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**Guide to choosing a
Consultant**



Contents

1. Background: about this resource	1
2. The process of selecting, engaging and managing consultants	1
Stage 1: Do we really need a consultant or contractor to help us?	1
Stage 2: Scoping the project and developing a project brief	1
Stage 3: Selecting the consultant	3
Stage 4: Engaging the consultant	4
Stage 5: Keeping the work on track	4
3. Key risks when using consultants	5
4. Other resources which may help you	5



1. Background: about this resource

Q Shelter offers a pre-approved consultants' panel which is one way of accessing consultants for work that organisations need. While Q Shelter pre-approves this consultants' panel it is absolutely essential that any organisation seeking to engage a consultant or contractor goes through their own process of assessment. A process of assessment will enable an organisation to articulate the work they want to do, seek proposals and consider the relative merits of proposals which will increase the likelihood that the final product and result has the desired impact.

This resource outlines some things an organisation can do to reduce risks and increase the likelihood that a project is successful.

2. The process of selecting, engaging and managing consultants

Stage 1: Do we really need a consultant or contractor to help us?

In the very early stages it is beneficial to assess whether an organisation needs a consultant or contractor, or whether work can be undertaken internally by the organisation. Reasons to consider a consultant or contractor include:

- the required piece of work is a specific area of expertise which is not currently part of your staff capabilities or role descriptions
- the required piece of work is time limited and has discrete boundaries
- current staff already have too many demands on their time
- the work is needed in a shorter time frame than existing staff could achieve in light of other priorities
- the work requires independence from the staff team and/or board (such as in the case of an evaluation of a program, service or organisation, or a tenant satisfaction survey/focus groups)
- your organisation would benefit from external, independent advice and assistance.

Even when additional help is required because of staff shortages, it can be helpful to think about how the work can be done by a consultant in a way that builds internal capability and/or capacity. This might involve developing a project team where staff have some roles and the consultant provides specific assistance too, and in a way that helps staff develop skills and confidence in new areas.

Summary:

The first decision to make is whether a consultant is needed or whether a project or piece of work might be better achieved by existing employees.

Stage 2: Scoping the project and developing a project brief

A critical step in the process is to scope the project that you need completed. Scoping helps you to decide the extent of the work, its purpose and the final product you need. Scoping will determine things like:



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- What is the purpose of the project?
- What are the background and key considerations that led to its inception?
- What activities and methods do we need/want?
- What skills do we need?
- When do we need the work by?
- How will the project be governed and managed?
- Who is the audience for the final product?
- What are the outputs and outcomes we are seeking?
- What resources do we have that we can apply to this project? Things to consider include:
 - budget
 - employee time
 - reference group
 - meeting rooms
 - administrative support
 - project management
 - others.....
- How big the project is and whether you need an open tender process or invite expressions of interest from a short list or even just one consultant if the work is very time limited with a small budget. Options for scoping the engagement process include:
 - ask one preferred provider for a proposal
 - ask a pre-shortlisted panel for proposals which you assess
 - seek expressions of interest and proposals more broadly and openly through advertising.
- At this stage it is another opportunity to check in on the question of whether you need a consultant or whether the work is best done/can be done by employees.

Once you have scoped a project and confirmed you need a consultant, you are in a position to write a project brief. A project brief is a basis for inviting consultants to submit a proposal for your assessment. Things you might include in a project brief include:

- project purpose (overarching statement of intent and direction)
- project objectives (specific things that are desired by the end of the project)
- background and context
- project governance and management
- key deliverables (outcomes and milestones such as interim and final reports)
- time frames
- any specific requirements such as process steps you require (such as workshop with the board to engage them in looking at a draft evaluation report)
- budget (unless you want consultants to quote without knowing your budget)
- key selection criteria (which is where you can capture the skills, capabilities and experience the consultant/team has to offer)
- what resources (apart from budget) your organisation can commit
- what you require in a project proposal.



