

## **Management consultancy's role in delivering lasting [triple bottom line] benefits**

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This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

### **Citation:**

REID, Iain, MATTHIAS, Olga and BAMFORD, David (2019). Management consultancy's role in delivering lasting [triple bottom line] benefits. Production planning and control. [Article]

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## **Management Consultancy's role in delivering lasting [Triple Bottom Line] benefits**

*Management consultants have become ubiquitous in helping improve organisational performance. This paper presents an investigation of the impact of their interventions on organisational sustainability and growth through the performance improvement work carried out for and with their clients. The paper presents the findings of a questionnaire survey of 440 respondents from 206 countries; 197 of respondents were Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs), 243 from large organisations. There is a particular focus on knowledge transfer in terms of urgency and impact of the work with regard to the extent to which consulting interventions in SMEs, as well as large multinational corporations, embed long-term sustainability practices.*

Keywords: intervention, sustainability, delivering 3BL performance

### **1. Introduction**

Modern capitalism, from which production and service systems evolved, has resulted in economic progress and prosperous societies. To satisfy demand and to mitigate the trade-offs required in balancing the differing priorities, organisations have implemented various operational improvement initiatives, beginning with Scientific Management (Taylor 1911). Since Taylor, hundreds of tools and techniques have been developed. The key organisational performance objectives of quality, dependability, speed and cost (Ferdows and De Meyer 1990) have driven the adoption of improvement programmes as companies seek long-term improvements to maintain sustainable competitive advantage.

This paper considers how organisations have dealt with demands which now also require achieving sustainable and operationally excellent production and service systems to satisfy customer, shareholder, social and environmental demands. The research presented demonstrates the impact of interventions by management consultants on organisations' strategic performance and how consultants help build long-term resilience and sustainability, thus influencing organisational growth and sustainability

through the performance improvement work that they carry out for and with their clients.

A number of key themes require exploration in order to offer a cohesive perspective regarding demands on businesses and management's responses to these, on the assumption that overall organisational performance objectives remain as already stated. The current swathe of available operational improvement programmes includes business excellence models, Lean Management, Six Sigma, Total Quality Management and Business Process Engineering (Panizzolo et al. 2012; Adebajo et al. 2015; Tickle et al. 2015). Whilst linked to Ferdows and De Meyer's contention, such programmes mainly focus on functional rather than organisational improvement, seemingly therefore highlighting short-term improvement in favour of sustained long-term capacity development (Done et al. 2011).

Additionally, managers provide a cohesive organisational response to the myriad emergent operational pressures, not least of which are technological and environmental dimensions which have changed the operations landscape. As organisations deal with these issues, management attention has broadened not only to respond to immediate challenges but also to try and ensure lasting improvement can be embedded within their organisations (Ates and Bititci 2011; Chakravorty and Hales 2016). This has led managers to take into account a number of additional concepts alongside the 'traditional' performance improvement techniques. For instance, organisations have explored ways of learning in order to create better results (Argyris 1999; Li and Rajagopalan 2008; Breslin and Jones 2012; Dooley et al. 2013; Calvard 2016; Schumacher and Scherzinger 2016). This has led to the consideration of an organisation's ability to absorb learning. Absorptive capacity influences how much new information can be assimilated and applied to commercial ends (Cohen and

Levinthal 1990; Sun and Anderson 2010; Tavani et al. 2013; Darlington et al. 2016). Networks are used increasingly for innovation and to enhance practice (Alexander and Childe 2013; Dooley et al. 2013; Gubbins and Dooley 2014). Networks are also used in changing the nature of supply chain relationships (Bateman 2005; Bhattacharya et al. 2014; Marshall et al. 2015; Wilhelm et al. 2016; Wu and Barnes 2016). Much of this has been achieved through working with external advisors, who have become ubiquitous in their supporting role (Wright et al. 2012; Harvey 2016; Ryan and O'Malley 2016; Zhang et al. 2016).

How this plethora of options for the management of operations has led to the embedded use of management consultants, is explored and presented in this paper. This paper considers how much impact external intervention has on internal process improvement and how it influences the delivery of growth and the Triple Bottom Line (3BL).

## **2. Literature Review**

The first step in exploring the role of management consultancy in delivering lasting 3BL benefits for organisations was to carry out a systematic literature review, based on the reasons for embarking upon improvement programmes and their required outcomes. As such these keywords were used as search terms to conduct a systematic literature review (SLR), as advocated by Tranfield et al. (2003). The review method was based on Moxham (2014), whereby search strings were used to identify relevant works from citation databases, and are shown in Table 1.

Strategic Literature Review – Search Strings		
Business Improvement	Operational Improvement	Management Innovation
Management Consultancy	Management Consultancy Interventions	Innovation Management
Business lifecycles	Lifecycles of organisations	Sustainability
Triple Bottom Line	Environmental regulation and Management Consultancy	Sustainable Manufacturing and consultancy interventions
SMEs	Impact	

**Table 1: Development of Search Strings**

To ensure maximum coverage the search strings were used with Emerald, ProQuest (including IBI/Inform) and Business Source Complete databases. Within ProQuest all sub-databases (i.e. ABI/INFORM Global and ABI/ INFORM Archive Complete) were selected; they were not date-range limited. The searches were for peer-reviewed journals only. The search results identified 1,675 articles, of which 7753 were duplicates. The final count is shown in Table 2.

Theme	Abstract	Abstract	No. of Journals
Triple Bottom Line	Sustainability		328
Management Consultancy	Impact		181
Triple Bottom Line	Impact		137
Triple Bottom Line	Sustainability	Impact	108
Management Consultancy	SMEs		33
Triple Bottom Line	SMEs		4
Consultancy	SMEs	Sustainability	2

**Table 2: Number of relevant studies by search term**

Echoing Junior and Filho (2012), it was found that only two papers supported the research idea, Witjes et al. (2017) and Daub and Scherrer (2009), and they did so only partially. This underlined not only that more practical research is needed but also that a classic literature search was required.

Organisations have adopted multiple improvement tools and techniques in order to be able to better respond to pressures on performance, grow their business and increase profitability (Adebanjo et al. 2010; Adebanjo et al. 2015; Tickle et al. 2015).

Research suggests long-term capacity development and more sustainable improvement happens when change and performance initiatives are carried out with external input (Done et al. 2011; Tickle et al. 2016). In recent years, broader consideration has been given to the triggers of improvement and the factors which make improvement stick, particularly to internal and external relationships, supply chains, knowledge creation and management, learning, innovation and culture as vital contributors to the long term sustainability of the organisation (Fugate et al. 2009; Ates and Bititci 2011; Anderson and Parker 2013; Hu et al. 2016; Tippmann et al. 2017).

### ***2.1 Triggers for change***

The trigger for any kind of change programme, be it externally or internally driven, emanates from a pressure to deliver, to perform and to be efficient. Regulation is the main external driver for performance improvement (Matthias 2013). It is a prolific source of change in every aspect of business, from workplace pensions to carbon emission targets. Internal drivers emerge from not achieving targets, a business problem which results in a financial gap, or the conception of a new initiative. Frequently, internal drivers arise as a corollary to regulatory-driven change as new ways of working impact throughout the organisation.

In the world of operations management, an integrated and efficient supply chain was seen as a way of potentially minimising monetary risks and increasing profits, thereby creating the conditions for a sustainable business (Chopra and Meindl 2007). Additional changes in the business environment generally have made environmental and corporate social responsibility factors more prominent, and a more integrative approach to operations management has been developed (Angell and Klassen 1999). This general thrust and the years of work on improvement initiatives of all kinds, as

already discussed, aligns closely with why organisations use consultants and the bulk of the work that consulting firms do, shown in Figure 1.

