

Eight Tips for Working with a Consultant



Top consultants offer suggestions for identifying, hiring, and working with consultants to produce a successful experience and end result for all involved.

Julie Gable, CRM, CDIA, FAI

New regulations, changes in legal discovery, and the productivity drain of uncontrolled records all compel businesses and government to seek outside assistance from records and information management (RIM) consultants, content management experts, and others who offer fee-based services. Faced with an accelerating transition from paper to electronic recordkeeping, organizations want help in plotting their present course and positioning themselves for the future – areas in which consultants excel.

Yet, many entrusted with finding and using consulting talent don't make the best use of their budget dollars, usually because they have only vague ideas about how consultants – and the consulting business – work. Here, then, is the best advice culled from several consultants (see sidebar, "Contributors to this Article") whose organizations offer a cross-section of RIM consulting services. Knowing what to watch for (and what to watch out for) can make the experience of identifying, hiring, and collaborating with consultants more productive and rewarding for everyone involved.

1 Understand What Consultants Do

The most common reason to hire a consultant is to get expertise not available in-house. Consultants provide

At the Core

This article

- ▶ Explains what consultants can do
- ▶ Provides suggestions for finding and working with consultants
- ▶ Discusses what to expect from a consulting relationship

analyses based on data and facts they gather from various sources within the client's organization. Consultants review this data and bring insights to it based on their knowledge and experience. The resulting deliverables may include:

- *Strategic planning and direction* – what to do in what order to move from the current situation to a desired situation. For example, a consultant might develop an enterprise strategy for managing electronic records in phases.
- *Advice, guidance, and work plans* – a set of recommendations for how to solve particular problems along with estimated resources, time frame, and costs to do so. For example, a consultant may advise what must be done to replace existing RIM software.
- *Tangible work product* – this may include such things as retention schedules, file plans, taxonomies, software specifications, and other tools needed to advance organiza-

tions' information management efforts.

Typical consulting projects include a mix of services delivered in phases to achieve an objective. Common projects include:

- *Developing or revising records management program components* – retention schedules, policies, procedures, training materials, or auditing
- *Identifying functional and technical specifications for technology to be acquired*
- *Developing integrated information management strategies for how content will be captured, stored, shared, and managed*

Sometimes, consultants are sought to validate internally developed opinions or approaches. Smaller firms may want the consultant to act as a "coach" for their own do-it-yourself effort, where internal personnel will do most of the work.

What consultants deliver depends on how the project is defined. This is principally done in writing through a documented scope of work.

2 Define the Project's Scope

Consultants unanimously agree that a scope of work statement is essential for any project. The scope document shows what the project's objec-

tives are, what is included (and what is not), as well as what the client expects to have at the end of the engagement. For example, a project described as “an assessment of the current records management program” can be a request for:

- (1) An opinion regarding the RIM program’s adaptability for use with electronic records
- (2) A comparison of the RIM program to other companies’ RIM practices in a specific industry
- (3) A review of whether the program has adequate staffing levels
- (4) An examination of whether the RIM program’s workflows are efficient

Any of these could factor into the review of a records management program, but the potential disconnect is where the client expected item (1) but got (4) or, worse, where the client thought it would get not just a RIM program assessment and recommendations for change, but the actual remedial work – the new policies, procedures, and retention schedules, too.

“Scope should focus on achievable goals. Understanding clearly what RIM consultants offer and what the organization needs are important,” explained Priscilla Emery of e-Enterprise Advisors. Scope is not a description of the current situation, but a clear definition of what the client wants to have accomplished at the end of the project. Recognize that the scope of work many require input from many sources, including IT, the legal department, and others.

For firms without prior experience in scoping information management projects, it can help to engage a consultant to do a needs analysis. This exercise ensures that requirements are defined as clearly as possible before any bidding process begins and that project aspects are not left open to interpretation. A needs analysis can also break a large project into smaller activities by determining how much of the organization will be part of the project. For

example, are all divisions included, or only a specified group? What about international locations?

