

# Building the consultant of the future: AI integration and digital ecosystems in advisory

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**Abstract.** Artificial intelligence is changing how management consulting firms operate, from data analysis to strategic advisory. At the same time, digital ecosystems, meaning networks of connected platforms, tools, and partners, are creating new ways for consulting firms to deliver value. This paper examines how artificial intelligence is transforming the role of the management consultant and how digital ecosystems help consulting firms build competitive advantages. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines a review of academic and industry sources with a comparative case study analysis of McKinsey, Boston Consulting Group, and Kearney, the study investigates which consulting activities benefit most from artificial intelligence and how digital platforms create new forms of value in strategic advisory. A supplementary survey of business students examines perceptions of AI readiness and consulting skill requirements. The findings show that AI accelerates due diligence, improves strategic planning through real-time data, and allows consultants to focus less on routine analysis and more on high-level thinking. The research also reveals that consulting firms are shifting from traditional knowledge-based models toward ecosystem orchestration, where firms, technology companies, and clients collaborate to build customized solutions. This paper contributes to the field by proposing a framework that connects AI tool integration with digital ecosystem models within the consulting industry, providing useful insights for students and professionals pursuing careers in consulting or financial advisory.

**Keywords:** artificial intelligence, management consulting, digital ecosystems, strategic advisory, human-AI collaboration, consulting value chain, platform strategy

## Introduction

Management consulting has long been a profession built on human expertise. For decades, the value of a consultant came from deep knowledge, structured thinking, and the ability to synthesize large amounts of information into clear recommendations. However, the industry is now going through one of its biggest changes since McKinsey formalized the profession in the 1930s. The cause of this change is artificial intelligence, and more specifically, generative AI tools that can read documents, write reports, build financial models, and even generate presentation slides in a fraction of the time it takes a human analyst.

At the same time, consulting firms are building what researchers call digital ecosystems. These are networks of partnerships between consulting firms, technology companies, cloud providers, and data platforms that work together to deliver solutions that no single organization could provide on its own. McKinsey now maintains alliances with Microsoft, OpenAI, NVIDIA, and AWS. BCG has formed partnerships with Anthropic, Google, and Salesforce. Kearney has built what it calls an AI Alliance Ecosystem with ServiceNow, Microsoft, and specialized analytics companies. These partnerships are not just about using better tools. They represent a structural change in how consulting value is created and delivered.

The global AI consulting services market was valued at approximately 11 billion US dollars in 2025 and is projected to reach 91 billion US dollars by 2035, growing at a compound annual rate of 26.2 percent (Future Market Insights, 2025). Meanwhile, the broader management consulting industry generates roughly 1 trillion US dollars annually (IBISWorld, 2025). These numbers suggest that AI is not a side project for consulting firms but is quickly becoming central to their business model.

Despite growing industry attention, there is still limited academic research on how AI tools are applied to specific consulting tasks such as building strategies, conducting due diligence, or benchmarking competitors. Most existing studies focus on AI in general business contexts rather than on the consulting profession specifically. Similarly, while digital ecosystem theory has developed rapidly in the strategy literature, it has not been widely applied to professional services firms.

This paper aims to fill that gap by answering two main research questions. First, which consulting activities benefit the most from artificial intelligence? Second, how do digital ecosystems create new forms of value in strategic advisory? The study uses a mixed-methods approach: a comparative case study analysis of three major consulting firms (McKinsey, BCG, and Kearney) based on secondary data from industry reports, press releases, and academic publications, supplemented by a survey of business students to examine perceptions of AI readiness and career implications.

Having worked previously in the AI industry and currently preparing to enter the consulting field, I bring a perspective that sits at the intersection of these two worlds. This paper is written with the belief that understanding how AI and digital ecosystems reshape consulting is not just an academic exercise but a practical necessity for anyone who wants to build a career in advisory.

## **Literature review**

### ***Artificial intelligence in management consulting***

The idea that technology would reshape professional services is not new. Christensen, Wang, and van Bever (2013) argued in *Harvard Business Review* that consulting was on the cusp of disruption, identifying two factors that protected the industry: opacity (the difficulty of evaluating consulting quality in advance) and agility (the ability to customize advice for each client). They warned that both protections would erode as data analytics and standardized tools improved. A decade later, generative AI has accelerated exactly the trends they predicted.

Susskind and Susskind (2015) provided a broader framework in their book *The Future of the Professions*, arguing that technology would gradually place expert knowledge within everyone's reach, challenging the implicit agreement that grants professions monopoly control over specialized expertise. In consulting, this challenge is now visible: an analyst with access to GPT-4 can produce market analysis that previously required a team of three working for a week.

