

WHY HIRE A CONSULTANT?

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There are basically three reasons why people might retain consultants:

- Use their specific expertise,
- Acquire their knowledge or
- Leverage their experience and network.

Let's briefly discuss each one.

USE A CONSULTANT'S SPECIFIC EXPERTISE

This is the typical way of using consultants: external expertise is brought in to address a specific, one time need. This covers a very broad range of activities, such as implementing and validating an analytical method, complying with a regulation or standard, solving a manufacturing problem, improving a management process or obtaining critical review of a business plan. Consultants with a specific expertise are also often used as expert witnesses in legal cases.

For these kinds of projects, a consultant should be an expert, a person offering in-depth, up-to-date expertise in a well defined field.

ACQUIRE A CONSULTANT'S KNOWLEDGE

If a new skill is going to be needed in an organization on an ongoing basis, it can be acquired through training provided by consultants in that field. This can take the form of public courses offered by professional organizations, such as ACS, or through in-house training sessions. The latter offers the advantage of being customized to the client's specific needs and prevents the client's interest in a certain area from being brought to public attention.

Beyond relevant expertise on the topic being taught, a teaching consultant should obviously also offer good oral communication skills.

LEVERAGE A CONSULTANT'S EXPERIENCE

Unlike the use of consultants to address a specific issue, as discussed above, what I mean here is *the use of consultants to produce unexpected outcomes*. For example, external consultants can bring considerable value to brainstorming sessions aimed at finding new markets for existing competencies, identifying synergistic partners, defining new products, etc.

The skill to look for in a consultant for this kind of projects is breadth, rather than depth: a broad understanding of technologies, markets, and preferably both is what is needed.

In my opinion, creating unexpected outcomes is an area where consultants are underutilized.

A FINAL THOUGHT

Across all three circumstances discussed above, another reason to hire a consultant is to make sure a job gets done. Who doesn't have a strategic project that keeps getting pushed back by the day-to-day demands on one's time?

Let's look at just one example of this type of situation. It has been my experience, as a scientist and as a research manager, that scientists are a lot more motivated to move ahead with their research than to write-up their past work. This recording of past work is critical, however. It allows, for instance, an attorney to draft and file a patent application. This writing activity can effectively be outsourced to a consultant competent in the field at hand. Exploratory activities, such as market studies, external technology reviews and even laboratory work also fall in this "often pushed back" category.

Give the project to a consultant. It will get top priority!

A polymer chemist, Dr. Bigwood mpbigwood@polymerphases.com worked 13 years in industrial research and research management for the largest producer of ion exchange resins before embarking on a career of technical consulting relating to the design and development of polymeric materials, expert witness work, and synthesis of custom polymers and polymeric materials. More information about Dr. Bigwood can be found [here](#).

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