

# The Ecosystem of Internal Consultants as a Structure: A Contradictory Approach to Leverage the Imbalance between Internal and External Consultants

Mavis Adu-Gyamfi<sup>1</sup> Gabriel Nyame<sup>2\*</sup>

1.College of Technology Education, Kumasi, University of Education, Winneba, P. O. Box 1277, Kumasi, Ghana

2.School of Management and Economics, University of Electronic Science and Technology, No. 2006, Xiyuan Ave., West High-tech Zone, Chengdu, Sichuan, China

## Abstract

Consultancy has become a characteristic phenomenon to many organizations in Ghana whether small or large. Organizational policies and programmes attempt to re-align consultancy issues to determine when a planned change is necessary to embark upon, and the key resources that will be employed in due course. The ecosystem of the internal consultants is though complex, it is relatively supportive in terms of planned change. This paper proposes a model that paradoxically leverages the imbalance between the internal and external consultants for same change initiative. The model was empirically experimented in College of Technology Education, Kumasi in which planned changes are pronounced. Questionnaires were used to obtain information about staffs' confidence and acceptance when working with either internal consultant or external consultant given some critical project. It was established that the consulting process regarding level of professionalism and realization of change outcomes were also optimal using internal consultants for the same planned change agenda.

**Keywords:** ecosystem, planned change, internal consultant, Internal-External Ecosystem Model

## 1. Introduction

Like external consultants, internal management consultants are also regarded as essential organizational resources to achieving corporate objectives and goals. Institutionalization of Research and Development (R&D) priorities in organizations stand to bring greater transformations in both process and resource drives in many organizations. To this extent, R&D departments are given needed investment to continue to uplift and sustain corporate performance in markets that they operate (Argote *et al.*, 2003). Antal and Krebsbach-Gnath (2001) argued that internal consultants must not only be seen as agents of organizational learning but as agents of planned change as well. By this notion, Anand *et al.* (2002); Alvesson (2004); Armbrüster & Kipping (2002); and Engwall & Kipping (2002) explained that both internal and external consultants mostly acquire same knowledge in consultancy training and skills development and are likely to demonstrate same level of expertise when carrying out the consulting process. However, experience in delivering consultancy services to clients play important role in the overall acceptance by clients (Alvesson, 2004). It is an obvious fact that most research works are directed towards the successes of external consultancy with very little work on internal consultancy, yet both acquire same skill development and training. It is thus important to answer the question of why such greater disparity of choice favours the external consultant more than the internal consultant. Also, there is greater variability in the ecosystem of the external consultant as compared to that of the internal consultant (Gammelsaeter, 2002). A consideration of the dimensions of management consultancy as explained by Gluckler and Armbruster (2003) reaffirms clients' willingness and positivity towards the external consultant. On the basis of resourcefulness, Brint (1994); Czerniawska (2004); Armbruster (2006); and Edersheim (2004) emphasized that the external consultant is seen to be more resourced outside the client's organization than the internal consultant from within. Many researches on external consultants failed to consider the dynamics of the ecosystem of consultancy in general and the ecosystem of internal consultants in particular. As a result, clients' choice for external consultants is more influenced by the externality and neutrality perceived of the work of the external consultant throughout the consulting process.

However, Miller and Subbiah (2012) challenged internal consultants to adopt a rather balanced approach that focuses on both goal-oriented and relationship-oriented routes which strengthen the balanced approach. In view of this, they proposed a five-factor model which highlighted factors such as *support*, *credibility*, *relevance*, *circumstance*, and *acceptance*. They contended that these are critical to making internal consultants successful. They explained that with the appropriate consultancy approach adopted, the internal consultant can be successful if all these factors are surely made present and effective. This suggests that it does not matter whether change managers, development specialists or process managers co-exist, internal consultants are still pivotal to change initiative in an organization especially for the purposes of change facilitation, implementation or follow-ups.

This paper presents three important sections. The first section discusses the concept of consultancy with more emphasis on ecosystem of consultants, vis-à-vis their relative acceptance by clients. The second section provides a simplistic model that puts the internal consultant on the same elevator pitch as the external consultant. The final

section gives implication of the model and its application in College of Technology Education, Kumasi of the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana.