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The project brief provides information to potential consultants that they need in order to be able to submit a project proposal. In the project brief, you can stipulate what you require in a proposal. You might consider things like:

- a statement from the consultant demonstrating their understanding of the project
- a statement of capability: including the skills, experience, availability of the consultant to do the work as well as relevant projects which demonstrate the capacity to deliver something similar
- a proposed methodology with time frames (hours allocated and deadlines) and deliverables (in the form of a project plan). A template for this can include:
 - strategies
 - actions
 - key performance indicators which reflect key deliverables and outputs
 - timeframes (hours and deadlines)
 - who is responsible.
- A budget and whether the budget is a fixed price
- an outline of the team and a summary of their background and skills including the roles that individuals will play in the project
- responses to any key selection criteria
- referees
- CVs of project team
- example
- insurance cover
- a proposed payment schedule.

What can happen if the brief isn't clear?

Sometimes consultants can find themselves responding to a brief that isn't sufficiently clear. This can be for various reasons such as:

- the organisation is still thinking through what it needs
- projects involving partners might reflect multiple goals which need clarification and synthesis.

Sometimes a consultant can help an organisation to develop and refine the brief as a basis for their proposal. If this process is protracted and requires a consultant to provide significant help with clarifying the actual brief then the organisation should expect that this is paid time.

Stage 3: Selecting the consultant

Selecting the consultant is an important stage. If the work is substantial enough or involves multiple agencies, it might be helpful to have a panel of people which may include a selection of the following types of roles depending on the size and scope of the work:

- the project manager
- staff with expertise or a direct relationship to the work being done or who will have implementation or follow-up responsibilities



- an external person with experience in recruitment (such as a partner agency)
- a board member (if the work is substantial or is being commissioned by the board) and/or most senior worker.

A selection process (depending on the scope of the work) might include:

- review of proposals and a decision based only on the proposal
- review and short-listing of proposals following by interviews
- a request for a presentation where the work is complex and of high importance and/or where more than one proposal meets the requirements of the brief.

Stage 4: Engaging the consultant

It is important that a process of engaging is clear and includes any specific negotiations about aspects of the project methodology. Before a contract or letter of appointment is signed, it can be very helpful to have an inception meeting where the agency can address the following:

- review of the project methodology and any adjustments agreed to
- review of time frames and pinning down key dates and deliverables
- clarification of organisation project manager
- clarification of project leader (from the consultancy team)
- agreements to exchange needed background information
- project management meeting schedule.

Depending on the size and scope of the work, an organisation might do one of the following:

- provide a letter of appointment with the proposal attached which is signed by all parties
- require a contract to be signed with the proposal, brief and any amendments as part of a schedule.

If the work is a very small piece of work, some agencies don't formalise the engagement/appointment of a contractor except through an email. This approach carries some risk and Q Shelter encourages organisations to have something in place which is a basis for managing a situation where the project is not progressing well.

Stage 5: Keeping the work on track

The organisation should ensure someone has the task of project managing the project. The consultant or consultancy team should also have an identified project leader and these two roles should expect to be in contact regularly including at pre-determined meeting times to check on progress and trouble shoot issues. The project proposal including a project plan will be key documentation to being able to keep the work on track.

If the project is substantial enough or involves work by a lead agency on behalf of other partners or a consortium it can be helpful to establish a project reference group or project management group. This should include terms of reference, frequency of meetings and an agreed project plan which will be the main reference document along with the brief. The role of the reference/project



management group should be well-defined alongside the project manager role which is always an essential component.

3. Key risks when using consultants

You should consider key risks for your organisation when engaging consultants. Some example risks are as follows:

	Risk	Options for mitigation/management
1	The brief isn't clear and the consultant embarks on activities and methodologies that are not focused on the client's needs and desired outcomes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensure the brief is clear• engage someone to help you develop the brief• use inception meeting and early stages of project to clarify the brief if necessary.• require a written proposal even if only approaching one consultant to test their capacity and clarity about the task.
2	Time frames are not met.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clear project plan• contract• milestone payments are withheld.
3	The project outcomes aren't owned by key employees.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Engage relevant employees in developing/reviewing the brief• involve relevant employees in selection process• involve relevant employees in a project team working beside consultants on certain, defined activities• involve relevant employees in milestones such as reviewing reports.
4	Consultants are engaged to do work that is better done by employees.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consider the questions in Stage 1• consider whether or not staff could undertake a discrete task instead of engaging a consultant

4. Other resources which may help you

[Department of Housing and Public Works Procurement Guide](#)

[European Chemicals Agency Guide to Hiring Consultants](#)

[The Globe and Mail Investors Tools](#) – based on the Executive's Guide to Consultants by David Fields.