“Take the time to nail the project scope down,” advised Jesse Wilkins, CDIA+, of Access Sciences. “No matter what fee structure is in place, the time you spend on specifying the scope will pay for itself and then some.” Consultants also caution that project scope may change as a project progresses, so a clear change control or amendment process is a must.

3 Find the Right Fit

These days, law firms, accounting firms, management consultants, storage companies, software companies, and others have all entered the records consulting marketplace. Also available are independent firms that specialize in records management issues, often with deep expertise in particular industries such as financial services, energy companies, or pharmaceuticals. Several sources of reputable consultants are available. (See sidebar, “Finding Consultants.”) To find the right firm for the job:

- *Evaluate the consultant’s knowledge of the organization’s industry.* “Shop for deep and applicable expertise, experience with current and emerging RIM practices and legal issues,” suggested George Cunningham of PelliGroup.
- *Verify the consultant’s track record.* “See if others in the sector have used consultants and find out what their experience has been,” offered J. Michael Pemberton, Ph.D., CRM, FAI, of Information Management Associates Inc.
- *Match the consultants’ skills and expertise to the specific needs of the project, particularly where technology is involved.* Noted Art Mansky of Miria Systems: “Consider the consultants’ experience in technologies associated with your line of business as well as their technical and

Finding Consultants

Some content management and records management software vendors maintain relationships with consultants who provide services as part of system implementation. Records storage vendors do likewise. Networking with such service providers as well as with other records managers can often help identify local consultants.

Some consultants advertise in ARMA International’s *Buyer’s Guide*, which is available at www.arma.org/buyersguide.

ARMA International members can access a list of RIM consultants by logging into www.arma.org/MyARMA, clicking on “Search for Members,” and choosing “Consultants” in the drop-down list under “Industry-Specific Groups.”

project management depth.”

- *Realize that big is not necessarily better.* “A large project can be undertaken by a group of smaller companies who come together with specific skill sets required to meet the project requirements,” advised Christine Ardern, CRM, FAI, of Entium Technology Partners.
- *Never underestimate the value of hands-on experience.* “It’s one thing for consultants to advise how something ought to be done, but have they actually done it in a real-world situation?” said Bruce Miller of RIMtech Inc.

To get more information about specific consultants, many organizations

What Not to Do

Don't Expect Free Consulting

Some firms, unsure of how to define their needs, simply call up multiple consulting firms and have them visit in person or via teleconference under the pretense of having them explain, "What could XYZ consulting firm do for us?" Great listeners who are terminally helpful, each consultant gives an overview of how they would define and approach the problem and at the end of the exercise, the seeker firm has a clearer idea of what to do. This ploy is a favorite of those who have inherited new job responsibilities that they know nothing about. It is also popular with purchasing department staff faced with writing a request for proposal (RFP) for an area in which they have no experience. Most seasoned consultants will ask for a scope of work rather than engage in this time-wasting exercise. Consider hiring a consultant for a fixed amount to actually define a scope of work or write the RFP.

Don't Expect Automatic Agreement with Last-Minute Contract Requirements

Make the requirements and stipulations clear up front. One organization hired a consultant, and only after the contract had been negotiated, disclosed that \$2 million in liability insurance was needed. Another required the consultant to have criminal background checks done on all consultant personnel, including the firm's owner. One client actually hired two different consultants and just assumed they would work together, sharing knowledge and expertise. Another assumed that the consultant would be happy working as a subcontractor to their in-place systems integrator firm. Yet another did not divulge until the last moment that all small consultants are billed through Kelly Services as temps. One Canadian firm neglected to mention that it must deduct a 10 percent tax from all vendors, thereby decreasing the consultant's profit by 10 percent.

Don't Expect Changes in Scope Without Paying for Them

Good consultants will identify what is needed and estimate any additional amount as an addendum to scope. It's one thing if a client has a question that will take a few minutes and is readily answered. It is another to

expect a major piece of work that was not identified as a deliverable in the original scope of work. Hiring a consultant to provide an assessment of a records management program, then expecting revised retention schedules as part of the end product is not reasonable. Sometimes, gaps in the project scope surface as a project progresses. When this happens, both parties should address the issue.

