**The five consultants who will sink your project before it begins…and how to avoid them**

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If you’ve been in the compliance field for any period of time, you’ve likely hired and fired consultants. We all know them. They come to verify or validate our findings, bring our teams up to speed on a new process, help us prepare for an audit, improve a process, or simply to facilitate a cause analysis or a working group.

Hopefully, they help more than they hurt. But there are no guarantees, and when a consulting project fails, plenty of blame goes around. That’s why you should fail big from the beginning. If that’s what you want, here are the five types of consultants you should look for:

1. **The Fly-by-Nighter:** She sweeps in on a red-eye to show you how to fix your problem. It doesn’t matter that she really hasn’t done this before or may only consult a little bit, on the side. No worries, though, you will definitely stay in budget – until, that is, you hire the next consultant to fix the problem again.   
    **The Problem:** You’ve heard the term “you get what you pay for?” The Fly-by-Nighter is notoriously cheap, and infamously incompetent. Pay for competence.
2. **The Rockstar Resume:** He’s the guy who has worked for every Fortune 500 company, and God too. His resume reads like he should currently be heading the quality assurance for the U.S. Congress. Perhaps he should; because like them, he hasn’t actually done any real work in quite some time.   
    **The Problem:** Great resumes are usually well earned, but some people rely too much on reputation after a while and forget how to actually do the work. Unless you can see evidence that this consultant has adapted to current practices, it he or she may not be the best fit for your need.
3. **The Silver Bullet:** She will fix all of your problems with the touch of a button. No need to really involve too many staffers from your side, she’s done this a hundred times before and she knows the answer. You might as well pay her in silver too, because that’s how costly this is going to be.  
    **The Problem:** Silver Bullet is expensive, but she also doesn’t want to engage with the people who really know what’s going on. A key advantage of having a consultant is that person’s objectivity, but even that fresh perspective needs to be based on data. Your silver bullet strategy may not correctly identify the challenge or come up with a viable solution.
4. **Communicationally-Challenged:** Yes, he has a cell phone and a work phone, but he’s never at either. His voicemail might be full or it might not be, but it doesn’t matter because you never get a call back. Perhaps you could get his wife’s phone number? This guy at least seems busy, but the question is: how will he ever execute your important project, and would you even know it when he did.   
    **The Problem:** Whether he’s unavailable whenever you call or unavailable standing right in front of you, that lack of communication is likely a sign of things to come. Can you afford to take that risk?
5. **The Power Player:** She’s the one who feels the need to stand up to the auditor, protecting her turf (and yours, of course). Belligerence is not beyond the realm of possibility, nor is righteous indignation: “How dare they suggest that we haven’t done that!”  
     
   **The Problem:** Auditors can be your best friend or your worst enemy, and there is no doubt that some auditors are misguided in their approach, but a great consultant should mediate, not exacerbate the issue.

So how do you avoid these charmers? Check references. Look for long-term engagements as well as short-term ones, and request samples of their key deliverables, for instance, a project or communication plan. Make sure references are recent and ask about results at every step of the way. Ask what challenges they encountered and how they dealt with them.

If they make it through anyway, pay attention to your gut, and address any issues immediately. Some companies (even though it is a well known fact that clients hate the practice) will pull the ‘bait and switch’ routine when staffing consulting engagements: Bob is proposed for the project, but when the engagement begins, Sue is the one in the lead. Vilifying consultants is fun, and the characters above are entertaining, but it is also a bit unfair. Often times companies make it difficult for consultants to succeed. Consider these common complaints from consultants about compliance and quality management executives:

* “The senior executives did not buy in.”
* “The CEO didn’t even show up; why would anyone else?”
* “The plan was there, but the resources weren’t.”
* “They only wanted a quick fix, not a long-term solution.”
* “The Terms of Reference were ever changing.”

Consulting is a symbiotic relationship. Many engagements are fast-moving and involve high-stakes, so putting the right team of consultants and internal staff together is essential to your continued success.

The great consultants will hold your hand while simultaneously holding your feet to the fire. They will help you construct a solution to your challenge and get their hands dirty implementing the solution right alongside of you. Similarly to teaching your child how to ride a bike, the greatest consultants will know at what point they can back away and let you go.

Beth Steuart recently joined D’Ardenne Associates, a quality management system consulting firm based in Roanoke, Va. She has more than 20 years of experience working with FDA-regulated companies such as Johnson & Johnson and Maybelline. Over the course of her career, she has hired each one of the characters above, and has diligently avoided becoming one herself.