Engaging an IT Consultant for Your Campus:

Guidelines for the President
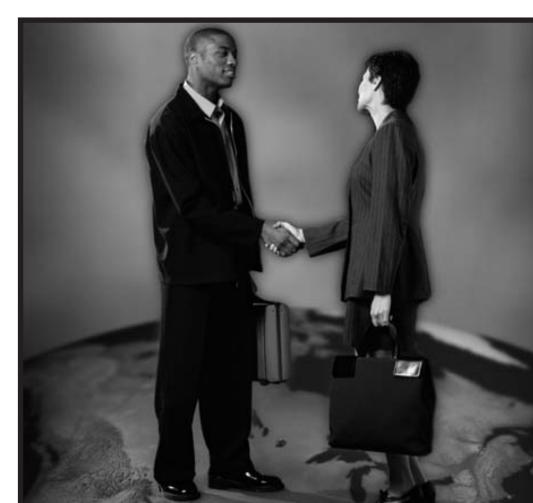
Using a consultant effectively can be tricky—but well worth the effort

By **Linda Fleit** and **Brian Hawkins**

Presidents are often faced with the challenge of deciding whether to engage an information technology (IT) consultant. In some cases, the need may be obvious, especially if technology seems to be causing serious consternation on your campus, as in the following examples:

- Faculty take every opportunity, even at cocktail parties, to complain to you about the institution's technology and support.
- Your college or university had to shut down the new administrative

information system—the one that cost $5 million—and had to use the old system as a backup during the first effort to "go live" with online registration.

■ You and your board feel that this new technology is a perpetual money sink, and there is no apparent plan to moderate these cost increases.

■ There is a heated campus discussion as to how IT "ought" to be organized.

■ Despite a campus initiative to standardize on a hardware platform, the Art Department steadfastly refuses to give up their Macs.

Is all of this to be expected, simply inherent in the complexities of technology? Or are such scenarios indicative of an IT environment that is not functioning as well as it should be? A consultant can potentially help a campus executive to sort such things through, analyze the situation, and develop plans for action. Although in some cases it may be obvious that a consultant would be helpful, there are times when it is not so clear cut, and these may be the very times when a consultant would be most effective.

Why Bring in a Consultant?

There are several key benefits to hiring a consultant. An external consultant can

■ bring objectivity to the discussion (which often may be laden with strong opinions and campus politics),

■ apply knowledge and experience gained from similar or related scenarios at other campuses, and

■ help campus leaders explore the role that information technology can play in achieving institutional goals.

Internal campus politics are often daunting, especially if many people have a stake in the outcome, and IT issues often seem to act as a magnet for such emotionally charged reactions. A good consultant can bring an objective point of view that takes internal issues into account without being invested in the institution's culture, politics, or historical context by offering an independent judgment of the personnel and practices on your campus. For any situation, it may be very difficult to sort out the issues—they are often quite complex, and the fact that they are technology-based can bring out anxiety and fear of the unknown, often exacerbating these reactions.

A good consultant will bring expertise and experience in dealing with similar situations and, in the case of a problematic environment, will be able to distinguish symptoms from root causes. Experience is critical in dealing with technology, and having the right experience at your disposal can mean the difference between stumbling in the dark and achieving your goals expeditiously. In addition to personal experience, a good consultant will bring awareness of best practices and other important research in the field on issues that may range from organizational structure, IT governance, and standards to budget planning, setting priorities, and the allocation of scarce resources. Pursuing new opportunities that no one at the institution is yet familiar with: doing strategic planning for IT; conducting a mandated program review; searching for a new campus information system—these are all projects that can be enhanced with the right outside expertise. And, finally, a consultant's expertise will often include the ability to bring to bear a results-oriented framework and a sense of urgency through the establishment of a schedule and setting of deadlines.

Such external and independent experience can often assist greatly in making the connection between the institution's strategic goals and the role that information technology can play in achieving those goals. This responsibility of integrating IT efforts and strategic goals ultimately lies with the president and his or her executive team (which ones hopes includes the chief information officer)—it should never be abdicated to a consultant![1]—though a consultant can be a valuable resource in assisting institutional leadership teams in realizing the importance of making this connection. An outside viewpoint can also be valuable in helping senior executives define their leadership role in shaping the institution's approach and response to technology opportunities. Incorporating information technology into one's thinking about the institution's strategic direction is uncharted water for many presidents, and the right consultant can help ease the way.

How Should the Decision Be Made?

