

STOCKHOLM SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS
1351 Master's Thesis in Business Management
Academic year 2025–2026

Rethinking Competence Development in the Age of AI

An exploratory study of management consultants' experiences of AI and competence
development

Noak Prah1 (23800) & Oskar Svensson (42794)

Supervisor: Katja Einola
Date examined: 2026-06-04
Discussant: Timmy Pelli & Emilia Thorstensson
Examiners: Filip Wijkström & Korinzia Toniolo

Abstract: This study explores how management consultants experience the impact of AI on competence development. Drawing on 20 exploratory interviews with management consultants from Stockholm-based firms, the study examines how AI is used in everyday consulting work, how consultants perceive its influence on their competence development, and how they interpret changing competence requirements in the profession. While existing literature often discusses AI in terms of increased or decreased need for certain skills and productivity outcomes, less attention has been paid to how professionals experience these changes in everyday work. The findings show that consultants experience AI's impact on competence development as ambivalent. AI enables faster access to information and more efficient task execution, while simultaneously reducing direct engagement in analytical and production-oriented tasks that have traditionally been central to competence development. The findings further suggest that AI changes which competencies are perceived as important, increasing the emphasis on effective AI use, evaluation of AI-generated outputs, and relational capabilities. Beyond the individual level, AI may also reshape traditional development pathways by reducing the need for junior-level tasks. Overall, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of AI's role in competence development by showing how it reshapes the processes through which competence is developed, which competencies are considered most important, and how competence itself is understood in management consulting.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Management Consulting, Competence Development, Deskilling, Upskilling

Acknowledgement

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to our supervisor, Katja Einola, for the guidance, reflections, and feedback provided throughout this study. The insights and encouragement have been invaluable to the completion of this work.

We would also like to extend our sincere thanks to all participants in this study for their willingness to contribute and for sharing their insightful experiences, which made this research possible.

Noak & Oskar

Table of contents

1 Introduction.....	1
1.1 Background.....	1
1.2 Research gap	2
1.3 Purpose of the study.....	3
1.4 Research questions.....	4
2 Literature review.....	5
2.1 Professional context: management consulting and competence development	5
2.2 AI in knowledge work and management consulting.....	6
2.3 AI and competence: deskilling, upskilling, and transformation	8
3 Method	11
3.1 Research approach	11
3.2 Research design	12
3.3 Data collection	13
3.3.1 Preparatory work.....	13
3.3.2 Main study	13
3.4 Data analysis	14
3.4.1 Sorting.....	15
3.4.2 Reducing	15
3.4.3 Argumentation.....	17
3.5 Quality of study.....	17
3.5.1 Credibility	17
3.5.2 Transferability	18
3.5.3 Dependability.....	18
3.5.4 Confirmability.....	18
3.6 Ethical considerations	19
4 Findings.....	20
4.1 Theme 1: a dual shift in competence through reduced engagement and increased performance	20
4.1.1 Traditional competencies: developed through learning by doing.....	20
4.1.2 From producing to curating: reduced engagement with core tasks	21
4.1.3 AI as a source of performance: increased efficiency and output	23

4.1.4 Reprioritization of competence: from technical skills to AI use and relational capabilities	24
4.1.5 Summary of theme 1	25
4.2 Theme 2: ambivalent effects of AI on competence development.....	26
4.2.1 AI as a driver of competence development.....	26
4.2.2 Risk of reduced independent thinking and superficial understanding.....	28
4.2.3 Coexisting opportunities and risks and continued usage	30
4.2.4 Externalization of risks in competence development	32
4.2.5 Summary of theme 2.....	33
4.3 Theme 3: a shift in management consulting structures and traditional competence development.....	33
4.3.1 Reduced entry-level work and challenges to traditional development pathways ...	33
4.3.2 Organizational pressure to adopt AI despite structural challenges	36
4.3.3 Summary of Theme 3.....	39
5 Discussion	40
5.1 Navigating contradictions in AI-enabled consulting work	41
5.2 Reconfiguration of competence development	44
5.3 The changing meaning of competence	45
5.4 Practical implications.....	47
6 Conclusion	49
6.1 How do management consultants experience the impact of AI on their competence development?	49
6.2 Limitations and future research	50
7 References.....	52
Appendix.....	57
Appendix A: List of interviewees	57
Appendix B: Interview guide.....	58
Appendix C: AI disclosure.....	60

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Technological advancements have continuously reshaped the nature of work (Autor, 2015; Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2017). From the mechanization of manual labor during the 18th century to the digitalization of information and widespread connectivity in the 21st century, each wave of innovation has altered not only what people do, but also what professional competencies they need and how these are developed.

A central mechanism in this development has been automation. Traditionally, automation has referred to the substitution of human labor in routine and repetitive tasks through machines (Autor, 2015). However, recent advances in generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), defined as machine learning models capable of generating new content, such as text, images, audio, code, simulations, and videos (Kalota, 2024), represent a shift in the scope of automation. Rather than only replacing manual or routine work, GenAI systems are now capable of performing activities traditionally associated with human cognition (Sutton et al., 2018). They can produce text, synthesize complex information, provide strategic recommendations, give relationship advice, and write poems. Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly viewed as a technology with the potential to fundamentally transform how people live and work (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2017), raising questions not only about efficiency gains, but also about the nature of human roles and development alongside AI tools. In this study, we use the term AI throughout the text to refer specifically to GenAI tools, particularly large language model-based systems used in knowledge work. While the term AI can refer to a wide range of technologies, this study is primarily concerned with this form of AI.

These changes are not merely speculative. AI tools are increasingly being integrated into work practices across industries (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2017; Rashid & Kausik, 2024). While there remains considerable uncertainty regarding the long-term consequences, early indications suggest that AI is beginning to reshape how work is carried out and how individuals engage with core tasks of their roles (Singla et al., 2025). This development is particularly salient in knowledge-intensive professions such as management consulting. As a profession,

management consulting is inherently knowledge-intensive: its core offering is the application of human competence to solve complex and ambiguous client problems. Management consultants are expected to structure ill-defined issues, conduct analyses, and translate these into actionable recommendations (Cerruti et al., 2019). Traditionally, these competencies are developed through hands-on experience, where management consultants engage with varied problem contexts and perform core tasks throughout the consulting process (Morgan, 2019). This development also takes place through interaction with colleagues and mentors, where questioning, feedback, and collaboration support learning (Morgan, 2019).

However, the increasing use of AI introduces new conditions for this model of competence development. By accelerating processes such as information gathering, processing, and analysis, AI alters how management consultants engage with tasks that have traditionally been central to competence development. This raises questions about how competence development is affected when core cognitive activities are partially or fully delegated to AI systems (Sutton et al., 2018). A growing number of scholars and public intellectuals have begun to question whether reliance on such tools may have unintended consequences for human learning and competence development (Ardichvili, 2022; Crowston & Bolici, 2025; Sutton et al., 2018). For instance, Wikforss and Klingberg (2026) highlight the risk that increased reliance on AI may lead to a decline in individuals' cognitive engagement, as thinking processes are progressively outsourced to machines. This, they argue, may weaken knowledge, critical thinking, and creativity. Similarly, Lindebaum et al. (2020) argue that while AI can improve efficiency and decision-making speed, overreliance on it risks suppressing human judgment, ethics, and freedom of choice, potentially leading to harmful organizational and societal outcomes.

1.2 Research gap

A growing body of research examines how artificial intelligence influences skills and the development of expertise (Ardichvili, 2022; Wikforss & Klingberg, 2026). Much of this work focuses on observable outcomes, such as productivity, performance, and the extent to which AI contributes to upskilling or deskilling (Crowston & Bolici, 2025). Some studies also propose mechanisms through which expertise development may be altered or disrupted (Sutton et al., 2018).

However, considerably less attention has been paid to how professionals themselves experience and interpret these changes in their everyday work. While existing literature provides valuable insights into what AI may do to competence development and outlines its potential consequences, it offers a limited understanding of how these transformations are perceived by those directly affected. In particular, we know little about how professionals interpret changes in their own development, how they view shifts in competence requirements, and how they navigate these changes in their day-to-day activities.

This study addresses this gap by shifting the focus from what AI does to competence development toward how management consultants interpret and respond to it. This approach makes it possible to capture the ambiguities, tensions, and evolving understandings that characterize the phenomenon. Such a perspective is especially relevant given the lack of consensus in the existing literature, where debates persist regarding whether AI leads to deskilling, upskilling, or more complex forms of transformation.

Rather than testing whether AI has positive or negative effects on expertise, this study seeks to contribute by providing an interpretative, experience-based perspective on competence development in the context of AI adoption in the management consulting industry. The research gap is illustrated in Figure 1.

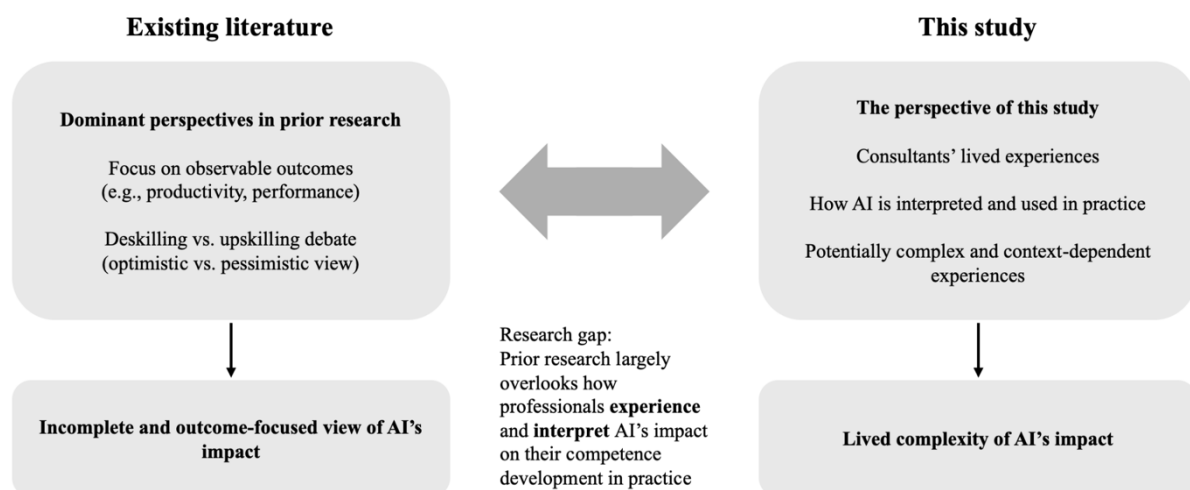


Figure 1: Research gap

1.3 Purpose of the study

Building on the identified research gap, this study seeks to explore how management consultants experience the impact of AI on their competence development. Through qualitative interviews, the study focuses on management consultants' own perspectives on how AI influences their work and competence development.

Understanding these dynamics is important for several reasons. Most significantly, it makes it possible to capture the ambiguities and tensions that characterize major technological changes in work practices. Such a phenomenon requires attention to both observable changes and how professionals experience and respond to these changes in practice. From an academic perspective, the study contributes to discussions on the relationship between AI and competence development by moving beyond a narrow focus on deskilling and upskilling, highlighting instead how competence development is interpreted in everyday work. From a practical perspective, it provides insights into how management consulting firms may need to rethink training, career development, and the integration of AI into everyday work practices. More broadly, it speaks to fundamental questions about the role of human cognition in a context where thinking itself may increasingly be delegated to machines.

1.4 Research questions

To fulfill this purpose, this study aims to answer the following research question:

1. How do management consultants experience the impact of AI on their competence development?

To further guide the analysis, the study explores the following sub-questions:

2. How do management consultants interpret shifts in required competencies when working with AI?

3. What tensions or challenges do management consultants experience in their competence development when using AI?

2 Literature review

2.1 Professional context: management consulting and competence development

Management consulting is a widely researched profession and has received much attention among scholars since the mid-twentieth century (Cerruti et al., 2019). The role of management consultants is to act as external experts who bring specialized knowledge, facilitate organizational change, and help clients adapt to rapidly shifting environments (Canato et al., 2011; Sturdy et al., 2009). The area of expertise within management consulting varies but generally covers areas such as strategy, IT, finance, marketing, operations, HR, and organizational performance (Kubr, 2002). Prior research highlights that management consultants may act both as innovators, who introduce new ideas and practices, and as legitimators, who validate the client's existing ideas (Sturdy et al., 2009).

