

# **LINKING CONSULTANCY SKILLS AND PREFERENCES: A CASE STUDY**

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Over the past decade, consultants in organisational change programmes have identified the fact that job skills (the ability to do a job) and job preferences (wanting to do a job) are inextricably linked. There have been numerous arguments on whether ability or preference is the pre-eminent characteristic in any job. This has largely been a sterile argument because of the recognition that there is a link between these two fundamental human experiences. At anyone time, either the ability to do a job or the preference for doing it may be uppermost. The real objective is to recognise that they exist and that both ability and preference must be taken into consideration when designing jobs for people.

This article concentrates on the preference side of the equation, not because it is seen to be more important than ability but because it is so often assumed to be unimportant. It looks at the preferences of successful consultants and draws conclusions on the link between preferences and skills of consultants working with clients. It is an area often overlooked in the research and literature. Consultants are frequently on the "giving" side of research but seldom on the "receiving" end.

The research was carried out in a major international consultancy organisation over a period of nine months as part of the development of the technique now known and being applied around the world as decision preference analysis (DPA).

Developed by the author and Dr R.E. Hicks, DPA is a technique aimed at increasing productivity in organisations through the matching of individual preferences to job preferences. The objectives of DPA are therefore to:

- measure the decision-making preferences of people;
- measure the decision-making requirements of jobs, and
- set up defined career paths with the right person in the right job.

When these objectives are achieved, people can then move more effectively into jobs where there is a high probability that they will enjoy what they are doing. And the evidence of past DPA research is that job satisfaction and productivity both rise when preferences between people and jobs are matched.

In fact, most people have a fair idea of their own preferences and whether these are matched on the job or not. As a check though, answer these questions. Would you rather check your bank statement yourself or ask the bank teller to do it for you? Would you rather study physics or study creative design? Would you rather program a computer or interview people for a job? Would you rather read a book on statistics or read a book on gardening? The answers to these questions give a clue to your preferences. The first alternative in each case is a quantitative activity, the second is qualitative. The DPA questionnaire asks a number of questions like these.

The QN/QL preferences measured by the DPA test are expressed as a percentage. People with an 80/20 preference, for example, would prefer to spend 80 per cent of their time on quantitative analysis and 20 per cent on qualitative analysis. A 20/80 person would have the reverse preferences. The first figure in each case is the preference for QN reasoning.

The questionnaire measures the preference profiles of individuals using eight discrete categories: social/people, creative/innovative, selling/persuasion, outdoor/mobile, mathematics/numerate, scientific/analytical, clerical/administration and practical/manual. These categories are also used in the analysis of the activities required in the job, which means that job profiles and individual profiles can be compared directly. The following general descriptions are the result of analysing some thousands of tests over a period of more than a decade.

An authoritarian, decisive accountant, serious and formal in relationships with other people, analytical but practical, with a dominant personality favouring the use of rules and regulations would be highly QN - a typical 80/20 person. Conversely, a sensitive and flexible, friendly personnel manager, supportive of his staff and responsive to people-oriented problems, with an open, communicative style would be highly QL - a typical 20/80 person.

The consultancy organisation under review in this research was divided into a number of regions around the world and the DPA test was used throughout to measure preferences. The cultural background was diverse, with consultants being involved from the UK, Sweden, Australia and New Zealand. In all, the research involved 317 consultants from separate regions or countries. The research clearly showed that successful consultants were those who had a particular preference profile.

The profitability of all regions appeared to depend largely on employing consultants whose preferences for selling were high. If this preference dropped too low, then continuity of work was threatened, as otherwise able consultants avoided the initiation of selling opportunities. The successful general consultant was also very qualitative, with high levels of preference for social, outdoor and creative as well as selling activities. There was a direct correlation between the presence of these preferences in the region and the region's profitability.

