

# **Words to Sell By**

## **An Exploratory Text Analysis of Human Capital Consultant Websites**

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*The present study compares the descriptive language used by boutique, medium and large human capital consulting firms to sell services through their websites. Using computer assisted content analysis of website text (product pages, about us, and FAQ sections) across 123 consulting firms' websites, resulting in a total of 51,612 words. The findings suggest a strong shared focus on leadership development and assessment across different types of consulting firms. Boutique firms more frequently specialized in surveys and highlighted terms such as health, while larger firms specialized in job fit and leadership. Medium sized firms tend to use the most positive language centered around growth and development (talent, success and effectiveness) while boutique firms show a preference for negative words that create urgency among potential customers urgency (issues, complex). The implications for consulting firms are vast and equally critical. Future research is also needed to explore how human capital consulting firms adapt their website content over time in response to changing internal and external business environments.*

*Keywords: qualitative research methods, human capital consulting psychology, consulting, consulting firm, business development*

## INTRODUCTION

Consulting and industrial-organizational (I-O) Psychology have long had a branding problem. Blum and Naylor (1968) define the discipline of industrial organizational psychology as “simply the application or extension of psychological facts and principles to the problems concerning human beings operating within the context of business and industry,” yet few outside the field understand the application of I-O psychology to real-world challenges and problems. Consulting psychology is a related but unique and specialized field of psychology that more deeply addresses such areas as assessment and interventions at the individual, team, and organizational levels. In addition, consulting psychologists largely focus on individual assessment and coaching. They typically leave the team consultation or enterprise or organizational interventions to others such as I-O psychologists, executive coaches, or human resource management specialists (Lowman, 2016). The common thread that binds these professionals is the application of psychological knowledge to organization, group or individual issues or situations to enable higher levels of work effectiveness and efficiency. These efforts are meant to drive organizational performance, employee satisfaction, and motivation. Consulting psychologists typically work in business or non-profit organizations, in consulting firms, or in private practice. While the brand of I-O and consulting psychology continue to be little known, the field has a long history (Gasser et al., 1998) in developing the way organizations function and is expected to grow in the future (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014).

Distinguishing the value of I-O – driven interventions, as opposed to management consulting firms, is dependent on how well practitioners can communicate the benefits. Gasser et al. (2000) suggested that I-O psychologists must engage in more advertising activities to sell more effectively, while the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) and Society of Consulting Psychology (SCP) have produced resources to help practitioners, students, and faculty communicate the value of I-O and consulting psychology more effectively to lay audiences (Lin, Nolan, and Dalal, 2018; Jankovic et al., 2018).

An essential tool for companies to broaden their reach involves the use of a website to express their brand, sell their products, and describe their services (Liu et al., 1997). Company websites help potential customers develop attitudes towards company brands and ultimately make purchasing decisions regarding products and services (Sicilia, Ruiz, & Reynolds, 2006; Voorveld, Neijens, & Smit, 2009). The specific language used by sites can also drive purchase decisions (Jansen, Sobel, & Zhang, 2011). While previous research on how I-O psychologists advertise focused on traditional advertising methods (Gasser et al., 2001), there has yet to be a review of websites for consulting firms and how consultants use language in presenting and selling their services. Few studies (Armbrüster & Barchewitz, 2004) have looked at how human capital consulting firms sell their products to potential clients.

A review of the pertinent and relevant literature on the challenges for consulting firms to effectively market their services revealed several remarkable and noteworthy elements. For example, Ardichvili (2000), in a study of 12 independent consultants revealed a common dilemma as to whether marketing of services offered via fancy promotional content versus more innovative ways of achieving the same goal of attracting clients and new business. These creative ways include enhanced working with other like-minded consultancies along with building intimate relationships with past and current clients were considered far more important and impactful to generating new business rather than website content or cold calling. However, 90% of participants in this focused study rated themselves low on marketing ability and they posited that partnering with other consultants who may be good at marketing may be a better approach to enhance selling of their services than the reliance on what is said on their website.

Eyring (2000) offered an even more challenging prospect for consultants and for industrial-organizational consultants: the added implications of the global landscape. Having a global mindset or perhaps a broader perspective on what clients need and how to capture their mindshare means creating a shared sense of purpose and direction (Collins & Porras, 1996). In turn, this needs to be reflected in how consulting psychologists define their “why” or purpose (Eyring, 2000) and, most importantly, how this “reason for being” is reflected in marketing collateral. In addition, in order to effectively promote new business, that sense of purpose needs to be authentic which enables consultants to engage with current and

prospective clients to identify how a partnership can be forged to promote inclusive growth in the world (Holt & Seki, 2012).

