QATALYST
RESEARCH GROUP

BEYOND THE HYPE: THE THREAT AI POSES FOR CONSULTING FIRMS

The First in a Two Part Series

Consulting is changing fast. AI is cutting time, cost, and headcount. Here is what your firm needs to know now:

Table of CONTENTS

Introduction

Management consultants are waking up to an uncomfortable reality: increasing numbers of their competitors are using AI to access knowledge bases and accelerate the review documents and data as well as the preparation of proposals, reports and presentations. Some estimates suggest that 50% or more of the consulting industry could disappear by 2030 as a direct result of AI-driven efficiencies and automation.

If you haven't noticed yet, you're not paying attention. With the advent of advanced systems like ChatGPT-5, AI systems now automate tasks from project planning and research to analysis, strategy development, and even report writing. This lets clients perform tasks once the exclusive domain of consultants. It's introducing new competitors and changing the competitive landscape, all while threatening to eliminate many entry-level positions in the industry.

At Qatalyst Research Group, we've been immersed in this transformation: integrating AI across our operations, building proprietary tools, and studying AI's broader market impact. This blog post—the first in a two-part series—shares what we've learned about the threat AI poses to consulting firms. In the second post, we'll present a practical guide for firms seeking to adapt.

This article explores six major shifts:

1. Today's AI is the worst we'll ever use
2. AI is already automating many consulting tasks
3. Consulting firms are behind the curve
4. Clients and competitors will force rapid adoption
5. Firms that resist AI will struggle to survive
6. AI is redefining consulting roles and skills

The sections below discuss each of these points in detail. In our next blog post, we will outline specific actions that consultants and firms can take to maintain and even strengthen their competitive position in this rapidly evolving sector.

***Who This Is For:** While the insights here apply to all consulting firms, we've written this primarily with small and medium-sized consultancies in mind. These firms often face unique challenges when adopting AI — from limited resources to competing priorities — but they also have opportunities to move faster than larger competitors. If you're a client, industry partner, or work in a related field, you'll also gain insight into how AI is reshaping the consulting services you use or deliver.*

1 Today's AI is the worst we'll ever use

AI does not need to reach artificial general intelligence (AGI) to upend consulting. Even if AI development froze at today's level, the current generation of tools is already remarkably powerful. And, of course, AI development isn't standing still – it's accelerating. As one expert quipped, ***"this is the worst AI we'll ever use,"*** underscoring that models like GPT-5 are the least advanced we will ever see going forward. And yet, they are already outperforming many human expectations in both creative and analytical tasks. Sam Altman, the CEO of OpenAI compares GPT-3 to a high school student, GPT-4 to a college student, and GPT-5 to a legitimate expert with PhD-level depth in any area. Claude 4 models now handle tasks taking "tens of minutes to hours" that previously required days.

***What this means for you:** You can't afford to wait for AI to 'settle down' — today's tools are already strong enough to disrupt your market position. Consultants who are banking on AI limitations as a safety net will find that net shrinking year by year.*

2 Consultants are being replaced by algorithms

Today's generative AI and machine learning tools can rapidly gather information, analyze data, generate strategic insights, and even prepare draft reports. Tasks that used to require a team of junior analysts working for weeks might now be completed by an AI in hours. Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei cautions that AI could reduce ***"half of all entry-level white-collar jobs"*** **–** including roles in consulting, finance,

law, and tech – within just 1–5 years. This isn't sci-fi speculation; it's a near-term reality we must confront. Youth unemployment is soaring in Canada and the United States, partly attributed to AI displacing entry-level roles.

And it isn't just entry-level staff. A 2025 Microsoft study of real-world AI tool usage found that **even highly educated professionals are vulnerable**. While entry-level clerical jobs topped the exposure list, professional roles in law, consulting, and finance also rank among the most at risk of being replicated or augmented by AI.

While some industry leaders maintain that AI will primarily augment human capabilities rather than replace them, the evidence suggests a more nuanced reality. The World Economic Forum projects 170 million new AI-related jobs by 2030, yet these likely require different skills than traditional entry-level consulting roles.

At Qatalyst, we have experienced this first-hand. We've managed to automate a wide range of internal tasks using AI, from initial data collection and research to preliminary analysis and even first-draft report generation. These automations free our human consultants to focus on higher-value activities like interpretation, client communication, and creative problem-solving. They are also reducing our need for entry-level staff.

