A Paradigm of Learning:

Amongst Junior Consultants at Andersen Consulting

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ABSTRACT

The primary objective of this paper is to investigate how management consultants, at Andersen Consulting KB learn and develop professionally through their work. We have used an interpretative research approach called phenomenography in order to determine the various ways (conceptions) of learning that exist among a group of consultants, ranging from one to four years of experience. In connection with this objective, we have compiled a model of essential competencies that have assisted the process of development, and in effect, influenced how the consultants learn. Our intention with this twofold approach is to try and gain a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon of learning. We have avoided getting bogged down in the "official" AC interpretation of competency by relating solely to statements made concerning the consultants' experiences.

It is assumed, in many cases, that the official structures designed to facilitate learning are the main cause of development among the employees of knowledge intensive organizations; i.e. training, monitoring, counseling, etc. Is this really the case? Andersen Consulting International spends 10% of its revenue on training consultants at their educational facilities located primarily in Chicago – St. Charles. However, in this paper, it was discovered that the courses aimed at consultants at the level of focus (1-4 years) were not really of great benefit. The consultants learn mainly on the job and this is largely due to their experiences with other people and through doing their assigned tasks.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# 1.	INTRODUCTION

In this introductory chapter, we will touch upon the problem area and relate to the reader the factors that concern this empirical study: theory, problem area, methodology, etc.

1.1 Background

In the information age, where knowledge is deemed as being paramount to success, organizations are formulating strategies intended to foster learning. This goal is perceived as essential to the organization because it is understood as creating the setting for achieving competitive advantage. Acquiring knowledge through inducing learning is seen as a necessary means of staying abreast with the latest developments within one's field of endeavor. It seems that what the organization knows is never enough because the demands of its clients are constantly changing in tandem with new developments. With that thought in mind, one can surmise that the employees of an organization are trained to keep in line with the continuous evolution of their industry and society as a whole.

Judging from the numerous fads and trends that have been introduced, and subsequently replaced, within the field of management, it is realistic to assume that changes will always be a part of an organization's reality. Even today's hottest concept does not automatically gain acceptance, "much about knowledge's recent rise to prominence has the appearance of faddishness and evangelism" (Brown & Duguid, 2000). Training programs are designed and implemented with the objective of adapting to those changes through enhancing employees' competencies. Demands from clients for new, additional, or modifications to existing training are constant. The types and forms of training provided are changing in response to perceived and real

employee competence needs, and these are driven by business competition (Dubois, 1993).

Nowadays, the upgrading of technology and processes within organizations occurs quite frequently and with these changes comes the need to prepare the employees for new tasks. Rapid technological change within areas, such as microelectronics and communications, in combination with growth in service and knowledge-based industries (Ektsted, et al 1988) has led to the need for an ongoing development of competence for competitive success. The organization can never be considered perfect and so the need for constant evaluation and reinvention may be the only way to cope with the new developments that shake up industries on a regular basis. However, in many instances where the organization is extremely large and the workforce very diverse, management feels that it is still a matter of finding a one-stop solution, which does not always meet the expectations of a multifaceted and culturally diverse workforce.

Students entering the workforce every year bring with them the latest theoretical reasoning that the intellectual world has to offer. However, even as they start off at new jobs the need for learning how things are done in that particular place means that their education is far from finished; in fact, it is, in many instances, only just beginning and an ongoing process. Organizations have training programs and other structures in place that are specifically intended to prepare the employee for the duties and tasks inherent to their position. This makes it possible for the employees to consistently re-orient themselves and develop skills that are essential for accomplishing their work at an acceptable level of competence.

As is very often the case, after an employee settles into a job and familiarizes him/herself with the responsibilities and tasks related to the position, something comes along and shakes up the routine. It may involve a new process being introduced by the management, a promotion, transfer, whatever, and the process of settling in starts anew. The training regimen in place usually takes into consideration such changes and the necessary steps are taken to facilitate learning and address any perceived shortcomings that the employee may have. However, does this mean that the training program is the most relevant aspect of the employee's development? This may or may not be the case, but one thing is certain, if the organization does not take the time to reflect and learn from their employees' progress, they may miss an invaluable opportunity for enhancing the developmental process.

It has been largely assumed that once the fundamentals, deemed as necessary to foster competency development, are in place the desired results will be actualized. One aspect of that assumption that can be questioned is whether this is the case in a large multi-national operation. Is it, for instance, a given that a training program developed and used primarily in one country can be used as a blueprint for employees worldwide just because they happen to have the same employer? From a national level, there may arise inconsistencies in the plan, when local management tries to promote competency through implementing procedures that were developed elsewhere. Whatever the case, it seems that investigating the matter further using a narrow focus group as the common denominator, should present interesting conclusions as to how it works at Andersen Consulting, and this is our intention.

The investment that is made in developing the competency of the organization's employees is seen as a way of retaining one's competitive advantage within an industry. In the case of Andersen Consulting, the

organization invests approximately 10% of its revenue into training related activities for their workforce worldwide. It is, without doubt, a necessary and logical investment. However are the returns on such an investment up to expectations and does it create the primary avenue for developing the kind of employee that is most efficient in executing their duties? This is not the question for this paper but it goes some way in clarifying the importance of investigating different possibilities as opposed to taking things for granted.

1.2 THESIS RELATED ISSUES

In today's knowledge intensive society, many organizations are faced with the daunting challenge of maintaining a competitive edge through ensuring that their employees stay abreast with the dominant changes that come about over the years. Many companies have begun using competency models to help them identify the essential skills, knowledge, and personal characteristics needed for successful performance in a job and to ensure that human resource systems focus on developing them (Lucia & Lepsinger, 1999). This normally involves a substantial investment in carrying out their objectives and, at the same time, creating an atmosphere that leads to employee development.

When tasks are to be performed it is not employees per se that are needed, but employees who possess certain, more or less specialized and more or less advanced, competencies that facilitate satisfactory work performance (Nordhaug, 1998). Additional competence development contributes to this process since it involves molding the employee into being as highly efficient as their innate capabilities will allow. Organizations, to a large extent, believe that they have institutionalized this process through their training and monitoring programs. However, this process may not be fully understood by simply tracing the formal procedures in place and assuming that the desired outcomes

will be reached. In generalizing the employees needs and concluding that course A or B will provide the essentials, the organization may not only fall short of their goal, but could also create disillusionment. A variety of factors could come into play, employees that take the courses but still do not "make the grade" may not be inclined to continue at their present position because they feel misunderstood or sidelined.

1.2.1 Learning

There is a delicate process that takes place within companies and is the foundation for learning and the employees' development. It is, to a large extent, centered on training regimens but also takes into consideration other aspects such as individual and organizational learning, competencies, etc. A point of departure for this paper is a view on learning based on the following definition. "Learning is an active, constructive, cognitive and social process where the learner strategically manages available cognitive, physical, and social resources to create new knowledge by interacting with information in the environment and integrating it with information already stored in memory" (Sheull, 1988). Furthermore, we assume that the following features can characterize learning:

Learning is embedded, learning will take place in a situation – we learn out in the real world where the knowledge and skills are needed to solve problems. As Brown et al. (1989) say, "We must, therefore, attempt to use the intelligence in the learning environments to reflect and support the learner's or user's active creation or co-production, in situ, of idiosyncratic, hidden models and concept, whose textures are developed between the learner/user and the situating activity in which the technology is embedded."

Learning and knowing is a constructive process, as indicated by the fact that learning is embedded, we should view learning as a constructive process rather than a passive absorption of facts and rules. The view that the learner should acquire the expert's knowledge does not necessarily acknowledge this constructive perspective. Knowledge and skills are gained and regained over and over in an on-going process between the learner and situations in which the knowledge and skills are required. The central notion is that understanding and learning are active, constructive, generative processes such as assimilation, augmentation, and self-reorganization.

Learning is a social process, several researchers (e.g. Kearsley, 1994), it happens in collaboration between people or together with technology. This is especially true in complex domains. So, when introducing technology the view should be shifted from seeing it as a cognitive delivery system to seeing it as means to support collaborative conversations about a topic (Brown, 1989). The central notion is that learning is enculturation, the process by which learners become collaborative meaning-makers among a group defined by common practices, language, use of tools, values, beliefs, and so on (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wasson, 1996).

Furthermore, it is stated that humans construct their worldview on "objective reality" (Berger & Lockman, 1966). Consequently, there are no objective realities. Instead, there are social realities, which are continually being constructed and re-constructed in human actions and interactions. Researching these social realities then becomes a discovery of how humans make sense of their perceived worlds, and how these perceptions change over time and differ from one person or group to another. Whenever people encounter new experiences or ideas, a process of constructing and reconstructing meaning starts. In this way, people make sense of what is happening (Weick, 1995),

resulting in new or adapted mental models (also called interpretative schemata or mini-theories concerning reality) that guide their actions.

1.2.2 Organizational Learning

Organizational learning refers to processes of individual and collective learning, both within and between organizations (Dodgson, 1993; Prange, 1996) There was some public interest in the topic during the early 1960s, and researchers have since became more attracted to the idea. As a consequence, by the 1970s, a sparse but regular stream of articles and books began to flow (Argyris, 1964; Cangelosi and Dill, 1965). The notion of organizations as learning entities has gained considerably in popularity over the last decade, and is now regarded as an important issue both theoretically and in practice. Today, it is viewed as a rather important factor in management to understand the processes within the organization that induce learning.

Learning generally specifies something positive, an enriching process through which we, based on past experiences, become better prepared to meet future unknowns. In the business world, where uncertainties are constantly created by shifting customer preference, government policies, globalization and other open handed change situations (Stacey, 1992), it is of fundamental importance. It is, therefore, not surprising that a paradigm of learning has become particularly appealing to both researchers and practitioners, in an effort to continuously improve effectiveness and maintain survival in new and unfamiliar situations.

Organizational learning can be, and has been, studied both from a micro as well as a macro perspective; many organization theorists treat organizational learning at the level of the individual, as well as the group. The concept of

organizational learning has taken on many aspects due to its rather general nature and understanding amongst scholars has varied over the course of the years, I present some of the more recent developments.

Argyris and Schön (1978) perceive organizational learning as the process by which organizational members detect errors or anomalies and correct them by restructuring organizational theory in use. This process is initiated by individuals learning within the organization, who are primarily interested in organizational theories or theories in action. It is assumed that the process is brought about through sharing individual and collective enquiry constructs and modifies theories in use; exact process remains unclear. They argue that organizational learning occurs when members of the organization act as learning agents, responding to changes in the internal and external environments by detecting and correcting errors in the theory in use and embedding the results of their inquiry in private images and shared maps.

Furthermore, they argue that there is no organizational learning without individual learning, and that individual learning is a necessary but insufficient condition for organizational learning. In addition, they stress that organizational learning could be thought of as a process mediated by the collaborative inquiry of individual members. In their capacity as agents of organizational learning, individuals structure the continually changing artifacts called organization theory in use. Their work as learning agents is unfinished until the results of their inquiry, their discoveries, inventions and evaluations are recorded in the media of organizational theory in use.

Huber (1991) concluded that an entity learns if through the processing of information the range of its potential behavior is change. "Let us assume that an organization learns if any of its units acquires knowledge that it recognizes

as potentially useful to the organization". This concept of entity includes individuals, groups, organizations, industries, and society. Information/knowledge is generated through acquisition, distribution, interpretation and storage; the related processes of organizational learning remain unspecified.

To round this list of scholars off, Weick and Roberts (1993) defined organizational learning as consisting of interrelating actions of individuals which result in a "collective mind". It is brought about primarily through connections between behaviors rather than people. Behaviors and actions bring about heedful interrelating via contribution, representation, and subordination.

The question "what is organizational learning" is far from simple, judging by its variations, which reflect the many different perceptions of this phenomenon. Some authors support the idea that it is the individual who acts and learns within the organizational framework (eg Dodgson, 1993; March and Olsen, 1976). "Individuals are the primary learning entity in firms and it is individuals which create organizational forms that enable learning in ways which facilitate organizational transformation" (Dodgson, 1993: 377).

In support of this view, Argyris and Schön (1978) argue that the organizations do not literally remember, think or learn. If the individual member's theories are not encoded in the organizational theories, then the individual has learned but the organization has not. A similar assumption is taken by Kim (1993), who argues that "organizations can learn independent of any specific individual but not independent of all individuals."

To end this part, the only thing that comes to mind is that there is no one right answer to how individuals learn within the context of the organization. In the

process of determining what this learning may be, it seems somehow reasonable that what they learn should also factor into the equation, since that learning can not be seen as an isolated phenomenon.

1.2.3 Systems Thinking

Senge (1990) recognized that, somewhat similar to Argyris and Schön, organizations learn only through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning, but without it, organizational learning does not occur. According to Senge, many organizations suffer from learning disabilities. In order to cure the diseases and enhance the organization's capacity to learn, he proposed the learning organization as a practical model. He argued that the learning organization has the capacity for both generative learning (i.e., active) and adaptive learning (i.e., passive) as the sustainable sources of competitive advantage.

According to Senge (1990, 1991), there are five disciplines of learning: mental models (making sense of the world and our actions), team learning (mastering the practices of dialogue and discussion), shared vision (answering the question, "What do we want to create?"), systems thinking (seeing patterns and relationships), and personal mastery (clarifying what is important and seeing reality objectively). Each of the five disciplines can be thought of on the following three distinct levels; practices (what you do), principles (guiding ideas and insights), and essences, as stated previously, comes with high level of mastery in the disciplines (Senge, 1990). Among these five disciplines, Senge (1990) emphasized the importance of "systems thinking" as the discipline that integrates the disciplines, fusing them into a coherent body of theory and practice.

According to Roberts & Kliener (1999), there are at least five relevant forms of system thinking when regarding organizational learning, which include living system thinking. This perspective has emerged from the "new sciences" of the twentieth century, of which one example is chaos theory. According to living system thinking, there is no such thing as a system that can not be perceived as "living". According to Capra (1996), living system thinking presents a holistic worldview, seeing the world as an integrated whole rather than a dissociated collection of parts. One should have an awareness that recognizes the fundamental interdependence of all phenomena and that individuals and societies are all embedded in the cyclical processes of nature. One should see the world not as a collection of isolated objects but as networks of phenomena that are fundamentally interconnected and interdependent.

According to Begun (1994), researchers in the field try to understand systems that change in ways that are not applicable to the linear cause and effect and, therefore, are known as non-linear dynamics. This dynamism refers to the systems that are studied in the process of change and are not reflected in the so-called stable systems. Furthermore, Wilson (1999) states that in dynamic systems the constant feedback of changes throughout the systems means that small differences in the initial stage create hugely magnified effects.

Dynamic theories can, according to Begun (1994), lift organizational science up a level of abstraction, toward General Systems Theory, so that more accessibility is possible within the discipline and with other disciplines. What should be emphasized though is that linear relationships can be an important part of some systems; but linear relationships are rare in more intractable natural systems, and especially in organizational systems. Most systems, will in some sense, not fit into linear models and it gives erroneous solutions to employ such methods.

Furthermore, Begun explains that dynamic theories encourage a more holistic explanation of phenomena and discourages reductionism. Events are interconnected within systems and are, in turn, subsystems of larger systems. Furthermore, relationships among subsystems rather than single variables, becomes the primary area to study. Efforts to isolate single variables and their effects become feeble or even useless.

