

# An Investigation of Human Resource Consultants Services in Multinational Companies in Thailand

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**Abstract.** Today multinational companies (MNCs) face some challenges in their Human Resource (HR) strategies, policies and practices. Some studies have found that building relationships between firms and HR consultants benefits the HR system's work. However, HR consulting is at the early stage of development in Thailand, it has problems of its own, and not much is known about HR consulting services. This research study aimed to investigate the current services that HR consultants provide to MNCs in Thailand, and to study the practices of HR consultants in MNCs in Thailand. A qualitative research method was chosen and employed for this study. During the data collection, document content analysis and in-depth interviews were conducted to gain detailed information from different individuals. For the data analysis, manual coding including the process of initial coding and categorization was used to interpret the qualitative data. The research findings emerged from the 12 selected participants who were HR consultants and clients of HR consulting. The results of the study revealed that HR consultants provide HR consulting service to MNCs in Thailand through five main specialties: (1) HR transformation, (2) Strategic change & organizational development, (3) Talent management and rewards, (4) Technology adoption, and (5) Labor relations. The results of this study also highlighted the current consulting process, factors relating to the consulting results, and deficiencies of HR consulting in Thailand. Finally, this study summarized the functions, necessary skills, knowledge and qualities of qualified HR consultants.

**Keywords:** Human Resource Consulting Service, Human Resource Consultant, Multinational Company, Thailand

## Introduction

The modern business environment has changed rapidly and has become increasingly complex. HR consultants play an important role in providing support in HR solutions to organizations. Mayhew (2010) regarded HR consulting as a driving force to make HR add value to the organizations. Research has found that building a relationship between a firm and an HR consultancy benefits the firm's HR system to work more efficiently. Over the past five years, some famous MNCs in Thailand have hired and built long-term relationships with consultants to assist them in addressing their HR issues, including strategy consultancies, full service consultancies, boutiques and internal HR consultants. Different MNC industries, such as the automotive, consumer products, and financial industry have hired different HR consulting services or set up their own HR Business Partner (BP) (Accenture, 2008; Mercer, 2007). Currently, there are more than 200 consulting firms in Bangkok, including consulting companies and freelancers (Consulting Forum, 2010). At the same time, the global workforce issue and multinational nature of MNCs make their HR strategies, policies and practices more delicate and complicated than local companies. This means that MNCs need HR consulting to meet their special requirements.

HR consulting is a developing industry in Thailand. Therefore, there are some challenging issues, including the understanding of HR consulting content, the competency of HR consultants and the HR service requirements of MNCs.

## Research Objectives and Questions

This research had two objectives:

1. Investigate the services that HR consultants provide to multinational companies in Thailand; and
2. To study the practices of HR consultants in multinational companies in Thailand.

The two research questions emerged from the research objectives. So, the current research aimed to answer these questions:

1. What are the services that HR consultants provide to the multinational companies in Thailand?
2. How do HR consultants provide services to support multinational companies in Thailand?

The results may help individual HR consultants, HR consulting firms, MNCs, and the whole HR consulting industry to be aware of both opportunities and challenging problems occurring in HR consulting for MNCs in Thailand.

## Literature Review

HR consulting constitutes a significant part of the general management consulting, and thus, its growth also depends on the growth of the management consulting market (Kitay & Wright, 1999). HR consulting is closely related to HR practices in the companies. HR functions are going through considerable changes, with outsourcing, extensive use of the Intranet, more complex organizational structures, and an increased importance of intellectual capital that creates competitive advantages for a company (Lawler & Mohrman, 2005).

As Ellehuus (2008) pointed out, depending on a company's particular needs, an HR consultant can assist clients with strategically integrating effective HR processes, programs and practices into their daily operations. Their role is also to maximize the client's performance related to HR by introducing or marketing "best practice", as well as to provide periodic feedback to clients regarding their performance related to annual management objectives. Additionally, consultants can evaluate which business functions should remain in-house and which business functions may be effectively outsourced.

