

Consultants: Time to End the Confusion

By: Robert D. Grossman

Webster's Dictionary defines a "consultant" as "a person who gives professional or expert advice." But, with that definition, isn't just about everyone a consultant? In our industry, organizations are quick to give their representatives titles that convey competence and expertise, which can be confusing to the end user.

How does the end user know who's competent? With a sales engineer or systems architect, the answer is simple: Engineers and architects are degreed positions, so look for the diploma. But with consultants, it's not as black and white.

Let's create our own definition. We'll stick with Webster as closely as we can: A consultant is a person who gives unbiased professional or expert advice and is beholden only to the person who has hired him.

Still, the advice given by a consultant varies, so let's explore an advisor's duties and responsibilities.

Consultants Help Make Decisions

Many vendors will provide design, engineering, installation and project management services as part of a "turn-key" solution. If you've selected such a vendor and are confident it will meet your needs, you do not need a consultant.

If there are several vendors involved, comparing their bids is much like comparing apples to oranges. If you believe that you can evaluate their offerings and select the one that best suits your needs, you're acting as the consultant yourself and don't need to hire outside help.

But there's a difference between need and benefit: Many organizations find that there are tangible benefits, both financial and operational, in employing this outside expertise.

Consultants Often Act as Specifiers

A consultant is hired by end users to look at their specific concerns and apply the appropriate technology and operational procedures to accomplish their goals. The objective can be very specific or ethereal, but the end result is generally a specification that details how the problem will be solved. These specifications fall into two categories: functional and performance specifications.

A functional specification describes what a system will do. It is generic in nature and written to allow multiple vendors to apply their specific products. Often, it relies on the lowest common denominator to ensure wider participation between vendors, and may be accompanied by an approved vendor list.

A performance specification is more stringent and describes how the system will work. To accomplish this, a consultant generally has a specific system in mind, and while others may equal the performance, the criteria are much tighter. This type of specification selects a single vendor "or equal," and is often the basis for a sole-source procurement agreement.

With either type, the consultant evaluates the options, discusses them with the client and — based on his opinion and expertise — designs a system around the customer's needs or budget. Sometimes a manufacturer is favored because the consultant has had good experiences and often the installed equipment dictates the add-on products, but there should be no financial incentive for the consultant to choose a particular brand.

The consultant provides this specification in a format that may be sent to multiple vendors, ensuring a competitive bid process. While he helps evaluate the different proposed products to verify their suitability, he also explains the intangibles. Does the integrator have a history of successfully completing projects like the client's? Will the manufacturer support the product for the life of the system? Does the product have a good track record?

"Theory cannot compensate for actual experience," says Fred Zagurski, of Fred Zagurski Consultants. "Only a consultant from the 'field' will know what corners the bidders will try to shortcut, and (he) address these issues in their specifications."

The consultant also acts as a representative during the construction and commissioning process. He ensures the installed system is the one specified, and will work through the many changes and add-ons that are inevitable side effects of the construction process. Often, a consultant will save his client more than his fees by ensuring the project stays on schedule and within budget.

Integrity, Experience Are Crucial

It's clear there is no substitute for integrity and experience. To ensure a consultant's independence, look for someone who is doing it for a living, and is not just "between jobs." Look for experience with the type of project you are considering. And make sure he has been around long enough to have the reputation, industry contacts and people skills needed to smooth over the rough spots, should it come to that. Remember, your choice in consultant is a lot like a headache remedy — neither does you any good unless it takes away the pain.

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