The decision as to whether to engage a consultant, as well as the subsequent decision as to which consultant to bring in, should involve the executive team, especially the CIO or person

responsible for IT administration on campus. It is important for the team—and the campus—to understand that calling in an outsider is not a reflection on the quality of institutional resources or leadership. Instead, this consultation should be thought of as part of an ongoing process to review and enhance the institution's effectiveness. Since IT affects everyone, including the entire executive team in the decision making is a way of recognizing that IT transcends the traditional organizational silos.

The decision to bring in an external consultant may be met with eagerness or with anxiety on the part of the CIO. If this doesn't come as a surprise to this individual and is part of a process that he or she has been involved in, anxiety that this is a "vote of no confidence" will be reduced. The CIO may even welcome such an external voice to reinforce and amplify what he or she has been advocating, perhaps without adequate credibility to be really "heard."

At any given institution, the CIO may be an excellent consultant for other institutions but unable to make himself or herself a credible source because of historical or political reasons. Alternatively, it may be impossible for him or her to be objective in analyzing difficult situations at home or to be an impartial facilitator in the discussion of new opportunities.

In all of these cases, it is critical to recognize that there are personnel and morale implications that the president must be aware of and sensitive to. While a president will want to point out that the CIO and the IT department will be beneficiaries of such an engagement, bringing in a consultant may be a delicate issue, and this needs to be overtly addressed if the consulting is to be effective. This is especially true in situations in which it may appear that the CIO is at the heart of all the problems. It is important to accept the fact that appearances can be misleading, and an effective consultant can help you, and the rest of the team including the CIO, discern the underlying truth, the pros and cons, and other mitigating circumstances.

How Do You Find the Right Consultant?

There is no such thing as the "right person"—someone who is the perfect, ideal consultant under all circumstances. Looking at credentials and experience is important, of course, but it is also important to remember that the "goodness of the fit" depends on the relationship you develop. Using a consultant effectively is largely a matter of trust, so it is critical that you find someone with whom you can build that trust relationship easily. In other words, the chemistry has to be right! This applies especially to the relationship between the consultant and the president but also between the consultant and the team that does the hiring. It is therefore imperative that the consultant clearly knows who has done the hiring and that the expectations for candor, for reporting, and so forth are as transparent and public as possible.

There is simply no better way to find a good consultant than through personal contacts. It is the most informative—as well as the most expedient—way to gain information and begin the trust relationship. With information technology being a key and compelling force throughout higher education, the chances of finding the right consultant by talking with your colleagues at other institutions are excellent. Even if they have not used a consultant themselves, they are usually able to tap into the right places in the higher education network, very likely yielding at least one or two names for you to consider. If you need to go beyond such contacts, University Business magazine publishes an annual directory of consultants, including those who specialize in information technology, although this is not an exhaustive list.

The type of consultant that you are looking for—one who will be dealing with high-level issues—is found in one of three venues:

1. A respected professional or team of professionals with extensive experience as a practitioner in the IT field. This is just like any other campus visiting team.

2. A small company that focuses solely on IT and/or higher education issues. This category usually is made up of professionals who may work either alone for a client or as part of a team but whose professional origins are in higher education.

3. A large, professional consulting organization that may do many other things in addition to consulting, such as auditing or outsourcing.

The per-hour or per-day costs tend to increase as the size of the organization increases, but a good rule of thumb is that you should expect to pay a consultant about what you would pay an attorney or a physician. Considering what the institution spends on technology overall, the expenditure on a consultant is, in a very real sense, an insurance policy designed to protect that investment.

The first thing to verify is that the consultant has experience in higher education; this is a must! A consultant needs to understand and have experience working in the higher education environment, as there are so many cultural contexts that make this kind of an engagement fundamentally different from IT consulting in business or industry. These cultural factors include the pervasiveness of technology throughout the organization; the link between technology's role and the institution's educational mission; the nature of consensus-based decision-making, along with the ubiquity of committees; and the special role of the faculty within the institution, both culturally and organizationally. A consultant needs to appreciate, and be sensitive to, this type of organization. A consultant who is not highly experienced with the academic culture is likely to become frustrated and bewildered very quickly. In addition, a consultant who brings along assumptions from the more top-down business world is likely to raise hackles unnecessarily on campus.

Once you have made the initial contact with a consultant, there are a number of questions you will want to ask, in addition to the usual inquiries

about background and experience. These questions are all designed to help determine how well this person fits with your needs.