To fulfill this role, management consultants rely on a broad set of competencies. The literature consistently emphasizes a combination of technical, problem-solving, communication, adaptability, and relationship-building skills (Morgan 2019; Visscher 2006). These competencies are particularly critical given the non-standardized and context-dependent nature of the work, which requires management consultants to continuously adapt to different clients, environments, and problem contexts (Visscher, 2006). Moreover, Morgan (2019) adds that these competencies are crucial because they enable management consultants to create value by observing behaviors, asking critical questions, and challenging assumptions, thereby contributing novel perspectives.

Competence development within management consulting is traditionally understood as largely experiential. Due to the multifaceted nature of the profession, development primarily occurs through learning by doing, where management consultants develop their skills through direct participation in client projects and through reflection in interaction with colleagues and mentors (Morgan, 2019; Visscher, 2006). In this process, management consultants build both the technical capabilities required for the job and also more tacit skills such as client communication and professional judgment, which are difficult to acquire through formal training. Formal education plays a role, but is generally insufficient on its own due to the highly

situational and context-dependent nature of management consulting practice (Visscher, 2006). In this sense, competence emerges through repeated exposure to real-world problems where management consultants apply their knowledge across diverse contexts (Morgan, 2019).

To understand how expertise is developed within the profession, prior research has examined the mechanisms underlying learning by doing and their contribution to competence development among management consultants. Werr and Stjernberg (2003) propose that management consultants develop competencies through a cyclical process in which knowledge is derived from prior experience, adapted to new project contexts, and subsequently shared within the organization for application in future client engagements. They emphasize that competence is primarily developed through practical experience, as learning is embedded in the execution of tasks in specific contexts. This is further supported by studies showing that engagement in analytical and cognitively demanding activities supports the development of higher-order thinking skills and broader cognitive capabilities (Ceballos et al., 2025; Wu & Molnar, 2022).

2.2 AI in knowledge work and management consulting

The increasing integration of AI into knowledge-intensive work has led to a growing scholarly interest in its implications for professions such as management consulting (Ardichvili, 2022; Mohan, 2024). In particular, the emergence of large language models (LLMs), such as ChatGPT, has introduced new ways of performing core consulting tasks. Mohan (2024) argues that the profession, traditionally relying solely on human expertise, is undergoing a transformation, as AI systems are now capable of automating tasks, supporting data analysis, and generating insights across a wide range of business functions. Moreover, research on AI in knowledge work suggests that these technologies are increasingly able to perform cognitive and analytical tasks, thereby redistributing how work is carried out between humans and machines (Jarrahi, 2019; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021).

Prior research highlights several potential benefits of AI in management consulting work. These include increased productivity through the automation of routine tasks, which allows management consultants to allocate more time to complex and creative work, as well as enhanced decision-making through improved data analysis capabilities (Ardichvili, 2022).

Furthermore, AI is often described as a collaborative tool, where human judgment and creativity are complemented by machine efficiency and analytical capacity (Ardichvili, 2022). In this context, AI is often conceptualized as being applied either through automation, where tasks are performed by AI systems, or augmentation, where humans and AI collaborate in task execution. However, Raisch and Krakowski (2021) argue that this distinction is overly simplistic, as automation and augmentation are not separate approaches but form an interdependent and persistent paradox in organizational practice. Automation and augmentation are both contradictory and interdependent: organizations may emphasize one at a given point, but over time and across tasks, the two continuously shape and enable each other. This dynamic highlights that AI does not simply replace or support human work, but continuously reshapes it through ongoing interactions between human and machine contributions.

However, the literature also identifies significant challenges associated with the integration of AI, particularly in relation to competence development (Ardichvili, 2022; Sutton et al., 2018). Several scholars argue that AI may hinder competence development by reducing opportunities for deliberate practice and social learning (Ardichvili, 2022; Sutton et al., 2018). In particular, the automation of routine tasks may reduce learning opportunities, especially for junior management consultants who traditionally rely on such tasks as entry points for competence development. In addition, the decreased need for collaboration around routine work may reduce opportunities for informal and social learning within teams. Another challenge relates to the black box nature of AI systems, which can make it difficult for users to understand how outputs are generated. This lack of transparency may hinder necessary critical reflection, while also increasing the risk of overreliance on automated outputs. Over time, such reliance may contribute to skill degradation if individuals become less engaged in independent problem-solving (Kokina & Davenport, 2017).

Building on this, Ardichvili (2022) identifies three key mechanisms through which AI may negatively affect competence development. First, automation gives employees fewer opportunities to perform tasks repeatedly and progress to more complex tasks. Second, automated environments limit opportunities for informal and incidental development through social interaction with colleagues. Drawing on Reimann and Markauskaite (2019), Ardichvili (2022) highlights this point by arguing that people primarily learn through social interactions in the workplace rather than through memorizing facts, rules, and routines. Third, automation

of cognitive work leads to micro-tasking, where tasks are broken into smaller, less complex components that are easier for machines to handle. Similarly, Jarrahi (2019) finds that a common strategy for organizing work is to break tasks into smaller subtasks that can be performed in collaboration with AI, which can reduce task complexity and limit competence development.

Taken together, the literature suggests that AI not only changes how management consulting work is performed, but also alters the conditions under which competence is developed. AI may increase efficiency and support task performance, but it can simultaneously reduce exposure to certain types of learning experiences, particularly those related to routine work and social interaction.

2.3 AI and competence: deskilling, upskilling, and transformation

A central debate within technological development concerns whether new technologies lead to deskilling or upskilling, that is, whether they reduce the level of skills required to perform a job or increase it. This debate has a long history but has become particularly salient in the context of AI and knowledge work (Crowston & Bolici, 2025; Sutton et al., 2018).

A substantial body of research highlights the potential for deskilling associated with AI adoption. Sutton et al. (2018) argue that while AI-driven automation can enhance productivity, it may simultaneously reduce human engagement in core tasks, thereby limiting opportunities for learning and skill development. This is closely linked to the concepts of automation bias and technology dominance, where individuals increasingly defer to AI-generated outputs rather than relying on their own judgment. Over time, such reliance can weaken critical thinking and reduce individuals' ability to independently perform tasks. Extending this perspective, Rinta-Kahila et al. (2023) demonstrate how cognitive automation can lead to vicious circles of skill erosion, where increased reliance on automated systems reduces opportunities for practice, leading to diminished competence and further dependence on technology. In other words, deskilling is not a one-time effect but a self-reinforcing process that unfolds over time.

Ferdman (2025) takes the argument further by suggesting that deskilling should not only be understood as an individual-level problem, but also as a structural one related to how AI is

embedded in socio-technical environments. Rather than simply resulting from individual overreliance, deskilling can emerge from structural changes in tasks, where opportunities for learning and skill development are gradually removed from everyday work. Ultimately, AI may reshape the structure of work in ways that make skill decline more likely even when individuals intend to remain engaged.

At the same time, a growing body of literature challenges the assumption that AI necessarily leads to deskilling, instead emphasizing its potential to enable upskilling. From this perspective, AI can enhance competence development by automating routine tasks and allowing individuals to focus on more complex and cognitively demanding activities. Morandini et al. (2023) argue that the integration of AI in organizations is associated with an increased demand for higher-level and transversal skills, such as critical thinking and problem-solving. Similarly, Jaiswal et al. (2022) highlight that AI-driven workplaces increasingly require new key skills: data analysis, digital, complex cognitive, decision-making, and continuous learning skills, suggesting a shift in the overall competence profile of knowledge workers.

However, the extent to which AI enables upskilling is not equal across individuals. Jia et al. (2024), as discussed by Crowston and Bolici (2025), describe a multiplier effect, where individuals with higher levels of prior knowledge benefit more from AI tools. By reducing time spent on routine tasks, AI enables these individuals to further develop and apply their expertise, thereby supporting advanced competence development. In this scenario, AI amplifies existing differences, allowing experts to deepen their competence at a faster rate. In contrast, Crowston and Bolici (2025) also identify a leveling effect, where AI tools disproportionately benefit less experienced individuals by enabling them to perform tasks at a higher level than their underlying competence would otherwise allow. While this may improve short-term performance, it raises questions about whether such improvements reflect skill development or a form of dependency on AI.

In addition to upskilling, the literature increasingly highlights the importance of reskilling in the context of AI. While upskilling refers to the enhancement of existing skills, reskilling involves the development of entirely new skill sets (Bodea et al., 2024). This reflects the idea that as AI systems automate certain activities, they also introduce new forms of work that

require workers to develop new competencies to remain relevant in a changing work environment.

From an organizational perspective, this implies a continuous need to identify emerging skill requirements and support employees in adapting to them. Morandini et al. (2023) emphasize that the adoption of AI is often accompanied by skill gaps that cannot be addressed solely through incremental learning, but instead require more substantial retraining and development efforts. Similarly, broader research on AI and global labor markets suggests that technological change is likely to increase the need for both upskilling and reskilling across occupations (Crămărenco et al., 2023). In other words, competence development in the context of AI involves both strengthening existing capabilities and reconfiguring skill profiles over time.

Taken together, the literature presents a nuanced view of AI's impact on competence development. While some studies emphasize the risk of deskilling through structural changes in work and reduced task engagement, others highlight the potential for upskilling by enabling individuals to focus on more complex and cognitively demanding activities. Furthermore, the distinction between upskilling and reskilling underscores that competence development in this context is not only about enhancing existing skills, but may also involve developing entirely new ones. Overall, the impact of AI on competence is best understood as a dynamic process shaped by individual, organizational, and structural factors, rather than as a binary outcome of either deskilling or upskilling.

3 Method

3.1 Research approach

This study seeks to examine how management consultants experience the impact of AI on competence development. Given the focus on understanding the lived experiences and perceptions of AI, we adopted a qualitative exploratory research approach to capture deep insights from the experiences of management consultants (Bell et al., 2022). This enabled an in-depth exploration that captured the complexity of the issue. In contrast, a quantitative approach would have limited the ability to capture the depth, ambiguity, and richness of the participants' perspectives (Bell et al., 2022).

The study followed an interpretive research approach, where reality is understood as a social construction shaped by individuals' interactions and beliefs (Neuman, 2014). From this perspective, the objective was not to identify objective truths about AI's impact, but to understand how management consultants experience these changes in relation to their own professional development. To support the research, an abductive approach was applied by iteratively moving between empirical observations and previous literature to interpret emerging patterns (Hulst & Visser, 2024). This approach enabled our study to gain deeper insight into the emerging, experienced duality of AI's effects on competence development for management consultants, which is dependent on perspective and situation. The abductive approach enabled us to draw on participants' insights and integrate them with existing literature to interpret our findings. It also allowed for flexibility in both data collection and analysis, which could be iteratively developed based on the empirical findings, while still grounding the study in existing literature.

Lastly, we chose to adopt a semi-structured interview format (Bell et al., 2022). This provided a balance between consistency and flexibility, as it ensured that key themes were covered across all interviews while allowing participants to elaborate on aspects they perceived as important. It also enabled spontaneous follow-up questions, which were essential for capturing deeper insights into participants' reasoning (Kvale & Brinkman, 2015). The semi-structured interview format supported the study's interpretive approach by enabling us to explore how management

consultants experience and interpret the effects of AI on competence development (Langley & Meziani, 2020).

3.2 Research design

The study was based on a qualitative interview design, where each interview provided an individual account of how AI is experienced in a management consulting context. The empirical setting consisted of management consultants working at different firms. The reasoning for selecting participants from different firms rather than a single firm was to obtain a broader view of how management consultants' competence development is affected by AI. By including management consultants from multiple firms, we aimed to minimize the risk that findings would be shaped by a single firm's implementation of a specific AI tool, which could influence how participants experience AI's effect on competence development. Instead, this design enabled us to capture a variety of implemented AI tools and explore how management consultants experienced AI more broadly, rather than focusing on a specific practice within one specific firm.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, meaning that individuals were chosen based on their relevance to the research question (Bell et al., 2022). The primary criteria for selection were that participants (1) were currently working as management consultants, (2) used AI tools to some extent in their work, and (3) had at least two years of professional experience. The first two criteria were used in order to gain insights from participants who could share experiences that would serve to answer the research questions. The last requirement for prior experience was important to capture reflections on changes over time. Since the broader adoption of AI in management consulting accelerated around 2023-2024 (Singla et al., 2024), participants with several years of experience were better able to compare work practices before and after the introduction of AI in the workplace, as well as reflect on how competence development may have been affected over time.

