Research

Consultant engagement for computer system selection

A pro-active client role in small businesses

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Because of their limited number of senior positions and fewer alternative career paths, small businesses have a more difficult time attracting and retaining skilled information systems (IS) staff and are thus dependent upon external expertise. Small businesses are particularly dependent on outside expertise when first computerizing. Because small businesses suffer from severe financial constraints, it is often difficult to justify the cost of custom software. Hence, for many small businesses, engaging a consultant to help with identifying suitable packaged software and related hardware, is their first critical step toward computerization. This study explores the importance of pro-active client involvement when engaging a consultant to assist with computer system selection in small businesses. Client involvement throughout consultant engagement is found to be integral to project success and frequently lacking due to misconceptions of small businesses regarding their role. Small businesses often overestimate the impact of consultant and vendor support in achieving successful computer system selection and implementation. For consultant engagement to be successful, the process must be viewed as being directed toward the achievement of specific organizational results where the client accepts responsibility for direction of the process.

Keywords: Consultant Engagement, Small Business, Small Enterprise, Consultants, Outsiders, Advisors, Consultation, Management Information Systems, IS Personnel Resource Management, IS Staffing, Consultant/Client Relations.

1. Introduction

Research evidence suggests that there is a relationship between organizational size and computer usage characteristics [8,10]. Small businesses suffer from resource poverty [40], a condition characterized by severe constraints on financial resources, a lack of trained personnel, and a short-range management perspective imposed by a volatile competitive environment. As a consequence, in applying information technology (IT) to their organizations, small businesses are likely to face problems which are different from those faced by larger organizations [42].

Organizations of all sizes are placing greater reliance on external sources of software and computer support. McFarlan and McKenny [29] identify “limited staff” and “dramatic increase in the number of potential applications” as major factors influencing firms in this direction. Because of their small size, limited number of senior positions, and

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fewer alternative career paths, small businesses have a more difficult time attracting and retaining skilled information systems (IS) staff and thus are more dependent on external IS expertise.

External expertise can be employed directly, for example to help with identifying information requirements and selecting an application package. It is also employed indirectly through the purchase of an application package, where the package embodies the expertise and efforts of external developers. Because small businesses suffer from severe constraints on financial resources, it is often difficult to justify the cost of custom software. Thus, for many small businesses, engaging a consultant to help with identifying suitable packaged software and related hardware, is their first critical step toward computerization.

Though several studies have looked at board of director [4,27], stakeholder [17], and business consultant [34] impact on small businesses [31], the literature on consultant engagement has tended to focus on the concerns of large organizations and general management consulting [13,41]. Various descriptive articles have addressed the benefits of engaging consultants to assist with the selection of computer systems [11,12]. Several texts and articles have been written on “how to engage” consultants [18,20]; while other authors have suggested “how to consult” [19,21]. Little research has specifically addressed the engagement of outside IS expertise by small and medium business, a significant and growing practice [24].

This paper is an exploration of the consultant engagement process in small businesses selecting a computer system. The importance of the client role is emphasized. The paper proceeds as follows. First, the companies studied are described. Second, the question of why small businesses look outside their organizations for assistance is considered. Third, an argument is developed for close client involvement throughout consultant engagement. Fourth, implications of client misunderstanding of their own and the consultant’s roles are identified. Fifth, several activities that small businesses can pursue to improve chances of a successful consultant engagement are presented. Lastly, case study observations are summarized. Specific recommendations to the small business manager are highlighted at the end of each section.

2. The Case Companies

Ideas and recommendations presented in this paper are drawn from the literature and a longitudinal study of the computerization experiences of five small firms in Singapore. The case study research sites were selected because of their minimal prior computerization experience, and their intention to employ a consultant through the Small Enterprise Computerization Program (SECP). The SECP is a Singapore Government Program to encourage and assist small businesses to become more competitive through the application of IT. The SECP definition of a small business is a service sector firm with fewer than 50 employees, or a manufacturing firm with less than $8 million in fixed assets [14].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Case Companies Profile.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Case 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>Graphic Design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnover (millions US$)</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employees</td>
<td>Admin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Areas of previous experience with consultants</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Methods of data collection employed during the case research included: semi-structured interviews of consultants, vendors and key staff in the client organizations; attendance at package demonstrations; attendance at project review meetings; and review of project related documentation. For one small business a comprehensive formal teaching case was developed [15] and circulated to key players for feedback.

