

2003
**HANDBOOK OF
BUSINESS
STRATEGY**

*A Comprehensive Resource Guide
to Strategic Management: From
Long-Range Planning to
Tactical Business Development*

FROM THE PUBLISHERS OF
**JOURNAL OF
BUSINESS
STRATEGY**

THOMSON

A reprint from: 2003 Handbook of Business Strategy



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How to Find, Hire and Work with Consultants

By William T. Mooney, Jr.

Use a nine-phase process in every consulting relationship.

Companies often rush into relationships with consultants. They either recognize a problem too late to marshal enough internal forces to deal with it quickly, or have spent too long pursuing a goal the wrong way. They see a consultant either as a quick fix, the option of last resort, or a necessary evil to keep at arm's length.

Instead, companies should see hiring a consultant as part of a larger strategic process that starts with recognizing a need, want, problem or opportunity; taking steps to address it; and noting improvement over a period of time. Understanding the process can optimize results and help avoid painful experiences. The logic of the process lies in the following nine phases:

1. Assessing the need to do something about a problem or an opportunity that presents itself;
2. Examining all applicable resources;
3. Selecting candidates who can help solve the problem or take advantage of the opportunity;
4. Interviewing candidates;
5. Evaluating candidates;
6. Negotiating and coming to an agreement with a candidate;
7. Managing the work;
8. Ending the work; and
9. Considering post-project issues.

Applying each phase methodically will increase the probability of finding the right match of consultant and client and maximize the value added for the client organization.

PHASE 1: DETERMINING IF YOU NEED A CONSULTANT

Phase 1 involves answering some key questions to determine your objectives in hiring a consultant, to identify necessary actions, to select best practices that will guide further decisions, and to identify tangible outcomes.

The Institute of Management Consultants' (IMC-USA) publication, "How to Hire a Management Consultant and Get Your Money's Worth," is a good starting point. It suggests that you need a consultant when you answer the question, "How can I tell if I need a consultant?" with any one or more of these answers:

- Management does not have the knowledge and skills

necessary to solve the problems it has identified.

- Management has the necessary knowledge and skills but not the time or personnel to solve problems.
- Management's efforts do not produce the desired long-term improvements.
- Management requires an independent, third-party opinion, either to confirm a decision or to provide an alternative.
- Management believes that performance could be better but does not know what to do to gain improvements.

Other reasons for hiring consultants may include the need for: specialized expertise; an independent, unbiased opinion; technical assistance to be in regulatory or legal compliance; as well as various one-time projects.

Another key question you may need to ask is, "How do I determine what needs to be changed?" This requires being able to identify a particular problem and preferably also specifying the goal for the solution. For example, if a company has too many workplace injuries, management can state the desired goal in terms of a specific lower number of injuries. Other examples of concisely stated goals are: increasing sales, increasing visibility, or gaining a better understanding of the legal labyrinth of personnel law.

Often, the problem management sees may not be the root cause of the difficulty. "As a consultant, in nine out of ten cases I found that problem A, which the client saw, was really a byproduct of problems B, C, and D," says John Callahan, former consultant and current president and CEO of Kandu Investment Company in Santa Paula, CA. "The client was trying to overcome a production problem by doing a better job in sales, for example."

Serious problems sometimes keep management from seeing clearly when it comes to identifying problems. "Sometimes companies are so frustrated by the time they hire a consultant that they don't know where to start or what questions to ask. At a time like this, it's particularly challenging to take the time to think through what the company needs," says Janice Scanlan, CMC, president of Performance Foundations in Houston, which helps clients sell what they deliver, deliver what they sell, and do so in a manner that the customer comes back. Scanlan also prepared the worksheet "How to Achieve Fit and

Compatibility” for IMC-USA’s publication. “A poor fit results when clients don’t do a systematic needs analysis, fail to systematically consider issues like compatibility and comfort level, or don’t have a clear idea of what they want consultants to do and how they want to work with them,” says Scanlan.

The timing of a consulting relationship is therefore an important consideration. “The worst time to hire a consultant is when you’re in a panic, when the fire has already started, if you’ve already had a crash, or after you’ve appointed a committee,” says Robert Huber, CMC, CPCM, president of international consulting firm Robert Huber Associates in Scottsdale, AZ. Huber also conducts national conference workshops on how to effectively hire and use management consultants. “The best time is in good times, because hiring a consultant is not a sign of weakness, but of strength.”