According to Roberts & Kleiner (1999), the living system thinking perspective assumes that human groups, processes and activities are self-organizing, like ecological niches. There aren't any designers or re-engineers to control the flow of information. Information spreads rapidly through the organization in its own natural patterns. If the right people meet in diverse, frequent interactions, with a variety of patterns to those interactions, a beneficial re-framing will emerge on its own.

1.2.4 Competency

Only recently has the concept of competence been featuring regularly in management circles (Sandberg, 2000). It is mainly the concept's focus on the relation between the person and work that noted researchers, such as McClelland (1973) and Boyatzis (1982), have found interesting for the purposes of identifying and describing essential human knowledge and skills at work. As Morgan (1988) argued, the concept of competence encourages scholars to think not only about knowledge itself, but also about the knowledge that is required in competent work performance. As it is with organizational learning, there is likewise no cohesive understanding of the concept of competency. Much has been written about what is not a competency and how organizations can identify competencies.

Gurvis and Grey describe competency as a simultaneous integration of knowledge, skills and attitudes required for performance in a designated role and setting (Dowd, 2000). That definition, although helpful, is probably a bit too broad. Clearly, we all know that knowledge does not always equate with ability to perform; nor does ability to perform a task always signify an understanding of that task. Simply put, competency is seen as the ability to perform a task (Dubois, 1993).

Another interpretation of competency defines it as "an underlying characteristic of a person which results in effective and/or superior performance on the job" (Klemp, 1980, p 21). A somewhat more detailed description derived from the accumulated views of HR Managers is: "a cluster of related knowledge, skills, and attitudes that affects a major part of one's job (role or responsibility), that correlates with performance on the job, that can be measured against well accepted standards, and that can be improved via training and development" (Parry, 1996, p.50).

Although the concept of competence has not been in frequent use until recently, the problem of identifying what constitutes competence at work is not new. Taylor (1911) was one of the first in modern times to address this problem through his "time and motion studies." When working as an engineer, he noticed a large difference between the least and most competent workers' ways of accomplishing their work. To enable the identification of what constituted competence among the most competent workers, Taylor argued for leadership based on scientific principles from the rationalistic tradition. Taylor proposed that by using these studies, managers should be able to identify what constitutes workers' competence by classifying, tabulating and reducing it to rules, laws and formulas. Using these descriptions of competence as a starting

point, Taylor demonstrated that managers could set up systematic training and development activities that yielded improvements in workers' competence and consequently, increased effectiveness in organizations (Sandberg 2000).

According to Sandberg, the dominant approaches today within management to identify competence are essentially based on the scientific principle of the rationalistic research tradition, job analysis (Armstron, 1991; Cascio 1995; Ferris et all, 1990; Gael, 1988). There are three main approaches that can be distinguished from the literature: the worker-oriented, the work- oriented, and the multi-method oriented (Sandberg, 1994; Veres, Locklear & Sims, 1990).

According to Sandberg, in research on managerial work, a standard approach has been to break jobs down into critical skills that have to be mastered if high performance is to be achieved (eg Boyatzis, 1982; Katz, 1995; Mcknight, 1991; Mintzberg, 1980). Probably the most widespread typology includes three types of such skills or competencies: technical, interpersonal, and conceptual (Yukl, 1989, p. 191). Technical skills comprise knowledge about methods, processes, and techniques designed to conduct a specialized activity as well as the ability to use tools and operative equipment related to this activity. Interpersonal skills embrace knowledge about human behavior and interpersonal processes, empathy and social sensitivity, ability to communicate, and cooperative capabilities. Finally, conceptual skills include analytical capacity, creativity, efficiency in problem solving and ability to recognize opportunities and potential problems. Altogether, this threefold typology distinguishes between individual skills in coping with things, people, ideas and concepts (Yukl, 1989, p. 192).

When they build competency models, many companies come up with similar lists- a constellation of a half-dozen or more competencies such as leadership,

flexibility, initiative and so on (Darrell & Benjamin, 1998). However, these apparent similarities are misleading. While the models may apply the same broad labels, the behaviors that define that competency – those things that really are the engine of a competency model – should and do differ from one company to another. According to Dubois (1993), when competencies are defined too broadly, they lose their relevance for an organization and its employees. In modeling competencies, each organization needs to tread a fine line between what is too specific (and therefore short –lived) and what is too general (and therefore vague). Models must identify competencies based on an understanding of what creates excellence in that particular organization.

Although the rationalistic approaches continue to contribute to our understanding of competence, their view of competence as a set of attributes has been criticized as problematic for identifying and describing competence at work. According to Attewell (1990), Norris (1991), and Sandberg (1991, 1994), the rationalistic "operationalizations" of attributes into quantitative measures often result in abstract and overly narrow and simplified descriptions that may not adequately represent the complexity of competence in work performance. Moreover, the use of KSAs and other general models of competence within the rationalistic approaches tend to predefine what constitutes competence.

According to Sandberg (1994), such predefinitions of competence may confirm a researcher's own model of competence, rather than capture workers' competence. The strongest concern, however, is that the descriptions of competence produced by the rationalistic approaches are indirect. That is, the sets of competencies do not illuminate what constitutes effectiveness in accomplishing work. Rather, an identified set of attributes specifies central prerequisites for performing particular work competently. Such descriptions

demonstrate neither whether the workers use these attributes, nor how they use them in accomplishing their work. For example, it is possible to observe two workers possessing identical attributes but, nevertheless, accomplishing work differently, depending upon which attributes they use and how they use them (Sandberg, 2000).

1.2.5 Communities of Practice

Brown and Duguid (1991:54; cf., Lave & Wenger, 1991) suggest that learning should be understood in terms of the practicing communities that emerge, whereby the focus should be on how they configure themselves when practicing their work and behaving as members of a community. This social perspective is based on the idea of "communities of practice" and focuses on non-canonical practices during which members create new ideas and insights about their work at hand. These learning processes take place during day-to-day activities, and seem to be successful by virtue of being unplanned. The authors particularly question the relevance of efforts by top management to abstract knowledge from practice into work descriptions or training schemes, thereby forming groups which conceal other influential but self-constituted communities, especially if the latter communities span formal organization boundaries.

Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest that being alive as human beings we are constantly engaged in the pursuit of enterprises of all kinds, from ensuring our physical survival to seeking the most lofty pleasures. As we define these enterprises and engage in their pursuit together, we interact with each other and with the world, and we tune our relationships with each other and with the world accordingly; in other words, we learn. According to these researchers, over time this collective learning results in practices that reflect both the

pursuit of enterprises and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise. It makes sense, therefore, to call these kinds of communities, "communities of practice."

Lave and Wenger have developed an analytical concept, legitimate peripheral participation (LLP), where learning is conceived as, basically, a social affair, that is; as participation in practice. The authors argue that the concept can be used to understand all forms of learning. In a sense, LPP was developed in an effort to find a term that could be used to understand learning in situations without any visible signs of teaching activities. LPP point out that the learners inevitably are participating in communities of practice, in interactional contexts. In order for newcomers to accumulate knowledge, acquire skills and/or learn some form of profession or job in an organizational setting, they must participate fully in the so-called socio-cultural practices of a community. According to Lave and Wenger, it is the community that learns, however they argue that the learning process does not overlook the individual, who is merely viewed as part of the community. So, the learning process involves learning an identity and a profession or skill in addition to a sense of belonging to the organization.

Etienne Wenger in *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity* (1998) sheds some light on how the process of learning takes place within different contexts. He makes the following assumptions connected to learning:

- We are social beings and this fact is a central aspect of learning.
- Knowledge is a matter of competence with respect to valued enterprises – e.g. singing in tune, discovering scientific facts, fixing machines, being convivial, etc.

- Knowing is a matter of participating in the pursuit of such enterprises, that is, of active engagement in the world.
- Understanding, is our ability to experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful; it is ultimately what learning is to produce.

Wenger (1998) stresses the need for rethinking learning; for individuals, it means that learning is an issue of engaging in and contributing to the practices of their communities. For communities, it means that learning is an issue of refining their practice and ensuing new generations of members. For organizations, it means that learning is an issue of sustaining the interconnected communities of practice through which an organization knows what it knows and thus becomes effective and valuable as an organization.

According to Wenger, the social production of meaning is the relevant level of analysis for talking about practice. In making this argument, three basic concepts are produced as the foundation for this theory – negotiation of meaning, participation, and reification. Furthermore, practice defines a community through three dimensions: mutual engagement, a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire.

Wenger noted that, when we are in a community of practice of which we are a full member and are in familiar territory and can handle ourselves competently. We experience competence and we are recognized as competent. We know how to engage with others. We understand why they do what they do because we understand the enterprise to which participants are accountable. Moreover, we share the resources they use to communicate and go about their activities. These dimensions of competence become dimensions of identity:

Mutuality of engagement: In a community of practice, we learn certain ways of engaging in action with other people. We develop certain expectations about how to interact, how people treat each other, and how to work together. We become who we are by being able to play a part in the relations of engagement that constitute our community. Our competence gains its value through its very partiality. As an identity, this translates into a form of individuality defined with respect to a community. It is a certain way of being part of a whole through mutual engagement.

Accountability to an enterprise: As we invest ourselves in an enterprise, the forms of accountability through which we are able to contribute to that enterprise make us look at the world in certain ways. As an identity, this translates into a perspective. It does not mean that all members of a community look at the world in the same way. Nonetheless, an identity in this sense manifests as a tendency to come up with certain interpretations, to engage in certain actions, to make certain choices, to value certain experiences – all by virtue of participating in certain enterprises.

Negotiability of a repertoire: Sustained engagement in practice yields an ability to interpret and make use of the repertoire of that practice. We recognize the history of a practice in the artifacts, actions, and language of the community. We can make use of that history because we have been part of it and it is now part of us; we do this through a personal history of participation. As an identity, this translates into a personal set of events, references, memories, and experiences that create individual relations of negotiability with respect to the repertoire of a practice.

Marginalization often separates experience and competence by creating a choice between them. Conversely, internally focused core mentor-ship tends to

render them congruent. In either case, the creation of knowledge is impaired. By keeping the tension between experience and competence alive, communities of practice create a dynamic form of continuity that preserves knowledge while keeping it current. They can take care of problems before they are recognized institutionally. It is communities of practice therefore that can take responsibility for the preservation of old competencies and the development of new ones, for the continued relevance of artifacts, stories, and routines, for the renewal of concepts and techniques, and for the fine tuning of enterprises to new circumstances.

1.3 PURPOSE

The primary purpose of this paper is to investigate the learning process among consultants (1 – 4 years experience) at Andersen Consulting KB (Sweden), in order to gain an understanding of how they learn and what encourages or induces the process. Our primary concern is how the consultants learn, but, we will also reflect upon what they learn (competencies) in order to gain a holistic view of the subject.

1.4 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Identify how learning takes place amongst consultants at Andersen Consulting (1 – 4 years experience) and what role competency plays in that process.

1.5 METHODOLOGY

1.5.1 The Challenge

In the first module of the MIM Program, "Investigating the International Manager's Arena", the first vignette concerned difficulties that companies have in benefiting from the theoretical work being done at universities. It brought to the attention of the program's participants the problem associated with making the transition from the intellectual circles to business ones. Intellectuals are more concerned with making empirical studies and connecting them to relevant theories in order to explain phenomena, thus creating understanding. Companies, on the other hand, seem to be more interested in practical approaches that can be used to evaluate their current situation and if possible propose measures for improvement.

In order to attempt to bridge that gap in priorities, we have decided to conduct a two pronged analysis. This, we believe, should be one way of meeting the University's requirements and producing something that can be considered of use for our employer Andersen Consulting KB. With those objectives in mind, we will present a qualitative study on how consultants learn and will follow that up with a competency model derived from statements made in the interviews. Using the theory that was presented in the Background Section of this paper, we also hope to be able to point out the reasons why this approach is applicable and draw our conclusions from them.

1.5.2 Research Perspective
Part One

In the first part of the empirical study, we have decided to use an interpretative research approach known as phenomenography. This approach is quite effective in exploring phenomena related to learning and organizational issues (i.e. competence) because it enables the researcher to draw unbiased

conclusions based directly on their findings as opposed to superimposing existing norms on the subject.

According to phenomenographic researchers, direct descriptions of learning are not immediately apparent in the rationalistic theories and methods. Instead, these reasons emerge when one examines assumptions underlying these theories at the metatheoretical level, ontological and epistemological assumptions, in particular (Sandberg, 2000). In a general sense, the rationalistic researcher invokes a dualistic ontology assuming that person and world are distinct entities; as well as an objectivistic epistemology, assuming the existence of and objective reality independent of and beyond the human mind (Bernstein, 1983; Husserl, 1970/1986; Rorty, 1979; Schon, 1983; Searle, 1992; Shotter, 1992; Winograd & Flores, 1986).

The dualistic ontology underlies division of the phenomenon of competence into two separate entities, namely worker and work. The objectivistic epistemology implies objective, knowable work that is beyond workers, and leads to descriptions of work activities that are independent of the workers who accomplish them. Taking this objective, dualistic perspective, advocates of rationalistic approaches identify and describe human competence indirectly, viewing it as consisting of two independent entities – prerequisite worker attributes and work activities (Sandberg, 2000).

The interpretative research tradition may provide an alternative to the rationalistic approaches to learning. Weber (1964/1947) was the primary initiator of this tradition, but phenomenological sociologists such as Schutz (1945, 1953), Berger and Luckmann (1966) and Giddens (1984, 1993) developed it further. The main feature of the interpretative research tradition is its phenomenological base, the stipulation that person and world are

inextricably related thorough persons' lived experience of the world (Berger & Luckmann, 1966 Husserl 1970; Schutz, 1945, 1953). Phenomenography was elaborated as an empirical qualitative method, in response to the limitations of the dominant quantitative methods in education.

This approach was originally developed by an educational research group in Sweden in the seventies (Marton, Dahlgren, Svensson, & Saljo, 1977) to describe the qualitatively different ways in which aspects of reality are experienced (Marton, 1981). Co-founders Marton & Svensson (1979) argued that traditional research about learning took the researcher's perspective as the point of departure and endeavored to "observe the learner's world and describe it as we see it." The researchers that developed this qualitative research approach had, as a goal, to identify a qualitative, non-dualistic research approach that identified and retained the discourses of research participants and focused on people's understanding of the world around them. The goal was achieved, and the outcome is a distinctive qualitative approach that has application within a wide range of disciplines.

As in other approaches within the interpretative research tradition, the primary focus of phenomenography is on the meaning structure of lived experience, that is, the meaning an aspect of reality takes on for the people studied. In the phenomenographic approach, the term conception is used to refer to people's ways of experiencing or making sense of their world (Sandberg, 2000). Phenomenography, as with other qualitative research approaches, assumes that subjective knowledge, as the object of research is a useful and informative undertaking and that within subjective knowledge, there is meaning and understanding that reflects various views of the phenomenon.

This research approach we think is appropriate for our basic assignment, finding a way of determining how consultants at AC learn, and what is the outcome of that learning process. It gives us the possibility of identifying and depicting the consultant's own experiences of his/her work in a more integrated way and at the same time should enable us to capture variations in the consultant's approach to work. There are several main arguments that make phenomenography an attractive research approach for this paper and the ones that we believe apply to this assignment are the following:

- With its focus on describing the person and reality as an internal relation, phenomenography has the potential to provide us with a direct description of learning processes.

- As it strives to describe the range of people's conception in a holistic and integrated way, it has the potential to describe this development in a less fragmentary way.

- And, finally, the purpose of phenomenography is to produce descriptions of individual conception of reality that can be used as a basis for training and development activities.