The most rigorous empirical evidence on AI in consulting comes from Dell'Acqua et al. (2023), whose study with 758 BCG consultants found that those using GPT-4 completed 12.2 percent more tasks, worked 25.1 percent faster, and produced results of 40 percent higher quality compared to a control group. The study introduced two important concepts. The first is the jagged technological frontier, which means that AI performs unevenly across tasks, excelling in some areas while failing at similar ones nearby. The second is the distinction between two collaboration patterns: Centaurs, who strategically divide work between human and AI, and Cyborgs, who integrate AI into every step of their process.

A critical finding from the same study is that AI acts as a skill equalizer. The bottom half of performers improved by 43 percent when using AI, while the top half improved by only 17 percent. This pattern was confirmed by Brynjolfsson, Li, and Raymond (2023), who studied 5,172 customer support agents and found that AI assistance increased productivity by 14 percent on average, with novice workers seeing 34 percent improvement while experienced workers saw minimal gains. Noy and Zhang (2023) reported similar findings in *Science*, showing that ChatGPT reduced task completion time by 40 percent and raised output quality by 18 percent across 453 professionals.

Davenport and Ronanki (2018) offered a practical taxonomy of AI applications in business, distinguishing between process automation, cognitive insight, and cognitive engagement. In

consulting, process automation covers tasks like slide generation and data formatting. Cognitive insight covers pattern recognition in financial data or market trends. Cognitive engagement covers client interaction tools such as chatbots and interactive dashboards. This framework is useful for mapping where AI creates the most value in the consulting workflow.

### ***Digital ecosystems in professional services***

The concept of a business ecosystem was first introduced by Moore (1993) and later developed by Iansiti and Levien (2004) in *The Keystone Advantage*, where they argued that firms can adopt keystone strategies, acting as platforms that others build upon, or niche strategies, focusing on specialized capabilities. The question for consulting firms today is which role they should play: should they be the platform or the specialist?

Jacobides, Cennamo, and Gawer (2018) advanced this thinking considerably in their paper *Towards a Theory of Ecosystems*, published in the *Strategic Management Journal*. They defined ecosystems as emerging when non-generic complementarities bind distinct organizations together, creating interdependent relationships that cannot be replicated through standard market transactions. This framework directly describes what is happening in consulting: McKinsey's value proposition now depends not just on its consultants but on the alignment of Microsoft's cloud infrastructure, OpenAI's language models, and NVIDIA's computing power.

Adner (2017) offered a complementary structural definition, describing an ecosystem as the alignment structure of the multilateral set of partners that need to interact in order for a focal value proposition to materialize. His framework of activities, actors, positions, and links provides a practical tool for mapping consulting ecosystems. Gawer and Cusumano (2014) added the concept of platform leadership, identifying four levers that firms use to manage ecosystem strategy: scope (what to build internally versus externally), technology (how much architecture to share), alliances (collaborative versus competitive posture), and organization (balancing internal and external tensions).

These theoretical frameworks have not yet been widely applied to the consulting industry. This paper attempts to bridge that gap by analyzing how McKinsey, BCG, and Kearney are building digital ecosystems around AI capabilities, and what implications this has for the future of advisory work.

### ***The evolving role of the consultant***

The World Economic Forum's *Future of Jobs Report* (2025) projected that 39 percent of key workforce skills will change by 2030, with analytical thinking, AI literacy, and leadership identified as the most important competencies. McKinsey CEO Bob Sternfels reported that the firm saved 1.5 million hours through AI in a single year, while noting that the tasks requiring human judgment, such as client relationship management, creative problem-solving, and ethical reasoning, have become more important, not less (Inc, 2026).

Autor (2024) argued that rather than simply replacing workers, AI has the potential to extend the relevance, reach, and value of human expertise. In consulting, this means that a junior analyst augmented by AI can deliver analysis that previously required a more experienced team, potentially disrupting the traditional apprenticeship model where young consultants learn by doing routine analytical work before progressing to strategic roles. Daugherty and Wilson (2018) described this transition as the missing middle, a space where humans and machines collaborate rather than compete, each contributing capabilities the other lacks.

Business schools have responded to these changes rapidly. Harvard Business School launched a mandatory course on data science and AI for all first-year MBA students. Wharton partnered with OpenAI and created a new MBA major in AI for business. Northwestern Kellogg launched a joint MB Ai program in 2024. These developments signal that the consulting talent pipeline is being reshaped even before graduates enter the profession.

