

Choosing the Right Consultant

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With more organizations downsizing, yet still needing to fulfill all of their operational and service objectives, many have turned to *outsourcing* or using human resources outside the organization. In many cases these resources are external *consultants* or people who have professional expertise in a specific discipline gathered through educational and on-the-job experience. Many of these people are highly qualified and have proven themselves in organizations of different sizes, shapes and descriptions. They are skilled practitioners with valuable expertise to share and who can greatly benefit an organization by saving a lot of time and effort. If you are a decision maker who needs additional resource for a specific project or length of time but who does not want to saddle the organization with another employee who draws a salary, taps into the benefit and retirement or 401K plans, and uses internal physical resources, then outsourcing often makes sense.

The key in making a selection of a consultant (or consulting firm) is to do your homework. The old adage of *buyer beware* certainly applies when it comes to consultants. There are many people calling themselves *consultants* who have simply been laid off or fired from a job and while looking for full-time employment will often try to sell their services as an independent contractor. While many of these people may be qualified, the important factor to ask yourself before hiring one of them is, *Will this person be around to complete the project or later if we need them to come back for follow-up work or issues?* If the answer to that question is *no* then you will be starting all over again with someone new should the need arise. Additionally, most of these part-time consultants do not have the business expertise of a consultant related to negotiation, contracting, material preparation, and established business contacts (in case materials need to be reproduced or purchased). The result could be added costs or delays while they try to figure something out in order to complete an assignment or project. Another issue is what happens if they start a project and then get a job offer. The reality is that they will likely bail out to take on the security that will feed and house their family or themselves rather than gamble on a short-term project or paycheck. The bottom line to consider is, *Will saving a given amount of money be worth it in the long run?*

Here are some questions to ask in preparing to hire a consultant:

- What is the full scope of the project (what are the real issues/problems)?
- What type of person or expertise is exactly needed?
- What other knowledge and skills does the person need to succeed in the project?
- What value will the person/firm being considered add to the organization/project?
- Are there alternatives to hiring a consultant?
- Who will have hiring/decision-making power for the project/contract?
- Where is the best place to find the right person (e.g. professional organizations, periodicals, or the Internet)?

- What selection process will be used to choose the right candidate (using a checklist is a good idea)?
- What credentials does the final candidate have (e.g. education, training, knowledge, skills, publications authored, or awards won)?
- What references do they have? Get at least three.
- Do they have the right personality to fit into the organizational culture?
- What type of contract is needed?

There are many excellent books on the consulting process on the market. The important thing is to get everything in writing BEFORE the project begins. This includes such things as costs, fees/expenses, project objectives, deliverables (what you will have when they leave), organizational responsibilities (what you will provide in the way of staffing, supervision, and materials), cancellation clauses (for both you and them), and additional considerations (what happens if an extension is needed).

The consulting process can be a successful way to get a job done or it can turn into a nightmare, depending on how you approach it. These are just some basics. Do your homework if you are in the consultant market.

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