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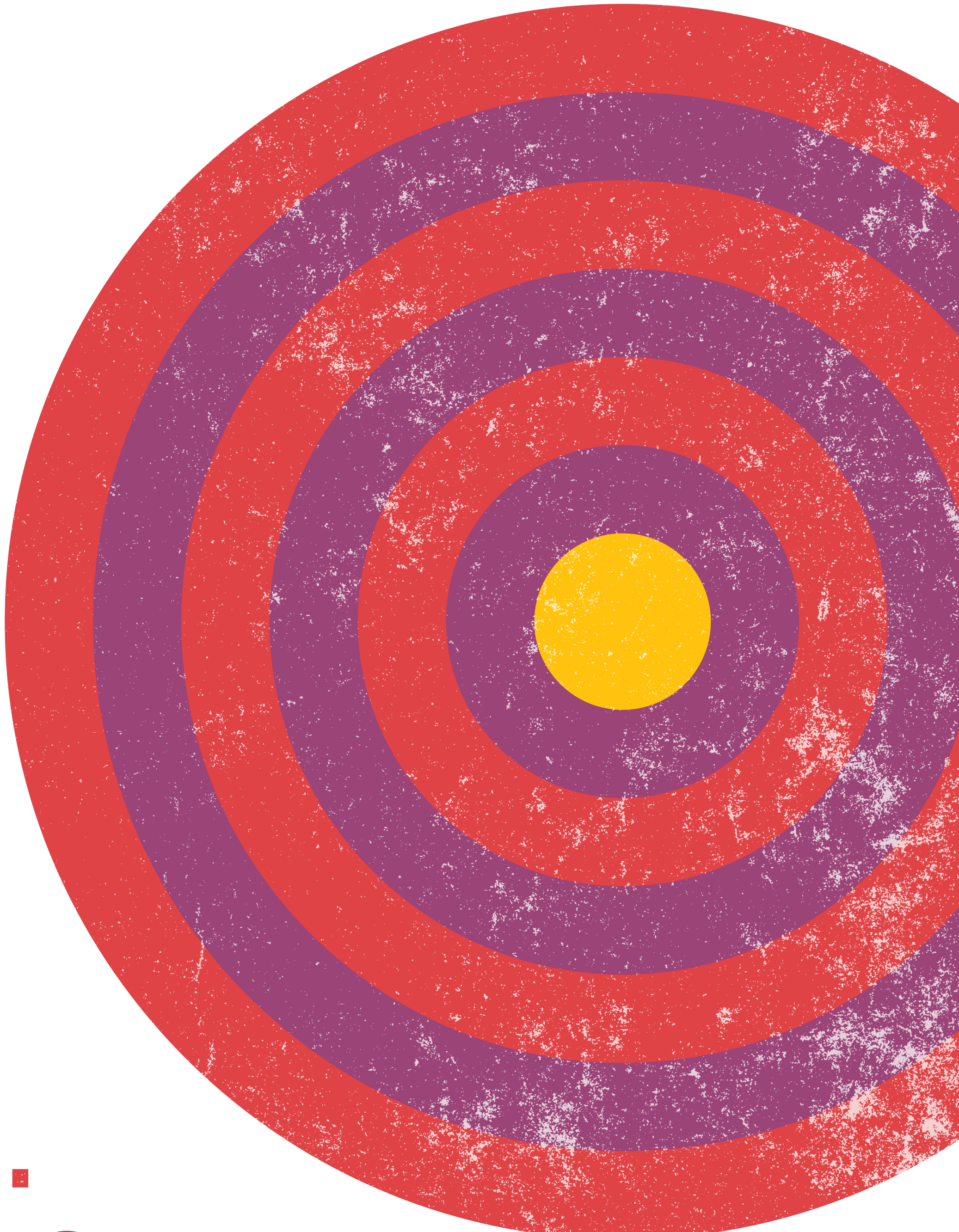

GUIDE TO...

