Do Externs Have Power? My Time at Altman Vilandrie

Michael Plasmeier

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Over IAP, I had the privilege of working for Altman Vilandrie and Company, a Boston-based management strategy consulting firm. As a one-month extern, I was joining the organization at the very bottom of the ladder. Could I still have an impact as an extern?

During my time at Altman Vilandrie, I was staffed on two teams. The first three weeks I worked on a data center market analysis with two other consultants. During the final week, I worked on the competitive analysis for a large multichannel video programming distributor (MVPD) (essentially a cable or satellite provider) with a different, larger team.

This paper analyzes the project teams that I worked on at Altman Vilandrie & Company and it explores the power that externs have. This paper analyses the question using the 3 “lenses” proposed by John Carroll (2006). This paper will use my observations from my month at Altman Vilandrie. Through a strategic design lens, externs have little formal power, as they start at the bottom of the ladder. However, interns can still exert significant political power by influencing other members of the team. Using a political lens, I will focus on a disagreement I had with another member of my team and how I worked to make my ideas heard. Finally, externs contribute to a team’s culture. They, along with the other members of the team, bring their experience from previous work to build a team culture.

**Strategic Design Lens**

Most companies have a specific organization or hierarchy that divides who does what work. This hierarchy is often referred to as the organizational chart. Management designs the formal structure of a company to help the company achieve its goals and strategies.

In the management consulting industry, companies or other organizations purchase professional services from consulting teams. These teams are usually made up of between 3-7 people and work on a project anywhere from a few weeks to a few months. Unlike many other jobs, consulting works on a project basis – there is a clear start and end to a project. When a project ends, everyone is split up and is reassigned onto a new team.

The consulting industry is very hierarchical in terms of title and rank. People who graduate with an undergraduate degree start as “analysts,” a role that is typically occupied for a number years. MBA graduates start as “consultants.” Larger projects may be managed by a “project manager.” Finally, projects are overseen by “principals.” At some firms, there is a strict promotional schedule where you eligible for a promotion. At this point many firms also have an up or out policy that you must be promoted or let go. Although other companies may have different names for each role, they share a similar hierarchical structure.

Each role has a defined set of basic responsibilities. For example, principals are responsible for recruiting business, dealing with clients, and giving the final presentation. They are not generally involved day to day in the project. The principal usually owns the communication with the client. The principal basically served as the interface between the team and the client. Analysts are responsible for much of the detailed research that is needed in the project. Primarily, analysts work with Excel, generating complex spreadsheet models. In addition, in many cases, analysts draft copies of slides. I was an analyst extern.

However, with both of the teams I was on at Altman Vilandrie, if needed, people would reach beyond the job description to help out the team. The first team I was on was made up of two consultants. Because they did not have an analyst on their team before I joined, the consultants did the research work. In addition, when a project came close to crunch time, the principal would often pitch in and help with the work.

In addition, on both of teams I was on, we would sometimes discuss issues as a team. At that point, I felt that we were a team of equals – I felt that all members could provide their input on what they thought the problems and solutions were. Despite being hired to do low-level research, the strategic design of an organization still allows externs to contribute to the work.

From this experience, it seemed that that the teams that I worked on had a good mix of hierarchy, but internal flexibility when needed. The hierarchy put newer members closer to the actual work, but when it came time to crunch time, more senior members of the team were willing to help. In addition, the teams still welcomed the opinion of the lowest ranking members of the team. This helped the team achieve the best possible output product.

**Political Lens**

Individual members of the team had different interests and priorities. Carroll’s (2006) political lens decomposes the goals of an organization’s goals into the goals of individuals. These may be the same as the organization’s goals or they might be separate. From my experience, every member of the team wanted to solve the client’s problem. However, different members of the team had different ideas on how to accomplish that. I will speak more about a disagreement I had with a member of my team later in this paper.

The lady who was in charge of staffing at the firm was in position of power. She could make your life fun or miserable depending on what type of project you were staffed on. Thus many people made sure to stay on her good side. A good project might be one that is more interesting or more varied than the one you were working on before. I remember hearing people joking that if you got on her bad side you would be doing straight “due diligences” for several months – a less interesting type of project.

Altman Vilandrie is a “low travel” firm. This means that most people spend most of their days in the office. This is different from other consulting firms. This allows some group relations to form because people saw each other in the office. In particular, people gathered to eat together for lunch. This helped people form groups that lasted beyond single projects. Groups that exist beyond the formal hierarchy help spread information and get things done for the group.