According to Organisaatiot, Maisterin and Suomi (2008), before engaging an HR consultant, an organization may want to consider the issue carefully. The organization should define the scope of the project they are seeking assistance with, develop a timeline for completion, research the available consultants to find the best fit for the project, and consider any long-term assistance the organization may need. These steps can make the consulting process more efficient and effective. When confronting a new situation where a customer has little or no expertise, it may be advisable to seek a second opinion from people outside the organization who have greater experience in critical areas. Deciding on when to allow an outsider to handle sensitive business tasks is one of the most demanding tasks of company managers. Sometimes, consultants can give a customer an entirely new viewpoint, collect information they cannot get, interpret it in ways they would not have thought of, and develop a plan of action that might be invaluable and prevent serious mistakes.

### HR issue for MNCs in Thailand

Tayeb (2005) argued that the multinational nature of MNCs' workforce makes their HR strategies, policies and practices the most delicate and complicated of all managerial tasks. The larger the MNC market and number of employees, the more complicated its business affairs and the more complex its management.

A challenging aspect of the HR field in most firms with multinational operations is the multicultural nature of their workforce, which is further compounded by its geographical dispersion. The HR department, like other functional departments, operates, not in a vacuum, but within the overall internal organizational environment and the external national and international context.

Recently many MNCs in developing countries have found that human resource management (HRM) with a higher degree of localization tends to bring higher profits for company. Thus, localization appears to be a logical and effective HR strategy. Localization is manifest in two ways: one is expatriate localization; the other is recruitment or promotion of local staff in the corporate

management system (Liu, 2007). Therefore, to be successful abroad, MNCs need to understand the local culture and customs. Additionally, HR executives in MNCs should have a clear picture of the local legal framework and the workplace issues that are most important to the local people.

In Thailand, HR are critical to sustaining growth in its rapidly advancing economy. Raising the skill levels of Thailand's labor force will be a key factor for its modernization. Companies have encouraged the development of science programs by offering scholarships and developing in-house training. Gross and Connor (2006) pointed out that companies strive to provide both a satisfactory salary plan and a comfortable work environment in order to retain satisfied employees, and thus discourage the prevalent trend of job-hopping. Thai labor laws are designed to protect workers and preserve their rights, such as minimum standards for salary and benefits, and the maximum amount of work hours and days. The labor law provides a reasonable work environment and protects against labor exploitation by defining minimum wage, health care coverage, termination procedures and so on. Obtaining a good understanding of the labor laws in Thailand is important when managing a business. The HR personnel of MNCs should adjust their HR policies to adhere to Thai labor law requirements, such as compensation packages, contracts of employees, and incorporate strict HR practices in their organization.

The traditional expatriate management model is no longer suitable to the environment of host countries' subsidiaries (Reinhart, 2005), which causes problems in expatriate cross-cultural management in host countries. Different countries have different cultures and values, which means that Western managers probably cannot effectively handle the jobs which require a good understanding of some developing countries, in such areas as marketing and HRM. How to adapt to local political and economic systems, especially social culture and values, and how to improve expatriate performance, reduce costs, and retain good relationships with the host country have become primary concerns at the HR personnel and management level in MNCs. It is known that Thai culture focuses on respect, so that Thais acknowledge paternalistic hierarchy and are typically hesitant to challenge those in a position of authority. Rather, they feel most comfortable when others are patient and willing to compromise. As Roongrengsuke (2005) mentioned, Thai values are different from Western values. Sometimes, some Thai values can be misunderstood, misinterpreted and inappropriately practiced in organizations, resulting in unfair and unethical management of HR. Many traditional values in Thailand are very worthy and valuable and should be retained in society and in the workplace, as they help to create good relationships, trust, team spirit and harmony among workers, especially during times of economic difficulty. However, it is important to develop the correct understanding and practice of those values among employees.

## Research Method

In this study, the researcher used a qualitative method to answer the research questions. The researcher decided to use a qualitative strategy because the research intention was to explore and understand the HR consultants and their services content in MNCs in Thailand. Thus, the researcher focused on the perspectives, attitudes, understanding, and experience among HR consultants who have experience in serving MNCs in Thailand and the MNC clients of HR consulting.