The tangible outcome of Phase 1 is a statement of need or a decision on a desired change.

PHASE 2: SCANNING FOR RESOURCES

Phase 2 involves examining all available resources, including internal ones, that might help correct the problem or take advantage of the opportunity. Consider the pros and cons of internal versus external resources. Huber explains, “A consultant can play many valuable roles during a project, even simultaneously (such as advisor, analyst, auditor, author, counselor, documenter, evaluator, expert, facilitator, implementer, information gatherer, negotiator, non-decision maker, organizer, scapegoat, strategist, trainer, and translator). But the chief role of a consultant is facilitator.

“A management consultant is a professional with special expertise who assists managers in *non-decision-making* roles with information and impartial advice so they can better define and achieve their organizational goals,” continues Huber. “Organizations should retain decision-making authority. I see a consultant as the logical extension of the education system, a resource to help managers come to common understanding and make better informed business decisions. Finally, a good consultant can often reinforce your ideas by ‘reframing’ them. If it comes out of the mouth of a consultant, people will listen,” says Huber.

In some cases, internal resources may be available but cannot be applied for reasons of confidentiality, as when evaluating work being done in-house or in a merger or acquisition situation. On the other hand, discomfort with divulging sensitive information about the organization may make it more appropriate to keep the business in-house. A scan for resources also compares the cost-effectiveness of internal versus external resources.

The tangible outcome of Phase 2 is a statement on the availability or lack of internal resources that could be applied to solve the problem or take advantage of the

The chief role of a consultant is facilitator.

opportunity. The statement might include a decision to hire an external resource.

PHASE 3: FINDING AND SELECTING CANDIDATES

The objective in Phase 3 is to generate a list of consulting resources from which to select a few promising candidates. Among the key questions management must ask is, “What type of consultant do we need?” IMC-USA defines a “management consultant” as “a professional who, for a fee, helps the managers of client organizations define and achieve their goals through improved utilization of resources. He or she may do this by helping to identify problems and/or opportunities. Management consultants not only propose change but help implement it. As independent professionals, their sole concern is the welfare of the client organizations they serve. Management consultants are either sole practitioners who work with a small support staff or members of a consulting firm who work with professional colleagues and a large support staff.”

Consultants can be generalists able to work with top management on a wide range of concerns or specialists who help in a specific area of the business. When generalists help businesses assess needs and situations and make recommendations, some of those recommendations may entail the hiring of other consultants who can provide specialized expertise to solve specific problems in functional areas.

Once the company has identified the appropriate type of consultant, the best way to find candidates is through referral. The first place to go is a trusted advisor — a CPA, lawyer, banker, insurance agent, another consultant, fellow member of an industry trade association, or even a competitor. Ask the advisor if she knows someone who has experience and a proven track record at solving the particular kind of problem, ideally in the same industry.

“Like many other executives, I use a tiered approach to finding a consultant,” says Gary Wertz, president of North American operations for Ossur, a medical device company. “First, I use consultants I’ve used in the past. If I don’t know anyone in the area of expertise I need, I call an executive colleague and ask for a recommendation. If the colleague recommends the consultant, he or she was obviously satisfied with the work. I may also call a consultant I know in a different field and ask for a suggestion. I never go to Web sites looking for a consultant. I want to work with someone whose capabilities I know.”

The worst time to hire a consultant is when you're in a panic.

Wertz, a former consultant, says, "When I was a consultant, executives used to tell me they didn't want me delegating the work to some young MBA. They were buying my 20 years of experience, expertise, knowledge, and skills. As a client now, I tell consultants the same thing. Sometimes consultants tell you you're buying a total team, but I'm not interested in a dog and pony show from someone who then goes on to make a pitch elsewhere while he assigns my project to someone who has been out of college for two years," adds Wertz.

If the referral approach falls short, or to supplement it, management can inquire with a professional consultant organization such as the IMC-USA (www.imcusa.org), the IMC International (www.imci.org) or the National Consultant Referrals, Inc. (www.4consultingservices.com). When looking for a specialized consultant, discipline organizations such as the Independent Computer Consultants Association (ICCA) (www.icca.org) or the Society of Human Resources Management (SHRM) Consultants Forum (www.shrm.org/consultants) can help.