The following preferences were therefore shown to be crucial in selecting the general consultant. They are listed in order of priority:

- (1) Social/people
- (2) Selling/persuasion
- (3) Creative/innovative
- (4) Outdoor/mobile

- (5) Practical/manual
- (6) Mathematics/numerate
- (7) Scientific/analytical
- (8) Clerical/administrative

The mean QN/QL score was around 35/65. Comments on the results in each region are made below.

### UK REGION 1

The modal DPA score for all consultants in this region was 37/63, with a mean of 43/57, over a sample size of 72 tests. The highest preferences were in social, outdoor, practical and selling activities. In fact, this region had the highest selling preferences of any region tested, with nearly 36 per cent of the consultants having a high preference for selling. Consultants in UK Region I also had the lowest preference for clerical work, whilst the mathematics and scientific preferences were in the medium preference range.

The picture that emerged from this region was one of a very active group of consultants who enjoyed selling and liked to be out and about, away from the office.

Based on the successful consultant profile the only negative factor was a less-than- average score for creativity. This posed a

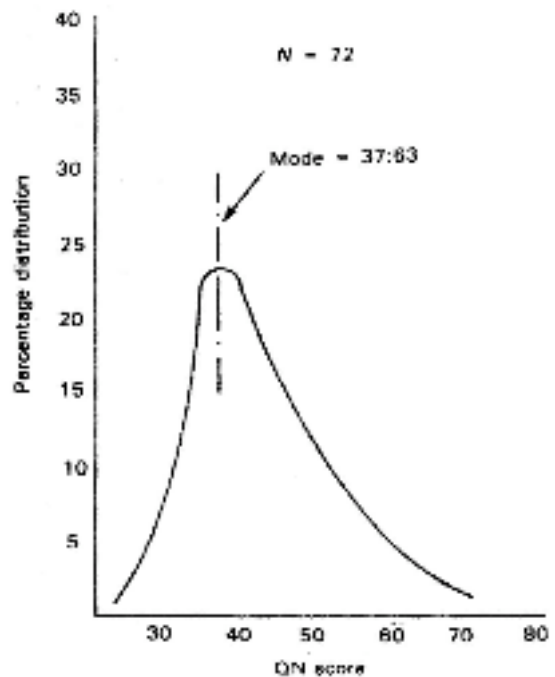


FIGURE 1.  
UK Region 1

problem in activities which required a high level of innovation or acceptance of new techniques. However, the region was financially successful and reported one of the highest net profit results in the company.

### UK REGION 2

The modal DPA score for all consultants in this region was 38/62, with a mean of 43/57, over a sample size of 68 tests. The highest preferences in this group were for social and outdoor activities, followed very closely by creative and practical. Preferences for clerical activities were low.

The results for this region were very close to those for UK Region I apart from the important aspect of selling. In UK Region 2, 25 per cent of consultants had a high preference for selling, compared with 36 per cent in UK Region 1. Creative preferences were some 10 per cent higher than UK Region 1. The marginally higher overall QN result in UK Region 2 compared with UK Region I (38 per cent QN compared with 37 per cent QN) was due almost entirely to the higher selling preference in the former region.

