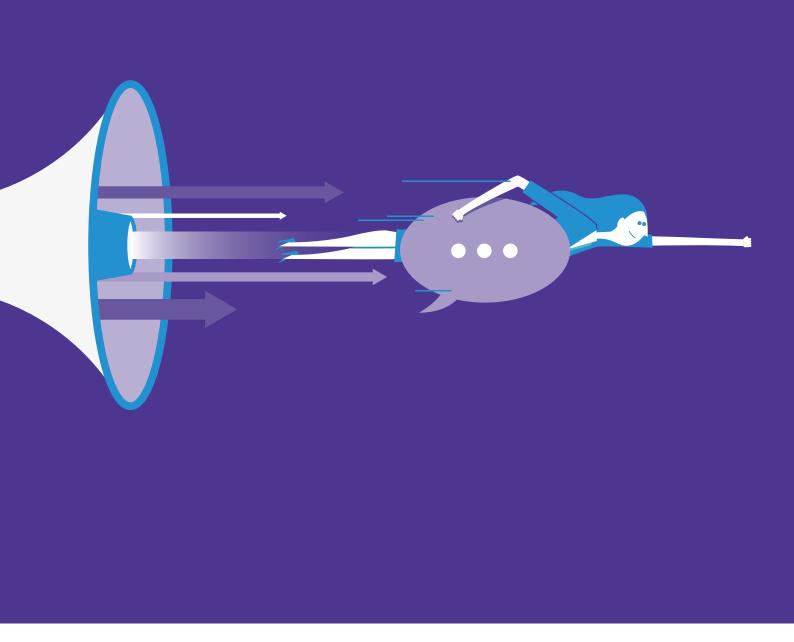# QUALITY RATINGS OF THOUGHT LEADERSHIP FOR THE SECOND HALF OF 2016

*Analysis of thought leadership and ranking of leading consulting firms based on our established methodology*

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# When did data and analysis go out of fashion?

All this talk of a "post-truth world"[1] has left us particularly sensitive to how firms are evidencing and convincing readers and viewers of their point of view. Despite examples set elsewhere in society, it strikes us as naïve, and possibly arrogant, to assume that simply having a firm's name associated with a piece of content is enough to make the views expressed in that content convincing and believable. Yet this approach is one taken by too many firms, and it is not a recent development—we have many examples published well before the recent political upheavals on both sides of the Atlantic.

Looking at the pieces reviewed for this edition of our thought leadership ratings, we find less than a third (31%) contain any type of primary research. That's right: 69% contain zero evidence of collecting new data, and drilling down even further, we find 83% offer not so much as a hint of an interview with someone dealing with this issue out there in the real world.

Of course, it's entirely possible to generate helpful insights through intelligent analysis of secondary data sources—The Boston Consulting Group and McKinsey Global Institute immediately come to mind as organisations doing this well. Our sample, however, reveals that this is done successfully a mere 13% of the time. That leaves— wait for it—a full 56% of our sample bereft of any type of primary research or robust analysis of secondary data.

So what exactly are these 56% of pieces based upon? We suspect their owners would argue that they are based upon years of experience working with clients. This may well be true, and this experience may well be very valuable. But the sceptical senior executive—who only has the name of your firm to support your point of view—is probably thinking, "What are they trying to sell me now?" As readers of more thought leadership than most, here are our three recommendations for being trusted:

1.  Make it very clear who owns this piece and why they are qualified to comment on this topic. When was the last time you read a non-fiction book without first deciding whether you trusted the view of the author? Your audience is no different.

2.  If your point of view is interesting but not worthy of a significant time investment, don't wrap it up as something it's not. Readers and viewers have very different expectations of a short blog and a polished report. Don't give them the substance of the former wrapped up as the latter.

3.  If it's worth doing, then do it right. Look at what others have said about the same topic, then think about how you can push this thinking onward. Consider what evidence you would need to be convinced that this is the right way to go.

Following these three recommendations is likely to improve not only resilience but also appeal. Content that ticks these boxes—with author credibility established and underpinned by appropriate research and analysis—has the potential to be not only more convincing but also more engaging. All of us are programmed to engage more with the voice of an individual than the anonymous voice of a corporation. And to relate to the insights and stories of those who have been out there and done that— insights and stories that come not from a brief reference to content found through Google, but from intelligent conversations with those who have valuable experience to share.

