

HELPING HANDS

How can you get the most out of hiring a consultant? It's all about knowing what you want to achieve, being willing to change and not losing sight of who is in charge. By **Katie Kilgallen**

Retailers spend millions every year on consultants. And, despite the cost, calling them in is becoming an increasingly routine reaction to any perceived skills gap or problems that arise.

But, once they've left, the organisation can sometimes be left trying to work out exactly where its money has gone. A loss of control and focus can lead to a project overrunning or disappointing results upon completion. This leaves the uncomfortable feeling that too much money has been spent for too little gain.

Consultants may not always produce tangible results, but does the fault always lie with them, or can the organisation take some of the blame? As retailers gain more experience of using consultants, they are beginning to develop best practice and establishing ways to avoid the common pitfalls.

Some of the most critical mistakes are often made right at the beginning. Organisations often call on consultants during periods of great change, when they are under pressure to achieve results while at the same time being strapped for resources. This means the crucial preparation and planning stages can often be rushed.

New Look UK & Eire HR director Ann Chan says: "It's really important how you start off. You really have

to do your homework and be really clear-minded about what your own objectives are. It's wrong to bring in a consultant and make them guess and I think a lot of people do that – they're not sure about something so they bring someone in."

N² Consulting director Nik Davis agrees that evaluating your real needs is essential and extremely helpful to consultants as well. "I think the real key is for retailers to understand why they really need to use consultants in the first place," she says.

Davis believes that consultants are often the people best placed to help, but equally there is a danger that retailers will bring them in when they actually need to develop the internal capacity. "Consultants are often objective, individual people with the skill base to drive your business forward," she says. "But if you're short of a skill you're going to be short of forever, you need a permanent solution."

Once you've established what your needs are and that consultants are the right way to meet them, the next step is finding the right consultants for your business. Again, the process can't be rushed and should include asking shortlisted advisers some hard questions about what value they plan to bring, as well as being honest about your own business.

Chan says: "You've got to go through a really careful selection process so you're getting the right sort of fit for your needs – not so much for where your

organisation is at the moment but where you want to take your organisation."

Once appointed, communicating and collaborating with consultants to come up with a clear brief and a precise set of deliverables should be the next priority.

Vodafone consumer sales director Tom Devine says being very specific with consultants about your objectives and goals is the best way to make sure you achieve your aims. "You really need to have a tight piece of work you want them to do," he says.

GEAR UP FOR CHANGE

Javelin Group chief executive Tony Stockil says the importance of this step can't be overstressed. "The time involved in creating a brief and deliverables is an absolutely essential part of the process and quite often gets too little attention," he says.

However, the procurement and planning processes should only be the beginning of the dialogue between consultant and client. Progress needs to be reviewed constantly and the way it will be monitored needs to be established as part of the brief. Davis says: "Plans do change but there needs to be agreement on how that will be managed."

The key stakeholders in the organisation all need to be heavily involved in the entire process if they want to part of the solution. Chan says: "You can't say, 'Here you are – go away and do it,' because you'll never be

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Global executive search firm Horton International has made former DSGi group HR director **David Longbottom** (pictured) as its UK chairman. He was appointed to the main board at DSGi in 2002. Previously, he held a number of other positions within the company, including sales director and deputy managing director of Currys. Longbottom replaces Alan Tipper, who has retired as Horton International's UK chairman but will remain as a non-executive director.

Former Talk Sport host **James Whale** – sacked for encouraging listeners to back Boris Johnson in the

London mayoral elections last month – is to join home shopping channel Bid TV as a new presenter on its evening slot. Whale, who was once a trainee buyer at Harrods, will join the channel next week.

Instore has appointed **Ebrahim Suleman** as group finance director. Suleman, a qualified chartered accountant, has worked as director of finance at the company's subsidiary Poundstretcher since October last year.

