

**The Importance of Human Connection in Consultant
Satisfaction at an IT Staffing Company**

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the impact of human connection on the satisfaction of Information Technology (IT) consultants at staffing firms. The study applies a qualitative methodology and in vivo and descriptive coding methods to examine two years of consultant survey data from a large IT staffing firm. Using classic human behavioural theories as a basis for understanding and prioritizing consultant needs, this study interprets the coding results and offer suggestions for providing a consultant care program. The research findings show that communication, support, and personal connection are important components in consultant satisfaction. In a highly competitive and growing industry, consulting firms must create ways to stay ahead of the competition and stand out in their field. A consultant care program that provides the basics of consultant service and support will position themselves to be more competitive in attracting and retaining top talent.

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List of Symbols, Nomenclature, or Abbreviations

“Consultant” is a contingent worker on a contract.

“Client” is the company the staffing firm is contracted with, and where they place the consultant for work.

The terms “consulting firm”, “staffing firm”, and “staffing company” are used interchangeably to indicate the employer for the consultant that hires contingent workers (consultants) to work on contracts for clients.

“IT Staffing” means the industry which the consultants are contracted to apply information technology expertise.

“NPS” or “net promoter system/score” means a method to measure customer loyalty by evaluating the customer or employee’s likelihood for recommending a business.

“LTR” or “likely to recommend” refers to the survey question: “How likely are you to recommend Company X to a friend or colleague?” It is used to calculate the net promoter score.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The Information Technology (IT) staffing industry is a thriving business, particularly in the U.S., where the seventy-one top firms that each generate over \$100 million in revenue pull in \$34.6 billion in revenue combined (SIA, 2023). Staffing firms fill gaps in the workforce by providing permanent staff or contingent workers (consultants) for other companies. The firm can choose to hire consultants as employees, or they may opt to use contractors or subcontractors to fill the clients' needs. Although there are exceptions, consultant employees are usually paid quite well on an hourly basis and offered minimal benefits (Base36, n.d.). Some firms may opt to provide paid time off, holidays, and medical benefits to attract top talent and stay competitive in the market (Adams, 2015). Although consultants are compensated well (in accordance with market conditions) for their work, they are not often integrated like staff employees when it comes to being part of the company community and culture. The temporary nature of their contract may leave the consultants feeling like a "number," exploited for profit, and not truly part of the company fabric (Indeed, 2023). The consultant is in the unique situation of being both an employee and a customer, but never quite fully embraced in either role. Larger staffing firms might employ thousands of consultants, and although some are willing to invest in their staff by providing very basic, employee-like benefits, such as health insurance, they do not always invest in delivering full support of their experience while on assignment. It is extremely expensive to provide human resources (HR), payroll, IT, timekeeping, and career development support for employees of a large company, and as such, highly impersonal service desks and call centers may be used to address and resolve consultant issues. This type of support is sometimes outsourced, slow

in response and resolution, and does not offer the warm, inclusive feelings one might get when fully immersed in a company culture. It is typical in the IT staffing industry for consultant employees to be treated as temporary, pass-through workers, leaving them feeling dissatisfied and not especially loyal to their companies (SIA, 2018). As businesses find it increasingly difficult to attract and retain top talent, staffing firms are expected to become even more relevant and useful in filling gaps in the workforce (Experis, 2024). Staffing companies that can solve for improvement of consultant satisfaction will have a major advantage in a highly competitive market. Where consultants are free to choose the firm in which they work, they will likely select the firm that is supportive and easy to work with, even when they are not the highest paying.

There is a complexity in the relationships between the staffing firms, clients, and consultants. The client and consultant exist as both the service provided and the customer in the staffing life cycle. The client is a customer which allows the firm to provide a service (their jobs). The consultant is the service provided by the firm to the client and is also a customer whose needs are filled by the firm's jobs (the service). To help explain, Figure 1.1 illustrates the cycle and shows how the client and the consultant become both the product/service for the firm, as well as the customer for the firm. Due to this unique relationship, the vast literature pertaining to employee satisfaction was not explored in this context. Although consultants are often employees of the staffing firm, many of the satisfaction factors, outside of pay and benefits, are not attainable for the firm to provide directly to the consultant. The reason for this is that the consultant sits with, and is managed by, the client in his/her day-to-day work. Because the consultants work either from home or at the client location, it is difficult to manage typical employee satisfiers

like work environment, company culture, and management style. The available research on satisfaction tends to focus either on general customer behaviours (Singh, et al., 2023), or what permanent employees look for in a job (Sageer, Rafat, & Agarwal, 2012). For that reason, a focus on customer satisfaction was pursued more heavily in the literature research for this thesis, and the consultant is viewed through the lens of a customer more so than an employee. However, some employee satisfaction principles in the literature can be tapped to impact factors that are within the control of the firm.

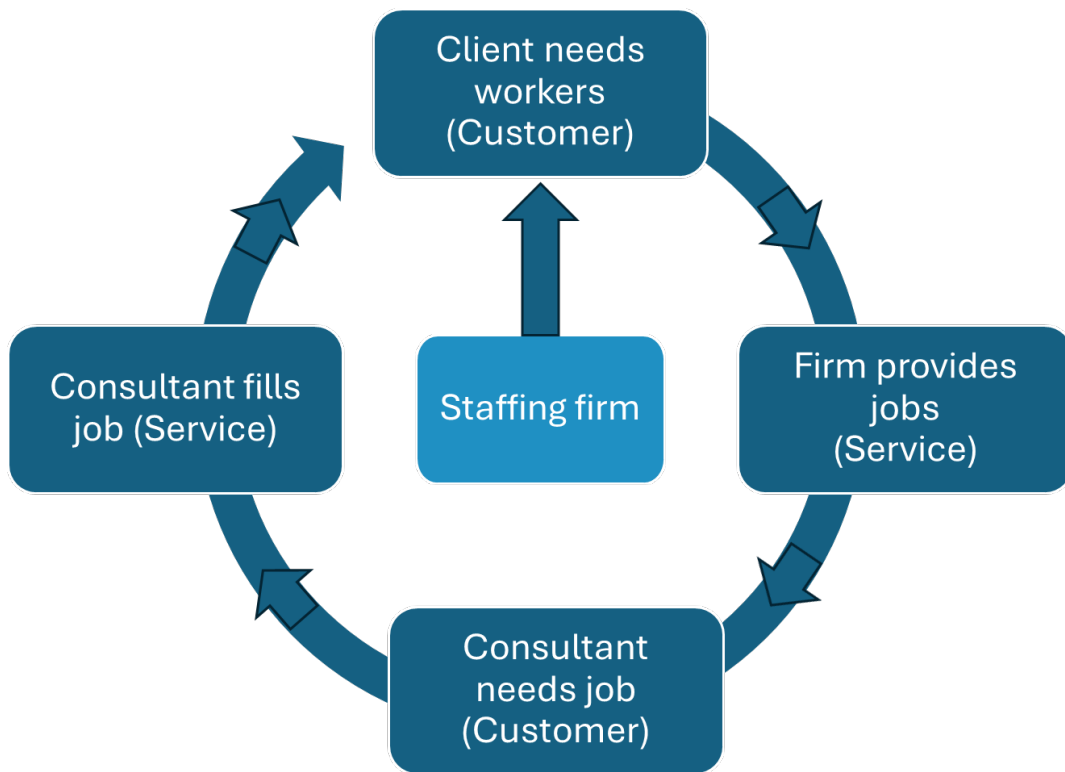


Figure 1.1

The consultant and client each coexist as both a customer and the product/service provided.

The complexity for the consultant is that there are two companies in the relationship: the consulting firm and the client for the job in which they are contracted. The literature

focused on consultant satisfaction tends to center around the nature of the work at the client (Sonne, 1999), rather than a focus on the consulting company itself. Top satisfaction factors for consultants are often identified to be pay, location of work and working conditions (Osborne, 2022), all of which the firm has limited control over. IT firms across North America generally solicit jobs from the same pool of companies, and since clients determine the work available, set billing rates, and provide the onsite work management, the satisfaction measures are more about the job than the consulting firm. Because of this, IT staffing firms often neglect to invest in areas in which they do have control, such as in support, communication, recognition, and provision of tools to enable career growth. The IT staffing industry lacks research and guidance for how to identify and prioritize consultant needs in an effective way, to sustain and grow the business. Companies may lack the evidence as to how improved consultant service and support might affect the bottom line.

There is little published research on the impact of personalized customer service for consultants and their satisfaction, and its role in the success of an IT staffing firm (Detamore, 2008; Mabaso, Maja, Lekwape, Makhasane, & Khumalo, 2021; Morrell & Simonetto, 1999). This paper provides a preliminary examination of the impacts and outcomes of personal connection and human contact at an IT staffing firm. It offers insights for companies to discover better ways to create programs that not only benefit the consultant, but also offer a better return on investment for the firm. This study also provides the perspective of viewing the consultant as a customer as opposed to, or in addition to, an employee. This allows for additional research and insights for application of satisfiers to improve the consultant experience.

Human, or social, connection is understood to be the “ways in which one can connect to others physically, behaviorally, cognitively, and emotionally” (Holt-Lunstad, 2018). It is the ability to relate to others in a way that creates a sense of belonging, inclusion, and mutual support. Research indicates that fostering connections in the workplace may be good for business as it enhances feelings of well-being and can increase productivity. Company efforts should be focused on increasing trust and collaboration and demonstrating feelings of respect and that the employee is valued (Holt-Lunstad, 2018). As society increasingly moves online for social connection (Sandra, Trigo, Ricardo, & Duarte, 2023), companies should be more cognizant of nurturing social and human interaction in the workplace.

This thesis explores the importance of human connection in consultant satisfaction at an IT staffing company. Existing literature is examined to develop customer service parallels for the IT staffing industry. Next, is a description of the methodology, data, and analysis from consultant surveys at a large IT staffing firm in North America. From the analysis, insights are generated into satisfiers, dissatisfiers, and other factors important to consultants when choosing a firm. The results will be presented, recommendations will be offered, and suggestions will be proposed for future study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

At first glance, the obvious go-to for a literature search might appear to be articles on employee satisfaction (Voordt & Jensen, 2023; Raggiotto, Compagno, & Scarpi, 2023; Muktamar, Jenita, Munizu, Astuti, & Putra, 2023). Although consultants are often employees of the firm, there are limitations to control of the work environment. Because the consultants sit in the clients' offices, there are other factors the staffing company can focus on to create a great workplace, like communication, connection, training, and support. Because of this, the consultant will be viewed as a customer when determining how to deliver a satisfying experience.