Participants were recruited through personal and professional networks. While this sampling approach may have limited the generalizability of the findings, it was consistent with the exploratory nature of the study, where the objective was to gain depth rather than breadth. At the same time, the sample included management consultants from different firms, roles, and

levels of experience, which provided a range of perspectives on the use of AI in consulting work. Existing relationships facilitated access to participants and supported open and reflective conversations, which enabled richer insights into their experiences. Throughout the research process, we remained aware of the potential influence of these relationships and considered this in both data collection and analysis.

3.3 Data collection

3.3.1 Preparatory work

As an initial step, two pilot interviews were conducted to explore how management consultants use AI in their daily work and to identify relevant research directions. At this stage, the study had a broader exploratory focus, including topics such as informal or unauthorized use of AI tools. However, during the pilot interviews, a recurring and more compelling theme emerged: participants expressed concerns about competence development as AI became more common. Based on these early insights, the focus of the study was refined toward this issue, shaping the design of the main study. The pilot interviews thus played an important role in guiding the research direction and ensuring that the study focused on a phenomenon that participants themselves found meaningful and relevant.

3.3.2 Main study

The main study consisted of 20 semi-structured interviews with management consultants from 11 different firms located in Stockholm. The participants had between 2 and 15 years of professional experience. The interviews were conducted until recurring themes became increasingly evident, and additional interviews were assessed as contributing limited new insights in relation to the study's purpose. All interviews were conducted digitally via Microsoft Teams and were scheduled for one hour. In practice, the interviews lasted between 34 and 72 minutes, depending on the depth of discussion and participant availability. The participants and the length of the interviews are listed in Appendix A.

At the beginning of each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their anonymity, and their right to withdraw. All participants consented to the recording of the interviews. To ensure confidentiality, all names were replaced with pseudonyms in the study. The interviews were transcribed using an automatic transcription tool, which was selected to ensure compliance with data protection regulations, thereby safeguarding participant confidentiality. The transcripts were subsequently reviewed to ensure accuracy.

The semi-structured interview format was supported by an interview guide organized around key themes related to AI usage and competence development. Each theme included open-ended questions, allowing participants to describe their experiences in their own words. Follow-up questions were used extensively to encourage deeper reflections and examples. The full interview guide is included in Appendix B. After each interview, a brief review was conducted to identify key insights and reflect on how subsequent interviews could be improved. This included minor refinements to question phrasings and adjustments in emphasis to ensure clarity and depth in the data collection process.

To illustrate the iterative nature of the data collection process, one pattern that received increased attention during the interviews was participants' descriptions of both positive and negative effects of AI on competence development. While these experiences were broadly similar across participants, they were expressed in different situations. The semi-structured interview format made it possible to explore this pattern in greater depth through flexible follow-up questions, which helped us better understand how participants experienced these contrasting effects and provide richer insights into the phenomenon.

3.4 Data analysis

A thematic analysis approach was employed to identify patterns in the interview data and structure management consultants' experiences into coherent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach allowed for the development of themes based on the empirical material, without being constrained by pre-existing theoretical frameworks. A grounded theory approach was therefore not adopted, as the aim of the study was not to generate new theory, but to explore and interpret participants' experiences (Charmaz, 2006).

To further structure the analysis and develop findings that addressed the research question, the analytical framework proposed by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) was applied. This framework consists of three stages: sorting, reducing, and argumentation. In this study, sorting involved identifying recurring patterns and preliminary categories within the empirical material. This was followed by reducing, where the data were condensed into more analytically relevant sub-themes and aggregated themes. Finally, argumentation was used to relate these themes to existing literature and to substantiate the study's findings. This approach supported a systematic yet interpretive analysis, which enabled an in-depth understanding of how management consultants experienced the impact of AI on competence development.

3.4.1 Sorting

All interviews were transcribed and reviewed individually by both researchers, who also conducted the initial sorting separately. This ensured a comprehensive overview of the material and a deeper understanding of its meaning. Following the independent sorting, iterative discussions were conducted to compare interpretations and refine the categorization. In cases of uncertainty, a conservative approach was adopted whereby all potentially relevant quotes were included.

During this process, potentially relevant and insightful quotes were identified and annotated, constituting a first-order sorting of the data. These quotes were then grouped into preliminary thematic categories as part of a second-order sorting. All selected quotes were compiled into a separate document, integrating contributions from all participants and organizing them according to the emerging themes. The original interview transcriptions remained unaltered throughout the process, allowing for continuous reference to the primary data in subsequent stages of the analysis.

3.4.2 Reducing

The next step in the data analysis process was to reduce the empirical material to a manageable amount that was effective to analyze and process, while still being representative of the total amount of material (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). From the initial sorting phase, the

empirical material was organized into sub-themes, representing a more condensed and structured version of the data.

Following this reduction, the sub-themes were further synthesized into three aggregated themes, which were identified as the most relevant for understanding how management consultants experienced AI's impact on competence development: Theme 1: dual shift in competence through reduced engagement and increased performance, Theme 2: ambivalent effects of AI on competence development, and Theme 3: shifting management consulting structures and traditional competence development. The sorting and reducing process is illustrated in Figure 2, which shows how the analysis progressed from initial sorting to aggregated themes.

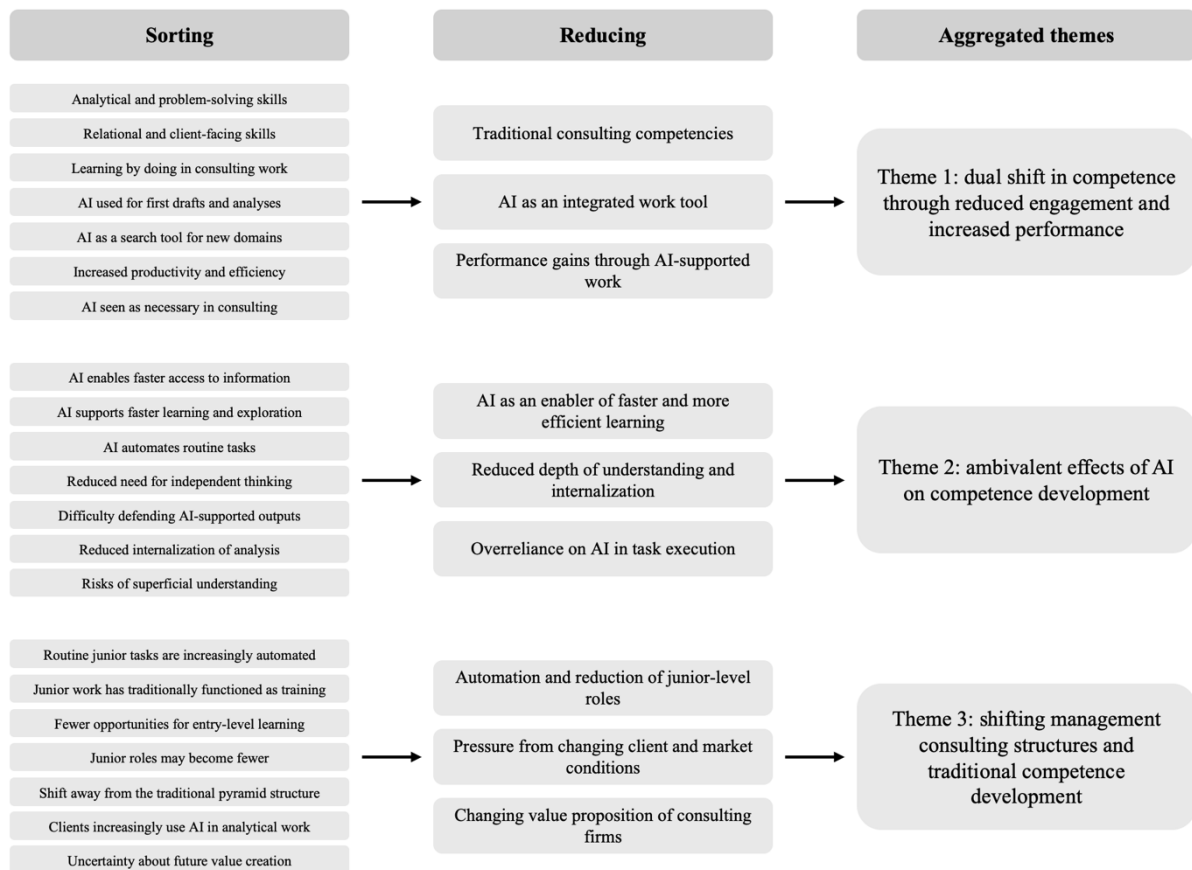


Figure 2: Sorting process

3.4.3 Argumentation

The final step in the data analysis process involved using the empirical material to conduct analytical reasoning in relation to existing literature (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Based on the identified themes and patterns, the analysis provided the basis for engaging with and extending existing research on AI and competence development in the subsequent discussion.

This enabled a more nuanced understanding of how AI affects competence development by incorporating management consultants' perspectives on how these changes are experienced in practice. It also showed that the impact of AI is not only visible in performance outcomes, but also in how competence is understood in everyday work.

3.5 Quality of study

The quality of qualitative research is commonly assessed through the concept of trustworthiness, which includes the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These criteria provided a framework for evaluating how well the study captured participants' experiences and how transparently and consistently the research was conducted. In this study, particular emphasis has been placed on maintaining a close connection between the empirical material and the analysis, as well as ensuring transparency throughout the research process.

3.5.1 Credibility

Credibility concerns the extent to which the findings accurately represent participants' experiences. In this study, credibility was supported through an iterative research process in which data collection and analysis were closely connected. During the interviews, follow-up questions were used extensively to encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences and provide concrete examples, which enabled a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

In the analysis, both researchers were involved and conducted parts of the categorization and interpretation independently before comparing and discussing their insights. This process allowed for the identification of consistent patterns in the data while also challenging initial

interpretations. Furthermore, one researcher's familiarity with the consulting context facilitated meaningful engagement with participants' accounts, while conscious efforts were made to remain open to perspectives that did not align with prior expectations.

3.5.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings may be relevant in other contexts. As qualitative research does not aim for statistical generalization, this study instead provides a description of the research context, including the characteristics of the participants and how they were selected. The sample included consultants from different firms, roles, and levels of experience, contributing to a range of perspectives within the shared context of Stockholm-based management consulting firms. However, the findings should be understood in relation to this specific geographical and professional setting, which may have influenced how AI is experienced in practice. By outlining these contextual conditions, the study enables readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other settings with similar characteristics.

3.5.3 Dependability

Dependability relates to the consistency and transparency of the research process. In this study, the research design, data collection process, and analytical steps have been documented in detail. This includes the use of pilot interviews, development of the interview guide, the interview settings, and the different stages of the analysis, including sorting, reducing, and argumentation. The use of a structured analytical approach supported consistency in how the data were interpreted. While the findings were shaped by the specific context of the study, the transparent documentation of the research process allows readers to follow how the conclusions were reached and to understand the logic underlying the analysis.

3.5.4 Confirmability

Confirmability concerns the extent to which the findings are grounded in the empirical material rather than shaped by researcher bias. In this study, confirmability was supported by involving both researchers throughout the analysis process. Independent interpretations were developed

and then discussed, which helped ensure that the findings were not based on a single perspective.

In addition, the analysis remained closely connected to the empirical material, with interpretations continuously revisited and evaluated in relation to the data. This approach contributed to maintaining a transparent link between the participants' accounts and the conclusions drawn in the study.

3.6 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations in this study focused on ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and the protection of participants' identities. To ensure anonymity, all names were replaced with pseudonyms using neutral labels. In addition, no company names were disclosed in order to prevent traceability and protect the identity of participants' workplaces (Saunders et al., 2014).

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, how the data would be used, and their right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained before the interviews, including consent to participate and to be recorded. Participants also signed a consent form outlining the study and the handling of their data.

