

A Critical Review  
Of The Five-Factor  
Model For Success Of  
Internal Consultants  
Outlined By Christine  
Miller And Karthik  
Subbiah (2012)

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**ABSTRACT**

The concept of internal consultancy is gradually gaining greater recognition in many organizations today. A number of models have been put forward to address challenges faced by Internal Consultants (ICs) as far as business and change initiative's successes are concerned. This article reviewed the five-factor model proposed by Miller and Subbiah (2012) and discusses the challenges of the model as a basis to make the work of the IC successful. Further, we proposed an integrative balanced approach model to enhance the one proposed by Miller and Subbiah (2012). Literature was thoroughly reviewed to understand and analyze the five factors and their relevant interconnectivity as well as the levels of success anticipated for an effective change initiative. Despite the relevance of the model, the analysis shows an ecosystem of ICs as a structure, suggesting multiplicity of factors to guarantee change success. Moreover, the dimensionality of the factors, their possible combination and presence support, and their degree of influence and prioritization emerged as significant aspects of the model that requires thorough assessment to ensure successful change initiative. Also, the three levels of change are integrated into the balanced approach model for quality feedback between performance and relationship. Hence, these useful aspects of the five factors pointed out in this article can aid practitioners and researchers to customize strategies to fit into specific contexts in ensuring presence support and effectiveness of the factors as well as other related factors.

**Keywords:** consultants, five-factor model, internal consultancy, organizations

Miller, C. and Subbiah, K. (2012). A Five-Factor Model for Success of Internal Consultants. SAM Advanced Management Journal, Vol. 77 Issue 1, p4-12.

A proposal of the five-factor model for success of internal consultants was developed by Christine Miller and Karthik Subbiah to support the balance approach to successful internal consulting, and was published in SAM Advanced Management Journal in 2012.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

This article proposes a model that considers the presence and effectiveness of five critical factors necessary and sufficient to support both goal-oriented and relationship-oriented approaches (a balance approach) used by ICs during the change process. The Miller and Subbiah (2012) emphasized five thematic areas summed up into a five-factor model for strengthening the balanced approach on one hand, and the challenges that the IC faces including roles and responsibilities shared between the internal consultant and the senior leadership team, on the other hand. They argued that it does not even matter the balanced approach that the IC uses, factors such as credibility, relevance, acceptance, circumspection, and support must all be present and effective for successful change initiative facilitated by the IC. Some authors (Harrison, 1974; Hunger & Thomas. L. Wheelen, 2004; Pitt & Koufopoulos, 2017) argued that a success at project, change initiative, and capability levels largely contribute to the IC's success, the five-factor model ensures the success of the internal consultant at all levels especially when these factors are made present and effective for the purpose of a sustained change initiative.

## 2. SUMMARY

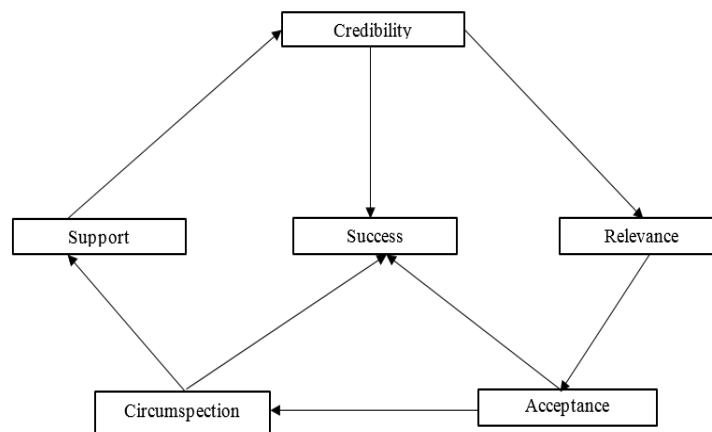
Miller and Subbiah begins their article with the notion that the business environment today has become more turbulent in its own wake due to globalization resulting in technological innovations and keen competition. Businesses thus aim at improving performance in order to sustain competition in the global market, and this can be done when they innovate on a continual basis. Innovations come with change initiatives characterized by new capabilities and resources such as time, management's support, experts – internal or external consultants, financial requirements, and technological drive. Normally, either internal or external consultant is contracted to facilitate a change initiative but they both face challenges during the consulting process particularly the IC. However, according to Kelley, (1979) cited in Miller and Subbiah (2012), ICs may sometimes play the role of analysts, sensors, advisors, implementers, troubleshooters or researchers within a project. Though the internal and external consultants have their respective benefits and limitations, the authors identified some weaknesses with the existing internal consulting model, and thus proposed the five-factor model to effectively strengthen the internal consulting model for a greater success for the IC. Hence, the article was more focused on the five-factor model that ensures the success of ICs throughout the consulting cycle. Moreover, it dealt into five important thematic areas (i.e. challenges and their sources of internal consultants, IC's dilemma, recommendation of the balanced approach, the proposal of the five-factor model, and assignment of roles and responsibilities between the senior leadership team and the IC) presented in a fashion that demonstrated the relevance of their proposal for IC's success.