The academic literature specifically for IT consultant satisfaction is limited. When performing a Google Scholar search for "IT consulting and satisfaction", top results pertain to the satisfaction of the client, and the few that pertain to consultant satisfaction are dated prior to 2016 and are studies conducted in countries outside North America. However, many parallels can be drawn to customer experience research in other industries. This review will present research on human behaviour to illustrate that customer loyalty is created through meeting needs of individuals to improve satisfaction, and to help answer whether human connection is the key to unlocking retention. This section will explore behavioural theories of customer satisfaction and loyalty, highlight industry reports, describe satisfiers for customers, explain organizational benefits of retention, and explain the impacts of human connection in customer retention.

Consultants Have Choices

In a competitive market consultants have choices (CIO, 2023), and nearly two-thirds of temporary workers turn to ratings sites, like Glassdoor, to decide which firm to work with (Osborne, 2021). Retention of IT workers is a challenge in an industry where turnover is costly (Westlund & Hannon, 2008; Allen, 2008) and to attain strong satisfaction ratings, companies must support and serve their consultants to foster loyalty (Murray, 2019). Companies that prioritize satisfaction and retention realize improved profitability, brand loyalty, and customer advocacy (Forbes Council, 2023). Determining the drivers of consultant satisfaction are vital for a firm to encourage loyalty, improve ratings, and retain the talented employees they worked so hard to recruit (Allen, 2008). When a consultant is presented with choices for a job and a staffing firm to work with, different priorities may be at play. Research shows the primary factor for a consultant choosing a job is typically compensation (Gartner, 2019). When a consultant is looking for a consulting firm to work and grow with, factors for consideration are support, work/life balance, company culture, connection, and inclusion (Osborne, 2023).

Behavioural Models to Understand Consultant Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction and loyalty have long been studied topics, and several human behavioural models prevail in the literature that help interpret what can be considered good customer service in the IT staffing space. In 1945, Maslow proposed The Theory of Human Motivation (Maslow, 1943). Although the theory proposes a hierarchy of general human needs, it is a relatable framework in the world of business and makes it easy understand how to best determine motivational drivers to retain employees (The World of Work Project, 2019). Maslow explains that what drives human

behaviour is a set of needs arranged in a hierarchy, in which an individual seeks to fulfill lower needs before moving on to higher needs. As Maslow states, “Human needs arrange themselves in hierarchies of pre-potency. That is to say, the appearance of one need usually rests on the prior satisfaction of another, more pre-potent need.” (Maslow, 1943) For example, basic needs such as food, water, and shelter, must be met before higher needs, like social connection, are pursued and satisfied. A 2021 study into the application of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs shows the five independent need variables (physiological, security and safety, social, self-esteem, self-actualization) have an influence on the employee loyalty variable (Artaya, Kamisutara, Muchayan, & Deviyanti, 2021). The study concluded that if the five independent variables can be fulfilled to meet employee expectations, then true employee loyalty is maintained. Applying the theory to IT consulting suggests, for example, that pay must be provided before the employee seeks additional training at work. A firm that provides an industry leading training program may not motivate consultants to stay when they are receiving little support, communication, and response. A company that provides great communication will not retain consultants who are not paid in a timely manner. Lower needs must be met for the higher needs to matter.

Simon and March developed a theory of Organizational Equilibrium in 1958, which implies that when individual satisfaction is high, the employee will be more likely to stay with the company (Simon & March, 1993). According to this theory, an individual will stay with an organization if what the company offers is equal to or exceeds the contributions required of the employee. In other words, if the worker perceives the right state of balance with the employer, the worker will be inclined to stay. When applying

this theory to the world of IT staffing, one would posit that consultants who are more satisfied (through company inducements) are less likely to leave the organization when it is not worth their effort to do so (Tosi, 2008). The theory also suggests that when there is a perceived ease of movement to another organization, the consultant would be more likely to transfer (Allen, 2008). With this logic, a consulting firm that is found to be easy to work with may induce the consultant to stay to avoid the perceived hardship of changing companies.

Influenced by Maslow's theory of needs, Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory was proposed in 1959 (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959). It implied there are two sets of factors that influence satisfaction or dissatisfaction in the workplace: hygiene factors, which are job expectations that will become dissatisfiers if not met, and motivator factors, that will contribute to satisfaction when present. Hygiene factors include pay, work conditions, relationships at work, and quality of management. Motivator factors involve recognition, opportunity for growth, and meaningful work. Presence of hygiene factors will prevent dissatisfaction, but will not promote satisfaction, and presence of motivator factors will lead to satisfaction, but not cause dissatisfaction when absent. Companies can excel at pleasing employees by meeting expectations for hygiene factors as well as through offering motivators to achieve satisfaction.

These behavioural theories have been applied to various industries, including banking (Artaya, Kamisutara, Muchayan, & Deviyanti, 2021), engineering (Detamore, 2008), and retail (Tan & Waheed, 2011), to name a few. Many have been able to draw parallels with Herzberg, March and Simon, and Maslow's theories to demonstrate motivators and detractors for people in the workplace, and they remain applicable by

today's standards (Mitsakis & Galanakis, 2022). To uncover success in IT consultant retention, these theories may assist in providing groundwork for building an effective consultant experience program.

Measuring Success

Companies require tried and trusted methodologies to measure satisfaction and its effects on loyalty and organizational performance. A widely applied tool used to measure customer experience, brand health, and to predict business growth, is the Net Promoter Score (NPS) (Baehre, O'Dwyer, O'Malley, & Lee, 2021). In 2003, Fred Reichheld, Bain, and Satmetrix created the program to simplify measurement and interpretation of customer behaviour (About the Net Promoter System, 2024). Approximately two-thirds of Fortune 1000 companies across various industries apply NPS via a survey (Colvin, 2020). By simply asking “how likely are you to recommend *company x* to a friend or colleague?”, abbreviated as LTR (likely to recommend), a company can gain insights into satisfaction at their organization and predict future growth. The respondents answer with a score of 0 (not at all likely) to 10 (extremely likely) and the responses fall into three categories: promoter (9-10), passives (7-8), and detractors (0-6). The NPS output is a number between -100 and +100, calculated by subtracting the percentage of customers who are detractors from the percentage of promoters.

$$\text{NPS} = \% \text{ of Promoters} - \% \text{ of Detractors}$$

The number can then be used to compare performance against the benchmark for the industry or against themselves. For example, in 2023, the consulting industry was benchmarked at 67 and internet software and services rested at 9 (Raileanu, 2023), which present very different averages and prevent accurate cross-industry comparison. Passive

scores are not factored because they are indicative of contentment, neutrality, or indifference, which is neither the goal, nor a good predictor of business growth.

Promoters are found to be enthusiastic, repeat buyers, and will recommend the product or service to others. Passives are satisfied but have not reached a level of loyalty and may switch to a competitor if a better service is offered. Detractors are not happy with the service and could potentially damage the company's reputation (Medallia, 2024).

To determine how to compare a company's NPS to others, there are two methods. An absolute NPS uses the score as a marker against all other companies across industries, where a relative NPS compares the score against other companies within the same industry (Carpenter, n.d.). According to the NPS creators, the following is used to measure absolute NPS: above 0 is good, above 20 is favorable, above 50 is excellent, above 80 is world class. Relative NPS is a better way to measure performance against competitors in the industry. Survey company ClearlyRated provides industry NPS benchmarks each year. Table 2.1 illustrates the staffing industry talent NPS over a thirteen-year period, allowing staffing firms to see how they stack up against others. The relative NPS for staffing talent sits in the favourable range for absolute NPS across all industries. The company evaluated in this study ended 2023 with a talent NPS of 65, considered an excellent absolute NPS, and well above the benchmark in its industry. This information was provided by the company's marketing department.

Table 2.1

Talent NPS in the Staffing Industry 2011-2023 (Clearly Rated, 2023)

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Net Promoter Score	28%	30%	33%	22%	24%	21%	21%	24%	Talent Study was not conducted in 2019	18%	Talent Study was not conducted in 2021	19%	30%
Average Score	7.90	8.02	8.07	7.64	7.68	7.69	7.62	7.89		8.64		7.7	8.0
% Promoters	50%	48%	53%	51%	49%	47%	45%	45%	Talent Study was not conducted in 2019	40%	Talent Study was not conducted in 2021	45%	50%
% Passive	28%	35%	26%	20%	25%	27%	30%	34%		38%		29%	30%
% Detractors	22%	17%	21%	29%	26%	26%	24%	21%	Talent Study was not conducted in 2019	22%	Talent Study was not conducted in 2021	26%	20%

To achieve a desirable NPS, respondents must feel their needs are met by the company and management (Picoult, 2021). NPS can be used to spark an internal reflection on what may be either customer dissatisfiers or super-satisfiers and where adjustments can be made to improve future business growth. The NPS provides a quantitative look at satisfaction data. Although NPS will not be the method used for results, this study will incorporate LTR and NPS ideologies. The open-ended comments related to the LTR question will be used to explore satisfiers for consultants at an IT staffing firm. Not all academics agree that NPS is an accurate predictor for future sales growth (Baehre, O'Dwyer, O'Malley, & Lee, 2021) and that it should be used more as a health check for whether customer needs are being met (Carpenter, n.d.). As this thesis is a qualitative study, an analysis of the open-ended comments related to the NPS question to measure consultant satisfaction will be presented.

Industry Resources

For those looking for valuable insights, the Staffing Industry Analysts (SIA) organization provides research and insights for workforce solutions. SIA is a trusted resource for buyers and suppliers, conducting research and providing data and

publications to help firms improve business results (Staffing Industry Analysts, 2024). Each year SIA conducts a survey of over 20,000 temporary workers to highlight relevant trends and offer insight into the preferences of consultants across staffing firms. The 2021, 2022 and 2023 Temporary Worker Surveys by SIA showed a consistent trend in worker preference for qualities in a staffing firm, including communication, support and recognition. The report indicated that pay rate is reported to be the number one criterion for a consultant to accept an assignment, but it is not all that matters (Osborne, 2022).

