Consultant Dependency in Complex Automation Projects: Implications for the Work Environment[1]

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ABSTRACT

This study explores organizational work environment issues related to the dynamics of client-consultant teams in complex automation projects. Focusing on a Swedish industrial company's long-term collaboration with a consultancy firm to implement HR process automation, the study highlights how the interplay between knowledge and power shape the collaboration, stakeholder salience, and project success. Grounded in Nordic traditions of user-participation and democracy, it draws attention to how automation initiatives affect structural working conditions, job demands, and resources. This qualitative, single-case study, featuring participatory observations and semi-structured interviews, reveals the importance of addressing work environment issues at an organizational level and underscores the challenges of ensuring knowledge transfer, balancing stakeholder interests, and maintaining agile, collaborative practices. The findings contribute to current Nordic and global discourses by demonstrating how client–consultant relationships and dependency can transform an organization's conditions and requirements for work, emphasizing the need for a strategic approach to project management.

KEYWORDS

client–consultant relationships / complex automation projects / organizational work environment / power dynamics

Introduction

Applying automation, developed with the very purpose of replacing humans in the performance of work, is a difficult undertaking for any organization. Consequently, automation is typically realized through projects, in which external IT experts are hired temporarily to support the client-organization (Pee et al. 2007). However, due to rapid technological developments, the potential of automation is no longer limited to separate robotic process automation (RPA) installations for structured, administrative work (Willcocks & Lacity 2016). Nowadays, several automation technologies, like AI and RPA, can be combined to support humans in increasingly complex work processes, where some tasks are automated while others still need human intervention (Davenport & Kirby 2016). While simpler automation projects, regarding routine, rule-based tasks, just take a couple of weeks to develop and implement and can then be handled by in-house competence (Asatiani & Penttinen 2016), automation of complex work processes seems to require long-term client-consultant relationships. Additionally, complex automation projects often require attention to a higher level of technological complexity, including system integrations and interoperability challenges. Yet, the fundamental technological knowledge tends to lie with the consultants hired to implement and configure these automations

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(Pee et al. 2007). Thus, the client-organization risks forming a dependence on these consultants, which would have direct effects on its organizational work environment, in terms of, for example, management, resources, and control (AFS 2015:4). In this way, long-term client–consultant relationships, established through complex automation projects, represent a novel and potentially impactful team dynamic and structure.

Although it is well recognized that organizations implement automation to better streamline their operations, expecting to promote productivity and efficiency, as well as relieve employees' routine workload (Willcocks & Lacity 2016), the potential of automation is not always realized. Organizations often overemphasize the possibilities of automation without fully acknowledging the time and effort it takes for such initiatives to be successfully designed and implemented (Markus 2004). A common pitfall is to treat automation as mere IT projects, focusing on its technological features while overlooking its far-reaching implications for the structure of an organization, as well as its potential impact on the employees' work situation (Baptista et al. 2020; Markus 2004). Consequently, despite the growing interest in automating complex work, its implications for people's work environment remain underexplored (SAWEE 2020, 2022).

However, for work environment to become a strategic component in driving organizational change, as well as automation initiatives, the attention for these issues must shift from the individual to the organizational level (SAWEE 2020). On an individual level, employees may fear losing their jobs to automation, feel stressed by the need to adopt new technologies, or experience the mental strain of changing their common ways of working (Arntz et al. 2017; Brynjolfsson & McAfee 2014; Parker & Grote 2022; Visagie et al. 2020). But automation is not just a technical product, with work environment effects limited to specific implementations. It is also an intricate, collaborative process with substantial effects on an organization's overall work environment. For on the organizational level, automation initiatives affect the very conditions and requirements for work, such as management and governance, communication, room for action, as well as demands, resources, and responsibilities (AFS 2015:4). Introducing new technologies and automated workflows inherently changes the way people work, creating new working arrangements and collaborations, which in turn alters the structure of work itself (SAWEE 2022). Therefore, the organizational perspective on work environment offers a much-needed clarification of why automation cannot be treated as 'just IT', as it affects all parts and levels of an organization.

Against this backdrop, the aim of this study is to explore organizational work environment issues related to the dynamics of client-consultant teams in complex automation projects. I investigate this empirically through a qualitative case study, featuring participatory observations and semi-structured interviews, focusing on the automation of several human resource (HR) processes at a large industrial company in Sweden, including its preboarding, onboarding, offboarding, and parental leave processes. The industrial company has hired a consultancy firm to help implement and configure these automations and together they collaborate in a client-consultant team consisting of 10 members. To this end, I ask*: How do the dynamics of long-term client-consultant relationships affect the organizational work environment when automating complex HR processes?*

Furthermore, the Nordic context of this study is noteworthy, since both businesses are based in Sweden. Likewise, it draws insights from previous Scandinavian research on information systems (Iivari & Lyytinen 1998), work environment (Sandblad et al. 2003), as well as Swedish work environment legislation (AFS 2015:4). In order

to theoretically explore the dynamics of the client-consultant team, I apply the theory of stakeholder identification and salience (Mitchell et al. 1997). Building on previous research on automation (Asatiani et al. 2020; Lacity & Willcocks 2021; Willcocks & Lacity 2016), client–consultant relationships (McGivern 1983; Nikolova & Devinney 2009; Pozzebon & Pinsonneault 2012), and work environment (SAWEE 2020, 2022), I analyze the empirical findings from the aforementioned case study.