Hogan (2020) disputed the notion that marketing can be better served through building networks and relationships. While networking as posited by Ardichvili (2000) is still necessary to sustain consulting businesses, marketing remains the crucial avenue for building it - plus there are strategic and tactical aspects to marketing. Hogan, a renowned industrial-organizational psychologist who developed the popular Hogan Assessment systems and tools, argued that getting marketing right is challenging and requires a depth of serious thinking and strong research that ultimately needs to be reflected in the firm's web collateral mainly through clear distinction between what it does and offers versus its competitors. Demonstrating these key differentiators then enables consultancies to position themselves distinctly from the competition. Hogan believes, though, that networking comes into play by engaging with current and past clients by asking them what was done well for them and what the competition does better. Being as empirical as possible in this is what enhances marketing and promotions on websites and other collateral including social media advertisements (Hogan, 2020).

Krajl (1994) supported the general notion that developing a significant understanding of the target client cannot be a generic offering and instead requires having a focus on service offerings. Consultants should not be try to provide every service for every client and a deep initiation and immersion in identifying, thoughtfully, and deeply understanding, and engaging that unique clientele is the first step in developing marketing collateral for consultants to effectively promote services. As a clinical psychologist consultant, Krajl (1992), also emphasized that a clear focus with the help of a conceptual framework of that niche market would allow consultants to develop a strong appreciation for the elements and factors that influence a client to purchase consulting services. Consultants do not have to recreate the wheel and can find such marketing approaches, models, and frameworks for effective service delivery from professional psychological or consulting associations (Krajl, 1992). In addition, Franco & Haase (2020) included brand, marketing, sales, and industry contacts. Norton (2020) cited this as a key factor in not just gaining new clients but also creating an advantage for performance enablers such as strategy development, deployment, and talent management. These can then be woven into marketing collateral and service offering language in a holistic manner. Sokol (2020) clarified this strategy by explaining consulting services from the point-of-view of a sole industrial-organizational psychology practitioner. There are four distinct competencies the sole-practitioner consulting practice needs to be cognizant of: selling business, delivering business, managing business, and differentiating business. Sokol posits the unlikelihood that the sole practitioner can be equally skilled and find the same utility across all four domains. Those who do not like to sell or market business, or simply cannot sell at all, likely should outsource that activity to outside experts. This includes establishing distinct service offerings, intellectual property and, of course, establishing a niche that creates a market advantage to sell and deliver business (Sokol, 2020). It is through this integrated and thoughtful approach that a consultancy may present. Any marketing strategy requires words and presentations to successfully market and sell services.

Though the terms may vary, many human capital and management consulting firms engage in I-O and consulting psychology activities (Rotolo et al., 2018) and perform consultations typically associated with I-O psychology training (i.e. assessment, validation, executive coaching, people analytics). Despite their similarities, I-O Psychology's brand remains relatively unknown in comparison to management consulting (Kaplan, 2017). This may be due to management consulting having a more effective brand; namely one that exudes professionalism and expertise (Kipping, 2011).

In the present study, the researchers sought to understand how management consulting firms use key terms and language to sell their products, services, and interventions. The researchers sought to answer the following exploratory research questions:

***Research Question 1: What language is most used by consulting firms to describe their services?***

***Research Question 2: Are there differences in how consulting firms of differing sizes describe their products and services?***

## Method

The researchers used a qualitative approach to conduct an analysis of online text (Islam, et al., 2016; Chetta, et al, 2017) to better understand how consulting firms marketed themselves through their website. To identify consulting firms applying I-O – related interventions, a researcher searched the SIOP Consultant Locator and reviewed external consultant profiles. The researcher reviewed each consultant profile and noted the name of the consulting firms that each listed consultant was employed with. Next, the researchers searched for the consulting firms and noted all that had websites. This resulted in a list of 123 consulting firms. From those 123 consulting firms, the researchers collected text data off of each of their websites. The text data included language from the site's product pages, about us, and FAQ pages. Customer reviews, comments, and testimonials were excluded from the data gathering process.

Once the data was gathered, the researchers categorized each consulting firm into one of three size-based categories: *small* (<100 employees) *medium* (>100-<1000 employees) and *large* (>1000 employees). This criterion was determined by reviewing LinkedIn pages for each firm which reported the number of employees.

The accumulated data resulted in a total of 55 small consulting firms, 52 medium firms, and 16 large consulting firms in the dataset, yielding a total of 51,612 words. The software employed for extracting major themes included RIOT scan (Boyd, 2016) and text mining packages such as “tidytext” (Silge & Robinson, 2016), “tm” (Feinerer & Hornik, 2018), and “stm,” (Roberts, 2018) which were employed in R.

