Why Clients Don't Implement

Idea In Short

Clients implement consultant recommendations only about half the time. The reasons are rarely binary and span choices, timing, risk aversion, politics, resources and change management. Consultants should frame recommendations as options, secure executive sponsors and stay engaged post-delivery to drive adoption.

Clients Pay Millions for Recommendations

Management consultants are not cheap. Consulting bill rates run high, and client energy goes into rallying the organization for kickoff meetings, focus groups, interviews, working sessions and status reports. It is all hands on deck for the client and the advisor. The investment is substantial in money and effort.

The obvious question is why clients do not implement. It sounds childish, but it is super relevant. Why go to the business doctor if you are not planning to take the advice? Maybe you should have chosen someone else or saved your money. From personal experience, clients implemented recommendations about 50 percent of the time. This varies dramatically by industry, project type and the relationship between partner and client. For anyone new to consulting, this is surprising1.

For experienced consultants, nothing surprises them. Clients want choices of what, when and how much to implement. This is a principal-agent problem. Clients have numerous reasons to pause, reconsider, delay or partially implement recommendations. They might fully agree with the logic of your storyboard and fully refuse to implement what you suggest.

Choices, Not Right or Wrong

The reasons are intellectual, emotional and practical because we are all people. One respondent noted that clients need the analysis, not the solution, to choose the right way

forward. Another observed that clients hold information consultants lack, so they make the final call based on a more comprehensive perspective.

A senior consultant explained that clients value input but value the freedom to not act on it even more. They value what consultants hear and see far more than what they say. Clients have plenty of advisors around them, each with their own agenda. Another consultant provides a list of options with considerations and a recommended choice. In most cases there is no wrong decision, merely a business decision.

Market Changes and Timing

Market changes derail implementation. Dynamic business situations, implementation challenges and budget cutting all contribute. Clients postpone implementation because the timing is not right. Strategic changes are often not perceived as delivering immediate return on investment.

One respondent noted that too much time goes to obsolete things. When market conditions shift, yesterday's recommendation may no longer fit. The consultant delivered sound advice at the time, but the window closed before the client could act.

Risk Aversion and Inertia

Lack of true motivation to change is a common barrier. Cultural issues and fear of moving forward hold organizations back. It is easier to do things the old way, and not enough pain accumulates to force real change. Humans do not like change, and comfort with the familiar is powerful.

Lack of ownership, resources and reluctance toward bigger changes create inertia. Fear of venturing into something new is widespread, and many clients are risk-averse. Systems support existing perspectives, and changing them is painful and expensive. The cost of disruption often exceeds the perceived benefit in the short term. 2

Politics and Leadership

Multiple stakeholders and union issues complicate implementation. Lack of internal alignment and willingness to take bold action block progress. Clients may want to implement

but cannot follow through for political reasons. Internal factions resist changes that threaten their power or budgets.

Leadership turnover also disrupts adoption. A sponsor who championed the recommendation leaves, and the successor has different priorities. Without a strong executive sponsor with authority to cut through resistance, recommendations stall regardless of merit.

Time, Resources and Money

Clients sometimes need to change entire business processes to implement ideas. This requires conversations with many stakeholders. Budget constraints, capability gaps and insufficient time undermine execution. Available resources including money, time and capability may fall short. Required time for returns can stretch beyond what uncertain markets tolerate.

One consultant noted that engagements are sometimes commissioned to sell a preconceived idea. If a finding goes counter to that, the consultant is asked to change the narrative or remove certain recommendations. This corruption of the advisory process happens more than clients admit.

Change Management Gaps

Implementation of strategy is always about people. Lack of change management efforts and insufficient follow-through from ideation to finalization undermine results. People at the working level feel they know problems and solutions better, creating resistance. Inability to manage change or fear of change compounds the difficulty.

Consultants overestimate client teams' ability to take on additional responsibilities while maintaining current ones. Not implementing or managing change properly leads to partial adoption. The gap between the C-suite and boots on the ground is where most recommendations die. 3

Shortcuts and Quick Wins

Clients skip steps in the advice and move to action before being aligned. They do not free

up enough time to do things properly or see processes through to completion. Short-term issues derail long-term drives. Lack of agility in implementation prevents course correction.

Complex problems require multi-faceted solutions combining people, process and technology. These are expressed as final deliverable roadmaps. Clients are neither willing to fund nor maintain momentum around the full scope. Leaders organize only around initial low-hanging fruit as quick wins they can boast about. The balance of the work moves to shelf-ware, displaced by the newest fire drill.

Large Corporate Versus Smaller Company

Recommendations deviating too far from existing client plans face funding, resourcing and political barriers. Disruptive or unexpected recommendations are worth proposing if backed by a strong business case. However, you cannot count on them being implemented well in large corporate environments.

Smaller companies have fewer barriers. They have higher risk tolerance, fewer stakeholders to convince and higher relative potential impact. Changing the trajectory of an entire company matters more than changing a business unit. The size and complexity of the organization shapes adoption.

Rarely a Binary Yes or No

Recommendations are often partially implemented but rarely 100 percent complete. This stems from lack of alignment between the C-suite and the field. Corporate leadership decides to adopt recommendations but lacks change management follow-through to track and manage execution down through locations.

In some engagements with experienced clients, consultants stay on for months post-implementation to ensure compliance and drive change. Otherwise, organizational inertia is too much for clients to overcome alone. The consultant's job does not end at delivery. Sustained engagement bridges the gap between recommendation and results.

Eight Potential Reasons

One respondent catalogued eight reasons. Cost thresholds prevent business cases from

justifying execution. Risk and compliance frameworks need alignment. Effort estimates balloon four to five times due to process drag. Internal politics create overlap, poor program management and blocking. Resource gaps leave clients unable to cover business-as-usual and strategic projects. Pivoting priorities pull funding to other problems. Stakeholder mapping falls short of selling wide and deep enough.

Rarely is there just one reason. Implementation failure is multi-causal, and consultants who understand this complexity can design engagements that account for it. The best advisors frame recommendations as choices, secure sponsors early and build change management into the scope from day one.

- 1Investopedia On The Principal-Agent Problem And Moral Hazard
- 2McKinsey On Distortions And Deceptions In Strategic Decisions Including The Principal-Agent Problem
- 3McKinsey On The Four Building Blocks Of Change

Summary

Client nonimplementation is the norm, not the exception. Recommendations face politics, inertia, scarce resources and weak change management. Consultants who frame advice as choices, secure sponsors and stay engaged through execution will see higher adoption. Implementation is about people.