

The Bittersweet Taste of Sensemaking

How Consultants Make Sense of Generative AI in Relation to their
Professional Identity

by

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Abstract

Title: The bittersweet taste of sensemaking: How consultants make sense of Generative AI in relation to their professional identity

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Purpose: This study focuses on how consultants interpret and make sense of the ambiguity and uncertainty associated with GenAI. The purpose of this research is to contribute to a deeper understanding of how GenAI disruption and consultants' professional identity influence sensemaking. Furthermore, this study seeks to offer further insights into the relationship between technological disruption, professional identity, and sensemaking within consulting.

Methodology: This qualitative study adopts an interpretive research tradition and follows an abductive approach. The research is based on empirical material collected through semi-structured interviews with twelve consultants from Big Four consulting firms in Scandinavia and the DACH region.

Theoretical Perspective: Our study primarily focuses on sensemaking theory, which Weick (1995) describes as a process by which individuals construct plausible interpretations to understand ambiguous situations and guide action. This perspective helps us understand how consultants interpret the ambiguity surrounding GenAI. This study also draws on literature arguing that technological change and identity threats can trigger sensemaking processes (Weick, 1990; Vough et al. 2020). Additionally, this study incorporates literature on professional identity in consulting to understand how GenAI relates to the future relevance of their expertise and profession (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Gill, 2015).

Conclusion: This study reveals how consultants make sense of GenAI in relation to their professional identity within the consulting industry. The findings show that consultants frequently “sugarcoat” GenAI by constructing positive and plausible narratives to protect their professional identity. However, underlying ambiguity, tensions, and concerns about the future of consulting work remain present beneath the surface.

Keywords: Organizational Change, Sensemaking, Consulting, Artificial Intelligence, Narratives

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List of Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
Big Four	The major consulting companies: Ernst and Young, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Deloitte and KPMG
DACH	Deutschland (D), Austria (A), and Switzerland (CH)
EY	Ernst & Young
KIF	Knowledge Intensive Firm
GenAI	Generative Artificial Intelligence
PSF	Professional Service Firm
PwC	PricewaterhouseCoopers
SI	Symbolic Interactionism

1 Introduction

“Every rose has its thorn,” sings the band Poison (1988). Currently, it seems like Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) appears to be the “rose” among the major consulting companies; Ernst and Young (EY), PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), Deloitte, KPMG, also known as Big Four. No matter which major consulting firm’s website one opens, the beauty of GenAI appears. According to the current industry discourse, AI has emerged as an accelerator of growth and innovation (see, among others, Deloitte, 2026; EY, 2026; KPMG, 2026; PwC, 2023). Just as a rose grows and blooms, the consulting industry places its hopes in AI as a driver of increased productivity and a promising future (Sharma, 2025, pp.10-14). GenAI is increasingly described as a source of innovation, growth, and competitive advantage (Xing et al. 2026, pp.1-3). In particular, GenAI is portrayed as a tool that enhances productivity and frees consultants from time-consuming routine tasks, allowing them to focus on higher-value activities and strategic advisory work (Pattanayak, 2020, pp. 8-10). Furthermore, consulting firms increasingly disseminate positive digital transformation narratives that frame technological change as beneficial, inevitable, and strategically necessary (Monod et al. 2024, p.761).

However, every rose has its thorn, and so does GenAI. It is inevitable that GenAI is disrupting various professions and occupations, including jobs in the consulting industry (Economist, 2018; Forbes, 2021). Contrary to the positive narratives promoted by consulting firms, critical perspectives suggest that GenAI could potentially take over traditional consulting tasks (Samokhvalov, 2024, pp.63-65). This concern is connected to GenAI's growing capabilities to generate text, summarize information, analyze data, and produce strategic recommendations, which overlap with activities traditionally associated with consultants (Brynjolfsson et al. 2025, pp.890-892). As a consequence, some scholars argue that GenAI developments may force consulting firms to reconsider existing business and pricing models, which are often based on selling billable hours for labor-intensive work (Samokhvalov, 2024, p.64). These concerns are further amplified as AI increasingly replaces research and analytical work, consulting firms might face layoffs, changing the pyramid structure, and increasing pressure to prove value beyond billable hours (Observer, 2025). Thus, rather than functioning only as an

accelerator for the consulting industry, GenAI could also potentially challenge consultants' professional expertise.

This phenomenon aligns with broader discussions about the future of professional expertise in the age of artificial intelligence (Susskind & Susskind, 2017). While some scholars highlight the potential benefits of GenAI (see, among others, Benbya et al. 2024; Brynjolfsson et al. 2025), others highlight the risks and uncertainties associated with increasingly capable GenAI tools (see, among others, Samokhvalov, 2024; Susskind & Susskind 2017). As a result, GenAI simultaneously represents opportunities and threats, creating uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding the future of the consulting industry.

Despite these tensions and differing views on GenAI, change driven by GenAI within the consulting industry appears inevitable.. Existing discussions surrounding GenAI in consulting have mainly focused on industry-level development. Consequently, less attention has been given to those most directly affected by these changes: the individual consultants whose daily work and professional identity may be reshaped by GenAI.

Prior research has shown that the outcomes of technological change are shaped by how organizational members interpret, appropriate, and interact with technology, rather than by the technology alone (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; Orlikowski, 1992). Furthermore, it is crucial for companies to focus on how individuals deal with change processes as failing to gain employees' support may risk the failure of the change initiative (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, pp.89-90).

We therefore argue that it is important to study in depth how individual consultants deal with the disruption brought by GenAI, as surface-level agreement with organizational change does not necessarily reflect genuine acceptance. Employees may publicly support technological change while simultaneously experiencing uncertainty, skepticism, or concern beneath the surface. Ignoring these reactions can create risks for organizations, especially in contexts where positive technological narratives dominate discussions about GenAI. Bellary and Marathe (2025, p.3) argue that reducing AI discussions is dangerous because it may lead to either “blind techno-optimism or paralyzing fear”.

1.1 Background

Existing literature argues that technological change can trigger sensemaking as new technologies often disrupt existing assumptions, routines, and understandings (Griffith, 1999, pp.483-484). To understand how individual consultants respond to similar technological changes caused by GenAI, our research draws on sensemaking theory. Sensemaking refers to the process by which individuals interpret and construct meaning in situations characterized by uncertainty, ambiguity, or disruption (Weick, 1995, pp.91-92). Rather than viewing GenAI as a purely technological tool, sensemaking perspectives emphasize that individuals actively interpret technological changes through their interactions with the technological tool (Griffith, 1999, pp.485-486).

At the same time, GenAI is a relatively new technology, and research in the field is still developing, especially with regard to sensemaking on GenAI within the consulting industry. Furthermore, it remains unclear how and to what extent GenAI will transform the consulting industry and whether GenAI will fulfill the expectations currently placed upon it by consulting firms.

It is also important to consider the professional identity of consultants. Existing literature describes consulting as a profession closely connected to perceptions of expertise, exclusivity, and problem-solving capability (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006, pp.196-200; Gill, 2015, pp.14-17). When technologies such as GenAI potentially alter the meaning of expertise and knowledge work, they may also threaten consultants' professional identity. Prior literature suggests that threat to one's identity can then trigger sensemaking (Vough et al. 2020, p.249). Studies further show that professionals engage in sensemaking processes to interpret technological disruptions and maintain coherent professional identities in changing environments (Goto,2022). Sensemaking can therefore become an important mechanism through which individuals respond to identity threats (Lutgen-Sandvik's, 2008, p.106; Vough et al. 2020, p.249).

1.2 Research Purpose and Research Question

All in all, we know that currently there is ambiguity and a lot of uncertainty regarding the impact of GenAI on the consulting industry. Although dominant corporate narratives strongly

emphasize opportunity, augmentation, and innovation, GenAI simultaneously carries potentially disruptive implications for consulting work and professional expertise. Existing literature has highlighted the importance of sensemaking in situations characterized by ambiguity and disruption (Weick, 1995). However, what remains unclear is how individual consultants make sense of this ambiguity in relation to their professional identity.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to contribute to a deeper understanding of how individual consultants make sense of GenAI in relation to their professional identity. Drawing on sensemaking theory, the study examines how consultants construct meanings around GenAI and how these interpretations relate to their understanding of themselves as professionals. Rather than treating GenAI as primarily a technical tool, this study approaches it as a symbolic object that shapes how consultants understand GenAI.

Thereby this study also aims to offer new insights into how technology triggers sensemaking and how professional identity in consulting influences sensemaking. To uncover this, we conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with management consultants from the Big Four. Using the symbolic interactionist tradition, this thesis focuses on the perspectives of individual consultants and aims to contribute to existing discussions on GenAI and professional work by exploring the identity-related implications of GenAI beyond organizational adoption and technological performance.

Building on this context, our research is guided by the following research question:

How do individual consultants make sense of GenAI in relation to their professional identity?

1.3 Outline of the Thesis

The thesis is structured into six chapters. Chapter 1, introduces the research context, outlines the aim of our study as well as defines our research question.

In Chapter 2 we present the theoretical foundations of the study, focusing on literature about the impact of GenAI on the consulting industry. This chapter also includes research on sensemaking and examines how professional identity impacts sensemaking.

Chapter 3 explains the methodological approach of our study, beginning with the interpretivist research philosophy that guides our research, followed by the research design and data collection process. The chapter concludes with the data analysis and considerations related to the credibility of our study.

The following Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings and shows how consultants draw on three different narratives to make sense of GenAI. The first narrative, “It made no difference”, anchors GenAI in familiar historical patterns of technological change and engages in retrospective sensemaking. In the second narrative, “It makes my everyday easier”, consultants use plausibility to construct GenAI as sufficiently capable to support ongoing action. Lastly, in the third narrative, “It will make the future better”, consultants engage in prospective sensemaking by constructing desirable future scenarios around GenAI. Furthermore, in this chapter we also describe how consultants treat GenAI as a symbolic object whose meaning is adjusted to protect their individual professional identity.

Chapter 5 discusses the empirical findings, by placing the findings in a broader theoretical context. Thereby, we contribute to the literature on GenAI in consulting by showing how consultants continuously construct and shift between different narratives in ways that preserve their future relevance. Furthermore, our study contributes to sensemaking theory in relation to professional identity by focusing on how consultants use sensemaking as a mechanism to protect their professional identity.

This study concludes with Chapter 6, where we summarize the key findings of our study. In this chapter we point out the theoretical contribution as well as the practical implication of our study. Finally, we raise awareness for the limitations of our study and suggest directions for future research.

2 Literature Review

To understand how consultants make sense of GenAI in relation to their future professional identity, we will begin the following literature review by exploring the current changes GenAI is bringing to the consulting industry. Secondly, we discuss why sensemaking is relevant for understanding how consultants perceive the current and future implications of GenAI on their industry.

2.1 GenAI Disrupts the Consulting Industry

Management consulting firms are widely understood to be knowledge-intensive firms (KIF), which are described as organizations that offer the use of knowledge-based products (Alvesson, 2004, p.17). Alvesson (2004, p.17) further describes management consulting firms as organizations “where most work is of an intellectual nature, and where well-educated, qualified employees form the major part of the workforce”. Similarly, Starbuck (1992, p.4) defines KIFs as firms that employ highly educated personnel whose work relies on specialized, esoteric skills that are difficult for the average person to attain. This means that consulting firms derive their value not from physical products, but from their ability to mobilize expertise, and professional knowledge to solve complex client problems.

Management consulting firms are also commonly categorized as professional service firms (PSF). According to Løwendahl et al. (2001, p.912), PSFs rely heavily on highly educated employees and their ability to transform their knowledge into intangible, knowledge-based solutions for their clients. As a result, consulting work usually involves interpreting complex and ambiguous situations, structuring problems, and translating insights into actionable recommendations (Løwendahl et al. 2001, pp.913-914). Together, KIFs’ and PSFs’ perspectives highlight that consulting firms fundamentally rely on human expertise, judgment, and intellectual capability as their main sources of professional value and legitimacy.

The knowledge-intensive nature of consulting makes the emergence of GenAI particularly significant for the industry. Unlike earlier digital technologies, which focused primarily on automating routine or administrative work, GenAI increasingly overlaps with activities traditionally associated with human cognitive and professional expertise (Brynjolfsson et al. 2025). GenAI has attracted attention because of its ability to perform a wide range of

knowledge-intensive tasks traditionally associated with human cognitive work (Benbya et al. 2024, p.23).

Consequently, the emergence of GenAI does not only function as another technology within the consulting industry, but increasingly overlaps with activities that have historically been associated with consultants themselves. GenAI may not only enhance consulting work, but also gradually reshape how professional value, expertise, and differentiation are understood within the consulting industry. This creates both significant opportunities and uncertainties regarding the future evolution of consulting work and professional expertise.

2.1.1 Benefits and Positive Narratives around GenAI

Existing research highlights several potential benefits associated with the integration of GenAI into professional work. GenAI tools are increasingly being used to support tasks such as drafting and refining written materials, summarizing and synthesizing information, analyzing data, and preparing reports and presentations, which can improve productivity and enable faster insight generation (Brynjolfsson et al. 2025, pp.934-935; Gupta et al. 2025, p.10; Law & Varanasi, 2025, pp.139-142). Studies also suggest that GenAI enables entry-level professionals to complete reporting and analytical tasks more efficiently, potentially narrowing the gap with more experienced colleagues (Brynjolfsson et al. 2025, p.890; Mayer et al. 2025, p.604).

Benbya et al. (2024, pp.23-27) argue that GenAI is becoming a viable tool to enhance productivity and drive innovation across various sectors due to its ability to perform tasks that have traditionally required human judgment, interpretation, and creativity. In knowledge-intensive industries, GenAI can process and synthesize vast amounts of structured and unstructured information, uncover patterns, generate insights, and support analytical decision-making at speeds that are significantly faster than human speeds (Benbya et al. 2024, pp.24-27).

Within consulting, these capabilities directly impact the core consulting activities. GenAI has been shown to enhance process efficiency, automate routine and documentation-related tasks, optimize knowledge management, and support more accurate analysis and strategic decision-making, thereby improving service delivery, reducing costs, and fostering innovation

in consulting business models (Pattanayak, 2020, pp.5-6; Samokhvalov, 2024, p.23). Based on this, we see GenAI as a technology capable of strengthening consulting performance and competitiveness.

The growing importance of GenAI is also reflected in corporate narratives surrounding consulting firms. Research suggests that AI adoption can create new sources of competitive advantage, pushing firms to develop human-AI augmentation capabilities and adapt to rapidly changing business environments (Krakowski et al. 2023, pp.1443-1444; Xing et al. 2026, p.11). Similarly, Tavoletti et al. (2022, pp.620-621) argue that management consulting firms are reconfiguring their business models to provide end-to-end digital solutions and gain a competitive advantage during digital transformation. The emergence of GenAI intensifies this dynamic, because this means that consulting firms increasingly face pressure to integrate GenAI into their business models in order to maintain competitiveness and strengthen their market positioning (Tavoletti et al. 2022, pp.620-622).

In response, major consulting firms have invested heavily in AI initiatives, such as PwC, which announced a \$1 billion investment in AI transformation from 2023 to 2026 (PwC, 2023). These investments are strategic efforts to position consulting firms as competent AI actors capable of guiding clients through AI transformation, thereby creating demands from clients for their AI solutions (Monod et al. 2024, pp.763-764; Sharma, 2025, pp.11-12).

This positioning is also achieved through strategic communication and narrative construction. Fischer-Appelt and Dernbach (2022, p.88) define "narrative strategy" as any strategic use of narratives to plan and outline the direction of organizational change in the context of broader social narratives. Applying the context of GenAI, consulting firms therefore do not only communicate technological developments, but actively construct narratives surrounding GenAI to legitimize investments, attract clients, and strengthen their market positioning.

