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Organizational dominance and the rise of corporate professionalism: The case of management consultancy in the UK

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While recent debates about the professions have noted the pervasive influence of organizations, less is known about how this plays out at the macro or occupational level. In this paper, we address this concern, focusing on corporate professionalism (CP) as an emergent form which appears to be shaped by organizational interests. Drawing on relational perspectives of professions, we focus on the strategies of two associations in the UK management consultancy field over a 50-year period. Our analysis of archival and interview data reveals how, over time, both associations substantially modified their strategies in response to shifting priorities of firms employing large numbers of consultants—abandoning early commitments to occupational professionalism in favor of a corporate form. A key contribution of the paper is to develop a process model for understanding how and why CP emerges. We also highlight the need to pay more attention to the often neglected role of employing organizations in accounts of professional formation in contemporary society.

KEYWORDS: *corporate professionalism*; *professional organizations*; *management consultancy*.

Writing over three decades ago, Keith Brint (1994: 11) highlighted the need to understand 'professional development in relation to […] the interests of organizations that employ large numbers of professionals'. Since then, a rich vein or work has focused on this process and how professions are responding to a 'dramatic rise in organizational dominance' (Sandholtz, Chung and Waisberg 2019: 1351). It is noted how organizations, including professional services firms (PSFs) are now transforming established professional identities (Anderson-Gough, Grey and Robson 2018), practices (Smets, Morris and Greenwood 2012), career systems (Malhotra et al. 2021), and training regimes (Malhotra, Morris and Hinings 2006). Within organizations, professionals have struggled to adapt to these challenges, maintaining their autonomy and controlling jurisdictions (Huising 2015; Fayard, Stigliani and Bechky 2017; Sandholtz, Chung and Waisberg 2019). At the occupational level,

some professional associations (hereafter PAs) have also adapted their strategies and policies, seemingly to align with organizational interests (Adler, Kwon and Hecksher 2008; Noordegraaf 2011). For example, PAs representing new occupations, such as management consultants, information technology analysts, and project managers, have tended to 'structure themselves so as to accommodate corporate patterns' (Dacin, Goodstein and Scott 2002: 49). Rather than pursue an 'occupational model' of professionalism—centered on occupational closure and reserved labor markets (Evetts 2002; Kirkpatrick, Aulakh and Muzio 2021)—these occupations have embraced 'market based norms and practices' (Leicht and Lyman 2006: 18).

Recently, these changes in the strategies of PAs have received growing attention as examples of 'corporate professionalism' (hereafter CP) (Hodgson, Paton and Muzio 2015; Reed 2018; Salman 2019; Collins and Butler 2020).

Research on this topic has usefully charted key features of CP, such as a focus on organizational membership and the use of competency-based credentials, often co-produced with employers. However, much of this work has been descriptive, with less attention paid to the question of how PAs transition to CP or why they chose to do so in the first place. The latter is puzzling given the assumed benefits of the occupational model of professionalism in terms of improved income and status for practitioners (association members) (Kirkpatrick, Aulakh and Muzio 2021). Furthermore, while most accounts of CP imply that employing organizations play a key role, we still know very little about the mechanics of this process: how organizations exert influence, under what conditions, and how this shapes the strategies of PAs.

Given these concerns, in this paper we pose a central research question: *how and under what conditions do professional associations move towards corporate professionalism*? To investigate this matter, we respond to wider calls for a 'relational' approach toward the professions (Abbott 2005; Anteby, Chan and DiBenigno 2016), focusing in particular on the interaction between PAs and employing organizations. Historically, studies of 'professional projects' have largely neglected the role of organizations as significant actors within professionalization projects—paying more attention to relationships between PAs, the state, universities, and other competing professions (Abbott 1988; Lounsbury and Kaghan 2001; Lounsbury 2007; Muzio et al. 2011, Muzio, Aulakh and Kirkpatrick 2019). In contrast, our argument is that in order to understand the emergence of CP, employing organizations need to be assigned a more central role. As Suddaby, Cooper and Greenwood (2007: 25) suggest, it is indeed necessary to 'revisit theories of professionalism, which did not fully anticipate the shift of professional work to the context of large organizations'.

As an empirical case, we focus on the development of PAs in the UK management consulting field from 1956 to 2007, drawing on multiple sources. This historical perspective gives us an unprecedented ability to chart shifting relationships between large firms and PAs and assess how this process contributed to the emergence of CP. Our analysis highlights the ways in which leading PAs in the UK consulting field responded to the shifting demands and expectations of firms, by engaging in a number of *accommodation strategies* which led directly to the emergence of CP. Building on these insights, we propose a general process model for corporate professionalization, and the conditions under which this is most likely to emerge. This we argue makes an important contribution to our understanding of professionalization in contemporary societies.

EXTENDING EXTANT THEORIZING
Occupational professionalism and CP

The sociology of professions has identified 'professionalism' as distinct mode of regulation based on collegiality and the ability of experts to exert significant control over both the ends and means of their practice (Abel 1988; Macdonald 1995; Freidson 2001). A guiding assumption is that emerging occupations engage in 'professionalization projects', following the example of collegial professions, such as law and medicine (Gorman and Sandefur 2011). Typically, this implies the formation of PAs and attempts to gain occupational closure through the regulation of both the production of producers (education and certification) and the behavior of exiting producers (Muzio, Aulakh and Kirkpatrick 2019). However, while this 'occupational model' of professionalism (Evetts 2002), continues to be an aspiration for many groups (Kirkpatrick, Aulakh and Muzio 2021), it oversimplifies the heterogeneity which exists across and within professions. This is especially so in light of political and economic developments over the last 30 years which have weakened if not dismantled many traditional professional structures and practices (Leicht and Fennell 2001). In this context, new forms of expert-based occupations have started to emerge that challenge the conventional model of professional regulation. As Muzio, Brock and Suddaby (2013: 705) suggest, 'the traditional liberal or collegial professionalism (Johnson 1972) is only one of several possible solutions for the institutionalization of a particular activity with other outcomes including: corporate and meditative professionalism … semi-professionalism … bureaucratization … managerialism and entrepreneurship … and the various hybrids that exist'.