Part Two

In the second part of the empirical study, we will present a competency model based on an inductive analysis of statements made by the consultants partaking in this study. In general, competency models of this type are considered to be an offspring of the rationalistic approach to understanding work-related efficiency. This may be the case but we think that it will give a more holistic perspective to this paper by being included a practical side as well. After the

"how" consultants learn is addressed, by using phenomenography, it should be interesting to investigate how essential competencies, the "what", influences that process.

When developing a competency model starting from scratch, one has to be meticulous about collecting data. This method calls for developing a competency model using data collected internally, from interviews with incumbents and informed observers, focus groups and on- the-job observations. The data is also analyzed internally to identify the competencies seen as significant to effective performance. Since the main objective of this paper is not to produce a model that will be used for specific organizational purposes, the procedures listed here will not be taken into account. The model is taking the consultants interviewed as the point of departure and is wholly contingent on their statements and opinions.

As stated earlier, a competency model describes the particular combination of knowledge, skills, and characteristics needed to effectively perform a role in an organization and is used as a human resource tool for selection, training and development, appraisal, and succession planning (Lucia & Lepsinger, 1999). In training & development and appraisal systems, the model provides a list of behaviors and skills that must be developed to maintain satisfactory levels of performance. This is the standard objective of these models but, in the case of this paper, it is to be used as a means of understanding how the learning processes of consultants are influenced by competencies.

1.5.3 Research Approach

We will interview about 10 consultants in order to determine, among other things, how they have developed as professionals since starting at their jobs.

What they know now compared to what they knew at the start? How did the process evolve? Are they more valuable as employees/professionals, how and why? The objective of posing such a wide range of general questions is to get a feel for what the individual considers to be relevant to their own development and the processes that brought about this change at work, rather than a reflection of company policy. In the process of carrying out the interviews, we will continuously observe the consultants and analyze their answers as well as their reactions to the questions. We will describe as fully as we can, giving a thorough description of our relevant findings. Throughout the research process we will compare each incident to existing codes, as part of the process of building up a set of categories.

The method of phenomenography data collection and data analysis is inseparable according to its founders. For one thing during the collection of data, analysis is taking place and early phases of analysis can influence later data collection. Indeed the authors state that there is even greater analytic responsibility placed upon the researcher prior to and during data collection. This occurs because he or she "has a responsibility to contemplate the phenomenon, to discern its structure against the backgrounds of the situations in which it might be experienced to distinguish its salient features." As the empirical study is used as the point of departure, theories or the theoretical framework are generated from research data, which means that most hypotheses and concepts, not only come from the data, but are systematically worked out in relation to the data during the course of the research.

In phenomenography, the research approach commonly takes the form of a semi-structured interview in which the relation of the individual/individuals to his/her/their experience of the phenomenon is highlighted and described to understanding another person's meaning of experiencing a phenomenon.

The interview process is reflective and emphasizes a need for sensitivity to the way in which each person delimits the objects of study, yet it is still both explorative and directive in its approach and ambition. The researcher wishes the interviewee to reflect on his or her experience of the object of study. Interviews are undertaken with the assistance of predetermined entry questions which can be incorporated to assist the interviewee to reflect on the phenomenon from his or her own frame of reference. Interviews develop according to both the interviewee's discourse and responses to the semi-structured questions. Where appropriate, each person can be invited to explain further his or her undertaking and examples are gleaned to make clear the intent and language or the interviewee.

In explicating the method used by phenomenographers, researcher do it basically by dialoguing data collection procedures with data analyzing procedures. All the procedures described in this section are called "intimate" procedures since the researchers are theoretically understood to be involved in the same process that they are studying and the data collecting and analyzing procedures cannot be separated.

1.6 RESEARCH PARTNER

About Andersen Consulting

Andersen Consulting is an $8.9 billion management and technology consulting organization that is reinventing itself to become the market-maker, architect and builder of the New Economy, delivering innovations that improve the way the world works and lives. More than 65,000 professionals in 48 countries deliver a wide range of specialized capabilities through service lines to clients across all industries. The firm's network of businesses provides a range of services including venture funding, business incubation and launch, consulting, technology and alliances. Its home page address is http://www.ac.com. On

January 1, 2001, the firm will enter the next century with a new name marking its wholly independent status and reflecting the firm's bold new approach to serving its clients.

Principal Industries Served

Automotive & Industrial Products
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Chemicals
Communications
Electronics & High Tech
Energy
Food & Consumer Packaged Goods
Government
Health Services
Insurance
Media & Entertainment
Natural Resources
Retail
Pharmaceuticals & Medical Products
Transportation & Travel Services
Utilities

Competencies

Process
Change Management
Strategic Services
Technology

2. HOW CONSULTANTS LEARN

EMPIRICAL STUDY (Part 1)

Consulting is the process by which an individual or firm assists a dient to achieve a stated outcome. The assistance can come in the form of information, recommendations or actual hands-on work. A consultant is very often a specialist within a professional area who completes the work necessary to achieve the client's desired outcome. Consulting is not a descriptor that identifies a profession in itself (Biech, 1999). Unlike doctors or accountants, highly skilled consultants come from very different backgrounds. A qualifying adjective is required to identify the form of service or the area of expertise; for example, management consultant, engineering consultant, IT consultant, performance consultant, etc. Although it is not a "profession" by definition, consulting is often referred to as "the consulting profession".

2.1 THE CONSULTANT'S WORLD

The actual work of a consultant can vary quite a bit; depending on the area of expertise offered and on the clients' needs. Consultants are picked to participate in projects depending on their expertise and experience. Every consultant must be a subject-matter expert in some area – management development, organization development, training, or any profession such as IT, security, writing, marketing, or many other fields that come to mind. Consultants work both individually and as a team, individually to perform tasks more efficiently and as a team when faced with complex problems. The consultants that constitute the group used for this study are from various competency groups within Andersen Consulting, this mix is typical of the way they work. A consultant in our study gave this account of what they do:

"I believe that being a consulting firm, basically we add value to clients, which is coming from some kind of collective expertise and experience. That expertise is built on skill profiles of people on methodology, experiences and practice across industries. A very big part of it is that we work as catalysts for change that is an experience of looking at expertise as being deep, specified information and knowledge. I would say that our firm brings previous experience and knowledge as well from very soft expertise coming from a long experience of change processes and general management. What is more important and differentiates this firm from less successful ones is the ability for people to understand how to integrate into change processes. How to interact with people to deliver human related skills, personal skills."

In order to sell their ideas, consultants have to impress on the client that they know their particular industry, as well as others, which gives them the advantage of bringing the best practices to the situation. These advantages are the consultant's trump card and are the result of partaking in multiple projects across industries. When the consultant is assigned to a project, they start by analyzing the processes in the client's company and afterwards propose how they can be improved upon. They have to specify from the beginning what the outcome would be and identify the clients targets that are effective. One of the consultants describe the work as follows:

"I'll use what we are doing now as an example. We are working with a company in Gothenburg, where we change the way that they are working. We change their organization, we define their roles, new tasks for people to do, so first thing we did was that we have to develop these roles, we have to develop the way they work. We know about the way they work

now, and the process that they have. Then we sat down. We have experience. We have done this before. We have a project manager who was also the manager for that project. He brought his experience into this project. We sat down and put down on paper the new processes, the new responsibilities, the new roles in this organization, and then recommendations."

Even after determining an area of expertise, a consultant has to select the actual work method that will be used to address the client's needs. Likewise, if one is a generalist, which most management consultants tend to be, they will need to determine whether the focus will be on a specific industry, as opposed to trying to cover them all. Consulting relies heavily on the interaction between people, which is in fact the method that the consultant uses to get his/her message across. This is not only true for the actual carrying out of an assignment, but also for making contacts among local businessmen.

Q. What are the important qualities that you bring to the client?

"We bring our previous expertise and a new way of looking at things. Being in a traditional line organization you sometimes get locked in your position, you don't see what's happening around you. So what we bring in are basically new visions and new ways of doing things. It's never the "company" that goes to the client. We have our databases, knowledge exchange etc but when you go into workshops, talk with the clients there's always individuals, if you don't have individuals there, it does not matter whether you are Andersen or McKenzie."

In this chapter we will present the views of consultants and some interpretation of statements that they made, which address how learning is induced at

Andersen Consulting. The consultants described the factors that contributed to their development and enhanced their performance. In the process of carrying out this analysis, we were able to identify two qualitatively distinct learning conceptions and elaborated on their outcomes.

2.2 CONCEPTIONS OF LEARNING

According to our interpretation of the statements made by consultants at Andersen Consulting KB, there are two qualitatively distinct conceptions of how they learn at their job. Even though the differences between these conceptions become clear in this analysis, it does not mean that the consultants learn uniquely within the area that they fall. There are some factors that have contributed to the consultants' realization that they need a particular mixture of skills, knowledge and attributes in order to be most effective in their profession. In general, as a consequence, they refer very often to the same issues that are most important to their development, but when it comes to the actual work processes and how they learn, they then fall back into what can be viewed as their accustomed learning behaviors.

We interviewed a total of 11 consultants for this paper, but unfortunately one interview was inaudible and another was from the testing stage, so it did not have very revealing responses. The following chart represents the distribution of the nine participating consultants into conceptions:

	Conception A	Conception B
Consultants #	5	4

The following graph presents the different conceptions of learning amongst the consultants interviewed at Andersen Consulting.
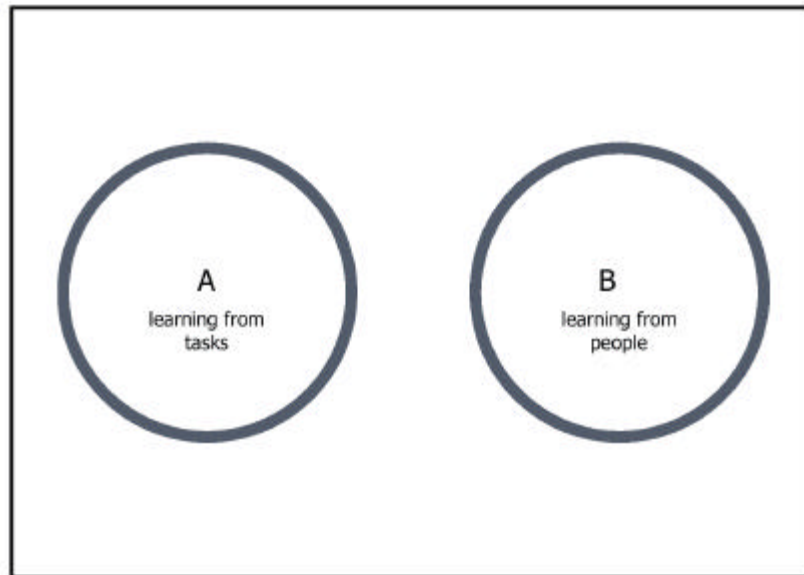
Figure 2.1: Conceptions of Learning

Source: Own Model

2.2.1 Conception A - Learning from tasks

The consultants that fall within Conception A made statements that we were able to interpret as learning from tasks. In a sense, this means that they acquire most of the knowledge related to their work by going through the processes related to the tasks that they are assigned. It would be erroneous on our part to suggest that these consultants only learn this way, obviously they learn from people as well, but they do not think what they learn from others is of great significance. They refer to having a network in order to be effective but in their case, this is mainly a reference for recommendations, i.e. to locate information in the databases. These consultants consider building their expertise in relation to tasks as their strong point and feel that once they have the prerequisite

knowledge that is the main thing. Their individual contribution to the group is what they believe to be the most important aspect of their work.

2.2.2 Conception B - Learning from people

The consultants that fall within Conception B made statements that we were able to interpret as learning from people. For these consultants, it seems more relevant to them that they tap into the collective knowledge of people concerned and use that as their leverage, rather than trying to build particular industry expertise themselves. It is taken for granted that the processes needed to accomplish the work are there, so they do not need to be emphasized one way or another. They build up a close knit network that consists of people that are more than just client or peer, they are considered friends and are there as a resource to be exploited on a regular basis. These consultants stress the importance of interpersonal skills as being more relevant to their job then acquiring a vast knowledge base; the firm has all the knowledge within it, so why concentrate on what is already there? They believe that their strong side involves getting the work group into action, motivating people and being a catalyst for change.

2.3 FORMAL STRUCTURES

Before continuing with this empirical study, we want to point out the relevance of Andersen Consulting's formal structures on shaping the understanding of their employees in regard to their learning and development. The processes used in these structures can be understood as supporting one conception of learning, while influencing the other. This may be the reason why it was very difficult to actually separate the two groupings and, as a result, see some differences between them.
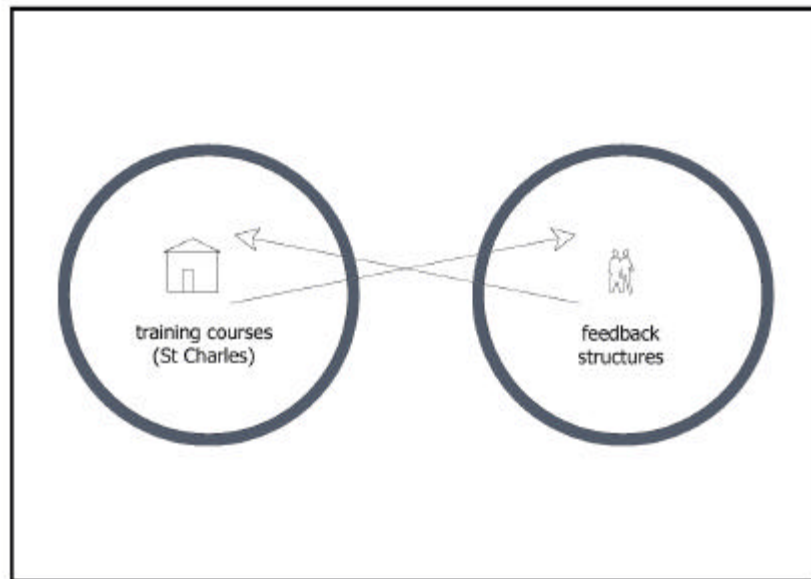
Figure 2.2: Integrating structures

Source: Own Model

The structures in place that reinforce Conception A (learning from tasks) include training programs (St Charles, etc), Computer Based Training and Knowledge X-change (databases).

The structures in place that bolster Conception B (learning from people) include the Counselor/Annual Review Program and Project Feedback

These structures are designed to facilitate learning and address perceived shortcomings; improving skills essential for a consultant to perform at an acceptable level; for example, courses related to leadership, communication etc.

However, in general, training programs (available to consultants at this level) were not viewed as being particularly useful for gaining knowledge that can be applied to their work process. Nevertheless, they all tend to agree that the

courses were useful for establishing a network within the company, which is essential for accomplishing their work.

Likewise, the structures that concentrate on focusing the consultant's learning through interaction with senior consultants (people) are based on a process that reflects over the work that the consultant has actually done, their experiences.

2.4 CONCEPTION A – LEARNING FROM TASKS

The consultants at Andersen Consulting that fall within this conception are very meticulous about their work tasks and try to develop expertise within particular roles. This in their belief is what a consultant needs to do and is expressed by the following individual:

What has developed you the most?

"In the first years at AC you have different roles which is a good thing since people generally don't know what they want to do, that's why they go into consulting. <u>Having the opportunity to try different roles and eventually you start getting really good at something and you can stick to those roles</u>."

