

Choosing effective consultants effectively.

Introduction.

Organisations should consider calling upon assistance from consultants for many reasons, many of which are not widely recognised or understood. Many companies are suspicious and put off by the perceived high cost and in some cases have poor experience on which to base their views!

The commissioning process.

Some organisations fail to recognise that commissioning a consultancy process should be handled in the same way as any purchasing decision. That is:-

Identify the need.

Some common examples of issues which may be identified are:-

1. The organisation does not have the full range of skills or knowledge required to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities or threats and then to develop the appropriate responses.
2. The organisation has the skills and knowledge but does not have the time to apply them. An alternative to additional staff recruitment or extending deadlines would be to opt for short term consultancy support to bridge the resource gap.
3. The organisation needs to avoid or resolve conflicts of interest regarding problem identification and possible courses of action, by obtaining a fresh or independent view where differences of opinion exist.
4. An individual or group wants their view on a particular issue to be endorsed by the application of an independent viewpoint.
5. Senior management requires an external source to stimulate or augment thinking on policy or strategy matters.

The need identification process is extremely important and if a real need cannot be clearly identified with specific and measurable objectives set for meeting the need, the organisation should not proceed with the commission.

Prepare a terms of reference (TOR) brief.

If a project is perceived to fail, organisations may lay the blame firmly on the consultant. Selecting the wrong consultant can be disastrous and potentially very damaging. A TOR would set out in very clear and unambiguous terms:-

Background information about the organisation and the circumstances leading to the decision to commission consultants.

The purpose of the assignment and its overall scope, together with constraints such as timescales and the expected solutions or outcomes. These should be well defined and measurable.

Any key points which should be addressed by the consultant.

The content of a TOR should be derived from the identification of needs and should be checked and possible amended by those who will be working with, or who will be affected by the outcomes.

Identify possible solution providers.

There are a number of professional bodies to whom consultants may belong. Members of The Chartered Management Institute of Management Accountants are trained in the key principles of management and to understand the vital functions of a business whatever its size. They can help to manage and develop the resources of many types of business. Theirs is a 'hands on' approach designed to secure an improved, value added future. In the accountancy profession, only Chartered Management Accountants (*CMA's*) with their specialist skills and practical expertise have this focus. Whereas the auditor chronicles the past, the *CMA* challenges history, questioning, dissecting and projecting to build a successful future.

Take references.

All consultants should be able to demonstrate their track record by providing a list of previous and current clients who would be willing to provide references.

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