In this regard, CP represents one of the most prominent departures from the 'traditional liberal or collegial'—read occupational—model of professionalism (Muzio et al. 2011; Hodgson, Paton and Muzio 2015). CP is closely tied to the interests, preferences and values of large—usually private—organizations, which are the main employers and providers of professional expertise. This results in a number of distinctive features including the introduction of organizational in addition to individual forms of membership in PAs, the focus on transnational rather than exclusively national jurisdictions, the use of competence-based credentials (often based on organization-specific accreditation processes) rather than formal occupation-wide qualifications, and the co-production of knowledge with employers and end users. Work in this area has further refined this concept by highlighting its hybrid (Hodgson, Paton and Muzio 2015) and fluid character and by exploring differences

within (Cross and Swart 2021) and across professions (Butler and Collins 2016; Collins and Butler 2020) as well as national contexts (Sabini and Paton 2021).

Yet, as noted earlier, the literature has remained primarily descriptive focusing on *what* CP is and how it differs from alternative forms of professionalism. While this is understandable with a new concept, there has been less attention given to *how* and *why* CP might emerge. What work does exist in this area (see, on the specific case of management consulting, McKenna 2006; David, Sine and Haveman 2013), has tended to show how PAs originally tried to legitimize themselves by mimicking the structures, practices, and vocabularies of collegial professions such as law. Later on, as others have shown (Collins and Butler 2020), PAs adopted a more organizational or corporate stance. In this context, Hodgson, Paton and Muzio (2015) in their study of project management have argued that CP involves a selective blending of logics and practices, some usually connected with traditional models of professionalization and others more novel and corporate in orientation. This might reflect the fact that these new occupations over time may shift between different strategies according to their perceived success (or lack thereof) as well as pressures from their membership and external stakeholders. Nevertheless, what we still lack is a deep account of how CP unfolds over time and a theoretical understanding of the actors, processes, and conditions involved. In particular, there is a need to account for the role employing organizations might play.

Professional formation and the role of employing organizations

A useful way of approaching this task is through what Anteby, Chan and DiBenigno (2016: 45) describe as a 'relational lens'. This implies the analysis of 'occupations in relation to the broader system of relations they are embedded within' and taking into account 'the different ways occupations relate with those in their broader field'. These ideas are not new of course and have featured prominently in the sociology of the professions (Macdonald 1995). Classic texts such as Johnson (1972) and Larson (1977), for example, have emphasized the key relationship with the state, if anything because only the state has the power to grant monopolies and restrictive arrangements. Indeed, professional jurisdictions have been understood as regulative bargains (Cooper et al. 1988: 8), whereby the state grants a high degree of labor market protection in exchange for the profession's commitment to quality and public service. In a seminal contribution, Abbott (1988) also shifts the attention to the dynamic relationship between different occupations

as they compete for work and struggle to create and maintain jurisdictions in what is an unstable and continuously evolving 'system'. Burrage, Jaraush and Siegrist (1990) consolidated these various contributions in a multi-actor framework where professionalism emerges from interactions of four distinct actors: the state, clients, universities, and the professions themselves.

However, while there has always been a realization of the distinctive role that large bureaucratic organizations could play as consumers (see, e.g., Johnson 1972), the role of organizations as employers of professionals and producers of professional services has received less attention. This is probably because, outside of the public sector, the norm had been for professionals to work in sole or small-scale practice. Indeed, employment in large-scale organizations is often considered as a potential source of de-professionalization (Leicht and Fennell 2001) or simply as an 'aberration' (Barley and Tolbert 1991: 1). It is only more recently (Muzio and Kirkpatrick 2011; Muzio, Brock and Suddaby 2013) that it has been established that professionalism can adapt to more bureaucratic and commercial contexts as exemplified by the case of PSFs (Brock, Powell and Hinings 1999; Empson et al. 2015). As such, attempts to understand the strategies of PAs, even when they have taken a relational approach, have neglected the role of employing organizations, such as global law firms or large audit and accountancy firms (e.g., today's Big Four).

This, we argue, is an important limitation. The last 30 years or so have seen the raise of the large global PSFs (Arnold 2005; Suddaby, Cooper and Greenwood 2007; Muzio, Aulakh and Kirkpatrick 2019) as increasingly powerful actors. These firms employ a growing majority of professionals, control the most lucrative transactions and prestigious clients, and exercise considerable influence even outside of their jurisdictions, given their role at the heart of global capitalism (Sharma 1997; Boussebaa and Faulconbridge 2019) and as gatekeepers of key societal institutions (Coffee 2006). This influence is also likely to extend to the development of professionalization projects more generally, to the strategies of PAs and to the forms of 'voluntary regulation' that emerge (Lester 2016). In this context, responding to calls to fully consider the impact of PSFs on professionalization projects (Suddaby, Cooper and Greenwood 2007), we focus on the relationship between PAs and large employing organizations, how this co-evolves over time and the consequences that this may have for professionalism and professionalization. In particular, anticipating our conclusion, we tie this dynamic relationship between PAs and large organizations to the emergence of new (corporate) forms of professionalism.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research setting

To address these concerns, we focus on the historical case of the professionalization project of management consultants in the UK. This case represents an ideal setting to examine our research question for a number of reasons. First, following a similar pattern in the USA and other countries, there have been ongoing—albeit only partially successful—attempts to professionalize the sector (Kubr 2002; see also McKenna 2006; David, Sine and Haveman 2013; Butler and Collins 2016; Collins and Butler 2020). In the UK, this started with the formation of two PAs: the Management Consultants Association (MCA), established in 1956, and the Institute of Management Consultants (IMC), in 1962 (Tisdall 1982). However, as we shall see that professionalization project later morphed into CP, thus making it possible to achieve what Mahoney (2015: 202) terms *historical explanation*—'the identification of causes of outcomes that have already occurred'.

