Hiring an Evaluation Consultant

A Usable Knowledge White Paper

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INTRODUCTION

Hiring consultants of any kind is always a challenge for not-for-profit organizations. Unlike a physical product it's hard to kick the tires before you buy. Moreover, consulting services are typically very expensive, highly customized and the results of the work are sometimes mission critical. In a study we did for the United Way of New York City (UWNYC) some years ago, we found that while most of the consulting engagements UWNYC brokered for member organizations were successful, several wound up doing more harm than good. When things went bad it was usually for one or more of the following four reasons:

- The consultant was difficult to work with (he or she was often inflexible or unavailable or did not get along with staff or thought only in terms of billable hours)
- The consultant had a 'process' and was unwilling to collaborate or adequately understand the nonprofit's unique situation-- the consultant in other words was a know-it-all
- The consultant was unable to understand the nonprofit's 'big picture' or the environment in which it operated
- The project failed to build the nonprofit's internal capacity or help it grow in a strategic way

The United Way study focused on consulting in general and was not specific to program evaluation. But in light of what we learned, we thought it might be useful to share some thoughts about what to look for in an evaluation consultant and how to select and hire one for your next evaluation project.

The place to start is with the goals of the project. What do you hope to accomplish? We've identified five different kinds of evaluation projects:

- Emergency evaluations
- Evaluations of a new initiative
- Development of an evaluation system
- Formative or process oriented evaluations
- Summative or Outcomes evaluations

They are discussed at length on our blog at www.usablellc.net/?p=523. Of course a competent firm ought to be able to handle any of these kinds of projects—there are no firms that we know of that specialize in one or the other. Our purpose in laying them out is to encourage you to think about your goals and about the elements of success that are unique to them.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN AN EVALUATION CONSULTANT

The qualities to look for in an evaluation consultant are similar to the qualities you would seek from any kind of consultant. Of course exactly how they apply to an evaluator differs a bit given the nature of evaluation work. Here is our list of six critical skills:

- Technical Competence
- Strong project management skills
- Excellent thinking skills
- Excellent ability to communicate with stakeholders
- Flexibility
- An orientation towards collaboration

Methodological competence has to do with an evaluator's level of technical skill.

An evaluator's technical competence relates to his or her ability to design a study that will answer the questions your organization has about its programs and the skill to deploy strategies for answering them. Most specialist firms have this capacity, though firms that do evaluation as part of a general consulting practice often do not. It is important to bear in mind that methodological competence means more than knowing how to word survey questions or conduct focus groups and more than knowing which statistical technique to use. It means the ability to design the broad parameters of a study and the ability and experience to manage it down to the details.

How can you assess a consultant's methodological competence? The place to start is with their educational background. Generally, the more the better, but experience counts too since having it helps anticipate and manage problems as they arise. A background teaching methodology is a good gauge as well. Despite the old saw, those who can teach are often also those that *can* do.

Project management is about getting your project done on time and within the agreed upon budget.

For a project to succeed, you need a consultant who understands what it takes to get research done. You need a consultant who can find a venue for your focus group, track down missing participants from a longitudinal study or make sure that interview participants are available when their interviews are scheduled. Without these skills, the best laid plans will never be realized.

How can you assess a firm's project management skills? We think the best way is to look at their experience. How long have they been in business? How many similar surveys, interviews, focus groups, have they done in the past? Firms with lots of experience usually know how to make a study happen. Those are the firms you will want to look at the most closely.

Thinking skills are hard to quantify yet we believe they are *the* key element in any evaluation project. If methodological competence has to do with the ability to collect and analyze data, thinking skills relate to the ability to uncover its meanings in a thoughtful way. Analysis involves more than simply running a set of statistical procedures or condensing and paraphrasing some quotations from a series of interviews. Rather, it has to do with understanding how all these things relate to your organization's strategic position and vision. Good analysis ought to be sensitive to its own limitations and should ask as many questions as it answers. More than just communicating what was learned in an evaluation project, analysis should stimulate thinking.

Good thinking skills relate to the ability to uncover what findings mean in a way that they can contribute to an organization's strategic vision.

Good thinking skills also means the ability to think outside of the box and to develop new approaches and new methods uniquely suited to your organization's situation. Recipes have their place, but they are not always the best way to get at what you want to learn. We cover flexibility and adaptability in another section of this White Paper, but there is no doubt that it begins with the ability to think creatively in order to go beyond the approaches described in an evaluation textbook.

How can you assess a consultant's thinking skills? Thinking skills are hard to describe but not that hard to assess. Educational background and work experience are certainly important as is an orientation towards answering big picture questions. But even Ph.Ds. can get overly caught up in data and miss the forest for the trees. When you sit down with a potential evaluator try asking who, in the evaluation field, has most influenced them and why. Do they have an answer? Can they think on their feet (an indicator of thoughtfulness and intellectual flexibility) well enough to explain why?

Flexibility is about recognizing that program evaluation takes place in the real world.