Where firms have only limited control of pay rates due to client limitations, there are many other factors the firm can positively influence, such as location of assignment, working conditions, company culture, work/life balance, and close match to the skills being requested (Osborne, 2021). For example, one in eight workers felt that they had walked into their assignment totally unprepared, not having sufficient support, training, or information related to their assignment (Osborne, 2021). Their perception of how well they were prepared had a high correlation with how likely they were to recommend their agency to friends and colleagues. Among those who felt unprepared, the net promoter score (NPS) was -34, as there were more detractors than promoters of the business. Temporary workers who considered themselves properly prepared for their assignment produced an NPS of 78, on par with NPS earned by satisfaction leaders Google and Apple. One consultant responds to how he could have been better prepared. “Some type of orientation would have been more helpful. Specifically, info about timecards, pay periods, communication and planning with my recruiter, etc.” Consultants who were asked what firms could do to improve the image of the staffing industry responded they

would appreciate training, communication, feedback on performance, career coaching, and more accurate job information up front (Osborne, 2021).

The *2023 Temporary Worker Survey* highlighted what consultants are looking for in a staffing firm (Osborne, 2023), namely, trustworthiness, communication, preparedness for the assignment, and quick resolution to problems. When evaluating satisfaction with communication, it was found the frequency was key, where most consultants wanted to hear from their firm at least once or twice a month. The survey found consultants greatly appreciate being well prepared for their assignments. They require accurate information about the job, culture, management, and logistics for the assignment. Career and skills training is also an asset, and although not always a main factor in choosing a firm, providing training may give a firm an edge over its competitors. When consultants asked to recommend ways for staffing firms to improve the industry image, they suggested communicating information accurately and honestly, staying in touch, being trustworthy, and offering ongoing training (Osborne, 2023).

There are other companies and industry experts that staffing companies will tap into for helpful information in measuring, evaluating, and addressing satisfaction or engaging with talent, and several are listed below. The American Staffing Association (ASA) represents staffing, recruiting, and workforce solution companies. They allow staffing firms to connect with a community of peers in the staffing, recruiting, and workforce solutions industry and provides news, data, and research to help staffing firms grow (ASA, n.d.). Companies like Sense offer a service that allows firms to engage with their talent more effectively and efficiently. They also publish content that provides best practices and insights for the staffing industry to boost their productivity (Sense, n.d.),

some which are referenced in this paper. Qualtrics is another software and research company that partners with other companies to provide experience management software and tools, as well as data to assist in making good decisions to satisfy customers (Qualtrics, n.d.). The staffing industry is a big business, and there are many sources for support and information in improving the consultant experience.

How to Satisfy Consultants

One of the most critical issues facing organizations is how to retain the employees they want to keep (Morrell & Simonetto, 1999; Allen, 2008). In the consulting field, recruiters work hard to attract top talent and turnover is expensive. To target strategies for retention, companies must understand which customer they are serving. Staffing firms must first determine where the consultants fit in their company, and where they should land on the importance scale for their business. Once they know the *who*, they must then determine *how* to satisfy their customers. For example, Nordstroms is not just well known for what they offer, but rather how they offer it. They have created a customer-centric approach to fulfill the emotional needs of their primary customer (Fader, 2020). Consulting firms may be tempted to recognize the client, the company that contracts them to fill staffing needs, as the primary customer, since the client enters a contract with the firm and pays the firm for its services. The clients that firms serve are undoubtedly a customer, as they are paying for a service, but literature suggests that the primary customer is not always the source of revenue. In the article “Choosing the Right Customer”, Simons delves into how identifying the right primary audience can help organizations understand the needs and demands of their consumers, which in turn will help them progress and expand. The strategic choice of choosing the right customer will

define company success. The most important customers are not those “that generate the most revenue but those that can unlock the most value in your business.” (Simons, 2014). For these reasons companies should properly define their primary customer and commit resources to pleasing that customer.

Once the primary customer is identified, the process of satisfying the customer can be pursued, and customer loyalty is the product of a process that starts with customer satisfaction (Ngo, 2015). Companies tend to systemize their approach to managing the consultant experience, in that they identify indicators that are not met, then attempt to fix them. For example, if consultants provide feedback indicating onboarding is confusing, they create a new hire onboarding checklist, rather than evaluating the entire onboarding process and implementing broader improvements. This approach does not allow them to fully enrich the customer experience and elevate to a human experience, where they are connecting with the customers in a meaningful way to appeal to their needs, beliefs, ambitions, and feelings (Roggeveen & Rosengren, 2022). In analyzing the factors that lead to consultant retention, the theme of human connection is prevalent, as personal contact provides many benefits for the consultant as explained below.

“Human connection is the sense of closeness and belongingness a person can experience when having supportive relationships with those around them” (Stiles, 2021). Maslow recognized belonging and connection as a basic need that must be satisfied before other things can be enjoyed. Human connection is a sense of closeness and of belonging that a person can feel when having supportive relationships of those around them (Stiles, 2021). Human connection makes people happier and are associated with better health and longevity (Oppong, 2019).

Studies show that rewards, performance management, training, recognition, and career development are necessary to retain consultants, all of which require some level of human touch to accomplish (Mabaso, Maja, Lekwape, Makhasane, & Khumalo, 2021). For example, a contact at the company can provide onboarding guidance, orienting to firm software and processes, response and resolution to questions and issues, and connection to the company throughout the assignment. When a consultant has interpersonal relationships at the company, they are more satisfied (Hayes, 2014). Satisfaction, in turn, creates confidence, loyalty, and improved work output (Westlund & Hannon, 2008). A study of customer satisfaction in the banking sector showed that trust and satisfaction were more impacted by people than processes. The author states that people are at the heart of the customer experience, and that starting with employee motivation and engaging the right people, the customer will be more satisfied (Chidley & Pritchard, 2014).

There are many parallels on which to draw for consultant satisfaction and loyalty from other industries. In a study on customer service in the retail sector, it is suggested that focusing on the human experience, rather than the customer experience, will drive better success (Roggeveen & Rosengren, 2022). Where the customer experience targets what the company offers and how consumers respond to those offers, the human experience focuses on the desires, needs, and wants of customers, and how the company can respond to those factors. The Roggeveen and Rosengren study suggests that firms should proactively connect with consumers in anticipation of their needs, rather than relying on the consumer to respond to offers. This can best be achieved through periodic phone calls or in-person meetings to allow for a voice connection or an exchange of eye

contact and body language (Roggeveen & Rosengren, 2022). Another study shows that face-to-face requests are 34 times more effective than those sent by email, promoting cooperation, and improving negotiation outcomes (Roghanizad & Bohns, 2017). Thus, connections should be a strategic pillar of the company's operations, marked with customer touchpoints, personalization, and outward expression of company culture. As this study is viewing consultants through a customer-centric lens, the above parallels are applicable in the staffing industry.

According to consultants, identifying a mentor, or main point of contact, helps them perform better in their assignments (Tillou & Al Ariss, 2022). Study results show that consultants have a desire for human connection, and the connections have been shown to help the consultant grow in their positions, which improves loyalty and longevity with the company (Tillou & Al Ariss, 2022). Recognizing what the customer wants, and providing it in a human manner, allows opportunities for employers to deliver appropriate experiences to drive satisfaction (Roggeveen & Rosengren, 2022). Consultants report that effective support includes identification of someone they can ask for advice in the organization, and to have good relationships with colleagues (Tillou & Al Ariss, 2022).

There are many benefits for an organization to retain consultants through providing a *good* experience, such as keeping great talent and reducing turnover costs. Perhaps of even greater impact is the risk of not providing a *great* experience. Research links high turnover rates to poor organizational performance, and employee departures devour time, money, and resources (Allen, 2008). A study of management consulting firms found that when consultants feel they are committed and dedicated to their jobs,

they look even more negatively on a firm that does not provide them with the proper support. They feel they are working hard for the company, but the company is not working hard for them. They perceive that the firm holds different values than they do, which results in a decrease in motivation and loyalty (Tillou & Al Ariss, 2022). Workers who feel disconnected from the organization are more likely to leave (CIO, 2023). The cause of low levels of trust is a people issue rather than a process issue (Chidley & Pritchard, 2014). Whether an employee, customer, or consultant, research shows that treatment, human connection, and social interaction are key to unlocking retention and creating a great experience (Bode, Singh, & Rogan, 2015).

Conclusion

The literature for IT consultant satisfaction is scarce, but parallels can be drawn from customer experience research in other industries. This review explores how consultant loyalty, achieved through meeting individual needs and enhancing satisfaction, might be influenced by human connection in the IT staffing sector. It delves into behavioural theories of satisfaction and loyalty, industry reports, key satisfaction factors for consultants, organizational benefits of retention, and the impact of human connection on consultant retention.

Understanding the drivers of consultant satisfaction is crucial for fostering loyalty and retaining top talent. Behavioural models like Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, March and Simon's Organizational Equilibrium, and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory shed light on those drivers. These theories emphasize the importance of meeting basic needs before higher-level needs, the balance between company offerings and employee contributions, and factors like hygiene and motivator factors in the workplace. Applying these models

to IT consulting suggests that addressing basic needs like compensation is essential before offering advanced benefits like training programs.

Measuring consultant experience is vital for an organization in determining customer service performance. The Net Promoter Score (NPS) is a widely used tool to measure customer experience and predict business growth. By asking respondents to rate their likelihood of recommending a company, firms can gain insights into satisfaction levels. NPS can provide a quantitative look at satisfaction data, although its accuracy as a predictor for future sales growth is debated. Comparing NPS against industry benchmarks helps companies understand their performance and areas for improvement in comparison to their competition.

Organizations like Staffing Industry Analysts (SIA) offer valuable insights into workforce solutions and current trends. SIA's surveys reveal that consultants prioritize factors like pay rates, assignment preparedness, communication, and trustworthiness in staffing firms. Other resources like the American Staffing Association (ASA), Sense, and Qualtrics provide support and information for improving the consultant experience. Staffing firms can draw on these resources to optimize performance.