There are also regional consulting organizations, such as the Association of Professional Consultants (APC) in Orange County, CA (www.consultapc.org), the Society of Professional Consultants (SPC) in Massachusetts (www.spconsultants.org), and the Professional and Technical Consultants Association (PATCA) in Silicon Valley (www.patca.org). Many consultants' associations have a certification process for membership.

Another place to turn is a referral service, such as the National Consultants Referral Service or a consultant broker who has built strong relationships with and sub-contracts to a stable of consultants.

Beware of taking shortcuts by selecting candidates through what Huber calls "brother-in-law" consulting and "Trojan horse" consulting. He explains, "An example of the former is when a food service director at a university hires a food service director at another university to give him a biased report, with the favor returned by the other director for some other needed service or product. An example of the latter is when someone purports to be an independent consultant, but has direct or indirect financial connections to a vendor. Although there are no guarantees for independence, a certified independent management consultant is bound by a code of ethics to be truly independent," explains Huber.

The tangible outcome of Phase 3 is a list of consultants, which management then narrows down to the most promising candidates. At this point, you may want to review the candidates' Web sites. However, this may be unnecessary. "Most business executives know that a fancy Web site does not mean the consultant is knowledgeable," says Wertz.

According to some best practices, asking for proposals is the next step. However, it is more common to ask for proposals after the pool of applicants has been narrowed down through interviews. Either approach, however, is equally valid.

PHASE 4: INTERVIEWING THE CANDIDATES

In selecting candidates consider both personal attributes and experience. According to Huber, the perfect consultant is creative, dynamic, fair, goal-oriented, honest, independent, logical, motivated, objective, organized, patient, professional, responsive, resourceful, sincere, straightforward, strategic, and trustworthy. A thorough interview process can go a long way toward finding just such a perfect individual.

The IMC-USA recommends selecting for interviews the two or three consultants whose experience comes closest to matching the situation. You should determine that each consultant, not just his or her firm, displays a thorough familiarity with the situation, confirmed by the consultant's previous success in a similar context. The IMC suggests learning the outcomes of relevant consulting engagements, whether the consultant used honesty and tact when making recommendations, and how well he or she worked with an organization's people. Additional essential information includes statements by references about the consultant's ability to make things happen and whether he or she has established personal rapport with management during the initial interviews.

During the interview process, it is particularly important to pay attention to the questions the candidate asks. Rather than just talking generically about what they can do for the business and how little it is going to cost, consultants should be interested in finding out specifically what the business wants to achieve.

"Many consultants don't ask good questions," says Callahan. "As a client, I become irritated with consultants who waste my time trying to sell me solutions without bothering to find out what my problems are. I don't want to be put in a position where I have to figure out how the consultant's solutions fit into my business. Also," says Callahan, "it's not the client's responsibility to know what questions to ask. However, the client must be willing to share information openly and answer straightforwardly about the situation and the problems. Demand that your consultants ask good questions and give them honest answers. The efficacy of their solutions is based on the strength of their questions. As the saying goes, any fool

can give you an answer, and fools often do. It takes a wise person to ask you a good question.”

Sometimes management becomes enamored with a particular candidate during the interview process and no longer considers it necessary to check references. The result is that the company hires someone who is good at interviewing. Best practices for Phase 4, therefore, include a thorough reference check of the top candidates. Find out if the candidate has previously handled a similar problem, knows the industry, produces results, doesn't play havoc with the organization, and does what he says on time and within budget. Rather than just calling the two or three listed references, ask for a recent client list and pick from this list. Speak with someone who directly supervised the consultant's work and ask both open-ended and specific questions. Always ask the reference, "Would you hire the consultant again?" Pay attention to what is *not* being said.

Asking the right questions of candidates and references and paying careful attention to the verbal and non-verbal quality of the answers will result in a good feel for the prospective working relationship. The outcome of Phase 4 is not a decision on whom to hire, but a shorter list of two or three candidates for final evaluation.

