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**An exploration of the roles played by
external sustainability consultants in
organizations**

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An exploration of the roles played by external sustainability consultants in organizations

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Abstract

One of our most important, yet difficult, missions in modern society is to make the world more sustainable. Due to the complexity of sustainability issues, the lack of knowledge or expertise in the area, companies may choose to hire an external sustainability consultant to further their sustainability work. Despite the importance of sustainability consultants, there are relatively few researchers who have paid attention to their role in making organizations more sustainable. Hence, we ask: What roles do external sustainability consultants play in their clients' organizations? In researching this, twenty interviews were conducted with Swedish-based sustainability consultants and client companies to capture the roles and combination of roles. In addition to the roles found in previous research, two new roles emerged in this study: *Spider in the Web* characterizing the relational aspect, and the *Knight in Shining Armor* characterizing the urgency in solving problems fast. The existence of two additional roles for sustainability consultants (compared to management consultants) could be due to the wickedness of sustainability issues. Furthermore, we stress that sustainability consultants can combine roles either simultaneously or sequentially, which is generally neglected in previous research. It can also be concluded that sustainability consultants can be clustered into change agents and agents of stability. However, we found no indications of the "fashion-setter" clustering in our empirical material, despite this being outlined in previous management consultant literature.

Keywords: Sustainability consultants, roles, sustainability, change agents, change management, fashion-setter, agent of stability, management consulting.

INTRODUCTION

Making the world more sustainable is difficult and requires educating organizations and organizational renewal (e.g., Gond et al., 2012; Heiskanen et al., 2016; Van Poeck et al., 2017a; Sarid & Goldman, 2021). On the flipside, integrating sustainability into firms' operations is often presented as holding potential to improve an organization's competitiveness and survival (Lubin & Esty, 2010; Sheth et al., 2011; Porter & Kramer, 2011). *Sustainability* is derived from Latin and means to "sustain", "support" and "maintain", entering as a common usage in the early 1970s (Læssøe, 2008; Caradonna, 2014). The concept emphasizes that the human must carefully and choicely live with the natural resources and emphasizes that the human and the economy are interconnected to the environment, as well as create a safe society for individuals. Thus, sustainability is a balancing act between social, economical, political and environmental ideals. Sadly, humankind has become a villain in the 'unsustainable' world we live in today (Caradonna, 2014), meaning that we must guide our way out and learn how to become more sustainable (Finger, Asún & Nwangwu, 2001). To achieve this, companies may choose to hire an external sustainability consultant to support them in the process. Scholars have also started to take an interest in the emergent industry of sustainability consultants that, for example, could impact organizational decision making, idea generation and change process in relation to sustainability (e.g., Brés & Gond, 2014; Sturdy, 2015). Previous studies generally stress the sustainability consultants as educators (e.g., Kioupi and Voulvoulis, 2019; Sarid & Goldman, 2021) and change agents (e.g., Van Poeck et al., 2017a). Some studies have also developed a more nuanced typology of ideal types of roles a sustainability change agent could perform (e.g., Van Poeck et al., 2017a).

While some previous studies have indicated that there is diversity in the roles sustainability consultants can perform in organizations, there are few studies that in detail describe these roles and even fewer that do so based on empirical material. This is problematic given the rise of an extensive sustainability consultant industry that has the potential to shape firms' sustainability practices. We, therefore, ask: *What roles do external sustainability consultants play in their clients' organizations?*

In answering this question, we draw on previous research into general management consultants and a study of Swedish based sustainability consultants and clients. While the concept of *role* is well established in previous management consulting research, it is often vaguely defined and taken for granted that the reader knows what a role is. In this study we use roles to describe an overall function that the consultant plays, such as an expert or coach. We show that sustainability consultants perform several of the roles identified in previous management consultant literature, but we argue that two additional roles emerged in this study: the *Spider in the Web* and the *Knight in Shining Armor*. It is claimed that these roles might be specific for sustainability consultants, as compared to general management consultants, due to the wickedness of sustainability issues. It is also found that sustainability consultants combine different roles in a hybrid manner, something that has not been identified in previous studies. Additionally, we argue that sustainability consultants can be classified as change agents and agents of stability, however there are no indications of consultants being fashion-setters.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section will begin with a description of previous studies on consultants within sustainability. However, due to lack of previous research within sustainability consulting and the consultants' and clients' perceptions of the roles played, previous literature on management consultants and their roles will be used as a type of middle range theory.

Consultants and sustainability

Although limited, a large amount of previous research within the topic of consultants and sustainability has been focused on the consultants' role as educators. In Kioupi and Voulvoulis (2019) study of educators in sustainable development, the contextual factor is expressed as important in order for all actors involved to see the bigger picture of sustainability as well as to get an understanding of the role of education and learning in sustainable development. The framework developed by the authors enables education practitioners to construct a vision for sustainability, and by doing so identify and form their curriculum, which is guided by education as a powerful tool to make the world more sustainable (Kioupi & Voulvoulis, 2019). This is working in favor of universities in educating the future sustainability professionals (Hesselbarth & Schaltegger, 2014; Heiskanen, Thidell & Rodhe, 2016). Moreover, Sarid and Goldman (2021) also proposed a framework of education, but instead focused on motivation factors driving individuals in acting as sustainability change agents to inspire others in becoming environmental citizens. Here, the emphasis is put on the voluntary aspect of being a change agent for sustainability (Sarid & Goldman, 2021). Also referring to change agents, Van Poeck et al. (2017a) studied how the change agent contributes to sustainable development and in which ways this can be. The authors state that change agents enable different kinds of learning but that there is a high diversity in the role (Van Poeck et al., 2017a). Education can then be used to reduce the gap between the desired sustainable state the organization wishes to reach, and the present state. But it is not only the act of learning organizations how to behave, but one must also change the attitudes and values of the organization for them to fully operate sustainably (Kioupi & Voulvoulis, 2019). Moreover, there are studies conducted that emphasize that change agents of sustainability see themselves being part of a much bigger movement in the change towards organizations becoming more sustainable. Meaning that it is not only a job to be a sustainability change agent, but also a passion and you must fully commit to it (Walker, 2007).

Regarding the role of change agents, Van Poeck et al. (2017a) developed four ideal types of change agents that contribute to sustainable development, namely the Mediator, Convincer, Technician and Concerned Explorer. The *Mediator* role implies the change agent to be an open-ended and collective problem solver in the sustainable transition (Van Poeck et al., 2017a). The role is that of an initiator, establishing initiatives and enabling opportunities for people to engage in the change process, and much characterized as the agent personally detaching and also taking a third-party role in catalyzing the change in terms of innovation, learning and dialogue. The mediator also facilitates change as they as experts help actors come together, creating co-thinking, and thus co-creating the change amongst the actors (Læssøe, 2008; Van Poeck et al., 2017a). The *Convincer* role is characterized as more instrumental where

the matter of sustainability becomes the change agent's personal concern and commitment, driven by beliefs, emotions, and values (Van Poeck et al., 2017a). By activating individuals and inducing the awareness, the convincer attempts to socialize them, meaning that the change agent is educating them in transferring the values, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and identities (Biesta, 2009; Van Poeck et al., 2017a). In doing this the change agent acts as a role model, exhibiting the virtuous behavior, where emphasis is put on doing the right thing at the right time, also considered highly important when educating (Blok, Gremmen & Wesselink, 2015). The main focus in this role is that of radical change by setting good examples in an attempt to provide a model in which can become imitated and copied. It also involves the act of convincing others to adopt pre-determined solutions, thus acting as solution providers.

By combining instrumental orientation and personal detachment, the *Technician* is another ideal type of role by a change agent in sustainable development explained by Van Poeck et al. (2017a). Drawing from Aristotelian and the concept of “*techne*”, rationality is used as concrete problem solving, and sustainability is approached as technical knowledge, following with implementation. In this sense, learning regards the change agent to produce technicians in such ways as providing techno-scientific knowledge and skills, along with implementing green practices and technologies (Van Poeck et al., 2017a). Thus, the role of the technician is used when dealing with structured issues and problems (Hoppe, 2010; Van Poeck et al., 2017a). As a combination of the open-endedness of the Mediator and the personal involvement of the Convincer, the role of the *Concerned Explorer* is expressed as the last ideal type of role by the authors. Holding the emotional opinions, beliefs, and norms strong in relation to sustainability, providing concrete solutions, however differently from the Convincer, the Concerned Explorer contributes these values in facilitating dialogue as well as mutual learning between the participants through raising awareness, enhancing the interest and attention to sustainability in the long term (Hoppe, 2010; Van Poeck et al., 2017a). In his sense, the Concerned Explorer is that of a visionary (Van Poeck et al., 2017a).

Management consulting - a concept with many meanings

The concept of management consulting can be traced back to the early 1900s and the Taylorism movement (Wright & Kipping, 2012), but the academic interest lagged behind. Due to the exponential growth in the management consulting industry overall, has allowed for a drastic increase in the academia within the field (Mosonyi et al., 2020; Furusten, 2013), enabling a wide spread of academia touching upon different topics in management consulting, dominated by themes regarding knowledge and identity (Mosonyi et al., 2020). Moreover, there has been a drastic rise in literature on management consultants as change agents the last two decades (Caldwell, 2003; Furusten, 2013; Mosonyi et al., 2020) pointing towards a legitimization in the field (Wood & Logsdon, 2016; Mosonyi et al., 2020). As the consulting industry is characterized by transactional and institutional uncertainties along with the theoretical diversity within the field, the comments regarding management consulting tend to differ (Furusten, 2009; Mosonyi et al., 2020). Institutional uncertainty is thus defined as the future within an institutional environment that cannot be foreseen or anticipated, such as regulation (Ford & Greer, 2020). For instance, it is suggested that the management consulting literature is rather broad and that there more or less are as many different forms of management consultants as

individuals practicing it, implying there to be several different roles to be performed (Kubr, 2002; Mohe & Seidl, 2011; Kipping, 2011). Implying that the phenomenon is rather complex to capture (Mosonyi et al., 2020). Hence, due to the complexity of management consulting, several different explanations of roles are therefore needed, and a standardized definition of management consultants is unobtainable (Kubr, 2002; Furusten, 2009; Fincham, Mohe & Seidl 2013).

In a review of 50 years of studies within management consulting, three broad clusters emerged when describing the nature of consultants: drivers of success, the role of the consultant and the client-consultant relationship. These were later further developed, where the role of the consultant was divided into streams of literature highlighting management consultants as *change agents*, *agents of stability* and *fashion-setters*. This literature was also distinguished between a functionalist or critical view, where the change agents and agents of stability stem from the functionalist view, i.e., the “bright side”, where until the mid-1980s this view was dominant. Further, the literature of consultants as fashion setters act as the critical view, i.e., the “dark side”, which emerged in the 1990s questioning the before collaborative nature of the consultant (Abrahamson, 1996; Cerruti et al., 2019; Mosonyi et al., 2020). Nevertheless, this view has also been challenged, meaning that instead of dividing the literature into functionalist vs. critical, Mosonyi et al. (2020) argues for a more holistic approach, linking previous streams of literature, creating dialogues between them, providing an alternative view, referred to as ‘metaparadigmatic’ view. However, still dominating the management journals is the functionalist and critical view (Mosonyi et al., 2020).

