Small Things Behind Big Changes:
The Multidimensionality of Work as Part of
Inter-organizational Strategizing
Involving Strategy Consulting Firms and Their Clients

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Abstract :

In the current business environment, organizations are increasingly relying on external expertise, such as strategy and management consulting firms, to help shape their strategic direction. These entities collaborate with businesses to achieve short-term objectives and drive broader initiatives, which fosters reflection on overall development and the formulation of new strategies. This paper delves into the pivotal role of consulting firms in shaping the strategy of client firms by analyzing the work performed during the consulting mission. To achieve this, we propose a novel methodology that primarily leverages email exchanges between consulting firms and client teams, which is a primary mode of communication in this context. This data source allows us to reconstruct the key events of the strategizing process, identify different forms of work, and analyze the connections between consulting tasks and the forms of work they entail. Our findings emphasize the importance of multidimensional work in shaping client-consultant strategizing.

Keywords : inter-organizational strategizing, consulting, emails, work

Résumé :

Dans le contexte actuel, les organisations ont de plus en plus recours à l'expertise externe, telle que les cabinets de conseil en stratégie et management. Ces entités collaborent avec les entreprises pour atteindre des objectifs à court terme et mener des initiatives plus larges, ce qui favorise la réflexion sur le développement global et la formulation de nouvelles stratégies. Cet article explore le rôle crucial des cabinets de conseil dans la définition de la stratégie des entreprises en analysant le travail effectué lors de la mission de conseil. Pour ce faire, nous proposons une méthodologie novatrice qui s'appuie principalement sur les échanges d'emails entre les cabinets de conseil et les équipes de l'entreprise cliente. Cette source de données nous permet de reconstruire les événements clés du processus de strategizing, d'identifier les différentes formes de travail et d'analyser les liens entre les différentes tâches et les formes de travail qu'elles impliquent. Nos résultats mettent en évidence l'importance du travail multidimensionnel dans la définition du strategizing entre consultants et clients.

Mots clés : strategizing inter-organisationnel, consulting, emails, travail

Acknowledgements

1. INTRODUCTION

Businesses throughout society engage in inter-organizational relationships to collaborate on shared missions and provide each other with necessary resources. In doing so, more and more organizations tend to engage in a process of strategy formation with each other, a process also known as inter-organizational strategizing (De Gooyert et al., 2019). The daily work on joint projects and the exchange of ideas lead to a shared activity among all the members of the strategizing process (Jarzabkowski, 2003), which is then followed throughout the relationship.

Recent research has provided insights into inter-organizational strategizing within business-to-business product-oriented relationships (e.g., Abrahamsen et al., 2016). However, little attention has been given to the exchange of services provided by knowledge-intensive business actors, such as strategy and management consulting firms. This omission appears to be critical. With consultants being increasingly involved in strategy-making (Cerruti et al., 2019), a narrow focus on practitioners dealing with strategy internally overlooks the reality that many organizations face today.

Therefore, this research focuses on the inter-organizational strategizing process between clients and consultants. Consulting firms are active actors in this process, breaking down their mission into numerous tasks. They address issues related to the client firm's initial needs and goals (Strauss, 1985) by performing different forms of work to produce various work objects (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019), including the client firm's strategy. Consequently, this paper explores inter-organizational strategizing, with a focus on the micro-foundations that underlie this dynamic process. Given the complexity of client-consultant interactions (Cerruti et al., 2019), it is important to understand the interplay between actors' 'sayings' and 'doings' (Gehman et al., 2013). Consequently, this study focuses on the consulting tasks and forms of work performed by consultants with client firm teams throughout the strategizing process. Its

objective is to address the following question: **How do consultants and their clients work on the strategizing?** To this end, we will outline the theoretical background of our argument, explain our research methodology based on the email analysis, and discuss our findings.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIZING: CASE OF CONSULTING FIRMS AND THEIR CLIENTS

As management practices have evolved, so have scholars' approaches to the study of strategy. While it was once viewed as something that could be predicted and planned through strategic planning, the idea of business strategy has since developed into a dynamic and process-oriented field (Whittington, 1996).

The strategizing focuses largely on the "*detailed processes and practices which constitute the day-to-day activities of organizational life and which relate to strategic outcomes*" (Johnson et al., 2003, p. 3). These micro-foundations are built up on "*socially accomplished, situated activity arising from the actions and interactions of multiple level actors*" (Jarzabkowski, 2005, p. 6). Scholars who defend this perspective insist on the ubiquitous nature of strategy emergence, stating that it can be top-down, middle-out or bottom-up (Hendry & Seidl, 2003). They argue that the 'situated' strategic activity of these actors is embedded in various levels of context, coming not only from the firm itself, but also from other firms in the market and the society at large (Pettigrew, 1987). To handle such contexts, actors utilize their knowledge and skills to be able to iterate between thinking and doing stages before taking action (Wilson & Jarzabkowski, 2004). They use various strategic tools, which represent "*an actionable form of knowledge that strategy research provides to practice*" (Jarzabkowski & Wilson, 2006, p. 356). These tools facilitate the connection between cognition and action,

knowledge and practice (Labatut et al., 2009). They promote collaboration among members of the strategizing process and manage the evolution of the strategic thinking (Zanin et al., 2020).

This study focuses on one particular type of strategizing process, i.e. inter-organizational strategizing between consulting firms and their clients. Academic interest in the relationship between consulting firms and their clients has increased since the mid-20th century (Cerruti et al., 2019) and has undergone various changes in recent decades. The client-consultant relationship was initially studied as a basic business-to-business dyad. However, scholars have since developed this relationship under various theoretical lenses. These range from the buyer-seller network perspective (e.g., Wynstra et al., 2006) to the relationship management perspective (e.g., Arslanagic-Kalajdzic et al., 2020). Furthermore, since this particular organizational dyad has been studied from different perspectives, the name of the services delivered has also changed and are now commonly referred to as 'professional services' when viewed from a service perspective (Baker & Faulkner, 1991). Alternatively, they can be referred to as 'knowledge-intensive business services' (KIBS) when the main element of the client-consultant relationship, knowledge, is emphasized (Bettencourt et al., 2002).

Consulting is considered to be a knowledge industry for a number of reasons. These firms typically employ highly qualified professionals (Filiatrault & Lapierre, 1997) and engage in reciprocal knowledge transfer with their clients. This involves the exchange of need-related knowledge from the client and technological output-related knowledge from the consulting firm (Schaarschmidt et al., 2015). The client-consultant relationship is intertwined and involves a shared mission where both parties are obligated to combine their forces and work together, even when dealing with something as traditionally specific to each company as business strategy (De Gooyert et al., 2019). Through collaborative inter-organizational strategizing, the parties

utilize their relational dynamics, which in turn impacts their individual roles and the overall consulting intervention (Lundgren & Blom, 2009).