In terms of research methods, purposive sampling, theoretical sampling and the snowball technique were used to identify the participants who had experience serving MNCs and who were working in MNCs, and MNC clients who had experience working with HR consultants. The data collection was conducted through content analysis and in-depth interviews. After the content analysis phase, 12 participants were interviewed using an interview guide of semi-structured interview questions that were audio-recorded in 30 to 80 minute long interviews. The interview guide was generated from the literature review and a content analysis of the information from websites of the top 15 Asian HR consulting firms which maintain local offices or businesses in Thailand. The interview was conducted in the English language. The data analysis of this study was a manual coding technique for coding, categorizing, renaming, and finding the emerging categories from the data.

The researcher considered the ethical issues, one important aspect of which was to maintain the highly confidential nature of the background information, and to produce no harm to the participants before, during, and after the study. Also, informed consent forms and voluntary agreements were made between the participants and the researcher before the interviews. As well, a letter of permission to collect data was accepted by all participants before the researcher went to the field to collect data.

## Data Analysis

After the data were collected, transcribed and stored in computer files, the data analysis was systematically done through manual coding. The initial coding was the first step to analyze the data after the transcription of each interview. Then, the researcher conducted the second cycle of coding by grouping, merging and generalizing similarly coded data from the transcription, in order to reduce the number of initial codes, and then grouped the data into categories. The researcher arrived at 285 open codes in the second cycle of coding, which were classified into 10 categories. Following are the profiles of the 12 participants and the results obtained from their interviews.

Table 1. Participants' profiles

Participant	Gender	Profession	Title/Position	Employer
#P1	M	Consultant, Strategic planning	Strategic planning consultant	Freelance
#P2	F	Consultant, HRM	Principal consultant	Consulting Firm
#P3	M	Consultant, OD	Executive Coach	Consulting Firm
#P4	F	HR, Career planning	Human Resources Analyst	MNC
#P5	F	HR, Learning and Development	Human Resource Personnel	MNC
#P6	M	Consultant, International HRM	Managing Director	Consulting Firm
#P7	M	Consultant, OD	Independent Researcher	MNC
#P8	F	Consultant, Headhunting and Recruitment	Consulting Manager	Consulting Firm
#P9	F	HR, full function (except training)	HR Manager	MNC
#P10	F	HR, Public relations	Human Resource Specialist	MNC
#P11	M	Consultant, Recruitment	Independent Researcher	Freelance
#P12	M	Consulting, Full function	Partner	Consulting Firm

The participants consisted of both HR consultants and the clients of HR consultants' services working in MNCs. There were few basic differences in perspectives between the two groups; their

perspectives complemented each other. For example, in terms of the deficiencies of current HR consulting services, clients group gave more information about the quality of HR consultants and their services, and the HR consultant group shared more information from a macroscopic view.

## Findings

The findings from the reduced codes yielded a total of 10 categories, based on 285 open codes: (1) HR consultant functions, (2) common needs, (3) HR consulting service, (4) necessary skills, (5) necessary qualities, (6) necessary knowledge, (7) consulting process, (8) factors relating to the consulting results, (9) problems of HR consulting, and (10) future trends of HR consulting. The tenth is an additional finding to give a deeper understanding of this study's topic.

The answer to the *first research question* emerged from the interviews as three categories. They are namely: HR consultants' functions, Common needs of MNCs for HR consultants, and HR consulting services.

**HR consultants' functions** are the general activities that HR consultants engage in everyday. Currently, these HR consultant services mostly match the needs of MNCs for HR consulting services, but there is a potential for growth in the services provided by HR consulting as the dynamic business environment evolves. The services of HR consulting are able to respond to this evolution.

The **HR consultant functions** as an advisor, HR specialist and strategic business partner. The HR consultants are responsible for assisting clients with solving problems related to HR issues, making choices among different HR strategies and policies, strategically integrating effective HR processes or systems into their daily operation, and tapping HR potential to maximize the clients' performance by providing objective opinions, solutions, new knowledge, technologies, and professional services.