In a market where consultants are in demand and can choose the firm they work for; it is important for firms to be aware of their abilities to create an experience that will retain and attract talent. Retaining top talent requires an understanding of their needs and delivering a satisfying experience. Identifying the primary customers and committing resources to please them is a crucial first step. Human connection emerges as a significant factor, with studies showing that personal relationships, mentorship, and support improve consultant satisfaction and loyalty. Consultants appreciate regular

communication, preparedness for assignments, career development opportunities, and honest, accurate information from staffing firms.

Effective consultant satisfaction strategies involve more than just meeting basic needs. Companies must understand and prioritize the human connection, providing a personalized, supportive experience for consultants. Failure to do so does not only present risk for losing top talent but also negatively impacts organizational performance and reputation. By focusing on factors like trust, communication, and social interaction, IT staffing firms can unlock consultant retention to create a positive consultant experience.

Unfortunately, evidence is lacking to show that these strategies create a more positive consultant experience. This gap in research and evidence-based ROI presents a challenge for staffing firms in justifying the investment in more comprehensive consultant support. Firms tend to focus on increasing the sales and recruiting workforce to build upon their business, and they often neglect the business potential in fulfilling the needs of their primary customers, the consultants. Providing data and analysis on the rewards of an effective consultant experience program will help to close this gap and allow firms to realize more value in their businesses. To generate my results, a qualitative interpretive framework was used to categorize information from open-ended survey data and provide a preliminary look at what factors are most important to consultants when considering their own satisfaction at the staffing firm.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter addresses the research methodology used in collecting and interpreting the survey data, to determine the importance of human connection and support of consultants at an IT staffing firm. The purpose of the research will be presented, followed by the qualitative approach, samples selected, data analysis, and limitations and benefits of the applied methodology.

Purpose

The purpose of the study is to investigate whether human connection with consultants at an IT staffing firm has an impact on consultant satisfaction. As the demand for IT talent surges, and workers' needs and wants change, firms struggle to compete for and retain top talent. Discovering and understanding the needs and desires of the consultants will lead to a better understanding of how to improve satisfaction. From there one can determine the role human connection plays in consultant satisfaction. Improving satisfaction can create loyalty to help firms improve their bottom lines.

Qualitative Approach

This study employed a thematic, qualitative research approach to provide preliminary insights into how human connection and relationship plays a role in consultant satisfaction. A common approach to gain insights into consumer psychology (Fischer & Guzel, 2022), it helps facilitate a deeper understanding of social phenomena which relies on study of the experience of humans in their natural setting (UTA Libraries, 2023). It allows the creation of concepts by comparing, contrasting, and categorizing the information (Aspers & Corte, 2019) to understand meaning as one seeks to get closer to

people and their contexts (Small, 2021). Utilizing a thematic qualitative analysis for this research allows the leveraging of individual experiences to draw conclusions related to satisfiers and dissatisfiers for consultants at the staffing firm (Naeem, Ozuem, & Ranfagni, 2023; Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The open-ended response data was organized to prepare for analysis, and the information was read and reviewed to get a sense of what it contained. Initial coding was performed by making notes to highlight key words and phrases. A secondary coding was performed to identify recurring concepts and themes, and each item was grouped into a category. As Miles and Huberman note, the purpose of the study should be kept in mind while also allowing yourself to be open to new discoveries (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 1994). The qualitative approach helps simplify and focus the information to allow comparison and understanding of human behaviours (Daniel, 2016).

There are several techniques available for coding, and in this study the *in vivo* and descriptive coding approaches were utilized. Most responses were brief and concise in conveying the feeling, so *in vivo* coding was used. *In vivo* allows for the capture of the subject's exact words, which can preserve the authenticity of the sentiment (Siegel, n.d.). Where responses were short and concise, this method often made the most sense. Where expressions were implied rather than stated, descriptive coding was used, which summarizes and captures the conveyed ideas.

Survey

Satisfaction survey data from a large IT staffing company in the US was utilized as a basis for the study. The survey consists of seven questions meant to collect the consultants' perceptions on their experiences at the company. The survey is sent to

approximately ten thousand consultants in a three-month period and averages a response rate of 21%. The survey consists of a mix of question formats to obtain measurements for consultant satisfiers and dissatisfiers. The survey serves two purposes for the company: it alerts staff of negative surveys for immediate follow-up and resolution, and it allows the company to monitor trends when the data is compiled and analyzed each month. The full survey includes the seven questions below.

1. How likely would you be to recommend us to a friend or colleague?

Extremely Likely (10) to Not At All Likely (0)

2. What is the primary reason for your score? (Open-end)

3. What one thing we can do to improve your overall experience? (Open-end)

4. Please rate your level of satisfaction with Experis in the following areas:

Very Satisfied (10) to Not at All Satisfied (0) or N/A

a) Preparing you for your assignment

b) People you work with

c) Overall communication

d) Career resources provided

e) Dedication to finding your next assignment

5. When was the last time a representative reached out to you?

a) Within the last 2 weeks

- b) 3-4 weeks ago
- c) 5-8 weeks ago
- d) More than 8 weeks
- e) Don't know
- f) Do not know who my representative is

6. Would you like to recognize anyone within Experis for delivering great customer service? (Open-end)

Please tell us who and why it was an exceptional experience. (Open-end)

Is there anything else you would like to share with Experis? (Open-end)

7. Do we have permission to contact you about your feedback? (Yes/No)

For this study, the three open-ended question responses below were investigated. After being asked: "How likely would you be to recommend the company to a friend or colleague?" (also known as LTR), the respondent is asked:

Q1: What is the primary reason for your (LTR) score?

Q2: What one thing can the company do to improve your overall experience?

Q3: Is there anything else you would like to share?

Sampling and Data Collection

This study included existing data from a survey database of the IT staffing company for 2022 and 2023¹. This produced over 11,000 survey responses, so to narrow the field, consultants working at one large national bank were chosen. Focusing on this account, with about 300 consultants and approximately 300 surveys, provided a more manageable number of surveys to code. The response rate is reflective of the rate for the general population of consultant surveys, at an average of 21% across the two-year period. The bank is representative of the other consultants in the business as they have similar technical skills, use the same systems and processes for onboarding and time entry, and the structure of the team is like that of other areas of the company (i.e., recruiting, sales, and account management support). The reason for looking across two years of data was to identify the presence of trends in pre- and post-dedicated consultant support. In late 2022, dedicated support of Consultant Experience Managers (CEM) was implemented for consultants at this account in late 2022. This service is provided to about half of the general consultant population at the firm.

Coding Methods

A review of the Saldaña coding manual (Saldaña, 2013) was useful in preparing for the analysis. The in vivo coding method was used to extract participants' key words from the responses, and where needed, descriptive coding was used to track sentiments in

¹ The survey data used was from the staffing firm that employs me. I received permission, from the Director of Global Market Intelligence at ManpowerGroup to use the information contained in the surveys in preparation and publication of my thesis and was asked to refrain from revealing specific survey numbers and NPS.

the responses where the key words were implied. For example, where the response read, “Plenty of information supplied in advance of interviews, good support post-interview and pre-onboarding,” I used “preparation” as the preliminary code. During the preliminary coding process, those key words and sentiments were mined, and recurring themes emerged.

Data Analysis

After performing a preliminary round of coding using in vivo and descriptive methods, the codes were trended by topic (as described above) and grouped into seven categories. The emergence of themes from the preliminary coding allowed for further insight and investigation into the drivers for consultant satisfaction, which aid in the development of conclusions found in the discussion section.

Limitations

Use of the survey data for this study presented some limitations as well as several benefits. One of the biggest limitations of using the existing data was that it did not allow tailoring of the questions to suit this study. Consultants may have asked whether they worked at other firms, and how the benefits, communication, and processes compare. For those who are consulting for the first time, it would also help to know how their expectations aligned to the temporary staffing world. A missed opportunity may have been the ability to request clarification or elaboration on the responses. A benefit of this method, however, is that the nature of the emailed survey may encourage more honest responses. Jeff Hancock, professor of communication at Stanford University, stated that contrary to popular belief, technology does not make people more inclined to lie (Stanger, 2012). His study at Cornell showed that people lied most often on the phone

and least often over email (Hancock, Thom-Santelli, & Ritchie, 2004). Respondents tend to portray a more socially desirable image when being interviewed on the phone versus responding to an online survey (Keeter, 2015). Another benefit to surveying is the increased response pool. Where interviews are time consuming due to development of the questions, scheduling, and transcription, this survey study allowed time for a greater number of responses to be analyzed (LinkedIn, n.d.). Because this analysis is an initial examination of the unexplored topic of the impact of human connection on consultant satisfaction at an IT staffing firm, the survey data is sufficient for the exploration of consultant satisfiers and dissatisfiers.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter provides information on the participants, findings from the survey analysis, and the themes that emerged. A sample of 301 surveys were examined, and 429 open-ended (non-required) questions were answered, as displayed in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

Number of Open-ended Responses

Question	Number of Responses
Q1	229
Q2	178
Q3	22
Total	429

Once reviewed, it was discovered there was repetition of feedback in questions 2 and 3, therefore, the focus of the analysis is on comments for question 1: *What is the primary reason for your (LTR) score?*

Preliminary coding results centered around attitudes and friendliness of people, availability of desirable jobs, statements on communications and response time to questions and issues, satisfaction with pay and benefits, experience with the technology, and feelings of preparedness for their assignment. From there, preliminary coding was analyzed and grouped into these seven categories: people and professionalism,

communication and response time, technology, pay and benefits, job opportunities, training and career resources, and onboarding and preparation. In many cases, a single comment was coded with more than one category, as the responses spanned across different topics. Below is an explanation of each category, a summary of observed responses, and some response examples that are representative of capturing the overall sentiment.

Although NPS is utilized at the company owning the surveys, NPS was not used in interpreting the results in this study as it is a numerical score system, and this is a qualitative study. Some LTR observations were made when reviewing the open-ended comments to see how they aligned with the sentiment in the text, and in many cases, it provided insight into how the critique or praise affected overall satisfaction.

