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Ethical issues regarding independence in a commercial environment

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Private practitioners have to balance their professional ethics with business interests. Maintaining professional independence in assessment and findings can provide an area of challenge where the two areas of interest compete.

The following pressures can emerge for private practitioners operating in a commercial environment.

- To produce assessments, findings, recommendations or outcomes that are consistent with those expected from the client with reference to their broader political and organisational agendas and imperatives.
- To ensure that assessments, findings, recommendations or outcomes produced are palatable to the field, service or program context.
- To highlight positive feedback and distill negative or critical feedback so as not to disturb the relationship between the consultant or contractor and the client or the field.

The above pressures can manifest in a number of different ways. For me, the above identified tensions often emerge at the point of writing the first draft of the final report, inclusive of recommendations. Although happy to receive feedback from the client where there have been errors in the facts presented, missing data or information, questionable analysis, or a need for greater clarity in expression and meaning, the feedback provided by the client can proceed down the path of overt pressure to change the *content* of recommendations. In my experience, clients have attempted either soft negotiation ('could you please reconsider?'), medium level negotiation/persuasion ('I would like you to alter or remove the following') to hard level persuasion ('I am going to change or remove certain recommendations within the document'). The above scenario raises a number of issues which will be discussed in the paper.