

Using Consultants

It has been said that consultants are people who borrow your watch to tell you the time. Some might even keep the watch and suggest a retainer for further time checks, before selling it back to you just as the battery runs out.

Like all good tales, this one has a grain of truth. For example, interpretive planners certainly gather information from the people who know the subject best. However, a good consultant will combine this with their own knowledge, experience and skills to reveal opportunities, overcome constraints and chart a path to project success.

Every situation is unique and consultants shouldn't be expected to parachute in with ready-made answers. They are more useful as part of a project team, acting as catalyst, provocateur, idea factory, arbitrator and voice of reason. This may entail them asking some difficult questions in order to raise everybody's understanding of the real issues.

At its best, working with consultants is an economical way of accessing experienced labour, specialist skills, alternative approaches and new ideas. At its worst, it can be an ineffective, unproductive and costly waste of time. What makes the difference?

Briefs and budgets

Understanding why a project is being carried out and what outcomes are required is obviously vital. A clear and comprehensive brief provides the basic foundation for a successful plan. Briefs should clearly describe the project goals, including its background, scope, aims and objectives, outputs, timescales and budget¹.

Project resourcing is also a major issue. The funds and timescales available must reflect the scale of issues to be resolved and the quality of thinking required. Although some consultants will take on under-resourced projects, this carries a high risk for the client of paying for something that is worth nothing. The consultant also risks being associated with sub-standard work.

Selection process

Choosing the right consultant is the make or break point for any project. This creates the conditions for the work to be enjoyable and highly successful or for it to devour time and resources for little benefit. Selecting committed, creative, quality driven, client-focused consultants will help produce a 'can-do' atmosphere in which anything is possible.

Reliance on rigid competitive tendering that favours the lowest price bid is a major cause of project failure. If compelled to use this method, changing the emphasis from price to ability, reliability, compatibility, quality and value for money can be achieved simply by stating the available budget in the brief. If freed from the artificial

constraints of competitive tendering, it is often better to simply identify the best consultant for the job and thrash out an agreement with them within the available budget.

Unless as part of a well-resourced competition, consultants shouldn't be asked to suggest solutions or develop designs at the selection stage. This regrettable practice produces poor results by fixing the project outcomes before any in-depth consideration of the full project parameters and possibilities can take place. Requiring this free work also puts smaller practices under huge strain and is against the professional code of conduct for many consultants.

Despite the selection process being critical to the project's success, consultants still receive tender requests that:

- Arrive unannounced, without a call to check suitability, availability or interest.
- Lack clearly stated aims or outcomes on which to assess the work required.
- Have no indication of the available budget.
- Are sent to eight or more consultants, making tendering uneconomical and increasing fee levels across the industry to pay for unnecessary work.
- Require unpaid design proposals before proper research, consultation and planning of objectives, themes, storylines or media.
- Are part of a spurious tender process where the preferred contractor has already (often correctly) been identified.

Project management

Having commissioned the right consultant, the challenge is to create a structured yet flexible and supportive project environment where everybody's interests are aligned. Successful projects are often those where a strong partnership approach is forged between consultant and client for the duration of the project and beyond. The consultant becomes an integral part of the client's team of project stakeholders who are jointly responsible for ensuring the success of the endeavour.

This partnership and team orientated approach can involve the client group in additional work, but usually produces a better result, in addition to transferring knowledge and skills from consultant to the client organisation. A true win:win scenario.

Aaron Lawton, interpretation, visitor experience and tourism consultant

¹See p8 for further guidance on interpretive design briefs.

"To fulfil a dream, to be allowed to sweat over lonely labour, to be given the chance to create, is the meat and potatoes of life. The money is the gravy." Bette Davis, actress (1908 - 1989)