Evaluation is often underfunded, done under time pressure, and may involve working with stakeholders who are not fully committed to it. These realities require a firm that realizes that evaluation is not your organization's main business. Flexibility means understanding that evaluation work will have tremendous value even if it does not follow every dictum laid down in a textbook on research methods. It means, accepting that as in all things, the perfect should not become the enemy of the good. The key is having the expertise to know where and how to make methodological compromises in order to get the project done. We like Bamberger, Rugh and Mabry's *Real World Evaluation: Working Under Budget, Time, Data and Political Constraints*. It has a lot of practical advice to offer on this subject and you can find it here.

How can you assess a consultant's flexibility? The answer here is pretty straight forward. First, of course you ought to be able to get an idea in your initial interview. Does the consultant talk research techniques with you or does he or she ask about your program? The former can sometimes indicate an over emphasis on academic rigor and a concomitant lack of consideration for the kinds of compromises that have to be made to get work done in the real world. One quality often associated with flexibility is comfort with uncertainty. Try simply asking the firms you bring in to interview to describe an evaluation gone awry and ask how they handled the situation.

Collaborative evaluators understand that no matter how good a job they do collecting data, you know your program better than they do.

Your knowledge about what works and what doesn't, your questions and concerns, and your thoughts about how to best manage the evaluation have a key role to play as the evaluation plan develops and the project moves forward. But that role doesn't end once the project gets going. The consultant you work with should have a willingness to include you in the data analysis / data interpretation process as well. In our experience, such an approach yields richer and deeper answers to the evaluation's key questions.

Just as important, it also increases the chances that the study's results will be used. In a collaborative approach, the ownership of findings is shared. Much more than in a 'go it alone' model, both you and your evaluator have a joint stake in the project. You understand the report you get at the end of the project because you had a voice in shaping it. Because of such an understanding, you and your team will have more confidence in implementing the study's recommendations. Collaboration in other words, makes the report actionable.

How do you assess how collaborative a consultant's is? The best way of course is to ask-- both the consultant and his or her references. Two great questions are: "What kind of role do you anticipate my team will play in the evaluation project," and "how do you see that role changing as the project unfolds?" If the consultant tells you that you'll just be helping to arrange interviews or sending out survey reminders, his or her orientation may not be well geared to collaboration.

Excellent communication skills facilitate the utilization of evaluation findings.

Reports, summaries, etc. need to present data and other evidence in a way that is accessible and easy to navigate. For many nonprofits the 30 page evaluation report may not be the best way to go. Your evaluation consultant needs to be able to understand what kind of communication strategy will work best for your organization. Program managers for example may be best served with a report that emphasizes how an initiative was deployed whereas your development group, in order to fulfill funder requirement, may need one focused on outcomes.

The timeliness of the report is just as important. Real time reporting lessens the surprises sometimes found in a final report, breaks the content of such a report up into manageable chunks, and generates excitement among stakeholders. A consultant who expects to submit only a final report may not understand this value.

How do you assess a consultant's communication skills? That's an easy one, just ask for some writing samples. When you get them, evaluate them for overall tone and readability. Can you see your stakeholders understanding what the consultant has written? Can you see them viewing it as reasonable and accurate? If you'd like to learn about best practices for reporting and communication, take a look at *Evaluation Strategies for Communicating and*

Reporting by Torres, Preskill and Pointek. We use it when we teach evaluation and often refer back to it when we start a new project.

Client oriented means all of the things we have listed so far and more.

In a word, a client-oriented consultant is one who is easy to work with. We've covered the big things like flexibility and collaboration, but the little things matter as well. A client-oriented consultant returns phone calls and emails promptly; is trustworthy and accountable; and understands confidentiality. He or she has your best interests at heart and is ready to go above and beyond the requirements of the work plan or contract to get the job done for you on time and within budget.

How do you know if a consultant is client oriented? This is really the hardest thing of all to judge. Of course, flexibility and collaboration play some role, but at the end of the day it's very much a judgment call. You may get some inkling in the back and forth that typically occurs during the selection process, but besides following up with references, you will most likely need to check in with your right brain on this one. Trust your instincts and if in doubt, move on if the relationship doesn't feel right.

SURFACING AN EVALUATION FIRM

Let's move on to the hiring process. How do you narrow your choices down to a short list of consultants to choose from. First, of course—how do you locate prospective consultants? It's not new information for us to suggest that the colleagues in your field are probably the best place to start. But what do you do if you don't have a colleague who has worked recently with an evaluator. Where else can you look? First try asking your funders. They may know of a firm based on their work with other nonprofits. A local United Way may be appropriate as well. Another great source may be a local, regional or national association of organizations in your field.

You'll probably want to review four or five proposals before you create a short list of firms to interview. But what if the referral sources mentioned above don't generate a sufficient number of leads? Probably the best source in the evaluation space is the online directory maintained by the American Evaluation Association. It lists evaluation firms in all fifty states. The significant advantage the AEA Directory provides is the level of certainty it provides that the individuals listed are actually evaluation professionals—you have to be a member of the AEA to have a listing. This may not be the case elsewhere. Indeed, some directories allow consultants to list so many practice areas that surfacing a real specialist can be next to impossible. The problem is that consultants who bill themselves as generalists may not have the technical expertise to bring the project off succesfully.

