

## Let's Hear It For The Consultant

**Tony Angel, managing director of Edifice, responds to Jeremy Waud's contention on i-FM (see "Contractor versus Consultant", March 2008) that the FM provider is a better alternative to the independent consultant for the provision of "appropriate and cost-effective" advice.**

I read the recent article "Contractor versus Consultant" with a great deal of interest. Initially because of the obviously competitive approach to the subject evidenced not only in the title of the opinion piece but thereafter in some rather alarming comments within the article itself; but also because my own background includes long spells as both service provider and independent consultant. Indeed, I've also enjoyed roles as the client, and I reckon that gives me a pretty good perspective from which to offer a response and – perhaps – a different take on the issue.

As the MD of an independent facilities consultancy, I would have to start by rejecting totally what are sweeping generalisations about the consultancy profession as a whole. Jeremy alleges that the consultant is a "high flyer" (is it bad to be successful at what you do?) lacking in commercial awareness and acumen; that there is likely to be little on offer by way of specialist sector experience and understanding; that the consultant is driven by opportunities to "sell on" and maximise revenue as opposed to being "focussed on the job in hand"; and – wait for it- that consultants live in "cuckoo land" where they're unable to distinguish the world of academia and theory from practical realism.

In my experience, the reality of this rather bleak picture is very different. Here's why...

1. A consultant who is devoid of commercial awareness is unlikely to be a consultant for very long. All projects are driven by a requirement to add value in some shape or form, and for the most part that value is measured empirically; similar services and service levels are required for less cost, or some additional benefit (a broader scope of services, better delivery mechanisms, more comprehensive MI, higher service levels, etc) is demanded for no higher cost. Corporate Boards tend to be pretty pragmatic when it comes to measuring added value, and the bottom line normally figures somewhere in the equation.

To achieve this requires the ability to translate such requirements into a sustainable solution from the supply side and that can best be achieved by adopting a partnering approach that sees all parties aligning both objectives and expectations. Consultants therefore need to inhabit the worlds of both the client and the service provider, and to do so successfully – indeed, one only has to look at the talent in the consultancy world today to realise that the backbone is derived from people with genuine and substantial managerial or operational experience, be that on the





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service provider side or as client. This is hardly a scenario that suggests an absence of commercial acumen, is it?

2. More and more, we are seeing evidence of the true “intelligent client”. This is someone that knows and understands the nature of his/her business; that has a clear idea of what that business wants as an output from the project (although, perhaps, not how to achieve that output); and that has amassed a fair amount of personal experience within the FM sector, so is well networked and “savvy”. Palming off the wrong resource on such a client isn’t an option, which is why Edifice (and any consultancy with whom we partner) has very specific requirements of its staff with regard to both experience and qualifications. Indeed, we can, and always do, resource projects by specifically matching the requirements of those projects and the skill sets of the resource team. These skill sets can be technical, managerial, or a mixture of the two and it’s quite common practice for consultancies that might be perceived as competitors to pool resources when the occasion demands.

This ability to harness expertise is – in my experience – something that the service provider side of the industry is unable to match. Indeed, I know of few service providers that will carry such a mix of skills and experience on the basis that they might be required at some point in time; the reality in many cases is that a client (having seen a senior manager at the point of sale) will be allocated whatever resource is available. Finally, whilst I’m aware that, in the case of the large “mega-practices” that arose out of the accountancy profession, graduate staff allocation can be something of a problem, in the main they’re not the organisations providing consultancy advice in the FM sector. In any event, it’s a situation that can be managed from the outset by the client – as in many areas of life, you just need to be clear about what it is you want, and unambiguous in imparting that information.

3. Contrary to the suggestion made in the article to which I’m responding, for virtually all consultancy projects fees are agreed in advance, are completely transparent, and are finite – when the project has been successfully delivered the commercial arrangement will come to an end. It’s interesting that Jeremy suggests some kind of focus on future revenue generation, because the reality – and the irony – is that the consultant is extremely unlikely to be in a position to benefit from any future revenue opportunity arising out of the initial project. The irony, of course, is that similar can’t be said of the service provider.

Now, in reading these views it might be assumed that I’m proposing the opposite to Jeremy’s article – that only a “true” consultancy can offer true consultancy advice. Actually, that’s not the case at all. I do think that it’s important to ensure objectivity, however, and that it’s imperative to avoid any possibility of conflict of interest. I also believe that (internal client) perception often demands a demonstrably impartial view to be afforded the appropriate level of seriousness, both within the FM department of the client organisation



and beyond, i.e. at Board level. Further, consultancy practices tend to amass a body of intellectual property – systems, processes, analytical tools, documentation, etc – that enable projects to be managed and implemented effectively, and all of these will usually be “live” (i.e. they’ll continue to be developed, and to evolve, as the learning process from each project feeds into the central body of organisational knowledge). I believe that the IP possessed within each consultancy practice is crucially important, and it’s unlikely to be found in the same depth, or amassed/developed with the same level of expertise, within a service provider organisation.

Notwithstanding the above, what matters more than anything else is the quality of advice on offer – a client simply needs to adopt a sensible, professional approach to procuring such advice, and that means scrutinising both the organisation bidding/wishing to provide it and the people within that organisation. There’s no reason to be dogmatic about it, and there’s certainly no reason for any of us within the industry to be divisive. And that, after all, is what prompted this response in the first place.

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**About Edifice**  
Edifice is an independent consultancy providing objective, intelligent advice on the management of facilities and property in support of core business objectives. Working closely with its clients it provides solutions that are flexible, sustainable and – most important – appropriate to business needs. Blue chip clients include Cable & Wireless, Microsoft, WPP Group, United Business Media, O2, Iron Mountain, and Sainsbury’s.

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