S. D. BECHTEL, JR. FOUNDATION
STEPHEN BECHTEL FUND

WORKING WITH CONSULTANTS

Resources for Funders and Nonprofits

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Nonprofits and grantmakers engage consultants for a variety of needs. Here are responses to commonly asked questions that can help you, and your consultant, get the most from each interaction.

1. What do consultants do?

Lots of things. A consultant can help your organization complete a needed task or solve a complex problem. Consultants offer advice, perspective, tools, inspiration, skills, and services. A consultant might be contracted to meet a specialized need such as completing your financial audit, supplying your information technology platform, or conducting a search for your next executive leader. They could be called on to develop strategies, facilitate planning with your team, design programs, evaluate the effectiveness of your approaches , or support deep learning on diversity, equity, and inclusion. The best consultants often give their clients something extra – encouraging bold, forward-looking decisions and actions that will advance an organization's mission and sustainability.

2. How do I find a consultant?

There are often many consultants to choose from no matter the task. You will benefit from developing a diverse pool of candidates who can bring different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives to the table. Reach out to groups that are underrepresented in your field through relevant job boards, listservs, social media groups, directories, professional associations, conferences, training programs, and schools. You may also want to seek referrals from peer organizations that have successfully engaged consultants for similar work. This can be a productive approach, but keep in mind that if your networks are not diverse, relying on referrals alone will replicate this lack of diversity in your candidate pool. Be sure to interview more than one consultant before making a commitment, and thoroughly check the references of any consultant you are seriously considering.

Be respectful of the consultants you are considering, and avoid requesting time-intensive proposals from them. In many cases, you may benefit from a relational approach to assessing candidates that does not require written submissions (e.g., get-to-know-you meetings). In situations where written submissions would be useful, a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) can help you narrow the field. An RFQ is less work for the consultant than a Request for Proposals and provides a great way to get basic information about consultant capabilities.

3. How do I select a consultant for my project?

Consider the trade-offs. It can be comfortable to hire a consultant you've worked with before, and this shortens the amount of time and effort required to bring them up to speed on your organization and the context for your work. On the other hand, familiarity alone is not enough. Your chosen consultant should have qualifications appropriate to the work you need done. The fact that they performed well on another engagement is no guarantee if you're asking them to work in a new subject area or in an unfamiliar manner.

4. What makes a good consultant?

Qualified consultants have relevant values, skills, and experience. They have strong references. They are good listeners and creative thinkers. They are focused on helping you reach your goals, and capable of integrating multiple perspectives in the process, especially from the people most affected by the work.

5. What makes a good client?

A good client defines the project and its goals clearly, commits to work closely with and be responsive to their consultant, seeks and acts on feedback, demonstrates curiosity, and is open to learning with and through the consultant.

6. What makes for a good consulting engagement?

In a word: clarity. Get clear on why you need a consultant. Describe the problem you need to address. Then define a work plan including objectives, approach, tasks, timing, work products, payment schedules, and means of resolving disputes. The project may need to change over time, but starting out with a set of mutually understood goals and a plan will make it easier to identify and adjust to needed changes along the way.

Similarly, identify any terms of the engagement that are important to you, especially anything related to ownership of outputs created by the consultant. Describe how any conflicts will be mediated.

A consultant and client also need an open, trusting relationship. You and your consultant are a team. You may end up working closely together for many months. It's important to have shared values, mutual respect, and strong lines of communication.

7. Is it better to hire a solo practitioner, a small firm, or a big firm?

It depends on the project. In any case, the consultant or the team should have experience with projects of comparable scope. Consider the full range of capacities needed to carry out the work when searching for a consultant. Consider: Do you need a single qualified person or a team with multiple specialties and skill levels? What is the output you expect? If it is a document, what level of presentation and production will you require? For example, will it be a simple written report, or will it be highly polished through editing, design, and infographics?

If working with an individual or a very small firm, ask about how your project fits in with other projects they are currently managing – it is important to recognize any implications that other consultant commitments might have for your project timeline. If working with a large firm, ask if your project is significant enough to garner the time and attention it will require from the consulting group. In any case, follow your instincts to assess whether you feel the consultant seeks to develop a good working relationship with you. Ask the team to describe the primary role/s of each member, and state the amount of time you should expect from each.

Whether working with a large firm or a solo practitioner, consider including a provision in the contract that any change in the project or team leadership requires prior approval. Be sure to schedule, at the project outset, periodic briefings by the project team.

8. What should I expect to pay?

Consulting fees will vary among parties you consider, perhaps even widely. A detailed budget that aligns fees with major milestones or phases of work will help facilitate a discussion about what you are paying for and may lead to clarification on where emphasis should be placed in your project. It will help to have the benefit of multiple bids as well as information from colleagues regarding what they have invested in similar projects. Make sure you know if the consultant is charging by the hour or by the project, and be clear on protocols for dealing with any overages.

9. If I find two firms I like, can I ask them to work together?

While it may be tempting, forcing two consultants to work together can invite problems – especially if they don't have an existing affiliation. The consultant-client relationship is already complex. Hiring two firms for a job will likely slow down the work because of the need for additional coordination. This will in turn drive up costs (unless the consultants agree to lower fees, which may mean diminished commitment to your work). And if the consultants disagree at any key point in the project, you will get mixed messages and conflicting advice. A better approach is to hire one firm and ask them how they would go about augmenting their team to include any missing skills. They may already have an affiliation with someone who has additional expertise you may be seeking.

If you end up deciding to hire two firms, be sure that one party is designated as your lead consultant, with all parties expressing comfort with this arrangement.

