

PART 2: How To Choose A Computer Consultant

Chris Morton

What Comprises A Needs Analysis?

Using prepared questions developed from initial meetings and their understanding of your business, consulting firms should conduct in-depth interviews with both management and the ultimate system users.

Occasionally, the consultants leave thinking they understand the full magnitude of your problem, only to realize that they've only uncovered minor symptoms. Be open to their explanation of the larger picture — this information could prove invaluable. Next, the firm will conduct additional research as required and compile their findings into a detailed report which can later become the basis for a corporate board or bank presentation. At a minimum, the report should include a descriptive narrative, a

cost-justification analysis, an investment summary, a graphical flowchart, and installation and training schedules.

Yes, But Should You Buy From Them?

There are no restrictions prohibiting computer consultants from also selling merchandise. Better firms adhere to the Code of Ethics of the Independent Computer Consultants Association, which promotes objectivity in addition to professionalism and technical expertise. Many independents have direct links with product suppliers, often getting answers to questions quicker than retail stores. When you contract for the needs analysis, some consultants even offer a substantial purchase credit if you also acquire the turnkey system through them.

If the consultants have demonstrated their competence and you trust their objectivity, there's no reason not to purchase from them if their quote is agreeable and they can provide after-the-sale service.

You can often take delivery quicker from the independent

than from the retail outlet that undergoes multiple processing steps before shipment finally leaves the warehouse. The same holds true for defective merchandise replacements — there's no advantage in dealing with a big-name retailer because they boast about a repair facility. They're often backed up for weeks and can't provide the quick turnaround they promised when the sale was made. Independents can usually get you running again in a shorter timespan.

What Should You Expect To Pay?

A reputable consulting firm will explain their fee upfront, which can range from thirty to several hundred of dollars per hour in metropolitan areas. The firm should first provide a needs analysis estimate, which can range from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars, depending upon complexity of the system.

Additional Services

A major consideration in selecting a consulting firm is the scope of services they provide. Without proper training, maintenance, and service, even comprehen-

sive computer systems will fall into disuse. Since the time spent learning a new computer system varies, an exact training schedule is difficult to formulate; flexibility is an important consideration. Look for "extras" such as in-house services, after-hours sessions, or phone consultations, particularly in the initial months of system use.

Ideally, the firm should be viewed as a "sustaining resource"; once a project has been completed, watch for their ongoing interest in your business. Are they continually providing suggestions to increase the productivity of your investment? If they're really good, they might also provide information on other aspects of your operation beyond the computer installation, which might involve advertising, employee safety, or customer relations. The firm should act as if they are an integral part of your business, continually looking out for your interests. ♦

Chris Morton is a microcomputer specialist and president of Crossover Technologies in Traverse City.

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