## Results

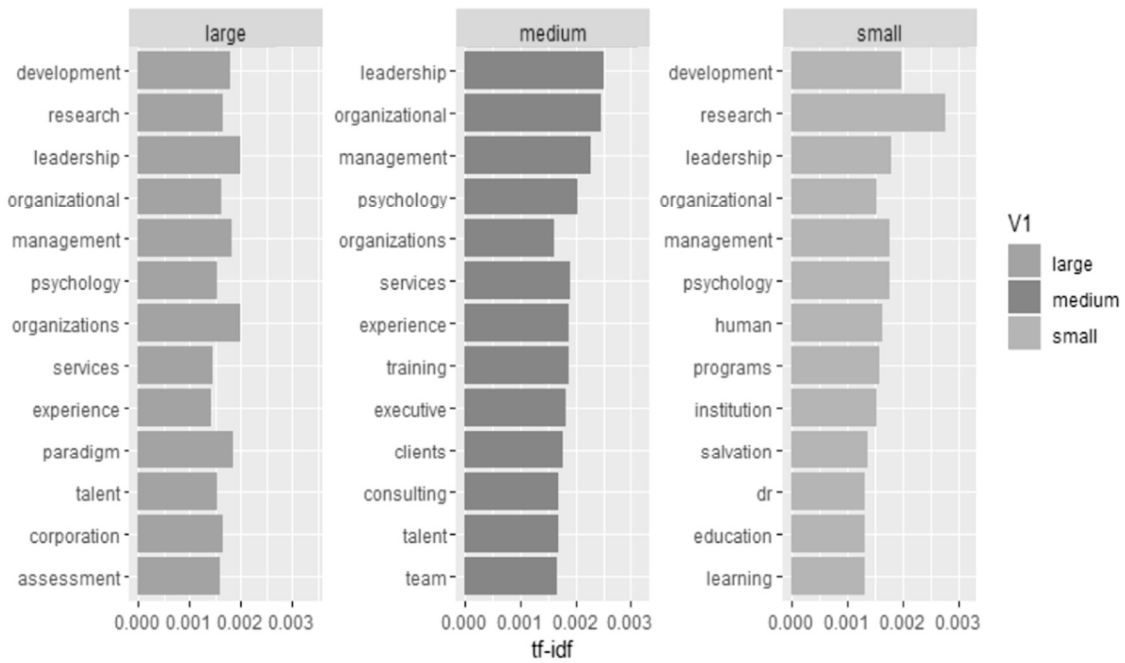
To analyze the most frequently used words, the research team first cleaned the texts and deployed the “tidytext” package in R. The preliminary analyses removed all the punctuations as well as stop words such as a, are, that, etc. “Tidytext” converted the document into tokens, and a frequency chart was built to pull up the number of terms in the text. The results suggested the 10 most common terms in the matrix were as follows: *business*(273), *development*(255), *leadership*(232), *management*(216), *organizational*(208), *psychology*(195), *services*(156), *talent*(152), *clients*(147), and *training*(146).

To get the overall sentiment index, the “bing” dictionary in the “tidyverse” package (Wickman & Golemund, 2017) was used to see which positive and negative words were used most frequently and leveraged on the consultancy's websites. Sentiment analyses allow for the comparison of emotions and opinions in the corpus. Figure 1 presents a representation of the output, using the R package “wordcloud”; the most often appearing positive words were *talent*, *success* and *effectiveness*, while the most commonly used negative words included *issues*, *complex*, and *stress*.