4 Findings

4.1 Theme 1: a dual shift in competence through reduced engagement and increased performance

Throughout the interviews, participants consistently described how the increasing use of AI has changed what it means to be a competent management consultant. While this was often initially framed as a shift in required skills, a deeper analysis revealed a more complex dual development. The consultants described how AI reduces their direct involvement in core analytical tasks that have traditionally been central to competence development, while at the same time experiencing themselves as becoming more effective and competitive in their roles. This suggests a contrast between reduced engagement in traditional competence development and increased performance enabled by AI.

4.1.1 Traditional competencies: developed through learning by doing

Throughout the interviews, there was a strong consensus that the most important competencies for a management consultant have traditionally been analytical and problem-solving skills, together with interpersonal and relational capabilities. These included abilities such as structuring complex problems, understanding and working with different types of data, as well as communication, trustworthiness, and the ability to interact effectively with clients.

As one interviewee expressed:

“I’m thinking about the ability to think in terms of processes and to have a structured approach to how you work from start to finish, what needs to be done and when, and so on. I’m also thinking about the content of what you produce, that you should really understand the questions you’re working with. And then I also think a nice thing is people skills, soft skills, being able to actually understand what needs to be done, understand the question, but also be able to communicate and work together with others.” David

Another interviewee had a similar view:

“I would say that number one is being a good judge of character. That’s the most important thing, because in the end, we work with people... It’s also important to be analytical and a problem solver, and to be proactive.” Henrik

In addition, the participants consistently described that these competencies have traditionally been developed through learning by doing. The consultants explained how repeated exposure to tasks such as structuring problems, conducting analyses, creating presentations, and interacting with clients has allowed them to gradually build both the required technical understanding and people skills.

“With us, it’s very much learning by doing. You’re fairly quickly thrown into all parts of our process.” Julia

Beyond simply performing tasks, the process of learning by doing was also described as iterative and social. Several participants emphasized how competence develops through imitation of more experienced colleagues, interaction with others, and continuous feedback.

One interviewee described this process as follows:

“I mean, trial and error is always the answer. I’ve tried, to a large extent, to identify people who seem competent and then try to do what they do. And then I’ve tried to actively seek feedback and implement that feedback as much as possible.” Nils

In other words, competence development has been closely tied to direct and social engagement in the full management consulting process, from analysis to client interaction.

4.1.2 From producing to curating: reduced engagement with core tasks

A central change described by participants is that AI increasingly performs parts of the analytical and production-related work that consultants previously carried out themselves. Instead of producing analyses from scratch, the consultants now use AI to generate initial outputs, which they then review and adapt.

“Output is created by a model. Your role becomes more about sorting through that output, phrasing it correctly, and making refinements to a greater extent than it is today. In many ways, it’s a partner role. So each consultant becomes less and less the one who creates the material and more and more the one who organizes and refines it.” Nils

Another interviewee had a similar view:

“Whereas now, an AI can do this entire analysis for you, and you only need to turn it into slides. But if you’ve come that far in your own AI development, you can even use Claude to create the slide for you. So it becomes a completely different skill, being able to verify and sell the message, rather than actually producing it.” Ebba

This shift is also reflected in how participants described their day-to-day interactions with AI:

“I would ask it to do a lot of things, and then I would adjust. So that’s kind of what it’s become, you end up being a bit more of a micromanager, in a way, toward an AI.” Nils

Similarly, as consultants are often required to quickly develop expertise in new industries, participants described how this process has shifted from manual search and information gathering to a more automated process where information can be generated instantly with AI:

“The biggest difference is that you don’t really do your own research in the same way anymore. Instead, you ask someone else to do the research for you, or at least that’s how I work now.” Anders

This shift reflects a movement from producing to curating, where the consultants are less directly involved in the full analytical process. This implies a shift away from the direct and social engagement described above, as the consultants become less involved in the full problem-solving process themselves. As a result, they engage less in the types of activities that have traditionally been central to developing deep understanding.

4.1.3 AI as a source of performance: increased efficiency and output

The participants consistently emphasized that AI significantly enhanced their performance. By automating time-consuming tasks, AI enables the consultants to work faster and more efficiently.

One interviewee described it as:

“It becomes much easier. You won’t need to be as good at Excel. You can just use these tools. You won’t need to know how to program. You won’t have to be as skilled at all the Excel shortcuts like before. You can do things much faster with all the AI tools that are available.”

Anna

Another interviewee expressed a similar view:

“You get a first draft that is decent, but that you need to tweak. And it becomes a better final product than if you had spent the same amount of time writing it yourself” Lars

This highlights how AI reduces the effort required to perform tasks that previously demanded a high level of technical skill. As a result, tasks that used to be time-consuming and cognitively demanding can now be completed more quickly and with less individual input. In other words, AI both increases overall speed and lowers the threshold for performing complex tasks.

Several participants also highlighted that if certain technical tasks can be performed by AI, the baseline performance of an average management consultant increases.

One interviewee described it as:

“You could describe it as having enabled a lower-performing or average consultant to operate at a higher level. In other words, the baseline has increased.” Anders

This suggests that AI enables a more standardized level of output across the consultants. This means that AI contributes to raising expectations of what consultants are able to deliver, regardless of individual experience or skill level.

Overall, these accounts indicate that AI functions not only as a support tool, but as a driver of performance. AI does not merely change how work is done, but also allows consultants to

deliver higher-quality outputs with less effort. This contributes to a sense of increased effectiveness and competitiveness, even when consultants are less directly involved in producing the underlying work.

4.1.4 Reprioritization of competence: from technical skills to AI use and relational capabilities

As a consequence of these changes, the participants described a shift in which competencies are considered most important. Analytical skills are not described as irrelevant, but their role appears to be changing, as many technical tasks can now be performed by AI tools.

“Whereas the more analytical work, especially handling data, collecting data, and supporting information, that kind of very technical analytical ability, I would guess, is something that could become less important to possess if AI keeps getting better at doing that work.” Julia

At the same time, competence in using AI tools effectively was seen as becoming increasingly central:

“We constantly see it as being a good consultant who isn’t replaceable, you need to be a consultant who can use AI well. Right now, a consultant without AI can’t compete with a consultant who uses AI.” Henrik

This competence also includes more specific skills related to how AI tools are used in practice, particularly in terms of prompting:

“Well, partly it’s about taking the time to really learn how to prompt properly and truly understand how to use AI and what’s important to keep in mind.” Lars

Another interviewee described the risk of consultants becoming irrelevant if they do not learn how to use AI to their benefit:

“Yeah, I think it’s more that I feel in my role as a consultant, that I need to upskill myself and get better at understanding how I can apply AI effectively. That’s how I can become a better consultant going forward. Because if I don’t do that, I think that if you don’t have competence

in AI and understand how it can help you in your day-to-day work as a consultant, you'll eventually become less relevant." Karl

In addition, participants emphasized that soft skills, such as relationship-building and communication, are gaining importance as AI frees up time previously spent on technical work.

One interviewee described it:

"Just sitting and crunching data, polishing things, or double-checking work. Instead, you can free up time that you can then spend on things like building relationships, or creating value in other ways." Karl

Another interviewee agreed:

"I believe the last part I mentioned, related to building client relationships and so on, will become even more important." Anna

This shift is also reflected in how the consultants described a change in what they focus on cognitively in their work:

"Someone in my role five years ago might have been responsible for delivering a few slides for a deck and had to think carefully about exactly what should go where and how to phrase it. But now, since I can use AI to some extent for that, I'm able to free up more mental space to focus on the story instead." Nils

Taken together, this suggests a reprioritization of competence, where the ability to use AI effectively and manage client relationships becomes more central, while traditional technical skills become relatively less important.

4.1.5 Summary of theme 1

Overall, the findings reveal a dual shift in how competence is experienced in the context of AI. On the one hand, the consultants are less directly engaged in the analytical and production-oriented tasks that have traditionally been central to competence development. On the other hand, they are able to perform at a higher level due to the support of AI tools, leading to increased efficiency and competitiveness.

This creates a situation where reduced engagement in traditional competence-building activities coexists with improved performance. Competence is increasingly expressed through the ability to leverage AI effectively and manage client relationships, rather than through deep technical expertise alone. This suggests a distinction between improved performance and the underlying competence traditionally developed through direct engagement in the work.

4.2 Theme 2: ambivalent effects of AI on competence development

A central theme emerging from the interviews is the ambivalent nature of how AI affects competence development. Across interviews, AI is described as both enabling and constraining competence development, creating a tension between efficiency and depth.

On the one hand, the consultants emphasized that AI contributes positively to competence development by providing easy access to large amounts of information and enabling them to explore new domains more efficiently. On the other hand, they expressed concerns about how this shift, from manually performing tasks to curating and evaluating AI-generated outputs, may affect the depth of learning and the extent to which knowledge is internalized.

Rather than presenting a clear positive or negative view, the consultants consistently articulated both perspectives in parallel. This indicates an underlying tension between short-term gains in efficiency and potential long-term implications for competence development. Notably, this tension was more often pronounced when the consultants reflected on others than when they described their own use of AI.

4.2.1 AI as a driver of competence development

One important pattern was that the consultants experienced AI as enabling faster and more efficient learning by providing immediate access to information and supporting exploration of unfamiliar domains. The interviewees described how AI tools allow them to quickly gain an overview of new industries and topics, which was previously more time-consuming.

As one consultant explained:

“I still think that the ability to learn has become much faster now when it comes to getting into a complex industry... So I’m not saying that the ability to learn is deteriorating. Rather, it is becoming more efficient and more tailored to the level at which you want the information. So the ability to learn, or learning in general, is becoming much more efficient.”

Peter

Similarly, another participant highlighted the potential of AI for learning:

“But with that in mind, I still want to emphasize just how great the potential is for better, faster, more efficient learning as well.” Anders

This was particularly evident in situations where the consultants were required to quickly familiarize themselves with new contexts:

“In the consulting role, you very often end up in situations where you don’t actually know the industry, or the client, or the subject matter. I mean, especially when you’re new, but it can happen even after many years of experience. And being able to use AI to, within just a few days, suddenly know quite a lot about a given area, that simply wasn’t possible before. So it’s really something quite fundamental and, well, it will have a very significant impact.” Joel

However, the role of AI extends beyond simply speeding up access to information. Several participants described how AI enables a more iterative and exploratory learning process, where they actively engage with the tool through questioning and feedback. In this sense, learning becomes less linear and more interaction-based.

For example, one consultant described how AI was used both to understand new concepts, put the information into different contexts, and simulate feedback:

“I use it to do basic research when I come across something I’m not familiar with or don’t understand. Essentially, it’s like asking the question: what does this mean in context X?... I upload images of my slides and ask it to give me feedback on them, and to tell me what my manager would say about this, or what the partner would say about it.” Nils

In addition, some consultants emphasized that the increasing expectation to use AI itself drives competence development. Being required to engage with AI tools was described as a form of pressure that encourages individuals to challenge themselves and learn new skills.

As one interviewee explained:

“If I think about using AI more, and that there are expectations that we should use AI... It pushes you to become more forward-looking... I actually think that’s a good thing, because you get challenged to learn something new. So I think that, from a behavioral and cultural perspective, using AI a lot actually strengthens your ability to be a good advisor to clients.”

Anna

Finally, AI was also described as enabling competence development by freeing up time from routine tasks, allowing the consultants to focus on more valuable forms of learning:

“AI makes it possible to free up time to learn new things and develop new skills that you need.” Lars

Taken together, these findings indicate that the consultants experience AI as a powerful enabler of competence development. It allows them to explore a broader range of topics faster, engage in more interactive learning processes, and develop new skills through changing expectations and by freeing up time.

4.2.2 Risk of reduced independent thinking and superficial understanding

Accompanying the emphasis on the positive effects of AI on competence development were concerns about how these developments may affect the depth and quality of learning. In particular, a recurring theme across interviews was that increasing reliance on AI may reduce the need for independent thinking, thereby altering the processes through which knowledge is deepened and internalized.

Several participants highlighted that when AI generates outputs, such as analyses or summaries, the consultants may become less engaged in the underlying logic and reasoning behind them. They risk shifting into a more passive role of reviewing and accepting outputs. This, in turn, may reduce their engagement with the work, limiting their ability to fully understand its nuances and depth, and ultimately weakening learning outcomes.