Second, while individual self-employed practitioners were and remain important in the sector (Cross and Swart 2021), larger firms have played a crucial role in management consulting from the outset (Gross and Kieser 2006: 81). This was notably true in the UK, where the so-called 'Big 4' engineering-based firms—Associated Industrial Consultants (AIC), Urwick Orr & Partners (UOP), Production Engineering (P-E), and Personnel Administration (PA)—had founded the MCA. At the time, these firms accounted for *three quarters* of the consulting industry's total fee income estimated at £4 million (Tisdall 1982: 9). Later, as the sector grew and matured, the population of leading firms changed with the arrival of new entrants with alternative models of 'consulting', such as strategy and eventually technology focused firms (Ferguson 2002; Kipping and Kirkpatrick 2013). Nevertheless, while the population of firms changed quite dramatically over our period of interest, this did not alter the dominance of the largest organizations, which still accounted for about half of total fee income by the early 21st century (O'Mahoney and Markham 2013: 50). As such, the case of UK management consulting is ideal for addressing our research question, highlighting both clear trends toward CP and the presence of large organizations, which may have contributed to it.

To develop our case study, we were able to draw on a combination of three main data sources: unpublished archival documents; articles from the general and trade press; and semi-structured interviews. With regard to documentary sources, we drew on the MCA's own archive and, for the IMC, from the Goddard papers available at the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick. In both archives, we copied all documents relating to:

(i) membership, including questions of admission and certification as well as descriptive data about both individual practitioners and organizational members;
(ii) the standards applied by these associations toward the behavior of members, including ethics guidelines;
(iii) the strategic directions of the associations, which were discussed at committee and board levels and explained in communications/newsletters to members; and
(iv) interactions with key employing organizations whether in membership or not.

In total, these archival documents comprised around 4000 pages (circa 3000 for the MCA and 1000 for the IMC) which we then analyzed in more detail. While internal documentation from the major consulting firms was not available, the MCA and IMC archives contained details of interactions with and observations about these firms conducted by the associations, including those that did not become members. From the extant literature (e.g., Tisdall 1982; Ferguson 2002; McKenna 2006) and media sources (see below), some additional information was found.

Second, for the press documents, we searched both the Nexis UK database, including national newspapers, such as *The Times*, and the online archive of *Management Consultancy* (later incorporated into *Accountancy Age*) for news articles mentioning these two associations. This led to 284 articles on the IMC and 97 on the MCA in the general press; and 185 on the IMC and 132 on the MCA in *Management Consultancy* and *Accountancy Age*. Based on either the title or, if available, abstract, we then selected the most relevant publications. This led us to read and analyze the full text for approximately 20% of general publications and 40% of the trade press. It is important to note that these publications reported on both associations as well as the practices of leading firms.

As a third source, we conducted 10 semi-structured tape-recorded interviews with former key actors within the IMC and MCA, who we identified in the archival documentation combined with snowball-style sampling. These interviewees were also involved with leading firms (usually in prominent roles) and were therefore able to speak to the relationship between the PAs and the employing organizations in the field. Though conscious of

the potential errors and biases of retrospective interviews, these not only complemented our archival evidence but also represented a useful means of data triangulation (Berg and Lune 2012).

To analyze our data, we adopted a design similar to the one used by David, Sine and Haveman (2013) in their historical study of the US consultancy field. Specifically, we employed a contextualized explanation method (Welch et al. 2011) based on process tracing: a well-established technique for identifying causal mechanisms and inferences in qualitative cases (see, for an overview, George and Bennett 2005, Ch. 10; Mahoney 2015). Process tracing has been used to address causality in historical events but goes beyond 'a purely historical account that *implies* or *asserts* a causal sequence' (George and Bennett 2005: 225; emphasis added). According to Mahoney (2015: 202), whose methodological approach we are broadly following, it requires '(1) good knowledge of the history of the case, (2) good knowledge of relevant preexisting theories and generalizations, and (3) a strong capacity to carry out sound logical reasoning by combining facts about the case with more general knowledge'.

Turning to the details, we first conducted a 'sequence analysis', identifying 'events that unfold over time' and 'that set [the PAs] down long-run trajectories of change' (Mahoney 2015: 204)—in our case the professionalization project of management consultants. This process revealed a drift over time toward CP. Table 1 presents a detailed illustration of this. In a second step, we then explored possible causes of CP, using 'inductive discovery' (Mahoney 2015: 215–7) to focus specifically on changing relationships between PAs and populations of larger consultancy firms. Importantly, our analysis process was iterative rather than chronological, focusing on surprising or unexpected outcomes (such as policy changes initiated by PAs) and then working back to explore possible causes (e.g., the role of employing organizations).

FINDINGS

We present the main findings of our historical analysis in two main subsections. First, we describe the professionalization project of management consultants in the UK over a 50-year period, showing how it transitioned from an occupational to corporate model. We then turn to the questions of *why* and *how* this shift occurred, focusing on the shifting practices and commitments of employing organizations, their evolving relationships with PAs and how PAs, in turn, responded through a variety of accommodation strategies.

The professionalization project: from an occupational to corporate model

Our story starts with what looks like a conventional professionalization project as both leading associations, the MCA and IMC, pursued, with some success, an 'occupational model' of professionalism based on individual membership, closure, and third-party regulation (see also Tisdall 1982; Butler and Collins 2016). This is line with the situation in other jurisdictions like the USA, where large consultancy firms also sought to legitimize their activities through the creation of a PA, ethical codes, shared credentials, and a body of knowledge (David, Sine and Haveman 2013). Yet by the end of our period, as summarized in Table 1, the British PAs had largely abandoned their focus on closure and shifted to a corporate model of professionalization, characterized by organizational membership schemes, competence-based qualification framework, and the acceptance of more commercial practices.

