

## **What to expect if you are using a consultant.**

I wish I'd know when I was commissioning consultants what I know now that I am one. The benefit of hindsight is a wonderful thing, so here's my selection of thoughts about what to expect and what's reasonable in your use of external consultants. How can you get maximum benefit from bringing someone in to lend another perspective?

Much depends on the type of consultancy work you are commissioning. If it's a research or policy piece, expectations, roles and responsibilities are much more straightforward. You usually have a clear idea about the subject matter and the skills needed to undertake the work.

However if the work is more developmental, or involves some strategic review or change process you should be looking for a consultant who can add value to what you are doing, not to *take over* the work of internal staff. Don't expect your consultant to do it for you. A prospective client of mine once declared herself just '*too busy*' to develop and write the organisations business plan. Expect your consultant to ask lots of questions about how you are seeing the issue at hand and help you to get some clarity about it, not to just agree with you and your ideas about solving the problem.

Consultancy in my book is more an art than a science. Having a consultant with lots of management experience and theories may be helpful, but how do they see the project developing? What's their preferred style of working? Are they coming in as an 'expert or change leader' or do they see themselves more as an 'enabler or facilitator'? More importantly are **you** clear about the type of consultant you are looking for?

Give your project time to develop, '*can you start next week and finish in two months*'? Is a common request? Most consultants ( at least the ones worth their salt ) will be looking to find new projects up to a month or so in advance. Projects take time to set up and get going, dates have to be booked in people's diaries well in advance, and rushing the process, especially if it's a change process, just seems to harm it.

Once you have a clear idea about the working style, the appropriate role of the consultant and the timescales, get as clear as you can about your outcomes and what you expect to see at the end of the work. Many clients I work with find it hard to put their finger on what they actually want from the work, but time spent debating and defining clear achievable outcomes and clarifying all these points will pay enormous dividends later on.