## 2. The Concept of Consultancy

Consultancy is an actionable process in which an individual, a group or a firm is knowledgeable in some technical area and initiates a planned change, facilitates, implements and monitors results according to expected outcomes to solve a problem or address a concern in an organization. Gross and Kieser (2006) defined consultancy as a value creation activity in which a professional applies knowledge and technical expertise to a business concern and to help improve business performance of an organization. Similarly, Kyrö (1995) explained that consultancy involves analyzing a business concern and providing a solution to improve performance. However, Kenton *et al.* (2003) argued that consultancy is rather a collaborative attempt in which responsibility and ownership rest equally with the consultant and the client. This assertion suggests that consultancy is characterized by a number of dimensions and elements which include consultancy type, the nature of the consulting process, resource requirements, expected deliverables, cost estimations, capacity and ability, and scheduling and monitoring activities involved.

In fact, the specialty in consultancy and technical expertise required vary from one problem to another. For instance, strategy consultants may consider change initiatives that solve corporate strategic problems (David, 2012), business consultants may focus on business models and processes that are results oriented (Fincham, 1999), technology consultants may consider technological innovations that improve performance (Kirk and Vasconcelos, 2003), marketing consultants may emphasize propensity to obtain high market shares while still protecting brand and image of the organization (Kipping and Saint-Martin, 2005), and IT consultants may focus on both hardware and software solutions that ease business functions for improved service delivery and performance (Fincham, 2006). Consultants can thus be internal or external and can be just a single expert with support staff, a group of experts or a firm that provides consulting services (Kenton *et al.*, 2003). Whether internal or external consultants, it is important to understand the pull and push factors that enhance selection by clients, and the sustained confidence repose in such a choice. Previous studies indicate that clients mostly prefer to have a group of experts or an entire firm as external consultant than considering just a single person to handle huge projects. Engwall & Kipping (2002) mostly associate this rationale to the high risks with an individual expert and inadequacy of resource strengths even though Miller and Subbiah (2012) argued that the number of experts for a planned change is immaterial but the know-how to change initiatives for significant improvement is what really matters. Alvesson and Johansson (2002) demonstrated in their work that available resources and rich expertise of consultants are not sufficient indicators of successful planned change but full commitment of the clients complements any successful change initiatives.

### 2.1 The Ecosystem of Consultants

Obviously, it is necessary to examine the ecosystem of consultants in general but the most tensioned is the ecosystem of the internal consultant as a structure. Interestingly, the internal consultant is sometimes regarded by clients as mere reporting entity on project initiatives just like other change managers, operational managers and development specialists in the same organization with different reporting structure. The pull and push factors that pervade in the operational domain of external consultants are so different from those of internal consultants. This suggests that the environment (ecosystem) within which the external consultants operate influence clients' selection in facilitating a change initiative (Armbrüster and Kipping, 2002). In fact, several dimensions in the ecosystem of each side can be considered when assessing propensity of clients' choice of internal or external consultants (Gluckler and Armbruster, 2003).

*The ecosystem of consultants is defined as the proximate boundary in which consultants independently initiates change, determine planned change resources, create work relationships, facilitate or implement design procedures, and monitor and evaluate project outcomes.*

It is important to emphasize that external consultant is free on negotiations about a planned change than internal consultants, and at a distance he/she is seen as a special professional than the internal consultant (Miller and Subbiah, 2012). In view of this, they argued that the external consultant stands the chance of using expert status as a guarantee to influence and solicit views for project entry and secured contracts. Anand *et al.* (2002) explained that external consultants get more project contracts than internal consultants perhaps because of their neutrality and ideas from experience. This is what Miller and Subbiah (2012) termed as *outsider tag* which to a larger extent favours external consultants even in a weaker competitive enclave of some professional market demand. However, Brint (1994) described such perception as inappropriate since training, knowledge and skills acquired cut across the two professionals. Though some past studies looked at a seamless wider ecosystem of the external consultant in terms of other competitive consultants in some professional practice, development partners, Agencies, Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs), government regulatory policies, reputation gained over the years, number of projects undertakings and capacity to offer deliverables, resource base, and impact of successful project outcomes on clients' corporate performance. These externalities in the external ecosystem exhibit many

dimensions that can influence selection of project initiatives by clients. Contrarily, clients' selection of internal or external consultants is much dependent on ability and capacity to deliver project outcomes usually confine to project schedules and positive outcomes. It is because of this important consideration that Fincham (1999) reiterated consultant-client relationship as a catalyst to clients' confidence in a consultant's performance. Despite the wider scope of the ecosystem of external consultants, many of these externalities including their multiplicity of dimensions do not affect the consulting process. Thus, the external consultant freely facilitates change initiatives after entry and contract agreement (Gross and Kieser, 2006).

