new management consultant experiences can be improved by attending to three key themes. As well as improving experiences, the findings indicate that actions taken in line with addressing the themes can also increase new consultants' efficacy and develop their potential for success in the role.

Acknowledgements

To the participants who shared their experiences with me. Insights you have shared will help illuminate the path for future generations of consultants. Your journeys are inspiring. I hope this thesis is as useful to aspiring and new consultants as your stories were to me.

To Professor David McKie, my supervisor, my mentor, my role model and my friend. You are a constant inspiration to those around you. Your unfailing optimism, realism and belief in me drove me to live into possibility. I have learnt many life lessons from you and have become a more compassionate, confident and competent leader because of your guidance. I admire you and you have had a significant impact on my life. Thank you.

To the University of Waikato. Tertiary education has changed the course of my life, widening my horizons and creating unforeseen opportunities. I have been privileged to travel and receive financial support through various scholarships on offer. Your teaching and support staff care immensely and have been instrumental to my education success.

To my best friend and soon-to-be wife, Isabel. Throughout my education journey, you have been a constant. You have encouraged me more times than I can count. You have taught me to be more thankful and thoughtful. You have helped alleviate my worries and been a pillar in my moments of stress and doubt. I could not have done this without you.

To my son, Kairo. Getting to spend time with you as you began school, watching you grow into a considerate, caring and confident human being, makes the difficulties of completing full-time study worthwhile. I cherish the time we spend together and I am honoured to be a role model for you through my learning. Always seek more knowledge, my son, and always remain teachable.

This work is dedicated to my late grandfather, Neville Lawrence Price. You leave behind a momentous legacy in your descendants. Because of values you instilled in me from a young age, I have an unquenchable thirst to constantly better myself. You taught me to never settle for anything less than excellence, to always question the world and to seize every opportunity. The value you placed on learning was infectious and I know (and appreciate immensely) how proud you were of me for pursuing higher education. Thank you for your support and guidance.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Background

Central to the discipline of management consulting is its ability to continuously attract fresh talent. Indeed, the value of new consultants within their employing firm is well recognised (Alvesson, 2012; Edersheim, 2004; Waisberg & Nelson, 2018). When new management consultants commence employment, they are thrust into roles that require them to create value for their clients, advise on multiple facets of business, and hold a mixture of generalist and specialist knowledge across a range of industries (Curuksu, 2018). This research explores how new consultants navigate and make sense of the transition into their roles. It seeks to provide advice for those entering or seeking to enter the role, and for the firms who are employing them.

The profession of consulting is entrenched in society with over 120 years of history and an estimated global industry value of USD 260 billion in 2019 (Biggs, 2010; Statista, 2020). Nationally in 2019, the consulting services industry employed around 25,000 people and had a projected revenue of NZD 8.3 billion (IBISWorld, 2020). For a profession that advises multinational corporations and governments on practically every industry, gauging its true scope is problematic due to the ambiguous and unregulated nature of the profession (Kipping & Clark, 2012a). This century old practice is the further obscured by the absence of a universal management consulting definition, the lack of any governing body and even any typical consulting firm size, with practices ranging from individual operations to multinational corporations.

Management consulting is often considered an elite profession, ergo, competition is high among applicants and recruiting firms alike (Binder, Davis, & Bloom, 2016). Indeed, many independent websites provide freemium resources to help prepare applicants for the recruitment processes of MBB (McKinsey, BCG, Bain) and the Big 4 (Deloitte, EY, KPMG, PwC). Additionally, roadmaps of the hiring and induction process, graduate testimonials and descriptions of their ideal management consultant profile are readily available on the firm websites. Competent consultants who can satisfy client expectations are crucial to such firm's success, and selection procedures are the first step to ensuring this happens (Armbrüster, 2004). Indubitably, MBB and the Big 4 internally benchmark and measure the effectiveness of their hiring and induction practices. Furthermore, these firms feature frequently in quantitative rankings by news outlets and independent auditors that assess the work environment. Unsurprisingly, therefore, a broad overview of what it is like to work for these companies is available. However, data driven qualitative recounts of new consultants' experiences are largely absent from academic literature.

I found no New Zealand literature on new entrant management consultants' journeys. Additionally, there is little research globally that details consultants' experiences just prior to joining their firm of choice, through to the early career phases at their consultancy. The impact of the recruitment and induction process on new hires' experiences, on their understanding of their role and how they make sense of their new career paths is largely unclear. This is significant given the prominence of management consulting across most industries, the appeal of consulting for new entrants and the industry's reputation for attracting high level talent (Armbrüster, 2004; Rivera, 2012b). In this thesis I explore the experiences of new consultants (i.e., those who have been in their role for less than one year) by using the lenses of appreciative inquiry, analytical autoethnography and action research. I used semi-structured interviews to help me map the consultants' learnings throughout the application process and during the early stages of their consulting careers. Although this research seeks to clarify how new consultants navigate recruitment and onboarding processes, it is not just designed to add to knowledge in the area. It also has an action dimensions in seeking to provide recommendations designed to help myself at a time I stand on the cusp of joining a firm, and other aspiring consultants, as well as assisting their employing organisations to better understand and manage these processes.

My motives for pursuing this largely unexplored research topic are primarily due to a vested interest. Namely, the realm of consulting appeals to me in all its confused and confusing glory. My late grandfather, an engineer by trade, inspired in me from an early age the confidence that all problems are solvable, they just require the right approach. Consulting encapsulates avant-garde and analytical problem solving together with a passion for communicating and creating meaningful change. It offers intellectual intrigue, spanning the most difficult projects faced by both the public and private sectors, often delivering noteworthy yet largely unacknowledged change that impacts the global community.

I have known about management consulting for less than a year, however my affinity with the profession has been present my whole life. As (Binder et al., 2016) observe, this is not unusual as it often goes unrealised as a potential career path until after commencement of tertiary study. In one of my previous careers, I enjoyed a fast-paced work environment, improving business efficiency through diagnostics, utilising my communication abilities to achieve mutual outcomes, and the need to constantly learn new skills to stay relevant and increase promotion opportunities. The literature and the interviews tended to confirm these as central to management consulting. For example, while the trajectory in early career consulting has a clearly defined progression, later stage promotion is based on performance and completion of learning requirements (Noury, Gand, & Sardas, 2016).

Furthermore, consulting will undoubtedly allow me to utilise knowledge gained through my tertiary education. While completing my undergraduate and postgraduate study, I witnessed the value of innovation in problem solving and further experienced the importance of diverse thinking in teams. I now know that any given moment, leadership and excellence are achieved, in part, through empowering others to do the same, epitomising the aphorism of the rising tide that lifts all boats. When multiple points of individual brilliance coalesce, it allows the realisation and achievement of bigger and bolder projects, previously unimaginable. Consulting offers me a chance to enact these learnings.

1.1 Rationale

The findings of this study contribute the following to the body of management consulting and to the body of work that can be called threshold literature. In completing this research, I sought to understand how new consultants are successful. This involved in the initial stages, gaining employment with their firms and once in their role, when the consultants embrace their identity as a consultant. Through this study I hope to provide insights on best practice for aspiring consultants, incoming consultants and their employing firms. To achieve this, my research question for this study was: “How might individuals and organisations improve the recruitment and onboarding of new entrant management consultants?”

Sub questions that helped me answer this question, and explanations of why they were chosen are as follows:

1. What do organisations do well in the recruitment and onboarding for new entrant management consultants?

Grounded in appreciative inquiry, this question is repeated until it helps establish what firms do well, both intentionally and unintentionally. Through identification it allows these best practices to be replicated.

2. What could organisations do better in the recruitment and onboarding for new entrant management consultants?

This question, also repeated, seeks to establish a pattern of consensus in areas for improvement across the industry, irrespective of the firm.

3. At what stage, or stages, of their management consulting journey do new entrants perceive themselves as authentic management consultants?

Here I sought to establish when and how new consultants constructed their management consultant identity.

4. Are such perceptions important and can they be influenced?

This question seeks to explore the role that identity plays in assimilation and actions that organisations and individuals can take to improve this process.

5. Could threshold concepts and threshold crossings help improve onboarding for the new entrant management consultants, and/or for their employers, or for both?

While conducting my literature review, I identified threshold theories as a possible option for improving the integration of consultants into their new role. I had a wider interest in threshold theory and was pleasantly surprised to find that threshold crossings resonated with how new consultants experience their development.

I wanted to use my research to understand new entrant consultant's perceptions of what helped shape their journey into consultancy. I also wanted to provide value to consulting firms by identifying factors that contribute to new consultants' development and how they can better catalyse and facilitate these. For aspiring and new consultants, I hope to provide insight into the recruitment and onboarding processes by elucidating internal and external factors that contribute to the growth of successful new consultants.

The New Zealand consulting industry is largely underrepresented in scholarly literature. Furthermore, new entrant consultants are largely portrayed as homogeneous with their more senior counterparts in contemporary international consulting literature. This remains true, even though participants of this study proposed that New Zealand consultants are more generalist oriented in their industries of work than their counterparts overseas. This thesis is positioned in a New Zealand context, yet some findings are applicable in a global context.

1.2 Thesis structure

Chapter 2 reviews available literature and establishes the key themes that underpin my research.

Chapter 3 introduces the theoretical framework and justifies the choice of research methods. It discusses research design, data collection and data analysis processes.

Chapter 4 presents the interview results and discusses the implications of themes found through thematic analysis. It explores the themes in available literature.

Chapter 5 summarises the research with conclusions, offers recommendations, identifies limitations and suggests future research directions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Mapping the Field

2.0 Introduction

This review begins by defining and describing management consulting and justifying why the field is important and worth researching. It uses that starting point to establish a context for the specific question that guides the whole thesis: how do new consultants navigate the challenges of onboarding and of getting established in their role? It then goes on to examine what the management consulting literature identifies as the challenges in those transitions and responses to them. Since academic and practitioner literature in that field employs the idea of liminality for those transitions, the thesis explores the possible relevance of threshold concepts and threshold crossings both to understanding those transitions and to engaging productively with them. Accordingly, the chapter also briefly reviews some of the literature on liminality and threshold thinking and experiences. Given the (un)timely arrival of COVID-19, it also offers a brief examination of emerging literature pertinent to consultancy.

To establish context, this literature review first briefly defines management consulting, as the generally agreed upon scope of this industry is non-exclusive and the subject of frequent academic debate. As Henningsen (2020) observes: “The complexity of the phenomenon of management consultancy is due not only to the enormous size, geographical extension and organizational segmentation of the management consultancy industry” (p. 7), but it also extends “to the methodologies management consultants subscribe to and the service products they offer to their clients” (p. 7).

In reviewing the literature, I identified a research gap around explanations of how new entrant consultants and their firms overcome the challenges associated with entry into the role. The thesis ventures into this unexplored realm. The review explores the view of consulting at a junior level as a collective experience as participants reflect on their experiences.

2.1 An Overview of Management Consulting Research

Although definitions of a consultant's role are varied, amalgamation of some of the most prominent (Greiner & Metzger, 1983; Kipping & Clark, 2012a; Kubr, 2002) can be synthesised into the following definition: *Management consultants offer problem-solving and implementation services to clients with the intent to add value through increases in one or more loci of managerial, operational and financial performance*. To support this definition, which focuses on the knowledge that consultants hold to achieve their outcomes, this review first turns to recent consolidations of prominent academic consulting literature.

Mosonyi, Empson, and Gond (2020) conduct a systematic review of 219 peer-reviewed journals published over the last 28 years, to establish management consulting's place in contemporary management research. The results of their thematic inductive analysis separates existing research into one or more of the following three areas of study: Identity; Knowledge; and Power. Mosonyi et al. (2020) identify the limitations of taking this metaparadigmatic view, which indeed recluses potentially unimagined paradigms present in consulting literature. Nevertheless, they mitigate this limitation somewhat by proposing that future research utilise an integrative framework. This is situated at the crossroads of identity, power and knowledge in order to conceptualise correlations between these themes. For this thesis, the practical application of this literature is found in the identity-knowledge-power interface where all three themes were found to contribute to the rise in liminality. This in turn, opened pathways to subsequent threshold crossings that enables that limitations of liminality to be overcome.

Mosonyi et al. (2020) and Cerruti, Tavoletti, and Grieco (2019) undertake comparative reviews in their attempts to collate consulting literature. The two reviews share similarities in their paradigmatic focus and inclusion of only scholarly peer reviewed journals. This approach suggests the paradigms prescribed may not encapsulate all relevant literature. Interestingly, Cerruti et al. (2019) find most of the empirical evidence to be qualitative in nature, perhaps reflecting the relatively unbounded nature of consultancy. They argue that management consulting sits on a continuum, suspended betwixt the demands of providing innovation and, more recently, a stronger data driven approach. This article proposes the following drivers of consultant efficacy: competence of the individual and the assessment model used; held and developed skills, the impact of human resource management; knowledge management within the firms, and; how success is perceived by consultants and their organisation. This thesis considers how these signpost potential instances that can both cause liminality and catalyse threshold crossings in new consultants.

An overview of management consulting literature would be incomplete without including critical analysis of the available research. Sturdy's (2011) detailed examination of consultancy, its role in management and the claims made from literature, showed that the claims made for management consulting's impact on management practice are often unsubstantiated and lack any firm academic grounding. Fortunately, since this study was published, many have sought to fill that academic void (Gill, 2015; Harvey, Morris, & Müller Santos, 2017; Kipping & Clark, 2012b; Sturdy, Wylie, & Wright, 2013; Visscher, Heusinkveld, & O'Mahoney, 2018). Nevertheless, the assertions of caution posed by Sturdy (2011), of supplementing consultancy research findings with existing management theory remain pertinent when executing data collection for this thesis.

2.2 Transitioning to the role of consultant: Challenges and responses

At a macro level, new consultants are faced with the simultaneous pressures of acclimatising to their workplace and navigating a profession known to be stressful (Meriläinen, Tienari, Thomas, & Davies, 2004; Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2016). On closer examination, the new consultant must also strive to produce measurable outputs and provide more value to their employer than they have taken from their employing organisation (Eichhorn, 2017; Kammeyer-Mueller, Wanberg, Rubenstein, & Song, 2013; Watkins, 2013). While unable to be deemed more acute than career consultants' experiences, due to a lack of empirical evidence, the struggles of new entrant consultants encompass a unique set of circumstances that undoubtedly amplify difficulties associated with the profession of consulting. This thesis argues that challenges faced by new consultants include: role transition; self-perception and image projection; task, organisational and client pressures, and; knowledge requirements.

Schmidt (2017) uses storytelling and narratives to describe the challenges faced by consulting hopefuls. It is argued that consultancy firms project an image of the application process and the role of the new consultant to groom their applicants and maximise the value they provide. He also listed four key messages firms promote:

> First, consulting is one of the hardest and most selective jobs one can have. Second, no other job makes one grow so much in such a short time period. Third, no one can get the job without thorough interview preparation. Fourth, smart candidates use smart books to study for the interviews that are not merely to be regarded as selection processes but rather as performances of one's identity (Schmidt, 2017, p. 162).

This quote provides key insight into the way aspiring and new consultants may frame their challenges. It also provides a useful avenue for investigating how they assimilate the dimensions of their new role.

In understanding how new entrants respond to challenges, it is crucial to examine self-perception and image projection. Bourgoin and Harvey (2018) argue that consultants need to constantly present an image of professionalism to clients. At the same time they need to learn as much about their client as possible (Bourgoin & Harvey, 2018). The conditions are ripe for triggering Hillman's (2013) *Imposter Syndrome* in attempts to do both and stay authentic. Building on Goffman's (1967) classic use of dramaturgical analysis, Bourgoin and Harvey's 21-month ethnographic study places the consultants as actors. The key is to balance a credible client-facing image while simultaneously acquiring enough knowledge about their client's business to produce tangible results. From the study, Bourgoin and Harvey identify the crafting of relevance, resonance and substance as tactics used by consultants to manage this tension. The specific tactics are to draw on existing knowledge while portraying competence; generating rapport by recapitulating and reframing information gained from clients back to the clients; and producing early results that demonstrate a level of productivity.

These tactics provide value by both boosting client relations and by bolstering the consultants' self-worth. Pertinent to this thesis, it is purported that new entrants experienced more acute feelings of lack of credibility combined with the added pressure of brief periods to learn before having to deliver. Bourgoin and Harvey's (2018) work usefully pinpoints instances in which role challenges may arise, and ways in which consultants deal with it. Consequently, I expect to find comparable experiences in this research. This thesis also seeks expand on the work of Bourgoin and Harvey by identifying how consultants develop these strategies.

Many scholars have recognised the importance of identity construction in consulting (Gill, 2015; Kitay & Wright, 2007; Mosonyi et al., 2020; Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2016). The potential for an identity to disconnect can vary tremendously firm to firm. Research suggests the cause is the established identity of the organisation itself and the differing identities of the individuals working within them (Alvesson & Empson, 2008). Of particular significance for this thesis among identity construction literature is research by Gill (2015) evaluating the impact of perceived elite status on workplace performance anxiety. However, this study is limited in that, whilst including interview participants ranging from graduate to senior consultants, it only explores the perceptions of one firm and eight participants. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Gill identifies the culture of concealing anxiety and stresses due to perceived colleague and workplace expectations. In turn, this generates unrealistic personal standards and an unhealthy self-identity, the point at which they feel the need to maintain sustained peak performance, or risk damaging their status within the firm (Gill, 2015, p. 319).

A self-perpetuating cycle, living up to expectations can be seen to only increase the associated pressures to further perform. In application, this cyclic endeavour to constantly achieve and outperform undoubtedly places immense pressure on all levels of consultants, in particular, those entering into a workplace and needing to prove their value. Mühlhaus and Bouwmeester (2016) corroborate this supposition, using exploratory research and social identity theory to explore how management consultants shape identity through self-categorisation. They find that if consultants fail to meet normalised occupational standards, work stress increases exponentially from fear of social exclusion from a perceived high-status clique.