For MNCs, participants emphasized that the function of HR consultants is to help them respond to the complexity and risk that come with working in different languages and cultures, with varying local requirements and changing legislation, in order to manage human capital consistently and efficiently across a client's global operation.

**Current HR consulting services** are combined with the **common needs of MNCs for HR consulting services** in an exploration of the HR consulting activities that are actually provided to MNCs. This gives a clearer picture, and a deeper understanding of what really occurs in the HR consulting service to MNCs. According to the research findings, MNCs faced some common HR issues for which they required HR consultants' help to cope with them, and which come mainly from the following dimensions: 1) globalization and localization, 2) talent issues, 3) cost pressures, 4) innovation, and 5) emerging technology. The results of the study revealed that HR consultants provide HR consulting services to MNCs in Thailand, through five the main specialties: 1) HR transformation, 2) strategic change and organizational development, 3) talent management and rewards, 4) technology adoption 5) labor relations.

The answer to the *second research question* are the six related categories that emerged from the participants: **necessary skills, necessary qualities, necessary knowledge, consulting process, factors relating to the consulting results, and problems of HR consulting.**

The consulting service is a systemic process, and the work process of HR consultants also shows their abilities. Therefore, to answer the question of how consultants provide services to support MNCs required an answer to the question of what skills, qualities and knowledge a qualified HR consultant should possess. Weiss (2004) proposed that a consulting service is a systemic process, and a process of revealing HR consultants' abilities. Clients could observe and come to know HR consultants' personality and skills when they provided HR consulting service. As Cascio (2005) noted, the most consultants can hope for is to influence the client through their credibility, expertise, skills, knowledge and understanding, and to change something. They do this through their interventions and leaving once the client has been helped. The critical skills, qualities and knowledge of HR consultants are further described in Table 2.

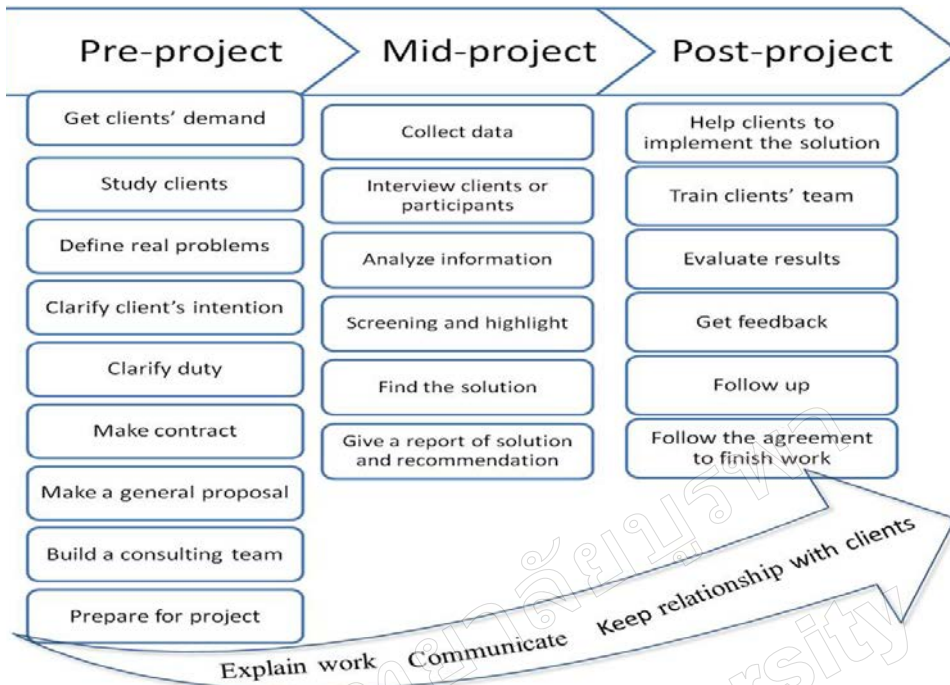
Table 2. Necessary skills, qualities and knowledge of HR consultants