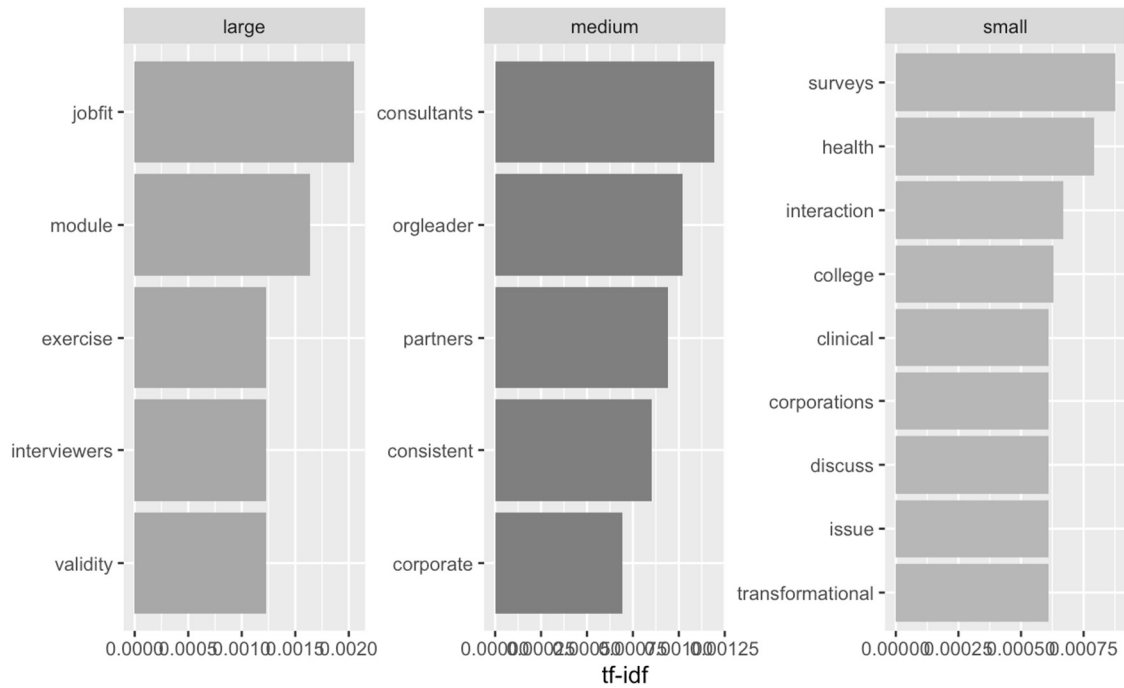
FIGURE 1  
WORD CLOUD FOR OVERALL SENTIMENT



**FIGURE 2**  
**HIGHEST TERM FREQUENCY FOR EACH DOCUMENT**



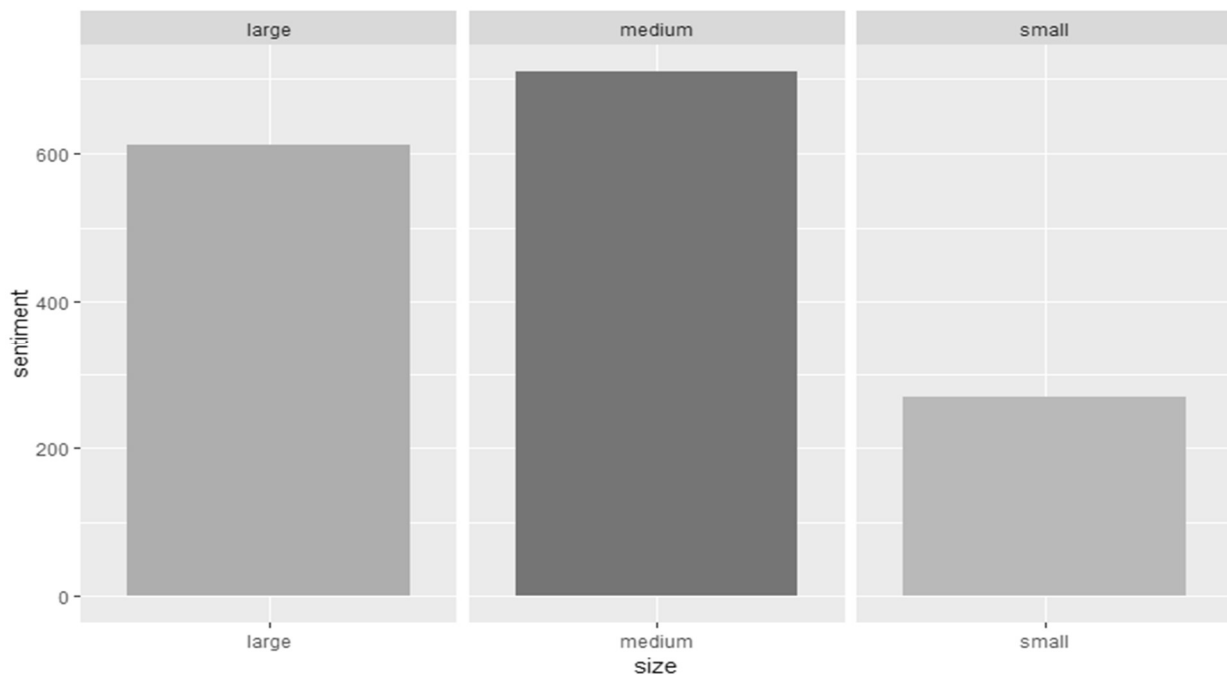
**FIGURE 3**  
**HIGHEST UNIQUE FREQUENCY FOR EACH DOCUMENT**



