

## Hiring a Management Consultant



# How to Hire a Management Consultant and Get the Results You Expect

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The following questions will help you to determine whether you need a management consultant:

**Our organization could be more successful if...**

**Over the past twelve months, what has it cost to do nothing about this situation?**

**Do we have the internal resources to face this situation?**

## I. Answers to the Twelve Most Commonly Asked Questions

### **Q1. What Is a Management Consultant?**

A management consultant is a professional who, for a fee, helps the management of client organizations define and achieve their goals through improved utilization of resources. He may do this by helping to identify problems and/or opportunities, and recommend solutions.

Management consultants not only propose change but also help implement it. As independent professionals, their primary concern is the welfare of the client organizations they serve.

### **Q2. What Kind of Management Consultants Can I Use?**

Management consultants are either sole practitioners who work with a small support staff or members of a consulting firm who work with professional colleagues and a large support staff. They may be generalists able to work with top management on a wide range of concerns or specialists.

*Common consulting specialties include:*

Research & Development  
Physical Distribution  
Financial Planning & Control  
Sales & Marketing  
Human Resources Management & Labor Relations Administration  
Manufacturing Information Technology  
Wage & Salary Administration  
Incentive Compensation  
Organizational Planning & Development  
Strategic & Business Planning

### **Q3. How Can I Tell If I Need a Consultant?**

There are no hard and fast rules for deciding to bring in a management consultant. Common situations suggesting that a consultant may provide help include:

- Management believes that performance could be better but is not sure what to do to gain improvements.
- Management does not have the specific knowledge and skills necessary to solve the problems it has identified.
- Management has the necessary knowledge and skills but not the time or personnel to solve problems.
- Management's efforts have not produced the desired long-term improvements.
- Management requires an independent, third party opinion, either to confirm a decision or to provide alternatives.

Often a situation will require that a consultant be retained until in-house capabilities are enhanced by a permanent staff addition.

### **Q4. How Do I Determine What Needs to Be Changed?**

At times, you will be able to specify the issue, such as a puzzling increase in workplace injuries. Often, however, this will not be possible. In such cases, listing symptoms or desired goals will usually indicate the type of consultant you need.

Be aware, though, that often a consultant's largest contribution is to help clients define problems or opportunities. Your initial conversation with a consultant should tell you if your problem has been properly defined.

### **Q5. How Do I Find a Competent Consultant?**

You can turn to many sources for help in selecting a consultant. Your organization's attorney, accountant or banker may be a good source of referrals, as may your trade association. To widen your search, you can turn to one or both of the following organizations: **The Institute of Management Consultants USA**, 2025 M Street NW, Suite 800 / Washington, DC 20036-3309 / USA Voice: 1-800-221-2557 / Fax: 202-857-1891 / Email: [office@imcusa.org](mailto:office@imcusa.org) / <http://www.imcusa.org>

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IMC USA certifies the professional competence of individual consultants, accredits professional practices, and certifies individuals within those accredited practices.

## **The International Council of Management Consulting Institutes**

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ICMCI, the global association of national management consulting institutes, provides referral resources worldwide.

## **Q6. How Do Management Consultants Charge for Their Services?**

A management consultant's fee will be influenced by a number of factors, including the client's need for special knowledge and experience; how much competition for clients there is; the consultant's reputation; and, if known, the benefit to the client of a successful outcome.

In a typical engagement a consultant may charge a portion of the total fee when the project begins and throughout the project (including any adjustment) until acceptance of the final report. Management consultants who have previously engaged in projects that resemble yours will generally quote a flat fee. Occasionally this fee is payable in advance, but more commonly it is paid according to a benchmark-related schedule.

When the management consultant serves in a purely advisory or coaching capacity, it is traditional to charge a flat fee for each advisory session, board of directors meeting, or private session.

Sometimes the consulting arrangement will involve a not-to-exceed figure or a figure that when reached triggers a joint evaluation of results-to-date and an estimate of the time needed to reach a satisfactory conclusion.