Existing studies suggest that corporate AI narratives frequently frame GenAI as beneficial, innovative, and complementary to human expertise, rather than disruptive or threatening (Sharma, 2025, pp.6-7; Xing et al. 2026, pp.2-4). Current metaphors like "partnership", "symbiosis" and "augmentations" as well as referring to AI as an "ally", are common in discussions about AI (Bellary & Marathe, 2025, pp. 5-6; Butler et al. 2026; Jarrahi et al. 2023).

For example, PwC consistently frames AI as “human-led, tech-powered” and emphasizes AI as an enabler that amplifies human expertise rather than replaces it (Sharma, 2025, pp.6-8). Furthermore, Sharma’s analysis shows that PwC’s AI rebranding strategy deliberately adopts an optimistic tone by portraying AI as a source of “momentum,” innovation, and future growth rather than as a disruptive force (Sharma, 2025, pp.9-10).

However, from the perspective of sociotechnical imaginaries, research argues that AI narratives do not tell us the objective descriptions of technological reality, rather they tell us the desires of those who construct them (Bareis & Katzenbach, 2022, pp.858-859). Similarly, Xing et al. (2026, pp.2-4) argue that AI narratives function as forms of sensegiving through which organizations shape stakeholder perceptions of AI initiatives. Using these perspectives, GenAI narratives function as strategic organizational tools used to influence how stakeholders interpret GenAI adoption.

Consequently, existing studies suggest that corporate AI narratives may sometimes emphasize opportunities and benefits while downplaying limitations, uncertainties, or disruptive implications associated with the technology (Monod et al. 2024, p.764; Sharma, 2025, pp.4-9). Xing et al. (2026, pp.1-2) highlight that firms may engage in symbolic AI narratives that overstate AI engagement without fully reflecting underlying technological realities. In line with this, Monod et al. (2024, p.761) argue that consulting firms tend to disseminate relatively simplistic and ambiguous discourses surrounding digital transformation.

Taken together, these studies indicate that the dominant, positive narratives surrounding GenAI in consulting should not automatically be treated as objective representations of technological reality. Rather, they may also reflect consulting firms’ strategic efforts to maintain legitimacy, reinforce market relevance, attract clients, and position themselves competitively within the broader societal discourse surrounding GenAI.

2.1.2 The Challenges and Ambiguity of GenAI in Consulting

Despite the positive narratives surrounding GenAI, existing literature also highlights several uncertainties surrounding GenAI. Drawing on a broader study of the future of professions, including the consulting industry, Susskind and Susskind (2017, pp.125-128) argue that

technological development is transforming professional work. Furthermore, they emphasize that the focus of this transformation lays on automation, new forms of expertise distribution, and the potential replacement of traditional professionals by machines or non-experts.

In line with this perspective, other studies suggest that GenAI might redefine clients' views on the value consultants can add (Brynjolfsson et al. 2025, pp.895-897; Samokhvalov, 2024, p.61). Brynjolfsson et al. (2025, pp.895-897) suggests that GenAI enables automation of labor-intensive tasks such as data collection, analysis, and presentation, which are traditionally performed by junior consultants, allowing firms to deliver insights faster and at a lower cost. As faster data processing and real-time analysis become increasingly accessible through GenAI, clients may also begin to expect more rapid, responsive, and highly customized solutions from consulting firms (Samokhvalov, 2024, p.61). Consequently, the traditional value of manual analytical work and routine "data crunching" may gradually decline, potentially reshaping client expectations toward more senior-level engagement (Samokhvalov, 2024, p.61).

GenAI developments may also require consulting firms to reconsider their existing business and pricing models, which are often based on selling billable hours for labor-intensive work (Samokhvalov, 2024, p.64). These firms may explore alternative pricing structures, such as outcome- or performance-based fee models. At the same time, consultants' role may evolve from being mere "service suppliers" to "strategic partners", who focus on high-value outcomes rather than hours worked, and as "agents of thought", where the primary value is derived from independent reasoning, professional judgment, and high-level strategic insight rather than data processing (Samokhvalov, 2024, pp.63-64).

Interestingly, existing studies present competing perspectives on whether GenAI will ultimately complement or replace human expertise. One perspective, positions technology as a complement to enhance and optimize traditional ways of working, making professionals more efficient (Susskind & Susskind, 2017, pp.125-126). This perspective aligns with studies suggesting that while AI can automate routine tasks, it also creates opportunities for new forms of human-machine collaboration, rather than replacing human consultants entirely (Raisch & Krakowski, 2021; Jarrahi, 2018). According to this perspective, human interaction, judgment,

and strategic thinking remain the core strengths that continue to differentiate human consultants from AI systems.

However, another perspective points toward a more disruptive future, where increasingly capable systems will substitute professional roles altogether (Susskind & Susskind, 2017, pp.134-135). In this scenario, the authors (2017, pp.134-135) argue that while technology currently streamlines traditional methods, in the long run, increasingly capable systems will "substitute" for human professionals by taking over the tasks traditionally reserved for them. This means that the role of consultants as exclusive holders of expertise may gradually erode, as knowledge becomes more accessible through technology. Consequently, this uncertainty could lead to a decline in the traditional "grand bargain", in which professionals acted as exclusive gatekeepers of expertise (Susskind & Susskind, 2017, p.138).

Taken together, these perspectives highlight the ambiguity surrounding GenAI in the consulting industry. On the one hand, GenAI is framed as a strategic opportunity capable of enhancing productivity, enabling innovation, and strengthening consulting capabilities. On the other hand, GenAI also raises uncertainties regarding changing client expectations, shifting business models, and the future relevance of consulting expertise.

2.2 Technology as a Trigger for Sensemaking

The following section will center on sensemaking. Sensemaking, as an interpersonal process, can resolve ambiguity (Lutgen-Sandvik's, 2008, p.106) and thereby help us to understand how consultants make sense of the ambiguity surrounding GenAI.

The concept of sensemaking, developed by Weick et al. (2005, pp.409-412), involves the process of turning circumstances into a comprehensible situation that can be articulated explicitly in words and serves as a basis for action. Sensemaking is a process in which individuals or groups extract specific signals or cues from their surroundings in order to interpret them and create plausible explanations to guide their actions (Weick, 1995 pp.30-31). This provides us with a framework for understanding how individuals and organizations create meaning in ambiguous or uncertain situations.

Due to the rapid technological advancements, academic scholars have also applied sensemaking theory to the study of technological change in organizations (see among others

Griffith, 1999; Scarbrough et al. 2025). Technology-triggered sensemaking is defined as the process by which individuals and groups construct meaning when encountering new or changed technology that disrupt their established routines (Weick, 1990 cited in Scarbrough et.al, 2025, p.1886).

Sensemaking is usually triggered when people are forced to "switch cognitive gears" from automatic, habitual behavior to active thinking (Griffith, 1999, pp.480-481). The author identifies specific conditions that act as catalysts for sensemaking: First is novelty, which occurs when a technology or the situation it creates is unfamiliar or previously unknown. Second is discrepancy, which happens when there is a gap between what an individual expects to happen and what they actually observe. Third are deliberate initiatives, such as management directives that require individuals to adopt or engage with new technologies (Griffith, 1999, p.479).

Another central assumption of this line of research is that technology is naturally ambiguous, allowing for multiple interpretations among organizational members (Weick, 1990 cited in Bergving & Pettersson, 2025, p.18). According to this perspective, technology is recognized as being equivocal, admitting "several possible or plausible interpretations" (Weick, 1990 cited in Goto, 2022, p.79). A technology can be understood in very different ways by various people in diverse contexts. The impact of technology depends not only on its technical features, but also on how individuals within an organization interpret and enact it. Thus, it is necessary for individuals and groups to make sense of technology before acting on it.

Recent studies have extended this perspective by examining how GenAI intensifies sensemaking processes. Scarbrough et al. (2025, p.1886) argue that GenAI acts as a particularly powerful trigger because it is an epistemic technology, meaning it is involved in producing and validating knowledge. Unlike previous technologies, which only affected work at the margins, AI challenges the fundamental knowledge claims and jurisdictions of professional groups. This challenge intensifies sensemaking efforts as professionals must reconcile the machine's "black boxed" outputs with their own expert judgment. As a result, this sensemaking becomes critical to determine whether AI is perceived as a threat to one's professional agency or an opportunity to expand it. This often shifts the focus from mundane executional tasks to higher-level strategic or thinking roles (Scarbrough et al. 2025).

Another study by Orlikowski and Gash (1994, pp.197-199) introduces the concept of technological frames, which refers to the assumptions, expectations, and knowledge that individuals develop about a technology through sensemaking. The authors argue that technological frames are a product of sensemaking processes. When individuals encounter new technology, they must interpret its purpose, functionality, and implications for their work. This sensemaking process involves drawing on existing cognitive structures, assumptions, and expectations to make sense of the unfamiliar. This paper also highlights that sensemaking is not a purely individual activity but a social process. Members of a group or community often share technological frames that guide their collective understanding and actions toward technology. These literatures help to explain why technologies such as GenAI should be viewed as an equivocal object whose impact towards the organization depends on how consultants interpret its meaning.

Combined, this body of literature provides a foundation for understanding technology as a trigger for sensemaking, particularly in contexts characterized by ambiguity and disruption.

2.3 Ways Consultants Deal with Ambiguity

As consultants encounter competing narratives and uncertain implications triggered by GenAI, they may engage in processes of meaning construction to understand what the technology means for their professional identity. Their interpretation of these situations can be understood through the lens of sensemaking. Therefore, we will focus in the following subchapter on ways individuals can engage in sensemaking.

2.3.1 Time Dimensions Impact Sensemaking

According to Weick (1995, p.17), sensemaking originally contains seven properties: identity, retrospect, enactment, social contact, ongoing events, cues, and plausibility. A comprehensive review of sensemaking by Maitlis and Christianson (2014) shows that more recent studies highlight the importance of the temporal dimension of sensemaking. Focusing on the temporal dimension, sensemaking involves making sense of past events (Weick, 1995, p.24), focusing on plausibility rather than accuracy in the present (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p.415) and imagining a desirable scenario for the future (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015, p.24). In the

following we will explain how these three dimensions could impact consultants' sensemaking regarding GenAI.

Retrospective Sensemaking

Sensemaking was inherently introduced by Weick (1995, pp.24-29) as a retrospective process, meaning that individuals make sense of events by looking back at what has already happened. According to Weick (1995, p.24), retrospective sensemaking happens after an event or disruption. It is triggered by ambiguity or interruptions in ongoing activities, prompting individuals to reflect on past actions and events to restore order. By anchoring GenAI in familiar historical patterns of technological change, we assume that consultants could engage in retrospective sensemaking. This process involves interpreting current situations by looking back at past experiences and observations to construct plausible interpretations of the present events.

Plausibility

Furthermore, we think that consultants could engage in the sensemaking process by not only recalling the past events, but also by making use of events in the present. In this case, consultants could make use of plausibility. Plausibility, as core property of sensemaking, seeks to construct interpretations that appear reasonable, coherent, and credible enough to sustain action, rather than being objectively accurate representations of reality (Weick, 1995, p.57). Since GenAI is causing ambiguous situations for consultants, we assume that consultants do not necessarily seek the most accurate explanation. Rather, they seek an account that is plausible and fits the available cues well enough to enable continued action. Therefore, plausibility could serve as a "good enough" explanation that fits the situation. This would enable consultants to move on with their daily activities, and making further questioning or critical reassessment unnecessary.

Prospective Sensemaking

While literature on retrospective sensemaking and plausibility provides insights into how consultants could make sense of GenAI, Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015, p.18) argue that a strong emphasis in retrospective sensemaking, often overlooks the importance of considering the future. This risks neglecting events such as strategic discussions or anticipations of future

scenarios. However, considering the future is essential, as individuals often construct interpretations by anticipating a possible future (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015, p.18). Building on this critique of retrospective sensemaking, scholars have introduced a future-oriented dimension, referred to as prospective sensemaking (Patvardhan et al. 2018). Prospective sensemaking occurs before an event happens. It is proactive and forward-looking, aiming to create meaning and understanding about future possibilities (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015, pp.24-26). Prospective sensemaking involves envisioning a desired or possible future and constructing a plausible path back to the present (Patvardhan et al. 2018, p.4). This process is often supported by what Gioia et al. (2002, p.623) describes as future-perfect thinking, where actors imagine a future state such as "this will have happened", and then work backwards to make sense of how to achieve it.

Understanding GenAI requires prospective sensemaking because, unlike traditional technologies that can be evaluated based on past performance, GenAI is characterized by rapidly evolving phenomena driven by future expectations, high uncertainty, and complex internal operations (Särner et al. 2024, p.73). GenAI is also often perceived as a "black box" due to its complex internal operations and probabilistic outcomes (Särner et al. 2024, p.73). As a result, individuals often cannot rely solely on retrospective experience to interpret its implications. Instead, prospective sensemaking helps individuals anticipate future possibilities and understand the potential applications and implications of GenAI, thereby reducing uncertainty in its integration into existing systems.

Furthermore, prospective sensemaking is particularly relevant in the context of consulting, because consultants are not only interpreting what GenAI currently does, but also what it means for the future of their industry. This includes implications for expertise, staffing structures, client expectations, and business models. Thus, prospective sensemaking could enable consultants to construct plausible future scenarios, which might help them to reduce uncertainty and guide present actions despite uncertainty.

2.3.2 Identity Impacts Sensemaking

Given the challenges that GenAI poses to the consulting industry, GenAI can be seen as a potential threat in the future. Previous literature suggests that threats to existing and desired future identities can serve as a stimulus for sensemaking (Petriglieri, 2011, pp.644-657; Vough et al. 2020, p.249). This showcases not only how technology triggers prospective sensemaking, but also points out the connection between sensemaking and identity.

Identity refers to individuals' answers to the questions 'Who am I?' and 'Who are we?' (Ashforth et al. 2008, p.327). Although abundant research has shown that a threat to one's identity can trigger sensemaking (Petriglieri, 2011, p.644-657; Vough et al. 2020, p.249), the precise relationship between identity and sensemaking remains unclear, as the literature intersects and offers many different interpretations (Vough et al. 2020, p. 246).

One body of literature focuses on how sensemaking influences identity (Vough et al. 2020, p.246). These scholars view sensemaking as a mechanism "through which identity work occurs" (Vough et al. 2020, p.251) and therefore, uses sensemaking as a lens to understand identity construction (Vough et al. 2020, p.246). However, another body of literature argues that sensemaking is a broader process of which identity work is a part, implying that it is identity that influences sensemaking (Vough et al. 2020, p.246). According to this perspective, who we think we are as individuals, shapes how we interpret and respond to situations (Weick, 1995, p.22).

While we acknowledge the need for an "integrative approach that conceptualizes identity and sensemaking as two interwoven, recursive processes" (Vough et al. 2020, p.246), we decided to focus on how identity impacts sensemaking. We based our decision on Vough et al. (2020, p.253), who argue that the "authors' focus on understanding sensemaking or identity processes" decides which construct is primary and which secondary.

As we are interested in consultants' sensemaking process, we aim to explore how the professional identity of consultants could influence their sensemaking regarding GenAI. Therefore, we will focus on the following on how identity impacts sensemaking. Our decision

is also in line with Weick's (1995, pp.22-23) study, which describes identity construction as the central property among the seven properties of sensemaking. Thus, identity construction next to other properties like retrospective and plausibility impacts how individuals make sense of their experiences, which we will explain more in detail in the following.