Luxury jewellers Garrard and Stephen Webster have jointly appointed **Terri Eagle** as chief executive and president. She will oversee both businesses. Eagle

was most recently president and chief executive of John Hardy USA. Previously, she held several senior management positions at jewellery company David Yurman, including chief operating officer.



Property agency Christie + Co has made two appointments to its valuation and corporate team. **Elouise Jones** (pictured) leaves Lidl UK, where she was an acquisitions manager for the Midlands region. **Nigel Lea** joins

from The Co-operative Group, where he was business acquisitions manager for the South East and Central Eastern regions.

“ You’ve got to listen to what they are telling you, even if sometimes it won’t make you feel comfortable ”

ANN CHAN, NEW LOOK

happy with the results. You have to be involved with them and it should be a shared workload.”

Chan maintains that keeping the relationship open and honest is critical. “You’ve got to be open-minded and listen to what they are telling you, even if sometimes it won’t make you feel comfortable.”

Making an effort to establish an integrated way of working can pay dividends. The best results often come when consultants feel part of a team that will stand together in success and failure, rather than the likely scapegoats when targets are not met.

It is also crucial for the organisation to keep focused, in control and to keep challenging the consultants. “You need to keep going back to the brief,” Devine adds. “It’s quite easy to start in one place and before you know it you’ve moved on elsewhere – you’re trying to boil the ocean.”

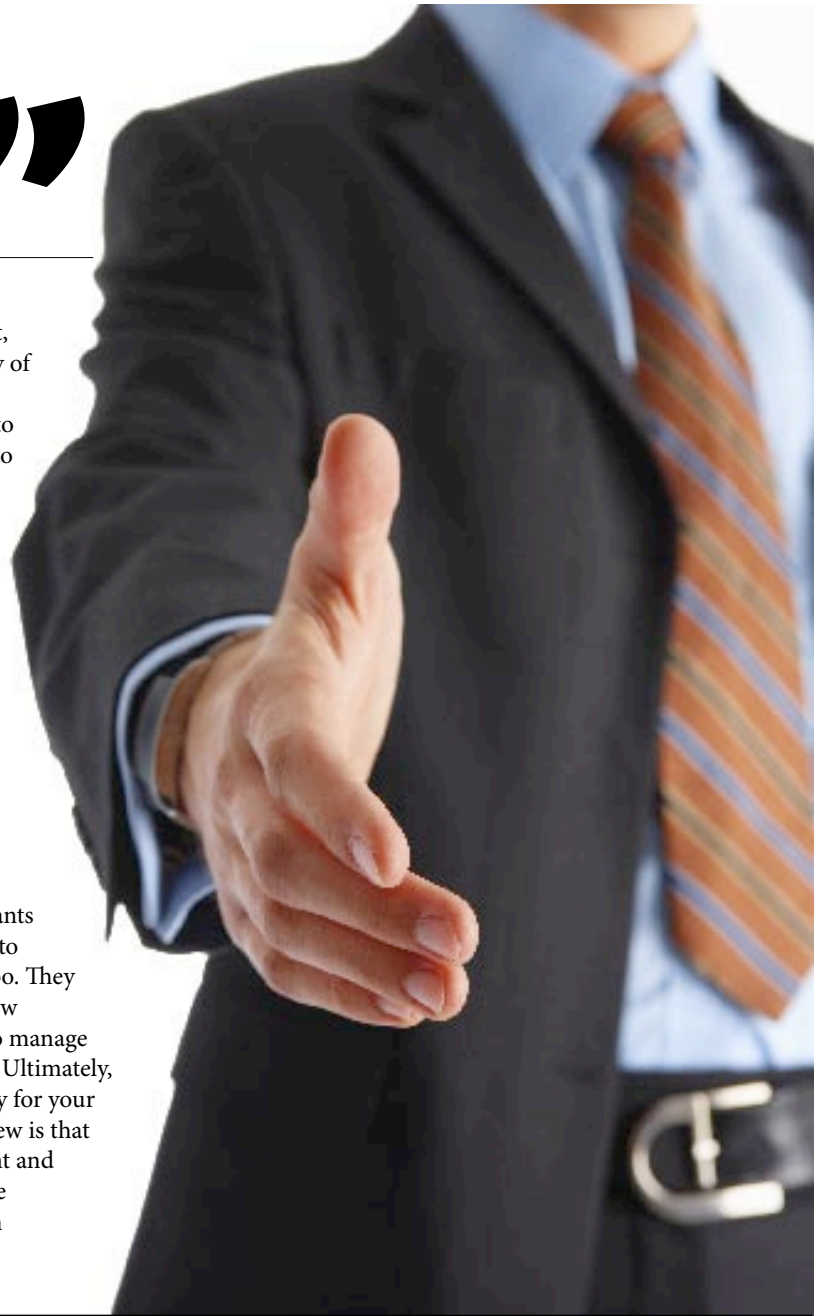
Taking ownership of a project is critical. Davis says: “Some organisations do give up control of the solution too easily and hand over to consultants thinking, ‘They know best – they know what they can do.’” Chan advocates the appointment of a “sponsor” or “figurehead” for the project – one key person that people can go to.