GETTING THE BEST OUT OF A CONSULTANCY

CONTENTS

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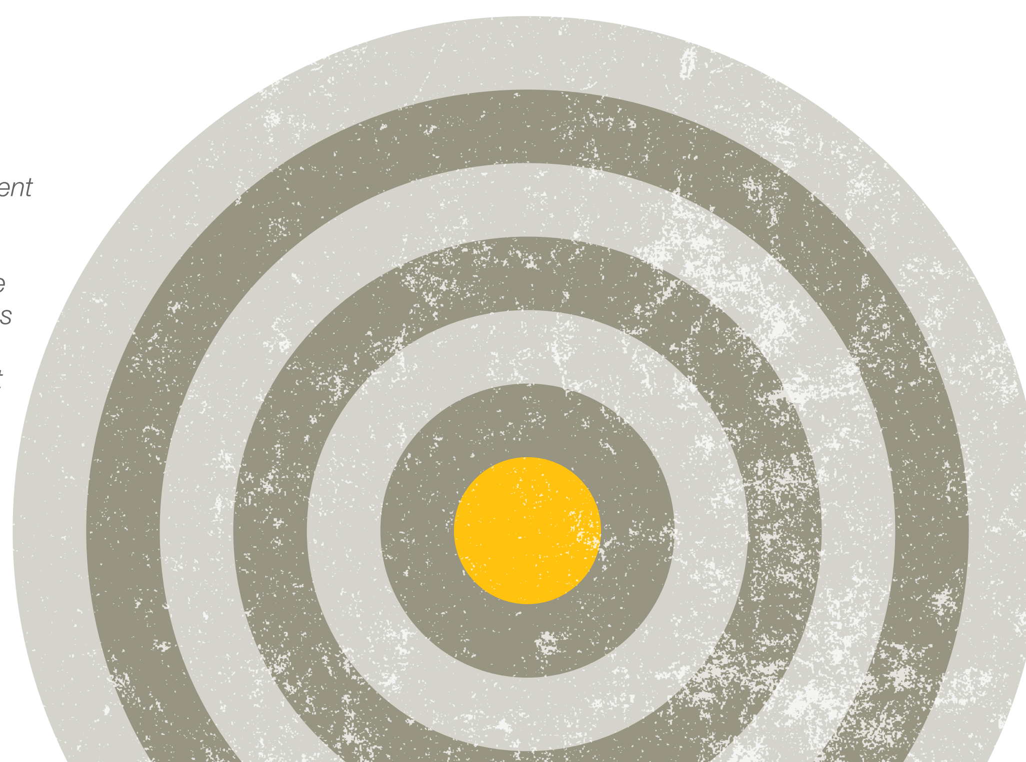


INTRODUCTION

NGOs use consultants for many different reasons including training, strategic reviews and project evaluations.

Consultancy costs can be a large budget item for many NGOs and so getting the best out of it is essential. This guide provides tips that will help you learn from good practices and avoid common mistakes. It is for staff involved in commissioning and managing consultants, particularly in programmes, grant management and monitoring, evaluation and learning. In this guide, the person or the organisation who is hiring a consultant is called 'the client'.

This guide is a summarised and updated version of a longer publication produced by Oxfam[1]. It follows a sequence of steps in managing a consultancy, but each can be read as a stand-alone section:

1 **The reasons for the consultancy**
2 **Defining the consultancy**
3 **Terms of reference**
4 **Contract and budget**
5 **Finding and recruiting a consultant**
6 **Managing the consultant**
7 **Feedback, finalising and follow up**

GOLDEN RULES OF CONSULTANCY

- Be sure that there is a genuine need for external support or an independent point of view.
- Be clear about the essential elements of the consultancy and why they are needed, and about the different priorities of the desirable elements.
- Draft clear concise terms of reference, making use of advice and ideas from those who will be involved but keep control of the consultancy. Don't overload the terms of reference with excessive demands.
- Be clear about the timing and deadlines.
- Fix a realistic budget and number of days for the work.
- Find consultants through the broadest and fairest selection process that is appropriate to the scale of the consultancy but also make use of contacts to attract consultants who are recommended or already known.
- Be prepared to discuss the priorities and the level of detail required in different areas of the terms of reference with the consultant; be ready for a breadth versus depth discussion. Confirm all agreements on modifications to the terms of reference in writing.
- Provide the consultant with access to information and contacts and ensure they keep you informed on progress. Prepare colleagues to provide time and materials to support the consultancy.
- Be flexible about arrangements when things don't go to plan whilst keeping sight of the essential elements of the terms of reference. Be fair in negotiating changes to the agreements.
- Manage the reactions of colleagues to the consultancy findings; develop a practical management response to make best use of the recommendations.
- Provide feedback to the consultant on the management response and the overall experience of the consultancy.

1 The full report by John Rowley and Frances Rubin for Oxfam can be downloaded from: http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/effective-consultancies-in-development-and-humanitarian-programmes-115364, or purchased from http://developmentbookshop.com/effective-consultancies-in-development-and-humanitarian-programmes-pb

1 REASONS FOR THE CONSULTANCY

The first step in appointing an external consultant is to be clear on the reasons for needing one. Start by asking if a member of staff could be seconded to do the work; using internal staff will typically be cheaper and could give that staff member extra experience.

REASONS TO HIRE AN EXTERNAL CONSULTANT

External consultants can support an organisation in almost any area of work. Three common benefits that consultants bring are:

- **Extra capacity:** staff may temporarily be fully occupied and a consultant can bridge the gap for a limited period
- **Skills, experience or knowledge that staff do not possess:** for example, specialist knowledge to design a new programme in a new country or sector.
- **Independence on how a piece of work is going and what it has achieved:** for example, external evaluations of projects are commonly required by donors. This is probably the most common use of consultants currently in the international development sector.

Consultants might be used for a combination of these reasons. For example, hiring a consultant to facilitate a workshop, even if staff have the skills, provides independent facilitation that enables all staff to fully participate. Using a consultant to recruit for a staff post might save staff time and provide an independent decision-making process.

