

# New Study Reveals Top 5 Ethical Transgressions in Consulting

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A new study has expanded the discussion on ethical practice in business consulting by reviewing media reporting, interview transcripts and jokes made on the internet to identify five common ethical transgressions made by consultants.

The research was conducted by Onno Bouwmeester (<https://www.durham.ac.uk/business/our-people/onno-bouwmeester/>), Professor of Consulting and Business Ethics at Durham University Business School (<https://www.durham.ac.uk/business/>), and Director of VU Knowledge Hub for Consulting and Professional Service Firms (<https://vu.nl/en/research/more-about/vu-center-for-consulting-and-professional-service-firms>) at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (<https://vu.nl/en>). His study finds that, whilst clients are typically portrayed within industry guidance as the biggest victims of ethical failures by consultants, media reporting, accepted industry attitudes and conversations with consulting staff reveal a very different reality.

Professor Bouwmeester says,

“The media typically positions both consultants and clients as partners in crime in various ethical scandals reported by journalists; from helping their clients to find loopholes in the law or facilitating tax avoidance practices, to links to corrupt officials. Clients are not the only, and certainly not the most vulnerable stakeholder in situations where ethical transgressions occur.

Current consulting guidance and literature, he states, pays little attention to this, focusing instead on how to deliver a service that is up to agreed professional standards to protect clients. However, there currently is little guidance or protection in place that considers other, more vulnerable stakeholders impacted in instances when ethical behaviour falls short.

Professor Bouwmeester continues,

“In reality, client staff and junior consultants can often be the ones most impacted by such ethical dilemmas. In addition, these realities have become the theme of popular jokes within the consulting community, seemingly with little action taken on addressing these shortcomings.”

His study contributes to the business ethics debate by widening the discussion. By reviewing interviews given by more than 100 Dutch consultants, the study identifies the top five ethical transgressions commonly made in consulting. Then, by analysing a sample of almost 100 popular critical consultant jokes found on the internet, Bouwmeester illustrates each issue to provide perspective on the problematic wider attitudes.

The Top Five Ethical Transgressions are;

- 1) Being Detrimental to Client Staff: Described as situations where clients ask consultants for an opinion on individual employees. Consultants, in attempting to avoid assessing employees behind their backs may give enough vague indicators to where they think problems within a department or team can

originate, so that clients draw their own conclusions.

2) Jeopardising Professional Independence: Defined as instances of consultants being manipulated when preparing their assignment conclusions, either because the client may want to hear a certain outcome for which the grounds are insufficient, or when a consultant does not agree professionally with the client's preferred approach, but overlooks this to keep the peace.

3) Overbilling and Selling Juniors as Seniors: Exemplified by instances where consultants overpromise in client proposals by offering more hours or delivery than they actually plan to provide, or enhancing junior staff CVs in order to secure a higher fee.

4) Fake it 'til You Make it: Described as consultants suggesting they have more experience, expertise, and capacity than they really have. Or taking on more work than capacity allows for, bluffing to clients and trying to catch up during the assignment. One key consequence of this is junior consultants struggling to cope with the pressure of keeping up pretences and feeling insecure with the expectations placed upon them.

5) Being Engaged in Unnecessary Work: For example, instances where consultants take on assignments specified as vital by clients, despite feeling such projects will lead nowhere or have minimal impact. Instead of voicing such concerns or stepping back, consultants go through the motions, agreeing with the client to secure the fee and keep the peace, but ultimately offer very little value.

Professor Bouwmeester says,

“While codes of conduct focus on the consultant-client relationship, and in particular on the primary client who pays, who owns the problem and who is mentioned in the contract between consultant and client, consultant ethics should include more stakeholders. The jokes and interviews reviewed in this study provide much evidence for this call, just like investigative journalists.”

The full study “What Jokes Can Tell: A Top 5 of Ethical Transgressions in Consulting” is available to read in the Management Consulting Journal (<https://dro.dur.ac.uk/38143/1/38143.pdf?DDD2+smlg14+vbdv77>)

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