

PRACTICE NOTE

Can Prior Consultations with Specialists Backfire on Auditors?

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KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- When an audit senior has prior experience consulting with ADA specialists, managers evaluate the senior as more competent.
- However, such a prior experience leads managers to rely less on the senior's ADA work performed independently.
- Prior consultation experience leads to lower superior reliance even when the subordinate's ADA skills are low.

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Executive Summary

As advanced audit data analytics (ADA), including artificial intelligence, become increasingly sophisticated, auditor consultations with in-house ADA specialists are likely to become commonplace. We examine whether auditors' prior ADA consultation experience affects their superiors' reliance on their ADA work performed independently of specialists. On the one hand, learning from ADA specialists through prior consultation may enhance auditors' technological proficiency, increasing their superiors' reliance on their ADA testing. On the other hand, a known history of consultation may signal dependence on specialists. This signal may conflict with superiors' expectations that auditors can perform ADA tasks independently, triggering a backlash effect that ultimately undermines reliance.

In an experiment, we find that when an audit senior has prior experience consulting with ADA specialists, audit managers evaluate the senior as more competent, yet rely less on the senior's independent ADA work. This pattern is consistent with a backlash effect. Prior consultation experience leads to lower superior reliance even when the subordinate's ADA skills are low. This unexpected result is concerning, as backlash may discourage consultation even among auditors who need it most for learning and skill development (i.e., those with lower ADA skills). Our findings highlight the importance of managing the interpersonal dynamics of engagement teams when incorporating ADA into audits.

Main Takeaways

- When an audit senior has prior experience consulting with ADA specialists, managers evaluate the senior as more competent.
- However, such a prior experience leads managers to rely less on the senior's ADA work performed independently.
- Prior consultation experience leads to lower superior reliance even when the subordinate's ADA skills are low.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, backlash, consultation, data analytics skills, specialists, superiors' reliance

The Issue

As advanced audit data analytics (ADA), including artificial intelligence (AI), are increasingly being integrated into audit practice, auditors increasingly turn to in-house ADA specialists for advice. In this study, we examine whether an auditor's prior ADA consultation experience affects superiors' reliance on the auditor's ADA work performed independently.

Two competing perspectives emerge. From a *learning perspective*, advice from ADA specialists serves as a critical learning resource for developing auditors' data-related skills, such as structuring complex data, configuring and interpreting analytic models, and evaluating the reliability of algorithmic outputs—capabilities that firms increasingly view as core audit competencies (e.g., Tysiac 2020; Brewer 2024). Equipped with these enhanced skills, auditors should thus be better positioned to perform subsequent ADA tasks. Accordingly, superiors could *increase* their reliance on subordinates' ADA work when the subordinates have more prior consultation experience.

In contrast, from a *dependence-backlash* perspective, seeking advice can be interpreted as a sign of dependence on others' expertise (e.g., Bol and Leiby 2018). This signal may conflict with superiors' expectations of the norm: auditors typically complete assigned audit testing autonomously rather than through consultations (e.g., Trompeter and Wright 2010; Ciconte III et al. 2025). Deviating from such expectations can lead to negative reactions, reducing superior reliance—i.e., a backlash (e.g., Moss-Racusin et al. 2010; Rudman et al. 2012). Therefore, below is the main research question we examine in this study. In addition, we examine whether its effect is dependent on the auditors' ADA skill levels (i.e., higher vs. lower).

- **Research Question:** Does an auditor's prior ADA consultation experience increase or decrease superior reliance on their independent ADA work?

Methodology

One hundred and thirty-three audit seniors and audit managers (average audit experience 11.67 years) from three audit firms affiliated with FAR participated in our experiment. Participants assumed the role of lead audit manager on a hypothetical audit engagement, acting as the primary reviewer of work completed by a subordinate audit senior. The subordinate either often sought advice from in-house ADA specialists or often independently executed ADA tests (i.e., *Subordinate Consultation Experience Present* vs. *Absent*). The

