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# Ecosystems as time machines:

What consulting ecosystems  
tell us about the future





## Introduction

Consulting firms are tricky things to run: Invest ahead of the demand curve, and you risk upsetting your finely-tuned utilisation rates; wait, and the market has moved on. There's pressure from clients too, whose choice of firm is influenced by the latter's breadth of services, especially in the context of large-scale transformation programmes where the capabilities required aren't clear at the outset. Investment decisions are a fraught balance between long-term stewardship and opportunism.

All this explains why so much attention and effort is being invested in building ecosystems—networks of other suppliers that can provide technology and/or much-needed input into consulting projects. Many of the firms we interviewed for our previous white paper, [\*To acquire or not to acquire\*](#), talked of the importance of their investment in this area.

While not easy to develop and run, having a strategic alliance with another company is considerably cheaper than buying it or building up the equivalent resources in-house. It also allows a consulting firm to develop relationships with companies that don't want to be bought. (Our enduring law of acquisitions is that the firms you want to buy won't want to sell, and those that want to sell, you shouldn't buy.) More than anything else, though, an ecosystem gives a firm a range of toe-holds in alternative futures, rather than having to place its finite resources on a small number of bets.

This white paper takes off where our last one finished, and explores what ecosystems can look like in practice, and what this may tell us about the future of consulting—ecosystems as time machines.

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