

# Need Help? Call a Consultant



Contemporary life is fraught with many frustrations. Rapid change in all aspects of life - personal, social and business life - are evident every day. Information, some useful, some not, threatens to consume us. The trick is to harness information that can be useful and to apply it in a meaningful and worthwhile way.

Information relating to business is in the forefront. Literally, today's concept becomes tomorrow's *standard*. It happens in the blink of an eye. Miss the boat and you miss opportunity.

Staying current, deciding the proper application of new information and that which is important for you in no easy task. Complacency is the enemy. How *does* one stay current? How can one person *know it all*? Even a fixed staff, busy with the day-to-day task of operating a business, can't do it all. Sometimes none of us can see the *forest for the trees*.

Those of you engaged in the building service industry are not immune to the phenomenon of supersonic change. Think of the evolution of the industry since 1980. Many of those that have not dealt with the times are long since gone. Remember them?

How can we stay current? *Enter the consultant...* traditionally the expert from 50 miles away that has all the answers. Not really. However, the *genuine* consultant can *add* to the energy of a company.

In today's world of cost conscious busy executives, use of a consultant or consulting group may work for you. Consultants have been around for a long tie. You've used their services in legal and accounting matters. There are other areas of expertise for which a business may find a consultant useful and cost effective. To name a few:

- ❖ Strategic Planning
- ❖ Human Resources
- ❖ Insurance/Safety
- ❖ Training
- ❖ Marketing
- ❖ Merger and acquisition advisory/intermediary services
- ❖ Computer and Software application
- ❖ And More

So, who are consultants and how come they know so much? Simply stated, consultants are people that have, by virtue of their experience and specific knowledge, organized that expertise and specific knowledge in a form that can be useful to others. When applied to a specific case or situation, problems can be solved or, averted. More than that, future needs and opportunities can be anticipated and knowledge applied so that little problems don't become big ones. You may also have the chance to seize an opportunity.

A consultant is simply added temporary staff with specific information that, if employed properly, can help maintain business vitality. However, be advised that if you're smart enough to use a consultant, you need to be smart enough to put to use what you've learned through the consultant. The consultant provides analysis, insight and direction. Management provides implementation.

As in any profession, most consultants are effective. A few are not. If you consider using a consultant, there are certain guidelines that can assure the experience will be positive and

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cost effective. These guidelines include:

- ❖ Have a clear idea of the project for which you retain a consultant.
- ❖ Convey the essence of your concept of the project to the consultant.
- ❖ Articulate goals, including time parameters.
- ❖ Have a clear and precise understanding about cost and terms.
- ❖ Establish certain criteria.
- ❖ Determine payment schedules and amount.
- ❖ Create an engagement agreement that is all-inclusive, after having determined the essence of the project.
- ❖ Make no assumptions about the project's progress. manage the project.

## FOLLOW INSTINCTS TO A POINT BUT CHECK CREDENTIALS. YOU DON'T WANT TO REPEAT SOMEONE ELSE'S MISTAKE

Even projects with good intentions and clear goals can drag on with no end in sight. The consultant hired on an ad-hoc basis can, if allowed, become a fixture. Like any project or venture, the project for which the consultant was hired must be managed, being careful to not let one project diffuse into many. The result may be to simply end up with another staff member in the management mix.

What about cost? As stated earlier, there must be a clear understanding about cost, the project stage at which a payment is due and payment terms. Cost will vary according to time and material spent (hourly, daily, etc.) or it can be on a lump sum, per project basis. In other cases, as in the case of acquisition and/or merger advisory/intermediary services, a fee is paid only if and when the project is successfully completed. Whatever the agreement, it should be clearly understood by each party and be in written form.

Select the consultant that is right for you. Have a good feeling about the person or people with whom the project is being entrusted. Be comfortable with the choice, but be vigilant about monitoring progress. Be prepared and able to terminate the project if necessary. The success or failure of a project is a shared responsibility between the consultant and those who managed the project.

The basis of a consultant's value and the determining factor in his or her selection is knowledge, expertise and participation in past successful projects... in a word, his or her credentials. Follow instincts to a point, but check credentials. You don't want to repeat someone else's mistake.

In contemporary business life, outsourcing certain specific tasks can be a very effective use of time and money if employed with forethought. In many cases, firms simply don't have the in-house resources to complete projects that will permit them to thrive and progress. Approach the retention of a consultant in the manner in which you would make any significant purchase or would hire a permanent staff member.

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*Gary Penrod, CBSE, founded and operated a successful building service firm. He has been a BSCAI member for 13 years, where he has served as a board member, which included a term as President. He formed Gary Penrod and Associates, Inc., a consulting service with specialty in providing advisory/intermediary services to the merger/acquisition sector of the building service industry.*