Table 1 presents a basic profile of the 5 case companies’ industry, turnover, number of employees and prior experience with consultants. The businesses studied represent diverse industries and vary in size from a high of 130 employees (Case 4 – metal surface treatment processing) to a low of 13 (Case 1). Turnover for 1987 ranged between $0.3 and $3.0 million US dollars. Cases 1, 2 and 5 have experienced dramatic growth in sales since that time.

Generally the case firms have had little prior experience with consultants. Case 3 is the only firm to have had prior experience with computerization and IS consultants, having installed a three station multi-user microcomputer in 1985. Cases 2 and 5 have consulted external accountants in the past, and Case 2 has employed the services of a freight forwarding operations consultant.

Early in Case 2, the SECP advisor encountered a difficult situation involving the operations consultant mentioned. The consultant, wanting to extend his business with the case company, was proposing a computer system solution which specified custom development using a highly obscure microcomputer operating system and database management system. Though the consultant understood the business, he obviously had little appreciation of the technology. The SECP advisor’s task of dislodging the consultant, though ultimately successful, proved to be very difficult. An important issue not addressed in the case study, is the relative importance of consultant experience with and expertise on the industry versus the technology.

Table 2 presents characteristics of the case companies’ computerization projects. Hours of client involvement in the selection project vary between 35 and 300. In all 5 cases, the highest priority application of interest was a high volume, transaction processing (or paper processing) application. Secondary applications included CAD/CAM (Case 1), Quality Control (Case 5), and Estimating (Case 3). All case companies except Case 3, implemented the systems selected.

Case 3 appears to have had little real intention to replace their aged and precariously functioning multi-user micro. They were using the project to give staff the impression of being progressive, and due to serious financial concerns, were hoping for a recommendation to “do nothing.”

Actual costs of implementation were higher than early consultant estimates, with the worst case (Case 5) being double the original $125,000 estimate. The lengthy, average time required to complete selection (22 weeks) was generally a consequence of client indecisiveness or unavailability of necessary client resources.

Table 2
Selection Projects Profile.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Case 1</th>
<th>Case 2</th>
<th>Case 3</th>
<th>Case 4</th>
<th>Case 5</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First time</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computerization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours of Client</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effort on Project</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Application</td>
<td>Project</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>Billing</td>
<td>Inventory</td>
<td>Whole Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selected</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost of Solution</td>
<td>$15,000</td>
<td>$50,000</td>
<td>$75,000</td>
<td>$40,000</td>
<td>$250,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommended ($US)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of the</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection Project</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(weeks)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Why Small Businesses Look Outside

Small businesses seek outside assistance with a variety of objectives. Frankenhuys [13] identifies savings, an independent view, and expertise as being the main reasons that organizations engage consultants. Savings may be realised through a cost cutting study, or more directly through the avoidance of hiring full-time staff. Where a small business is computerizing for the first time, all of these objectives may be sought. Other research has suggested that the use of external expertise can increase computer knowledge or compensate for lack of knowledge and thereby improve the chances of successful computer usage by small firms.

Bruce [3] cites rapid technological change, worldwide competitive pressures, and problems of high costs and poor cost-effectiveness of information systems as reasons why large organizations are seeking outside IS assistance. David G. Robinson, president of Index Group Inc., one of the largest IT consulting companies in the world, emphasizes the increasing complexity of managing and surviving competitively in global markets as being the major stimulus for firms to seek outside expertise [28]. With increasing acceptance of inter-organizational systems (e.g. electronic exchange of documentation between small suppliers and large manufacturers), these issues of complexity and rapid change become important to small businesses as well as large.

Besides requiring expert advice, small business management needs on-the-job assistance in carrying out their chosen course of action. Kentzman and Samaras [22] suggest that “outside people,” (e.g. lawyers, accountants, bankers, boards of directors) seldom have time to help the small business in seeing through the advice they offer. For this reason, the consultant’s breadth of experience with problem identification, alternatives generation, and implementation, is often desirable.

In many ways, the needs of small businesses for outside assistance with computer system selection are analogous with the needs of small businesses for outside assistance with business planning. Computerization planning and business planning are both periodic, temporal staff functions requiring substantial expertise. Cohn and Lindberg [6] surveyed 197 small and large firm executives about their perceptions of the critical difficulties in managing small versus large companies. They found that the skills, time, and staff necessary for planning are not major issues in large organizations, yet these same issues represent most of the planning related management difficulties of small firms. Delone observed that “the practice of planning computer applications and the existence of basic computer controls are important to [implementation] success [yet] with the low cost of small business computer systems, there is a temptation to purchase computers prematurely [9].”