Miller and Subbiah (2012) explained the challenges of the IC in terms of referential power, outsider tag, and perceived conflict. Since the IC reports in a dotted-line manner to the Department's or Unit's head/manager, he/she does not have the authority to drive as well as support the change process. For instance, they do not have the power to go their own way according to their expertise and experience at the initial stages of the project (Anand, Glick, & Manz, 2002). Supervisors or line managers including other workers see the IC as one not belonging to their Department/Unit, and as a result may show a lukewarm attitude that can jeopardize the success of the IC. In addition, they pointed out that there is usually an element of perceived conflict between managers in charge of resource use and the IC. While the IC tries to address issues relating to time and resource use for a successful implementation of the change initiative, the location manager exercises restraint on resource use such that their annual budget is not affected.

Based on the challenges mentioned, Miller and Subbiah (2012) argued that the IC is always in a dilemma as to which approach to adopt, that is, either a goal-oriented approach or a relationship-oriented one. They claimed that while the goal-oriented approach brings quick results yet difficult to sustain and perhaps affecting the credibility of the consultant, the relationship-oriented approach significantly delays forward direction of the project. Hence, they suggested that a hybrid or balanced approach is preferred in order to protect the credibility of the IC whilst ensuring speedy forward direction of the project. In fact, with the balanced approach according

to the authors, the relationship-oriented approach takes effect before the goal-oriented approach. This is because the initial stages of the change initiative deserve better understanding by all stakeholders involved in the project and as the project moves forward in the right direction, goals of the project can be achieved. In this sense, the authors' argument supports the point made by Harrison, (1974) cited in Miller and Subbiah (2012) that the success of the internal consultant is a complete reflection of the successes at project, change initiative, and business or capability levels. However, the authors were of the view that regardless of the impact the balanced approach can have on a change initiative, it takes the efforts of the senior leadership team to ensure adequate readiness at the initial stages prior to the deployment of the IC. They explained that the period between the launch of the change and the deployment of the internal consultant is critical and can significantly affect the overall change success. It is for this reason that Miller and Subbiah (2012) proposed the five-factor model (Fig. 1) to really strengthen the balanced approach.

Figure 1: Miller and Subbiah's (2012) Five-Factor Model



Source: Miller & Subbiah (2012)

Interestingly, the five factors – credibility, relevance, acceptance, circumspection, and support included in the model cut across all the most salient levels in the organization while still considering the balanced approach. In effect, the authors recognized these five factors as critical success factors necessary to be adopted by the IC. They emphasized that the factors are not only important to the success of the internal consultant but also senior management. Credibility according to Miller and Subbiah (2012) relates to the effects that the change initiative can have across the organization. If the change is perceived to bring positive effects on personnel wellbeing, then they can have confidence in the IC and classify him/her as credible otherwise the change initiative is a threat. This is what according to the McLagan, (2003) found in his study that the personnel including stakeholders commit to the IC's efforts to change initiative when the change can impact their work life positively. For the case of the relevance factor, the authors argue that businesses have vision, and the internal consultant's change initiative and forward direction should conform to such corporate vision. Hence, he/she

needs to really understand the technical nature and implications of the change process and the techniques and tools required to bring improvement.

Miller and Subbiah (2012) explained acceptance factor as emanating from political, social, and technical aspects of both the change initiative itself and top management. They based their discussion of the three aspects on what Tichy, (1983) considered as important for change management because the deployment stage shows signs of acceptance or rejection of the change initiative. For instance, if there is support and commitment from top management in terms of motivation and resources – political, all stakeholders and personnel embrace and understand the change process and the resultant change solutions as well as the effects – technical. Further, people are made part of the change process right from conception – social, by which the internal consultant can be successful.