As one consultant reflected:

“If you don’t understand how we arrived at the results, it can be difficult to explain them. And to really understand that, you probably need to go through all the steps manually and actually produce the work yourself.” Ingrid

Similarly, another interviewee stated:

[About learning by doing] “If everything is just thrown into an LLM, there ends up being very little doing, and then you have to assume there is very little learning as well.” Arvid

The same interviewee further emphasized:

“But I strongly believe in the idea that I need to be able to back up what I say. And if I just ask an AI for an answer, then I’ll end up presenting a conclusion that isn’t really mine, and when someone asks about it, I won’t be able to explain it.” Arvid

These statements capture how competence development extends beyond producing correct outputs. It also involves understanding and being able to justify one’s work.

Another interviewee highlighted how this affects internalization:

“When you get a question about what you’ve actually done, you can’t really answer it, because you don’t remember. When you’ve actually sat down and written something yourself, that’s when you really internalize it.” Anna

Several interviewees also pointed to a risk of reduced cognitive effort:

“I think we become quite lazy in our thinking when we use AI, and I definitely see that as a risk.” Johanna

“There is probably a risk with AI that you become a bit lazy or dumb, that you stop thinking for yourself. You just input something, the AI gives you an answer, and then you think, ‘okay, this must be correct, this must be the truth’, instead of actually reflecting on whether it is really accurate.” Karl

Closely related to this was the concern that reduced engagement in the full problem-solving process may affect the development of intuition and tacit knowledge. When parts of the repeated exposure to tasks were delegated to AI, the consultants feared that the opportunity to

build such intuition was diminished. As reflected in the interviews, certain forms of knowledge may not develop unless consultants actively work through the material themselves.

“I think that kind of knowledge, that clinical eye, is developed less and less the more you use AI, and that can be problematic.” Nils

“You could probably say that intuition might get worse with AI, or at least risks getting worse, if you don’t also focus on your own learning when working with AI.” Anders

Importantly, these concerns were not described as inevitable outcomes, but rather as potential risks depending on how AI is used. As previously stated, the consultants emphasized the importance of maintaining a critical approach and ensuring that AI is not used as a substitute for thinking. However, this requires a high degree of self-awareness, particularly in a time-pressured consulting environment where AI also creates incentives to take shortcuts. As will be explored further, there are also indications that such risks are more often attributed to others than to oneself.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the consultants experienced several risks associated with AI in competence development. AI usage, if not handled correctly, can undermine the processes through which deep understanding, internalization, and intuition are developed. This creates a fundamental tension between efficiency and learning.

4.2.3 Coexisting opportunities and risks and continued usage

Another notable pattern across the interviews was that the consultants did not take a clear position on the tension between the positive and negative effects of AI on competence development. Instead, both perspectives were held simultaneously. While they clearly articulated concerns related to weakened independent thinking, internalization, and intuition, these concerns did not lead to rejection or avoidance of AI. Rather, the consultants continued to emphasize the importance of AI as an integral part of their work.

This coexistence of opportunities and risks is reflected in how the consultants spoke about AI. They acknowledged that reliance on AI may undermine certain aspects of competence

development, while at the same time emphasizing that it enables them to work more efficiently and remain competitive. These perspectives were presented as parallel realities that must be managed.

Importantly, when asked to reflect on how one should act in practice, the dominant conclusion was not to limit or avoid the use of AI, but to engage with it actively. This became particularly evident when the consultants reflected on what advice they would give to others, such as junior colleagues.

One interviewee expresses this clearly:

“Use AI as much as you want, as long as it makes you better and helps you deliver faster. But you have to be able to stand behind everything you say or the material you produce. I mean, you just want to remove those formatting things, the long dashes, otherwise it becomes so boring to read, at least I think so. But if it is 100 percent AI-generated material, fine. If it is good, then it is completely fine. And if you can stand behind it, then it is great.” Anders

Another interviewee provided a similar perspective:

“I would look for where I could use AI to make my life a bit easier, and then try to build it into my daily work so that I use it every day, that I actively apply AI. Because I think that if you don’t do that, others will end up overtaking you.” Nils

These statements suggest that the consultants view the use of AI as necessary for maintaining performance and relevance. Avoiding AI for the sake of competence development was not presented as a viable option. The emphasis was placed on using it effectively while maintaining responsibility for the output.

In this sense, the consultants accepted the tension between efficiency and learning as an inherent condition of their work. This highlights a key insight: the consultants were required to simultaneously leverage the benefits of AI and mitigate its risks, even though these aspects are inherently conflicted. The task becomes balancing efficiency and learning, without compromising the use of AI itself.

4.2.4 Externalization of risks in competence development

A further pattern emerging from the interviews is that concerns regarding the negative effects of AI on competence development are often directed towards others, especially junior consultants, rather than oneself. While the consultants clearly articulated risks, as discussed earlier, these concerns were rarely framed as applying to their own use of AI. Instead, participants described themselves as using AI in a reflective and controlled manner, while expressing greater concern about how others may be affected.

As one interviewee put it:

“There’s probably a risk that juniors might not develop in the same way. They may not train their brains as much as the older generation has.” Jacob

Furthermore, when asked whether there are specific tasks they are getting worse at after starting to use AI, one interviewee responded:

“No, I wouldn’t say that. I will probably just become better. Yes, that’s what I would say. Or what would I even become worse at?” Anders

Similarly, when asked about concrete examples concerning themselves, participants often ended up referring to others rather than themselves:

“I can very clearly tell when people actually understand. You’re allowed to use AI, that’s fine, and I do it too. But you still have to understand what it is you’re presenting. And it becomes very obvious if someone hasn’t really done their homework, comes in to present something, and then gets follow-up questions they can’t answer at all. I mean, I see it in recruitment, and I can also see it among junior colleagues who haven’t really understood.” Joel

Here, the risk was described as something affecting others who may lack the necessary understanding, while the interviewee implicitly positioned themselves as possessing this competence. In other words, the potential negative consequences of AI are, to a large extent, externalized.

Importantly, the consultants simultaneously demonstrated a high level of awareness regarding the potential risks of AI. However, this awareness was often accompanied by a belief that these risks can be mitigated through individual responsibility and that they themselves were

successfully doing so. The negative effects were thus acknowledged at a general level, but downplayed in relation to one's own work.

This externalization of risk can be understood as a way for the consultants to make sense of a complex and uncertain situation. By positioning themselves as competent and reflective users of AI, they are able to reconcile the tension between recognizing potential risks and continuing to rely on AI in their work.

4.2.5 Summary of theme 2

Overall, the findings show that the consultants experience the impact of AI on competence development as inherently ambivalent. AI enables faster and more flexible learning, while simultaneously introducing risks related to weakened independent thinking, internalization, and intuition. Rather than resolving this tension, the consultants appear to accept it as a defining condition of their work. They continue to rely on AI despite recognizing its potential downsides, and often manage this contradiction by emphasizing responsible use and externalizing risks to others.

4.3 Theme 3: a shift in management consulting structures and traditional competence development

Beyond shifts in individual competencies and competence development processes, the interviews also indicate broader implications for the organization of consulting work. Several respondents highlighted that the growing integration of AI may challenge the traditional models through which consultants develop competencies and advance within firms.

4.3.1 Reduced entry-level work and challenges to traditional development pathways

A recurring concern among interviewees was that many of the tasks traditionally performed by junior consultants are increasingly being supported or replaced by AI. These include activities such as summarizing information, creating slides, drafting materials, and conducting basic

analyses. Although such tasks were often described as repetitive or low-value, participants also described them as playing an important role in how consultants learn the profession.

Through repeated exposure to these tasks, junior consultants gradually develop an understanding of both the content and the consulting process. In this sense, such work is not only about producing output, but also about learning how to think and act as a consultant.

One interviewee described this clearly:

“I believe that many of the tasks I did in my first six months were things like taking notes and writing them up, drafting emails, creating simple slides, and summarizing material. These are classic tasks that AI can do. At the same time, they were important for me in order to learn the company culture, the job itself, the craft of being a consultant, client relationships, and tone of voice. I think that if all of those learning opportunities disappear, then the bar for what a new hire is expected to deliver is raised.” David

Against this background, the participants questioned how the competence development process will take place in the future if AI increasingly takes over these foundational tasks. If junior consultants have fewer opportunities to engage in this type of work, it becomes less clear how they are expected to build the experience required for more senior roles. Several interviewees therefore expressed concern that junior roles may gradually become fewer, or in some cases disappear altogether, as AI continues to advance.

As one participant put it:

“That’s probably the danger when it comes to young people entering the job market, those jobs might no longer exist, the more manual, repetitive ones. But then people are expected to go straight from their studies into a more senior role. And I find it very hard to see how that would be possible.” William

Another participant expressed a similar concern:

“I think that after us, there will probably be fewer and fewer entry-level jobs in the consulting profession... AI can be used for many of the kinds of tasks that associates at the bottom of the hierarchy usually do.” Anna

At the same time, some participants viewed this shift as a natural and inevitable consequence of technological development in highly competitive industries:

“When AI comes in as a new part of learning and skills development, it’s not really the case that you still need to know everything you were expected to know five years ago, even if some people think that. Rather, because of AI, you don’t need to know everything anymore. There will be tasks where, as with all industrial development, you simply don’t need a human.” Lars

Several interviewees also connected this development to a possible shift away from the traditional pyramid model, where many junior consultants support fewer senior ones, towards a more diamond-shaped structure with fewer entry-level roles in relation to senior ones. Again, this raises questions about how individuals enter the profession and how competence development takes place for those who are given the opportunity.

One interviewee described it as follows:

“I believe that in the future there will be a somewhat different pyramid structure in consulting firms, where there won’t be the same need for the lower layer of junior associates or analysts. I think many of those tasks will instead be carried out by a senior consultant or a manager, with the help of AI.” Joel

Another interviewee expressed a similar view:

“It’s basically a pyramid structure. You have a lot of juniors at the bottom and seniors at the top. But now, much of the work that analysts and consultants do is tied to things like producing accurate analyses, putting together materials, formatting slides, and so on.” Anders

Some participants took this concern even further by questioning whether the profession may eventually need junior consultants at all in the future:

“I think it will be a continuous process, until there is essentially no need for juniors at all. And I know there are so many reports saying that we don’t see any impact on the labor market yet. And I think that’s a bit of a wishful dream. It may be that the numbers don’t show anything right now, but beneath the surface, the development is happening very, very fast.”

Nils

These reflections suggest that AI may both change how work is carried out and disrupt the traditional pathway through which consultants develop competence and progress within firms.

Some interviewees also linked this development to broader concerns about the future of the profession itself.

As one interviewee noted:

“I’m worried that jobs won’t exist anymore soon.” Peter

Another interviewee had a similar concern:

“From a consulting perspective, we believe there’s a risk that we might end up consulting ourselves out of a job.” Karl

These reflections also point to a broader concern about the future role of management consultants. As AI becomes more widely used, participants described a potential development in which clients may be able to carry out parts of the work traditionally performed by management consultants themselves, which could reduce the future need for their services.

4.3.2 Organizational pressure to adopt AI despite structural challenges

Despite the concerns outlined in the previous section, the interviewees consistently described strong pressure at the firm level to adopt AI. The question is not whether consulting firms should use AI, but how it should be integrated into consulting work.

One interviewee described this development as follows:

“So I think that more and more firms will start training their own AI agents. All consulting firms will probably have AI agents that are trained and even more tailored to specific tasks. It will just continue to develop further and further, that’s how it feels right now.” Lars

At the individual level, participants described that, despite identified risks related to competence development, the appropriate course of action is still to use AI extensively. Avoiding AI was not seen as a viable option, as it risks falling behind peers who are able to work faster and more efficiently. A similar pattern was described at the organizational level, where consulting firms are described as operating under strong competitive pressure to adopt AI in order to remain relevant in the market. The pressure to use AI thus extends beyond individual consultants and also shapes how firms respond to these changes.