Ambiguity in consultants professional identity

Professional identity in consulting revolves around elitism (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006, pp.197-200). Hereby, elitism can be described as "a view of being amongst 'the best'" (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006, p.197). Emphasis is placed on attempts to differentiate consultants towards other professions (Gill, 2015, p.15) in order to create an identity that is superior to other professions (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006, p.200). This image of an elite profession is constructed through a variety of strategic and symbolic mechanisms (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006, pp.200-203).

In addition to financial rewards (Gill, 2015, p.17), consulting companies attempt to construct an elite identity through highly selective recruiting practices. These firms adopt rigorous selection processes with high rejection rates and an emphasis on high academic backgrounds, portraying the profession of a consultant as highly skilled and capable, ensuring that only the "very best and the brightest" candidates are hired (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006, p.203). On a broader scale, this reinforces the perception of exclusivity and high standards within consulting, where every role, from junior to partner, is marked by a sense of elitism (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006, p.197). Social interactions with colleagues and clients further reinforce aligning one's self-identity with the social identity of success provided by the firm (Gill, 2025, p.24).

The working conditions in consulting foster high levels of loyalty and commitment to the company (Gill, 2015, pp.24-26). Perceiving oneself as part of an elite profession leads to a high level of self-confidence (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006, p.211) and provides consultants with "ontological security", which is a relatively secure sense of self (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006, p.221). This sense of self makes consultants see themselves as "successful people" and allows them to function effectively in highly ambiguous work environments (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006, p.221; Styhre et al. 2009, pp.170-172).

At the same time, annual rankings and yearly promotions move consultants up the hierarchy, where a sense of elitism is constructed by following a strict “up-or-out” logic (Alvesson, 2012). This means that consultants either receive a promotion or must leave the company.

This up-or-out mechanism contrasts with the "ontological security" that identifying with an elite identity might bring. Instead, this up-or-out mechanism in annual rankings makes individual consultants feel easily replaceable if they do not perform or behave according to the company's wishes (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006, p.214). Furthermore, it creates a consistent fear of losing one's job and the status that follows with it (Gill, 2015, p.29). These working conditions create a “highly competitive, hierarchical, individualistic and sometimes insecure” environment (Sturdy, 1997, p.407), in which consultants experiencing pressure and status anxiety (Gill, 2015, pp.26-30; Sturdy, 1997, pp.390-400).

Further research has found out that consultants have a tendency to play down anxiety and to appear confident in order to protect their elite professional identity (Gill, 2015, p.23). In line with this, consultants face pressure to hide any thoughts or behaviors that could be contradictory towards their elite identity (Gill, 2015, p.22). These companies' attempts to regulate consultants' identity are marked by the mechanism of identity regulation, which is defined as “the more or less intentional effects of social practices upon processes of identity construction and reconstruction” (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p.625). Existing research shows that in the consulting industry these attempts to identity regulation are strong (Alvesson, 2012; Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Gill, 2015).

In line with Alvesson (2012), we argue that a consultants' identity is an ambiguous mix between a sense of elitism and being superior towards the client and facing pressure, uncertainties and anxiety at the same time. Especially, regarding the uncertainties and anxiety consultants face, there is limited research (Gill, 2015, p.10).

It is also unclear to what extent identity triggers sensemaking, as literature concerning this topic is contradictory. Some researchers claim that sensemaking is a suitable and necessary component to deal with identity threats (Lutgen-Sandvik's, 2008, p.106; Vough et al. 2020, p.249). Additionally, researchers have drawn the connection that individuals' professional self-identity can be seen not only as an ongoing process, but also as a “continually constructed narrative” (Gill, 2015, p.4 based on Giddens, 1991; see also Rhodes & Brown, 2005,

pp.176-177). The constant aim for an elite identity limits consultants “to draw on other narratives of self” (Gill, 2015, p.21). Consequently, the elite identity becomes an important source for consultants’ sensemaking process.

Contrary to the idea that identity triggers sensemaking, other research has found out that identity threats can also inhibit sensemaking (Murphy, 2001, pp.44-46; Vough, 2020, p.249). Here a strongly held identity can constrain sensemaking. For example, in Murphy’s (2001) study of flight attendants identity constructions around the female gender became a barrier for sensemaking in a crisis, as the female stewards had difficulties responding in a suitable authoritative manner as it contradicted their identity of possessing a calm and service oriented personality.

Combined, existing sensemaking research explains how individuals interpret ambiguity, how technology triggers meaning-making, and how future-oriented interpretations can guide action. However, it remains ambiguous how consultants construct narratives in relation to their professional identity when there is ambiguity and simultaneously multiple perspectives on GenAI. By paying attention to the narratives that consultants construct on GenAI, we expect to gain a deeper understanding of how consultants make sense of the ambiguity surrounding GenAI.

3 Methodology

The following chapter outlines the methodology of our study. Firstly, we present the research approach, including the interpretivist tradition, qualitative methodology, and abductive research logic behind the study. Secondly, we describe the research design and data collection process, which included twelve in-depth interviews with management consultants from the Big Four consulting firms. Lastly, we present our approach to data analysis and conclude with reflections on the credibility, reflexivity, and limitations of our qualitative research.

3.1 Research Approach

This study aims to understand and explore how individual consultants make sense of GenAI in relation to their professional identity. In this study, we seek to understand how consultants interpret and respond to the ambiguity surrounding GenAI, as it presents both opportunities and potential threats to the future relevance of the consulting industry.

This study adopts a qualitative approach based on the interpretivist tradition and the symbolic interactionism sub-tradition. The symbolic interactionist (SI) perspective emphasizes that organizational phenomena should be understood through the “everyday interpretations and negotiations of local organizational actors” (Prasad, 2018, p.14). This perspective aligns with the assumption that the meanings of GenAI are socially constructed and continuously interpreted through consultants’ experiences, interactions, and their professional identity.

The study follows an abductive research approach, which allows the researchers a continuous movement between empirical findings and theoretical concepts throughout the research process (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2017, pp.4-7). Combined, these approaches allow us to shift the focus from whether GenAI changes consulting work to how consultants themselves construct meaning around these changes and how such interpretations shape their understanding of professional identity.

Interpretivist Tradition

The study is grounded in the interpretivist tradition, which suggests that reality is not an objective and fixed entity, but rather a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by individuals’ lived experiences, interpretations, and interactions (Prasad, 2018, pp.14-16). In line with this

tradition, the study seeks to understand how consultants construct meanings around GenAI through their everyday interpretations and social interactions rather than treating technological change as an objective phenomenon.

Central to the interpretivist tradition is the concept of “Verstehen”, meaning understanding social reality from the perspective of the individuals experiencing it. This study focuses on how consultants construct meanings around GenAI through their everyday interactions and interpretations (Prasad, 2018, p.14). Therefore, the research explores how consultants themselves interpret GenAI and how these interpretations influence their understanding of professional identity within consulting.

More specifically, this study adopts the SI sub-tradition, which is key to understanding the process of how individuals construct meaning in social situations (Prasad, 2018, pp.19-30). SI aligns closely with the theoretical foundation of sensemaking because both perspectives emphasize that meanings emerge through ongoing interpretation and interaction. As Prasad and Prasad (2000, p.389) argue, organizational phenomena should be understood through the “everyday interpretations and negotiations of local organizational actors” rather than being treated as self-evident realities. Similarly, they argue that researchers should focus on “the actual interpretive practices through which knowledge about it is acquired and communicated” (p.389).

This perspective is particularly relevant to our research question: How do individual consultants make sense of GenAI in relation to their professional identity?

To understand how individual consultants respond to technological changes, our research draws on sensemaking theory, which conceptualizes sensemaking as the process through which individuals interpret and construct meaning in situations characterized by uncertainty, ambiguity, or disruption (Weick, 1995, pp.91-92). SI emphasizes that individuals assign subjective meanings to symbols, objects, and behaviors based on social context, which then guide their actions (Prasad, 2018, p.21).

Therefore, connecting this perspective with sensemaking allows us to position GenAI as not only a technological tool, but also a symbolic object whose meaning is continuously interpreted and socially constructed within consulting practice.

Furthermore, research work in the SI tradition emphasizes the importance of language because it provides a system of shared symbols through which people interpret situations and construct social reality (Prasad, 2018, p.25). Therefore, this study examines commonly used expressions in consulting discourse, such as “accelerator,” “augmentation,” and “human-AI symbiosis” (Jarrahi, 2018; Sharma, 2025). Rather than assessing whether these claims are objectively accurate, the analysis focuses on how such terms function as symbolic objects through which consultants interpret the role of GenAI in their work and the corporate narratives surrounding GenAI.

To further explain how individual consultants interpret GenAI even though they face uncertainty about its impact on their professional identity, we also explore the roots of the SI theory, which stem from the work of George Herbert Mead (1913). In his theory of “the social self,” Mead distinguishes between the “I” and the “Me”. The “Me” represents the socialized aspect of a person, learned through interactions, roles, and the “generalized other”, while “I” represents the individual's immediate, spontaneous, and creative response to the “Me”.

In this context, the positive corporate narrative surrounding GenAI is understood as part of the “Me”, where consultants are expected to express a positive attitude toward GenAI. At the same time, the individual consultant might privately interpret this narrative differently from the “Me” or even question its validity, reflecting on the “I.”

Qualitative Research Strategy

Given the focus on how consultants engage in sensemaking surrounding GenAI, this research adopts a qualitative research strategy with an interpretive lens. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the purpose of the study is to understand how consultants interpret and give meaning to GenAI in relation to their professional identity, rather than to measure relationships between variables or test predefined hypotheses.

Qualitative research is well-suited for exploring the processes of interpretation, subjective experiences, and meaning-making processes within specific organizational contexts (Prasad, 2018, p.16-19). In line with the interpretivist tradition, this approach enabled us to explore how consultants talk about GenAI, how they describe its impact on consulting work, and how they reflect on the future relevance of their expertise and profession.

Abductive Research Approach

This research uses an abductive approach, whereby analysis iteratively moves between empirical observations and existing theoretical frameworks throughout the research process. Rather than following an inductive approach, which primarily develops theory from observed data, or a deductive approach, which applies pre-existing theories to interpret findings, the abductive approach allows us to combine elements of both approaches in order to refine our interpretations and understanding of the phenomenon. Alvesson and Kärreman (2007, p.713) argue that research often requires a more flexible and realistic approach that allows for continuous interaction between theory and empirical material rather than relying exclusively on either deduction or induction.

Our initial interest emerged from observing the growing discourse surrounding GenAI within the consulting industry, followed by the ambiguity regarding its implications for consulting work. During the interview process and early stages of the analysis, several themes related to uncertainty, normalization, professional relevance, and identity began to appear. We then engaged more deeply with literature on sensemaking, professional identity, consulting as knowledge-intensive work, and technological change.

At the same time, existing theoretical studies also shaped how we interpreted the empirical material. For example, sensemaking theory helped us understand how consultants interpreted and responded to the ambiguity surrounding GenAI, while professional identity literature supported our understanding of why consultants repeatedly emphasized the themes related to the uniqueness of human consultants such as human judgment, expertise, and relationship-building. Thus, the abductive approach therefore enabled continuous interaction between the theoretical framework and the empirical material, rather than following a strictly linear process.

3.2 Research Design

Based on our interest in exploring consultants' sensemaking and the opportunities that a qualitative research approach provides, we conducted semi-structured interviews with management consultants. This approach allows a flexible way to deeply engage with participants' views and social contexts (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, pp.5-15). The interviews

were designed to focus on consultants' experiences, reflections, and interpretations of the corporate narrative around GenAI, rather than technical assessments of AI systems.

For our unit of analysis, we chose management consultants working at the Big Four. The Big Four are the major international consulting and audit companies: KPMG, Deloitte, EY and PwC (Zorio-Grima & Carmona, 2019, p.952). Although these companies incorporate audit divisions, we decided to interview only employees from the consulting divisions, as the nature of work between consulting and audit differs significantly. This is especially the case regarding repetitive tasks and the impact and significance GenAI has on their work. To gain a broader picture on how consultants make sense of GenAI, we aimed to interview consultants from junior consultants up to partners to thereby cover the whole hierarchy inside consulting. Nevertheless, we decided to exclude interns and working students as these positions involve working at the company for a very limited time (often just three months), which limits their insights into the company. Additionally, these individuals are often students. By possessing a student identity alongside a professional identity, we assume that the identification with the professional identity of a consultant differs from that of full-time employed consultants. Furthermore, to gain more accurate and up-to-date results, consultants had to be active employees in the company, therefore we excluded retired consultants and ex-Big Four consultants that work now at another company.

Lastly, we decided to limit our sample to Scandinavia (Denmark, Sweden and Norway) and the DACH region (Austria, Germany and Switzerland) region. This decision was based on the fact, that in a global comparison, the countries in both regions are highly developed Western-countries that are all part of the European Economic Area and have therefore a similar economic system. Especially regarding management consulting service, research has indicated that both regions have similar work related cultures with respect to Hofstede's (1999) dimensions of individualism and power distance (Pemer et al. 2014, pp.274-276). Nevertheless, we are aware of cultural differences between Scandinavia and the DACH region. However, we decided to focus our sample on these two regions because the Big Four firms standardize most of their corporate communication and branding strategies internationally (Zorio-Grima & Carmona, 2019, p.979). This allowed us to draw on the same corporate narrative regarding GenAI when interviewing consultants from different countries.

3.3 Data Collection Process

This research uses qualitative, semi-structured interviews to understand and explore how individuals working in management consultancy firms make sense of GenAI in relation to their professional identity. We use semi-structured interviews since they provide flexibility to explore participants' interpretations, reflections, and experiences in depth while still maintaining alignment with the research purpose (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, pp.65-72).

The data collection process consisted of three main stages: sample selection, development of the interview guide, and the interview process.

Sample Collection

This research used purposive sampling to select interviewees with relevant experience and knowledge related to consulting work and GenAI. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which participants are intentionally selected because they can provide valuable and relevant insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Saunders & Townsend, 2018, p.485). In line with our research design, participants were selected based on three main criteria: working within Big Four consulting firms in the Scandinavian or DACH region, holding active consulting roles, and working outside of tax or accounting functions.

Participants were recruited through several channels, including the Lund University alumni network, personal contacts, and guest speakers at Lund University School of Economics and Management. Some consultants also acted as gatekeepers, helping to recruit additional interviewees through their professional networks. Initial contact was reached primarily through LinkedIn and email outreach, where we introduced the purpose and the theme of our research on GenAI and consulting.

Although many consultants expressed interest and willingness in being interviewed, scheduling interviews was often challenging because of time constraints and demanding work schedules from the consultants side. To address this, the interviews were planned two weeks to one month in advance, including offering flexible schedules in the evening and weekend interviews when necessary. Most interviews were conducted online, which helped us to get interview participation across different locations. Nevertheless, we had the chance to conduct the first

two interviews in person at one of the Big Four offices in Malmö, which provided additional opportunities for us to observe consultants' body language during the conversations.

The final sample consisted of 12 management consultants from the Big Four consulting firms: EY, KPMG, PwC, and Deloitte. To ensure a broader range of perspectives across firms, the sample included consultants from different organizational levels ranging from junior consultants to partners, including one partner-level interviewees. We managed to have a balanced distribution of participants across firms: EY (2), KPMG (4), PwC (3), and Deloitte (3). Focusing on consultants from multiple seniority levels allowed us to explore the potentially different interpretations of GenAI.

