

Outsourcing.....A Message to Companies seeking support.

By Kathie M. Thomas

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I own one of those businesses that companies outsource to. I read some time ago advice given to companies that practice outsourcing: "Be prepared for a very intense period of working with your partner before the contract, to promote a deep understanding of the business relationship and each other's culture and staff".

Very few businesses, in my experience, explain their requirements sufficiently or their expectations when outsourcing work. They forget that the person they are outsourcing to does not have historical knowledge of the job, or the company. Being short of time to get the job done is a probable cause. Often timing is the dictator - everything is needed in a hurry - usually yesterday. Technical language and acronyms produce further barriers. BUT, it can work. I have worked in the past for two different companies, consecutively, both using the acronym ERL meaning entirely different things. Whilst a little disorienting at first, it is always important to ask right away what particular acronyms mean, to settle into the new culture quickly.

It takes time to develop knowledge, understanding and to build a relationship, not just with the client, but with their client base also - if it is required that you have that contact. It can't be done overnight, or in a week. A secret to building the relationship with your client's client, is to start to think of the end person as your client. How would you deal with them if they were your personal client? Put your client's business on like an overcoat and treat it as your own business. You, therefore, create a more personal approach, and one that is more realistic, and at the very least, not distant.

With this in mind, it should then be relatively easy to know what questions to ask, on behalf of the out-sourcee, or what information to give, on behalf of the business outsourcing.

Being the 'out-sourcee' means you are not on the client premises, and you can't rely on things like sight, sound and smell to jog your memory, and remind you of things relating to that client. These senses help jog the memory of new employees when they're on the job learning. The 'out-sourcee' cannot depend upon these things. And often they're reluctant to keep picking up the phone, or sending emails to find out answers. They don't want to become a nuisance or feel that they are delaying too much. So, it would be beneficial to collate a set of questions quickly when receiving a new project - look through it, read initial information and write down a plan of action very early in the piece, so you can get any further information you require.

Another benefit to larger companies is that their dollar goes further inside a small business, as opposed to using a larger business, and personalised service is always an every day detail, mainly because you are now dealing with only one, or perhaps two people, instead of a large organisation.

One of my former clients was a two-person operation - a debt collection agency! I set up and maintained a database for them, typed their letters and final notices (amounting to many hundred each month) and two years later their staff had quadrupled, their profits increased and they could afford to pay a staff member to operate the computer they'd just purchased and take over the role I'd been playing. I basically worked myself out of a contract. But, if I didn't look after them and achieve for them, I would have lost the contract well before then. As I spent more time doing their work, I was able to make suggestions about some of the letters and how they were produced, offer further assistance and modify the database in Access to meet their needs (including the suggestions I'd made). When I first took on the role, the names list was a table in Word, given to me by the former out-sourcee. To develop a system and make things run smoother I set up the database and then promoted to the client the extra things I could do for them as a result. Whilst it meant that I was increasing the services I was providing to them, my initial plan was just to make things easier for myself, so I could be more efficient to them. We both benefited.

When my time with this agency ended a new issue arose. Ownership of Intellectual Property. My contract stated 'x' amount of dollars per letter - nothing at all about the database. That had been my initiative. I had invested in my own productivity by developing the database. It was in my interests to do that to cut down on time spent - after all I was only being paid per letter, not for how I managed the information. I agonised about what I should do - they wanted all the names and addresses on disk - over 3000! - but I was not prepared to give them the database that I'd designed and modified and which had not been paid for. In the end I exported the information into Word and saved it in table format. After all, that was how it had been given to me in the first place. If, however, I had been paid for the development of the database, it would have been a different story - it would belong to them!

Further advice I read recently said: "Develop a contingency plan in case the partnership fails. The plan should cover the legal, contractual and high-level operational considerations in bringing the function back in-house." It's possible that contracts may have to be revisited bi-annually, or annually to cover for any changes/improvements that have been made but not allowed for. Don't forget that technology is changing very quickly and what is not possible today may be possible tomorrow.

The issues for outsourcing then are:

- * Ensuring that sufficient information, especially historical information and an explanation of acronyms is provided to ensure the outsourcee can carry out the work efficiently and adequately.

- * Explore the possibilities of changes that could take place if the outsourcing is over an extended period of time.

- * Consider who owns what with regard to the work done, equipment and software used, and possibly databases designed. Is sufficient payment being made to cover these things? Whilst it is not necessary to over specify requirements, the issue of end results and ownership should be considered.

- * Should a large company use the services of a smaller one to meet outsourcing needs? Consider that what may seem small dollars to a large company can often go a long way inside a smaller company, whilst making use of specialised expertise, that can often be totally, or wholly, dedicated to your project.

- * What is the planned end result? Often, there can be more than one way to achieve this, and whilst the outsourcing company may see only one way, the outsourcee may well achieve it in a totally different fashion, whilst still being an acceptable arrangement for all in which to operate.

Be prepared to discuss different ways of handling the job - don't be too restrictive, it may save you money!

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