While created as and acting like a trade association, the MCA from its inception in 1956 promoted an occupational form of professionalism by requiring and raising educational, and ethical standards *within* member firms. For example, to be eligible for membership a consulting firm had to have been established in the UK for at least 5 years and have a minimum consulting staff of five, with 80% of them 'qualified' to degree level or above (for a list of 'Recognized Qualifications' dated March 1963, see MCA Archives, Box 15). The MCA also tried to exercise control over the behavior of its members—and by implication, of individual practitioners—which had to subscribe to a fairly strict code. This precluded them from direct advertising and promoting the goods or services of a third party (see, e.g., MCA Annual Report 1961, MCA, Box 22).

Initially, the MCA strongly enforced these rules. Thus, in 1967, the MCA denied Arthur Andersen (later to become one of the leading players in the industry) membership because its percentage of employees with more than 5 years' experience was too low. Furthermore, in its recommendation the membership committee noted, under 'Ethical considerations' a 'disquiet [...] on the firm's [Arthur Andersen's] aggressive approach to management consultancy' (Minutes of the Membership Committee meeting on 26/9/1967, MCA, Box 1). Even two decades later, these standards remained largely in place as a condition for entry. On 2 December 1987, for example, *The Times* referred to the MCA's 'stringent rules of entry' offering an 'imprimatur of professionalism' and ensuring that 'Jonnie-come-latelies [...] don't stand a chance of membership'.

Table 1 Professionalization project of UK management consulting: from an occupational to corporate model.

Period	Key events in professional associations	Key events in employing organizations	Features of occupational professionalism	Features of corprate professionalism
1950s and before	British Institute of Management (BIM) establishes a Register of consultants Foundation of the Management Consultancies Association (MCA)			
1960s	Foundation of the Institute of Management Consultants (IMC)	Accounting firms rejected by MCA, support the creation of the IMC First wave of audit and accounting firms admitted to MCA Arthur Anderson (initially) refused entry to the MCA	MCA code of practice restricting commercial behaviors MCA introduces stringent individual qualification requirements	
1970s	MCA relaxes staff qualification rules to admit more accounting firms and some strategy firms (A.T. Kearney)	UK's largest firm, PA, temporarily withdraws from MCA in dispute over restrictions on advertising	IMC introduces ethical code and disciplinary procedures IMC develops standard body of knowledge and introduces mandatory qualifying examination	
1980s	MCA changes name from 'Management Consultants Association' to 'Management Consultancies Association'	Arthur Anderson initiates first advertising campaign; followed by other accounting firms		IMC scraps qualifying exam and begins to develop competence qualification scheme IMC creates Registered Practices scheme as a form of corporate membership
1990s	IMC changes name from 'Institute of Management Consultants' to 'Institute of Management Consultancy'	Privy council turns down IMC application for Royal Charter IBM joins MCA first (1997) and then the IMC (1999)		MCA removes its advertising ban IMC launches its flagship competency-based qualification: the CMC award MCA changes ethical code from independent to objective advice IMC creates Certified Practices Scheme as more developed corporate membership scheme, allowing members to award IMC qualifications

Table 1 Continued

Period	Key events in professional associations	Key events in employing organizations	Features of occupational professionalism	Features of corproate professionalism
2000s	IMC merges with the Institute of Business Advisers to form the Institute of Business Consultants (IBC)I			IMC allows corporations to bench mark their own competency frameworks to the Institutes and allowing them to award the CMC internally
	MC becomes part of the Chartered Management Institute (CMI)			

Founded in 1962 mainly at the behest of consultants with an accounting background (Tisdall 1982), the IMC explicitly pursued an occupational model of professionalism. The aim was to further the interests of 'individual practitioners' (IMC Newsletter, 10/10/1967) by developing a body of knowledge, qualifying examinations, code of ethics and, eventually a Royal Charter: to provide legal endorsement of its professional status (IMC Journal, December 1972: 19). To achieve this goal, the IMC applied stringent rules of ethical behavior through a Disciplinary Committee formed in 1972 (IMC Journal, June 1972). Members needed to 'be careful to avoid commercial public relations' and 'bad sales promotion which jeopardizes our professional image' (IMC Newsletter, April 1969: 3, 11). Most importantly, the IMC introduced mandatory examinations for entry in 1980 to 'establish IMC as the distinguished standard setting body which it should be' (*Management Consultancy*, March 1980).

However, over time these commitments to an occupational model of professionalism, focused on regulating and advancing the interests of individual practitioners, faded. A key difficulty was the absence of government support for professionalization, which might have strengthened the regulatory authority and independence of PAs. Following the rapid growth of the industry in the 1940s and 1950s, the UK government had toyed with the idea of stronger regulation—prompting a 'register of approved consultants' overseen by the British Institute of Management 'to sort out the sheep from the goats' (Tisdall 1982: 38–9). However, following the establishment of the MCA in 1956 and a promise by firms to regulate themselves, government lost interest (Kipping and Saint-Martin 2005). By the 1980s government policy had changed again, favoring deregulation of professional monopolies and the dismantling of restrictive practices (Hanlon 1999). The golden age of professionalism was over as 'the Government's known reluctance to impose regulation' (*The Times*, 26/1/1994) became increasingly

obvious. Already in 1992, after an 'exploratory meeting' with the Clerk of the Privy Council, IMC officials had been informed that receiving a Royal Charter was 'not achievable in the short term' (IMC Annual Report and Accounts 1992). The government's own role as an 'intelligent consumer' of management consulting further exaggerated this trend, ensuring that its primary focus was on strengthening procurement as a means of upholding standards (OGC 2002) rather than third-party 'professional' regulation.