According to Stockil, it is imperative that all key stakeholders take part-ownership in the project from day one. Quite often they only become involved when the results are announced. “If they only surface and raise objections then, it’s very hard to wind back,” he says. “Ideally the outcome should rarely be a surprise. It should be a summary of what has already been agreed and is also known, rather

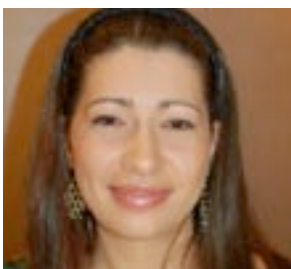
than a surprise announcement.”

Internal ownership of a project, combined with an integrated way of working, is the key to a smooth handover when a project comes to an end. Ultimately, to add value to a business there needs to be a clear transfer of skills. Devine says that, when Vodafone appointed consultants to run a wide-scale training programme for retail staff, it was made very clear that one of the main objectives was to be able to transfer those skills to its own retail training team so it could continue the work in the future. “We knew that we wanted that learning back in the organisation,” he says.

There is no doubt that consultants can add value, but retailers need to be prepared to put the work in too. They need to know their business, know their problem and be prepared to manage the process of finding a solution. Ultimately, you can’t relinquish responsibility for your own business. Chan says: “My view is that if you have employed a consultant and then you’re disappointed with the overall result, you have to look in the mirror first.” **RW**



» STORE MANAGER’S DIARY SAMEH TRAD, PHASE EIGHT, LAKESIDE, ESSEX



The award should highlight experiences we can all draw from and translate into our day-to-day work

A birthday present for our best employee

Having been manager of the Phase Eight store at Lakeside for almost a year, I thought it was time to review the way we work as a team. To provide staff with extra motivation, I have devised and implemented my own incentive scheme – the Best Employee Award.

Our eight part-time workers have been given total responsibility for the outcome. Each team member will vote on who they believe is the best employee and explain why. The voting form is divided into three categories – customer service, team-

work and “going the extra mile for the company” – so each staff member can provide examples of their peer’s excellence. I know it is going to be really tough choosing the winner.

On May 25, we’re heading to a restaurant on The Boardwalk at Lakeside for the store’s first birthday dinner, where I will reveal the winner. They will receive a make-up set, designer make-up bag and a Lakeside gift card. And, to highlight their accomplishment, the winner will also be presented with a framed Certifi-

cate of Outstanding Performance, which will be displayed in store for all our customers to view.

So far, my team have been very responsive to the scheme and are all looking forward to the results. It should provide both the staff and myself with key learnings from the past year. It will also highlight experiences that we can all draw from and translate into our day-to-day work. I am a firm believer in feedback as a valuable tool for progress at work.