

# Consultants: Who, When and Why?

*with Sandy Lockwood and Darlene Foret*

**W**ho else knows your institution better than you or your employees? Don't assume that all employees are sufficiently objective. Regulatory requirements and changes in our economy are constantly impacting how we do business. Assumptions can be dangerous!

"Many times", Lockwood says, "employees become so emotionally involved in their daily tasks that it makes it impossible to recognize challenges or solutions."

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How do you gain assurance that your organization is on track to achieve positive outcomes and fulfill its mission? An outside, objective set of eyes with industry expertise. A consultant! Engaging a consultant may be less expensive in the long run than finding out too late that a process, procedure or regulatory requirement is not met.

What exactly is an "educational consultant"? Are they mostly unemployed former school owners or managers or

compliance directors in a transition phase of their careers? How are those in this category different from other professional consultants? And, if they know so much, then why are they consulting and not actively in the trenches, or comfortably retired?

For some, becoming a consultant is often a segue from selling their institution to either retirement or a new career path. These consultants rarely linger in this capacity for long, but may impart helpful guidance to a few clients during their transition period. Others become temporary consultants because they were good at their specific niche within the industry and now want to flex their entrepreneurial muscles while between jobs. This group also typically utilizes consulting in a transitory phase. The small group of consultants who become successful professional career consultants often have diverse backgrounds, are acknowledged experts in educational management and operations, are extremely self-disciplined, and have a unique ability to inspire confidence and commitment in their clients to achieve quality benchmarks.

They are coaches.

Foret believes that "a consultant is similar to an athletic coach. Most become coaches from a passion for their sport and who see coaching as a

career path to continue doing what they love.”

A good consultant may well be a former school owner or manager, a teacher, a graduate placement expert, or a financial aid director, but what do they all have in common? A love of education, a knack for not only doing

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things right, but knowing the right things to do, a talent for coaching others to operate quality institutions with positive student outcomes, and a

determination to foster a culture of compliance for all their clients. And, they are good listeners.

Are consultants expensive? When are they worth the cost?

Cost is always relative to the end results of having them versus not having them. There are many very successful schools that never utilize

consultants and have historical records of being compliant. But, there are growing numbers who seek or should seek external “eyes and ears” to ensure that their compliance meter is in the safety zone.

“We recently completed an engagement with a 30-year-old institution that had been accredited for 25 years,” says Lockwood. “A husband and wife team owned it and had always done well on re-accreditation visits. As they neared retirement, they began to turn over most daily operations to their son and his wife. Somehow, under the very noses of these dedicated, attentive owners, this school found itself under Show Cause with its accrediting agency. It had failed to see the small holes in the dyke until serious cracks appeared in the dam. We were able, as external coaches, to see where and how the cracks happened and to assist the institution in having the Show Cause vacated and



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Sandy served as chair of the ACCET Accrediting Commission and has chaired numerous evaluation review teams. She is especially known for her work with accreditation matters, onsite institutional assessment visits, due diligence activities, operational management, acquisitions, regulatory expertise and problematic compliance issues.

**DARLENE FORET**, president of EDvice, Inc., has worked as a professional in the education field for over 17 years and has her Master of Science in Administration from Central Michigan University. She has held senior level management positions with several career colleges and schools with oversight of the compliance, academic, and

operational success of each campus.

Darlene’s forte is in managing administrative and fiscal operations, developing and implementing curriculum, regulatory compliance, staff and faculty development, institutional effectiveness/assessment plans, program development, policies and procedures manuals, and self-studies.



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Sandy and Darlene are well known presenters of industry topics.

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to get them back on the path that had somehow become grown over.”

Other clients who need consultants are schools seeking accreditation or state licensure and would benefit from the experienced time-efficient skills of third parties to achieve an accredited or licensed status. Still others who may find consultants to be life-saving are institutions who experience

crises: financial difficulties; need for operational expertise with student outcomes, financial aid or admissions; or adverse actions by their accreditors. Even industry attorneys or accountants sometimes seek the services of consultants to bring a practitioner’s perspective to a problematic situation for one of their clients.

## Consultant Checklist

Utilize the following checklist in structuring an engagement and assessing the value received from an educational consultant.

- Background.** Check both the consultant’s background and ask for references. (Note: Consultants are bound by confidentiality and may be reluctant to provide actual names of clients. However, they may be able to provide professional references of other industry professionals.)
- Competencies.** Inquire about their expertise as it relates to your particular need. Do they have experience with your current or desired accrediting agency? Have they assisted other clients with your specific challenge or problems?
- Personality match.** Did the consultant listen carefully during your initial discussion? Ask him/her to recount their understanding of your situation. Did the personal style of the consultant “fit” effectively within your organization?
- Get it in writing.** Get a written proposal to structure the agreement. Define the specific term and detailed scope of services and fees. Make sure there is a termination clause. Generally, a term should not last more than a year with periodic reviews of progress points and a planned exit strategy.
- Exit strategy.** Define what determines when the client’s objectives are reached or their problem is solved.
- Project evaluation.** Did the consultant provide the technical expertise you needed? Can you identify the professional contributions derived from utilizing the consultant? Did the consultant “coach” the institution to be able to perform certain objectives on their own and raise their skill levels? Did the consultant know when to pull back and not make the institution perpetually dependent upon their services?
- Would you hire the consultant again?**

What is the cost of hiring a consultant? Again, cost must be weighed by the institution's confidence in its regulatory compliance and fulfillment of its mission. Sometimes it pays to get an objective viewpoint rather than assume all is good.

