

February 2019

Quality Ratings of Thought Leadership for the Second Half of 2018

White Space



Twenty years of thought leadership ratings

Source has been analysing the quality of thought leadership for 20 years. In these two decades, an awful lot has changed in the world of consulting, and in thought leadership. But even looking back over a shorter period is instructive. For those who value what has gone before and see history as a source of advice for the present, we make available our quality ratings reports for the past six years, going back as far as the second half of 2012.¹ It's fascinating to reread our 2012 2H report and to reflect upon the intervening time, a period in which we've seen firms move up and down the rankings, driven by internal changes in approaches to thought leadership.

Here are four messages that stand out in our eyes:

Agree what good looks like—and don't let weak content out the door

Back in February 2013, in the introduction to our report, we wrote: "One [common issue] is consistency: Material which should never have seen the light of day is still getting published, perhaps because the quality control processes firms have in place (and many firms still have a very decentralised approach to the production of thought leadership) aren't adequate."

We could say the same today (although I like to think we'd choose shorter sentences). Consistency matters. It matters in terms of impact on clients: If it's on your website, someone is going to find it. And that someone is probably going to assume that's the best you have to offer. And it matters in terms of our rankings: When firms have maintained positions at the top of our rankings, they've had processes in place to prevent weak thought leadership from escaping the building. For centralised teams, such as IBM's Institute for Business Value (IBV hereafter), this is relatively easy. For large complex organisations with thought leadership being produced by many teams, less so. However, as Deloitte in the US demonstrated, it can be done.

Be aspirational

However, it's not enough to simply banish weak content. Firms that we've seen move upwards and stay near the top have put huge effort into creating high-quality thought leadership. In the past, we saw IBM's IBV (a tight centralised team) continuously driving improvement and the less centralised Deloitte establishing Deloitte

¹ White Space subscribers can access our quality ratings reports at [Source thought leadership reports](#).

University Press (now Deloitte Insights) as a go-to source for high-quality thought leadership. More recently, Accenture and Capgemini have both made great strides—and impressed clients and us alike—by setting high aspirations and investing in high-quality thought leadership.

If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got²

Over the past six years, some firms have changed their approach very little. And, unsurprisingly, these firms have made very little progress in improving the quality of their thought leadership. In our experience, sustainable improvement seldom happens organically. It requires a vision of what is possible, and the determination to get there. It requires alignment and training (no one is born knowing how to create great thought leadership), carrots (funding for the right ideas, praise for those delivering great content), and sticks (such as refusal to publish weak content).

But don't forget what got you to where you are today

As passionate advocates for great thought leadership, we feel dismayed when we hear of firms unravelling approaches that have driven success. Change is necessary as the needs and preferences of consulting clients develop, but sometimes change, often driven by a change of leadership, seems to happen without attention to what has driven success in the past. We'd encourage all firms that have secured stable positions at the top of our rankings to reflect on what got them there and to build on—rather than destroy—the foundations of their success.

² Usually attributed to Henry Ford.

Methodology

Our definition of thought leadership

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 straightforward 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 stand-alone 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.

The following firms have appeared in our rankings at some point but have been previously excluded and not reinstated due to a scarcity of relevant content: Aon (formerly Aon Hewitt) (last appeared 2016 H1), Booz Allen (2015 H2), CSC (2015 H1) then DXC Technology (2018 H1), Infosys (2016 H2), and Mercer (2015 H2).

Historically, we reviewed content from Hay Group and then Korn Ferry Hay Group from 2016 H1. This firm now appears as Korn Ferry.

BearingPoint did not publish enough substantial pieces to be included in this ranking, but we expect the firm to be included in the future.

Please do let us know of any firms that we are not analysing which you believe merit inclusion.

Our quality 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 15 questions. For each criterion, the piece of content receives a score between 1 and 5; this generates a total score for each piece of between 4 and 20.

Full details, including information about how each question is scored, can be found on White Space: [Our quality ratings methodology](#).

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?

Can we help you assess the quality of individual publications?

Underpinned by our quality criteria and benchmarking data, we provide feedback on individual pieces of content. This can be carried out pre publication, in which case we will also make suggestions about what can be improved before your deadline. Clients use our post-publication feedback to train creators of thought leadership, to identify opportunities, and to track progress.

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



Programme schedule for 2019

Reports 2019	Market Data and Analysis	Client and Brand Insights	Emerging Trends
January	Forecasts for 2019		
February	UK	UK Nordics GCC	
March	GCC Benelux Nordics	France Germany US	The Future of Pricing
April	France DACH Southern Europe	Energy & Resources Financial Services Healthcare Technology, Media & Telecoms	
May	US Eastern Europe & Russia		The Value Problem
June	Canada	Global Perceptions of Audit Firms Global Perceptions of Risk Firms Global Perceptions of Tax Firms	
July	South America Australia		
August	Africa Risk		The Make-Buy Decision
September	India Energy & Resources Planning for Growth in 2020	Talent Attractiveness in 2019	
October	Financial Services China South East Asia		
November	Japan Healthcare Technology, Media & Telecoms		The Future of Delivery
December	Tax		

White Space

A powerful research tool that allows subscribers to keep up to date with the latest content being produced and maximise their return on investment. A series of reports that analyse the quality and effectiveness of thought leadership are published throughout the year.

Our custom work

We provide advice and custom research services to the world's most successful professional services firms, helping them to identify, and develop strategic responses to, their most pressing opportunities and challenges.

Among other things, our work includes:

- Deep market and competitor analysis
- Acquisition strategy
- Proposition strategy and development
- Brand and client sentiment analysis
- Thought leadership strategy, development, and review

For more information about any of these, please visit our website or get in touch.

Source Global Research is a leading provider of information about the market for professional services.

Set up in 2007, Source serves the professional services industry with expert analysis, research, and reporting. We draw not only on our extensive in-house experience but also on the breadth of our relationships with both suppliers and buyers. All of our work is underpinned by our core values of intelligence, integrity, efficiency, and transparency.

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