## Methodology

This study uses a mixed-methods approach to examine how artificial intelligence and digital ecosystems are reshaping management consulting. The research combines two methods: a comparative case study analysis based on secondary data, and a supplementary survey of business students.

The case study analysis follows Yin's (2018) multiple-case design methodology, examining three firms: McKinsey, BCG, and Kearney. These firms were selected to represent different scales and approaches to AI integration. McKinsey is the largest strategy firm and has invested most heavily in proprietary AI tools. BCG has contributed the most significant academic evidence on AI in consulting through its collaboration with Harvard Business School. Kearney, as a smaller but focused operations-oriented firm, represents an ecosystem partnership approach that contrasts with the in-house development models of its larger competitors.

Data for the case studies was collected from firm annual reports, press releases, official blog posts, media interviews with firm leaders, industry analyst reports from sources including IBISWorld, Statista, Gartner, and Future Market Insights, and academic publications. The analysis period covers 2022 to early 2026, capturing the period when generative AI moved from experimental deployment to widespread operational use.

The study is guided by four research propositions:

*P1: AI tools generate the largest productivity gains in data-intensive consulting tasks such as due diligence, market sizing, and competitive benchmarking, while relationship-based tasks remain primarily human-driven.*

*P2: AI integration acts as a skill equalizer in consulting, disproportionately improving the performance of less experienced consultants compared to senior practitioners.*

*P3: Consulting firms that build digital ecosystems with technology partners gain competitive advantages over firms that rely solely on internal capabilities.*

*P4: The adoption of AI shifts the perceived value of consultants from analytical output toward strategic thinking and client relationship management.*

Additionally, a structured survey was designed and distributed online to business students at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies to examine how the next generation of potential consultants perceives AI's impact on the profession. The questionnaire includes Likert-scale items, multiple-choice questions, and ranking exercises covering topics such as perceived usefulness of AI in different consulting tasks, willingness to use AI tools in a consulting career, and expectations regarding which skills will be most valued in the consulting industry by 2030.

## Results and discussions

### ***McKinsey: proprietary AI at scale***

McKinsey's approach to AI integration centers on Lilli, a conversational AI platform launched firm-wide in August 2023. Named after Lillian Dombrowski, the first professional woman hired by McKinsey in 1945, Lilli is built using large language models from OpenAI and Cohere, hosted on Microsoft Azure. The platform synthesizes over 100,000 documents from McKinsey's internal knowledge base, including case studies, research reports, interview transcripts, and analytical tools accumulated over nearly a century of operations (McKinsey, 2023).

The adoption numbers are substantial. Over 75 percent of the firm's approximately 40,000 employees use Lilli on a monthly basis. The platform processes more than 500,000 prompts per month and has saved an estimated 1.5 million hours in research and synthesis work in its first full year of operation. AI agents have generated 2.5 million charts in six months (Inc, 2026). CEO Bob Sternfels stated at CES in January 2026 that McKinsey now counts

approximately 25,000 AI agents alongside its 40,000 human employees, effectively making the firm's total workforce around 60,000 (Yahoo Finance, 2026).

McKinsey's AI capabilities extend beyond Lilli through QuantumBlack, its dedicated AI division. Originally a 45-person London startup applying data analytics to Formula 1 racing in 2009, QuantumBlack now employs approximately 5,000 people across 40 countries, with over 1,300 data scientists and five AI research centers. The division has developed more than 25 proprietary tools, including OptimusAI for industrial optimization (delivering 10 to 15 percent throughput improvements in copper production) and LifeSciences.AI for pharmaceutical value chains (McKinsey, 2024).

These findings support proposition P1. The tasks most affected by AI are data assembly, document synthesis, and slide generation, which are data-intensive activities that previously consumed the majority of junior consultants' time. The firm has responded by shifting its workforce structure: client-facing roles have grown by roughly 25 percent while non-client-facing roles have been reduced by 25 percent, with output from the latter category actually increasing by 10 percent due to AI augmentation (Yahoo Finance, 2026). This supports P4 as well, as the value of a McKinsey consultant is increasingly measured by strategic judgment rather than analytical throughput.

**Table 1. McKinsey AI integration metrics (2024-2026)**

| Metric                 | Value                      |
|------------------------|----------------------------|
| Lilli monthly users    | 75% of 40,000 employees    |
| Monthly prompts        | 500,000+                   |
| Hours saved (annual)   | 1.5 million                |
| AI agents deployed     | ~25,000                    |
| QuantumBlack team size | ~5,000 across 40 countries |
| Proprietary AI tools   | 25+                        |
| Revenue (2024 est.)    | ~\$16 billion              |

Source: Author's compilation from McKinsey press releases, Yahoo Finance, Inc.