REASONS NOT TO HIRE AN EXTERNAL CONSULTANT

Do not organise a consultancy in order to avoid responsibility for a difficult management decision like restructuring posts or closing a programme or an office. Hire a consultant where additional support or information, expertise or analysis is required but not in an attempt to avoid a difficult situation.

> “INTERNAL STAFF WILL BE TYPICALLY CHEAPER AND COULD GIVE THAT STAFF MEMBER EXTRA EXPERIENCE.”

GOOD CONSULTANTS AND GOOD CLIENTS

A successful assignment requires the consultant and client to work well together usually over a short period of time, under circumstances that are often subject to change. Enter into a consultancy recognising the importance of building and sustaining a strong relationship based on mutual understanding and shared expectations.

In researching the book upon which this guide is based, a number of consultants and clients were asked what they thought made a good consultant and what made a good client. Below are some of their answers.

THE GOOD CONSULTANT

- Adapts quickly to different:
  - cultures
  - contexts
  - clients
  - requirements and terms of reference
- Listens and observes
- Understands different perspectives
- Is honest about what they can and cannot do
- Is empathetic and works in the client’s best interests
- Is flexible when circumstances change
- Researches and analyses skilfully
- Writes clearly and succinctly
- Delivers on time

THE GOOD CLIENT

- Is clear about:
  - why the consultancy is required
  - what they need from the consultant
  - how internal policies on consultants work
  - who needs to be involved
  - where information can be found
- Is committed to learning from the assignment
- Is available when agreed
- Can distinguish between bad news and bad consultancy practice
- Is welcoming and supportive
- Is flexible when circumstances change
- Provides agreed support
- Provides feedback to consultants
- Pays on time

2 DEFINING THE ASSIGNMENT

WHAT TYPE OF CONSULTANCY IS IT?

There are different types and styles of consultancy, which vary from a single short technical input to a longer term supporting role of a ‘critical friend’. In the case of a **short technical input**, the client may not be able to influence what methods the consultant might use and contact is often fairly minimal. In the case of the ‘**critical friend**’, the contact between the consultant and staff is intensive and the nature of what is required is modified as work progresses. It can be helpful to know where the consultancy may fit between these extremes.

FOR WHOM IS THE CONSULTANCY? THE TWO AIMS OF AN EVALUATION

In most cases, it is obvious that the consultant’s role is to serve the needs of the organisation and that the manager will make sure this is achieved. Programme evaluations can be problematic, as the consultancy may have to serve not only the needs of the organisation in improving its learning and management of future work but also satisfy the need to be accountable to the donor and other supporters. The increasing demands for evidence of impact from donors have tended to dominate and reduce the focus on the learning needs of the organisation. The manager’s job is to make sure their organisation’s needs are met.

WHO IS THE MANAGER FOR THE CLIENT ORGANISATION?

The client should have a manager for the consultancy who has the authority to make decisions on operational issues as they emerge and modify the terms of reference accordingly. This might include changing the scope of work (if, for example, some locations cannot be visited safely) or changing dates in the timeline if delays occur.

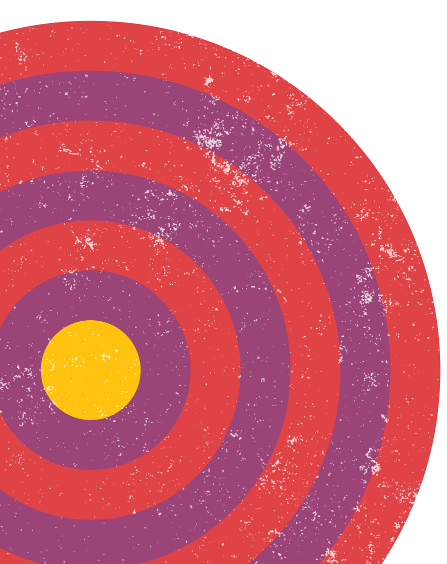
> CONSULTANTS WILL want to report to a single manager provided by the client. In the same way, a team of consultants will need to have a team leader who will act as manager. This clarity of leadership and reporting roles enables rapid decisions to be made when necessary.

3 TERMS OF REFERENCE

It is common in international development consulting to have the contract and terms of reference as two distinct documents. Usually the terms of reference are set out in an annex to the contract.

The contract defines the legal agreement; the payment schedule and "deliverables" that will trigger payments and who authorises them; tax and insurance issues and intellectual property rights. The terms of reference describe and define the work to be done.

The terms of reference is the key document in any consultancy. It will influence who applies for the work and how the work is carried out. When written well, it will not only serve as a key management tool but also sells the client organisation and the piece of work to potential consultants who may be in high demand. The consultant will refer to the terms of reference repeatedly during their work and it will be used to resolve uncertainties or disputes in relation to the scope of the work or the content of the final report.