Also, circumspection bothers on the best approach used to convince people to appreciate the change process as well as the appropriate time to effect it. They believe that an upward integration is so important to change success by the IC. Finally, in the context of support, the authors claim that stakeholders get motivated and enthused when they find the IC as supportive as possible throughout the change process and thereafter. The authors concluded their article with the proposition that the IC is strategically positioned within an organization to find solutions to problems and to become a real professional practitioner over time through experience.

In effect, a serious-minded business entity that aims at fast improvement to achieve corporate vision will use the five-factor model and ensure the presence and effectiveness of these factors for quality and excellent change initiative at all levels for optimum performance. Thus, Miller and Subbiah (2012) outlined five important steps that ensure a change success at the three levels, namely 1) a careful selection of an important change initiative that fulfills the vision, 2) a frame of reference that reflects the vision, 3) recognizing the change initiative as a key responsibility, 4) developing a success plan for the current change success and 5) creating a support platform that leads to commitment for change initiative success. Besides, they emphasized that the IC can be successful at all levels if the approach they adopt is a complete reflection of the five factors.

### **3. CRITIQUE**

The concept of internal consultancy is gradually gaining greater recognition in many organizations today. A number of models have been put forward to address challenges faced by ICs as far as business and change initiative's successes are concerned (Alvesson, 2012). Like other models, Miller and Subbiah (2012) proposed the five-factor model for the success of the IC. The authors explained well the challenges, approaches, and existing models of the IC. In fact, they addressed the dilemma that ICs face regarding the choice of approach for the consultancy process through the balance approach. Moreover, they demonstrated the applicability of the five-factor model across the three levels, that is, project, change initiative, and business levels. The sections

discussed were well organized and a reflection of the topic of the article. Practically, the factors credibility, relevance, acceptance, circumspection and support are all generic to the ecosystem of the IC. Most important in this context is their presence and effectiveness that Miller and Subbiah (2012) proposed in their model for adoption and initiation for change success.

#### **4. THE INTERNAL CONSULTANT AS A CHANGE AGENT**

Miller and Subbiah confirmed the notion that the IC is also a change agent responsible for change initiatives. They emphasized the need for the business or top management to consider using the IC for most change initiatives because he/she is able to come out with interventions that might address issues relating to policy, structure, business process, and operating procedure. Linking their understanding to the view of Kelley (1979), the IC can transfer knowledge to stakeholders including the location's head. Anand et al., (2002) were of the opinion that such an attempt strengthens knowledge sharing and capabilities of the location's head. Thus, the perceived conflict factor in the five-factor model prevents anticipated conflicts between the IC and the location's head. With greater understanding between the two players, smooth implementation of the change initiative can lead to success for the internal consultant.

Despite a business's efforts to support change initiative for improved performance, management equally aims at cost reduction. Thus, an implication of success in this context for both the IC and the business is a recipe for a reduction in the cost of consultancy because the IC is already on the firm's payroll (Miller & Subbiah, 2012). Moreover, monitoring and evaluation of progress of change success involve some indirect costs which in this sense can be avoided. A promotion of a complete recognition of the IC (i.e. in terms of roles and responsibilities) just like the external counterpart is what truly Miller and Subbiah (2012) put forward in their article. By their proposition, firms stand greater chance of benefiting from the leadership roles of the ICs.

#### **5. THE FIVE-FACTOR MODEL**

##### **5.1 ASSESSMENT OF THE FIVE FACTORS**

The five factors used in the model by the authors formed an ecosystem as a structure of the IC rather than being considered as unrelated factors in their own right. This is why the assessment of the factors implied their presence and effectiveness in the proposed five-factor model. It is one useful way the IC can achieve success for any change initiative because if the contribution of any of these factors is insignificant, at least, a level can be affected which can result in poor performance. Thus, the authors' concern about the need for top management and the IC to ensure the presence and effectiveness of the five factors cannot be disregarded. However, Miller and Subbiah (2012) did not define each of these factors in the perspective of the roles and responsibilities of the internal consultant. This makes it quite difficult to determine the scope or dimensionality of the factors, their degree of influence and overall impact on the model. In practice, each of the factors has relative effect on the



project, change initiative and the business performance. Nowhere in the article was such a measurement of the factors done to ascertain the presence and effectiveness of the model. Surely, if the factors are present and effective, each measure gives some level of output significant enough to ensure a change success for the IC. For instance, support in the form of strategy, policy guidelines, systems, structure, and resources are quantifiable, and their inadequacy and quality can affect the support factor.