In what follows, I first present a literature review as well as a depiction of the theoretical framework used for this study. Then, I will give an account of the applied method. Next, I present the case study background and empirical findings, centered around four themes regarding the interplay between knowledge and power in the client-consultant team, which I then analyze before presenting a concluding discussion. This study makes several important contributions to both research and practice concerning client–consultant relationships, by emphasizing the novel relationship dynamics of long-term client–consultant teams in complex automation projects. Furthermore, this study stresses the need to consider organizational work environment issues in relation to complex automation projects in general, and in client-consultant led HR process automation projects in particular.

Literature review and theoretical framework

In this section, I will discuss automation of work and its implications for the organizational work environment as well as describe the characteristics of complex automation projects with a focus on HR process automation. Additionally, I provide an overview of previous research regarding client–consultant relationships, before outlining the article's theoretical framework; the theory of stakeholder identification and silence (Mitchell et al. 1997).

Automation of work and organizational work environment

Working automation is nothing new. Its core logic remains comparable to nineteenth-century factory machine systems, which replaced human labor with technology to achieve greater continuity and control (Zuboff 1988). While early automation efforts prioritized improving quality and ensuring safety, by reducing physically demanding tasks, today's organizations increasingly look to automate activities considered tedious or time-consuming. By 'taking the robot out of the human' (Lacity & Willcocks 2021, p. 2), organizations have long sought to free their employees for more meaningful, value-creating activities while boosting productivity and efficiency. Hence, automation inevitably alters organizational forms as well as work processes. Though, despite the long history of automation and its profound impact on both workplace design and employees (Baptista et al. 2020; Markus 2004), knowledge about how automation affects people's work environment is still limited (SAWEE 2022).

As previously noted, work environment issues are often discussed at an individual level, and therefore, interventions have historically focused on ensuring a physically safe and suitable work situation (SAWEE 2020). However, there are several levels and dimensions to work environment, which together form a complete understanding of an

organization's general conditions for performing. The concept of work environment is understood as an employee's experiences of their work, affected by the overall workplace context, including working conditions, physical and technical environment, as well as social support (SAWEE 2022). The individual perspective is clearly relevant, but it can be limiting, as it contributes to the circumstance that efforts to improve employees' work environment mainly focus on rather practical aspects, relating to the physical and in some cases psychological work environment (Sandblad et al. 2003). Only when individuals' experiences of their overall work conditions are raised to the organizational level, sufficient insight into the actual impact of new organizational forms on the work environment can be achieved (SAWEE 2020). Without this broader perspective, the connection between automation of work and employees' work environment is first made when automation has tangible, negative effects on the work situation in which it was implemented (Sandblad et al. 2003). By discussing work environment issues on the organizational level, work environment thus becomes a strategic component, driving and shaping automation initiatives, ensuring that the employees' work environment is adequately considered throughout the automation process, not just as an after-thought (SAWEE 2020).

The definition of organizational work environment used here is acquired from Swedish work environment legislation, and it involves the structural conditions and requirements for work, such as management and governance, communication, participation, room for action, task allocation, as well as demands, resources, and responsibilities (AFS 2015:4). This conceptualization clearly reflects the distinctive 'grassroots' perspective, with an emphasis on user-participation and democracy, which is typical for Nordic information systems research (Iivari & Lyytinen 1998). Although work environment legislation naturally differs across countries, these regulations are grounded in foundational research addressing work environment aspects such as control, support, demands, and resources (Demerouti et al. 2001; Karasek & Theorell 1990). There are also more recent studies on the specific impact of technology on work environment, stressing changes related to job demands and job resources (Demerouti et al. 2014).

Job demands refer to the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of work that require sustained effort or skills and are thus related to certain costs of the same nature (Demerouti et al. 2014). An example of this is high work pressure, which again highlights the importance of individual experiences for an organization's work environment. However, if an individual experiences persistent high work pressure, it also says something about how the work is structured. Perhaps the task allocation is imbalanced or the management's communication of their expectations unclear. While job demands are not negative by nature, they do become job stressors when the effort required to meet these demands is not compensated by sufficient resources and rest. Job resources, on the other hand, refer to the physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of work that are either functional for achieving work goals, reducing job demands and the related physical and psychological costs, or promoting personal growth, learning, and development (Demerouti et al. 2014). Examples of organizational job resources, to cope with, for example, high work pressure, include receiving sufficient time and training to complete the tasks in question. Similarly, an automation project can be observed as a set of job demands that require corresponding job resources, such as time, expertise, and teamwork, to be successfully designed and implemented (Markus 2004). Therefore, the more complex and demanding an automation project is, the more robust the organizational resources put into this project must be.

Automation of complex HR processes

Not even the simplest RPA installation is completely free of risk (Lacity & Willcocks 2021). It could, for example, turn out that the automated task was not really suitable for automation to begin with, as tasks frequently change, requiring constant reconfiguration, or that there is not enough in-house competence to manage the implemented solution. Thus, the shift from simple, task-level automation to more complex automation projects, involving process-level automation and new workflows, requires even more attention to detail (Haleem et al. 2021; Madakam et al. 2022). To succeed in complex automation projects, organizations must take a more strategic approach to automation. By doing so, common missteps, such as unclear roles, lack of user know-how, costly maintenance, and lack of communication, can be identified and avoided before the automation is implemented (Lacity & Willcocks 2021).

This too applies to the introduction of automation into the HR function's work processes. Such initiatives, referred to as HR process automation, also have the potential to enhance services to employees and managers, ensure higher quality and security, boost productivity and efficiency, as well as ease employees' routine workload (Lacity & Willcocks 2021). One HR process often cited as particularly well-suited for automation is onboarding, that is, the introduction of new employees (Balasundaram & Venkatagiri 2020). Onboarding involves all the tasks required for new employees to start working, such as obtaining access cards, login details, and necessary work equipment. While every new employee must go through this process, onboarding also involves many existing actors and actor groups in an organization, for example, line managers, security personnel, and administrators. Nevertheless, there is reason to be cautious as HR processes are complex, encompassing both administrative tasks and crucial relational elements that cannot be fully entrusted to automation technologies. Since HR processes span virtually all parts of an organization, engaging and affecting numerous stakeholders, it can also be difficult to identify clear ownership over these processes. This complexity is further heightened by the task of organizing and managing a client-consultant led HR process automation project.

