

HIRING A CONSULTANT: WHO, WHEN, HOW

Project managers often turn to consultants to augment or add specialist skills to a change initiative. **MIKE SCOTT** asks how you can identify your requirements correctly



With change and transformation agendas scaling, pivoting and adapting to fast-moving variables, it's becoming increasingly common for project and programme managers to call in external consultants to support initiatives.

Consultancy worldwide is a £150bn industry and project management is a growing dynamic on both sides of the buy-sell equation. Buying consultancy provides organisations the ability to better resource their projects, but understanding the paradigm shift and how to manage the model effectively is paramount. So when does a project manager need a consultant and, if the need is identified, what consultancy options are appropriate?

GAP IN CAPACITY

When a project or programme manager identifies a requirement for consultancy support, it will generally be driven by a gap in capacity or capability.

Capacity requirements result from a lack of numbers available from the permanent resource base. Many organisations over recent years have purposefully cut their permanent staff count and project hubs and practices have not been immune to the onslaught. This leaves teams unable to flex up easily in times of need.

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But when there's a hill to climb, you need a bigger engine and there's only so many man-hours an under-resourced team can stumble forward without creating a heightened risk profile for the project. It's time to assess the capacity issue honestly and bring in consultants.

Hiring to cover capacity issues is great for augmenting a team over specific phases in the project lifecycle. This would likely be when a project is ramping up quickly or is at a critical time-limited period. This need not become the late rush to resource as it so often is. With a mature programme-planning ethic, project managers should track these requirements well ahead of the pinch-point, allowing time to select an appropriate consultant or consultants.

Not only does this ensure a better chance of augmenting with the right calibre consultant, but also avoiding being held to ransom by a contractor market that thrives on exploiting the causal link between desperation and cost.

Typically, though, a project manager should have a couple of routes to resource. Most will have access to contractors through trusted agencies and internal resource teams. Astute organisations, in line with minimising their own permanent base, have also developed partnering arrangements with specialist programmes management consultancies.

CAPABILITY

The other key instance when project managers would look to hire consultants is for gaps in capability. This requirement is more traditionally associated with consultancy support and is often used for technical skills and thought-leadership.

The type of capability sought will depend on the level the project manager is operating to. If the scope under the project manager's control is wide, then the type of consultancy required is more open-ended. Input to a future-banking project, for example, might require consultancy support from a subject matter expert or specialist in a particular element of fin-tech.

Technical specialists are useful when the expertise is not available within the permanent resource base. This is most likely to be the case when the project in question is leading-edge, innovation-based and where the company is looking to break new ground to gain a competitive advantage.

With new and emerging technologies intrinsically part of today's digital disruption, the need to hire specialists is increasing. Whether the project is infrastructure based, eCommerce and digital or maybe exploiting the power of analytics, there will likely be a need to work with a consultant or partnership that can help deliver the vision, but whether this will be the responsibility of a project manager largely depends on jurisdiction of duty.

ASSESSING THE GAPS

As project management has professionalised as a discipline, a good project manager will better be able to assess any capability gaps in the project function. Aside from the subject and domain specialists, the astute project manager will also be able to identify capability gaps with the project functions such as planning, assurance and delivery.



TYPES OF CONSULTANTS HIRED FOR TYPICAL TRANSFORMATION AND CHANGE INITIATIVES INCLUDE:

■ Technical specialist

Generally an IT subject matter expert, someone that is perhaps an expert on SAP systems, IT architecture, testing or software development. These are specific to the project or programme's requirements and fulfil a precise requirement that is crucial to what is being delivered.

■ Business analyst

Brought in to ensure there is an effective link between what the business requires and what is being delivered. The business analyst will be tasked with documentation, change management and working with both business stakeholders and developers or technical resources, making sure business and project objectives are aligned.

■ Management consultant


More likely to be found on larger strategic engagements, these consultants would be more aligned to deliver analysis and recommendations that directly help how an organisation performs. Also able to help with change management, IT operational models and process improvement type work.

■ PMO/planning, assurance and delivery

The project management office is the control centre for all programmes and projects, ensuring consistent tools and methods are used and that projects are aligned to business objectives. Assurance, health check and audit professionals are also starting to become more important to organisations to ensure quality controls are in place.

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The project may also have elements of software delivery that are potentially managed in a different way to the rest of the programme, in which case agile methodologies such as scrum will need to be adopted and embedded properly – by using specialist scrum masters or business analysts that can work with the business and development teams to ensure requirements/specs are well understood and defined.

It's increasingly likely that a project or programme manager will be responsible for looking towards the consultancy market in order to augment or add specialist skills to a change initiative. It's important that requirements are identified appropriately and – whether for capacity of capability reasons – any consultancy acquired adds significant value to the businesses. 



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