This research adheres to a body of practice-oriented studies that examine micro-foundations of the organizational routines. These routines represent repetitive and interdependent actions that actors perform daily to shape business strategy (Parmigiani & Howard-Grenville, 2011). Consequently, they constitute the practice dimension of the work (Phillips & Lawrence, 2012), which connects knowing with doing and gradually shapes the company's strategy (Gherardi, 2001). Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that strategizing research should not be confined to this dimension alone. While strategizing involves managers enacting strategy, there is still only a partial understanding of what goes on 'behind the curtain' (Jarzabkowski et al., 2015). To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the client-consultant work performed in the inter-organizational strategizing, we propose adopting the social-symbolic work perspective (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019; Phillips & Lawrence, 2012).

2.2. TURN TO WORK IN THE CLIENT-CONSULTANT STRATEGIZING

The social-symbolic work refers to the "*purposeful, reflexive efforts of individuals, collective actors, and networks of actors to shape social-symbolic objects*" (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019, p. 31). These objects can be quite diverse, ranging from individual emotions and routines to organizational strategies and institutional rules and regulations, and may exist on multiple levels simultaneously. The actors' actions have an impact on them as they perform 20 different forms of work (see Table 1). Laurence & Phillips (2019) have categorized them into three dimensions: material, discursive and relational. The relational dimension involves building social relationships with individuals, organizations, or institutions. The discursive dimension involves creating social-symbolic objects that rely on text and talk. The material dimension includes all tangible elements of the work, such as material inputs and outputs.

Table 1: 'New' forms of work (adopted from Lawrence & Phillips, 2019, pp. 44–45)

Form of work	Definition
Aesthetic work	« The employment of workers with certain embodied capacities and attributes that favorably appeal to customers and which are then organizationally mobilized, developed and commodified » (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007, p. 104)
Age work	« The institutional work of organizational actors to pursue their particular interests and to (de) legitimize age inequalities » (Collien et al., 2016)
Authenticity work	« Work involved in claiming authenticity » (Peterson, 2005, p. 1083)
Boundary work	« Strategic practical action for the purpose of establishing epistemic authority [by] drawing and redrawing … boundaries … [through] expulsion, expansion, and protection of autonomy » (Lamont & Molnar, 2002, p. 179)
Contextualization work	The institutional work that sustains responsible investment "glocalization", including filtering, repurposing, and coupling (Gond & Boxenbaum, 2013)
Cultural work	Action by actors to align themselves with prevailing societal preferences or attempts to shape cultural tastes and preferences (Glynn, 2000)
Discursive work	Discursive activity carried out to influence processes of social construction (Lawrence et al., 1999)
Emotion work	« Making a conscious, intended try at altering feeling » (Hochschild, 1979, p. 560)
Idea work	« Activities concerned with generating, selecting, realizing, nurturing, sharing, materializing, pitching and communicating ideas in organizations » (Carlsen et al., 2012, p. 1)
Identity work	« Identity work refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness » (Svenningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165)
Institutional work	« Purposive action…aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions » (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006)
Interaction work	The purposeful reconfiguring of the interactions among members of a coalition (Phillips & Lawrence, 2012)
Intersectional identity work	Constructing an understanding of a mutually constituted self that is coherent, distinct and positively valued (Atewologun et al., 2016)
Meaning work	« The struggle over the production of mobilizing and countermobilizing ideas and meanings » (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 613)
Narrative identity work	« Social efforts to craft self-narratives that meet a person's identity aims » (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010, p. 137)
Practice work	« Efforts to affect the recognition and acceptance of sets of routines, rather than their simply engaging in those routines » (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010, p. 190)
Race work	Efforts to reconstruct the meaning, power, and privileges associated with race (Whitaker, 2005)
Strategy work	The purposeful activities carried out by actors in the production of strategies (Whittington et al., 2006)
Temporal work	« Negotiating and resolving tensions among different understandings of what has happened in the past, what is at stake in the present, and what might emerge in the future » (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013, p. 965)
Values work	The activities that are carried out by actors whereby values come to be practiced in organizations (Gehman et al., 2013)

Although dimensions are well-defined, they are interconnected, which makes the social-symbolic work perspective interesting for our study of the client-consultant relationship. The relationships between different forms of work and the social-symbolic objects that people shape in this work are recursive. This enables a micro-analysis of the activities that clients and consultants pursue when strategizing (Karakulak & Lawrence, 2023). Moreover, the material

dimension of the work displays different tangible outputs that consultants submit to their clients in form of written reports (Christensen & Skærbæk, 2010). Additionally, this perspective is commonly used when studying complex projects with multiple heterogeneous actors involved, as demonstrated by Barberá-Tomás et al. (2019). The relational dimension of social-symbolic work contributes to the social construction of the network of actors as they share knowledge and learn from each other (Karakulak & Lawrence, 2023). When partners come from different sectors and do not share the same meanings, it is important to focus on their collaboration in activities (Gray & Purdy, 2018). Strategizing is a shared activity that is particularly concerned with the 'co-working' aspect of the client-consultant relationship, as both parties equally participate in the strategy formation (Jarzabkowski, 2003). For this purpose, the social-symbolic work perspective utilizes the idea of labor division among actors and emphasizes action patterns rather than individual roles (Geiger & Stendahl, 2023). Lawrence & Phillips (2019) emphasize the complex interplay between different types of work and propose a multidimensional understanding of the concept of work.

Following the same idea, in this paper we aim to explore the complex interactions of the consulting mission discussed by various authors (Cerruti et al., 2019). These knowledge-intensive actors guide their clients through the process of strategy formation by challenging their ways of working (Sturdy et al., 2009). However, it is unclear what lies behind this "*puzzle rooted in the work of actors*" (Phillips & Lawrence, 2012, p. 228). The present study extends the research undertaken by Karakulak & Lawrence (2023) by exploring the potential for further unintended impacts of actors' work on the objects created through that work, including the business strategy itself. The research question this study seeks to answer is:

How do consultants and their clients work on the strategizing?

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The following section presents the details of the research methodology chosen for this study, including the research design, methods of data collection, data processing, and data analysis.

3.1. LONGITUDINAL CASE STUDY

To answer the research question, we chose a longitudinal interpretive case study research design. This method was chosen because it was consistent with the process orientation of the research, allowing for the study of the strategizing process (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003). It was important to analyze the work of the actors over a period of time to ensure that the strategizing was truly influenced.

The research setting was the inter-organizational relationship between EYAD Consulting, a French firm specializing in business strategy and management consulting, and one of its long-term clients, a French SME family business specializing in the distribution of raw materials to bakeries and restaurants. The company operates from 4 sites and has 7 departments, including support functions (communication, human resources, finance and accounting), operations, sales, sales administration, purchasing and supply.