On the other hand, the ecosystem of internal consultants defines a set of resources, relationships, factor dimensions, key corporate individuals like managers or supervisors, and organizational management. Such a boundary includes client's corporate norms and practices beyond which the internal consultant has no tendency to influence. For instance, goal-oriented and relationship-oriented dimensions of the internal consultant are pivotal to the client side when negotiating for award of project contracts (Miller and Subbiah, 2012). To a larger extent, they contended that technical, political and social aspects of change solutions are critical to acceptance in their five-factor model. Considering a client's acceptance of a consultant for a change initiative, political aspect plays a critical role because certain individuals mostly become bias in the decision to award contracts. This means that it does not matter the nature of the change and the proposed solutions unless there are clearly laid down modalities and consensus based on some ratings and evaluations.

Delegation of powers for projects' assignments to consultants can become a serious debatable issue in some organizations especially among some management or committee members. Tichy (1983) stressed that political aspect of the client occurs during allocation of power and resources as well as when it becomes necessary to build coalition for change initiative. This is why Miller and Subbiah (2012) also emphasized that a client's capacity to deliver must be based on factors such as acceptance, support, credibility, circumspection, and relevance. This puts the internal consultant in a dilemma whether to go by goal-oriented approach or relationship-oriented approach; they however suggested a balanced approach for a successful project outcome. It is important to state that though the five-factor model fails to examine the extent of impact that any of these factors have on client's choice of consultant, the model does not regard political, social and technical aspects as too critical to change initiative. It is thus obvious that despite political tensions that may arise when selecting a credible and efficient consultant, many other factor dimensions are required to be considered, and the effect of these dimensions also depend on the nature and domain of change initiative. In essence, the ecosystem of internal consultant directly impacts the consulting process than the external, and its relative effect for consideration by the client is much more inbound.

### *2.2 The Ecosystem of Internal Consultant as a Structure*

Indeed, the ecosystem of the internal consultant is best encapsulated as a structure and not a separate entity like the external counterpart. As a structure, standard operating procedures are to be adhered to in the organization. Buono and Kerber (2005) illustrated this notion when they considered a team of professionals in an organization assigned to the task of solving a problem relating to increasing marketing costs. In this context, the team is anticipated to offer outcomes that lower marketing costs significantly. Thus, unlike the external consultant, the ecosystem of the internal consultant relates more to structure and factor dimensions such as resource requirement, credibility, support and commitment from management, acceptance by staff, etc. In view of this, the position of the internal consultant in the hierarchy matters for selection to embark on a planned change (Tita, 1981).

The actions of the internal consultant are strictly confined in the premise of the client's work flow and practices. Deviations from these are considered very awkward because the internal consultant is a known parameter in work procedures. Hence, no or little recognition is given to the internal consultant instead of being looked at as an expert for change initiative. According to Mintzberg and Westley (1992), the internal consultant is mostly pushed to dispatch reports to management or a project committee for progress of work on the underlying project. For instance, the client is interested in knowing returns on resource allocation and deployment, and to ascertain whether the change is likely to be successful. The situation is however different for the external consultant where stated resource requirements are made known in advance to the external consultant after the contracting phase. In fact, the internal consultant is not independent when discharging his/her duties when assigned the task to bring change. He or she discharges duties as any process or change manager.

### **3. The Internal-External Ecosystem Model (IEEM)**

The development of this model is based on the simplistic assumption that an internal consultant can leave the client's side and establish a consultancy firm on its own to become an external consultant in the same professional practice. Skills, training, and experience are bound to be same for both because they all undergo same knowledge acquisition, training, professional practice, and exhibits similar consultancy processes.