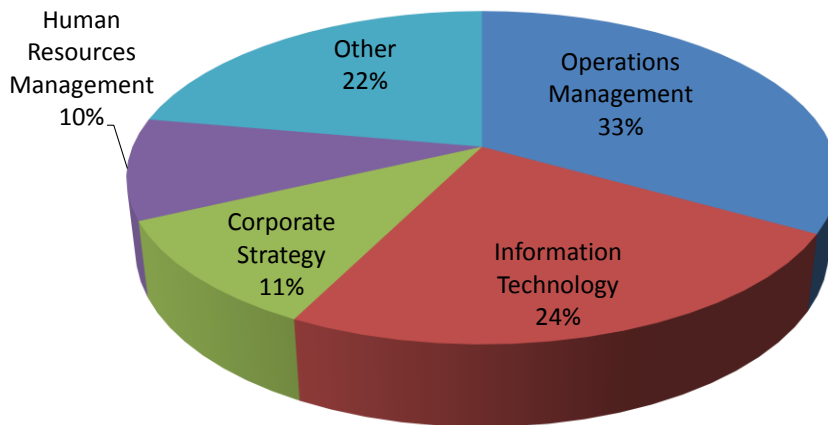


Figure 1: Breakdown of turnover by service line (Datamonitor 2016)

Organisations spend the most on Operations Management and IT, showing a continued focus on dealing with immediate, goal-driven, operational/business challenges.

## 2.2 *Internal Pressures, External Capacity and Capability*

Figure 1 highlights the nature of management consultants' work. Table 3 outlines why businesses hire consultants. The reasons hinge upon capability and/or capacity requirements, resulting from the reflection and decision-making noted by Reid et al. (2013). Capability involves specialist skills and knowledge of proprietary methodologies, considered an integral part of a consultant's expertise. Capacity is an issue, as regulatory demands usually require changes to be implemented by a certain deadline and organisations need to prioritise achieving these while still carrying out normal business activities.

Reason	Definition
Expertise	looking for knowledge they do not possess, be it “knowing-how” or “knowing-what”
Externality	looking for an external perspective, be it geography or industry
Extension	looking for an injection of extra resource
Endorsement	looking for a decision to be legitimised or de-personalised

**Table 3: Why companies buy consultants (Matthias 2013)**

Consultants are thus seen as providing ‘time compression economies’, because speed and quality of delivery are foremost considerations for the majority of projects undertaken.

Researchers have described the capacity and capability aspects as arising from performance reaching a critical point in an evolving situation during a business lifecycle (Phelps et al. 2007; Reid et al. 2013). When businesses encounter operational obstacles, or ‘hot spots’, these can lead to a tipping point, which requires reflection on whether the business will commit additional resources to rebalance the tipping point and create a new level of stability (Gladwell 2000; Phelps et al. 2007; Jones et al. 2008; Reid et al. 2013). Such thinking originates from epidemiological studies and has been widely studied by business and management scholars, especially since a business ‘tipping point’ is a consequence of environmental change (Laughlin 1991; Breslin 2008). In order to navigate beyond the ‘tipping point’, a move away from opportunistic, reactive working to a more deliberate and considered strategy is required (Ates and Bititci 2011).

This means that innovation should be a prime feature, rather than a ‘defensive’ or reactive stance of resolving problems. Firms must have the ability to identify, acquire, and apply new and requisite knowledge to resolve new challenges and succeed in the competitive environment. It is suggested that strategic, operational and leadership capabilities combined with organisational adaptability and access to external



resources enable an organisation to develop business resilience and sustainability (Ates and Bititci 2011; Tickle et al. 2016). Without the ability to tap into external sources of knowledge and help, issues are unlikely to be resolved quickly, and the results are unlikely to be as successful, in terms of longevity and outcome (Bessant et al. 2005b; Phelps et al. 2007; Reid et al. 2013).

A primary way of gaining access to and adopting new knowledge is from external sources (Alexander and Childe 2013). This kind of knowledge brings a new way of operating or performing into the organisation (externality), and provides endorsement to outside bodies (regulators for instance) because of the perceived independence of assurance and guidance provided. This is especially the case where regulatory compliance is required. Consultants bring insight as to what others are doing, providing a ‘bridge’, and help eliminate some aspects of trial and error learning which could otherwise happen (Bessant et al. 2005a; Wright et al. 2012).

The next section explores the key features of consultancy by way of explaining why external intervention helps organisations achieve significantly better results in overall performance and thus being instrumental in delivering 3BL benefits.

### ***2.3 Management Consultants, Innovation, Knowledge and Sustainable Results***

Innovation has been described as ‘the successful exploitation of new ideas’, and is seen as the basis of a competitive economy (Adams et al. 2006). Consultants provide a common source of innovation and interpretive validity of ideas which influences the extent to which ideas can be adapted to multiple agendas (Birkinshaw et al. 2008). Increased visibility of the innovation to competitors or companies in other industries reinforces the innovation further (Birkinshaw and Mol 2006: :86; Reay et al. 2013). Importantly, management innovations thus tend to be specific to the system in which

they were created, achieved indirectly through practice. This often makes them impossible to patent and hard to evaluate (Birkinshaw and Mol 2006; Birkinshaw et al. 2008; Wright et al. 2012). Prahalad and Hamel (1990) and Bradley et al. (2011), amongst others, categorise this as the creation of new stocks of ideas and contexts. Possessing knowledge of new stocks of ideas and the contexts in which they were made makes consultants intrinsically useful to organisations. Such constantly renewable knowledge of the wider business environment and how that is deployed and mediated by external market influences adds interesting perspectives to a management team, embodying strategic knowledge capabilities. This coincides with the Resource Based View (RBV) of an organisation, which states that sustaining a competitive advantage stems from an organisation's internal resources particularly new knowledge of the business environment and how that is deployed and mediated by external market influences (Winter 2003; Helfat et al. 2007; Fugate et al. 2009: :248; Winter 2012; Fu 2013). Not only is this core to much theory and practice, it is also core to the sustainable performance of any organisation.

#### ***2.4 The knowing-doing gap***

As organisations are drawn into the path of external intervention, the challenge is to ascertain if it should be short-term or long-term, and how to best leverage that given the existence of barriers and enablers within companies, be they SMEs (small medium enterprises) or LEs (large enterprises). The opportunity is the ability to manage the intervention steps and potential tipping points when an organisation is faced with a relapse from a unsuccessful intervention. There are no simple formulae for defining the best practice of establishing the need for external support (Ismail et al. 2011). Furthermore, Ismail and Sharifi (2006) identified that the change and uncertainty in SME environments requires companies to become more agile. They provide theories

and practical solutions for smoother operations and more flexible working. In order to survive, businesses are required to focus on process improvement without neglecting people, products, operations, or technology transfer and (Sharifi and Zhang 1999; Ismail and Sharifi 2006; Reid et al. 2013). The importance of such evaluation has long been emphasised in the field of change management because evaluation data may reveal successes and short-term wins, thus encouraging their celebration to provide further motivation to all parties (Kotter 1996).

To understand the internal and external turbulences at the scoping and execution stage, recognise the potential for relapse, and factor in the impact to the 3BL and long-term sustainability it is crucial that organisations manage intervention more successfully. Governance practices, meetings and progress reports provide key performance indicators (KPIs) underpinning 3BL results achievement whilst increasing sustainable intervention and knowledge transfer.

