

The Care and Feeding of Your Consultant

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If it weren't for lawyers there would be a lot more consultant jokes... A consultant is someone with a briefcase from more than 50 miles away... A consultant is someone who will borrow your watch and charge you to tell you the time... A consultant in a hot air balloon truly is a perpetual motion machine...

How you view consultants may be with humor, appreciation, disdain, or even fear. It depends on your experience and the consultants you've had in your life.

What follows is a primer on when to use a consultant, how to select your consultant, how to manage your consultant, things you can do to assure the project results you intend, and special cautions and suggestions. The perspective I bring to you is that of a consultant. I've been one for over twelve years. I know... you'd think I'd have found a job by now...

When to Use a Consultant - It's a Dirty Job...

The most frequent occasions for using a consultant are when there are things that you cannot, or will not, do. The most common instances are when (1) there is a need for special knowledge, experience, or skills for a new or one time project; (2) there are not enough of your people or time to get a project done in the time allowed; and/or (3) you prefer to have a third party perspective.

Examples of special needs consultants are aircraft acquisition specialists, pre-delivery inspection technicians, personnel search, out-placement services, and others.

An example: Recently we had a client decide they wanted a prior loved Beechjet 400A for their first business aircraft. Even though I started my business aviation career in Beech Aircraft's sales and marketing group and did a stint at Mitsubishi selling jets and turboprops, I am no expert on the current aircraft and the marketplace. John Thomason of Aviation Transactions of Blairsville, Georgia is.

In about six weeks the client went from giving the go ahead to going ahead on their first trip. The aircraft they have is one of the best in the country and the price was right. Without John the client would have taken months longer to gather the knowledge and information he brought to the table. His fees were more than offset by the quality of the end product as well as the savings he generated in support of the negotiations and pre-delivery inspection.

Another circumstance may be that your flattened right-sized lean-and-mean flight department may not have enough people or time to do the latest project and run the business, too. The right consultant can pull that special rabbit out of the hat while allowing your team to continue to deliver their daily miracles. Classic black holes for



time usually often assigned to consultants creating the first draft of a Flight Operations Manual or developing a Disaster Response Plan.

A third party perspective may be important to assure impartiality or to provide valuable external insights. Strategic planning, aircraft needs analyses, and audits are typical examples. More about the impact of the third party perspective in a moment.

The Power of Using a Consultant - Caution, This Gun is Loaded...

Yes, a consultant can be a tool for getting things done. It may not be fair, but a consultant's product can be the key to getting the approval for what you have been trying to get out done for months, or even years.

A few years ago I was asked to conduct a strategic planning study for a major flight department and its company in the Northeast. I was asked to review the value of flight department's services, the number and types of aircraft needed, the staff required to support them, and the quality of the systems and processes being employed in creating customer results. In the end, I was to assess what business aviation travel services were needed by the corporation and its passengers, underscore what the flight department was doing well, and propose options that would create even greater value.

The flight department manager told me he had conducted his own review the preceding year and had gotten no tangible results. We agreed, in order to maintain impartiality, I would conduct my efforts without seeing his study until after ours was finished.

When it was over, the flight department manager's study and ours matched on about 80% of his recommendations. However, where his study resulted in little action ours bore fruit on the majority of issues within a few months. I agree that it does not seem fair that an in-house manager/expert is not taken as seriously as someone from out of town. But there are several reasons this may happen. If you understand them, you can use the consulting relationship to your advantage.

Many executives indicate one of the reasons consultants are widely used and respected is they bring an outside perspective. Although an internal manager knows his/her company and operation intimately they may have little exposure to a wide variety of alternative approaches. A consultant has the luxury of broad-based knowledge and experience that makes it easier to identify best practices and to avoid hidden landmines.

In addition, a consultant may be perceived to be unbiased. An internal manager often bares the burden of being the recipient of the benefit of his or her recommendations. The use of a consultant avoids the potential appearance of a self-serving result.



And finally, one of the last deliverables from the consultant, an "acknowledged industry expert", is a written report committing his/her observations and recommendations to paper as a matter of record. There are two drivers for action here;

1. "We've paid for this advice. Everybody is up to speed on the issues.
1. Let's act now." and
2. When comes to efficiency and safety, once it's on the record, inaction
3. Can be a major liability.