The topics of “People & Professionalism” and “Communication & Response Time” appeared most frequently in the comments. The “Technology” and “Training and Career Resources” categories appeared the least frequently, as seen in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2

Coding Categories, Instances, and Positive vs. Negative Responses

Category	Instances	Positive/ Negative	Positive %	Negative %
Onboarding & Preparation	30	18/12	60%	40%
People & Professionalism	114	112/2	98%	2%
Communication & Response Time	99	80/19	81%	19%
Training & Career Resources	7	6/1	86%	14%
Pay & Benefits	22	10/12	45%	55%
Job Opportunities	24	1/23	4%	96%
Technology	8	1/7	13%	88%

Of the topics raised, “People & Professionalism,” “Communication & Response Time,” and “Training & Career Resources” had the highest percentages of positive feedback. “Job Opportunities” and “Technology” had the biggest percentage of negative feedback, as seen in Table 4.2.

Onboarding and Preparation

Comments that directly or indirectly mentioned pre-employment interviewing, onboarding, orientation, and assignment preparation were tagged with the onboarding and preparation category. This includes administrative onboarding, background checks, drug testing, direct deposit sign-up, benefit enrollment, and client or assignment orientation. Thirty survey respondents shared information about this pre-employment and orientation period. Eighteen of those comments placed onboarding and preparation in a positive light by commenting that onboarding was smooth and easy, and projecting feelings they were well-prepared for their assignments. Many consultants said the onboarding was smooth, systematic, and they were provided with great support during this phase of employment.

Comments about onboarding and preparation appeared in only 13% of the 229 responses. The following two quotations from two of the surveys were representative of the positive comments in general.

I have enjoyed how my recruiter and HR person has made the process seamless.

Team did a wonderful job in the hiring process.

Nine responses were considered negative, where it was reported onboarding or setup was slow, confusing, or frustrating. Several of the negative comments included disapproval of the level of communication during the pre-assignment period, as below.

Just the onboarding was a little frustrating, especially with the delays on certain requests, like background checks.

One participant indicated that although things did not go smoothly, the communication and support provided overall satisfaction.

Hasn't been as smooth sailing as I'd have hoped, but overall feel supported.

People and Professionalism

People and professionalism encompassed any mention of the company or individuals or teams who were perceived as helpful, thoughtful, caring, proficient, or professional. There were 114 mentions of people and professionalism, appearing in almost 50% of the responses, indicating a strong frequency. The responses were overwhelmingly positive in this category, where all but two respondents had a negative response. Some of the positive responses are:

Every team member has the same passion concerning your personal success as an employee.

Good assignment, benefits, good consultant manager.

Above and beyond [the importance of] all the new things that I am learning, is the people. I am very lucky to have a great team behind me. It makes all the difference in the world.

One unhappy respondent stated that although the processes were horrible, the people were nice.

Communication and Response Time

Responses fell into the communication category when touchpoints, meetings, calls, emails, newsletters, or sharing of information were mentioned. Also in this category are comments related to the length of time for which issues and questions are responded to and/or resolved. Ninety-nine individuals commented on communication from staff and/or response time to questions and issues. Nineteen responses contained a negative component or critique, similar to the quote below.

My points of contact have been very slow in communication especially answering questions or addressing issues I raised.

Hard to get a hold of someone for help.

I wish that communication was a bit more consistent and reliable.

Other respondents were pleased with the level of communication and response, as were these two below.

I am extremely happy with the process and communication once the interview is scheduled. My CEM keeps in touch often and listens and answers to all the questions I have.

I got all the answers I needed on time.

Training and Career Resources

Consultants who mentioned access to training, upskilling, career coaching, and development resources were tagged with the training and career resources category. Only seven responses mention these topics, suggesting they do not illicit a strong response when consultants are thinking about satisfaction. One respondent commented that these areas are lacking, but still provided a good overall response to the survey.

Provide better training and upskilling resources.

Some positive responses displayed appreciation for the additional opportunities to learn.

They provide great coaching and opportunities.

They are responsive and provide free upskilling training for consultants too if you are interested in learning a new skill.

Pay and Benefits

The pay and benefits category included mention of pay, paid time off, health or retirement benefits and appeared across twenty-two responses. The responses were divided almost evenly, with twelve of the comments, including those below, regarding perceived low pay or poor benefits.

Insurance sucks.

Benefits are not cost effective.

The 401K is not beneficial for contractors.

The other ten praised the company for offering competitive pay and benefits. A few examples are:

Benefits are decent for a contractor.

Good benefits for consultants.

Overall industry top benefits for a consulting firm.

Of the twelve more negative comments about pay and benefits, only 4 presented overall dissatisfaction with the company. The others were critical of pay and benefits but acknowledged other bright spots within the company. Three examples are:

Good company, but too few vacation days and medical coverage is too expensive.

I like my employer; however, the benefits are less than stellar.

Good opportunities, however pay rates are mediocre.

Job Opportunities

The respondents were overall very pleased with the job opportunities available, and the client work offered. There were twenty-four responses that mentioned jobs, and only this one was negative:

Not a good variety of jobs.

Of the many who mentioned satisfaction in this area, they described that the staffing company works with big clients, offers quality jobs, and provides the ability to match the job well to their skill sets. A few examples are below.

I like the number of opportunities you bring and your consideration of member choices on requirements.

They have a professional staff and an impressive list of clients.

They found me a job very quickly in a tough job market

Technology

The consultants provided eight responses for the technology category, where one response was positive and seven offered criticism or suggestions for improvement. This category appeared in 3.5% of the responses. Although most responses were negative, half

the respondents expressed overall satisfaction and would recommend the company to a colleague. Responses included:

The technology is redundant and there are obsolete tools. Nice people however.

A little frustrating trying to look up information related to the job.

2022 versus 2023

The responses for 2022 (before consultant support was provided) were compared to those of 2023 (after consultant support was provided). The comparison found an increase in the percentage of positive responses. In 2022, 89% of responses were positive, and in 2023, 95% of responses were positive in nature. There was also a significant increase in the number of survey responses in 2023, at 348% year over year. When observing the likely to recommend (LTR) response averages for these surveys, the score increased by 0.5 points in 2023, where 95% of the responses were rated a 7 or higher, indicating higher satisfaction.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter will include an interpretation of the results. A generalized report on the results will be provided, followed by an in-depth look at each category, and a revisit of the behavioural theories mentioned in Section 1.

The overall results were in alignment with the research in many ways. It was easy to observe which topics were hygiene factors or motivators by evaluating the frequency and nature of the comments. Consultants who felt their hygiene needs were not being met felt dissatisfied, and where motivators were present, they seemed delighted. The absence or limited mention of certain topics may indicate that some hygiene factors are expected, and when met, it does not produce excitement. The theme of being easy to work with, i.e., smooth onboarding, delivery of proactive information, and good communication, appeared to align with consultant satisfaction. Of especially frequent mention was satisfaction with the people, professionalism, and communication with staff. This supports the idea that the human connection component is a major motivator, eliciting positive feelings about the company, improving satisfaction, which will lead to retention and loyalty.

The Importance of Frequency

One way the respondents expressed the importance of topics was through frequency of mentions. Although using comment counts in qualitative research is controversial, it is useful in some practices (WSU Office of Assessment for Curricular Effectiveness, 2020). Figure 5.1 below illustrates a word cloud from the analyzed comments, and communication was the second most mentioned word. Although word clouds provide frequency of words, they may not reflect importance (WSU Office of

Assessment for Curricular Effectiveness, 2020). For example, the word “company” was a top mentioned word, but upon analysis it was not important in the reflection of feelings. Word clouds can provide some insight into what the participants wanted to communicate (Bletzer, 2015). Open-ended questions allow the consultant the freedom to discuss whatever is on their mind. When they are asked for the reason for their LTR score, the item that comes to mind is something they feel is important enough to mention. If the LTR score was high, they are forced to think about what makes the company deserve such a score. When a low score is given, there are likely factors causing dissatisfaction to illicit the response. The frequency of key topics allowed me to categorize the data and provided insights into what the consultants found important.



Figure 5.2

Word Cloud for Responses to Question 1

The count of topics, or lack of mention of certain topics, will be evaluated for each category below. Counting comments is not always useful information and requires some context, as it must have relevance to the purpose of the study. The categories below exist as either hygiene factors or motivators, and mention, or lack of mention, of each topic tells a story in the analysis.

People and Professionalism

People and professionalism were the most mentioned topics in the survey. This indicates that when consultants are thinking about satisfaction, they consider the people they work with, or for, as an important factor in that consideration. In addition, most of the responses in this category were positive, and even the respondents who displayed dissatisfaction in other areas were likely to recommend to a colleague when they saw value in the people. This supports the idea that satisfaction is driven, albeit not exclusively, by some perceived level of personal connection, and the professionalism of the company. The consultants added commentary and were delighted that the company offered professional and personable people in their interactions.

Communication and Response Time

The second most mentioned category was communication and response time. The results pointed to a higher level of job satisfaction when communication was excellent and was an overall dissatisfier when communication was lacking or absent. When looking at the likely to recommend numerical score in relation to communication and response time comments, the communication comments align with the score accordingly. It is gathered from the results that a minimally adequate level of communication is expected, excellent communication is appreciated, and lack of it is a big dissatisfier.

Onboarding and Preparation

Onboarding is the consultant's first experience with the company, and the experience will often set the tone for the rest of the assignment. A very poor onboarding process seems to be a major detractor for consultants, and where only thirty consultants commented, that may indicate that onboarding and preparation for assignment is usually

acceptable at the company. However, this topic can elicit strong reactions if the onboarding is not done well, or if the consultant does not feel prepared for the assignment. The results were roughly split in half for positive and negative responses, which indicates consultants receive an inconsistent experience for tasks that should be systematic. The negative responses included comments about too many systems and logins and unclear instructions. As one respondent noted, although the onboarding process was not up to par, the support provided made up for that.

Training and Career Resources

Very few comments mentioned training and career development tools and processes. This may indicate that training is not something consultants expect from a firm, and they are generally indifferent to whether it is provided. The consultants who commented that they did appreciate or take advantage of the available training, were very pleased with the offering. Those who commented negatively seem to not be aware of the available programs, and better promotional materials and education could help gain more recognition.