Of direct relevance to this thesis is a study by Chao (2005) detailing the experiences of 25 new entrant management consultants acclimatising to their roles. Using a naturalistic inquiry paradigm and interviews, Chao suggests that several key factors influence a consultant’s transition into their new workplace. Akin to the findings of Eichhorn (2017) research, Chao (2005) identifies learning on a project, and getting assigned with more challenging tasks as they gain competence, as a key way new consultants learn. Alongside that Chao (2005) found that relationships with peers, supervisors, mentors and clients helped the new consultants in three ways: to understand their workplace and expectations, to learn new skills, and to develop internal networks that helped them scope project opportunities. Consultants mostly learned from on-the-job experiences rather than formalised training. This practice could be explained by the findings of a heavy institutional and cultural focus within consultancies of delivering billable hours or perhaps a penchant for use of the "sink or swim" learning method. This suggests the process of learning to be a consultant and gaining an identity is a good indicator of how consultants begin to transition their identity.

On knowledge gathering requirements, work by Eichhorn (2017) demonstrates clearly the learning hurdles new consultants need to overcome to acculturate to a consulting workplace. Although this is from a thesis, her work is innovative in the nature of its auto-ethnographical research. While acknowledging her data may not be valid in a wider context, and her literature is not peer reviewed, other scholars (Bourgoin & Harvey, 2018) confirm the behaviours identified here.

Eichhorn's thesis is particularly pertinent to this study in finding the stages a consultant goes through to acquire new knowledge. She lists them as swift acquisition of meaningful information when starting a new project, being able to quickly produce tangible results, and learning responsibility through owning a portion of the project. For this study, these represent learning moments for knowledge that junior consultants need to acquire in order to become a consultant.

Once in the role, job crafting, the act of physically or cognitively adjusting self, structure or relationships in the workplace, is an action consultants are purported to take (Singh & Singh, 2016). This study finds crafting is a response to pressures such as overloading, ambiguity and resource constraints, however, the process can also be initiated by peers or managers. At a personal level, job crafting may involve pursuing progression opportunities, seeking more work or volunteering, and procrastinating. At a social level, the majority of crafting occurs through building and maintaining relationships. At the structural level, crafting through task adjustments, such as improvisation, were the most common. Other research supports the existing of job crafting through methods such as bricolage.

Recent work by Visscher et al. (2018), for example, challenges traditional portrayals of bricolage, as resource constrained, and a lower status activity, and resituates it as both an elite identity and an essential skill among management consultants. For these researchers, a bricoleur embodies creation through innovation when resources are scarce. Using an abductive research design, conducting interviews with consultants and their webpages, Visscher et al. apply the concept of bricolage to management consultants, a field previous not associated with bricolage. Given increasingly complex and ambiguous working conditions, the authors pose a strong argument for the value bricolage presents,. Since new entrant consultants are unlikely to start out with substantial resource allocations, they must quickly learn to innovate with available resources. Accordingly, although they may not seek it, the creation of a self-identity status of bricoleur might be forced upon these new consultants. In addition, Visscher et al. (2018) suggests that, should a new consultant learn to become a bricoleur, they may gain wider acceptance among their peers and thereby solidify their identity as a management consultant.

Boredom often manifests in knowledge and professional service firm work, resulting in disillusion among those who experience it (Costas & Kärreman, 2016). Contrary to the official discourse promoted by consultancy firms of the work consultants do, Costas and Kärreman find ennui among workers who were drawn by the allure of elite image of consulting. The methodology used to generate these conclusions is extensive - data from two management consultancy firms were gathered that incorporated 102 interviews, informal conversation, observation in numerous workplace settings and analysis of internal company documents. One problem with this approach is the assumption that all consultancies operate their recruitment and duty allocation in a similar manner to the case studies analysed. Nevertheless, the data showed that prior to arrival at the firm, consultants are sold an idealised view of the profession, namely, one of creativity, autonomy, status and swift career progression (Costas & Kärreman, 2016, p. 74). On arrival, and indeed acknowledged among the ranks even at the director level, Costas and Kärreman (2016) find the reality to be somewhat different. This disconnect, between expectations and reality, leads to a phenomenon the authors identify as identity regulation. After all, if a new entrant consultant, having made it through the strenuous recruitment process to practice as a consultant, expects to adopt a glamourous identity and is, instead, confronted by the potential of monotony, wherein does their identity lie? This betwixt and between position fits with the state of liminality that has been identified in cultural traditions by anthropologists.

2.3 The presence of liminality in new management consultants and the opportunities it presents

Of the challenges faced by consultants, this review identifies liminality as one of the most pervasive in other ways too. It is well established that consultant careers exist in a liminal space; so too it is known that liminality is present in both graduates and people transitioning careers (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003; Furlong, 2017; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016; Tansley & Tietze, 2013). First identified by Alvesson (1993), recent systematic reviews of management consulting literature (Cerruti et al., 2019; Mosonyi et al., 2020) again underscore the ambivalent nature of management consulting. Closer examination of available research reveals that studies into how consultants navigate this liminality mostly depict this phenomenon as analogous and unaffected by the segmentation that exist among consultants of differing tenure. However, this thesis positions new entrant consultants' experiences of liminality as a significant topic of exploration underpinned by the uncertainty faced by new entrant consultants.

The concept of liminality stems from the anthropological work of Van Gennep (1960) and was further developed by Turner (1977). Liminality exists when significant, transformative change is being undertaken (Van Gennep, 1960). Those experiencing liminality are in an ambiguous state, necessary to deconstruct previously held beliefs and reconstruct them through the combination of theory, reality and learning (Turner, 1977). Four types of liminality are supposed by Van Gennep: a shift in social status; physical relocation; change of circumstances; and the passage of time. This thesis argues that new entrant consultants are subjected to all of these as they commence their new roles.

Consulting as a liminal space has been established in the literature. Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) provided an essential foundation from which contemporary literature on consulting liminality has developed. Through applied institutional and narrative theories, and participant interviews and observations, the authors argue that untypically for people who find themselves in a liminal space, consultants flit in and out of liminality with each new project. The authors argue that as a result they seldom experience the rites of passage necessary to overcome liminality and instead, paradoxically, are called upon to create rites of passage necessary to transform their client's organisation. Czarniawska and Mazza's (2003) proposal of continuous, role-integrated liminality in management consulting poses an issue for the threshold-crossing perspective of this thesis.

Proving the usefulness of threshold thinking in addressing the liminality experienced by new consultants faces a barrier if academic claims of consultancy's permanently liminal state are substantiated. Recent arguments for the state of permanent liminality in consulting exist (Bamber, Allen-Collinson, & McCormack, 2017; Budtz-Jørgensen, Johnsen, & Sørensen, 2019; Johnsen & Sørensen, 2015; Reed & Thomas, 2020). If consulting is indefinitely liminal, this suggests that threshold crossings would never occur in consulting as they require the liminal period to come to an end (Kiley & Wisker, 2009, p. 432). However, Söderlund and Borg (2018) call for further research into the state of extended liminality. They posit the basis of a ritual overcoming of liminality. It is important when addressing consulting liminality, therefore, to establish a firm grounding of the concept of liminality used by this thesis. Specifically, when the term "liminality" is used in this thesis, it refers to the state of temporary liminality, as opposed to permanent liminality. Furthermore, clear career development pathways and well-defined milestones in the early career stages of consulting nullifies the potential for permanent liminality. That is why, for this thesis, it is most appropriate to adopt the concept of temporary liminality as is usually the case with its anthropological roots in such cases as coming of age rituals that end with an adolescent's acceptance as an adult in an adult world.

Nevertheless, different liminal situations can occur in consultancy at different stages. Even experienced consultants, when seeking to achieve work-life balance, face social pressure from both their organisation and their peers (Noury et al., 2016). Detailed examination of work-life balance pressures through exploratory case studies in two professional service firms – management and financial consulting – revealed that the most successful work-life balance is achieved in these firms through individual arrangements. Noury et al. find significant work-life balance restraints based on the nature of projects running (such as the ratio of junior to experienced staff, or deadlines), individual circumstances and performance at the firm, and the established work-life balance culture of the firm (driven by senior staff, such as partners or longer tenure employees, who hold opposing views to a younger generation of consultants). For example, from a new employee's perspective, it can be argued that speaking to a senior about leave or flexible working arrangements, when there is known stigma around these topics, is daunting and creates uncertainty.

The research by Noury et al. (2016) is helpful in identifying workplace contributors to liminality. Particularly in the early stages of employment before the culture is learned, unknowing gives rise to the liminality that exists in organisational working arrangements. While the study by Noury et al. (2016) gives sound insight into work-life balance, only 1 of 19 research participants interviewed in the management consulting firm held a junior position, therefore, the specific implications for new management consultants need more investigation.

It is known that liminality is, concurrently, destructive with risk, and constructive with opportunities (Garsten, 1999; Turner, 1977). A focus on constructive liminality is especially pertinent to this thesis. An often cited study by Beech (2011) suggests the transition through liminality, culminating in a new identity, is significant for both the individual and their community. Liminality is helpful in providing learning opportunities, skill growth and a richer range of work experiences to draw on (Tempest & Starkey, 2004, p. 522). While in a state of liminality, the inherent lack of a formed identity, presents an opportunity by allowing the development of applicable situational identities, meaning the individual is more flexible in the presence of uncertainty (Winstone & Moore, 2017). Liminality can force sensemaking to occur, causing the individual to evaluate who they are and who they want to be, forcing reflection about identity that may not have otherwise transpired (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014). Furthermore, depending on the circumstances in which it plays out, liminality allows for individual identity growth, creating a more open and flexible employee that has the ability to operate in a globalised context (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016).

Recently it has been suggested that some consultants embrace their liminal identity, using it to navigate power-dynamics in an organisation to facilitate change (Iszatt-White & Lenney, 2020). Although this recognition is significant, it is limited methodologically by the single participant used for this study. Other instances of liminal embracement include liminal events that are engineered by consultants and used as a strategic tool to navigate firm and client relations (Sturdy, Schwarz, & Spicer, 2006). Sturdy et al. (2006) demonstrate ways in which organisation and liminality combine to produce unrealised opportunities for consultants and their firms. However, such events are focused more so on senior level consultants or clients, so new consultants' exposure to them may be limited.

Of important note are coping mechanisms that may manifest as a result of consultants' liminality, until they are able meet the requirements of their threshold crossing. For example, learning how to positively view the challenges of management consulting as growth opportunities can positively impact consultants' ability to cope with stress (Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2016). Alternatively, consultants may fantasise about, and relabel their off-work identities and activities, to justify the volume of time spent committed to the workplace (Muhr & Kirkegaard, 2013). Additionally, the potential for high rewards may be enough to offset the known liminal cost of gaining elite status, self-identity permitting (Tansley & Tietze, 2013). It can be argued then, that new consultants benefit somewhat from being in a liminal state, acquiring latent skills prior to achieving a threshold crossing.

2.4 Crossing Thresholds

The examination of threshold crossings to date have largely been focused in the realm of education and tertiary study (Nicola-Richmond, Pépin, Larkin, & Taylor, 2018). This thesis suggests threshold thinking may facilitate the transition of new consultants. Threshold concepts and the subsequent crossings were first established as transformative moments in which a learner grasps a key concept that, until then, has blocked substantial learning. Some theorists maintain that these concepts and their realisation (i.e., their sustained application in practice that is often called a threshold crossing) enables an irreversible transformation. A good example in common usage is that once you learn to ride a bike, you never forget it.

It also has a transformative component in how the concept can serve to open up and connect latent ties to transform a worldview and enable a renewed and widened perspective (J. Meyer & Land, 2005, 2006). As part of the identification of such a moment, “transformation, illumination and revelation are key signifiers of threshold crossing” (Wisker, Kiley, & Masika, 2017, p. 122). First recognised in undergraduate student education, the value of threshold learning has more recently been recognised in post-graduate study and management learning (Irving, Wright, & Hibbert, 2019; Kiley & Wisker, 2009; Yip & Raelin, 2012). While threshold concepts and crossings are explored in depth among different tertiary subjects, literature is scarce in other instances where threshold crossings may be equally valid strategies. This thesis suggests that the available literature offers opportunities to apply the theory of threshold concepts to the transitional role of new management consultants.

Accordingly, the thesis seeks to explore how applying threshold crossings could help new consultants succeed in the transition to their role. It fits particularly with overcoming the liminality – already identified in the literature – that is associated with it. Furthermore, it responds to calls by Nicola-Richmond et al. (2018) for further evidencing of instances of threshold crossings outside the realm of education. It is possible that problem-based learning (PBL) may catalyse such threshold crossings (Savin-Baden & Tombs, 2018). The premise of PBL is solving complex problems that have a range of potential solutions, in the process engaging new ways of planning and thinking (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). Savin-Baden and Tombs (2018) argue that transdisciplinary PBL, such as a state of liminality or shifts in pedagogical self-perception, often triggers threshold crossings, or elucidates threshold concepts (p. 7). Thus, it is possible that new consultants experience a form of PBL when they are forced to ramp up their knowledge when undertaking an unfamiliar project.

Knowledge gathering is one way new consultants gain their consultant skill set (Chao, 2005; Eichhorn, 2017). Waisberg and Nelson (2018) posit that a lack of knowledge of client organisations and operations provide an opportunity for junior consultants to implement novel solutions to client problems, as opposed to recycling firm knowledge. Waisberg and Nelson found the culture in a leading consultancy firm encouraged questioning of decisions that the consultants disagreed with. Similarly, it is reported that, in McKinsey, a given idea or solution is generally weighted equally, tenure preclusive, and primarily considered for its quality (Rasiel, 1998). Additionally, the junior consultants' proximity to, and collaboration with, lower level client employees who would be using the solutions allowed the junior consultants to see that knowledge reuse was not feasible in certain situations. This provided junior consultants agency to create solutions that, although did not always meet the expectations of partners and client executives, produced an outcome better tailored for the client's needs. This piece of literature, when combined with work on threshold thinking work (e.g., Harlow, Cowie, McKie, and Peter, 2017), supports the supposition that this experience may catalyse a threshold crossing in new consultants. New entrant consultants who use their own solutions to solve client problems create the opportunity to overcome the liminality of their in-between state, through a threshold crossing into accepting their identity as management consultants.

It is possible that identity transformation associated with threshold crossings is, in part, triggered through internal workplace systems. For example, research has shown that, without simultaneous communitas and identity development, learned firm knowledge alone is inadequate to help junior consultants overcome liminality (Tansley & Tietze, 2013). They suggest that maximising talent potential and progressing through the rites of passage associated with consulting career progression requires a multi-faceted approach. Participation, in tandem, from the individual consultant, their peers and their firm are required to successfully navigate the liminal barrier and trigger the subsequent threshold crossing. Tansley and Tietze (2013) partially identify ways in which this may happen. However, since their research participants all originated from the same firm, lessons gained may not be applicable at a larger scale. Furthermore, as their data gathering focus groups included consultants at multiple career stages, it is plausible that junior consultants may have been reticent in the company of their more tenured seniors (Tansley & Tietze, 2013).

2.5 Covid and Consulting

Preliminary predictions saw a contraction of the consulting industry, alongside a redistribution of resources to match industry changes (Beroe, 2020). This will undoubtedly see a restructure in firms' recruitment and utilisation of labour, which was expected to be a finding reflected by my research. At the time of completion of this thesis, I was unable to find other academic literature that detailed the impact of Covid-19 on management consultants. However, given the confluent timing of this thesis and Covid-19, I thought it added value to consider a synthesis of peripheral literature.

Deloitte (2020) published a report that discusses leadership during Covid-19. It outlines pillars it sees as fundamental to resilient leadership. First, it details the importance of balancing company purpose and stakeholder psychological security needs through making decisions that are empathetic and that consider the impacts of Covid-19 on employees. Second, owning the narrative through effective, authentic and transparent leadership communication allows companies to ensure misinformation is minimised. The final pillar relevant to this thesis is decisive action, involving making the best possible decisions with the available information under pandemic imposed time pressures.

Covid-19’s impact on leadership was a commonly discussed topic among management literature on the pandemic. Tourish (2020) observes possible leadership responses to Covid-19 and their subsequent impact on company operations. He provides commentary on the potential decisions made within this period of uncertainty have, as they have a high margin for error and wide-reaching consequences if wrongly made. Furthermore, increasingly globalised systems and interconnected structures exponentially increase the complexity of decisions. It is argued that leaders, in impending times of crisis, are forced to choose between preventative action, which may seem unnecessary if nothing eventuates, or reactive action, that is then heralded as complacency. By exploring consultancy firms’ actions during Covid-19 and the impact it had on my participants, this thesis attempts to respond to Tourish’s call for management literature that explores leadership practices during the time of Covid-19’s intense uncertainty.

Challenges faced by new employees, such as acclimatising to the work place and adjusting to their new environment are well established in literature (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013). Carnevale and Hatak (2020) propose a new challenge catalysed by Covid-19. Person-environment fit is the congruence between a work environment and an employee’s values, desires and beliefs. Carnevale and Hatak argue that Covid-19 significantly disrupted this process, which is essential to helping new employees acclimatise to their workplace. They also note experiences impacted by Covid-19 that are tied to person-environment fit. These include socialisation, training and recruitment and selection processes. Further Covid-19 challenges induced by remote working include the toll of increased virtual communication and psychological impacts on employees after exiting lockdown

(DeFilippis, Impink, Singell, Polzer, & Sadun, 2020; Tan et al., 2020). This thesis seeks to substantiate claims made within these papers.

2.6 Summary

The plethora and variety of management consulting literature make the designation of management consulting as a research field challenging. However, it is clear new consultants are underrepresented in available research. This presents an opportunity for exploration of their experiences.