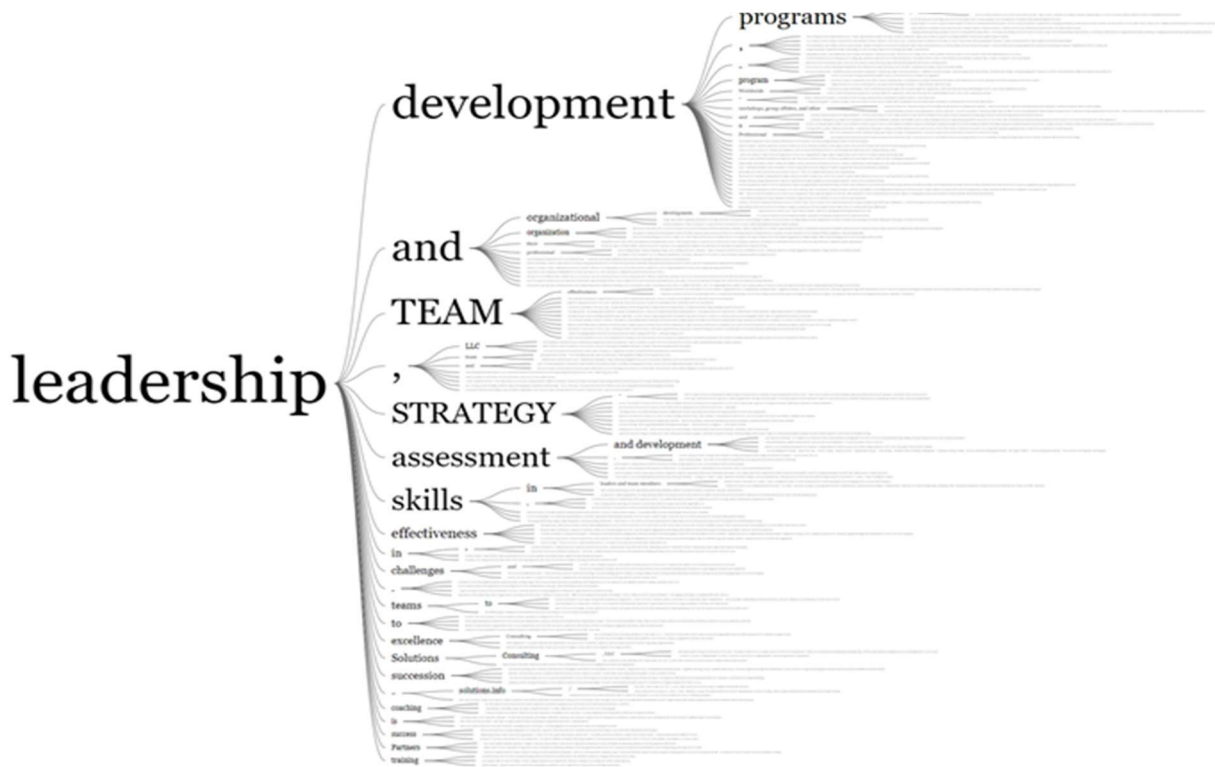
An exploratory analysis using the “*tidytext*” package in R provided a direct tool to calculate the *term frequency/inverse document frequency*, which refers to the frequency of a term adjusted for how rarely it is used. Figure 2 is the visualization of the highest term frequency associated by consulting firm size. For large consulting firms, the more relevant themes were “*development*”, “*research*”, and “*leadership*”. Boutique consulting firms seemed to use the same language since there is considerable overlap in language between large and small firms. Medium-sized firms seemed to focus more on “*leadership*”, “*organizational*”, and “*management*”. There seems to be some convergence around the offerings between large and boutique firms. Figure 3 includes the highest unique term frequency for each document with large firms using the term “*job fit*” Medium sized firms seem to focus on “*consultants*” and “*organizational leadership*” Boutique firms seemed to focus on services such as “*surveys*” and “*health*” within organizations.

The distributions and word cloud presented provide a descriptive representation of how sentiment changes across different firm sizes through the use of qualitative text data. The second research question aimed to determine the statistical significance in the difference of word usage across the three different types of consulting firms. Figure 4 illustrates the amount of positive sentiment in language used by firm size. The sentiment was examined using frequency differences between positive and negative terms. Medium consultancy firms have the highest sentiments of positivity. However, there is no significant difference using one sample t-tests examining mean differences. It may be that boutique firms use less positive language as a sales technique to create urgency among potential customers.