They view the work that they do as a continuation of their education, in the sense that they have to continuously update themselves on new developments. This involves a lot of reading on the subject matter that they are working with, also they can use their network to gain tips on the latest directions. The same consultant continues with this response:

How do you learn in this organization?

"I have a knowledge management background, so I know how our internal network is. I use it and I learned fast, it's continuous. I read a lot of material, which gives me knowledge. Since we have so much experience in different areas and we have a network of people that have experience and have studied, whatever. <u>It's one click away to learn things,</u> obviously you have that in your mind when you look for it. People have education and are used to sitting down and reading, whatever."

The consultants that fall within this conception view the network, which is a foundation of learning at AC as an extension of their knowledge base, in a sense as an object, rather than people that they actually learn from. Their peers are, to a large extent, viewed as another reference point, albeit an extremely useful one, for finding out what the latest developments are within the different fields. Another Consultant reinforces this interpretation:

How do you choose which info to use?

"First, I ask around among the people that I know in Stockholm, or people I know that have been working on projects. I can talk to them and say that I'm looking for this kind of info, do you have it? If I can't find it there, I start looking in a couple of KX databases, which I know are pretty good. <u>There is always somebody, you can always find someone that has done something similar and after can contact them directly and they will usually drive you in the right direction because they are involved with the same issues that you have."</u>

When the consultant is assigned his/her part of the work within the project group they perceive it as being their responsibility and likewise their contribution to the work process. Even though they are working within the context of a group, they feel that it is up to them to make their input valuable for the rest. In other words, they depend primarily on their innate abilities and personal expertise to make things work. The following quote sheds some light on this interpretation:

How do you decide what you are looking for?

"You are assigned a specific task or a problem to solve; your job is to perform. AC has a lot of methodologies on how to do that in the best way. We do get some training when we join AC, how to use the KX most effectively. Other than that, you are pretty much on your own."

Another Consultant in this grouping illustrates that gaining subject related expertise is the primary challenge and, basically, the main concern of these types. They feel that the greatest asset that they bring to the client is this expertise, even if the area that they are engaging is new for them as an individual. They know that they come on to a project with the collective expertise of AC at their disposal so in that sense they have the means of abridging that collective knowledge to their advantage. Anyway, it seems that appearing as an "expert" to the client is a priority:

What is the greatest challenge for you as a consultant?

"In this context, to keep up with the pace. Always learn faster than the client because when you go to a project sometimes you have experience from that industry but most of the time you don't. So basically when you

go into a project with a new client you need to learn as much as possible from their environment in a very short time, otherwise the won't hire you because as a consultant you should be able to help them. <u>They are really paying for our expertise</u>."

Consultants in this conception view their work as being highly specialized and something that can only be carried out by individuals with the prerequisite expertise. In the following sections, we will bring to the fore the main reasons why consultants in this conception tend to learn in this way, "by experiencing".

- **Learn to structure work**

Consultants in Conception A tend to prioritize structure in the work; it is perceived as being essential to carrying out their tasks. They want everything to be organized and orderly, readily available to them as they engage in different projects. In a sense, this expertise that they are building is one that is primarily contingent on using certain processes that they feel comfortable with. The following consultant explains one way to do this:

How do you start your day?

"<u>There are a few things that you need to do in order to get going. You go into a proposal stage and then you are looking at, once you get the job, you set up a few internal structures; financial structures how to get people on board the project. Interviews, meeting, etc, such logical steps.</u> It depends on the kind of job you are doing."

Consultants in this conception emphasize that structuring the work makes it possible to deal with engaging in changing scenarios through the retention of consistency in work method. By having these fixed ideals, the consultant becomes confident in their ability to effectively perform. Once they have mastered a specific approach to their task that meets the expectations of the group, they tend to reproduce it as they go along, adjusting when necessary to the particulars surrounding the assignment. In a new project they try to learn as much as possible about the field, which they incorporate into their style.

Could you tell me a little bit about the way you work here?

"…We are trying to structure all the questions that we want to answer and also in this case, we have structured the final report, this is what we want it to look like. So when we gather information we can always have the end in mind... When I started here I was more focused on the task I was doing, not looking at three to five weeks ahead. But now when I do things I can read about different things and find information and say to myself OK, I don't need this now but I know I am going to need it in a couple of months; and then I can save it and also think about it."

Consultants that believe in structuring to this extent feel that it is the best way to get the results that one is looking for, which in turn should be adequate to meet expectations: theirs and other's. This last interpretation was made based upon advice that a consultant had to offer at the end of the interview:

"Your chosen topic is interesting but the questions are broad. After you get more interviews you will get a sense of what it's like and then you can narrow down your queries to one or two topics within the whole range.

It's kind of difficult to ask indirect questions unless you know what you are trying to get at and then try to lean into that path."

- **Learn about specific areas (specialize)**

The consultants that learn through processes seem to have a predilection for specializing rather than gaining a broad scope. However, this is something that they do not admit to since it goes contrary to what is expected of them at this level. Even to a fault, they insist that they enjoy different kinds of roles, but there were a couple of slips that showed otherwise. The following excerpts from a consultant relating to his/her work illustrates this dilemma:

I enjoy working with clients, seeing new situations and learning from them although I don't want to do it for the rest of my life."

Are you missing the more traditional kind of work?

"I don't think it's more traditional, consulting has always been there. But still…I don't know really. I just like change."

But isn't that what you have now with all the different projects?

"I think it's the ownership then, to be able to own the progress by yourself."

In our interpretation, the consultant is alluding to not really enjoying changing areas since he/she is considering another line of work. Also, as is conceded in the last statement, it is another matter that influences this choice. The

consultant in this conception prefers to be an industry expert and that probably does not happen when the area of work keeps changing. Another Consultant made a different kind of slip, which made us realize that this specialization issue was real:

Can you take work behaviors to different projects?

"That you can always take to the next project, but the area has been different all the time. But, I think perhaps that's something that is OK in the beginning because when you start as an analyst, I wanted to see different clients, different kind of areas, industries, work. I still don't know which area I want to focus on in the future but of course it would have been great if I could have worked with another purchasing project because then I had that knowledge which I could bring on to the next client."

We almost missed this point but then it occurred to me "of course…purchasing project", it is not understood as being natural that such a project would be great to do again since it is not everybody's thing. In any case, what seems natural here is that the consultant is expressing a desire to specialize even though it is not what is expected of them at this point in their professional development.

- **Become critical to change**

Consultants within Conception A are also quite critical to change, this aspect of their make-up corresponds with them being inclined to concentrate on specifics. When they set out upon an assignment, they decide from the

beginning what they want for it to look like at the end, so if any changes are called for it upsets the picture that they envisaged, complicating the issue. It is a common strategy for consultants to organize their work from the start:

"I think what we are trying to do here…is structure all the questions that we want to answer and also in this case we have structured the final report, this is what we want it to look like. So, <u>when we gather information, we always have the end in mind.</u>"

Even though it can not be said that this strategy is unique to consultants in this conception, they seem especially rattled when something happens, which requires changing from the set format. It may not be something that they learn in a positive sense, but it definitely seems to matter based on the comments derived from the interviews. The response from a consultant sheds some light on what they consider to be unacceptable behavior:

Describe a problem that has been resolved unsuccessfully?

"I would say, what sometimes has been done poorly is management resource allocation if management is unable to stand up to the client. I was at a project…we had an initial agreement on what we were going to do. We said OK and decided on the resources that we needed and the number of men it would take, <u>everybody was in agreement, then down the line it turned out that what we thought was the scope wasn't the scope at all. The functionality that we thought was going to be implemented was expanded</u>… Management was not able to either assess the expectations correctly or stand up against unreasonable change requests from the client."

Because the consultants in this conception place great emphasis on being meticulous while carrying out their jobs and activities related to it, they feel that changing means losing a lot of the ideas that they want to use. They see change as a setback rather than as an opportunity to grow in their understanding. The following answer by a consultant sheds light on this interpretation:

Describe a problem on the job?

"It was a project, which was continuously re-scoped. Version one was we are going to build up a joint venture...<u>I was really looking forward to it but things changed...you had all these brilliant ideas, but they were all flushed down the drain</u>"

- **Their individuality sets them apart**

The consultants in Conception A tend to seek recognition through their individual contribution to the project group. They feel that their expertise and style is what makes them a valuable member of the collective, even though it is not easy to get the recognition that they deserve, (i.e. the consultant that was considering a traditional job). In fact, that same person goes on to say:

"When I say them, I mean the client, it's their result. <u>I don't think that I am blending into some kind of consultancy blob,</u> some kind of team. I like being in a team, we are definitely individuals."

Since it is the client who owns the result of the work, it is not very likely that an individual's contribution can be made explicit, and since this is the way the consultants in this grouping seek recognition, it is somewhat difficult to accept.

Another consultant managed to reflect back upon a positive contribution that was made due to using expertise acquired at a previous job. Being a consultant in an area that was relatively new to Andersen Consulting (Sweden) at the time, he/she was able to gain some recognition through his/her efforts:

What positive contribution have you made to a project?

"When I joined the firm...they decided to work with a small firm...I had a pretty good understanding of what they could deliver and what they could not. We had this technology discussion on what we were going to use and what was needed, how it was to be implemented, things like that. I had that background and argued against how they were going to do it, saying this way is probably not going to work out and I was right, they couldn't deliver and we got the job."

- **Stick with things that work**

Consultants in Conception A have a tendency to prefer playing it safe when it comes to carrying out their work. They believe that there is a right way of doing things and, once they manage to find out what that is, they use it as a formula for addressing the different tasks that they are assigned. They find a sense of security in knowing that the processes that they use are considered acceptable to their manager. The following consultant sheds some light on this interpretation:

In what way are you more skilled today, than when you started?

"When I started I was really insecure, I didn't really know how to do things how to plan my work. I could not see the whole picture. But now when I start a new project I go into it in another way. I try to learn as much as possible about the project, what the goal is, what do we want to deliver, <u>can we specify my tasks or my responsibilities so that I don't have to be unsure about that</u>. That did not happen in my first project, I was not sure what I was supposed to do and what other people were supposed to do. That is not so good."

Another consultant reinforces this interpretation by making the following statement:

"What I do when I search for a document on the KX is... I would like to get a document, a framework that I know people have used a couple of times. That I know is solid so that when I go to the client to try to implement that framework or use it <u>I want to know that it is a safe way of doing things. I don't' want to have things that are untested when I go to a project."</u>

2.4.1 Summary Conception A

Consultants falling within this conception, learning from tasks, are more concerned with their work processes and view the acquisition of expertise as the essential part of consulting. Individually, these consultants are very meticulous and prioritize structuring their work so that everything falls within certain norms. They seem to have a preference for specializing early on even

though they may not readily admit so. When they experience changes in the work, they tend to get rather critical since it upsets their flow. In general, these consultants seem to seek recognition through demonstrating their expertise in particular tasks; this was easily attributed to the technology consultants, since their work is rather straight laced compared to others. Likewise, the consultants within this conception seem to prefer playing it safe, they stick to formulas that have been tested in order to avoid surprises.

2.5 CONCEPTION B – LEARNING FROM PEOPLE

Consultants in Conception B place a lot more emphasis on learning from people as opposed to gaining individual expertise. The people that they learn from include peers, senior colleagues, clients, and experts working in the various fields that they come into contact with. They view their work as being diversified, and for that reason, do not try to establish a routine:

Are there any differences in traditional work and consulting?

"Big differences in the challenges I meet. In my former work all the tasks I did were routine work on a day to day basis, there were not that many surprises to me. In the first year there were a lot of surprises but then most of the time it became routine. After a year, I felt like I knew it all but here I still haven't got any routine task."

This consultant has experience from a more traditional environment and sees what he is doing now as fundamentally different. For this reason, he does not perceive the need for developing a particular approach to the job, unlike the consultants in the first perception. They have a personal network in place that

they use in order to access the expertise needed in carrying out their assigned task, as stated in the next quotation:

Doesn't the company have a network in place?

"The network is in place but I think <u>it is easier to have a personal contact. It is always easier if you know the person</u>. For instance, if you write a mail to someone say that you want know something about supply chain planning and you heard from someone that if you send a mail to someone in London, he might help you. OK so you do and of course he will help you, no doubt. But it will be better if you know that guy personally, send him a mail and say hi X thanks for last night, I would like to have some information."

In reference to learning, the consultants in this conception view being engaged in interpersonal activities as the primary way to do so. Even though they have individual tasks to perform on a project, they do not believe that they can find the answers to problems and issues mainly through reading about the area, they prefer turning to the project manager for guidance. A statement given by another consultant reinforces this interpretation:

How does learning take place on the job?

"I would say from being part of the team. In each case <u>we have a project manager who has been working with this same kind of questions</u>, very similar in the business almost and now he comes here he bring his knowledge<u>, he teaches us, he helps us during the project.</u> We work both individually and as a team, individually to perform tasks more efficiently and as a team if we come across problems we cannot solve ourselves. <u>We

can also always ask the project manager, for advise in that situation and get his experience etc."

Consultants in this conception view their work as being a team effort and, therefore, are comfortable working within that context. They are not looking for individual recognition through their work but believe that their efforts are reflected in the overall results achieved by all members. In reference to learning, it is something that is contingent on the managers that they work with, even though the traditional ways (reading, training, etc.) also facilitate the process. This belief is presented by the following quote:

Where did you learn these skills?

"On the job training, I think it's that you also have people that you think are doing it in a good way. You have met a different manager, I worked with four different managers, so you get to know their skills and you pickup some from him and some from her etc., but, of course, you have to train."

In order to be effective at their jobs, consultants in this conception view interpersonal abilities as paramount to effectiveness. It seems that they consider it more important to have this ability than to build a particular expertise, since the firm possesses all they need. As far as they are concerned, one has to be sensitive and keep the human factor in mind to avoid conflicts, which in effect will facilitate the work process. Another consultant, when contemplating the difficulties associated with their job makes the following observation.

What are the common difficulties that you encounter during work?

"I think in the project itself, it's basically a lot of politics, you have to get around the politics <u>in the different companies, you have to get to know people. It's really important how to get this personal contact with the client. To get their confidence and let them be confident in working with you, that's like the main thing I think when you are in the project.</u> When it comes to working in AC, it is important to know, well, there is a lot of knowledge in AC a lot of experience."

When reflecting upon the knowledge that they have taken from one project to the next, these consultants believe that the people skills are most relevant. Unlike consultants in Conception A, they do not try to establish a routine that they can use from project to project, they believe through their experience they build these soft skills and that it is only through people that one acquires them. This interpretation is supported by the next quote:

Have you actually taken knowledge or experience from one project to another?

"Yes, I have been working in projects that are different from each other, so I can't say that I have taken many skills directly. But on the other hand <u>you take a lot of experiences from working with people and that could be useful in every project.</u> For me personally, I have been in so many different areas of <u>consulting it's more the personal things you can actually re-use."</u>

The consultants in this grouping feel that what they need to learn is the people skills and these are found in individuals with experience. They tend to depend quite highly on their managers until they feel that they are in the position to

handle things themselves. These consultants are rather comfortable with the status quo and tend to move with the flow. In their opinion, it is even plausible that someone straight out of school, with the right aptitude, can accomplish the work of a consultant since they are assigned to a more experience colleague at the outset.

"Experience is the key, you need to work with things, you need to work with people who have been working with it for a long time. And, that's why I think we can come directly from school and start doing it as well since we have the networking in AC and we often work with people that have been working with this before. It doesn't matter if you are totally new on something, there is always someone you can ask."