No	Pseudonym	Service Line	Location	Role
1	Lukas	Customer & Operation	Sweden	Junior Consultant
2	Elias	Customer & Operation	Sweden	Director
3	Henrik	Customer & Operation	Sweden	Partner
4	Daniel	Healthcare & Life Sciences	Sweden	Junior Consultant
5	Jonas	Technology Consulting	Sweden	Senior Manager
6	Maya	Business Consulting	Sweden	Senior Consultant
7	Matteo	HR Consulting	Germany	Senior Consultant
8	Sofia	HR Consulting	Germany	Junior Consultant
9	Clara	Finance Transformation	Germany	Junior Consultant
10	Viktoria	HR Consulting	Sweden	Consultant
11	Elena	Customer & Marketing	Sweden	Director
12	Martin	Social Innovation	Austria	Consultant

Table 1: Interview Participants

Development of the Interview Guide

The interview guide was developed based on the theoretical foundations of sensemaking, SI, and professional identity as discussed in the literature review. Following the semi-structured interview format, the interview guide combined the predefined themes with the flexibility to

explore unexpected insights emerging during the interview (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018, pp.65-72).

Prior to developing the interview guide, both researchers explored the current GenAI discourse within the consulting industry through consulting reports, company websites, business magazines, podcasts, LinkedIn posts, and YouTube videos. This helped us to get some sense of how consulting firms publicly framed GenAI, including recurring narratives, metaphors, and vocabulary or jargons used. Familiarity with these discourses enabled us to confront consultants with the same language commonly used within the firms. Additionally, we had several informal conversations with consultants, former consultants, and interns to gain a better understanding of the topic, its nuances, and context of the industry. These conversations allowed us to check the consultants' familiarity with GenAI-related discussions, test our initial interview questions, and refine the wording when certain questions or concepts appeared unclear or too abstract. Consequently, the new sharpened interview questions helped us to ask critical questions while smoothing the interview process.

The final interview guide was designed to focus on consultants' experiences, reflections, and interpretations around GenAI, rather than on technical assessments of AI systems. The interview guide is structured around three major themes: (1) daily interaction with GenAI, (2) consultants' relationship with GenAI, and (3) future-oriented reflections about consulting work with GenAI.

The first theme focused on consultants' everyday work practices to give consultants a comfortable starting point for the conversation, as the questions were more intuitive to answer. The second theme explored how consultants positioned themselves in relation to GenAI. We used three metaphors identified in prior literature to facilitate reflection and discussion: partner, symbiosis, and augmentation (Bellary & Marathe, 2025, pp. 5-6; Butler et al. 2026; Jarrahi et al. 2023). The third theme concerned about the future of consulting and the ambiguity surrounding GenAI's potential implications. Here, the interviews became more critical by contrasting participants' future-oriented answers with their earlier responses. This approach aimed to explore whether consultants perceived GenAI as a potential existential threat to their consulting work and how they responded when confronted with ambiguity, uncertainty, and contradictions around the topic.

Throughout the research process, the interview guide was continuously refined in line with the abductive approach and slightly adjusted depending on each individual consultants' roles, service lines and professional backgrounds.

Conduction of Interviews

Between March and April 2026, we conducted 12 semi-structured interviews. Most of the interviews were conducted online via either Microsoft Teams or Google Meet, while two interviews were held in person. Each interview lasted between approximately 45 and 60 minutes. We intentionally did not send the interview questions beforehand because we wanted to capture the participants' immediate and spontaneous reflections rather than their overly prepared responses.

Before each interview, we did our formal introduction, introduced the purpose of our research, informed participants about anonymity and confidentiality, and asked for consent to audio-record the interview. To protect the participants' privacy and comfort, no video recordings were conducted, and all interviewees were assigned pseudonyms during the transcription and analysis process. Following the completion of the thesis, all recordings and transcripts will be deleted. After obtaining permission, interviews were recorded using mobile devices and later transcribed using the dictate function in Microsoft Word. The transcripts were subsequently reviewed and corrected manually while listening to the original recordings to ensure transcription accuracy.

During the interviews, both researchers adopted a collaborative division of responsibilities. One researcher facilitated the interview focused on posing structured inquiries, while the second researcher focused more on listening attentively, observing non-verbal expressions (e.g., gestures, tone, and body language), and identifying opportunities for deeper follow-up questions to ensure comprehensive and nuanced data collection. According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2018, pp.63-64), attention to participants' tone, expressions, and body language can provide richer access to meaning beyond the transcribed text itself. The roles between researchers shifted across interviews depending on the interviewees.

The interviews were conducted in English, although most of the interviewees were not native English speakers. We were aware that language differences could affect how certain ideas,

technical terms, and expressions were articulated, expressed or understood. However, the multilingual background of the researchers became advantageous in several situations. For example, German-speaking participants occasionally expressed themselves more freely in German, while other interviewees occasionally incorporated Swedish expressions during the interviews. In these cases, the researcher directly translated the German or Swedish expressions to English, so that the interviewed consultant could repeat the same statement again in English in the interview. Additionally, both researchers' prior work experience within the consulting industry helped to facilitate credibility and smoother follow-up discussions. In particular, one of the researcher's background in IT and consulting helped establish credibility during the conversations and enabled more nuanced follow-up questions regarding consulting practices, organizational dynamics, and GenAI-related discussions.

During the interviews, the interview guide remained flexible, which allowed us to prioritize core questions while adjusting follow-up questions depending on time constraints and the flow of each conversation.

3.4 Data Analysis

Throughout our analysis, we focused on the interpretivist main focus "Verstehen", to understand consulting's sensemaking process. Therefore, we aimed to move beyond the surface level of the direct quotes and tried to understand the meaning of metaphors and other rhetorical expressions and identify recurring patterns, paradoxes, and lastly central narratives in the consultants' answers.

Based on the literature prior explained, that narratives are a mechanism of sensemaking (Weick et al. 2005, p.409), we expected exploring consultants' narratives to give us access to the underlying ways of sensemaking consultants engage in. In our analysis we were guided by the three steps Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) suggest: sorting, reducing and arguing. At the same time it is important to mention that, in line with the abductive approach of our thesis, the analysis was conducted in iterative steps.

Based on the methodology of Gioia and Hamilton (2013) we started our analysis with a first-order analysis, where we used participants' direct quotes and focused on interviewees' own words and phrases. This step was followed by a second-order analysis, in which we

abstracted themes into broader aggregated dimensions. In the last step, the argumentation, we connected our findings with existing research, leading us to the discussion of our findings.

Initial Coding Process

Based on the three temporal dimensions of sensemaking and our first discussions after the interviews, we decided to start our analysis based on the three properties of sensemaking: retrospective, plausibility and prospective. We then marked quotes in the transcripts in three different colours in relation to the type of sensemaking we observed.

Considering the literature, we were also aware that the professional identity could also influence consultants' sensemaking regarding GenAI. Therefore we marked in another colour statements that were connected to consultants professional identity. Since we encountered paradoxes in the interviews, meaning contradictory claims within one consultant's answers as well as between different interviews, we decided to mark in additional colour, if a quote consisted next to one of the three temporal dimensions or the identity dimension, also of a paradox. On top of that we commented on quotes that used rhetorical expressions such as metaphors, repetitions, or exaggerations. These rhetorical expressions gave us additional valuable insights into the sensemaking process of consultants.

We then collected all the highlighted quotes in an Excel file and added a column indicating the broader topic to which this quote belonged: identity, retrospective, plausibility, or prospective.

Theme Development

Secondly, we looked for patterns and differences between the direct quotes and came up first with first-order quotes. It is important to mention that each first-order quote had to consist of a minimum of two quotes from two different consultants. Later, we interpreted and grouped the first-order codes into more general second-order quotes by identifying different broader patterns. Thereby, we obtained a more abstract view of the consultants' answers.

Throughout the entire theme development phase, we continuously reduced the amount of quotes whenever we decided that a quote offered more noise than relevance to our thesis. Furthermore, it is important to mention that the whole analysis process was iterative.

In this process, we constantly reviewed our codes together to increase coding consistency. The themes and finally findings evolved through a back-and-forth movement between data and theory. In this iterative process, some quotes were reduced and the structure of the first- and-second-order codes was changed several times to gain a more accurate analysis.

Final Analytical Framework: Arguing

The last step, the argumentation, began already during the sorting and reduction process of the quotes. We developed our final coding framework. In this last step we also interpreted our findings and placed them in a broader context. We saw and argued how the direct quotes reflect the theory of sensemaking and professional identity, providing insights into how consultants deal with the ambiguity of the changes that GenAI brings to their industry.

Paying special attention to the paradoxes provided valuable insights into how consultants cope with uncertainty, but also whenever they seem to avoid it. By connecting the paradoxes with Mead's "I" and "Me", we examined the paradoxes from a different perspective, which gave us valuable insight into these dynamics.

Through theorization and connecting our findings with existing research on the temporal dimensions of sensemaking, we further saw how three major narratives emerge out of the aggregated dimension: retrospective, plausibility, and prospective sensemaking.

Based on this, we further developed these narratives and integrated them into our aggregated dimensions. As a result, our redefined aggregated dimensions consist of the following: It made no difference: Retrospective Sensemaking; It makes my day easier: Plausibility; It will make a better future: Prospective Sensemaking; and Protection of Professional Identity.

The following figure shows our final coding framework:

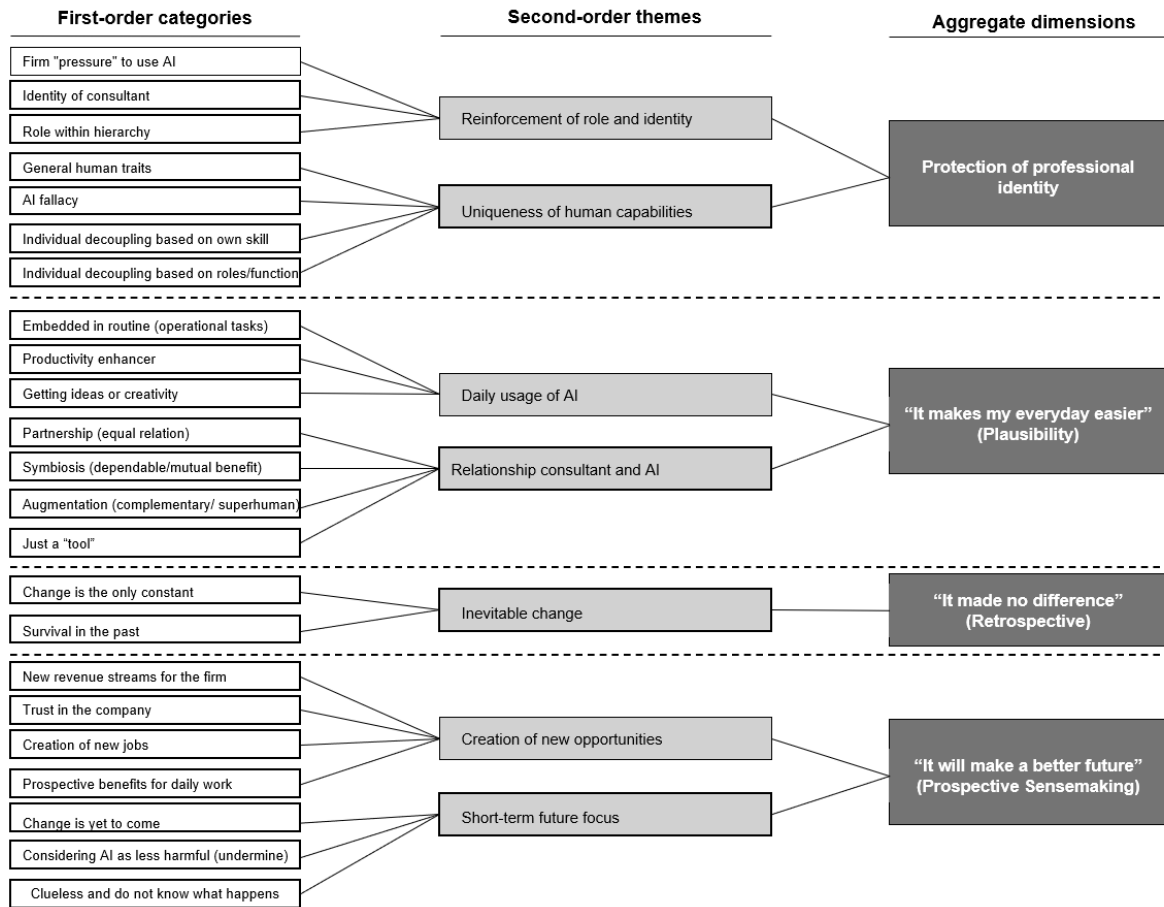


Figure 1: Final coding framework

3.5 Credibility and Reflexivity

To ensure the credibility of the study, we maintained transparency throughout the research process. We did this by documenting the stages of data collection, coding, and analysis. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Throughout the analytical process, we continuously discussed the coding and interpretations together to ensure that we maintain objectivity and the credibility of the analysis. We also used direct quotations from the interviewees to show how our interpretations were connected to the empirical data. At the same time, we acknowledge that our own backgrounds and assumptions may have influenced our interpretation of the participants' narratives.

Due to the scope of the study and time constraints, we limited the number of participants. Furthermore, we recognize that the interview setting may have influenced how openly participants expressed themselves. The first two interviews were conducted in office settings, where the interviewees appeared more formal and restrained. Other interviewees who chose to join the interview from home, appeared more relaxed and, in some cases, more willing to speak more openly about uncertainties and organizational reinforcement surrounding GenAI. While it is difficult to determine the extent to which the environment influenced the participants' responses, we suggest that the interview setting may have shaped the depth and openness of their reflections.

Both researchers had prior experience working in the consulting industry, which gave us advantages during the interviews, such as familiarity with the terminology and organization dynamics, which enabled us to ask relevant follow-up questions and better understand their responses. However, this prior experience also exposed us to potential biases. We were aware that we held certain assumptions regarding consulting culture, professional identity, and organizational dynamics, as well as our own knowledge about GenAI, which may have influenced how we interpreted participants' responses and narratives. For example, when consultants stated that they were "not stressed," we did not automatically interpret this as the non-existence of pressure. Reflecting on our own industry experiences with long working hours and strong expectations to appear competent, we then also considered the possibility that consultants might avoid openly admitting feelings of stress or being overwhelmed. Therefore, throughout the analysis process, we continuously reflected on how our own assumptions and experiences might have influenced our interpretations of the participants' narratives.

While having work experience in a German consulting firm, neither researcher had any working experience in the Swedish consulting industry. As a result, our understanding of Swedish consulting culture was peripheral rather than deeply embedded. Our distance from the Swedish consulting context may also have reduced the risks of becoming too closely aligned with the participants' experiences and assumptions. Rather than positioning ourselves as either insiders or outsiders, we took an in-between position, drawing on partial familiarity with consulting culture while still maintaining an analytical distance from the national and organizational context under study.

To address this reflexivity, we continuously reflected on how our own backgrounds, assumptions, and interpretations shaped the analysis. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2017) emphasize reflexivity as an important practice in qualitative research, in which researchers critically examine their own role in knowledge production. Working as a team of two researchers strengthened this process, as we regularly challenged each other's interpretations and questioned assumptions during the process of coding and analysis. In addition, our differing academic and cultural backgrounds encouraged further reflection on themes, strengthening the depth and credibility of the analysis.

3.6 Use of AI

In this study, we used AI in a limited way, primarily as a supporting tool throughout the research process. AI tools were mainly used to transcribe interviews, improve the quality of our writing, and refine the sentence structure, improve clarity and coherence, ensuring that the language used throughout the thesis was academically appropriate.

AI was also occasionally used for wording refinement during the analytical process. For example, after identifying the main ideas and preliminary theme titles, AI was sometimes used to generate alternative wording suggestions for naming themes. These suggestions were then reviewed, adjusted, and refined by the researchers to better reflect our own interpretations and analysis.

We also used Consensus AI to assist in identifying relevant academic literature and locating research papers connected to our arguments and analytical discussions. However, all referenced academic sources were manually read, reviewed and critically evaluated by the researchers before being included in the thesis.

