

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Cost Structure and Project Profitability in Environmental Consulting

A Case Study of Six Real-World Consulting Projects

Irene Yang

Springside Chestnut Hill Academy, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 19138, United States
Corresponding author email: nancyang910@126.com

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Abstract

Environmental consultants are pivotal to our modern economy, playing a key role in supporting environmental protection and regulatory compliance (Lyndsey, 2026). However, maintaining financial sustainability remains challenging due to the complex cost structures of environmental consulting projects. This study examines the relationship between project costs, revenue, and financial performance using real-world financial data from an environmental consulting company. By analyzing six projects representing different environmental consulting services, the study evaluates cost distribution, profit margins, and operational efficiency through financial and comparative analysis.

The analysis identifies four major findings. First, cost structures vary significantly across projects. Second, operational costs account for a high proportion of total costs in some projects, especially Project F and Project D, where they account for 82.63% and 65.67%, respectively. Third, high labor costs do not necessarily indicate inefficiency. Project E has a labor cost proportion of 55.72% but achieves the highest profit margin of 68.41%. Fourth, high operational expenses do not necessarily result in positive financial performance. Project F has an operational cost proportion of 82.63% and a profit margin of –17.12%, showing that high operational expenses combined with limited revenue can create financial pressure.

Based on these findings, environmental consulting companies can improve financial sustainability through operational efficiency, project-specific budgeting, and appropriate professional investment while maintaining service quality and environmental objectives.

Keywords: environmental consulting; project-based study; cost structure; profitability; financial analysis; project costing

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Over the past several years, climate change and its impacts on the environment, including rising temperatures, drought, and flooding, have gained increasing attention from global business, governments, and investors worldwide (NOAA, 2026). As organizations have faced stricter environmental laws, regulations, and growing expectations, environmental consulting services have become a crucial role for

helping businesses to achieve compliance and develop sustainable strategies. This situation provides an opportunity for environmental consulting companies to provide professional support such as regulatory compliance, environmental assessment, and sustainability planning.

Unlike traditional businesses that offer standardized products, environmental consulting companies typically operate through project-based services, advising businesses, organizations and governments on environmental issues, compliance with regulations, and developing sustainability practices (Deltak, 2023). Each project may involve different requirements, including specialized labor, operational support, and technological resources resulting in complex and variable cost structures. As a result, understanding financial performance and analyzing the cost structure are important for improving operational efficiency and profitability.

However, achieving environmental goals alone does not guarantee long-term business success. Many sustainable projects have faced financial challenges due to the high operational cost, uncertain demands, and intensive resource processes. Although environmental projects can create significant social and ecological benefits, companies also need to maintain financial sustainability to continue their growth. Effective businesses need to balance the environmental objectives with cost management, revenue generation, and long-term profitability. Thus, financial analysis can provide direct and valuable insights into how sustainable development of the environment achieves both environmental impact and economic stability.

Therefore, this research focuses on analyzing the cost structure and financial performance of environmental consulting projects to identify strategies that can be applied to support sustainable business growth.

1.2 Problem Statement

Environmental consulting projects often involve complex cost structures, including expert and engineer labor expenses, advanced technology investment, and operational costs. Since there are differences in project scale and requirements, each project may have significant variations in cost distribution and profitability. However, many businesses only manage basic financial information including costs, revenue, and profit. They overlook the factors that might indeed have the most significant influence on their financial performance. Without knowing the key cost factors, companies may face challenges in improving their operational efficiency, increasing profitability, and achieving sustainable growth. By analyzing several real-world project financial data, this research aims to identify major cost drivers, examine their relationship with profitability, and explore strategies that can help environmental consulting companies make effective financial decisions.

1.3 Research Objectives

This research aims to analyze the financial performance and cost structures of several environmental consulting projects for better understanding the factors influencing profitability and sustainable growth.