In saying that experience is the key and it rests in the hands of their capable managers, these consultants acknowledge the necessity of having it but at their level it's not that important. In the following sections we will bring to the fore the main reasons why consultants in this conception tend to learn in this way, "from people".

- **Learn to develop broad scope**

Consultants in Conception B prefer to develop a broad scope, which makes the general nature of consulting work at their level ideal. Probably, by the time they are required to concentrate on one particular area, they would have developed all the other skills that they consider important to this profession and can begin to concentrate on building expertise. Even some of them hope to continue with working in different areas:

Do you work on different projects because you want new experiences?

"Yes, I think the first two years you are allowed to work with what you want to do, <u>I have not chosen yet because I feel like I will like to work in different areas</u>."

The consultants in this conception feel that the people skills that they develop through being on so many different projects are very relevant to the continued survival of the firm. They see themselves as motivators and salesmen in a sense because their company has to continuously sell its services to clients and does not have a "product" per se. This they believe is their strong point and it very essential to the company:

"I think I have to have a lot of human knowledge since we are working with a lot of different people and <u>we are trying to convince them to do or buy the activities that we are providing. It's more important that you are a team player than individual star</u> because much of the work that we are providing is as a team. It's very seldom that I will do presentations with my name on it, it always has the client's name on it."

These consultants know that once their job on a project is done, they have to move on to the next one. However, the contacts that they build on each project is nurtured and maintained in order to make it easier to come back on repeat assignments. The consultants that are adept at this are in a position of advancing at a faster pace, since the value that they bring to the company can be quantified in direct terms. They are seen as valuable to the bottom line of the firm and that is something that they can use to their advantage. Another consultant goes on to express regret about not taking the initiative and getting involved with a lot of different projects in the beginning.

What did you do differently when you started out?

"The only thing I can say <u>that I might regret a bit is that I was working a very long time with one client</u>, which meant that I was working in the same industry with the same client. That is something I can regret, that I was not tougher or firmer...And that is not good, at least for me <u>I want to try different things, industries and clients."</u>

The consultants also may be understood as viewing sticking to one line of work for too long as boring, they seek challenges through changes.

- **Learn to appreciate change**

Consultants in this conception are driven by the challenge of engaging different situations in an efficient and productive manner, based on their people skills. They do not appreciate the secure environment that the consultants in the first conception strive for; maybe since they are not so concerned with building expertise in a specific area they like to keep moving before that fact catches up with them. On a serious note, these consultants thrive on change and it is one of the most rewarding parts of their work, as far as they are concerned:

Why did you become a consultant?

"Prior to this firm, I worked in another company, a traditional industry company. During that time I thought the job I had was repetitive... There was no real evolution or network so <u>I decided to change to consulting business instead to get more interesting work... The main reason why I joined the consulting firm is to get variety tasks and changes in the work</u>."

Consultants within this conception know that their work entails a lot of change and they come to see that aspect of it as fun, as opposed to a difficulty. They thrive on the diversity and enjoy the challenge, as stated by another consultant:

What is the most challenging part of your work?

"The most challenging, the most fun thing is when you get to do very different projects... <u>the challenge to always develop your comfort zone</u>. The more different projects you do<u>, you get into the situation of starting a project without actually having the skill. The more you dare to do it in the future, the more confident you are in all situations</u> and you come across in that confidence, so, <u>I think it's a self fulfilling prophecy in actually doing things that you are not really sure about</u>."

- **Inter-personal abilities matter**

Another consultant in Conception B, when talking about his/her job brings it down to basic terms, communication with clients. Just maintaining that line of communication is essential since whatever the consultants produce as a team has to be conveyed to the client successfully before it can be of any real use. Considering a major part of the consultant's job is done in collaboration with a counterpart from the client firm, there has to exist that flow in order for change objectives to be realized.

Describe a problem that you worked with that was resolved successfully!

"<u>A lot of my work for now is having good communication with the clients, it's a very person to person development</u> and, of course, it's always tricky

going into a company as a consultant. So, one classic example is to have a client that thinks that here comes a bunch of young people telling us what to do. We have to change their attitude for us to show them that we do have the knowledge and that we know what we are doing. That of course is preparation, you know what you are talking about, you use the knowledge within the firm. Many projects are awarded to us because of the knowledge within the firm."

Once again it is the interpersonal factor that takes priority over individual expertise, since the firm possesses that. The bottom line for these consultants is to develop these skills in order to be effective and once the time comes for specializing they will use these skills to complement the deep knowledge that they will then be required to develop. The next statement by another consultant in this grouping points out this reality:

What do you think makes a person a more competent consultant?

"Having knowledge in the area that you are working. Then have human competence - the emotional and sensitive part to lead people and to develop people not only yourself. It is easier to develop yourself but get other people you are working with in a developmental phase, that for me is what competence is."

This last statement, in a way, brings out their ideal type manager, what they all would like to be eventually. However, since the level of their work does not call for the complete package just yet, they are working on developing what they consider to be their strong side:

What can you take from one project to the next?

"Most of the knowledge I have got now is that I got to know the clients, the people in the organization. I knew people in this company and I had made a name in the client's company. I did not have that much to bring with regards to the content but I had the knowledge of knowing the people. I was known to the company and people did not have any anger towards me, which is sometimes the case when you are a consultant, coming into a company that might have had a bad experience with consultants in the past. They might not want to talk to you or even see you. I became known in the client's company because I worked for them in the past. I called them almost every week; we worked well together! I got to know them well. The managers at the client's site knew me very well during the course of that project, he could even recommend me to his peers which broadens the scope of my network."

In getting to know the client, the consultant also gets to know what they can do within that organizational environment; this is necessary in order to be effective at the job and build relations that last. Another consultant emphasis this reality that they have to adjust to:

Do you think the politics has to be understood or changed?

"I don't think that you can change it. It does not matter where you work, if it's at AC, the clients' firm or government. It's always about politics, you have to learn how to read it and understand it, actually. Then you have to place yourself in that reality and take the right actions, to make a difference within that organization. If you are implementing a concept, you know that you could do it straightforward it probably would not work,

then you have to read the environment and the politics. Then you know that he works like that, etc. and when you have read it, then you know how the people work, which manager they do not agree with."

In the opinion of these consultants, it is fundamental to their profession that they are capable of adjusting to these new situations that exist in the different companies they work with. In a sense one has to realize that anything goes as long as the client gets or believes he is getting what he wants. The next statement by a consultant may be kind of extreme, but it seems to capture the essence of this last interpretation:

What are the main differences between working at AC and a line organization?

"From the positive side in a line organization there exists bottlenecks, people who do not do what they are supposed to do, people who lack the capacity to finalize the target that they are supposed to reach. From the positive side, everything could be easier in a project, from the negative you need to be a chameleon sort of like prostitution but not really. You go into a room with the client and then you have to be the one that the client expects you to be. If you work with different people you behave differently and that could also mean your clothes should fit the situation, which is not required in other organizations."

- **Ambitions can be realized by action**

Consultants within this conception are more focused on getting positive results or recognition through taking action, rather than from a strong grasp of the subject area or expertise. They engage in situations and actually gain control

over certain tasks through brazen determination and, in other cases, through accident. Regardless of how they gain additional responsibility, what they tend to do is connect with the people involved in order to assure satisfaction, as the following statement alludes to:

How did you learn the skills needed to be a project manager?

"It's totally learning by doing, I started out, like, a year ago as an assistant to a program manager. I also had assistance from my AC project manager who was also working with her, this client manager, and, after a while I had to take over the project manager role, so it was totally learning by doing. <u>I don't think you can take any training courses in this, it is a lot of things to do with how you work together with different people and how you are with people. Sometimes you have to be an actor, you are not skilled in everything you do but at least say that you can get to know this, to get this knowledge and then you can ask someone else in the company."</u>

The consultants in this conception feel that if they want to succeed, it is mainly a matter of taking the initiative and they can get what they want. In their opinion success at Andersen Consulting is something that is achievable through ambition rather than expertise. The next consultant takes that stand:

You seem to have a lot of responsibility for your level, why?

"The reason why we can rank this is uh...<u>if you have an interest you will get tasks to do;</u> that is one of the main things about this firm. <u>If you feel that you want to take some responsibilities you can ask for it and you can get it</u>. That is the situation here. The gentleman who had the responsibility

for this report, he knew me and he also knows my colleague and he knows that we are ambitious so he said to us "I am confident to hand this over to you, do you want it?" Of course, I said no problem, I can do it! <u>It's just getting in contact with the right people when you come here; it's not that difficult actually</u>."

- **Take risks on the job**

Something else that may set these consultants aside from the ones in Conception A is that they are more likely to thrive on the unexpected rather than wishing to play it safe. In general, they seem to be somewhat more of risk takers, as captured in the next statement:

"<u>I think sometimes that this firm could be a little bit too conservative when it comes to what solutions you actually propose</u>. It's sometimes very much like good to be safe, OK but we've got the experience, let's do it this way. <u>Sometimes it could be more challenging, innovative ways and approaches;</u> it's changing though."

They see risk-taking as being a normal part of their job, since they tend to go into new situations without the subject related expertise but get the job done anyway. They think that this calls for a certain amount of flexibility on their part and as a result believe that the firm should be more open to new ways of doing things. Anyway, what is certain is that they grow as professionals due to this diversity of tasks and learn to appreciate it indeed, as stated by the next consultant:

What helped you the most?

"It's the most difficult thing to understand when you come here; so what should I actually do? How should I prioritize between all these things when people want me to do this and that. It's the most beneficial to get someone to actually say OK, this is what I would like you to do. And then <u>*you can go ahead and do the actions and not think about analyses you're about to do, but actually perform them. That's something you feel that as you get a grip on, you feel that you can take your own initiative. To take initiates and not be too risk adverse.*</u> *You have to be able to dare to try new things and dare to contact people around, both in the company and outside."*

2.5.1 Summary Conception B

Consultants in this conception, learning from people, are less concerned with their work processes and view the mastery of interpersonal skills as the primary means of efficiently carrying out their work. They rely primarily on tapping into the collective expertise of the firm so they tend to place less emphasis on their knowledge base, but more on relating to people, inside the firm and outside of it. They seem to have a preference for developing a broad scope at this level of their career and view specializing as an obstacle to be dealt with at a later stage. They thrive on change, which means that they find the line of work that they are in very stimulating, since they are constantly taking part in projects within different areas. In general, these consultants seem to seek recognition by taking action; they go for what they want believing that their ambition and drive is enough to get them where they want to be. Likewise, the consultants within this conception seem to prefer taking risks, since they realize that their job entails being flexible and coming up with new solutions to old problems.

2.6 Possible explanations for the variation

As we can see from the analysis, there are variations between the expressed categories. The question now is why is there a difference in the way the consultants conceive their learning. The educational background of the consultants is quite similar, every one of them has a degree from university in engineering, computer science or business; five have a MBA or the equivalent. This we do not think makes a big difference as they are spread out equally amongst the conceptions.

One interesting observation was the five of the consultants had previous experience prior to AC. The importance for the conceptions is that three came with IT/computer background and the other two, business/management background. One of the three with IT/computer background expressed conception B, while the other two placed in Conception A. The two with business/management background both expressed Conception B. The reason for this could be that when they joined the firm, they were placed in projects that reflected their experiences. The two consultants who had worked the longest (between 3-4 years on the job) are somehow overlapping between the two conceptions, even though it was possible to distinguish a preference for one or the other. These consultants expressed both Conception A and B as how they learned or the best way to learn. From this observation one could conclude that, conceiving both conceptions is not only possible but is also inevitable. Those who have worked the longest have experienced both conceptions and find it difficult to differentiate. It seems possible that, given a certain amount of time, Conceptions A and B could be expressed as one.

The reason for the variation in conception could also be explained by activity theory. Engeström (1991) views human activity as an interdependent system

involving the individual (or subject), the community of people who are similarly concerned with the problem, the division of labor between community members, and the conventions (rules) regarding actions.

In activity theory, the basic unit of analysis is human (work) activity. Human activities are driven by certain needs where people wish to achieve a certain purpose. One or more instruments or tools usually mediate this activity. Human beings mediate their activity by artifacts. Tools mean to divide work, norms and language can all be seen as artifacts for the activity.

To follow the activity theory perspective, the consultants from the two conceptions, represent the subject, the tools they use are different, consultants from Conception A use more technical expertise, while consultants from Conception B use communication and knowledge. The problem space or object could be the task of completing a project successfully. The community of people who are similarly concerned with the problem would be AC people, senior management and the client.

The division of labor between community members would basically be the roles and responsibilities of all the above players. For example consultants expressing Conception A will be responsible for building solutions and the technical aspects, etc, while consultants expressing Conception B will be responsible for planning, presentations and the retrieval and flow of knowledge throughout the project. The activity is realized through conscious and purposeful actions of participants.

Therefore, by consistently repeating these roles and responsibilities using the same artifacts repeatedly, the consultants become committed to those artifacts that they are using, creating a division in their consciousness. Thus the

variation in the conceptions is created by the work (activity) that they are doing. If the work the respective group of consultants are performing demands changes in the way the consultants work, then the conceptions will change with every new project, thereby changing how they conceive their learning development. But since, as mentioned earlier, the roles of the consultants remains fairly static, even though the projects change, their conception of how they learn would remain the same. They learn by performing their jobs, the same job, in a different way. In this way, activity theory reveals the process of collective knowing to be a network of processes and relationships. According to Engenstöm, the vitality of how a community knows depends upon the vigor of the interactions that take place between the cognitive processes of individual members and the infrastructure of knowing that they employ.

2.7 Sense-making

Why are they expressing two different conceptions? How have these conceptions been constructed? It could be a lot of different factors. It could be the way they make sense of their learning experience at the firm. Let us start by looking at the idea of sensemaking. In the broadest sense, it is a metaphor that "focuses attention into the idea that the reality of everyday life must be seen as an ongoing accomplishment, which takes particular shape and form as individuals attempt to created order and make retrospective sense of the situation in which they find themselves." Individuals are seen as engaged in ongoing processes through which they attempt to make their situations rationally accountable to themselves and others. Individuals are not seen as living in, and acting out their lives in relations to a wider reality, so much as creating and sustaining images of a wider reality, in part to rationalize what they are doing. They realize their reality by "reading into" their situation patterns of significant meaning" (Weick, 1988).

The consultants make sense of their learning environment by virtue of involvement and participation in that area. Consultants expressing conception B are doing so because what they do involves interacting, sharing with clients and colleagues etc, and this binds them and focuses the way they make sense of what they learn and how they learn in order to perform their jobs. According to Weick, action leads the sensemaking process; it does not follow it. Therefore, in order for the consultants to express how they learn they have to look back and remember an incident or incidents, which occurred that facilitated learning.

All the consultants that expressed Conception A went through this process of being nurtured by a senior consultant despite the fact that they (excluding two) did not mention it. Consultants expressing Conception B do not go to special classes to be trained, they learn from colleagues, from clients and build their network whilst on the job. They too go trough the process of trial and error. One possible explanation for this difference could be that the consultants found it very difficult to reflect back, and were very oriented to this moment. They found it very difficult to discuss aspects of their work in the past. Self-reflection is not one of their strong points. We believe that the majority of the data we collected from them dealt with present aspects of their job. We suspect that even when they were asked to reflect back on things, they used their present to describe the past.