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[1]  Katherine Schulten and Amanda Christy Brown, *Evaluating Sources in a 'Post-Trust' World: Ideas for Teaching and Learning About Fake News*, New York Times, last visited: Jan. 24, 2017. Available at: www.nytimes.com/2017/01/19/learning/lesson-plans/evaluating-sources-in-a-post-truth-world-ideas-for-teaching-and-learning-about-fake-news.html?_r=0

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# METHODOLOGY

There is one question we get asked more than any other: How do you define thought leadership? This is the definition we use in selecting material to be added to our White Space database, which in turn provides the list we choose from for our ratings:

We include material that is intended to say something new about business, technology, or the economy and is positioned by the firm as such (e.g., as thought leadership, insight, or research).

We do not include material that:

- **is primarily and obviously designed to sell a particular consulting service or solution or is clearly straight-forward marketing material;**

- **describes a single case study, except in cases where a firm is doing so to illustrate a broader point it is making about a subject;**

- **outlines the results of a survey with minimal analysis; or**

- **provides factual operational guidance on legislative or accounting changes.**

However, what seems perfectly clear on paper can at times be less clear when applied in practice. The first challenging boundary to manage is material around guidance on legislative or accounting changes. On this one, we do our utmost to separate factual guidance (which shouldn't be included) from material that brings the firm's experience and perspective to add value to the reader (and so should be added to our list).

A second challenge is generated by firms themselves when they decree some material to be "thought leadership" and other material (although it fits our criteria) as "something other than thought leadership". In order to be fair to all firms, we take the intelligent reader's perspective: If they would view this in the same light as other "thought leadership", then we do, too.

The third and final area we often find ourselves debating is around material produced in conjunction with outside bodies. On this one, if the intelligent reader would assume the consulting firm is the key driving force behind the piece, then we do, too, and we add it to the list.

## Formats

We include material that the reader would perceive as thought leadership—this may be a traditional PDF, an online report, or material presented through an interactive site. In order to compare like with like, we exclude blogs and blog-like material as well as standalone videos.

Where content is presented in multiple ways, we always aim to score the optimum format or mix of formats.

## Sampling

We review a random sample of each consulting firm's thought leadership based on a minimum of 20% of output or 10 pieces, whichever is the greater. For those firms producing more than 150 pieces of thought leadership in the six month period, we cap our reviews at 30.

## Firms included

The primary driver for inclusion in our list is size of firm. However, some large firms produce little thought leadership and some smaller firms produce a significant amount of high-quality content. The former we exclude from our process (although we keep a close eye on output), and the latter we consider including if we see a persistent commitment to thought leadership.

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Three firms—Booz Allen, CSC, and Mercer—have featured in our rankings in the past but are not included this period (nor were they included in 2016 H1) due to a scarcity of relevant content. Aon Hewitt has been excluded for the first time in this review due, also, to a scarcity of relevant content.

Two firms—FTI Consulting and North Highland—appear in our ratings for the first time in 2016 H2.

# Our criteria

Our criteria are based on research with senior executives in large organisations and assess the factors that drive individuals to pick up a piece of content; 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.

Each piece is rated individually against a series of questions. For each criteria, the piece of content receives a score between 1 and 5; this generates a total score for each piece of between 4 and 20. Please see Appendix One for more detail.

| **Figure 1** | **Our criteria for rating thought leadership** |
| --- | --- |

| Criteria | We ask: |
| --- | --- |
| **Differentiation** | • Is the subject topical?<br>• Is it different from what others are doing—either because of the topic or the angle taken?<br>• Is the article revelatory and/or contrary to prevailing views? |
| **Appeal** | • Is the reader likely to continue past the first paragraph of writing?<br>• Does the report look good?<br>• Do the structure and writing style make it easy to read?<br>• Does the report do anything interesting to make the material stick in the reader's mind? |
| **Resilience** | • Is there any quantitative primary research?<br>• Is there any qualitative primary research?<br>• Is there any secondary research?<br>• How good is the analysis of either primary or secondary research?<br>• Are credible internal experts used effectively?<br>• Is the methodology clearly described? |
| **Prompting action** | • Does the article clearly articulate action steps for the reader?<br>• Does the article give the reader a clear idea of how the consulting firm could help whilst avoiding being a thinly disguised sales pitch? |

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# Would you like to explore the findings of this report in more detail?

We can help you consider what our findings mean specifically for your firm. We run webinars and small group discussions based on in-depth analysis of our quality ratings and our knowledge and experience of thought leadership. Questions we often help our clients answer include:

- **Are we maximising returns on our thought leadership investment?**

- **Where are the biggest opportunities for increasing the impact of our thought leadership?**

- **What can we learn from the best—and the worst—of our content?**

- **What can we learn from our competitors' content?**

- **Where and how can we innovate effectively?**

- **What do the results suggest about our ways of working on thought leadership?**

To find out more, or simply to request a quote, please contact jo.peck@sourceglobalresearch.com.

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