Here is a partial listing of some consultant directories you may want to take a look at:

American Evaluation Association	Probably the best place to start: www.eval.org
Nonprofit Central	To be listed with this site consultants need to submit a recommendation which is verified BEFORE the listing goes live: http://www.npocentral.net/index.php?l=1
Southern New England Nonprofit Consultant Directory	Covers southern New England. Some great resources on the selection and hiring process: http://www.sneconsultant.org/search.asp
Idealist.org	Idealist doesn't list consultants per se but many of the organizations in their database are consultancies. http://www.idealist.org

SOLICITING A PROPOSAL

Don't feel that a full blown RFP process is only way to go. There are more approaches that can yield better results.

Many organizations seeking a consultant issue a formal RFP, or request for proposals, believing it creates a level playing field on which firms can pitch their approaches and compete for business. Typically, the RFP describes the program in question, suggests some high level evaluation questions, and specifies the criteria upon which responses will be evaluated. It may offer a budget or budget range. It is important to recognize however that not all evaluation projects begin with an RFP. Indeed there are good reasons to not employ an RFP process. What are they?

First, many firms, particularly smaller ones, often do not have the resources necessary to put together proposals on spec. Credible responses require a considerable effort to create and the best small firms may be too busy managing existing projects to respond. More important however, even the most well written RFP response may do little to help you evaluate a consultant based on the selection criteria we mentioned earlier. Certainly you'll be able to gauge responders' writing ability and perhaps get an idea of their technical competence, but you won't learn much about the soft skills that are essential to making an evaluation project a success. You won't learn much, for example, about an evaluator's flexibility, his or her ability to problem solve or willingness to go the extra mile necessary to make your project a success. Yet as we have said, organizations get the most value from an evaluation when it becomes a collaborative endeavor involving give-and-take with a trusted advisor.

For these reasons, we recommend you consider setting aside a formal RFP model and selecting your evaluator more holistically. One approach involves a letter of interest process. It differs from the RFP model in that it asks

A letter of interest process can help you assess a firm in ways that go beyond the limitations of an RFP which emphasizes mainly technical competency.

prospective consultants to share their perspectives on your project— their ideas and approaches— while de-emphasizing the kind of detailed evaluation plan that often changes anyway as projects move forward. Beyond asking for details about their approach, ask responders to describe the challenges they anticipate and their strategies for dealing with them. Ask them to draft a list of questions for your team. Their responses will be a good indicator of their flexibility and thoughtfulness. In reviewing the letters of intent you receive, first ask yourself whether the firms' approach aligns with the project as you see it. Are you, in other words, on the same page? Assuming that the firm's history suggests the technical competence necessary to do a credible job, ask yourself-- do you get the sense that they will make effective thinking partners? Would you enjoy working with them? Again, while it is critical that you verify their methodological competence, these kinds of soft skills are just as essential to getting the most value out of an evaluation project.

Improving the RFP Process

Whether you choose to try the letter of intent approach outlined above, or decide to go the route of a traditional RFP, make sure your solicitation includes the following items.

A brief history of your organization and of the program in question	This should be no more than a single paragraph especially if your organization's website provides a good background about your work.
The goals of the evaluation work	See Part I above. If you have started to develop evaluation questions you should include them here.
A detailed outline of the program	What are the program's main components? How far are you in terms of implementation? Who are the key participants? How many people are there in each participant group? Where are they located?
A budget range	This is key. A given program can be evaluated in many different ways. Firms responding to your solicitation need to get some idea of the scope of work you had in mind.
Expectations (if any) about the role internal staff will play in the work	Will staff assist with data collection? To what degree? Will they themselves be interviewed, etc.?
Expectations about reporting	Are you expecting a formal written report or will a series of shorter summary reports be satisfactory?

Due dates and contact information	Due dates are obvious enough but responders may also wish to contact you with follow-up questions about the project.

You should give responders at least three to four weeks to prepare their proposals, less if you are contacting firms you already know about, and more if the proposal is being released publically. It generally takes at least a few days for publically released solicitations to get noticed by potential responders.

Conclusions

We hope you have found this White Paper useful and more important that it has given you some new perspectives on how to locate and select an appropriate firm for your next evaluation project. If you have any questions or comments on the paper, please don't hesitate to drop us a line at information@usablellc.net. You can subscribe to our White Paper series by filling out the form at www.usablellc.net/resources/white-papers/sign-up.

About Usable Knowledge

For the past ten years, Usable Knowledge has provided program evaluation and consulting services to organizations in the nonprofit sector that need to understand how their work impacts those they serve. What distinguishes us is a belief that program evaluation is only successful when it creates usable, actionable, knowledge. If you would like to learn more about what we do and how we work please don't hesitate to contact us.