This failure to secure government support also coincided with moves toward a model of CP. An early and significant change here was in the membership composition and focus of both PAs. While the MCA had been established by the Big 4 engineering firms and always represented employing organizations, over time it became increasingly focused on their interests, changing its name in 1986 from Management *Consultants* Association to Management *Consultancies* Association (MCA 2016). The IMC also struggled with membership, which fell in relative terms from around 60% of employed consultants in the UK in the late 1960s (IMC members' journal, October 1969), to 7% at the turn of the millennium (Butler and Collins 2016). Already in 1980, the IMC had introduced firm-based membership through its 'Registered Practices' initiative (Management Opportunities: Annual Review from IMC 1992).

Linked to this were changes in the strategies of both PAs, heralding a shift to greater inclusiveness and pragmatism. A relaxation of entry standards began in the late 1960s as the MCA waived its 5-year work experience requirements to admit an increasing number of audit and accounting firms who mainly employed graduates, including Cooper Brothers, Robson Morrow, Peat Marwick Mitchell, Price Waterhouse, and Touche Ross (Growth of MCA Membership, 21/3/1972, MCA, Box 4). Later moves further relaxed entry requirements and deontological codes so as to allow US strategy firms, such as A.T.

Kearney to join in the 1970s, and then large IT firms such as the IBM consulting in the 1990s. In 1997, the MCA formalized what had become de facto weaker standards through a revision to its code of conduct. Rather than insisting that management consultants should offer *independent* advice, they were now required to focus on the 'creation of value for organizations, through the […] rendering of objective advice and/or the implementation of business solutions' (MCA, cited in O'Mahoney and Markham 2013; emphasis added). This change was designed to accept IT focused firms which specialized in implementing their own proprietary solutions and which were excluded under the previous definitions. In an earlier move, the MCA also lifted its ban on advertising (*The Times*, 22 June 2000).

The IMC followed a similar pattern. Concerned about declining membership, in 1982, the Institute suspended formal entry exams and in 1993 replaced these with the Certified Management Consultant (CMC) qualification. By the late 1990s, the CMC itself was further watered down: moving away from a definition of consulting expertise linked to 'time served' to recognizing 'a broad range of skills and experience' (*Management Consultancy*, 16/2/2000). As one insider, Brian Ing, remarked, the aim was to broaden the membership base to be 'inclusive of all 'flavors' of management consultancy and of all stakeholders in our profession' (*Management Consultancy*, 15/3/2000). This move coincided with the introduction of a 'Certified Practice' scheme, which made it possible for firms to 'have their competence frameworks benchmarked against the institute's certification process' (*The Accountant*, 21/2/2000). By 2008, there were 147 'Recognized Practices' and 17 'Premier Practices', including multinational firms like EDS, KPMG, Atos, and PA. Effectively, this removed the need for independent examinations or assessments by delegating this task to firms themselves.

Therefore, by the close of our period of interest, the strategies of both the MCA and IMC transitioned from what was originally an occupational model of professionalism to CP. But *why* and *how* did this happen?

Relationships between PAs and employing organizations and the drift toward CP

As noted earlier, a defining feature of the UK management consultancy sector was the dominance of—shifting—populations of large firms. This fact, combined with the unwillingness of governments to support professional regulation (see above), was critical for understanding the emergence of CP. Specifically, our analysis suggested that changes in the priorities of employing organizations, notably their commitments to professionalism, triggered

accommodation strategies by PAs. In what follows, we focus on both of these dimensions separately.

Changing commitments of employing organizations

At the outset, the large 'Big 4' engineering firms were prompted by the threat of more intrusive government regulation to set a PA, the MCA. For that same reason, according to a former IMC President, firms initially supported the associations in their quest to professionalize the sector and raise standards:

> The large practices [which were part of the MCA] had been […] taking notice of the Institute and getting their people to join. They were saying, you know "this is important, we need to be seen to be supporting this, we need to be seen to be saying that the management consultancy is a profession, it needs to be self-regulating". (Interview 6; see also Green 1995: 27) .

This commitment to an 'occupational' model of professionalism was also revealed by one of our respondents, who noted that the Big 4 firms had initially paid the IMC membership fees for their employees (Interview 2).

However, from the late 1960s onwards, this foundational settlement between the large employing organizations and the PAs slowly began to unravel. An early sign of this was the refusal of newly arrived US strategy firms, including McKinsey & Co., to join or support the MCA or IMC (see the Chairman's letter to the MCA Council, 22/3/1963, MCA, Box 15). McKinsey is known to have been a founding member of ACME in the USA during the 1930s and, through their Managing Director Marvin Bower, also of the (US) IMC in 1968 (McKenna 2006), but after entering the UK market in 1959, it refused to join the MCA. An additional tension point followed the decision of PA, then the largest consultancy firm in the UK, to leave the MCA in 1975. PA had complained about MCA rules prohibiting advertising, its Chairman arguing that the MCA had 'become bureaucratic and is in danger of stifling the competitive spirit between member firms' (*The Times*, 25/3/1975). Thus, in the 1970s some new entrants were refusing to join the MCA while established members were leaving because of disputes over its regulatory stance.

A similar situation applies to the IMC. By the early 1980s, many firms objected to its plan of introducing compulsory exams—a hallmark of occupational professionalism, fearing that this would threaten their 'long-established procedures to train their own staffs' (Tisdall 1982: 92–3). Indeed, by 1983 it was noted that '[t]he attitude to the IMC of top management in several of the large firms has changed' with these firms no longer

regarding the IMC with the 'same enthusiasm' (Report of Council Proceedings 1983: 1). Many firms gradually abandoned the policy of supporting IMC membership and even suggested that their employees should stop 'wasting any time on that' (Interview 3).

