

Empowering or undermining?

The role of consultants in corporate sustainability

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Consultants play a central role in helping large corporations and public organisations develop and deliver their sustainability strategies. Despite this, the work of sustainability consultants as ‘change agents’ remains partially understood. Better insights into how these consultants operate – positively and negatively – can help organisations deliver meaningful change.

Organisation Studies Research Group

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From decarbonising supply chains to promoting more equal societies, companies and public sector organisations are under pressure to help deliver change. The complexity of these challenges has created a new breed of consultants specialising in corporate sustainability. Typically, they operate across industries, advising companies, designing strategies and shaping regulation in this area.

Despite the central role sustainability consultants play, due to the confidential nature of their client relationships, much of the work they do and the way they operate remain hidden.

Research overview

In this briefing, we draw on our previous empirical research and on a wider review of corporate social responsibility (CSR) literature to propose new ways of understanding the complex and multiple roles that sustainability consultants play. We aim to:

- Empower corporate clients with a better understanding of sustainability consultants, so that they can use these consultants more strategically
- Highlight the multiple roles and range of expertise that sustainability consultants have, and how these might foster or hinder delivering social or environmental objectives

Key insights

Consultants can **empower** sustainability initiatives

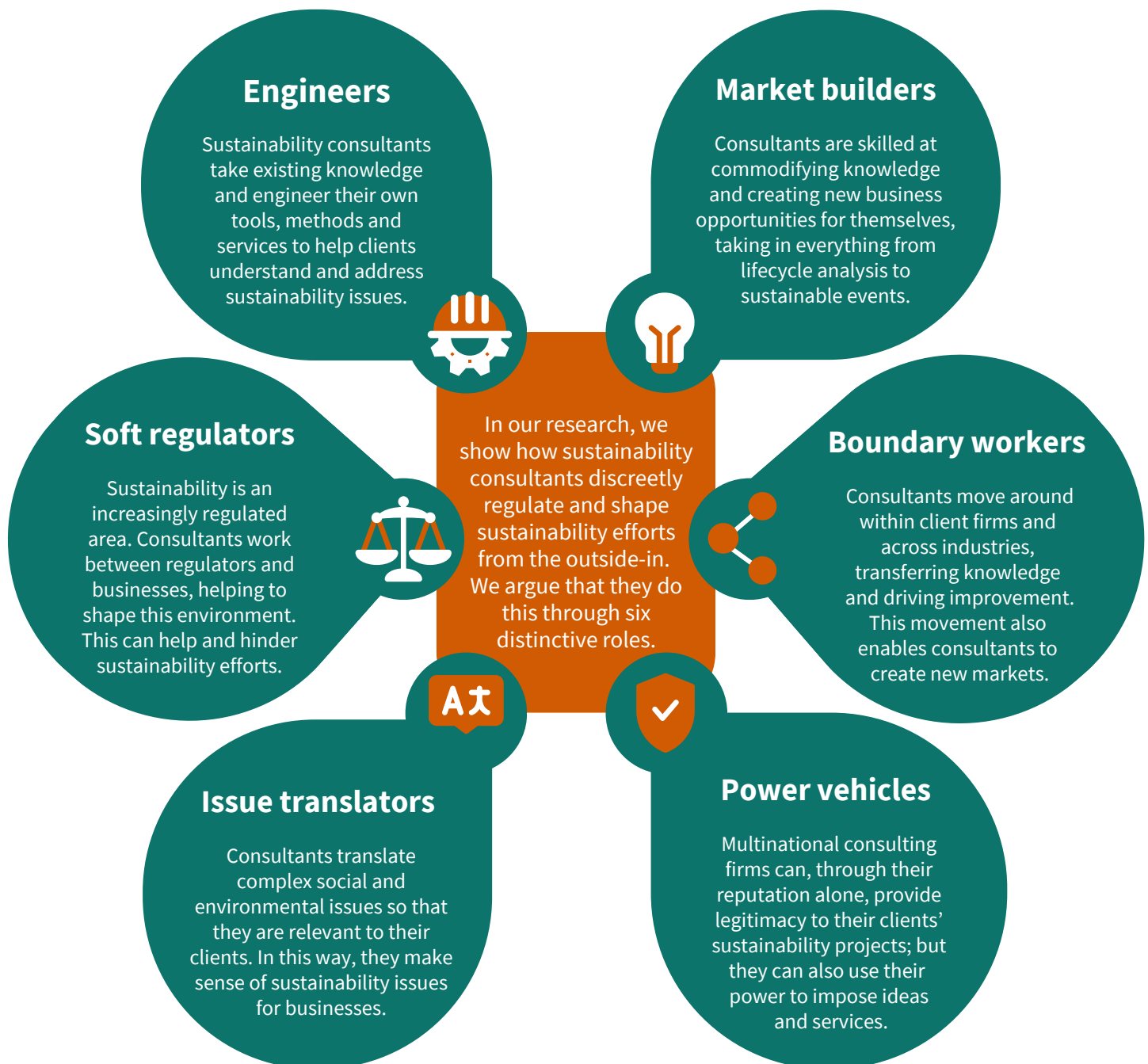
- Consultants can enhance the technical, commercial and legal knowledge of clients, providing them with useful tools, frameworks and new ways of understanding social and environmental issues that move beyond treating sustainability as an ‘add-on’ and drive impactful change.
- The involvement of well-known or specialist consultant firms can make sustainability initiatives more credible to people both inside and outside the client organisation. Skilled consultants can also galvanise change by forging coalitions between internal and external stakeholders.

