

# Why Use Consultants?

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Working with a consultant who has a broad knowledge base and experience working through similar issues to those you are experiencing brings a number of advantages to your team.

Independent consultants can help sort through conflicting claims and find the right solution for you. All vendors distribute literature telling how great their products are. An independent consultant is not selling products and does not get any financial incentives from the products they specify.

A project run internally can often get sidetracked by everyday management issues. Bringing in a consultant who can focus on delivering results will ensure that the goals are achieved quicker.

Consultancy should not be a means of deflecting project ownership from the management. However, if management is clear about its objectives and is able to select, direct and manage the consultants carefully, real added value can be seen. Using consultants is not cheap and best practice is to be highly selective in their use. This means only using consultants when they can add greatest value.

## When is it appropriate to use consultants?

All organisations at some time reach a point when they are aware that they could be doing things better or differently. It may be one or several areas of the operation that are not achieving their goal or not functioning as efficiently as they might.

The main reasons for using consultants usually focus around:

- Complexity
- Timescales
- Expertise
- Resources

The issue or problem may be short-term. To manage the change effectively and maximise the benefits will require an intense effort, potentially jeopardising the performance of the rest of the operation. Permanently increasing headcount to handle a short-term project will increase operating expenses. Alternatively a consultant can assist in managing the change until the introduction is complete and the operation has stabilized.

Often specialist knowledge exists within the company but a secondment cannot be arranged in the required timeframe. Consultants are ideally suited to providing the skills that are not available from permanent staff.

Decisions which result in a large change or financial commitment from the company will frequently involve consultants to review any analysis before a decision is made. An outsider can ensure that an objective approach and attitude are taken and that all potential alternatives are known and explored. Often the consultant will know of additional alternatives which were not even considered previously. At other times just having the consultant confirm competent and thorough analysis can add additional weight to the business case.

If a project has lost momentum or is not delivering the expected results a consultant can provide the impetus required to get it back on track.

### **How should you choose the consultants?**

Word of mouth recommendations are obviously important when selecting consultants but requirements will vary and therefore a structured approach is prudent.

Once you have identified one or more consultants who may be qualified to assist you in your problem area find out whether their style will compliment your company's and that of the people in your organisation. Ask for references and examples of how they successfully worked with other clients in similar situations.

It is useful to approach a few consultants during the project definition phase to get further ideas around the project scope and approach. You are seeking consultants with a track record of successfully implementing similar projects to yours and a structured methodology that captures the accumulated lessons of previous projects. To obtain an unbiased solution that best meets your needs, consultant independence is essential.

A fixed price agreement reduces risk for the client and should be acceptable to the consultants, providing the scope of work is well defined. There will often be additional items you would like the consultant to cover, so an agreed mechanism for additional work should be agreed from the outset.

### **How should you work with consultants?**

A good consultant will give you an objective opinion of the elements of the problem and recommendations for a resolution. It is difficult for consultants to offer sound advice without all the appropriate information or when the client is unclear about their own objectives. Once the consultant is selected it is essential to get a picture of the data and resources they need to tackle the project so that these can be prepared in advance of kick-off for a positive start.

The most effective consultancy projects are those in which client and consultant work as members of the team each bringing their own knowledge, expertise and resources. Team members who trust each other will share information and knowledge and as a result work together effectively and efficiently. There must be commitment from within the organisation to implement the project team's recommendations, otherwise the potential benefits from using consultants may not be realised.

On appointment of the consultants it is essential to have a well thought out and coordinated plan defining deliverables and expectations. They should be briefed on the project and the roles and time availability of the people involved. Lack of a clearly defined scope of work and expected results is one of the biggest sources of conflict between client and consultant. Regular communication is essential for the project to run smoothly. Without a clearly defined statement of work in place from the outset too much valuable time and money is spent defining what is required while the project clock is ticking.

### **To summarise ...**

The use of consultants is unlikely to bring benefits if you dismiss the consultants' involvement as an expensive distraction from everyday operations. However if you chose the right consultants, clearly define the project objectives, provide the consultants with the information they require and set aside time to review progress and buy into their ideas, the benefits will be seen.