<b>Necessary skills, qualities and knowledge for successful HR consultants</b>		
<b>Knowledge</b>	<b>Skills</b>	<b>Qualities</b>
-Asian specific	-Business sense	-Accept flexible working time
-Business operating	-Communication skills	-Be patient
-Business environment	-Consulting skills	-Be flexible
-Economy	-Creative thinking	-Enjoy sharing ideas
-Global issues	-Global mindset	-Enjoy challenges
-Market	-Holistic thinking	-Good discipline
-HR knowledge	-Language skills	-Leadership
-Labor law	-Implement skills	-Keep learning
-Local issues	-Interview skills	-Influence skills
-New technology	-Judgment skills	-Objectivity
-Multinational company	-Negotiation skills	-Positive attitude
-Organizational behavior	-Service minded	-Professional services devotion
-Psychology	-Technology skills	-Result based
-Research Method	-Training skills	-Sociability
	-Presentation skills	-Stress tolerance
	-Work experience	

In this study, Knowledge refers to concepts, facts, principles, and information and Skills are problem-solving techniques regarding particular subjects acquired by a person through experience and/or education. A Quality is something that is part of one's personal characteristics; it comes naturally to people and is hard to nurture, but if there is an appropriate training and learning plan, and people devote themselves to practice, to enhance and sharpen them, they can nurture some qualities.

A qualified HR consultant provides HR consulting services with systemic steps and processes. There are three main stages in a project: pre-project, mid-project, and post-project, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Process of consulting



Especially during the whole consulting project, HR consultants should continuously communicate with clients, clearly explain their job to the client's team or staff, and negotiate with clients when they encounter any problems or adjustments.

The factors relating to the results of consulting services described below highlight some key points during the consulting process; HR consultants and clients should pay attention to these topics at any time that they are using or providing consulting, to ensure they get an acceptable and effective consulting result. Some are controllable factors, such as the relationship with clients, information sources, ethics, abilities of consultants, and the clients' situations; and some are uncontrollable factors, such as changes in the business environment, economy, policies, and labor laws. Consultants and clients should work together and strive to get through those problems caused by controllable factors, and try their best to minimize the effect caused by uncontrollable factors.

This study put forward some issues that need improvement, in order to get a deeper understanding of the consulting context by discussing the deficiencies of HR consulting services. With respect to the current problems of HR consulting services, some problems are due to the present situation and circumstances of HR consulting and consultants, and some problems stem from clients' perceptions and understanding of the nature of HR consulting. Some problems also emerged from the process of HR consulting.

### Discussion

Deloitte's report (2012) noted that, as business becomes increasingly global, companies should improve their ability to build and manage a global workforce. At the same time, they should also consider creating appropriate local responsiveness. This study suggested that HR consultants can help MNCs manage their global workforce by designing repeatable, standardized, but flexible HR systems, processes and policies.

Devadoss (2011) argued that, around the world, jobs are moving from mature markets, where talent is expensive, to emerging markets, where talent is cheaper. Demographic shifts at both ends of the age spectrum are also having a big impact on talent. Deloitte (2012) believes this changing

workforce requires new talent management capabilities in areas such as leadership development, workforce planning, strategy alignment, and workforce diversity. In this study, participants who were HR consultants or the clients of HR consultants demonstrated that they provided or accepted HR consulting services in talent fields, such as headhunting, employee engagement and retention, and customized training for talent development.