- Analyze the cost structure of environmental consulting projects and identify major cost factors.
- Evaluate the relationship between project costs, revenue, and profitability to understand factors affecting financial performance.
- Compare financial performance across different projects and recognize improving strategies.
- Develop recommendations to help environmental consulting companies improve operational efficiency and achieve sustainable business growth.

1.4 Research Question

How can environmental consulting companies optimize their cost structures and improve financial sustainability while balancing their environmental impact and profitability?

2. Company and Project Overview

2.1 Company Background

This research examines an environmental consulting company that provides professional services related to environmental management and sustainable development. The company offers various services, including environmental impact assessments, environmental strategy studies, regulatory compliance support, and technical consulting. Its clients include businesses and local governments that require assistance with meeting environmental regulations and laws and improving their environmental management practices. Unlike other businesses that sell standardized products, this company primarily operates through a project-based service model. Each project is customized based on specific client needs and may require different levels of technical expertise, labor input, and operational resources. Due to variations in project scope, complexity, and resource requirements, different projects may experience significant variations in costs and profitability.

The company's services require professional knowledge and continuous coordination between technical teams and clients, as well as professional knowledge in environmental regulations and assessment procedures. This project-based business model makes the company an appropriate case study for analyzing the relationship between cost structures and financial performance.

By examining real-world financial data from multiple environmental consulting projects, this research aims to identify major cost drivers, evaluate factors that are associated with differences in financial performance and explore opportunities for improving profitability and long-term financial sustainability.

2.2 Selected Projects

This research analyzes financial data from several environmental consulting projects completed by the company. The selection of different types of environmental consulting projects represent various project scope, resource requirements, and operational complexity. These differences allow this study to compare cost structures and financial performance across different project conditions.

Professional service firms typically incur a combination of labor, overhead, direct nonsalary, and general administrative costs, and these cost components can be important considerations when evaluating profitability (Hurley and Touran 2002). Building on this perspective, the present study examines the cost structure and profitability of six environmental consulting projects using financial data provided by the company. The data include project revenue, labor costs, technology and professional costs, operational and administrative costs, and profitability information. To maintain confidentiality, the individual projects are labeled Project A, Project B, Project C, Project D, Project E, and Project F.

Table 1. Overview of Selected Environmental Consulting Projects

Project	Service type	Main activities	Project characteristics
A	Environmental management consulting	Environmental compliance support and consulting	Long-term service requiring continuous communication and professional support
B	Environmental feasibility assessment	Environmental evaluation and report preparation	Report-based project requiring technical analysis and regulatory knowledge
C	Construction-project environmental consulting	Environmental support and compliance assessment during construction	Requires coordination with construction processes and technical knowledge
D	Comprehensive utilization project consulting	Resource utilization and environmental management analysis	Complex project requiring customized solutions and technical expertise
E	Planning environmental impact assessment	Environmental impact analysis and development planning	Requires extensive research, data analysis, and professional expertise
F	Centralized collection and storage consulting	Environmental management and regulatory compliance support	Specialized project requiring operational planning and technical support

Although these projects provide similar environmental consulting services, differences in project requirements create variation in cost allocation and profitability. By comparing financial performance among different projects, this research can identify major cost drivers and examine how resource allocation is associated with differences in business outcomes.

This project-level analysis provides a foundation for evaluating opportunities to improve operational efficiency and financial sustainability.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Source and Confidentiality

This research uses real-world financial data from six environmental consulting projects completed by the company. The projects were selected from those available for analysis in the company's internal financial records because they represented different types of environmental consulting services and provided complete financial information for the analysis. The projects varied in scope, resource requirements, and service characteristics, providing a basis for comparing cost structures and profitability across different project types.

The collected data include project revenue, total costs, labor costs, technology and professional costs, operational and administrative expenses, and project profitability. The projects were completed between 2024 and 2026 and were recorded using the company's accounting system. The financial data were provided internally by the company and were categorized according to its existing cost classifications. Labor costs included technical commissions, marketing commissions, and management fees; technology and professional costs included review meeting expenses and technical assistance fees; and operational and administrative costs included business expenses, monitoring expenses, engineering parameter expenses, printing costs, travel expenses, and taxes. All costs analyzed in this study were treated as direct project costs rather than indirect costs allocated across projects.

