



**BOOK REVIEWS**  
**Curt Kampmeier, Editor**

**Developing Knowledge-Based Client Relationships Leadership in Professional Services (2nd edition)**

Ross Dawson (Elsevier, London, 2005)  
\$20.95

REVIEWED BY FIONA CZERNIAWSKA

The future of professional services is all about people, knowledge and relationships.” Few people would disagree with this statement by Ross Dawson. Clients want specialist knowledge and to work with consultants who respect them and are prepared to share their expertise with them. Moreover, transparency may not be what just clients want; it is also in a consulting firm’s economic interest. “Black-boxing the consulting process deprives clients of a chance to learn from consultants and leads to commoditization.”

Dawson is right to say that there are mounting pressures that make it harder for clients and consultants to establish and maintain these knowledge-based relationships: increasing client sophistication, which raises the bar for the consultant; and governance, which makes clients less comfortable with long-term dependency on their advisors. Differentiation is difficult, and knowledge is one of the most important ways in which consultants can make themselves stand out from the crowd.

Not particularly revolutionary, you might think. But where Dawson sets himself apart from the plethora of other writers on professional relationships and knowledge management is that he melds these two disciplines together. He talks about the *process* of getting the *content* across to the client: most writers talk about one or the other. This is, of course, the big challenge to consulting firms. Most firms would boast they have a small number of individuals who are excellent at building up their personal network of relationships. Most would also say they have invested in bringing the collective knowledge of their firm together. But few would say they’ve got the link between those individuals and their knowledge systems (and vice versa) working effectively. The relationship builders, able to sell the time of their immediate team without problem, may feel no incentive to start introducing different, less familiar ideas to their clients. Similarly, they may lack the time or inclination to drip their thinking into the collective knowledge pool.

This makes Dawson’s book an important one, and it’s no surprise that this is a second, expanded edition. Knowledge-based relationships, he argues, should go beyond the one-to-one model to which we’re so accustomed. Teamwork, value pricing, communication channels, and increas-

ing clients’ own capabilities are just as important, and Dawson has many thoughtful and insightful suggestions to make so far as the nitty-gritty of getting things done is concerned.

But will it change how consultants work or the firms that employ them?

Poor writing is my main gripe about this otherwise excellent book. Dawson may be a highly effective consultant, but he’s a writer in desperate search of a good editor. Let’s take an example: “Creating a self-reinforcing circle of knowledge-based relationships, involving deeper customer knowledge, greater openness, and service customization, enable positive client lock-in through superior value creation.” Now, I know what this means, but that doesn’t mean I like it. If you’re trying to change the way people behave (and I assume that’s Dawson’s aim, along with, rather unsubtly, winning more work), then finding clearer, less jargon-mired ways of doing it surely is possible.

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