

# How To Pick An IT Consultant

By David Berube

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At some point, most business are going to need to have some help from a IT consultant. Maybe your business is a small, without many IT resources. Maybe your company is larger, with a significant resources in IT already, and just needs a healthy dose of outside perspective. Whatever the reason, it can be difficult to choose an IT consultant, especially if you aren't a technical person.

I've heard stories about selecting consultants from all sorts of people. Quite a few have told me heard horror stories about how they wound up with large bills and little or nothing to show for it. Fortunately, it doesn't have to be hard to choose an IT consultant, because I've the knowledge I've accrued to create some guidelines you can use in choosing your IT consultant.

A Contract Programmer or an IT Consultant?

There are quite a few contract programmers out there masquerading as IT consultants. A real IT consultant isn't in the business of writing code; rather, he's in the business of solving problems, and code just happens to be one of the way that he (or she) does it. Conversely, a contract programmer will want you to spell out exactly what kind of program you want him to write. He doesn't solve problems; he just writes code the way he's told, and hopes it will fix the problem at hand. With a real IT consultant, you wind up with a solution that leaves everyone happy.

Focus on benefits, not technology.

Some IT consultants can get wrapped up in their technology; it's not uncommon to see consultants who specializes in "AS/400 mainframes" or "embedded systems", for example. A

real IT consultant, though, focuses on benefiting his client, using whatever technology is necessary, rather than on what technology he's familiar with. You want to hire someone that's skilled at solving problems, and that will use the technology that's best suited to your business, whatever it may be. You shouldn't have to pick a consultant based on what technology he's familiar with; he should be able to take care of almost any technological problem, either by doing the work himself or outsourcing to someone in his network of contacts.

Pay only for value.

Amateur IT consultants tend to charge for their time, not by the value of the work they perform; so do contract programmers. Real IT consultants, though, charge based on value provided to you, NOT based on time. This is because amateurs are afraid that they won't be able to complete the project in a reasonable amount of time, so they want reassurance that they'll be paid for their time in any situation. Experienced IT consultants, though, are confident in their ability to deliver code under their estimate, they are confident in their ability to provide value, and they that they can provide value that's worth MORE than their time is. You shouldn't be making an investment decision every time you consider calling your IT consultant.

It always takes time.

Some consultants will offer to send you a proposal after a ten or twenty minute phone conversation. It is impossible to accurately assess your situation that quickly; they are trying to provide you with a 'one-size-fits-all' package. Real IT consultants will not make provide you with answers, proposals, or fees until they know enough about your business to have an informed opinion. Unless your consultant is willing to spend enough time to really know what your problem is, you won't end up with the solution that you really need, because your consultant is making random shots in the dark.

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