Moreover, the presence and support of the IC to the stakeholders may be frowned upon with such unpleasant attitudes if some stakeholders notice a bigger change in their routine operations possibly resulting from the change initiative. Clark, (1996) argued that there is variability in the factors that makes the IC successful in change initiative. This suggests that though factors considered by the IC might all be critical; some might impact success more than others regardless of their presence and effectiveness. Efficiency defined in terms of output, contribution or degree of effect at different levels on the overall change success should be ensured as well. This is because a factor can be present and effective but may not be of much significance to overall change success. In addition, there is no precedence among the factors as to which factor must be made present and effective before the others in some tactical and logical order. For instance, if priority is given to the relevance factor than support and top management fails to re-align the existing system with the planned change, the IC is most likely to fail. Thus, the factors to address first, second, etc. matter in the initial stage and the deployment stage.

## **5.2 IMPLICATIONS OF THE FIVE-FACTOR MODEL**

The five-factor model is a very useful model for internal consulting practitioners. Though it is a simple model, it can cut across all levels in the organization provided the appropriate approach is used by the IC as explained by Miller and Subbiah (2012). An important benefit of the model is a legacy of long-term relationship between the stakeholders and the IC. This makes it easy for the IC to lead subsequent change initiative because of the credibility and acceptance obtainable from previous change initiative. It is thus, true that the IC is most likely to be successful provided the chosen approach reflects the five factors. Impliedly, an IC may choose to go by goal-oriented, relationship-oriented or hybrid of the two approaches and can still achieve a change success. In this sense, a thorough examination of the change environment is required (De Jong & Van Eekelen, 1999).

Further, unlike the other models, the five-factor model typically strengthens the technical, political, and social aspects of change solutions put forward by Tichy, (1983) as cited by Miller & Subbiah, (2012). For instance, acceptance of a change solution cuts across senior management team through key stakeholders to location personnel. In this way, the IC can have smooth implementation of the change solution.

The flow of the factors illustrated in the model depicts a cyclical inclination. Credibility and relevance factors are paramount to the initial stages of the planned change. A sensitive project requires a credible IC (Clegg, Kornberger, & Rhodes, 2004). Personnel offer optimal support when they have confidence in the IC. Top management sees a planned change as a way to improve performance for the attainment of goals (Appelbaum

& Steed, 2005). For the relevance factor, change initiative success depends on commitment on the part of all stakeholders involved. These concerns are what Miller and Subbiah argued for their presence and effectiveness at the initial stage of the consulting process. This supports the ideas of Antal & Krebsbach-Gnath, (2007) when they considered the linkage between project mandates and business performance at the primary stage of a change initiative. Thus, the connection between credibility and relevance sets the pace for the deployment stage. In addition, acceptance, circumspection and support factors are critical at the deployment stage because if personnel accept the change on grounds that there would not be too much burden on them, and feel the presence of the IC to help during the change process, they are not worried even for a broader scope. It must be emphasized that the model is cyclical and iterative across the three levels though the authors did not explain it, yet it is important for the purposes of feedback during the consulting process.