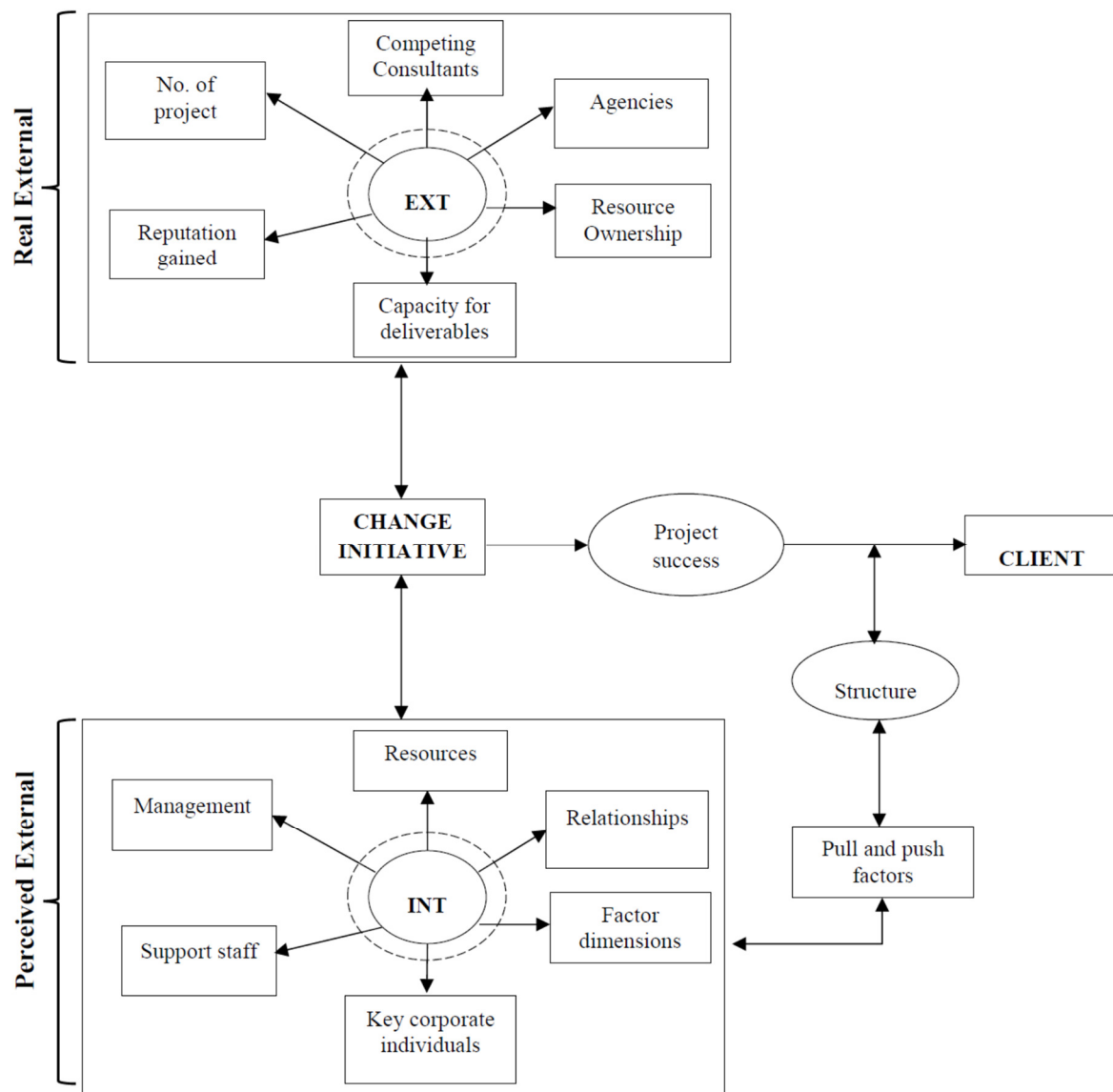
Further, given same sets of resources, training sets, support and commitment from the client, team support, and timelines, there is likely to be no significant difference between their respective outcomes for the same change initiative (Mabey, 2008). However, either side is surrounded by different entities and their associated features

which together form their respective ecosystems. The entity sets of the ecosystem of the internal consultant and the external consultant are strictly disjoint unless when the external consultant is in collaboration with the internal consultant on agreed facilitation of a common project. For instance, clients that have internal consultants, Bloomfield and Danieli (1995) suggested that it is ideal for such clients to adopt a collaborative approach to deal with a change initiative. They explained further that it is one best way for both to experience mixed efforts to facilitate a planned change, consensus building, harmonization of techniques, formats and styles, adaptations, and expected deliverables. For any CHANGE INITIATIVE that is expected to be well delivered by a consultant, *project success* is the most important of all regardless of challenges or lapses during the consulting process.