Client–consultant relationships

Client–consultant relationships have become an essential part of modern organizational life, with consulting projects shaping organizational structures and guiding strategic decision-making (Nikolova & Devinney 2009). However, much of the consulting literature is based on traditional approaches where the client–consultant relationship is seen as one-sided, either by being consultant-driven or client-driven. The first view perceives the consultants as dominant as they possess superior expertise, while the second view argues that the client dominates since they pay the consultants and can thus decide when to terminate the contract. The common denominator of this discourse is the matter of power, and who possesses more of it. But the true nature of client–consultant relationships calls for a more nuanced perspective, where these are observed as dialectical, meaning that both parties exercise power depending on the situation.

There are also studies that advocate for a further breakdown of the client–consultant relationship, by studying how the interplay between knowledge and power

shape IT projects. Accordingly, a fundamental aspect of client-consultant dynamics is the dispersal of roles and expertise. From this distinction, Pozzebon and Pinsonneault (2012) reflect on how knowledge and power is shared between the parties, deriving three archetypes of client-consultant relationships in IT projects: (1) a *dependency relationship*, where the consultants are experts and the client has a passive, information-providing role; (2) an *autonomy relationship,* in which the client leads while the consultants act as mentors in more passive roles; and (3) a *cooperative relationship*, where both the client and consultants take on an active, partner role. All archetypes come with their pros and cons, however. A heavily consultant-driven approach could yield rapid technical implementation but hinder long-term client autonomy. Full client independence may, on the other hand, neglect some advanced best practices, whereas cooperation can be highly productive but may trigger later power struggles if not managed.

Consequently, client–consultant interaction is a core factor for determining the success of consulting projects (Nikolova et al. 2009). Yet, much research tends to focus mainly on the role of the consultants, thereby undermining the importance of the client. In reality, however, both parties play an important role in shaping the relationship dynamics. Especially in innovative, complex projects, it becomes clear that both hold essential knowledge for achieving project success (Fu et al. 2023; Nikolova et al. 2009; Pee et al. 2007). Consultants and clients simply bring different forms of expertise. In IT projects intended to implement configurable technologies, there is a tension between global and local knowledge, as illustrated by the Global-Local dilemma (Pozzebon & Pinsonneault 2012). The global dimension refers to the instance that configurable technologies contain 'global' best practices, that is, standardized, generalized knowledge, while the local dimension refers to 'local' knowledge, embedded in the unique organizational context, to which the technology is to be adapted. Thus, clients and consultants need to negotiate how much of the technology's best practices to maintain and how much the system should be tailored to fit the local processes. This global-local negotiation is shaped by the client–consultant relationship as well as the interplay between knowledge and power.

In addition to separating knowledge-related roles (who is considered as expert) and power-related roles (who controls the project resources and/or makes key decisions), Pozzebon and Pinsonneault (2012) conceptualize both knowledge and power through two different lenses: the possession view and practice view. According to a possession view, knowledge and power are resources one can own (e.g., acquired and codified expertise, and formal authority), whereas a practice view implies that both knowledge and power are relational and exercised through interaction (i.e., that knowing is an evolving collective process embedded in action, and power is enacted through continuous interactions rather than being owned or stored). Regardless, both views highlight that knowledge and power are closely intertwined.

In relation to project complexity, more complex and innovative projects require a greater exchange of knowledge than simpler, routine initiatives, suggesting that knowledge transfer is a key factor for success (Pee et al. 2007). However, there is often a tension between 'getting the job done' and building in-house competence. While consultants are hired for their specialized knowledge, the client will not learn much if the consultants simply do all of the work without sufficiently involving the client. Since automation projects often require significant upskilling or reskilling of the workforce, clients hire consultants with the expectation that they will transfer their implementation knowledge

to in-house employees, enabling them to manage the system independently after go-live (Ko et al. 2005). Yet, knowledge transfer is not automatic, nor is it just a technical process, involving, for example, documentation and structured training sessions. It is also a process that requires attention to attitudes and motivations (Pee et al. 2007; Suzic et al. 2024). Accordingly, dependency relationships are often the result of poor knowledge transfer, either due to the consultants' unwillingness to share their expertise or an unmotivated client. But this could also be more subtle. The client might believe that they have absorbed the consultant's expertise, when in fact the consultant remains the real problem-solver (McGivern 1983). Such a capability gap has direct implications for project success, which is why conscious efforts to ensure knowledge transfer must be made (Pee et al. 2007).

Additionally, Pee et al. (2007) identify three interdependences (goal, task, and reward) which can shape the dynamics of client–consultant relationships and affect knowledge transfer within such teams. Goal interdependence refers to the extent to which one subgroup's goals depend on the achievement of the other subgroup's goals. Task interdependence involves the extent to which one subgroup's ability to complete its tasks depends on input or action from the other subgroup. Reward interdependence refers to the extent to which a subgroup's rewards, for example, bonuses or performance evaluations, depend on the performance of the other subgroup. By recognizing these interdependences project managers can design client-consultant projects, in terms of goal alignment, task division, and reward systems, to foster effective knowledge transfer between external IT consultants and client-staff. Still, complex automation projects usually require input from more actors than those represented in the client-consultant team.