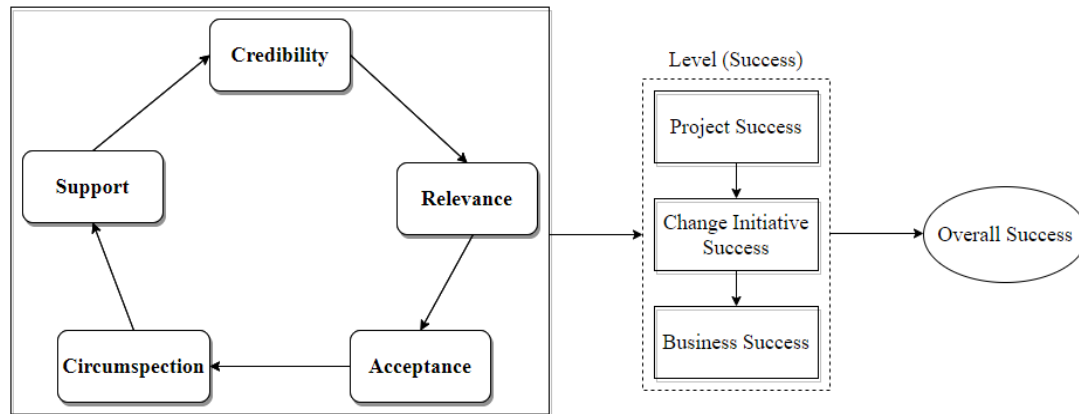
We argue that the model suffers a contradiction in respect of the flow among the factors relative to success. First, it suggests that the model can be decomposed such that for every pair of factors present and effective and moved forward by the approach of the IC, a change success can be achieved. The notion that all the five factors must be present and effective lack strong empirical support because it is not yet known that any two factors present and effective can lead to success. For example, between the factors: credibility and relevance at the initial stage of the planned change, success can be achieved. Second, the term 'success' in the model is vague in its representation since it does not tell whether success at one particular level, across the three levels or all levels. Until the term 'success' is properly defined in the model's context, and the supportive assumption clearly stated, the IC cannot determine which approach would best suit the model.

From the assertion made by Cockman, Evans, & Reynolds, (1999), success is best seen in the overall business performance rather than at individual change level. They further explained that the IC's performance is measured based on the actual change success results directly in line with the strategic goals of the business. Third, it does not matter for the factors to be iterative or cyclical once they are made present and effective. Instead, they are to be thoroughly scrutinized and prioritized for efficiency after their presence and effectiveness. Moreover, the model depicts a structure that militates against the flexibility of the IC as an expert in his/her operative scope of jurisdiction. Finally, in practice, the five factors are not exhaustive because factors such as motivation, authority, expert recognition, etc. are also critical success factors for a successful planned change. For instance, if all the five factors are present and effective, and the IC is not given authority of change control or duly recognized as a competent expert, improved performance can become a fiasco.

Referential power and respect given to the IC are motivational factors for success for improved business performance Antal & Krebsbach-Gnath, (2007). It is essential to point out that the model is scalable to include other factors such as those mentioned. However, the model can be re-illustrated as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 2: Re-illustration of the five-factor model



Source: Authors' Elaboration, 2020

### 5.3 ASSUMPTIONS AND TESTABILITY OF THE FIVE-FACTOR MODEL

There are some implicit assumptions underlying the five-factor model. These assumptions served best for the model to be adopted by the IC. First, the factors were assumed to be relatively constant in their effectiveness to enhance the work of the IC. For example, the support factor was considered stable throughout the consulting process but in practice, organizational dynamics and externalities can thwart policies, processes and structure such that some levels can be affected (Clegg et al., 2004). In fact, political influences can sometimes disrupt strategies for the planned change (Sturdy & Wright, 2011). Besides, attitudes and behaviors of some key members of the senior management team can negatively impact any of the three levels which can lead to failure regardless of a prior commitment to the factor presence and effectiveness. Also, organizations vary in context, setting, values, goals, industry, business functions, strengths and weaknesses, opportunities, markets, competition, resources, and capacities (Law, 2009; Stenmark & Zaffar, 2014). As a result, the five factors are not the only defined critical success factors that the IC has to ensure their presence and effectiveness for a change success. As explained earlier, the ecosystem of the IC as a structure constitutes multiplicity of factors that need thorough diagnosis so as to guarantee the change success (Adu-Gyamfi & Nyame, 2018).

