

12 Tips

on how to hire a business consultant

IT SEEMS you can hire a business consultant these days to do almost anything – from managing a marketing campaign to planning your business strategy, from evaluating your human resource policies through to providing outsourced human resource support, and from advising on information technology purchases through to designing a complete systems upgrade.

Whatever the task you need to have done, the process of hiring a business consultant is pretty standard. The following checklist is designed to help you avoid some common pitfalls and find the consultant that's right for you and your business.

This checklist has been prepared by Chris Lipscombe with the assistance of Ruth McDavitt and Christine Makumbe. All three contributors have over their respective careers worked on both sides of the fence – commissioning consultancy work, as well as working as consultants themselves. Here are their thoughts on what it takes to find a good one.

ground



1. Don't believe all you read on the website.

Of course a consultant, whether an individual or a firm, will want to present the best possible picture of its capability and clients. But does the website describe work done, or a wish-list of work wanted? Is the team that did the work still around? Did the work done actually do the job?

2. Pick horses for courses.

Different consultants – and different consultancy firms – will have strengths in different areas. These specialisations may be by geography or sector, by tools or business processes, or by time, project complexity and cost. Make sure you are considering the right kind of consultant, before you decide whether the consultant is right for you.

3. Write a comprehensive brief.

You will do a much better job of hiring the consultant that's right for you if you know in some detail what it is you want to have done. The work will cost you less and be a lot easier to manage, too.

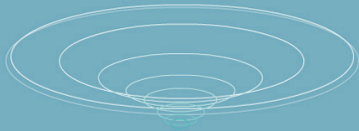
4. Tender with care.

You may be obliged to demonstrate a rigorous evaluation and selection process, but don't assume that a public tendering process will automatically give you (or your boss) the reassurance you are looking for. Tenders take time and cost you money, sometimes out of all proportion to the value of the job. Planning and documenting your evaluation and selection process, with clear evaluation criteria and properly communicated outcomes, may be more important than publicity or number of consultants evaluated. Existing relationships may also bring valuable knowledge.

5. Use your networks.

People you know may already have had good (or bad) experiences that they are prepared to share. Ask the people you know for names of people you can talk to, and ask for their opinion on consultants you identify as possibilities. New Zealand is a small place, and you'd be surprised who knows whom.

“Avoid common pitfalls and find the consultant that's right for you...”



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6. Ask for references.

You need to know the type of jobs they've done in the past, and how well they've done them (see items 1 and 5 above). But you also want to get a feel for what kind of person or firm they are. Are they good with reporting and communication generally? Are they flexible and adaptable? Are they known for bidding low and then hiking the price on variations to spec?

7. Check credentials.

Credentials packages may sometimes come across as dull and generic, but keep an eye out for specific information or experience that matches your or your organisation's need. Also, feel free to interrogate the consultant – they may not yet know what's most important to you, and they may have more to tell that will influence your final selection.

8. Ask for a taster.

If you want to get a better feel for a consultant's work and/or process, don't be afraid to ask for a trial engagement. It could be a workshop with key stakeholders that could also inform the consultant's response to your brief – in other words, of use to both parties.

9. Beware the 'A' team.

An old consulting trick is to wheel in the big guns for the pitch, and then use newbie consultants to deliver. Experience does not always equal excellence, and a young, energetic and committed consultancy team may be just what you need, but you should always know what you're going to get for your money.

10. Focus on value for money.

If the first step is to write a comprehensive brief (see item 3 above), then the next step is to make sure that the response from the consultant addresses the brief. The issue isn't so much what you will pay, as ensuring that you will be spending your money on the right outputs or deliverables. Some consultants tend towards a 'cookie-cutter' approach to consultancy. Make sure you're getting the cookie you want, rather than the cookie the consultant wants to sell you.

11. Remember you are the client.

You get to say what you want (see item 10 above). You also get to say how and when you want it. Of course, you may have to pay more and forego certain quality standards if you want to shorten timeframes or impose other stringent delivery requirements. But it's your call. You control the relationship.

12. Watch the chemistry.

You are going to have to work closely with this person, and depending on the duration or complexity of the project, you may have to do so for some time. You need to assume a degree of mutual respect and tolerance. The same goes for teams. It's even better if you think you can have fun together. Life's too short to be miserable!

“You need to assume a degree of mutual respect and tolerance”



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