Since 2019, this SME has been collaborating with EYAD Consulting. Initially, the consulting mission focused on the client firm's strategy. However, it subsequently expanded to include various assignments that were not directly related to the company's strategy. As researchers, our role was to understand which assignments were of strategic importance and which were not.

In their study, Jarzabkowski et al. (2021) discuss various methods for defining and activity as strategic. The authors consider an activity strategic "*to the extent that it is consequential for the strategic outcomes, directions, survival, and competitive advantage of the firm, even where these consequences are not part of an intended and formally articulated strategy*"

(Jarzabkowski et al., 2021, p. 3). In defining 'consequential', they posit that this term encompasses two distinct but related meanings. First, it can be understood as 'important'. Second, and more specifically, 'consequential' can be understood as an action that arises indirectly from another action, rather than as an intended cause and effect. Moreover, they highlight the importance of the active selection by researchers of what is strategic when conducting empirical research.

In accordance with these aforementioned recommendations, we conducted a comprehensive search for activities that could be considered consequential. Any activities that did not meet this criterion were excluded.

Upon analysis of the activities designated as strategic, a number of conclusions were reached. From the outset, the consulting firm sought to understand all internal interactions between different departments and sites, thereby attaining a comprehensive grasp of various processes and their impact on the client firm's overall performance. To this end, the firm conducted a series of workshops and engaged in simple interactions with various teams. Moreover, organizing activities played a crucial role in the consulting mission, as Whittington et al. (2006) posit that "*the practical, repeated and interlinked nature of strategizing/organizing carries with it a broad conception of strategy work and skills that goes beyond traditional analysis*" (ibid., 616). To carry out these activities, the consulting team, led by one consultant and occasionally accompanied by two others, adopted a comprehensive approach to the project. Consequently, EYAD Consulting gained a better understanding of the company's operations and involved the client firm's teams in strategic matters (Hendry & Seidl, 2003).

The objective was to eliminate all non-significant activities performed during the consulting mission, with the intention of treating the inter-organizational strategizing as the core of the

mission itself. Consequently, in this study, the terms 'inter-organizational strategizing' and 'consulting mission' are considered to be interchangeable.

3.2.   EMAILS AS DATA SOURCE

The present study employs email as a data source. As Daft & Lengel (1986) have noted, email represents a rich form of media that provides an independent, nonnormative mode of communication. They transmit not only textual information, but also images, music, and documents. Additionally, to observe the everyday work experience, it is necessary to use methods that provide detailed descriptions of work life (Barley & Kunda, 2001). In today's landscape, web conferencing and remote work are replacing face-to-face meetings and conversations. As a result, email has become a crucial data source. In the context of the client-consultant relationship, consultants tend to send detailed information about upcoming or past events via email (Casey, 1982). These emails contain details about the everyday work of both organizations. Moreover, they comprise a plethora of document attachments that are rich in informative content and were created throughout the duration of the consulting mission.

This study analyzes the emails exchanged between members of both companies during the first months of their collaboration, from January 2019 to September 2020. The emails were provided by the lead consultant responsible for the project from its inception. Although the consultant collaborated with the client firm's teams throughout the consulting mission, the study's narrative is presented from the consultant's perspective.

The collected emails include text messages, document attachments of tangible consulting deliverables and e-calendar reminders of scheduled face-to-face or web meetings. The information found in these emails consists of workshop summaries organized by EYAD Consulting with the client's teams, ideas about the mission's development, and communication between the actors of the dyad regarding ongoing issues. Table 2 resumes the initial data set.

Table 2 : Data set before processing

Period of email analysis		January 2019 – September 2020
Number of emails collected		895
Number of people involved in the email exchange	EYAD Consulting	3
	Client firm	23

To better contextualize the email content, it was necessary to have a thorough understanding of the organizational dyad. Therefore, we have been observing EYAD Consulting's work since May 2021 as part of our doctoral program prior to analyzing these emails.

3.3. DATA PROCESSING & ANALYSIS

To track the evolution of the strategizing process, we have analyzed 895 email threads exchanged between the members of both companies, where an email thread is an email conversation that contains a series of messages and replies linked by a common email subject, idea and time period. To do so, we developed a methodology aiming to process raw emails in order to simplify their eventual analysis (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Email analysis methodology
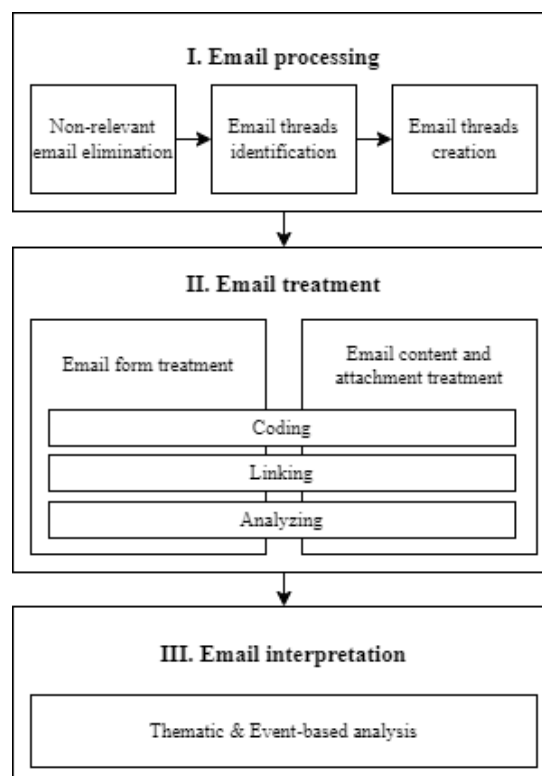
First of all, we proceeded to the **email processing phase**. It enabled to eliminate all the non-relevant email threads such as personal messages, out-of-context messages, and duplicates. Emails were then identified and classified chronologically. Finally, we 'created' email threads by consolidating emails that share a subject, time frame, and participants, but are stored separately due to people's tendency to create new email conversations instead of replying to the original one. In total, the email processing phase resulted in a total of 393 consolidated email threads out of the 895 email threads exchanged in 2019-2020, with 183 containing attachments and 210 without. The processed emails are available upon request.

After processing the email threads, we proceeded to the **email treatment phase**. We used a mixed approach, coding information both deductively and inductively. We coded the email form characteristics, such as email dates and participants, as well as email content and attachment characteristics. These elements were subsequently linked and subjected to analysis.