**FIGURE 4**  
**DIFFERENCES OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE WORDS**



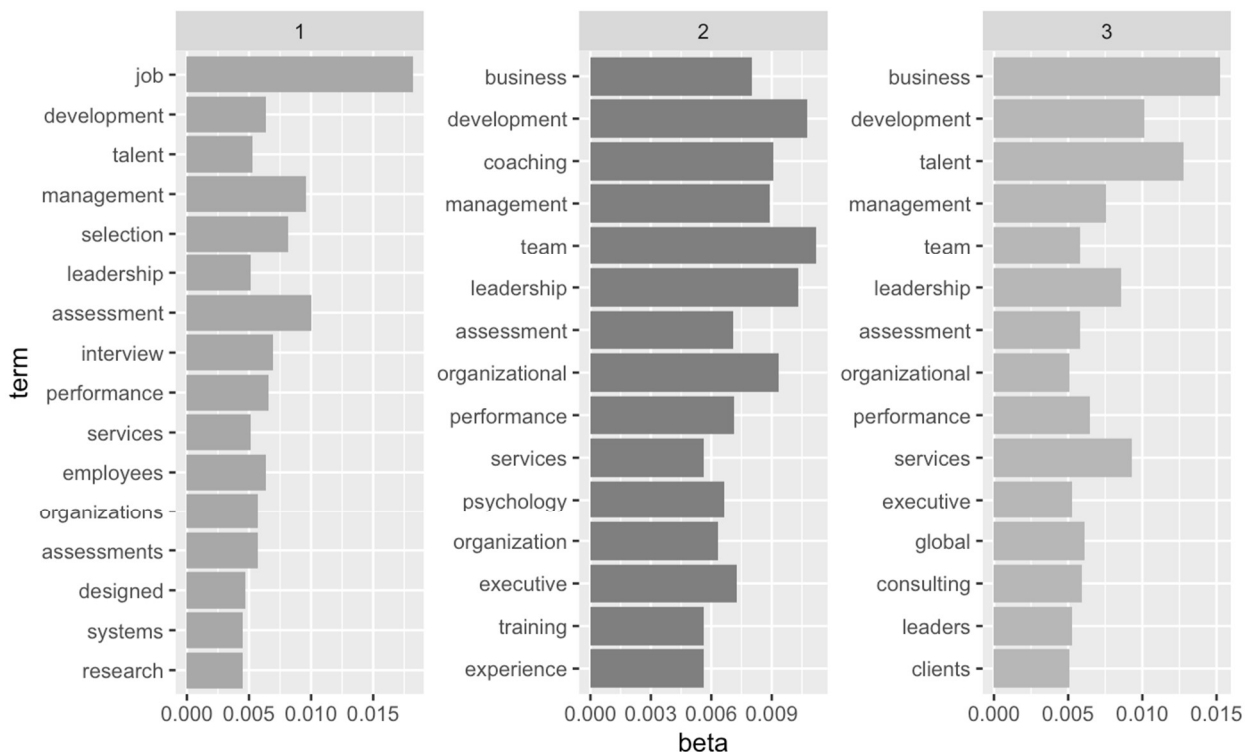
**FIGURE 5**  
**WORD TREE ASSOCIATED WITH “LEADERSHIP”**



In order to better understand the relationship between highly used terms word trees were created. Word trees are an open source text analysis tool that graphically represent the words most often associated with a key term in a hierarchical, branching order. In Figure 5, one of the most commonly presented terms on consultancy websites, “leadership”, is shown alongside its association with other words that follow it and those words’ sub-word trees. Leadership is most often coupled with development, teams, skills and strategy.

Topic modeling was also employed to test if there were divergent topics among the text. Topic modeling is a method for unsupervised classification of such documents, similar to clustering. To test if the documents have multiple major clusters, or separate topics, the “*topicmodels*” (Grün & Hornik, 2011) and “*stm*” (Roberts, 2018), packages were deployed in R to see what relevant words are related to each topic. The tidytext package provides this method for extracting the per-topic-per-word probabilities, called  $\beta$  (“beta”) (Silge & Robinson, 2017). Figure 6 displays those three clusters of most relevant words within each topic using the probability of per-topic-per word. There are some common words across topics, which is an advantage of natural language compared to “hard clustering”, a method which is mostly dependent on the distances of words from each other. If we purposefully set up three groups of topics, it is safe to conclude that the major topics in our text file are (a) *Talent Management and Selection* (b) *“Talent Development”*, and (c) *“Team and Performance Management”*, as these are major key words in talent development. It appears topic 1 is focused more on issues related to selection, interviewing, and leadership assessment. Topic 1 also includes the term research which is a core I-O consideration and closely related to many selection services. In comparison, topic 2 is focused more on coaching, management and leadership assessment of employees. Finally, topic 3 is focused mostly on team and performance management since it includes terms like “team”, “business”, “performance”, “global” and “clients”.

