

Common Mistakes in Hiring a Consultant and How to Avoid Them

By Tangie Newborn

Don't let these errors ruin your consulting relationship.

Nonprofits have traditionally hired consultants to help with strategic planning, organizational development, marketing, or training. In today's economic environment, however, more organizations are hiring consultants to oversee short-term or long-term projects. Outsourcing specific functions, such as membership management, conference planning, public relations, advocacy efforts, or software conversions can be an effective solution. Here are some other considerations:

- **Hiring a consultant can reduce overhead costs.**
- **Consultants offer fresh perspectives** and creative ideas.
- **Staff can spend more time on what they're best at doing.**
- **You can pay for specific services as needed** — a cost-effective solution for small organizations especially.
- **A consultant will often see the big picture in a way you and your colleagues can't.** A good consultant will look at your situation impartially and identify solutions quickly and efficiently.

But there's little point in hiring a consultant unless you take the time to make the relationship work. Here are some common mistakes that lead to problems — and ways to keep them from happening to you:

- **Mistake 1:** There is a lack of buy-in. **Remedy:** Make certain that staff, board, and stakeholders understand and accept the reasons for hiring the consultant.
- **Mistake 2:** The organization hires a consultant for the wrong reasons, such as to accelerate an executive director's exit. **Remedy:** Be sure you have a clear-cut goal in mind when you hire a consultant. Explore your intentions thoroughly to be sure you don't have any unexamined motives.
- **Mistake 3:** The consultant isn't a good fit. **Remedy:** Check that the consultant has experience with nonprofits similar to yours and complements your organization's culture. Ask for references and examples of the consultant's work before making a commitment. Check these out carefully.

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- **Mistake 4:** The scope of work is unclear. **Remedy:** Create a contract that spells out expectations for both you and the consultant. Assess your needs clearly. Develop a budget and timeline. Set milestones. Know what success will look like.
- **Mistake 5:** No one in the organization has the time to work with the consultant. **Remedy:** Appoint someone who will be committed to the project and willing to spend the time needed. Be realistic about how much staff time will be necessary. The consultant won't be successful without staff support.
- **Mistake 6:** People in the organization view the consultant as a vendor they've hired. **Remedy:** Make it clear that the relationship between organization and consultant is a partnership. Both partners must work together to achieve a common goal.
- **Mistake 7:** No time is spent on assuring effective communication. **Remedy:** Keep in mind that communication is the key to any thriving partnership. Communicating regularly and holding each other accountable to timelines, deliverables, and scope of work will go a long way in avoiding problems. From the outset, agree on how and when the consultant will communicate with you and others in the organization. Stay informed, and share concerns. Use the consultant's time wisely. Be on time for meetings, and avoid rescheduling. Troubleshoot problems immediately. Focus on communication that is as open and honest as possible.

At the end of the project, review reports with the consultant before dissemination. Submit a final report, and debrief. And then, celebrate your success together! 

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In Search of the White Knight: Finding the Perfect Consultant (Vol. 17, No. 6)

Play to Your Strengths: Using Outsourcing to Manage Human Resources (Vol. 17, No. 1)

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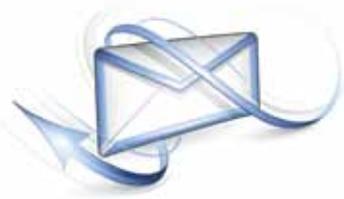
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CardPartner from UMB.....	9
DonorPerfect.....	page 13
Fundraising for a Cause.....	page 5
Harvard Kennedy School.....	page 7
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