## ***2.5 Learning to make a difference***

Through consultants' client relationship networks, access to, and transfer of, relevant knowledge for sustainable innovation is facilitated (Maister et al. 2000; Ayuso et al. 2006; Prieto and Easterby-Smith 2006; Gubbins and Dooley 2014). The governing mechanism of much relationship behaviour is an implied obligation of reciprocity (Hill et al. 2009; Eckerd et al. 2013). Reciprocity implies a symbiosis, a mutual benefit derived from operating as a virtual enterprise, functioning as a single company co-ordinating knowledge in the quest for operational success and competitive advantage (Bititci et al. 2005; Ebrahim-Khanjari et al. 2012). Reciprocity through coordinative capacity also suggests a psychological contract between the buyer and the supplier (Hill et al. 2009). However, whilst trust can oblige firms to behave with loyalty and conformity to expectations, relationship duration was found to have a significant

negative effect on knowledge transfer, implying that firms share more knowledge early in the relationship (Furusten 2009; Squire et al. 2009). The strength of weak ties is more conducive to knowledge transfer than either long or deep relationships because trust exists but familiarity does not (Dooley et al. 2013; Hu et al. 2016)

This highlights the importance of partner selection, especially when the focal firm is responsible for the environmental performance of the whole supply chain (Marshall et al. 2015; Sarkis and Dhavale 2015; Gopal and Thakkar 2016; Longoni and Cagliano 2016; Oelze et al. 2016; Wu and Barnes 2016; Brewer and Arnette 2017; Zhang et al. 2017). As such, environmental management principles have increasingly been integrated with the decision-making process for the conversion of resources into usable products and services. Initially, such work tended towards proactive pollution prevention, which could give competitive advantage, or reactive pollution control, which had little economic benefit. As environmental awareness became a corporate requirement and technological advancement enabled long-term improvement in environmental performance, organisations found that sustainable practice was becoming embedded.

## ***2.6 Defining best practice***

Consulting services are usually being embedded through client routines, the nature of their processes; and how clients perceive the strength of the relationship with consultants through consultants' responsiveness, not through longevity (Matthias (2013). This disrupts the foundations of the client-consultant relationship, putting customisation at the heart of becoming 'a trusted advisor' (Maister et al., 2000) encompassing the different skills and knowledge required for gathering and demonstrating organisational capability. In order to maximise impact, consultants must exploit the knowledge collectively held within the organization (Matthias (2013).

Management consulting is not standardised, is rarely precise or predictable, and can produce tangible and intangible outcomes (Czerniawska, 2003). O'Mahoney claims that industry growth is due to the fact that consultancy "represents a powerful solution for the institutional transfer of best practice" (2010:46). If he is right, this reinforces the question about how customers find out that remodelling in the image of consultancies is indeed best practice.

### ***2.7 Delivering bottom line impact***

The outcome of designing products, services and delivery systems that limit or reduce negative impacts on the natural environment, using technologies that can also drive down operating costs and close the supply chain loop, is that competitive advantages with unique environmental strategies reduce long-term risks and enhance financial performance (Bhattacharya et al. 2015; Dabhilkar et al. 2016). They particularly discussed how trade-offs and synergistic effects between the 3BL objectives require a contextual response, one which aligns functional competitive priorities with overall organisational competitive strategies.

The underlying rationale is that Consultancy is an intensely interpersonal business whose value proposition is accessing, acquiring, exchanging and creating knowledge using methods and tools different to that of the client but able to interact with client organisations (Richter and Niewiem, 2009). Consultants' market knowledge brings impartial and objective insights into managerial problems which combined with localised client knowledge create the conditions for showing creativity and experience in a specific situation to solve problems and transfer solutions (Goodale et al., 2008; Squire et al., 2009). They are considered in the light of their impact on client satisfaction, inter-organisational behaviour, the formations of alliances and networks and how this affects knowledge transfer and ultimately the TBL. Thus, each is

dependent on the other, varying from some dependence to total interdependence, all the while with consultants acting as intermediaries, creating the ‘bridges’ along which knowledge flows. One of the implications for consultants is that familiarity with the process should free up time for reflection and creativity when developing acts of intervention which have to comply with tight margins and the consequent greater pressure on TBL. The literature findings ascertained that intangible qualities are identifiable and have distinct behaviours attributable to them. Approaching the client problem in a way that resonates with the client helps them recognise a consulting firm’s suitability

## **2.8 *The impact of resources***

Building on this is research adopting a natural resource-based view (NRBV). Miemczyk et al. (2016). For instance explain the importance of new resources in technology, knowledge and relationships and stress the role of dynamic capabilities to constantly address changes in the business environment to renew those strategic resources. Consultants must combine a high degree of training and diagnostic skills to create findings, communication skills to articulate recommendations and interpersonal skills to develop strong, lasting relationships (Matthias, 2013). A summary of the literature findings are summarised in Table 2 highlighting indicative publications, the operational focus, the assumptions underlying each perspective and the co-ordinating mechanisms required.

Table 2. Different Literature Perspectives on Management Consultancy Practices

Management Consultancy	Themes	Frameworks and Models	Authors
Recognition of Need	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Procurement consultancy purchasing</li> <li>Long-term planning process rather than a randomly-appearing issue</li> </ul>		Lonsdale et al., 2017,
Pre-Intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uncovers paradoxes by disrupting existing patterns and structures, providing constructive conflict and learning, and dismantling convergent practices.</li> <li>Process design for delivery and management of consultancy interventions are not necessarily linked to volume</li> <li>Social relations from early in the intervention</li> </ul>	<p>The Service Encounter Triad</p> <p>The Pre-Experience Concept</p>	<p>(Beer, 2001)</p> <p>(Cook et al., 2002:160)</p> <p>Flanagan et al., 2005:381)</p> <p>Maththias, 2013)</p>
Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Annual planning and budgeting process. Through framework agreements and the quotidian through the annual budgeting cycle</li> </ul>	Planning Cycles	Maththias, 2013)
Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Outcome and the process are inseparable and impact the perception of quality and value.</li> <li>Infrastructure provides the organisational context for dynamic capabilities initiatives, just as it permeates much of Operations Management research and practice</li> </ul>	Dynamic capabilities initiatives	<p>(Gronroos, 2007:64).</p> <p>Anand et al. (2009)</p>
Barriers and Enablers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Technical and social competence inseparable</li> <li>Clients know when they need a project to finish and they develop a purchasing and execution timeline accordingly. A Process and a Communication Gap</li> </ul>	Service-Oriented Reference Model	Schein, 2002:24; Giannakis, 2011:352) (Mattias, 2013)
Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shortening timescales also reduces fee income, runs the risk of negatively impacting the flow of the experience.</li> <li>This customer-driven focus directly and positively impacts each client relationship, which is generally close and complex.</li> </ul>	Service Triangle	<p>(Jacobs et al., 2009).</p> <p>(Maththias, 2013)</p>
Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consulting knowledge, contribution is minimal and client satisfaction is likely to be detrimentally impacted</li> <li>Customisation Blueprint- evokes the knowledge evolution cycle and Deming's PDCA cycle. The key challenge of sustainable growth whilst operating in a market where consultancy buyers increasingly exercise their powers of choice and squeeze margins ever lower.</li> </ul>	Customisation Blueprint	<p>(Lu et al., 2010)</p> <p>(Mattias, 2013)</p>

## 2.9 Conceptual Framework

This research builds directly on the work of Flanagan et al. (2005) and Staughton and Johnston (2005) explicitly recognising the complex nature of design and delivery of a pure service in the B2B context of Management Consultancy. The literature review has synthesised the contexts and the need for a conceptual framework for studying intervention, presented in figure 2. This would appear to give credence to the idea of capture the potential tipping points, whilst providing a framework for the better management of external intervention for any given client encounter. This view of the steps of external intervention whilst consistent with Ismail et al., (2011) Interventionist Framework also incorporates the key concepts highlighted in the literature review.