**FIGURE 6**  
**THE MOST COMMON PER-TOPIC-PER-WORD TERMS**



**The SIOP and SCP Website**

In addition to consulting firm websites, the researchers also reviewed the websites of SIOP (<https://www.siop.org/>) and the SCP (<https://www.societyofconsultingpsychology.org/>) using an exploratory analysis on frequency of words. It should be noted that the SIOP website also attempts to promote I-O Psychology interventions. The results of the analyses demonstrate some of the branding and marketing focus of SIOP. Figure 7 shows a word cloud of the most common words used on the SIOP website which includes “team” and “conversation”. This analysis was conducted before the recent change in SIOP website. Figure 8 shows a word cloud of the most common words used on the SCP website which includes “consulting” “psychology” “members” “organizations” and “individuals”



FIGURE 7  
WORD CLOUD OF SIOP HOMEPAGE



FIGURE 8  
WORD CLOUD OF SCP HOMEPAGE



## Discussion

The present research used an exploratory computerized content analysis approach to better understand how management consulting firms describe the services they offer through their websites. The researchers used various exploratory text mining techniques, such as examining frequency of tokens, positive and negative words, and topic modeling to present a picture of current human capital consultancy services on the web. There are major themes surrounding “business” and “talent issues”, especially on “assessment” and “development”. The size of the consulting firms does not seem to influence the emotions conveyed by the language used, whether positive or negative. However, the frequency of words in each document suggested that consulting firms of different sizes do have a varied focus. There was a surprising confluence of terms used by large and boutique firms. While medium sized firms focused on “*leadership*” and

“consultants” This confluence may reflect mimicry with the boutique firms using the same language as larger firms to indicate commonality of services. While firms (regardless of size) used the term *business*, smaller firms tend to highlight survey and *research* services while medium size firms focus more on presenting expertise based around the term “*team*”; larger firms certainly concentrate on issues such as *talent* and *job fit*.

There seemed to be a strong focus on leadership, leadership development, and assessment across the different types of firms. While one might expect that the consulting firms are using the language of business to sell their services, it appears that there is a shared focus on core services such as assessment and leadership development. These functions are often the crossroads between business and psychology.

The results also demonstrate that there are overlaps in offerings across consulting firms, as well as clear differences. The present findings indicate that large, medium, and small firms prioritize different services to clients. Given the data, small firms more frequently specialize in surveys and highlight terms such as health, while larger firms specialize in job fit and leadership.

It is not surprising that most consulting firms tend to use positively charged language focused on growth and development. Organizational consultants may wish to communicate their ability to improve an organizations’ bottom line through their employees, especially in I-O related interventions. However, boutique firms seemed to use less positive language than either medium or large firms. It is interesting to see medium sized firms using the most positive language. The data also illustrate that talent and success were the two terms most strongly associated with positive sentiment. If positive sentiment is the strongest focus of the language of consultant websites, then the focus is “success through talent”.

In comparison to the SIOP and SCP sites, consulting firms are more focused on leadership development. SIOP seems focused on the idea of the SIOP team as a community of I-O psychologists with a concentration on future events. The appearance of Elaine Pulakos’ name is included in the word cloud indicates the importance of the SIOP webpage as a tool by which SIOP as an organization communicates with the larger I-O Psychology community. This is in stark contrast to consulting firms that are focused on their services and offerings.

The SCP site seems to include a greater focus on the individual as well as organizations that are impacted through consulting interventions. The SCP site does not seem as focused on groups or teams and instead has a stronger focus on individuals which seems to indicate a great focus on individual coaching within the consulting psychology field.

### **Implications for Consulting Firms**

The findings are relevant to the entire spectrum of human capital consulting firms as well as solo consulting psychology practitioners. For smaller firms, mining established competitors’ websites for key words may yield deeper insights into current market trends as well as effective copywriting techniques. Smaller firms can then grow their business by mimicking certain positive language and high frequency words to describe their own services to similar customer segments.

Medium and boutique firms may also strive to differentiate their services from large multi-service management consulting firms, highlighting the advantages of psychological approach over generic consulting frameworks for I-O Psychology interventions, including interdisciplinary lens, deeper people insights, and robust data analytics.

In turn, larger firms can learn from boutique firms about how to create urgency among potential customers through marketing messages. Boutique firms’ use of negative words, and their more specialized solutions and offerings can guide larger firms an opportunity to develop in-house practices related to specialized offerings.