The assistance available from the SECP has undoubtedly had some influence on the case companies’ intentions to use a consultant, as well as the timing of computerization efforts. Cases 2 and 5 indicated with some certainty that they would have engaged the services of a consultant regardless of the existence of the SECP; while Case 4 indicated they would probably not have attempted computerization without the support of the program.

**Recommendation 1.** Do not be tempted to purchase computers prematurely. Conduct a thorough information systems requirements analysis with the assistance of an experienced analyst. Where the appropriate expertise cannot be attracted to the firm, or developed within the firm, an outside consultant may be the logical recourse.

Not all the arguments are in favor of small businesses engaging outsiders. The costs of consultants are perceived by many small businesses as being prohibitive. Raymond [33] suggests that rather than engaging outsiders, an appropriate environment for successful implementation of information systems is one in which the small business has the in-house expertise to develop its own software. Kentzman and Samaras [22] considered the possibility that small businesses, generally, may not be able to cost effectively engage outside consultants. J.A. Turner [38] investigated the notion that organizations of different size exhibit distinct patterns of obtaining computer resources. He found that large banks tend to develop internal resources whereas smaller banks obtain these resources externally. Whether and when small businesses should seek outside assistance versus acquire or develop their own IS expertise in-house, is a question for further research.
4. The Need For Client Involvement

Several researchers have addressed the importance of client involvement in consultant engagement [2,5,23]. Engaging a consultant does not guarantee successful computerization. Many instances of major information system failures, where consultants played an integral role, have been reported in the popular press [1,39]. Instances of reputable, established consulting firms having failed in their attempts to address the information systems needs of smaller organizations have also been documented [30]. Delone [9] suggests that the involvement of external expertise is not a substitute for either top management involvement or top management knowledge of computers. Lees and Lees [25] examined difficulties experienced by small businesses with implementing computer systems and observed that small businesses often overestimate the impact of consultant and vendor support, or conversely, they underestimate the importance of their own role. Tilles [36] maintains that for consultant engagement to be successful, the process must be viewed as being directed toward the achievement of specific organizational results. "where the client accepts responsibility for direction of the process.” The case study findings strongly support this view.

In a previous analysis of the consultant engagement experiences of Singapore Graphic Designs Pte. Ltd. (Private Limited—similar to Company Limited), Case 1 in the study, Gable [16] identified several common concerns with consultant performance: (1) lack of commitment to implementation success, (2) little relevant experience demonstrated, (3) lack of a methodical approach,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Symptom(s)</th>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Recommendation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td>Junior staff completed bulk of work</td>
<td>(5)</td>
<td>Check References</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lacks</td>
<td>No offer of assistance with implementation</td>
<td>(8)</td>
<td>Negotiate the contract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>Short listed alternatives did not meet basic criteria</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Success</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td>Main consultant demonstrated little knowledge of market</td>
<td>(10)</td>
<td>Continuing review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lacks</td>
<td>Short listed alternatives did not meet basic criteria</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>No methodical approach employed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unstructured</td>
<td>Little documentation</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>Evaluate Proposals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach</td>
<td>Short listing criteria unclear</td>
<td></td>
<td>(10) and (11) Continuing review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Short listed alternatives did not meet basic criteria</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate</td>
<td>Poor vendor training</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>Evaluate Proposals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vendor</td>
<td>Poor vendor knowledge of their software</td>
<td></td>
<td>(10) and (11) Continuing review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appraisal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: [16])

SB- small business
and (4) inadequate appraisal of vendors. He then went on to present a twelve phase model of the client role in consultant engagement. Before selecting a consultant, the small business should: (1) define the problem, (2) evaluate internal resources available for the project, (3) canvass the market for prospective consulting firms, (4) develop a request for proposal (RFP), (5) check references, (6) evaluate proposals, (7) select a firm, (8) negotiate the contract and (9) announce the selection. SECP mechanisms established to facilitate consultant selection consist of an advisor, a register of qualified consultants, and seminars on the hardware and software selection process.