Pay and Benefits

This category offered a wide range of responses, from total dislike of the compensation plan, to complete praise for being the best in the business. Consultants getting paid (and paid on time) and receiving some form of health and retirement benefits are expected in our industry. These factors will become dissatisfiers when the employee feels they are not paid enough, especially in the absence of other positive qualities of the company. Although all consultants surveyed receive the same benefits, there was a split response, which may be due to the personal experiences of the individual. It is not

uncommon for first-time consultants to feel the benefits are not adequate, as they are more expensive when compared to working as a permanent employee. They may be unfamiliar with industry standards for consultant benefit packages and the minimal-to-no paid time off policy. Despite having more money in their pockets as a consultant, they still demand better benefits and paid time off without a reduction in pay. This lack of understanding of contingent work may lead to displeasure with the company. As evidenced by the many internet articles that explain consulting to newcomers, (Tulane, n.d.; Besieux, 2020) those who have been consultants in the past, for various firms, might better understand the structure of consulting work and the expected benefits. A majority of those who expressed negative views of pay, time off and benefits still expressed overall approval for the company.

Job Opportunities

A consulting firm is expected to provide good job opportunities, which may explain the relatively few responses in the category. This points to the overall sentiment that the quality and variety of jobs is acceptable. Those who did choose to comment on job quality and availability had a negative perception. Several responses portrayed disappointment with not being placed on subsequent jobs after the first assignment. Consultants are likely to stay when presented with new positions to avoid having to start over and onboard at a new consulting firm. This is a missed opportunity for many staffing firms.

Technology

The technology category was also rarely mentioned, indicating that the company's technology falls in line with what is expected at a consulting firm, but does

not seem to be a point of high satisfaction. The technology mentioned referenced systems for onboarding, time entry, pay statement access, and references to single sign-on. It was most mentioned in relation to the onboarding phase as it is the consultant's first experience with learning HR, time entry and benefits systems. Technology may be seen in a much better light when there is centralized access to all links, sites, and information with a single sign-on for all systems.

Summary

The frequency of mentions of certain topics reveals which factors are most important to consultants. According to other surveys on employee and consultant satisfaction, they traditionally mention pay, work location and work environment as top items of importance (Osborne, 2022), however, the survey data from this study tells an additional story. The most frequently mentioned topics were people, professionalism, communication, and response time. Consultants offered additional commentary to praise the professionalism and helpfulness of the people they interacted with, and who made a difference in their experience at work. It was this category that contained the most positive feedback. The highest number of negative comments were with communication and response time, and job opportunities. Good communication is a basic need for consultants, and in the absence of it, their experience is perceived to be poor. The results of this survey indicate an inconsistency in communication during onboarding and throughout the assignment. The communication category elicited the strongest responses on both the positive and negative sides of the fence and had a high number of mentions. This may indicate that through improved and consistent proactive communications and

timely response to questions, issues and problems, consultant satisfaction would be greatly enhanced.

Alignment with Behavioural Theories

Looking back to the behavioural theories mentioned in Chapter 2, each can be utilized to understand consultant needs and predict how to deliver on those needs for a great customer experience. As proposed in Figure 5.3, using each theory provides simplicity in the approach to satisfying consultants to gain true loyalty. If a company addresses pain points, meets needs, and makes it easy for consultants to stay, they will.



Figure 5.3

Applying Behavioural Theories to Improve Retention

The coded categories can be dropped into each theoretical framework to create a picture of consultant satisfiers and used to direct where energy should be focused to improve the experience. For example, pay and job opportunities must be present for a consultant to be

pleased with the level of communication. A good onboarding experience is expected (hygiene factor) but is a big dissatisfier if it goes wrong. By satisfying, at the very least, the hygiene factors for consultants, an organizational equilibrium can be created that will entice them to stay, as it will be easier for them to do so. Further details on each motivator and hygiene factor are provided in Figure 5.7.

Maslow

In the IT staffing industry, many consultants have grown to expect that a firm will do little more than find them work and pay them. If a firm goes above and beyond in any way, this is usually seen as positive, although consultants will still have complaints if other needs are not being met. Maslow suggests that needs are to be met in a hierarchy, starting with the most basic needs. For example, offering a recognition program will not be as meaningful to a consultant who does not receive a response from the company when he or she has an issue. Consultants who are not being paid in a timely manner, or at all, will not be able to feel good about levels of communication. The theory applied to consultant satisfaction and loyalty is pictured in Figure 5.4 below. Left of the pyramid is the loyalty scale, which improves as higher needs are being met. The pyramid indicates the levels of needs, starting with what consultants expect, then moving to factors they need to achieve a level of loyalty, followed by higher level wants or factors that are nice to have, which allows for the highest level of loyalty and more of a commitment to the company. To the right of the triangle, items observed in the surveys were applied to the hierarchy. From the bottom up, they increase in importance and impact on the loyalty of the consultant.

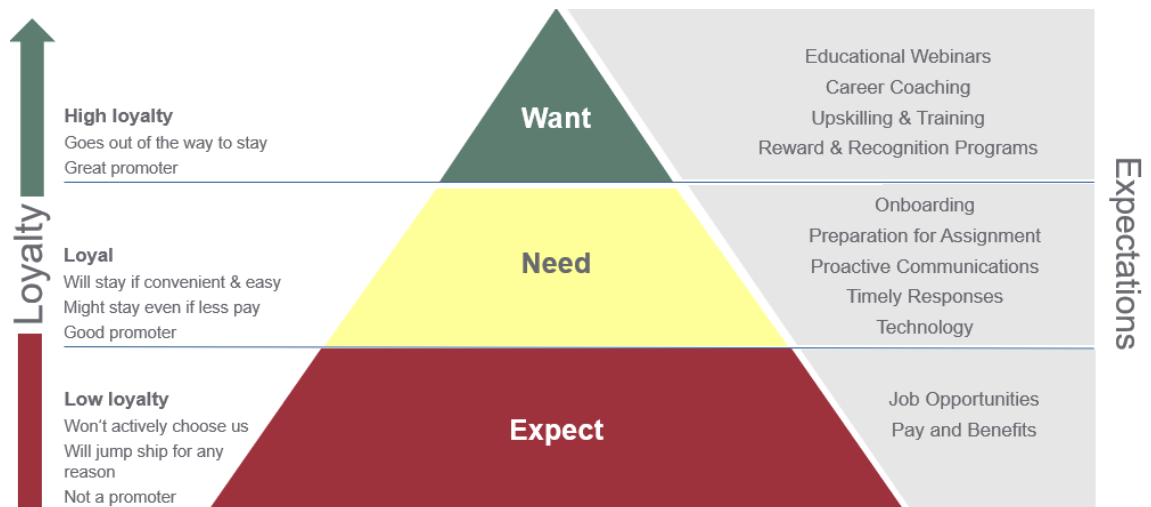


Figure 5.4

Consultant Hierarchy of Needs and Loyalty

Loyalty is the quality of being faithful in support of a company or brand (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, n.d.), and can range from a “hard-core loyal” to a “hard-core switcher” (Yim & Kannan, 1999; Terech, Bucklin, & Morrison, 2009) . Where loyalty is low, a consultant may work for that company, but the firm does not necessarily have their loyalty. The consultant may leave for any reason, including higher pay, a more attractive job, or less travel. When given a choice, the consultant may not choose a firm who is only providing the most basic expectations. At the need level, where some loyalty is attained, the consultant may stay with the firm if it is convenient to do so because they are found to be easy to work with. Some organizational equilibrium is being achieved at this level and these consultants may be good promoters of the company. At the highest level, true loyalty can be achieved. This group will go out of their way to stay with the company, even when pay is higher elsewhere. A higher level of organizational equilibrium is attained, and this group will be great promoters of the company.

Beyond a job and pay, there are many factors that contribute to a consultant being happy at work. They require forthcoming information about their assignment and client, instructions on using company systems like time entry and viewing paystubs, they need to know who to contact when they need something, and they need a timely response for their questions, issues, and concerns. As shown in Figure 5.5, temporary workers indicate that orientation, training, and communication about the assignment duties and culture are main drivers for satisfaction. This is based on a Sense presentation of the SIA Thought Leadership Series and the SIA 2015 Temporary Worker Survey.

What temps say drives satisfaction:

- Better communication about duties of assignment
- Better communication about culture of hiring company
- Training (particularly technology)
- Orientation



Figure 5.5

Satisfaction Drivers for Temporary Workers (Sense, 2017)

If a company is meeting consultants' needs, they may choose that company over others, as many staffing firms are not providing this level of support. They may even go out of their way to stay with the company when most other factors are equal, although the firm may not achieve true loyalty at this level. Consultants will stay when and where it is convenient and easy. Consultants whose needs are being met will be good promoters of the company, offering higher satisfaction scores, providing referrals, and staying longer.

Taking the hierarchy of needs a step further, a company can offer career development programs, training, upskilling, and partnership rewards. Offering a

dedicated main point of contact at the company can allow deeper relationships to grow, which will further develop consultant satisfaction. Other points of communication like newsletters and town hall meetings allow additional connections with leaders and resources within the company. These consultants will be excellent promoters of the company and will go well out of their way to stay with the firm. It is at this level that the staffing firm can achieve true loyalty from their consultant employees.

As consulting firms are highly susceptible during dips in the economy, proper engagement of consultants will allow a staffing firm more stability in an ever-changing market (see Figure 5.6). If a firm can meet the expectations, needs, and wants of the consultant, they have the potential to become a leader in an industry where proper consultant support is not a widely embraced practice. The figure below, from the Sense presentation of SIA Thought Leadership Series, illustrates the importance of engagement with consultants to improve retention, and thus, the bottom line. Winning the consultant over in the first few months with great communication, onboarding, and technology will set the stage for a longer-term relationship.