What this means for you: The technology to automate core consulting work is available right now. We're already in an era where an AI can analyze documents and data, write a market overview, or build a basic financial model faster (and often better) than a junior consultant could. It is time to integrate AI further into your operations and rethink the roles of your consultants, how junior-level work is done, and ways to move your team toward higher-value activities.

3 Consulting firms are behind the curve

Despite all the hype, most consulting firms are barely the scratching the surface in terms of realizing the potential applications for AI. Several factors explain why.

The Prevalence of Small Firms

In Canada, where we are headquartered, the industry is sizable in aggregate (e.g., revenues of $26 billion annually and employment of 154,000 people in 2024). However, it is extremely fragmented across an estimated 75,000 firms. Given an average of about two employees per firm, most simply don't have the scale or resources to develop, customize, or invest in their own AI tools and training.

Limited Access to AI Tools for Consulting

AI applications come in two flavors: Horizontal AI tools and Vertical AI Tools. **Horizontal tools** are designed to be versatile and used in a similar way across multiple industries. These tools may focus on common tasks such as text analysis, coding, surveying, scheduling, marketing, document summarization, writing, etc. The challenge is that most consultants undertake a range of tasks and therefore may need to invest in a wide range of tools, each of which they may use only from time to time. Cost is a major constraint.

Vertical AI tools are fine tuned for workflows and data unique to specific industries (e.g. healthcare, finance, law, or potentially consulting). Few commercial-grade vertical tools have been developed to date for the consulting industry, largely because of the diversity in services, tasks and processes across firms. Some firms developed their own vertical AI tools, providing them with a significant competitive advantage over those that did not.

Data Access and Quality Challenges

Consulting engagements run on data – market research data, operational data, financial data, documents, and more. A major barrier to AI adoption in consulting has been **access to the right data (and in the right format) to train, fine tune or drive AI models.** Unlike a well-defined task like AI playing chess or Go (where the rules and data are clear), consulting problems often involve messy, fragmented data spread across different client systems. In a 2024 IBM survey, 42% of organizations said they *"lacked sufficient proprietary data"* to effectively tailor or fine-tune generative AI models to their needs. The results are only as reliable as the data it's given.

Trust, Privacy, and Reliability Concerns

Hand-in-hand with data issues are the **serious trust, privacy, and safety concerns** that both consulting firms and their clients have about AI. Consultants deal with sensitive client information – strategic plans, operational data, etc. Understandably, clients (and consultants themselves) worry about plugging such data into AI tools. In fact, many organizations – and even some consulting firms – have outright

banned the use of public AI tools like ChatGPT for any client-related work due to fear of information leaks. The opportunity to run data on models like GPT-OSS operating on your own server offers an important strategy for overcoming such concerns.

Beyond privacy, there are **legitimate worries about AI reliability and quality control.** Current generative AI models are powerful, but they can also produce errors or "hallucinate" – confidently generate incorrect or fabricated information. This forces consultants to double-check AI outputs meticulously, which can erode the very efficiency gains AI is supposed to provide. There are also ethical and legal risks if an AI inadvertently uses copyrighted material in a report or introduces bias into an analysis.

Cultural and Business Model Inertia

Many consulting leaders built their careers in the traditional consulting model, and change is hard. Partners who are comfortable with the status quo may resist investing heavily in AI or altering workflows that generate revenue. There's also a knowledge gap: many partners and managers simply aren't familiar enough with AI tools to envision how to deploy them effectively.

For many consultancies, embracing AI might mean fundamentally **re-engineering decades-old processes and retraining a whole workforce** – like changing the engines on a plane in mid-flight. Firms charge clients fees for expert insight and teams of people putting in long hours. AI upends both pillars of that business model: it can replicate or augment expertise (e.g. through analytical insights) and **dramatically reduce the labor hours** needed for many tasks via automation. It's a massive management challenge, but increasingly it looks necessary.

What this means for you: The good news is that, if you are early in AI adoption process, you are not alone. However, moving forward will require a commitment from leadership, being creative with AI adoption — finding or developing affordable, targeted tools and partnerships that work at your scale, getting your data in shape, and developing policies regarding privacy, bias, reliability and validation, and transparency.

