WHAT A CLIENT LOOKS FOR IN A CONSULTANT

==

by Ir. Lukmanul Hakim, AMIChE, IPM
President Director of LebSolution

I'm going to tell you what a client is looking for in a consultant and how you should turn this knowledge to your advantage. Most of the content is coming from my 20 years personal experiences working for BP, ADNOC, and LebSolution (my own consulting firm).

1. WHY A CLIENT NEEDS CONSULTANT HELP

You may think that the first and only reason of a client needing consultant help is because they "don't know how" to solve their problem. In fact, in many cases that is the last rather than the first. Some possible reasons are listed below:

1. Don't have time, Needs to expedite delivery
2. Cost efficient rather than hiring a dedicated person(s)
3. Have independent view
4. Be referee among several conflicting departments
5. Don't have required tools/softwares to do the work.
6. Don't have required authority and/certification to do the work
7. Don't have adequate knowledge on the subject

In reason number 1 to 6 above, the client basically have the knowledge and the "know how" to solve their problem. Usually they emphasize that during the introduction meeting (before contract award) and/or during kick-off meeting (after contract award) to show to the consultant that "I am knowledgable about the problem so please don't cheat with me".

Understanding client reason is important to help consultant in giving proper response to client requirement. Most of the time, the reason is a combination of some points mentioned above.

2. HOW TO UNDERSTAND CLIENT NEEDS

When a client call a consultant for help, initially they will "verbally" explain a brief reason of the call and also what they want the consultant to deliver. Since this is just an "introduction", many times it is not well structured and not complete, which may create confusions, missleading, or unnecessary extra works if we go directly to making proposal based on this initial verbal information.

Here are some tips to get a better understanding of client needs from the first time without loosing too much effort or time afterwards:

1. If the initial information is delivered by phone call, ask the client to make it in a brief written format (one page letter, e-mail, fax, etc). Once the written information arrived, call for clarification as necessary. If the client is reluctant to write (too busy or maybe don't know how to write), offer something in written (but still informal) for them to confirm.
2. If the initial information is delivered in a meeting, use your communication skill to drive the discussion to make it as structured and complete as possible. Make notes along the discussion in a keywords bullet points format, wrap up the summary of the notes, and before the end of the meeting get confirmation from the client that the notes are correctly representing their reasons and needs (reading the notes, showing the notes, etc.).
3. The information should contain at least the following: reason of calling a consultant, expected deliverables from the consultant, and time table of deliveries. Optionally, when considered

necessary and available, the initial information may cover other specific requirements such as minimum consultant qualifications, formalities (permit, certification, etc), tools/softwares, etc.

Based on that confirmed initial information, the consultant can prepare a good technical and commercial proposal which will be "liked" by the client as they see it "fit for purpose" to their needs.

3. WHAT CLIENT LOOKS FOR IN A CONSULTANT

I will share some characteristics that a client expect to get from their consultant. This is also applicable for "internal consultant". You are internal consultant for your supervisor, team leader, manager, etc.

3.1. Transparent, Assertive, and Confident

First question from the client in the first meeting with the consultant will be "I have a concern/problem about..., can you help me by...?". The client is looking for transparency and assertiveness from all sentences coming from the consultant when answering the questions.

As a consultant, you have to "Say Can If You Can, Say Can't If You Can't". I call it "Double SCIYC" principle. This principle gives two benefits, you will not be overwhelmed with something that you can not deliver, and you will create client trust in the first time. If you think you can do it only through others (need other consultant to help you for some aspect), tell that also to the client. The client may accept that condition, and in many cases they also offer helps/alterntives to keep you enggaged in the potential project as they have their trust already in you.

Though, the above Double SCIYC principle should be applied such away that you create client confident in you. Tell them about your relevant knowledge and skills, your positive advantages compared to other consultants (offcourse without making black campaign about others), your success stories in other projects, and even some high impact contact names in your previous project for reference.

You may need to do practice in front of mirror and/or our colleagues to appear as confident. But remember, your confident must be "real and truth". Confident is not a lie, not to create miss-perception, and not to cover-up weaknesses.

When people fake confidence, they become arrogant. It becomes an illusion, an act, and normally we will see straight through it. In fact, the word "confident" comes from latin words "con" and "fides" which means "with faith". (Robin Sieger: http://www.siegerinternational.com/).

3.2. Understand "My Problems"

Just like physicians who can not help their patients without knowing patients' complaint about their health. The patient will wait for several questions from the physician while diagnosing their health problem. As a consultant, you can not help your client if you can not understand their problem. Your client is waiting for your questions to understand better their problem.