This is obviously speculation from our side; it is not a straightforward matter that there are two different categories. In many ways, we question some of the response we got from the consultants. Generally, since consultants work primarily within groups, this greatly influences their perceptions of the meaning of competencies and how they are acquired through their work. Not to belittle the information that we received, the face value of it, we began to think

that there may be some kind of common understanding derived from the experience at AC that takes the responsibility of independent thought away from the individual, in favor of the group/organization. What lead us to this understanding is the fact that consultants very rarely refer to themselves when they are giving examples, it's usually about the group.

It could be that the firm has indoctrinated the consultants. Having said that, the general understanding of what is relevant or best for the consultant is hard to dismiss as generalities or company line, since, to a large extent it must be the case. It is derived from the consultants' experience, as well as the legacy that the firm with its bastion of qualified individuals brings to the equation.

The question at this point is do they really learn in different ways, as portrayed by the consultants, is there a difference between learning from tasks and learning from people? We believe that the answer is no, because, at AC, learning from people is to a great extent learning from tasks. Even when the consultants are assigned to a senior consultant when they start, the process takes place while engaged in a task, through the course of a project.

2.8 Further Reflections

Consultants falling within the two conceptions, learning from tasks and learning from people, are very much in tune with the needs of the organization. The variations found in the two conceptions discovered through this analysis are a direct result of the way the individuals learn. The consultants in Conception A realize that they are, in a sense, the greatest resource of Andersen Consulting; it is primarily knowledge that the company sells and in the case of these consultants, "knowledge is with the people". In order to be

efficient at their jobs, they realize that they need to build expertise in subject matter, which they can bring to the different projects that they participate in.

The consultants that fall into Conception B, on the other hand, realize that their business is dependent on the abilities of people to go into different projects and sell ideas to the client. This, in a sense, can be seen as the marketing arm of the operation, where interpersonal abilities are needed to smooth out difficulties and find solutions of compromise. These consultants realize that their strong points complement those of the consultants in the first conception and working together they are better prepared to deal with any eventuality. In order to bring further understanding to this learning process, we have decided to refer to "communities of practice."

The traditional view of how people learn is based solely on the acquisition of information; transferring explicit knowledge between individuals fosters learning. Having identified two qualitative conceptions of how consultants learn and what induces this process from the data collected, it is quite evident that a large amount of learning takes place as participation in practice. From the consultants' view, learning is something that emerges from social interactions in the natural work setting. This view of learning is in line with the two key contributions of the social perspective that see organizational learning as socially constructed.

Both Conceptions, A and B, can be seen as being involved in a community of practice, as proposed by Etienne Wenger (1991). Communities of practice describe the informal settings in which people learn by doing. The concept proposes that people who work together eventually develop a shared understanding of how work would be accomplished. They come to form a mutual identity that clarifies to them who they are and what their place is

within the organization. Such a hidden association among workers argues Wenger, foster some of the most important and creative work-related learning.

Consultants expressing both conceptions learn on the job and they learn from working together. They do so by utilizing the network that they have built, the informal chats that they have with all their colleagues, not just colleagues they are in project groups with. We noticed this in the Göteborg office, where a group of consultants would gather and tell stories about their experiences at client sits over a cup of coffee. This is what Wenger means by community. He argues, "these naturally occurring communities are anything but formal, they are so informal as to often be nearly invisible".

As members of a community of practice, the consultants at Andersen Consulting learn from the community, its history and its evolution. Within a community of practice, being mutually engaged in an endeavor involves not only the individual's knowledge, but also, the knowledge of others. It draws on what a person does and what they know; as well as their ability to connect meaningfully to what they don't know – that is to the contributions and knowledge of others. This is rather obvious when participants have rather different roles, as in a medical operating team when mutual engagement involves complementary contribution (Wenger 1998). But it is also true among consultants, who have largely overlapping forms of competence due to their regular participation in different kinds of projects. Because they belong to a community of practice where people help each other, it is more important to know how to give and receive help than to try to know everything yourself.

Generally, any community of practice provides a set of models for negotiating the direction the individual takes (Wenger). They embody the history of the community through the very participation and identities of practitioners. They

include actual people as well as composite stories. More experienced peers also represent the history of the practice as a way of life. They are living testimonies to what is possible, expected and desirable. The consultants at AC are able to observe senior peers at work and consult regularly with them through the project feedback and counselor program. In so doing, they find favorites, people whom they use as role models and, as a consequence, the consultants find themselves imitating certain features of those individuals.

According to Wenger, exposure to this field of paradigmatic trajectories is likely to be the most influential factor shaping the learning of newcomers. In the end, it is members – by their very participation – who create the set of possibilities to which newcomers are exposed as they negotiate their own trajectories. No matter what is said, taught, prescribed, recommended, or tested, newcomers are no fools: once they have actual access to the practice, they soon find out what counts.

Another aspect of the social learning perspective that AC has captured really well is the constructionist view. Brown and Duguid (1988) are strong components of this view. They believe that formal instructions about how to do jobs are always inadequate, and therefore look at the way new entrants into organizations learn the unwritten information about how to perform effectively. They list strategies by which novices learn from peers: "lower order" processes of modeling, coaching, and scaffolding and fading.

According to the authors, modeling occurs when an expert demonstrates some aspect of practice. This strategy already exists at AC, as expressed by the consultants in Conception B; they are assigned to a senior consultant on a project when they start at the Company. They accepted what they saw as good practice and tried to emulate it. Scaffolding and fading occurs when experts

help novices initially to do what they cannot do unaided, then withdraw support when it is no longer need (Brown & Duguid). Articulation, reflect and exploration are what the authors consider higher level strategies. The lower levels deal with observable performance and how to improve it directly. Higher strategies involve an extra dimension of verbalization and thinking. In articulation, novices have to describe and explain what they are doing, reflection requires them to evaluate it, while exploration involves considering or testing alternatives.

2.8.1 Moving forward

The main conclusions that we can draw that may be of some interest to Andersen Consulting is that the way consultants learn may give some insight into how they should be trained. The consultants in Conception A might benefit early on if they took courses that addressed their interpersonal deficiencies: i.e. leadership, communication, etc. This might be a way of giving them the confidence that enables them to go into a project and maximize their actual expertise because they will be able to relay relevant info in a more convincing manner. While consultants in Conception B could probably benefit more from courses that are directly related to subject matter, as a means of giving them more depth in areas.

Another thought that comes to mind when going over the two conceptions is that maybe personality plays an important factor in how the consultants learn. A couple of the consultants in Conception A stated that they are most in need of developing characteristics that are apparent in Conception B: communication, presentation, leadership skills, etc. This seems to imply that by nature they are less inclined to learn from other people since they are not as

confident in their ability to do so. In the other scenario, perhaps consultants in Conception B are not patient enough to go deeply into the issues that surround a particular field; they may just prefer resorting to action. If this is the case, that personality plays a significant role, it might very well be counterproductive to try and force change upon these individuals since they may, as a consequence, find it difficult to cope with the pressures of the job.

Consequently, maybe the company needs to consider more seriously the needs of their junior employees. As shown in this analysis, there are consultants that feel they are being pressured into continuing to develop a broad scope, when they are more interested in specializing. Even though they reach a point where they do specialize, it seems that they can become disillusioned before then, (i.e. the consultant that wants to get a traditional job).

Phenomenography is stated to be an approach that gives the researcher the possibility of discovering an integrated and holistic way of understanding conceptions of learning amongst people. This may be the case but, once gaining an understanding of these conceptions, it seems reasonable to also investigate issues that influence them in order to arrive at something of substance that can be implemented by companies. Finding out how consultants learn is interesting, but what can one do with it? Is it realistic, once understanding how individuals learn, to try and influence that process without addressing what they learn? In trying to do so, will it give a better outcome? We believe these questions, could, in this case, be reasons for considering phenomenography as somewhat insufficient for understanding completely how learning takes place at Andersen Consulting.

While carrying out this analysis, we noticed an interesting factor that definitely seems to be influencing the learning process; consultants more or less referred

to the same essential competencies as being necessary to efficiently perform at their job. This lead us to think that, in order to gain a better understanding of how the learning process is influenced by those competencies, some more investigation into the subject is called for. Consequently, we have decided to present another analysis after this section, which consists of a competency model constructed from statements made by the consultants.

3. CONSULTANTS' ESSENTIAL COMPETENCIES

EMPIRICAL STUDY (Part 2)

The inclusion of this chapter in the thesis is the direct result of wanting to bring in something a little more hands-on. At the same time, it sheds some light on factors that influence the learning process. This model is influenced by systems thinking, in the sense that it focuses on "what" consultants learn (competencies), while considering its effects on how they learn. As Senge (1990) alludes to, "systems thinking has the capacity of fusing disciplines into a coherent body of theory and practice." In this case, it is my justification for applying a rationalistic model to a subjectivistic phenomenon with the intention of achieving a holistic outcome.

As Begun (1994) stipulates, events are interconnected within systems, which are in turn subsystems of larger systems. Furthermore, relationships among subsystems rather than single variables, becomes the primary area to study. Efforts to isolate single variables and their effects become feeble or even useless. This supports my assumption that leaving this study entirely on the findings of phenomenography gives an insufficient explanation of learning.

According to Capra (1996), living system thinking attends a holistic worldview, seeing the world as an integrated whole, rather than a dissociated collection of parts. One should have an awareness that recognizes the fundamental interdependence of all phenomena and that individuals and societies are all embedded in the cyclical processes of nature. One should see the world not as a collection of isolated objects, but as networks of phenomena that are fundamentally interconnected and interdependent.

The following definition of competencies gives an understanding of the subject: "a cluster of related knowledge, skills, and attitudes that affects a major part of one's job (role or responsibility), that correlates with performance on the job, that can be measured against well accepted standards, and that can be improved via training and development" (Parry, 1996, p.50).

A consultant at Andersen Consulting addresses the issue of competencies this way:

What personal attributes assist the consultant in their work?

"That depends a lot on the kind of assignments you are on and also varies from projects and stages that the project is in. Generally, there is one package of inter-personal skills; communication, appearance, things we look at when recruiting graduates as well. Some social skills, leadership skills, ambition, drive those kind of soft factors. This is what all the companies are looking for, but I do believe that communication – being able to interact with people in a general sense - is one very important part of it. The other part is more depending on where you work, what kinds of issues you are faced with – some kind of analytical skills. The interest of learning new things and the interest of interacting in change processes."

In rationalistic competency models, probably the most widespread typology includes three types of such skills or competencies: technical, interpersonal, and conceptual. Altogether, this threefold typology distinguishes between individual skills in coping with things, people, ideas and concepts (Yukl, 1989, p. 192).

3.1 CLUSTERS OF COMPETENCIES (Identified amongst AC Consultants)

Through our analysis, we discovered that there are three different clusters of competencies, which are perceived as essential for consultants at Andersen Consulting. These clusters were named in accordance with statements made by the consultants; this is why what is normally called Technical Competencies has been labeled Functional Competencies. They are as follows:

1) Interpersonal Competencies: for instance, networking, knowledge sharing, people skills, versatility, team player, leadership, communication and understanding politics.

2) Functional Competencies: for instance, subject related skills, time management and coordinating tasks.

3) Conceptual Competencies (Problem Solving): for instance, analytical skills, creativity, and building expertise fall into this category.

The consultants have described what competency means to them by reflecting upon the experiences resulting from their work. The consultants described competency in relation to what they are lacking or what they are good at. The essential aspects within each cluster of competence at work co-exist throughout the process of carrying out consulting work. They assist the consultant in effectively carrying out his/her work. There is a certain amount of uncertainty and ambiguity amongst consultants when describing competence at work but what they all have in common is that their understanding of competency is directly and internally related to their job and their personal experiences. Since

these essential competencies can be seen as necessary to all consultants, the following graph presents them in an integrated manner:
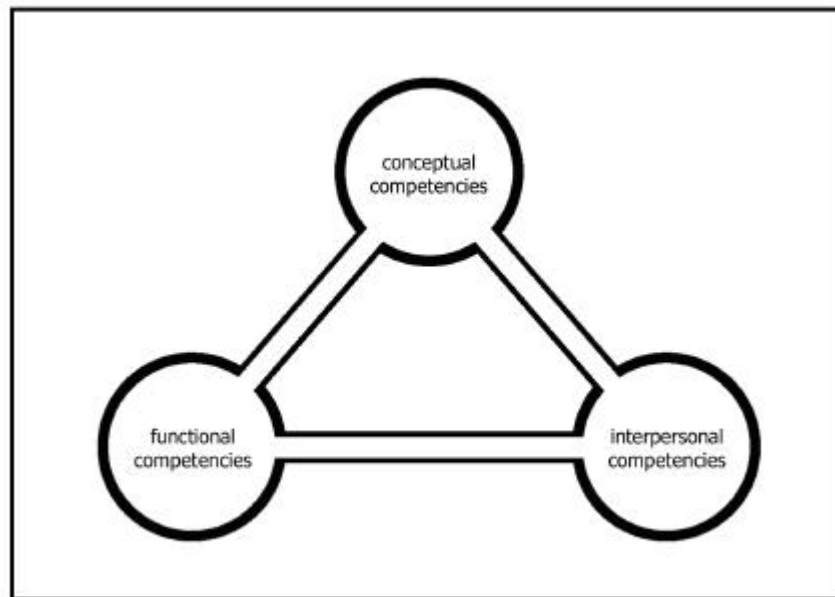

Figure 3.1: Integrated graph of competency clusters

Source: Own model

3.2 CLUSTER 1 – INTERPERSONAL COMPETENCIES

Competencies identified by consultants within this cluster are the following: networking, knowledge sharing, leadership and communication, being a team player, people skills, understanding politics and versatility. We have chosen those statements, which in my opinion clearly address the different elements of these competencies.

Networking

> *"Most of the knowledge I have got now is that I got to know the clients, the people in the organization. I did not have that much to bring with regards to the content, but I had the knowledge of knowing the people"*

This statement seems to be linking the consultant's ability to perform with his ability to build relations. At this level, the competence of networking seems to be referring to the importance of building and maintaining client relations as a means of facilitating the work process. When the consultant has built his network within the client firm, it would seem that it adds value to the relationship that exists between AC and the client. The client perceives the representatives of AC as colleagues rather than disruptive consultants. So, in a sense, it is not only important what the consultant knows but whom he knows.

> *"You have to be able to dare to try new things and dare to contact people around, both in the company and outside. To ask the ones who are the best, basically! It's very much about networking."*

In this second quotation, networking builds capacity by enabling the consultant to make contact with individuals that possess certain valuable information/knowledge. Through the person's internal and external networks, they can easily find solutions to problems and better understand new situations that they encounter through their work. Networking as a competency facilitates the consultant's work by speeding up things and cutting back on the time spent on research.

Another interesting observation that emerged is that the consultants that described networking as the most vital competence tend to be ones with

previous experience prior to AC. One of them made this statement when asked whether he had any experience prior to AC:

"I worked with foreigners in my old job, so I spent a lot of time in…that experience was very useful for me when I joined this company. We had a lot of personal contact almost everyday, often in their offices. It is a very valuable experience to work with customers."

Knowledge Sharing/Transfer

"In the end it's all coming down to where you need to be able to transfer the knowledge and also to connect the knowledge to people around you. If you don't have the interpersonal skills and the relationships then you will never be able to actually transfer knowledge. You try to acquire expertise as well because you should not forget that we are learning a lot from clients all the time."