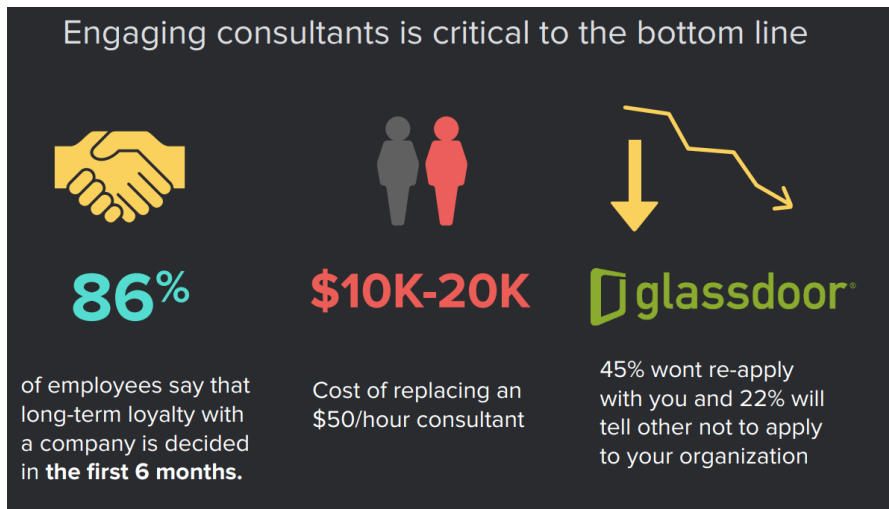


Figure 5.6

Impact to Bottom Line (Sense, 2017)

Herzberg

Herzberg's theory offers a deeper dive into categorizing hygiene factors and motivators for consultants. Items that staffing firms cannot afford to get wrong are displayed in Figure 5.7 under hygiene factors. Getting these items right may not return high accolades but getting them wrong can be detrimental to the business. The motivators list presents the items that may not draw negativity if neglected but will improve satisfaction when provided. Similarly, the SIA reports that what commonly drives consultants away is lack of communication, failure to pay, and unpleasant work environment. Satisfiers include trustworthiness, politeness, and quick resolution to problems (Osborne, 2022). Below are the survey coded categories listed under either hygiene or motivator, based on personal experience with the items and how consultants perceive them.

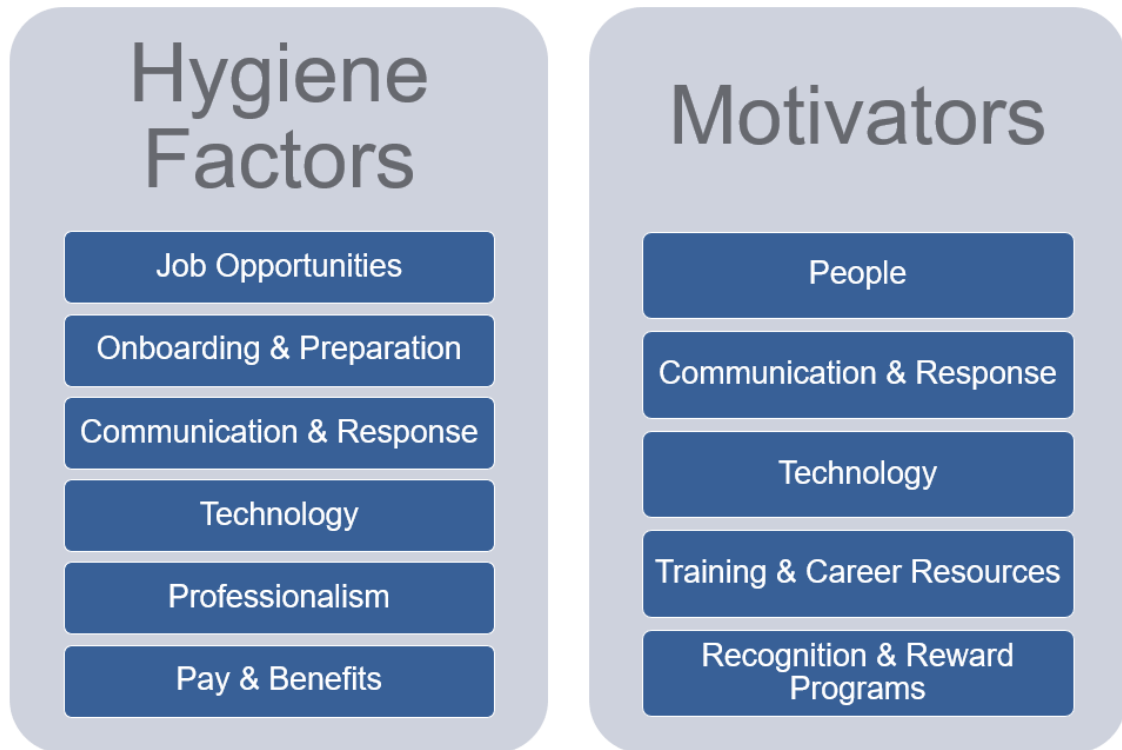


Figure 5.7

Herzberg's Factors for Consultants

Criticisms of Herzberg's two factor theory include the possible overlap of factors into the two categories of hygiene and motivational factors (Andersson, 2017). Although communication and timely response is expected of any employer, it is also a motivator in the IT staffing industry, as many consulting firms do not deliver in this area. Technology is also a factor that calls for minimum expectations but can also exceed expectations and facilitate a smooth and streamlined process that is sometimes uncommon in the industry.

Organizational Equilibrium

The combination of the Maslow and Herzberg theories provides excellent insight into which company efforts would contribute to creating an organizational equilibrium, where consultants will choose to stay with the firm. It can be argued that given the state

of the industry today, not all the highest-level needs in the hierarchy and motivational factors need to be met to achieve excellence in the field. The survey comments indicate that the consultant satisfaction bar is currently set low, so achieving equilibrium for retention is more easily achievable. Today, the key for consulting firms is to be easy to work with. This involves sufficiently meeting the consultants' basic needs shown in Figure 5.8, which will allow the firm to stand out among competitors. If consultants were to ask exactly what they need of a firm, at a minimum, it might look as below.



Figure 5.8

What Consultants Tell Us They Need

To further enhance loyalty, minimize turnover, and be recognized as the best in the business, the firm can accommodate for the higher-level needs and motivators seen in the top level of the Maslow pyramid in Figure 5.4, including upskilling, training, career development, rewards, and recognition.

Conclusion

The data shows that people and professionalism are satisfiers and communication can be a big dissatisfier. Removing barriers for onboarding and access to information will make it easier to stay than leave. A consultant who has a poor experience may never develop a favorable view of the company, regardless of the training, upskilling, and other supplemental benefits offered. A firm often has one chance to get it right, and if they can perform more consistently, their reputation will grow, business will improve, and consultants will stay longer. “The war for talent is here and the future of contractor engagement relies on your ability to engage with talent in a personal and authentic way” (Sense, 2017). Meeting progressively higher levels of needs will increase satisfaction and loyalty and be beneficial to the business.

Chapter 6: Recommendations and Conclusion

This section includes recommendations for firms to improve satisfaction, retention, and loyalty through development of a consultant care program. In the IT staffing industry, consultant care programs are perceived as optional and disposable, especially when the market becomes weak. It is often one of the first programs to be eliminated when markets shift, and times get tough. Although firms seem to be astutely aware of consultants' pain points, they continue to neglect customer service for this population, and their business suffers. Perhaps firms are not asking themselves the right question in relation to consultant care. They are asking whether they can do without consultant care programs and still maintain adequate revenue and profits, but should instead be asking themselves: What are we leaving on the table by not offering a great consultant care program? See Figure 6.1 below, from the Sense presentation for the SIA Thought Leadership Series, for which the statistics still hold true as evidenced by subsequent SIA reports. There is a lot to lose when a consulting firm does not keep retention and engagement front and center. Working to gain satisfaction and loyalty should be an important focus of the staffing company. "If nothing else, a worker's job satisfaction rating is a strong predictor of the likelihood that he or she will quit or be absent from work" (Krueger, 2005). A reduction in attrition and a commitment to redeployment can be achieved by executing an effective consultant care program and will bring great rewards to the company.

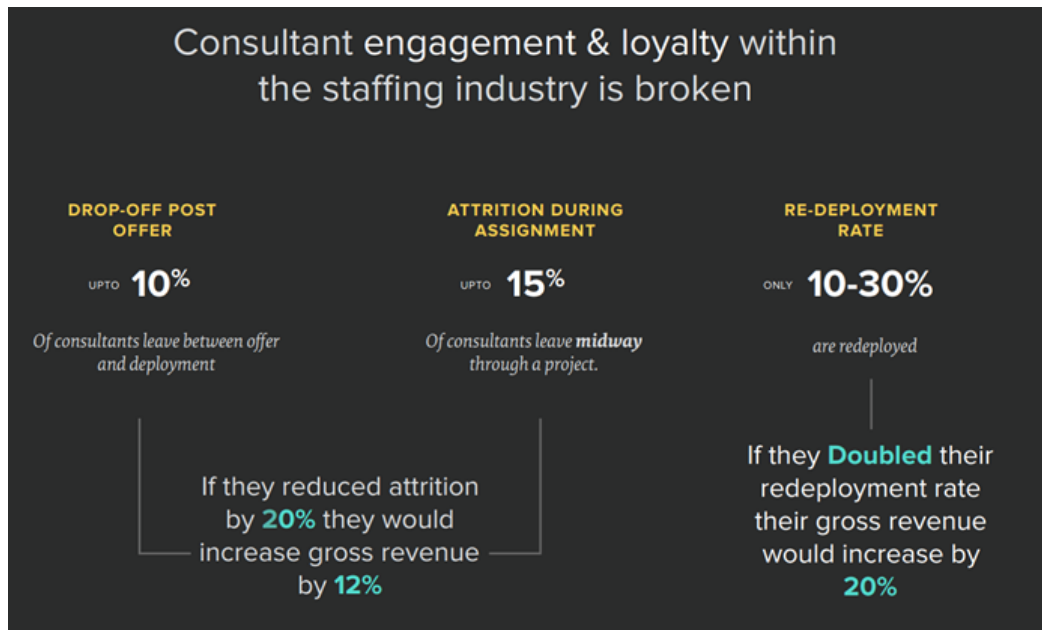


Figure 6.1

What the Staffing Industry is Leaving on the Table (Sense, 2017)

Why Consultant Care Programs Have not Been Implemented?

Established staffing firms are usually aware of how and where they are underperforming based on simple conversations with consultants, regular surveys, and incoming complaints. Despite knowing what consultants’ pain points are, satisfaction scores point to firm neglecting to properly address these problem areas, as if underperforming in these areas is acceptable and common practice in the industry. Identifying the root of this issue is important, and that is: companies may be resistant to investing time and money into areas they do not consider revenue producing (i.e., sales and recruiting). Firms may openly refer to positions of consultant support as “non-producers,” which perpetuates the mindset that the supportive role has no impact on the revenue of the business. The flaw in this mindset is that leaders do not make decisions that will meet the needs of one of their two primary customers, and therefore, a key

customer continues to be underserved. Staffing firms that choose to continue treating consultants like a product will harm their own reputation for being a good place to work. When the staffing business shifts in favor of the consultants, as in less available jobs, consultants will migrate towards firms who treat the consultants well. Creation of a consultant care program is important for a firm to successfully focus on and meet consultant needs.