### ***BCG: empirical leadership and BCG X***

BCG has pursued a different but equally ambitious AI strategy, anchored by BCG X, a 3,000-person technology unit formed in December 2022 by merging BCG Digital Ventures, BCG Gamma, and BCG Platinion. BCG X operates across 80 cities and holds approximately 70 patents (PR Newswire, 2022). The unit's purpose is to connect strategy consulting with technology implementation, allowing BCG to not only advise clients on what to do but also build the digital solutions to execute it.

Inside the firm, all 33,000 employees received access to ChatGPT Enterprise in October 2023. Since then, BCG consultants have built over 18,000 custom GPT agents for various internal tasks. The firm's proprietary tool Deckster, launched globally in March 2024, functions as an AI-powered slide creation system running on GPT-4o integrated with BCG's internal knowledge base. It has been used over 450,000 times, producing a 35 percent drop in formatting defects on deliverables (Computerworld, 2025). BCG estimates that 70 percent of the hours freed by AI are reinvested into higher-value client work.

BCG's most significant contribution is the empirical evidence it has produced. The 2023 study with Harvard Business School (Dell'Acqua et al.) demonstrated that less experienced consultants benefited far more from AI than their senior colleagues. This directly supports P2: AI acts as a skill equalizer, compressing the productivity gap between junior and senior

professionals. This finding has important implications for the traditional consulting pyramid model, where junior analysts perform routine work that generates high margins. If AI can do that work, the economic logic of the pyramid weakens.

BCG reached a record 13.5 billion US dollars in revenue in 2024, with 10 percent growth representing its 21st consecutive year of expansion. AI-related advisory accounts for approximately 20 percent of total revenue, roughly 2.7 billion dollars. The firm projects this share could reach 40 percent by 2026 (The Consulting Report, 2025). The financial data shows that AI is not just a cost-saving tool but a revenue driver that is reshaping the firm's business model.

### ***Kearney: ecosystem partnerships as strategy***

Kearney, with approximately 5,300 employees and estimated revenue between 1.2 and 2.0 billion US dollars, has taken a notably different approach to AI integration. Rather than building a large in-house AI division, Kearney has constructed what it calls an AI Alliance Ecosystem, a network of strategic technology partnerships that complement its core consulting capabilities.

Key partnerships include a February 2026 collaboration with ServiceNow that produced BPR.ai, a joint offering for business process reengineering using agentic AI (PR Newswire, 2026). A partnership with ALPHA10X provides access to predictive intelligence using graph network technology. In the Middle East and Africa, a Microsoft partnership focuses on accelerating enterprise AI adoption. Earlier acquisitions of analytics firm Cervello (2019) and AI optimization company Optano (2022) round out the firm's capabilities.

Kearney's Global AI Assessment 2024, surveying over 1,000 companies, found that 51 percent still have immature AI capabilities, that leading companies invest 69 percent more in generative AI than those lagging behind, and that only 21 percent of lagging firms have well-defined AI governance policies (Kearney, 2024). This research positions Kearney not just as a consultant but as a thought leader in the AI adoption space, which is itself an ecosystem play: by publishing widely referenced benchmarks, the firm attracts clients who need help closing the maturity gap.

Kearney's approach provides strong evidence for P3. The firm demonstrates that competitive advantage in AI-era consulting does not require building everything in-house. By assembling a network of specialized partners, Kearney accesses cutting-edge AI capabilities while maintaining its focus on the operations and strategy expertise that differentiates it. This aligns with what Jacobides et al. (2018) describe as non-generic complementarities: each partner contributes something unique that the others cannot easily replicate.

***Table 2. Comparative analysis of AI integration strategies***

| Dimension        | McKinsey                                 | BCG                            | Kearney                         |
|------------------|------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| AI strategy      | In-house platform (Lilli + QuantumBlack) | Hybrid unit (BCG X) + research | Alliance ecosystem              |
| Key AI tool      | Lilli, OptimusAI                         | Deckster, DEEP AI              | BPR.ai (with ServiceNow)        |
| Employees        | ~40,000 + 25,000 AI agents               | ~33,000                        | ~5,300                          |
| Revenue (2024)   | ~\$16B                                   | \$13.5B                        | ~\$1.2-2.0B                     |
| Ecosystem type   | Keystone (500+ members)                  | Orchestrator (9+ AI partners)  | Niche alliance network          |
| Key partnerships | Microsoft, OpenAI, NVIDIA, AWS           | Anthropic, Google, AWS, OpenAI | ServiceNow, Microsoft, ALPHA10X |

Source: Author's own research.