Theory of stakeholder identification and salience

Identifying key stakeholders of a firm is crucial for coordinating diverse interests, mitigating risks, and ensuring the success of organizational initiatives. Relying on Freeman's (1984, p. 46) broader definition of stakeholders, as 'any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives', Mitchell et al. (1997) build their own typology around the attributes of power, legitimacy, and urgency, proposing that stakeholders can be categorized by whether they possess one, two, or all three of the following attributes: (1) *power*, which refers to the ability to influence the firm; (2) *legitimacy*, which is the perceived validity or appropriateness of the stakeholder's claim or status, as judged by socially accepted norms, values, or definitions; and (3) *urgency*, which refers to the degree to which a stakeholder's claim or relationship calls for immediate attention. However, there are different layers to each attribute. Power can, for example, be of coercive (force or threat) or utilitarian (material or financial resources) nature and is not a steady state. It can thus be acquired, lost, or remain latent. Similarly, legitimacy is variable and can exist on multiple levels (individual, organizational, and societal). Urgency has two components, time sensitivity and criticality, referring to how crucial it is to address the stakeholder's claim promptly and how important the claim is to the stakeholder. *Salience* is then conceived as the level to which managers give priority to the stakeholder's claim. Hence, salience is assumed to increase with the cumulative presence of power, legitimacy, and urgency as perceived by the manager.

Mitchell et al. (1997) further emphasize that the categorization is in fact based on manager's *perceptions* of each stakeholder's power, legitimacy, and urgency. Therefore, a stakeholder's actual possession of these attributes matters less if managers fail to perceive them, or if they understand them incorrectly. This means that one stakeholder's objective possession of power, legitimacy, and urgency, may go unrecognized, while another stakeholder, with fewer actual attributes, can become salient. Consequently, there is a risk that managers' inattentiveness or biases influence which stakeholders receive attention. Still, this theory stresses the dynamic nature of these relationships; today's non-stakeholders may well be among tomorrow's most salient stakeholders.

Method

The findings presented in this study derive from a larger, ongoing, interpretative case study focusing on the automation of several HR processes at a large industrial company in Sweden. These findings are qualitative and have been collected through (1) participatory observations of the client-consultant team's various meetings (approx. 100 hours, spread over around 50 meetings, both digital, hybrid, and in person, during the fall of 2024), (2) informal conversations with the team members during the observations, (3) semi-structured interviews with members of the client-consultant team (eight interviews), as well as one semi-structured interview with the HR specialist at the industrial company, who works closely with the team.

The interviews, conducted in 2023–2024 and lasting 1–1.5 hours, focused on the automation initiative at the industrial company. Following a semi-structured approach, questions were adapted to the participants but remained exploratory, covering topics such as their work roles, collaboration within and beyond the client-consultant team, the intentions and efforts behind the automation initiative, challenges and opportunities, and the implications of HR process automation for the company and those working with the solutions. Respondents included the team coach and one in-house software developer from the industrial company, along with six consultants (four business analysts and two software developers). Material from the participatory observations and informal conversations included all team members. Direct quotes in the empirical findings are primarily from the transcribed interviews, with those drawn from field notes clearly indicated.

All interviews except for one, with the HR specialist, which was held in person, were conducted over the Microsoft Teams application. With each respondent's consent, all interviews were recorded and archived. The digital interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Teams' auto-transcription tool, while the audio from the in-person interview was transcribed using an AI tool called Aiko. Afterwards, all interview transcriptions were manually checked. The interview transcripts and field notes from the participatory observations, including records of work situations, team meetings, informal conversations, and direct quotes, were then thematically analyzed (Braun & Clarke 2006). The analysis followed an iterative process of coding and categorization, where initial codes were refined through repeated readings and comparisons across the material. Attention was given to patterns related to collaboration, power relations, and knowledge distribution within the client-consultant team. Through this process, recurring issues such as perceptions of dependency, control over the client-consultant relationship, and

coordination of work were identified and organized into broader themes. Ultimately, four themes were generated, which also structure the upcoming presentation of the empirical findings: (1) possession of basic technological knowledge, (2) possession of contractual power, (3) knowledge transfer attitudes, and (4) key decision-making power.

Furthermore, I adopted an interdisciplinary and hermeneutic approach to the literature analysis (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic 2014) to emphasize the importance of studying the dynamics of long-term client–consultant relationships, when automating complex work processes, and its implications for the organizational work environment, combined. In order to create a coherent description and narrative of complex HR process automation projects, carried out by client-consultant teams, and its effects on the organizational work environment, I have iteratively searched and analyzed literature from various disciplines, including information systems, HR management and development, and organizational theory, as well as materials from the Swedish work environment legislation.

Case study background and empirical findings

In spring of 2023, at the start of this case study, the industrial company had recently initiated its automation journey. Due to its significant size, with approximately 17,000 employees, the industrial company's administrative processes were bureaucratic and slow. In fact, a few years prior to this study, most of its administrative work were largely 'paper driven' still. Information often had to be copied from one Excel sheet to another, before printing it out as a hard copy. An administrator would then have to physically deliver the document to another department—for example, Security—for a required signature, thereafter it needed to be scanned and forwarded again. These numerous manual steps, physical printouts, and human interventions prolonged processing times and ultimately slowed down the daily workflow. This issue became even more pressing considering the, newly announced, estimated expansion, during which the industrial company needs to recruit 4000 new employees worldwide, per year, in the coming 5 years. Given that 80% of these new personnel will be stationed in Sweden, they could no longer cope with having slow HR processes. Thus, the industrial company decided to implement an automation platform provided by ServiceNow for facilitating the onboarding process and has since expanded the number of HR processes automated within this platform, also including the preboarding, offboarding, and parental leave processes.