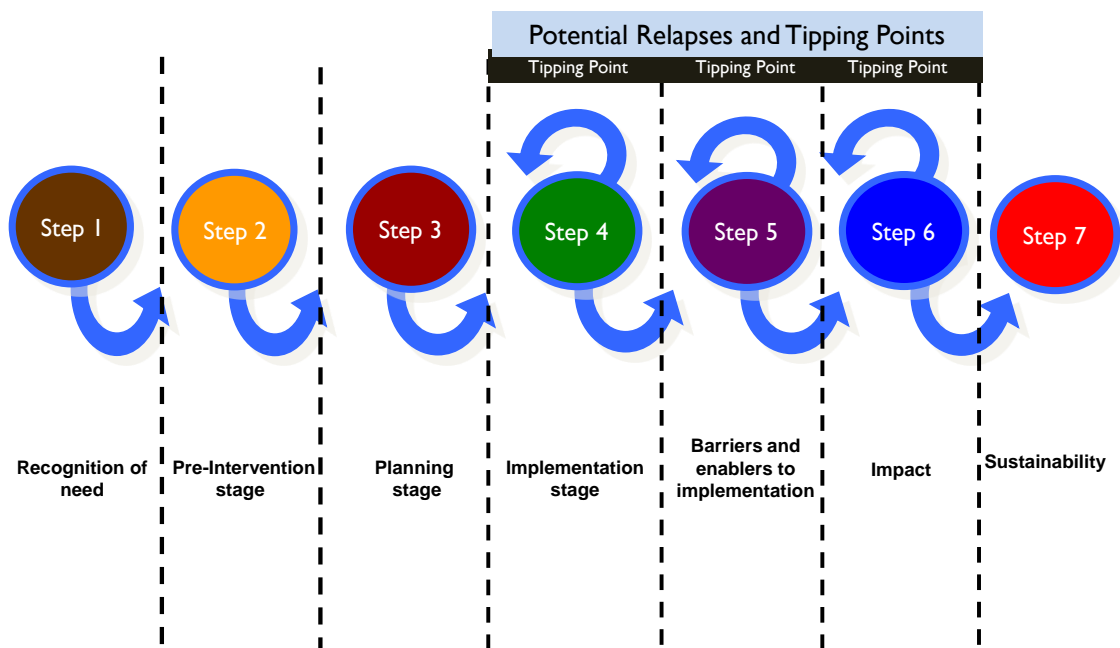


Figure 2: Intervention Steps (Adapted from Reid et al. 2013)

By investigating the intervention steps more precisely and effectively, the authors believe that consultants would be able to better serve their clients. In this way they are also able to enhance both on going relationship and preventing any potential tipping points or relapses when companies seek external parties to support their drive for



change. The literature has examined intervention steps and questioned the impact of theories in practice. The next section presents the research aim and objectives and the design of the survey instrument.

### **3. Methodology**

In the development of business-to-business research Wagner, Lukassen, and Mahlendorf (2010) identified the research design was a critical factor. The research design follows an ‘abductive’ logic Meyer and Lunnay (2013) where the key objective is develop or refine theories and models. As with deductive approaches, abduction moves from theory to data, however there is also emphasis for incorporating insights from the data outside the initial theoretical frame (Longsdale et al, 2017). Within this abductive approach, the collection of qualitative data was deemed appropriate given that the research aims were to develop understanding of how management consultancy’s role in delivering change (Matthias, 2013).

#### ***3.1 Research aim and objectives***

The aim of the study was to analyse the use and impact of external intervention on the size of organization and its 3BL. The objectives that support this aim are as follows:

- i. Identify a range of business improvement initiatives used by different types of organisations
- ii. Compare the knowledge gaps, awareness, use and effectiveness between LEs and SMEs
- iii. Compare the 3BL factors and use of improvement initiatives to understand how they might have evolved and influence the impact on the 3BL
- iv. Compare the roadmap to impact and sustainability of these initiatives between LEs and SMEs

Based on the literature study, the aim and objectives of this study would facilitate the important questions about consultants' direct or indirect impact on a firm's 3BL. The research questions which emerged were:

1. Are organisations taking full advantage of the suite of external intervention that create a firm's stability?
2. Is there a relationship between company size, willingness and ability to adopt business improvement initiatives and impact 3BL?

To achieve the study aim and objectives, it was important to capture opinions from around the world, across a variety of sectors and organisations of different sizes. The most suitable methodology, therefore, was the use of a questionnaire-based survey, which provided access to a large number of geographically-dispersed respondents, promoted response standardisation and better reliability (Denscombe 2007; Adebajo et al. 2015). The questionnaire was straightforward, enabling respondents to understand and interpret the questions clearly, as Denscombe (2007) advises.

### **3.2 Questionnaire design**

Through the key findings of the literature review seven hypotheses about the recognition of need, pre-intervention, planning, implementation, barriers and enablers, impact and sustainability within it were to be tested. The survey items reflected on the literature review's themes: capability, performance, knowledge, intervention, impact and sustainability, incorporating the relevant empirical studies. An initial questionnaire was piloted with 25 manufacturing SMEs involved in a European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) funded programme. Their feedback and suggested list of improvements in the research objectives contributed to the justification for the conceptual framework developed in this empirical study. The pilot questionnaire made full use of the intervention designed by Ismail et al (2011) in terms of the steps shown

in **Error! Reference source not found.** It included questions rating the relative importance of the factors in an ordinal form using a 5-point Likert scale “Agree or Disagree” format. Each question and answer was worded in a parallel manner to assist participants in responding both quickly and accurately. The findings from the initial study concluded that the concept of ‘impact’ was missing (Reid et al, 2013). The initial study reported the voice of SMEs, thus providing the basis to investigate comparisons of value of external management consultancies working with larger organisations. To eliminate potential misunderstanding of the initiatives across countries or cultures, each was briefly described in the questionnaire. Questions relating to nature of the intervention were open. Respondents were expected to answer on a five-level ordinal scale (aware, experienced, knowledgeable, unaware) presented in Figure 6. With respect to the nature of the knowing-doing gaps, respondents were expected to list their five key priorities within the particular themes. Questions relating to impact were closed, permitting users to scope out their priorities, answering on a dichotomous, binary, basis (yes/no). Regarding the extent of impact, respondents were expected to answer on a five-level ordinal scale (very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, neutral, disappointed and very disappointed), reported in Figure 7.

### **3.3 Sampling**

A number of sampling methods were considered such as quota, convenience, simple random, stratified, and multistage (Sekaran and Bougie 2013). Of the various non-probability methods, random sampling was considered the most suitable in terms of approximating the general audience population (Bryman and Bell 2007).

The questionnaire was deployed as a web survey distributed through LinkedIn by the researchers and their associated professional networks, enabling individuals and members to encourage organisations to participate. It was recognised that by using such

networks the organisations completing the survey were likely to be more advanced in the experiences and impact of consultancy and external intervention than if organisations were selected purely randomly. However, it was not possible to determine precisely how many middle managers were aware of or saw the questionnaire, given the approach. The IBM Statistical software package SPSS was used to analyse the data, to identify relationships and address the research questions.

## **Findings**

The research objective was to assess the knowledge gaps, awareness, use and effectiveness between LEs and SMEs as they move towards greater sustainability. A total of 440 respondents completed the survey, from 206 countries. Figure 3 shows the geographical distribution of the respondents with the EU and Africa provided most responses. Furthermore, 197 questionnaires (44 %) were completed by medium-sized organisations (MEs), while the remaining 277 (56 %) were LEs. One organisation omitted its company size. 44 organisations (9 %) were project-based, of which 21 (4%) were SMEs. The respondents also indicated their area of work: 168 (38 %) were in consultancy services, 54 (12 %) in general engineering, 43 (9.8 %) pharmaceutical, and 52 (11.7 %) in food supply chains.