There have been claims made that in the comparison between management consultants and academic scholars within management, consultants are believed to be of higher importance and impact in organizations. Consequently, the consultant is seen as more adequately delivering useful knowledge and stimulating change (Gummesson, 1991; Ginsberg & Abrahamson, 1991), where knowledge from the functionalist view is considered a resource of commodity that is exchangeable between actors (Alvesson, 2001; Richter & Niewiem, 2009; Mosonyi et al., 2020). On the contrary, there have also been more critical studies stating that consultants are “non-serious” knowledge representatives, where knowledge is not a fixed asset but instead translated through process or through rhetoric (Kieser, 2002; Alvesson, 2001; Mosonyi et al., 2020). Hence, they become less important and of lesser use in knowledge implementation and more perceived as a quick fix with fashionable frameworks (McGill, 1988). This has been questioned by Kieser (2002) as consultants not being of any use for an organization in the long-term.

Instead of developing a comprehensive understanding of the consultant per se, previous studies have focused on developing a notion and perception of consultants being either good or bad from the organizational point of view. Hence, the phenomenon needs to be considered further without putting focus on either negative or positive consequences for organizations. The majority of literature on organizations and the consequences of using management consultants is rooted in the normative literature, where it is common that the authors themselves have been consultants. Here, the interest again is not in the role of the consultants, but the professionalism in consulting and the impact of this on organizations. Examples of this are consultants as change agents, experts, organizational therapists, elite, professionals and with an emphasis on the benefits of outsourcing as an organization and the need for the

‘professionalism’ in their business (Furusten, 2009; Mosonyi et al., 2020). In these examples, the consultants consider themselves as heroic or enterprising self (Wright, Nyberg & Grant, 2012; Sturdy & Wright, 2008; Mosonyi et al., 2020).

Referring to management consultants as improvisers, Furusten (2009) goes beyond the theories of implementation and change and explores an organization’s use of consultants (Furusten, 2009; Mosonyi et al., 2020). These theories have thus been focused on the implementation of ideas and revenue increase as a result of this. In an attempt to understand management consultants as agents of stability, the author goes against the common understanding of consultants being change agents. From this perspective, one must consider change as a process and not isolate the consultant, as change is a complex process involving other aspects, such as how individuals and organization’s function. This calls for theorizing what consultants *do* instead of focusing on the result of what is *done*. Thus, Furusten (2009) challenges two theoretical claims previously made regarding the relationship between the organization and the consultant, meaning that (i) consultants act as agents of change, and (ii) that they act as standardizers resulting in organizations becoming isomorphic, hence sharing the same attributes. Along these lines, management consultants can be divided into two camps. In some instances, they are described as change agents who are hired to initiate and manage change in an organization. On the contrary, they are referred to as standardizers who offer a specific solution to all their clients (Furusten, 2009).

Management consultants as change agents

Describing the nature of consulting as manifold, one term commonly used is change agent which describes a person or agent who has a significant important role in organizations with a task to initiate, implement and manage change (Caldwell, 2003; Wright et al., 2012). Drawing on studies by Clark and Salaman (1996), consultants can be seen as witch doctors who, with the help of their magic wands, transform organizations. Another perspective of management consultants is their temporary positions of power in practices discussed by Czarniawska and Mazza (2003), stemming from institutional theory. To describe this phenomenon, the authors use ‘liminal space’ as the metaphor where the condition of liminality is when a practice that is commonly used and the space in which this is happening is replaced by new rituals, hence initiating change. In their study, it is inferred that consulting per se can be seen as a liminal space for both the client and consultant, thus acting as merchants of meaning (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003). Moreover, generally the literature on identities of consultants is rather fluid and positive, however tending to disregard the fact of evolving identities (Mosonyi et al., 2020). Change agent can be limited to one single person but can also be used to refer to a team or group of individuals in a change process. Thus, the characteristics of a change agent is manifold but summarized in that they can both be formally invited or not into a change process, they can be both task and process oriented, and lastly, they can be hired due to outside pressure, but they can also be proactively initiated (Van Poeck et al., 2017a). Moreover, change agents are not of a generic type, with specific attributes and competencies, and can thus not be captured in one single model of description, discussed being due to the ambiguous environments (Caldwell, 2003; Mosonyi et al., 2020).

In Bessant and Rush (1995) study of technology transfer, management consultants are considered highly important as the models of innovation are oftentimes non-linear and have multiple complex networks. Here, the consultants are described as intermediaries who have varying importance and contribution such as source of knowledge, financial support, human resource, and specialist skills in the implementation of technology. More specifically, the authors identify four different types of roles relating to the concept of change agents. The first revolves around direct transmission of the consultants previously obtained and specialized, *expert knowledge*. This role is considered to portray the traditional view of consultants. The second role is that of *experience sharing*, where the consultants utilize their experiences and ideas gained from previous projects onto new projects (Bessant & Rush, 1995; Brés & Gond, 2014), an activity of “[...] cross-pollinating between firms” (Bessant & Rush, 1995, p. 102). Thirdly, consultants can play the role as a *‘marriage broker’* where their offering is to provide clients with a series of specialist services through a single point of contact, either directly from the consultant or by a third party known to the consultant. Hence, the consultant supports clients through channel and selection assistance. In this role, the impartial and external nature of the consultant is important to ensure unbiased guidance. Lastly, consultants can act according to the *diagnostic role* where they support clients in enunciating and determining the clients’ specific needs in innovation (Bessant & Rush, 1995). Clients usually seek external advice for these purposes due to their internal lack of resources and experience in recognizing these needs (Bessant & Rush, 1995; Furusten & Werr, 2005). Consultants can then provide these clients with helpful input by, for example, developing a strategic framework on how to move forward with change or by suggesting how the identified problems can be addressed. The diagnostic role of consultants can be compared to a general medical practitioner whose role is to diagnose patients and prescribe an appropriate treatment. The interest of Bessant and Rush (1995) paper is the role of the intermediary as bridging the ‘managerial gap’ between the company and the technology at hand.

Similarly, due to many definitions regarding roles of the consultants, Furusten (2009) creates three main clusters of management consultants. These clusters caption the 80 definitions found in the study conducted between 1997 and 2007 in Sweden, which demonstrates the magnitude of the role of being a consultant. One of these clusters portrays the management consultant as *external resources* where the consultant is open-minded, a social speaker as well as a listener. The role is characterized much as a catalyst with advice, provides solutions to defined problems and is perceived as a specialist and expert. Another cluster is *Management consultant as a carrier*. This role entails the consultant to be a carrier of information, experience, and expertise in the field as well as knowledge within management, organization, and strategies. Lastly, management consultants are described as *supporters*, where the consultant takes on a role as a mentor who supports and coaches the management, contributing to the developments of leadership, business, and organizations (Furusten, 2009).

To contribute to the enrichment of studies made on management consultants and the roles they can play, Canato and Giangreco (2011) examine this topic and highlight the need for further studies in this area. The inference of their review shows that management consultants, similarly as Bessant and Rush (1995), can play four different types of roles, where three of them can be related to consultants as change agents. Firstly, they act as *Information Sources* that obtain specific information about different subject matters in which they are specialized

in, that they then provide their clients with. Thus, clients hire them for their higher level of expertise and their industry experience. The second role that management consultants play is the role of being *Knowledge Brokers*. In this role, the consultants support the clients in the development of novel solutions and are hired due to their vast experience in various industries which inspires and enables consultants to come up with innovative solutions for their clients. Thirdly, management consultants can act as *Knowledge Integrators* that aid clients in the integration of complex innovations by transferring knowledge and decreasing the friction that might follow. Consultants are hired for this role because of their exceptional expertise regarding a specific solution in which they also have previous experience in helping other clients with implementing (Bessant & Rush, 1995). Moreover, Brés and Gond (2014) cluster the consultants' use in knowledge only, implying that the use of consultants is useful in commodification processes (Kipping & Clark, 2012; Brés & Gond, 2014) as they translate knowledge (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Brés & Gond, 2014).

Management consultants as agents of stability

DiMaggio and Powell (1983/1991) argue that consultants shape the organizational fields, and Furusten (2009) further describes that from this perspective consultants have enabled firms to establish strong market positions through world-wide activities, hence obtaining normative power in that field. However, in the study conducted and the results obtained, these types of consultancies are of American origin and due to their global operations have set standards, where other actors in the field have adapted to these institutionalized structures. Further, drawing on arguments made by DiMaggio and Powell (1983/1991), Furusten (2009) states that consultants are seen as actors who carry organizational models across borders to other societies, hence becoming standardized management models. Thus, consultants become contributors to standardization of discourses globally, hence reducing uncertainty and creating stability (Furusten, 2009; Perner & Werr, 2013; Sieweke, Birkner & Mohe, 2012; Von Platen, 2015). In this sense, consultants would behave similarly and the general understandings in the global society would be common, concerning performativity of the consultant and how this is received from the client. This would also mean that organizations are becoming isomorphic, where there are prerequisites for how organizations should operate and how management is to be characterized. In turn, this makes it easier for consultants to deliver the standardized services, as well as an established knowledge in the field of organizations, with management consulting becoming a service performed in the same way and with the same content that fits different organizations. There would be requirements for what knowledge and experience is needed, as well as no incentives to improve as there already are predefined structures for right and wrong within the field. Contrary to the role of consultants being change agents, Furusten (2009) argues that this type of role entails stability and refers to agents of stability and standardizers with pre-decided structures (Furusten, 2009; Perner & Werr, 2013; Sieweke et al., 2012; Von Platen, 2015). Furthermore, Alinsky (1971) and Hargrave and Van de Ven (2009) argued that to make processes of changing institutions more effective, members should be provided with a sense of stability. This could be achieved by carrying out the change process in a way that is familiar, interesting, and entertaining for the institutional members (Alinsky, 1971; Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2009).

Management consultants as fashion-setters

As opposed to the view of management consultants as change agents, and drawing on arguments made by Abrahamson (1996), there is a cluster of literature within management consulting claiming them to be fashion-setters. Although literature is not very common (Mosonyi et al., 2020), the consultants through rhetoric, storytelling, and elitism act as for-profit salespeople. This is considered the dark side of the consulting literature, stemming from the critical perspective of consultancy (Cerruti et al., 2019). Referring to rhetoric, the consultant thus uses communication strategies and linguistic tools as a way to convince followers (Abrahamson, 1996; Alvesson, 2001; Mosonyi et al., 2020; Von Platen, 2015) that a certain management technique is fashionable and at the forefront in advancement at the moment (Abrahamson, 1996; Ten Bos & Heusinkveld, 2007; Von Platen, 2015). By this, the consultant creates a ‘fear’ amongst the clients and managers making them feel insecure and that they are lagging behind, thus creating an awareness and need (Abrahamson, 1996). The fashions also create an urgency of hiring a consultant to provide the correct business models and needed leadership style (Von Platen, 2015). Building on the view of fashion-setters, Canato and Giangreco (2011) argue that the fourth role of management consultants found in their study is the *Standard Setter* that provides all their different clients with a specific practice, thus diffusing it on the market. The rationale for hiring consultants as Standard Setters is thus based on the client firms not wanting to be any different from any of the other firms in the industry that have implemented that specific practice, hence grounded in a determined trend Canato & Giangreco, 2011).