During my review of the literature, I found evidence of where new consultants would likely face barriers in their journey. Firstly, difficulty when transitioning to the role of consultant was identified. Secondly, strenuous knowledge gathering requirements were found to be a substantial and ongoing requirement facing new consultants. Thirdly, significant amounts of management consulting literature dedicated to identity exists; in the context of this study, new consultants must undergo the construction and alignment of a consulting identity. Fourthly, the literature suggests consultants face a range of pressures generated by tasks, their employing firm and clients they engage with. Fifthly, Covid-19 literature, although scarce, was included in my literature review as I expected new consultants to be impacted by this event. Finally, the ambiguous and liminal nature of consulting was purported to pose a significant challenge for new consultants.

Works focused on consultants' identities and experiences, combined later with the participant interviews, suggest that liminality is perceived as a common occurrence.

The temporary liminality faced by new consultants appears particularly acute. In their roles, identity, organisation and knowledge factors coalesce in forming this liminality. Moreover, within the state of liminality, it is not too strong a verb to claim that growth opportunities *collide* with turbulent identity challenges. Notwithstanding, consultants emerge from the other side and demonstrate competence. This increased my expectations of finding evidence of thresholds during this study.

The rites of passage associated with liminality and the duties of management consultants suggest a threshold crossing must occur in them to allow the creation of a new identity. A comprehensive review of available literature showed that despite the prominence of consulting and its status as an elite occupation, little has been done to identify how and when these crossings occur. Yet, existing literature suggests multiple occasions, milestones and events that may trigger threshold crossings. Therefore, this thesis sought to identify instances and the impact of threshold crossings in an environment where they have not traditionally been studied. It also led me to consider thresholds as a way that new management consultants think about their journey and how to navigate it.

My review of the literature led me to believe that new consultants face significant pressure in their roles. This thesis seeks to fill a gap in existing literature by exploring the journeys of new management consultants and occurrences in this seemingly tumultuous time. It focuses the inquiry around the question: “How might individuals and organisations improve the recruitment and onboarding of new entrant management consultants?”

Chapter 3: Research Overview and Methodology

3.0 Introduction

This chapter comprises my considerations for my research. First, it sets out my chosen framework and reasoning for selecting qualitative research. Second, it presents my ethical considerations prior to, during and post research. Third, it set outs the interview question design, the data collection process followed, and the methods used for data analysis. The process of defining my research methodology guided me to select the most appropriate theories, concepts and analysis methods. Literature on methods (Kothari, 2004; Silverman, 2016), proposes that Framework selection and Research methodology development are essential to a sound foundation on which to conduct good research.

When selecting a research approach, I reflected on the goals of my research, what I wanted to get from the research and what I wanted to give my audiences. My greatest learning at this point followed Bloomberg and Volpe's (2019) insight that the research problem and purpose must be congruent with the chosen approach (p. 38). These considerations helped me determine that qualitative research was the best way to explore this topic. Another key learning during this selection period was that qualitative research is governed by context and the complexity of the human condition, seeking to understand the 'what' and 'how' in participant perceptions of real-world events. Combined with a constructivism paradigm, I determined qualitative research to be the best way to understand the experiences of new entrant management consultants from *their* perspectives. I wanted to generate practical advice for aspiring consultants and their employing firms that allowed them to act, and to have agency, rather than be acted upon.

3.1 Selecting a Guiding Framework

Given the multiple facets of my field of study, I considered several different frameworks: Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2015); Case Studies (Yin, 2018); Action Research (Reason & Bradbury-Huang, 2007); Autoethnography (Anderson, 2006), and; Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008). As Paton (2014, pp. 158-159) points out, there is no “right, best or most useful framework”, rather the onus is on the researcher to select the framework(s) based on “what one wants to do and which assumptions one shares”. Furthermore, Paton goes on to observe that every framework has strengths and limitations. To justify my choice of frameworks, I outline my deliberations below.

Grounded Theory was considered due to the relatively unexplored experiences of new entrant consultants in starting their consulting journeys. Working on an inductive basis, Grounded Theory constructs theory based on data gathered (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, 2017). The benefits of this framework lie in an exploratory approach that results in new knowledge and the potential for practical solutions applicable in everyday scenarios. Furthermore, it encourages exploration where little is known about the subject – in this case, about the experiences of new entrant consultants. Although I went into the research being open to a range of differing experiences, having recently gone through the interview process of applying for a management consultant role, I knew I held preconceived beliefs and understanding of the process. Oleson (2007) argues Grounded Theory methods discourage this level of constructive and interpretive involvement in the sensemaking process. For this reason, I chose not to use Grounded Theory.

Case Studies were appealing to this thesis due to the perceived difficulty in accessing participants and the anticipated variegation in their experiences. They are useful in exploratory research that investigates the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of a particular phenomenon and interpreting the decisions that comprised the cases of study (Yin, 2018). Case Studies are especially applicable in helping multiple competing variables be aligned into one final data set. Given that Case Studies research is improved by multiple data collection methods such as interviews, observations and researcher reflections, there were some barriers to using this method. Firstly, the nature of consulting work and Covid-19 disruptions meant observations were unfeasible. Secondly, given Case Study research is often longitudinal, time restrictions on my thesis and the difficulty of repeated access to consultants restricted me from using this method. Thirdly, I anticipated that individual participants’ experiences would vary significantly. I felt to fully explore and utilise the richness of data and insights gathered, another method would be more appropriate.

Given my involvement with the field of consulting, having myself experienced the application and recruitment process and poised to begin my journey as a consultant after completion of my thesis, I felt my own experience was pertinent to my research. Wall (2006) proposes autoethnography as an avenue to incorporate reflexivity into the thesis. An Analytical Autoethnography (AA) framework is one way that allows the ethnographer to validate their subjective perceptions through interaction with others in the same setting, in this case, others who have been through the same experience (Anderson, 2006, p. 385). AA therefore allowed me to transform my experiences during the application process into empirical data. However, using AA as a standalone methodology for my thesis was not appropriate as it requires full immersion in the social group being studied; I have not yet experienced life as a new consultant.

My desire to reveal positive experiences that would help realign participants' views of their roles and experiences in consulting led me to explore Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a potential framework. AI is considered a generative form of AR (Reason & Bradbury-Huang, 2007). AI entails a cooperative search for meaningful, positive experiences generates agency for change through envisioning what is possible (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2007, p. 276). The catalytic nature of AI encourages discovery and transformation. AI "unleashes information and commitment that together create energy for positive change" (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p. 4). The use of AI allows participants to initiate positive changes through experiences. Using AI ensured that participants were also able to benefit from the interview process.

Action Research is often considered a mode of enquiry, rather than a specific methodology and is also named as the progenitor of a range of inquiry methods (Reason & Bradbury-Huang, 2007). Reason and Bradbury-Huang state that a key function of AR is producing usable knowledge (p. 4). They posit that the process of generating knowledge is participatory and not confined to one area of change or one person, rather it takes a holistic approach to increasing the well-being of all involved through group buy-in. AR acknowledges the agency of all involved and seeks to empower them to create meaningful change. Furthermore, action research was considered for this study as it has recently been used to evaluate the use of threshold thinking in a liminal environment (Harlow et al., 2017). My concern with using an AR methodology was that traditionally it is iterative and conducted over a longer period of time than was available for my thesis. However, a discussion with my supervisor and evaluation of how I could adapt AR practices to produce actionable outcomes by the conclusion of my research helped me understand the value AR would bring to my research.

When selecting guiding frameworks, the overall purpose of my thesis was the primary consideration. Early in the planning stage I decided I wanted my research to be meaningful and usable. Namely, I wanted to produce a set of practical outcomes that benefitted participants, their employing firms, aspiring management consultants and myself as a future consultant. Therefore, I selected Appreciative Inquiry, Action Research and Analytical Autoethnography for my guiding frameworks. I believed these would be most useful to help uncover shared experiences, while generating comparative instances and actionable insights. Furthermore, these frameworks synthesised with each other, together providing a pathway that offered a more comprehensive understanding of the studied phenomena. I chose AA, as it "draws upon our personal experiences and perceptions to inform our broader social understandings" (Anderson, 2006, p. 390). I hoped to better understand my upcoming role as a new consultant, beyond the information available provided by firms or online, and provide verified insights for all aspiring consultants in New Zealand. AR helped ensure my research would have meaningful applications that were generated by all involved, not just by me as the researcher. Finally, AI gave me scope as a researcher to make iterative adjustments to my questioning and search for information after each interview; I knew exemplars of how new entrants navigated the consulting journey existed, but I was uncertain of where I would find them. AI methodology also allowed me to generate insights for my participants and future consultants by celebrating successes in my participants stories and encouraging them through affirmation of their experiences.

3.2 Ethics

The protection of the confidentiality of participants in my study was essential. By participating, my research participants risked external pressures; those associated with the highly demanding work of consulting and the potential impact on their individual reputations from answers they provided. Furthermore, the consultancy industry is highly competitive and regularly deals with confidential information, including project details and the recruitment and onboarding processes for new consultants. This was reflected during my initial contact with participants. The most common query I fielded about participating in the study was the assurance of anonymity for themselves and for their firm. Indeed, several participants conditionally agreed to the study, informing me they had to first get approval from relevant managers within their firm.

Noting these concerns, I first ensured all participants were comfortable participating and that they understood their information and that of their firm would be held in the utmost confidence. To further ensure their anonymity, I asked participants to self-assign a pseudonym, which was noted at the start of each interview. The act of asking participants to assign their own pseudonyms was a premeditated act to generate rapport. Allen and Wiles (2016) argue the process of creating a pseudonym helps foster the relationship between interviewee and interviewer and helps the participant retain a feeling of control of their experiences. Furthermore, the employer of each participant is not identified and instead referred to non-specifically as the 'firm'.

Before commencing data collection, I sought ethical approval, required by the University of Waikato for all human research. My approval from the Waikato Management School Human Research Ethics Committee can be found in Appendix 1 (Ethical Application WMS 20/18). When conducting interviews, I used Zoom software, which has an encrypted connection for online interviews. I also ensured a discreet environment for face-to-face interviews, adhering to qualitative research recommendations (Silverman, 2016). Post-interview, I followed recommended processes for storing qualitative data by storing all notes and participant information on a project-dedicated personal computer (James & Busher, 2016). A professional transcription service was used for transcribing the audio, the confidentiality agreement for can be found in Appendix 2. Once this thesis is accepted, interview records will be retained for three months and then destroyed.

3.3 Data collection

3.3.1 Participant selection

Research participants were needed to meet three criteria. First, they were required to be new to management consulting, with less than one-year experience in the industry. Second, they needed to hold an entry level position. Titles for entry level consulting positions vary and were cross checked with the participants and their respective company hierarchies prior to inclusion in the study. Third, in their consulting role, they needed to have spent the majority (>90%) of their career to date operating out of a New Zealand based office. This criterion was selected to minimise the impact of known cultural differences in consulting practices internationally (Mohe, 2008).

In my data collection I used purposive and snowball sampling. I posit that narrated consultant experiences are stymied by trade secrecy among firms and, therefore, make gathering data on management consultants difficult. For these reasons and using the guidelines set out by Payls (2008), purposive criterion sampling was selected, a priori, as most suitable when commencing data collection for this study. Purposive sampling was used to ensure my initial sample was representative of New Zealand's consulting landscape and to mitigate bias risks associated with the subsequent snowball sampling (D. L. Morgan, 2008). Using my personal networks and LinkedIn connections, I contacted fifteen participants initially with information regarding my study. Six agreed to participate. Following my initial interviews, I asked select interviewees if they knew of any other consultants that met the criteria. Snowball sampling was used in the second instance as it provided access to a population that is described by researchers challenging to access (Sturdy, Clark, Fincham, & Handley, 2009). Snowball sampling afforded three more leads, one of whom became a participant and, somewhat opportunistically, I used an unexpected consulting intern in the group of participants as a point of comparison. In total, seven participants were interviewed. I originally sought a minimum of ten. Unfortunately, Covid-19, alongside other industry disruptions outlined by some of the participants I interviewed, meant I was unable to reach ten.

3.3.2 Design

Adhering to the principles of appreciative inquiry outlined by Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003), it was essential to create the opportunity for participants to self-affirm in the interview process through highlighting and celebrating success. Additionally, it was essential that participants were encouraged to answer the interview questions through telling their stories as “narratives are central to human existence” (Presser & Sandberg, 2015, p. 1). With these in mind, I determined that semi-structured interviews were the most appropriate way to gather data.

Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewee to decide what is important when answering questions and the interviewer to participate in the production of knowledge (Brinkmann, 2018, p. 579). Therefore, I structured open-ended questions in a way that allowed participants to share their journey and any extra information they felt was pertinent, whilst also generating data relevant to my research (see Appendix 3). To ensure the process was authentic and participants were involved, I tried to return value to my participants through asking insightful questions with the intent of catalysing realisations about their own journeys.

A final consideration in my interview question development was that the difficulty of gathering data related to threshold crossings alongside the lack of experimental rigour in studies to date (Barradell, 2013; Nicola-Richmond et al., 2018, p. 110). If I told participants threshold crossings were a potential focus of my research, I risked influencing their responses related to them, thereby decreasing the validity of the data. To mitigate this, I attempted to utilise the neopositivist interview form, where data is extracted from interviewees without being influenced by the researcher (Brinkmann, 2018, p. 585). I did this by ensuring my early interview questions allowed instances of threshold crossings occurring to be identified, without explicitly explaining what a threshold crossing was. Near the end of my listed questions, I attempted to use a postmodern interview form that encouraged co-creation of realities (Brinkmann, 2018, p. 586). This was achieved by preparing a statement that explained the theory of threshold crossings, and then asked a follow-up question about their experiences with threshold crossings. Using both the neopositivist and postmodern forms allowed me to verify experiences of threshold crossings through generating diversified participant accounts of them occurring.

3.3.3 Interviewing

Prior to interviewing the participants, I emailed them a relevant file consisting of a study information disclosure form and a participant consent form (Appendix 4). Once consent was given, the platform for interviewing was established and the interview questions were sent to participants to help alleviate any pressure they may have felt prior to the interview. Interview platform selection considered the participant's preferred format, the University of Waikato's guidance for research interviews during Covid-19 and the prevailing New Zealand government Covid-19 mandates.

Interviews were held in August and September 2020. All the interviews were conducted via video chat. Covid-19 restrictions prevented me from conducting them in a face-to-face format, which was my original preference. Recognising the impact of the narrative environment proposed by Holstein and Gubrium (2016), I took care to note the setting of each interview and considered the impact in my data analysis process. Interviews conducted ran for around an hour each, with around forty minutes dedicated to answering structured questions and the remainder of the time used for discussing the issues that arose. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription service.

The interviews were conducted with the concept of active interviewing in mind. Interviews "are unavoidably active communicative enterprises" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2016, p. 79). That is, the interview process is animated, subjective and governed by the context in which it occurs – interviewers, therefore, must adapt accordingly. While I had set questions, the structure of the questions encouraged participants to guide the interview process. Additionally, using appreciative inquiry as a guiding paradigm meant my role as an interviewer was to honour, encourage and affirm the interviewees' experiences (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). Doing so shaped the interview into a social practice, which is known to be crucial to unlocking a richer depth of data (Brinkmann, 2018; Holstein & Gubrium, 2016).

3.4 Data analysis

Audio transcriptions were compared to the original audio files to first ensure accuracy. However, the primary function of comparison was to further my immersion in the data, an essential part of the research process and a way to ensure the data is fully explored and understood (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). This process allowed me to expand on the themes I had begun to identify and record during the interview process. As Spencer, Ritchie, and Ormston (2014) state "analysis does not begin when the researchers have finished collecting their data, but is an ongoing and inherent part of the whole process of qualitative research and should infuse all aspects" (p. 275). While I had identified some expected themes through my literature review, the nature of the largely exploratory research dictated that an inductive approach to data analysis was more appropriate.

Thematic analysis was used to analysis the data. Clarke and Braun (2017) describe thematic analysis as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data" (p. 297). It is undertaken by using codes to establish themes in the data, which in turn comprise a framework with which to interpret and report the data, all the while ensuring the analysis is underpinned by the research question (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297). The form of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) advocates for a flexible approach in the extraction of meaning from the data.

The transcriptions were imported into the software NVivo, chosen for its usefulness in collation, coding and visualisation of key themes. Wary of the potentially reductive nature of analysis software, outlined by Bloomberg and Volpe (2019, p. 250), I avoided relying on automated word frequency counts and text analysis tools. Instead the data was coded manually by rereading each transcript and allocating the data codes. Several codes were established based on initial interactions with the data content. New codes were added as the analysis was undertaken. Following the first round of data analysis, each transcription was reviewed against the existing codes and recoded or further coded as necessary. The coding density tool on NVivo allowed closer analysis areas of code and content rich data within the transcripts and other areas which were potentially underexplored or underrepresented in the analysis. Next, a mind map was created that explored how the codes related to each other. Over time and repeated readings, the themes were identified, and/or merged, or discounted. From this process, I identified four dominant themes that underpinned the codes, as well as several subthemes that comprised that provided further support for their parent themes.

Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

4.0 Introduction

Unexpectedly, as it was initiated mainly as a data-gathering process, I found that interviewing and gathering insights from the consultants turned out to be inspiring. It helped that, in the interviews, I combined appreciative inquiry with Schien's (2016) advice to reduce personal distance and be humble as well as exhibiting emotional openness and humility. The combination seemed to work in the sense of the rich data provided by the helpful responses of all of my participants. In fact, at multiple times throughout the data collection process, it felt like a privilege to be present as they disclosed personal aspects of their narratives and shared self-realisations about their journeys and identities. Nor was this just my perception of their openness as it was common to many and summed up in one interview by one participant's observation that "I feel like you're getting a very raw version of me".

Indeed, it was also gratifying to find participant observations clustering around similar themes. Although each consultant's background was as varied as their entry path into the profession – see Table 1 below – as I explored the data, and began to analyse it, I was able to identify common recurring themes. Each of these themes are examined below, in the context of the research question: How might individuals and organisations improve the recruitment and onboarding of new entrant management consultants?