TYPICAL CONTENTS OF A TERMS OF REFERENCE

- Title of the assignment
- Context of the assignment
- Purpose/objectives: why the work is necessary, and what it is expected to achieve
- Scope of the work (for example, a particular work unit, programme, or sector)
- Expected outcomes and products (reports/ documents/ workshops/ video and so on)
- Person specification: an outline of the skills and experience required
- How the work is to be carried out
- Schedule and logistics (including who does what between the client and consultant, within the scope of the consultancy assignment)
- Reporting requirements (during and end of contract)
- Overall timeframe and deadlines

TIGHT OR LOOSE ON METHODS?

How tightly does the client prescribe the methods to be followed and how much should be left to the discretion of the consultant? Being too prescriptive can stifle innovation and put off potential consultants, while a lack of specificity can result in misjudged bids or approaches from consultants who are not best qualified to do the work.

It is common for terms of reference to specify some elements of the methodology and to draw the attention of potential consultants to a range of sources of information and ideas but to leave space for modification and addition. Many include phrases like, 'Including, but not limited to, the following' before lists of sources and methods.

Consultants will want some guidance on how the client sees the work being done but will be uneasy if the methodology is too tightly prescribed. Some guidance about the methodology will give ideas on the depth and focus of the work but consultants need to be able to bring an independent approach to their work and they may have experience and methods that are specifically good for the assignment. This is partly why discussion and negotiation over sources and methods can improve the quality of the work done.

PRACTICAL ARRANGEMENTS

Who is responsible for making practical arrangements to carry out the assignment? The client is often best placed to make arrangements, for example for interviews, since they have the links to and relationships with many of the key informants.

The same may be true for travel and logistics. Where the client has a preferred travel agent and hotels or guest houses it may cost more and be less satisfactory to ask the consultant to make bookings as they will charge for time spent in making arrangements. It may be more efficient instead for the client to do this, while recognising that it adds to the management costs of the assignment.

THE REAL ESSENTIALS

It is important to be clear about the essential outputs that must be delivered by the consultant. It is also helpful add 'for the client to be clear in the terms of reference about the binding constraints that they are operating under, for example, meetings for which the results of the assignment are needed or the deadline for reporting to a donor.

CONSULTANTS WILL ask what decisions or processes depend on the results of the assignment, and about the deadlines and how the results will be used. They need this information to understand the context of the timetable and the client's overall motivation for the work to avoid misunderstandings that could hinder the successful completion of the assignment.

DRAFTING THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

Before setting the timetable, ask the key people who will be involved or affected by the consultancy about their time constraints. This will include the managers of the programme, the staff who will respond to the recommendations, advisory staff and those who can provide access to information or ideas, for example, staff who were involved in earlier stages of the work but have moved on.

Collect comments and ideas from these people on the terms of reference but do not automatically include all the suggestions as this can overload the assignment. Recently, there has been a tendency to overload terms of reference for evaluations by adding the DAC criteria of Relevance, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Impact and Sustainability[2] in addition to specific criteria formulated for the particular evaluation in question. It is important to keep control of the terms of reference to make sure they define clear and achievable tasks. The manager should negotiate priorities among the various demands of internal stakeholders, rather than leaving that to the consultant. Ask for advice from any colleagues who have managed assignments that they think went well and get their views on the draft terms of reference.

Consultants frequently find that the terms of reference are over-ambitious and describe a very large number of areas of enquiry without sufficiently defining the level of detail required. It is almost always necessary to discuss its meaning to arrive at a clear shared understanding of what is required by the client.

Consultants will ask about the priorities of the different elements of the terms of reference. They will want to focus on the most important elements and therefore need to know which, if any, can be treated lightly or dropped.

GETTING GOOD RECOMMENDATIONS START FROM THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

Being clear about the overall purpose of the consultancy includes being clear about what the organisation hopes to be able to do as a result of the findings even though this may not be a formal part of the terms of reference. There is a key principle in consulting that requires the consultant to make recommendations that are useful and can be put into operation. But it is a common complaint from clients that recommendations are impossible to carry out. This can happen if the consultant is being thoughtless or if the consultant is not adequately briefed by the terms of reference or the client on the context of the consultancy.

CONSULTANTS WILL want to know that their recommendations will be taken seriously and made use of and that this is not just a tick box exercise.

2 http://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/dac criteriaforevaluatingdevelopmentassistance.htm

PLANNING THE TIMING: WHEN TO APPOINT THE CONSULTANT

It is unfortunately true that much consultancy work is arranged at short notice. There is a tendency for clients to start looking for consultants too close to the start time for the assignment and for consultants to keep their options open for future work. Planning a consultancy like a programme evaluation should be easy because the need is known well in advance. Problems tend to occur when there are delays in recruiting a consultant and pressure builds as the deadline for the evaluation report approaches. An excusable cause of requiring a consultant at very short notice is where a previously selected consultant has to withdraw at a late stage when other preparations are in place. There is, in theory, no reason why a consultant could not be engaged some months before they are required to start.

CONSULTANTS' COMMON CONCERN

The client wanted an immediate start despite knowing a year ago that an evaluation would be necessary. They wanted it finished in two weeks to coincide with a management meeting.

IS AN INCEPTION PHASE NEEDED?