The Hybrid Nature of Roles

Canato and Giangreco (2011) explains that previous studies have perceived consultants as obtaining a specific single role, most often within a single category such as adopting a new standard. However, the authors want to emphasize that the organizational context usually enables consultancies to combine roles instead of these roles being mutually exclusive. With their study being focused on consultancies, i.e., the *firms* offering consultancy services, the authors argue that the organizational arrangements within the consultancies, for instance size and the existence of multiple divisions, are described as enabling the combination of roles. It is further suggested that the larger the consultancy firm is, the easier it is for the consultancy to play multiple roles. Thus, having different divisions focused on the practices of different roles, for example one division specialized in being *Knowledge Brokers* and another in being *Standard Setters*. Moreover, the existence of multiple different divisions within a consultancy firm also enables the presence of different roles during the progression of the same project. Hence enabling the transition between different roles by virtue of a different team of consultants. This further shed light on the importance of the organizational context in studying the roles of consultants (Canato & Giangreco, 2011). Similarly, in the study by Furusten (2009), the interviewed consultants state that they perform different tasks and play different roles depending on the situation, hence being referred to as *chameleons* (Furusten, 2009). This transition between roles according to different contexts is also described by Van Poeck et al. (2017a). This can be explained by the wicked nature of sustainability and the field requiring an open-ended and less linear approach to solving issues due to high complexity (Lans, Blok,

Wesselink, 2014; Heiskanen et al., 2016; Van Poeck et al., 2017a; Schank & Rieckmann, 2019). As a majority of authors have claimed, sustainability issues are characterized by a high level of complexity, ambiguity, where no clear-cut solution exists (Heiskanen et al., 2016; Neugebauer, Figge & Hahn, 2016; Schank & Rieckmann, 2019). In addition to this, Neugebauer et al. (2016) mention two other aspects of this wickedness concerning sustainability being its impacts on society and its long-term nature. Sustainability problems are described as being profoundly rooted in the way society is structured and intertwined with multiple societal practices, meaning that the solution to these types of problems cannot be found in isolation (Rotmans, 2006; Neugebauer et al., 2016). It is further argued that the underlying deficiencies in the way society is structured is the main cause for sustainability issues (Rotmans, 2005; Neugebauer et al., 2016). Additionally, the solutions to sustainability issues are often addressed over long time periods, compared to other types of political problems (Neugebauer et al., 2016). Thus, this requires tremendous knowledge within sustainability and related standards. How these standards are to be followed and implemented is of high priority for practitioners (Heiskanen et al., 2016; Schank & Rieckmann, 2019). Something that has not received much attention previously (Læssøe, 2007; Heiskanen et al., 2016; Van Poeck, Vandenabeele & Goeminne, 2017b).

Summary of the evolution in consultancy literature

To summarize the view of management consultants, the evolution of the literature on management consulting, where consultants started out being a concept referred to a doctor-patient relationship, is nowadays seen as a complex social activity with an ambiguous character (Cerruti et al., 2019). Hence implying that it is hard to capture this complexity in a single model of description (Caldwell, 2003).

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The following section presents the methodology of the study. Firstly, the research design is presented, followed by the method of collecting the data as well as a description of the participants in this study. Further, the data analysis method is described displaying the roles of consultants discovered, and lastly there is a description of the limitations and the ethical reflections of this study.

Research design

In order to answer the research question of this paper, a qualitative approach was used to obtain data and to get an understanding of the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of the topic. Thus, this approach enables an in-depth analysis of the research topic and the creation of a holistic view of the studied phenomenon (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Silverman, 2015). The context of the study is focused on the individual level and the role of the external sustainability consultant. For this reason, the empirical findings are based on interviews with several different external sustainability consultants implementing, or that have implemented, sustainable practices in organizations in Sweden. Additionally, interviews with clients that have hired, or are currently

hiring, an external sustainability consultant to support their sustainability work have been conducted, to gain a more holistic view of the role of the external sustainability consultant. In accordance with the grounded theory approach as described by Silverman (2015), this study's theory development and analysis have been grounded in the actual data collected for this study. Thus, the analysis and development of theories have occurred after the collection of empirical data, meaning that a hypothesis has been generated after the analysis of data rather than before. An approach that is well suited with qualitative research. Also, grounding the analysis in the collected data rather than existing theories indicates that any predilections of previous theories can be avoided (Silverman, 2015). The presented data and the study are aimed to contribute to the practice of implementing sustainable practices across organizations and in this the purpose of the external sustainability consultant in doing this.

Method of data collection

In the data collection, interviews with external sustainability consultants which are hired by organizations were used which further enabled various perspectives of the role of the consultant. Internally employed sustainability consultants are not of interest in this study, emphasizing the external role of the consultant only. Interviews also allowed for a deeper insight in a particular context and to research a complex matter (Silverman, 2015), hence best suited for the intended research. Several consulting firms offering sustainability services were approached, where fourteen consultants agreed to participate (see *table 1*). The interviews have been conducted in an in-depth, semi-structured and open-ended manner in order to gain a nuanced picture of the actions and the decision-making process (Silverman, 2015). The length of the interviews was between 45 minutes up to one hour due to the semi-structured approach, meaning that different questions arose during the interview. Moreover, to obtain a nuanced picture enabled through qualitative research methods (Hox & Boeije, 2005; Silverman, 2015), various reference companies found on the consultants' websites were interviewed anonymously through email interviews, in a structured manner (Silverman, 2015). This enabled us to obtain data from the client perspective, contributing to objectivity and less biased data. This data was also complemented with secondary data from websites where the consultants work, and news articles interviewing the consultants. Here document analysis was used as an approach to analyze the secondary data, in alignment with Silverman (2015). Additionally, we also made use of various platforms intended for companies working with sustainability such as CSR VästSverige and CSR Småland to find potential respondents. This approach was much like snowballing; using the consultants' social networks to further gather information and other participants to interview (Silverman, 2015). This allowed for an objective and wide perspective of the context of the consultant, which also enabled analysis regarding the data from the interviewees, alignment with Bryman and Bell (2015), regarding a holistic approach. The interviews held with the client companies were, as mentioned, done by email, where four standard and open-ended questions were asked and the respondents could answer, in alignment with Silverman (2015) being characterized as a structured interview. Snowballing was also the method used to find reference clients of the consultants where ten reference clients were asked to join the study. Out of these, six respondents answered and wished to be anonymous.

For the consultants, we are interested in the role per se and their tasks and assignments. It is also important to underline that the data collection is focused on the consultants' perspective on what they do, where the opportunity to observe what is actually done has not been obtained. This has been tried to minimize by asking the consultant for specific examples, as well as to complement the data with data collected from the reference clients. Following in *table 1* is a summary of the interviewed sustainability consultants, and in *table 2* is a summary of the interviewed clients operating in which industry, where the profit indicates the size of the client.

Date of interview	Company	Title	Gender	Experience in sustainability (years)
2022-01-31	GreenGoat	Partner	Female	3
2022-01-31	DuttCSR	CEO & Founder	Female	15
2022-02-08	EkoSofia	CEO & Founder	Male	29
2022-02-08	Canea	Sustainability Consultant	Male	20
2022-02-08	Lind Petrén Sustainability Affairs	Founder	Female	25
2022-02-10	2050	Sustainability Consultant	Female	22
2022-02-10	Ensucon	Sustainability Consultant	Female	6
2022-02-11	Enact	Sustainability Consultant	Female	10
2022-02-14	Esam	Sustainability Consultant	Female	21
2022-02-14	Hållbarhetsteamet	Co-Founder	Female	12
2022-02-21	Tyréns	Sustainability Consultant	Female	7
2022-03-04	Esam	Partner	Female	15
2022-03-25	Company X	Partner	Female	10
2022-03-25	Diya Consulting	Sustainability Consultant	Female	13

Table 1. Interviewed Sustainability Consultants

Date of interview	Company	Industry	Profit 2020
2022-03-28	Client 1	Real Estate	3 927 000 SEK
2022-03-29	Client 2	Real Estate	533 203 00 SEK
2022-03-29	Client 3	Construction	2 466 000 SEK
2022-03-29	Client 4	Construction	3 624 000 000 SEK
2022-03-30	Client 5	Real Estate	187 505 000 SEK
2022-03-31	Client 6	Food Retail	99 882 000 SEK

Table 2. Interviewed clients

Data analysis method

Firstly, we approached 21 consultancy firms based in Sweden where they only had sustainability consultants and were of a smaller character. We also contacted three consultancy firms where there were consultants in other fields in addition to sustainability, these firms were of a bigger character. Hence, not organizations where they had internal sustainability consultants only working within the company itself. Out of these, 14 replied where one of the consultants were from a company having other services within consultancy, other than sustainability. After accepting our request, these were interviewed online through teams and zoom regarding past and current projects, and their roles as external sustainability consultants in these projects.

The interviews were conducted in an iterative process in order to see if there existed a pattern, where the narratives by the consultants in the field are the base of the empirical findings. Meaning that the interviews were conducted and transcribed, patterns realized, and then further interviews were held. Inspired by grounded theory, these patterns and themes were found through line-by-line coding, hence enabling us to go back and forth between the data and the analysis, further discovering new perspectives. The line-by-line coding is also referred to as first-order coding where phrases and sentences from the interviews were compiled in an excel sheet, dividing them into clusters of phrases where similar things were mentioned by the consultants. After all the material was coded, the first-order codes were once again analyzed, and in doing so, twelve secondary codes were realized in the excel sheet. These codes were a summary of everything revealed by the consultants, where some codes were more in-depth and extensive than others, such as: experience, innovation, demand/supply, project structure, identity, relationships/networks, context, amongst others. The codes were once again analyzed to see if there were any overarching codes that described the roles of the consultant. This resulted in third-order codes being used as a base to form the empirical section, and in obtaining secondary data as a way of searching for relevant theories and articles using keywords (Silverman, 2015). The third-order codes generated the three themes of the empirical section being: *The ideal types of roles*, *Combination of roles* and *What determines and influences the role of the consultant*.