To protect confidential business information, all projects are labeled as Project A through Project F rather than using their actual names. The research focuses on identifying overall financial patterns and relationships among project-level costs and profitability rather than disclosing specific confidential business details. This approach allows the study to examine cost structures and financial sustainability while maintaining the confidentiality of the company's internal financial information.

3.2 Analytical Procedures

This research applies financial analysis methods to evaluate the relationship between cost structures, profitability, and financial sustainability across different environmental consulting projects. Since each project has different service requirements, resource inputs, and operational complexity, analyzing financial performance at the project level can help identify major factors influencing profitability.

First, this research analyzes the cost structure of each project by examining the distribution of major cost categories, including labor, technology-related expenses and operational costs. The proportion of each cost category is calculated to identify the primary cost drivers influencing project expenses. The following formulas are used to evaluate the percentage contribution of each cost category:

$$\text{Labor cost percentage} = \text{Labor cost} \div \text{Total cost} \times 100\%$$

$$\text{Technology and professional cost percentage} = \text{Technology and professional cost} \div \text{Total cost} \times 100\%$$

$$\text{Operational and administrative cost percentage} = \text{Operational and administrative cost} \div \text{Total cost} \times 100\%$$

Project profitability was measured using profit margin:

$$\text{Profit margin} = \text{Profit} \div \text{Revenue} \times 100\%$$

By comparing cost distribution, profitability indicators, and project characteristics, this research aims to determine how factors such as labor requirements, technical complexity and operational resources influence financial outcomes. These analytical methods provide a foundation for identifying cost optimization opportunities and developing recommendations to improve operational efficiency and long-term financial sustainability.

3.3 Limitations

This research has several limitations that should be considered when presenting the findings. First, the study is based on data from only one environmental consulting company, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Second, the analysis focuses on six specific environmental consulting projects, and a larger sample size might provide broader insights into cost structures and profitability patterns. Since the analysis is primarily descriptive, it identifies patterns and associations rather than establishing causal relationships between costs and profitability. Additionally, the projects differ in size and service type, which may affect the comparability of cost percentages across projects. Therefore, differences in cost structures should not be interpreted as evidence of direct causes of profitability outcomes. The research also does not fully account for external factors such as changes in market conditions, economic trends, and environmental regulations, which may be associated with differences in project costs and financial performance. Future research could include a larger number of projects to provide a more comprehensive understanding of financial sustainability in environmental consulting services.

4. Results

4.1 Cost Structure

Table 2. Cost Structure Comparison Across the Six Projects

Project	Labor (%)	Technology & professional (%)	Operational & administrative (%)	Total cost (RMB 10,000)
A	28.87	33.35	37.78	158.1893
B	39.46	20.70	39.84	70.2438
C	45.24	0.00	54.76	1.4788
D	34.33	0.00	65.67	34.5809
E	55.72	7.92	36.36	12.6347
F	17.38	0.00	82.63	2.6936

As shown in Table 2, the comparison among six projects demonstrates that cost structures vary across different environmental consulting services depending on project characteristics and service requirements. As shown in Table 2, these projects do not follow the same cost pattern, indicating that different types of consulting services require different combinations of financial resources. Operational and administrative costs account for a large share of total costs across several projects, while labor and technology-related expenses represent large cost components in projects requiring greater professional expertise or technical input.

The first key cost driver is associated with operational and administrative requirements. Projects with greater coordination, management procedures, and supporting activities show relatively higher operational-cost proportions in the selected sample. For example, the relatively high operational-cost proportions observed in Project F and Project D (82.63% and 65.67%, respectively), suggest that these service types may involve substantial organizational and administrative requirements. However, the differences in project scale and service characteristics should be considered when interpreting these percentages.

