

March 2020

The Future of Account Management

Emerging Trends





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Executive summary



I think the client/account manager relationship is only going to get closer. In the last few years, clients have been bringing more and more capabilities in-house, meaning that they look to strategy consultants for the really tough problems they can't solve otherwise; and that means that they will have to rely more heavily on their account managers as trusted advisors.

Dr. Andreas Berlin, Oliver Wyman

Towards the end of last year, we produced a report entitled [“The Future of Delivery”](#), which explored all of the different ways in which project delivery has evolved in response to changing client demand. And if there was one overarching narrative that came out of that report, it was one of diversification and complexity.

The “capability arms race” has been a fact of life in our industry for a while now; it feels as if every year large firms need access to an even broader range of expertise, lest clients decide that they have failed to keep up with the latest trends. But now, a similar phenomenon is taking place with project delivery. One firm may be selling one-day ideation sessions, six-week discovery projects, and 12-month managed services contracts—often to the same client.

In many ways, we regard this report as something of a companion piece to that one. Because the upshot of all of that additional complexity is that account management has become a more important topic in our industry than ever before. Account leads, and the account teams of which they are a part, have a key role to play in helping navigate complexity on both sides of the client/consultant relationship. On the one hand, they have to understand the nuances of clients’ business issues, and on the other they need to figure out how to bring together their firm’s different capabilities to create bespoke solutions that can address those needs; while also figuring out the right delivery model for those solutions.

Over the last year or two, we have heard from many of the firms that we work with that developments in the landscape of the industry have forced them to take a step back and re-evaluate their approach to account management. For a long time, the attitude of firms was something like: “Partners know how to manage their client relationships. If we do good work and give our partners the freedom to cultivate those relationships over dinner and on the golf course, we can trust that’ll lead to a healthy pipeline.”

That approach may have worked in the past, in a world where partners could reliably sell work and deliver it using the resources of their own practices and capability teams, but it’s increasingly ill-suited to a world where clients are looking for multidisciplinary solutions. Moreover, it’s rare these days that a project can be signed off by a single buying centre; selling work requires building relationships up and down the client organisation—and that’s a lot harder to do without a structured approach to account management.

Buyers in this industry also recognise the value of good account management. Every year, we survey thousands of clients around the world and ask them about their views on the firms that they have worked with. We also ask them which attributes of consulting firms they consider most important; in other words, what are the features of a firm that they take into consideration when deciding whether or not it’s the kind of service provider they could see building a long-term relationship with. And in every one of the last four years, account management has been one of the five most frequently cited such attributes (Fig. 0.1).

**Figure 0.1**

The attributes of consulting firms that clients care about the most

	2017	2018	2019	2020
1	Innovative approach	Innovative approach	Innovative approach	Innovative approach
2	Account management	Quality of thought leadership	Account management	Project methodologies
3	Quality of thought leadership	Project methodologies	Project methodologies	Account management
4	Project methodologies	Account management	Quality of thought leadership	Quality of thought leadership
5	Breadth of services	Ability to implement	Breadth of services	Breadth of services

All of this has only been magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Account managers, after all, are never more important than in a time of crisis. Many clients have had to, in the space of just a few weeks, completely re-evaluate their business priorities; and they will be looking for outside counsel to help them through this challenging period. Across every industry, there are sure to be opportunities for consultants to set themselves apart from the crowd by being supportive, flexible and responsive partners. Those that approach this period with the right values in mind may well find themselves coming out of it with client relationships that are stronger than ever before.

But the pandemic also means that firms may have to rethink on an operational level how they maintain those relationships. Partners are going to be spending a lot less time on client site for the foreseeable future; which will make it harder to build the strong human-to-human connections that are at the core of good account management practices. Account management has not typically been an area where firms relied heavily on software and data models—but many will now turn to technology as a solution to this challenge.



Methodology

Unless otherwise specified, the data in this report comes from a study conducted in February 2020 of 150 US-based senior executives, all of whom had personal experience using consulting services within the last year; 56% of them had used consulting services in the last three months. All respondents in this study worked in organisations with 500 or more employees.

75% of these executives had personally made the decision to bring in consultants. 69% had been part of project steering committees, and 57% of them had experience working in project teams alongside external consultants. Further details about their employers and their roles within their organisations are shown in Fig. 0.4, Fig. 0.5 and Fig. 0.6.