When presenting the data, quotes from the interviews are used in order for the reader to develop an understanding of the data and the interviewees voices, but also for credibility purposes of the gathered data and results of the study (Silverman, 2015) as the empirical findings are the narratives from the field. Firstly, seven ideal types of roles could be found in the collected data. However, as more data was retrieved and combined with previous research in the field, it was determined that some elements were similar, resulting in five ideal types of roles with some elements that were coded for in constructing the roles. It is important to mention that the consultant does not need to obtain every element of each role to play a specific role, hence a consultant can be a coach by simply organizing educational activities. The two roles that were interwoven into the *Coach* were the *Visionary* and the *Compass*. This is a result of the empirically driven categorization of roles based on the narratives by the respondents. The ideal types of roles and their associated elements are displayed in *table 3*.

Ideal types of roles	Elements
Expert	Knowledge, Expertise
Coach	Mentoring & Guiding, Educational Activities
Catalyst	Accelerator
Spider in the Web	Trust & Engagement, Mobilizing & Combating resistance, Convince the management team, Finding ambassadors
Knight in Shining Armor	Urgency, Savior

Table 3. Ideal types of roles and elements

Limitations and ethical reflections

In this study, there was a risk that we could not attain the intended respondents and thus not obtain correct data best suited for the research objectives. It is also the matter of biases in the data due to possible lack of trust between the interviewer and interviewee. Another risk was that the interpretation of the data collected as well as the liability of the data can become skewed as the consultant may present projects which have been completed successfully, only revealing the bright side. Furthermore, as the research was aimed at interviewing several consultants from different consultancy firms, the possibility of a spread in the data is present and hence not creating any similar codes and denominators. Another limitation is time constraint, as there were to be conducted several interviews, where transcribing correctly is very important but time consuming. This could lead to not being able to access the correct data intended and needed for the study. However, it can also be considered an advantage of this study approach of interviewing several different consultants as this enables several perspectives of the role of the sustainability consultant, thus the purpose of the study. Also, by focusing the research on external consultants and not internal ones in a company, enabled an outsider and objective perspective of the roles of interest. This can also be a disadvantage as the level of trust between the interviewer and interviewees is not as high compared to if the interviewer were an insider.

To remedy this, prior to the interviews, the research process and information regarding the publication of the study has been explained to the respondents. The risk of having online interviews through Zoom (video conference platform) was also considered regarding lack of the full experience and body language that comes with a face-to-face interview, along with technical difficulties which can arise. Despite these possible issues, it was considered the most favorable interview approach as this enabled us to become more time efficient thus conducting several interviews, in alignment with Archibald, Ambagtsheer, Casey & Lawless (2019) in their study of Zoom as a method of interviewing. Further, matters of confidentiality have been brought up prior to the interview in order to ensure a higher level of transparency and validity for the study. Hence, the respondents have been asked if they would prefer to be anonymous in their responses. In the data collected on the consultants, one company wanted to be anonymous, and for the rest of the respondents we only used their profession instead of their names. To protect the client-consultant relationship it was decided that the clients were to be anonymous in this study. Lastly, after the study has been finalized, the recordings will be deleted.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The following section presents the empirical data collected from the interviewed external sustainability consultants and clients, displaying the narratives in the field. This is complemented with secondary data from relevant websites. The collected data is structured in three themes; ideal types of roles of the consultants, the combination of roles, and what determines and influences the role of an external sustainability consultant.

The Ideal Types of Roles

With several definitions of roles revealed in this study, the findings have been compiled and summarized to five ideal types of roles an external sustainability consultant play.

The Expert

The most frequently mentioned role among the interviewees was that of sustainability consultants being experts, where both knowledge and experience was described as the most fundamental elements of the *Expert* role.

Knowledge

Identifying as experts within the sustainability field was a common denominator amongst all the interviewees. The rationale behind hiring sustainability consultants is often due to lack of internal resources and knowledge within sustainability. The expectations of sustainability consultants from the clients' side are that the consultants obtain more knowledge about sustainability than what the client retains in-house, and that they can provide the client with structures, methods, and tools to work with in order to achieve their hoped-for results in a time-efficient manner (Sustainability Consultant 2050). Most of the time, sustainability consultants obtain knowledge that no one in the client company does as explained by the founder at Lind Petrés Sustainability Affairs: "They perceive me as an expert and that is why they hire me, for my expert knowledge and to quickly get help with whatever they need help with." This view is also shared with some of the clients describing the reason for hiring a consultant is "[...] to gain access to cutting-edge expertise and knowledge in specific issues or because we need additional resources" (Client 4). It was also emphasized the matter of communicating the knowledge the consultant obtained. It depends on the ability to inform and share the knowledge in an easy way, which is considered one of the most important qualities a consultant can have (Client 3). Also shared with another client, emphasizing that "...they can deliver the right quality at the right time and preferably with added value in the form of in-depth analysis and improvement proposals" (Client 4).

With their main focus on support, GreenGoat helps clients with their sustainability work, regardless of the size of the project, describing themselves as consultants with flexibility and knowledge (Greeng, n.d.). Further, knowledge also implies spreading and increasing the awareness of sustainability, in order to reach the economic, social and environmental long-term goals (Ekosofia, n.d.). Which can be reached with the help of a sustainability consultant, with

a client mentioning that “The company has for a number of years worked actively with environmental issues and to include all parts, a consultant was needed” (Client 5).

Experience

In addition to offering expert knowledge, one third of the consultants expressed that they are often hired because of their experience within the field, and their ability to effectively and accurately use benchmarks to identify which methods or tools are appropriate for the client's operations and strategic outlooks. It is also the consultants' experience gained from various projects that the clients are looking for, in order to broaden their external monitoring (Sustainability Consultant Tyréns). When asking a client what makes a consultant legitimate, a common response was experience and knowledge in which the consultant obtained and could be passed on, based on experience in other fields and industries (Client 3, Client 4, Client 5, Client 6).

[...] as an external party, you can describe what they do in other industries. For example, say you are in the haulage industry, and they say that ‘oh we are the best in the haulage industry’, but then I can say that ‘yes but you are shit if you compare with the IT industry.’ Of course, I don't say that, but I can see it. As a consultant you can contribute by showing examples and thinking outside the box. That is an aspect that I think is important (Sustainability Consultant Esam)

The Coach

Another role that all the consultants responded that they play is the role of being a coach and a pillar of support for their clients. This role is usually one that the sustainability consultants play as the project progresses, when methods and tools have been implemented to help the clients get on the right track. The partner at GreenGoat explained that, in her role as a sustainability consultant, she gets deeply involved with the clients and their implementation of sustainable practices in the initial phase when the clients themselves do not obtain the right competencies. The initial phases usually revolve around having stakeholder dialogues and making materiality analyses to help the clients to comprehend which resources to prioritize to reach their goals with their sustainability work. Later in the project, their roles as sustainability consultants have evolved into becoming more of a coaching role where their work is mostly focused on giving advice on sustainability matters, coordinating workshops and educational lectures for both management teams and floor personnel.

One of our current clients stated that: ‘last year you carried me, but this year I can take a step back and start working with these things myself.’ It is all about teaching the clients how to ride a bike, but we also tag along during the bike adventures (Partner GreenGoat).

This view of sustainability consultants acting as support in the sustainability work is also shared by many of the clients. “For us it works very well now when we are in charge of our own sustainability work, but the sustainability consultant can always be the expert we consult or that coaches us in various things that we can't, or don't have time to solve ourselves” (Client 6). This role is further divided into three elements: mentoring and guiding, mobilizing and educational activities.

Mentoring and Guiding

One element of the *Coach* can be to act as a mentor for a specific employee or group of employees in an organization that has recently been assigned the responsibility of the organization's operational and strategic sustainability work. This response was from consultants which had the role of being an Interim at a company for a longer time period.

I have also coached an organization where there was a communication manager who also got sustainability on their plate, so I coached that person for a whole year and together with them we built up their entire sustainability strategy (Founder Lind Petré Sustainability Affairs)

It can also be the case explained by a sustainability consultant at Tyréns saying that during her time working with a project for a public authority, being one of the larger projects she has conducted, she was considered one of ‘them’ despite being external. This, she explains, is due to the long time period of her being involved in the project. Here she gets to mentor within sustainable construction at the company. It was also emphasized the role of guiding CEOs and clients in decision-making, goal setting and strategies. Clients oftentimes demand a role describing what is next in line in their path toward implementing sustainability in their business and that is when the consultant becomes a compass and described as; “...you get to guide a little” (Sustainability Consultant Diya Consulting). Being a guide and compass does not entail that the sustainability consultant does the work for the client, but in a way pushes them towards the right direction, navigating the way. “It is important to find the right course, where are we going? What is our role in this?” and then to make the client realize their sustainable impact (Partner Company X). A guide also implies the consultant to be some sort of a visionary, envisioning the long-term sustainable impact. This was mentioned in the interview with the Founder at Lind Petré Sustainability Affairs, where she distinguished between a sustainability consultant and a management consultant, and that the main difference is that the sustainability consultant often has a more long-term perspective. She explained that the sustainable impact is not something that happens overnight and that for the world to become more sustainable the companies need to have sustainable visions and think long term, whereas for example profitability is often focused on the short term of a business’ goals.

Educational Activities

Several of the consultants identified educational activities, such as sustainability lectures or workshops, as an additional facet of the *Coaching* role. These educational activities can be done with all types of employees, both ‘floor personnel’ and management teams. It can also be driven by external trends in the industry (Sustainability Consultant Diya Consulting). The goal is to reach a consensus in the organization regarding the meaning and possibilities of sustainability, as well as to highlight how the organizations can reap the benefits of operating in a sustainable manner, as shared by the CEOs and partners of the consultancy firms interviewed. Central to these educations are pointing out the demands and expectations from the outside world regarding companies' sustainability work, helping them with making the right short- and long-term strategic decisions in terms of the companies’ sustainable development, and enabling them to make appropriate risk analyses (Ekosofia, n.d.). These educational

activities can also take place after a project has been completed, something mentioned by a partner at GreenGoat:

Sometimes we return to a client at a later stage to have various training sessions for both employees and management teams. I believe that the employees think that these sessions are important and instructive. They get a chance to leave their lathe for a moment to learn about Agenda 2030.

The Catalyst

Accelerator

Sustainability consultants can also play the role as catalysts, meaning that they are brought into the organization to accelerate the work on sustainability. “We needed reinforcement to follow up the environmental requirements in our ongoing projects and develop our environmental requirements in the future” (Client 3). Another client also mentioned that they hired consultants to start the sustainability work at their workplace, as well as to reach mandatory laws and to become environmentally certified according to Swedish legislation (Client 6). Due to the experiences and knowledge that sustainability consultants have in the field, they can identify the changes that may be necessary and suggest strategies and processes for an organization's sustainable development in a more efficient manner than internal employees that do not possess the same level of experience or knowledge. At times, the sustainability consultants portray the face of the change, due to their expertise and external nature. “In many cases the external factor of being a consultant is an advantage. ‘Here comes the expert’, so then they must listen” (Sustainability Consultant 2050). In some situations, the clients already have an idea on how to solve an issue or how to coordinate their work on sustainability but want to bring in an external sustainability consultant to ensure that their plans are well-founded. The main task for the sustainability consultant is therefore to provide their clients with their opinion, hence, to press the ‘go-button’, to accelerate and get the project rolling, implying that “We’re just supposed to be catalysts” (Sustainability Consultant Canea). Also occasionally, consultants are also hired specifically due to their external nature and less due to their ability to bring in new ideas and perspectives.