The third phase of the methodology entailed the **interpretation of emails** through thematic and event-based analysis. On the one hand, thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2014) was used to define the different tasks, that constitute the main elements of the consulting mission. These tasks represent different themes for the work performed by the consultant. Some tasks may result in various deliverables submitted to the client firm's executives as a result of the consulting efforts. We then used the notion of phases to organize the performance of various tasks and the submission of different deliverables on a timeline. These phases were either specifically identified and announced by the lead consultant or were designed based on groups of similar tasks performed over the same time period. Some tasks are directly related to the mission's phases, while others are secondary and aim to complement those that are directly related.

The preceding email treatment phase permitted us to concentrate on the work carried out by EYAD Consulting and the client firm during the email interpretation phase. In the emails, we

searched for various forms of work that had been previously synthesized by Laurence & Phillips (2019) (see Table 1). These forms of work were conducted either in real-life workshops or via email. We identified them by analyzing the descriptions of the activities and elements associated with each form of work. For example, we looked at message tonality to identify emotion work and terms like 'company's DNA' or 'our values' to identify values work.

Simultaneously, we have coded other forms of work that were not previously identified in the academic literature. These forms of work were mentioned multiple times via email and had an impact on the development of the consulting task. Therefore, we argue that these new forms of work should be considered on the same level as those that were previously studied by the scholars, as they influenced the evolution of the inter-organizational strategizing process.

All the email interpretation steps were done through an event-based approach (Hussenot & Missonier, 2016), allowing us to interpret something provided with electronic support rather than real life, like emails, as events. As multiple emails are often sent about the same matter, piecing them together is necessary to understand the whole story. To accomplish this, we focused on the real-life events that took place behind these email exchanges, event meaning « *a moment in which the activity and its organization are concrete and tangible* » (Hussenot & Missonier, 2016, p. 9). We analyzed past and future acts related to the event to understand its position in the temporality of all the events of the consulting mission.

After distinguishing between various consulting tasks, we analyzed different forms of work performed in these tasks. Following the same event-based approach, we identified the number of occurrences of each type of work per task. Subsequently, we analyzed the connections between tasks, deliverables and forms of work to trace the emergence and interdependence of ideas. These connections are critical for comprehending of the impact of different forms of work

on the development of strategic thinking. Table 3 provides a brief overview of the key terms used in the previously outlined methodology.

Table 3: Email analysis methodology: key notions

I.	Email processing
Email	A single message sent from one individual to one or more recipients. If subsequent responses are received, the email is transformed into an email thread.
Email thread	A series of messages and replies linked by a common email subject, idea and time period. It may contain textual information and different attached documents.
Consolidated email thread	Consolidation of multiple email threads that share a subject, time frame, and participants, but are stored separately.
II.	**Email treatment**
Email form	Descriptive elements of the emails, including the time and date of their transmission, the sender and recipient, the email subject and other information.
Email content	Textual information that is contained within an email.
Email attachment	A document that is attached to an email. It can be in a variety of formats, such as Word, PDF, Excel, PowerPoint, etc.
III.	**Email interpretation**
Task	An assignment on a specific theme performed by one or many actors.
Deliverable	A document submitted as a result of the task.
Phase	Temporal dimension of the studied process. The phases are either defined by the actors or defined by the researcher through the analysis of different tasks performed over a certain period of time.

4. FINDINGS

The following section presents the study's findings and is divided into two sub-sections. The first sub-section outlines the elements of the consulting mission, including the main phases, tasks, and submitted deliverables. Next, the elements will be mapped onto a timeline to connect them and create a narrative. In the second sub-section, the work completed during each consulting task will be explored. We will examine the different forms of work performed by strategy consultants and client firm teams in the strategizing process, emphasizing their interrelatedness and multidimensional nature.

4.1. CONTENT OF THE CLIENT-CONSULTANT STRATEGIZING

4.1.1. Main elements of the consulting mission: phases, tasks and deliverables

The consulting relationship between EYAD Consulting and the client company begins with six **phases**: (I) first meetings with the client firm's executives and contract signing, (II) first

meetings with the teams, (III) assessment of the current functioning of sites and departments, (IV) 'gluing' process, (V) organization of the company's processes and structure, and (VI) new beginnings. During the course of these phases, EYAD Consulting carried out a total of 23 consulting **tasks** with the client firm's teams (see Table 4).

During these tasks, consultants submitted various deliverables as a result of their work. If the deliverable was produced by the lead consultant and client firm's teams during a workshop, it was considered as an intermediary deliverable and was incorporated directly into the task. If the deliverable was mentioned more frequently than others and had a significant impact on the task's evolution, it was titled a '**task deliverable**' and studied independently (see Table 4).

Table 4: Tasks and task deliverables

Task n°	Task content	Task deliverable
1	First meetings between EYAD Consulting and the client firm's executives and teams	
2	Development of the global performance of the client company	A (Design of the current organizational chart) B (Study of the client firm's current market position) C (Analysis of the external communication of the client firm) D (Sustainability and Standard Compliance report) E (Design of the current organizational processes) F (Desing of the current organizational structure) G (Design of a management dashboard) H (Market research and market potential study) I (Proposition of the new organizational structure)
3	Conception of the procedures to optimize the client firm's internal meetings	A (New meeting format proposal)
4	Optimization of the functioning of the sales department	A (Definition of the role of the salespeople in the company)
5	Recruitment of the head of the communication department	
6	Optimization of the functioning of the Site 1	
7	Optimization of the functioning of the Site 2	
8	Optimization of the functioning of the Site 3	
9	Optimization of the functioning of the Site 4	
10	Optimization of the functioning of the purchasing & supply department	A (Product file optimization: cleaning and organizing) B (Creation of the supplier reference list)
11	Optimization of the functioning of the support functions (human resources, communication, finance & accounting)	

12	Conception of the employee survey to analyze the global functioning of the company as well as employees' needs	A (First version of the survey) B (Second and final version of the survey)
13	Work on the client firm's pricing system	
14	Optimization of the functioning of the finance & accounting department	
15	Optimization of the functioning of the operations department	
16	Work on the new system of company car use	
17	Optimization of the functioning of the sales administration department	
18	Organizing of the e-commerce challenge for the sales department	
19	ERP software cleaning	
20	Optimization of the functioning of the human resources department	
21	Optimization of the functioning of the communication department	A (Work on the communication strategy of the client firm)
22	Work on the collaboration of sales and sales administration departments	
23	Business Cloud implementation	

Moreover, the lead consultant sometimes appeared to place greater emphasis on certain deliverables over others. These deliverables were referred to as '**phase deliverables**' as they consolidated the work completed during a particular phase and marked the transition to a new phase (see Table 5).