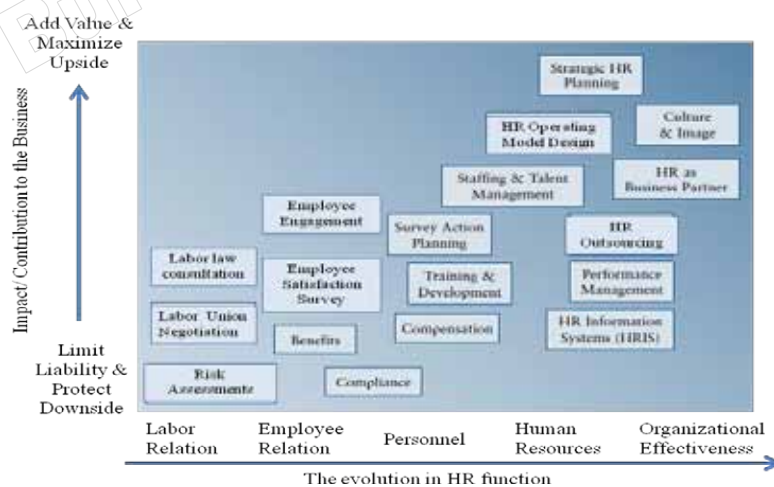
Mazor (2012) stated that many companies are under constant pressure to reduce costs. While HR has made tremendous strides to manage its costs and improve its operating efficiency over the past two or three decades, there is usually room to improve. The researcher found that HR consultants could help in people-related cost reduction by deploying and integrating solutions, for example, by designing a scalable HR operating model, or outsourcing non-strategic HR work.

In today's business world, breakthrough ideas and continuous improvement can come from anywhere in the organization. HR has a valuable role to play in helping companies use innovation as a competitive weapon. In this study, during the interview process, the participants, MNCs' HR personnel, mentioned many times that the reason to hire HR consultants is they can bring new knowledge, new technologies and new tools to their clients.

Geller (2012) noted that HR must deliver services that comply with local labor laws and workforce regulations, a challenge that is magnified as a business expands its global footprint. HR must also comply with broader business regulations, such as those related to data privacy and security. Therefore, this study found that dealing with risk and compliance is a common need of MNCs for HR consulting services, and the HR consulting practice of participants also confirmed this point. Especially, from the participants' experience and perspectives, the internal HR consultant generally helps MNCs handle employee grievances or disputes, even strikes.

These issues for HR are due to the evolution of the traditional HR function. The new functions of HR require that HR should add value to organizations, and support the organizational business strategy and goals. As seen in Figure 2, with the evolution of the HR function, the emphases of HR strategy are transferred. Lawler and his team (2007) found, according to their longitudinal study, that HR professionals were spending much more time as a strategic business partner and far less time maintaining records, compared to five to seven years earlier. For MNCs, if they want to survive global competition, they should also put their time and money into the right strategy center of HR, when they pay high service fees; they also consider the value of return from HR consultants.

Figure 2. Modern consulting services



Source: Adapted from Vosburgh, 2007, p. 15

It is easy to see that HR consultants provide different service to different levels of the organization, and what this Figure shows is the same as the result of this study: MNCs' common needs for HR consulting services and the main HR consulting services are focused on the organizational



level, and the valued-add level, but MNCs still need HR consultants to deal with the HR issues of limiting liability and labor relations levels, to maintain local responsiveness.

Peters (2002) claimed that the most common obstacles to effective HR consultants are the relationships with their clients. Mayhew (2010) mentioned, during consulting, that HR consultants should win clients as an ally to ensure the progress and success of a consulting project and to get necessary support when they needed it. Once HR consultants determine the solution, they should make sure their client implements their recommendation, to change their behavior. This study also argued that consultants should have the skills to impact, persuade and guide their clients to implement their solutions and recommendations. MNCs have their own special issues: the role of headquarters. In some MNCs, headquarters have an influence over branch companies, so it is confusing to consulting services when headquarters change their policies and strategies or make new decisions. Therefore, when HR consultants serve for MNCs, they should do some study on their clients' headquarters and their relationship with the local branch. If the headquarters determine what policies and strategies are adopted by the subordinate company, consultants should keep count of the changes in the clients' headquarters

The research of the Society for Human Resource Management (2005) reported that the central challenge to a service organization, such as a consulting firm, is to manage the substance of what they do for their clients and to manage the expectations and perceptions of their clients. This requires that the consulting firm is truly aware of the needs of the clients. The problems of the clients need to be addressed, so that the clients are aware that the consulting firm really cares for them. Therefore, this study implies that the trust of the client is to be earned by the service organization in order to create a strong customer relationship.