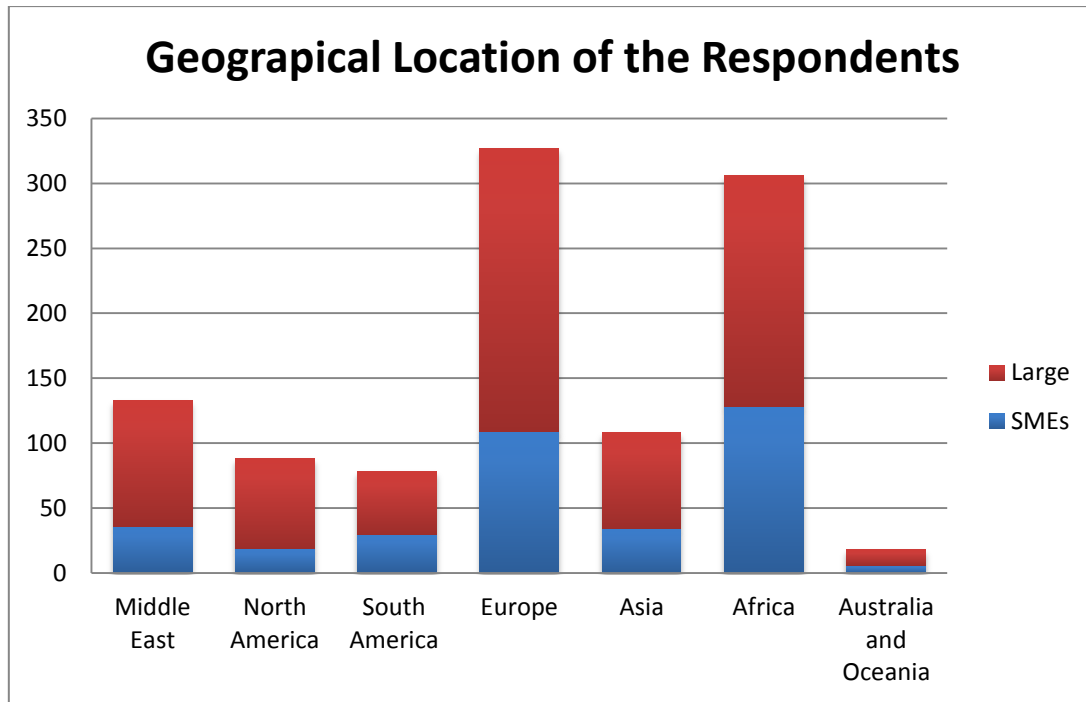


Figure 3: Geographical Location of Respondents

### 3.4 Organisational hotspots prior to external intervention

Figure 4 shows the primary intention the 440 respondents wished to address through the intervention they were about to embark on. The focus on developing a firm's business process remained the key focus for external intervention, reported by 14 % of SMEs, and 27 % of LEs. This compares with response rates of 8 % respectively to issues in regards to information technology.

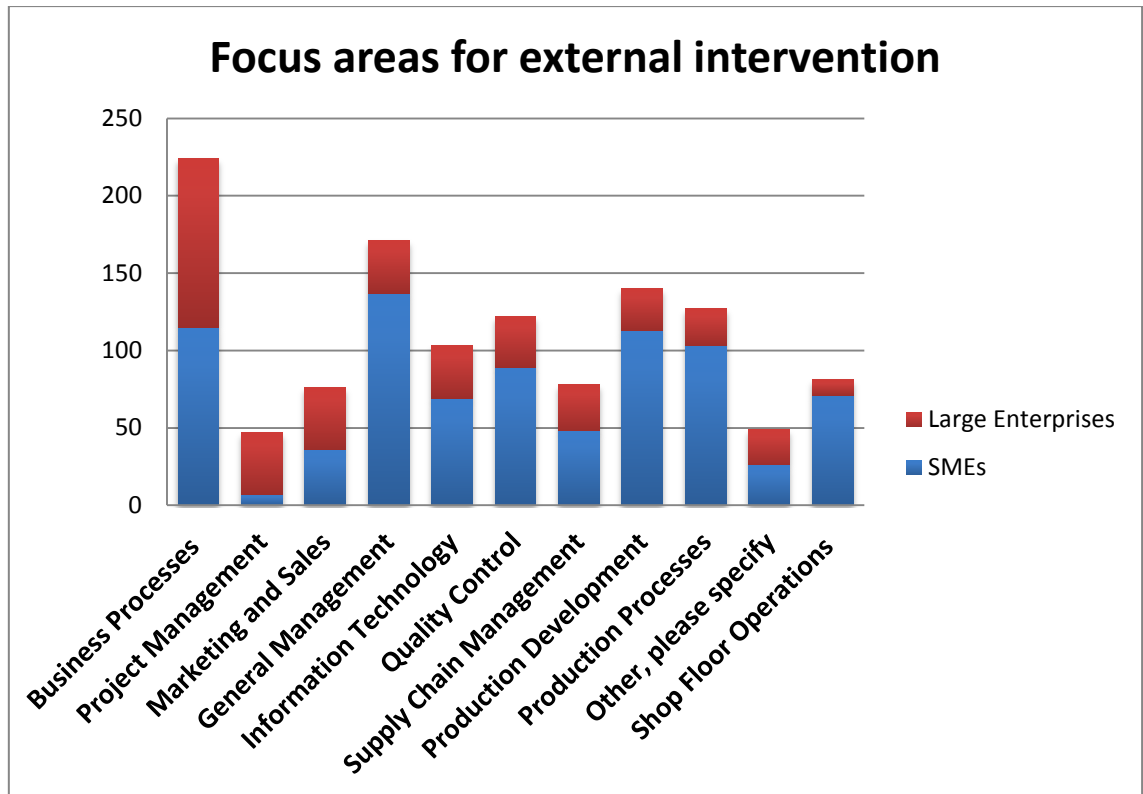


Figure 4: Primary improvement focus of the intervention

Identifying knowledge gaps from initial recognition of need permits potential shortfalls in resources and skills to be pinpointed. Figure 5 presents the resource constraints identified in step 1: the recognition of need. For example, 30% of respondents said change stemmed from unclear/inefficient business processes; 49% highlighted resources issues relating to skills shortages and knowledge gaps. This places experience of best practices below awareness of tools such as business process re-engineering (BPR).