Table 5: Phases and phase deliverables

Phase n°	Phase content	Phase deliverable
I	First meetings with the client firm's executives & Contract signing	* (Contract for the consulting mission is signed)
II	First meetings with the teams	
III	Assessment of the current functioning of the client firm	
IV	'Gluing process' of all the elements of the current functioning of the client firm	* (State of the client firm's processes, operations and organizational structure)
V	Work on the organization of the client firm's processes and organizational structure	* (Proposal for the client firm's new organizational structure)
VI	New beginnings: start of the implementation of the organizational structure proposed by EYAD Consulting	

4.1.2. Mapping of the client-consultant strategizing process

To offer a complete overview, we have compiled all the aforementioned elements and presented them in a timeline (see Figure 2). The subsequent paragraphs depict the narrative of the consulting mission's first phases and the interconnections between its various components. To

ensure clarity, each element of this narrative is accompanied by its corresponding reference in Tables 4 and 5 and Figure 2 (e.g., [1] refers to the task 1 in Table 4, [2A] refers to the task deliverable A of the task 2 in Table 4, and so on).

Figure 2 : Timeline of the main elements of the first phases of the consulting mission
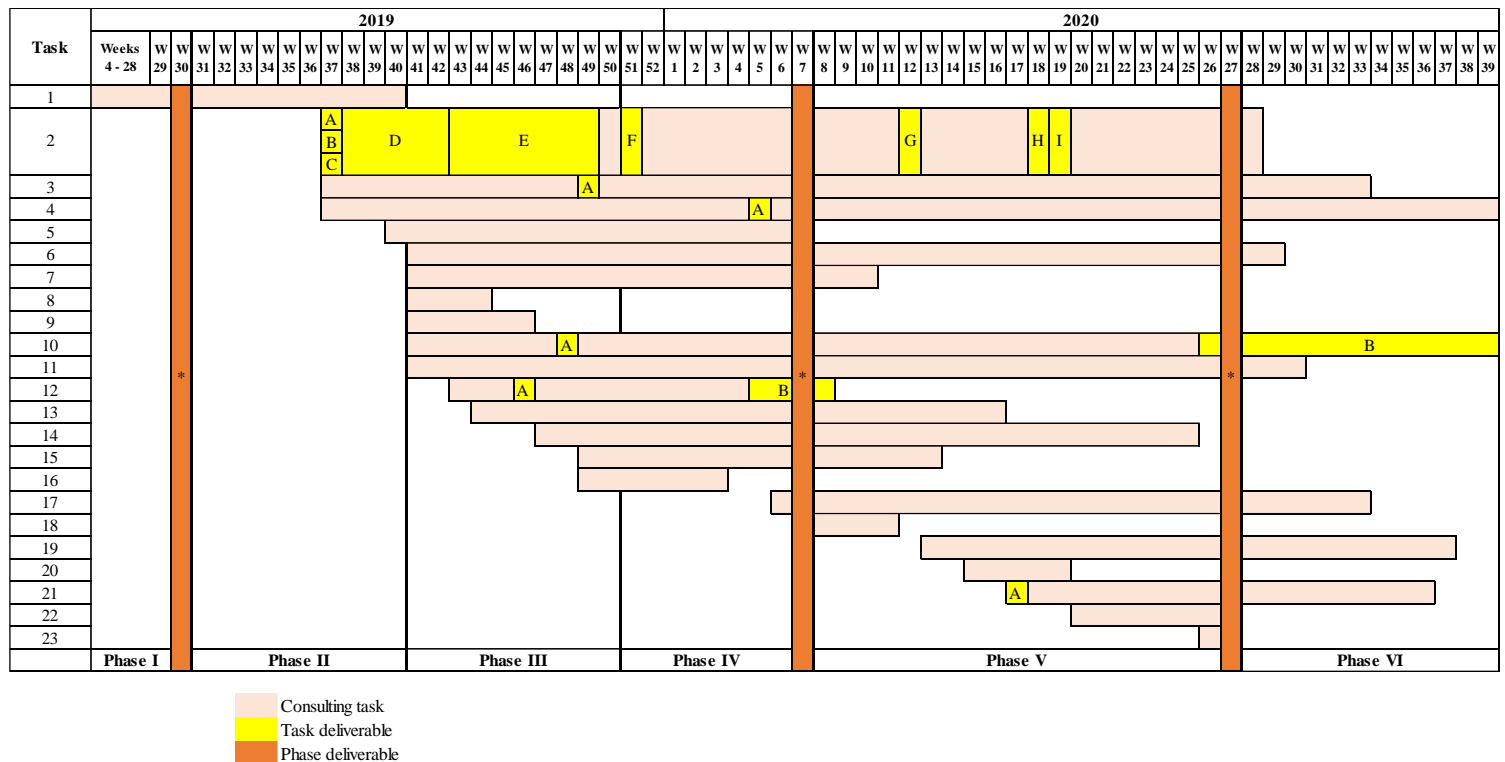
[Phase I]: As with any relationship, the first phase of the consulting mission involved laying the foundation for the work that the client company wanted EYAD Consulting to undertake. This phase took over six months to agree on the mission's content and primary participants, despite limited interactions between the two organizations. During the first meetings [1], the executives of the client firm presented their strategy to the lead consultant, who then worked to provide practical insights. Each meeting ended with a summary of the discussion and actions taken, demonstrating the consultant's efforts in sensemaking and persuasion. In a series of meetings between EYAD Consulting members and the executives of the client firm, the objectives to be achieved were defined, and the contract was signed [I*]. The client firm then

informed its employees about the consulting mission and the role that EYAD Consulting would play in its development. EYAD Consulting subsequently contacted the client firm's employees.

[Phase II]: After being introduced to the client firm's teams, the lead consultant met with all the department heads to introduce the consulting firm, its mission, and the work to be done in each department. Next, the consultant sought to understand the client firm's key operations and to analyze its current organizational structure [2]. As a result, EYAD Consulting produced three deliverables: an organizational chart [2A], an analysis of the company's position in the market [2B], and an evaluation of its external communications [2C]. These deliverables demonstrated the consulting firm's expertise and provided an overview of the client company.

It also marked the beginning of change management, which involved identifying problems for the firm's strategic vision and providing solid solutions. To encourage employees to work for the good of the company without scaring them off, the lead consultant attended monthly global meetings organized by the client firm [3]. This opportunity enabled EYAD Consulting to become acquainted with all the key players in the company, gain a better understanding of the applied practices, and discover new ideas for the consulting mission. As a result, EYAD Consulting developed new tasks and produced some operational reports, specifically related to sustainability and compliance with standards [2D].

It also allowed to start the activities related to the third phase of the consulting mission, which is the study of the sites and departments. The sales department, which has the greatest impact on turnover, was the first to be analyzed [4]. A thorough evaluation was conducted to analyze the department's current functioning and the links between its members and other departments.

