



## *How to Hire Computer Consultants*

In today's business climate the odds are good that most companies will at some time or another hire outside help in the form of a consultant. This article will attempt to provide some tips on how to find, hire and then work with consultants. While we will concentrate mainly on computer consultants, most of this information would apply to any type of consultant.

Your first task if you're considering a consultant is to define your needs. Do you want to hire a consultant to develop a specific piece of software? Are you looking for strategy advice? Do you need training for your employees? Or do you just need someone to assist with day-to-day operations? Consultants generally are hired as either contract workers or employees, often referred to respectively as 1099 or W-2 based on the IRS forms used to document their compensation. These types of hiring and the issues involved are well beyond the scope of this document, even probably beyond the comprehension of mere mortals. You may wish to discuss this with your freakishly intelligent accountant (a must have for any business) or read the cryptic IRS document at [http://www.irs.gov/prod/bus\\_info/pub1976.pdf](http://www.irs.gov/prod/bus_info/pub1976.pdf).

Once you've defined why you need a consultant, you need to find some candidates. You can certainly resort to all the usual resources: yellow pages, newspaper and magazine ads, online job sites. Be sure to look for a consultant or firm on a scale that matches your project. Andersen Consulting or other mega-firms probably won't be interested in your 2 day data-entry program. Be sure to explore other methods of finding a consultant as well. Word-of-mouth is a great way to find people, so talk with other business people that you trust or check with your local Chamber of Commerce.

After you've settled on some potential consultants, check out their web sites. Given the popularity of the world-wide web, it's pretty much unacceptable that a technical firm would not have a web site. Most especially, if you want to hire a firm to do web work, you will want to see the work they have done for themselves.

Next, it's time to interview candidates. Depending upon the size of the firm, you may make your initial contact with a salesperson or with the technical person directly. If you do initially contact a salesperson, try to speak with the technical staff as soon as possible – the salesperson will generally not give you a good indication of the type of technical staff you'll be dealing with. Remember, hiring a consultant is similar to hiring an employee. You want to make your decision based on the people you'll be dealing with, not based on the sales staff.

Most consultants will tend to describe the work that they do based on the tools they use. For example, "I develop database applications using Microsoft Visual Basic and SQL Server." Unless you have a technical background, that makes little sense to you, and it does little to describe the consultant's skills. Hiring a consultant based on that would be like hiring a carpenter based on his statement "I use Stanley hammers and Dewalt radial saws," while learning nothing about what he's actually built with those tools. For the most part, when first interviewing a software developer you should focus more on what they've built than on the tools they use.

Another annoying foible of most consultants is their use of industry jargon. If you have trouble following all the terminology a consultant uses when talking about projects, don't hesitate to request a translation. The consultant's job is to handle the technical details of the project while helping you to understand what's being done. If you can't understand what the consultant is telling you, it will definitely lead to trouble – you'll find yourself unable to monitor your project while relying blindly on your consultant. One hallmark of a good consultant is the ability to explain their technology in an easy-to-understand fashion, and you should run from any consultant that cannot do this. Don't accept statements like "Trust me, you just wouldn't understand this."

As mentioned above, when interviewing consultants you'll want to learn what types of projects they have completed in the past. Any software developer should be able to demonstrate for you some programs that they have written or web sites they've developed. In addition to this, request a list of clients and/or references with whom you can speak. Many developers will tell you "I can't show you my software," or "I can't list my clients because they don't want it known they hired outside help." This is fairly common, and should be expected. However, unless you're trying to hire a software developer for your nuclear missile system, the consultant should be able to show two or three projects and provide several references. Very few consultants have a completely confidential client list, and you should be suspicious of anyone who will not provide references. This is another spot where your own network can be very helpful in getting information about a consultant.

Once you've narrowed your field of consultants, you may want to do a competitive bid for your project. In order to do this, you'll have to specify your project in appropriate detail. You may need to work with one or more consultants to get this specification done. Conversely, you may wish to just hire one consultant to do the specification as the first phase of a multi-phase project. While it will generally cost you some money to get the specification done, the time and effort saved in avoiding later mistakes will be well worth it. Your consultant will generally offer either a flat-rate bid for the project, or an hourly rate with an estimate of hours required. It's important to nail down these details before getting into the project. It's equally important to determine who will own the product(s) upon completion. If you're developing a program to automate a key business process, you'll probably want to ensure that the consultant does not sell it to a competitor. This ownership will probably be affected by the Works Made for Hire section of the 1976 Copyright Act, which you can find online at <http://www.loc.gov/copyright/circs/circ09.pdf>.

This has been an extremely short introduction to some of the issues involved in hiring a web developer. We encourage you to contact us if you'd like more information.

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