At the same time, we ensure academic integrity compliance by not copying AI-generated suggestions and outputs directly into this thesis. The analysis, interpretations, arguments, and final written content presented in this study were developed by the researchers. Maintaining direct control over the writing process was important because we wanted the thesis to reflect our own understanding, interpretations, and analysis of the empirical material. This also allowed us to verify our arguments continuously, revisit earlier interpretations, and trace them back to the original empirical material and academic sources as needed.

4 Empirical Findings

Based on the methodology of the study, we will present the empirical findings from our interviewees in this chapter. Here, we will elaborate on the narratives and insights we gained regarding the impact of the professional identity on how consultants make sense of GenAI.

According to prior literature on how technology triggers sensemaking, we expected consultants to openly acknowledge that GenAI brings uncertainty and disruption to the consulting profession. In line with literature discussing how GenAI might change the client expectations, automation of traditional consulting tasks, and potential shifts in traditional consulting business and pricing models, we also expected consultants to express stronger concerns regarding the future implications of GenAI for the industry. As a consequence, we expected that consultants would not portray GenAI purely positively, but instead openly reflect on the risks and possible threats associated with the development of GenAI in consulting.

4.1 First Impression of the Interviews

Contrary to our expectations, the consultants gave us the first impression that they did not perceive GenAI as a problem. We got this first impression based on two major claims that the consultants made.

The first claim was that GenAI was not harmful according to the consultants, as GenAI was only causing minor changes for their industry. Thereby, consultants treated GenAI implementation as a natural phenomenon rather than a potential danger. This claim was further reinforced by linking change caused by GenAI to a broader trajectory of ongoing continuous change within the consulting industry, as the partner Henrik explains:

It's like everything else. It just becomes normal. So it might be very unique now. But in a few years, ... So what? This is, of course, it's like this. And then there is something else coming. And then you just build it in ... So you need to find new ways to be competitive. (Henrik - partner)

Even more drastically than what Henrik mentioned, another consultant; Daniel, explicitly frames GenAI not as a future possibility with uncertainties, but as an already established reality:

I think that *** [company name], for example, in this case, see AI not as the future, but more as a fact. (Daniel - junior consultant)

By positioning GenAI as an obvious and natural development the adaptation is presented as a rational response rather than something requiring deeper critical evaluation. In doing so, the consultants interviewed positioned themselves as merely responding to objective reality rather than actively engaging in sensemaking.

The second claim was that GenAI was not a potential danger, as consultants stated that it was obviously positive for their industry. They showcased their positivity towards GenAI by portraying it as beneficial for keeping up with the pace and expectations of consulting work. For example Lukas positively emphasized its benefits:

And instead to have that done by AI, it's much easier and it looks way more efficient if you come to the client oh we solved this now in 30 minutes okay yeah that's really good instead of taking a week. (Lukas - junior consultant)

By using rhetoric expressions like "much easier", "way more efficient" and "really good", Lukas underlined an increase in productivity and efficiency, making it seem obvious that AI brings mostly benefits.

Another consultant, Daniel, further highlighted the primary benefits that GenAI as a practical and supportive tool brings:

I think GenAI is really good for admin stuff...So, you know, kind of this is kind of a no-brainer, but you know, writing emails, text, and kind of helping is come up with ideas...I think that is something that I use it constantly for. (Daniel - junior consultant)

One senior manager, Jonas, went even further, emphasizing that the immediate and tangible efficiency gains of GenAI adoption are simply an obvious, rational response to workplace demands:

We have over 400,000 employees at EY alone who are heavily daily users of EYQ ... So it's like, I won't say a convincing thing, it's more about the need of

the hour. Because I at least see a lot of gain and benefits using it. (Jonas - senior manager)

Taken together, by claiming that GenAI is causing only minor disruptions and that GenAI adoption is obviously positive for their industry, consultants position GenAI as something that is already integrated into established work practices, therefore no longer in need of interpretation. In the above quotes, the consultants made it seem obvious that AI would create benefits and would not disrupt their professional identity, so they are not afraid of the future.

Thereby, on the surface, we got the impression that the interviewed consultants wanted to reassure us that there is no need to worry that GenAI could be a threat for their industry, thereby discouraging us from further questioning. Based on this initial impression, we implied that the consultants were only engaged in a subtle form of sensemaking around GenAI.

After receiving mostly responses within the first five to ten minutes of the interviews claiming that GenAI does not disrupt the consulting industry and should instead be viewed positively, we began to feel increasingly exhausted. Unlike the curiosity and excitement we felt at the beginning of the interviews, by this point, the one of us interviewing found it difficult to come up with follow-up questions. Furthermore, we started to question our own assumptions about our research topic up to that point where we even wondered why we had chosen that topic in the first place, as nothing was as we had imagined. Depending on personality and prior experience, one of us felt intimidated by the interviewees, while the other experienced mainly exhaustion. At times, the one asking questions felt close to giving up and simply wanted the interview to end.

But conducting the interviews as a team of two gave us a critical advantage. As explained in the methodology chapter, the second person had more of an observer's perspective during the interview. Based on this, this person felt less stuck in the interview process and had often maintained curiosity about the topic, so in our interview the second person, the prior observer, helped the original interviewer out by asking new questions. This was a crucial turning point in our interviews, as things started to get interesting, and we gained a second impression of the interviews. The more questions we asked, the more we observed how paradoxes emerged within the consultants' answers.

While consultants further normalized GenAI by constructing it as a productivity enhancer that enables them to handle more work in the same amount of time, this claim also revealed a limitation. Although GenAI is perceived to save time, this does not necessarily translate into reduced workload or changed expectations, as Matteo, a senior consultant, told us:

So it helps me to do a lot more, but I work the same, to be honest....I mean, it could be something to save up time, but the reality and what is expected of me doesn't match with that. (Matteo - senior consultant)

An even stronger criticism, was expressed by Lukas, another consultant, who unexpectedly remarked that the emerging capabilities of GenAI could besides the benefits also pose a threat to his profession:

It's hard to basically say because I don't want AI to take my job as well. So, I mean, it's a tricky line that, but I mean, obviously it would be nice to be able to really integrate it such that you could just, for instance, take Copilot and say that we are having this client working in that industry and we are now finalizing this proposal. (Lukas - junior consultant)

As more and more paradoxes emerged, it became clear that consultants were indeed acknowledging that GenAI was causing disruption to their professional identity. Rather than being purely optimistic about the future development of GenAI, it was rather the case that the consultants were aware of the downsides and risks of AI and actively chose to focus on the positive scenarios. These observations made us see patterns along interviewees as well as between different interviewees. Throughout the data analysis, we realized that these patterns were parts of narratives that the consultants had actively constructed. We also observed that consultants used these narratives to make sense of GenAI in relation to their professional identity.

Since narratives can be seen as a mechanism of sensemaking (Weick et al. 2005, pp. 409-412) we conclude that the consultants were actively constructing narratives through sensemaking, highlighting the positive scenarios instead of elaborating on the negatives. In below sections, we present three narratives supported by quotes from the interviews that belong to recurring interpretive patterns identified as sensemaking properties.

4.2 First Narrative: “It made no difference” (Retrospective Sensemaking)

The first narrative consultants draw on is that the consulting industry has already survived past technological disruption; therefore, GenAI made no difference with what happened before. In line with this, most consultants mentioned the disruption of GenAI in the consulting industry by framing it as an unavoidable change.

As the first narrative anchors GenAI in familiar historical patterns of technological change, we argue that this narrative is related to retrospective sensemaking. Furthermore, by positioning GenAI as an obvious and natural development, consultants can downplay its novelty and uncertainty. We argue that this is a clear effort of the sensemaking process.

Specifically, consultants normalize this phenomenon by looking at previous technological and industrial shifts and using past experiences of how consulting firms have adapted to similar disruptions in the past to understand the present. For instance, Daniel, a junior consultant, explained that senior people within the company viewed GenAI as “a similar thing” to developments they had encountered throughout their careers:

Yeah, that thing overall, like the consulting industry and also senior people at the firm see AI as a similar thing in that sense, and it's something that I've seen throughout their careers, sort of. (Daniel - junior consultant)

While Elena, a director, explicitly compared GenAI to something that happened in the past:

That change is similar to the one that we realized in the digitalization part 10 or 15 years ago. (Elena - director)

Interestingly, Elena continued to make sense of GenAI through analogies to prior transformations, using the same analogy four times, even when she acknowledged uncertainties about it:

And that was for, you know, the digitalization 10 or 12 years ago, the same thing here. But here it's even more tricky because the changes are happening so quickly, so you cannot really predict on how it's going to look like. You can't predict how a person's

role will look like in a year from now, maybe not even four months from now, if we are developing a proof of concept in a way. (Elena - director)

By anchoring GenAI in familiar historical patterns of technological change, consultants engaged in retrospective sensemaking, whereby individuals interpret current situations by looking back at past experiences and observations to construct plausible interpretations of the present events. Consultants engage in the sensemaking process not only by recalling the past events, but also by looking at their daily interactions with Gen AI, as we will elaborate on in the next section.

4.3 Second Narrative: “It makes my everyday easier” (Plausibility)

The second narrative that consultants told us was that GenAI makes their everyday work easier. During our interviews, consultants frequently portrayed GenAI as already embedded within the everyday routines of consulting work. We claim that consultants’ active plausibility-building efforts show how consultants engage in sensemaking. Rather than seeking objectively accurate representations of reality, we argue that consultants use plausibility, as a property of sensemaking, to seek and construct interpretations that appear reasonable, coherent, and sufficiently credible to sustain action.

We suggest that GenAI is causing ambiguous situations for consultants. Therefore, they do not necessarily seek the most accurate explanation. Instead, they are looking for an account that is plausible and fits the available cues well enough to enable continued action. Therefore, plausibility serves as a "good enough" explanation that fits the situation and enables consultants to move on with their daily activities. Thereby consultants produce narratives through which GenAI adoption appears logical, manageable, and compatible with their professional identity.

This plausibility becomes visible when Sofia, a junior consultant, describes her relationship with GenAI while at the same time acknowledging its limitations:

Of course, you always have to be a little bit, yeah, how to say, skeptical maybe as well. ...I think the skepticism that you heard probably was more towards the complete relying on the outcomes, which I wouldn't recommend, and I'm also not sure to what extent that would come. But in general, I wouldn't say I'm skeptical towards the AI

tools or towards the usage of it, because I also use it myself, and I think it's very important to do so and to train the company to do so in order to stay on track. I also realized in many situations, I mean, of course, in the beginning of the interview, I provided you with an example where I was a little bit... Maybe that also made you feel that I'm kind of skeptical, but there's also enough examples where I felt that these tools helped me expand my ideas or think in another direction as I wouldn't have (Sofia - junior consultant)

In this quote, Sofia uses positive use cases of GenAI, as plausible explanations to overweight her skepticism towards GenAI. Limitations of GenAI were also mentioned by Daniel, another junior consultant:

You'll still have to make a lot of adjustments, you'll still have to really evaluate a lot of stuff, and you can't really trust AI. (Daniel - junior consultant)

Despite skepticism and challenges such as extensive rework, consultants continued to describe having positive and collaborative relationships with GenAI, framing it as sufficiently useful and reliable enough to remain integrated into their work.

Several consultants described GenAI as being similar to “a co-worker” (Henrik - partner), “a good partner,” (Martin - consultant) or “another team member” (Elias - director). Thereby they constructed a relationship in which the technology is not perfect but “good enough” to justify continued reliance:

I think I would see it as a co-worker, that's how I would see it, as a co-worker that you can work along with and that you can coach that and ask that person to do things or it could that person or robot or whatever, an agent can help, can come with suggestions and do things and then do it very smoothly. (Henrik - partner)

Other consultants used words like “enabler” (Elena - director) and “resources” (Henrik - partner), all indicating that GenAI is beneficial to them. They thereby accept the “good enough” standard of their interaction with GenAI, making its use for their daily work plausible.

Maya, a senior consultant, even considered GenAI as a personal assistant that only acted as a supplementary tool, without critically evaluating whether it fulfilled its promises:

Honestly, for me, it's more like a personal assistant. It helps quite a bit again, because sometimes, especially if you're communicating with a wide group of people with different level of seniority, that in some cases might not even be familiar with the topic you're talking about, instead of having to spend a lot of time thinking about, okay, how should I structure this information to get the message across, I can simply describe it and get it in probably two minutes. (Maya - senior consultant)

These descriptions illustrate how consultants do not require GenAI to be flawless in order to integrate it into their work. Rather, they construct GenAI as sufficiently capable and useful enough to support ongoing action. This reflects the aspect of plausibility concerning “good enough” explanations and arrangements rather than objective certainty.

Another aspect of plausibility is that it is reinforced socially through the organizational environment. Plausibility is not judged individually alone, but also through social validation. Accounts become more plausible when they align with shared understandings and are reinforced by others. Across the interviews, consultants described a growing organizational expectation to use GenAI, communicated through peer discussions, leadership messaging, and repeated exposure to positive internal narratives. As Maya, as senior consultant describes: “But again, of course, it comes up in a lot of conversations, because as I mentioned, there's now more and more people coming to use it.” (Maya - senior consultant)

Similarly, another senior consultant, Matteo, also mentioned the active discussions on how to leverage GenAI, as quoted, “I think with colleagues, I definitely talk about the functionalities a lot, like how can we make the best out of what we have?” (Matteo-senior consultant).

At the more senior level, this expectation becomes even more explicit. Elena, a director, tells us: “it's more assumed that you everyone, regardless of level, need to be able to utilize AI.” (Elena - director).

Through this repeated organizational reinforcement, GenAI gains plausibility as consultants encounter consistent social cues that frame its use as normal, beneficial, and professionally expected. In this way, GenAI adoption becomes not merely accepted, but it triggers sensemaking where consultants construct GenAI-usage as the most reasonable and logical action. This makes further questioning or critical reassessment unnecessary.

4.4 Third Narrative: “It will make the future better” (Prospective Sensemaking)

In line with the previous two chapters, in which consultants constructed narratives, while making sense of past (retrospective sensemaking) and present (plausibility sensemaking) events, consultants do also construct a third narrative that GenAI will make their future better. The construction of this third narrative is a form of prospective sensemaking because building such narratives serve as a mechanism to construct a desirable and plausible future in the face of uncertainty.

When we asked the consultants about how they envision the future of their profession and industry in regards to GenAI-related disruption, consultants mostly emphasized that it was obvious that GenAI will bring new opportunities rather than pose an existential threat.

Firstly, this accentuation on the creation of new opportunities was done by highlighting new revenue streams generated by AI-related advisory work. Daniel, a junior consultant, explains this further:

Exactly, because a lot of the other companies don't really know how they should catch this train, the AI train, and then they turn to a consulting company for help. (Daniel - junior consultant)

Here, Daniel frames AI disruption not primarily as a threat to consulting, but as a driver of future demand. Although he acknowledges that consulting itself may also be disrupted, he reinterprets this disruption as outweighed by broader market opportunities:

It's not only consulting that's going to be disrupted by AI. A lot of industry will...when other companies are disrupted by AI, they're turning to consulting industries to help them navigate. (Daniel - junior consultant)

In doing so, Daniel is not denying that the industry will be disrupted, but he reframes it as a future where consulting remains valuable and necessary. This reflects prospective sensemaking by constructing a future narrative where the profession adapts and will gain benefits despite disruption.

A similar pattern emerges when Elias, a director, explains the creation of new business opportunities driven by GenAI:

Because we have a lot of AI projects and that's basically new business for us that wasn't there before. (Elias - director)

This statement presents future business growth as an almost self-evident consequence of GenAI adoption. Here, Elias draws a fast conclusion, making it seem obsolete for us interviewees to question it. However, when we indeed asked Elias how such growth would align with potential pricing model adjustments if AI reduces billable hours, he admitted: “I haven't been thinking about that actually.” (Elias - director)

Our interpretation of this response is that the consultant is engaging in the selective projection of optimistic future scenarios with favorable outcomes for himself while leaving underlying tensions unresolved.