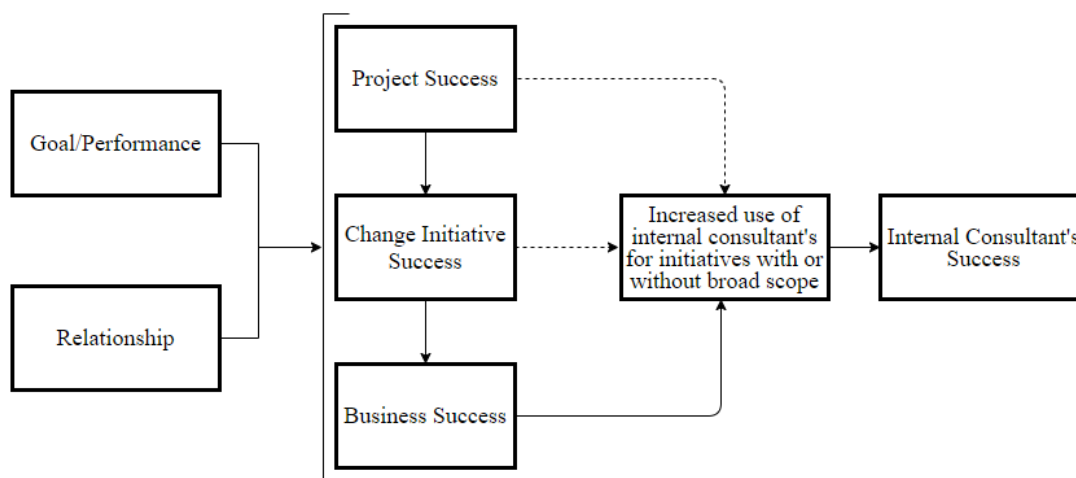
Testing a model is crucial to ascertain whether or not a model is practicable for success (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003). For the five-factor model to merit usage by ICs in the field of consultancy, the model had to be tested in an organization. If successful, strong recommendation is made to ICs for their planned change efforts. In the study by Miller and Subbiah (2012), there was no claim that indicated that the model was tested in an organization, and the results proved successful. Rather, the authors related the explanation of the relevance factor to the examples about Motorola developing and deploying the Six Sigma approach while Toyota capitalizes on its indigenously developed system for a better competitive edge. Also, for the circumspection factor where it was necessary to sustain positive attitudes among stakeholders for effective change initiative, Motorola Corporate University and Toyota's Operations Management Consulting Division were used as examples.

### 6. AN INTEGRATIVE MODEL FOR THE BALANCED APPROACH

The balance approach is the recommended approach by Miller and Subbiah each time the IC is in a dilemma as to whether or not to adopt the goal-oriented approach or the relationship-oriented approach. Good as their recommendation is, the simplicity of the balanced approach model failed to integrate the three levels of change considered for the discussion. The model only offers a feedback loop between performance (i.e., goal) and relationship. It is true that relationship-oriented is realized prior to the launch of the change initiative but it is operative across the initial levels where the factors of the model are well recognized.

Also, the goal-oriented cuts across the later levels because in the level-success continuum, the farther across the levels upstream the closer it is to reach the goal or performance (Ko, 2010; Ram, 1999). Hence, it is important to integrate the balanced approach with the level success so that the IC would be much more mindful of the use of the five factors across the levels while implementing the balanced approach. Fig. 2 shows the integrative model for the balanced approach.

Figure 2: The integrative model for the balanced approach



Source: Authors' Elaboration, 2020

It is imperative to suggest to not only internal consultants and top management of organizations but also researchers, analysts, project leaders, and project implementers who are directly involve in change initiatives to effectively adopt the five-factor model for most change initiatives. As stakeholders of a planned change, the success of the internal consultant is also a reflection of success for all stakeholders. Thus, this article is important for the aforementioned stakeholders when considering a planned change implementation for business performance.

Obviously, for the ICs to be successful, this article, based on the advice of Adu-Gyamfi & Nyame (2018), recommends the five-factor model as a complementary solution to the balanced approach despite the pull and

push factors of their ecosystem typified as a structure. However, in practice, not all the factors can be present and effective (Lundberg & Young, 2001), and besides the article does not tell the scope of definitions of these factors and how they are measured to impact project success, change initiative success and improved business performance.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In summary, the five factors of the five-factor model are non-exhaustive, inadequately tested for success, still fail to deal with the IC's referential power or authority, and the ineptness of some underlying assumptions to be relatively constant. Moreover, the recommended balanced approach vis-à-vis the five-factor model was only feasible across the three levels. This suggests that further studies have to be done to come out with an appropriate approach that the IC can adopt in order to best deal with all levels in the organization. Besides these shortcomings of the five-factor model, the work by Miller and Subbiah digressed from the traditional works on the distinction between and capabilities of internal and external consultants to one that emphasizes the competitive look of the internal consultants through the presence and effectiveness of the five factors for project success, change initiative success, and business success. Thus, the study exposed the ecosystem of ICs for thorough diagnosis to guarantee the change success for business performance.

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