

# Hospital News<sup>™</sup>

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## A CEO'S Perspective on Consultants

by STEVE L. UROSEVICH

After 30 years as a healthcare institution executive, I have had the opportunity to use the services of many consulting firms. My experiences have been positive, negative, and even humorous. Through it all though, I have learned why consultants can be helpful, when is the best time to use consultants, and how to choose the right one for the task at hand.

The popular view of consultants may be best stated in Scott Adams' book, *The Dilbert Principle*:

"Consultants have credibility because they are not dumb enough to be regular employees of your company.

Consultants eventually leave, which makes them scapegoats for major management blunders.

Consultants can schedule time on the boss's calendar because they don't have your reputation as a whiney little troublemaker who constantly brings up unsolvable issues.

Consultants will return your boss's calls because it's all billable time.

Consultants work preposterously long hours, thus making regular employees feel like worthless toads for working only 60 hours a week."

Despite Mr. Adams' humorous observations there are thoughtful, cost-efficient, and effective benefits that healthcare organizations can derive from strategic use of outside advisors.

I engaged consultants because:

**Consultants offer added value and credibility.** They bring industry-wide experience from multiple organizations and can share best practice solutions for similar problems. They bring objectivity because they are unencumbered by internal politics.

**Consultants are focused.** Without the distraction of multiple responsibilities that face today's healthcare managers, consultants can devote their full energy to a project, while partnering with employees to identify issues and create plans of correction.

**Consultants can speed up the work process.** Often consulting projects are completed faster than if internal staff tries to fit the project into already busy schedules. And in today's fast-paced environment, timing can be critical.

**Consultants do eventually leave.** Without creating permanent overhead, problems can be addressed and solved cost-effectively with consultants.

I often engaged consultants when:

**Internal consensus is difficult to achieve.** Sometimes an objective third party provides the needed catalyst to get staff entrenched in their beliefs to take a fresh look.

**Temporary staffing gaps occur.** Consultants can provide continuity for an organization while permanent staff is recruited.

**Current staff lacks expertise in a critical area.** Outsourcing many times is less expensive in the long run, especially if the knowledge is only required one time or on a very occasional basis.

I successfully chose consultants using the following criteria:

**How well do they listen?** Good consultants are not afflicted with diarrhea of words and constipation of thought. They focus on the engagement at hand, not the next contract they hope to get signed.

**What is their non-consulting experience?** Effective consultants have hands-on experience. It is most effective when the staff assigned to the engagement have been in positions that they are now being asked to advise.

**Is their work guaranteed?** Superior consultants will warranty their work. If results fall short of what is expected, they should work to correct it or offer to accept reduced fees for the project.

**Do they take a partnership approach?** The best firms partner with your staff, creating a framework for teamwork. They do not position themselves as the experts with all the answers.

**What is their success rate?** Good consulting firms can demonstrate a high level of success as demonstrated by excellent client referrals, extensive repeat business, and low staff turnover. All these go a long way to establish that most important intangible element – trust.

Now I have joined the ranks of consultants. In the transition, my biggest eye opening experience has been that while as a CEO my phone calls always were returned, now as a "vendor" my calls oftentimes go unanswered. This is both frustrating and humbling. However, I also have enjoyed the satisfaction of providing quality service for a client and seeing improved results. I remember how good consultants helped my institutions over the years, and I am now using my perspective as a former CEO to help others get the most from their consulting engagements.

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