Another consultant, Sofia, emphasized envisioned time gains due to AI, while also showing awareness that such positive outcomes are uncertain:

Of course, the best case would if we could actually delegate tasks to the systems. So it takes less time for particular manual tasks. So that would be the best case. (Sofia - junior consultant)

By labeling this scenario as the “best case”, Sofia is actively telling us a narrative, as she acknowledges the existence of less favourable alternatives. This shows that consultants are aware of uncertainty, but rather selectively create desirable future scenarios.

Another consultant, Elena, highlighted the risk even more drastically, stating that the company depends on just one positive scenario:

Basically everything that we do from like forecasting to planning, securing the data is in place, all of that kind of will be hygiene factors. And then everything that has to do with analysis, that is what our clients will pay us for. That is our differentiator. And that I hope will not change. Otherwise we won't have a business. (Elena - director)

Elena further elaborates the risks the industry might face in the future:

We have a lot to gain but we're also in a bit of a trouble because then we really see like when it [AI] can correct the errors then it's like why do we need a consultant's expertise and pay them a ton of money. (Elena - director)

In contrast to the initial highly positive quotes, these two more critical quotes reveal that consultants are aware that GenAI may undermine the core element of consulting. To suppress emerging concerns, consultants actively overshadow them by putting a stronger emphasis on positive future scenarios. This shows that consultants tend to create a narrative that makes their desirable future scenario seem plausible and unquestionable.

Despite the gains in efficiency and time that consultants emphasize in their quotes, consultants simultaneously recognize that these benefits may not reduce the workload, as Henrik, a partner, tells us:

The thing is that juniors are just going to do [the analysis][...]if they can do the analysis 10 times quicker, they will only get 10 times more job to do. (Henrik - partner)

Another consultant, Martin, even criticizes this point and further elaborates on the context surrounding it:

But I think that AI should increase productivity and therefore we should work less and have more free time. For example, like work 30 hours instead of 40 because, Yeah, because we're more productive...But as we all know, capitalism is going to be like, we just have to, you have to work the same amount, but be way more productive in the end. (Martin - consultant)

This shows us that the productivity improvements are recognised as double-edged rather than being universally beneficial for all consultants. We argue that they bring more benefits for the clients and the company than to the individual consultants.

Thirdly, consultants, like Viktoria, explicitly mentioned that new job opportunities would open up, meaning they could always find another job: "It will create new jobs... I can apply for that instead." (Viktoria - consultant)

Here, Viktoria makes sense of a positive future by actively highlighting the creation of new jobs over the loss of others. Another consultant, Jonas, told us further:

I foresee a lot of jobs getting created over the coming years. Of course, jobs will disappear, no doubt about it. It's already been there in the market. People are getting laid off. There are people who are being made redundant because their work is no longer required. It's being done by the AI agents. But then I foresee a lot of jobs that will be created that I know for short for as of now and as of today. (Jonas - senior manager)

In this quote, the engagement in prospective sensemaking becomes even more clear. Jonas is not denying the disruption and is aware that GenAI could replace consulting jobs. Instead, he actively chooses to construct a narrative of job creation over redundancy, implying that the future will generally be positive.

While consultants frequently constructed narratives about optimistic future opportunities, we observed that another pattern of prospective sensemaking emerged when discussions shifted to the timing of GenAI disruption. Consultants often acknowledged that GenAI could eventually threaten aspects of consulting work, but positioned such disruption as has not yet arrived. By describing significant GenAI disruption as a problem for the distant future rather than the near term, consultants constructed narratives of short-term professional identity protection.

When asked to elaborate more in detail on how consultants envision their individual future and the future of their industry in the next five to ten years, nearly every consultant had difficulties providing concrete answers to this question. To then answer the question consultants drew on future-related narratives:

In the first future-related narrative, several consultants created narratives suggesting that GenAI may become disruptive, but it is yet not sufficiently advanced to pose an imminent threat. This becomes clear, for example, in Daniel's statement:

I think that part already points out that AI now is not as efficient or as smoothly with the user experience as it could be or as the future potential. (Daniel - junior consultant)

Clara, a junior consultant, further elaborates the same situation:

I think at the moment it's not good and it can't, it can't, I don't know, it can't do the tasks you have to do. But when you, I don't know, look at it in 10 years, I think it's a risk we see there. Because, sometimes when you hear the news and so on, when you chat with

them and how they answer your prompts and so on, they also have feelings, I think, sometimes. And I don't know if that's too good for our human being.” (Clara - junior consultant)

Here, Clara explicitly mentions potential risks in the future. She acknowledges that GenAI may threaten her professional identity. This triggered her to actively construct a narrative that focuses on the short-term future, in which GenAI is not harmful, reassuring that her professional identity will not be threatened by GenAI in the near future.

To undermine the threat of GenAI in the near future, consultants do not only stress that GenAI is less harmful in the next few years compared to the long-term future, they use a second future-related narrative, where they claim that the “change is yet to come”. This becomes visible, for example, in Sofia’s argumentation:

But I think for achieving that, it does not only take a lot of training and so on for the companies, but also the AI tools to be developed in a way so that they are so specific. I'm not sure how exactly that will be possible in the closer future. (Sofia - junior consultant)

Portraying change as “yet to come” provides consultants with a sense of short-term stability and safety, while postponing dealing with potential threats to the future. However, the further consultants were pushed to imagine more distant futures, the more their optimistic narratives began to weaken. We realized this, for example, in the interview with Lukas, when he said:

I think that will actually be for a long time like the final touches manual work that actually does like matter if you get the engagement or not because we have our competitors as well that's i think is something that ai at the moment cannot like replicate but maybe in in the future but then i'm also wondering what that's a bit like maybe a pessimistic view. (Lukas - junior consultant)

This shows that creating narratives of a bright future to protect one’s own professional identity, works only to a certain extent.

When consultants could no longer plausibly maintain either optimistic opportunity narratives or temporal distancing, another form of prospective sensemaking emerged: framing the future

as unknowable. An example of this narrative can be seen in how Clara, a junior consultant, talks about the future:

I don't think in 10 years. So it's so far away. So I'm living more in the moment right now. (Clara - junior consultant)

The same phenomenon can be seen in the interview with Elena. Rather than articulating clear future expectations, she responded by claiming that the pace of technological change makes prediction impossible for everyone:

The changes are happening so quickly, so you cannot really predict on how it's going to look like. You can't predict how a person's role will look like in a year from now, maybe not even four months from now, if we are developing a proof of concept in a way. (Elena - director)

Interestingly, Elena's uncertainty regarding the future only concerned GenAI and not her professional role within the hierarchy:

First of all, I will be a partner within five years. Five years, I think it's too long of time to predict, given where we are right now. Maybe I could predict what I would do within six months or maybe 8 months, but I think even a year from now, I think it's different (Elena - director)

These quotes show us that claiming uncertainty about the future of GenAI can be seen as an active choice to consider other future events rather than this specific topic. Thus, we argue for the use of sensemaking also in this case, as in sum, different narratives are used by the same consultant, and just whichever narrative is more suitable for the specific situation is chosen.

4.5 GenAI as a Symbolic Object

Beyond interpreting consultants' sensemaking in the past, present and future separately, we argue that it is also important to examine our findings from a bird's-eye view. Across all three dimensions, a recurring pattern emerged, consultants continuously shift how they portray GenAI by either accentuating or downplaying its importance and capabilities.

This creates a paradox, showcasing that consultants do not treat GenAI as a neutral stable technological object, but rather as a symbolic object whose meaning is actively constructed and reconstructed through interaction.

Through the lens of SI, we therefore conclude that consultants transform GenAI from a technological neutral object into a symbolic object by attributing different meanings to it depending on which interpretation can protect their professional identity in the specific situation. For consultants, GenAI existence can be flexibly negotiated, its positivity is accentuated when it supports the narrative about future opportunities, and downplayed when consultants want to preserve their future relevance.

Consultants tend to construct positive narratives about GenAI by attributing relational, and positive characteristics to it and personifying it. The positive words used to describe their relationship with GenAI, as described in the chapter about plausibility-sensemaking, are "a team member" (Elias - director), "a friend" (Lukas - junior consultant), and "a good partner" (Martin- consultant), as well as the opportunities GenAI creates for the profession.

This aligns with the positive corporate narratives from the companies, where GenAI is framed as a driver for innovation and growth. Thus, we conclude that by showcasing a positive framing of GenAI, consultants aim to signal their alignment with their employer, proving that they agree with the direction the company is heading. This becomes even more explicit when Clara, a junior consultant, mentions that she trusts the development of their company towards AI:

And the second one is that at ***, they are really behind the process that we can use Gen AI and the Agentic AI. So they want us to get the skills. And I think even if Gen AI or Agentic AI is in 10 years at the point that they can do our work, we then have the knowledge to do the agentic thing with the AI. And so I think our work would change or will change, but our company is so behind the point that we gained the skills. (Clara - junior consultant)

Here, Clara places trust in her company's abilities to create new opportunities in the future. Furthermore, this statement is used as an explanation to why she is not afraid that AI-disruption could threaten her professional identity.

At the same time, the same consultant, Clara, displayed her negative views on AI by pointing out the mistakes that AI makes:

And for the website, you have to create texts and these don't can be more than, for example, 100 words. And if you ask the AI, then with the prompt, I just write my text with not more than 100 words, 100 words. Sometimes it's 150 words and you think, okay, thanks for nothing. But I also think that the Gen AI in general do a lot of mistakes. (Clara - junior consultant)

Another consultant, Martin, shares similar experiences regarding his experiences with AI fallacy:

I'm sometimes like I wrote hundreds of very similar reports because like after every model we have to write a report and just a couple of things change and I'm faster writing them on my own actually than doing it with AI because it's always writes it in a different way than what I want it to be. (Martin - consultant)

By emphasizing AI fallacy, consultants symbolically reduce the capability of GenAI while simultaneously elevating the importance of their own expertise. At moments like these, GenAI is no longer framed as a strategic enabler but rather as an imperfect tool that requires human oversight, as Jonas explains:

So, the values, I would say, no matter how smart these models become, you will always need somebody to do the final review of these reports, otherwise you will break up into **** like how Deloitte did it in Australia. ... I mean, of course, I mean, you are supposed to use these tools to make your life easy and better. ... So you have to be that extra smart to differentiate the output that you receive from these ML models before you present it to the client. (Jonas - senior manager)

Elena, a director, shares Jona's opinion by emphasizing the importance of human capabilities in the consulting industry:

In our world, it's, everything has to do with consultancy is about relationship building and securing the trust. So we will never ever utilize AI without reviewing it first. (Elena - director)

These quotes demonstrate how the emphasis on AI fallacy is deeply intertwined with human values and skills. Consultants construct narratives around the uniqueness of human capabilities, implying that humans have certain traits, such as trust, judgment, and relationship-building, that are the core of a consultant's work and that AI will never possess. Throughout this process, consultants symbolically position GenAI as supportive yet subordinate, where it is valuable enough to assist, but insufficient to replace the consultant.

The previous chapter has shown how consultants attribute positive or negative meanings to GenAI, and thereby construct symbolic objects out of GenAI. Seeing GenAI as a technologic invention would make it plausible and obvious that it is disrupting the daily work of consultants. However, perceiving GenAI as a symbolic object, where GenAI is “a good partner” or someone who “in general does a lot of mistakes,” depending on the argument, creates the meaning that there won't be major disruptions due to GenAI, and that therefore GenAI is harmless to consultants.

4.6 Conclusion of the Findings

At the beginning of the interviews, we got the impression that the consultants made it seem obvious that GenAI will create benefits and pose no disruption to their professional identity. Instead, the consultants position GenAI as something already integrated into established work practices and therefore no longer requiring interpretation. Based on these initial responses, we implied that consultants were only engaged in subtle forms of sensemaking regarding GenAI.

However, as the interviews progressed, the consultants simultaneously referred to GenAI concerns, such as workload intensification and replacement risks. As a result, paradoxes increasingly emerged in the consultants' responses. Rather than being purely optimistic about the future development of GenAI, these contradictions suggest that consultants were aware of the downfalls and risks of AI and actively chose to focus on the positive scenarios.

Consultants constructed these positive scenarios by using three narratives. The first narrative “It made no difference”, anchored GenAI in familiar historical patterns of technological change. By recalling past events, such as digitalization, consultants engaged in retrospective sensemaking. Within this narrative, consultants argued that the consulting industry always survived past technological disruptions, and that GenAI therefore, does not represent a new threat to their industry.

In the second narrative, “It makes my everyday easier”, GenAI is constructed as capable enough to support ongoing action. Rather than seeking for the most accurate explanation of how GenAI is embedded in the everyday routines of consulting work, the consultants described having positive and collaborative relationships with GenAI, in which the technology is “good enough” to justify continued reliance. Therefore, this narrative is related to plausibility, as one of the properties of sensemaking.

In the third narrative, “It will make the future better”, consultants engaged in prospective sensemaking by constructing desirable future scenarios around GenAI. While the consultants were aware of the uncertainty that GenAI creates, they selectively created desirable future scenarios, where they envisioned new revenue streams for their industry, prospective benefits for their daily work, and the creation of new jobs. Furthermore, the consultants were postponing dealing with potential threats to the future by portraying change as “yet to come”. When they could no longer plausibly maintain either optimistic opportunity narratives or temporal distancing, they framed the future as unknowable. Since the consultants simultaneously expressed certainty regarding the creation of new opportunities, we argue that they shifted between different narratives depending on whichever narrative suited the specific situation best.

A recurring pattern emerged across all three narratives: Consultants continuously shifted how they portray GenAI by either accentuating or downplaying its importance and capabilities. Therefore, we argue that consultants transform GenAI from a technological neutral object into a symbolic object by attributing different meanings to it depending on which interpretation can best protect their professional identity in the specific situation. Positivity is accentuated when GenAI supports the narrative about future opportunities, and serves to signal consultant’s alignment with their employer. Conversely, consultants emphasize GenAI fallacy, when they want to preserve their individual relevance in the future.

The identified paradoxes in consultants’ responses suggest that consultants were actively engaged in ongoing sensemaking processes. In the following discussion, we will connect these findings to a broader theoretical context and demonstrate how they contribute to existing literature on GenAI in consulting as well as sensemaking theory.

5 Discussion

As we saw in the previous chapter, the consultants we spoke to attributed both positive and negative aspects towards GenAI consultants did not view GenAI purely as a technological tool, and did not focus on its capabilities and functionalities. One of the most surprising findings was that, consultants instead selectively choose scenarios which have favorable outcomes for them and continuously shift how they portray GenAI by either accentuating or downplaying its importance and capabilities. Additionally, our findings suggest that speaking positively about GenAI is not necessarily grounded in a detailed technological understanding of the tool itself.

In the first part of this discussion, we will therefore contribute to the literature on GenAI in consulting by showing how consultants continuously construct and shift between different narratives in ways that preserve their future relevance and survival in the industry.

Nevertheless, this is not the only contribution of our study. Since the paradoxes in the consultants' answers revealed that consultants were aware of the downfalls and risks of GenAI and actively chose to focus on the positive scenarios, we argue that consultants were actively engaged in ongoing sensemaking processes to protect their identity. Thus, we also feel that our study contributes to the literature on sensemaking. In the second part of the discussion we will focus on how consultants use sensemaking as a mechanism to protect their professional identity.

