

About to Hire an IT Consultant: 5 Things a Small Business Should Know

1. A Career Consultant is your best bet.

IT professionals turn to consulting for different reasons. During bad economic times displaced people sometimes wind up in consulting because it happened to be the only opportunity available. In this case, consulting is just a way to pay the bills while looking for the next job.

A career consultant has made a decision to go-it-alone because their skills keep them in demand. These professionals have continually made a personal investment in skill development to remain employed.

2. A Consulting Firm is another service you purchase.

These firms go by many names; professional recruiters, staffing firms, headhunters, etc. Most professional consultants will work through a consulting firm or independently. Consulting firms that have been around for a while have extensive networks of professional ties. Because of this network, consultants frequently find work through them.

A consultant's hourly rate is usually the same whether they work directly for you, or if they work for a consulting firm. Be aware that the rate you pay for the consultant working through a firm will be higher because the firm wants their cut.

Be sure to ask what you are getting for the higher rate that you are paying them for.

3. Follow-up on their professionalism.

A consultant who is a true professional will conduct themselves as a privileged guest to your company, not a hero you can't survive without.

Too many consultants spend a lot of time on their cell phones or chatting with others in the office. Even if they do not charge you for the time (but most will), the distraction is counter productive for them and others in the office.

Make sure you get references that you are able to follow-up with, and be certain that you do. Even if the skill set you are hiring the consultant for isn't what they used on their previous

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contract. That's OK, what you need to find out is how they conducted themselves and if they would be hired again.

4. What counts as previous work experience varies by culture.

I have experienced this phenomenon many times in my career. This goes beyond the professional embellishment that we all do with our resumes. I have found that in the USA we tend to consider "work experience" as one or two years of hands-on work experience.

On the other hand I have had to hold the hand of some off shore professionals who barely touched a technology that they were hired for. I am not saying all off shore professionals are like this—quite the contrary. In fact, I have worked with some who are very accomplished with their IT skills.

More than once I have been told that the best way to learn a skill is to get a job doing it. That way you are strongly motivated. Basically this is a sink-or-swim philosophy. You should probably be aware that this is happening on the other side of your desk since it is your dime.

The bottom line is to follow-up on those references. Also, if you are hiring a consultant you haven't worked with before; allow yourself an out in case their skills are requiring them to do too much on the job training.

5. English as a primary language is important.

When speaking a second language, it is much easier to be understood in a social conversation than it is when focusing on a production problem.

Misunderstandings occur because our concentration shifts to technical details when we have to focus on project details or support issues.

I have worked with a number of consultants who had good technical skills, but working as part of a team was problematic. Misunderstandings result in lost time spent clarifying what was

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said and sometimes resulted in additional problems because directions weren't clear.

Author's Background:

I have been an IT professional for over twenty years. I started off as a programmer, progressed to team leader, project manager, and into management. Shortly before Y2K I made a career change, left the W-2 world and began working as an independent consultant. One of the interesting things about being a consultant is being an "outsider." Other people you are working with, especially the employees of the company do not see you as a rival "player". So, not only do you see a lot of things in the company you are working at, people tend to confide in you as well.

I hope you can benefit from some of these tips.