[Phase III]: In the third phase, the lead consultant continued to work on the analysis of the functioning of the client firm's departments. Before analyzing the communication operations,

EYAD Consulting actively participated in the recruitment of a head of the communication department [5]. The consulting firm analyzed the client's sites [6; 7; 8; 9], purchasing and supply department [10], and support functions as a whole [11] to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of their current organizational structures. To clarify the interactions between members of different departments and sites, a survey was conducted to gather employee feedback on current activities and suggestions for future improvements [12; 12A].

The sales department analysis raised concerns about the effectiveness of other aspects of the company's operations, specifically the pricing system [13]. The potential implementation of a new pricing system required the optimization of the company's product portfolio, which was performed with the assistance of the purchasing and supply department [10A]. The effectiveness of the internal meetings was also reviewed, and EYAD Consulting proposed a new meeting format [3A]. After these meetings, and upon completion of the sustainability and standard compliance report [2D], the company began to prioritize the issue of CO_2 emissions. Consequently, they reviewed the use of company vehicles to decrease emissions [16].

Finally, EYAD Consulting analyzed the finance & accounting [14] and operations [15] departments to prepare a comprehensive report on the current organizational processes of all company's sites and departments [2E].

[Phase IV]: The fourth phase serves as a transitory period between the overall analysis of the main activities of the client firm and the detailed study of its organizational processes and structure. During this period, the lead consultant 'glues' all the information gathered during the previous phases together and provides the client firm with a report on the state of its current processes and activities [IV*]. To achieve this, the consultant had to consider information from all the workshops organized by EYAD Consulting for each department [2E], the results of the

previous phase's employee survey [12B], salespeople's perspectives on their role in the company [4A], and the organizational chart of the client firm created by EYAD Consulting [2F].

These deliverables enabled EYAD Consulting to strengthen its relationship with the client firm's employees. It was crucial for EYAD Consulting to maintain communication with the department heads, especially after their teams completed the survey. The survey revealed the significance of the sales administrators who were previously considered as part of the sales department. It was decided to treat them as a separate department and study their role more closely [17]. Regarding the sales department, the salespeople's perspectives on their role in the company sparked a discussion on department processes and KPIs. They began seeking ways to increase the percentage of customers placing orders online instead of relying on salesmen. This led to the implementation of a short-term e-commerce challenge [18].

[Phase V]: Upon receipt of a report from EYAD Consulting regarding the state of the client firm's current processes and activities [IV*], it was determined that a reorganization was necessary. The examination of certain departments revealed their interconnectedness with others. For example, the study of the sales department led to an examination of the human resources department [20]. The collaborative efforts between the sales department and the sales administration department were analyzed due to their connection [22].

It marked also the start of the work on the company's information systems. EYAD Consulting participated in cleaning and optimizing the Enterprise Resource Planning system (ERP) [19]. Additionally, they began implementing the Business Cloud in the client firm [23], as both systems had a direct impact on the company's activities.

After five months of recruitment process for the head of the communication department, the newly hired employee proposed a communication strategy [21; 21A]. The strategy was

reviewed by EYAD Consulting and the client firm's executives. During this phase, EYAD Consulting also produced strategic deliverables. These included a dashboard displaying the global KPIs of the client firm [2G] and a report demonstrating the potential of the market [2H]. Additionally, EYAD Consulting proposed a new organizational structure to the client firm in order to improve its processes and increase its productivity [2I]. The proposal was accepted after some adjustments [V*].

[Phase VI]: Once the proposal was accepted [V*], the client firm gradually informed its employees about the new functions of the company and the individuals who would be occupying them. Therefore, it was necessary to explain to them their new roles and the interactions that they would have with their colleagues. As a result of this change, certain departments had to adjust their operations. For example, the purchasing and supply department was tasked with creating a comprehensive list of the client firm's suppliers [10B].

4.2. WORK VIEW OF THE CLIENT-CONSULTANT STRATEGIZING

4.2.1. Different forms of work and work auxiliaries in the client-consultant strategizing

Email interactions between strategy consultants and the members of the client firm provided some evidence of the work done during the first months of the consulting mission. These forms of work represent different micro-foundations on which the strategizing process was grounded. Some of them have already been identified in the academic literature, while others were discovered empirically. Additionally, we identified different work auxiliaries that supported the performance of different forms of work by consultants and client firm teams. Table 6 and Table 7 summarize the number of occurrences of different forms of work and work auxiliaries in the consulting tasks.

Table 6: Number of occurrences of performance of different forms of work in the consulting tasks

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	Total
Existing forms of work (Laurence & Phillips, 2019)	Aesthetic work	1		2							1			1					1				1		**7**
	Boundary work	1			1		1	1					1									1			**6**
	Discursive work	2	2	1	2		1			1	1	1	1	1	1	1			1		1				**17**
	Emotion work	2	2	2	2							1	1	1	1		1	1	1				1		**16**
	Idea work	3	1	5	3	1	1	1		3	2			2	1	3	1	1	1		1	1	1		**32**
	Identity work	2			3		2	2	1	1	2		1		1			2	1		1	1	1		**21**
	Institutional work			2	1									1			1								**5**
	Interaction work				3	1	2	1	1	1	3							2	1				1		**16**
	Meaning work	3	2	2				2			2			1	1		1	1	1		1				**17**
	Narrative identity work	1			1											1									**3**
	Practice work			2	2		1	1			2						1		1	1					**11**
	Strategy work	2	2	1	1													1				1			**8**
	Values work			1		1												1	1						**4**
Newly identified forms of work	Conceptual work	1	2	2	2	2							1	2			1		1						**14**
	Problem work	1			1		1			1															**4**
	Responsibility work				1		1				1														**3**
Total		**19**	**11**	**20**	**22**	**6**	**9**	**9**	**2**	**3**	**15**	**4**	**5**	**9**	**5**	**5**	**7**	**9**	**10**	**1**	**4**	**4**	**5**	**0**	

Table 7: Number of occurrences of use of work auxiliaries in the consulting tasks

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	Total
Communication auxiliary	2	1	2	1	1	2		1		1		1	1	1	1	1	1		3	1		1		**22**
Networking auxiliary	4		2	1					1	1			2											**11**
Total	**6**	**1**	**4**	**2**	**1**	**2**	**0**	**1**	**1**	**2**	**0**	**1**	**3**	**1**	**1**	**1**	**1**	**0**	**3**	**1**	**0**	**1**	**0**	

The main focus of the research was on the discovery of the activities of the client firm. The principal forms of work involved in this process were idea and identity work. A total of 32 and 21 occurrences were counted for these two forms of work (see Table 6). This work helped to gain insight into the organizational processes and to redefine the identity of different functions and departments. Interaction work was the complement to these two and was done when there was a need to focus on the interdepartmental relationships (16 occurrences).

