



Finding the Right Consultant Brings Mutual Success



Some consultants have been known to be expensive, time consuming, and even egotistical; initial impressions may be that they are sending customers down seemingly fruitless paths. However, many consultants bring an array of successful experiences to the table, that when shared properly can provide substantial benefits that outweigh the costs. While there is no crystal ball to tell which consultant will most benefit your organization, checking references and setting balanced expectations of knowledge, cost, and ability to work with your organization will go a long way to ensure you have an arrangement that is mutually beneficial.

One of my previous supervisors believed that consulting, when done right, puts the consultant out of work. A consultant's task is not only to guide, train, and execute, but also to enable the customer to perform on their own. If not, then the consultant is outsourcing, not consulting. I liked the analogy he shared of improving a basketball team. At first the consultant focuses on the team's weaknesses, often jumping on the floor to rebound, score, or play defense. Realizing a consultant can't play all positions, the next step is for the consultant to become the point guard, a coach on the floor to direct and motivate the team. Eventually the consultant wants to step off the floor and coach from the sidelines, allowing players to increase their skills and experience. Once management has learned and implemented the new processes and skills, the consultant will step off the bench and watch the game from the skybox, occasionally providing counsel on fine-tuning the team. Eventually the organization will heal and run itself. The successful consultant is no longer needed.

In *Lessons Learned From Software Engineering Consulting*, Dr. David A. Cook and Theron R. Leishman share some of the insights they have acquired from numerous years of consulting. While the focus of this article is on the more common problems that they have encountered, the closing suggestions for improvement are useful for almost all problems: Don't be afraid to ask for insight from others. This can work by asking a new person in the group with a fresh perspective, talking to someone from another group who may be showing success, or finding the right help from outside the organization.

Gregory T. Daich discusses ideas for getting more for your training time and dollars in *Overcoming Training Dilemmas Brings Greater Training Value*. It is usually not easy to find the necessary funding for training, and finding the time to go to the training can be even more difficult. When the training results in improvements that outweigh the costs it is great, but too often the stress on funding and time only results in little improvement with less funding and time now available.

We also have an article for our readers working in the consulting area. Sarah A. Sheard, Suzanne Zampella, and Albert J. Truesdale write about their lessons from challenging situations in *Ten Key Techniques for Process Improvement Consulting in a Challenging Environment*.

In this month's supporting articles, I wanted to expand on addressing organizational issues, so the line-up includes *The Human Dynamics of IT Teams*. In this article Jennifer Tucker, Abby Mackness, and Hile Rutledge remind us that people make software, and we must determine how to best work with these people to achieve the most success. In *Making Meetings Work*, Michael Ochs and Rini van Solingen share some insights from analysis of over 315 meetings in their own organization. While the results may not apply to all organizations, this could be the starting point for similar studies over a broader data set. In *Verification and Validation People Can Be More Than Technical Advisors*, George Jackelen shares one perspective for thinking outside the box when looking for help. In his example, a verification and validation group can also provide support in non-technical areas of software development. Finally, in our online article *Information Assurance in Wireless Residential Networking Technology: IEEE and Bluetooth*, Rayford B. Vaughn and Ambareen Siraj compare these two technologies, discussing both their strengths and weaknesses.

There are many different reasons to hire consultants. Organizations might want a sanity check, training, an overhaul, or even someone to do the work for them. Whether you find this support from internal mentors or from outside consultants, I hope this issue will help you consider new alternatives.

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