Ten years later, the growing indifference on the part of leading firms to the occupational model of professionalism had become even more acute, prompting the then President of the IMC, George Lapsley, to note: '[w]e have done well to hold on to our membership through the recession, but many of those who work in the big consultancies, about half the profession, don't feel the need to become members' (*The Times*, 11/11/1993). Another former IMC President confirmed this picture: 'the large firms began to feel that actually it was their own brand, their own reputation with clients that was important and was what gave them the credibility' (Interview 2).

This reluctance on behalf of larger employing organizations to collaborate with PAs increased as new waves of firms entered the sector. An early example for this attitude were the US-based strategy firms, such as McKinsey. As noted, these firms had originally supported the development of PAs in their home country as a way of gaining legitimacy (David, Sine and Haveman 2013) but by the 1960s in conjunction with their growing success and reputation, they changed strategies. Rather than relying on the external validation provided by membership of a PAs they increasingly drew this internally from their own brands and association with prestigious clients (McKenna 2006; Kipping 2011; Harvey, Morris and Santos 2017). As Roger Morrison, who headed the firm's London office in the 1970s, put it: 'We were strongly endorsed by a number of influential people in the U.K. business society largely because we had been retained by Shell and ICI. It became almost fashionable to call in McKinsey. […] So McKinsey is a household word' (quoted by Edersheim 2014).

From the early 1990s global accounting and IT firms also embraced this model of emphasizing their 'distinct cultures' (*Management Consultancy*, 2/7/1997) and the development of internal credentials and certifications. As one ex-IMC president explained:

> I think the large firms began to feel that actually it was their own brand, their own reputation with clients that was important and was what gave them the credibility, as firms but also as individual consultants to say that you were a Price Waterhouse or you know, Touche Ross or KPMG consultant or Andersen Consulting, whatever it was, consultant, was enough of a "qualification". They didn't need the Institute on top of that, so there was that culture going on. Senior

people within the large firms felt that the IMC was less important than their predecessors 20 or 30 years ago had done. That inevitably filters down through to the more junior members of staff, who then, you know, don't actually see it as being a good thing or helping their progress within the firm if they give up their time and effort to be part of any of the working bodies, committees, councils, etc. (Interview 6)

In effect, 'training at a big name consultancy' had become 'a qualification in itself' (*The Accountant*, 21 February 2000).

Hence, by the mid-1990s, interest among leading employing organizations in developing an occupational model of professionalism based on third-party regulation had faded, making them less receptive to the agendas of either the MCA or IMC.

Accommodation strategies by the PAs

This growing indifference of firms to an occupational model of professionalism prompted the PAs to engage in a series of accommodation strategies, including a more inclusive approach to membership as well as an increased pragmatism in the application of existing rules.

Successive moves by both PAs to relax their entry criteria and standards were a primary indicator of a more inclusive approach to membership. An early example, was the MCA's decision to formally lower its entry requirements to allow A.T. Kearney (who's staff, with MBAs, lacked the requisite experience) to join in 1971 (see the Chairman's letter to the MCA Council, 22/3/1963, MCA Archives, Box 15). Further accommodations included the weakening of regulatory requirements such as the MCA's decision to abandon restrictions on advertising and the re-writing of its ethical code in 1998: altering the language from 'independent' to 'objective' advice. The former was a direct response to the emerging business models of leading IT and accounting firms which had embraced 'advertising with a great deal of enthusiasm and huge amounts of money' (*The Times*, 22 June 2000). The latter decision (changing the ethical code) was motivated by a desire to recruit firms which did not exclusively focus on providing independent advice to clients. As one of our respondent's explained:

> Because given the rise of IT and solutions provision, if you are acting as an agent for Oracle or SAP or one of those big software houses, you can't be independent. They don't recommend independent objective solutions, they're tied …. If as PWC you've got a strategic alliance with Oracle, you can't claim to be independent because you're not, you're tied to Oracle. So

they [the MCA] changed the wording of the ethical code from 'a consultant must be independent', to 'a consultant must be objective'… it was a response to the stages of growth and the commercial position and experience of the big firms, incorporated firms, who increasingly because of the business they were getting into, could not meet the definition of the original independent management consultant (Interview 4).

This decision ultimately opened the floodgates for IT firms, such as IBM, which previously had not been judged to meet professional standards, to join the MCA. Indeed, as one Ex-IMC President put it, this represented: 'a crunch point, a barometric moment… you could hear the gasps of surprise when it happened'. (Interview 7)

The IMC made similar efforts to accommodate firm interests. Concerns first arose in the early 1980s when membership began to fall (IMC Discussion Paper 1983). In response the IMC proposed to 'forsake the current emphasis on narrow professionalism for membership growth' (Whither IMC 1983), specifically by abandoning entry exams that had been opposed by the larger firms (Tisdall 1982). This same logic also influenced the IMC's later 're-branding exercise' in the mid-1990s (IMC Journal, 14 March 1998). As an editorial of *Management Consultancy* (14 February 1998) explained:

> [f]or years it [the IMC] pursued a quixotic quest to become the gatekeeper of the profession, controlling a closed shop of certificated consultants who alone were allowed to practice the craft. This was always doomed: the big firms were never going to co-operate with a scheme which might interfere with their staffing.

To address this concern, from 1997, the IMC embarked on what then President Paul Lynch described as 'a big mind-set change' (*Management Consultancy*, 14/11/1997), to break away from the 'cozy, exclusive comfort of a quasi-nineteenth century "reading room"'. Key elements of this 'mind-set change' were the re-naming exercise from Institute of Management Consultants to Institute of Management Consulting so as to represent a wider range of stakeholders and the introduction of the Certified Practice scheme which made it possible for firms to benchmark their own—in house—competency frameworks against the IMC's professional standards (CMC Review 2002). The latter initiative represented a quite deliberate 'way of embracing large practices or trying to get them on board …' (Interview 2), offering a far softer form of regulation designed to strengthen their 'membership proposition'. As another informant explained,

the Certified Practice scheme provided 'them [the firms] this external referencing point, framework which doesn't threaten their competitiveness' (Interview 4). Partly for this reason, the certified practices initiative was judged to be a success by many. At IBM, for example, one senior manager explained: 'Certified Practice status shows a consistent quality of individual consultants, gives confidence to clients, and provides our consultants with a transportable qualification […] all three parties benefit' (IMC Journal 1999).