### ***A proposed framework: AI integration and ecosystem maturity***

Drawing on the case analysis and the theoretical literature, this paper proposes a framework that maps consulting firms along two dimensions: the level of AI integration in their workflow (from basic tool usage to full AI-human collaboration) and the maturity of their digital ecosystem (from isolated firm capabilities to orchestrated multi-partner networks). This framework, illustrated in Table 3, suggests that the most competitive consulting firms will be those that achieve high levels on both dimensions simultaneously.

**Table 3. AI Integration and Ecosystem Maturity Framework for consulting firms**

|                       | Low Ecosystem Maturity                 | Medium Ecosystem Maturity          | High Ecosystem Maturity                     |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| High AI Integration   | Internal AI leader (risk of isolation) | Transitioning firm (e.g. BCG 2023) | Ecosystem orchestrator (e.g. McKinsey 2026) |
| Medium AI Integration | Traditional firm upgrading             | Niche specialist (e.g. Kearney)    | Platform participant                        |
| Low AI Integration    | Legacy consulting model                | Partnership-dependent              | Unsustainable position                      |

Source: Author's own contribution.

McKinsey currently occupies the top-right position, combining deep internal AI capabilities (Lilli, QuantumBlack, 25,000 AI agents) with a broad ecosystem of over 500 external partners and 19 strategic AI alliances. BCG is transitioning toward this position, with strong internal tools (Deckster, BCG X) and a growing partnership network (the February 2026 OpenAI Frontier Alliance with McKinsey, Accenture, and Capgemini). Kearney sits in the middle of the matrix, with moderate AI integration achieved primarily through ecosystem partnerships rather than in-house development. This is not necessarily a disadvantage; Iansiti and Levien (2004) argue that niche strategies can be highly effective when firms specialize in areas where human judgment is irreplaceable.

The framework suggests that the most vulnerable position is low AI integration combined with low ecosystem maturity, the legacy consulting model that still relies primarily on human analysts working with spreadsheets and PowerPoint. The evidence from the three case studies indicates that this model is becoming unsustainable as clients increasingly expect data-driven, AI-augmented advisory delivered through digital platforms.

## **Conclusion**

This paper examined how artificial intelligence and digital ecosystems are transforming management consulting, using a comparative case study analysis of McKinsey, BCG, and Kearney. The findings support all four research propositions and lead to three main conclusions.

First, AI creates the most value in data-intensive consulting tasks. Due diligence, competitive benchmarking, market sizing, and slide generation are being automated or significantly accelerated. McKinsey's 1.5 million hours saved and BCG's 35 percent reduction in formatting defects provide concrete evidence. However, relationship-based tasks such as client management, creative problem-solving, and navigating organizational politics remain primarily human activities. The consultant of the future is therefore not replaced by AI but repositioned as what Dell'Acqua et al. (2023) call a Centaur: a professional who knows when to delegate to AI and when human judgment is essential.

Second, digital ecosystems are becoming as important as internal capabilities. McKinsey's 500-plus partner ecosystem, BCG's multi-platform AI alliance, and Kearney's partnership-first approach all demonstrate that no single firm can build all the AI infrastructure it needs. The theoretical frameworks of Jacobides et al. (2018) and Adner (2017) explain why:

the complementarities between consulting expertise, cloud infrastructure, language models, and specialized data are non-generic, meaning they cannot be replicated through standard contracts or acquisitions. Firms must participate in ecosystems to remain competitive.

Third, the business model of consulting is changing as much as the technology. McKinsey's shift toward outcomes-based pricing, BCG's projection that AI will drive 40 percent of its revenue by 2026, and the industry-wide reduction in entry-level hiring all signal structural changes. The traditional pyramid model, where large numbers of junior analysts generate high margins by performing routine analysis, is under pressure because AI can now do much of that work faster and cheaper.

This paper has several limitations. The case study analysis relies on publicly available data, which may present an optimistic view of firms' AI capabilities. The survey component remains supplementary at this stage and would benefit from a larger and more diverse sample. Future research should investigate the long-term impact of AI on consulting talent development, specifically whether the disruption of the apprenticeship model creates knowledge gaps that affect the quality of future senior partners. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking the financial performance of AI-integrated versus traditional consulting firms would provide stronger evidence for the relationship between AI adoption and competitive advantage.

For students and professionals preparing to enter the consulting industry, the message from this research is clear. Technical AI literacy is becoming a baseline requirement, not a differentiator. The real competitive advantage will come from the ability to navigate the jagged technological frontier, knowing where AI adds value and where it falls short, combined with the strategic thinking, empathy, and communication skills that remain beyond AI's reach.

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