Further phases of the model through project completion are: (10) continuing review and refinement of mutual and individual responsibilities, (11) continuing monitoring and control of progress, and (12) post-engagement evaluation of the service. Table 3 is a summary of: problems identified from Case 1; symptoms which led to problem recognition; where (in the 12 phase consultant engagement process) the problems originated; and recommendations on how the problems might have been avoided. Except for the consultant’s lack of commitment to implementation success, all problems identified by Gable stemmed from both poor consultant and poor small business performance in continuing review and follow-up.

**Recommendation 2. Be involved.** Most problems, when identified early through ongoing review, can be readily addressed.

**Recommendation 3. Thoroughly assess the consultant’s commitment to working with small businesses.** “A small business is not a little big business [40].” The consultant must be committed to working with small businesses in order to be effective and viable in the longer term. If required, commitment to your computer system implementation project can be contractually required at the outset, before commencement of selection.

5. Misconceived View of The Client Role

Often inadequate involvement of the client stems from a misconceived view of the client/consultant relationship. From case studies of 12 small companies, Tilles [36] identified three commonly held views of the client/consultant relationship: (i) Buyer/Seller, (ii) Informant/Recipient, and (iii) Patient/Doctor, each of which implies inadequate client involvement.

The buyer/seller view assumes the client (the buyer) is responsible for specifying what it is he wants, the conditions and schedule for delivery, and for negotiating the price. Having met these conditions, all further responsibility until delivery rests with the selected consultant (the seller). A rule of interaction implicit in this view is that the burden of proof is on the consultant (the salesman) to demonstrate the relevance of his experience and approach, often given little knowledge of the client’s problem.

Case 4 clearly had the buyer/seller view. As a consequence, the consultant and the advisor experienced a great deal of difficulty contacting the client, scheduling meetings and demonstrations, and getting decisions made. Ultimately, the consultant was required to make many decisions in a vacuum. Thus, when he finally became involved at the end of the project (and was asked to pay for the consultant’s services), the client’s surprise at certain of the project results was not unexpected.

The informant/recipient view assumes that all the client (the informant) has to do is to facilitate the free flow of information between the client and consultant (the recipient). If the consultant or vendor is retained to help with implementation, their role being to effect and facilitate purposive change in the organization, the client must assume greater responsibility. Even where the only objective is to select a suitable packaged software solution, the client may be called upon to make decisions which redirect the project.

Case 5 is best classified as having the informant/recipient view. This firm happily supplied all the information the consultant requested of them. The consultant in this case ‘was quite happy with the arrangement. The client did not question their expertise and did not appear to be interested in understanding the selection process. The consultant conducted the analysis and presented the solution with little need to justify their efforts or results. A consequence of this extreme reliance on the consultant was a system which the case firm outgrew before implementation was complete. The consultant paid inadequate attention to the case firm’s rapidly growing transaction volumes. Ultimately Case 5 spent twice what the consultant
had estimated, on a series of piecemeal upgrades, resulting in a less than ideal solution.

Sometimes a consultant (the doctor) is called in because of concern with the performance of an individual or entity in the firm (the patient). This view entails several problems. First, unlike sick patients, seldom is the organizational entity of concern willing to admit a problem exists. Serious difficulties can arise either because the consultant has been called in by other than the problem entity, or because the entity who invited them is unwilling to admit it is they who are in need of help. Second, in organizations often the problem does not lie with individuals, but with relations between individuals and groups. Here the patient/doctor view is faulted for obscuring the fact that the client can be multiple individuals or groups, all of whom may be affected by the implementation of an information system and all of whom may play a role in its success or failure. Perhaps family counsell ing would make a better analogy. Third, unlike the patient, the client is not absolved of responsibility for problem diagnosis. Effective engagement requires that the problem is well defined and an appropriate consultant is selected with the problem in mind. Fourth, having decided with the consultant an approach to addressing the problem, much effort is required of the client organization to effect the necessary change. Often the organization has difficulty mastering new skills and types of behavior required. Here the consultant and client may be able to work most productively together. Again, the patient/doctor analogy misleads in that it generally does not imply teamwork.

Client involvement in Cases 1, 2 and 3 was felt on the whole to be adequate, if sometimes inappropriate. These three clients appreciated the value and importance of their involvement.

6. Pro-Active Client Activities

The client’s needs cause a project to be initiated and it is the client’s money that finances it. The organization must manage the consultant rather than the reverse. From the case studies and review of the literature, three main activities the small business can undertake to engage consultants more effectively are: (i) assess client consultant compatibility, (ii) identify and address specific organizational goals, and (iii) accommodate evolving project objectives.