PHASE 5: EVALUATING THE CANDIDATES

In this phase, management evaluates the top candidates with the objective to reach a hiring decision. The consultant needs the specialized knowledge and skills to solve the problem, including knowledge of the functional area — marketing, human resources, manufacturing, etc. — as well as of the industry. Experience is key, and industry familiarity is a plus because the consultant will spend less time learning the industry. She will also have contacts in the industry who may provide needed connections for additional strategic advantage.

“Favor the ‘has-done’ consultant over the ‘can-do’ variety,” suggests Doreen Mangan in her article “The Profits and Pitfalls of Hiring Outside Help” (*Independent Business*, May-June 1991).

“Consultants who say, ‘we can do that or ‘we can do just about anything’ are probably not experts,” says Wertz. “You can't be a jack of all trades.”

In some types of businesses, however, industry experience may not be as essential, but experience with that business model may be critical. According to Callahan, for example, “Eighty-five percent of service businesses are identical, and a solution that works for one may work equally well for one in another industry, provided the consultant is able to translate between the different industries' languages.”

In addition to experience, evaluate the candidates' “soft skills.” The consultant and client must have compatible personalities, and the consultant must be able to work with and get the cooperation of the organization's

“I get irritated with consultants who waste my time trying to sell me solutions without bothering to find out what my problems are.”

people. What is the person's work style? Does she prefer to work alone or with partners? If the referral source was a trusted advisor, he may be able to provide information on the consultant's personality, as well as any partners or employees who may be brought into the business.

IMC-USA suggests considering the following points to reach a final decision:

- Breadth of experience that encompasses and goes beyond the situation as defined;
- Demonstrated ability to complete assignments within budget and on schedule;
- Demonstrated ability to develop practical recommendations and to have them implemented successfully;
- Demonstrated ability to work with people diplomatically and effectively and to minimize disruption of ongoing operations;
- Degree of trust and rapport established with management during initial contacts.

Once you have weighed these considerations, IMC-USA recommends asking the candidate of choice to submit a proposal. Lisa Hebert's article “Six Simple Steps to Finding a GREAT Business Consultant” (*Mass High Tech*, May 1999, www.spconsultants.org/articles/sixsteps.htm) discourages bidding out jobs to several consultants. “Highly skilled consultants are not going to significantly over-price or under-price their services. They are going to ask a fair price for a set of tasks and deliverables and can generally work within a client's budget to achieve a defined set of results.”

The tangible outcome of Phase 5 is the identification of the best candidate with whom you could negotiate an agreement.

PHASE 6: NEGOTIATING AN AGREEMENT

The success of Phase 6 hinges on a detailed proposal, which, according to IMC-USA and other experienced resources, should spell out items such as the following:

- The objective and scope of the assignment;

A detailed definition of deliverables is key to a successful working relationship.

- What the consultant will do, what the client should do, and what they will do jointly during and following the project's completion to assure its success;
- The assumptions for the project;
- A well-defined change order mechanism establishing how changes in the scope of the project will be handled;
- The nature of the final report and interim progress reports;
- The anticipated charges, basis of charges, expenses, and terms of payment; and
- The conditions under which the client or the consultant may cancel the agreement.

A detailed definition of deliverables is key to a successful working relationship. When a consultant makes a proposal that you then incorporate into the contract or agreement, it is best to break the project down into well-defined phases, each of which has a short, descriptive title. A consultant should tell you what he will do and why, but he is not obligated to describe *how* it will be done in the proposal. However, the consultant should describe a tangible deliverable for each phase, such as a particular report, hands-on effort, or personnel whom he has trained and who passed a test.

In some cases, a formal contract may not be necessary. "I had a dozen formal contracts with all the legalese, but never used them," says Wertz. "A letter of understanding was always sufficient. Now when I hire a consultant, it's someone I know through a recommendation. I explain what the issue is and what we're looking for in terms of help and in the way of an outcome. Then I ask the consultant to send me a letter of understanding that states his understanding of the issue, the approach to deal with it in broad terms, the estimated cost, and the deliverables. The deliverables I want to be as specific as possible. I once hired a consultant who drove me crazy with all his time sheets and listings of how much he spent on phone calls and postage. I'm not interested in the nickels and dimes. I just want to know what the product will be and the global fee. Otherwise I'm paying more for the time it takes to collect and track all the details than for the actual work.

