Maximize the Value of Your Consultant

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A detailed plan creates an effective consulting engagement

By Kim New, JD, BSN, RN

In the course of healthcare internal auditing, expertise is sometimes needed in subject matters outside an auditor's proficiency. The remedy is often to engage a consultant who is a specialist in the subject matter.

When engaging a consultant it is easy to breathe a sigh of relief when the funding is arranged and the engagement dates set. At that point you may feel your work is done and the rest is up to the consultant.

However, preparation before the onsite visit improves the outcome for everyone involved. Although there is no single right way to interact with a consultant, much depends on the services that are being provided. There are some ways you can maximize the benefits to your institution and streamline the process for everyone involved.

Experience is important

Naturally you will want to determine whether the consultant has actual experience with your type of issue or request. You also want to know whether they have experience in your particular setting. Although services can be very specialized, some consultants offer broad services on a range of topics. It is not safe to simply assume the consultant is qualified to do the work you are seeking.

Relevant experience with your type of setting can be essential. The approach to certain issues will necessarily differ considerably depending on whether your facility is a large academic medical center, a critical access hospital, an outpatient-only care provider or a large multi-facility health system.

Request references. A trusted colleague who has previously engaged the consultant may be another good approach to consider. However, you may be amply satisfied after fully vetting the consultant's work history and experience.

Set expectations

To avoid misunderstandings, set clear expectations regarding the scope of work. Agree on whether the consultant will be evaluating processes and providing feedback via a report. Will onsite instruction be provided as part of the engagement? Will the consultant provide tools to help continue the work after she is gone? If you expect a written report, discuss the format and be sure to reach an understanding on how long it will take to generate the report after completion of the work.

Fees should be discussed up front. It should be clear about what is included and what is not. For instance, if the consultant charges a flat fee, are you expected to pay travel and lodging or any other extras? If a formal report will be generated, will there be additional fees for report preparation? Most consultants will include report preparation in their fees, but there are some circumstances where the report may involve additional expense.

Pre-engagement considerations

Ensure the engagement is not scheduled when staff would be distracted by other priorities, such as a Joint Commission Survey, EHR conversion, major construction project, management retreat or other event. If there are key stakeholders the consultant needs to meet with, ensure there are no conflicts with their availability.

When possible, ensure the engagement is scheduled far enough in advance to have time to make all necessary preparations. Check with the compliance department to confirm whether vendor credentialing is required. Allow sufficient time for the consultant to be approved as a vendor. Determine whether there is a requirement that consultants be insured.

Determine what else is required by your organization. Depending on the type of engagement and sensitivity, it may be reasonable to require the consultant to undergo fingerprinting, drug screening, TB skin testing, flu vaccination, a criminal background check, badging, and more. These essentials can take time to accomplish.

Before engaging the consultant, check with your organization's legal department about contracts or standard service agreements. If the legal department has a standard document, it may be easier to use that than to make multiple revisions of the consultant's template.

Ensure the engagement is not scheduled when staff would be distracted by other priorities.

If there is a possibility that the consultant will access protected health information, ensure a business associate agreement is in place. If the consulting engagement involves an issue that may be associated with significant risk, check with counsel about a recommended approach. It may be prudent to have counsel engage the consultant so the work performed is privileged work product. If so, an engagement letter and directions for communications should be provided at the outset.

Prepare the necessary paperwork so paying the consultant is not delayed. Most vendor management programs require a W-9 and it is better to obtain this before beginning the work. If there is no vendor management system, the accounts payable department should be able to identify any forms needed before issuing payment.

Plan the engagement

Ask the consultant to help you plan the visit. The consultant should be able to provide redacted sample agendas or statements of work from prior engagements. Many clients find these provide additional ideas they had not thought of, but would like to include in the engagement. Having examples can help speed the task of developing an agenda from scratch.

Determine whether the consultant has specific areas to visit or staff members to meet with, and the time to allot for each of them. If meetings need to be arranged, confirm that meeting space is available.

As soon as possible, provide a tentative agenda for the consultant to review and edit. Clearly identify any presentations you expect the consultant to deliver so the consultant arrives with slideshows or handouts ready to go. If presentations are anticipated, confirm whether they can be recorded for internal use.

If you prefer to do a formal introduction, ask the consultant for a brief bio. If you will be inviting staff to a presentation, consider developing a flyer to be posted so the staff knows about the event. Make a note on your calendar to send one or two reminders to staff close to the presentation date.

Don't forget to reserve a conference room and confirm any necessary AV arrangements.

Communication

Let relevant staff know to expect the consultant's visit. But also let them know that the goal is to evaluate processes as they really are, not how staff thinks they should be.

If the consultant will be touring clinical areas, confirm whether special arrangements need to be made. If they will be going into the OR, for instance, you may need to make arrangements to have scrubs available. If they are visiting procedural areas, identify some times that might be best for observing the desired procedures.

When time is scheduled in clinical areas, try to ensure only one or two staff members accompany the consultant. Although many people may be interested in seeing the process and hearing the consultant's thoughts, more than two people touring a clinical area can be disruptive to patient care.

Travel and hotel arrangements

When a tentative agenda is in place, the consultant can begin to make travel arrangements. It is also helpful to set expectations for the end of the visit, in terms of wrap up and timing. If you want the consultant to detail findings in an exit session, let the consultant know. Establish what expectations are regarding the consultant's departure day and time.

If you are paying for a consulting day, be sure the schedule corresponds. If the consultant has to leave early in the afternoon on the last day, you may need to negotiate the fee accordingly.

If you can help the consultant with travel plans, be sure to do so. Here are some things you may want to share with the consultant. Provide the addresses of nearby hotels and facility discounts at local hotels and businesses. Also, inform them whether it will be more economical to use a rental car or cabs for transportation between the airport, hotel and your facility.

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Ask the consultant if there are any needed documents to help better understand your processes prior to coming onsite. It may be helpful to review particular policies and other documents. If the consultant agrees, send the relevant policies and procedures, meeting minutes, organizational structure charts, prior corrective action plans, etc., about a month before the engagement.

Schedule a call with the consultant a week before coming onsite to discuss last minute details. Ensure they know who the key staff members are they will be interacting with, and let them know if there are any internal politics or pushback to be aware of. If meals will be provided, confirm any dietary restrictions. Confirm the arrival date and time. Exchange cell phone information so that last minute emergencies can be addressed quickly if the need arises.

Send a confirmation email with the final agenda and the specific address and location where you will meet on the day of arrival. Although such detail may seem unnecessary to you, some organizations may have several local facilities and more than one main lobby. Include information about parking if relevant.

If the consultant will be onsite for several days, consider scheduling time for someone else to accompany them. This will allow you time to catch up on emails and attend to other important tasks. It can also give you a chance to refocus. It can be draining to spend extended periods of time with a consultant. Plan accordingly.

Conclusion

In the end, learn from your experiences and develop your own list of essentials for engaging a consultant. When all of the important details are addressed, it is possible to engage a consultant with a minimum of trouble, and the relationship can be invaluable. DI

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