5.1 GenAI: Rose or Complementary Green Foliage?

In the introduction we highlighted that, at the moment, GenAI appears to be the “rose” within the Big Four consulting firms, where GenAI is frequently positively portrayed as an accelerator for growth (see among others: Deloitte, 2026; EY, 2026; KPMG, 2026; PwC, 2023). This is aligned with the existing literature that shows the positive potential of GenAI for enhancing process efficiency and supporting consulting work (Pattanayak, 2020, pp.5-6; Samokhvalov, 2024, p.63).

What we found particularly interesting throughout the interviews, and aligned with these positive corporate narratives described in the introduction, was that consultants themselves frequently reproduced these highly positive narratives. When attributing positive meanings to

GenAI, the consultants also appeared to view it as the “rose” we described earlier: a symbol of growth, innovation, and future opportunity within consulting. This finding suggests that the positive narratives surrounding GenAI are promoted not only at the organizational level, but are also actively reproduced by individual consultants.

However, as the interviews progressed, we noticed that the consultants continuously shifted their portrayal of GenAI, moving from positive attributions to negative perspectives on GenAI depending on which perspective appeared more relevant to the specific situation.

Initially GenAI was framed as highly beneficial. However, consultants later downplayed its actual capabilities whenever the technology appeared to threaten their own future relevance. In these moments, the “rose” appeared to function more as a surface-level alignment. When consultants used negative attribution towards GenAI, it no longer seemed to be the center of the bouquet but rather, acted as the complementary green foliage surrounding it. Ultimately, GenAI became the secondary element, supporting the individual consultants’ capabilities of trust, judgment and relationship-building.

These findings add nuance to the paper by Benbya et al. (2024), which discussed the broad capabilities of GenAI for knowledge work. While Benbya et al. (2024, pp.23-27) elaborated how GenAI could transform knowledge work by impacting the creation, retrieval, sharing, and application of knowledge, our findings suggest that consultants’ actual engagement with GenAI was more cautious and limited to minor repetitive and supportive tasks. During our interviews, consultants often described GenAI as useful for mundane, routine, and low-risk tasks, while continuing to emphasize the superiority of human judgment, contextual understanding, and client relationship-building. Therefore, our study adds empirical nuance to Benbya et al.’s (2024) paper, by showing which GenAI-related task consultants emphasize.

At the same time, Benbya et al.’s (2024) study acknowledges tensions surrounding hallucinations, contextual limitations, overreliance, and occupational identity. Our study aligns with their viewpoint, as the consultants in our interview expressed similar concerns.

Another surprising insight from the interviews, was that during the interviews, consultants never discussed GenAI through detailed technological explanations of its capabilities and limitations. Instead, their responses derived from their personal experiences, symbolic

interpretations, and abstract metaphors. Here consultants frequently compared GenAI to a “friend”, a “partner” or emphasized a “human-AI symbiosis”, which aligns with prior literature discussing relational framings of GenAI (Butler et al. 2026; Bellary & Marathe, 2025, pp. 5-6; Jarrahi et al. 2023).

In summary, our findings contribute to the literature on GenAI in the consulting industry by suggesting that speaking positively about GenAI is not necessarily grounded in detailed technological understandings of the tool itself. Instead, consultants often interpreted GenAI through symbolic, relational, and experience-based narratives related to consulting work and future professional relevance.

5.2 Sugarcoating as an Identity Protection Mechanism

During our analysis, we asked ourselves why consultants wanted us to believe that they were only engaging in a subtle form of sensemaking. We argue that this is connected to consultants' attempts to defend their elite identity in order to protect it.

Across the interviews, consultants rarely expressed direct skepticism toward GenAI, even when discussing the uncertainty of the future of consulting work. In most cases, skepticism towards the overall company's GenAI strategies was expressed only indirectly, between the lines, or emerged only if we ask in detail to elaborate further.

When we asked consultants directly if they had negative feelings about the future concerning GenAI, they often used positive or ambiguous words like “curious” or “excited”. At the same time, contradictions and paradoxes frequently appeared elsewhere in the interviews when consultants indirectly referred to concerns about workload intensification, replacement risks, and changing client expectations.

We interpret the consultants' response as connected to the elite professional identity embedded in consulting culture. Existing literature describes consulting as strongly associated with expertise, confidence, adaptability, and high performance (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006 pp.196-200; Gill, 2015, pp.14-17). In such environments, consultants face difficulties openly expressing their uncertainty, vulnerability, or fear because these emotions can conflict with the professions' expectations. Thus, there is no safe environment for consultants to express their “true self” when discussing the uncertainty surrounding GenAI. As a result, consultants

frequently aligned themselves closely with corporate narratives surrounding the benefits and future relevance of GenAI, while simultaneously softening the more threatening implications of the technology.

This dynamic can be interpreted through Mead's distinction between the "I" and the "Me." The "Me" reflects socially expected roles, norms, and behaviors, while the "I" represents more personal, spontaneous, and potentially divergent reactions (Mead, 1913).

Applying this distinction to our findings, we interpret that consultants frequently expressed their acceptance of the positive corporate narrative surrounding GenAI, reflecting alignment with the "Me" of consultant identity. During the interviews, consultants repeatedly mentioned adaptability, opportunities, and the positive future potential of GenAI, which closely aligned with organizational expectations and broader corporate narratives surrounding AI adoption.

At the same time, moments of hesitation, contradiction, and paradox occasionally emerged indirectly throughout the interviews, indicating that more uncertain reactions associated with the "I" were not entirely absent, but often remained less explicitly articulated. Consultants partly acknowledged that GenAI's emergence and its capabilities pose a potential threat to their current consulting business and professional identity. However, these concerns were frequently softened or followed by more optimistic framings of opportunity, growth, or adaptability.

Therefore, we interpret a consultant's behavior of avoiding showing feelings and vulnerability as a form of identity protection. Consultants put on a mask, hiding their emotions and thereby protecting their "I". By aligning the "Me" with the corporate narrative, consultants try to protect their professional identity. At the same time, consultants suppress their "I", which in most of the cases contains divergent feelings as the company's goals, as well as doubts and fears, as we saw in the quotes, where the paradoxes highlighted that the "I" does not always align with the "Me".

We interpret this as meaning that, by suppressing the "I", consultants actually intend to protect their "I". At first, the idea of protecting the "I" through suppression may appear contradictory. However, a similar situation is illustrated in Nicola Yoon's novel *Everything, Everything* (2015).

In the novel, a mother does not allow her daughter to play outside because she is afraid that the kid could catch a disease. The mother repeatedly reassures her daughter that there is no need to go outside and that the kid should not worry about not leaving the house. The mother suppresses her daughter in order to protect her. The same mechanism can be found in our findings. The mother is the “Me,” which continuously reinforces the idea that GenAI is causing no harmful disruption. She suppresses her daughter, the “I”, by emphasizing that there is no need for the daughter, the “I”, to confront herself with the reality that GenAI contains threats and could be dangerous to her future development.

Using this analogy further, both the mother in the novel and the consultant in our study are aware that the reality contains potential harmful and uncertain developments. This means that consultants partly acknowledge that GenAI’s emergence and its capabilities pose a potential threat to their current consulting business and professional identity. However, by suppressing their individual fears and doubts, and overly emphasizing on the positive opportunities of GenAI, they suppress negative feelings. Instead, they encourage the “I” not to worry about potential threats and thereby protect the “I” from further doubt.

Rather than suppressing the “I,” we observed that some consultants used an even more radical way to protect their own identity. Some consultants even decoupled their “I”, their private identity, from their “Me”, their professional identity. In this case, they pointed out that their private identity was more important than their professional identity, meaning they did not identify themselves primarily through their job. By decoupling themselves based on their own unique individual skills (e.g. IT knowledge), these consultants constructed a narrative that they “can survive without their Me”, implying that they could find job opportunities in any other industry as well. Thereby, they reduced the importance of their professional consulting identity. These findings contradict Goto (2022), because in our study not every employee sets the focus of their sensemaking on the elements that support the institution.

Finally, our findings suggest that although GenAI is a new form of technological disruption, consultants rely on the traditional identity-regulation mechanisms rooted in the elite professional identity of consulting. In line with the research on identity construction in consulting (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Gill, 2015), consultants repeatedly defended their professional distinctiveness by emphasizing uniquely human capabilities such as judgment, trust, contextual understanding, and relationship management. These narratives reflect

traditional elite identity constructions in consulting, where consultants maintain legitimacy by presenting themselves as experts with distinctive, irreplaceable skills.

Therefore, GenAI does not appear to change how consultants protect their identity. Instead, it creates a new situation in which existing identity narratives are reused and adapted. This suggests that the identity regulation mechanisms described in previous literature (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Gill, 2015) remain highly relevant even in technologically novel environments. No matter the focus of the research, whether it be organisational pressure, client dependency, status anxiety, or in our case on GenAI, the underlying identity-protective mechanisms remain stable. Consultants continue to defend their elite identity by positioning themselves as superior, not only compared to clients or other professions, but also compared to GenAI.

The dynamic between the “I” and “Me” can be further illustrated by using sugarcoats in baking as an analogy. A sugarcoat is sweet and gives a positive first impression. This is similar to the first impression consultants gave us: one should have positivity towards GenAI. However, underneath a sugarcoat not everything tastes sweet, as a sugarcoat can also hide the bitterness of a burned cake. In our case, the bitterness is the paradoxes that emerged during the interviews, where consultants expressed concerns and admitted the potential harmful impact of GenAI on their professional identity. Just as putting a sugarcoat on top of a cake preserves others from seeing its unpleasant aspects, focusing on the positivity toward GenAI serves as a form of identity protection that suppresses uncomfortable topics around GenAI.

5.3 The Bittersweet Taste of Sensemaking

As we were interested in how consultants make sense of GenAI in relation to their professional identity, we looked into how they interpreted, explained, and positioned GenAI throughout the interviews. As described in the previous chapter, at first glance, consultants gave us the first impression that they engaged in only a subtle form of sensemaking.

Across the interviews, GenAI was frequently portrayed as beneficial, inevitable, and already embedded into everyday consulting work. Consultants repeatedly framed GenAI as a productivity enhancer that improves efficiency, accelerates work processes, and creates future opportunities for both consultants and consulting firms.

Initially, this created the impression that GenAI was not experienced as a major disruption requiring deeper reflection or interpretive work. Therefore at first sight, our findings appeared to contradict prior literature suggesting that technological disruption triggers sensemaking processes because it disrupts existing assumptions and routines (Griffith, 1999, pp.472-473; Weick, 1995, p.71).

At the same time, this first impression aligns with literature suggesting that strong professional identities may inhibit or constrain sensemaking processes (Murphy, 2001, pp.44-46; Vough, 2020, p.249). By repeatedly portraying GenAI as normal, manageable, and compatible with consulting work, consultants initially appeared to minimize ambiguity in ways that protected the stability and continuity of their professional identity.

However, as the interviews progressed, paradoxes and contradictions increasingly appeared in consultants' responses, they simultaneously referred to concerns about workload intensification, replacement risks, changing client expectations, and uncertainty regarding future consulting roles.

These paradoxes suggest that consultants were in fact engaged in obvious ongoing sensemaking processes. We therefore argue that the ambiguity brought by GenAI as discussed in the literature review was strongly reflected throughout the interviews. Rather than representing a stable or neutral technological tool, GenAI appeared to function as an equivocal and ambiguous technological development that disrupts assumptions about expertise, value creation, and the future relevance of consultants (Weick, 1990, cited in Scarbrough et al. 2025, p.1887).

Contemporaneously, the disruption associated with GenAI differed from the more visible crisis caused by technological disruptions described in earlier sensemaking literature. Unlike sudden crises or visible organizational breakdowns, GenAI appeared as a slower, more normalized form of disruption, becoming embedded in everyday consulting practices.

Consultants often portrayed GenAI as “already normal” or “part of everyday work,” which softened the visibility of disruption itself. Nevertheless, we argue that the absence of a visible crisis does not indicate an absence of sensemaking. Instead, the normalization of GenAI may itself represent an outcome of ongoing sensemaking processes through which consultants

continuously constructed interpretations that made GenAI appear compatible with consulting work and professional identity.

This ongoing sensemaking became visible across the narratives which were constructed through sensemaking properties which are retrospective, plausibility, and prospective narratives. Consultants repeatedly interpreted GenAI by comparing it to past technological changes, constructing plausible explanations for why GenAI currently supports rather than threatens consulting work, and projecting optimistic future scenarios in which consulting remained relevant despite technological disruption. Rather than occurring as a one-time reaction, sensemaking appeared to be continuous and ongoing. Consultants repeatedly moved between past experiences, present organizational expectations, and future-oriented interpretations.

Referring back to the analogy of the sugarcoat, consultants intentionally put the icing on the cake to make it look pretty and sweet. The icing are the narratives constructed by the consultants. We interpret their action of sugarcoating as their engagement in sensemaking. However, sensemaking can also shift away the attention from more unpleasant experiences and thoughts. Beneath the façade of optimism, consultants expressed doubts, contradictions, and reservations about the disruptive potential of GenAI. However, the paradoxes observed throughout the findings indicate that consultants' positive narratives on GenAI should not be mistaken for their genuine alignment and beliefs.

Consultants often portrayed GenAI simultaneously as an assistant tool supporting the consulting beneficially and as a technological invention that might threaten the consultant in the future. These contradictions suggest that consultants do not simply adopt organizational narratives wholesale, but instead negotiate them against their own experiences, observations, and identity concerns. Using SI as a methodology, helped us further to understand how consultants construct meaning around GenAI. By connecting SI with sensemaking, we explored how consultants positioned GenAI as a symbolic object whose meaning is continuously interpreted and socially constructed within consulting practice (Prasad, 2018; Weick, 1995).

Their narratives were guided by the attribution consultants placed on GenAI. On the one hand, the consultants assigned positive attributions to GenAI. They repeated the corporate positive

narrative to showcase they aligned perfectly with their companies' demands. Thereby, they signaled their fit as an employee their company should keep at any time. On the other hand, we observed that consultants placed negative attributions on GenAI. While this might seem contradictory, downplaying GenAI's capabilities supports the consultants' attempts to protect their identity and signal to their employer their individual future relevance in the company. This emphasizes that AI does not have the capability to replace them in the future.

This finding aligns with prior literature arguing that organizational members are active interpreters who selectively appropriate and reinterpret organisational messages, rather than passive recipients of sensegiving, in our case the corporate positive narrative (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Nevertheless, our findings also stress the limitations of sensegiving resulting in the company's intended outcomes, especially when corporate narratives conflict with personal experience or identity threats.

Our study suggests that the absence of a visible crisis does not indicate the absence of sensemaking. Instead, the normalization of GenAI may itself represent an outcome of ongoing sensemaking processes through which consultants continuously constructed interpretations that made GenAI appear compatible with consulting work and professional identity. Furthermore, our study extends sensemaking literature by showing that paradoxes within an individual may emerge. These paradoxes can be understood as indicators of unresolved tension between organizationally promoted meanings and individual-level interpretations. Therefore, the findings of this study support the claim that technology disruptions provoke interpretive processes, while also extending the literature by showing that such sensemaking may occur even when actors explicitly deny ambiguity. We therefore argue that the denial of ambiguity may itself be understood as an outcome of sensemaking.

6 Conclusion

Our study aimed to understand how consultants make sense of GenAI in relation to their professional identity. Since consultants did not view GenAI as merely a technological tool, but rather as a symbolic object, our findings suggest that speaking positively about GenAI is not necessarily grounded in detailed technological understandings of the tool itself. In line with this, our main empirical finding is that consultants make sense of GenAI by emphasizing its positive aspects in ways that protect their elite professional identity. Through this ongoing sensemaking process, consultants thereby simultaneously navigate the ambiguity, contradictions, and identity threats caused by GenAI. Therefore, our study contributes to the literature on GenAI, as well as to sensemaking theory in relation to professional identity, as we will explain in the following section.