Significant discursive and emotion work (17 and 16 occurrences) was required to persuade the client firm's executives to sign the contract, to promote employee cooperation, and to present the new developments to the client firm's employees in a clear and concise manner in order to ensure their acceptance.

Boundary work was conducted when the individual efforts deviated from the original objective and were passed on to the other subjects. If this deviation was intentional, narrative identity work was sometimes necessary to define the labels of new functions for better understanding by all. Moreover, aesthetic work was included in certain consulting deliverables to meet the requirements of the consulting firm or the client firm, or to enhance the presentation of the information.

Explicitly strategic ideas were usually discussed during strategy work, when individuals met to identify future steps to achieve the defined organizational direction. The new organizational elements were implemented, followed by institutional work. Practice work allowed employees to get to integrate these elements into their routines. To ensure alignment with the organization's values and standards, a values work was conducted to validate these ideas.

Table 8 presents a variety of examples of how forms of work were interpreted in the email correspondence.

Table 8: Forms of work identified in the email correspondence: examples of verbatims

Task n°	Form of work	Work description	Examples of verbatims
1	Idea work	Exchange of ideas for the Powerpoint support that aims to present EYAD Consulting to the client firm's employees	« *Here is a proposal of 10 ideas that are simpler and easier for everyone to understand. You can adapt them as you wish: (1) Understand internal operations (2) Identify internal needs (3) Simplify the organizational structure...* » (lead consultant to the executive 2)
	Boundary work	Definition of limits of confidentiality	« *Second, please complete the 'Salespeople classification' tab. As mentioned, this document is not intended for distribution – it will simply enable us to have new thoughts on the organization of the sales department* » (lead consultant to the head of the sales department)
	Discursive work	Providing an opportunity for client firm's staff to express themselves	« *For [client firm], there will be 2 surveys. The first one will allow to give everyone a chance to have a say, so we'll find out the needs and expectations of the employees* » (lead consultant to the consultant 2)
		Requesting permission from the client firm's staff to attend their global meetings	Lead consultant to staff: « *Would you consider my presence at the quarterly sales meeting? Thank you in advance for your feedback* » One of the salespeople: « *No problem for me.* »

Analyzing email interactions also revealed three forms of work that scholars had not previously identified: conceptual, problem and responsibility forms of work (see Table 9). Conceptual work is a significant aspect of the consulting profession, as consultants create solutions for their clients through an iterative process of searching, thinking, and doing. Evidence of problem work was also found in the first phases of the consulting mission. The consultant discussed with the employees both future department development ideas (part of idea work) and the daily work problems faced by employees. The lead consultant involved the employees in the process of 'building the new company' to enhance the efficiency of the client firm's operations and address employee problems, thus making them perform responsibility work. In the case of this client firm, it is either the consultant or the employees themselves who must lead the teams to bring about change, while maintaining objectivity and accountability in their actions.

Table 9: 'New' forms of work

Form of work	Definition
Conceptual work	Going through the activities of searching, thinking and doing something with the ultimate goal of creating something new
Problem work	Activities related to identifying the deficiencies of the current system
Responsibility work	Purposeful actions aimed at identifying the leader, respecting their identity, and playing the role of a leader to guide actors and/or a project

Furthermore, the analysis of email interactions revealed two work auxiliaries that support and facilitate the work performance in the consulting mission (see Table 10). These auxiliaries aim to facilitate the exchange of information or contacts, schedule meetings, or establish relationships between individuals. They enable bonding between inter-organizational actors and the different work they have to perform.

Table 10: Work auxiliaries

Work auxiliary	Definition
Communication	Actions aimed at sharing basic information, such as meeting organization details, general knowledge about different people and departments, and other relevant information
Networking	Actions designed to connect people for future collaborations

In summary, the strategizing process of the first months of the consulting mission shows various forms of work performed by EYAD Consulting and the client firm's teams. These forms of work enabled the understanding, optimization, and reorganization of the client firm's structure and operations, thereby influencing the company's strategic direction.

4.2.2. Multidimensional work as part of client-consultant strategizing

After analyzing the various forms of work performed in the consulting tasks of the first months of the mission, it became evident that some work was heterogeneous and could not be classified within the previously presented forms of work. We referred to this type of work as multidimensional and provided examples in the Table 11.

Table 11: Multidimensional work: examples of verbatims

Task n°	Work dimensions	Work description	Examples of verbatims
1	Narrative identity work & Identity work	Change of terminology used to describe different roles within the sales and sales administration departments	« *For the sales department, we will use the terms « salesman » and « sales administrators » _ to simplify our approach, the terms « technical salesman » and « telemarketer » will no longer be applied* » (lead consultant to the head of the sales department)
4	Identity work & Interaction work	There was a need to understand who does what and who interacts	« *For the sales department, the first step is to define the job of a « salesman » so that all staff have a clear and*

		with who in the department	*unique vision of this job and its missions* » (lead consultant to the head of the sales department)
4	Interaction work & Practice work	Discussion of creating a chat group to facilitate the communication across the sales department	[Consultant suggests creating a chat group to facilitate the communication across the sales department] One of the salespeople: « W*e already have a chat on our [site 4], but it's rarely used. Then yes, I can create a WhatsApp group, but I know that [executive 1] was not in favor of implementing this system. I'll leave it to the group to decide whether to set it up or not*. » Executive 1: « *I am not in favor of it to prevent information from circulating on social networks. After talking to [lead consultant] yesterday, I approved a test, hence the email you received.* »

We consider the work performed by the actors as multidimensional when it encompasses the characteristics of multiple forms of work. As Table 12 shows, it is a prevalent aspect in the majority of consulting tasks (17 out of 23), and most of the forms of work can be heterogeneous enough to be part of it (9 out of 16). Therefore, it acts as a unifying factor across various consulting tasks and the inter-organizational strategizing process in general.

The multidimensional nature is particularly relevant to identity work, as evidenced by the 15 occurrences in Table 12. In client-consultant relationships, consultants often seek to understand the identities of various actors, departments, and sites, and then redefine them. Idea work is also frequently involved in multidimensional work (7 occurrences). During strategy development, organizational actors express their perspectives and visions for the future of the company. Next to the idea work, there is interaction work (6 occurrences), which refers to the various ways people interact to turn ideas into action. It is an important part of strategizing, as actors make their ideas a reality.