For larger or more complex assignments, an inception phase can be very useful in providing both sides the time to move from a more general understanding of the terms of reference to a tighter definition of the work.

The inception phase report may replace some components of the terms of reference. The great advantage for the consultant is that they are able to design the work and make plans based on a clearer understanding of what materials are available and a better understanding of what the client needs.

“THERE IS A TENDENCY FOR CLIENTS TO START LOOKING FOR CONSULTANTS TOO CLOSE TO THE START TIME AND FOR CONSULTANTS TO KEEP THEIR OPTIONS OPEN FOR FUTURE WORK.”

An inception phase costs a number of consultant days to draft the inception phase report and some staff time to respond to it. This may be worthwhile for the greater clarity afforded on both sides and the investment in shared understanding of the tasks. Sometimes the same results can be achieved through a more informal process in which the client and consultant agree on some clarifications and modifications to the terms of reference. The client may need to make the point that the agreement replaces some elements of the terms of reference and requires acknowledgment from the consultant. The important point is to have a mutually agreed way forward for the rest of the assignment and have this confirmed in writing, which may only be an exchange of emails.

4 CONTRACT AND BUDGET

FEES

The largest cost element of a consultancy is the fees. The total fees are usually calculated as a daily rate multiplied by the number of days required. Many organisations have agreed ranges for daily rates so the calculations of an adequate budget are not difficult. The actual budget will depend on the consultant who is selected for the work. Choosing the right consultant tends to involve several exchanges, which cover availability, skills and fee rates.

When negotiating a total budget for fees, the most common approach is to start by discussing how much work can be done within the available budget. It is also possible to assess the number of days required to do the work and then negotiate on how much this might cost. Consultants will admit that they often do more work than the paid days in a consultancy. This is clearly not ideal but points to the tendency for the agreement on the work that needs to be done to take precedence.

See the table below for some examples of how the overall budget for fees is affected more by changing the number of days than by changing the daily rate. Consultants know this too!

People budgeting for consultancy for the first time may be surprised by the sums involved and it may be worthwhile looking at the section in *Effective Consultancies in Development and Humanitarian Programmes* that deals with how consultants set their rates and considers the costs of other services that are obtained from freelance providers.

If it's difficult to agree on a daily rate, it may be easier to negotiate a lump sum for the job in which a figure will be agreed upon for the delivery of the products and the number of days supplied does not feature in the contract.

Overall, the total fees to be paid and the number of working days must make an attractive combination that will motivate the consultant to do a good job and demonstrate to them that this is what is expected.

CONSULTANTS' COSTS

Consultants are running a business and they should cover their own business costs, for instance, providing their own computers, routine communications, stationery and other office materials.

CALCULATIONS OF BUDGET FOR FEES

	Number of days				
Daily rate	**10**	**12**	**15**	**17**	**20**
350	3500	4200	5250	5950	7000
375	3750	4500	5625	6375	7500
400	4000	4800	6000	6800	8000
425	4250	5100	6375	7225	8500
450	4500	5400	6750	7650	9000

Exceptions occur where the assignment requires a lot of costly communications (for example, telephone interviews) or a lot of materials (for example, workshops). Most organisations have specified lists of what can and cannot be claimed by consultants.

BE OPEN ABOUT THE AVAILABLE BUDGET

The person managing the call for tenders will need to decide whether or not to publish the limits of the budget. If the available budget is stated the request for proposals, the bids will all tend to be close to the limit. The alternative view is that not revealing the budget will result in a wider range of bids containing a wider range of ideas but there is a danger of wasting the time of both the client and the consultants who propose work with a budget beyond the means. If the budget is realistic and fits well with the work described, it should be possible to choose between some high quality proposals and secure the best value and most interesting bid.

STAFF TIME COSTS

A consultancy will also cost the organisation in the time required by staff to brief and manage the consultant, and to be interviewed and respond to findings. The key people involved will include the overall consultancy manager, admin staff managing the contract, the staff who will implement the recommendations and the managers who oversee the programme where the consultancy is taking place. Others may be important in providing access to information and ideas or in providing introductions to other key informants. In a smaller organisation, many of these roles will be played by the same staff.

5 FINDING AND RECRUITING CONSULTANTS

Consultants are freelance, self-employed professionals or staff of consulting companies. They work in teams or individually, directly with the client or through a company, and a team can be made up of company staff and freelance consultants working together.

FINDING A CONSULTANT

It is common for clients to find consultants through personal links and networks, and while this may be effective, it is weak in terms of competition, openness and accountability. Increasingly, organisational procurement policies and donor contracts require that a transparent, competitive process has been followed, with the rigour required being proportionate and varying according to the value of the contract.

To reach a range of potential consultants and improve the impartiality and credibility of the recruitment process, use NGO/charity websites like Bond or NCVO, free digital networks like Pelican Initiative or LinkedIn or pay to advertise on sites like devnetjobs.org. This does not exclude advertising the post though personal networks, asking colleagues for recommendations, or encouraging particular consultants or companies to apply.