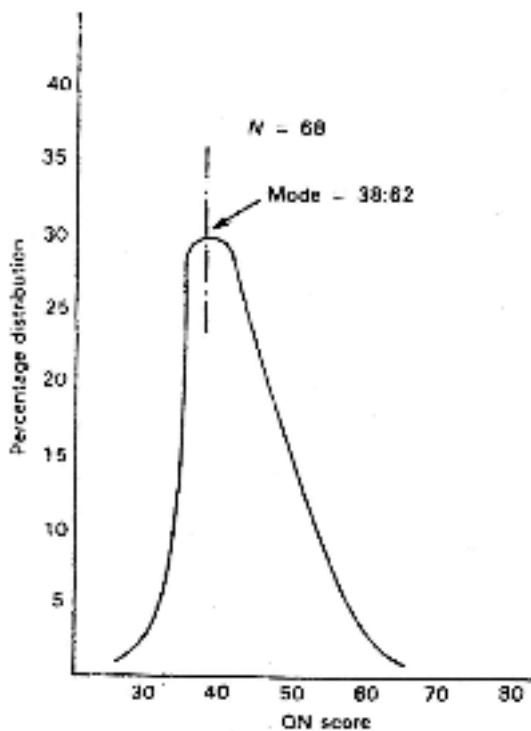


FIGURE 2.  
UK Region 2

### UK REGION 3

The profile for this region was bi-modal, with one modal value at 38/62 and the other at 48/52. The mean value was 44/56, over a sample size of 23 tests.

Social, outdoor and practical preferences were high with clerical and mathematics preferences being low. In fact, only 10 per cent of consultants in this region had any preference for mathematics at all, the lowest proportion of any region measured. In contrast, with some notable exceptions in individual consultants, social preferences were very high.

The bi-modal profile was interesting, with 12 of the 23 consultants forming a subgroup whose profile was almost identical with general consultants, whilst the remainder had a profile which was far more quantitative. In this latter group, there were many consultants whose social preferences were so low that they would appear to be doing general consultancy work by accident rather than by design. This decreased the overall performance of the group. In addition, the proportion of consultants with high selling preferences was also quite low - only 24 per cent of consultants in this region had a high selling preference.

There was, indeed, some underlying conflict in the region, with some of the consultants recognising that their level of satisfaction and performance in the job was less than it should have been.

### UK REGION 4

This region has also produced a bi-modal profile. One modal score was the same as the general consultants, 38/62, whilst the other was far more quantitative at 52/48. This mean score was 45/55, over a sample size of 35 tests.

Social, outdoor and practical preferences were high, and were the same as those normally scored by general consultants. However, scientific preferences were higher and creative preferences were lower than those normally scored by general consultants. There seemed to be two potential problems in this region. In the first place, overall selling preferences were one of the lowest out of all the regions measured. Only 23 per cent of consultants in this region had high selling preferences. Responsibility for selling rested on the shoulders of half-a-dozen consultants who enjoyed the role.