Don't Expect Guarantees or Miracles

Expecting consultants to guarantee a reduction of legal, financial, or operational risk as the result of a RIM consulting engagement is unreasonable – there are too many variables, such as end user behavior, that simply cannot be controlled. Likewise, clients who really just want to complain about how bad things are at the firm – no respect, no money, no help – should not expect the consulting project, whatever its scope, to magically change all that. In addition, no one should expect that technology recommendations will be a magic bullet cure for years of poor practices.

Don't Expect the Consultant to Change the Report

The consultant's findings, analysis, and recommendations are the result of hard work and honest effort to suggest what is in the client's best interest. While it may be reasonable to change the order in which things appear, being told to emphasize or de-emphasize report aspects, or to change recommendations to better fit internal politics, is not something most consultants will accept. If the client wants a different report, he or she should get a different consultant.

Don't Share the Consultant's Work Product Outside the Organization

In one true example, a consultant prepared an RFP for a major pension fund, which used it successfully, then simply passed it to another pension fund doing similar work. Work product is the consultant's bread and butter. Deliverables are custom prepared for each client and are, in essence, the product that the consultant produces. It is unfair for a consultant to do work for two organizations for the price of one.

Contributors to this Article

Name	Company
Alan A. Andolsen, CRM, CMC	Naremco Services Inc.
Christine Ardern, CRM, FAI	Entium Technology Partners
George Cunningham	PelliGroup (formerly Cunningham & Montaña)
Priscilla Emery	e-Nterprise Advisors
Julie Gable, CRM, CDIA, FAI	Gable Consulting LLC
Mark Lagodinski, CRM	Ernst & Young
Art Mansky	Miria Systems
Bruce Miller	RIMtech Inc.
J. Michael Pemberton, Ph.D., CRM, FAI	Information Management Associates Inc.
Jesse Wilkins, CDIA+	Access Sciences Inc.

prepare a request for information, usually a form that requests specifics about the consulting firm's:

- Years in business
- Location, management, and ownership
- Services provided
- Staff and their qualifications, including certifications such as CRM, CDIA, ERM
- Similar clients and past projects

Choosing from among qualified consultants may be a matter of personal interviews or a formalized request for proposal (RFP) process. An RFP generally includes as much detail about the contemplated project as possible, as well as a clear picture of what kind of work product the consultant must deliver in a specified time frame. The RFP allows consultants to clarify their approach and detail the activities that

will take place to accomplish the project objective.

RFP responses will also clearly outline responsibilities, including the client's responsibilities, regarding project management, regular communications, scheduling of interviews, review sessions, approval of submitted work, and expectations for knowledge transfer and management concurrence for the duration of the project. Like the project scope document, the successful consultant proposal becomes part of the contract between client and consultant.

4 Understand Fees, Pay for Quality

Consultants may charge on a time and materials (T&M) basis, such as an hourly or daily rate plus all expenses associated with the project. T&M puts the onus on the client to make sure that the work is progressing at the speed

expected. T&M pricing may also be negotiated with a cap or set limit that is not to be exceeded. T&M prices can range from \$150 to \$300 or more per hour, or \$1,200 to \$2,400 per day.

Where project scope is well-defined and understood, consultants may charge a firm, fixed price for the deliverables identified. However, don't expect a fixed price for hands-on work if the consultant hasn't actually seen the environment. While it is possible to estimate time per file drawer for an extensive records inventory, it is not possible to know that folders in the drawers are so old that they crumble on contact – a fact that will slow the process and likely increase the price.

Fees should not be the sole criterion for consultant selection. According to PelliGroup's Cunningham, "Shop for quality and value; cheap does not mean competent. A small amount of high-quality assistance is a much better investment than a lot of bad advice."

5 Spell out the Details

The contract formalizes understanding between client and consultant. No matter how cordial the relationship or how relatively small the project, most consultants prefer to have a contract in place.

Like their clients, consultants generally don't like surprises. "Whenever possible, let consultants know standard contracting and procurement procedures up front," said e-Nterprise's Emery.