The second key cost driver is related to professional expertise. Labor costs become more influential in projects that require extensive analysis, evaluation, and specialized knowledge. For instance, Project E has the highest labor-cost proportion among the selected projects, accounting for 55.72% of total costs, while also achieving the highest profit margin of 68.41%. This pattern suggests that a relatively high labor-cost share does not necessarily indicate inefficient cost management. Given the knowledge-intensive nature of professional service firms, labor and specialized expertise are central to providing customized solutions and specialist knowledge for clients (Von Nordenflycht, 2010). However, the results from this six-project sample do not establish that higher labor costs caused higher profitability.

The third key cost driver is associated with technical requirements. Technology-related expenses vary depending on the specific service model and project needs. Some projects require additional technical support or specialized resources, while others rely more heavily on professional labor and operational activities. Therefore, technology costs could be considered with project characteristics rather than regarded as a fixed expense category.

Overall, these findings indicate that environmental consulting companies should adopt project-specific cost management strategies. Understanding the different factors that influence project costs provides a foundation for improving resource allocation, controlling expenses, and evaluating how cost structures affect overall profitability.

4.2 Project Profitability

Table 3. Financial Performance Across the Six Projects

Project	Revenue (RMB 10,000)	Total cost (RMB 10,000)	Profit (RMB 10,000)	Profit margin (%)
A	243.4851	158.1893	85.2958	35.03
B	118.0000	70.2438	47.7562	40.47
C	3.0000	1.4788	1.5212	50.71
D	54.0000	34.5809	19.4191	35.96
E	40.0000	12.6347	27.3653	68.41
F	2.3000	2.6936	-0.3936	-17.12

Based on Table 3, the financial performance of the six environmental consulting projects varies significantly across different project types. Among the selected projects, Project A generated the highest revenue of 243.4851(10,000 RMB) and achieved a profit of 85.2958(10,000 RMB), demonstrating strong financial outcomes, which might be associated with its relatively larger project scale. Project E presents the highest profitability, with a profit margin of 68.41%, followed by Project C with a profit margin of 50.71%. In contrast, Project F is the only project experiencing a financial loss, with a negative profit margin of -17.12%. This result indicates that its project revenue does not fully cover the associated costs. Overall, the differences observed across the six projects suggest that project scale, cost control, resource allocation, and revenue may be associated with differences in financial performance. These findings also suggest that different project types require different financial management strategies to maintain profitability and long-term sustainability.

The projects also differ substantially in scale and service type, which is important when comparing profitability percentages and cost structures. Larger projects may generate greater absolute profits, while smaller projects may show relatively large cost percentages because of their limited revenue base. Therefore, comparisons across the six projects should be interpreted as project-specific patterns rather than direct evidence of how a particular cost category determines profitability.

4.3 Cost Structure and Profitability

The relationship between cost structure and profitability indicates that financial outcomes are closely associated with how resources are allocated in each project. Different allocation patterns of labor, technology, and operational resources are associated with different project profitability patterns across the selected projects. Although all environmental consulting projects require similar categories of expenses, the proportion of each cost component varies depending on service types, project complexity, and operational requirements. The comparison between Table 2 and Table 3 suggests that profitability is related not only to total costs but also to the relationship between project costs, revenue, and service requirements.

According to Table 2 and Table 3, different projects demonstrate different profitability patterns. Project A and Project B achieve the highest total profits among the selected projects, generating profits of 85.2958 and 47.7562 (10,000 RMB), respectively. This result may be associated with their relatively

larger project scale and higher revenue generation. Although these projects involve considerable costs, their revenue levels are sufficient to cover expenses and generate positive financial outcomes. Therefore, large-scale projects may achieve strong profitability when resource investment is matched with corresponding revenue opportunities.

In contrast, Project E and Project C demonstrate that professional expertise can also contribute to higher profitability. Project E has the highest labor cost proportion among the selected projects, accounting for 55.72% of total costs, while achieving the highest profit margin of 68.41%. Similarly, Project C has a labor cost proportion of 45.24% and achieves a profit margin of 50.71%. These results suggest that higher labor investment does not necessarily represent inefficient cost management. For professional environmental consulting services, investment in specialized knowledge, analysis, and technical expertise may create greater project value and improve profitability when the generated revenue exceeds the additional costs.