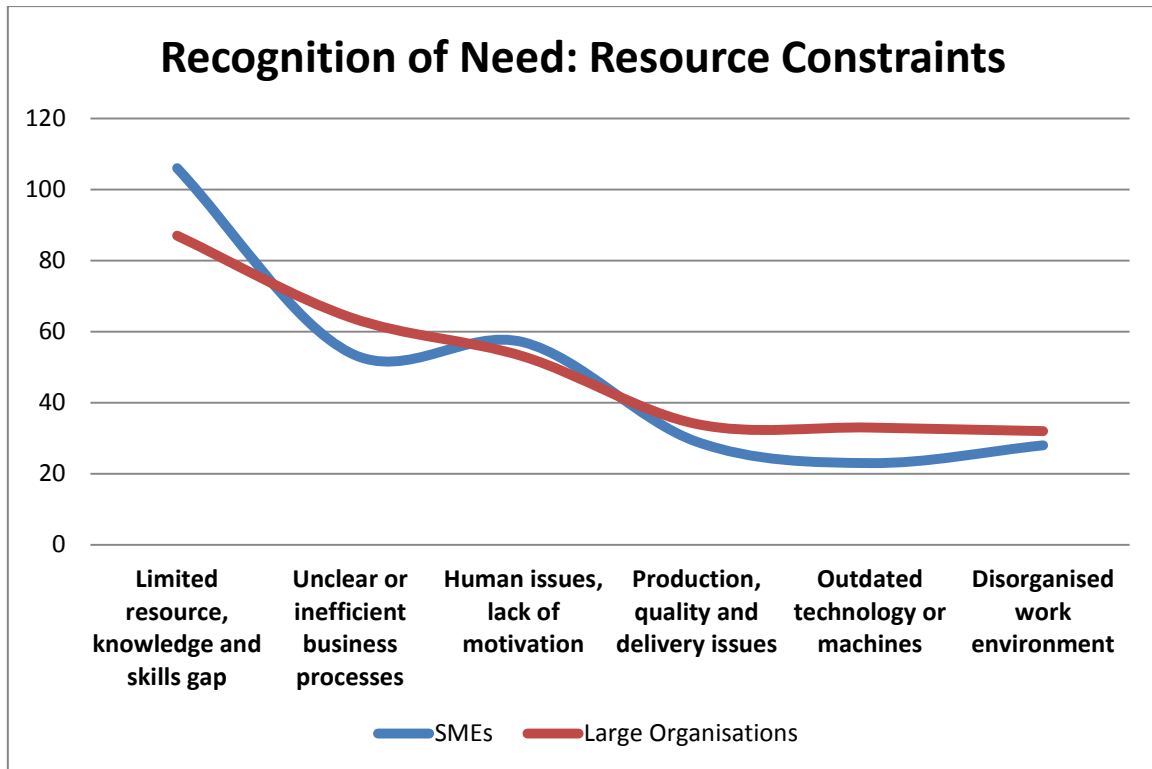


Figure 5: Resource constraints prior to external intervention

The high concern areas are limited knowledge and skills (24 %) with SMEs and (20 %) with LEs, relatively high awareness of best practices (46 %), however only 13 % experienced, 6 % for SMEs and 7 % claiming to be experts. In terms of the initial level of awareness and knowledge in the specific area of the intervention: 15 % (n=67) of SMEs and 15 % (n=68) of LEs declared themselves as 'Knowledgeable', whilst 25 % (n=112) of SMEs and 21 % (n=92) of LEs declared themselves 'Aware' of the tools and techniques supporting the intervention, represented in Figure 6. Furthermore, 45% (N=199) reported the Director as the key driving force behind the intervention.

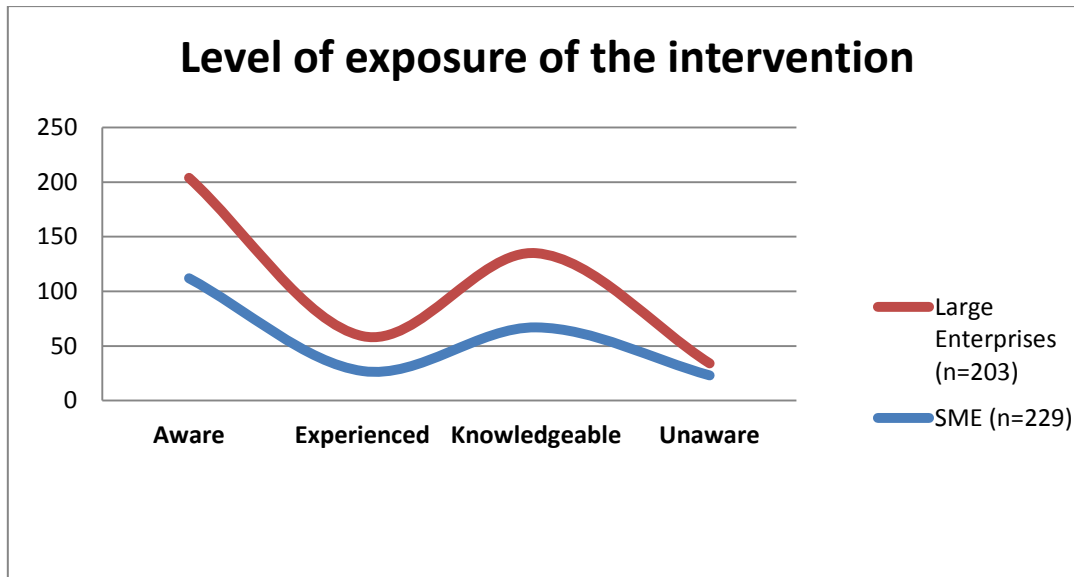


Figure 6: Resource constraints prior to external intervention

Whilst the intervention itself is dynamic and the implementation team focused on progress, resistance to change was apparent. For example 25% (n=124) of the respondents reported internal resistance to seeking external intervention reported issues relating to:

- Organisation culture too difficult to be understood by external resources
- Senior managers were unsure how the external support was going to impact their positions and sphere of authority
- Concern of opening up the company challenges to competitors
- People wanted to learn rather than to be taught how to do things
- Feeling uncomfortable, stressed, potential loss of jobs

Different communication mechanisms are used to launch interventions. For example, 43% (n=190) adopt a 'kick off' meeting', and 18 % (n=82) used a newsletter (with a follow up news letter supporting the progress of the intervention).

The advantage of the seven-step approach shown in Reid et al. (2013) is that it follows a series of logical steps whereby companies are supported through an intervention programme over an extended period. This increases the likelihood that new behaviors become habitual. Another finding was that the number of SMEs in



developing regions able to secure government funding for business growth was extremely low, at only 9% (n=34). Furthermore, in terms of the impact of the intervention, 13 % (n=204) of declared that improved quality was the most significant impact, whilst new innovations 12 percent (n= 25), and reduced costs 15 % (n=31) considered the impact of the external intervention was somewhat disappointing, with only 12 percent, depicted in Figure 7).

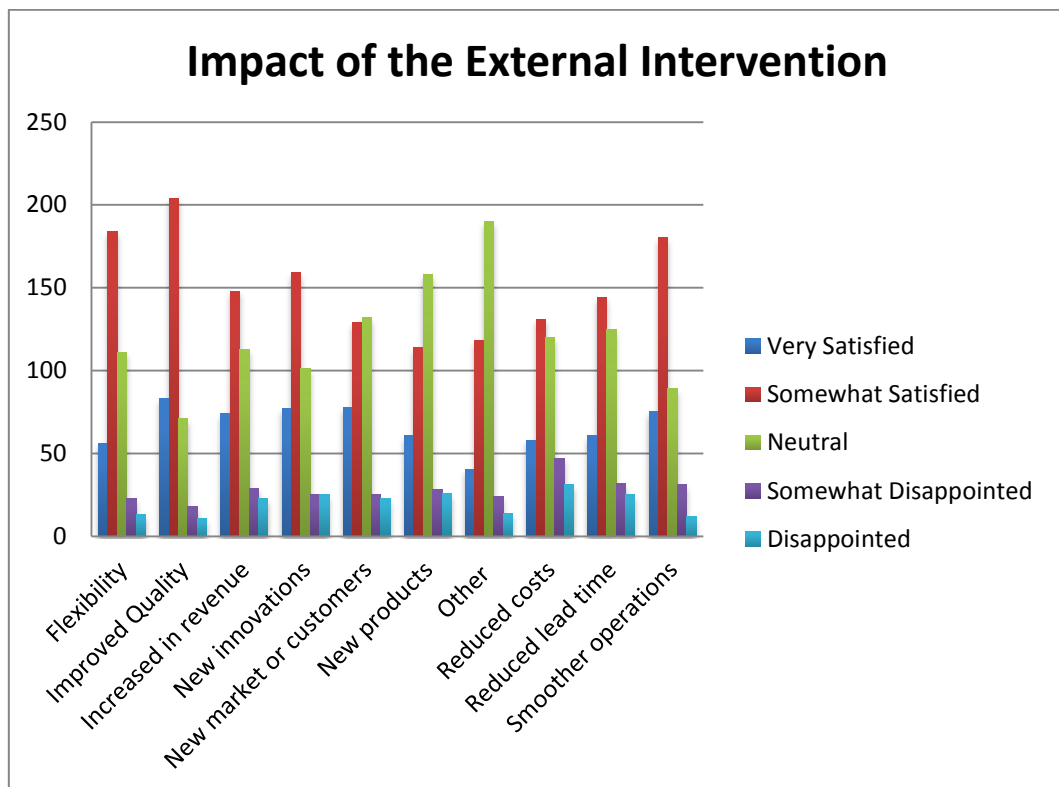


Figure 7: Impact of the intervention

Whilst the intervention has been treated openly the ‘impact’ question often refers to the return on the investment or on the bottom line as a result of the intervention. The analysis revealed that LEs identified predominantly with credibility as their key driver 42 % (n=189), compared to 12 % (n=53) of SMEs. 31 % (n=138) of SMEs benefit from the intervention in relation to the knowing-doing gap rather than financial benefits.