- How does your expertise match what has been described as our situation? This question looks for insight—an extremely important characteristic in an effective consultant. You should watch for signs that the person is leaping to premature conclusions or is inappropriately making your circumstances fit his or her own experience.
- What will your process look like for dealing with us? The consultant's experience will show here, in that in addition to answering this question, the consultant has an opportunity to demonstrate his or her willingness and ability to treat your situation as unique—another very desirable characteristic a campus should be seeking.
- Will you work alone or with a team? If the latter, what is the added value? If you are dealing with a range of issues, a team approach is often better, but only if the consultant can demonstrate that the team members complement each other without too much overlap. Quite often, the initial discussion should focus on using that individual and, secondarily, on whether a team is better. Because of the comfort campuses often have with the visiting team approach, they seek this essentially as a predetermined solution.
- What deliverables can we expect? What you are really looking for here is, "Will you give us a solution or will you help us find a solution with your guidance?" The answer to this will be an important clue to the consultant's approach. Either answer can be right for your needs, but one is more likely to feel right for your institution (and for you). You and your team need to know what your institution ideally would like to see and to convey that to the consultant. Are you looking for a list of recommendations, an analysis of the milieu, a set of specific technical responses? Defining these issues up

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front will lead to a more successful consultation.

- How will you know when your work is done? There are at least two things to look for in this answer: the extent to which the consultant works with well defined objectives, and how likely you and the campus will be urged into additional work as the initial assignment concludes.

In addition to the questions that you should ask the consultant, there are questions that he or she should ask you. These, too, give you a sense of the professionalism and "fit" with a given consultant.

- Are you engaging my services to help with problem solving or to ratify decisions that are already made? A consultant will want to understand this piece of the political landscape before setting out and adjust his or her approach accordingly. If there is a given agenda, the consultant needs to know that and also to explain that his or her role is not that of a "hired gun" prepared to automatically validate some predetermined outcome. Look for indications of independence and individual integrity.
- Do you have a gut feel for what the solution is at this point? The consul-

tant should want to know your perspective and candid instincts on the situation as early as possible. Whether that turns out to be right or wrong, or somewhere in between, he or she needs to begin planning right away about how to deal with your instincts. However, the caveats about independence still apply.

- Are you particularly unhappy with any of the people involved? Consultants really hate to be known as the ones directly responsible for what appears to be a hatchet job. It is important for the consultant to know if the reason for this assignment fundamentally revolves around a difficult personnel situation. The consultant should ask where the problems manifest themselves, with whom, and who are the other officers of the institution with key perspectives that they should seek out. The consultant also needs to know the extent to which these concerns have been directly conveyed to the professionals in question, and how.
- Are there financial resources available to help address the situation, if necessary? The consultant's recommendations may or may not have a financial impact, but in either case, he or she will want to know what the constraints may be. It is fine to explain about budget pressures your campus may be experiencing, but if you really want an answer (albeit a single consultant's perspective) as to what needs to be done to correct the situation, imposing an arbitrary constraint on the solution will fail to provide a complete picture of what may actually be needed. However, if there is in fact a fixed budget that is all an institution can afford, a consultant can help the institution figure out its priorities so that they can reasonably stay within this number and have the assurance that the money will be spent wisely. This should be done with the understanding that a more complete solution may not be possible without additional resources.

References are critically important. Even though a consultant may have

come to you through word of mouth, you should seek at least three additional references, making sure that you ask the most important question: "Would you engage this consultant again?" Find out whether the previous clients received what they thought they had contracted for, and the reactions that others on campus had to this individual or firm.

If it turns out that you have to have a formal selection process that includes issuing a Request For Proposal, you will likely need to delegate most or all of the operational aspects of the process to the CIO or some other executive, but remember that you are ultimately responsible for the direction, as has been discussed.

Several final concerns and issues should be kept in mind in selecting an appropriate consultant. If you decide to go with a large firm, be careful of the senior partner of the firm selling the job but having a junior person actually do the work. Irrespective of the category of consultants you are considering, be careful if in the initial discussions the consultant works hard to expand the scope of work. Trust your instinct and discomfort if the consultant seems to be asking a lot of questions that have obvious (to you) answers. And finally, step very carefully if the consultant or the consultant's company provides a wide variety of services and could financially benefit from the advice he or she gives you if you decide to make use of those other services.

How Do You Guarantee a Successful Outcome?

The following list identifies some of the things that the president hiring a consultant can do to maximize the positive benefits for the consulting experience.