4.1 Participants

Table 1 introduces each participant, their firm, their tenure and how they entered their consulting role. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, I have used pseudonyms rather than actual names and provided only minimal detail about each of them.

TABLE 1 – PARTICIPANTS

Pseudonym	Company	Tenure	Entry type
Ansome	Big 4 firm	More than 6, less than 12 months	Graduate role
Bradley	Big 4 firm	More than 6, less than 12 months	Intern and then graduate role
Daniel	Big 4 firm	More than 6, less than 12 months	Graduate role
Edward	Big 4 firm	More than 6, less than 12 months	Direct entry consultant
Iris	Big 4 firm	3 months	Intern role
James	Big 4 firm	More than 6, less than 12 months	Intern and then graduate role
Joanne	Big 4 firm	More than 6, less than 12 months	Graduate role

4.2 Theme selection

TABLE 2 – INITIAL THEMES

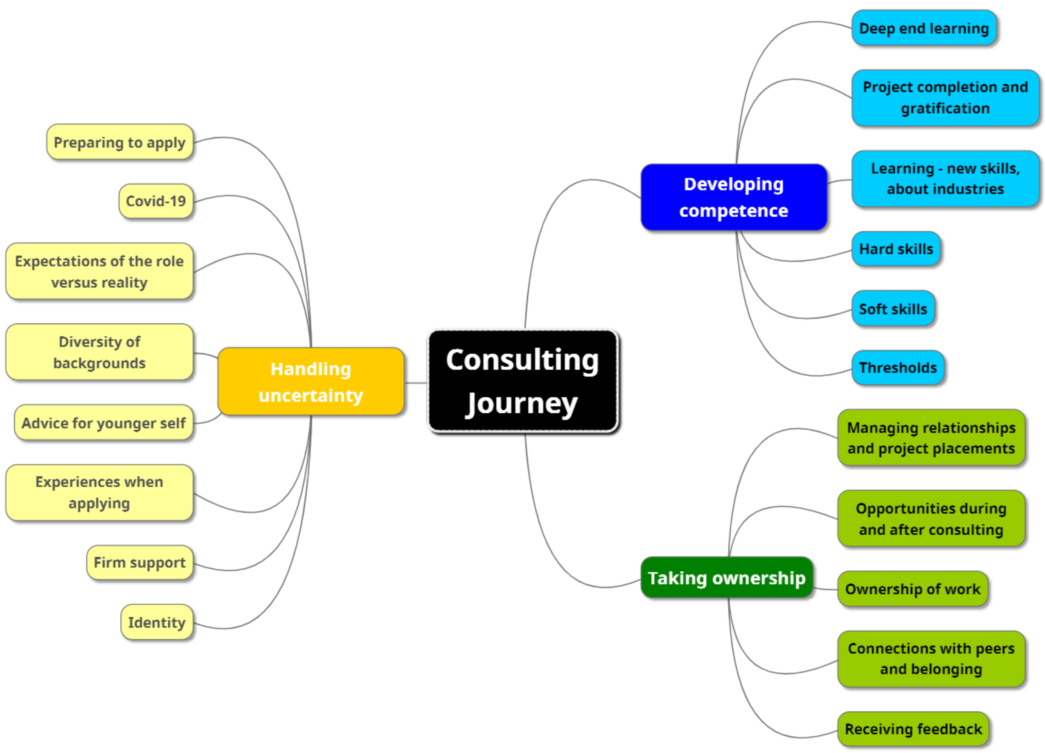
	Theme	Case occurrence	Coding count
1.	Preparing to apply	7	67
2.	Ownership of work	7	57
3.	Managing relationships and project placements	7	46
4.	Soft skills	7	41
5.	Connections with peers, belonging	7	38
6.	Learning – new skills, about industries	7	36
7.	Experiences when applying	6	33
8.	Expectations of the role versus experiencing the reality	6	28
9.	Opportunities during and after consulting	6	23
10.	Diversity of consultant's background	7	19
11.	Hard skills	7	18
12.	Project completion and gratification	6	18
13.	Receiving feedback	6	18
14.	Identity	6	15
15.	Covid-19	5	14
16.	Thresholds	5	13
17.	Deep end learning	5	11
18.	Advice for younger self	5	10
19.	Firm support	5	8

Initial analysis of the interview data produced 19 themes. In my analysis, I found similar language suggesting similar responses. I also include stemmed words and synonyms. For example, "own", "owning", "ownership" and "responsible for". I went as high as 19 to be as inclusive as possible. At that stage, I reached saturation point and further analysis of the language did not suggest any fresh themes. Table

2 above shows these themes. It also includes the number of cases they were mentioned in (out of a possible seven interviews) and how many times they were coded during thematic analysis, to demonstrate the weighting I assigned to each theme.

The coding process involved looking for both overarching and overlapping themes. To focus this search, I developed a thematic depiction in mind map form. The idea was to better visualise the relationship between the two. The resulting visualisation enabled insights into otherwise latent connections between the themes – shown in Figure 1: Theme Mind Map.

FIGURE 1 – THEME MIND MAP



The developed visualisation distilled the original 19 themes into three key themes and ten subthemes, shown in Table 3. These three key themes were: ‘Handling uncertainty’, which deals largely with the time before, and almost immediately afterwards, entering consulting; ‘Developing competence’, which deals with the early stages of the job, and; ‘Taking ownership’, which concerns consultants once they are settling in the role. At the outset, it was not my intention to present the themes chronologically. Nevertheless, the way the themes emerged from the interviewees’ discourse, and the visualisation, fitted well with my early intent to track the consultant journey and helped to reduce the subthemes from 19 down to a more manageable ten. These ten subthemes are discussed below, under each of the three key theme headings.

TABLE 3 – FINAL THEMES

Key Theme	Subthemes
Handling uncertainty	Application preparation
	What to expect when applying
	Expectations of the role versus reality
	The impact of Covid-19
Developing competence	Learning pathways
	Skill development
	Thresholds and project completion
Taking ownership	Owning the work
	Managing relationships
	Opportunities during and after consulting

4.3 Theme one – Handling uncertainty

One purpose of this study was exploring how consultants overcame the uncertainty and liminality of their role. This section covers these experiences. It was discovered that all participants experienced some level of uncertainty when preparing to enter the role of consultant. In their interviews the participants shared a wealth of experiences and advice about the different methods they used to overcome this uncertainty. While there were differences in the routes the consultants took to gain employment with their firms, commonalities exist in how they managed this uncertainty. Future applicants and consultants will benefit greatly from this cornucopia of knowledge as it gives them an indication of what to expect and how to navigate the process.

Once in the role, consultants continued to experience ambiguity, consistent with findings in the scholarly literature (Alvesson, 1993; Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003). Predictably, yet salient given the unfolding pandemic, Covid-19 appeared to amplify participants' experiences of uncertainty in their consulting role. I discovered uncertainty experienced by new consultants can be partially attributed to their perceptions of the role versus the reality of the work. By elucidating realities of the role, participants provided more clarity about what to expect and in the process revealed common fallacies in previously held expectations.

4.3.1 Application preparation

Preparing to apply was one of the topics that arose most frequently in the interviews. Each consultant clearly remembered the experiences, the steps they took and the important insights they drew from going through the process. Having been through the process myself, I can empathise and vividly recall the steps and details of each stage in the recruitment process, some of which I will share as autoethnographical findings. In terms of the literature, there were few surprises. Indeed, much of what follows here confirms what is contained in the sources on applying for consulting such as published academic work (e.g., O'Mahoney (2010), and the online resources such as the ranked list on the Ready for Consulting (n.d.) website. This thesis did not find significant substitutions for them. However, this section of the thesis adds retrospective reflections and learnings from experienced consultants that may augment the standard findings in ways that might help aspiring consultants achieve their goal of preparing successfully.

The reflections covered a diverse range. Daniel states the obvious elements of preparation as follows: “Up until the recruitment day the things that you need to get done are pretty cut and dry. You obviously need to have an attractive CV, reasonably good grades, you need to prepare for your psychometric test by doing practice tests” and concludes that “if you do all those things very well there is a pretty good chance you’ll make a recruitment day.” At the risk of presenting a ‘blinding flash of the bleeding obvious’, it remains important to note that ‘preparation’ is a process that starts before applying. Joanne picked this up by observing crucial considerations of the recruiters and interviewers that applicants must be aware of before commencing the application process, “There’s a sway away from ticking all the boxes and it’s now more about who you are as a person”.

Schmidt (2017) added further value by highlighting the need to also show points of difference when applying for consulting roles. In a helpful comment, he adds that interviews "are not merely to be regarded as selection processes but rather as performances of one's identity" (p. 162). This is reflected by the participants' unique backgrounds. James solidifies the need for this while augmenting it with specific suggestions around authenticity and self-presentation in preparing to apply:

> Differentiating yourself as much as possible, or coming up with a personal narrative for who you are is really important because you know, they have thousands and thousands of applications every year, and standing out from that is often a matter of convincing the hiring people that you're a genuine person.

As part of the differentiation process, different kinds of diversity came up. Participants manifested this surprisingly in their different degree subjects in that, unexpectedly for this researcher, a business degree was not the norm. I take caution here to not claim that business degrees are not important in consulting. In the literature, Research by Kipping (2002) argues that the pursuit of MBA degrees and the increase in graduate business schools is intertwined with the growth of the management consulting profession. However, I can say that among the participants, without revealing any identifying information about them, that while some had studied some aspect of business in their degree, none had pursued a purely business focused degree. Additionally, some had unexpected fields of study that one would not usually associate with consulting. Edward says that what helped prepare him for consulting was:

> Having the broad study base, so making sure that in my studies, I'd covered off a lot of areas that have a sort of wide range of specialties helped and it has helped a lot for the jobs. A lot of these types of work, in consulting, the clients or potential projects, the people who are signing the tenders, want to know what you bring that's different.

Diverse experiences were a defining feature of the participants. They all had some combination of work experience, life experience, internships, scholarships, research projects, international travel, interesting hobbies or extra-curriculars. This is also true of my own background. Therefore, it is reasonable to infer that highlighting experiences gained outside of study are crucial when applying. Ansome confirmed this, stating "That's something that I've spoken to partners about, diversity in background. Because the firm is all about diversity, it's a major thing". A quick scan of any MBB or Big 4 website reveals that the commitment to diversity in hiring is an explicitly stated factor. For example, the BCG (n.d.) website states the they strive to "recruit passionate, open-minded people of all gender identities, sexual orientations, ethnicities, physical abilities, and experience" (para. 2). It was reassuring to see that in the hiring process, at least for my research participants, this, at least in some areas, was a reality.

Participants concurred around identifying research as an essential part of preparing for the role. James was self-critical in this as he thought back on his on preparations:

> I did learn a little bit about the company, but looking back on it now, I could have put in so much more effort, to just research the company, research the

> position, learn about the people I'd be working with. The stuff I knew back then barely scratched the surface.

This was reinforced by ideas about resisting the temptation to assume the firms are homologous when applying. This assumption turned out to be questionable. Although the nature of the work is similar, the firms and divisions of work identified by the participants differed significantly. Ansome offered the useful strategy of investigating firm-specific strategy to combat this: "I think if you do some work and look into the strategy of the firms that you're applying for and then talk about that, then that's a golden ticket."

Mentorship played an important role in the preparation. Some participants had access to other consultants who had successfully gone through the process and found them a useful source of information for understanding what to expect. Others accessed mentors such as graduates they had studied with or lecturers at university. One participant chose to use LinkedIn to reach out to potential leads for their internship.

In the literature, Tarki and Sanandaji (2020) suggested that demonstration of general problem-solving skills offered a good indicator of future success in a consulting role. In the research, one finding was that problem solving is a key competency of a consultant's role and is evaluated by firms accordingly during the application process. The majority (4 of 7) of my participants said understanding how to problem solve was measured in their application. James provided some concrete examples:

> Being involved with case competitions at uni was quite good. That's not to say that doing case competitions teaches you the exact same skillset as consulting in the industry, because it doesn't. It teaches you like an interesting way of thinking, or like a logical way to set problems out.

However, Tarki and Sanandaji (2020) offered consolation for those who don't pass their case study interview. Their findings suggested that case studies are an academically unverified way of selecting talent (Tarki & Sanandaji, 2020). Given that there is no right or wrong answer, the methods used to solve the case are subject to interviewer bias. Indeed, McKinsey has recently begun using software that evaluates applicants' cognitive processes (Kantar et al., 2018). Moreover, Ansome provides a reminder for hopefuls who falter at this stage "being in the Big 4 isn't the be all and end all of everything. Work is just one part of your life and you need to balance it all out".

A final note on preparing to apply. Applicants must understand what the firms are looking for and how to present that information. Using published works or online resources will help substantially. Additionally, I argue that awareness of the volume of applications that the firms receive, and the software tools they use to screen these applications can help you prepare a better initial application. When preparing for my application, I first researched a range of online resources, taking the suggestions of the most credible. I felt I had a strong CV, but it was also my least embellished. No unnecessary information, simple formatting, quantifiable single line experiences, an even split of work and academic history, on two pages. This proved to be a successful format for entering the initial rounds of testing as O'Mahoney (2010) work confirmed.

4.3.2 What to expect when applying

What to expect when you apply may vary with the route you take. Bradley shared their first application experience “I applied for the grad programme, I made the first cut [from my] CV, and then they went to testing and I didn’t make the cut there. All the testing with the quant was probably my downfall.” The story has a happy ending however, as the participant messaged one of the directors on LinkedIn and went for coffee, which led first to a successful internship offer and then, after the internship was complete, to a subsequent job offer from the firm. In contrast, when Edward was entering the role, he already knew his interviewers through his previous work history and industry engagement. This demonstrates there is more than one pathway to entering a consulting role.

It is possible to track a generalised overview of the more ‘traditional’ route of intern or graduate application. It begins with an initial submission of the application, then through online testing before the final round interviews, which may include group testing (Rivera, 2012a). In the previous section, experiences of the initial application process are covered. At the later stages of the application process, firms, it is commonly known, test problem-solving, team interaction and numerical skills. Below I share and compare the experiences of myself and two other applicants. While they are by no means indicative of all those who go the same route, they offer examples of how an application journey may unfold. My experience was that:

I applied to one MBB firm in a rush because applications were closing the next day. I knew I wouldn't get through to the interview round, but I was still shocked at how quickly they rejected me (three days later); especially given the volume of applicants they must have had. I'm glad this was my first experience of applying – it made me realise I had to step up my game if I was serious about getting a role.

I only applied for two of the Big 4 firms as I didn't think the others suited my experience. I also only applied for service lines I knew I excelled at. Of all the companies I researched, I most liked the company I eventually got an offer from; I liked their projects, their evaluation software and tasks, the culture seemed great, and I liked the departments they had listed – they seemed to be around a lot of cutting edge technology.

Really, when applying, that firm was the only application I had a proper crack at. By that I mean throughout the testing I was 100% honest with my answers – I didn't think too much about what I thought they wanted. Likewise, in the interview process, I was me. I didn't try to change my personality and figured that they'd either like me or they wouldn't. I got on really well with the interviewers and I found some good commonalities with them. I treated them as people, equals, rather than stressing because of an imagined hierarchical distance.

I had prepped five stories that I wanted the interviewers to know about, around questions I thought they would ask me. Funnily enough, they wanted to know about completely different things than I had anticipated and asked me a lot about my work history. In a way this was good, it meant my answers

> were more real and showed them that I knew my stuff – I doubt anyone could bluff their way through those interviews.

Similarly, James emphasised how he decided to show his personality during the interview in the following ways: “I tried to go in and, it’s a cliché, but be myself in the interview. I think the idea behind that was that if I couldn’t get the job by being my natural person, then I wasn’t gonna want to work there.” For him that worked out as in his own words “I ended up just talking to the guy who interviewed me, one of the partners, about music, for ten, fifteen minutes. So that was probably one of the things that got me the job in the end.”

Daniel shared his experience of the process from applying through to interviewing on his recruitment day:

> Generally speaking, most of the management consulting roles have the earliest deadlines in the recruitment process, and so I just basically just applied for everything, big three, big four, and got a recruitment day with [what became his firm].
>
> I think that some of my early applications were actually really shit. Especially for the big 3 ones, because the big 3 deadlines end 3 weeks or a month before the big 4 ones do. I think a huge reason why my application for [his firm] specifically was really solid, was because I learnt from my very obvious mistakes that I made with the big 3 applications.
>
> So, for example, I went into a lot of the psychometric testing with big 3, just without preparation, I hadn’t done any practise tests, I don’t think that my

> CV was anywhere up to scratch what it was by the time I'd applied for [his firm]. I've [sic] got the rejections quite quickly after those applications, so I think taking those rejections, understanding why and sort of getting feedback, as well as [talking to] other people who had gone through the process successfully, was probably the biggest part of me being accepted.

This echoes my experience in applying for an MBB firm. I was underprepared and did not realise how early the application dates were. Daniel noted a piece of advice for his former self in the same situation: "I actually didn't give myself a chance with all the mistakes I was making. I probably would have just gotten onto it a lot earlier because I was literally applying the day before deadlines for all three of them". Again, preparation stands out as a critical factor. Firms ensure candidates, in Schmidt (2017) words, know that "no one can get the job without thorough interview preparation" (p. 162).

Using feedback to transform the work he was doing, in this case applying for firms, Daniel displayed an attribute I noticed among all my participants. It is also identified by Eichhorn (2017) as a skill consultants must learn: consultants need to use self-analysis, feedback and take ownership of setbacks to improve themselves in order to also improve their output and results. The 'Owning the work' section of this chapter covers this aspect in more depth.