What is this going to cost? - And when?

Consulting fees vary widely. Most aviation consultants charge fees from \$800 to \$2,000 per day. It depends upon the project and the consultant. This sounds like a lot of money... and it is. But, there are a couple of factors can put consulting costs in perspective. The first is what would it cost, in salary and time, if you were to put your own people on the project and expect the same quality of outcome? Second, top management consultants are getting \$3,000 to \$10,000 per day. That can make business aviation consultants look like a bargain.

I would suggest you worry less about your consultant's daily rate than the cost of the end product. After all, a slow \$1,000 per day consultant can easily exceed the cost of a highly experienced and efficient \$2,000 per day consultant. You are buying a result - an outcome. The total project price and speed of its completion are the budgetary issues at hand.

Most consultants will ask for a partial payment at the beginning of the project to cover early costs. This is customary and appropriate. If the project takes a couple of months, or longer, expect several billing points to cover progress and expenses. You can budget for travel and other project-related expenses to range from 15% to 30 % of the total project costs.

How to Set Up the Project

There are several things that you can do be more certain that you get the results you need from a consultant's project. The first is to get buy-in from the folks who will be asked to act on the project's recommendations. This is usually a senior executive with budget or policy authority. Getting his/her buy-in in the beginning avoids the "pushing the rope up hill" challenge often otherwise encountered. After all, ideas proposed by senior executives have a high likelihood of seeing the light of day.

Getting the buy-in you need is usually easy if you get the executive in question to co-sponsor the project with you. He/she can act as the representative of the company and its customer group. You can make his/her sponsorship painless by having the executive take a high value and low time-cost role. This can include assisting in the definition of the project's objectives and deliverables as well as approving the selection of the consultant. If you want to tie a ribbon on the executive's commitment have him/her involved in the project progress briefings so he/she is co-responsible for the project and its results. This is not sneaky - it is simply good business.



As a result of your meetings with the sponsoring executive you should be able to define the project's scope, objectives, and deliverables. This is extremely important for two reasons; (1) It will confirm that you and your sponsoring executive are expecting the same things as outcomes of the project and (2) the candidate consultants will have the same set of information from which to create their presentations and proposals.

Important Steps to Selecting Your Consultant

There are a number of instances when a consultant has bitten, or consumed, the hand that was feeding him. If you don't select your consultant well, or if you leave the consultant unmanaged you could be in for a nasty surprise.

There are several ways to find good candidates for your project:

1. Ask other organizations who do they know and recommend,
2. Review periodicals for articles that address your specific issues and talk with the authors about potential resources (including themselves), and
3. Check with industry organizations like the National Business Aviation Association and the Flight Safety Foundation (recognizing that neither should be expected to give recommendations).

Sort through the pool of candidates to identify the two or three finalists most likely to have experience in addressing your specific needs. Call and ask them to send you information about themselves, their business, recent projects, etc. Obviously, the quality and timeliness of their response will be an important gage of their desire to work with you and what you may expect in their performance.

Have the finalists provide references from several of their most recent clients. Ask them to include companies that have had work similar to yours. The references should include both flight department contacts as well as corporate executives. It is imperative that you take the time to check these references. You can learn a lot about each consultant's strengths and weaknesses as well as the results you can expect. Four good questions to ask are:

1. Did the consultant deliver his/her service as advertised (on time and on budget)?
2. How pleased were they with the process and product?
3. If you were to select this consultant for your project, what would they suggest you do to assure the best results?
4. Would they use this consultant again?

The next step is what is sometimes called "consultants on parade". Bring your finalists to your facility to look into their baby blues and get to know them and their abilities better. Include private time for yourself as well as a meeting with the sponsoring executive to assure his/her continued commitment. During these meetings you should clearly define your project, its objectives and deliverables, and any specific elements or processes you want included. This is the time for the consultants to ask all the right questions. Then send them home to prepare a firm proposal.