[...] The fact that you are external is much appreciated. You bring in expertise and you are paid for your expertise, but our contact persons have the same remarks as us. It is rather stupid, because it's not necessarily what I say, but the fact that I say it (Sustainability Consultant Enact)

The Spider in the Web

The consultant can act as a *Spider in the Web* in a project with a client, meaning that they become a central connection point by coordinating activities and the people involved. According to the consultants, this entails creating trust and engagement amongst the employees, reducing the friction and handling resistance in the change process, convincing and onboarding the management in an organization and helping to assign ambassadors. This role is constructed with four elements: Trust and engagement, combating resistance, convincing the management team, and finding ambassadors.

Trust and engagement

All the consultants emphasize the importance of a good client-consultant relationship. For this to be established, a high level of trust is seen as important and needed from both parties involved which many of the interviewed sustainability consultants argue starts with engagement. According to a client who has hired sustainability consultants, trust and legitimacy is perceived to be gained through good reputation and recommendations from others (Client 1) as well as through earlier conducted reference projects (Client 3). The CEO & Founder at DuttCSR emphasized that external sustainability consultants need to convince the individuals in the client organization that they are ‘one of them’ in a sense, because the sustainability consultants are not there to work by themselves but to collaborate with the employees as a team, something shared with the Co-Founder at Hållbarhetsteamet:

You try, and usually, become part of the team. The best thing is to build good relationships, have lunch together, and really encourage them to have a good relationship. [...] Such a thing as how to dress when you are there, you are aware and know who to talk to, that you do not come from a completely different world and dim down into their reality. We always try to be super relevant and research the company. So that you do not use a ‘one-size-fit-all’ type of strategy, meaning that all our projects are tailor-made for that company.

According to the consultants, establishing a clear vision and communicating the goals and expected benefits with the sustainability work that they are hired for, as well as implementing this is also essential for building trust and engagement among employees. The matter of making the client feel listened to is also a way of decreasing the uncertainty and inducing trust (Sustainability Consultant Diya Consulting). Something shared with the Sustainability consultant at Enact, and further discussed by the sustainability consultant at Esam:

We work a lot to create a common goal. So, the first time we meet them, we spend a lot of time getting people to communicate what's important, so that they feel listened to. It's actually a key factor, that you really invite to conversations, what is important to them and how they should contribute to this work. So that you create a common objective. It usually works very well actually.

Mobilizing and combating resistance

As described by most of the interviewed sustainability consultants, the job sometimes includes addressing people and behavioral issues. This can take many different forms, for example supporting a single individual or a whole management team. The focal point is to collaborate with clients in uncovering the path forward, rather than telling them exactly what to do. Resistance is described by most of the consultants as being a natural part of almost every project. The resistance can be both internal, from stakeholders inside the organization like employees, or external, from outside stakeholders such as oil companies (CEO & Founder Ekosofia). This view is however not shared with the CEO & Founder at DuttCSR and the sustainability consultant at Ensucon, saying that they have not encountered any resistance. Moreover, the most prevalent type of resistance that sustainability consultants face in their projects is of the internal kind. Resistance as a consequence of sustainability work can occur due to many different factors. It could emerge due to fear of the unknown, lack of knowledge, future costs for the company, bigger workload, or as a result of the organizational culture

(Founder Lind Petrén Sustainability Affairs; Sustainability Consultant 2050; CEO & Founder EkoSofia; Sustainability Consultant Canea). The CEO & Founder at EkoSofia also mentions that employees might feel caught up in change that others have inaugurated, especially if this person is someone from outside the organization, leaving them with a feeling of ‘taken aback’ and their role being threatened. To avoid these scenarios, activities and discussions that involve the employees can be organized, which might also have positive implications for the organizational culture since employees feel that their input is valuable to the organization (CEO & Founder Ekosofia). Moreover, in these kinds of scenarios the consultants can mitigate the resistance and uncertainty that may occur by describing examples of similar cases and clients. This so that the employees can relate and understand the meaning of the change and their contribution (Sustainability Consultant Diya Consulting).

I usually say that one should not overestimate people's knowledge, but one should not underestimate their ability to understand. The first can be difficult to absorb, people do not know as much as you think but they can understand it if you explain it the right way. I have had such fantastic experiences of that. No matter what position you have in a company, the most brilliant ideas can arise from anyone in the organization. (CEO & Founder EkoSofia)

Convince the management team

As described by the consultants, engagement from employees is not perceived to be enough to make the implementation of new sustainable practices successful. If the idea of the sustainability project does not originate from the management team it will be very difficult for the sustainability consultant to succeed in his or her role.

It is not uncommon that you ‘enter from the wrong door’. For example, you get an assignment, but the person you talk to is not even part of the management team. And then you make an action plan and you say ‘Can you work with this?’ and ‘see you in a week or two’, and then that person hits a wall when talking to the management and does not get the resources required. Then my job as a project manager becomes very difficult (Sustainability Consultant Esam).

The most important part of a project is perceived to be engagement and trust from the management level because without it the goals and objectives will not be met. A successful project starts at the core, in order for the project to be prioritized and for gaining access to the right resources, an opinion shared by a partner at GreenGoat and the CEO & Founder at EkoSofia.

It's the tone at the top that makes the world a bit different. Often in sustainability it is like a bottom-up kind of movement from the people in the organization. [...] If you really want change it helps if you are CEO or CFO or both. If the top is clear and committed, like ‘We will make a change and have a new way of interacting with our stakeholders’. It makes the process so much easier. Because people don't always love change, but at least then the resistance is not so much that ‘I won't do it’ it is more that ‘I don't want to do it (Sustainability consultant Enact).

Find ambassadors

The process of involving employees varies from organization to organization. Workshops and open discussions are utilized in some projects, in other projects it could be helpful to assign

some individuals the role of ambassadors that translates the change throughout the organization. As mentioned by the sustainability consultant at Canea:

The type of involvement is unique to a company, but the most common is the ‘cat on the rat’, or ‘train the trainer principle’. A certain part of our projects is that we involve some selected individuals from the organization and train them so that they have the competence, see the benefits, and have the insight. So, they become ambassadors and administer it throughout the company. This is done because they will remain in the company, but the consultant will not. Throwing some glitter is the consultant's most important task. That is, to create heroes in the organization. Then you get a greater guarantee that it is the customer's culture, language, and values that it speaks to.

A lack of engagement from the individuals in the client organization might lead to a lack of ownership of these new processes, which could ultimately lead to failure of the sustainability initiative. Hence, finding an ambassador that takes on the role of anchoring the change in the organization, especially after the consultant has left, is, according to the sustainability consultants, essential. “We always work with the employees, because otherwise we cannot enter the organization. This is because it is not us who do the job, but it is the manager, or the person responsible, who owns the process and who takes it further, and who spreads the knowledge we give them and ensures that it remains in the company.” (Co-Founder Hållbarhetsteamet).

The Knight in Shining Armor

The consultant can act as a *Knight in Shining Armor* in a project with a client, meaning that the client contacts the consultants when they feel pressured for an example deadline or overwhelmed with sustainability work overall. Hence, in this role the urgency becomes a central point where the consultant becomes a savior for the client.

Urgency

Generally speaking, the client hires a consultant when they are in a rush, when there is a deadline for a specific project or policy, or when they do not have resources to hire a new employee (Sustainability Consultant Ensucon). Oftentimes, it is when the company is running out of time and the consultant becomes the *Knight in Shining Armor*. But it is usually the case that “it starts to burn a little, so that we need to come there with the fire extinguisher [...] the fire comes first, then the work of change” (Partner GreenGoat). Moreover, projects can be very short so it would not be beneficial for the client company to hire someone, and hence they hire a consultant to do the work for them (Sustainability Consultant Ensucon). Thus, the urgency is stressed in this role.

Sustainability issues are now in an exponential phase, and “it is our turn to deal with these issues” (Sustainability Consultant Ensucon). “If you look at what is happening right now in the outside world, there is a pretty good market for sustainability consultants” (CEO & Founder DuttCSR). With this said, according to the respondents, sustainability is becoming very important for companies to address and incorporate, where the outside pressure is creating an urgency, hence hiring sustainability consultants is an option to do this.

I feel that it is more and more becoming valued properly in terms of companies being willing to pay for this kind of service and they are willing to pay more for it as well. [...] and I also see a change in the need for sustainability professionals, especially in labor and human rights. I think that in the short-term there is a growth in that kind of consultants. Which I think is right, because we can see more and more legislation, standards, and regulation, so companies feel the heat and urgency and respond to it (Sustainability Consultant Enact)

Savior

Furthermore, it is not unusual that companies hire sustainability consultants because they feel overwhelmed by the urgency of making sustainable actions and implementing sustainable practices. The lack of knowledge from the client's side also results in sustainability being portrayed as something that is very hard, sometimes impossible, to accomplish. Thus, sustainability consultants are hired to break the barriers, mobilize the employees in the company and spread the awareness that sustainability is not unachievable while simultaneously developing a plan on how the company should approach sustainability.

The issue of sustainability itself can be quite challenging. So far, where we live, we may not see such huge differences. If we look at ecological sustainability, we are beginning to detect it and we are beginning to feel polarization. Right now, it is a highly important issue what the environment looks like around us. Then a doomsday feeling can easily arise - "There is no point that we do something. We are just so small, how are we going to be able to do anything?". Then I believe that you need to be the safe person who holds the hand and who ensures that "Yes, it is possible to do something" and then explain why and what they can do (Partner Esam).

Moreover, the expectations from the client's perspective, and what they demand, is knowledge from the consultant, something shared with all the consultants. This is also the reason for the person becoming the savior.

[...][they expect a lot of knowledge, they expect concrete results, they don't expect us to say "well there are many risks and they are complex" but they expect us to say "there are many and complex but we manage to prioritize them, and these are the five most important and this is how you can mitigate that risk, example one, example two..." [...] so a list of concrete recommendations that are pragmatic and that can be used in their business (Sustainability Consultant Enact)

Combinations of roles

The most prevalent finding in this study regarding the role of external sustainability consultants was that of being an expert. However, the nature of the role of a sustainability consultant is very dynamic. Most commonly, sustainability consultants do not play one specific role which they sustain during their whole consultancy career. Rather, the interviewed sustainability consultants demonstrated that the combination of different roles is a lot more common than playing one specific role, creating a hybridity in the role. The combination and creation of these hybrid roles is highly dependent upon the client's demand and the organizational context, as stressed by the consultants.