Set Expectations with the Consultant

As the assignment begins, the most important thing you as president can do is to assure that consistent expectations are shared with the consultant. Whether the project is large or small, whether it is multi-month or just one

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day, having a common understanding of the scope of the engagement, the issues the consultant is to address, the consultant's approach, and the form of the delivery of results is fundamental. If you have particular agenda items that may not be obvious, it is imperative to make them explicit at the very beginning of the consultation.

Set Expectations with the Community

The campus community will no doubt be wondering about the consulting engagement and its potential impact. As the assignment begins, a message from the president can be very helpful in clearing up ambiguity (and in lessening the panic in particularly troubling situations). The most helpful and positive climate for the consultant to work in is one that regards this project as a baseline assessment of technology in preparation for strategic planning. Every institution can benefit from a routine check-up from time to time; this is not a witch hunt, and there is no reason for anyone to see it that way. Unfortunately, there is a tendency on many campuses to fill in whatever blanks are not filled in, so the best way to cut down on these unnecessary rumors is to be upfront in clarifying the goals and purposes of any such visit. You also may want to design into the visit some open time for members of the faculty, students, and other constituencies to meet with the consultant, so that no one can say this was all "stage managed." Such an initial message may well include some of the

logistics of the assignment, a list of who will be interviewed, the overall schedule, a target date for when the final report will be available, and so on.

Assure the Needed Contact with the Consultant

Contact between you and the consultant will be necessary during and throughout the engagement. The consultant will likely find it very useful to be able to check back with you for additional feedback on certain items, so some blocked time at the end of the day, or first thing in the morning, can prove to be very useful. The two of you should have the opportunity to verify that you are on the same track during as well as before the visit. A final exit interview at the end of a campus visit is almost always helpful to everyone concerned. Again, you may want to include your executive team here, but you should make sure that they have some private one-on-one time as well so that things that are better not said in a large public group can be discovered in a timely manner, and advice can be given as to how that information is ultimately presented.

Request a Written Summary of the Consultancy

The results of the engagement should always be provided in written form. Many of the things the consultant will tell the campus may be unfamiliar or be in an unfamiliar context, so having a written report to refer to can be invaluable in helping you and the community discuss, and even eventually internalize, the assessment and recommendations. The report should be specific (and sensitive) to your institution. The written report can become an important benchmark about where you are, where you have been, and where you need to go, just like accreditation evaluations and other campus visiting team reports that can be looked back on, providing a campus a longitudinal sense of progress. Such a report should be widely shared within the campus community, especially if the consulting assignment has a strategic focus.

With a public report, the more everyone knows about it, the greater the chances of getting buy-in to the things that resulted from the consultancy. Or, looking at it alternatively, if you try to keep such a report confidential, the inevitable leaks will torpedo such a clandestine approach.

Assure Alternate Means of Communication and Advice

In addition to the one-on-one meeting associated with the exit, you should assure that, within reason, there is an opportunity for follow-up, clarifications, and so forth after the actual visit. There are often (if not inevitably) items that should be in a private letter to the president from the consultant. Such a letter might include comments about personnel situations, personal attitudes that might present future problems, and so forth. Such correspondence needs to be kept confidential, but it can provide important insights into the processes and players involved and thus should be encouraged.

Conclusion

We undoubtedly have all heard the old joke that "a consultant is someone who borrows your watch to tell you what time it is, and then charges you for it." Whether this is humorous or not is irrelevant, but in fact, this cliché is at least partially true. It is seldom that a consultant tells you anything you don't already know or that you haven't heard from others on campus. The value of a consultant is not so much in the creation of new messages for you to hear but in the distillation and delivery of the message, putting it in terms that are meaningful and acceptable to you. It is about validation of various perspectives, about framing choices, and about getting feedback that is not flavored by politics and emotional reactions. These are difficult tasks to accomplish, especially in a credible and widely acceptable manner. A good consultant can give you perspective on your institution's situation that can have enormous value. Ultimately, a president and a campus may choose to follow some, all, or even none of the consultant's specific recommendations, but the value of the consulting assignment must ultimately be judged in terms of the nature and depth of campus discussions that ensue during and after the engagement. The real value is not about solutions but about creating common perspectives, criteria for ongoing evaluation, and greater intra-campus trust and dialogue about these critical IT issues. *e*

Endnote

1. D. Ward and B. L. Hawkins, "Presidential Leadership for Information Technology," EDUCAUSE Review, Vol. 38, No. 3, May/June 2003.

Linda Fleit (lfleit@edutech-int.com) is President of Edutech International, and Brian L. Hawkins is President of EDUCAUSE.