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EXCLUSIVE: How to get full value from consultants

Friday, August 07, 2009

For the public sector, the current financial crisis means value for money is more important than ever, so what about spending money on outside consultants? Liz Lawson from human resource consultant Wickland Westcott gives some tips

The current economic climate and the resulting pressure on public spending mean that organisations need to think more carefully about how they spend their money. For public bodies, scrutiny around their use of resources, particularly external consultancy resources, will continue and probably intensify. Consequently, it is now more important than ever that clients, the buyers of consultancy services, get the best value from the consultants they hire.

Perhaps you are about to appoint a consultancy organisation for the first time or are looking to review your existing suppliers? If so, it is worth considering the following research findings, and perhaps using these as a check-list against which to evaluate consultancy suppliers.

Wickland Westcott commissioned research to determine how to ensure successful consultancy outcomes. To gain a breadth of perspective, clients and consultants were invited to take part in the study and share their thoughts, and a number of key behaviours were identified as being critical success factors in the client-consultant relationship.

At the outset of a consultancy assignment, for instance during an introductory meeting or pitch, you should be looking out for the consultant to demonstrate the following behaviours:

- looks to gain a clear understanding of your organisation, and objectives – do they ask relevant, insightful questions, and do they listen?
- accurately analyses your problem or need
- has a track record of using practical, value-adding solutions, not just academic or theoretical ideas
- understands your commercial priorities and keeps in mind the organisation's wider objectives that their consultancy intervention is designed to support
- is able to build rapport with you and/or your team
- demonstrates they are a credible professional, someone you think you can have an adult-to-adult relationship with based upon mutual trust and respect
- doesn't overtly sell – lets their knowledge, experience and added value demonstrate themselves

Once the project or assignment is underway, a further set of consultant behaviours appear to point to a satisfactory outcome:

- clearly and coherently manages your expectations – advises you upfront on what can realistically be delivered within agreed costs and timescales
- demonstrates a strong focus upon quality – this should be evident in all their outputs, materials and conversations
- they are genuine and have the confidence to say what they think but never forget your organisational reality
- maintains high professional and ethical standards
- shows commitment to the assignment – will give it the time and attention required to make the project a success
- communicates frequently and proactively - he/she keeps you informed of any problems or issues at the earliest opportunity, and doesn't wait for you to ring them

Additionally, there are things that as clients you can be doing in advance of a consultancy assignment, to maximise the chances of success:

- be clear about what you want to achieve, even if you're not sure how to get there, and be ready to articulate your expectations
- be willing to be guided by the consultant and open to their ideas
- consider what you value most in a consultancy supplier – most clients agreed that that knowledge and expertise, and a high quality, tailored service, were more important than finding the cheapest solution
- prior to employing a consultancy supplier, make sure you have positioned the piece of work internally and engaged the relevant stakeholders in your organisation
- ensure you understand the likely costs involved and organise the appropriate funds

In securing an effective consultancy solution, the relationship between client and supplier is therefore critical. While the ownership for managing this dynamic must sit primarily with the consultant, it is wise that you both prepare the ground in advance within your own organisation and understand what you are looking for in your consultancy supplier, to optimise the likely return on investment.



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