In the case of the Internal consultant (INT), the ecosystem constitutes such entities like key corporate individuals and relationships with team members, supervisors, management and other staffs who may be directly or indirectly affected by the planned change. Factor dimensions like capacity to deliver, perceived knowledge level, familiarity with project environment, etc. hinge on the internal consultant's ability to implement and complete within schedules. Resources available to action the planned change include human capital, funds, facilities, data and/or information, and analytic intelligence of the internal consultant. Level of commitment and support from management enhances the work of the internal consultant, and if same is given to the internal just like the external, project outcome is likely to be a success. Though the entities in the ecosystem of the internal consultant seem unrelated, they are carried out in accordance with work procedures in the organization. Obviously, the role that the internal consultant plays in them is more of a *structure*. However, upon entry, the external consultant can decide to introduce new approaches, handle these entities differently or ignore some of them (Bowker and Star, 1999). Thus, between the CLIENT and the INT, *pull factors* such as prior knowledge about internal practices, processes, workflows, etc. and *push factors* including lukewarm attitude, limited confidence, inexperience, etc. are quite distractive to progress.

On the other hand, the entities of the ecosystem of the external consultant (EXT) are independent of the CLIENT until the point where the external consultant gains entry and perhaps awarded a contract to design and implement the change initiative. For instance, competing consultants only contest if they can gain entry and contracted. Agencies whether private or public may sometimes engage in partnership with the external consultant to attest other planned change scenarios in some other firms. As part of the strength of the external consultant, factors such as ownership of resources, achievements in other similar projects, years of experience and reputation gained and high caliber of project team and capacity to fulfill deliverables technically serve as pull factors in the sight of the CLIENT. Thus, the external consultant is seen as more credible, independent, reliable, resourceful, and task-oriented. It must be emphasized that the entities or factor dimensions of the ecosystem of the external consultant do not influence one another unlike the case of the internal consultant where some factors can influence others. For example, management and support staff can influence one another, and the resultant effect can determine the success or failure of the actions of the internal consultant. This is one fundamental problem that Carlile (2004) pointed out that internal consultants are to be mindful of stakeholders involved in a change initiative because any agitations that evolve from stakeholders can jeopardize the planned implementation of the change initiative. **Figure 1** shows the ecosystem of the internal consultant and the ecosystem of the external consultant in relation to change initiative of the client (i.e. IEEM). Thus, the Internal-External Ecosystem Model brings the internal consultant on the same elevator pitch with that of the external consultant. This means that though the internal consultant is part of the CLIENT's human resource assets, the model perceived the INT as external while the EXT remains the real or actual external consultant outside the organization. In this sense, the INT is prioritized as external and allowed to function just as any other EXT. Moreover, CLIENTS are likely to have greater confidence in their own internal consultants for many change initiatives unless it is necessary to have collaboration with a real external consultant. Further, this model brings a shift of competition among other competing external consultants to one that exists between perceived EXT (i.e. internal consultant) and the real EXT. Hence, the model leverages the imbalance between the internal consultant and the external consultant.

However, from the two contrasting perspectives, the client is thus in a dilemma to choose the side that is likely to deliver project outcomes according to anticipated requirements. Rationally, firms are likely to engage a consultant whose project outcomes minimize cost while increasing overall performance. By this model, the internal consultant can gain entry and being contracted all things being equal on the premise that he or she is more familiar with the operating environment, work procedures, stakeholders, communication protocols, weaknesses and strengths of departments affected by the change initiative solution.



INT: Internal Consultant

EXT: External consultant

**Figure 1.** The Internal-External Ecosystem Model (IEEM)

#### 4. Methods and Application of the IEEM

Prior to the implementation of the IEEM, opinions of staffs of College of Technology Education, Kumasi (COLTEK) of the University of Education, Winneba were solicited on whether internal consultant or external consultant is viable for a change initiative on re-aligning ICT platform to address software development projects of students in the Information Technology Education Department of COLTEK. 45 staff members were sampled using stratified random sampling in which 15 departments were considered as strata and three staff members selected from each Department. **Table 1** shows Departments used for the study.