4 Clients and competitors are forcing firms to change

In the very near future, consultants won't be debating whether to use AI – their clients and competitors will give them no choice.

Clients Demand AI-Powered Solutions

Perhaps the most immediate catalyst is coming from **clients themselves.** Not long ago, clients might have been wary of consultants using AI. Now we see the opposite: clients are *demanding* that their consulting firms bring AI capabilities to the table. In an IBM Institute for Business Value study, 86% of consulting clients said they are actively looking for consulting services that incorporate AI and technology assets. Furthermore, 66% of consulting clients surveyed said they would stop working with firms that don't use AI in their service delivery.

New AI-Driven Competitors Emerge

It's not just traditional rival firms that one has to worry about; **entirely new categories of competitors** are emerging that leverage AI as their core differentiator. Boutique "AI-first" consulting firms (smaller consultancies or startups) are explicitly positioning themselves as fully AI-enabled, agile alternatives to the old guard. These firms often market a value proposition of *faster, data-driven insights at lower cost*, thanks to their heavy use of automation and analytics. For example, a startup called Xavier AI has launched as an "AI strategy consultant" aimed at the 99% of businesses that could never afford a traditional McKinsey-style engagement.

Incumbent Consulting Firms Arming Themselves with AI

Your competitors will not be standing still. **Consultants are using AI internally to streamline their own processes** – from proposal writing to research. In competitive bids, a firm that uses AI effectively might be able to promise quicker turnaround or a smaller, cheaper team for the same project, undercutting a rival that uses the traditional manpower-heavy approach. Even the messaging has shifted – **leading consultancies now emphasize "hybrid intelligence"** (combining AI tools with human judgment) as their model for solving client problems.

The largest firms have launched dedicated AI and analytics units, which may enable them to extend services beyond their traditional markets. McKinsey's acquisition of QuantumBlack (an AI and advanced analytics company) and its integration into many client engagements is a case in point: through QuantumBlack, McKinsey consultants can leverage advanced algorithms and data science techniques to uncover

insights from massive datasets that a human team might miss. BCG's GAMMA unit similarly focuses on embedding AI and machine learning into projects across marketing, supply chain, risk analysis, and more.

Clients Becoming More Self-Sufficient with AI

Many clients are becoming **"AI-enabled" themselves**, which will reduce their reliance on external consultants. Government and other large organizations are building data science and AI teams in-house, capable of meeting certain needs internally rather than paying consultants. When they hire consultants, they will expect them to bring something beyond what the client's own team can do. **Consultants might find that their toughest new competitor is the client's internal team armed with AI.** The need to "***Show us something we can't do ourselves,***" will push consultants to adopt AI just to stay a step ahead of (or at least in step with) their clients.

What this means for you: The bad news is the rate of AI adoption will accelerate tremendously over the next few years. For firms of all sizes, this means clients and competitors will dictate the pace of AI adoption. Adapting becomes a strategic necessity, not a choice.

5 Firms that are slow to adopt will struggle

We anticipate a shakeout in the industry: **consulting firms that are slow to adopt AI will struggle** as the gap widens between tech-enabled firms and those stuck in the old model. Here's how we see this playing out over the next several years:

- **Acceleration of AI adoption:** First, the rate of AI adoption in consulting will continue to accelerate as tools become more accessible and essential. The software ecosystem is growing quickly – both in terms of commercial software-as-a-service (SaaS) products and custom development aided by AI. Firms, even smaller ones, will have increasing access to tools they can plug into their work. This includes both improvements to long-standing consulting tools that have added AI capabilities (e.g., established qualitative analysis software like NVivo or Atlas.ti now integrating AI features, or popular data visualization tools embedding AI assistants) and a wave of new AI-focused startups offering consulting-relevant products (e.g. tools like Insight7 for analyzing qualitative feedback using AI or Outset.AI for AI-driven surveys). Moreover, the rise of AI coding assistants and no-code platforms means that consultants (or small tech teams) can more easily develop **custom mini-applications** (scaffolding) to automate parts of their workflow. In other words,

building a tailored AI tool for a specific consulting need is becoming faster and cheaper, which lowers the barrier for firms to innovate on their own. As these technologies spread, firms that have resisted using AI will find it ever harder to justify why they aren't leveraging the readily available efficiency gains.