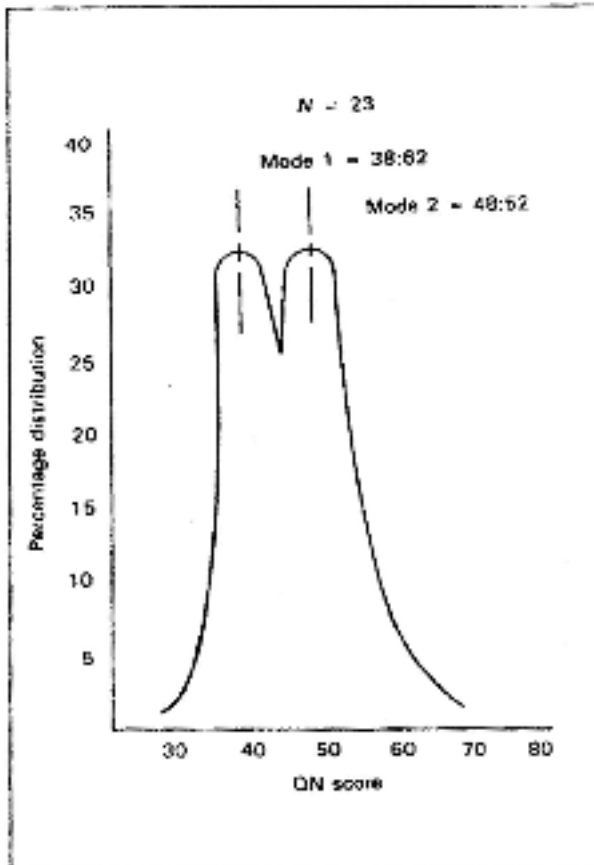


FIGURE 3.  
UK Region 3

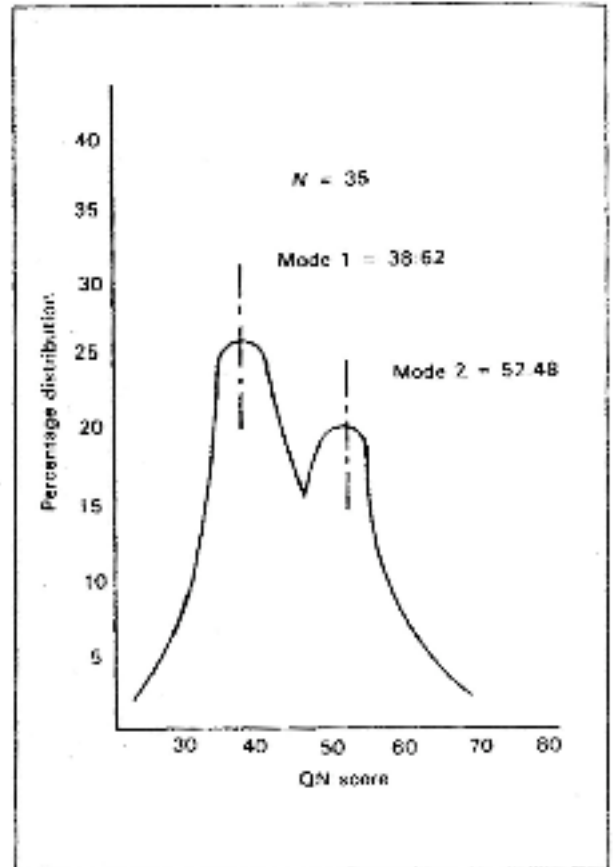


FIGURE 4.  
UK Region 4

Because of the nature of the work in this region, the combination of both QL and QN consultants was in line with the strategy employed in the region. However, regions with the highest proportion of consultants with high selling preferences also turned in the best results which necessitated a trade-off between active selling and "back-room" consultancy.

The dilemma posed by this result was real. Consultants who had high mathematics preferences seldom had high selling preferences. This was a problem which was finally resolved by making all consultants aware of their own and each other's preferences and discussing their DPA scores openly and without bias. Another successful strategy adopted within the region was to apply a team approach in selling, in which one QN and one QL consultant formed a sales team. With each one being aware of the other's preferences, this enabled consultants to discuss a wide range of client problems and thereby overcame the QN/QL dilemma in the region. It was a formula which lifted sales dramatically.

### UK REGION 5

The modal DPA score for all consultants in this region was 58/42 with a mean of 50/50 over a sample size of 23 consultants. It was by far the highest quantitative group measured. The highest preferences were for scientific, practical and creative activities; the lowest were for selling and social. This region was almost the complete reverse of the general consulting regions - almost a mirror image of the results obtained for UK Region 1, for example.

This was a very interesting region. It consisted of scientific, research-oriented consultants working on assignments involving the assessment and application of computer technology. Conflict within the group was minimal. None of the consultants had a high selling preference. This region had built up a reputation for technical excellence and assignments gravitated into the region rather than were marketed.

### SWEDEN

The modal DPA score for all consultants in this region was 41/59 with a mean of 42/58

