

Airport Beacon Report



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Tips on Selecting An Airport Consultant

By Mark R. Davidson, A.A.E. Vice President

After several years of managing airports, I have taken a career turn which has placed me on the other side of the table as a consultant. My new position with *Airport Business Solutions* has provided me with a new perspective and has granted me the opportunity to participate in the RFP/RFQ process on a number of projects. Since I also logged a number of hours issuing and evaluating RFPs and RFQs, I think it would be beneficial to relay some insights and guidelines that may be beneficial.

What is a Consultant?

The word "consultant" can mean different things to different people. In general, a consultant is a professional with knowledge and experience in a specialized field or number of fields. However, a significant role of a consultant is to bring a different perspective to a problem. Many airport management personnel have been employed by the same airport throughout their careers, and can be somewhat myopic in the approach to problem resolution. Oftentimes, the role of the consultant is to bring their knowledge and experience of what has been successful (and not so successful) at other airports, and relate them to the issue at hand for their client. It has been said that a consultant does nothing but steals ideas from others and calls them their own. However, the mark of a good consultant is to know which ideas to steal and apply in the right situation.

In most cases, consultants are highly trained in analyzing problems and needs, as well as developing solutions to satisfy objectives. For the most part, consultants are project-oriented and concentrate on results, which means their focus is towards achieving their customer's objectives. The degree to which

these objectives are achieved is an important measure of the consultant's contribution. The consultant is an advisor, not a miracle worker. Airports need to be leery of anyone promising "quick fixes", because a good consultant will not have all the answers, but will know where to find them. As such, selecting the right consultant is a critical business decision that can have a significant impact on an airport's success.

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ABS Relocates to Sunny Tampa

After several years of living and working in the Atlanta area, Michael A. Hodges, MAI decided to relocate the ABS Headquarters to Tampa, Florida for the warm weather and sunny skies. Below is a map of Florida that will assist our clients in locating our new office. Welcome to Florida Michael !!



UPCOMING SEMINARS
Basics of Small Airport Management
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Choosing a Consultant

Now that we understand the benefits, as well as the limitations, of a consultant, the first step is to determine what are the most important criteria in selecting a consultant for the project or work you need to have done. Is cost a primary concern? Is there a deadline that must be met? These concerns, as well as determining what needs to be accomplished, is crucial for successful. The more specific you are, the better the final product will be and the quicker the consultant will be able to direct their resources in the right direction.

The next step is to get the word out and advertise your need for a consultant. This can be accomplished by advertising in industry publications or contacting directly a number of consulting firms that have experience in the field. The worse thing an airport can do is to have a consultant already selected and request proposals and interviews from others to satisfy procurement procedures. This is both ineffective for the airport and unfair to the consultants. One thing I have learned from being a consultant, is that it costs money and takes a lot of time to submit a quality proposal. As such, establishing a “short-list” or awarding a three-to-five year consulting service contract is a fair way to procure needed services without obtaining bids every time you need a quick answer. This may also provide you with the opportunity to procure subject-matter experts by requiring the consultant to subcontract on matters that are outside of their expertise.

Once the project or objective has been defined and the project has been advertised, the firms bidding on a project should be analyzed on the following:

- Experience - Research the consultants you are considering to see how often they have worked on projects that fit your needs. Be wary of “too much” experience. Excessive experience on a single type of project is great if you are involved in litigation that might require expert witness testimony, but may

result in a failure to comprehensively evaluate the issue at hand. In addition, it is not unusual for a consultant to “inflate” their experience levels, so use common sense to make sure it all makes sense.

- References - Reputable consultants will be more than happy to give you a list of past clients to call. Once you make the call, be sure to ask if they were satisfied with the service and ask if they experienced any poor service before acquiring the firm. However, remember that most people will avoid providing a negative reference, no matter how justified. As such, take the reference-checking opportunity to ask the airports about some of the other firms that have submitted proposals. Have they ever worked with any of the other firms? What were their experiences with them? Are they aware of other airports that have used any of the firms? You may be able to discover more significant and worthwhile information regarding other firms bidding on the project via this method.
- Analysis Process - Make sure you agree with their procedures and time lines.
- Technical Competence - Determine if the consultant possesses the particular expertise required for the proposed assignment.
- Customer Benefits - Hire a consultant who has experience implementing programs that will benefit your customers, as well as your governing body.
- Communication Skills - Make sure the consultant can communicate effectively.
- Chemistry - If you and the consultant share the same business philosophy and working style, then it will make the entire process run smoothly.
- On-going Support - Be sure that after your program is implemented, you are not left high and dry. Hire a consultant that will be there to help you through implementation and beyond.
- Honesty - Beware of consultants that promise they can do everything and know the answer to every question. As mentioned previously, it is not always important that the consultant knows the answer to every question.

Sometimes it is more important that they will admit to limited knowledge in an area, but are willing to do whatever it takes to find the right answer for your particular problem.

Project Costs

Consulting costs are determined by the time needed to accomplish the task at hand, and can vary depending upon the complexity of the project, availability of information, and the scope of the final work product. Regardless, in most situations (but not all) consultants should be able to give you a good idea of the costs associated with a task from their experience doing similar jobs for other airports. Some projects such as valuations, business plans, and development of Minimum Standards can normally be done for a "fixed fee", plus expenses. Other activities like conflict resolution, litigation support, and lease negotiations, are priced per diem, plus expenses. Therefore, it is important that you try to answer all of the consultant's questions as comprehensively as possible if you are looking for a "fixed fee" cost. Nothing creates conflict on a project more than when a consultant underbids because the scope of the project or the expectations of the airport changes. Always set forth the goals and objectives in writing in the contract prior to proceeding on a project.

Who is doing the work?

When selecting consultants, remember they come in all sizes. Many are solo practitioners, and you will want to see if the person has the time and skills to carry all out of the various aspects of your project. In addition, when interviewing a firm, make sure you ask who will actually be performing the work. Often a senior person comes for the interview, but when the project has begun, they are nowhere in sight, and a very junior person is all you see. Be sure to ask for the level of involvement of each person named in a project team. Also, make sure to determine who is the contact and responsible party should a conflict arise.

Finally, remember that a consultant is not a staff member or a magician. They will work on a schedule

and in a manner that might be different from what your staff is accustomed to. Be clear about deadlines and check-in points, but let the consultant do their job. Also, a consultant can only work with the information and time you make available. Therefore, be sure to share everything relevant, including your time. Communication is the key component to a successful consultant/airport relationship.

Hurricane Charley hits an *Airport Business Solutions* Team Member

Although Hurricane Charley turned east before hitting ABS's new headquarters in Tampa, the Company was impacted by the



Quality Tie Down Ropes

storm at our satellite office in Fort Myers. Executive Vice President, Bobbi Thompson, who lives and works in Cape Coral, a suburb of Fort Myers, was directly impacted and considers herself lucky to only suffer minimal damage to her office and home. According to Bobbi, the week following the storm was a learning experience since she went without electricity and clean water. During the week, she learned to cook bacon, eggs, and coffee on the grill and thanks to the pool, they were able to take a bath. To say the least, Bobbi has a new appreciation for air conditioning, roofs without leaks, drinking water, and most of all friends and family.

Airport Business Solutions is recognized as the leader in providing valuation, analysis, and consulting services to airports and aviation businesses, and offers a diversity of backgrounds and experience which provides a new, creative, and "outside the box" perspective on a myriad of aviation issues and problems.

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