As a good consultant you should first listen to client initial information about their problem, show your empathy, ask for clarifications as necessary, propose and get agreement on "problem definition". It is better to have the agreed problem definition in written format.

Based on my 20 years of experience, a good problem definition should contain the following four components "What's wrong; With what; By how much; So what". For example "Frequent trips occurred on condensate pump A, around 4 trips in a week, leading to 20% loss of production".

3.3. Offer Helps and Solutions - "Please, Not Adding My Problems"

I took some opportunities to talk to client representative and asked them what they don't like from a consultant. First answer is always the same "my consultant is adding my problem, instead of reducing it". If that is the impression perceived by your client, you know what will happen next. Your client tends to intervene too much thus disturbing the execution, and most probably you will never be called again.

To avoid the above negative impression, you have to "offer helps and solutions". Following are some tips on how to effectively offer solutions:

- ***Educate your client on principles of "Problem Solving Methodology"***. With this awareness, your client will better appreciate the stages you are going through in delivering the work, thus increasing more probability to have good impression on you delivery. Typical problem solving methodolgy can be the following:
    1. Define the problem (Problem Definition),
    2. Go, see, and assess the problem (Data Collection and Analysis),
    3. Identify root causes (Conclusions)
    4. Propose improvements (Recommendations)
    5. Build and execute plans (Follow up recommendations)
    6. Validate and sustain result (Validate effectiveness of recommendations)
    7. Share learning points
- ***Appreciate client's effort - Retrofit clients initial works***. When you see good initial efforts done by the client in resolving the problem, show your appreciation and tell in loud and clear that your proposed solution is a continuation of their good effort. By that, you positively engage your client and increasing their committment in supporting your work. At the same time, reducing your work load as you don't have to start from zero.
- ***Give options of solution and rank them based on existing constraints***. There is a saying "Many ways to Rome", but remember there is always obstacles in each way. Your role as consultant is to identify and show the ways and defining which way is the best based on client's existing contraints. Proposing more than one options will create a client's positive impression on your work, that you have tried your best to find the best way.
- ***Let client make decision***. At the end, your client is your boss. By letting the client make the decision on which option of solution to take, you indirectly emphasize that they are in-charge which is an impression they like to keep.

3.4. Be Responsive

In my 20 years of experience, I knew some of high qualified consultants that have informally been "banned" by some clients. When I asked why, the client says that they can not contact the consultant easily, difficult to get update, and take long time to get answer or clarification when required.

So, once the work is awarded to you, you need to ensure the following:

- Provide progress update without being asked for,
- Timely delivery and provide early notification if you will miss the deadline,
- Response to questions/clarifications in timely manner

3.5. Good Communication and Reporting Skill

Whether you are an external consultant or internal consultant, either in the middle or final stage of the work, your works end in the format of “presentations” and “reports”. Therefore beside your technical skill in your area of expertise, you have to have an excellent “communication” and “report writing” skills.

I remember a good memory related with this subject when I was studying chemical engineering in the Institute of Technology Bandung (ITB: http://www.che.itb.ac.id/). Every time after a milestone achieved in my research project, I had to submit and present the result to my supervising lecturer (Danu Ariono, BS, DEA, Dr.Ing). In the first occasion, he threw my report to the garbage bin and gave me a brief verbal speech “Lukman, after graduating from this institute, as chemical engineer all your work will be ended in a report. What ever quality in your work is useless when you can not make a good report”. Then he asked me to write again a better quality of report.

I took the advice seriously, and you know what, while working as employee in BP and ADNOC group of companies, I was acknowledged as “Senior Report Engineer” which is a special title given to me. And for sure this communication and reporting skill have helped me alot in running my own consulting firm (LebSolution Indonesia).

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

As a consultant you need to understand client reason so you can give proper response to client requirement. It is recommended to get a confirmed written initial information about client reasons and needs to avoid loosing too much effort and and time in the execution. Based on that, you can prepare a good technical and commercial proposal which will be “liked” by the client as they see it “fit for purpose” to their needs.

Most of clients, including your internal client (supervisor, team leaders, managers, etc) are looking for the following characteristics in you:

- *Transparent, Assertive, and Confident;*
- *Understand “My Problems”;*
- *Offer Helps and Solutions - “Please, Not Adding My Problems” (Educate client on principles of ”Problem Solving Methodology”, Appreciate client’s effort - Retrofit clients initial works, Give options of solution and rank them based on existing constraints, Let client make decision*);
- *Be Responsive;*
- *Good Communication and Reporting Skill.*