This study suggests that the deficiencies of today's consulting service refer to expectation mismatch, high turnover, unqualified consultants, trust issues (caused by confidentiality), ethics issues and service prices. HR consultants should serve their client with integrity, competence and objectivity; otherwise clients can feel that consultants lack enough ethics. Quality, professionalism, and ethics are seen to be key elements for choosing a consulting team (European Federation of Management Consultancies [FEACO], 2007).

Expectation mismatch is a critical problem of HR consulting. The researcher found this problem derived from two perspectives: HR consultants and clients. In some cases, clients have a misunderstanding of HR consultants, and have unrealistic expectations of them, but HR consultants are not saviors (Peters, 2002). In other cases, the researcher found that some HR consultants lack enough ability to help their clients solve problems, or transfer solutions through implementation into practice, and eventually make the HR consulting project fail, which is certainly a mismatch of clients' expectations. Besides, if HR consultants cannot understand the true intention and goals of clients, they also cannot provide satisfactory alternative solutions.

This study also raised the problem of high turnover in HR consulting. The primary reason for high-turnover was the stress and the intensive nature of the work, including heavy workloads, long work hours and travel (Rasiel, 1999), and fierce competition, with consulting firms stealing excellent consultants from each other.

According to the participants who were MNC clients, the research found that the service price issue is related to the client's financial situation and expectations. If a client's organization does not have enough budget for an HR department, the client will have problems to supply the budget for HR consulting services. At the same time, if HR consultants cannot meet clients' expectations, clients definitely complain that HR consultants are over-priced and under-deliver. However, Johansson, Krishnamuthy and Schlissberg (2007) thought that the value of a solution is difficult to evaluate, so that setting the right price for a solution is really crucial: too high, and clients will not meet their own needs; too low, and suppliers will not get paid for the value they are delivering and the effort that went into it. According to Roegner (2001) and Johansson *et al.* (2007), HR consultants offer a solution when they can solve a problem by applying some level of expertise and, at times, a proprietary method. They must develop unique insights into the client and its industry and use those insights to create an integrated, customized solution that really works better than the available alternatives. What

makes a solution valuable and distinctive is that it focuses on results and is meaningful to a broader client base. Only then will consultants have the kind of offering—one delivering measurable value to customers—that is needed for a winning solution.

## Implications

**Implication for Practice #1:** Guidelines for HR consultants or those people who seek to become an HR consultant can use in preparing, improving, and developing themselves. Some professional organizations, such as the Personnel Management Association of Thailand (PMAT), can develop this career guideline according to the results of this study.

**Implication for Practice #2:** Guidelines for an HR consulting firm to use in improving, and developing their consultants and service.

**Implication for Practice #3:** Guidelines for MNCs to use in improving their internal consultants or selecting external consultants.

**Implication for Practice #4:** Enhancement of the awareness of the need for HR consulting. When the companies learn and become aware of the value and content of HR consulting, they may consider employing HR consulting services from internal or external HR consultants when they need assistance to deal with some tough HR issues. It will benefit the development of the HR consulting industry in Thailand, and may aid the building of long-term cooperative relationships between clients and consultants.

## Recommendations for Further Research

There were several recommendations for future research related to HR consulting and consultants. **Firstly**, the research findings of this study presented some factors relating to the results of consulting service. In a future study, a quantitative research method would enhance the understanding of how those factors influence the results of HR consulting service. **Secondly**, further studies are required to investigate each of the dimensions of consulting services and the respective fields of HR consultants, if a deeper understanding of Thai HR consulting is to be achieved. Within each field, there are a number of interesting issues to be examined in detail. **Thirdly**, in a future study, a comparison might be done to contrast the differences between the local organizations and the MNCs in their use of HR consulting services and its results may have academic and practical value. **Fourth**, the researcher recommends that future research should consider the type of MNC companies, and compare the demands and requirements of HR consulting services of different types of MNCs. New insights may be gained through such a comparative process. Moreover, the future study should be conducted about only one role of HR consultants: either internal consultants or external consultants, and investigate the perspectives of internal HR consultants in comparing them with the differences between internal and external consulting.

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