However, not all projects achieve positive financial outcomes. Based on Table 3, Project F is the only project experiencing a financial loss, with a negative profit margin of -17.12% . According to Table 2, operational and administrative costs account for 82.63% of its total cost structure, while its revenue was only 2.3000 (10,000 RMB). The high operational-cost share therefore coincides with the project's negative profit margin. However, given the substantial differences in project size and service type across the six projects, this pattern should not be interpreted as evidence that high operational costs caused the loss. Instead, it suggests that operational cost structures should be evaluated together with project scale, service requirements, and revenue potential.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that profitability is related not only to the total amount of costs but also by the structure and purpose of cost allocation. Environmental consulting companies should adopt project-specific financial management strategies by balancing operational efficiency, professional investment, and revenue potential.

5. Discussion

Profitability varies across projects and may be associated with multiple characteristics rather than a single cost component. Project complexity and professional requirements may be associated with differences in project profitability. Previous research suggests that project complexity can affect the level of project management effort required and is relevant to project profitability (Kaufmann and Kock, 2022). Based on the analysis of the six selected projects, project scale, service type, professional requirements, and operational efficiency appear alongside differences in financial outcomes across the selected projects. Understanding these factors can help environmental consulting companies develop more effective financial strategies and improve their long-term sustainability.

First, project scale and revenue generation play an important role in determining profitability. According to Table 3, Project A and Project B demonstrate relatively larger project scales, and their total profits are higher compared with other selected projects. In project-based professional services, cost control and resource planning are important considerations in managing project profitability (Pellicer 2005). Although these projects require greater resource investment and operational support, their revenue is sufficient to cover the expenses and even generate additional profit. This suggests that project size and revenue potential are important considerations when evaluating financial performance. However, companies should also ensure that larger projects maintain effective cost management to avoid excessive resource consumption.

Second, service complexity and professional requirements also are related to profitability. The results from Project E and Project C are consistent with the idea that professional expertise can represent an important component of value creation in professional service firms (Løwendahl, Revang, and Fostenløykken 2001). However, the present analysis does not establish that greater labor investment directly caused their higher profit margins.

Finally, operational efficiency and cost management are important considerations in project-level financial management. Project F had the highest operational and administrative cost share among the six

projects, and this high cost share coincided with its negative profit margin. However, Project F was also substantially smaller than several other projects and represented a different service type. Therefore, the results do not establish that its high operational-cost share caused the loss. Instead, companies may benefit from evaluating operational costs together with project scale, service requirements, revenue expectations, and resource allocation.

Overall, the profitability of environmental consulting projects depends on the balance between revenue generation, professional value creation, and effective cost management. Companies should adopt flexible strategies based on individual project characteristics rather than applying a standardized approach to all services.

6. Managerial Implications

6.1 Project-Specific Budgeting

The company can develop project-specific budgeting strategies that can further help companies improve financial performance. As shown in Table 2, different projects have different major cost components. In some projects, labor costs represent a large proportion of total expenses, while others have more significant technology or operational costs. Therefore, a single budget model may not be suitable for every type of environmental consulting project. Before each project begins, companies can estimate expected expenses based on the service type, project requirements, and previous project experience. Labor, technology, and operational expenses should be considered when developing a project-specific budget. The company should also compare actual expenses with the planned budget at regular intervals. If a particular cost category exceeds the expected budget significantly, adjustments can be made in a timely manner. Therefore, combining pre-project cost estimation with ongoing budget monitoring may help companies manage expenses more effectively and improve financial performance.