Lockwood advises, "When talking with a consultant, don't be hesitant to ask a lot of questions and negotiate. What are your options in structuring the engagement? How can you maximize the benefit from the consultant's time? Good consultants will listen carefully, assess your situation, propose a plan, and will be forthright in discussing their fees. Most will offer options of a purely hourly structure, a project based fee, or other menu based services."

For example, if an institution is up for renewal of accreditation, an institution may engage a consultant to guide the entire self-study process, or it may ask the consultant to review the work produced internally. Good consultants will never promise or guarantee results of state or accrediting agency decisions.

So, how can an institution assess a consultant's value? Should you ask for references?

Foret acknowledges, "This is a hard question for good consultants, because confidentiality is a sacred trust between consultants and their clients. Ask anyway, as some have clients who are most happy to share their positive experiences and successes from utilizing the consultant's services."

However, the most effective means of assessing the value of a consultant is in the consultation prior to the engagement and the resulting agreement or contract you are given. Did they understand your objectives and propose only services needed to meet those objectives? What is their personal background and experience? Ask how they track their time and ask

for estimates at certain intervals of progress and hours expended. Is it worth the cost? Only "time" will tell, so make certain that benchmarks are carefully established.

Also, make certain that you and your staff meet your obligations. A consultant is only as good as the information he or she receives. Is it complete and timely? How much effort is required from the consultant? Does he or she need to create all the verbiage or simply edit the verbiage you submit? Are exhibits substantial and fully supportive? Do you have complete and compliant catalogs, policies & procedures, departmental manuals, a comprehensive institutional assessment plan and business plan, detailed tracking systems that produce clear data? The worth of a consultant is relational to the institution's compliance health and relies upon their ability and/or time to do the work themselves, hire a consultant to do the work, or partner with a consultant to jointly seek desired objectives. An expert consultant always prefers to be a partner and a coach.

Make certain that the consultant has the expertise in the area you need. No consultant can be an expert in every area. Is the consultant an independent or does he or she have colleagues? Is there someone whose expertise specifically meets your needs? If your accreditation is with ACCSCT or ABHES, can a consultant who has only worked with ACCET and ACICS truly help you? If a consultant's personal experience is in faculty and program development, can he or she be a valuable partner if you're sinking in student outcomes? Good consulting firms have a network of professionals whom they call upon to assist their clients when specific expertise is needed.

"Ask probing questions," Lockwood says. "Inquire about something specific

relative to your state or accrediting agency. For example, a consultant not familiar with ACCSCT may not have a clue about IAIP's. And what is a 'Doc. 28.1' to someone not familiar with ACCET standards? Be cautious if your consultant does not seem knowledgeable about the details of your particular agency or state. In our firm, we are connected with experienced professionals and other consultants from all over the country so that we can consistently provide our clients with the most knowledgeable and current expertise that best meets their needs."

Okay, so you hire a consulting firm. When is the job done? Simple. When it's over! Make certain that the agreement with the consultant has a clearly defined term. If it is to be extended, revisit the benefits of the relationship and the scope of services.

According to Foret, "A troubled relationship is one in which the consultant is difficult to reach, unresponsive, and fails to meet deadlines. Don't ignore these 'early warning signs.' Also, review the record. Did the school achieve its objectives or is there clear progress being made? If there is progress and still a need, then rehire them!"

And, when should a consultant "fire" the client? This one is easy for a good consultant. "Fire" the client when you KNOW that all goals have been successfully met and that the institution no longer needs your regular,

ongoing services. For sure, they will call you when another need arises. But, also "fire" any client who insists on continuing noncompliant practices after being advised by you or other parties that they are operating outside of acceptable guidelines. And, definitely fire any client who is abusing or misrepresenting your relationship in an attempt to gain favor with regulatory bodies.

Overall, consultants can be a valuable part of building an ongoing compliance culture

as good ones will bring a critical external perspective to your operations

and keep you "compliance ready."

Preventive maintenance is not expensive if it keeps you in safe harbor.

Utilize consultants for simulated assessment visits as an adjunct to your internal monitoring practices. A jeweler often doesn't notice his own worn and tarnished ring, yet makes brilliant jewels for others. Make certain that any tarnish is caught from within your organization BEFORE serious damage occurs.

And, above all, utilize consultants as coaches to help you and your team develop the habit of testing your compliance health at all times. The "warm fuzzies" for a good consultant come when the client scores a touchdown. The crowd cheers for the players and the team. Good coaches smile happily from the sidelines and begin to look for the next "coachable moment."

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