To accomplish this, the industrial company has hired a consultancy firm to help implement and configure these HR process automations. A collaboration in a client-consultant team has been formed, consisting of 10 members, of which six are consultants and four are from the industrial company. Leading the team is the *service manager* (SM), who is assisted by the *team coach* (TC) —both from the client-organization. The other two members from the company are *software developers* (#1-2) with a focus on ServiceNow programming. From the consultancy firm, there are four *business analysts* (BA#1-4), which work alongside two additional *software developers* (#5-6) specialized in ServiceNow programming. While the nature of the software developer role is rather straightforward, a BA gathers and translates requirements from various stakeholders, within the client-organization, for the developers to technologically realize and execute. Thus, a BA must be attentive to the needs of different stakeholders and users as well as technically familiar with the possibilities and limitations of the ServiceNow platform.

The SM is the official team leader and mainly functions on a strategic level, acting as a bridge between the particular client-consultant team and other ServiceNow teams (those who automate workflows that are not related to HR), as well as the industrial company's HR function. The TC, on the other hand, has a more operational, hands-on role within the team, being responsible for supporting its agile working method, scheduling and moderating recurring meetings, and confirming that they follow the set plan for each sprint. The client-consultant team works in so-called 'sprints', with several joint meetings per week, such as daily stand-up meetings for short check-ins, weekly backlog refinement discussions where they prioritize leftover tasks from previous sprints, as well as sprint planning sessions to set the agenda for the upcoming sprint. Thus, every 2 weeks there is a sprint-release of the client-consultant team's latest deliverables to production.

The different team members also meet in smaller constellations to collaborate among themselves as well as with other teams and organizational functions. The BAs, for example, regularly meet with a user experience (UX) designer, whose task is to create user-friendly and effective digital products/services by putting the user at the center of the development and implementation process. Together, they synchronize ideas and requirements regarding the interface design of the automated solutions. As the client-consultant team works specifically with *HR* process automation, they also have an essential collaboration with the industrial company's HR function. In the beginning of each week, the SM and TC have a meeting with a particular HR specialist. During this meeting, they discuss and prioritize HR's requirements and wishes regarding certain automation features. It is assumed that the needs of HR should be given top priority, since the HR function has the most comprehensive view of each HR process. However, the industrial company's line managers are the ones responsible for the execution of the automated HR processes, since they possess the ultimate personnel responsibility. This means that in fact it is the line managers who are considered the actual end-users of these automated workflows, not the HR function.

A general purpose of the client-consultant team is to operate as a technical management group for the ServiceNow-based solutions regarding the onboarding, preboarding, offboarding, and parental leave processes at the industrial company. Besides configuring and maintaining the ServiceNow solutions, and providing technical support to end-users, the team develop these systems further to adhere to different stakeholders' needs, which often are revealed through use. As previously mentioned, the onboarding process concerns the introduction of new employees. Preboarding, however, is typically integrated into the onboarding process, as it covers a few simple tasks that initiate the actual onboarding. Offboarding is at the other end of the employee life cycle, as it concerns the process of disengaging an employee from their position within the company. Finally, the parental leave process is initiated when employees take time off to care for their newborn or children.

These ServiceNow-based HR solutions are currently in use, and some have been in place for several years. The onboarding process has been running for about 4 years, while the parental leave process was introduced in May 2024. During this time span, from late 2020 to 2024, the industrial company's preboarding and offboarding processes were also automated and implemented. The HR process automations consist of digitalized workflows, where some tasks are fully automated (e.g., ordering access cards, IT equipment, and system permissions) and other tasks are still performed by line managers, the concerned employees, or other personnel (e.g., introducing the new employees to colleagues, and taking online courses). This automation initiative is not only intended

to save time for the line managers but also to help new employees get up to speed faster as well as allow for fewer intermediaries overall. The empirical findings from the semi-structured interviews and participatory observations are presented below, organized according to the aforementioned themes.

Theme 1: Possession of basic technological knowledge

This theme explores the industrial company's dependence on consultants for their ServiceNow expertise, focusing on how basic technological knowledge is distributed. Differing interpretations of this knowledge are highlighted, viewed either in terms of quantity or quality.

Both the consultants and the client representatives seem to agree on the fact that the industrial company is dependent on the hired consultants. This is evident as the consultants are both in majority and possess the main technology-related knowledge. Besides, this client–consultant relationship is likely to continue as long as the industrial company uses the specific ServiceNow automation platform, which adds to the sense of a strong dependence. However, there is an interesting difference in the way different client-respondents address their dependence on the consultants. The HR specialist at the industrial company holds that it is not sustainable to be as dependent on a consultancy firm as they currently are, and states that: 'it becomes incredibly vulnerable'. But the HR specialist does not emphasize that this vulnerability is since the consultants are the primary ServiceNow-experts of the team, rather the main concern seems to relate to the fact that the number of consultants exceeds the number of team members from the client-side.

This can be contrasted with the views of a software developer, from the industrial company, who is a part of the client-consultant team. Being relatively inexperienced in the automation platform, software developer #1 is worried about what would happen if a particular consultant left: 'She has an incredibly important core competence… it would be disastrous if she left', clearly pointing to a lack of in-house competence. This tension is further amplified when the HR specialist expresses that most of the consultants are fairly inexperienced, this being the first job and client project for many of them. In relation to these 'junior' consultants, the HR specialist of the client-organization states that problems occasionally arise when employees from the HR function of the company seem to know more about the automation platform than the hired consultants: 'Sometimes it feels a bit like we, as those formulating our [HR's] requirements, have a better grasp of new things in the system than those who are actually supposed to be the experts. That is very challenging'.

