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If One Wants a Good Result, One Needs a Good Consult

Pam Hackbart-Dean

Imagine having all the staff, time, knowledge, and resources to work on those long-awaited projects that keep getting put on the back burner. Although the staff of any archives would like to do it all, from planning to execution, this may be beyond its normal workload. In this situation, a qualified, specialized consultant can make the completion of one or more projects a reality. A consultant can deliver specific work or a certain product in a shorter time frame than may be possible in-house.

What exactly is a consultant? According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, it is one who gives professional advice or services. The *Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science* is more specific: a consultant is "a person with knowledge and experience in a specialized field, hired by a library or other institution to analyze a problem and provide professional or technical advice concerning possible solutions, especially when the required level of expertise is not available within the organization or the opinion of an outsider is desirable. A consultant may

also participate in the planning and implementation phase of a recommended change."[1]

Richard J. Cox summarizes the consultant's function as: "At the most fundamental level, consultants are about problem solving."[2] Usually there are three types of consulting functions: evaluation, planning and development, and project rescue. Evaluation, the most typical, generally involves analysis of background materials, a site visit, and the creation of a final report. In planning and development, the consultant is hired to help shape a desired change or to create something new. Project rescue calls for corrections in a stalled or foundering project or program.[3]

Consultants often serve in an advisory role to make recommendations and provide options. One of the options a consultant may suggest is to hire an outside firm or a project archivist/contractor to undertake a specific activity. In such a case, the job would be specified with time frames, deliverables or action items, and a payment plan.

Archival consultants, specifically, can offer expertise in the general institutional evaluation of an archives, archival program planning, and space planning and management, as well as assist in the design and implementation of special projects that involve the use of archival records and manuscripts. They may be trained and experienced in the appraisal of the research and institutional (evidential, fiscal, or legal) value of paper and electronic records and all things that make up special collections.[4] They also may be knowledgeable in the processing or cataloging of these unique materials, including the creation of finding aids

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[1] Joan Reitz, *Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science*, 2006 (online resource) http://lu.com/odlis/search.cfm (accessed June 13, 2007).

[2] Richard J. Cox, *Archives & Archivists in the Information Age* (New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, Inc., 2005): 36.

[3] Virginia Stewart, "Transactions in Archival Consulting," *Midwestern Archivist* 10 (1985): 107.

[4] Karen Benedict, "The Records Management and Archives Consultant," in *Using Consultants in Libraries and Information Centers*, ed. Edward D. Garten (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1992): 130.

or guides to collections. Finally, consultants may be familiar with preservation or conservation of rare historical records.

ADVANTAGES

Consultants or consulting firms may offer experience or specialized expertise that is not available in one's own institution. They may have successfully completed a project similar to the one under consideration and can therefore offer information based on that experience: what worked, what was achieved, and what problems were encountered. Furthermore, a consultant may be more aware of outside resources that could help in the successful completion of the project. This gives the consultant a broader, more comprehensive basis for making recommendations.

Consultants may specialize in a particular area or type of collection (such as digital projects or political papers). This allows them to gauge potential problems and troubleshoot them when making recommendations.

One often-overlooked advantage that consultants bring to the table is they do not have preconceptions and biases and can usually see the overall situation objectively. This means they can say things that may be interpreted as critical within an institution without fear of being penalized. A consultant is more likely to point out situations that need to be changed even if the change is an unpopular one. Likewise, a consultant is not limited or hampered by the political situation of an institution.[5]

Often an outside consultant has external credibility with both the staff and administration. The consultant is regarded as an authority, someone to be listened to. As John T. Phillips maintains, "Consultants add value to an organization that is, for some reason, beyond the capability of existing employees or contractors."[6]

The most significant advantage to using a consultant is acquiring not only a much higher level of talent quickly, but also someone who can see that the job is done in a timely manner. That translates into best value for your money. A consultant can be

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[5] David Batty, "When to Call in a Consultant and How to Choose the Right One," in *Using Consultants in Libraries and Information Centers*: 18-19.

[6] John T. Phillips, "Preparing to Be a RIM Consultant," *Information Management Journal* 34 (January 2000): 58.

scheduled to come at a certain time and is expected to complete the project by a specific date.