6.1. Assess Client / Consultant Compatibility

Several studies have addressed the implementation of OR/MS models. Radnor, Rubenstein, and Tansik [32] developed a model of the implementation of operations research and research and development in government and private sector organizations and tested the model with data in a cross-sectional field study. The results indicated that: (1) relations between the operations researcher and the client are associated with implementation problems and vice versa, (2) top management support is associated with a low level of implementation problems, and (3) there are some indications that a good client relationship is the most important variable of successful implementation.

Through a case study of consultant engagement experiences of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, Lucas and Plimpton [26] concluded that “establishing and maintaining the relationship deserves equal attention to the task effort. The crucial components in this type of consulting are establishing a psychological contract, considering the consultant’s impact on the organization, developing the client’s capability to solve the problem, planning for termination, and developing trust based power.” These findings point to the importance of client involvement and the client/consultant relationship.

The relationship between the client and consultant is similar in many respects to that of the manager and researcher. There should exist trust, and any attempt by the consultant at deception must be viewed seriously. The consultant’s proposal is a first draft, high-level plan. It cannot address every issue and detail that is likely to arise throughout the engagement. The proposal will
necessarily leave room for interpretation and maneuver. Interpreting the proposal requires close cooperation between the small business and the consultant. This suggests the relationship between the small business and the consultant can have substantial impact on the project direction and outcome. This also further emphasizes the importance of continuing review of responsibilities and progress.

As indicated in Table 3, one of the problems experienced by Case 1, was that the junior consultant who conducted the bulk of the project, had little relevant experience. As a consequence of this and other problems identified, the selection project had substantial potential to fail. Yet, an ‘acceptable’ solution was identified and was ‘reasonably well’ implemented. The level of success realized, in the face of these difficulties must, to some extent, be attributed to the good personal relationship between the client and the junior consultant. From the outset, these two individuals interacted well at a personal level. Consequently, the client was willing to overlook the consultant’s limitations and to employ her as best she could under the circumstances. The consultant was willing to put the effort necessary to compensate for her lack of experience. The client had a more integral involvement (to the point of explicitly directing the efforts of the consultant) than would have been necessary under ideal circumstances, yet this deep involvement served to maximize her own education on the firm’s information requirements and the selection process. The consultant on the other hand had good access to software references and vendors, and could address basic technical concerns as they arose. The resultant marriage of effort and expertise was reasonably effective.

**Recommendation 5. Attempt to maximize client and consultant compatibility (or avoid major incompatibility) by involving specific client staff who are responsible for the project, in the selection of specific consultant staff.**

6.2. Identify Specific Organizational Goals

Research suggests that adequate early consideration of specific project objectives is important to consultant engagement success. A.N. Turner [37] identifies “clarity of purpose” as a key factor in successful consultant engagement. Wittreich [41] observed that “… in negotiating the purchase of a service the buyer often feels he is putting his fate in the seller’s hands.” Where this feeling is evident, it is unlikely that the small business has identified specific organizational goals and accepted responsibility for the process of achieving them.

An objective of the SECP is to assist the client and the consultant in defining the problem, the project objectives, and the project scope. This is achieved through: early orientation of the applicant; the advisor’s initial “potential for computerization” report; consultant seminars, where SECP goals and expectations are clarified to registered consultants; advisor seminars; and small business seminars. These mechanisms tend to address what Turner distinguishes as “traditional goals” of providing requested information, providing a solution to a given problem, conducting a diagnosis that may redefine the problem, and assisting with implementation. Other of Turner’s goals which tend not to be explicitly addressed in many consultant engagements, and which we will term “higher goals” are: build consensus and commitment, facilitate client learning, and improve organizational effectiveness.

Clients must determine in advance what results they want to obtain from engaging a consultant. Tilles [36] identifies four outcomes: (i) improved performance, (ii) improved ability to solve problems independently, (iii) changes in the client/consultant relationship, and (iv) changes in organizational relationships. Most engagements will result in several of these outcomes and the client should consciously and visibly identify their objectives early on.