Theme 2: Possession of contractual power

This theme examines control over the client-consultant contract as a key source of power. While the reliance on multiple consultants is strategically justified, high turnover has exposed the industrial company's vulnerability and reinforced its dependency, leading to efforts to build greater in-house competencies.

The large number of consultants is considered favorable from an up- and down-scaling perspective, referring to the ability to quickly terminate or expand the number of consultants based on the current need for labor, which emphasizes the industrial

company's formal power over upholding the contract with the consultants. Moreover, BA#2 describes the company's unusual approach of treating consultants as permanent resources, rather than project hires. 'Resource consultants' have no formal say in what work is to be done but contribute as executors of allocated tasks. At the same time, the HR specialist says that the staff structure is not as secure with consultants as regular employees and points to that they have a history of high turnover; many influential and knowledgeable consultants have moved on to other clients. However, this is something that the industrial company is working on, which is reflected by the quotation below:

> The SM has worked to ensure that we are about 50-50 client and consultant team members. But there has historically been more from the consultancy firm. When I first started working with the team, there were no permanent employees from the industrial company, apart from SM. Everyone else were consultants then. Even the TC, who was also from the consultancy firm. He recently transferred over to us. (HR specialist)

Theme 3: Knowledge transfer attitudes

This theme addresses the industrial company's long-term dependence on consultants' technological and process-related knowledge. Both parties voice concern over insufficient knowledge transfer, though they differ on how it should be achieved.

The lack of in-house competence is acknowledged both within the team and by higher management in the industrial company. For instance, the SM is openly talking about the need, communicated from top-management, to recruit an internal BA. Moreover, one of the software developers (#6) on the consultant-side is highly involved in a project to transfer simpler, technical support tasks to functions within the industrial company, which would reduce the need for consultants in this regard. In light of this explicit search for more in-house competence, BA#1 expresses that it seems strange that the existing consultant knowledge is not fully utilized: 'If they want more in-house skills, they should make sure that the BA consultants teach the client employees how to be a good BA' (quotation from field notes). Here, BA#1 points to a knowledge-surplus on the consultant-side and questions why the industrial company focuses on hiring new staff, instead of training the existing workforce on the hired consultants' knowledge and then recruit these people internally to the team. The supportive attitude toward organizing knowledge transfer activities is explained by the consultancy firm's business model, which is centered on building sound and long-term client-relationships. However, several consultants, including BA#1, have expressed that it is beneficial for them to still be needed: 'It is good that they make mistakes sometimes, because then they need us' (quotation from field notes).

Theme 4: Key decision-making power

This theme examines the client-consultant team's working methods, showing how decision-making power shapes the process. A perceived loss of control over task structuring, increased workload, and limited transparency in prioritizing user needs reflect tensions over who ultimately drives the team's agenda.

The consultants persistently feel inferior to their client in one respect, that is, in the control over work contents and distribution of tasks. During the sprint planning meetings, the client-consultant team, led by the TC, discusses which tasks should be handled during the upcoming sprint and in which order these should be prioritized. These undertakings include leftover tasks from previous sprints, incident reports received from the users of the implemented HR process automations, and the BAs' collected needs from other stakeholders. Nonetheless, the SM has the final say in the prioritization of the team's work, which is frequently reflected in sudden changes of, and additions to, the team's sprint plans. These changes appear to be closely linked to the weekly meetings between the SM, TC, and HR specialist. Team members from both the consultant- and client-side note that the SM seems to push HR's agenda, even though this interferes with their initial planning, causing an added workload, and in some cases results in end-user issues being down-prioritized. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for these requirements to not adequately consider ServiceNow's actual technical functionality. One of the software developers (#5) form the consultancy firm states that:

> It becomes extra difficult because SM lacks the technological understanding of our team's collaboration, which is evident when SM is stepping in and changing the priority order of our tasks without further thought about what technical consequences this will have for us developers. (Software developer #5, consultancy firm)

However, it is also stated that HR's needs and wishes should be prioritized by the team since they work with HR process automation. They have even spent entire team days discussing how they should adjust their ways of working so that the HR function has a direct communication path into the team's work order. This discussion was prompted by the HR function expressing dissatisfaction concerning that even their small matters took far too long for the team to handle. Similarly, though, end-users of the automated HR solutions have voiced frustration regarding that they have not been sufficiently involved in the automation initiative. All consultants highlight this as regrettable, and one states that:

> When we do talk to line managers, it is in case form really. In other words, complaints that we receive about something not working or that they have accidentally done something. That is basically the communication we have with the line managers. (Business analyst #4)

Lastly, all team members, who have been responsible for the technical support, state that the industrial company has not adequately considered the time required to manage the implemented HR processes automations. All consultants express that their team's efficiency suffers because they are dealing with further system development and technical support/management in parallel.

Empirical analysis

As shown, four themes were generated from the empirical material: (1) possession of basic technological knowledge, (2) possession of contractual power, (3) knowledge transfer attitudes, and (4) key decision-making power. All relate to the interplay of knowledge

and power within the client-consultant team, revealing how the relationship dynamics may affect the industrial company's organizational work environment. The first theme relates to possession of the basic technological knowledge of the ServiceNow automation platform, and in line with previous research this seems to lie with the hired consultants (Pee et al. 2007). Although the respondents have different views on whether this knowledge-surplus is of quantitative or qualitative nature, it is understood as an essential job resource, nonetheless. In the client-consultant team, the ServiceNow-expertise is both functional for developing and managing the HR process automations and instrumental in easing the job demands posed by the project's high technological complexity. However, the matter of knowledge and power is highly intertwined, as is indicated by the HR specialist's statement that the HR personnel sometimes know more about the ServiceNow platform than the hired expert-consultants. From the perspective of the theory of stakeholder identification and salience (Mitchell et al. 1997), such crucial expertise represents a source of power, meaning that the stakeholder in possession of it has the ability to influence the work of the team. The HR specialist's remarks regarding the consultants' lack of experience can be viewed as a questioning of their legitimacy. Since legitimacy is socially constructed, it is understandable to associate a lack of work experience with a lack of knowledge. Though the consultants' formal expert-knowledge might not be questioned, as they indeed are employed because of their training in the ServiceNow platform, the validity of their claim or status does not seem to be perceived as exclusively strong by the HR function.

