

HIGH TECH HIRED HELP

By Phillip M. Perry

How to get the right guru for your business

If your business is like most others, your profit depends largely on your computer. How can you operate efficiently without a system that tracks your customer contact information, revenues, inventory and profit and loss? ✂ No wonder you want your computer fixed fast when something goes wrong. That means bringing in outside help. And that's where you face a risky decision: Who do you hire? ✂ Pick the wrong consultant and your bottom line will take a hit. At the very least, delays in getting your system running will anger your customers. And a consultant with poor communication skills will frustrate your staff.



Even worse, the consultant may mis-use your sensitive business data. Your profit figures and customer lists, if they fall into competitive hands, can compromise your entire operation. Finally, switching consultants can be very costly, especially if the replacement does not know much about the software program that's already in place.

How can you minimize your risk? Follow what the experts say about getting the right guru:

1: Ask other businesses for leads

What computer consultants are used by other businesses in your region? And are the relationships happy ones? Those are perhaps the most important questions you can ask when seeking out a computer consultant. Indeed, you can draw up a great "short list" of prospects just by conversing with other business owners.

Larger companies can be good sources of leads because they often have more experience dealing with computer consultants. Try to find out the names of computer consultants used by the most successful, fastest growing businesses in your region. Then call them. Even those consultants who will work only for large companies may give you valuable referrals to qualified assistance.

2: Ask consultants for references

"A lot of people don't ask for references," says Gloria Metrick, owner of

GeoMetrick Enterprises, a computer consultancy in Okemos, MI. "They figure the consultant will provide only the best references, so why bother? But the fact is that you can learn a lot from current clients by asking the right questions."

Suppose you ask a reference if the consultant can perform a certain task well. The individual answers in the affirmative, but cannot elaborate with

consultant. "On the other hand if the reference goes into great detail, it would indicate that the consultant has, in fact, performed the task you asked about," says Metrick.

It's also very important to compare rates, according to Metrick. "If a consultant's fee falls well outside the range of others, find out why," she says. There can be good reasons for a price discrepancy. "The consultant who comes

What to ask about a potential computer consultant

Look before you leap. Prior to hiring a computer consultant, ask for a list of clients. Call those clients and ask if the consultant:

- talks in plain English?
- takes an interest in helping your staff?
- understands business?
- has expertise in the area you need?
- responds quickly when you call?
- has been in business for a long time?
- held relationships with some clients for a long time?
- is willing to work in small pieces, using check points with clearly defined goals? Is cooperative?
- listens to needs before offering solutions?
- is up front about any vested interest in a product?
- has a back up, in terms of a colleague, who can take over if the consultant is not available?
- brings the job in on time?

specific examples. That can be a clue that the reference is just saying nice things because of a friendship with the

in on the high side may have more experience in the industry. The person who is low may just want to work

Categories of computer consultants

Systems integrator	Specializes in getting off-the-shelf software to work together on your hardware. Writes only modest customization.
Contract programmer	Creates a custom system from scratch. Used when there is no off-the-shelf software that can get your job done.
On-site consultant	Writes programs at your location, with extensive testing on your computers.
Vertically oriented specialist	Concentrates on a software category such as accounting, inventory control or manufacturing.
Horizontal specialist	Concentrates on a platform such as Windows XP or UNIX, but works with a variety of software categories.

locally. The important thing is to find out the reason."

3: Select a consultant who knows business as well as computers

Whoever helps you improve your data processing system must be capable of understanding why you are in business. "Many technical folks want to avoid business issues," says Nik Johnson, president of Computer Advisors, Prospect, KY. "I wish I had a nickel for every programmer who thought the reason the client was in business was to support his game." The consultant should know why you want to collect your receivables, not just that you need the code that will do so.

It's very important that you have someone you can talk to. "If you can discuss a business situation with a computer consultant in normal English words you will benefit two ways," says Johnson. "On the business side, you will get a good idea of whether the prospect understands profit and loss. On the technical side, the consultant who can explain a complex issue to an intelligent person with straightforward English words probably understands the data processing field."

4: Look for good people skills

Your computer consultant must have skills that go beyond the technical, into the realm of communications and training. In your interviews with consultants, find out which ones exhibit a real interest in solving the problems of your staff. Good consultants build systems that lend themselves to how human beings are already working. They don't expect your staff to change their ways of working to meet the needs of the computer system.