The final proposal must address the specific concerns and expectations you have put forth as well as describe the process they will use to achieve the result. It should include the deliverables, the amount of time needed, and the fee. The time and fee should not be exceeded unless you, the client, substantially change the project. If, during the project, it is necessary to change the scope there should be an amendment of the original agreement that reflects the new conditions.

It is likely that during these meetings you will identify a consultant who has a blend of the knowledge, skills, and understanding of your needs that you want. Make sure you know who from the consulting firm will take the lead on your project. More than one client has bought a proposal from a major rainmaker and had other folks show up to do the work. This is neither good nor bad. However, it is important to know what, and who, you are buying.

Conduct of the Project

From your end, one of the basic requirements in assuring the success of a consulting effort is to make the necessary resources available. This includes giving the consultant access to the necessary people (executives, flight department managers, pilots, technicians, etc.), necessary information (historic records, etc.), and adequate opportunities to see normal procedures including maintenance and jump seat access for trip observations.

At the onset of the project, it can be very beneficial to have a department to introduce the project and the consultant. Flight department members often see a consultant as a threat to themselves and the operation. After all, this person with no vested interest is going to come in and mess in their neighborhood. On top of that, the consultant is likely to make recommendations the flight department is going to have to respond to. It's like someone else writing checks you'll have to make good. The sooner you can establish mutual understanding and respect between the consultant and your team, the better.

The project process should be pre-defined. You should have a good understanding of what will be done, when, how, and by whom. Additionally, there should be way points en route that allow you to be briefed on the project's progress (are we on schedule?) and any important findings to date. If there are opportunities to improve, why not address them now rather than wait for the end report? Besides, addressed opportunities are more constructive to your career, and those of your department's members, than simple fault finding!

One of the important reasons for doing way point checks is that a project often changes after it gets started. It is imperative that everyone be working from the same set of amended expectations and deliverables lest there be embarrassing surprises in the end. I often ask for a clarification of expectations and outcomes multiple times during a project. My clients seem to appreciate the check up.

If your consultant is reluctant to share some information it could be for good reason; insufficient data to confirm a suspected issue or sharing information with you may



compromise a promised confidence. But, if the consultant appears to withholding information in preparation for the final report you may be seeing the first signs of an upcoming storm. You better have a strong private conversation with the consultant before you lose control of the project... and its outcome.

The Project's Product

If the project was well defined, the consultant did a good job of communicating, and you've paid attention, the final report should contain no surprises for you or your boss.

The end of the project should have multiple steps. The first is an informal report to the oversight team of findings and opportunities. The oversight team can evaluate the accuracy of the results and assist with the design of the final presentations for its specific audiences. This level of preparation might sound like tampering but it is important for the consultant's product to be well heard and responded to if you are going to get your money's worth. With that in mind, it is essential for the report to contain terms well understood by its audiences and not to contain references that are either confusing or distracting. In other words, the consultant should welcome support in making sure the semantics are effective rather than damaging.

There can be two or more presentations of the final report. For instance, you may want to have an executive overview for the senior audience. This is designed to give a basis of understanding of the issues that are followed by suggestions and recommendations for action. Your flight department team may deserve a briefing on the project, too. This presentation should focus on what is within their control; what is being done well and where there are opportunities for future improvement. Don't duck the hard stuff, but don't offer conjectures about the future, either.

The briefing's content and level of detail should be adjusted to meet the needs of each audience. Different projects can require different presentations, but I recommend against giving the hard copy to the attendees until after the verbal presentation to avoid distractions and confusion caused by audience members reading and jumping ahead.

You don't have to fire your consultant in order to get them out of the building... Design and define your project as a distinct entity with a finite finish. Yes, a good consultant should earn your future business but you should not be indefinitely joined at the hip (wallet). At the end of the project plan to celebrate with your oversight team to put a ribbon on it. Debrief the consultant on what went well and what would work better next time. It's good CRM (Consultant Resource Management).

With the exception of giving your consultant a bonus (a rare event) the nicest thing you can do as reward for a job well done is to offer to serve as a reference for future potential clients, and of course make referrals early and often.

Oh, by the way... Although I have been a consultant for twelve years my kids say it could get worse... I could go to law school.