The second theme involves possession of contractual power in the client–consultant relationship. Both parties recognize the industrial company's formal power over the consultants' continued employment, which is consistent with a client-driven understanding of this relationship (Nikolova & Devinney 2009). The substantial consultant presence is justified from an up- and down-scaling perspective, underscoring the industrial company's contractual power. Nevertheless, several client-respondents also highlight their vulnerability should the consultants decide to terminate the collaboration. The consultants, on the other hand, are well aware of their power in numbers but are also mindful of that their employment depends on a potentially limited need for their expertise. This raises the question of which party holds control over the relationship, highlighting the dialectical nature of power and how it can be gained as well as lost (Mitchell et al. 1997; Nikolova & Devinney 2009). The perceived vulnerability of this consultant dependency, compounded by a history of high consultant turnover, has prompted the industrial company to recruit more in-house expertise, illustrating the distinction between possessing power and actively practicing it (Pozzebon & Pinsonneault 2012). While Mitchell et al. (1997) state that power is not static, their conceptualization of it suggests that it is a resource one party can own. However, this view seems too rigid in this client–consultant relationship, where the consultants could exercise a form of power, that is, by resigning, that would overturn the contractual power possessed by the industrial company, if the consultants acted on it. Although the consultants work to protect their employment at the industrial company and recognize their client's formal power over their continued relationship, resigning is a source of coercive power that they could call attention to in order to enforce their claims in situations where they lack perceived legitimacy and/or urgency (Mitchell et al. 1997). It is important to note, however, that this 'threat' is not mentioned by the consultants themselves, but by the client-respondents. Thus, this

supports a more nuanced understanding of power as something that can be both possessed and practiced (Pozzebon & Pinsonneault 2012).

The third theme concerns knowledge transfer attitudes, which reiterates the fact that in complex projects knowledge transfer is a key factor for project success (Fu et al. 2023; Nikolova et al. 2009; Pee et al. 2007). However, this subject is more or less explicitly addressed by the different parties. From the consultant-side, there is an explicit wish for proper knowledge transfer activities, while client-respondents refer to a knowledge-surplus on the consultant-side, implying that they have not learned enough from the consultants. The ambiguity concerning the consultants' request for added knowledge transfer activities, and their simultaneous desire to still be needed, can be explained by tensions between the goal, task, and reward interdependences (Pee et al. 2007). Regarding task interdependence, both parties benefit from effective knowledge transfer, as this would result in better functioning HR process automations, which, in turn, would allow the client-consultant team to engage in more system development rather than technical support. In terms of rewards, both parties also benefit from a successful project. The industrial company would make productivity and efficiency gains, as the consultants promote a good client–consultant relationship. However, it is within the dimension of goal interdependence tensions may arise. The consultants' occasional withholding of knowledge, to remain needed, can be explained by their idea that the client's goal is to terminate their contract after the project is completed. But, according to the client-respondents, the industrial company intends to maintain the relationship with the consultancy firm as long as they use the ServiceNow automation platform. Without actually having to, the consultants thus display a form of utilitarian power by not contributing all their knowledge (Mitchell et al. 1997).

This can be further contrasted with the client-respondents' realization that they have not learned enough from the consultants, which stresses several patterns in the existing client-consultant literature, for example, that knowledge transfer is not automatic (Pee et al. 2007; Suzic et al. 2024) and that there might be an expectation that the consultants transfer knowledge to in-house employees for them to manage the system independently after its implementation (Ko et al. 2005). The second part of this finding, though, seems to relate to the uncertainty that arises when basic technological knowledge is held by external actors who are not permanently part of the industrial company. The plan to recruit more in-house competence implies that the industrial company views itself as overly reliant on the consultants, even though they may not be truly locked in a dependency relationship. Since both parties in the client-consultant team take on an active partner role, contributing essential information and resources, they actually establish a cooperative relationship (Pozzebon & Pinsonneault 2012). However, they seem to suffer from the long-term disadvantages of this relationship archetype, that is, that the initial highly productive collaboration has triggered later power struggles, suggesting that this relationship dynamic has not been properly managed.

Examining different organizational work environment aspects reveals a potential explanation; the structure of the client–consultant relationship alters the industrial company's organizational work environment, as the conditions and requirements for their shared tasks are distributed among both internal and external actors. While the industrial company's SM and TC oversee the management and governance of the client-consultant team, other aspects, such as communication, room for action, task allocation, and job demands and resources (AFS 2015:4), are collectively shared among team members,

regardless of whether they are internal or external employees. In terms of knowledge transfer, and the interdependences that enable such activities, there seems to be a lack of consensus within the team regarding the distribution of responsibilities, communication, and the arrangement of job resources. If properly managed, these aspects would foster a better relationship as well as project success (Demerouti et al. 2014; Pee et al. 2007).