Daniel demonstrated some of what was involved in this when reflecting on his interview process:

> I think where the really really valuable insights came in was being prepared for the fact that the interview was going to be over an hour long with quite senior people, and so being able to really drill in specific examples over my internship and studies that I could draw on to help answer those questions and being prepared for the case study as well, getting tips. For example, not overexert your ideas onto the group because the exercise as it so happens is not so much about the ideas that you come up with but it is to sort of show how you work with and manage a team.

Rivera (2012a) adds force to this by stating that aspiring consultants should be aware that “recruiting committees typically weigh interviews more than resumes in final offer decisions” (p. 74). Clearly this is worth factoring in when applying for firms. My experience was that the timeframe between receiving an invitation to complete the testing and the actual testing itself, within 72 hours, was short. To remove some of the time pressure, preparation should be done beforehand. Additionally, it is not enough to do general case preparation. Ansome’s experiences supported this in reflecting that “I did the online testing. Did that for [firm 1], [firm 2], the whole works. [Their firm] was the only one I got offered it.” In additions, this acts as a reminder that different firms look at different aspects and that research needs to be conducted on the testing methods applied be each firm.

4.3.3 Expectations of the role versus reality

For firms, the stakes of getting the recruitment and onboarding process right for junior consultants is high. Eichhorn (2017) found that a large portion of large consultancies' employees are younger than 35 and recently graduated (pp. 5-8). Over the years, in order to attract top talent, consultancy firms have sculpted an image of management consulting as an elite profession (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2019). Management consulting is also one of the most preferred professions for MBA graduates (Auritt et al., 2015). It is understandable then, that firms tend to glamorise the duties of junior consultants during the recruitment process in order to attract the best talent. Ansome captures this experience as follows:

> You get sold this amazing dream about what you can do, and the thing is you can do all that stuff, but it's like all the things that they sell you are things that you do over your whole career, like working on amazing engagements and whatnot. They might be the once in the career kind of thing, but they are the ones that you always hear about.

Nevertheless, the findings in the present study concur with the findings of Costas and Kärreman (2016) that:

> The official company discourses apparent in the firms' websites, brochures and recruitment leaflets emphasize the creative nature of consulting work and the creative consultant… As a result, individuals, and specifically graduates entering these companies, expect to be conducting inspiring and creative work and thus being inspired and creative themselves (p. 69).

Six of my seven participants experienced some form of disillusionment once in the role. Edward, the odd one out as a direct entry consultant, did not have the same experience. This finding, while preliminary, suggests that the firms accept the exciting images of consultants may assist, and may even be cultivated, as part of their reputational capital for attracting graduates. Joanne spoke of the role of her recruiters in building up expectations:

> We talked a lot about this as a grad cohort, it definitely wasn't what we expected it to be. Like, it's sold to uni students as this kind of amazing world where nothing really makes sense and it's almost exciting in this mysterious way. I remember in the interview they'd be like, 'oh yeah, you know, you won't know what you're doing, like month to month', and I think when you're in the interview, or you're beginning to understand what management consulting is, you interpret that as, oh it's really gonna be fun and exciting because things are changing all the time.

It is possible to discount some of the consultants' perception of being deceived by their firms as naivety. Costas and Kärreman (2016), for example, recognise it is no secret that consultancy work can be boring and note that industry aspirants are well equipped to discover this on their own. However, it should also be understood that firms' amplification of the role created unrealistic expectations that, in turn, led to dissatisfaction among my participants.

I discovered through my interviews that the work may not be that exciting at times. Knowing this in advance of beginning my role in consulting was not concerning to me. Rather, it helped further prepare me for the realities of the work. Joanne regretting not knowing this before accepting the role: "I wish I knew that so I could have weighed out my options more, understanding that, let's say, 50% of the time, you’re working on a boring project. How would that have influenced my choice to join the firm?”

That may be linked to the idea that junior consultants do not understand their role responsibility until entry to the firm. Joanne admitted that “I’ve definitely found that some of the projects I’ve been doing have been quite repetitive and not necessarily the aspect of consulting that you would imagine it to be”. This does open opportunities for firms to address this explicitly by making the role requirements clear prior to junior consultants commencing employment. Bradley, for example, provided more detail of what to expect in a junior consultant role. He said, “as an analyst [junior consultant level] your role is to be that support mechanism… it is about making everyone’s life easier in a way”. This was consistent with what several other participants said, including Edward who entered a consultant role directly.

It is possible that firms already try to communication the role expectations. After I was offered a contract and accepted the role, my firm provided me a mentor who had been through the graduate program a year prior. They informed me early on that I could ask them any questions I had about the role. I feel that they helped me to better understand my duties before commencing my role. It appears then that information related to duties are not secret, rather it becomes available if the incoming consultant knows who and what to ask.

Beginning employment with any company is a significant milestone that is well documented in academic literature. At this stage, the new employee experiences increased stress while employing a range of coping methods to try gain a sense of control over their work (Feldman & Brett, 1983). Having found evidence of consultancies using "sink or swim" methods to indoctrinate junior consultants during my literature review (Chao, 2005; Eichhorn, 2017), I expected to see instance of this practice in my research. What was unexpected, however, was how early this occurs in the process. A small number of those interviewed indicated that they felt their firms could have assisted more with the transition. Daniel recounts experiencing this during his first assignment:

> I'd wish that I'd known your first job is basically assigned at random. I was expecting that all of the grads are going to be thrown into jobs that matched that their expertise to foster a smooth transition, and that is absolutely not the case.

Firms could help ease some of the work anxiety experienced by new consultants by communicating this more effectively. Again, Daniel provided evidence of this:

> I was somewhat under the impression that you had to stick with your first gig for quite a while. I wasn't really on it for that long either, so it's not a huge deal, but I think there were some days where I was feeling very, a bit low and a bit trapped.

Moreover, he continued "I think just having that knowledge to sort of prepare myself in the year leading up to that, that there is a very good chance you are not going to enjoy your first job"; offered the following advice "but don't worry, because you don't have to stay in it" and concluded that "It probably would have made some of those days a bit smoother."

After their initial assignment, participants indicated they became more comfortable speaking to their seniors about work expectations. Therefore, ensuring communication channels are clearly communicated could help consultants manage their work expectations early on. Joanne spoke about the way she was handling her current assignment:

> In the end, the firm has to make money and you have to do the hard yards occasionally, but I think knowing that, like I've told people that I'm not happy where I am with this project, and I've been assured that in at least a month or two, I won't still be on it. So, there's a light at the end of the tunnel too. I know it won't be forever, so it's okay.

I propose that firms and incoming consultants have a shared and equal responsibility to ensure that expectations and reality match. Due diligence should be conducted by the aspirant consultant. Firms should facilitate incoming consultants' exploration of the role requirements. Doing so may ease the transition into the job, reduce new consultants' disillusionment, and improve retention rates.

4.3.4 The impact of Covid-19 on new management consultants

When beginning work on this thesis I did not expect findings related to Covid-19. However, in reflection it seems obvious that this event influenced new consultants' experiences significantly. It is important to note that findings related to Covid-19 that I have identified were naturally occurring. I asked probing questions related to Covid-19 only if the participants first brought it up in their answers and it was directly related to answering this thesis' research question. While the number of times I coded Covid-19 related instances was only fourteen, Covid-19's impact was identified by five of seven participants, suggesting shared experiences among the demographic of new consultants in New Zealand. It is my hope that this section contributes valuable insights to a wider body of Covid-19 academic literature.

Disruption to organisations' recruitment practices, predicted by Beroe (2020), Carnevale and Hatak (2020), was the first obvious impact of Covid-19. Despite pandemic induced disruptions, my experience with the recruitment process was largely positive. Below is an excerpt from my journal that discusses my experiences of the recruitment process during Covid-19:

> The waiting was the worst part, it may have been due to Covid, but the process seemed to take ages. The MBB firm was quick with a rejection, and the firm that gave me an offer was the second fastest. But the other firm, along with another graduate role I had applied for, took months to get back to me. I had applied, tested, interviewed and received an offer from my firm before hearing back from the others about the initial stages.

> Covid-19 definitely affected my interview experience. The recruitment day was online, where it would usually be in person. We still got to meet existing firm consultants, but video chatting over Zoom removed some of the nuances of the communication experience. I also felt the time between the day's Zoom events were equally a help and a hindrance. Helpful, in that it gave me time to digest information I had heard in earlier sessions. A hindrance because my stress and adrenaline levels fluctuated significantly throughout the day.
>
> At the end of the recruitment day, a partner told us that Covid had influenced their hiring decisions. They said the firm was planning a second hiring round later in the year that the day's unsuccessful applicants would be considered for. My understanding is the firm recruited fewer graduate consultants than usual because of Covid. Additionally, I applied for a role in one team yet was offered a role in a different team due to department shuffles that the firm attributed to Covid.

The firm's actions in providing information to the applicants is an example of effective leadership communication and is encouraging given calls for leaders to adopt "people first" practices during the pandemic (Deloitte, 2020; Nembhard, Burns, & Shortell, 2020; Rao & Sutton, 2020). Some firms also appeared to extend support services during Covid-19. Bradley stated:

> I think the other thing that [his firm] has been really good with is, like obviously it's been a really tough year, Covid, and then I've had some life stuff going on which has been pretty horrible. But it's the kind of support metrics, the understanding that shit goes on [by his firm], has been amazing.

> And I've been really impressed by that. And they do genuinely care about you as a person and they do want you to do well, and they don't want you to crash and burn and they don't want you to do any of that which is awesome.

This statement suggests firm's wellbeing structures were utilised more by employees because of Covid-19. Ensuring employee wellbeing is an established way to increase commitment and decrease turnover (J. P. Meyer & Maltin, 2010). Accordingly, support Bradley received during Covid-19 appears to have increased his commitment to his firm. The presence of support services present in firms may mitigate some of the negative effects of remote work identified by DeFilippis et al. (2020). Furthermore, having these services available may have also lessened the psychological impacts, identified by Tan et al. (2020), of returning to work after a lockdown, although this supposition requires further research to be validated.

The most prominent impact of Covid-19 participants identified was a decline in socialisation. Damage to new employee relationships because of Covid-19 was predicted by Carnevale and Hatak (2020), who suggested that feelings of displacement and misfit would be felt because of workplace physical interaction limitations. Daniel felt that while he personally had not been disadvantaged in his relationship building, some of his peers were denied the same opportunity. He stated:

> I was lucky to form some pretty good connections early on and those have grown into friendships now. So, that process wasn't really interrupted by

> Covid so to speak, but I definitely do know that some of my peers that joined around the same time as me haven't really had that same comradery and immersion in the grad[uate] unit experience which is sad I think.

Daniel also revealed that he sensed a lack of collective purpose among his team during the first 2020 New Zealand lockdown:

> Basically, once lockdown started it was very much just you do your work from 9 to 5 and there are events happening through calls and you can join if you want to. But what I found is that a lot of people, myself included, often wouldn't because we don't have that flow of people to follow in the office, and you don't have that, I wouldn't call it peer pressure so to speak, but that feeling of missing out you would get if you were seeing that everyone is gravitating towards this thing or talking point [in the office].

Bradley showed he felt the impact of the lockdown acutely. He said, "I hate working from home. I need to be around people, I need to get out of the house, I need to do stuff". The long-term impact of this initial lack of socialisation for new consultants is yet to be seen. Carnevale and Hatak (2020) argue if the feeling of misfit created by Covid-19 is left unaddressed, the "incongruence presents a potential disaster for employee well-being and productivity for organizations" (p. 184). Firms would benefit from understanding that some new consultants have had this experience. By knowing this, they can then seek to provide supplementary opportunities for those impacted. It does, however, appear that some lost experiences are being regained. This also highlights the impact New Zealand's return to normalcy has had on the process of socialisation. Ansome shared their experience of returning to the office after the lockdown. They stated:

> I think we've, the firm, handled it really well. We were very smooth with a very smooth transition to home. Obviously, it was difficult, we had two weeks in the office before we were sent home, so it almost feels like there's a chunk missing out of my year where I never met anybody at the office.

Ansome explained his post lockdown experience in the office "Now that we've been back in the office… It's almost just kicked off again. I think relationships being made has been delayed, but it's all kind of sorted out now, and people make the most of it". Consultants appear to need the socialisation. Ansome observed "Everyone's back in the office and wanting to be back, which is really nice".

Two impacts on perceptions of firm norms were identified by participants. Firstly, globally, travel was impacted by Covid-19. Within management consulting, travel is traditionally portrayed as a downside of the role of the consultant (Visscher et al., 2018). Peripheral research by Gustafson (2014) finds more negative than positive psychological impacts on frequent travellers. Yet, interestingly, some participants felt disappointed by the restrictions on travel opportunities that Covid-19 caused. Ansome and Edward both missed out on international travel opportunities due to Covid-19. Ansome explained:

> I feel like travel is a reason why people get into a profession like this, and as soon as Covid hit and it showed that being in the same room as someone

> is so overrated, you know, it really dampens people's expectations of the travel that they're able to do.

The second impact noticed by participants was the impact on company spending. Ansome spoke of his impression of how company spending was dampened by Covid-19:

> Sometimes you really do feel the big private sector flex about how they can sort of just pay for like any sort of amount of shit, like counselling services and some pretty cool dinners and drinks and all that kind of stuff, but I haven't really felt it so much recently because of Covid and things.

It is important to note that not all outcomes of Covid-19 were perceived as negative. For Ansome, Covid-19 meant some unexpected downtime in which they used to learn new skills to help in their role. They said, "When you're not chargeable, which for me during Covid, I was at home just sort of not doing any client work, then there is nothing else to do so you might as well [upskill]". Joanne experienced increased input from all levels of her team when working on a project during the lockdown. She also felt like it increased her access to senior team members. She said:

> I think a huge high point [of her consulting experience] was on one of those really good projects where there's creativity and innovation, that sort of thing. We all got together as a group, and it was over Covid so we all did it on this kind of brainstorming site called [site name]. So we were all on there and we were all on [Microsoft] Teams chatting away, and doing like a huge collaborative, whiteboarding session almost, but with people from all levels,

> so partners to me, to everyone in the team, thinking and spitting out ideas, and it was just a really fun process to be a part of and a huge highlight. It's pretty rare to actually sit down with a partner and talk about the project.

4.4 Theme two – Developing competence

Understanding how new consultants overcome the liminality associated with starting a new job, while simultaneously undertaking a role infamous for its liminality, was a research topic of this study. My findings indicate that new consultants overcome this liminality through developing competence. In the context of this study, competence is both tangible, in expertise attained, and intangible, in participants' self-perceptions of their proficiency and accomplishments.

The success of management consultancies is tied directly to the competence of the consultants a firm sends to its clients (Bronnenmayer, Wirtz, & Göttel, 2016). Therefore, ensuring new consultants demonstrate competence and feel competent is clearly in firms' best interests. Synonymous with existing literature (Chao, 2005; Eichhorn, 2017), I found new consultants become competent through a mixture of training and experiences. These included on the job learning; utilising firm resources; accumulating a range of hard and soft skills; completing projects, and; undergoing threshold crossings.

4.4.1 Learning pathways

During this study I developed an understanding of how new consultants gain the knowledge and skills required to demonstrate competency in their role. It is argued that new learning for consultants learning occurs largely through informal on the job experiences (Chao, 2005). Correlating and contrasting this, my study participants identified several channels through which they learn. These included ‘deep end’ learning; self and firm directed learning; and checking in with peers and managers. Furthermore, this study’s findings suggest the exposure to multiple industries and projects forces swift development within new consultants. Consequently, participants also identified the demanding nature of assimilating a large quantity of knowledge under time, firm and client pressure.

Akin to the findings of Bourgoin and Harvey (2018), my participants revealed there is only a limited grace period for new consultants to gain the skills and knowledge they need for a project. Daniel provided evidence of this: “Having to find my feet and just quickly learn things as they are being asked of me is literally what consulting has been all about since I started at [his firm]”. This practice results in what I refer to as ‘deep end’ learning. Deep end learning is akin to the ‘sink-or-swim’ method described by Eichhorn (2017), requiring junior consultants “to learn quickly and on their own since they are directly ‘thrown’ into work” (p. 9). Daniel gave another example:

> In my experience, you are on a job and you basically just have to learn what it is you’re supposed to be doing. Sometimes it’s quite simple and it’s not a problem and sometimes the task is very complicated, and you don’t have

> the nice sort of system or long grace period where you can find your feet. You have to sink or swim in a lot of cases.

Daniel provided further evidence suggesting that deep end learning occurs any time a new consultant is also new to the industry or project they are staffed on. Referring to his most recent job, he stated:

> It was a lot more difficult than I'd expected it to be. I was expecting a bit of a grace period to find my feet and figure out what I was supposed to do, but it really wasn't, it was very deep end, 'go [listed four tasks he had to complete] and let us know how you get on'.

New consultants, through indoctrination, shared experiences with peers and perceived industry norms, may eventually perceive the pathway of development through deep end growth as normal. Schmidt (2017) argues "The audience [of the consulting lifestyle], particularly young consulting aspirants, are expected to adopt this worldview without reflecting on its downsides" (p. 163). He also notes that this perception helps consultants feel a sense of belonging to the firm and to their peers.

There was a desire from two participants for greater compassion from more senior staff, given the arduous learning requirements. Bradley stated that "the expectations on you are that you know or that you pick it up quickly, and certain people that have been around a while can forget what that's like." It is important to clarify that the participants did not want or expect a reduction in duties. Rather, they simply sought acknowledgement and empathy for the learning pressures they faced on projects. It is unclear if this is a common trend across firms. However, organisations and leaders would do well to remember the impact empathetic leadership has on individual performance is well documented (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Furthermore, organisational support during the infancy stages of a role are incredibly important in laying the foundation for future performance and commitment (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013). Therefore, I argue that recognising individual contributions is necessary and essential for the development of new consultants.