"Standard contract clauses may not be applicable," cautioned Entium's Ardern. One example is local government contracts, where liability insurance clauses written for heavy construction work are not relevant to information management projects. These can be nasty surprises for consultants that have already quoted a fixed price in their proposals. Such unexpected terms can slow the project's start while they are re-negotiated.

The contract should also represent

the interests of both parties. “Consultants have the right to protect intellectual property developed and owned by the consultant,” says Naremc Services Inc.’s Alan A. Andolsen, CRM, CMC.

Other clauses to include:

- *Confidentiality of client and consultant information.* Clients stipulate that their information should not be disclosed to others; consultants stipulate that their work product must not be shared with others outside the contracting organization.
- *“Out clauses” that can be invoked by either side for project cancellation.* These typically deal with payment for services rendered up to the time of cancellation.
- *Estimated travel requirements,* including the amount of time consultants are required or expected to be onsite.
- *Acceptable expenses and how these will be reimbursed*
- *Clear payment schedule and payment terms.* If invoices are paid net 45 days, the contract should state this. Deductions taken for prompt payment – e.g., 2 percent within 10 days – should be made clear. Required deductions for local taxes or license fees should also be spelled out.
- *Additional work or addendum clauses.* These describe the process for scoping, estimating, and approving costs for additional work that was not specifically identified in the initial scope of work.

6 Expect to Participate

Consultants unanimously emphasize that clients should expect to be active project participants and that such involvement is critical to project success.

“Clients must be involved in all aspects of the engagement. The client knows his or her organization and is an

ongoing resource about operations, people, practices, culture, and a multitude of other issues,” Cunningham said. Andolsen elaborated: “Because many elements in our projects have serious legal repercussions, it is essential that the client participate in their development and understand their ramifications.”

According to Ernst & Young’s Mark Lagodinski, CRM, “Client participation can be significant depending on engagement type. Clients should expect to spend time handling logistics, attending status meetings, and handling internal communications with stakeholders, interviewees, and others.”

Mansky stated, “Client participation is critical to the success of an ECM engagement.” Emery concurred, “The best projects are the ones where the affected parties are participating willingly.”

Clients should also expect:

- Projects conducted in accord with clear and stated ethical principles and an atmosphere of trust, openness, and integrity in all consultant dealings
- Work product that is tailored to their organization’s situation, not a cookie-cutter solution or a one-size-fits-all approach
- Open, honest, and frequent communication regarding project status, including risks for project completion and what can be done about them

Consultants expect that ethical behavior is a two-way street. This means that clients and potential clients will also act in good faith and respect the fact that for consultants, time really is money. Some expectations, and some behaviors, are simply unreasonable and can impede rather than foster a strong sense

of partnership and collaboration (See sidebar, “What Not To Do.”)

7 Remember, It’s a Business

Consulting is a business. Most consultants don’t want to make a killing; they simply want to make a living. Consultants have basically two things to sell: their time and their expertise, which consists of experience and knowledge. All consultants spend significant time honing their skills and keeping their knowledge up-to-date, so it is unreasonable to expect them to simply give these away. Consultants offer services in exchange for fees, the same as any other business, and they depend on prompt payment of those fees to sustain their enterprises. While most consultants don’t mind a quick question, they do resent those looking for free consultation. They also don’t like potential clients who presume that consultants will do anything to get their business.

8 Commit to a Successful Collaboration

The best way to work with a consultant is to be specific about what is needed, in what time frame, and what the finished product should look like. Realize that it will take time, money, and other resources to achieve the desired result, and be prepared for a commitment of all three. Consultants are partners and collaborators who genuinely want to help their clients succeed. As with all good relationships, successful consulting projects require mutual respect, ethical behavior, and willingness to work together toward specific goals. ■

Julie Gable, CRM, CDIA, FAI, is the associate executive editor of The Information Management Journal. For the past 18 years, she has been president of Gable Consulting LLC, an independent RIM consulting firm based in Philadelphia. She may be contacted at juliegable@verizon.net or www.gableconsulting.com.