

Case study

Learn about the firm and people involved in this scenario and look at how it develops.

Then consider the ethical themes and skills that are touched on.



The firm

XYZ is a small project consultancy formed last year by a team that broke away from a bigger firm to focus on a particular market niche. They have a reputation for knowing that niche very well. The firm has landed its first overseas contract, so there's a real feeling that the firm is now getting the recognition it deserves. This contract makes the firm's future growth more secure.

The background

The contract is with an agency of an overseas government, and part of the project's first stage is an engagement programme with a key stakeholder. This will involve a network of workers delivering an important service across the country. Their feedback will help identify any substantial hurdles that could influence key parameters for the next stage of the project. For this reason, the firm has sent one of its key people to organise and implement that engagement.

The people



John is an experienced project manager and was one of the people involved in setting up the new firm. He's excited about this contract – it allows him to broaden his experience and show how the new firm can take on bigger challenges like this.



William has worked for the client agency for several years and has been given responsibility for overseeing this project. He's a real 'people person', and his range of contacts means he's a person of growing influence in the government.



Karen joined XYZ earlier in the year, enticed by its focus and reputation, and what she'd heard about its culture. She's glad to have now completed all of her academic and professional training and is keen to gain as much experience as possible.

The scenario that develops

John's point of view

"I was very well looked after when I got there. Admittedly, it would have been better to get straight into the work, but it was nice to be shown around a bit too. It's an interesting country and seeing it with a local is great. On the second day, however, I really did force the pace, asking how the engagement programme would be organised. You can imagine my surprise when William, my opposite number at the agency, said it had already been carried out and he'd be able to give me the results in a day or two. The results were just being written up.

"I was a bit taken aback – our plan had been for carefully arranged forums to elicit the best feedback on how sensitive the main project would be to certain hurdles. After all, these were the people on the ground who face them all the time."

William's point of view

"I really like John, but you can tell he doesn't understand how we do things here. Our friends at the opinion research firm got the information we needed and I'll share that with John tomorrow. It's pretty much what we expected. We know these outworking people and what their views are."

"The report will look really good and I know the results will please John, as they clear the way for the next big stage of the project to start. After all, that's what we're really here to deliver. We'll just do a quick photo-shoot for him at the local charity that those survey people like to use, before he's off home on the plane."

Karen's point of view

"The opinion research that John brought back looks all very fine, but to be honest, it just feels a bit too fine. I know I've only been here a few months, but I've never seen a round peg fit into a round hole quite so perfectly before. The engagement came back with nothing but green lights across all of the key parameters. OK, so there could be no problems, but we all know how important these findings are for delivering the next stage of the project. John's such a nice guy and I'm worried that if I criticise the report, I'll end up looking like I'm criticising him. That'd make the office no fun place for a while, and I've got my probation period to think of – I've still got a couple of months to go."



The following week

Karen's point of view

“You should have seen the look John gave me when I saw him at the coffee machine and tried a joke about the engagement report. He’s obviously concerned about it, and after he’d asked for my honest opinion, we ended up spending a whole hour going over the problem and what we could do about it. We knew that running with the report as it stood was too big a risk, and so we mapped out how it would look if that risk was realised. It didn’t paint a pretty picture for the project. Then we mapped out what the risks were from making some sort of challenge to the report, and they weren’t very pretty either. Just as we thought we’d landed ourselves between a rock and a hard place, I sort of nudged John to look beyond this one project. After all, I joined this firm because of its reputation. If we didn’t sort out this bit of the project, then where would we be with our other clients?”

“Even though we agreed on this, we still didn’t have a plan for sorting it out. But after chatting it over with some close colleagues over the weekend, I had a brainwave. A bit of online research identified a big global firm that the local opinion researchers sometimes partnered with. I messaged John the idea and he gave it the thumbs-up. We met with the big firm and agreed that they would approach the local firm directly to find out more about how they’d done this piece of work. The next few weeks were pretty manic, as their review did find problems, but we got the right engagement in the end and identified some material hurdles for the next stage.”