Where to Start?

Identify the Primary Customer; and the Consultant is a Customer

Where does a company start in developing an effective program dedicated to consultant experience? As explained in Chapter 2, companies must be clear about where consultants should land on the importance scale for their business. Firms may be tempted to recognize the client (the company that contracts them to fill staffing needs) as the primary customer, and to view the consultant as an employee. The research suggests that the consultant is also a customer, if not the primary customer, as they unlock the most value for the business. Viewing the consultant as a customer, and the primary at that, will lead to additional inquiries as to whether their primary customer is being well served. Firms can then draw on the established research to properly meet their customers' needs and achieve greater consultant satisfaction.

Provide Excellent Communication, Connection, and Engagement

Companies whose business is putting people to work should value those people and maintain personal connection. The consultant care program should offer a main point of contact for onboarding and orientation assistance, monthly checkpoints, timely response to questions, escalation of issues, and performance feedback. Automation and

push technology to notify consultants of new opportunities should be used to help facilitate placement after their assignments come to an end. The company must be viewed as “easy to work with” and adding human connection to the equation can help in creating that.

Through additional channels, monthly newsletters, town hall meetings, focus groups, and discussion boards can be used for supplementary connection. A one-stop, self-service portal should also be available for consultant access to systems, documents, instructions, timekeeping, paystubs, referrals, and new job opportunities.

Build Training, Rewards, and Recognition Programs

To round out and improve support, companies should consider building programs to recognize and reward consultants. Great performance should be recognized through feedback, social media, and newsletter kudos. The company should offer rewards and loyalty programs to incentivize desired behaviours, such as candidate referrals and sales leads, acceptance of extensions and new assignments, and longevity at the company. By providing opportunities for career development through upskilling, training, and career coaching programs, satisfaction will be enhanced. A solid redeployment program should be in place to reduce the turnover in the talent pool.

Measure Success

As with any company that is for-profit, all new process, operations, and people should be tied either directly or indirectly to an increase in performance and revenue. Support staff are not often seen as producers but are vital in the success of the business. Staffing firms struggle to measure the value in support positions, and below are suggested key metrics to help measure the success of a consultant experience program. This

information should be shared to demonstrate to executive leaders that the program is a necessity, not an option. Key indicators include:

- *Headcount* – Because attrition is generally high in this industry, headcount should increase as consultants are retained and redeployed. Headcount also has a direct relationship to increased revenue.
- *Redeployment percentage* – Firms should measure how often existing talent is redeployed, or, being utilized to fill open roles (Hyson, 2020). With an average industry redeployment rate of 20% (Sense, 2017), this is a generally untapped approach (Gagnon, 2023). Redeploying reduces onboarding costs, which can cost more than \$4,000 per placement (Vasconcellos, 2024), and because redeployed consultants are a proven talent, they may exhibit greater success in assignments, driving up client satisfaction.
- *Early terminations/resignations* – Having a dedicated support person to guide the consultant during a time of uncertainty in the role has value. Whether convincing them to stay at their job or arranging for alternate assignments to better suit their needs, the financial returns are beneficial. It is too easy for a consultant to quit for another opportunity when they do not feel a connection to the company.
- *Survey results* – Consultants should be surveyed regularly, and data should be collected for how likely they are to refer (LTR) to a colleague, the level of satisfaction for overall communication, and how well they were prepared for assignment. The NPS calculation can be used to track improvement and predict future success. Survey responses and scores will increase with dedicated consultant support.

- *Referrals* – The number of candidate referrals is an indicator that the consultants are happy with the company and improves fill rates for open jobs. Some of a firm’s best consultants come from referrals, and it portrays confidence in the company when friends and colleagues are recommended for employment.
- *Sales Leads* – When consultants are called on a regular basis, the point of contact can solicit information about what the client has been working on, and where they might need help. This information is shared with sales for follow up. The quality of the leads in this scenario are excellent, as consultants on the ground are great observers of the business and involved in internal meetings and discussions. Consultants should also be provided with an opportunity to refer new clients to the company through a sales referral reward program, which could have amazing financial potential.

Recommendations for Future Study

This thesis presented a preliminary look at human connection for consultants in IT staffing. There are several areas for future research that will further assist staffing companies in determining the value for consultant care programs to retain consultants.

What effect do consultant care programs have on client satisfaction?

There is good reason to believe that consultant care programs will have a positive impact on consultant satisfaction, but how might client satisfaction be impacted? A qualitative study into the relationship between consultant satisfaction and client satisfaction could be explored through surveys and interviews. The potentially positive impact on client satisfaction would further highlight the importance of a consultant care program.

Does the existence of a consultant care program lead to financial returns?

Although staffing firms may see the benefits of a consultant care program, at a for-profit organization the program's true value lies in the return on investment and the financial impact. The study could explore whether with the program implemented, more revenue through retention and redeployment is realized. If client satisfaction is enhanced through improved consultant care, does the firm receive additional job opportunities, placements, and become vendor of choice? This information would allow firms to make decisions based on financial evidence rather than consultant surveys.

Are outsourced consultant support programs effective and sustainable in IT staffing?

Some firms may turn to outside help for managing consultant care, risking customer satisfaction for reduced costs. Contracting offshore or onshore IT services to provide customer support has been found to have a negative impact on customer satisfaction, however, it is still widely utilized (Witaker, Krishnan, Fornell, & Morgeson, 2019). An additional study on the impact of an outsourced care center in the IT consulting space would better inform staffing firms in making these decisions.

Using NPS

Although NPS is a widely used tool across industries, including in staffing, it was not used in the reporting of results or the discussion in this thesis, as it is a quantitative measurement. For the purposes of this study, the calculated NPS is analogous and reflective of the sentiments in the comments, as the comments are requested as an explanation for the LTR score. Future quantitative study can be performed to provide additional analysis across several consulting firms to dig deeper into the nature of

consultant satisfaction and its effect on retention and as a predictor of future growth of the company.

Conclusion

Solving the problem of consultant care has been a dilemma for many staffing firms as they are not often willing to commit money, time, and effort (or do not have the knowledge), to implement the program correctly. Band-aid fixes to the problem, such as offering centralized service desk support (sometimes outsourced to other countries), do not fully meet the needs of consultants and become a poor return on investment. Some companies who do make the investment in dedicated support for consultants will often abandon the program at the first sign of a slipping economy. In job market where the consultants are in demand and have a choice of staffing firm, a consultant care program can allow the firm to stand out among competition.

The behavioural theories presented in Chapter 2 offer a foundation of understanding to recognize the needs of consultants. By excelling at meeting consultants' most basic needs, loyalty can root on more solid ground. Herzberg's theories help reveal hygiene factors and motivators and to avoid pitfalls and delight the consultants. Then through meeting needs, satisfying hygiene factors, and addressing motivators, an organizational equilibrium can be reached where the consultant will find it more beneficial and easier to stay with the company than to leave.

The academic contribution of this thesis is the new perspective of applying customer service principles to consultant satisfaction, rather than traditional employee satisfaction factors. Viewing the consultant as a customer offers a new approach to applying satisfaction factors and enhancing the overall experience.

The survey results showed that communication and human connection can eliminate other negative perceptions of a company and its processes. Even when onboarding processes are challenging, and resolution to issues are sometimes slow, great customer service will make the difference in a consultant feeling well-supported. Acknowledgement of the consultants' issues, timely communication, clear expectations, and human connection are key ingredients to customer satisfaction for consultants. Ideally, they will have one main point of contact they can develop a relationship with and feel connected to. They need that one person who will not pass the buck and will be resourceful in getting an answer: someone to connect the communication gaps between sales, recruiting, and the other operational teams. The formula is finding a solution in simplicity, going back to the basics of human behaviour, and in good old-fashioned customer service. Companies should provide the level of support they would want to receive as an employee and a customer.

At a minimum, a firm should provide dedicated support for smooth administration and processes, excellent communication, connection, and engagement. Consultants will stay when they find a firm that easy to work with. This simple, yet very important, idea is the key to attracting and retaining talent in a tough market. To perform above and beyond, a staffing firm can deliver on other value propositions to exceed consultants' expectations. This includes offering an industry leading recognition and rewards program, and educational opportunities for career growth and development. If a firm is willing to invest in maintaining a high level of consultant satisfaction and true loyalty, rewards will surely follow.

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Curriculum Vitae

Surname: Harvey

Given Names: Lauren Jeanne

Present Citizenship Status: Canadian and American

EDUCATION

2.1 Post-Secondary Education

- Enrolled part-time in the MBA program at the University of New Brunswick, 2021 to present
- Associate of Applied Science, Physical Therapy, Newbury College, Brookline, Massachusetts, 1999, *Cum Laude*
- Bachelor of Science, Therapeutic Recreation, University of Connecticut, Storrs, 1997

2.2 Title of Graduate Thesis and Supervisor's Name: *The Importance of Human Connection in Consultant Satisfaction at an IT Staffing Company*. Supervisor David Foord, PhD, Faculty of Management.

2.3 General Area (s) of Academic Interest: Business management, human resources, and science, health, and information technology studies.

EMPLOYMENT

3.1 Employment History

- Director of Consultant Experience, Experis (January 2022 – present), Remote, Milwaukee, WI, USA
- Senior Practice Director, Experis (2017 - 2022), Remote, Milwaukee, WI, USA
- Resource Manager, Experis (2012 – 2016), Remote, Milwaukee, WI, USA

- Clinical and Business Analyst, Information Systems, Clinical Applications, Horizon Health (2008 – 2012), Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada
- Advanced Clinical Applications Team Manager, MEDITECH (2005- 2008), Massachusetts, USA
- Supervisor, Marketing Support Representative, MEDITECH (2003 - 2005), Massachusetts, USA
- Application Consultant, MEDITECH (2000-2003), Massachusetts, USA