Where necessary, we have also drawn on data from our global data model, a bottom-up model of the professional services industry that we use to size the industry. This model covers over 80 countries, and includes detailed data on almost 1,600 firms, as well as higher-level estimates for a further 400,000 firms. Additionally, we have referred at certain points to data from our annual Client Perception Study, in which we ask thousands of clients around the world about their views on firms that they have worked with or have considered working with. Except where noted, the data that we have used in this report refers specifically to the US market.

To explore the different ways in which firms are approaching the topic of account management, we conducted a series of interviews with leaders in the professional services industry. Many of them had personal experience as account managers; others had been involved in creating firmwide account management strategies. A full list of contributors is available at the back of this report.

A selection of these conversations have been made available to subscribers of our Emerging Trends programme as an accompanying interview series. You can read transcripts of these interviews—and access interactive data visualisations and other additional pieces of content—by going to the [Emerging Trends platform](#) on the Source Global Research website. If you do not have access to this platform, please contact your account manager.



Figure 0.4

Sectors represented in our sample

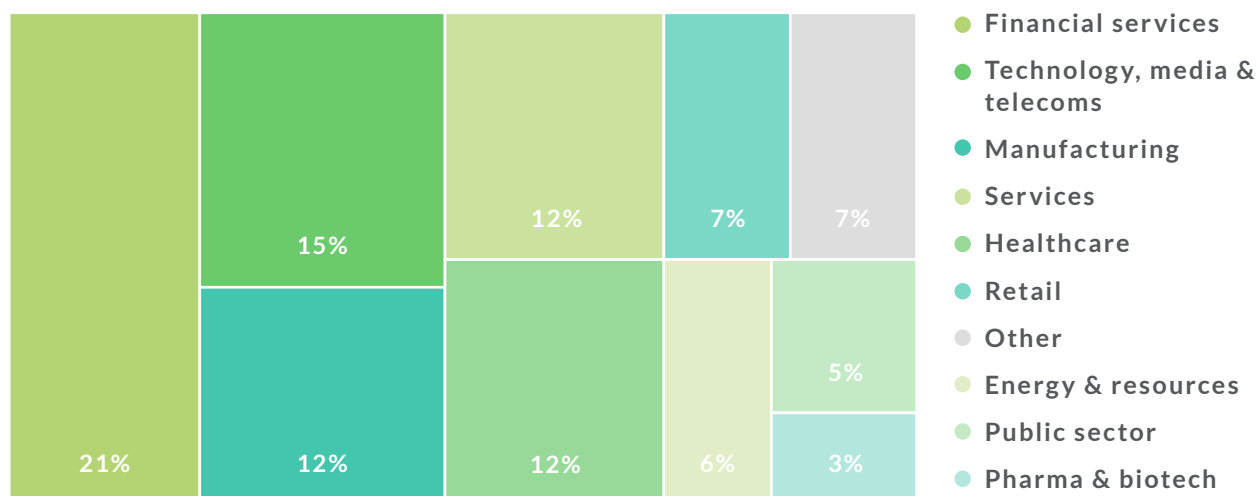


Figure 0.5

Size of clients' organisations in our sample by revenue

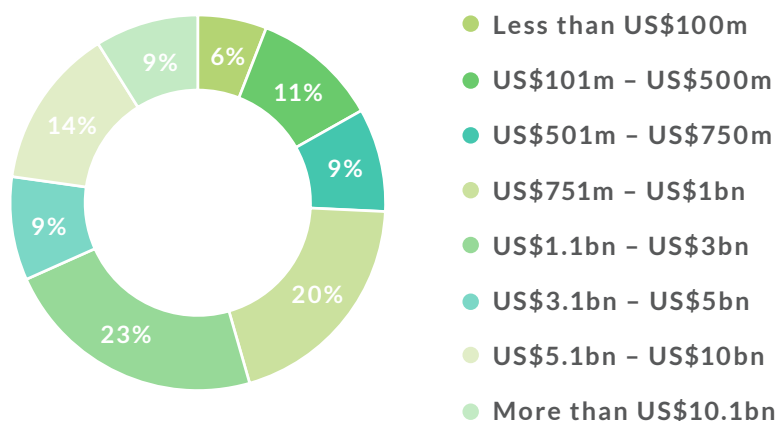
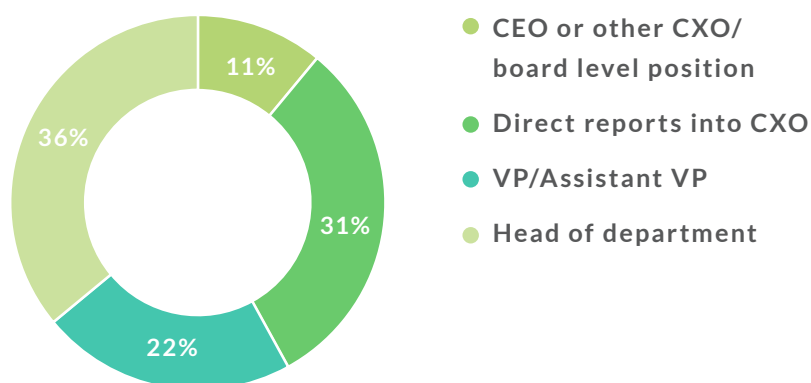


