# Why McKinsey Stays in the News

## Idea In Short

A book about McKinsey drew five distinct press reactions: awe at its CEO factory, unease about its influence, admiration for its brainpower model, skepticism about its advice record and fascination with its scandals. Read all five together and a durable truth emerges: nobody gets fired for hiring McKinsey, whatever the outcome.

## One Book, Five Verdicts

Duff McDonald's book on McKinsey & Company landed in 2013 and set off a small wave of press coverage, each outlet reading the same 400-plus pages and arriving somewhere different.1 Reading the five reactions side by side is more useful than reading any single one, because the spread itself is the finding: a firm that inspires equal parts awe, unease, admiration, skepticism and fascination, decade after decade, is not an ordinary professional services business. It is a cultural institution with a balance sheet.

## The CEO Factory

The most quoted statistic came from a headline count: more than 150 McKinsey alumni were running companies worth a billion dollars or more as of 2011. A separate 2008 USA Today study calculated the odds of a McKinsey consultant becoming a public company CEO at roughly one in 690, a figure no rival firm can match. The same reporting noted McKinsey pulled in about 10 million dollars a year from Enron before its collapse, yet the firm was never named as a civil or criminal defendant in the resulting litigation, an outcome alumni and critics read in opposite ways.

## Secret Influence and Insecure Overachievers

A separate segment called the firm a pit stop for talent, noting that only about one in six new hires stays past five years, treating McKinsey as a finishing school rather than a career. Harsher language followed: one description called the work industrial espionage couched in the language of best practices, and another dubbed the alumni network a corporate mandarin elite. The firm's own global managing partner, Dominic Barton, offered a memorable self-description in a separate interview, calling McKinsey hires insecure overachievers, a phrase that stuck precisely because insiders recognized it as fair.2

## Consultorial Fairy Dust

A more admiring take framed McKinsey as proof that business had become a genuine profession, one that thrives on raw brainpower applied to genuinely hard problems. This is the version McKinsey itself would recognize: elite recruiting, rigorous training, frameworks that travel across industries and a brand that signals seriousness to a board weighing a difficult decision. Call it consultorial fairy dust if the skepticism appeals, but boards keep buying it, year after year, which is its own kind of evidence.

## Not All Roses

The sharpest criticism targeted outcomes rather than reputation, built around a blunt line: nobody gets fired for hiring McKinsey, no matter what happens afterward. The examples cited were substantial: Enron, the Time Warner-AOL merger, General Motors' underpowered response to Japanese competitors and, most memorably, a 1980 forecast for AT&T that predicted 900,000 cellphone subscribers by 2000 against an actual figure north of 109 million.3 Clients, the reporting noted, are also frequently barred by contract from disclosing what McKinsey actually recommended, which makes independent scoring of the firm's advice unusually difficult.

## The Pattern Repeats With Every Book

McKinsey has weathered this cycle more than once, and the repetition is itself informative. Each new book or exposé reliably produces the same spread of reactions, from awed profile pieces to pointed criticism of specific engagements, and the firm's client base does not meaningfully shrink after any of them. That resilience suggests boards are not actually reading these books as due diligence before hiring the firm; they are reading them, if at all, as background color on an institution whose hiring decision was already effectively made by industry convention.

## What the Book Left Out

Notably absent from most of the coverage was much discussion of the firms competing directly with McKinsey for the same mandates, a gap that says something about the book's framing as much as about the industry. Rival strategy firms built comparable alumni networks and comparable reputations for rigor, yet none drew quite the same combination of press fascination and cultural shorthand. Part of the explanation is simply age and scale: a firm founded in the early twentieth century has had a full century to accumulate both famous successes and famous near-misses, giving journalists more material to work with than a newer competitor could offer.

## Cracking the Brand

The most durable explanation for the firm's staying power came last: when advice works, the CEO gets the public credit, not the consultants, and when advice fails, badly-advised companies tend to re-hire McKinsey anyway rather than walk away. The firm functions less like a single advisor and more like a best-practices aggregator, a way for a board to buy assurance that a decision reflects what peer companies are already doing. Treated as a required expense rather than a discretionary one, McKinsey's business model turns out to be remarkably resistant to bad press, scandal coverage and even documented forecasting misses. The book's five readings disagree about almost everything except that conclusion.

- 1Duff McDonald
- 2Dominic Barton
- 3AT&T

## Summary

Five outlets read the same book and produced five different verdicts, from CEO factory to secret influence to consultorial fairy dust. The throughline holds regardless: clients keep re-hiring the firm, credit stays with the CEO and McKinsey remains the required expense boards cannot easily skip.