

Consultants: The Buyer's View

By ELIZABETH SHEY GOROVITZ

What about the people who hire consultants? What do they look for? What do these training directors and human resource development managers think about the demand for and effectiveness of independent consultants?

Most say they would never hire an unknown. At Xerox in Connecticut, divisions choose consultants based on a definitive set of "consultant guidelines"; using a specific dollar figure as a benchmark, division representatives select the most expert consultant based on that individual's professional experience.

"We hire human resource development consultants for different tasks," said Jim Bolt, former director of human resources planning and development at Xerox. "Most often, they develop management training program design, teach executive education programs and conduct training research. We always prefer to use someone we know—someone we're sure does good work."

Donald Fronzaglia, director of human resource development of Polaroid, Cambridge, Mass., concurs: "We wouldn't hire an unknown—ever. Experience is critical; we must have something on which to evaluate consultants. We look at a person's areas of expertise and the significant achievements he or she has made in those areas. We also pursue a series of recommendations and reference checks. Sometimes we select a consultant on the basis of 'how good we feel,' or gut reaction, as opposed to some identifiable measurable impact.

"We're spending less and enjoying it more," Fronzaglia continued. "In economic good times,

there's a tendency to be less discriminatory. Now, the recession forces us into a better assessment of return-on-investment. We've used consultants recently as third party observers and facilitators on specific issues tasks."

At Arthur Young & Company, the international accounting firm, consultants satisfy marketing and public relations needs. Ellen Malaski, director of educational methods at Arthur Young in Reston, Va., frequently hires freelancers to do script writing for training programs. "We have a full studio here and we develop all of our own programs," she

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said. "Writing consultants are helpful because they add polish to a specialty area. They assist in readability and help put the program in the proper format—either oral or written. For every 10 programs we conduct, we hire about five outsiders."

How does she select them? "Sometimes we call back people we've used before, and sometimes we hire new people," said Malaski. "It's all based on credentials and finding the right specialist for the right area.

Word of mouth helps, too."

The Levi Strauss Company in San Francisco curbed its use of consultants in 1982. "We used some, but not too many," said Carl Coleman, manager of training and development. "We decided to cut back on independent consultants in order to decrease the flow of money outside the company."

Last year, Levi Strauss hired out-of-house specialists primarily to teach training programs; some also helped in program design. Now, the company considers consulting a last resort: "It's not always appropriate for our people to look at themselves and determine the root of a problem. In that situation, we hire an expert to do an OD intervention program with personnel development. When it's a special case like that, or when we're sure our staff is too busy with other projects, we hire consultants to handle new programs."

Another reason for the decrease in consultant use is packaged training. "Programs we can buy on the outside are better than they used to be," remarked Coleman. "Before, if we needed a workshop, we brought in a consultant. Now, we used packaged training instead of a consultant."

Like other training directors, Coleman "would never hire an unknown." After a careful analysis of an individual's professional experience, he determines the closeness of the match to his organization. In addition to expertise, he places equal emphasis on a consultant's interpersonal skills.

Instead of replacing consultants with packaged training, Con Edison in New York typically uses consultants to tailor pack-

aged programs or to conduct job competency analyses. "Hiring a consultant at Con Ed is not an economic consideration," said John Jenness, director of human resources planning and development. "It's a question of emphasis—it depends on your needs."

Jenness recommends that a large company—25,000 employees

or more—keep \$100,000 to \$150,000 available on a contingency basis for HRD consultants. Con Ed, however, has included very little in its consulting budget for 1983.

At AT&T in Basking Ridge, N.J., management training is a popular discipline in which to find consultants. Despite 2,000

in-house course developers and 5,000 deliverers, the company hires outside help for management and technical training. "If we need leading edge, outside expertise, we turn to consultants," said Charles Sherrard, division manager for training and education. "We frequently hire them to design and lead seminars, such as our Bell Advanced Management Program, and to make presentations."

The selection process at AT&T is deliberate and well-planned.

"We do the front-end work ourselves," Sherrard explained. Then we search the field to find people experienced in tasks similar to ours. Once they're on the job, we keep detailed logs to record their effectiveness."

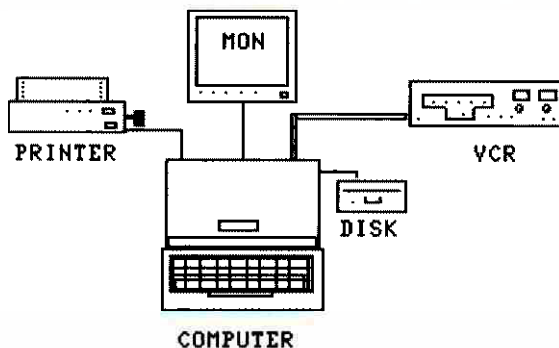
According to Sherrard, "literature searches" frequently serve as sources of information and background on academicians in training and development. Leads also begin with the *ASTD Who's Who Membership Directory*.

But as with any well-planned training program, determining needs is the first step in hiring a consultant. "Define what you want to do," said Sherrard, "then go after the right person. Matching needs with experience practically guarantees success."

While the majority of managers surveyed voiced a common reluctance to hire an unknown consultant, this should not discourage an HRD practitioner considering a consulting career. One may be "unknown" as a consultant, but "well known" for training and development skills practiced under other guises. Newcomers to consulting presumably are new only to the consulting situation—not to the abilities they hope to market and apply. The test, it seems, is to match one's talent to the need for it.

—TDJ

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