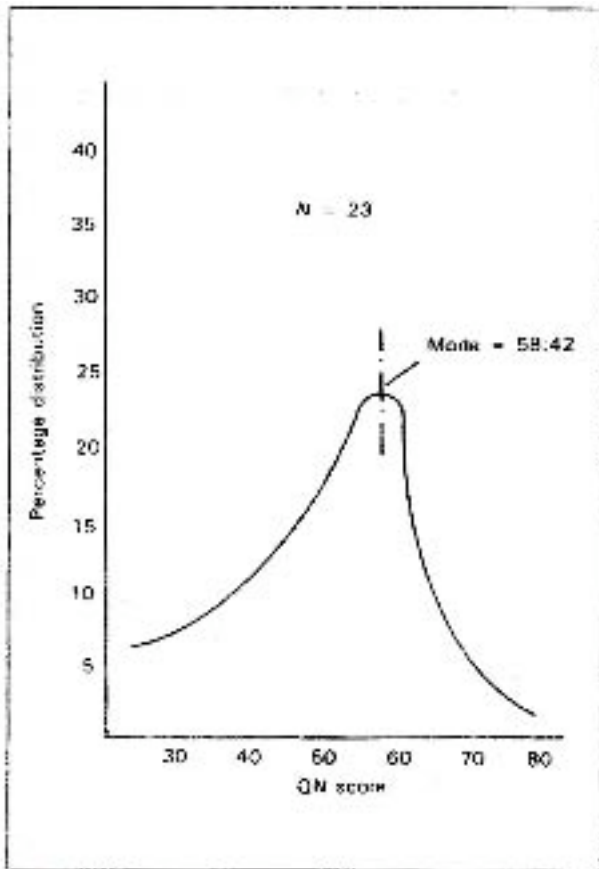


FIGURE 5.  
UK Region 5

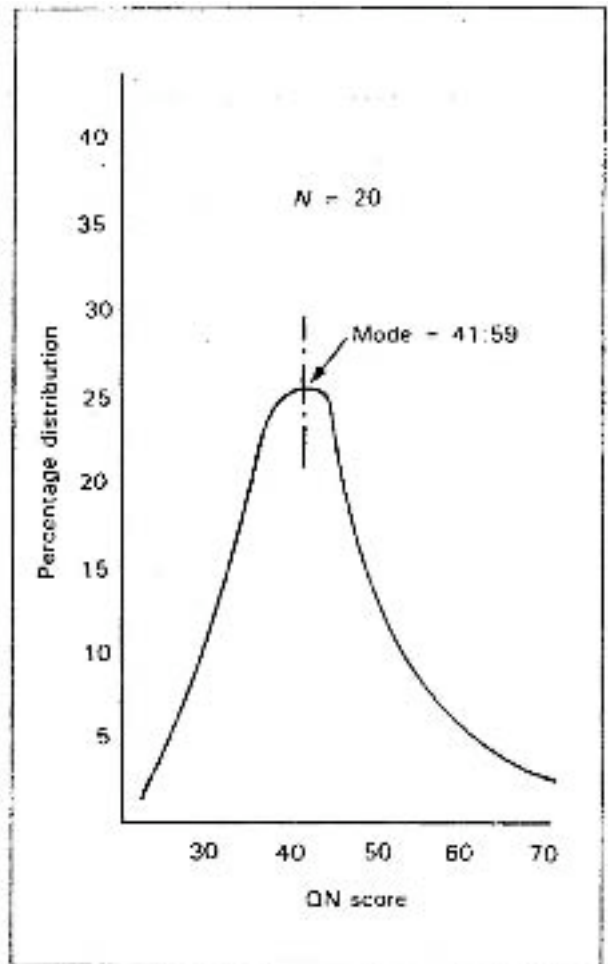


FIGURE 6.  
Sweden

over a sample size of 20 tests. The highest preferences in this group were for social, outdoor and creative activities, followed closely by selling. The regional profile was typical of that found in other general consulting regions. There was a high level of selling preference throughout the region but QN preferences, especially mathematics and clerical, were low.

Although the modal value was somewhat more QN than other general consulting regions, the difference was not great, and may have been due to the small sample size. Another interesting factor emerging from the profile was that the region had a higher-than-average preference for scientific activities. This could have indicated a need to use past experience and established procedure but was balanced by quite a high preference for creative activities. It appeared to be a balanced profile, without the strong trends found in some of the other regions - more comfortable than exciting.