Getting recommendations is an important part of the process and although this does not make it a more open procedure it provides an element of cross-checking. It is important to know if someone is recommending a consultant or just passing on their contact details.

Experienced individual consultants seem to find that work comes to them and they do relatively little searching. Many clients search initially through their own networks or ask for personal recommendations from colleagues. It is common to send out email descriptions of the assignment to contacts and ask them to pass it on to others who might be interested, but be clear if someone is being asked directly about their own interest in the work.

ONE CONSULTANT OR A TEAM?

This question may be answered by the size of the budget available for the consultancy as well as by the range of skills and experience required in the work. Choosing to work with a team may require a different selection process, for example, through competitive tenders (see below).

The client will also need to consider not just the individual skills and experience of the team but also their experience of working together previously. It might be necessary to interview possible teams for the consultancy and perhaps require them to present some ideas on how they would approach the job.

It is common to ask for evidence from previous work and this has become easier as more development organisations including NGOs and consulting companies publish reports on open websites. It is not always easy to know what role a consultant has played in a job and their name on the report is not a guarantee that they added value to the work.

Ask colleagues to make recommendations or help review examples of previous work or interview potential consultants. The person managing the consultancy will have the final decision but advice from colleagues can be helpful. Having a colleague take part in interviews can be very useful when interviewing consultants who have a lot more experience of a particular sector or geographic area or of consultancy work.

LOCAL OR INTERNATIONAL CONSULTANTS?

This question is less about about the person who might be selected and more about the knowledge and experience required. Is detailed knowledge of the local context and a wide range of experience in different places needed to provide perspective and a different point of view? Usually a balancing act is required between getting the experience needed and as many of the skills as possible while also managing availability.

FREELANCE OR A CONSULTANCY COMPANY?

Using consultancy companies is one way of getting better quality assurance and a team of consultants, as companies usually have a wide range of consultants available. It may be more costly than paying a freelance consultant because companies have higher overheads but this may pay off in terms of quality assurance and time saved in putting a team together. Companies are more likely to scan websites and groups for work opportunities but are less likely to apply for small contracts or contracts for only one consultant. Companies are found in the same ways that individuals are found and word-of-mouth and reputation play important roles.

WHY HAVE A PERSON SPECIFICATION?

It is very helpful to both sides if the consultancy advertisement is clear about the skills and experience required. Usually the key point is the experience which may be of a specific geographic location or of a particular kind of work (facilitation, training) or a particular sector (health, water and sanitation and so on).

THE SKILLS OF BEING A CONSULTANT AS A CRITERION OF CHOICE

Some skills are needed in all consultancy work and may be as important as specific areas of knowledge or experience. For example, the ability to understand a situation quickly, to get on well with people and, perhaps above all, to be able to write quickly and clearly. In most cases of consultancy, so much depends upon the final report that writing skills are crucial.

GETTING A BROADER CHOICE OF CONSULTANTS

The way that consultancies are managed means that the availability of candidate consultants comes to play a major role in the selection process. If the client has flexibility over timing then they can have a much greater selection of consultants available to choose from. Lack of time is probably the biggest problem in selecting the best consultants, but an adequately-timed comprehensive and competitive recruitment process can yield the best results in selection.

A two or three stage process can be fairer and draw in a wider range of candidates. It is possible to start simply by asking for a one or two-page expression of interest and the CVs of potential candidates. This may be enough to select a short list of two or three candidates for interview or to ask for a full proposal.

The client could go on from the expression of interest to require a full proposal and then shortlist or select on the basis of the quality of the proposals or tenders received. A call for tenders requires presenting a significant amount of information and designing a framework for the tenders and putting in the time to examine the tenders received.

A PROPORTIONATE RECRUITMENT PROCESS

It is important to design a recruitment process that is proportionate to the overall costs of the consultancy or to the importance of results. Some agencies have budget thresholds which trigger a more formal recruitment procedure. However, it can be argued that the decision to engage in a broader more elaborate process should be determined by the importance of the expected results. Don't forget that consultants do not get paid when they are pitching for work and so the requirements should be reasonable and in line with the importance of the piece of work.

"IT IS IMPORTANT TO DESIGN A RECRUITMENT PROCESS THAT IS PROPORTIONATE TO THE OVERALL COSTS OF THE CONSULTANCY OR TO THE IMPORTANCE OF RESULTS."

6 MANAGING CONSULTANTS

NEGOTIATING FEES AND TIMETABLES

Agreeing a contract almost always requires some negotiation. Usually the key elements are the fees and the timetable. Fees are negotiated (see above) and it may take a few exchanges before a satisfactory arrangement is reached.

The timetable may also require some negotiation so that the needs of the client are met. Although there may be greater flexibility than is suggested by the dates posted in the advertisement of the consultancy, it is important to keep the deadline in sight and, if a compromise is possible, the best alternative to meeting the deadline.