Figure 0.6

Sample distribution by job role





Contributors

We are extremely grateful to all the people we spoke to for making this report possible. Below is a list of the individuals who have contributed (excluding those who wished to remain anonymous).

Name	Job title	Organisation
Dr. Andreas Berlin	Director of Strategic Development	Oliver Wyman
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Venkat Chandra	COO and Chief Product Officer	Kaitongo
Aimie Chapple	Executive Officer – Customer Management	Capita
Nick Dussuyer	Head of Sales and Client Management Western Europe	Willis Towers Watson
Paul English	Global Leader Markets and Clients	Grant Thornton
Casey Foss	Director of Marketing	West Monroe
Elinor Hull	COO, Identity Services	Post Office
Tom Hulsebosch	Managing Director	West Monroe
Frank Kurre	Global Account Management Leader and Managing Director	Protiviti
Dean Lonsdale	Director in Public Sector Consulting	Deloitte
Chiaki Nishino	Executive Committee, North American Region & Global Women in Leadership	Prophet
Bob Pethick	Global Advisory Clients and Markets Leader	PwC
Sumathi Pundit	Founder and CEO	Kaitongo
Gary Reader	Global Head of Clients and Markets	KPMG
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A co-Founder and Managing Director of Source, Fiona is one of the world's leading commentators on the management consulting industry. Since founding Source in 2008, she has been bringing this expertise to bear on our clients' most pressing strategic projects and business issues. Fiona has published a dozen books on consulting topics, including two for The Economist: Business Consulting: A Guide to How it Works and How to Make it Work and Buying Professional Services. She has more than 20 years' experience as a management consultant, working primarily in the areas of marketing and strategy. She was previously in charge of strategic planning for EY in the UK and has worked in the consulting practice of PwC. Fiona also has a PhD in 17th century French art and lives in hope that it will be of practical use in business someday.

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Fergus is the Producer of our thought leadership at Source. In this capacity, he oversees our Emerging Trends research programme, hosts our fortnightly podcast, and creates content for our blog and social channels. He has contributed to a number of leading management and professional services publications, and regularly speaks at our own events and those of our clients.

Prior to joining Source, Fergus was a management consultant at Capgemini Invent, where he helped develop customer loyalty strategies for leading retailers and consumer products companies. He holds a degree in philosophy from Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge.

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Ed is a Managing Director of Source, and he is particularly focused on HR, strategic marketing, and new product development. He is a key member of the Source research team and spends much of his time interviewing consultants and their clients around the world in order to identify and explore major market trends.

Ed regularly speaks about the consulting market to leadership teams around the world, has lectured at Columbia University (New York), Imperial College (London), and Vrije Universiteit (Amsterdam), and he is regularly quoted by media including the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, the Financial Times, Bloomberg, and the trade press. Prior to joining Source in 2008, Ed spent seven years in various marketing roles for Sony Europe.

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Programme schedule for 2020

Reports 2020	Market Data & Analysis	Client & Brand Insights	Emerging Trends
January	Forecasts for 2020		
February	UK	UK	
March	GCC Benelux Nordics	GCC Nordics	The Future of Account Management
April	Southern Europe DACH France	Germany	
May	US Eastern Europe & Russia Global Tax Advisory	US France	
June	Canada South America	Financial Services Technology, Media & Telecoms	Sustainable Futures: Building Resilient Businesses
July	Mexico Australia Global Risk Services	Energy & Resources Healthcare	
August	India China Africa	Perceptions of Audit Firms Perceptions of Tax Firms	
September	Energy & Resources Planning for Growth in 2021	Perceptions of Risk Firms	Sustainable Futures: A Climate Transformed
October	Financial Services South East Asia Japan		
November	Healthcare Technology, Media & Telecoms		The Consultant of Tomorrow
December			

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