- **Big productivity gains:** As firms integrate AI, they will see significant improvements in productivity and capability. A consultant armed with the right AI can handle a larger volume of work (or more complex analysis) in the same amount of time, effectively **increasing throughput**. However, this also introduces a tough dynamic: if each consultant can do more, you may not need as many consultants as before for the same amount of work.

- **Declining consulting fees.** The cost of delivering consulting services will drop with AI-driven efficiency. We are already seeing **clients demand pricing adjustments** to reflect the new efficiencies. For example, PwC's global Chief AI Officer recently revealed that PwC has begun cutting some of its consulting fees because clients noticed the firm using AI tools and asked for their fair share of the efficiency gains. In PwC's case, the firm acknowledged roughly 30% efficiency improvements in certain technology implementation projects thanks to AI, and in turn adjusted prices downward by a similar magnitude.

- **Oversupply of consulting capacity:** In economic terms, if each consultant can do twice the work thanks to AI, you'd need twice as many projects to keep everyone busy at current staffing levels. It's unlikely that demand will expand that quickly, especially if clients choose to do more in-house. So, we could see an **oversupply of consulting capacity** in the market, which tends to drive prices and margins down further. This scenario would especially hurt firms that are slow to adapt – they'll be competing in a tougher market without the efficiency advantages of AI.

The net result could be industry consolidation. Firms that integrate AI could start to dominate more of the market, while many small or traditionalist firms struggle to win contracts. It will also become increasingly difficult for any firm – large or small – to keep up-to-date with the *breakneck pace of AI advancement* unless they are actively in the game. We're moving into an era of **self-improving, multi-modal AI models with agent-like capabilities** that evolve rapidly. A firm that hasn't been experimenting with AI won't magically catch up one day; the gap will compound over time.

What this means for you: AI adoption will increase competition by increasing industry capacity while placing downward pressure on fees. This scenario would especially hurt firms that are slow to adapt – they'll be competing in a tougher market without the efficiency advantages of AI.

6 Consulting roles are changing

The rise of AI doesn't spell the absolute end of consulting, but it will profoundly reshape what it means to work in consulting. Firms that survive and thrive in the AI era will inevitably look different from those of the past. Teams will be leaner and more tech-heavy. Junior roles will be fewer but more specialized. Every consultant will be part analyst, part technologist, and part strategist. Here's what we anticipate for most firms:

- **AI will mostly replace or augment tasks – not entire jobs – but certain roles will shrink:** Rather than AI instantly automating whole consulting jobs out of existence, what we're seeing is AI taking over specific tasks within jobs. However, when a large share of an entry-level consultant's typical tasks can be handled by AI, the firm simply doesn't need as many people in that role.

- **Every consulting role will require AI knowledge, and new hybrid roles will emerge:** In the AI-enabled consulting firm, *every position becomes an "AI position" to some extent***.** One recruiter recently noted *"a growing demand for hybrid consultants who understand both business strategy and AI implementation."* Many firms are hiring more tech-savvy talent – bringing in data scientists, software engineers, and AI specialists to work alongside the MBAs and industry experts. Some firms have even created entirely new roles like *"prompt engineer," "automation architect," or "AI ethicist"* to support client engagements.

- **Shift to higher-value, more human-centric work:** As AI takes over the more routine, repeatable, and analysis-heavy tasks, the focus of human consultants will shift upward to what truly requires human insight, creativity, and interpersonal skills. We expect much more emphasis on **higher-level functions and strategic thinking** – areas where human judgment makes the difference in how analysis is synthesized or how a problem is framed. Consultants will spend more time on the *"so what"* of analysis (implications, recommendations, innovative solutions) rather than the grunt work of putting the analysis together. **Managing and overseeing AI** will also become a key part of many roles – someone needs to decide what the AI should do, feed it the right prompts or data, check its outputs, and integrate those outputs into the broader project.