Occasionally, management consultants encounter a prospective client who wants fees to be on a contingency basis; for example, a certain amount when sales exceed a target figure or when cost reductions exceed a specified figure. Contingency arrangements may work, but this depends ultimately on the parties' integrity. By avoiding pure contingency arrangements you can help assure the consultant's objectivity.

Management consultants generally bill separately for expenses (travel, entertainment, communications, and special services) as they accumulate, often at monthly intervals.

## **Q7. How Do I Screen Recommended Consultants?**

Select for interviews the two or three consultants whose experience comes closest to matching the situation you have defined. It is very important to determine that each consultant, not just his or her firm, displays a thorough familiarity with the situation. The references each candidate provides should confirm the consultant's previous success in a similar context. You will want to learn the outcomes of relevant consulting engagements, whether the consultant used honesty and tact when making recommendations, and how well he or she worked with an organization's people.

In addition, you will want the following information: the consultant's experience in handling similar situations, what her references say about her ability to make things happen, and whether she has established personal rapport with management during her initial interviews. Experience is important but not to the exclusion of the other considerations.

## **Q8. How Do I Make the Final Selection?**

Once each consultant's experience has been confirmed and references checked, use the following considerations to make your final selection:

- Breadth of experience that encompasses and goes beyond the situation as defined.
- Demonstrated ability to complete assignments within budget and on schedule.
- Demonstrated ability to develop practical recommendations and to have them implemented successfully.

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- Demonstrated ability to work with people diplomatically and effectively and to minimize disruption of ongoing operations.
- Degree of trust and rapport established with management during initial contacts.
- When you have weighed these considerations, ask the consultant of choice to submit a proposal.



## **Q9. What Kind of an Agreement Do I Make With a Consultant?**

The consultant's proposal should spell out in as much detail as needed such things as:

- The objective and scope of the assignment.
- What the consultant will do, what the client should do, and what they will do jointly during and following the project's completion to assure its success.
- The nature of completion or agreed upon evidence of delivered value.
- The anticipated charges, basis of charges, expenses, and terms of payment.
- The conditions under which the client or the consultant may cancel the agreement.

Review the proposal with the consultant and resolve all the questions you may have. Portions of the proposal may have to be rewritten to provide desired assurances and clarity. Accept the proposal only when you thoroughly understand its terms and conditions.

## **Q10. How Do I Assure the Successful Completion of the Project?**

You can assure the successful completion of a consulting engagement by doing the following:

- Make certain that everyone in the organization will provide what the consultant needs in order to gather information and make recommendations.
- Inform all concerned, either through a general meeting or personal memos, that a consultant has been engaged, and explain the nature or purpose of the engagement.
- Allay any anxiety that may result when people learn that a consultant has been engaged.
- Be available to the consultant to review progress, clarify information, or help in resolving temporary difficulties. Candidly voice concerns to the consultant.
- Avoid pressuring the consultant to discuss findings or recommendations until she has thoroughly researched the situation and is ready to do so.

## **Q11. How Do I Assure Confidentiality and Avoid Conflict of Interest?**

All reputable consultants consider the detailed knowledge they gain of a client's operations and personnel to be confidential. Such information is not to be discussed with, or disclosed to, a third party without the client's expressed permission. Further, no ethical consultant will work with two competing firms without the permission of both. These are requirements of the codes of ethics to which all reputable consultants subscribe. See [IMC Code of Ethics](#).

## **Q12. How Do I Evaluate the Project's Success?**

The success of a consulting project can be measured in many ways. Frequently, the change that results from an engagement is obvious; for example, measurable savings realized, new business generated, or delays eliminated.

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Some projects, however, may have payoffs that are only realized gradually. In such situations you should be able to see progress in achieving the project's goals.

To gain a subjective appraisal, ask the question, "On balance, and considering everything, would I hire the same consultant again?" If the answer is "Yes," the project can generally be considered a success.

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## II. How to Achieve Fit and Compatibility

The process of making certain that a consultant is on the same page with you resembles hiring a top-level executive: you must find a set of values, competencies, and approaches that will take you and your organization where you want to go.



The following questions are designed to help you identify consultants who fit your needs and are compatible with your organization. They help you to prepare for and subsequently evaluate your meeting with prospective management consultants.