Hence, the historical record shows how PAs altered their strategies in direct response to what they perceived to be the interests and priorities of leading employing organizations. In many respects this trend was also exaggerated by competition between PAs. As late as in 1998, the journal *Management Consultancy* (14/3/1998) referred to an 'unedifying "turf war"', where 'both bodies are trying to position themselves as the voice of consultancy'. Such rivalry meant that accommodation strategies adopted by one PA were quickly followed by the other, accelerating a race to the bottom in a bid to water down regulatory standards and enlist the attention of the larger employing organizations.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper foremost contribution is to provide a detailed historical account of a 'corporate' professionalization project in action. We show how this unfolds over time, the actors involved and the strategies and tactics they deploy as well as some of the key conflicts and tensions involved. In management consultancy, while the IMC and MCA were initially motivated by an occupational model of professionalism, they ultimately chose to abandon this model, largely for pragmatic reasons. In this respect, our historical case, focusing on the UK, shares much in common with other accounts of failed professionalization in management consultancy. In the USA, for example, David, Sine and Haveman (2013) describe how professionalization emerged at an early stage, with the formation of an association (ACME) and ethical codes, as well as the adoption of professional norms, imageries, and vocabularies. Similarly, for the UK, Butler and Collins (2016) and Collins and Butler (2020) provide a rich account of how the IMC sought to professionalize the sector along conventional lines, including the pursuit of a Royal Charter.

More generally, the features of CP that we observed in the case of management consultancy were similar to those highlighted in other professions (Muzio et al. 2011; Paton, Hodgson and Muzio 2013; Hodgson, Paton and Muzio 2015; Reed 2018; Sabini and Paton 2021). Most

notable was the emphasis on organizational member-ship and voluntary adjustments to regulatory standards. However, in contrast to other accounts (Hodgson, Paton and Muzio 2015), we find that this emergent model of CP is not easily described as a hybrid—drawing opportunistically on both occupational and corporate logics. Rather, what our longitudinal data show is that CP gradually becomes the *dominant* form, eventually displacing occupational professionalism.

These findings have important implications for theory. First, they add to knowledge of how CP emerges and why PAs voluntarily follow this path. We noted that while previous accounts have focused on specifying the concept of CP and differentiating it from occupational forms of professionalism (Muzio et al. 2011; Paton, Hodgson and Muzio 2013; Hodgson, Paton and Muzio 2015; Reed 2018; Collins and Butler 2020; Sabini and Paton 2021), they say little about *how* and *why* it occurs. In contrast, our analysis helps to address this gap, highlighting the key conditions that favored CP. These conditions (depicted in Fig. 1) relate both to the nature of interactions between large management consulting firms and PAs, which triggered CP and also to exogenous factors that exacerbated this process.

Within the central box of Fig. 1 we note the primary mechanism that drove CP in our case—the evolving relationship between the 'behaviour of dominant employing organizations' and the 'behaviour of professional associations'. This relationship suggests that while PAs were the primary movers in the shift to CP, their actions were largely reactive, in response to changing priorities of large employing organizations. As we saw, the Big 4 engineering firms had initially supported the goal of occupational professionalism, to pre-empt more onerous forms of state regulation. A commitment to (professional) self-regulation might also help to boost legitimacy and overcome what Aldrich and Fiol (1994) term the 'liability of newness' (see also David, Sine and Haveman 2013). However, over time, these concerns faded as the larger firms gained confidence and pursued business strategies that were less compatible with professional regulation such as advertising. Crucially, our story extends previous contributions (McKenna 2006; Kipping 2011; Kipping and Kirkpatrick 2013; Harvey, Morris and Santos 2017) to show the effect that the ability of large firms to draw validation, internally, from their own brands, reputation, proprietary methodologies and elite recruitment and training practices had on their attitudes toward professionalization.

As Fig. 1 shows, PAs responded to this situation, altering their own behavior to engage in two kinds of accommodation strategies: a more inclusive approach to membership and as an increased pragmatism in the application of rules and standards. These strategies were emergent and did not come about quickly or seamlessly. Rather, they unfolded in an incremental way, at key junctures summarized in Table 1—each time prompted by assessments of consultancy firm behavior and the perceived need to adapt. This process was also accelerated by competition between our two PAs, which started a regulatory race to the bottom as each association tried to outdo the other.