As an extern, because you recently started, you do not have a group of friends. In addition, because you will be leaving soon, people might be less willing to invest social capital in you to bring you into a group. This makes it challenging to exert political power as an extern.

**Cultural Lens**

During my month in consulting, I was able to observe the attitudes of management consultants first hand. I observed how consultants present to each other and to the client. I have noticed that the experience has changed how I approach some situations in my life after leaving Altman Vilandrie.

One of the consultants I worked with treated the hierarchy very formally. He only talked to the principal when absolutely necessary. Even though it was only internal, he would still try to prepare polished work for the principal. A lot of time was spent polishing slides, just to change them again later. However, on the other team I was on, people did not seem to share as strong an aversion to talking informally with the people higher up on the hierarchy.

Having a hierarchy allows each person to focus on their part, without becoming too involved in other people’s work. However, this hierarchy-reliant culture reduces the cohesiveness between the team members, reducing the flow of information. This might result in a well presented, but poor recommendation to the client.

As an extern on two projects, I realized a difference in culture between the two teams that I was on. Because all of the teams turn over fairly frequently, each team’s culture is different. As people move from project to project, they learn and perpetuate certain aspects of team culture. Externs might be able to have some impact on the culture of a group, since some externs have had previous work experience. Externs mostly absorb the culture of a team and the firm in the short time that they are on a team.

**A Political Conflict**

During my second project I had a conflict with the senior analyst on my team. He and I had significant disagreements regarding the facts of the project, the direction we should research in, and the emerging recommendation for the project. I felt like we disagreed on almost every aspect. My experience here shows how an extern can still exert influence over the direction of a project.

First, we disagreed about the technical facts of a system. The other analyst thought that something was technically possible, when I was pretty sure it was not. I thought I was better qualified to think about the technical merits of the system. While I had a technical background, the other analyst did not. He was a history graduate from Harvard.

We also disagreed on where to spend research time. I thought that a bit of technical research was important, so that we could better understand our client’s motivation in building their product. Understanding their motivation would help us hypothesize about why they were asking the question they hired us to answer and the type of answers that there were really looking for.

The senior analyst and I also disagreed on how to present and format research. He thought that it would be good to have an Excel spreadsheet of the data. He believed that was what the project manager was expecting. I thought using OneNote was a good idea. I tried using Excel, but I just found it too limiting and slow. I switched to OneNote. When I presented my work to the project manager, she really liked the use of OneNote as a research tool.

The senior analyst had power because he had been at the firm for about two years and I was just an extern. In addition, he had been working on the project for a week or two, while I had just joined the project. Perhaps he disagreed with me because he did not want to seem upstaged by an extern.

To try to get my ideas adopted by the team, I needed to convince the team about my point of view. First, I just did things the way I thought was best. This did not take much more additional time and this allowed me to be able to present the team with results. From my experience, showing up with results made it easier to convince people than simply showing up with theories.

I attempted to convince the other analyst on the project that my views were correct. This was difficult because he worked closely with the senior analyst before. Those two were on the project before I started, and they probably worked together before. The other analyst appeared to stay neutral – unwilling to pick a side.

My most successful strategy was I talked directly to the project manager, bypassing the senior analyst. The project manager liked my ideas and adopted them, shaping the project. By bypassing the senior analyst, I was able to achieve my goal of influencing the project in the direction I thought it should go. I played politics to make my voice heard.

I don’t think the senior analyst appreciated me going above him to the project manager. If I was correct in postulating that he did not like getting upstaged by an extern than this strategy might not have been optimal regarding my relationship with him. However, he would likely not be the one who provides a recommendation to the HR committee.

**Putting the Lenses Together**

During my time at Altman Vilandrie and Company, I saw that externs can actually have substantial power. At first it appears that the structural design and political power works against externs. Externs are starting at the very bottom of the ladder. Externs start without knowing the other people, and must form group memberships. However, this is challenging because they will be leaving again soon. However, the structural design of the organization can empower externs by allowing the best ideas to rise to the top. An extern can still recruit supports and try to influence members of the team to support their point of view. All group members bring their past work experiences to the team in order to form a team culture. Externs contribute to this by bringing their own experiences to the table and learning the culture of consulting, the firm, and the teams they work on.

References

Carroll, J. S. (2006). Introduction to Organizational Analysis: The Three Lenses.