### **Your Needs**

**If this engagement were successful, in what ways would the organization be different?** *For example, more competitive, better positioned, more profitable, better focused, more effective, run smoother, operate faster or have a brighter, more sustainable future.*

**What would be the same? What characteristics of your organization are highly valued?** *For example: Our first-to-market approach has helped us gain the largest market share. We have a collaborative environment, which has been key to our success.*

**What would be the value of this project? How would the changes it brings benefit the organization?**

**Consultants fill various functions. Here are options to consider when deciding which function(s) you would like the consultant to perform:**

*Do the work Act as change agent  
Lead the work Manage projects  
Act as mentor & advisor Provide recommendations  
Transmit knowledge Implement solutions  
Be an independent observer Serve as a technical expert  
Serve as a facilitator Collaborate with management*

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Other:

## Your Expectations

**Note: Avoid self-diagnosis.** For example: Our need is to increase sales; therefore we need a sales-training program. Fewer-than-desired sales, however, can be the symptom of a number of problems, including poor market coverage, position, and/or penetration; unappealing and/or noncompetitive products or services; poor service delivery; inability to sell; and lack of alignment of marketing, sales, delivery and service.

*Let the consultant ask questions to determine the root causes of your issues or problems.*

**Did the consultant ask questions that helped you clarify or think differently about your situation?**

**Did he probe to ensure adequate understanding of your situation?**

**Did the consultant "jump to a solution" before discovering your unique circumstances?**

**Was the consultant focused on making your organization better, or was the focus on his own ideas? Did the solution seem "canned" or unique to your needs?**

**Did the consultant question your data and assumptions?**

**Did the consultant work with you to develop objectives measures of success for the engagement?**

## Competence to Perform the Work

*The questions that follow will help you to evaluate your meeting with a prospective consultant.*

**Was the consultant able to cite engagements that addressed challenges similar in type and scope to yours? What was the consultant's role in those engagements?**

**Was the consultant comfortable discussing the specifics of an engagement without divulging confidential information?**

**Did the consultant portray a positive attitude and demeanor regarding past client assignments? Was she candid about difficulties and responses to unexpected events? Could he provide lessons learned?**

## Fit and Compatibility

**Did you feel comfortable divulging sensitive or confidential information about your organization?**

**How do you expect to work with the consultant?** For example,

- How do you want to be informed of progress?
- How frequently do you expect to interact with the consultant?
- Did she appear willing and flexible to work with your needs?
- How do you want to receive bad news?

***Did the consultant provide information you may not have liked, but needed to know?***

***Who will actually perform the work?***

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***Will the consultant work simultaneously with various levels of the organization? Has he handled this kind of assignment successfully?***

***Did the consultant provide a written summation of your discussions about approaches, fees, and deliverables? Was it consistent with your understanding?***

**NOTE:** *Your confidence in a consultant is enhanced by assurances of competence, experience, and adherence to high standards of professionalism and ethics. The Institute of Management Consultants USA's certification requirements and Code of Ethics reflect international standards and can be valuable resources when selecting a management consultant.*

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## **III. Getting the Most Value from the Relationship**

*How a consulting engagement begins is a key factor in assuring a beneficial outcome. Your situation should have been defined carefully, and you should have a clear agreement with the consultant regarding deliverables, fees, and responsibilities. Moreover, keeping in close touch with your consultant helps to assure the project's success. You should be able to discuss anything the consulting engagement reveals in an open and candid fashion with your consultant.*

*The following guidelines will help you get the most value from the engagement.*

### ***What If the Fee Seems Too High?***

*You may be able to reduce a high fee by narrowing the scope of the assignment, providing more leeway in scheduling the work, or having your own people assume some of the tasks in the project. Turning the assignment into phases of activity can also spread the payments.*

### ***Research, Results, and Feedback***

*After the start date is set, the management consultant will probably meet again with you, your key associates, and anyone else who will be involved with the assignment. Your consultant will use this meeting to introduce the consulting staff and describe the plan of action. After this meeting he will begin the process of generating as much information as possible in a limited period of time. This could entail:*