6.2 Operational Efficiency

Improving operational efficiency is important for environmental consulting companies. By comparing the projects in Table 2, operational and administrative expenses account for a high proportion of total costs in several projects, especially Project F, where operational and administrative expenses represented a large share of total project costs. Therefore, several measures can be considered to improve operational efficiency. First, the company can optimize its internal workflow and reduce unnecessary administrative procedures. Second, resources can be planned and allocated in advance, while digital tools can be used when appropriate to reduce communication and documentation expenses. Finally, the company can establish an operational budget before each project begins. These measures may help control unnecessary expenses while maintaining the quality of project services.

6.3 Appropriate Professional Investment

Balancing professional investment and profitability could also help environmental consulting companies improve their financial sustainability. As demonstrated by Project E, although its labor cost represents a relatively high proportion of total cost, it also achieves the highest profit margin among the selected projects. Therefore, companies should not reduce labor costs blindly. Instead, they should retain and appropriately allocate professional employees whose expertise creates greater value for the company and its clients. Companies can also evaluate whether additional professional input is likely to generate sufficient project value and revenue, while allocating staff according to project complexity and requirements. In this way, labor investment can be viewed not only as an expense, but also as an important source of value creation, since professional service firms rely heavily on knowledge and specialized expertise as part of their value creation process (Løwendahl, Revang, and Fosstenløkken 2001). Therefore, the company should focus on the return generated by professional investment rather than simply minimizing labor expenses.

6.4 Monitoring Profitability at the Project Level

Overall, improving profitability does not simply mean reducing costs. Environmental consulting companies should focus on how resources are allocated and how effectively they contribute to project value. Improving operational efficiency, developing project-specific budgets, and maintaining appropriate investment, service quality, revenue generation, and long-term financial sustainability.

7. Conclusion

This research examined how environmental consulting companies can optimize their cost structures and improve financial sustainability while maintaining their environmental objectives. By analyzing financial data from six different environmental consulting projects, the study evaluated cost distribution, profitability, and the relationship between different cost components and financial performance.

The findings demonstrate that different projects have significantly different cost structures. Operational costs have accounted for a high proportion of total in several of the analyzed projects, while labor costs appear to be more important in projects that require greater professional expertise. As demonstrated by Project E in Table 2, although labor costs account for a relatively high proportion of total costs, the project also achieves the highest profit margin. This suggests that high expenses do not necessarily lead to low profitability, while high operational cost with limited revenue may create financial pressure, project F's high operational-cost share coincided with its negative profit margin and limited revenue; however, this pattern should be interpreted cautiously because of differences in project scale and service type. Therefore, profitability should be evaluated not only based on how much a company spends, but also on how effectively costs are allocated and matched with revenue generation.

Based on these findings, environmental consulting companies can improve their financial sustainability by using different cost management strategies for different types of projects. Improving operational efficiency and investing in professional expertise when necessary, can also help control costs while maintaining project quality. Rather than simply reducing expenses, companies should focus on allocating resources according to project requirements and expected value. These approaches may support financial performance while maintaining the quality and environmental objectives of consulting services.

8. Data and Confidentiality Statement

The financial data analyzed in this study were provided by the case company. Project names and identifying information have been replaced with labels A–F. The author has not disclosed client names, contracts, or other identifying business information. Because the dataset is proprietary, the underlying project records are not publicly available.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interests related to this work.

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A. Detailed Project Financial Data

Table A1. Detailed Project Financial Data (RMB 10,000)

Project	Revenue	Labor	Technology & professional	Operational & adminis- trative	Total cost	Profit	Profit margin
A	243.4851	45.6725	52.7516	59.7652	158.1893	85.2958	35.03%
B	118.0000	27.7187	14.5434	27.9817	70.2438	47.7562	40.47%
C	3.0000	0.6690	0.0000	0.8098	1.4788	1.5212	50.71%
D	54.0000	11.8730	0.0000	22.7079	34.5809	19.4191	35.96%
E	40.0000	7.0406	1.0000	4.5941	12.6347	27.3653	68.41%
F	2.3000	0.4680	0.0000	2.2256	2.6936	−0.3936	−17.12%

Note. Project data was provided by the environmental consulting company. Projects are labeled A–F for confidentiality. Monetary values are presented in units of RMB 10,000.