DISADVANTAGES

As is usually the case, along with advantages, there are some disadvantages to utilizing a consultant for a project. For instance, a consultant may not be familiar with the history or institutional framework in which situations exist. Unfamiliar with institutional traditions and idiosyncrasies, a consultant may make recommendations that are unrealistic or beyond the scope of the institution.[7]

Of course, hiring a consultant requires an outlay of money for consulting fees. This money simply may not be available. Budgets may be tight and readily available funds may just not be present to pay for a consultant.

Finally, consultants cannot perform miracles and they cannot solve all problems. Simply having a consultant recommend a change or suggest a resolution to a problem will not make it happen. As Richard J. Cox suggests, "Consultants are facilitators and sources of knowledge, offering their expertise for hire. They are there to evaluate a situation and to make recommendations, but it is ultimately the responsibility of the organization to implement the recommendations in a manner that is meaningful to their own corporate culture."[8]

WHAT CONSULTANTS CAN DO

Experienced and knowledgeable consultants can act as technical expediters or as political activists. As technical expediters, a consultant can guide the administration in identifying what it wants a consultant to accomplish. Anne Ostendarp, an archival consultant, observes, "Working with smaller organizations, such as a small New England church with no trained archival staff, he or she may need to educate the group on what they need from and the skills required of a consultant."[9]

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[7] Gordon W. Fuller. *Getting the Most Out of Your Consultant: A Guide to Selecting and Choosing* (New York: CRC Press, 1998): 44.

[8] Cox, *Archives & Archivists*, 36-37.

[9] Anne Ostendarp, telephone conversation with author, September 12, 2007.

Similarly, a consultant might be working with an organization that realizes there is a problem which needs to be fixed, but is not exactly sure what the issue is or what the result should be once it is resolved. The consultant can help that organization understand what is needed for success by evaluating what is being sought and why.[10]

In the role as political activist, the consultant's strength may be that he or she has authority with the administration. Better yet, consultants can ask embarrassing questions and take the heat.[11] A good consultant can also be used strategically to advance any number of controversial causes. For example, the staff may know what to do, but cannot convince upper management to follow their ideas or that the projects warrant support. According to Anne Ostendarp, consultants can help staff be heard. "There are times when an archives staff realizes that changes can only be made if advocated by an external voice. Administration will take notice of a consultant's recommendation."[12] Archives can also use their consultant's expertise and credentials to build consensus.

CASE STUDY: SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY

Special Collections at Georgia State University (GSU) holds the papers of American songwriter and singer Johnny Mercer. This collection is endowed by the Johnny Mercer Foundation. It was the desire of the Foundation that this collection would include anything and everything created by Johnny Mercer and that this unique resource would be actively promoted for research use.

In the spring of 2004, Special Collections hired a consultant to design a business plan to strategize on: 1) how to acquire additional materials related to Mercer not already in the collection (sheet music, sound recordings, even movies), 2) creating a discography for the artist, and 3) developing an outreach plan to incorporate public school students and teachers to utilize primary sources from this collection. After meeting with

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[10] Ibid.

[11] Beverly A. Rawles and Michael B. Wessells, *Working with Library Consultants* (Hamden, Conn.: Shoe String Press, Inc., 1984): 4-5.

[12] Ostendarp telephone conversation.

the consultant and learning of her recommendations, Special Collections staff felt strongly that they would need another consultant (temporary position) to make these suggestions a reality. The original consultant advocated for a temporary position to carry out the business plan when meeting with the library administration, as well in the final written report.

Thanks to the well-designed business plan and advocacy of the consultant, Special Collections was able to add a temporary position to complete the Mercer project. This final project included publishing a discography online, updating the Special Collections Website, purchasing missing sound recordings, sheet music, and movies, and developing an outreach plan associated with this collection. The Johnny Mercer project was a success due to the work of the consultant who designed the initial business plan and advocated for additional help.

WORKING WITH A CONSULTANT

To begin any project, the archives needs to elucidate the scope of work and the expertise required of a consultant. Clarifying what is to be accomplished and why, as well as a potential timetable for completion, is essential.

Other issues to spell out include: Does this project require one—and only one—assignment to be performed or is the job more complicated? Is a professional required? (Sometimes this is not known until after talking to the initial consultant.) Should the person or consulting firm be required to have many years' experience on the job, especially when it comes to managing groups of people, or is the undertaking simple enough for someone new to the profession?

Next, the project should be broken into segments. Each phase needs to have an outlined schedule, identified deliverables, and a method of estimating how much time and money are available for the consultant's services to be performed. Also, it is important to determine the staff's involvement with the particular project.[13]

Finally, a time frame must be created. According to Alexander Cohen and Elaine Cohen's article, "How to Hire the

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[13] Mary Duffy, "Define the Consulting Project," *WebJunction* (May 2003) <http://webjunction.org/do/DisplayContent?id=1151> (accessed May 18, 2007).