As mentioned previously, playing the role of the *Expert* was expressed by all the interviewed sustainability consultants and clients. Despite the heterogeneity of every project and assignment, the most common reason for hiring sustainability consultants shared by all the

respondents is the lack of competencies in-house. Often, clients have a basic understanding of sustainability and what they want to achieve, but their knowledge and experience in the sustainability field is limited. Thus, according to the sustainability consultants, they enter the client company as the *Expert*, providing their expertise and suggesting the path forward based on previous experiences and benchmarks. According to the consultants, it is usually not enough to just provide the facts, tools, and methods for the clients to utilize. The clients need some mentoring and guidance along the way, and to be reassured that they are taking the right steps. Moreover, a client does not always know what they need, so the task of the consultants is to create awareness, enabling the customers to see the benefits and opportunities. Thereafter, they can develop credible environmental work according to the clients' business (CEO & Founder EkoSofia). This was also mentioned by one of the clients, implying that they hired an external sustainability consultant to "[...] reach development areas we ourselves have not thought of" (Client 5). The consultants interviewed also state on their website what type of services they can provide the client with as a way of informing the client about what they need (Duttcsr, n.d.; Ekosofia, n.d.) and what they can expect when hiring them (Hållbarhetsteamet, n.d.). Thus, the consultants play the role of the *Expert* and the *Coach* simultaneously, creating a hybrid role that is shaped by the demands and expectations from the client and the nature of the project.

Many of the consultants also provided examples of how the *Expert* role and the *Catalyst* can be combined. The Co-founder at Hållbarhetsteamet explained that due to the increase of legal requirements and the pressure from external stakeholders, it might be hard for companies to know which type of competence is needed and how the change process is going to look. Thus, the rationale behind hiring a sustainability consultant can be based on the lack of expertise and the need for an accelerator that gives them a push in the right direction. This view is shared with the partner at GreenGoat, explaining that the external pressure will keep on increasing.

[...] you may not have in-house competence, you want to start a sustainability work but do not know in which end you should do it [...] both in terms of competence and in terms of time, that's why you hire a consultant. But I also experience that there is an expectation that you as a consultant have tested this before, you expect a consultant to have done this a couple of times before, so you avoid the start-up mistakes, you have seen the pitfalls (Sustainability Consultant Canea).

Furthermore, the findings have shown that in some instances, the sustainability consultants need to combine the role of the *Expert*, *Knight in Shining Armor*, and the *Spider in the Web* simultaneously in order to fulfill the needs of the client. As the sustainability consultant at Esam explains, a consultant's trustworthiness is connected to his or her level of expertise:

To build a relationship, they must feel that they can trust you. This in turn places demands on competence and that you work fact-based. That means that you must always work with your own skills development and deliver, keeping the cash inflow steady.

In those organizations where sustainability issues are perceived as huge obstacles that are almost impossible for the organization to mitigate (Co-Founder Hållbarhetsteamet), the consultant takes on the role of the *Knight in Shining Armor* that ensures the members that sustainability is in fact not impossible to achieve (Partner Esam). In these situations, the sustainability consultant needs to clarify the problem and the process, narrow it down and

explain exactly what they are going to do together in their sustainability work (Co-Founder Hållbarhetsteamet; Sustainability Consultant Enact). To do this, the consultant needs to be perceived as trustworthy and establish engagement among the members of the client organization, hence obtaining the role of the *Spider in the Web*.

What determines and influences which role the consultant has?

Context was often brought up to discussion in every interview with the sustainability consultants. This aspect was important, and it was implied that every project and role of the consultant depends very much on the client, the conditions, and the expectations of the projects. Moreover, all sustainability consultants emphasized that every project is unique and need-dependent (Sustainability Consultant Tyréns). It can also be due to the industry in which the company is operating where there are certain processes that are considered sustainable, but where it can become even more sustainable, if they just look outside of the box (Founder at Lind Petrés Sustainability Affairs).

Client's context

Companies are becoming increasingly more pressured from external legislation, the new taxonomy, and various stakeholders when conducting and running their businesses. The European Union, global UN goals, Paris Agreement, national legislation in Sweden and not the least the media coverage from the summer of 2021 in Glasgow, are some factors that shed more light on the sustainable aspect nowadays (Co-founder Hållbarhetsteamet). This overall context influences how companies need to operate (Co-Founder Hållbarhetsteamet), along with what is demanded by clients (Founder Lind Petrés Sustainability Affairs). If there are any rapid changes in society, the company may not be able to adjust in time as there may be a lack of knowledge within the business. This can be a reason for hiring consultants, that the client does not have enough resources necessary which is usually the case with small- and medium sized enterprises (CEO & Founder DuttCSR; Client 1; Client 2; Client 3; Client 6).

Furthermore, like all parts of a company, there is a certain amount of competence already, but when it comes to sustainability, it is very rare that it fully and functionally exists. There may be someone who has knowledge regarding sustainability, but less knowledge about how to coordinate and work with it correctly (Co-Founder Hållbarhetsteamet). Moreover, depending on what type of industry the client is operating in there are different definitions of sustainability and sustainability work. Within the company, it is important to define what sustainability means for them and how they need to work with it. If this is not established, the consultant's job can become difficult (Founder Lind Petrés Sustainability Affairs). The structure of the company also has significant importance when working with sustainability. For example, the projects can progress more smoothly if there is a board which is willing to work with sustainability and allows the resources for it (Partner GreenGoat). In other situations, clients have claimed to work with sustainability, but the consultants see that this is not the case, also referred to as greenwashing. Here, transparency and straightforwardness are important from the consultants' side, having the ability to say that they do not want to be part of that (CEO & Founder EkoSofia; Sustainability Consultant 2050). As companies need to consider the differentiating factors of various industries, they also need to think about which countries

and cultures are part of the client's supply chain. In Sweden, the companies are very good at the social aspect of sustainability. However, if the clients have suppliers in other countries, they need to identify if they have the same social conditions as in Sweden.

Ericsson sent quotes to England and the manufacturers did not open them until they could report their environmental work. They had learned that if you want to be in the market, you must make demands on your suppliers in order for customers to make new demands [...] You have to look at your surroundings, your stakeholders and follow the requirements and ideas that exist on how to do this in a better way (CEO & Founder EkoSofia)

Consultants' context

It is a challenge to be a consultant in an environment that is constantly changing with new legal requirements and changing expectations from stakeholders. But the main challenge is that in every project and relationship, one needs to clarify what the expectations are and if it is necessary to curb them a bit and say that "I can't do this, or this is not in the budget". which is found to be rather tricky (Sustainability Consultant Enact). During a project, the context and expectations from the client can change, hence changing the condition for the consultant (Sustainability Consultant Canea). The outside world is another aspect mentioned to play a major role in the definition of a consultant's role, as it depends on what is important for the moment and what questions are asked (Founder Lind Petrés Sustainability Affairs). A consultant's role, when being in several different kinds of projects, enables various experiences to be utilized, something considered positive by all consultants. Projects are everything else but repetitive, which is emphasized as a benefit for the client. To have insights in different industries and that the consultant has different perspectives. This "look outside of the window" enables understanding and experience which is important because it is seldom that the company or sector itself looks outside of their business (Sustainability Consultant Enact). However, being part of different projects as an external sustainability consultant, it is seen as important to be able to adapt to the company and their culture. Knowing *when* and *how* to step into the right role (Sustainability Consultant Canea) as well as not having the mindset of 'one-size-fit-all' is imperative. You need to dress correctly, know who you need to talk to and have extensive knowledge about the client, hence putting yourself in the client's shoes (Co-Founder Hållbarhetsteamet; Founder Lind Petrés Sustainability Affairs).

In the 90's there was talk of crocodiles being someone with a big mouth and small ears and an elephant being someone having big ears and no mouth. This is decided by the context, and a consultant should be both, an elephant at the beginning of the project, then a crocodile to inspire and coach. Lastly, it is important to be a chameleon; adapt to the organizational language and culture. Well, I help craftsmen and government agencies, these are different languages and different cultures [...] Then you need to be a chameleon to figure out "what color should I have today?". Sometimes you must wear a jacket, sometimes, a sweater, and sometimes you need to level up and wear a tie (Sustainability Consultant at Canea).

Structure of projects

Consulting is a multifaceted role which entails a lot of different projects and structures, often based on predefined models but modified to fit the context and client. This view was shared by

all interviewed consultants. Projects differ in terms of duration where sometimes they are shorter where the main task is to create a sustainability report, or longer, such as when implementing an environmental management system (CEO & Founder EkoSofia). There are also projects that entail a more permanent position at a company as an Interim Sustainability Manager (CEO & Founder DuttCSR). This can become rather tricky as you become “...squeezed between different interests which are difficult to navigate in” (Sustainability Consultant Diya Consulting). A clear structure, goals, action plan, and a project owner is perceived to be needed regardless of project.

Different models and different process steps for different products and offers. We usually have a ready-made template. We also have a model for business development where we suggest starting with an external analysis, stakeholder, and competitor analysis, etc. Which I think is very common (Sustainability Consultant 2050)

Sometimes the consultant bases their sustainability work from the client’s perspective regarding the UN’s Global Sustainability goals or meeting the International Organization for Standardization’s (ISO) standards (CEO & Founder EkoSofia; Co-Founder Hållbarhetsteamet). The client and their issue at hand are the starting point for consultants at Enact. This is because the companies are different, meaning that you cannot just copy and paste, you always have to think a bit further than structures. Another consultant also emphasized the importance of trying to mix junior and senior consultants in a project to obtain different perspectives of the project and issue at hand (Sustainability Consultant 2050). So, depending on the project, industry or client, the sustainability consultants need to adapt and know when to listen to the client, thus being an elephant with big ears. However sometimes they need to be able to speak up, thus acting as a crocodile with a big mouth. Although most importantly, the consultants need to adapt and camouflage themselves when meeting different stakeholders and clients, and learn to ‘speak the same language’, thus acting as a chameleon (Sustainability Consultant Canea).

DISCUSSION

The findings revolve around the external sustainability consultants and clients’ response, and due to scarce literature in this area of sustainability, literature on management consulting has been used to answer the research question of this study: *What roles do external sustainability consultants play in their clients’ organizations?* The findings are in line with arguments made by researchers in the field (Kubr, 2002; Furusten, 2009; Mohe & Seidl, 2011; Kipping, 2011; Fincham et al., 2013; Mosonyi et al., 2020), being that the definitions of the roles of management consultants are as broad as there are consultants in the field, meaning that they cannot be captured in one specific description thus highlighting the complexity of the subject. Moreover, the findings also disclose combinations of the roles where the differing contexts have been shown to be an important influencing factor. The importance of context is also supported by researchers in the field (Caldwell, 2003; Mosonyi et al., 2020).