As one interviewee put it:

“I mean, I think it’s difficult. I think it will be tough for consulting firms to survive if they don’t use AI.” Johanna

As a result, the structural challenges associated with AI are not framed as reasons to slow down its adoption. Instead, they are treated as consequences that firms need to manage. The focus shifts from questioning AI to managing its implications. This means that consulting firms must handle two developments simultaneously: they are expected to embrace AI in order to remain competitive, while at the same time rethinking how competence is developed within the profession.

Furthermore, some participants suggested that this development may make consulting a more specialist profession, where broader roles decline and more advanced forms of expertise become increasingly important.

As one interviewee stated:

“But at the same time, I think AI platforms will soon be so good that it will become more of a specialist profession. The very best will remain, but the breadth will probably disappear, so to speak.” Peter

Another participant developed this idea further by reflecting on how the consulting role may need to evolve in order to remain relevant and provide value to clients:

“I think we’re moving toward a future where the consulting role, in a few years, will be more about selling value... I believe it will shift toward selling what value you want to achieve. Whether that’s an operating model or a roadmap for cost savings, I think all of that will, in the end, be about selling value rather than headcount, which is what we may have done in the past.” Karl

These reflections point to an ongoing shift not only in how consultants work with AI, but also in how they are expected to create value for clients. Therefore, changes in the number of consultants may be only one part of a broader transformation, where a more significant effect of AI lies in how consultants need to develop competencies that remain valuable in an AI-enabled context.

One participant elaborated on this point by emphasizing that staying relevant may depend not only on using AI, but on knowing where it creates value and where other capabilities remain more important:

“As a consultant, you might actually have quite a lot to offer by saying: ‘You know what, we shouldn’t just implement AI everywhere. Instead, we should identify the areas where it can actually create real impact.’ And then there are other things that might be even more important. What will be decisive? It’s that you stay curious, that you understand there’s no silver bullet, and that it’s really about curiosity, experimenting, and fostering that kind of culture within the organization.” Johan

While not all participants provided equally detailed reflections on how management consultants should develop competencies in response to these changes, several interviewees clearly emphasized the need to adapt and find new ways of remaining relevant.

“I think that as consultants, we also have to find a way to think for ourselves, otherwise we’re completely useless. That’s what consultants are hired for after all. It’s basically brains for hire.” Johanna

Another participant emphasized that overreliance on AI tools could undermine the expertise that gives management consultants their value, highlighting the need to continue developing relevant competencies:

“If we’re just going to recite what AI has come up with, then we might as well hire actors who are great presenters. In that case, actual expertise doesn’t really matter.” Julia

Taken together, the interviews reflect a sense of uncertainty about how the industry structure will evolve and how management consulting firms will continue to create value for clients. At the same time, one point was clear: the development of AI is seen as inevitable, and adapting to it is perceived as necessary to remain relevant, even if this may eventually reduce demand for some traditional consulting services.

4.3.3 Summary of Theme 3

Overall, the findings show that the impact of AI extends beyond individual competence development and into the structure of management consulting firms. By reducing the need for traditional junior tasks, AI challenges established pathways through which consultants develop experience and progress to more senior roles. At the same time, both individuals and organizations continue to emphasize the necessity of adopting AI in order to remain competitive.

5 Discussion

This study suggests that the impact of AI on competence development involves both a transformation in how skills are acquired and a more fundamental shift in how competence is understood and enacted in practice. While existing perspectives often focus on how technologies simply reduce or enhance skills, the findings of this study indicate that AI also reshapes the criteria by which competence is evaluated and experienced within the profession. In management consulting, the integration of AI introduces a tension between increased efficiency and reduced depth of understanding, challenging established assumptions about how competence is both developed and expressed in practice.

To synthesize these dynamics, Figure 3 presents a model of AI-mediated competence development in management consulting. The model illustrates how the integration of AI into consulting work transforms everyday work practices, which in turn gives rise to ambivalent effects on competence development. These effects are experienced as a tension between efficiency gains and reduced depth of learning, ultimately contributing to a reconfiguration of competence development processes, a shift in how competence is understood within the profession, and a disruption of traditional development pathways.

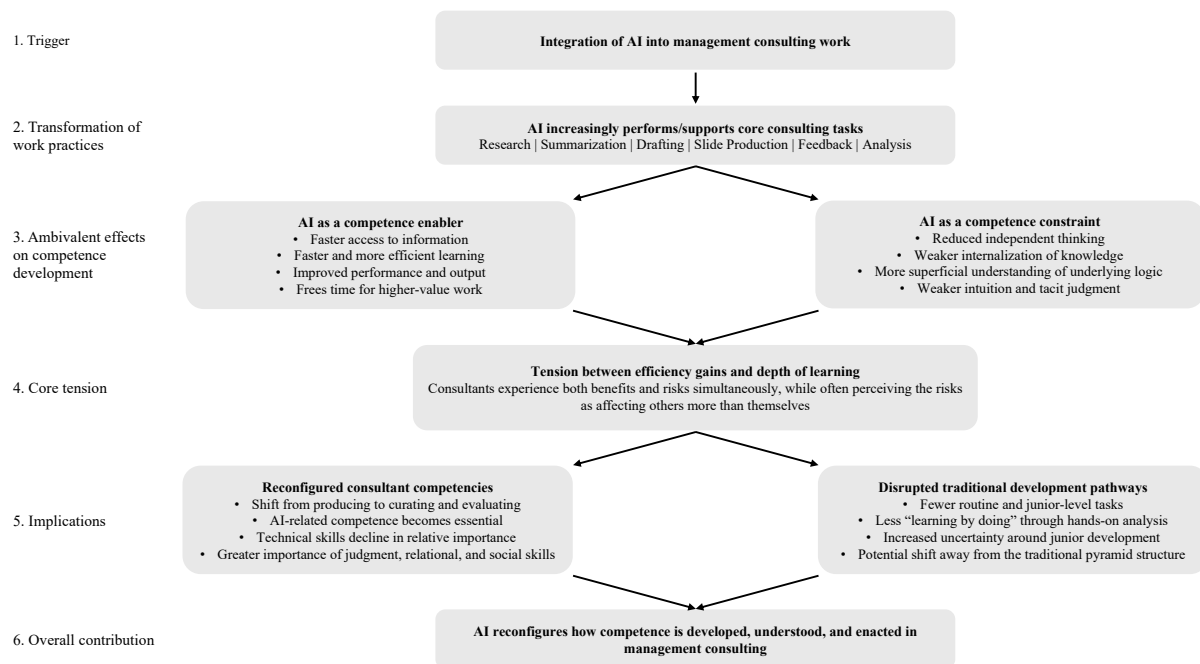


Figure 3: Model of AI-mediated competence development in management consulting

Building on this model, the following sections discuss key aspects of this transformation. First, the discussion examines the contradictions the consultants experience in their everyday work, particularly how AI is understood as both enabling efficiency and constraining depth of understanding, and how these tensions are managed rather than resolved. Second, the discussion addresses how competence development processes are reconfigured, highlighting a shift from learning through hands-on work to developing competence through evaluating and refining AI-generated outputs. Third, the discussion explores how the meaning of competence itself is changing, showing how competence is increasingly understood in terms of efficiency and effective use of AI. Finally, the practical implications of these developments are discussed, with particular attention to how these changes affect individual consultants and the organization of consulting work.

5.1 Navigating contradictions in AI-enabled consulting work

The tensions described in this section correspond to the ambivalent effects on competence development and the core tension illustrated in Figure 3. As shown in the model, the integration of AI simultaneously enables new forms of efficiency while constraining aspects of deeper learning, resulting in a set of contradictions that the consultants must navigate in their everyday work.

These contradictions are reflected in how management consultants describe their experiences of AI in their everyday work. Two tensions are particularly prominent. First, AI is described as both enabling and constraining core aspects of consulting work. Second, while potential negative consequences are clearly acknowledged, these are often projected onto others, particularly junior consultants, while more experienced consultants position themselves as capable of using AI without undermining their own competence. Together, these tensions suggest that the impact of AI is experienced as a set of ongoing contradictions that the consultants navigate in their everyday work.

This first tension is reflected in how the consultants describe AI as both enabling and constraining the consulting role. On the one hand, the consultants describe AI as a tool that enhances efficiency and allows them to focus more on value-adding activities. In particular, AI's ability to support time-consuming analytical tasks is seen as freeing up time for

relationship-building and client interaction. This aligns with the traditional view of consulting as a profession where interpersonal skills and the ability to create trust are critical. Therefore, AI is perceived as strengthening some of the most important aspects of the consulting role.

At the same time, this increased efficiency comes with perceived drawbacks. The consultants express concerns that relying on AI-generated outputs reduces their depth of understanding and makes it more difficult to fully grasp and explain the underlying logic of their work. As highlighted in the findings, the shift from producing analyses to curating and reviewing AI-generated material may weaken internalization and reduce opportunities to develop intuition and professional judgment. This creates a contradiction: the same technology that frees up time for relationship-building and client interaction may simultaneously undermine credibility in those interactions. If consultants are unable to demonstrate a deep understanding of their work, the trust that forms client relationships may be weakened. In this sense, AI both enables and threatens the very competencies that constitute effective consulting. Rather than resolving this contradiction, the consultants appear to accept both perspectives as valid and continue to rely on AI despite these concerns.

This tension reflects broader discussions in the literature on deskilling and upskilling. As outlined in the literature review, research presents conflicting views on whether AI leads to reduced or enhanced competence (Crowston & Bolici, 2025; Sutton et al., 2018). Some scholars emphasize how automation may reduce opportunities for learning and lead to skill degradation, while others highlight how AI enables individuals to focus on more complex tasks and develop stronger or new competencies. The findings of this study suggest that the consultants themselves do not resolve this debate in practice. Instead, they experience both outcomes simultaneously. AI is seen as enabling faster and better learning and increased efficiency, while also introducing risks related to superficial understanding and reduced independent thinking. This reinforces the idea that the impact of AI on competence development is not a binary outcome, but a context-dependent process. It is not only unclear what AI leads to in practice, but also how the consultants themselves interpret these effects. Their accounts reveal a high degree of ambiguity, where multiple, and sometimes conflicting, interpretations coexist.

A second key tension concerns how the negative implications of AI are distributed across different groups. While the consultants demonstrate strong awareness of the potential risks

associated with AI, such as reduced learning and overreliance, these risks are rarely applied to themselves. Instead, they are frequently projected onto others, particularly junior consultants. The interviewees tend to describe themselves as capable of using AI in a reflective and controlled manner, while expressing concern that others or less experienced colleagues may rely too heavily on AI without developing the necessary underlying understanding. By positioning themselves as competent users of AI, the consultants can reconcile the tension between recognizing potential risks and continuing to rely on the technology in their own work.

This finding connects to existing literature on how the effects of AI may differ across individuals. As previously discussed, research highlights both a multiplier effect, where more skilled individuals benefit more from AI, and a leveling effect, where less experienced individuals can perform at a relatively higher level (Crowston & Bolici, 2025; Jia et al., 2024). The findings of this study mirror this ambiguity. The consultants appear to believe that AI will affect different groups in different ways, but without a clear consensus on how. AI is partly seen as raising the baseline performance of less experienced consultants, enabling them to produce higher-quality outputs. On the other hand, there is a concern that this may come at the expense of deeper learning among less experienced consultants, which could ultimately lead to weaker performance.

The consultants' perceptions reflect the same uncertainty presented in the literature. Their accounts suggest that both a leveling and a multiplier effect may occur simultaneously or that it is unclear which of these effects will ultimately have the biggest impact. However, similar to the first tension, this ambiguity is not resolved. Instead, the consultants navigate it by assuming that the negative consequences are more likely to affect others than themselves.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the integration of AI into consulting work is characterized by unresolved contradictions. The consultants experience AI as both enabling and constraining, and as both an opportunity and a risk, without attempting to reconcile these opposing perspectives. Instead, they manage these tensions by holding them in parallel and by attributing risks to different groups. The change is both technical and social: AI both presents a clear transformation of work and a set of ongoing tensions that consultants must navigate in their everyday practice.

5.2 Reconfiguration of competence development

As illustrated in Figure 3, the tensions described above are closely linked to a reconfiguration of how competence is developed within the profession. In particular, the transformation of work practices suggests that competence development is increasingly shaped by interaction with AI rather than by direct engagement in the full management consulting process.