"Delineate what your expectations are," Wertz contin-

ues. "I had a consultant who wanted to fly first class. I told him that we don't allow our own employees to fly first class, so unless he could fly coach, we could not work together."

While the fee is an important consideration, being "penny wise and pound foolish" results in getting what you paid for. According to IMC-USA, a management consultant's fee is influenced by a number of factors, including "the client's need for special knowledge and experience; how much competition for clients there is; the consultant's reputation; and, if known, the benefit to the client of a successful outcome."

A consultant may charge one-third of the total fee at the inception of the project, another third after completing the research or fieldwork, and the final third upon acceptance of the final report or deliverable. Sometimes consultants quote a flat fee, but in many cases they tie fees to a benchmark-related schedule, in which case it's good practice to ask for an estimate of the amount of time to be included in the proposal.

Most consulting project failures result from one of three reasons: Something was not covered by the contract, someone assumed something without writing it down, or the contract lacked a provision for a change order. The tangible outcome of Phase 6, therefore, is a thoroughly executed and fully understood agreement, free of loopholes.

PHASE 7: MANAGING THE CONSULTANT'S WORK

Companies that hire consultants have a right to expect a certain level of performance, value-added services, and the achievement of the planned outcome. They can expect that the consultant is available as needed, fits into the company culture, works alongside the client in solving the problem, and comes in on budget with estimates of time and money.

"When I'm implementing the changes the consultant suggested, I want that consultant standing next to me being responsible and accountable for the implementation," says Callahan. "I don't want a consultant telling me that I have a problem implementing the solution. Don't just tell me that I ought to put more energy, effort, or money into it, because if that's the truth, it should have been in the original plan."

IMC-USA makes the following suggestions for assuring the success of a project:

- Make certain everyone in the organization will provide what the consultant needs in order to gather information and make recommendations.
- Inform all concerned that you have engaged a consultant, and explain the nature or purpose of the engagement.
- Allay any anxiety that may result when people learn that a consultant has been engaged.
- Be available to the consultant to review progress,

CURRENT TRENDS IN CONSULTING

Management consulting is separating into two areas, says E. Michael Shays, CMC, chairman of IMC-USA and executive director of the International Council of Management Consulting Institutes (ICMCI). He explains, "One is the area of management expertise based on experience and training in management fields, industries, or functions. The other area, which is growing exponentially, is the area of technical expertise, the people who develop IT systems. The latter are not 'management' consultants in the pure sense of the term, but are employed by management consulting firms."

There is a growing trend for companies to establish internal consulting groups, and those groups are beginning to take their services outside to their customers. "Shell, for instance, has an outstanding consultant group in Houston that currently consults internally, but could just as well go outside," says Shays. "We have audited their process of recruiting, training, and performance evaluation and find it to be as good or better than any external consulting company."

IBM has converted its systems engineers into consultants. Hewlett-Packard was at one time considering purchasing PriceWaterhouseCoopers, which is a consulting group attached to a large accounting firm. Many accounting firms are spinning off their consulting groups apart from the auditing side.

The consultants' approach to consultative selling, which says 'you have a problem, let me find a solution that addresses it,' is now being used by non-consulting companies. Further, some companies, although not consultants in their business, are actually doing consulting work with their clients. Branding compa-

nies, for instance, would not consider themselves to be in the business of management consulting, yet they are learning how to sell and respond to clients through the consulting processes. Many have employees who are called consultants. They help clients understand solution options available to them. Once the client has selected the option it wants, the company's experts step in to deliver.

Internationally, more and more countries are developing a consulting capability, often with ICMCI (International Council of Management Consulting Institutes) involvement. IMC-USA is one of 35 country institutes that are part of ICMCI. ICMCI is helping to establish management consulting institutes in developing countries, as well as nurturing institutes in developed countries.

To protect clients of consultants, these institutes around the world, such as IMC-USA, are certifying consultants who have met international standards of education, experience, client performance, and consulting competence. Candidates for certification must pass a rigorous examination on their competence and ethics. There are more than 12,000 Certified Management Consultants (CMC) in the world today. The experience requirement of three years eliminates the group of people who call themselves consultants but are really just in it temporarily while they look for their next job.