I found that deep end learning commences from day one of the role. Several participants were staffed on projects as soon as they started. James recalled that "I actually got my first project five minutes before starting on my first day because I met my manager at the train station, by coincidence." However, James saw this as a positive of his role: "It was all very fast moving, but I think that's one of the things that I really enjoy about the job, is the fact that you're never in one place for too long." This statement validates one of my reasons for choosing consulting, I was drawn to the job by the promised variety.

Iris' first day as an intern and the way she received her first assignment appeared similar to the way graduate consultants were assigned roles. Iris said, "When I got there the first thing they said to me is 'right, you're going to be doing [task title]'". Iris had no experience in what the firm was asking her to do and found it hard to seek guidance given how busy the department was. She concluded that "They just kind of threw me in the deep end and were like 'you've got 2 days, and it has to be set up for the new client'". This suggests that new consultants who complete a consulting internship before starting in their role are at an advantage as they may understand learning expectations.

Participants also navigated learning pressure by utilising available knowledge resources. Participants considered their colleagues at a similar hierarchical level within the firm to be knowledge resources, although they were not always perceived as accessible. Edward described two considerations before reaching out to colleagues: “There’s always a bit of pressure because you know everyone’s under time pressure, so you don’t want to be sucking up much chargeable hours asking for help… also wanting to get to a decent position before you get help.” He emphasised their worth, when he did utilise them, “In general, the members of the team have been really helpful every time I’ve reached out.”

Internal company knowledge banks, accessed via intranet or software, were identified as another valuable source of information for increasing learning potential. Daniel described his firm’s knowledge bank: “[His firm] have networks and webs where you can get whatever you want at any given time”. He did not use these knowledge banks after hours, but recognised the value they held and applauded his peers who did, “There are some people in my grad[uate] class that are absolutely killing it, and are really putting in the hours outside of the 9 to 5 and learning lots of new skills”. It appears true then that firms recognise the skill development opportunities gained from working in management consulting contribute to the sustainability of consulting as a career pathway (Chudzikowski, Gustafsson, & Tams, 2020).

A final point on learning pathways. The desire to learn was a common trait displayed by participants. At the conclusion of each interview, when asked if they had any questions, every participant wanted to know more about my research. They were curious about the theories that guided my research, about what I hoped to find and what I had found so far. Bradley shared his thirst for knowledge, “I am genuinely interested in what goes in the business world, politics, all that kind of thing”. He concluded that “I don’t think that’s a requirement [of a new consultant], but I do think that being aware of what goes on is important because some of the work we do is impacted by that”. This demonstrated to me that some consultants have a constant thirst for uncovering knowledge. I believe this desire to learn and to know is a driving force that helps new consultants gain the skills needed to competently fulfil their role.

4.4.2 Developing a consulting skill set

When interviewing participants, they would often mention skills they considered crucial in their role as a new consultant. This section is dedicated to highlighting these skills. In presenting these I hope to help ease incoming consultants’ role transitions. Of course, it is not essential for new consultants to have all of the identified skills when they start. Nevertheless, it’s logical that learning listed skills prior to starting may reduce the frenetic learning requirements experienced when beginning the role. Additionally, future consultants should be aware that continuous skill development is an essential part of the consultant career (Adams & Zanzi, 2004). Similarly, being aware of the skills utilised as a new consultant may provide consulting aspirants a more realistic picture of the job requirements, helping to better prepare them to enter the role of consulting.

TABLE 4 – PARTICIPANT'S PERCEPTIONS OF IMPORTANT SKILLS

Identified Skills		Examples
Hard skills	Quantitative	*Data, analytics, numerical problem solving*
	Computing	*Excel, PowerPoint, computer science*
	Writing	*Spelling and grammar, clarity, business writing*
Soft skills	Interpersonal	*Collaborating, getting team buy-in, emotional intelligence*
	Self-confidence	*Willingness to challenge the status quo, speaking up, stepping outside of comfort zone*
	Communication	*Presenting, asking the right questions, talking to the team*
	Time management	*Self-management, being prepared for change, committing to complete a task*

Much of the literature converges (Alvesson, 2012; Kakabadse, Louchart, & Kakabadse, 2006; O'Mahoney, 2010; Visscher et al., 2018) in agreeing that the nature of consulting requires the utilisation of a wide range of skills. In a further refinement, Alvesson (1993) claims that the essence of a consultant's role is being able to adjust their skills to fit the current context in which they find themselves (Alvesson, 1993, p. 1005). Table 4 shows skills that participants said they used in their role. The table is divided into hard and soft skills, with emphasis placed on themes that more than one participant identified as important to their role. Beside the skills are participants examples of the mentioned skill in action. In my own experiences of the application and testing phases, most of the skills identified in Table 4 were assessed. Therefore, it appears that firms recognise the need for these skills in new consultants.

Hard skills featured much less frequently than soft skills during the coding process, at 18 and 41 occurrences, respectively. Nevertheless, the hard skills identified were consistent with existing literature regarding the nature of consulting work (e.g., O'Mahoney, 2010). Foremost among those identified was the need for sound quantitative skills. Bradley felt his quantitative skills were lacking: "I didn't enjoy it and so I ignored it, rather than actually focussing on it and so now it is biting me on the bum and I'm having to kind of ramp that up really quickly". However, he concluded that he felt there would be opportunities to further develop these, "I do know that I haven't had too many opportunities to do [quantitative work], and I do know when I do get those opportunities I will learn, I will pick it up and I will be able to do it". Daniel also felt his firm afforded him the opportunity to develop the skills he wanted to: "I think data and analytics is a very valuable set of skills to help. In being someone that didn't do that at uni I think I would like to take advantage of those opportunities as I can."

An important hard skill was understanding a range of computing software. When asked what he did well in the job, James said "generally being quick with computers is what I'd say". He provided further explanation that demonstrated the learning tensions of a new consultant:

> You can obviously learn everything on the job, but if you know how to use PowerPoint and Excel then you'll certainly be in a better position than people who can't, because there's plenty of other things that you need to be learning at the same time as well.

Joanne echoed this sentiment when asked what prepared her for the job: "I did a bunch of computer science [at university] which kinda gave me more advanced skills with computing. But, it wasn't something I realised would be such a big aspect of the job" and concluded that "having computer skills and being able to work with Excel has been crazy useful for the day to day work". This is important knowledge for me to know before I enter the role of new consultant and skills I will attempt to develop further.

Ability to write was the final hard skill participants identified as useful for consulting. Joanne stated "Every aspect of the work we do, we always have to write a report of some degree. And that's been going well, I've been getting good responses from management about clarity of writing". Edward felt it was important "Being able to bring together writing so that it's a little bit more pressure off my bosses, who need to spend more time doing the work rather than writing". Edward's statement provides insight into value a consultant can add to the role by upskilling in effective research business writing before starting in the role. Bradley expressed this with insight: "There is definitely a style to how we communicate and how we write and how we present information". He felt "aligning to that and also being able to pivot so that it meets the audience that you are writing for" were important skills to have.

Deloitte Access Economics (2017) predict soft skill intensive work will account for two thirds of available employment by 2030. Balcar (2016) argues that workplaces must improve workplace education systems to reflect the increasing importance of soft skills in the workplace. Soft skills were also found to have a significant impact on graduates wage earning ability (Succi & Wieandt, 2019). Therefore, it is not surprising that participants of this study identified the importance of soft skills in their role.

The first category of soft skills I identified related to interpersonal skills. James shared a project experience where he needed buy in from multiple parties in his department, including senior colleagues:

> It was a bit of a balancing act, but the key part for mitigating that was involving everyone and talking to them beforehand, floating my ideas, getting their opinions and getting them to speak. I brought everyone together and said this is what we're thinking, but these thoughts have come from these people, so acknowledging everyone's ideas and making it a team effort.

This statement shows James enacting emotional intelligence. He took on the role of facilitator and evoked team commitment by ensuring everyone felt heard (Hunter, 2007). Bradley also felt he had grown in his ability to handle difficult situations, demonstrating emotional intelligence growth. He stated:

> I think since joining that is something that I've learnt and have a done a lot better. Around how you react to situations, what's the big picture, where are you trying to get to, how can you manage the interaction in a way that's going to kind of get a good outcome.

Participants also identified confidence as another important soft skill. This manifested in several different ways. For Joanne, it meant "If something's going wrong, just saying it straight up. And especially in a team situation where it's kinda like, if you don't speak up, this project could go to absolute crap". Edward had a similar perception of a new consultant's role, stating "I think being able to bring in a fresh perspective, and being a bit brave to challenge what's been done and embedded in the past" he concluded "That's been one that I've probably done well, just coming in and seeing what's been done for a long time but could do with a shake-up".

Interestingly, even though Edward demonstrated confidence by challenging the status quo, he still felt he had room for improvement. He felt he could have better prepared by understanding certain process within his firm: "I think having put in a bit more effort and learning and education behind that would have helped me to be a bit more confident".

During our interview, Daniel explained a project he had just been on. During his explanation, he said something that reassured me as an incoming consultant:

> In some respects you hear all these stories that you learn these things really fast and it doesn't really matter if you haven't got experience, it's more important you go for it and give it an honest go. At the time when you are a fresh grad[uate] you don't really know what that looks like necessarily and you haven't always tested your limits so to speak.

Epitomising how important it is for new consultants to back themselves and embrace challenging situations as opportunities for development, Daniel explained the outcome of being pushed past his perceived limits during the project:

> I think that was as out of my comfort zone as I've been in a while, and just to have successes come out of that and learn all the things I've learned is something I think will positively reinforce more instances like that over the next years.

Communication often featured in required soft skills. This is unsurprising, given the traditional portrayal of consultants as merchants of meaning who inform clients using their toolbox of linguistic artefacts (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1990). Participants felt the ability to sell your work was essential. Joanne said:

> I wish I'd known how much of a key aspect of consulting detail and presentation would be… I guess it was a bit of a shock, in the sense that it's not always what you think and how you solve problems, it's also this huge other aspect of presenting it to clients well.

Communication internally was equally important. James provided a tip for those starting a new role:

> The importance of first impressions is always good to remember. I'm not saying that I made a bad first impression or anything, but I think for the first few weeks I could have worked harder at learning everyone's name, going out of my way to talk to people, and meeting people while you're still the new guy.

He went on to conclude that he found it "more difficult to meet people once you've been there three, four weeks and you've been in the same place and you haven't asked people's names".

Other key communication features included: seeking feedback, checking in with managers, clarifying expectations and talking with colleagues. However, I will not discuss these here as I cover them later when discussing the theme 'Taking ownership'.

The last soft skill participants identified was the importance of time management. As James put it, "I think quite an important skill to have is self-management, knowing what your schedule is, knowing how much time you've got". Kate felt a necessary trait was: "Being able to just sit in a room for whatever amount of time it takes to get things done" and continued that she thought it "is something that, sometimes, you need when you're doing consulting because you can't really predict what the time limits are gonna be and you just need to commit and sit down and do it".

Daniel discussed an aspect of time management that was important for him, "It's not necessarily time management according to set deadlines, I think it's time management in the event that something spontaneous pops up or an opportunity out of the blue suddenly presents itself". He then concluded that time management was important in these scenarios because "If you haven't managed your time well to allow for stuff like that happening, then you either can't jump at an opportunity or you aren't prepared to be able to deliver something that has randomly come up". To take advantage of such opportunities, it seems time management is essential.

4.4.3 Project completion and thresholds

It was inspiring and a privilege to be privy to participants reliving their moments of success. One of the most notable findings of this study was that the majority of participants felt the completion of a project was a significant and transformative occasion. Indeed, Daniel suggested "I think a lot of people would agree that the stages of your consulting journey are often defined by the jobs that you're on".

Using appreciative questioning during my interviews, I encouraged participants to identify highlights of their experiences while consulting. Most participants identified gratification from completing projects as prominent achievements. Daniel provided evidence of this when I asked him to pinpoint significant stages or moments in his management consulting career. He said, “For me those stages are very much grounded in the end of an engagement”.

For Daniel, finishing a project meant “Being able to confirm to yourself that, even in the face of pressure you are able to pick up those skills and come out on top of it and deliver a good output for the client,” he felt “That’s probably been the most rewarding thing about the [firm] experience so far”. This sense of achievement is important as it is an example of positive coping using self-categorisation. It is known that when this occurs in management consultants, they engage in an ‘upward spiral’ which allows them to better handle stressors associated with the role (Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2016).

Daniel elaborated on his project completion experiences, revealing he recognised the value of these moments in retrospect:

> I think at the end of both of those engagements, I was able to quite vividly reflect on the growth that happens. Speaking to what I was saying before, when people say that you learn and you grow really quickly [in a consultant role], you don’t know what that looks like necessarily. I think that really highlights just how autonomously that happens, and sort of in the background.

Similarly, James identified in reflecting on the progress he has made in his role as a new consultant:

> When I think about my day to day work, it’s not necessarily the most engaging work… but when I step back and look at the things that I’ve achieved during my times, the projects that I’ve contributed to, that’s where the high points come in.

My research indicated experience gained from, and the subsequent benefits of, completing projects, was a compounding effect for participants. Knowledge attained from one project was then able to be used in future engagements. It is argued that this process is beneficial and necessary for the growth of both the junior consultant and the firm (Werr & Stjernberg, 2003). Joanne provided an account of this in practice: “I think, at the end of my last project, I understood why we were doing it, and what the point of the project was”. She then drew a comparison between her last project and her current one, “I mean it’s similar, and there are differences that are unique to the client. But in terms of understanding what questions to ask and why we’re asking them, it makes a lot more sense now”. Bradley provided a detailed account of this occurring in his role as a new consultant:

> The work we do [as new consultants] it’s not always the same, and so coming in, and not knowing anything, I find it quite hard at times to get the big picture and see where we are going. But having done a few projects, having worked on [listed other tasks], I can start putting those pieces together even for something that’s new.

Bradley provided further evidence of why this was valuable in his role:

> The last project I was on we did some [lists task] which I hadn't done before. But now having done that, thinking about other things that I've been around since that's had [lists task], I've got those lenses on what that terminology is like, where the direction should go, what some of those things are. And it's not that I can use exactly what happened in that last project, but I can build off that. So for me, that's been kind of incremental over the process, it's just slowly built, especially around [lists tasks]. Once the ball is rolling, you build speed and then you can understand how people that have been here a while can do it so quickly… It's connecting those dots on something that didn't necessarily be [sic] there, but then changes how you approach it.

The incremental accumulation of knowledge described by Bradley heralds the presence of a potential threshold crossing. Indicative of this, a story shared by one participant provides evidence of a threshold crossing occurring in which a new way of thinking was discovered. After explaining the concept of a threshold crossing to James, he revealed "It perfectly describes what I felt in, about my third month of working at the [client site]". James' provided background to the experience:

> I'd started the project and felt a little bit out of my depth, what's going on, got given pieces of work, did them, then rushed onto the next one, never really learning too much about the [client site] and how it worked.

He then went on to identify the moment of crossing:

> There was a very distinct moment, about three months in, when I was having to explain [the work he had done] to the manager of that group of people.

> And in that moment, I realised that I knew more about this very specific, niche part of the [client site] than he did… and so I think the threshold that I‘d crossed was, I no longer viewed myself as the new guy, or the guy who’s just here for admin tasks. I viewed myself as the guy who can learn a concept and then explain it well enough to people whose job it is to do that.

Nicola-Richmond et al. (2018) argue the process of grasping threshold concepts "should involve a shift in the identity of the learner, the integration of new verbal and/or mental language specific to the discipline, and a period of liminality where students shift between previous and new understandings of the concept" (p. 102). This verifies the presence of a threshold in James' story; he experienced liminality when beginning the engagement, before gaining in-depth knowledge, resulting in a subsequent perception shift of his self-identity.

The experience resulted in a permanent change of mindset for James. He concluded "It was a really empowering feeling because it taught me that if I put the time into learning something, then I'll be good at it and I can explain it to people… It was quite a confidence boost". From my perspective, that provides evidence that during the process of engagement on projects, new consultants learn a mode of thinking specific to the profession of consulting. Baillie, Bowden, and Meyer (2013) elaborate on the development of this type of threshold thinking, attributing it to the development of phronesis grounded by episteme (p. 231).

It is also worth recording that this is not universal. Participants agreed not all consulting projects were equal for catalysing learning moments. Therefore, new consultants should not expect gratification and transformation from every project. Participants reflected on project experiences that ranged from complex and inspiring, to so boring they induced disillusion with the role. Joanne provided some hope, stating "It's quite rare to come across a project that's really awesome, but when they do happen that's pretty special".

4.5 Theme three – Taking ownership

Throughout my research, I was constantly impressed by the personal accountability participants held for their journey to date, their roles and their futures. The final key theme of my study reflects on how participants regularly demonstrate taking ownership. This surfaced as a crucial action new consultants take to help navigate the onboarding process and the beginning of their careers.

Owning their work helped participants generate impetus and facilitate self-growth. During this process, relationships they held directly influenced project, learning and development opportunities. Existing literature confirms the importance of relationships for new consultants (Chao, 2005). Therefore, I argue that new consultants who take ownership of their work and relationships optimise their growth potential within the consulting industry.

4.5.1 Owning the work

Participant stories implied ownership of their work was one of the most important behaviours in the role of a new consultant. This was evidenced by the saturation the code had; ‘ownership of work’ was the second most frequent coded in my data analysis. Participants placed significant weight on taking responsibility for their actions in every aspect of their work.

An important finding was that project satisfaction correlated directly with the amount of ownership participants felt they had over their work. Joanne explained “I’ve noticed that on projects that aren’t as good, it’s often because you aren’t given as much responsibility, so you don’t have ownership over it”. Similarly, Bradley described a moment when he was recognised for owning the work “My role was to [describes task] and that got really good feedback, so that for me was awesome. To be recognised for owning that rather than just being a part of that was cool”.