However, while the dynamic of PA accommodation is central for understanding CP, it is important to understand exogenous factors that made it more likely. Specifically, Fig. 1 reveals three such factors, all of which exaggerated the *dependency* of PAs on the large organizations employing professionals. The first relates to the foundation of the UK management consulting field
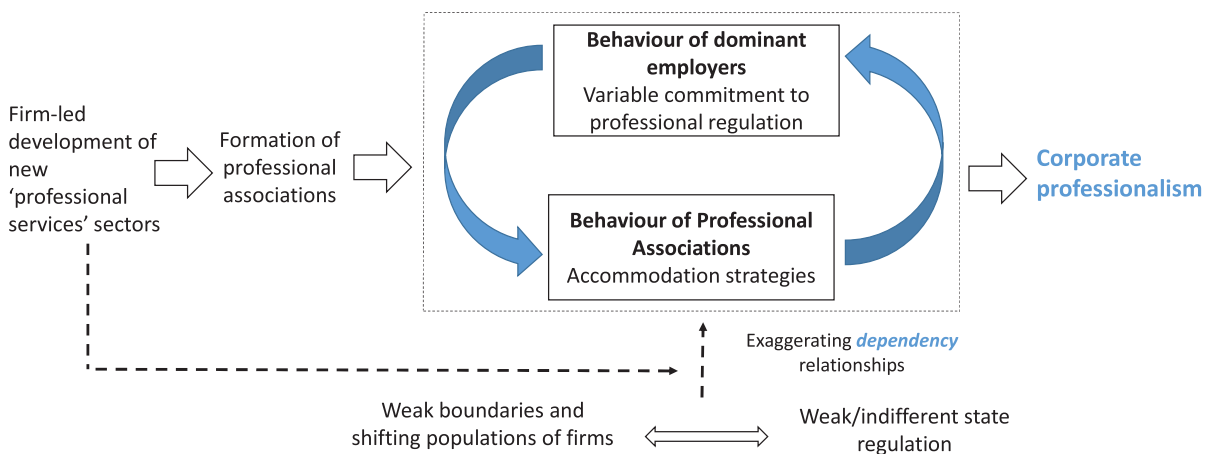

Figure 1 Emergence of Corporate Professionalism.

(noted on the far left-hand side of the figure). Unlike other contexts, such as law (Sugarman 1995), in management consultancy, the larger firms (Big 4) led the development of this sector, pre-dating the formation of PAs. This fact meant that firms were already accustomed to operating without 'prior definitions, established procedures, existing protocols or ideas […] which are traditionally used by professionals' (Ackroyd 1996: 616). It also meant that employing organizations were the dominant actors in this field, with a strong role, from the outset in creating and funding PAs.

Second, dependency relationships were exacerbated by the ambivalence of the state toward professional regulation (lower row of Fig. 1) (see also Collins and Butler 2020). Government recognition (in the form of a Charter, or even licensing) might have strengthened the authority of PAs over the employing organizations and made them less reliant on the patronage of large firms. This, however did not materialize. Rather the focus of government in the UK was on the role of the employing organizations in regulating themselves and on encouraging clients to rely on procurement as a mechanism for maintaining standards and value for money (Armbruester 2006). Lastly, it is important to note the weak boundaries of the management consultancy field in the UK and frequent changes in the population of larger firms (Kipping and Kirkpatrick 2013). This population churn—which perversely stemmed from the absence of tight professional regulation—placed PAs on the back foot from the 1970s onwards. Specifically, it meant that in order to maintain their viability, both associations were forced into a stance of reacting to changes in the sector (rather than shaping them) by actively trying to appeal to the interests of new entrants as these became increasingly dominant. Crucially, these firms often had very different business models and attitudes to professional membership than older firms.

Therefore, our analysis suggests a process of model for the emergence of CP, which accounts both for the divergent strategies of PAs and the conditions that prompted those strategies. While the model is developed in the context of only one historical example (management consultancy), it nevertheless goes some way to addressing the limitations of previous research on this topic. In particular, it highlights the reactive nature of CP and how it emerges under conditions of dependency on one set of actors, that is, large employing organizations.

Relatedly, a second implication of our findings are for broader theoretical understandings of professional formation in contemporary society. As we saw, most sociological accounts of this process are dominated by the notion of 'professionalization projects' (Gorman and Sandefur 2011), which seek to advance the occupational interests of individual practitioners by regulating both the production of and behavior by producers (Abel 1988; Evetts 2002; Kirkpatrick, Aulakh and Muzio 2021). From this perspective, the state and competing professions are key actors in shaping how projects unfold, with employing organizations assigned a secondary (or even nonexistent) role. In contrast, our analysis shows how alternative pathways of professional formation, that is, CP, emerge in situations where employing organizations are the dominant actors. In this context, one is likely to see PA strategies that diverge from the norm and emphasize the private interests of employers over and above more inclusive notions of public trusteeship (Brint 1994).

Looking ahead, our analysis highlights a number of directions for future research. A key question is whether the process model (Fig. 1) derived from the case of management consultancy might apply to other professions that also operate in contexts where employer interests are dominant. This seems likely in the case of other management professions which emerged at the beginning of the 20th century. Lounsbury (2002: 264), for example, shows how PAs in financial services eventually became 'important emissaries of an emergent market logic'. However, we now have more recent occupations, such as those connected to new forms of technologies or to grand challenges, such as CSR (Brès et al. 2019; Girschik, Svystunova and Lysova 2022; Iatridis, Gond and Kesidou 2022; Shin et al. 2022), which are 'born corporate' from the start. It could be that these professions adopt a more extreme version of CP or even develop entirely new models which dispense with the goal of achieving closure in favor of alternative strategies based on networked forms of organization and social movement characteristics. At the other extreme, even more established professions with a stronger regulatory position, such as law and accounting, may adopt elements of CP. This seems especially plausible, given the growing size and global reach of PSFs which increasingly transcend national jurisdictions (Empson et al. 2015; Muzio, Aulakh and Kirkpatrick 2019) and have resources and capabilities that greatly exceed those of their home country PAs (Greenwood and Suddaby 2006).

Lastly, it would be interesting to explore further the consequences of CP, both for professionals themselves and their clients. Where PAs are concerned, CP may well be an effective survival strategy for halting decline and maintaining viability. However, jettisoning occupational closure goals could have negative implications for the material interests of rank-and-file practitioners (Kirkpatrick, Aulakh and Muzio 2021). Where clients are concerned, the drift to CP may be equally problematic,

especially if it fails to encourage a public service 'ideology' rooted in 'nonnegotiable, minimum standards' (Maister, in Webber 2002). According to O'Mahoney (2011: 104), initiatives such as 'certified practices', which result in the delegation of professional responsibilities to firms are unlikely to have much 'impact on the ethical consequences of industrial practice'.

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