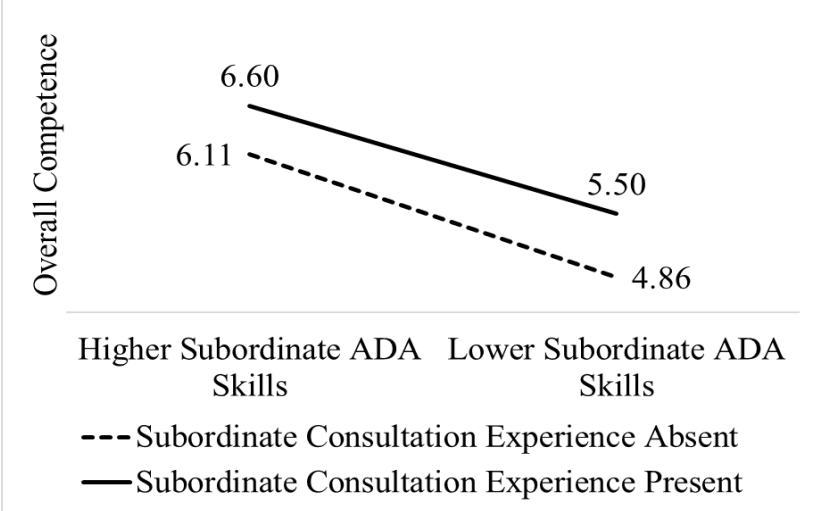
subordinate has either higher or lower ADA skills (i.e., *Higher vs. Lower Subordinate ADA Skills*).

The subordinate recently utilized a firm-developed AI tool independently to test the client’s allowance for doubtful accounts. The AI testing produced an estimate exceeding the client’s reported allowance by more than materiality and hence indicated the need for an upward audit adjustment. The subordinate also performed a traditional aging-of-accounts-receivable test, yielding an immaterial difference and thus supporting the client’s reported estimate (i.e., no adjustments needed). Participants were instructed to (1) estimate the appropriate allowance for doubtful accounts, (2) decide whether to propose an audit adjustment to the client, and, if applicable, (3) determine the adjustment amount.

Findings

We find that superiors evaluate subordinates with prior consultation experience as more competent than those without such experience (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Superiors’ Evaluations of the Subordinate’s Overall Competence

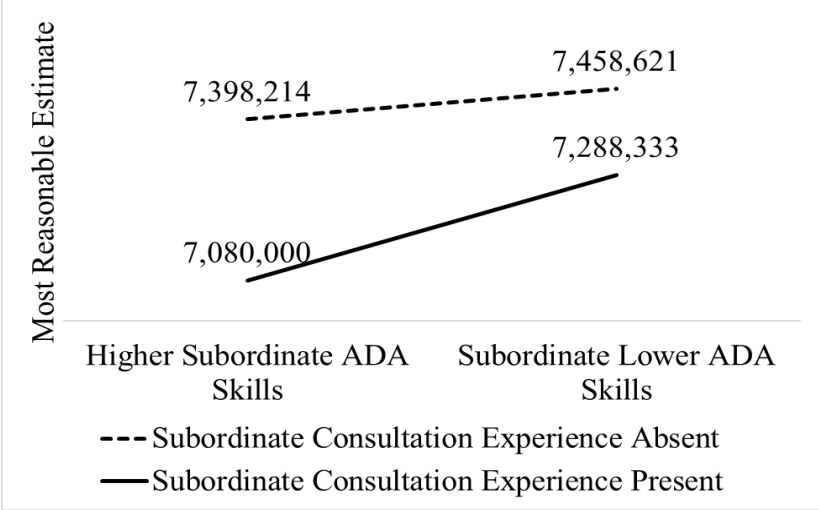


However, they rely *less* on these subordinates’ AI testing outcome (see Figure 2). Specifically, when the subordinate has prior experience consulting with an ADA specialist, superiors provide lower estimates of the client’s allowance, being less likely to propose an audit adjustment, and proposing smaller adjustment amounts, indicating *less* reliance on the subordinates’ AI testing outcome. This pattern is consistent with the prediction from a *dependence-backlash* perspective. Given prior evidence on the underutilization of specialists in audit practice (e.g., Hux 2017; Bauer and Estep 2019; Boritz et al. 2020), this finding is concerning, as auditors may further avoid seeking valuable advice to sidestep negative

