The Wisdom of It Depends

Idea In Short

It depends sounds evasive and is often the most honest, useful answer a consultant can give. It slows the conversation enough to understand context, avoid false choices and avoid oversimplifying genuinely complex problems, without becoming an excuse to duck a real decision.

An Underrated Phrase

"It depends" gets used constantly in business school and management consulting, and despite how it sounds, it is often the best short answer available to a client. Read casually, it looks timid or evasive, hedging rather than committing. Read carefully, it does something more useful: it slows the conversation down long enough to understand both the words and the intent behind a question, avoid oversimplifying something genuinely complex, fit the problem correctly within project scope, surface hidden assumptions baked into how the question was framed and confirm that the right people are actually answering it.

Most Real Problems Are Complex

Clients pay consultants specifically to solve difficult, persistent problems, the kind that would already be solved if they were easy. Author Seth Godin calls these perfect problems, ones that resist quick answers by design.1 Answering complex problems off the cuff usually means one of two things: either genuine expertise built from years of pattern recognition, which is rare, or an answer that has not actually engaged with the full problem, which is far more common. Most consulting work sits squarely in the complex-problem, complex-solution quadrant, grinding work, but exactly the kind of problem large organizations actually have and consultants are trained to solve.

Context Changes the Answer

No question arrives in a vacuum. Asked whether to invest in a particular stock, the honest answer depends on time horizon, since a short holding period changes the calculus entirely, risk tolerance, since comfort with volatility varies by investor, and diversification, since one stock's role differs wildly depending on what else sits in the portfolio. A well-known real-world example: a major tech company once banned remote work company-wide, and the honest reaction was not simple approval or disapproval but a recognition that the right answer depends on the role. An employee in a clearly scoped, low-collaboration function does not need the same commuting standard as someone in product marketing, where fluid work and constant customer interaction make in-person presence genuinely valuable.

Naming False Choices

People, and especially anyone selling a position, tend to oversimplify into black-and-white framing, the false dilemma. Political messaging leans on this constantly, presenting only two options when several exist. On a conference call, hearing an argument built around an artificial either-or choice is worth challenging directly: naming the missing third or fourth option, or the possibility that neither presented choice is actually correct, rather than accepting the narrowed frame as given.

Resisting the Shortcut

Clients, understandably, want speed. They value the rigor and structure consultants bring, and they also want it delivered in half the time for half the fee. Sticking to the process outlined in the original proposal, while giving regular updates along the way, is part of the coaching role a consultant plays, resisting pressure to skip steps that exist precisely because the problem is not actually simple.

When It Depends Actually Is a Dodge

Fairness requires acknowledging the failure mode too: "it depends" absolutely can be a genuine dodge, used to avoid ever committing to a position that might later prove wrong. The tell is time. A consultant who says it depends and then spends the next two weeks defining variables and gathering evidence is doing real work; a consultant who says it depends repeatedly across an entire engagement without ever narrowing the answer has turned a legitimate starting point into a permanent hiding place, and clients are right to push back when that pattern appears.

Turning It Depends Into a Real Answer

Saying "it depends" well requires a second sentence, not just the phrase itself. The useful version names the specific variables that would change the answer, then proposes the fastest way to pin down which case actually applies: a data pull, a short interview or a quick calculation. Left as a standalone phrase, "it depends" is exactly the evasive dodge critics accuse it of being. Paired with the variables and a plan to resolve them, it becomes the opening move of a real analysis rather than an excuse to avoid giving one.

Simplifying Without Oversimplifying

Great consulting work does make the complex simple, framing the issue accurately so the client is solving the right problem, grounding recommendations in real data, and building genuine client confidence in the resulting decision.2 What it should never do is oversimplify purely for convenience, trading a defensible answer for a fast one. "It depends" is the honest starting point for that work, not a way to avoid finishing it.3

- 1Wicked Problem
- 2Problem Structuring
- 3Decision-Making

Summary

It depends is not a dodge when it earns its place: complex problems need context, false choices need naming and clients need real analysis, not a shortcut. Frame the issue accurately, support it with data, then give a real answer, not a permanent hedge.