New consultants have latent agency to take ownership of projects, understanding this will help them become more competent in their role. Accordingly, being proactive is an action and an attitude the new consultant should adopt to increase their ownership of work. Acting rather than being acted upon directly influences the course of a new consultant’s career. Joanne emphasised “A big aspect of getting what you want out of this job is speaking out and talking about it and being proactive”. She explained “If you’re not happy with the work you’re on or someone you’re working with, if you don’t speak out, nothing’s gonna [sic] change”.

Correspondingly, Daniel revealed that before beginning his role "I didn't necessarily consider myself to be a super proactive person" however, that changed because "Rewards are available at [firm] by being proactive and trying to drive your own destiny". Daniel also said "I think I've also been proactive about pursuing things that are of interest to me" because "One of the dangers I was sort of warned of joining [his firm] was that if you allow them to, they will basically dictate your path, in your jobs, for you". However, he emphasised that "If you're proactive enough, you can… get yourself on to work ahead of time that you want to be on or care about or want to learn more and explore with".

If the new consultant fails to take ownership of their job placement, the projects they are on will be dictated. Daniel explained the process:

> What generally happens is that once you finish your engagement, if you don't have anything in your pipeline, either what will happen is if there is more work to be done in the service line that you are currently in, you'll just get put on [a job], or the [scheduling] manager will look at your bookings, see that you've free once the engagement finishes and if you haven't done anything to get yourself onto a job… they'll basically strongly recommend that you do what they have in mind for you.

Getting a placement is not the only use of owning work for a new consultant. Once on a new project, participants found it difficult to adjust. Additionally, I found evidence that commencing a project induced self-doubt in some participants.

Demonstrating this, Joanne stated “Every time you start a new project, it’s completely new. It’s completely, I don’t know what this is, and it doesn’t make sense and I can’t imagine how we could possibly solve this problem”. Joanne attempted to control this doubt by understanding the objective of the project, stating “I think it’s key early on in the engagement, figuring out what the point is”.

These findings suggest taking control of discovering what is needed to complete tasks becomes an essential duty of the new consultant. Only by doing so can the consultant deliver the results expected by senior colleagues and clients. There were different approaches to how participants managed the early stages of a new project. One way is through utilising colleagues who are willing to make knowledge resources available to new consultants. However, the new consultant must be willing to seek these resources out. James provided an example of how this works:

> When you’re starting up a project and you really don’t know much, you should take that opportunity while you’re still new to ask about everything. If there’s an acronym that you don’t understand or a group of people who do things, you don’t know what they do, just ask about it. People will be happy to help you, and it’s much better to do that sooner in the project rather than later.

Utilising the knowledge of peers during the early stages of a project will help new consultants gain control of their tasks. Daniel provided further evidence of this in action on an engagement where he had little knowledge of the project:

> It was an area of expertise that I was not equipped for at all, but during those early weeks, I just reached out to some of my friends in my grad[uate] class that I knew had extensive experience in [project] and were able to help me figure out those early things, and over the last three or four weeks I've just worked hard and been patient and given it a really honest go.

The last part of Daniel's statement is crucial to understanding the required behaviours of a new consultant. Once new consultants know what needs to be done, they must then take charge of the work.

Another way participants can own their work is by understanding their workload capacity. If new consultants become overloaded, they become ineffective in their role. James argued "This is a skill I think everyone has to learn in their first company in consulting". James said "I think I can manage expectations of myself well" and elaborated on how he achieved management of his workload: "When other people try and load work on me, I know pretty much as soon as they give it to me whether I can do it or not". He concluded "If I can't do it, then I'll tell them right away". Accordingly, this is an important learning for me and a lesson I take into my role as a new consultant.

For new consultants, it is important to have a realistic and achievable workload as not meeting workplace expectations can result in consultants having lowered effectiveness and increased stress levels (Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2016). My personal belief in delivering results is akin to the adage that it is better to 'under promise and over deliver'. James echoed this sentiment:

> If you're a senior or a manager and you're looking around the office trying to find someone who can do your work for you… you'd much rather have someone say 'I'm sorry, I'm slammed, I can't do that', than just say 'yes I can do that', and then end up not doing it, or maybe doing a poor job of it because they're too stressed.

Consulting aspirants who are fortunate enough to gain an internship in the field of consulting would benefit from remembering that even as an intern, your ability to own your work is being assessed. Comparative to the new consultants, Iris demonstrated as a consulting intern, owning the work was equally important. She stated "You're not necessarily expected to work as many hours, and to stay all the time and they're not going to push you constantly to be on top of the work, because you've got to look after it yourself".

During a project, new consultants can ensure they own their work by checking in, taking ownership for their mistakes and seeking feedback to improve. Checking in is an important tool for new consultants to use to ensure they are meeting the expectations of their supervisors and minimising avoidable mistakes. Furthermore, checking in is a behaviour that contributes to effective time management. James emphasised "It's much better to spend 5 minutes of [the person in charge] time looking over what you've done, than for you to spend 5 hours on something and then have to do it all over again."

Admitting mistakes is an important part of being a new consultant. Joanne thought this was something she did well. She gave an example: “The other day I realised as I was doing it that something was a bit off,” and notified her manager “Instead of hiding it under the rug and letting it go through,” even though “Nobody probably would’ve noticed and it probably wouldn’t have mattered in the long run”. The act of admitting mistakes also affords new consultants the opportunity to check in. Joanne concluded by explaining the benefit of admitting mistakes, whilst demonstrating ownership of following up on feedback: “Being able to actually say ‘oh look, this does look wrong’, and ‘I think I screwed this bit up’, and ‘can you please check it’, and making sure that follow through happens”.

Bradley shared another example of owning mistakes. He revealed that, as a new consultant, “You are always going to make mistakes and have learning opportunities, but for me one of my rules is make a mistake once, don’t do it again,” however, “You might slip up with that… and that can still be hard, but making sure you are taking on the learnings and working forward from that,” is essential to succeeding in the role.

New consultants should be prepared, if they make a substantial error, to receive honest feedback. Bradley admitted “Getting critical feedback isn’t always enjoyable, and you might feel shit when you get it”. In this situation, it is imperative to take the feedback on objectively and, as Bradley shared, “Try to action it and see the bigger picture”.

The new consultant can also proactively seek feedback by highlighting perceived shortcomings in their work. James revealed that "The people reviewing your work like it a lot more if you can call out points where you're not sure". If, within his work, James saw "Something that I wasn't one hundred percent sure of, what I'd used to do is I'd say 'ah that's fine, they probably won't notice it anyway, it won't actually matter that much'". In those situations, "Invariably the senior or partner reviewing my work would be like 'I think it's all good, but there's just this one thing'. [As himself, James exclaimed] 'Ah shit, should have changed that'".

This behaviour shifted as James grew his consulting tenure, eventuating in ownership of his mistakes through a change in behaviour. The act of self-evaluation of work is an important behaviour to adopt because it helps build trust with senior staff. James explained:

> I've made a habit of turning in work and saying, 'done this, I think one call out is X Y Z, can you please have a look at that?' And that means they don't have to, there's an element of trust, and they know that if you haven't called it out, you're pretty comfortable with it.

Lastly, new consultants who wish to progress in the industry identified the process of undertaking ownership of their image as an important practice. Edward, the direct entry consultant, took ownership for shaping his reputation through the work he has done. Edward believed "In consulting, a big part of it is the name on the page at the end of the credentials… Even though it's early days, by publishing articles, speaking at conferences and that kind of thing… there's some recognition already". However, when undertaking this, new consultants should note the tension that exists in their role image between heteronomy and autonomy. To ensure they retain credibility, consultants must balance client perceptions of actions that are the consultants own, and actions that are under firm directive (Bourgoin & Bencherki, 2013, p. 34).

4.5.2 Managing relationships

It is no secret that the role of consultant entails much interaction. At a new consultant level, this interaction may occur between peers, with seniors or with clients. I expected interaction between these parties to arise in my research. What was unexpected was the frequency with which it arose, and the importance participants placed on it. Most participants confirmed they did not understand how important relationship building was until they had spent some time in their roles. This is an essential learning from my study and one I will enact in my new role. I also encourage other incoming consultants to commit to building relationships to maximise their growth potential.

Some participants expressed regret at not knowing the value of relationships prior to starting and believed it would have changed the level of effort they put into networking. Ansome explained:

> I probably would have gone into it [the role] with a more positive, social view… I would have wanted to go in and make connections and make

> friends, as opposed to just go in and do my work [sic] and leave. I've tried to get better at that recently.

James gave an uncomplicated explanation of why team relationships need to be built: "You're spending forty, fifty hours a week with people, it's well worth the time investing in your relationships with them, making sure you get on". Firm structures indicate the importance of building connections with colleagues is understood and encouraged. One such structure I was fortunate to have experienced as an incoming consultant was a mentor system. My journal entry illustrates its value:

> One thing my firm has done really well in the interim before I start is assigning me a buddy. They are helpful, honest and willing to share their knowledge and experiences. I've met with them a couple of times and having my experiences and concerns validated by them is energising. It's so good being able to get an insider view into my future workplace, especially with the long stand down period I have between signing my contract and starting. It helps me feel like the firm is already looking out for me.

Relationship building requires a conscious effort given the demanding nature of consulting work. James took ownership of his relationships prior to starting his role by getting to know people, gaining name recognition and establishing relationships. Bradley recognised the importance of intentional relationship building and set out to establish them at the beginning of his role, explaining that "I made a conscious effort of trying to meet people and introduce myself". He admitted "I'm not always good at it" and "It definitely put me out of my comfort zone," but explained that "Coming in with that mindset helped because it is a big machine and people come and go and you can quite easily hide, in a way, without meaning to".

Comparatively, failure to make peer connections may have a negative impact on consultants' role experiences (Mühlhaus & Bouwmeester, 2016). Iris felt "Towards the end of my internship, because of the nature of the work… I'd sit away in the [area] quite a lot, away from everyone else [in the team]. I felt that towards the end I got quite isolated". She expressed regret, noting "I would have loved to have tried to come out more, but you get bogged down and busy with something and you just kind of forget". Iris also acknowledged she could have made more effort to build connections. She admitted "If I had taken the initiative to come out of the [area] and actually go and see them, it would have worked out a lot better".

Personality type appeared to influence participants willingness and ability to network, consistent with the findings of existing literature (Guthrie, Coate, & Schwoerer, 1998). As Ansome explained in relation to his own challenges:

> I could network a lot better. They really encourage you to try and go out for coffees with people and put yourself out there, but I'm quite quiet so I didn't really do that which is something I should do a lot more, especially since everything is so relationship-based.

Effective relationship building may positively influence career development. Participants confirmed that those who were better at relationship building held a distinct advantage in securing project placements. Ansome explained “It’s hard because some people are naturally good at that and then they are the ones that end up in like getting on the good pieces of work because they know the right people to cosy up to”. Daniel confirmed “Something that was rewarding for sure was wanting to get into [project] and going out of my way to talk to the people that I needed to talk to, to get onto a job, and it ended up happening”.

The (dis)advantage afforded by (in)ability to form relationships was confirmed by other participants. Joanne explained because she had “Quite an extroverted personality” relationship building came easier. She sympathised with those for whom it did not come as easy and claimed “I know that some people will struggle because they’re a bit more quiet, and so it doesn’t come as naturally which feels a bit rough at times”.

Therefore, to increase opportunities, the new management consultant, must be able to bridge the perceived power distance between themselves and senior management. Daniel believed “a big aspect of doing well in management consulting is ensuring your relationships with managers and senior leadership people are quite strong”. It is worth remembering that fear of senior staff has to be tempered by the knowledge that they are invested in the success of new consultants.

Reflecting on entering the role, Daniel would have advised his former self “To not to be so intimidated by the partners, or more senior people,” continuing “I’m not so much now that I’ve broken the ice with a lot of them, and have gotten experience interacting with people. I realise now that they only want us to succeed and do well". He elaborated "If you pull them aside or ask them out for coffee to talk about whatever the case may be… a lot of the time they are really keen to do that and help you along your journey" but noted they would do it only "As long as they are not absolutely swamped with work".

Therefore, I argue it is essential new consultants time relationship building efforts with senior staff appropriately. This includes being considerate of time pressures and structuring interactions in a deliberate way to maximise efficacy. Bradley suggested because "they are very time-poor," if going to senior staff with a query or idea it was important to go prepared "with a semi-answer" and consider beforehand "how you ask the question".

Relationships with clients were considered equally important by participants. It's value is equally reflected in literature (Stroh, 2019). Therefore, new consultants should build relationships with clients whenever an appropriate opportunity arises. Joanne said, "I think to grow as a consultant… Interacting with clients is key to the role, and if I'm avoiding it then I'm not really stretching myself".

To summarise this and section and the value of relationships for new consultants, I close with a piece of wisdom from James that I will remember when starting my consulting role. He stated:

> I think it's always good to remember that the value that you get is directly correlated with the relationships that you make, and to an extent, the

> networks that you make. Looking back, one of the things that I'd try and do… before I started, is spend less time trying to work super hard, and more time going for coffees with the grad[uate] group or just going over to people's desks, saying hello, seeing how they are. 'Cause you know, it's not a competition or anything. And if you're only in one of these places for two, three, four, five years, you're gonna [sic] move on to other places and, at the end of the day, the things that are going to matter are the people that you meet and the relationships you've made.

4.5.3 Opportunities during and after consulting

The desirability of a career in management consulting is well established (Binder et al., 2016; Donnelly & Gamsu, 2019). This section explores the why behind consultants choosing this as a career pathway and the key motivators for them doing so. I argue that opportunities afforded by a consulting career path, both during and after, are an essential factor in attracting new recruits to the profession.

Multiple participants identified the lodestone of the role's attractiveness as the opportunity to learn new skills and gain exposure to multiple industries. Joanne explained "Management consulting was a way to try a range of different things at once". James was drawn to consulting when "I looked at some of the different options available and I realised quite quickly that this was one of the roles that was gonna [sic] give me the most experience in as many different places as possible". Daniel held a similar perspective: "The main reason why I wanted to get into consulting in the first place because I knew that it would just be like a really solid four to five years of being able to just learn as much as I can".

Daniel provided further description of the opportunities he had encountered in the role:

> A lot of the really have just been revolved around learning or new skills on the job. I went into consulting knowing that I didn't really know what I wanted to specialise in and was just keen to try lots of different things. And to have that experience put on a plate for you, where you are thrown into an industry that you have no familiarity with and generally don't have the hard skills for and being able to confirm to yourself that even in the face of pressure you are able to pick up those skills and come out on top of it and deliver a good output for the client. That's probably been one of the most rewarding things, probably the most rewarding thing about the [firm] experience so far.

Participants identified that there are many opportunities in management consulting. However, they also emphasised that new consultants must ensure they are continuously open to learning and possibility to maximise what they get from the experience. Predictably, new consultants' attitudes towards the work impact the experience. James shared his attitude towards the opportunities, stating "I'm trying to work hard, but I'm also trying to really enjoy the process. Learn as much as I can, be open to new opportunities," and continued "I'm sort of doing this blind as much as anybody else, but I think that's going to be one of the things that contributes to how well I enjoy the job”. James concluded by highlighting different attitudes towards the role:

> I look at the people who are moaning and the people who are seeming to be happy with the job, and I definitely notice that it’s the people that seem to have a more open mind, who seem to give the positive vibes around the office, that are a lot happier.

New consultants understand that a management consulting career may be unsustainable given that management consulting is notorious for its high turnover (Alvesson, 2012; Armbrüster, 2006) and it is predicted that half of all consultants leave the industry within seven years of starting (O'Mahoney, 2010, p. 356). Participants evidenced this by demonstrating either implicit or explicit awareness of the potential tenure brevity of their consulting role. Joanne admitted “I don’t think I’ll be in management consulting forever, it’s more about figuring it out.” She explained the draw of the role was to “be able to try lots of different areas, and then hopefully at the end of my time, I will know a little bit more about what I wanna specialise in, where I wanna head into,” and concluded with “Weighing out all the possibilities of where my career could go, where my life could go, was a big moment when I realised that management consulting was gonna be a good choice”.

Other participants agreed that the opportunities afforded by the role outweighed the role’s likely transience. Bradley stated:

> This is definitely a bucket list tick for me. I feel very lucky to be here, although it can be very challenging to have gone into something is not

> necessarily a life-long career. But it's something that I really wanted to do and is going to open awesome opportunities for me later on and so I don't take that lightly.

O'Mahoney (2010) believes that consultants "Probably have more options than any other career when it comes to moving on" (p. 356). Correspondingly, this study found exit opportunities are a significant reason people enter consulting. Joanne explained "Being in a big firm… with that reputation on a CV," was "good for career growth". However, as with the rest of the opportunities available during their career, new consultants must take responsibility for accessing and maximising these opportunities. Daniel observed:

> There are some people in my grad[uate] class that are absolutely killing it, and are really putting in the hours outside of the nine to five [work day] and learning lots of new skills and getting qualifications and credentials to show for it on their CV for whatever experience they want to move onto next.

4.6 Summary

Three key themes were identified during thematic analysis: Handling uncertainty; Developing competence; and Taking ownership.

New consultants experience a wide range of uncertainty. Participants identified ways to mitigate this uncertainty. Consulting aspirants would benefit from understanding their target firm's expectations and highlighting individual points of difference when preparing for to apply. The routes to entering the role differ, however, understanding what to expect and best practice gives applicants an increased chance of success.

The uncertainty created by beginning a role as a new consultant was amplified by a perceived gap between participants' expectations of consulting versus the reality of the role. Participants disillusionment stemmed largely from actual role responsibilities comparative to the responsibilities that were marketed to them. Onus for rectifying this disconnect appears to rest equally with firms and their applicants.

Covid-19 greatly increased participants feelings of uncertainty. Adverse impacts from Covid-19 on participants included a decrease in the socialisation process and a dulling of the perceived opportunities in management consulting. However, Covid-19 also had some unexpected positive impacts. Firm support actions during the pandemic increased participants commitment to their company and participants benefitted from increased access to senior management during project planning.