Consultants can **undermine** sustainability initiatives

- Companies or organisations can become too reliant on external consultants, meaning they fail to develop their own expertise or leadership around sustainability issues.
- Social and environmental challenges can be treated as simply technical or market-driven issues, undermining more creative or radical approaches to solving them.
- Consultants may advance practices that create conflicts of interests between consultants and their clients or encourage clients to adopt costly and ineffective social and environmental policies.

From multinational consulting firms to specialist agencies and NGOs, sustainability consultants are widespread. Our research shows they can be a powerful ally to internal sustainability managers but also potentially detrimental. The balance of power between consultants and sustainability managers is complex and shifting, with both sides becoming dependent on each other. A well-managed consultant-client relationship can lead to better outcomes, but this depends on understanding how consultants work.

Six key roles of sustainability consultants



Understanding the multiple roles of sustainability consultants can help organisations to:

- **Use consultant expertise strategically**, e.g., leveraging their reputation to win over sceptical stakeholders
- **Avoid pitfalls**, such as becoming over-reliant on consultants, ensuring that internal sustainability capabilities are developed alongside using external support
- **Foster more effective collaborations with consultants**, leading to better sustainability outcomes



Consultants contribute to empowering and legitimising but also potentially supplanting and undermining the activities of in-house sustainability managers. If we make these relationships work better, together we can achieve more. We hope that by shining a light on the multiple roles that sustainability consultants play, we can support better collaborations and more transformative outcomes.”

Dr Szilvia Mosonyi, QMUL

Underpinning research

Gond, J.-P., Brès, L., Mosonyi, S. (April 2024). Consultants as discreet corporate change agents for sustainability: Transforming organizations from the outside-in. *Business Ethics, the Environment & Responsibility*, 33(2), pp. 157-169



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Szilvia is the Co-Director of the Organisation Studies Research Group at the School of Business & Management, Queen Mary University of London. She completed her PhD at Bayes Business School, City, University of London. She holds an MRes from Bayes Business School, an MA in Corporate Social Responsibility from Nottingham University Business School and an MA in Sociology from the Eotvos Lorand University of Science in Hungary. Szilvia has expertise in corporate responsibility and sustainability, responsible leadership, management consulting and professionalisation with interests in responsible investment and ESG. Her research centres on sustainability in management and finance, where she explores contemporary professionalisation and professional practices.



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Prior to Bayes, Jean-Pascal held academic positions at HEC Montréal (University of Montréal, Canada) and at the International Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility at Nottingham University Business School. He has a PhD in Management Sciences from the University of Toulouse I (France). His research mobilises organisation theory and economic sociology to investigate corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainable finance. Current research includes the roles of standards and metrics in the institutionalisation of CSR in the financial marketplace and corporations, the influence of CSR on employees, dynamics of CSR professionalisation and shareholder activism on sustainability issues.



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