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

Our study makes a contribution to the literature on GenAI in consulting by demonstrating how consultants continuously shift between optimistic and skeptical perspectives to preserve their future relevance in the industry.

While the existing literature frequently emphasizes GenAI's transformative capabilities for knowledge work (Benbya et al. 2024, pp.23-27), our findings show that consultants often positioned GenAI as a supportive and secondary to human judgment, trust, and relationship-building whenever the technology appeared to threaten the value of human consultants.

Our study therefore adds empirical nuance to existing discussions on GenAI in consulting, showing that consultants attribute meaning to GenAI based on its relation to their own future relevance rather than on a detailed technological understanding of the tool itself.

More broadly, our study contributes to sensemaking literature by showing how sensemaking surrounding technological disruption can be strongly shaped by professional identity concerns. Existing literature suggests that sensemaking is a suitable and necessary component to deal with identity threats (Lutgen-Sandvik's, 2008, p.106; Vough et al. 2020, p.249).

Our findings extend the literature by showing that the consultants' professional identity concerns strongly influenced the sensemaking surrounding GenAI. The strong influence of the professional identity was shown when consultants initially "sugarcoated" GenAI by emphasizing its positive aspects to protect their professional identity. During this "sugarcoating" process, consultants emphasized GenAI's positive aspects while simultaneously softening or downplaying its more threatening implications. By doing this, sensemaking also became a mechanism for consultants to preserve their legitimacy, expertise, and the distinctiveness of their professional role.

Our study also contributes to the literature on technology and sensemaking by extending prior research on how technological change triggers sensemaking processes because it disrupts existing assumptions, routines, and understandings (Griffith, 1999, p.479 ; Weick, 1995, pp.100-101). While existing literature often associates sensemaking with visible disruptions, crises, or major organizational breakdowns, our findings suggest that ambiguity may also emerge through slower and more normalized forms of technological disruption. The ambiguity does not need to be fully visible or explicitly acknowledged in order to trigger sensemaking.

GenAI was portrayed by consultants as inevitable and already embedded into everyday consulting work, which diminished the visibility of the disruption itself. However, paradoxes and contradictions frequently emerged throughout the interviews, suggesting that consultants were still actively engaged in ongoing sensemaking processes.

Therefore, our findings show that ambiguity does not need to be fully visible or explicitly recognized in order to trigger sensemaking. Rather, the denial or normalization of ambiguity as shown by the consultants could also represent an outcome of ongoing sensemaking processes rather than an absence of sensemaking.

Furthermore, this study also highlights the importance of prospective sensemaking, particularly in contexts of technology uncertainty. Traditional sensemaking literature has mainly emphasized retrospective interpretation through references to past experiences (Weick, 1995, p.24). However, our findings show that consultants also relied on prospective future-oriented narratives to maintain their professional relevance. This future-oriented framing of GenAI reflects elements of prospective sensemaking in line with previous studies (Gioia, et al , 2002; Goto, 2022; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

Consultants often constructed future scenarios in which consulting expertise remained valuable despite the potential disruption caused by GenAI. Thus, our study suggests that prospective sensemaking is an important mechanism in the contexts where technological disruption creates uncertainty that may potentially threaten future relevance and professional identity.

Our study therefore emphasizes how prospective projections of future opportunities and continued relevance become central mechanisms when individuals face technological ambiguity and identity threats.

6.2 Practical Implications

At first glance positively, the consultants' surface alignment with the company's direction on GenAI can be viewed for the Big Four. However, our findings uncovered that paradoxes emerged within individuals. We interpreted these paradoxes as indicators of unresolved tension between organizationally promoted meanings and individual-level interpretations.

While managers are often encouraged to focus on sensemaking to reach the consensus of their employees for the change process, we argue that focusing solely on sensemaking is not always the best for the company. Especially in ambiguous situations, like in our case due to the uncertainty GenAI brings, we observed that consultants are not deeply agreeing with the corporate narrative. Rather, we argue that they suppress divergent meanings and opinions. Therefore, we suggest that consultants alignment with the corporate narrative should be rather seen as a “sugarcoat” that the individuals built just to conform to the company narrative.

We argue that a strong emphasis on the corporate narrative, with the attention of sensegiving towards employees, can be a risk for companies' future success. The reason given is that companies risk not paying attention to identity regulation mechanisms, which are especially important, as we have shown, because individuals tend to suppress certain negative feelings and opinions.

As a consequence, companies are neglecting their employees' needs. In our study, for example, some consultants criticized that the narrative is overemphasizing GenAIs capabilities, and argued that other topics are important as well. As one employee made us aware that the dominant corporate narrative makes it difficult for senior employees to listen to the GenAI-concerns of others, the risks become even more prominent. Several consultants

mentioned similar situations by admitting that almost no one speaks negatively about GenAI in their company.

Another risk we identified regarding strong identity regulation influenced by the companies, is that consultants in some cases even decoupled their private identity from their professional identity. In this decoupling mechanism, the consultants downgraded drastically the relevance they emphasize on their job. As a consequence, they diminished their connection to their company and are more likely to change companies or even industries.

6.3 Limitations of the Research and Further Research

The SI tradition that we used for this research allowed us to gain insights into the dynamics between the “Me” and the “I”. To analyse the “I” more in depth future studies could benefit from adopting a psychoanalytical tradition, which promises more insights into consultants’ fears and unconscious worries.

Another limitation of our study consists in only having interviews as sources for our analysis. Further research could therefore include on-site observations to reveal how consultants talk for example with their colleagues about GenAI changes, when they are not in the spotlight. According to the dramaturgical-tradition, the interviews would put the interviewees in the spotlight, allowing us to observe the front stage performances since consultants try to portray themselves “normal” or pretend to be normal.

Furthermore, we suggest that further research conducts longitudinal qualitative interviews. This approach provides the opportunity to build trusting relationships with consultants and therefore create a safe environment for interviewees where they can openly express their personal opinions and feelings.

In order to create a safe environment for consultants, conducting online questionnaires with open-ended questions could also be beneficial. While we tried to ensure the interviewees anonymity as much as possible, interviewees might not have felt anonymous during the interview process in semi-structured qualitative interviews, especially since they knew they were being recorded. We therefore think that online questionnaires would give an additional

way to increase anonymity and therefore give the consultants possibilities to raise their concerns and worries.

Further research focusing on just one service line in consulting could provide us with more specific results. In our case, the way consultants engaged in GenAI was influenced by the service line each interviewed consultant belonged to. For example, GenAI usage of data regarding HR-transformation, such as regarding M&As, was strictly regulated, while supply chain data had less restrictions. Therefore the nature of the work and consequently concrete GenAI usage, differed depending on each service line. Goto's (2022) research that focused solely on auditing in Big Four, brought more specific insights into the prospective sensemaking process of auditors. Therefore, we argue for extending our research by focusing on each service line separately.

As we have highlighted, prospective sensemaking is important for understanding sensemaking processes regarding ambiguous technologies. Further research exploring narratives emerging from prospective sensemaking would be beneficial, for example, for new, emerging, ambiguous technologies, such as quantum computing.

What still remains unclear is whether the identity protection mechanism “protecting by suppressing” we elaborated on in our discussion, is an effective way for consultants to protect their identity in the long run. Thus, the current literature on professional identity could benefit from studies that evaluate the efficiency and consequences of the “protecting by suppressing” mechanism. While our discussion showed that talking positively about GenAI does not necessarily mean that consultants have a deep technological understanding of the GenAI tool itself, the actual knowledge consultants possess on GenAI could not be evaluated throughout our interviews. Therefore, future research is needed to better understand to what extent consultants use metaphors instead of technological explanations based on their limited GenAI knowledge.

6.4 Final Conclusion

Our study aimed to understand how consultants make sense of GenAI in relation to their professional identity. Although consultants frequently portrayed GenAI as obvious, manageable, and non-threatening, thereby implying that only a subtle version of sensemaking

effort was necessary, our analysis shows that their efforts to portray those narratives constituted sensemaking efforts.

Initially consultants “sugarcoated” GenAI, by constructing a symbolic object marked by positive attributes in order to protect their professional identity. By paying attention to the paradoxes within the consultants’ responses, we revealed that beneath this positivity, concerns and worries about the future remained present. Therefore, we argue that consultants are actively engaged in ongoing sensemaking because GenAI creates ambiguity and identity threats.

To summarize, we will use our sugarcoat analogy one final time: If your cake is partially burned, a sugarcoat can hide the burned parts at first glance, so that others will not see it. However, once the cake is eaten, the bitter aftertaste remains, and it cannot be removed by the sugarcoat.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide Structure

Section	Objective	Example Interview Questions	Link to Research Focus
1. Background and Role	Understanding their role and position in the hierarchy	- Can you describe your current role and main responsibilities? - Why did you choose to become a consultant?	Role expectations, hierarchy, Identity construction
2. Topic no.1: Daily interaction with GenAI	Consultant's perception of reality, consultants' AI usage and AI-knowledge, serves as a base for contrasting the real usage of AI with the corporate positive narrative	- For which tasks do you usually use GenAI? - Do you have any concrete examples where GenAI in your work was useful? - Do you have any concrete examples where GenAI in your work was not useful? - Was it due to your lack of AI-knowledge or because of the flaws of AI?	Understanding reality/ living experiences -> Tradition: symbolic interactionism
3. Topic no.2: Exploring sensegiving of the corporate positive narrative	Exploring the driver of the positive narrative, examining how the positive narrative is implemented in the daily consultants' work	- Is there a place (like a newsletter or the onboarding day) where your company especially encourages consultants to use GenAI? - How does the consulting industry benefit from GenAI?	Sensegiving and internal distribution of the positive narrative, Sensemaking
4. Topic no.3: Challenging the corporate narrative against reality	Consultants' relationship with GenAI and future-oriented reflections about consulting work with GenAI, capture tensions or emotional responses, confronting	- With which metaphor would you describe your relationship towards AI? What is GenAI for you? - As GenAI makes your work more efficient, do you work less because of GenAI? - Would you say that GenAI is more beneficial for the whole company than for you as an individual consultant?	Identity tension; Response to the corporate narrative, Sensemaking

	consultants with the ambiguity of GenAI		
5. Closing questions	Open space	• How do you personally feel about AI in consulting? • How do you position yourself in relation in the narratives about GenAI—do you agree with it, are you ambivalent, skeptical? • Is there anything about AI and consulting that we haven't discussed but you think is important?	Sensemaking

Appendix B: Interview Guideline

[Prioritized questions are marked in bold]

1. **Background and Role**

We did our homework for this interview, and we found out you are a [position] in [service line] at [company].

- **Can you describe your current role and main responsibilities?**
- Why did you choose to become a consultant?

2. **Topic no.1: Daily interaction with GenAI**

Explanation: Now we are interested in your daily use of GenAI at work, thereby we mean both publicly-available external GenAI (e.g. ChatGPT) and internal GenAI (your company-internal-AI), all designed to generate content based on prompts.

- **For which tasks do you usually use GenAI?**
 - Do you have different internal GenAI-systems at [company-name]?
 - Before you use the GenAI result as the final output, how many times do you adjust the prompt?
- **Do you have any concrete examples where GenAI in your work was useful?**
 - **Why was it useful?**
 - Did your manager and your colleagues react to your successful AI-usage?
- **Do you have any concrete examples where GenAI in your work was not useful?**
 - **Why was it not useful?**
 - **Was it due to your lack of AI-knowledge or because of the flaws of AI?**
 - Did you share your experience about it with your manager or colleagues?
- **Would you describe yourself as AI-savvy (knowledgeable)?**

- **If you could dream, in a few years, what would you want your relationship with AI to look like in a few years, especially as AI evolves towards agentic AI?**

[Transition: Let's keep this positive narrative about GenAI in mind.]

3. Topic no.2: Exploring sensegiving of the corporate positive narrative

- *Partner/Director only question:* **How do people learn about GenAI at [company-name]? Which mindset towards GenAI do you want them to achieve?**
- **Is there a place (like a newsletter or the onboarding day) where your company especially encourages consultants to use GenAI?** (who is behind? Is there a person at [company-name] that is working a lot to accelerate the GenAI adoption at [company-name]?...Why do you think this person is doing it?
- **How does the consulting industry benefit from GenAI?**

[Transition question to get consultants into critical thinking: If it aligned with the personal background of the consultant: As you studied your Bachelors/Master at Lund University: Is this positive discourse on GenAI at [company-name] different from the one you heard during your studies in Lund?...as our Master at LUSEM for example is critical on AI and its impact.]

- **Topic no.3: Challenging the corporate narrative against reality**

A. Questions regarding AI-metaphors

- **With which metaphor would you describe your relationship with AI? What is GenAI for you?**
- From our research we see 3 metaphors describing the relationship between humans and AI:
 - Partnership
 - Symbiosis
 - Augmentation
- **Do you think one of these 3 is an accurate description of your relationship with GenAI?**
 - [After having chosen] Why do you think metaphor is (not) accurate to describe your relationship with AI?

- Where do you see GenAI being a [chosen metaphor] at which concrete tasks?
Can you give us some examples?
- **As GenAI makes your work more efficient, do you work less because of GenAI?**
 - Do you have less stress at work because of AI?
 - (Probably no) But if this is the case, why is GenAI then still a [chosen metaphor] for you?
- **Have you heard your colleagues using one of these metaphors?**
 - **Which role had those colleagues?**

B. Questions regarding the business model:

- Which role will be impacted the most in two to three years? (junior - director)
- How will your role be impacted by it?
- **Agentic AI could take over implementation tasks, how much do you think your work will change because of it?**
- Will you hire the same amount of interns/juniors?
- Are we moving towards an obelisk business model?
- **If your friend, also working in consulting, will lose their job because of AI, how do you feel about it?**

C. Questions regarding the pricing model:

- Did the revenue increase because of GenAI usage in your team?
- Would you say that GenAI is more beneficial for your client than for your company?
- Would you say that GenAI is more beneficial for the whole company than for you as an individual consultant?
- How are we seen by clients and how do we see others?
 - Before GenAI, which qualities or values did clients associate with consultants?
 - With GenAI: How does the client see you now because of AI?; How is the client's perception shifting?
 - What makes you special in the age of AI?

Further critical questions:

- As the people you work with on the clients side are also engaged in similar topics as you, how do you, as a consultant, differ in terms of expertise compared to them? Do you think that GenAI can replace these skills?
- Do you experience cognitive decline, diminishing general knowledge or reduction in creativity? As there are studies that show that the usage of AI is correlated with cognitive offloading?
 - If they say no: do you think that this is the case with younger generations (GenZ)?
- *Partner/Director only question:* **Does the client's CEO expect that your consultants transmit the positive narrative on GenAI inside the client's company?**
- *Partner/Director only question:* Are you becoming more critical towards the junior consultants? (for example, as there have been scandals like consultants using AI for producing client reports?)
 - How do you ensure that there is enough time for consultants to learn about AI?
- *Junior only question:* **Is your project leader critical towards junior consultants using GenAI at work? (for example as there have been scandals like consultants using AI for producing client reports)?**
- What happens in conversations when doubts or limitations are raised about GenAI towards the project leader?
- **Have you encountered someone in your company that is more sceptical towards the positive GenAI narrative?**
 - Do you think they feel any pressure to adapt to this positive narrative?

5. Closing Questions

- (As you mentioned various threats, for example the possibility that less junior consultants are needed) **How do you position yourself in relation to the narratives about GenAI - do you agree with it, ambivalent, skeptical?**
 - If positive: Have you had concerns towards the positive narrative?

- How do you personally feel about AI in consulting? **Between being positive, curious, skeptical and negative: where would you position yourself?**
- Is there anything about AI and consulting that we haven't discussed but you think is important?