Similar roles found in previous studies

It was found that there were several roles which can be found in previous studies in management consulting. The most prevalent role found in this study was that of the *Expert*, where knowledge and experience are the two key elements constructing this role, stemming from the fact that the client lacks these resources in-house. With experience, the consultant can use benchmarks when entering a new project as well as identify appropriate solutions. The role of the *Expert* can be found in previous studies made on management consultants, however structured in a slightly different manner. Canato and Giangreco's (2011) description of the *Information Sources* role has resembling characteristics to the *Expert* role in this study where they are hired for their high level of expertise and industry experience. In contrast to how the *Expert* role is structured in this study, Bessant and Rush (1996) have separated experience and knowledge into two different roles: *Expert knowledge* and *Experience sharing*. In this study, the rationale behind clustering knowledge and experience under the *Expert* role is due to the fact that the consultants claimed that their expertise is based on the interplay between their knowledge and experience in sustainability. Hence, these two factors were not perceived as effectful individually, but must be combined for fulfillment of the role.

Moreover, the *Carrier* and the *External Resource* role (Furusten, 2009) is much like the *Expert* role revealed in this study, in terms of providing expertise and experience. However, the *External Resource* also acts as a *Catalyst*, where due to the emphasis put on the role by the consultants suggest this to be its own role in this study. Based on the response from the consultants, it can be inferred that Furusten's (2009) definition of consultants as external resource can be rather generalized in comparison with the data obtained. With expertise as the most fundamental component, the *Technician*, as described by Hoppe (2010) and Van Poeck et al. (2017a), can also be related to the *Expert* role identified in this study. However, with the *Technician* being focused on concrete problem solving, thus implying that sustainability issues can be solved with definite solutions (Van Poeck et al., 2017a) is not in alignment with the findings of this report and other previous studies. This is because sustainability issues have been described as wicked problems with no clear-cut solution (Lans et al., 2014; Heiskanen et al., 2016; Neugebauer et al., 2016; Schank & Rieckmann, 2019). Hence, the *Technician* can be placed in previous literature's category of management consultants as fashion-setters, whereas the role of the *Expert* can be concluded to belong to the category of change agents.

The *Coaching* role identified in the findings was prevalent and considered rather broad, which included the elements mentoring, guiding, educational activities and acting as a visionary. In previous studies on management consultants, this role has been referred to as *Knowledge Brokers* (Canato & Giangreco, 2011) where the consultant transfers their knowledge within the field to the client, using benchmarking and other comparison tools. Similarly, researchers have clustered the use of the consultants as a source of knowledge in which they translate this to other actors (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Kipping & Clark, 2012; Brés & Gond, 2014). To some degree this resembles the *Expert* role in terms of experience utilization, but it is more focused on the practice of transferring knowledge, much like an educational activity. The act of mentoring as a management consultant is also acknowledged in the role of the *Supporter* (Furusten, 2009) where the main task of the consultant is to mentor and coach the members of the organization, using education as a tool (Kioupi & Voulvoulis,

2019). Both the role of the *Convincer* and *Concerned Explorer* (Van Poeck et al., 2017a) also share similar characteristics as the *Coach* role in terms of activating individuals through educational activities. Central to the *Convincer* and *Concerned Explorer* is the change agent's personal concern and commitment regarding sustainability issues, where this person's beliefs, emotions and values serve as the basis for their motivation for driving sustainable change efforts forward. A consultant taking on any of these roles is a virtuous individual at heart with the aim of being an inspirational leader by “walking the talk” to enable followers to copy or imitate these behaviors (Biesta, 2009; Blok et al., 2015). This high level of virtuousness could not be identified among the consultants from the discourses of the interviews. However, it can be argued that these types of roles are best identified in interactions between consultants and the followers as the practice of “walking the talk” and imitation by other actors is best disclosed during observations. Hence implying that the interviews conducted in this study would have to be complemented with observations of interactions between members to uncover a higher degree of virtuousness among the respondents. Based on the categorization in previous research of consultants as change agents, agents of stability and fashion-setters (Abrahamson, 1996; Cerruti et al., 2019; Mosonyi et al., 2020), the role of the *Coach* has several characteristics similar to that of a change agent.

As mentioned previously, the role of the *Catalyst* was also found in Furusten's (2009) paper, however as a smaller element of the more extensive role of being an external resource. It can be argued that based on the claims made by the consultants, the role of being a *Catalyst* has more extensive meaning to it than described in previous literature on management consultants. In Van Poeck et al. (2017a) study on sustainability change agents, the role of the *Mediator* sheds light on the catalyzing nature of being an initiator in sustainability change processes, combining it with facilitating features such as mobilizing and networking, as can be seen in the *Spider in the Web* role. Thus, the *Mediator* can be perceived as a combination of the *Catalyst* and the *Spider in the Web* in this study, but with primary focus on being the initiator who precipitates the change. The limited presence of this type of role in previous management consultant literature implies that playing the role of a *Catalyst* is more pertinent for consultants in the field of sustainability than pure management consultants. According to descriptions in previous research on management consulting (Abrahamson, 1996; Cerruti et al., 2019; Mosonyi et al., 2020), the *Catalyst* found in this study can be discussed to be a change agent, hired to accelerate the work on sustainability.

New types of roles

When analyzing the empirical data through the lens of previous literature it can be concluded that two of the roles discovered during the interviews were not completely correlated to roles identified previously on management consultants or sustainability change agents. The roles in question being the *Knight in Shining Armor* and the *Spider in the Web*.

As mentioned previously, the consultants claimed that they often were hired when the clients were in a hurry or felt time-sensitive due to a deadline or similar. The *Knight in Shining Armor* emerged from this urgency to solve these kinds of problems as a consultant. Playing this role was often due to external pressure arising from expectations, legal requirements, or knowledge in a, for the clients, ‘new’ area, being sustainability. What the client demanded in

these situations were concrete steps to solve the issues. The idea of a consultant rescuing the clients has not been described in previous research. Even though the consultants in these situations are in much use of their knowledge and expertise to help the client, the urgency accompanied by uncertainty is not highlighted in the *Expert* role, which differentiates it from the role of the *Knight in Shining Armor*. In this role, knowledge (educational background) can be seen as more of an ingredient, thus not being the main focus (Cerruti et al., 2019). However, the *Knight in Shining Armor* touches upon the role of the *Convincer* and *Concerned Explorer* where creating awareness through knowledge transfer and mutual learning raises awareness (Biesta, 2009; Hoppe, 2010; Van Poeck et al., 2017a). But once again, the urgency is not highlighted in these roles, resulting in the *Knight in Shining Armor* portraying a solution to the feeling of defeat and issues of inertia experienced by the clients, thus differentiating this role from other roles found in previous research. It can be discussed that due to the urgency portrayed in media (Lubin & Etsy, 2010), the vitality to incorporate sustainability (Sheth et al., 2011), or just the concept of sustainability being a wicked problem (Heiskanen et al., 2016; Neugebauer et al., 2016), points to the fact that the *Knight in Shining Armor* is much related to that of solely a sustainability consultant. Thus, the consultant can help stabilize the uncertainty occurring from the wicked nature of sustainability (Lans et al., 2014; Heiskanen et al., 2016; Schank & Rieckmann, 2019). Hence, as described by the respondents, the consultant becomes a savior.

In the role of *Knight in Shining Armor* it very much depends on the context and nature of the issue the client faces in determining if the consultant is a change agent or an agent of stability. As previous research has claimed consultants to be either a change agent or agent of stability (Furusten, 2009, Cerutti et al., 2019), this role, to some extent, goes against these claims. From a knowledge and resource perspective, the consultant as a savior creates some sense of stability and guidance for the client regarding the next step. However, it is much context dependent, as the findings did not declare that the consultant used standardized models (Furusten, 2009) to reduce the uncertainty (Furusten, 2009; Perner & Werr, 2013; Sieweke et al., 2012; Von Platen, 2015). Thus, there is some degree of alignment between statements of consultants as agents of stability and the role of *Knight in Shining Armor*. Overall, there were no indications by the respondents that uncertainties arose when consultants entered the organizations, as mentioned by Cerruti et al. (2019). However, there are also elements of the *Knight in Shining Armor* that pertains to the clustering of consultants as change agents by creating and maintaining change. Hence, this role is a mix between an agent of stability and a change agent.

The *Spider in the Web* was one of the more extensive roles described by the consultants. This role shed light on the relational aspect of being a sustainability consultant were creating trust and engagement among employees, as well as smoothening the change process by handling any resistance or friction were perceived as important. In previous studies on management consultants, this type of relational role has not been identified. Bessant and Rush's (1995) description of management consultants being 'marriage brokers' does, to a certain degree, shed light on the relational aspect where the consultant acts as the medium between the client and a third party by offering support in the selection process. Thus, the *Spider in the Web* and the *Marriage Broker* are similar to a certain degree as they are both highlighting the relational aspect of being a consultant. However, the marriage broker role is very limited in

this area since it does not portray the essential features of trust, engagement, and handling resistance, but only focuses on the external relations between clients, consultants and third parties (Bessant & Rush, 1995). Alinsky (1971) and Hargrave and Van de Ven (2009) emphasized that providing members with a sense of stability during processes of change was proven to be an effective measure. Providing stability can be done by conducting the change process in a familiar, interesting, and entertaining way for members. This lays at the heart of the *Spider in the Web* role that emphasizes the caring of internal relationships between the consultant and the members of the client organization, ensuring that the change process goes smoothly. Being centered around the aspect of stability, the *Spider in the Web* can be described as an agent of stability rather than agent of change where the overall purpose of the role is to reduce uncertainties and friction (Furusten, 2009; Perner & Werr, 2013; Sieweke et al., 2012; Von Platen, 2015). Failing to frame change in a familiar manner for the organizational members could result in the discouragement and loss of members (Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2009). Hence, creating trust and engagement, thus combating resistance, and attaining stability is most easily done by speaking the same language as the client, hence being a chameleon with the ability to adapt to the client's organizational culture.

Combination of roles

Simultaneous and sequential

It can be inferred from the findings that the roles are rather fluid, meaning that the consultants' role changes when entering different organizational contexts. This is because the uniqueness of every project requires them to adapt to the various conditions and expectations from the clients. The disparity of the organizational contexts also generates the possibility of combining different roles with each other thus creating new types of hybrid roles. This is an ongoing process in every project, where at the end of a project, the consultant's specific combination of roles dissolves, and a new combination of roles arises when entering another project with different demands. An example of this was described by the Partner at GreenGoat where they in the start-up phase of a project usually play the role of the *Expert* who uses their knowledge and experience to determine how the project should be structured, which resources to utilize, and what stakeholders to talk to. Then later in the project, the project requires them to play the role of the *Coach* where the work is mostly focused on giving advice, coordinating workshops and educational lectures for members of the organization. Canato and Giangreco (2011) also discussed the phenomenon of consultants combining different roles as a result of changing organizational contexts, hence rejecting previous ideas of consultant's solely obtaining one specific role. However, as the authors further argue, it is usually consultancies of larger size with multiple divisions that can play and combine different roles. Hence implying that several individual consultants within a consultancy firm are needed for the combination of roles to be possible, thus indicating that the combination of roles is only possible on the firm-level and not the individual level. Contrary to this statement, the interviewed consultants (most of which being either the founder or employed by a consultancy of smaller size) declared that they themselves combine different roles either simultaneously or transition between roles throughout the course of a project. Thus, implying that it is possible to combine different roles

on an individual level and not solely on the firm-level. The reason behind this occurrence is argued to be due to the characteristics of the majority of consultants interviewed in this study, either being self-employed in a consulting firm with no other employees or being employed by a consultancy of smaller size where different departments are non-existent.