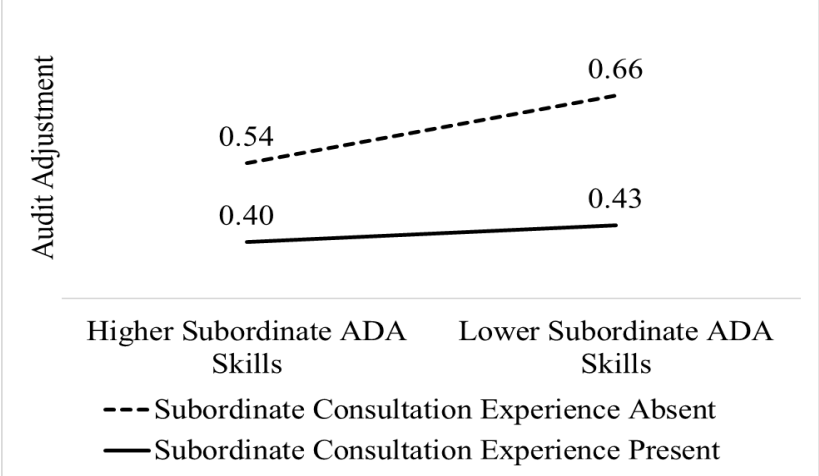
consequences—even in complex task environments (e.g., AI and accounting estimate audits) where consultation is often warranted.

Figure 2: Superiors’ Reliance on the Subordinate’s AI Testing Outcome

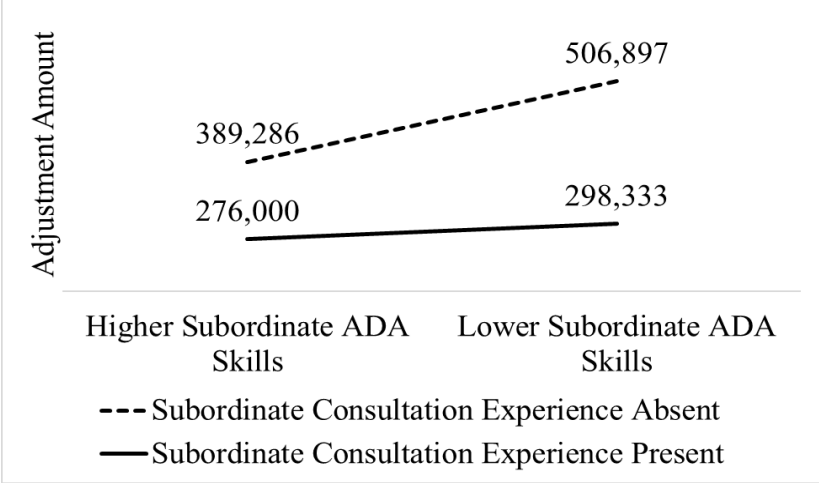
Panel A: Most Reasonable Estimate



Panel B: Audit Adjustment



Panel C: Adjustment Amount



Even more concerning is that the negative effect of prior consultation persists regardless of the subordinate's ADA skill level (also see Figure 2). This finding presents a potential risk, as it suggests that reduced superior reliance may discourage consultation even among those who may benefit most from it for learning and skill development (i.e., auditors with lower ADA skills).

Conclusion and Relevance to Audit Practice

Audit firms actively encourage specialist consultation, recognizing its benefits for enhancing auditors' professional judgment and skepticism (e.g., Zeidman 2010; Ranzilla et al. 2011). Specifically, consultation with the central data function is perceived as a positive indicator of appropriate AI use (FRC 2025). However, we find that prior consultation experience leads superiors to place lower reliance on the subordinate's AI testing outcome regardless of the subordinate's ADA skill level. This unexpected finding is concerning, as it suggests that backlash may discourage consultation even among those who most need it for learning and skill development.

As audit firms increasingly adopt advanced technologies and promote collaboration with ADA specialists (e.g., AICPA 2020; Tysiac 2020), they must understand and manage any unintended consequences. To foster a culture of continuous learning and innovation, firms should actively encourage consultation as a valued behavior while minimizing the risk that auditors will face reduced reliance on their work simply because they sought out expert guidance.

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