

Ten Steps for Successful “Pay-Per-Project” Services

By Susan Culbertson

More than ever, businesses today are turning to consultants to handle special projects. This is especially true when the project is outside the expertise of in-house staff, when that staff is fully engaged in core business activities, and when consultants have social skills and experience to handle the project faster and more economically.

Still, as you probably know all too well, consultant-client relationships don't always end on a positive note. Susan Culbertson, an IMA member and former president of the Southwest Virginia Chapter who now works as a business consultant, recommends the following ways to help assure that your pay-per-project effort is successful.

1. **Review the skills and reputation of the potential consultant.** The consultant should have leadership, camaraderie, ability to integrate quickly into a client's environment, and should be a good “fit” for the personalities in your office.
2. **Contact the pay-per-project consultant's past clients.** Request their evaluations of the consultant on technical skills, ability to interact with the staff, adaptability to unfamiliar computer software and hardware, as well as the consultant's overall success.
3. **Know what you want.** Define, as much as possible, the project or job description that needs to be handled. Clearly communicate what output you expect.
4. **Include a scope of work in your contract.** Be as specific as possible, especially in the description of expected output or goals. If the project is expected to extend over a long period, make provisions in the contract to allow for market or management changes.

5. **Know where you are.** Many times a consultant arrives at the client's site to discover that the client is not at the starting point defined in the contract. If you're not ready, be prepared to postpone the start of the consultant's contract or to expand the scope of the work.
6. **Know what you have.** Have adequate information gathered or identified before the consultant arrives, or build breaks into the consultant's on-site schedule to allow time for gathering the information as the contract progresses. Then, your schedule won't be interrupted by repeated requests for information, and you won't have to pay the consultant for idle time.
7. **Communicate with your staff.** A good consultant will engender trust in the client's staff. Top management's endorsement of the consultant aids in this process. A trusting relationship promotes teamwork and quicker solutions.
8. **Stay on top of progress.** Establish regular meetings with the pay-per-project consultant to discuss progress, provide feedback, and reevaluate strategy and goals. The timetable for these meetings will vary, based on the project. Meetings can be as often as daily or as infrequent as monthly or quarterly.
9. **Don't expect the consultant to have more control than you had when the project was in-house.** You can expect the pay-per-project consultant to have more focus and discipline than the average in-house process or system.
10. **Be consistent.** Find someone you trust and continue to use him/her, even if only occasionally. This person will be more "in tune" with your company and will be quicker to respond appropriately in emergencies.

Published in *Small-Business Update*, December 1998/January 1999.
Reprinted with permission.