- One or more methods of data collection and review*
- Analysis of the findings*
- Testing of assumptions*
- Development of alternative solutions*
- More testing of viability and practicality*
- Drawing conclusions*

*Throughout this process your consultant should provide you with continuous, informal feedback so that you understand what is being done and why. You also should receive and review the findings and conclusions before he delivers recommendations. Once the recommendations are in your hands, he should provide you with clear guidance on how to proceed, either with or without further assistance.*

### ***Once the Assignment Is Underway***

*After you've informed employees about the consulting engagement, focus on establishing an effective working relationship with your consultant. Be straightforward in relating your concerns, expectations and working style, and identify the liaison on the project. The liaison may be you or someone on your staff. Make sure this individual understands the consultant's work plan so that he or she can provide any needed introductions or resources.*

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*When the consultant reports her interim findings, listen carefully even if you don't like what you hear. If any conclusion is not well founded, direct the consultant to an internal source who may provide additional information.*

*In getting to the heart of a problem, your consultant may uncover other issues that need to be resolved. Some may be prerequisites to resolving the issue at hand, but many will not. It is tempting to add these new issues to the project, but if meeting your original schedule and budget is important, do not ask the consultant to include them in the current assignment.*

*When it is necessary to expand the scope of an assignment be sure the consultant tells you what impact this will have on the project's schedule and fee.*

## **How to Evaluate the Consultant's Advice**

*When the consultant presents his recommendations, ask yourself these questions:*

- Has the consultant delivered what was promised earlier?
- Have the real issues been addressed?
- Are the recommendations logical, and will they work in my organization?
- Do I understand the steps to take?
- If there are potential savings involved, do I know how to achieve them?
- Have our employees learned how to find and solve problems on their own?
- Will our company be stronger as a result?
- When will the consultant return to check on the success of the project?

*If you are not satisfied with the answers to any of these questions, ask the consultant to give you the additional information you need. A good consultant would rather put in additional effort than leave a client unsatisfied.*

## **Act Immediately on the Recommendations**

*To make sure you get maximum benefit from the efforts of your organization and the consultant, implement the consultant's recommendations before they are lost in the organizational inertia of your company. Tell your staff to report in one month on the progress they are making, and call for regular reports until the work has been completed. You can expect the consultant to take an equal interest in seeing that his or her recommendations result in benefits.*



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## **IV. Useful Tools and Resources**

*A number of useful tools and resources exist for verifying, selecting and evaluating a management consultant. They include references, certification and adherence to professional and ethical standards.*

***References** and selection have been discussed and provide one means of independent verification that a consultant has competence to perform, has carried out similar assignments and has worked well with the organization's personnel. Considerations such as working within budgets, practicality of recommendations, ability to make things happen and honesty and tact help you assess competence, fit and compatibility. Asking individuals who have worked with this consultant will help you to assess your conversations with the consultant and the management consultant's assertions. However, there are additional means that help you find and choose a management consultant.*

***Peer evaluation and certification** provide another avenue of verification and independent evaluation.*

*Has the consultant passed peer assessment through a professional association that verifies references, reviews working knowledge, requires continuing education and sets standards of conduct?*

*Professional associations can provide access to a larger talent pool and individuals who are engaged in management consulting as a profession. Management consulting is not something left to amateurs or individuals looking for temporary work "between jobs." Ensure your organization has proven talent through independent verification of competence and professional standards. The internationally recognized professional standards for certification of management consultants are provided in, [What's behind the "CMC"](#) (Certified Management Consultant).*

### **Professional standards and ethics.**

*Adhering voluntarily to ethical values are extremely important to ensure:*

- Standards of conduct and competence
- Impartiality
- Confidentiality
- No conflicts of interest
- Integrity
- Agreements in writing

*The IMC USA Code of Ethics provides a standard of conduct to expect from a management consultant that exceeds the law. All members of IMC USA pledge in writing to abide by the [Code of Ethics](#). CMCs (Certified Management Consultants) through IMC USA must pass a written examination of their ability to recognize and handle ethical situations that impact a client assignment.*