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Business Evolving in the Information Age
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your money's worth IT'S A TWO-WAY STREET By Jim Buttjer

How to Get More Out of the Consultants You Hire

YOU HAVE A MAJOR project underway with the biggest budget in years, and you need to make every dollar count to keep on schedule. What's more, you've hired consultants to come in and help you execute the complex project, filling in vital resource and skill gaps. You expect a lot from the consultants that you're paying \$50, \$100, \$200 or more an hour for their expertise. And rightly you should.

Then you wake up one Friday afternoon after everyone is gone. Consultants have flown home, employees have left early — and the project's status report indicates your tasks are behind schedule and over budget. Too many hours spent, not enough results. What happened?

Let's assume your consultants are competent practitioners in their field. Their objective is to help you, the client, succeed by delivering results and exceeding expectations. Making you look good helps them look good and win that next project from you. So why aren't you getting your money's worth?

Sometimes, it's your fault. Yes, that's right, sometimes you waste your consultants' time and thus your own money. How, you ask, can this happen? Trust me when I say, as a consultant, I hate wasting our time and your money. If I am independent or getting a share of the revenue generated from my services, I may be stuffing my pockets in the short term with all the extra hours. But eventually my projects will suffer, my reputation will suffer and I will suffer. Consultants would rather have a string of successful projects behind them instead of bad references they would rather not

mention. After all, the best reputations are built by consultants who can call upon previous clients as references.

Obviously, I will be despised by the unethical consultants out there who don't want me to reveal how they let you waste your money and pad their pockets at the same time. But I'm not writing for them. I'm writing for the executives and managers who've found themselves stuck at the short end of the stick. While many consultants have the initiative to try to point out the waste, some do it better than others without upsetting their clients. Here, I aim to educate and remind every client that you can take easy steps to help your consultants perform better, faster, save you considerable amounts of money, and increase the chances of turning your project in early or on time and within budget. And that makes everybody look good.

Your End of the Bargain

What do consultants need from you? Clear objectives, reasonable deadlines, direction, executive support, tools, access, accountability, respect, your time and your ears when needed, to name a few. Let's look at some of these in more detail.

Often consultants are given too small an amount of project background before being sent to work. Instead, especially for larger, longer or more complicated projects, state what business pain the project is going to cure, the project's objectives and the timeline. Explain how the project got to where it is, as well as the impact of making or breaking the

timeline will be to the business. This helps the consultant identify with the needs of the business more as an employee and less as an outsider.

Define what success is for this project, when it will be determined and how it will be measured. Define scope as narrowly as possible. Inform the consultants that anything that falls outside the defined scope should be brought to the project manager for consideration before dedicating any time to that task/subject. Especially for technical consultants, this can be an easy trap set by employees, managers or even other consultants. Technical consultants are naturally curious, and giving them a clear task list and project objectives to work against, coupled with a designated taskmaster, will help keep them on course.

If your organization is one in which employees view consultants as slaves they can offload their work onto, consider assigning someone, perhaps the project manager or an employee counterpart, to act as the sole taskmaster for each consultant. Make sure everyone knows who can assign tasks to the consultant, and the process for getting a task on a consultant's to-do list. In some cases, consultants can help distribute the load. But always ask yourself at the end of the project whether the benefits to be gained from performing that task are something you want (or can accept) walking out the door, or do you want (or need) that strategic experience in-house?

Hold regular, short, status meetings, always based on an agenda and always with a specified time box. This is too often ignored; always have an agenda for any meeting and have a designated length. Require input to status reports from the consultants or have them submit their input to a central source such as the project manager.

Define escalation processes and time periods — and stick to them. Give your consultants the tools they need to accomplish the tasks you give them. Have the tools ready when the consultants walk in the door, and let them know the resources available. Simple tools such as telephones with conferencing functions and long-distance, printers, fax machines, wipe boards, network cables, contact lists, access badges — these are all things you or a project administrator can take care of. Resources at the consultants' disposal should also be explained, such as: administrative assistants, intranet websites, knowledge management repositories and remote access software. If it takes three weeks to setup an e-mail account, either your organization is involved with international security or your processes are broken.

If necessary, let your fellow managers and executives know the importance of your project's success. Their

response to your need will be directly proportional to their involvement in the project, an executive statement about the urgency and support for this project, your relationship with the executive ranks, the chance to contribute to the business, cure for a business pain and the incentives available.

Introduce your consultants to all appropriate people involved in the project, starting with the stakeholders, the project manager and their immediate teammates. Whenever possible, have them meet the other project team members face to face. Getting to know people, matching a face to a name and developing relationships pays for itself in immeasurable ways. People will always work harder for those they have met, especially if they had a chance to have fun together sponsored by the project's budget. Schedule the occasional team dinner, organize a trip to a sporting event or comedy show — it all helps keep the morale up.

Be accessible to your consultants. They will be forced to guess the answer or what you'd want when communication is impeded because you're too busy, you don't answer your phone or e-mail or return messages in a timely manner, or when their go-to person disappears for a trip or vacation without a backup. Worse, the consultant will be forced to start letting other people know you are not being responsive to his or her needs. And that only builds contempt, diminishes credibility for both of you and breaks down relationships.

