

# Quality ratings of thought leadership for the first half of 2013

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This report is for firms that subscribe to White Space

## (Almost) all change

In our last report, surveying the thought leadership output of the world's largest consulting firms in the second half of 2012, we suggested that the winds of change were starting to blow through our quality rankings. While the top five firms had stayed the same, firms in the middle of our rankings had been making some significant changes to the way they did thought leadership.

That prediction proved to be correct. Our rankings for this report, which looks at thought leadership activity in the first half of 2013, show the most substantial change in the order that we've seen for some time.

However, the one place where things haven't changed is right at the very top. BCG still leads our league table, although only by a hair's breadth. IBM, meanwhile, has moved from third to second place; a significant achievement, but one that comes at a price. While most other firms' scores continue to be brought down by the inconsistency of their output, IBM has adopted a highly disciplined approach, severely limiting the quantity of its output in its efforts to control quality – a point we will come back to later. PwC climbs from fifth to third place, largely owing to its '10 minute' series, which represents an outstanding example of how a firm can combine substance in thought leadership with brevity. Accenture also moves up our rankings, from 7th position to 4th. This is a firm which is still bedevilled by the very inconsistency which IBM has largely eradicated, but its overall score has been lifted by some excellent pieces of research and the extent to which it grounds its thinking in practical realities. Deloitte does well, too, rising to 5th position from 8th in our last report: the firm's US practice in particular is publishing an increasing volume of high-quality, topical thinking. And finally, amongst the risers, Capgemini deserves a mention: something of a dark horse where thought leadership is concerned, the firm has broken in to the top ten, largely on the back of some thorough and thought-provoking material on digitisation.

For every riser, though, a faller. The biggest casualty is Bain – which falls from 6th to 16th place on the back of material that firmly ticks the sector specialisation box, but seems to do little else besides. Booz suffers, too – a fall of just 5% in quality being enough to see the firm drop from 2nd to 7th place and act as a reminder that it really is tough at the top. And then there are the perennially weak: firms like Arthur D. Little and CSC have contrived to lose ground where there wasn't, in truth, much to lose.

In fact, looking in aggregate across all firms, the average score was 9.40 out of a possible 20, down 3% on the second half of 2012. Average scores fell across all our criteria, but the decreases were most marked where 'Prompting action' was concerned.

## Black marks, white space

So, what are firms getting wrong? Or, to put it another way, where are the opportunities?

- **Resilience – too many surveys, not enough analysis:** Having read hundreds of pieces of thought leadership over the past couple of weeks, we've reached the fairly jaundiced conclusion that most consulting firms need to seriously rethink their approach to gathering primary data. Surveys are an easy option: graphs and stats can give a patina of credibility to an otherwise unexceptional report. But they do little to bolster a firm's standing in clients' eyes. Two things matter here: having the courage to ask the previously unasked questions, and genuinely analysing the results (simply describing them is not enough).
- **Into the weeds:** For most firms, thought leadership continues to be a spectator sport: consultants prefer to deliver their opinions from on high rather than getting involved in the nitty-gritty of the game. But the nitty-gritty is where the action is, certainly from a client's point of view. "What I resent about consultants is that they don't get down in the weeds," said the CIO of one substantial American corporation to us recently. "I'm down in the weeds every day." In part, this points to a long-

running weakness in thought leadership – the scarcity of serious, practical advice: “Segment your customers”, typical of the guidance meted out by most firms, doesn’t get close to the type of hands-on pragmatism clients would find genuinely helpful.

- **Meaning what you say:** Clients also want consultants who believe what they say and care about the impact it may have. As a result, we’re seeing the emergence of a small (some would say very small) group of individuals who are prepared to make a name for themselves by having a point of view; they’ve become advocates instead of passive observers. Inevitably, not everyone will agree with everything these people say, but clients – they tell us – prefer someone who has strong, but well-informed opinions because it sets them apart from the humdrum, workaday consultants they typically meet. Thought leadership shouldn’t be a platform for meekness or mediocrity.
- **Mind the gap:** Most consulting firms remain nervous of publishing material which clients might construe to be a pitch for business. However, all our client research suggests that clients are quite aware of the commercial function of thought leadership and, provided that the latter remains within acceptable bounds, don’t have a serious problem with it. For them, it’s a trade-off: they want access to new ideas, evidence that these ideas are being put into practice and some sense of what the likely pitfalls will be should they go down the same route. If they get to the end of piece of thought leadership having ticked all of those boxes, they’re unlikely to quibble if the authors have the audacity to promote their expertise in the field. If, however, the quality of thinking is poor, self-promotion will certainly smack of arrogance. In this context, it’s often the simplest things that work best: tailoring a boilerplate description of a firm’s capabilities, rather serving up the standard version is a perfect example. Just a shame that so few firms dare to do even that.

Please note that:

- The list of firms we rate varies slightly from report to report. Where a firm hasn’t produced a significant volume of material in a traditional format (see below) or we have had problems accessing it, we exclude them from the following tables.
- We aim to read a minimum of 15% of a firm’s output. However, with so many significant moves in our rankings, we expanded our rating activity this time, reading and reviewing almost a quarter of all publications.
- Aon Hewitt and IBM have published a relatively small number of pieces of thought leaders, and we’re unable to access much of CSC’s material. For all three firms, our ratings are based on 100% of the material which is available / accessible.
- Only thought leadership in traditional formats (books, articles, reports, etc) and their electronic variants has been rated here.
- Long-standing readers of this report will also notice that we changed one aspect of our ‘ratings’ terminology in our last report. In the past we’ve talked about ‘appropriate commercialisation’ – the extent to which a firm finds the right balance between not mentioning its services at all and making a hard sales pitch – which acknowledges the fact that thought leadership, unlike academic research, has commercial goals, however oblique or low-key they may be. We’ve now changed this to ‘Prompting action’ which captures our belief that thought leadership should be designed to have an impact while acknowledging the fact that some material is less obviously and directly ‘commercial’ in the sense of driving sales.