Right Consultant," it is good to ask for a three-month turnaround for results, and a good consultant should have no problem meeting this deadline.[14] For large tasks, such as an intricate digitization project or processing/cataloging projects, the deadline could be several years away.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT CONSULTANT FOR THE JOB

Where does one start looking for a consultant? Reputation! There is no better way to find a high-quality consultant than to call one's peers and ask them about their consultant experiences and for their recommendations. Keep in mind, though, that this does not eliminate the need to check references.[15]

There are resources available to find consultants in addition to peers' recommendations. One source to identify consultants is the lists maintained by various state agencies, libraries, and national, state, and local library/archive associations. The names of consultants who address specific subject matters can be found on the Websites of organizations such as the American Library Association, the Special Libraries Association, the American Institute of Conservation, and the Academy of Certified Archivists. Some of these lists are maintained by publishers and by universities. One could also use the *Consultants and Consulting Organizations Directory* or the *Directory of Library and Information Professionals* (both published by Gale).

Once one has identified the names of prospective consultants, they should be contacted and told what the project will entail. These five questions can help narrow down the choices:

- Do you understand the project?
- Do you have the subject matter expertise and qualifications relevant to the project?
- What would be your methodology/work plan to accomplish these tasks?

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[14] Alexander Cohen and Elaine Cohen, "How to Hire the Right Consultant for Your Library," *Computers in Libraries* (July/August 2003): <http://www.infotoday.com/cilmag/jul03/cohen.shtml> (accessed September 17, 2007).

[15] Batty, "When to Call in a Consultant," 20.

- Do you (and your staff) have adequate time to meet our deadline?[16]
- Can you provide us with references on your work?

Do not engage any professional consultant without first doing the necessary homework. Jane Kenamore, of the Kenamore and Klinkow consulting firm, suggests that when hiring a consultant an archives needs to verify the consultant's credentials and experience.[17] This would include validating the consultant's body of work, years in business, previous successful relevant assignments completed, references, and activity in professional organizations. In regard to references, it is important to interview the consultant's previous clients, and, if possible, view his or her previous work. Furthermore, check consultants' proof of insurance including liability insurance and workmen's compensation.[18] If the consultant will be working onsite, he or she will need a certificate or proof of insurance. Most importantly, do not hire anyone who is not genuinely interested and eager.[19]

Depending upon its parent institution, an archives may be able to hire a favored consultant directly. More often than not, the regulations of one's institution will require a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) or Request for Proposal (RFP) to be sent to several consultants. It is always necessary to have a budget in mind, and the RFP should reflect that budget.[20] Several library associations and state libraries maintain sample RFQs and RFPs so that one can get a good idea about how to write one. If an archives is in an academic, public, government, or corporate library, the institution or funding agency's purchasing department may use a standard form to which one may append

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[16] Cohen and Cohen. "How to Hire the Right Consultant."

[17] Jane Kenamore, telephone conversation with author, September 27, 2007.

[18] Ibid.

[19] David Brudney, "Managing the Consultant: Careful Not to Doom the Project," *Ideas & Trends* (September 2006) < http://www.hotel-online.com/News/PR2006_3rd/Sep06_ManagingConsultant.html> (accessed May 24, 2007).

[20] Rawles and Wessells, *Working with Library Consultants*, 39.

a narrative explaining the work the consultant is to undertake. It is always important to work with the institution's financial officer to make sure the paperwork gets done correctly from the beginning of any project.

Whatever the type of institution and its requirements for hiring a consultant, make certain to have a detailed, written contract.[21] This agreement should clearly specify the expected outcome of the project (including a written report and time frame), proof of insurance, the price, and payment terms. Other things to consider in this contract are identifying who will be the contact at the institution, any privacy and confidentiality agreement, and whether progress reports will be required.[22] This contract is an understanding between the institution and the consultant that is designed to keep everyone on the same page.

PREPARING FOR THE CONSULTANT

Once a consultant has been hired, it is important to take all the necessary steps to ensure a successful project. In many ways working with a consultant requires the same good managerial skills that one uses in running any department or program.