New consultants are required to swiftly develop competence. Firms provided official support channels to achieve this, while participants also identified informal networks that they autonomously discovered, thereby sharing responsibility for the development of their knowledge. Firms catalyse competence development through 'deep-end' learning, forcing consultants to upskill quickly. New consultants manage this process by seeking feedback and utilising knowledge resources such as their peers and firm information systems.

Participants identified a range of hard and soft skills that were instrumental to the completion of their duties. Incoming consultants can increase their role readiness by learning some of the listed skills before entering the role. Doing so will alleviate learning pressure associated with becoming a new consultant. It is crucial to form positive learning habits early on, as it allows new consultants to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by the role.

Arguably, the most significant portion new consultants' learning occurs at the end of a project. The conclusion of projects heralded new ways of thinking for the participants and afforded them a more in-depth understanding of industries. Participants identified significant learning moments at the conclusion of projects that mirrored the transformative nature of threshold crossings. These positive shifts changed participants self-perception as they realised the volume of knowledge they had accumulated and what they had achieved.

To be successful in consulting, new consultants must take ownership. Participants identified taking ownership as a way to ensure they met firm and client expectations while simultaneously setting themselves up for success in their futures. Additionally, new consultants who own their work experience greater satisfaction than those who do not. They have increased access to rewards and can reduce some of the associated role stress through owning their learning progress. Additionally, ownership of work through seeking feedback and checking in improves trust with their senior colleagues.

Crucial to the role of a new consultant is taking ownership of relationships. This study found preferred project placement largely correlates with participants’ ability to form relationships and gain access to information about upcoming projects. Relationships are an essential way to complement and supplement new consultants’ knowledge. To maximise their potential for success, new consultants must actively seek to form new relationships within their firm across hierarchical levels.

Finally, consultants must take ownership of the opportunities available during consulting. Doing so boosts their efficacy while in the role and increases exit opportunities once they finish. A large part of what attracts applicants to a consulting role are the opportunities it provides, yet it is up to applicants to seek out and act upon these opportunities.

Chapter 5: Summing up

5.0 Conclusions

My main research question for this study was "How might individuals and organisations improve the recruitment and onboarding of new entrant management consultants?" The first revelation is that new consultants are largely responsible for dictating their own journey during the application and integration processes. Similarly, to improve their efficacy and draw maximum value from the opportunities available in consulting, new consultants must take ownership of their work and relationships. Furthermore, firms can assist with this process by ensuring awareness of, and access to, all necessary resources. Finally, this study found that new consultants develop competence using a range of different pathways, with significant, transformative learning occurring at the conclusion of projects. I believe that integrating these findings in recruitment and onboarding practices of firms will improve them. Additionally, aspiring and incoming consultants will benefit from applying findings in this study.

Sub questions within my study helped me answer my research question. In answer to the first sub-question, "What do organisations do well in the recruitment and onboarding for new entrant management consultants?" I found that firms' facilitation of relationship development, through actions such as mentor programmes and encouraging catch ups, helps new consultants' acculturation and development. Furthermore, new consultants benefit from firms' explicit and implicit encouragement of ownership and autonomy in learning and relationships. Finally, firms and new consultants will benefit from continued culture matching practices. By encouraging applicants to retain and demonstrate their personality, and through hiring consultants whose values are consistent with their firms, trust is built between firms and their employees. This was consistent with what I expected to find.

Firms may benefit from knowing the following findings for the second sub-question "What could organisations do better in the recruitment and onboarding for new entrant management consultants?". These learnings provide use for firms when planning human resource management (HRM) practices for new consultants. Firstly, this research showed new consultants felt misled by firms' portrayal of the role, consistent with existing evaluation of firms' recruitment practices (Schmidt, 2017). While Costas and Kärreman (2016) identified a potential disconnect in consultants' expectations of the role versus the reality, I did not expect the practice to be so strongly protested by my participants. Secondly, if firms ensure communication channels with new consultants are clearly established, it will allow them to autonomously attain information related to their performance and project placement. Thirdly, owning the work allows new consultants to take control of their development and therefore, their identity. Fourthly, recognition for their work improves new consultants' perception of their identity as consultants. Finally, Covid-19 had an impact on new consultants' socialisation and acculturation processes

The third sub-question was "At what stage, or stages, of their management consulting journey do new entrants perceive themselves as authentic management consultants?" Supplementary to this was the fourth sub-question "Are such perceptions important and can they be influenced?" This research again highlighted the uncertainty of a consulting role and provide new contributions by revealing how it can be overcome through research and preparation. Indeed, this was a key concern of mine before entering the industry – how do I become a 'real' consultant. I now know that new consultants become more confident in their authenticity as they accumulate a wider knowledge base, with several channels to available for them to achieve this. They gain the most substantial validation of their identities at the completion of projects, when reflecting on what they have achieved over the course of the project. Moreover, the impact of project completion on a new management consultant's self-perception appears to be a compounding effect.

My final sub-question was "Could threshold concepts and threshold crossings help improve onboarding for the new entrant management consultants, and/or for their employers, or for both?" Given the highly liminal nature of consulting (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003), I expected to find evidence of new consultants overcoming this through thresholds, although I was not sure where it would occur. This study found these transformative experiences often occurred at the completion of a project. This was a significant and surprising discovery of this study. In addition it is a response to the call from Nicola-Richmond et al. (2018) for more research on threshold thinking outside the realm of education. This study found new consultants are constantly learning during projects. Yet, sometimes they may not realise it until the completion of the project. Once new consultants understand their contribution to the wider projection completion, a collation of latent knowledge manifests as a threshold crossing, transforming their understanding and allowing them to apply gained knowledge to future projects. This process helps new consultants become competent in their roles.

During this study I used Analytical Autoethnography, Appreciative Inquiry and Action Research as my guiding frameworks. Appreciative Inquiry helped me celebrate my participants stories and encouraged them through affirmation of their experiences. The action of sharing stories helped participants recognise transformative moments in themselves. As they reflected on their successes and best practices during their consulting journeys, I became privy to them self-validating their experiences and learnings. Analytical Autoethnography helped me be reflexive in my research, using my own experiences whist applying to complement the experiences of the participants. Reflecting on my own experiences helped me realise what I did well and what I could share with others to help them succeed in the application process. Finally, Action Research ensures my learnings become action. Before beginning this study, I viewed the field of management consulting as an enigma; now I understand how to progress in my future career path and have generated actions that I and others can take to increase our chances of success.

I believe that this study adds knowledge to an important and under-researched area. Few studies to date have focused on the experiences of new management consultants prior to and when commencing their journeys as management consultants. Fewer still – my literature search did not find any – have focused on new management consultants in a New Zealand context. The geographical isolation and generalist nature of New Zealand management consultants means their experiences comparative to their international counterparts are likely heterogeneous. Furthermore, Covid-19 and New Zealand’s reaction to it added an unexpected level of discovery to this study.

It was an honour to interview so many talented new consultants and I was inspired by their stories. It is my hope that aspirant and incoming consultants find use in this research and it helps them succeed in their expedition, and firms consider this knowledge when improving their HRM practices. The knowledge I have attained is immeasurably valuable to me as I begin my career as a management consultant.

5.1 Recommendations

Several key recommendations stand out for navigating the recruitment and onboarding process. I provide these recommendations with the hope that aspirant and incoming consultants, and their employing firms, gain benefit from them.

Firstly, to aspirant consultants. Prepare well for the application. Remember that firms receive thousands of applications in any given year and many consulting aspirants meet firms’ minimum qualification requirements. What will set you apart from the competition is your ability to communicate your: personality; experiences; the research you have conducted beforehand; and your fit with firm culture and the role. Failure to do any of these will damage your employment chances.

Secondly to incoming consultants (and myself as one). Prepare before starting the role. Generally, there is an extended lead time between getting an offer and starting.

Use this time to pick up some essential skills. Utilise your mentor if you have one. Start building relationships before you enter the role.

Thirdly, to incoming and new consultants. Take ownership of your career. Own your learning and skill development. Build genuine relationships and leverage the opportunities these provide. Seek out opportunities for self-improvement and project placement. Ask for feedback and check in regularly to ensure you are meeting expectations. Being proactive in your time at the firm is essential to maximising the returns you get.

Fourthly, to firms and incoming consultants. Ensure the reality of new consultants' work matches their expectations of the role. Failure to match these may have a negative impact on employee performance and commitment. There are several ways firms can rectify this disconnect: Ensure they portray the role in a realistic light during recruitment; check applicants understanding of the duties of the new consultant whilst interviewing, and; ensure applicants are well informed of their duties prior to commencing their role, potentially through the mentor system. Similarly, incoming consultants should to conduct their own due diligence on the duties of their role.

Finally, to firms. Investigate the impact of Covid-19 on new consultants. Specifically, the effect it had on their firm socialisation and acculturation. Doing so will allow firms to identify how new consultants were adversely impacted by the pandemic and provide relevant support solutions.

5.2 Limitations

Seven interviews were conducted where ten were originally pursued. Nevertheless, a reoccurrence in themes by my fifth interview indicated to me that I was reaching data saturation. Indeed, a review of reputed literature suggests that most key themes are identified after five or six interviews (Francis et al., 2010; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; M. G. Morgan, Fischhoff, Bostrom, & Atman, 2002). As such, I feel confident that the interviews uncovered most of the major themes associated with new entrant consultants' experiences. That said future research into this area would do well to increase the volume of participants.

Covid-19 and the New Zealand lockdowns significantly impacted my intended participant numbers, interview dates, and meant all my interviews had to be conducted via a Zoom call. At the time of interview preparation, the University of Waikato had also strongly recommended moving interviews to an online format wherever possible. Conducting sessions this way limited my ability as an interviewer to read my participants' non-verbal cues. I also felt it depersonalised the experience somewhat. Additionally, connectivity issues arose in one of my interviews and I potentially lost valuable data as when asking the participant to repeat themselves, they chose to give me an abridged version of their original answer. Coincidentally, a silver lining appeared because of the connectivity. In two interviews my participants were not able to use their camera, but they could still see me. I observed that it seemed as though this level of anonymity provided them an opportunity to speak more freely, without worrying about appearances.

Ideally, I would have liked to include data of consultants' experiences from MBB and boutique firms. Unfortunately, MBB has limited employees based in New Zealand and I found it exceedingly difficult to get a reply from any of the new consultants whose LinkedIn profiles showed they worked at one of MBB in New Zealand. It was also challenging to pinpoint new consultants in boutique firms. My general investigation placed a lot of them as industry experts who had then moved into consulting. This group of individuals were less relevant to my thesis audience. For these reasons, my participants chosen were all as new entrants to one of the Big 4. I gathered a cross section of employees from across the Big 4. How they entered consulting varied range in how each entered consulting. I included data from an interview with someone who had only interned at one of the Big 4 as a point of comparison and contrast.

5.3 Future research directions

Liminality in consulting has long been established. However, the use of threshold thinking in management consulting has little coverage in contemporary literature. The volume of knowledge new consultants are expected to consume, combined with the ambiguous nature of a consultant's role, creates conditions where thresholds can reasonably be expected to occur. Indeed, this study provided evidence of such. Further research is needed to verify their occurrence and the impact this has on the journey of new consultants.

This study showed some of the impact of Covid-19 on management consultants. Yet, the long-term impacts of Covid-19 on management consulting remain to be seen. Covid-19 provides a wealth of exploration opportunity for management researchers. Any future research that looked at the impact of the pandemic on management consultants would be a valuable contribution to knowledge.

This study focused on qualitative experiences of six new consultants and one intern, who all had worked at one of the 'Big 4' firms in New Zealand. It did not include a comparison of new consultants in boutique firms or at the, arguably, more prestigious MBB firms. Additionally, there is little literature globally that solely focuses on new consultants. Therefore, future studies into the experiences of new consultants could take an international and multi-firm approach with a larger study group, to confirm the suppositions of this study. Additionally, a mixed-methods approach that included quantitative research would provide empirical data that management consulting firms may be more receptive to adopting, given the largely quantitative nature of the business.

Participants in this study and existing literature (Alvesson, 2012; O'Mahoney, 2010) identify the temporal nature of the management consulting career. A common impression I have after this study is that the many new consultants consider a career in consulting to be short-term. Future research could evaluate the impact that this perception of the role has on employees' commitment to the work.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Ethics approval

WAIKATO MANAGEMENT SCHOOL
TE RAUPAPA

THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

Walkato Management School
The University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105
Hamilton 3240
New Zealand

[redacted]
Research and Postgraduate Manager
Phone [redacted]
www.management.ac.nz/research

Garth Tunnicliffe
[redacted]

11/20/2020

Dear Garth

Ethical Application WMS 20/18
Exploring the journeys of new entrant management consultants

The above research project, as outlined in your submitted application, has been granted Ethics Approval for Research by the Waikato Management School Human Research Ethics Committee.

Please note: should you make any major changes to the project outlined in the approved ethics application, you may need to reapply for ethics approval.

Best wishes for your research.

Kind regards,

[redacted]
WMS Research and Postgraduate Manager

Appendix 2 – Confidentiality agreement

Intentionally ommited for publication.

Appendix 3 – Interview questions

Introduction

- Explain the purpose of my research
- Disclose my position as incoming consultant
- Ensure participant is aware of their right to choose not to answer and reinforce confidentiality
- Gain written consent prior to the interview commencing and confirm at the end of the interview to use the information obtained
- Advise that the interview may take up to one hour, and check for questions.
- Check and note pseudonym
- Gain agreement to commence
- **Begin recording and notify**
- Proceed with questions

Interview Questions

1. What are some highpoints you've had as a management consultant?

(Subjects could include: Where are you working? What sort of projects are you working on? What people you meet? What industries have you worked with?)

2. How did you become a management consultant? *(When and how did you find your way into a management consultant role?)*

3. What did you do well that prepared you for the application and interview process?

4. What do you think you could you have done better to prepare you for the application and interview process?

5. What three things did you do well that prepared you for doing the job?

6. What three things do you do well since you've been in the job?

7. Can you think of three things that you could do better in the job?

8. Can you think of any stories that illustrate high points on your journey as a management consultant?

9. Can you pinpoint any significant stages in your journey of either becoming or continuing as a management consultant?

10. What people, if any, helped you enter management consulting? If yes, how did they help?

11. On reflection, what 3 things do you wish you'd know or done:

a. Before you applied for the job?
b. Before you started in the job?

12. What advice might you give to your younger self a) before you applied and b) before you started?

Interviewer: Have you heard of threshold concepts? When grasped, your understanding or way of viewing 'something' transforms. For example, during a leadership communication paper I learned that instances from my childhood were shaping the way I communicated with others. Once I realized this and crossed this threshold it enabled me to better evaluate my communication style and replace personal mechanisms that no longer served me.

Experiencing a threshold crossing helps you overcome uncertainty and leads to changes in the way you perceive things and possibly even a shift in the way you view yourself.

13. Can you identify an instance in which you've experienced a threshold crossing while navigating your consulting journey?

14. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your management consulting journey?

Additional questions will be asked based on the data gathered during the interview and any probing questions based on the participants' responses

Concluding the Interview

- Clarify any interviewer questions
- **Stop recording**
- Confirm at the end of the interview consent to use the information obtained
- Clarify consent to follow-up with any additional questions once the interview has been transcribed.
- Thank the participant

Appendix 4 – Information disclosure and participant consent forms

Consent Form for Participants

Waikato Management School
Te Raupapa

THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

Exploring the journeys of new entrant management consultants

Consent Form for Participants

I have read the **Information Sheet for Participants** for this study and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I also understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time prior to the submission of the thesis, or to decline to answer any particular questions in the study. I agree to provide information to the researchers under the conditions of confidentiality set out in the **Information Disclosure Sheet**.

I agree to the interview being electronically recorded.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the **Information Disclosure Sheet**.

Signed: ____

Name: ____

Date: ____

Researcher's name and contact information:
Garth Tunnicliffe
Phone: [redacted]
Email:

Supervisor's name and contact information:
Professor David McKie
Waikato Management School
Private Bag 3105
Hamilton 3240
Telephone: [redacted]
Email:

Participant Information Disclosure Sheet

Waikato Management School
Te Raupapa

THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

Overview
My name is Garth Tunnicliffe. As part of my Master of Management studies, I am conducting and reporting on a research project. This thesis forms an important part of my Masters degree. For my project I wish to research the experiences of new management consultants in the application process and their experiences in seeking employment and starting at their organisation. The project is titled: Exploring the journeys of new entrant management consultants.

What will you have to do and how long will it take?
I would like you to participate in a one-to-one interview to gather information about your experiences of entering a management consultant role. The interview will be semi-structured, consisting of open-ended questions and discussion time. I anticipate it will take no more than 60 minutes of your time. If you agree, the interview will be recorded and subsequently transcribed. I also intend to take notes during the interview.

What will happen to the information collected?
Your responses will be used to write my thesis. There is also potential for my thesis to be developed into a publication or conference document after completion. Only my supervisor and I will have access to the information you provide me in the interview notes, recordings and the paper written. After three months or less from the completion of the project, all notes and recordings will be destroyed. I will keep a copy of the paper on file but will treat it with the strictest confidentiality.

All identifying information contained in interview information will be removed when that information is included in my thesis and will not be included in any subsequent documents. You will be assigned a pre-agreed upon pseudonym. This ensures the privacy of participants.

Declaration to participants
If you take part in the study, you have the right to:

- Refuse to answer any question.
- Withdraw from the study at any time prior to the submission of the thesis.
- Ask any further questions about the study that occurs to you during your participation.
- Be given access to a summary of the findings from the study when it is concluded.

If you have any questions about this research project, you can contact me, Garth Tunnicliffe:

- Email: [redacted]
- Telephone:

My project is being supervised by Professor David McKie. His contact details are:

- Telephone: [redacted]
- Email:
- Address: Waikato Management School,