**Figure 1**

Quality rankings for the first half of 2013

 Areas of particular strength

 Areas of particular weakness

Rank	Firm	Differentiation	Appeal	Resilience	Prompting action	Total
1	BCG	3.33	2.79	2.52	2.05	10.69
2	IBM	3.22	2.63	2.33	2.40	10.59
3	PwC	2.93	2.75	2.20	2.55	10.42
4	Accenture	2.96	2.89	1.85	2.72	10.42
5	Deloitte	3.14	2.76	2.42	2.02	10.34
6	Roland Berger	3.09	2.77	2.29	2.18	10.33
7	Booz & Company	3.24	3.01	2.10	1.89	10.23
8	EY	3.02	2.48	2.29	2.27	10.06
9	Capgemini Consulting	2.97	2.63	2.10	2.20	9.89
10	Hay Group	2.80	2.65	2.15	2.25	9.85
11	KPMG	2.90	2.51	2.16	1.95	9.52
Average (all reports reviewed)		2.90	2.51	2.00	1.99	9.40
12	McKinsey	3.06	2.60	1.90	1.75	9.30
13	Booz Allen	3.00	2.31	2.21	1.69	9.21
14	AT Kearney	3.04	2.50	1.79	1.87	9.20
15	Aon Hewitt	2.85	2.28	1.98	1.83	8.94
16	Bain	2.69	2.36	1.56	1.54	8.14
17	Towers Watson	2.77	2.06	1.81	1.37	8.02
18	Mercer	2.90	2.08	1.65	1.35	7.98
19	TCS	2.59	1.83	1.77	1.68	7.87
20	L.E.K.	2.33	2.38	1.37	1.75	7.83
21	Arthur D. Little	2.17	1.95	1.55	1.80	7.47
22	CSC	2.78	1.83	1.47	1.25	7.33
23	PA Consulting	2.18	2.06	1.28	1.55	7.07

**Figure 2**

Comparing ranks and scores in the first half of 2013 with those in the second half of 2012

Firm	Score out of 20 in the second half of 2012	Rank in the second half of 2012	Score out of 20 in the first half of 2013	Rank in the first half of 2013	% change in score
Accenture	10.18	7	10.42	4	2%
Aon Hewitt	9.75	11	8.94	15	-8%
Arthur D. Little	8.78	18	7.47	21	-15%
AT Kearney	9.18	16	9.20	14	0%
Bain	10.21	6	8.14	16	-20%
BCG	10.90	1	10.69	1	-2%
Booz & Company	10.79	2	10.23	7	-5%
Booz Allen	7.78	22	9.21	13	18%
Capgemini Consulting	9.36	15	9.89	9	6%
CSC	8.58	20	7.33	22	-14%
Deloitte	10.10	8	10.34	5	2%
EY	10.09	9	10.06	8	0%
Hay Group	10.00	10	9.85	10	-1%
IBM	10.62	3	10.59	2	0%
KPMG	9.61	12	9.52	11	-1%
L.E.K.	8.67	19	7.83	20	-10%
McKinsey	9.49	13	9.30	12	-2%
Mercer	7.44	23	7.98	18	7%
PA Consulting	7.32	24	7.07	23	-3%
PwC	10.23	5	10.42	3	2%
Roland Berger	10.41	4	10.33	6	-1%
TCS	8.54	21	7.87	19	-8%
Towers Watson	9.44	14	8.02	17	-15%
Average (all reports reviewed)	9.71		9.40		-3%

## A note on our methodology

Potential clients are inundated with information and analysis from every direction. Unquestionably, the vast majority is binned or deleted instantly. Our methodology is based on research with senior executives and assesses the factors that drive a member of your target audience to pick up a piece of material, to read past the first paragraph and beyond, to have confidence in what they have read and to take action based on what they have absorbed.

We take a random sample of each consulting firm's thought leadership (a minimum of 15% and a greater proportion in many cases) and score individual articles against four criteria:

- **Differentiation** – will the potential reader pick up and begin to read this piece of thought-leadership? Sadly, many potential clients complain that, despite its pretensions, most material produced by consulting firms is indistinguishable from that produced by their competitors and that most thought 'leading' is in fact thought 'following'. We ask whether a piece of thought leadership is timely, whether it is different to what others are doing (either because of the topic or angle taken) and question whether it is revelatory.
- **Appeal** – does the writing style and presentation encourage the reader to keep on reading past the introduction and beyond? With so many options available to today's reader, many readers will not make it past the first paragraph if these issues are not addressed. We ask whether the introduction captures the reader's attention and compels them to continue, whether the report looks good and if the writing style and structure make it easy to read. And finally, we consider whether the report does anything to make the material stick in the reader's mind.
- **Resilience** – will the reader feel confident in what they are being told? Whether a client buys into the idea a consulting firm is trying to put across depends on the evidence. We explore the robustness of each report including the use of primary and secondary research (both quantitative and qualitative), the quality of analysis and description of methodology, and the use of credible internal experts.
- **Prompting action** – will the reader do something because they have read this report? Good thought leadership takes the reader beyond the 'that's interesting' stage – it gives them the tools and inspiration to identify issues in their own organisation or to begin to address a pressing concern. We ask whether the next steps for the reader are clear. We also check that the material isn't a poorly-disguised sales pitch which would undermine its credibility and chances of prompting action.

These attributes are scored 1–5, where one is the lowest rating and five is the highest. For more details on the exact criteria used, please [click here](#).

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