Avoid the consultant who shows resentment at speaking with your personnel. You'll have problems down the road when your staff needs technical assistance. Consultants with an attitude can create havoc with your business. They will try to control how you run your business or they will do something and not

tell you what they have done. Then when something goes wrong, you are forced to run them down and find them.

5: Go with integrity

"It's difficult to assess integrity," says Bob Avallone, president of Metapro Systems, Lexington, MA. "But the effects of hiring the wrong person can be devastating. In one case we heard about, people had hired a consultant who walked out on the job and took the software and disks. In other cases, consultants take software and sell it without the client's permission or don't abide by the confidentiality agreement."

Vested interests can also be costly for the client. When a California business started having problems closing its books, the owner called in a new consultant to look at a spreadsheet

The seven biggest computer consultant traps

- 1 Overlooking experience reports from other businesses.
- 2 Selecting a consultant who knows a lot about computers but nothing about business.
- 3 Selecting a consultant without people skills.
- 4 Selecting a consultant without the required expertise.
- 5 Not ferreting out hidden vested interests.
- 6 Letting the consultant take control of the project.
- 7 Agreeing to a big project without a second opinion.

What happens when your consultant disappears?

Suppose your computer consultant writes you a lot of custom code that works just great...then leaves your state or goes into another line of business. Who will take care of maintaining and improving your computer program?

Consultants who disappear, or who are fired, often leave behind indecipherable code. You can be stuck with a big bill when you have to hire another programmer to spend time figuring out what the previous person did. Not to mention expensive down time that occurs until the new consultant can get things back up to speed.

How can you avoid this problem?

If you are signing up with a consulting firm that has many consultants, ask the top executives what steps they take to make sure that another consultant can pick up the torch that someone else throws down. Also, make sure you grill them on their techniques for controlling the quality of their personnel, and for assuring continuity when a consultant departs. Ask if they require that their programmers use a common set of templates so other consultants can easily pick up your code.

If you are hiring an independent consultant, make sure the person is agreeable to sharing code, and can give you the names of other individuals who can understand their programming style.

In either case, all code should be documented thoroughly.

program that had been designed for them. As it turned out, the first consultant had been a sales person for the spreadsheet vendor and had been determined to solve the business' accounting problem with that tool. The result was the business had paid the consultant \$12,000 to create a general ledger, payroll and accounts receivable program that did a poor imitation of a shrink-wrapped package that would have cost \$150 off the shelf.

Ask if your intended consultant has a vested interest such as a percentage of every sale made by a vendor or draws a steady salary from the company. But balance this cautionary statement against a counterweight: Vendor ties often mean that the consultant has better access to the technical support needed to complete projects. Some vendors offer extra training and technical support to consultants with whom they have an ongoing relationship. But the important thing is that such relationships are disclosed, make sense and do not hinder the selection of the best solution for your business problems.

One independent source of consultants is the Independent Computer Consultants Association in St. Louis. This organization has a code of ethics that requires its 1,500 members to reveal any potential conflicts of interest with clients.

"Our members are required to

explain any partnership they may have with vendors," says executive director Joyce Burkard. You will especially want to know if the consultant is getting a commission for recommending a certain software program or hardware item. (This is in contrast with certification, a term which refers to a certain level of proven knowledge on the part of a consultant in a specific program such as Microsoft Access. To be certified, the consultant must pass a rigorous exam. Certification does not imply financial reward for recommending a program.)

You can reach the ICCA at 800/774-4222 or 314/892-1675. You can also search for consultants in your region at the ICCA's Web page. Tune your browser to www.icca.org.

Following the advice in this column will mean more time spent up front in selecting the right outside help. But the investment required to assess the quality of a prospect will pay rich dividends in terms of company health. The wrong consultant will tie up your operations in ineffective and inappropriate programs. The right one will be a critical resource that will employ your data like a springboard to bounce your company onto a higher plateau of profits. ■

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Who owns the program your consultant writes?

You own the program that has been written by your computer consultant, right? Maybe not. If an independent consultant writes customized code for you, the code belongs to the creator unless you have specific written contract stating that you own the code. And this contract should be reviewed by an attorney cognizant of intellectual property law.

Make sure you get a copy of the source code—the program written by the consultant. This can be a big help to another consultant who needs to work on your system.

Your contract with the consultant should answer the following questions:

- Who owns the custom program?
- May the consultant sell the same program to your competitors?
- If the consultant is using a third party software as the basis for customization, do you retain the license to use that software if the consultant leaves?