10. How do you keep a consulting project on track and on budget?

Follow these steps:

- Make time to work with your consultant and respond promptly to their requests for information, clarification, or guidance
- Offer and accept continual feedback on the progress of the project, including anticipating any challenges in its next phase
- Schedule regular check-ins to help keep the project on track and make it easy to adjust to changes in what is needed or expected
- Agree on a team leader who will be the key point of contact throughout the project
- Link the payment schedule to milestones, with a cap on the amount to be billed at each stage

If you're working with a team of consultants, make sure that key team members have enough time allocated to the project to reach the results you need.

11. How much time will it take to work with a consultant?

The short answer: as much time as it takes, and probably more than you think. Consultants can't do the work without their client's input and guidance. It's good practice to ask the consultant, upfront, what they will need from you and your team to be successful.

At minimum, expect to make introductions and send emails to connect the consultant to key project contacts and information sources. You may also be called upon to convene a meeting of key actors to launch the project. And, of course, assume that throughout the course of the work, you will need to meet regularly with the consultant to discuss progress and preliminary results – and to provide and receive feedback.

12. What if a foundation pays for a consultant to work with a nonprofit organization?

When foundations pay consultants directly, it raises issues of accountability and confidentiality and may complicate an already important and perhaps even challenging relationship. However, if a foundation does hire a consultant to work with a nonprofit organization, all three parties need a clear agreement about decision rights, objectives, approach, and timeframe in which the work is to be completed. Be clear about what (if any) information is confidential, what will be shared, and when foundation staff will (and will not) participate in meetings.

13. Who owns the reports and other products produced by consultants?

It depends on the agreement, so make a point to discuss this question before finalizing your approach. In the process, surface your assumptions and the consultant's, and ensure that the contract covers use and control of work products.

Questions to consider: Who is the report/product for? Why would your organization want/need to own the product? If you own/distribute the product, how will you acknowledge the consultant's work? How much control does the consultant have over the content? What if the deliverables include material that may have been previously generated or published?

14. What if we change our minds about what we need after we've engaged a consultant?

Be prompt, honest, and clear in communicating about any shift in your needs. If you wish to continue working together but alter the course of the work, be candid about what brought about the change in your thinking. You may find that the consultant has already considered ways to re-focus the work. Ask for the consultant's ideas about how to revise and amend the work plan, talk together about any new expertise that should be brought in, and directly consider and address implications for the project budget.

In general, treat the process of revising or amending a work plan and contract as carefully as you would the original negotiation.

15. What do we do if it's not working out?

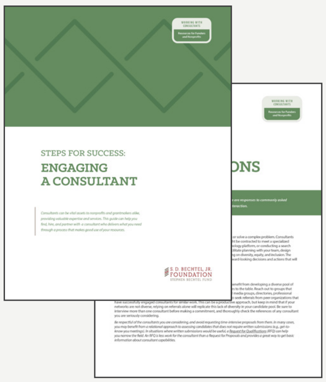
Reflect on the causes of the trouble, and take responsibility if you are contributing to the problem. Give honest and constructive feedback, and allow time for the consultant to make adjustments. Be straightforward in stating your expectations, and set a date for checking in again. If your best efforts don't get the project back on track, follow the mediation or termination procedures established in the contract including appropriate notice, compensation for work completed before the notice, and ownership of any work already produced.

Also, don't assume that one disappointing engagement means that the consultant is no good. Their reputation is essential to their ability to make a living. Be thoughtful about what you say – and to whom – when an engagement doesn't work out.

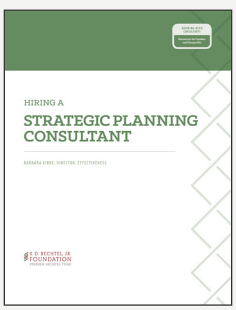
WORKING WITH CONSULTANTS SERIES

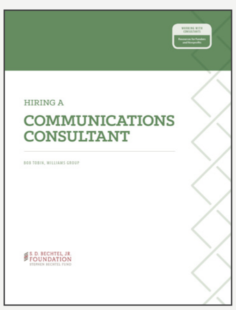
Consultants support the effectiveness of nonprofit agencies and grantmakers in many ways and on many levels. Based on lessons we've learned as well as the experiences of grantees we support, the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation offers resources for working with consultants. This series features a guide for helping organizations take steps to find, hire, and partner with a consultant. It includes Foundation-generated essays on working with consultants who specialize in strategic planning, communications, evaluation, and fundraising, as well as a resource developed by Equity in the Center on partnering with equity consultants.

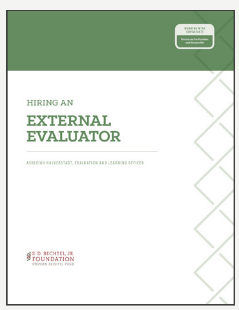
Access the full series online at sdbjrfoundation.org/effectiveness/consultants or issuelab.org

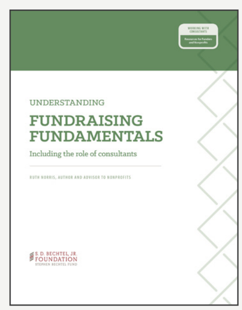


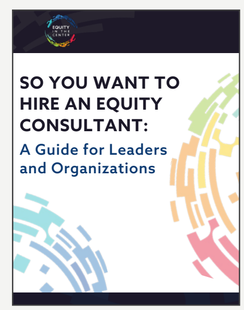
Start by reading this tutorial featuring nine steps to partnering with a consultant. It's accompanied by a set of frequently asked questions.











View these materials when engaging consultants to support specialized topics.

If needed, use this guide to develop a Request for Qualifications (RFQ), a more equitable alternative to a Request for Proposals (RFP). In many cases, however, you may benefit from a relational approach – and altogether avoid issuing RFQs or RFPs.