The first thing to do is to assign a point person or project manager who will work directly with the consultant. Then prepare for the consultant's arrival in advance by meeting with the archives staff to describe the project. The staff should understand the purpose of using the consultant and why the project cannot be done by staff. The reasons may be lack of time; the need for special expertise on a short term basis; the need for an outside, objective analysis of the problem; or the experience and skills current staff does not have. This discussion should help minimize any potential negative reactions by staff personnel.[23]

Subsequently, be certain that staff is advised about any disruptions that may interrupt their workflow, the time period in which this may occur, and what efforts may be required from their units. The project manager should tell the consultant

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[21] Elizabeth Yakel, *Starting An Archives*, (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1994): 12.

[22] Kenamore telephone interview.

[23] Rawles and Wessells, *Working with Library Consultants*, 55-56.

what the staff has been advised regarding disruptions. If other disruptions are anticipated, they need to be cleared by the project manager.

Be sure to provide information, documentation, and answers to consultants' questions concerning the project. This may include reports, manuals (such as processing manuals or disaster plans), and organizational charts.

Finally, provide assistance in scheduling staff, space, and resources required for the project. It is important to organize the project from start to finish.

MANAGING THE CONSULTANT

The project manager can help ensure a successful project by establishing a working partnership with the consultant. This should include maintaining frequent communication with the consultant; actively guiding, participating in, and facilitating the effort; and using a systematic means of monitoring progress.[24]

Updated reports at major milestones are an excellent instrument for monitoring the progress of the consulting effort. Although these need not be complicated presentations, they should detail what activities have taken place, summarize preliminary findings, alert the archives to possible problems or issues, and outline the next steps.

There should also be regularly scheduled project update meetings to allow for the archives staff and the consultant to talk about the status reports, exchange views, and offer feedback on any issues that may be relevant to the work. There has to be both written and personal interaction.[25] Sometimes things may be too sensitive to be put in writing, but the issues will still need to be discussed. Remember, consultants do not want a lot of meetings—to them, time is money. However, keeping track of the progress of the project and any concerns is essential. Communication is important!

It is necessary to provide quick feedback to the consultant, both positive and negative. Time and resources are wasted if the archives does not provide guidance. Throughout the project,

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[24] Benedict, "The Records Management and Archives Consultant," 135.

[25] Rawles and Wessells, *Working with Library Consultants*, 112.

the project manager and archives staff must be candid and forthcoming about the challenges the project presents. Though it may be difficult, an archives must also put aside its embarrassment and fears and tell the consultant the entire story.

The major deliverable is the final report, often accompanied by an executive summary that focuses on the findings, conclusions, recommendations, and proposed implementation plan. "The report should be a clear and concise statement of each step to be taken to implement a program or complete a project."[26] Remember, the consultant may offer new perspectives for the archives' consideration. He or she may also answer the question, What is next?

BRINGING THE PROJECT TO CLOSURE

The report is usually the tangible product of consultation. This should include a variety of options. If this is a planning consultant, the archives should use the report to guide the programs or changes implemented as a result of the consultation. As soon as the project is finished, take time to evaluate the report. Can or will the archives implement the consultant's recommendations? What should have been done differently? Were all the goals and objectives met?

Provide the consultant as much honest feedback as possible. That is as important to him or her as the payment. Do not hesitate to call weeks or months later if there is a question or if further clarification is required. One cannot expect consultants to provide more service without an additional fee, but they should be willing to answer questions on what has been completed.[27]

Where to go from there? Ultimately, the archives must review the options or recommendations provided by the consultant to determine what is best for their organization. "The question to ask: what tools does the archives give itself to enact change?"[28] It is the responsibility of the consultant and the archives to establish realistic benchmarks for assessing progress, as well as to decide what tools will be used to make the necessary

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[26] Benedict, "The Records Management and Archives Consultant," 136.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ostendarp telephone conversation.

changes. The success of any consultation will be determined on the completion of long-range changes.[29]

CONCLUSION

Most archives that have used consultants have found this to be a positive experience. Archives do not have all the resources and time to complete all the projects and programs that they would like or need to do. Utilizing consultants can provide guidance and/or help projects get done in a timely manner.

The lesson learned is that having the ideal consultant means having identified an individual with the expertise and education required for a specific project and a record of completing similar projects. It is effective for both the archives and the consultant when there are well-defined needs, goals, and timelines. Continued communication during this process is vital between the consultant, administration, and archives staff. When one wants a good result to a successful completion of a project, then deal with a quality consultant.

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[29] Cox, *Archives & Archivists*, 57.