## AUSTRALIA REGION 1

The modal DPA score for all consultants in

this region was 45/55 with a mean of 46/54 over a sample size of 32 tests.

Although the highest preferences were in social, creative and outdoor activities, there was also a high preference for science which balanced a low preference for selling. Next to UK Region 5, this region had the lowest selling preference and the highest scientific preferences of any region measured. Only 19 per cent of consultants had a high preference for selling, whilst 38 per cent had high scientific preferences.

The profile also showed a larger number of QN consultants than in other general consulting regions. This would normally indicate a profile requiring quantitative rather than intuitive solutions to problems and working by past experience and standard procedures.

One of the conclusions drawn from these results was that the region should increase the number of consultants with high selling preferences. Using UK Region I as a guide, the goal would be to have at least 40 per

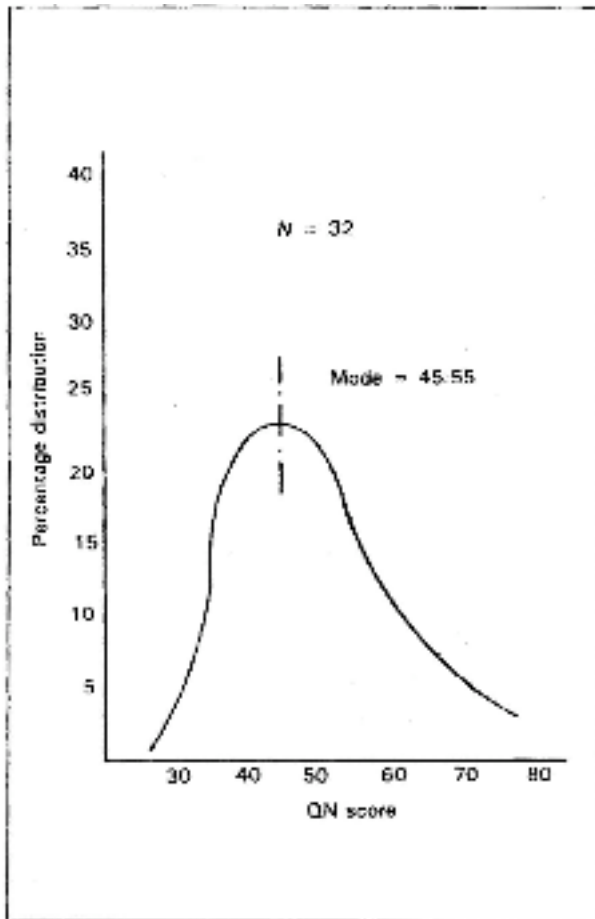


FIGURE 7.  
Australia Region 1

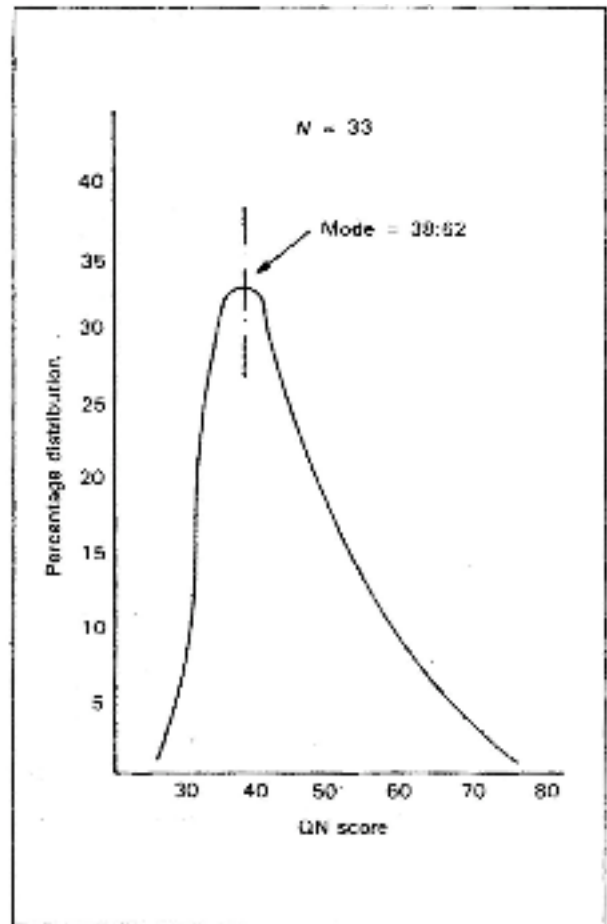


FIGURE 8.  
Australia Region 2'

cent of consultants in each region with high selling preferences.

## AUSTRALIA REGION 2

The modal DPA score in this region was 38/62, with a mean of 45/55, over a sample size of 33 tests. The highest preferences were in social, outdoor, practical and selling activities. In fact, next to UK Region 1, this region had the highest selling preferences of any region in the company.

Consultants had low preferences for scientific, mathematics and clerical activities and the lowest preference for creative activities of any region. The latter result was seen as a problem in such things as the acceptance of new techniques and as a danger sign in assignments which required a high level of innovation.

## DISCUSSION

Although the research clearly highlighted the preferences required to be an effective

consultant, the selection of a candidate for any consultancy position still has to be matched with the particular requirements of the job. A consultant in management information technology, for example, would clearly require a higher quantitative score than a general consultant, or a personnel consultant.

Similarly, the consulting job itself requires careful assessment through the compilation of an activity analysis. The development of an activity analysis is an integral part of the DPA technique. Although the DPA position activity analysis is *not* a job specification, it may resemble one in many cases. As the name indicates, it is an *activity* analysis; it analyses the activities required to do the job, including the mundane (but essential) tasks carried out in most jobs, such as:

- answering and talking over the telephone;