Furthermore, instruments relating to the 3BL were also investigated, such as the drivers in terms of urgency and impact, represented in Figure 8.

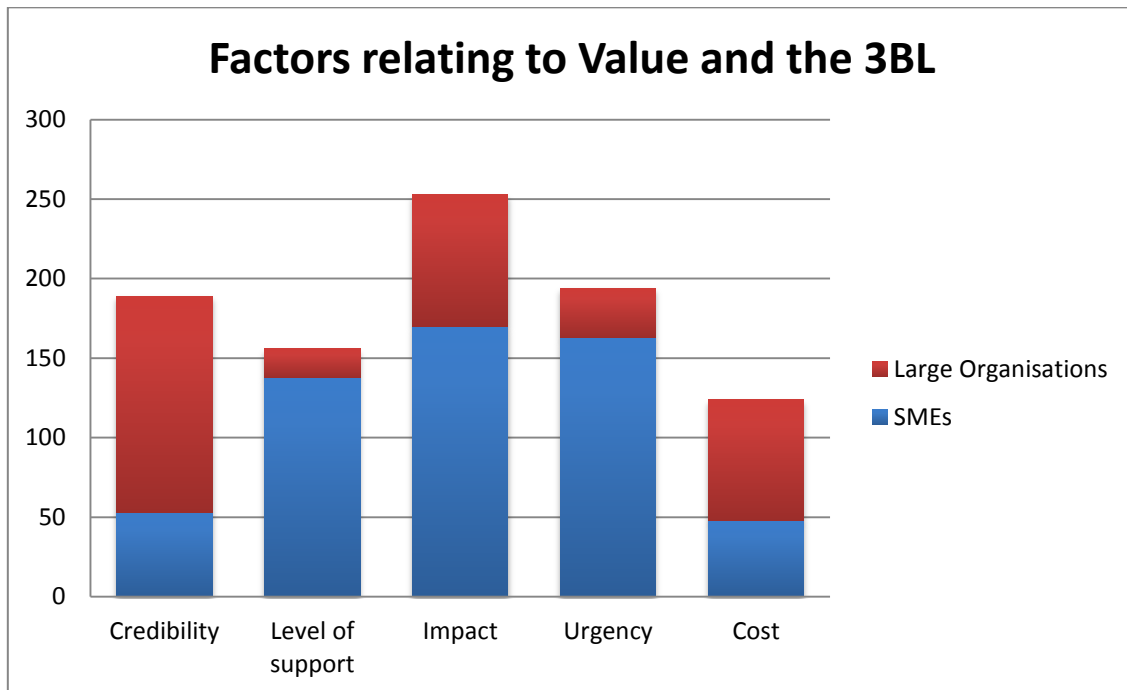


Figure 8: Factors relating to value and the 3BL

#### 4. Discussion

Fundamentally this is a practitioner not a conceptual paper. In order to clearly add value and make a defined contribution the latter part of this paper has been arranged around the aim, objectives and research questions. The aim of the study was to analyse the impact and use of external intervention on the triple bottom line and the size of organization and impact on the 3BL. The objectives that support this aim are: i) Identify a range of business improvement initiatives that can be used by different types of organisations; ii) Compare the knowledge gaps: awareness; use and effectiveness between LEs and SMEs; iii) Compare the 3BL factors and use of improvement initiatives to understand how they might have evolved and influence the impact on the 3BL; iv) Compare the roadmap to impact and sustainability of these initiatives between LEs and SMEs. These aspects will be addressed within the conclusion section of the paper. The research questions, used to provide a clear structure for the discussion are: i)

Are organisations taking full advantage of the suite of initiatives that facilitate improvements in their operational performance? ii) Is there a relationship between company size, willingness and ability to adopt business improvement initiatives and impact 3BL?

***4.1 Are organisations taking full advantage of the suite of external intervention that create a firm's stability?***

Academic literature is awash with a plethora of tools, techniques and frameworks. In addition, multiple consultancies have 'their' way of doing improvement – drawing from their own applied experiences of use in numerous sectors and organisations but also the academic evidence base. Whilst operational improvement programmes includes the likes of business excellence models, Lean Management, Six Sigma, Total Quality Management and Business Process Engineering (Panizzolo et al. 2012; Adebajo et al. 2015; Tickle et al. 2015) evidence from the feedback by the 440 respondents indicates rather limited specific knowledge and skills; only 24 % with SMEs and 20 % with LEs.

According to Furusten (2009) and Squire et al. (2009) relationship duration was also found to have a significant negative effect on knowledge transfer; firms share more knowledge early in the relationship. Dooley et al. (2013) and Hu et al. (2016) go further stating that 'weak' ties are more conducive to knowledge transfer. Marshall et al. (2015), Sarkis and Dhavale (2015), Gopal and Thakkar (2016), Longoni and Cagliano (2016), Oelze et al. (2016), Wu and Barnes (2016), Brewer and Arnette (2017), and Zhang et al. (2017) all highlight the importance of partner selection, especially when the principal organisation is accountable for the environmental performance of the whole supply chain. The survey identified that 30% of the drivers for change stemmed from unclear or inefficient business processes, which leads to what Done et al (2011)

described as short-term development in favour of sustained long-term capability improvement.

Amongst the organisations within this research there does appear to be a higher awareness of best practices, at 46 % of respondents. This suggests it is a requirement to 'be aware' and gels with Bhattacharya et al. (2015) and Dabhilkar et al. (2016) who position that competitive advantages with unique environmental strategies reduce long-term risks and enhance financial performance. Going further, they debate how trade-offs and synergistic effects between the 3BL objectives require a contextual response, aligning functional competitive priorities with organisational competitive strategies. In a related way, Ates and Bititci (2011) and Reid et al. (2013) propose that management consideration has widened to deal with the immediate challenges and to try and ensure improvement can be engrained within their businesses in a durable manner.

Interestingly, within this research only 13 % of respondents claimed to be experts (6 % for SMEs and 7 % for LEs), placing experience of best practices below awareness for specific tools and techniques. This fits with the rather general approach to improvement tools identified by some authors (Adebanjo et al. 2010; Adebanjo et al. 2015; Tickle et al. 2015) who propose that organisations adopt multiple tools and techniques to better respond to pressures on performance, grow their business and increase profitability. The likes of Hu et al. (2016), Oelze et al. (2016), Mishra and Hopkinson (2017) and Tippmann et al. (2017) have given thought to the triggers of improvement and the features which make improvement stick. Ates and Bititci (2011), and Tickle et al. (2016) suggested that strategic, operational and leadership capabilities combined with organisational adaptability and access to external resources enable an organisation to develop business resilience and sustainability. Remarkably, 45% (N=199) of the respondents reported that the senior Director was the key driving force

behind the intervention, which fits with ideas put forward by authors such as Helfat et al. (2007), Fugate et al. (2009), Winter (2012) and Fu (2013) suggesting that the Resource Based View (RBV) sustains a competitive advantage from the organisation's internal resources, particularly new knowledge of the business environment. From the survey leadership was specifically reinforced through adopting a 'kick off' meeting' (43%), followed by newsletter (18 %).