However, there is one fundamental condition that distinguishes this case from existing client-consultant literature; there is no 'post-project' phase. Thus, one possible explanation for the industrial company's lack of initiative or motivation for knowledge transfer is that they do not appreciate the point of such activities as they are determined that the consultant-relationship will be ongoing. In this way, the industrial company reinforces the fact that the primary ServiceNow-expertise is held by the consultants, which implies that proper knowledge transfer does not occur. This consultant-driven approach is more common in short-term consulting projects, as it can yield rapid technical implementation at first, but might hinder long-term client autonomy (Pozzebon & Pinsonneault 2012). Again, parallels can be drawn to the organizational work environment aspects of management and governance (AFS 2015:4). While knowledge and knowledge transfer are seen as job resources, that need to be managed and distributed, the tensions within the client-consultant team suggest that there is no clear structure for this collaboration. The team agrees on their respective roles, but the division of labor and responsibilities between them is sometimes unclear. Therefore, despite the complexity of the automation initiative, necessary knowledge transfer is not ensured, which is negative for the project's success (Pee et al. 2007).

Lastly, the fourth theme involves key decision-making power. The results suggest that the SM makes the key decisions regarding the client-consultant team's work contents. Frequently, these decisions seem to result in an experienced added workload for the team, which implies less room for action and control (AFS 2015:4), especially for the software developers. Thus, the negotiation of what local and global knowledge to include in the automated solutions seems to be somewhat distorted, as HR's local knowledge is prioritized over the recommended, standardized functionality of the ServiceNow platform. This raises the question of whether such local adaptation is truly well-informed when it conflicts with the technology's global features, or if this exemplifies HR's display of power (Mitchell et al. 1997; Pozzebon and Pinsonneault 2012).

From an organizational work environment perspective, the software developers' situation is a typical example of when the job demands exceed the provided job resources (AFS 2015:4; Demerouti et al. 2014). Correspondingly, it is clear that the team does not have enough time to sustainably manage both further system development and technical support of the implemented solutions. Another aspect of this is that the SM appears to prioritize HR's requests over the team's sprint plans, and by extension, the end-users' needs. This suggests the HR function is consistently viewed as a more salient stakeholder than both the consultants and the end-users, likely because it is seen as possessing all three attributes: power, legitimacy, and urgency (Mitchell et al. 1997). Although, in this respect, there is room to question the potential biases of the SM, as the received incident reports from end-users indicate a stronger urgency from these stakeholders. Nonetheless, as constituting the link between organizational strategy and the team's day-to-day operations, the SM may face more strategically urgent pressure from top-management. In addition, it remains uncertain whether the HR function has indeed a more accurate understanding of the automated HR processes than the line

managers, who oversee and partake in their execution, something that might undermine the legitimacy of HR's claims. Returning to the first theme, the HR specialist's claim to occasionally surpass the consultants' ServiceNow-related knowledge may reflect the HR function's perception that they have absorbed the consultants' expertise, even though the consultants remain the actual problem-solvers (McGivern 1983).

Concluding discussion

This study sets out to explore organizational work environment issues related to the dynamics of client-consultant teams when automating complex work processes, drawing from a qualitative case study on the automation of several HR processes at a large industrial company in Sweden. The findings reveal an interesting, multilayered dynamic between the industrial company and the consultants in the long-term client-consultant team. This study reinforces and extends existing research on client–consultant relationships, complex automation projects, and organizational work environment, by highlighting knowledge and power as intertwined resources that can be both possessed and practiced. Given that Nordic IS research emphasizes user-participation and democracy, the project's lack of end-user involvement stands out as a clear shortcoming.

While the client-respondents seem to be more concerned about the vulnerability of the collaboration, it is clear that the consultants are aware that their employment depends on a potentially limited need for their expertise. Likewise, the team's cooperative relationship dynamic highlights that knowledge and power are deeply intertwined and play a crucial role in shaping how both client- and consultant-stakeholders perceive and engage with their responsibilities, resources, and abilities to exercise influence. While the findings demonstrate that the basic technological knowledge lies with the consultants, they do not seem to be perceived as the most salient stakeholder, which stresses how stakeholder salience is based on the manager's perception of their power, legitimacy, and urgency (Mitchell et al. 1997). The industrial company views itself as overly reliant on the consultants, but the dependency within the client-consultant team is not one-sided, rather it is a question of influence concerning resource control, decision-making, and expertise. This applies to all client-consultant teams, but such a dynamic becomes even more urgent in complex automation projects, as these client-consultant collaborations require more extensive sharing and integration of knowledge about both the technology and the specific requirements of the client-organization. Compared to temporary consulting projects, long-term client–consultant relationships demand a more strategic approach, as their ongoing nature continually reshapes interdependences, power dynamics, and the overall organization of the automation project.

As HR process automation involves and affects many different stakeholders, a strategic organization throughout the entire automation process is required to avoid common pitfalls, such as lack of user know-how, costly maintenance, and lack of communication, as suggested by Lacity and Willcocks (2021). This insight stresses the need to address work environment issues at an organizational level to fully grasp how seemingly small decisions within the client-consultant team can affect the industrial company's structural conditions and requirements for work, such as management and governance, communication, participation, room for action, task allocation, as well as demands, resources, and responsibilities (AFS 2015:4). Because the team comprises both

internal and external competence, long-term client–consultant relationships, formed through complex automation projects, will transform the client's organizational work environment. Understanding this is essential for managing and structuring client–consultant relationships that promote knowledge transfer, project success, as well as strong collaborations.

Limitations and further research

This study has limitations, as it is a qualitative, single-case study based primarily on participatory observations and nine semi-structured interviews. The Swedish context also affects the generalizability of the findings. The study's aim is to provide empirical insights into organizational work environment issues related to client-consultant dynamics in complex automation projects, rather than to make broad claims about Nordic or global contexts. Future research could therefore explore these dynamics in other settings and countries with different work environment legislation. Moreover, further studies on client–consultant relationships might more closely examine how stakeholder dynamics evolve under agile methods and extensive co-creation in long-term automation projects.

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