This reconfiguration must be understood against the background that consultants describe AI as enhancing productivity and efficiency. As previously mentioned, AI tools are described as enabling faster access to information, quicker analysis, and more efficient production of materials. Furthermore, outputs generated by AI are often described as requiring only minor revisions before they can be used in consulting work.

However, interviewees also emphasize that their professional competencies have traditionally been developed through repeated engagement in core consulting tasks. The emergence of AI represents a rapid shift in these work practices, as many of these tasks are now delegated to AI tools. While this transformation is largely experienced as beneficial in terms of efficiency, respondents also acknowledge potential negative implications for the development of problem-solving and critical thinking skills. However, these concerns are generally not perceived as having a significant effect on their own current work practices.

These points reveal a contradiction between participants' experiences of their own competence development and the processes of competence development described in prior literature. Existing research suggests that competence development in management consulting is traditionally grounded in the manual execution of analytical tasks, where individuals progress from basic assignments toward more complex responsibilities through sustained practice (Morgan, 2019; Visscher, 2006; Werr & Stjernberg, 2003). This manual grind is argued to play a central role in developing domain expertise and understanding the craft of consulting. Moreover, engaging in cognitively demanding analytical work has been shown to support the development of higher-order thinking skills (Ceballos et al., 2025; Wu & Molnar, 2022). In contrast to these perspectives, the interviewees in this study largely experience that they continue to develop competencies and even improve as consultants by outsourcing tasks to AI and improving AI-generated output.

Taken together, this indicates a shift in how consultants experience competence development in the context of AI. It can be understood as a transition from a production-based model, in which analyses are primarily conducted and processed by humans, to a more evaluation-oriented model, where consultants increasingly rely on AI tools and focus on interpreting and assessing AI-generated outputs.

This shift in competence development has further implications for the types of skills considered most critical in the profession. While analytical and problem-solving abilities remain important and are still viewed as technical core competencies, the findings suggest an increasing need for interpretative competence. Specifically, consultants must be able to critically evaluate and contextualize AI-generated results.

This may also offer an explanation for why the interviewees experience the negative effects of AI adoption as limited, as they may compensate by developing stronger interpretative capabilities while the visibility and perceived importance of traditional technical skills diminish in AI-supported work processes. Another possible explanation is that, due to the highly competitive context of management consulting, potential long-term drawbacks for competence development become less visible compared to the immediate benefits of efficiency gains. Alternatively, existing literature may not yet fully reflect the rapid technological advancements brought by AI, meaning that earlier models of competence development may be less suited to today's management consulting context.

Overall, the findings suggest that AI reconfigures competence development by shifting the consultant's role from producing work manually to evaluating and curating AI-generated outputs. Competence development, therefore, becomes less dependent on carrying out every step of the consulting process oneself and more dependent on the ability to evaluate and curate AI-generated material.

5.3 The changing meaning of competence

Beyond changes in how competence is developed, the model in Figure 3 also points to a more fundamental transformation: a shift in how competence itself is understood. Competence is no

longer defined solely in terms of individual knowledge and analytical ability, but increasingly in terms of how efficient consultants are and how efficiently they are able to work with AI.

This more fundamental transformation is reflected in how the consultants describe their understanding of competence in the context of AI. While much of the existing debate focuses on whether AI leads to deskilling or upskilling, our findings suggest that consultants are operating with a shifting and somewhat ambiguous understanding of what competence actually means.

When discussing which competencies are important for a management consultant, participants consistently refer to a combination of analytical and technical skills, together with interpersonal and relational skills. These align with the competencies traditionally emphasized in the literature on management consulting (Morgan, 2019). However, when reflecting on how these competencies interact with AI, the focus shifts. Rather than emphasizing the deepening or development of these competencies, the consultants frequently start framing competence in terms of performing tasks more efficiently.

This was especially evident when participants discussed the positive effects of AI. AI is described as enabling them to complete tasks faster and access information more easily. In many cases, this increased efficiency is both implicitly and explicitly equated with becoming more competent. In other words, competence is not only associated with what the consultants know or understand, but increasingly with how efficiently they are able to produce results using AI. This reflects a tension between competence as deep understanding and experience, and competence as efficiency, grounded in speed and the ability to leverage tools for this.

This shift is not always explicitly articulated by the consultants, but emerges through how they describe their competencies and competence development. While they continue to value traditional competencies such as problem-solving and relationship-building, their accounts suggest that the criteria for what it means to be good at these activities may be changing. Competence appears to be increasingly associated with the ability to work efficiently and use AI for this purpose.

This observation sheds new light on the literature on deskilling, upskilling, and reskilling. As discussed in the literature review, previous research largely frames the impact of AI in terms of

whether skills are lost, enhanced, or replaced (Bodea et al., 2024; Morandini et al., 2023; Sutton et al., 2018). However, the findings of this study suggest that such categorizations may be insufficient to capture what is occurring in practice, or how the consultants themselves experience it. Rather than simply reducing or increasing the importance of certain competencies, AI seems to be reshaping what counts as competencies in the first place. In a way, this is related to the idea of reskilling, where new competencies emerge alongside technological change, but it goes a step further by suggesting that the meaning of competence itself is evolving.

However, this reconstruction is not without complications. As discussed in earlier sections, the consultants simultaneously recognize that deep understanding and the ability to justify their work remain critical for maintaining credibility and trust with clients. In other words, the traditional sense of competence has not disappeared, but is increasingly being challenged by competence as efficiency. The challenge for the consultants is therefore to navigate the relationship between these two dimensions.

Taken together, these findings indicate that the impact of AI on competence development extends beyond questions of whether it leads to deskilling or upskilling. Instead, AI contributes to a broader redefinition of what competence means.

5.4 Practical implications

As illustrated by the implications in Figure 3, the reconfiguration of competence development and the shifting understanding of competence give rise to several practical implications for both individual consultants and management consulting firms.

First, at the individual level, the study identifies implications for an emerging competence profile among management consultants. The experienced inevitability of increased use of AI tools, along with their capacity to generate advanced analyses and improve efficiency, has contributed to a shift in required skills. In particular, greater emphasis is placed on the ability to interpret, evaluate, and further develop outputs generated by AI tools. This competence appears to be of growing importance and is likely to play an increasingly central role in the future of the profession. Secondly, the study suggests an increased need for understanding how

AI systems operate, including the processes through which they generate analyses and produce outputs. To leverage these tools efficiently and deliver value to clients, management consultants must develop knowledge of how such systems are designed and which factors most significantly influence their performance. This includes the ability to use AI tools in ways that maximize both efficiency and the quality of outcomes. Finally, this study highlights concerns regarding potential overreliance on AI and its implications for the role of management consultants. In particular, it underscores the need for greater awareness of the trade-off between efficiency gains and their potential impact on the development and application of the professional expertise that has traditionally characterized the field.

Furthermore, although this study does not explicitly adopt an organizational perspective on the impact of AI, it nevertheless indicates several important practical implications at the firm level. First, the emergence of a revised competence profile for management consultants suggests a need for firms to adapt their approaches to competence development. In particular, there is a growing requirement for firms to ensure that employees are capable of using AI tools efficiently and with a high degree of quality, while also keeping pace with rapid technological advancements. Second, the findings indicate that organizational structures may evolve as a result of AI adoption, reducing the need for junior consultants performing routine tasks. This development raises questions regarding how firms can effectively onboard and develop new employees, who may be required to assume larger responsibilities earlier in their careers, and how such transitions can be managed while continuing to deliver value to clients. Finally, the study points to potential implications for the value proposition of management consulting firms. The findings suggest that consultants are able to perform similar tasks with fewer resources, while traditional pricing models remain based on hours worked and personnel involved. In light of ongoing AI development, this may necessitate a reconsideration of how value is conceptualized and communicated in order to align with the evolving technological landscape.

Taken together, the model presented in Figure 3 highlights that the impact of AI on management consulting is a complex process in which changes in work practices give rise to ambivalent effects on competence development. These tensions reshape how competence is developed, valued, and enacted, and ultimately point to a broader shift in what it means to be a competent management consultant.

6 Conclusion

6.1 How do management consultants experience the impact of AI on their competence development?

The purpose of this study has been to explore how management consultants experience the impact of AI on competence development. By examining consultants' experiences of AI usage in combination with existing literature, this study has sought to address the following research questions:

- 1. How do management consultants experience the impact of AI on their competence development?*
- 2. How do management consultants interpret shifts in required competencies when working with AI?*
- 3. What tensions or challenges do management consultants experience in their competence development when using AI?*

The findings show that management consultants experience AI's impact on competence development as ambivalent. AI is described as enabling consultants to work more efficiently, access information faster, and thereby support competence development. At the same time, it reduces their direct engagement in analytical and production-oriented tasks that have traditionally been central to competence development, raising concerns about reduced independent thinking and weaker internalization. This creates a distinction between improved performance and underlying competence. Notably, these risks are often described as affecting others, particularly junior consultants, rather than the interviewees themselves.

The findings further show that consultants interpret AI as changing which competencies are considered important. Traditional skills such as analytical ability and relationship-building remain central, but their relative importance appears to be shifting. As AI increasingly supports tasks such as drafting and initial analysis, competence is increasingly associated with the ability to use AI effectively, evaluate AI-generated outputs, and engage in social aspects of the work, such as building relationships with clients.

Beyond the individual level, the findings suggest that AI may reshape the structural conditions of management consulting work. By replacing or supporting tasks traditionally performed by junior consultants, AI challenges traditional pathways of learning by doing and raises questions about how future consultants will gain the experience needed to progress to senior roles. At the same time, both individuals and firms describe AI adoption as necessary to remain competitive, despite uncertainty about its long-term consequences for competence development.

Taken together, the study contributes to existing discussions on AI and competence development by showing that its impact cannot be understood simply in terms of whether it reduces or increases the level of skills required. Rather, AI appears to more fundamentally transform both how competence is developed and how competence is understood within management consulting. The challenge going forward is therefore not only how to use AI effectively, but also how to ensure that its continued use supports the development of understanding and meaningful professional competence.

6.2 Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. First, the sample consisted of 20 management consultants from Stockholm-based firms, which limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other contexts. Although the sample included participants from different firms, roles, and levels of experience, the findings should be understood in relation to this specific context.

Second, participants were recruited through personal and professional networks. This may have influenced both who participated in the study and how openly they reflected on their experiences. However, this recruitment approach also supported access to relevant participants and enabled open conversations about a complex topic.

Third, the study is based on participants' own interpretations of how AI affects their competence development. As a result, the findings capture how consultants experience these changes, rather than measuring actual changes in competence over time. This is consistent with the purpose of the study, but it also means that the study cannot determine whether AI objectively improves or weakens competence development.

These limitations open up several directions for future research. First, future studies could examine the actual effects of AI on competence development over time, particularly among junior consultants. Since this study focuses on how consultants experience AI, future research could use more observable indicators to investigate how AI use affects problem-solving ability, professional judgment, and other aspects of competence in practice.

Second, future research could examine which competencies are actually needed in AI-supported management consulting work. While this study captures consultants' perceptions of shifting competence requirements, future research could investigate how these competencies are used in practice and which ones become most important as AI development continues.

Third, future research could examine how management consulting firms should be structured in response to AI. The findings of this study suggest that AI may reduce the need for some traditional junior tasks, raising questions about how firms can organize career progression and training when established structures are disrupted. Future research could therefore explore whether consulting firms will continue to rely on traditional pyramid structures, shift toward more diamond-shaped models, or develop entirely new approaches to competence development and value creation.

Finally, future studies could broaden the empirical context by including consultants from other geographical contexts, industries, or types of consulting firms. This would make it possible to compare whether the tensions identified in this study are specific to Stockholm-based management consulting firms or whether they reflect broader changes in knowledge-intensive work.