### **Limitations**

There are three major limitations in this exploratory study. First, the data from the study came from publicly available text on websites. While the text data can provide some information about the selling strategies of consulting firms, selling as a consultant is not necessarily done through a website alone (Lahti, 2015). Future researchers may wish to look at a variety of different sales techniques, such as the content of

professional presentations and webinars. Other sources of text data such as social media posts, marketing materials (i.e. white papers) should be analyzed to better understand the communication process of consulting firms. While understanding how consulting firms sell their products is important, understanding the sales process that consultants undertake may provide deeper insights. Interviews with consultants who specialize in sales would provide much needed insights to the I-O and consulting psychology communities about how best to frame their interventions. While this qualitative approach provides an initial step, further research must be conducted in order to understand the sales process. By taking a market research approach to future research studies I-O and consulting psychologists may understand how to promote their respective interventions and products more effectively.

A third limitation of this exploratory study may also include the still-evolving but powerful and game-changing digital revolution in workplaces around the world and this realization is still taking root in the consulting world. The new digital revolution shaping the consulting industry itself offers tremendous opportunities for consulting firms to enhance the experiences of their clients are still opening up and advising clients on leveraging analytics will ultimately be an entrenched part of modern consulting. However, consultants must learn new skill sets to stay ahead of this metamorphic disruption. Leading consultancies understand that interpreting “big data” no longer gives them an edge on the competition. Rather, in this new and forthcoming era of digital disruption, it is essential to their very existence and likely, survival. Consequently, for both consultancies and their clients, data science is now a commodity and has been highlighted as a key trend by SIOP (2020). While some large consulting firms are beginning to market these services. Boutique firms may wish to specialize further in this area as well.

The present study provides some insights into the type of language used by consulting firms in selling I-O and consulting psychology interventions. As language changes and I-O psychology becomes more closely associated with other terms such as ‘people analytics’, ‘people science,’ and ‘HR analytics,’ the selling of I-O psychology and consulting psychology may take on a different tenor. Understanding how I-O Psychology interventions are described will provide scientists and practitioners with a better sense of how a lay audience perceives I-O Psychology. Consulting firms may wish to focus on data and analytics rather than just the success of their interventions with regards to developing talent. Understanding what language is most appealing to potential customers of I-O interventions will help consulting firms develop a more robust marketing message and extend the reach of I-O Psychology as a field in the future.

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**APPENDIX 1**  
**LIST OF IO PSYCHOLOGY CONSULTING FIRMS**

<b>Large Firms</b>	<b>Medium Firms</b>	<b>Boutique Firms</b>
Cornerstone DDI APTMetrics Shaker Fors Marsh Group RAND People Assessments PWC EY Mercer-Sirota Aon SAP BTS Gartner SHL SHRM	Saberhagen & Associates Proven Technology Consulting Coldwell Banker Andrulis Associates MDA Leadership ARFA Software Technology Park UNAM Atrium Financial Associates Idea Partners For Organizational Success HumRRO Cultivare Corvirtus Cheloha Consulting Group DebCohenLLC Colihan Consulting Wisconsin Management Company CCA Inc. Training Industry Global Talent Strategies Ricoh Leadership Excellence Consulting Fresh Success Chatham Financial The Leadership Effect Align Mark Minerva Work Solutions LLC Ascension Consulting Services Convergent Unify Consulting Candeo Leadership Consulting Mael Consulting Outmatch Leaders Lyceum Genovo Consulting Catalyst International Vaya Group Job Leaders The Pittman McLenegan Group, L.C. Accelerata Consulting Molto Crescendo	Andrulis Associates Vectoring Performance Group LLC Ben baran L Bartels Consulting Group LLC Geistt J. Brown Group LLC DrJosh Solutions Quintela.io Starworks Leadership LLC Strategic Leadership Collaborative Crescent Management Consulting Good Works Consulting Knowledge Is Power Corporation Dubin Advisory Group Organisation Solutions DataPoints Informed Assessment Solutions DCI Consulting Enelra Talent Solutions, LLC Park Consulting The Cooper Strategic Group Summit Leadership Partners Grace Church Consulting Geode Capital Management PDRI An SHL Company Jackson Leadership Colorado Assessment Half Moon Consulting LLC Lawson International Category 1 Consulting MPG Innovision International Envisia Learning LO Dynamics Hoohana Partners Business Consulting The McCollum Group, LLC Polaris Assessment Systems Inc. Paradigm Personality Labs Leadership Solutions Consulting C M A IO Advisory Org Leader LLC HealthStar Partners Tracom Corporation

	Alandria Saifer PhD. Inc. Talent Acuity HRSG Liquidnet Symphony Talent Hirevue Holborn CultureAMP YSC Consulting Namely Hogan Assessments	Assessment Associates International JPA International Seity Insight Ramsay Corporation Working Resources Insight Business Works Talent Metrics Consulting Dattner Consulting, LLC Ferdman Consulting Edelman & Associates LeaderAmp
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