In this study, it was found that the role of the *Expert* was present in all the different projects, regardless of the context changing. The nature of this occurrence can be explained by the niche field of sustainability being an issue of wicked character that is complex with no clear-cut solution (Heiskanen et al., 2016; Neugebauer et al., 2016; Schank & Rieckmann, 2019). The sustainability consultants are hired mainly due to their expertise and experience in the field of sustainability, an area in which the clients usually have a limited level of knowledge and thus experience. However, the lack of expertise and experience are most of the time not the only two factors hindering an organization from succeeding with their sustainability work. Sometimes an organization needs someone from the outside that gets the project rolling, i.e., a *Catalyst*. In other instances, the sustainability consultant might need to engage and mobilize members of the organization in order for the project to succeed as it is much dependent on getting people on board with the project. The main task of the sustainability consultant is to demonstrate his or her knowledge and how it has been utilized in past projects to create trust and engagement so that the current project can succeed. This implies that the *Expert* role serves as the core role which the sustainability consultants combine with the other roles depending on the organizational context, as presented in the findings. The environment in which the external sustainability consultants are operating in was emphasized as being highly context dependent. It was mentioned by both clients and consultants that the work on sustainability, and the reason for hiring external sustainability consultants, was due to regulatory uncertainties as well as from pressure from stakeholders. Regarding to which degree organizations work with sustainability and the reason for hiring consultants emphasized, it can be discussed that the lack of institutionalization of sustainability practices in companies causes uncertainty amongst the clients (Ford & Greer, 2020) hence resulting in them hiring consultants. Consultants then provide the client with different guidelines and practices to overcome this uncertainty, explaining the wide differences in the projects taken on by the consultants. Thus, sustainability consultants can be perceived as chameleons that perform different tasks, hence obtaining different roles, depending on the situation (Furusten, 2009).

Consultants as change agents, agents of stability or fashion-setters?

When comparing the empirical findings to the clustering made in previous research of consultants being change agents, agents of stability and fashion-setters (Abrahamson, 1996; Furusten, 2009; Cerruti et al., 2019), there is a correlation between Van Poeck et al. (2017a) claim about consultants being change agents. It can be considered that the sustainability consultants were both task- and process-oriented, hired due to outside pressure and proactively initiated. Further, as the sustainability consultants use various models, which are carried across organizational borders (Furusten, 2009) but adjusted according to contextual factors, they can in a way shape the organizational field of sustainability (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983/1991), hence becoming agents of stability (Furusten, 2009). Even though operating in different industries, by implementing standards according to ISO, the consultants reduce the uncertainty

for both the client organization, and thus their stakeholders, hence contributing to stability (Furusten, 2009; Perner & Werr, 2013; Sieweke et al., 2012; Von Platen, 2015). This can however be discussed to only hold in cases when consultants implement ‘standardized’ management models, expressed by Furusten (2009). However, it can be discussed that there was more focus on the consultant being formally invited (hired), than that of not being invited. The reason for the findings not complying with this can be due to the fact that they are external consultants and not internal ones. If they were to be internal consultants employed and working within an organization, it would be easier to engage in the process of change. Lastly, as can be inferred, elements of change agents and agents of stability have been found in the empirical data collected in this study. However, there were no indications that external sustainability consultants were fashion-setters in the projects presented by the consultants and in the response from the clients. It was emphasized that there were no specific, non-adjusted models used with every client, hence going against claims made about consultants being fashion-setters (Abrahamson, 1996), with specific models (Canato & Giangreco, 2011). Further, it was not explained in any way that the sustainability consultants are salespersons explained by Cerruti et al. (2019) and acknowledge by Abrahamson (1996), Alvesson (2001), Mosonyi et al., (2020) and Von Platen (2015) using rhetoric to convince or persuade the clients to undertake a certain practice or model. The reason for this can be due to the fact that the collected data is mainly based on the consultant’s perspective of their own roles, which might result in a more biased picture weighted towards the bright side, i.e., the functionalist perspective. However, if there would have been a more in-depth focus on the client perspective in this study, this critical and dark side perspective (Abrahamson, 1996; Cerruti et al., 2019; Mosonyi et al., 2020) may have been revealed. This cannot be proven to be valid based on the collected data in this study. Another argument as to why sustainability consultants cannot be categorized as fashion-setters is due to the wicked nature of sustainability issues overall. Since the definition of a wicked problem implies that there are no definite solutions to these types of issues, this contradicts the idea of consultants being fashion-setters that implements one standard practice in every project (Heiskanen et al., 2016; Schank & Rieckmann, 2019). This is also in alignment with arguments made by Rotmans (2006) and Neugebauer et al. (2016) about the impossibility of solving sustainability issues in isolation, pointing to the importance of contextual factors. As expressed by the interviewed sustainability consultants, the uniqueness of every project which results from differing contexts requires the consultants to adjust their methods to fit the specific needs of the organization. This is another factor which disregards the idea of sustainability consultants being fashion-setters since they are not bound to use one specific standard solution. Hence, considering this, the role of a fashion-setter can find it hard to solve wicked problems.

Considering the overall definition of consultants as change agents, being initiating, implementing, and managing change as explained by Caldwell (2003), in some contexts the role of the external sustainability consultant is in alignment with this definition. When consultants are change agents, the definition of elephant, crocodile and chameleon can be used to explain the several roles defined in the previous research (Bessant & Rush, 1995; Furusten, 2009; Canato & Giangreco, 2011). This is because the role of being a good listener, speaking out about different practices and informing the client, as well as to adapt to the client organization, is much like a change agent. In projects where the consultant has a more “standardized” mission as mentioned previously, such as ISO certifying the client, the task is

more or less pre-defined where the consultant knows what to do, and the client knows what to expect. Here, the consultant does not need to listen to the same extent, speak up and adapt to the client. However, it can be the other way around meaning that the client must comply with the certification the consultant has been hired to implement. Hence contributing to stability for the client organization and various stakeholders. Moreover, the emphasis on standardization and the characteristics of this imply isomorphism in the organizational field. Hence, contributing to stability for the client organization and various stakeholders. However, this cannot be fully concluded in this study.

CONCLUSION

The paper contributes to sustainable development and organizational studies as it enhances the understanding of the complexity regarding the roles an external sustainability consultant plays in the implementation of sustainable practices in their client organizations. Our study also contributes to filling a gap in literature regarding studies within sustainability and consultancy, especially regarding the classification of roles. Hence, the aim of this paper was to answer the following research question: *What roles do external sustainability consultants play in their clients' organizations?* In this study, the conclusion is threefold.

Firstly, it can be concluded that the nature of the *Expert* is an underlying role in all the realized roles, being the foundation for the construction of the hybrid roles. The contextual factor is the main determinant of which roles the external sustainability consultants come to play. In this study, five ideal types of roles could be identified. Three of these roles, namely the *Expert*, *Coach*, and *Catalyst*, were comparable to roles discovered in previous studies on management consultants and change agents within sustainable development. However, two of the roles identified in this study could not be completely correlated with roles found in previous research. These two roles being the *Spider in the Web* and the *Knight in Shining Armor*. Assumptions as to why these two roles have materialized in this study are based on the wicked field of sustainability, with much emphasis on the urgency and ambiguity around this matter. As a *Spider in the Web*, the consultant can mitigate the friction and mobilize actors, untying the knots that exist within organizations, which often occurs due to the complexity regarding sustainability. Similarly, the *Knight in Shining Armor* also mitigates the complex and ambiguous nature of sustainability issues, but by combating the urgency and uncertainty, elements that are products of the wickedness of sustainability.

Secondly, trying to distinguish between various roles the consultant obtains, in combination with other roles and within certain contexts has been revealed to be rather complex and hard, based on the findings in this study. Management consulting is a manyfold, complex practice making it hard to obtain a single standardized definition. The findings imply that the external sustainability consultants play various roles throughout the project, where the context enables combinations of roles in order to satisfy the client and reach the goal of the project at hand. It can be concluded that the role of the consultant is a hybrid one, where the sustainability consultant applies a broad and varied combination of different elements in constructing a hybrid role which, depending on the environment the consultant operates in, influences the role

being performed. Thus, the role of the consultant can be summarized as them being chameleons, adapting to the client organization and supplying different sustainable practices.

Thirdly, drawing on the hybridity of the role of the consultant, it can be concluded that in some situations the consultant acts as an agent of change that initiates, maintains, and implements change. Roles that can be categorized as change agents are the *Expert*, *Coach*, *Catalyst*, and *Spider in the Web*. Whereas in some instances the consultant can act as an agent of stability, reducing the uncertainty arising from the wickedness of sustainability and thus creating stability. In this study, the *Knight in Shining Armor* has characteristics of both an agent of stability and change agent, hence falling between these two clusters. It can however be concluded that there were no indications of the consultant being a fashion-setter in this study, which is due to the wicked nature of sustainability where a clear-cut solution is not applicable and cannot be solved in isolation.

This study can be beneficial for both organizations facing the complex incorporation of sustainable practices, as well as for sustainability consultants wishing to deepen their understanding of the dynamics of the roles they can play. The study also enables the organizations to understand what they can expect from a sustainability consultant, and also determine what type of role they need a consultant to play. For practitioners within sustainability consulting, the clarification of roles played can facilitate their own understanding of their practices. It also enables the creation of a common language to describe and capture the roles, so that the consultants can more easily identify what role they have and explain this to the clients. With this clarification of roles, the consultants also can evaluate and map their knowledge, thus pinpointing what they might need to develop. For future research within consultants as fashion-setters, the possibility of observations could be used, contrary to narratives from the respondents, to examine this matter in an attempt to interpret the roles. Moreover, exploring the differences between hiring an external sustainability consultant compared to employing a sustainability manager full time, as well as examining the differences in impact and effectiveness of results, can be recommendations for future research within the field of consultancy and sustainability. Future recommendations can also be to examine specific industries or types of projects to determine if the two new types of roles and the combination of roles are specific to sustainability.

To summarize, management consulting and sustainability overall are two complex areas that are hard to capture in a single description as revealed in this study. Based on the findings, it can be inferred that an external sustainability consultant can play a multiple set of roles either simultaneously or in a sequential manner, in which none of them are mutually exclusive. Contrary to previous studies, it cannot be concluded in this study that the consultant only plays one role in implementing sustainable practices in organizations, which can be explained by the wicked nature of sustainability requiring flexibility and variation.

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