7 References

- Ardichvili, A. (2022). The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Expertise Development: Implications for HRD, *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, vol. 24, no. 2, pp.78-98, 10.1177/15234223221077304
- Autor, D. H. (2015). Why Are There Still So Many Jobs? The History and Future of Workplace Automation, *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 29, no. 3, pp.3-30, 10.1257/jep.29.3.3
- Bell, E., Bryman, A., & Harley, B. (2022). *Business Research Methods*, 6th edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Bodea, C.N., Paparic, M., Mogos, R.I., & Dascula, M.I. (2024). Artificial intelligence adoption in the workplace and its impact on the upskilling and reskilling strategies, *Amfiteatru Economic*, vol. 26, no. 65, pp.126-144, <https://doi.org/10.24818/EA/2024/65/126>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp.77-101, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Brynjolfsson, E., & McAfee, A. (2017). The Business of Artificial Intelligence, *Harvard Business Review*, <https://people.dsv.su.se/~perjons/AI%20and%20Healthcare/The%20Business%20of%20Artificial%20Intelligence.pdf>
- Canato, A., & Giangreco, A. (2011). Gurus or Wizards? A Review of the Role of Management Consultants, *European Management Review*, Vol. 8, no. 4, pp.231-244, 10.1111/j.1740-4762.2011.01021.x
- Ceballos, H., van den Boogaart, T., van Ginkel, S., Spandaw, J., & Drijvers, P. (2025). How collaborative problem solving promotes higher-order thinking skills: A systematic review of design features and processes, *Thinking skills and creativity*, vol. 59, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2025.102001>

Cerruti, C., Tavoletti, E., & Grieco, C. (2019). Management consulting: a review of fifty years of scholarly research, *Management Research Review*, vol. 42, no. 8, pp.902-925, <https://doi.org/10.1108/MRR-03-2018-0100>

Charmaz, K. (2006). Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis, Los Angeles: SAGE Publishing

Crămărenco, R.E., Burcă-Voicu, M.I., & Dabija, D.C. (2023). The impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on employees' skills and well-being in global labor markets: A systematic review, *Oeconomia Copernicana*, vol. 14, no. 3, pp.731-767, <https://doi.org/10.24136/oc.2023.022>

Crowston, K., & Bolici, F. (2025). Deskillling and upskilling with AI systems, *Information Research*, vol. 30, pp.1009-1023, <https://doi.org/10.47989/ir30iConf47143>

Ferdman, A. (2025). AI deskillling is a structural problem, *AI & Society*, Vol. 41, pp.3001-3013, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-025-02686-z>

Hulst, M. van., & Visser, E.L. (2024). Abductive analysis in qualitative research, *Public administration review*, vol. 85, no. 2, pp.567-580, <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13856>

Jaiswal, A., Arun, C.J., & Varma, A. (2022). Rebooting employees: Upskilling for artificial intelligence in multinational corporations, *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, vol. 33, no. 6, pp. 1179-1208, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2021.1891114>

Jarrahi, M.H. (2019). In the age of the smart artificial intelligence: AI's dual capacities for automating and informing work, *Business Information Review*, vol. 36, no. 4, pp.178-187, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0266382119883999>

Jia, N., Luo, X., Fang, Z., & Liao, C. (2024). When and how artificial intelligence augments employee creativity, *Academy of Management Journal*, vol. 67, no. 1, pp.5-32, <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2022.0426>

Kalota, F. (2024). Primer on Generative Artificial Intelligence, *Education Sciences*, vol. 14, no. 172, <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14020172>

Kokina, J., & Davenport, T.H. (2017). The emergence of Artificial Intelligence: How automation is changing auditing, *Journal of Emerging Technologies in Accounting*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp.115-122, 10.2308/jeta-51730

Kubr, M. (2002). Management Consulting: A Guide to the Profession, 4th edn, Geneva: International Labour Office

Kvale, S., & Brinkman, S. (2015). Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing, 3rd edn, California: SAGE Publishing

Langley, A., & Meziani, N. (2020). Making interviews meaningful, *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, vol. 56, no. 3, pp.370-391, 10.1177/0021886320937818

Lincoln, Y.S., & Guba, E.G. (1985). Naturalistic Inquiry, London: SAGE Publishing

Lindebaum, D., Vesa, M., & Den Hond, F. (2020). Insights from “the machine stops” to better understand rational assumptions in algorithmic decision making and its implications for organizations, *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 45, no. 1, pp.247-263, <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2018.0181>

Mohan, S.K. (2024). Management Consulting in the Artificial Intelligence – LLM Era, *Management consulting journal*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp.9-24, 10.2478-mcj-2024-0002

Morandini, S., Fraboni, F., De Angelis, M., Puzzo, G., Giusino, D. & Pietrantoni, L. (2023). The impact of artificial intelligence on workers’ skills: Upskilling and reskilling in organisations, *Informing Science: The International Journal of an Emerging Transdiscipline*, vol. 26, pp.39-68, <https://doi.org/10.28945/5078>

Morgan, W. (2019). The Skills and Competences of Management Consultants and How They are Developed, *Management Consulting Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp.16-21, 10.2478/mcj-2019-0004

Neuman, W.L. (2014). Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches, 7th edn, Essex: Pearson

Raisch, S., & Krakowski, S. (2021). Artificial intelligence and management: The automation–augmentation paradox, *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 46, no. 1, pp.192-210, <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2018.0072>

Rashid, A.B., & Kausik, A.K. (2024). AI revolutionizing industries worldwide: A comprehensive overview of its diverse applications, *Hybrid advances*, vol. 7, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hybadv.2024.100277>

Rennstam, J., & Wästerfors, D. (2018). Analyze!: crafting your data in qualitative research, Lund: Studentlitteratur

Rinta-Kahila, T., Penttinen, E., Salovaara, A., Soliman., W. & Ruissalo, J. (2023). The vicious circles of skill erosion: A case study of cognitive automation, *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, vol. 24, no. 5, pp.1378-1412, <https://doi.org/10.17705/ljais.00829>

Saunders, B., Kitzinger, J., & Kitzinger, C. (2014). Anonymising interview data: challenges and compromise in practice, *Qualitative Research*, vol. 15, no. 5, pp.616-632, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794114550439>

Singla, A., Sukharevsky, A., Yee, L., Chui, M., & Hall, B. (2024). The state of AI in early 2024: Gen AI adoption spikes and starts to generate value, <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/quantumblack/our-insights/the-state-of-ai-2024> [Accessed 9 March 2026]

Singla, A., Sukharevsky, A., Hall, B., Yee, L., Chui, M., & Balakrishnan, T. (2025). The State of AI: How Organizations Are Rewiring to Capture Value, <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/quantumblack/our-insights/the-state-of-ai-how-organizations-are-rewiring-to-capture-value> [Accessed 9 March 2026]

Sturdy, A., Clark, T., Fincham, R., & Handley, K. (2009). Between Innovation and Legitimation - Boundaries and Knowledge Flow in Management Consultancy, *Sage Journals*, vol. 16, no. 5, pp.627-653, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508409338435>

Sutton, S.G., Arnold, V., & Holt, M. (2018). How Much Automation Is Too Much? Keeping the Human Relevant in Knowledge Work, *Journal of emerging technologies in accounting*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp.15-25, <https://doi.org/10.2308/jeta-52311>

Visscher, K. (2006). Capturing the competence of management consulting work, *Journal of Workplace Learning*, vol. 18, no. 4, pp.248-260, <https://doi.org/10.1108/13665620610665845>

Werr, A., & Stjernberg, T. (2003). Exploring Management Consulting Firms as Knowledge Systems, *Organizational studies*, vol. 24, no. 6, pp.881-908, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840603024006004>

Wikforss, Å., & Klingberg, T. (2026). Varför Lära?: meningen med mänsklig kunskap i AI-tider, Stockholm: Natur & Kultur Digital

Wu, H., & Molnar, G. (2022). Analysing complex problem-solving strategies from a cognitive perspective: The role of thinking skills, *Journal of Intelligence*, vol. 10, no. 46, <https://doi.org/10.3390/jintelligence10030046>

Appendix

Appendix A: List of interviewees

Name	Company	Length
“Anders”	Company A	72 Minutes
“Karl”	Company A	53 Minutes
“Lars”	Company B	60 Minutes
“Henrik”	Company B	64 Minutes
“Arvid”	Company B	58 Minutes
“David”	Company C	44 Minutes
“Nils”	Company D	45 Minutes
“Peter”	Company E	42 Minutes
“Anna”	Company E	52 Minutes
“Klara”	Company E	40 minutes
“Johan”	Company F	59 Minutes
“Ingrid”	Company G	49 Minutes
“Julia”	Company G	55 Minutes
“Alicia”	Company G	40 Minutes
“William”	Company G	34 Minutes
"Jacob"	Company G	36 Minutes
“Joel”	Company H	49 Minutes
“Johanna”	Company I	37 Minutes
“Ebba”	Company J	48 Minutes
“Vincent”	Company K	45 Minutes

Appendix B: Interview guide

Introduction

Q1: Can you briefly tell me about your role, how long you've been in consulting, and the kinds of projects you typically work on?

Potential follow-ups:

- What kinds of analytical tasks do you usually work on?
- Typical deliverables?
- Client-facing or more internal work?
- Team structure in projects?

AI in everyday consulting work

Q2: How do you use AI in your daily work?

Potential follow-ups:

- What do you do differently now than before you first had access to any AI/LLM programs?

Q3: When did you start using AI in your work? How did you use it in the beginning compared to now?

Competence and expectations in consulting

Q4: When you think of a skilled consultant, what kinds of competencies and skills are most important?

Q5: Do you think what it means to be a skilled consultant has changed since AI became more common? In what way?

Q6: Looking back at your career so far, how did you personally learn to think and work like a consultant?

Q7: Do you feel that AI changes how consultants learn or develop these competencies today? If yes, how?

Q8: If a new consultant joined your team today, what advice would you give them about using AI while still developing strong professional skills?

Experiential learning, intuition, and tacit knowledge

Q9: Some people talk about developing a kind of “gut feeling” or intuition over time. Do you recognize that with yourself or others?

Follow-ups:

- If yes, do you think AI changes how that kind of experience develops? How?
- If not, how would you describe that kind of professional expertise instead?

Q10: Are there parts of consulting work that you feel are especially important to learn through experience, where AI shouldn’t take too big a role?

Q11: If you think about the specific tasks you do, are there situations where AI changes how you learn from these tasks? For example, by speeding things up, skipping steps, or changing how you approach the work?

Closing reflections

Q12: Looking ahead to a future with increased AI usage, what do you think might change about how consultants learn and develop new skills and competencies?

Q13: Is there anything about AI and competence development that you think people misunderstand?

Q14: Is there something important about this topic that we didn’t ask about?

Appendix C: AI disclosure

In a study about AI and competence development, it seems only appropriate to disclose our own use of AI tools. AI tools were used in a supportive and transparent manner throughout the research and writing process of this study. Their role was limited to practical assistance and did not replace the authors' critical thinking, analysis, interpretation, or final decision-making.

First, AI was used for transcription support by helping convert recorded interviews and notes into written text. This improved efficiency in the data processing stage. All transcriptions were reviewed and, where necessary, corrected by the authors to ensure accuracy. This was important in order to reduce the risk of inaccurate transcriptions or misinterpretations of participants' statements.

Second, AI tools were used for language refinement. This included support with grammar, clarity, and readability, particularly during later stages of the writing process. The underlying arguments, structure, and academic content remained the authors' own. This contributed to improving the overall quality of the thesis by making the text more coherent and easier to follow. At the same time, a potential risk was that AI-generated language suggestions could change the intended meaning or make the text too generic. To reduce this risk, all suggestions were reviewed critically and only accepted when they reflected our own intended meaning.

Third, AI was used as a tool for general feedback. It provided suggestions on coherence and functioned as a form of informal brainstorming during the development of the study. These suggestions were critically assessed by the authors. This helped identify unclear formulations, repetitions, and areas where arguments could be further developed. However, AI was not used to conduct the analysis, generate findings, or draw conclusions. The interpretation of the empirical material, the development of themes, and the final academic judgments remained the responsibility of the authors.

Overall, AI was used as a complementary tool to support efficiency and clarity in the research process. The use of AI tools also provided insights into the thesis topic itself. It made visible the same tension discussed in the study: AI can increase efficiency and improve output, but it also requires critical reflection to avoid reduced independent thinking and overreliance. This

reinforced the importance of using AI as a support for human cognition rather than as a substitute for it. All substantive analysis, interpretation, conclusions, and final decisions remained the responsibility of the authors.

The AI tools used in the development of this study were ChatGPT (<https://chat.openai.com/>) and Klang.AI (<https://klang.ai>).