**Table 1.** Departments of COLTEK

<b>Name of Department</b>	<b>Number Selected</b>	<b>Junior Staff (JS)/Senior Staff (SS)/Senior Member (SM)</b>
Accounting Education	3	JS, JS, SM
Management Education	3	JS, SM, SM
Fashion design and Textiles Education	3	SM, SS, SS
Automotive Technology Education	3	JS, JS, SS
Electrical/Electronics Technology Education	3	SM, SM, SM
Mechanical Technology Education	3	SS, SM, SS
Wood Technology Education	3	SM, SM, SM
Information Technology Education	3	JS, SM, SM
Secretarial Education	3	SS, SS, SM
Catering and Hospitality Education	3	JS, JS, SS
Construction Technology Education	3	SM, SM, SS
Executive Office Administration	3	SS, JS, SM
Business Administration	3	SM, SS, SS
Marketing Education	3	SS, SS, SS
Competency-Based Training	3	SM, JS, SS
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>	

45 questionnaires were administered to all sampled staff, and the response rate was as high as 93% since all staff members were easy to be located. The 7% accounted for some questions on answered and others unsuitable for the questions asked perhaps respondents did not understand the questions properly even though a pilot test was done to ascertain the clarity of all the questions. The results of the analysis of the data collected indicated that 72% of staff in COLTEK believed that considering internal consultant to facilitate the change initiative is preferred to the external consultant because they found the internal consultant as their own could best work with. The remaining 28% felt that the external consultant may give directives that could derail their primary activities and besides could cost the University so much. In the questionnaire, five key factors were considered and they included acceptance, cost of consulting process, regard as expert in the two cases, accomplishing deliverables, and management support and commitment.

To ascertain the feedback from the analysis of the data, three senior members who are experts in facilitating software development projects in the Department of Information Technology Education (ITE) and had been performing similar consulting projects for other firms like SoftCity Technologies in Kumasi were perceived as external consultants to action the change initiative. The team of experts was introduced to the concept of IEEM and was tasked to action the model if deliverables could be fulfilled. Management gave the support, commitment, and needed resources by allowing the consultancy cycle to be effected. Since it was a short planned change affecting the ITE Department, the duration for the project was 4 weeks. From gaining entry, contracting, collecting data, diagnosing the problem domain, developing solutions, implementing, and disengaging the activity, project outcomes satisfied anticipated requirements by the end of the third week. Reports were submitted to management about their recommendations. It was obvious that the IEEM had a few challenges since the factor dimensions varied from those of a typical manufacturing firm; the experts had to introduce new entities while applying the IEEM. Recommendation from the experts indicated that entities are not same for every professional area and that experts applying the IEEM must look up for entities that relate and directly affect the change initiative. However, the project outcome suggested that the internal consultant when elevated to the level of external consultant and given the recognition by the client just like the external consultant can equally perform like the external consultants.

## 5. Implications of IEEM

The proposed model offers a number of implications in the professional field of consultancy. One significant benefit of the model is a cut in costs incurred when internal consultants are contracted to lead a change initiative especially when planned changes are more pronounced. When clients opt for internal consultants they become more considerate in their cost estimates about change initiative than the external, and hence the overall consultancy cost is relatively lower than that of the external consultancy.

The model stands to promote internal consultants to serve as clients' agents of change when change initiatives are to be implemented. Lack of confidence in internal consultants in many firms is the result of the big gap between the internal consultant and the external consultant. This has also contributed to the multiplicity of external consultants especially in Ghana because majority of firms in Ghana do not have clearly recognized internal consultants. However, there are some team leaders or facilitators in some organizations who function as consultants but are not distinctively designated as professional practitioners in their field.

Effective relationship with stakeholders is best handled by the internal consultants than the external consultant because the internal consultant knows the internal systems very well and can regularly monitor implementation phases than the external consultant. This allows for amendments to work in progress until the project becomes successful.

## 6. Conclusion

Internal and external consultants are seen as same professional practitioners regardless of the mandate assigned to each of them. Perception about internal consultants by clients together with the ecosystem affects complete acceptance by clients. However, IEEM leverages such an imbalance between them and firms that have confidence in their own experts are likely to succeed in using them for their planned change initiatives. Though the model makes it open to factor dimensions or entities applicable to certain fields, other factors or entities can be added depending on the nature of change initiative.

It is therefore important to emphasize that the IEEM bridges that gap between the internal and external consultants and elevates the internal consultant at the same level pegging like the external consultant. Thus, the IEEM is recommended for firms as a way of addressing their own planned changes for process improvement and overall corporate performance.

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