Table 12: Multidimensional work (MW) as part of the client-consultant strategizing

(the forms of work not covered by the multidimensional work were intentionally excluded)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	Number of occurrences of the MW per form of work
Aesthetic work	MW1																							1
Boundary work												MW13												1
Idea work	MW1			MW3			MW8			MW12				MW14						MW16		MW17		7
Identity work	MW1; MW2			MW4; MW6		MW7	MW8; MW9	MW10	MW11	MW12		MW13		MW14			MW15			MW16		MW17		15
Interaction work				MW4; MW5		MW7		MW10	MW11								MW15							6
Meaning work							MW9																	1
Narrative identity work	MW2			MW6																				2
Practice work				MW5																				1
Strategy work				MW3																				1
Number of occurrences of the MW per task	2			4		1	2	1	1	1		1		1			1			1		1		

After listing various forms of work and cases of multidimensional work, Table 12 enabled us to identify the pairings of forms of work that tend to go together. We found links between practice, interaction, identity, boundary, narrative identity, meaning, aesthetic, idea, problem and strategy forms of work. These dimensions of work were not only interrelated, but also complemented each other and the tasks to which they were related to. The forms of work that are not linked to any other type are emotion, institutional, discursive, values, conceptual and responsibility work. This is likely due to the specific nature of certain forms of work, as they all require a certain amount of preliminary knowledge and 'preparation' before proceeding. Figure 3 summarizes the existing links between different forms of work in the relationship between EYAD Consulting and its client firm.

Figure 3: Pairings of multidimensional work
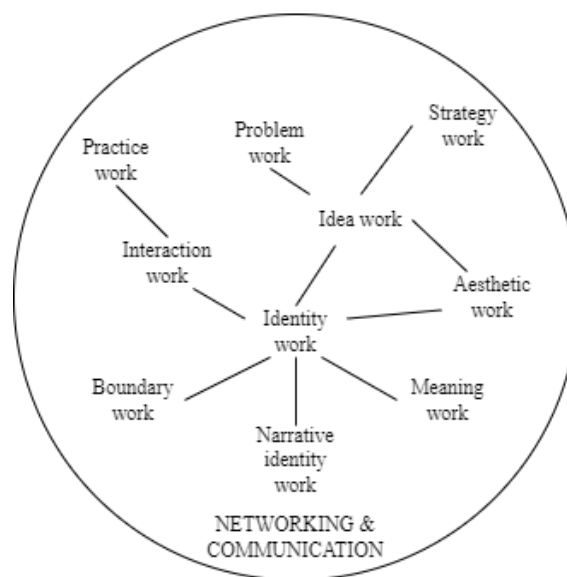
The consulting mission in the first year focuses on two work dimensions: identity and idea work. These enable the lead consultant to understand the client firm and its specificities. Aesthetic work is often associated with these two forms of work, which the consultant initiates to simplify ideas and improve their presentation for better comprehension.

Identity work can then be accompanied by meaning and boundary work. It is important for the lead consultant to understand the client firm's situation and to follow the designed guidelines. Additionally, narrative identity work can be done when reviewing department identities and people's functions, and when identifying new functions, a narrative of what is new should follow. It frequently involves interaction work, focusing not only on the 'being' but also on the 'becoming'. EYAD Consulting has identified new issues that could hinder project implementation and the development of new practices by studying the interactions between different departments, which pertains to practice work.

As for the idea work, it is often accompanied by the problem work. During the first months of the consulting mission, the consultant and client teams analyze the current state of the operations and identify opportunities for enhancing productivity. Our analysis revealed that new directions for development were often discovered through the idea work. This was achieved by linking the idea work with the strategy work, with the intention of producing strategies.

Moreover, Figure 3 highlights the underlying cause of the multidimensional nature of certain forms of work, which is the prevalence of communication and networking work auxiliaries. Upon comparison of the aforementioned Tables 7 and 12, it becomes evident that the majority of tasks with included dimensions of work relied upon the utilization of work auxiliaries (with exception of task 7, which did not necessitate the integration of work auxiliaries). These work auxiliaries create a global environment for performing multidimensional work, thereby constituting an essential element of the client-consultant inter-organizational strategizing process. They enable inter-organizational actors to collaborate on complex projects that necessitate the simultaneous performance of diverse forms of work.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The objective of this article is to examine the client-consultant strategizing process through the lens of micro-level analysis, focusing on the work performed by the actors in the process.

First, we present the content of the strategizing process by presenting different consulting tasks, deliverables and phases of the first months of the consulting mission. Then, we adopt a work view and identify different forms of work that were present in the consulting tasks. It was evident that the work was pervasive throughout the consulting mission, as most of the tasks demonstrated its presence. Similarly to the events in Hussenot & Missonier's (2016) study, the consulting tasks appeared to be interconnected through the various forms of work performed "*through engagement with past and anticipated events*" (ibid., 3).

Furthermore, two work auxiliaries were identified: communication and networking. These facilitate the performance of work in the consulting mission. They enable the creation of bonds between forms of work, consulting tasks, and inter-organizational actors in general. Consequently, they have an impact on the performance of the multidimensional work that consultants and their clients are subjected to perform. This multidimensional work combines the characteristics of different forms of work and, following the approach of Karakulak & Lawrence (2023), represents one of the mechanisms by which different forms of work interact. The interconnections between different forms of work are particularly intricate when there is a recursive relationship between the work and the objects on which people work, which is the business strategy in the case of this study (Barberá-Tomás et al., 2019; Karakulak & Lawrence, 2023). The combination of multidimensional work with the use of work auxiliaries enables inter-organizational actors to maintain the strategy guideline coherent across different phases of the consulting mission.

Additionally, this article brought more attention to one of the most bypassed data sources in the 21st century, which is email. Usually used as a traditional archival source, emails are rarely used for more profound reasons, such as the use as a primary data source. The analysis of over 800 raw emails exchanged between a strategy consultant and a client firm's teams revealed that emails can provide valuable information not only about various life events, but also about entire processes. When completed by other data sources, such as interviews for example, emails can help mitigate the risk of recall bias, which is a common limitation of retrospective studies (Raphael, 1987). This is especially relevant for client-consultant collaborations, where real-life discussions are often documented and emailed by the consultants after meetings (Casey, 1982).

This research also has some limitations. Firstly, the narrative was constructed from the lead consultant's perspective. The consultant tended to send more emails and therefore seemed to lead the strategizing process. To ensure a more balanced view, future studies should include the client's point of view. Secondly, this study only focuses on the first months of the consulting mission with one specific client firm, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. As the mission progressed over time, fewer different forms of work were identified (see Table 6). To determine if the multidimensional work discovered in the study is unique to this particular period or persists throughout the consulting mission, it would be beneficial to examine other periods. Finally, to ensure objectivity and accuracy, emails should be complemented by other data sources, particularly when companies use multiple modes of interaction to shape their strategies. For example, interviews with key stakeholders, such as the lead consultant and the client firm's executives, can offer a crucial perspective for interpreting the information collected by the researcher.

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