This competency, it would seem, is the furtherance of the consultant's networking ability. However I have separated them because building networks is one thing, using them effectively is another. Through the contacts made as they go along, the consultant gains invaluable knowledge, but he/she must be able to use that information to their advantage and understand the importance of passing it on. Obviously, having relations is not a one way street and in order to make them grow the consultant must be able to assist in turn his colleagues and counterparts when the need arises. In a sense, the consultant can perceive their role as being a link in a chain and realize that if they so happen to be a weak link, the chain is bound to break and they will find cooperation from individuals to not be forthcoming.

"Competency, as I see it, is sharing knowledge between individuals because when you go to our internal training courses you meet a lot of people that are working with the same kind of problems that we are working with. And the good thing about it is to meet them and to exchange experiences".

From this second quotation, we believe that sharing knowledge is a means of inducing lasting relationships amongst the consultants that meet each other through training courses and obviously on the job, as well. It is stated fairly often that the knowledge that the consultants possesses is the true capital within such a large consultancy firm as Andersen Consulting. Through these relationships, the consultants profit from the experiences of colleagues, which is something that proves invaluable on the job.

In reality, having the network does not guarantee an effective knowledge transfer. They come across problems, for example: difficulties in making contacts, undocumented knowledge and lost knowledge. After explaining an incident where he successfully transferred knowledge, one of the consultants stated:

"This experience was great, it's something that does not always work within AC because it's such a big company. In many cases you need to do something and even when you identify the person or the projects that have done it before, wherever that might be they are hard to get hold of. It's not always possible to get that knowledge transfer, I think that this was a successful case."

Here, the consultant sees the issue of knowledge transfer as a deep-rooted problem in the organization. Another consultant in this group shares these

sentiments. When asked if there are any existing mechanisms through which knowledge is transferred, he replied:

> *"I think that is something that would be good, but is not working very well at present. There are databases that you should put information in, but you have so little time and, from my perspective, we really should set time for that. It would be extremely valuable to have when I start a new project. On the other hand when I am already in a project or maybe at the end phase, I almost never have that time because at that you have so much to do in a little time and you have to meet the deadlines. That's really something that should work better because it's really important, of course, it would help in the next project if you have done it before."*

Knowledge is the backbone to the consulting business, and knowledge is with the people. There is a general feeling that knowledge transfer and sharing is a problem and is seen by many consultants as a competence that is failing and needs immediate attention.

Team Player

Consultants rarely work individually, they are assigned to teams when doing a project and every team member is given a task according to their strengths. Each task is part of a whole so its vital that each member carries out their part during the time frame given, but what is as important is that these groups of consultants get along.

> *"It's more important that you are a team player than an individual star because much of the work that we are providing is as a team. It's very seldom that I will do presentations with my name on it".*

Being a team player seems to be a very relevant competency for consultants since they work on projects, primarily within groups. In this context it seems the ego of the individual should not come into play, since their work is dependent upon having a cooperative, functional group. All members of the team have to work in sync with their colleagues, which should have the positive effect of speeding up their work.

> *"I have met colleagues that lack social skills and, here at AC, that is important. It's important to be a team player, able to work in teams efficiently. In a group, you have to be able to get along. You generally don't argue with people. If you do it's on a friendly basis, you keep a professional level."*

Furthermore, everyone involved in a group should understand the relevance of maintaining cordial relations, which, in effect, creates the kind of atmosphere that does not impede their work. Possessing this competency is an essential way of facilitating the work process since it creates a friendly atmosphere.

Leadership/Communication

Leadership skills are seen as a very important competence for a large number of consultants. In order to be effective at motivating the group and reaching set targets, it is essential to have it especially as one gains additional responsibility. Communication seems also to be an integral part of this, which is why they are featured together.

> *"A consultant needs good leadership skills. For example, if somebody gets stuck on something they should be able to motivate him or her. They*

should be able to identify potential problems, ideally before they occur or be able to handle them properly."

This competency highlights the importance of leadership and communication as a way of bringing effectiveness to the work of the consultant. Since consultants work within groups, there must exist effective leadership amongst them in order to make sure that they work in keeping with their goals set from the beginning. However, since difficulties are always to be expected in new and challenging situations, it is especially important that the leader possesses the capacity to motivate his team and stave off all problems that may arise. In this sense, a leader is expected to have vision as well as the necessary competence in handling people and the task at hand. The next quotation, we believe, helps to further bolster our interpretation of what leadership entails.

"There is a very strong focus on delivered value on one side and on the other side leadership skills. If you are looking at pure effectiveness perspective, I think the ability to pick up info that is really necessary and being able to prioritize and also being able to develop communication skills".

People Skills

From our observation, this competency focuses particularly on the human relational skills that are needed in order to create a harmonious environment and facilitate collaboration. Since the work that consultants do is very hectic and as a result stressful, it is necessary to have empathy when dealing with people. Consultants need to be sensitive to the needs of others and open to ideas that are presented, even though it may not exactly be what they have in mind.

"You have to have human competency, the emotional and sensitive part to lead people and to develop people, not only yourself. It is easier to develop yourself than to get other people you are working with in a development phase. That, for me, is what competence is."

By being open minded to different ideas, new solutions can be forthcoming, which would not be the case if they always believed that what they know is all that matters. Also, by being tolerant of other's views and working together with them to come to a common understanding, the consultant is in a position to enhance their knowledge as well as the person's. Furthermore, this skill is necessary for the consultant as they take on more responsibility and manage other people in their group. At that point, the consultant may even have to take on the role of teacher since they usually find themselves in charge of people with less experience within the field or task at hand.

"What every consultant needs to have is, they need to be good with people. They need to listen to people, they need to take other people's opinion into consideration before making a decision".

The consultants really seem to take this competency very seriously. In fact, in order to gain compliance from a difficult client, there is a strategy they use to resolve the situation amicably.

"Try to get a feel for the person you are talking to, interacting with and you try a trick. When I joined the firm, one of the senior consultants on my first project said that what you should try to do in situations like that is you should try and reason with your counterpart and make him come to

the conclusion that you want, with him thinking that he came to that conclusion."

It did not matter from which competency area the consultant came from, they all seemed to believe that using this strategy is one good way to realize objectives.

Understanding politics

Our interpretation of this competency is that the consultant has to understand the realities that control the way people operate within their particular work environment. Every company has a work ethic that comes across in the way they deal with each other on the job. The politics very often stems from the culture of the company and is often reflected in relationships that exist within it.

> *"Interacting with clients, the political side can be a challenge, to be able to work with a lot of different kinds of people efficiently. In general, you need to work with a lot of different types of people and to make sure that you are working in a way that everyone becomes happy with. In political situations, you just try to be reasonable, use common sense. Try to get a feel for the person you are talking to, interacting with".*

Dealing with international firms, the consultant has to be adept at adjusting to every situation they find themselves in, in order to get their message across without creating any unnecessary waves. In fact, one consultant described their role when entering a company as being a "chameleon". We think that aptly describes how they must constantly readjust their approach in order to benefit from their experiences and excel at their jobs.

"It's always about politics, you have to learn how to read it and understand it actually. Then you have to place yourself in that reality and take the right actions to make a difference within that organization."

Versatility

"One of the most important advantages with this job, you get to meet a lot of different people, from the CEO to factory foreman. Most often, it makes people go for something, they are pressing themselves to the limit sometimes and, other times, they get to abridge previous experience, which they haven't used for a long time. For example, you could meet a purchasing manager that has been working as an engineer for another company doing something else, all of a sudden that kind of experience is available to you. You get to meet various people at different levels, from different backgrounds. You tend to meet them in very intense situations."

This competency, in our interpretation, means that the consultant should be able to relate with everybody involved in a project regardless of status or position. Being in a highly intellectually demanding profession, the consultant should not lose touch with the realities that exist on every assignment. Not everyone that they come in contact with possesses an advanced university degree so they have to be able to relate to everyone in an appropriate fashion in order to get their message across. Since consultants are basically selling ideas they have to know what way works best in each and every situation in order to gain the best results. The proper way of approaching each situation is adequately described by a consultant:

"You must be able to stay humble on your skills. You naturally do in this profession because everything is always new."

3.3 CLUSTER 2 –FUNCTIONAL COMPETENCIES

Competencies identified by consultants within this cluster are the following: subject related skills, coordinating tasks and time management. We have chosen those statements, which, in our interpretation, clearly address its different elements. To introduce it, we present a quotation that goes someway towards giving a general view of what it entails.

" There are a few things that you need to do in order to get going. You go into a proposal stage and then you are looking at, once you get the job, you set up a few internal structures; financial structures how to get people on board the project; interviews, meeting, etc, such logical steps. It depends on the kind of job you are doing. Looking at a traditional IT project, the experience is that we spend quite a lot of time at the clients. Looking at a typical strategy project, it may be more a traditional consultancy approach in the way that you go to meetings, workshops, and short interactions with the client and then you get back to your office. I don't think that there is one way of doing things."

Subject Related Skills

These competencies are directly related to the consultant's area of expertise and his/her professional orientation. In Andersen Consulting, there are four defined areas of competency: change management, strategic services, process and technology. In most instances, the consultants in our studies did not emphasis

this aspect of the competency make-up, it is regarded as a given that they possess these abilities. They are the areas that they are formally trained in and can be regarded as their profession and, for that reason, we will not delve in the matter further even though we can stress that this competency is without doubt the most fundamental of them all.

Coordinating Tasks

"We usually work together in the beginning of the project and at the end. In the beginning you define what are your basic requirements and, once that is defined the technical team works quite independently to do the actual implementation and development. And, then, during the rollout, in the end, you work together again to ensure that the organization is in place to provide the solution."

In this competency there is a lot of emphasis on knowing your particular role in the scheme of things. The consultant should be able to concentrate on his/her assignment and have an understanding of how it fits into the big picture or the final result. Everybody has to do his or her part once the work has been divided, it needs to be carried out and the rest of the team assumes that it will be done to the letter. It is very much about the team effort and the individual consultant has to have an understanding of which parts of the work falls under their auspices.

"You are assigned a specific task or a problem to solve; your job is to perform. If I give a colleague a task to perform and say that it should be finished tomorrow at 12pm, I feel a hundred percent sure that it will be delivered on time"

The consultant's job entails the transfer of specific knowledge and this process is facilitated greatly through giving presentations.

> *"Once we had the experience, some of us with some parts, others with other parts, we developed a crash course curriculum. One person developed presentations about front-end development, another back end integration, and things like that. Then we went out to different projects and held one-week courses."*

As a consultant gains additional responsibility, he/she has to not only ensure that their input corresponds with the objectives of the group, they have to assist fellow team members to do likewise.

> *"You need to have had a leading role in a project before you can become a manager. You have to know how to structure your team, manage them, the help that is needed. You need to have done these things in smaller groups first. So once again, it's experience from having done it before."*

Time Management

> *"At this point, I try to look at people to understand how they balance work and family, making the most of time at work."*

Due to the hectic nature of working on projects, which have deadlines that have to be adhered to, the consultant must learn how to concentrate on things that are priority rather than getting bogged down in the work. This is something that they learn over time, as they gain experience since they very often feel overwhelmed in the beginning, before they understand how things really work. Also, it's an important issue because if they are over stressed at their jobs even

their family lives can suffer. As one consultant puts it, they learn to deal with these issues as they go along:

"It's always difficult when you have so many projects like we do, to have time to schedule training. But, it also depends on how much you want to do the training so when drawing up our yearly plan we try to put down the training courses that we need but we don't set aside the time for it. We try to see when we have time due to our schedule. My St. Charles training came about like this."

3.4 CLUSTER 3 – CONCEPTUAL COMPETENCIES (Problem Solving)

Consultants, when referring to this cluster, see competency as developing expertise, analytical skills and creativity. This cluster stresses the need for consultants to develop unspecified knowledge and skills that are used for attaining work related objectives. While certain roles are given to consultants that possess specialized knowledge, for example IT skills, in general they have to learn a lot from a multitude of industries that are new and unusual to them. This requires the consultant to constantly read and acquire knowledge in order to be current with issues surrounding the area that they find themselves in, as well as learn from individuals with more experience. Previous skills and knowledge learned on past projects can also be used on occasion but it is very often that they find themselves in unfamiliar territory.

The consultants, when reflecting on this cluster, cannot specifically say what competence they need to do the job but it depends primarily on what conclusions they draw using their analytical skills.

"You get more used to working in different projects as you go along. You deepen your functional knowledge within the different areas, not so much from reading and studying, but it's your own critical thinking of what may and may not work in this situation. Within the activity of finding a solution you really develop your own thinking. Building on the unique understanding of the client's situation you develop analytical skills."

Developing Expertise

In order to realize good results when tackling a problem the consultant uses knowledge gained from previous assignments, but also has to build a real understanding of the particular area at hand. The consultant's "product" that he brings to the client is intangible and based specifically on knowledge built from engaging in multiple projects and finding solutions to specific problems. When a consultancy firm is engaged to address problems or shortcomings that may exist in a company, they refer back to prior experience and use that as a strong point while they develop further expertise in the new area.

"The greatest challenge for me as a consultant is to keep up with the pace. Always learn faster than the client does, because when you go to a project, sometimes you have experience from that industry but most of the time you don't. So, basically, when you go into a project with a new client you need to learn as much as possible from their environment in a very short time, otherwise they won't hire. They are really paying for our expertise."

Consultants are at an added advantage when they enter a project because they are not only limited to what is apparent in the situation that exists at a particular company. Individuals that work with the client company are so busy dealing

with the daily issues involved in running the business that they do not have the time nor inclination to research and introduce different, unfamiliar strategies. This is the consultants trump card, since they automatically come with different possibilities relating back to experiences gained on other projects within that industry and even cross industry.

We believe that developing this competency is extremely important to the consultant because this is the sphere within which they generate the ideas that they use to resolve issues faced by their client. Also, it tends to develop the consultant's knowledge base as well as producing different possibilities for the implementation of those ideas. We think this next statement by a consultant illustrates the formative nature of developing expertise:

> *"Your brain is the most important tool and needs to be continuously developed so even if the foundation is there for its development, there are still a lot of things that one needs to do."*

This competency is not a result of the consultant's knowledge in a specific field, but is derived from exposure to may different areas and problems. It's something that is not developed through training, but is the result of experiences that the individual encounters.

Analytical Skills

In order for the consultant to analyze the situation when they come into a new project, they have to objectively assess the position of the company and, if possible, use knowledge that they acquired from other projects to address it. The consultants are brought into the project with certain skills as strong points and after reviewing the situation, they come to an understanding of how they

can fit those skills into the new situation in a way that makes sense and achieves their client's objectives.

> *"When you come into a new situation, you know exactly what kind of activities you need to do and what info you need. Some of that info I know from experience what I need, while other info you have to sit down and see what is the problem and what is needed to solve it. "*

The solutions that the consultant brings to a project is not only a result of their training and experience but also an accumulation of knowledge that exists within Andersen Consulting and is found in databases and understood by colleagues that have been in similar situations. The consultant from such a major firm is seen as a representative of that accumulated knowledge since he is part of the system and automatically should have access to it.

> *"When I go into a project, I am not from their company. I have a different background and environment at Andersen. I can analyze their problem from a different point of view. I don't get into the detailed information."*

Creativity

This competence, in a sense, is a result of the two competencies that came before it. The creative element can be brought to the job as a result of the expertise and analytical skills that are developed through the work. With that exposure, the consultant can use his own deductive ability to seek out solutions that can be applied favorably to the task that they are responsible for.

"What I appreciate the most myself as competence is creativity and the ability to see new solutions coming from continual solutions to different industries, create new solutions in the industry that you are in."