Additionally, consultants will focus on **tasks that inherently require personal involvement or emotional intelligence**, like building client relationships, facilitating workshops, driving change management with client teams, and providing the empathy and reassurance that no machine can replace. There will also be a premium on **domain-specific expertise** and tacit knowledge – consultants who know an industry deeply or can tap into insights that aren't readily available in any database will remain invaluable, because AI can only work with the information it has. Furthermore, as AI handles existing well-defined tasks, human consultants will gravitate towards **developing new**

services and solving novel problems (some of which may not even exist today) – essentially, charting into areas where playbooks aren't established and creativity is needed. In many cases, the consultant's role will be to serve as the **glue between various automated components** of a project – ensuring that the outputs of different AI tools and analyses make sense together, and that nothing falls through the cracks in an increasingly automated workflow. Finally, consultants will likely produce a **broader array of deliverables** – not just slide decks, but interactive dashboards, custom-built analytical models, or even working prototypes of tools as part of their recommendations. We might see application development become an integral part of service delivery for consulting firms.

- **New skills and deliverables (including tech development) become part of consulting:** As part of this evolution, we expect some skill areas to become much more important for consultants. These include things like process design and integration (how to plug AI tools into business processes effectively), validation, safety and quality assurance of AI outputs, data governance, and of course the strategic direction and contextual understanding to know what questions to ask and what to do with the answers. Implementation skills will also be in higher demand – helping clients not only figure out strategy but actually implement AI-driven changes.

- **Continuous reskilling as a way of life:** Even senior consultants and partners will need to continuously update their skills and understanding, because the technology itself is evolving so fast. We expect to see regular internal programs to certify consultants on the latest tools, sabbaticals or rotations for staff to gain tech experience, and hiring from more diverse backgrounds (e.g., mixing in software engineers or cognitive scientists with traditional business consultants).

The Transition in the Consulting Industry

Category	Pre-AI Era	AI-Enabled Era
Research Tasks	Junior staff spend weeks on primary and secondary market research	AI completes secondary research in hours and support key elements of the primary research
Who performs analysis	Entry-level staff run analysis	AI automates quantitative and qualitative analysis
Report writing	Consultants build reports	AI drafts, humans edit
Role of senior consultants	Strategic oversight & client management	Strategic oversight, AI integration, validation, client management
Skills requirements	Industry expertise	AI integration and domain expertise
Project length	Months-long studies accepted	Real time insights demanded

Revenue model	Billable hours and materials	Value-based/outcome-based pricing
Proposals	Senior consultants draft proposals over days	AI creates first drafts in minutes
Competition	Traditional consulting firms	AI-first consultancies, in-house AI teams
Firm competitive advantages	Reputation, network, expertise	Proprietary AI tools, speed, data integration, reliability

What this means for you: For every consulting professional, this means building AI literacy and embracing hybrid roles will be essential to staying relevant.

Our Upcoming Post

The transformation is already underway. In short: AI expands capacity, compresses timelines, and pushes fees down. The question isn't whether AI will reshape consulting but rather what firms will lead coming out of this change or be left behind. The firms that thrive won't out-muscle algorithms; they'll out-design the system around them. In Part 2, we share the operating moves—backbone, build vs. buy, team shape, ecosystem, and cadence—that have worked for us and our partners.

If you are interested in finding out more:

- This fall, we're hosting webinars for consultants and researchers on how you can leverage AI to strengthen your services and operations. If you'd like an invite, tell us you're interested and we'll share the details.
- If you prefer a quick one-on-one to talk through your operation, let us know that as well.
- Later this year, we will be launching an online service where you can assess your organization's AI readiness and adoption and develop a strategy to improve your performance. We can provide services to help you review your operations, prioritize use cases, and develop, adapt and integrate the AI tools you need.

If you are interested, contact Sushant Tare at sushant.tare@qatalyst-research.ca.

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CONSULTING EXPERTISE, AMPLIFIED BY AI

Blending human insight and advanced technology for faster, more effective results.

At Qatalyst Research Group, we are integrating AI into every aspect of our practice —from sales to research, analysis, and output generation. Combining senior consulting expertise, an in-house development team, and a suite of AI tools, we can assist non-profits, government and other firms in integrating AI into their operations. We offer end-to-end AI transformation services that meet organizations where they are in their digital journey.

Go to https://qatalyst.ca/ or reach out to Sushant Tare at sushant.tare@qatalyst-research.ca to find out more about how we might work together.

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