MANAGEMENT BASED ON DELIVERABLES

The contract will specify payment amounts and timing and the deliverables (usually written reports) that will allow payments to be made. This helps the consultant with their cash flow so they don't have to wait to the end of the work to get paid. This is more important for solo freelancers than it is for consultancy companies.

Typically payments are made on acceptance of an inception report, on delivery of a draft report and on acceptance of the final report. Note the difference between payment on delivery and payment on acceptance. The percentages could be something like 40:40:20 so that the consultancy has a clear end point with the delivery of a satisfactory product and does not create cash flow problems for the consultant. Clearly there is a question of reasonable behaviour on both sides in the production of the final report where the client makes reasonable demands for improvements on the draft and the consultant makes reasonable efforts to complete it. On both sides, the main issue is likely to be the time required to get comments from the client and the time required to get amendments done by the consultant.

THE EXPECTATION OF RECIPROCITY IN LAW

One key element of contract law is the expectation of reciprocal arrangements in which both sides have rights and responsibilities that are in some way equitable. The client agrees to provide some information and access and to pay for certain products, and the consultant agrees to work hard and deliver the products. In a permanent post, these reciprocal rights and responsibilities are laid out in fine detail in job descriptions and employment contracts and renegotiated in regular reviews. In a consultancy, the entire process is condensed into a short period of time and is governed by the contents of the contract and terms of reference.

It is likely that one or both documents will need some modifications to get the best out of the consultancy as the consultant is selected, the work gets started and the situation changes. Modifications have to remain fair to both sides.

A BINDING CONTRACT

Once the contract is agreed the work can start, although many consultants have experience of starting without a written contract. Under English law a verbal contract can be binding so if the client asks the consultant to start work, say in a phone call, and the consultant starts to put in time on the work then the client can be liable to pay appropriate fees even if the work is cancelled at a later date. Although this is the legal position, there are very few legal disputes around consultancies in international development as neither side has much appetite for legal action.

MAKING INFORMATION AVAILABLE

Much of the core work of the consultancy involves making information available to the consultant and helping them to get in touch with informants. This is a very special area of work because the consultant usually starts the work without a clear idea of what they need to see and who they need to meet. As the work progresses they will come across both documents and people they decide they want to see and it is important the client creates some flexibility in the timing to make sure that additional meetings can be arranged.

The client has a responsibility to make available material that might be useful to the consultancy and to identify informants who could be helpful. The consultant will ask for all relevant material but they won't know if they have received it or not. It is not good practice to criticise a report from a consultancy that does not include evidence from a source that was not made available.

REGULAR REPORTING FROM CONSULTANTS

In a consultancy of more than a month it may be wise to require regular feedback from the consultant. This is just part of the 'no surprises' approach in which both sides agree to inform the other if things are not going to plan or if they see potential problems. It is reasonable for the client to say that they would appreciate a no surprises approach because it is so much more difficult to manage reports that contain unexpected and negative findings. A regular update might just be one page of notes about activities that are planned and completed and a section to draw attention to potential issues with timing or other contract issues.

There is usually no problem with asking for an update on progress and the client has a responsibility for checking that the work is proceeding normally. The consultant also may want to check on how their work is being seen and if preliminary findings seem reasonable to the client. Checking initial observations can be a way to identify sources of information that were not mentioned in the earlier briefing.

DEALING WITH PROBLEMS AND DELAYS

It is always likely that something will not go as expected and some agility is usually required to make the best of the situation. In most cases, the difficulties will arise out of unforeseen circumstances and no one is to blame. The client has to decide how to manage the difficulties which usually means accepting a delay to the work or accepting a reduction in scope or depth in the work.

Where a consultant asks for more time, the client will need to assess how much this is due to genuinely unforeseeable circumstances and how much the consultant is at fault for not having thought through the work. If the consultant has predicted this difficulty in their regular updates then it may be acceptable to grant either extra time or extra paid days (budget permitting).

Added paid days should not normally be accepted when it comes to delivering an acceptable consultancy report. The consultant should be expecting to work on the draft material until it is acceptable. But overall both sides should respect the concept of reciprocity and shared responsibility for the quality of the work done.

7 FEEDBACK, FINALISING AND FOLLOW UP

THE REPORT AND FEEDBACK

It is important to remember the overall purpose of the consultancy when reviewing the report, especially where it is an evaluation. It is not possible for the consultant to know the programme as well as the staff but they should offer new and different ways of looking at some aspects of the work. The job of the consultancy manager is to get the best out of the report and use the elements that provide helpful contributions. Nobody likes to have their work criticised and this may be particularly true when the criticism comes from a consultant who has spent a relatively short time looking at the programme.

All consultants have had the experience of a client finding fault with small details and not looking seriously at the main messages of a report.

“IT IS GOOD TO STRUCTURE THE REPORT INSISTING ON A SHORT SUMMARY AND CONCISE PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.”

MANAGING FEEDBACK TO CONSULTANTS

The client may have to manage potentially unhelpful feedback from colleagues who feel that the findings are unfair or incorrect. A good consultancy report will clearly separate observations, conclusions and recommendations. This should make it easier to manage responses as it will be clear if the disagreement is over the observations or the judgement of the consultant. Where the disagreement is on observations it may be necessary to provide additional information or interpretation.