This is probably the main reason that a client engages a consultancy firm since they have to bring their operations abreast with the latest developments, as well as encourage new developments.

"The client expects the consultant to bring experience from similar situations in competitive organizations, in organizations under the same industry or value chain or even cross industry. I believe also that he kind of expects you to be on top of things, some developments, leadership side of it, bringing new thoughts. What are the trends? Where are things going? Do you have any new ideas on this? The client expects you to be creative; not only building on previous experience and doing copy paste solutions but, actually, together with the client given their specific situation, be creative and find new solutions."

3.5 SUMMARY

There are three different clusters of essential competencies, which are perceived by consultants at Andersen Consulting as a must. They have been identified as the Interpersonal, Functional and Conceptual Competencies.

The Interpersonal Cluster consists of competencies that have to do with interactions between people. The first competency is networking, which basically is the capacity for building reliable relations with interested parties through work, (i.e. peers, clients, etc). The second is "knowledge sharing", which can be understood as the transfer of knowledge and experiences within

one's network. The third competency involves "people skills", which means that the consultants have to be adept at handling the issues that arise on their job. It can be characterized by such words as sensitivity, empathy, understanding, etc. The fourth, somewhat less emphasized competency is "versatility", which means that the consultants have to be able to relate to people at all levels of organizations. The fifth competency is "being a team player", which may have something in common with people skills but is more concerned with the day to day issues that arise on the project: it takes a little bit more effort to be consistent on a daily basis. The sixth competencies "Leadership and communication" were lumped together by the consultants probably because there seems to be a course with the same title: anyway these competencies are needed in order to actualize the work. The last competency within this cluster is "understanding politics", which means that the consultants have to be adept at reading situations that exist at the different firms.

The Functional Cluster has to do with competencies that are more directly related to work processes and tasks. The first competency in this group is developing subject-related skills and involves the consultants' familiarity with new developments in their area. The second concerns time management and, basically, has to do with the consultants finding time from their busy schedules to take care of other things, (i.e. family, training, etc). The third competency has to do with coordinating tasks. The consultants are given individual tasks to perform and they have make sure that their efforts are in sync with the groups'.

The Conceptual Cluster consists of competencies that can be considered of a higher order and are difficult for the consultants to describe objectively. The first competency involves analytical skills, which the consultant needs in order to assess situations that exist on projects that they are assigned to. The second is developing expertise, which in a sense is a combination of skills related to

more than just their area of concentration. It is built through having an understanding of issues in general. The last identified competency in this cluster is creativity, which is a combination of the first two; the consultant finds new solutions to existing problems.

3.6 CONCLUSION

By identifying the competencies essential for carrying out their work, the consultants are confirming its influence on their learning process. In practically every interview, the same competencies were mentioned. Every consultant had what they considered to be their strong points, but they also talked about competencies that they lacked and needed to develop. This awareness means that they are consciously trying to improve those areas that they feel inadequate in. This involves a determined effort on the part of the consultant. However, since the training courses that are available at the junior level are basic and standard, they feel that having more say in what they did would make a significant difference to their development.

The competencies that have been identified seem to naturally fit with the two conceptions of learning identified in the first analysis. The functional competencies are in line with Conception A (learning from tasks) and the interpersonal competencies also correspond with Conception B. In order to clarify these findings, we present the following graph:
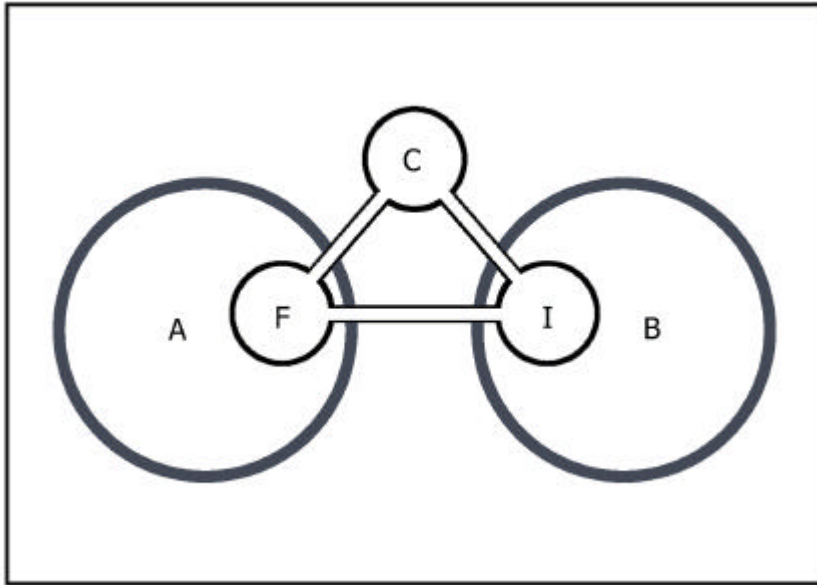
Figure 3.2: Influence of competencies on the learning process

Source: Own Model

The Conceptual Competencies, we believe, can not be attributed to a particular learning conception; as described earlier they are on a different level. It is not our intention to attribute a cluster of competencies solely to a conception, thus the open lines connecting them. The consultants are in need of accessing all these competencies but, it seems that the cluster within their conception is obviously their forte.

Organizational theorists C. K. Prahalad and Gary Hamel (1990) suggest that an organization is defined in terms of its "core competencies". The constellations of community of practice that embody these competencies are what gives an organization its identity, in terms of what it knows how to do as an organization (Snyder 1996). What the organization knows can only be reflected through its people, so, it seems reasonable to assume that essential competencies can be understood as influencing the learning process.

For learning in practice to be possible an experience of meaning must be in interaction with a regime of competence. Although experience and competence are both constituents of learning – and thus of knowing – they do not determine each other. They may be out of alignment in either direction. The process of learning is a two-way interaction: competence may drive experience and likewise, experience may drive competence (Wenger).

According to Wenger, this interaction of experience and competence is crucial to the evolution of practice. In it lies the potential for a transformation of both experience and competence, and thus for learning, individually and collectively. In fact learning – taken to be a transformation of knowing – can be characterized as a change in the alignment between experience and competence, whichever of the two takes the lead in causing a realignment at any given moment.

According to Wenger, when we are with a community of practice as a full member, we are in familiar territory. We can handle ourselves competently. We experience competence and we are recognized as competent. We know how to engage with others. We understand why they do what they do because we understand the enterprise to which participants are accountable. Moreover, we share the resources they use to communicate and go about their activities.

4. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was not to find out how things are, but rather how the consultants discuss, how they look upon it and how they experience certain things, in this case learning. It is more like a subjective reality. From the data collected, we have analyzed and presented the consultants' subjective views on learning and the processes that facilitated this learning at Andersen Consulting. Also important to the issue of learning is their perception of what "competence" means to them. This is important because understanding what constitutes aspects of competence in accomplishing work provides the foundation for managerial activities, which aim to develop human competence. Also important to the issue of learning is what the consultants think of training and development programs provided by AC. Since we were unable to get an official view of this, we assumed that the formal learning structures provided by the firm represents their view of how their employees learn and develop.

In our data the employees voiced dissatisfaction with the formal learning structures in terms of inducing learning that is needed to perform their jobs. They clearly do not see the benefits from training programs. The training that they believe they need in order to perform their jobs is not available to them when they believe they need them. They want training programs tailor-made for specific areas and expertise. They need more time to attend training programs of their choice. They want to listened to in relation to training, especially when they are new.

There is a relationship between what the consultants expressed as competence and how they learned these competencies. For example, the majority of the consultants described competence, as soft skills needed to perform their job, the so-called "people skills". These skills they expressed, were learnt on the

job, from working with people. There was not a single mention of training being particularly useful in attaining these skills. Theories about how people learn in organizations are many and they are different in many respects. The social perspective on organizational learning was very helpful in understanding the consultant's experience, but they fall short in terms of finding a balance between the individual action part of learning and organization's structure. At AC, for example, the training and development programs they provide contributes immensely to individual learning, whether they acknowledge it or not, for example, training at St. Charles is not considered useful by the consultants. They meet a lot of people, with different experiences from different works of life. Thus, one can conclude that St. Charles facilitates some kind of social learning, in particular, learning form people.

One of the most important lessons that we have learnt is that it is very difficult to get people to talk about their experiences, especially if it includes reflecting back on reality. It was very interesting to see brilliant minds struggling to reflect back on experiences that should not be forgettable. For these consultants talking to us was like talking to a client, it was hard for them to admit that they have learnt or that they need to learn. It was as if they think it would make them vulnerable if they talk about it to people that are not part of their circle. Getting subjective experiences from them was very difficult. They found it a strain to talk about their personal experience. Describing a personal experience the consultants constantly referred to the company, their team and their colleagues. They should great contempt for general questions, which did not make our task any easier.

Nevertheless, through this thesis, we discovered that there are two qualitatively distinct conceptions of learning amongst junior consultants at Andersen Consulting. These two conceptions are learning from tasks and learning from

people. Of the nine consultants interviewed, five could be placed in Conception A (learning from tasks) and four fit in Conception B (learning from people).

The variations found in the two conceptions are a direct result of the way the individuals learn. The consultants in Conception A realize that in order to be efficient at their jobs, they need to build expertise in subject matter, which they can bring to the different projects that they participate in. The consultants in Conception B realize that their business is dependent on the abilities of people to go into different projects and sell ideas to the client. In general, the consultants realize that their strong points complement each other and in working together they are better prepared to deal with any eventuality.

It seemed like a good idea to look further at what consultants feel they need to learn (competencies) and in so doing, if there is an influence on their learning as a result of them. From this analysis, we were able to identify competencies that the consultants deemed as essential to their efficiency and effectiveness at work. These competencies were then arranged in clusters: Interpersonal, Functional and Conceptual Competencies.

The Interpersonal Cluster consists of competencies that have to do with interactions between people. They include networking, knowledge sharing, people skills, being a team player, leadership/communication, understanding politics, and versatility.

The Functional Cluster has to do with competencies that are more directly related to work processes and tasks. They include subject-related skills, time management and coordinating tasks.

The Conceptual Cluster consists of competencies that can be considered of a higher order and are difficult for the consultants to describe objectively. They include analytical skills, developing expertise and creativity.

After identifying what the consultants considered essential skills, we were able to place them within the framework that was developed for the conceptions of learning. The Functional Cluster seemed to fit naturally into Conception A (learning from tasks) since they supported one another. Likewise the Interpersonal Cluster corresponds completely with Conception B (learning from people). By making this correlation, it seems to clarify what consultants can view as their strong points while taking into consideration what they lacked by making reference to the other sphere. It can not be said that the clusters placed in each conception are unique to that particular group, only that it is most likely can be perceived as their forte. Conceptual Competencies, being more subjective in nature do not seem to fall into either of the learning conceptions but are nevertheless accessed by all the consultants. Through this matching process, we hope that it has become clear that competencies do influence the learning process of these consultants.

Another finding that came about from this research is that Andersen Consulting has official structures in place that can be understood as influencing both conceptions of learning. The training programs, in principle correspond neatly with Conception A but are found to be less effective for consultants at the level of this study. Also the project feedback and counselor program, which can be placed in Conception B, are reflecting upon the actual work that the consultant has done. So, it seems reasonable to assume that these structures can also be seen as contributing to an integrative learning

Based on the findings in this study, we have developed the following graph to illustrate the learning process as interpreted:
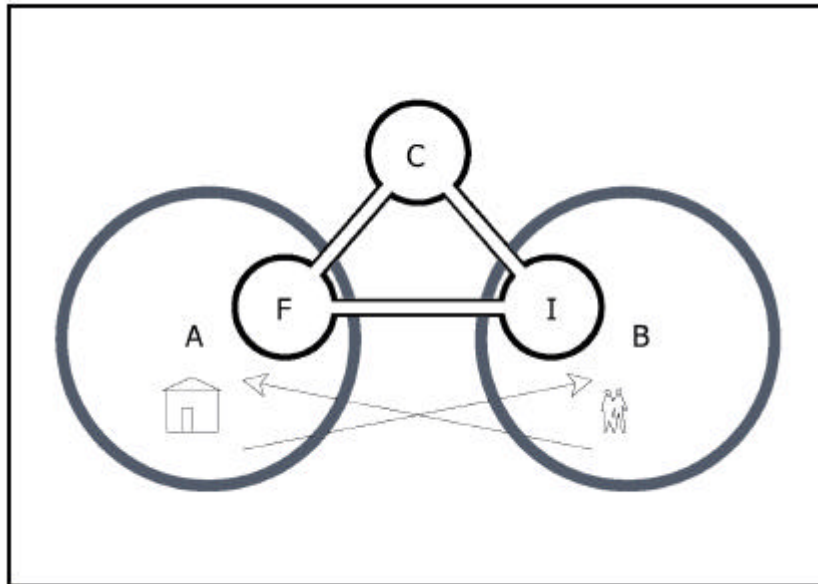

Figure 4.1: Integrated learning process

Source: Own Model

As a result of the findings in this thesis, we can recommend that Andersen Consulting pays more attention to the needs of their junior consultants. When we say this, it is in reference to the kind of courses that they do. The introductory courses, while being beneficial for building a wider network do not seem to be of much practical use. It is more likely that the consultants will gain greater benefit from courses that address their shortcomings. In the case of consultants within Conception A, courses that deal with developing interpersonal abilities, i.e. leadership, communication, etc. could be beneficial. While in the case of consultants within Conception B, courses that are area specific will provide more depth in subject matter.

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APPENDIX 1

<u>Sample letter for Interviewees</u>

As you know from a communication sent out by ….., we are working with Andersen Consulting in order to conduct a research project geared towards understanding how consultants learn on the job. We will also develop a competency model that will pinpoint and refine the critical skills and behaviors needed to succeed as a consultant; basically before the level of manager. We are currently attending Handels Högskola in Göteborg and this project is the focus of our Msc. thesis.

Generally speaking, the purpose of this project is to gain a better understanding of the nature of the work, the issues that are faced day to day, and specific behaviors that are urged by the consultants. From the information that we gather, we hope to be able to give the management at Andersen Consulting KB an alternative view concerning competency development. Unlike the system in place, this exercise is designed to take from the consultants' personal views, likewise experiences.

Interviews will be scheduled in face to face meetings in order to address the issues relevant to this project. The interview will take about 60 – 90 minutes of your time, and your individual responses will be kept confidential. Your input will be combined with input from other participants in this effort. The questions posed in the interview are rather open and designed to explore the interviewees personal development, that has occurred while in the employ of Andersen Consulting.

APPENDIX 2

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Nature of the work

1. What assists you the most in your development at Andersen Consulting?

2. What factors contribute to your learning on the job?

3. What issues and challenges do you face day to day?

4. In order to get your job done, which functions or departments do you need to involve and work closely with?

Work related competencies

1. Describe a problem you worked on that was resolved or handled successfully. What did   you do? Why?

2. Describe a problem you worked on that was handled unsuccessfully or poorly. What did you do? Why?

3. Describe one of the most frustrating problems or situations that you have encountered. What happened? How did you resolve it?

4. Provide an example of something you have done that exemplifies a positive contribution of an effective consultant.

5. What are some of the factors that limit success for people in your position?

6. What are some of the behaviors or skills currently being used by consultants that must be maintained to be successful? Why?

7. What are some of the behaviors or skills that need to be changed and/or that are currently weak? Why? How can they be enhanced?

8. What difficulties did you have to overcome in order to be effective at your job?

9. Would it be possible for someone just joining the company to take on your current role? If no, why not?