**Recommendation 6. Thoroughly consider your objectives for the selection project. Try to specify your goals as clearly as possible in advance, and assess prospective consultants’ skills and experience relative to these goals.**

In small businesses computerizing for the first time, improved performance is often the primary objective. Improved performance may be desired in cost effectiveness, sales, customer service, management decision making, etc. “Higher goals”, such as changes in the organization and improvements in the client’s ability to solve related prob-
lems, cannot be evaluated in terms of short-term financial criteria. In none of the 5 cases did either the client or the consultant pay more than cursory attention to these longer term, less tangible goals. Clients tend to be unwilling to explicitly pay for these intangibles, and therefore, consultants are unwilling to explicitly deliver them. These goals too often are addressed only to the extent that they are satisfied as a by-product of efforts to achieve the more tangible objectives (e.g. identify software and hardware). This was true of all five cases studied.

Recommendation 7. In specifying the goals of the project, besides the “traditional” goal of selecting a computer system, also consider other important, less tangible requirements of the project and the consultant including: conditioning of user expectations, education of client staff on the selection process, preparing the firm for change, facilitating client/vendor relations, and developing a deep understanding of your organizational information requirements.

6.3. Accommodate Evolving Project Objectives

Whatever the explicitly identified objectives of the project, as the need arises, both parties may agree to move to other goals. Packaged software selection can entail complexities not associated with custom development. Selecting from amongst multiple, sometimes numerous options, each of which may offer several alternative strategies for its implementation, can yield a confusing plethora of alternative project paths. Thus, the client is required to make decisions throughout the project and adjust the project direction based on these decisions.

In Cases 4 and 5, as the feasibility study progressed and the clients became cognizant of their real information needs and computerization potential, it was found that initial estimates were grossly inaccurate. The client had to either proceed as initially agreed, or radically readjust their expectations of both costs and benefits of the project. Client and consultant flexibility is important in this situation. Requiring the consultant to adhere to a proposal which is “cast in stone” and not taking account of new information, can lead to a “narrow” system, which is not amenable to change and evolution over time. Alternatively it can mean information requirements are incorrectly prioritized with the more important being delayed unnecessarily.

Recommendation 8. Though you have clearly defined your project goals, be prepared to modify the project direction where necessary. Don’t be tied to an RFP and proposal which are “cast in stone.”

7. Case Summary

In the paper we identified the importance of client involvement and the implications of misconceived views of the client/consultant relationship. We then went on to identify three main activities the small business can pursue in order to engage consultants more effectively: (i) assess client and consultant compatibility, (ii) identify and address specific organizational goals, and (iii) accommodate evolving project objectives.

Table 4 summarizes the performance of the case companies along these five dimensions and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions of Client Performance</th>
<th>Case 1</th>
<th>Case 2</th>
<th>Case 3</th>
<th>Case 4</th>
<th>Case 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Involvement</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>reasonable</td>
<td>reasonable</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>View on Roles</td>
<td>reasonable</td>
<td>reasonable</td>
<td>reasonable</td>
<td>Buyer</td>
<td>Informant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compatibility</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>medium</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specification of Goals</td>
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<td>adequate</td>
<td>poor</td>
<td>adequate</td>
<td>adequate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal Flexibility</td>
<td>n/a</td>
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<td>good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Success</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>adequate</td>
<td>poor</td>
<td>poor</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
indicates the outcomes of the computer system selection projects.

Cases 1 and 2 experienced reasonable levels of success with their projects, while results for cases 3, 4 and 5, for a variety of reasons, were generally poor.

As indicated previously, in none of the 5 cases was adequate attention paid to longer term, less tangible goals of the projects. All cases except Case 3, did an adequate job of specifying their tangible goals for the project (hardware and software solution expectations). Case 3, though reasonably involved, with a reasonable view of their role, and high compatibility with the consultant, did a poor job of specifying to the consultant their goal of impressing staff, without actually intending action. As a consequence the consultant did not recommend “do nothing” and management was embarrassed.

Cases 4 and 5 were flexible where necessary, regarding costs and benefits expected of the project. Cases 1, 2 and 3 were not tested in this regard, as their projects were largely straightforward.

High involvement does not compensate for a misconceived view on roles. Case 5, though highly involved, did not assume responsibility for the project until much expense and effort had been unnecessarily expended as a consequence of their hands-off, “informant/recipient” view.

Cases 1 and 2 performed reasonably well along the dimensions identified and realized reasonable computer solutions. The system selected for Case 4 was a good one, but the client had so little involvement in the process, they were ill-equipped to undertake implementation. As on the selection project, they were unwilling to allocate adequate resources to implementation, resulting in a poorly functioning system.

Of the five cases, Case 1 realized the greatest level of success as a result of their high involvement, high compatibility with the consultant, and reasonable view on roles.

References