- writing letters and memoranda;
- dictating, either to a personal secretary, or to a dictating machine;

- attending meetings/committees;
- talking to the boss, or subordinates;
- thinking;
- reading financial papers, journals; and
- entertaining casual visitors.

Many of these activities are included in every job, but are rarely defined in a job specification. Whereas job specifications tend to be passive documents, the position activity analysis is dynamic. *Activity* is the key word in objectively measuring jobs. But we have to be careful of falling into the "generic" trap, that is, assuming that the title of the job (consultant, for example) actually conveys any information at all about the content of the job. It does not. The consultant's job can cover a wide range of activities, from highly QN, a technical computer consultant for example, to highly QL, such as a personnel consultant. To place all consultants in the same category and to expect the same level of job satisfaction in every job which the consultant might be expected to do can often lead to serious anomalies in staffing, as this research found.

## **ACTIVITY IS THE KEY WORD IN OBJECTIVELY MEASURING JOBS**

In spite of this, one factor clearly stands out - successful general consultants, the management consultants by common definition, require high preferences for social, selling, creative and outdoor activities. The fact that they may avoid quantitative activities is irrelevant, provided that they have access to someone who can do it for them.

Thus in the management of career paths for consultants, the following guidelines came out of this research:

1. Consultancy is predominantly a qualitative profession. Therefore training should focus on selling, communication, group decision making and negotiation skills.
2. Although quantitative skills may be required in special circumstances, to be ultimately successful, consultants should be supported by carefully chosen administrative back-up. The consultant's career can often be retarded by unfulfilled expectations of a consultant's ability to cope with administrative problems.

In planning the career of a general consultant, activity analyses should be completed for all those jobs into which the consultant might be promoted, for example, supervising consultant, sales consultant, regional or accounts manager.

Preferences of candidates should then be checked against job preferences.

Most important, the career paths for consultants should be planned in line with personal and organisational objectives. At the time this research was carried out, Australia Region 1 was one of the least successful regions because this planning had not been carried out. Consultants with preferences which did not match the job requirements were working in the region by accident rather than by design.