49 % of the respondents highlighted resources issues relating to skills shortages and knowledge gaps, perhaps explaining why organisations spend the most on Operations Management consultancy (Datamonitor 2016) showing a continued focus on dealing with immediate, goal-driven, operational/business challenges. This also fits with organisations exploring ways of learning in order to create better results (Breslin and Jones 2012; Calvard 2016; Schumacher and Scherzinger 2016), specifically using consultants to transfer knowledge, create new ideas and apply 'in context'. All of this suggests that consultants are intrinsically useful to organisations (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990; Bradley et al. 2011), but not according to 25 % of the respondents who reported internal resistance to seeking external intervention. Reasons provided ranged from 'organisation culture too difficult to be understood by external resources' to 'People wanted to learn rather than to be taught how to do things'.

#### ***4.2 Is there a relationship between company size, willingness and ability to adopt business improvement initiatives and impact 3BL?***

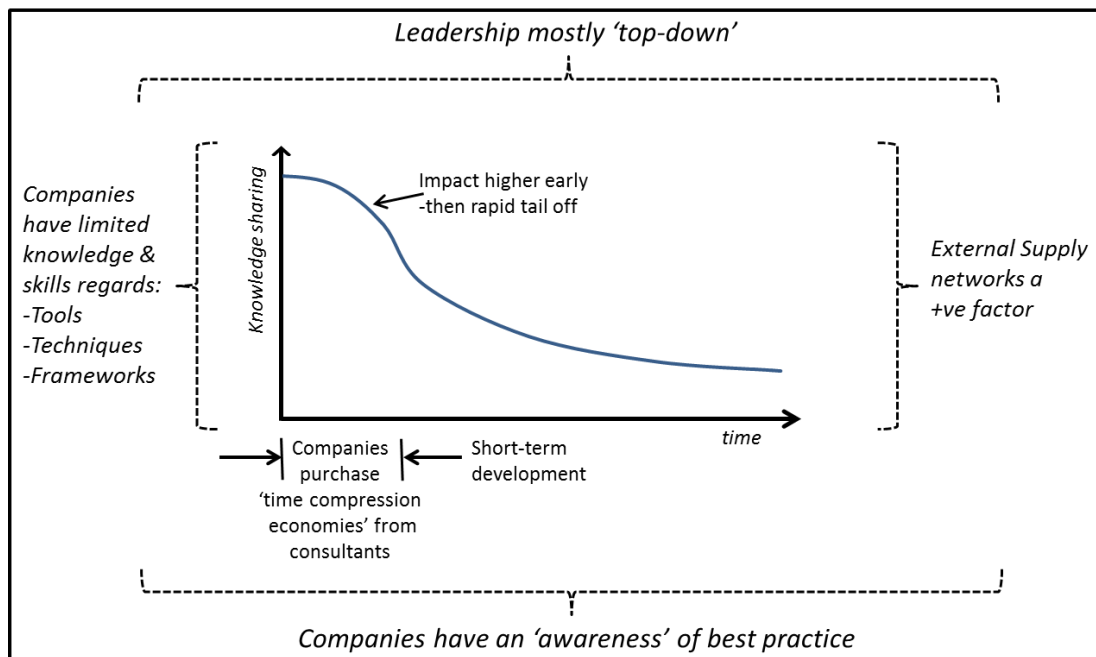
A key finding is that LEs identified predominantly with credibility as their key driver (42 %) compared to only 12 % reported by SMEs; perhaps explained by the ability to afford to pay consultant day rates? Prieto and Easterby-Smith 2006, and Gubbins and Dooley 2014 suggest that buying access through consultants' client relationship networks speeds up access to and transfer of relevant knowledge for sustainable

innovation. In addition, according to Done et al. (2011) and Tickle et al. (2016) long-term capacity development and more sustainable improvement happens when change and performance initiatives are carried out with external input. Some authors (Reid et al. 2013; Phelps et al. 2007; Bessant et al. 2005b) posit that without the ability to use external sources, issues are unlikely to be resolved and results unlikely to be as successful. Are organisations perhaps purchasing ‘time compression economies’, because speed and quality of delivery are important considerations?

15 % of SMEs and 15 % of LEs declared themselves as ‘Knowledgeable’, whilst 25 % of SMEs and 21 % of large organisations declared themselves as ‘Aware’ of the tools and techniques supporting the intervention. This perhaps fits with the literature suggesting that when businesses encounter operational obstacles, or ‘hot spots’, they will commit additional resources, through bought in consultants (Gladwell 2000; Phelps et al. 2007; Jones et al. 2008; Matthias 2013; Reid et al. 2013) to increase the likelihood of increasing their absorptive capacity. E.g. new information being assimilated and applied (Cohen and Levinthal 1990; Phelps et al. 2007; Sun and Anderson 2010; Tavani et al. 2013). In addition, networks are increasingly used for innovation and enhancing practice (Alexander and Childe 2013; Dooley et al. 2013; Gubbins and Dooley 2014).

31 % of SMEs claim to benefit from external support in relation to the ‘knowing-doing gap’ rather than pure financial cost benefits, which perhaps explains the changing nature of supply chain relationships (Bhattacharya et al. 2014; Bhattacharya et al. 2015; Marshall et al. 2015; Miemczyk et al. 2016; Wilhelm et al. 2016). Additionally, organisations purchase consultants capacity for many reasons, such as: expertise, externality, extension, endorsement (Matthias, 2013). From the survey the element of ‘unclear business processes’ as a defined knowledge gap was relatively low; 12 % of SMEs, 15 % of LEs, indicating again perhaps that speedy results

are sought. If this is the case, it again raises the question of achieving long-term sustainability rather than short-term fix.



**Figure 9: Management Consultancy's role in delivering Triple Bottom Line benefits**

Figure 9 represents a conceptual summary of this discussion section, representing management consultancy's role in delivering lasting [Triple Bottom Line] benefits. Key aspects of this are that leadership appears to be mostly 'top down', and that companies choose to purchase time compression impact from consultants – this has a defined impact early on then the perception is that it tails off rapidly. Whilst this research has explored the aspects directed by the developed research questions, including showing evidence that organisations deliver better 3BL and overall business performance outcomes with management consultants, the situation is not straightforward.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has investigated the impact of interventions by management consultants and how their work influences a firm's organisational growth through performance

improvement. This study provides an initial theoretical framework (see **Error! Reference source not found.**) and explains the seven steps to intervention to create business resilience through actively managed facilitation in order to create long-term sustainable growth. The objective of this research was to identify a range of business improvement initiatives that can be used by different types of organisations, and findings confirm that there are variations in how SMEs and LEs engage with external consultancy firms. For example, SMEs adopted a broader scope of external intervention relating to: (i) business process; (ii) production processes; (ii) product development and (iv) information technology, whereas, LEs focused predominately towards business process improvement.

The study also identifies the potential shortfalls in the knowledge gaps within the facilitation process. Whilst SMEs and LEs were both clearly aware and knowledgeable of the kinds of tools and techniques being offered by external bodies, their experience was somewhat lacking. In addition, it is important to note that most tools and techniques were compatible with both SMEs and LEs. However, future research could be undertaken to understand if the applicability of the tools within SMEs and LEs is being fully utilised.

The combination of the findings also considers the long-term impact of the intervention. For example, ‘urgency’ was the key factor for SMEs to the 3BL, as well as the knowledge limitations, capability, and resource constraints. By contrast, LEs utilised external consultants in order to develop their ‘credibility’, impact and bottom line costs. Clearly, there is a lack of alignment of the 3BL thinking between SMEs and LEs in terms of the value add. The research could have importance in defining the performance measures for value through the 3BL. The findings of this paper illustrate the tensions and frustrations that exist in achieving long-term impact and value. However, those intervention were considered successful in term of improved quality, smoother operations and increased flexibility within the operations.



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