All 35 ICMCI institutes follow the same rigorous certification process as IMC-USA, so executives of global companies that count on the value of the CMC designation in the United States can find highly qualified resources no matter where they may do business.

clarify information, or help in resolving temporary difficulties.

- Don't pressure the consultant to discuss findings or recommendations until he has thoroughly researched the situation and is ready to do so.

A key here is that the client must work along with the consultant, providing time, information, resources, and ensuring the cooperation of others in the organization. Don't waste money by wasting the consultant's time. "Sometimes organizations use external resources in an effort to reduce or eliminate internal employee involvement on a project. However, it is important to keep in mind that there is always employee and continued management involvement in every project," says Huber. "In fact, you may spend as much time working with a con-

sultant as you would if you did it yourself."

The results a company can expect depend not only on the consultant but also on the way people at the company treat the consultant. Clients must be honest and forthcoming about their organizations' problems, follow through on commitments, and be willing to make the changes the consultant proposes.

"Both parties must be candid and develop a relationship in which they truly listen to one another and talk through the issues, especially when it comes to information they may not want to hear," says Scanlan. "It's also vital that clients remain flexible because many things can happen during an engagement. In one of my assignments, we uncovered major theft within the organization. The owner-operator reacted with strong emotion, feeling vio-

lated in a very personal sense. His first reaction was to lash out and prosecute the employee. However, the company did not have the proper internal controls to be able to prove in a court of law who had committed the theft. Fortunately, the owner was flexible enough to stand back, regard the situation unemotionally, and develop a solution that legally protected the company while removing the employee from the area where further theft was possible. Ultimately the person resigned. It was a matter of sitting down and working through this very sensitive business and emotional issue. The desired outcome was achieved with minimal disruption to the business.”

The tangible outcome of Phase 7 is a successful working relationship between client and consultant that leads to the accomplishment of specific objectives.

PHASE 8: ENDING THE WORK

In-progress and end-of-project reporting requirements are among the best practices for facilitating the evaluation of a consultant's completed work. Each report summarizes what has been accomplished since the last one with respect to achieving the objectives, staying on budget and on schedule, and noting any contingencies. The reporting requirements also specify how adjustments will be made when progress does not meet the objectives, the budget, or the schedule.

Evaluation includes an assessment of whether the consultant is able to produce the results that were outlined and, if not, what valid reasons for the failure may exist within the hiring company. IMC-USA lists three specific means of evaluating a project's success:

1. Seeing obvious results such as measurable savings realized, new business generated, or delays eliminated;
2. When payoffs can be realized only gradually, seeing visible progress in achieving the project's goals; and
3. Answering “yes” to the question “On balance, and considering everything, would I hire the same consultant again?”

Clients have the right to expect that the consultant bears the responsibility for the performance when project implementation is complete. Some consultants return at specified intervals for a year or more to ensure that the company has institutionalized the change.

The tangible outcome of Phase 8 is a successfully completed project that leaves no questions unanswered or objectives unmet.

Don't waste money by wasting the consultant's time.

PHASE 9: MAKING POST-PROJECT CONSIDERATIONS

A number of best practices help ensure the institutionalization of the change. IMC-USA recommends that the client act immediately: “Implement the consultant's recommendations before they're lost in organizational inertia. Tell your staff to report in one month on the progress they're making, and call for regular reports until the work has been completed. You can expect the consultant to take an equal interest in seeing that his or her recommendations result in benefits.”

However, if management and staff are unable to continue applying the new procedures or to use the new system, or if employees don't understand the steps to take from here on out, how to achieve the savings the consultant promised, or solve day-to-day problems connected with the project, the consultant may need to return. In the words of IMC-USA, “A good consultant would rather put in additional effort than leave a client unsatisfied.” Hiring the consultant as the implementer or change manager may be a necessary final step to achieving the tangible outcome of this final phase: a project complete to everyone's satisfaction.

A comprehensive and systematic approach, based on best practices and a logical sequence of activities, forms the foundation of a strategy and tactics for hiring and working with consultants. It's best to draw on knowledgeable external resources when the business is doing well, because it leaves sufficient time for careful consideration of all the phases. However, having this strategic methodology in place now will ensure that the business can quickly enter into a successful consulting relationship when a sudden need should arise. ■

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