It is common to underestimate the amount of time it takes to get comments from staff and colleagues on a consultancy report. This is partly why it is good to structure the report insisting on a short summary and concise presentation of findings and recommendations.

Consultants may put in their timetable a preferred date for receiving comments from the client and the time they will require to produce a final draft based on the comments. However, they may simply suggest that the final draft will be delivered ‘x days after receipt of comments/feedback’. It is important to remember that the consultant will not normally be paid some proportion of their fees until the final report is accepted by the client.

Therefore unreasonable delays in making comments or unreasonable requests for modifications are likely to have an unfair impact on their financial situation. Consultants also need to schedule their different pieces of work, sometimes running assignments in parallel or back-to-back, so unanticipated delays can also cause significant problems around consultant availability. Nevertheless, a client must not accept poor or incomplete work especially not just because of inconvenient timing.

If the consultant has managed a ‘no surprises’ approach, perhaps by repeated briefings on their findings or feedback sessions on what they are beginning to conclude, then the report should be easy to deal with. However, it is also often true that people deal better with criticism of their work when it is being discussed than when they see it written down in a formal report. The person managing the consultancy may have to manage the staff reactions to the report as well as the formulation of a management response.

A MANAGEMENT RESPONSE TO THE FINDINGS

There should be a management response even if it is to reject the findings or accept the need to think more deeply about the issues raised. There is no obligation to share the management response with the consultant and one of the difficulties of working as a consultant is not knowing about the impact of one’s work. It is, however, very rewarding for a consultant to get feedback from a client and it may build a better relationship with the consultant if they might be used again.

FINALISING THE REPORT

Some agencies include their management response to consultancies in the consultancy report itself. This makes sense and certainly helps appraisals of the consultancy at a later date. It is often difficult to find out what happened after a consultancy report was delivered if the management response is buried somewhere in internal emails and files that a subsequent consultancy may fail to find.

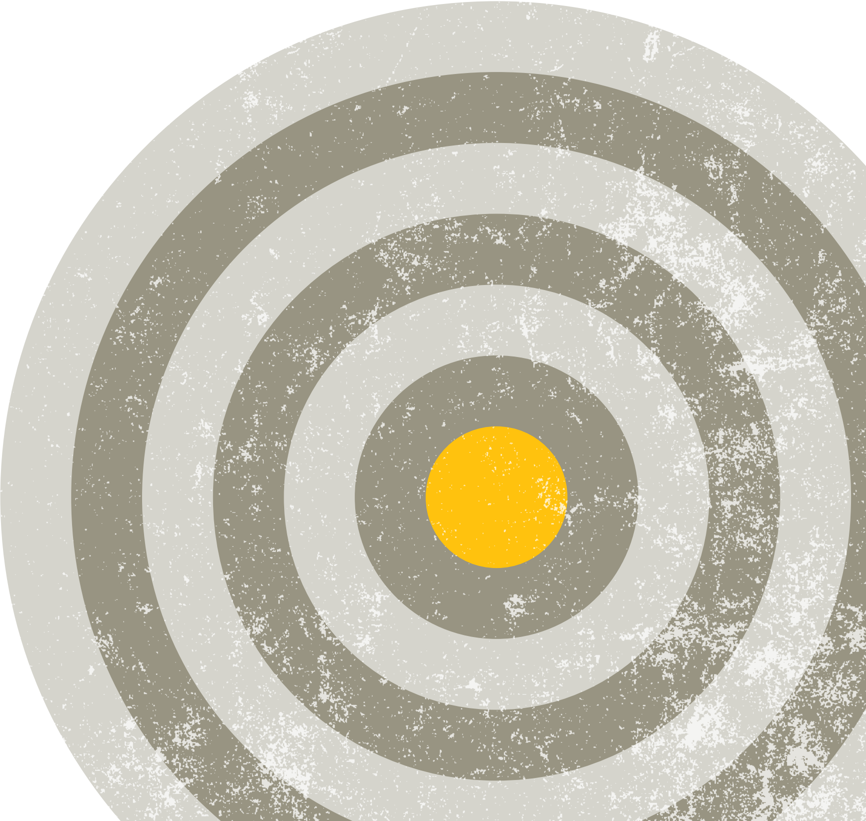
A consultancy is usually only useful if it leads to action. The consultant should have focused on the specific situation of the client organisation and made their recommendations as easy to make operational as possible. This is when the time taken to define the terms of reference and find the right consultant, and manage them well, will be rewarded.

8 FURTHER RESOURCES

Effective Consultancies in Development and Humanitarian Programmes, by John Rowley and Frances Rubin, the full book upon which this guide is based, can be downloaded or bought:
policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/effective-consultancies-in-development-and-humanitarian-programmes-115364

developmentbookshop.com/effective-consultancies-in-development-and-humanitarian-programmes-pb

For further resources, go to **bond.org.uk/resources**.



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