If your organization and project have a significant number of administrative tasks, ask yourself if you would you rather have your consultants spend their time and your budget doing "administrivia," or would it be faster and/or less expensive to have an employee counterpart or administrative assistant/project assistant do it? Filling out forms, making copies of status reports, installing software — these tasks consume significant amounts of a consultant's time and your money. Isn't there a less expensive project administrators (at \$20-\$40 an hour) to take care of these tasks instead of consultants (at \$50 to \$200 an hour)? At one client I recorded my daily time in three places, including one homegrown, difficult-to-use system using six-minute intervals per project code. Believe me, that was painful, and I felt like I was letting my client waste its money. I made suggestions, but that's how the client wanted it, so that's what the client got.

Include your consultants in strategy, status and planning meetings, then exclude them where it makes sense. Consultants can offer insight and perspective, lend hard-earned advice about the best course of action, validate ideas and offer alternative solutions. You are paying for their minds as well as the extra pairs of hands and eyes, so get your

money's worth. While they may not need to be involved in your high level budget meetings, include them in the early meetings in multiple areas. After a good sampling of meetings, they will be able to tell you which they should be in, what areas they may be able to make contributions in, and which meetings they cannot contribute to or should not attend. Pepper that with the consultant's level of knowledge, responsibility and influence, and then make your decision on how many meetings that consultant should really attend. You can even move items to the front of the agenda that concern the consultants, and allow them to leave early if they don't need to stick around.

Remember your consultants can't know everything. Consultants often have deep knowledge in a few areas and general knowledge in many areas. What you should look for is their ability and willingness to research or find the answers and get back to you with results and recommendations. They can add more value to the results if they are given the context in which those results may be applied, so let them know the problem is you're trying to solve. Challenge your consultants to be creative, innovative and use their powerful peer network. You get more than just the consultant's expertise — you get his or her entire company's expertise. Consultants love to solve problems and fill in the blanks — let them. Then take the time to recognize their contributions when they are able to help.

Your consultants are there to help you accomplish a goal. They are your partners, not your enemies. Taking a positive attitude toward your consultants will do wonders for productivity and morale. When consultants like the environment and the people they are working for, they will seek ways to exceed expectations instead of merely meet them, to play by the spirit of the contract instead of the letter of the contract, and be flexible when you ask for more than they signed up for. They will work late or weekends, take on more responsibilities, expand scope or cut their pay in drastic situations to meet new budget requirements.

Give your consultants feedback on a regular basis. Let them know when you're happy with their work, and tell them what you want to see changed. Always let them know exactly where they and you stand, and always do it sooner instead of later. Be firm, but fair. Always ask how you can help them help you. You may find that your employees are not supplying the consultant with what he or she needs in a timely manner. Fix the problem, and get the consultant's productivity and focus back to where it should be — on your project.

Be open to your consultants' ideas — and make sure you let them know that. Too often consultants are only told

to do and not ask too many questions. This creates the perception that their ideas for a better way to do something, how to save both of you time, or even make more money, will not be received with an open mind. Push your consultants to achieve realistic goals and timelines, but be willing to fix it when goals and timelines cannot be met given the combination of current or new requirements, skills, resources or tools.


When the project is done or the consultants' role comes to an end, give them a performance review, orally, at least, but preferably in writing (first check whether your contract with the consultant's company allows for evaluation). If you have been working as partners throughout the project, this review will basically write itself and there will be no surprises. This shows your consultants your sincerity in appreciating their work and measuring their performance.

The Big Payoff

Let us suppose that you've implemented all these ideas, and you could save a few hours per consultant per week while increasing productivity. What kind of results could you expect? How much would it be worth to you if you could meet your deadline instead of being a week late? How many consultants' hours and expenses would it save if you finished the project two weeks ahead of time?

Consider what you could do if you saved the following amounts on your project:

- Conservative/small savings: 4 hours/week x 5 consultants x 13 weeks (3 month project) x \$50/hour = \$13,000
- Medium-sized project savings: 6 hours/week x 10 consultants x 26 weeks (6 months) x \$100/hour = \$156,000
- Enterprise project savings: 6 hours/week x 20 consultants x 52 weeks (1 year) x \$150/hour = \$936,000

Obviously, there are many more ways you can reduce the amount of wasted time and money while getting more out of your consultants. If you follow these common sense reminders above, you'll see great improvements in productivity, morale, meeting deadlines and staying under budget. Which, probably, were among the reasons you hired a consultant in the first place. 

Jim Buttjer is a senior consultant with a global consulting company. He has multi-industry, global work experience with Fortune 500 companies and specializes in high-performance IT infrastructure and services for ERP packages.



At Bellsoft, we specialize in implementing ERP, SCM and EAI solutions to our clients. We have helped clients across all industries including Automotive, Textile, Fabricated Metals, Electronics, Plastics, Chemical and Consumer Products implement these applications successfully.

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