

THE DAILY RECORD

LAW, REAL ESTATE, FINANCE AND GENERAL INTELLIGENCE SINCE 1908

In Defense Of Independent Consultants

BY MARTHA BUYER
DAILY RECORD COLUMNIST

I've just returned from the annual meeting of the Society of Telecommunications Consultants (www.stcconsultants.org), an organization of independent consultants whose members must annually sign a pledge of vendor independence.

These consultant members, whose expertise runs the gamut from bill auditing to complex cable plan design, and everything in between, represent the finest of consultants whose ethical business conduct and technical credentials, though diverse, are beyond reproach.

Since the accounting fraud and corporate mismanagement scandals of the last few years, consultants generally have been given an unwarranted — and unjustified — bad rap. By the same logic that suggests most accountants are competent and ethical, so too are most professional consultants who operate in all sectors of the marketplace. The bottom line is that competent, independent consultants bring value to the table.

In a tight technology market, the intuitive assumption is that consultants cost money. But the fact remains the value a good independent consultant, or consulting firm, brings to the table far outweighs its cost, no matter what the size or scope of the project.

Generally speaking, consultants come to their respective practices after years in the field, either on the vendor or user side. They understand the technology and the market space and how the game is played. They provide an end-user, whether it be a Fortune 500 company or a neighborhood business, with the necessary expertise and street smarts to make the best decision in the most efficient way.

Rather than having to spend time learning the technology and the distinctions between one product offering and another, the decision maker can rely upon the independent consultant's familiarity with the technology or product and his/her independence from any one vendor or product line.

In this way, the decision-maker is able to evaluate the alternatives in a language that is readily understandable and make the best decision for the business without having to invest the considerable amounts of time necessary to get up to speed on a technology or scope of products. From the decision-maker's perspective, most implemented technology is only of interest if it's not working properly or if it's costing the company money without perceived benefit.

Recently, a friend who is a physician asked me to recommend a telecommunications consultant for his practice as it prepared to move to larger space. When he received the proposal, he shared the information with his partners. They decided the cost of consulting services was too high. They decided they would save the money because, from their perspective, they could just ask other medical office personnel what they had done in similar circumstances.

While this decision may have saved money in the short term,

TELECOM LAW



MARTHA BUYER

when the cabling wasn't properly laid out and when the phones had less than satisfactory sound quality, the practice was forced to hire a consultant to solve its problems.

At this point, the consultant's fees were considerably higher than those initially proposed, because the project was much more labor intensive than it would have been if the consultant had been retained at the outset. I had a very hard time convincing the physician, who is a specialist, that while he wouldn't consider consulting an orthopedist if he was experiencing a hearing problem, likewise, he shouldn't rely on the technology decisions made by non-experts to make the decisions that were in the best interest of his practice.

As in a medical situation, he would have been better served to retain the expert for the limited purpose of his technology implementation. This approach would have saved the practice both money and aggravation.

Another area where a consultant can be of great value is as an outsource provider. Many consultants

who have years of experience running departments within businesses have opened their doors to provide outsourcing services to clients that may have neither the time nor the resources to operate their own IT or telecommunications departments.

Here again, a business, governmental entity or organization can benefit from the years of expertise and experience of its outsource provider at a fraction of what it would cost to bring the same individual, or team of individuals, in house.

The stories of money saved — or refunded — following the work of a consultant are legendary. Millions of dollars are found each year for businesses and other telecommunications consumers who have been erroneously or inappropriately billed for services that either they did not contract for or did not use. Increasingly, large companies are outsourcing both their telecommunications bill paying and contract compliance to small niche firms whose expertise comes at a small price but provides immeasurable value.

In short, independent consultants bring value wherever they go. Unlike the old adage "you get what you pay for," with an independent consultant, you get much, much more.

For more information on the Society of Telecommunications Consultants, call (800) 782-7670 or visit the website at <http://www.stc-consultants.org>.

Martha Buyer is an attorney concentrating in the practice of telecommunications law. Her clients range from Fortune 500 companies to small family-owned businesses where she has provided a range of telecommunications consulting and legal services, primarily geared to support corporate end-users working with carriers and equipment providers. Buyer can be contacted at martha@marthabuyer.com.