IT Contractor versus Consultant – What's the Difference?

by Bonnie D. Huval

Is a computer consultant or IT consultant just a contract programmer or software engineer who uses a fancy title and charges a higher rate?

The short answer is no. Each is valuable for the right type of engagement. But putting one into an engagement where you really need the other is a mistake--and you can't always tell who is who by the titles on their business cards.

Find out what they do. That will tell you what category is the true one, and in turn will tell you what roles are appropriate to consider them for.

What Contract Technical Workers Do

Contract technical workers focus on exactly that--the technical skills in which they specialize. It's up to you to tell them what to implement. For a software designer, you say what the software has to do. For a programmer, you provide specifications for the software.

A good contractor is a self-starter with superb technical skill, and can produce excellent technical work with less need for supervision and motivation than most regular employees. When your project is done, the contractor leaves without fuss. Your employees carry on with maintenance of whatever the project built.

Here is an example of using contract technical workers wisely. Let's say that you have decided to build a new XYZ system to fit in with a radical change in business procedures. You've done the business analysis in-house and have specified exactly what you want to build. Your IT team is competent in most of the programming skills needed. However, they have not designed and built a major database before. In fact, all of their previous design and programming projects have been small. The tools and techniques needed to build and maintain a large system cost effectively are new to them.

You bring in technical specialists as the team leads for the project. They do the 'heavy lifting'--the core of the database design and construction, software design, source code control, and quality assurance tools and procedures. Your IT employees work under their guidance, being mentored by the contracted specialists along the way.

Your project is finished faster than if you used only your IT team. The design, implementation, testing and deployment avoid the types of mistakes that happen when everyone on the team is new to the tools and techniques they are using. When the specialists leave, your entire IT team's expertise has expanded and they are capable of carrying on with maintenance and enhancements.

What IT / Computer Consultants Do

Many contract technical workers focus exclusively on the technical work. One of the best contract programmers who once worked for me said bluntly that he didn't want to have to understand what the equipment was supposed to do when our software sent commands to it. If I would just tell him what software I wanted, he would write it, but he didn't want to have to pay attention to anything else. He certainly didn't want to have to interact with other people to find out what they wanted. He wrote fine software, and I let him concentrate on what he did so well. That's the big difference between a contractor and a consultant.

Information Technology consultants usually start out as contract technical workers. The consultant has some expert technical skills (design, programming, testing) and is likely to have at least some expertise across a wide range of the skills involved in the entire birth, life and eventual death of a system. But the consultant's professional growth is not purely addition and refinement of technical skills.

Start with computer capability. Add business acumen, common sense, and 'soft skills' and the result is an IT consultant.

A formal computer related project begins with business analysis. This means looking at what the business is doing (Point A), imagining what it needs to do instead (Point B), figuring out what has to be done to go from Point A to Point B, and writing that down (business case, requirements, and so on).

Other tasks in the project grow from the analysis. On the technical side, these include functional specifications and detailed specifications, design, implementation, testing, source code control, training, and technical support. On the human side, changes in what people do have to be planned, and people have to be taught their new procedures.

Each of those tasks is done by people with specific roles, titles and skills. Many of them may labor in their portion of the project without seeing the overall picture clearly. A good IT consultant sees it all--the business objectives to be met, human procedural changes, the 'big picture' Information Technology systems involved, and the crucial details necessary to make it all work.

This requires a frame of mind unlike that of a contract programmer. Not everyone can do it. It's one of the reasons a consultant gets higher rates.

Confusion in Usage of the Terms

In other fields, a consultant provides expert advice and guidance to a client. Implementing the consultant's recommendations is the client's responsibility. The line is not so clear in information technology.

Many people say they are computer consultants or IT consultants when their remit is primarily implementation, not guidance. That isn't consulting in the sense that the word is used elsewhere.

Good 'computer consultants' provide a blend of expertise and service that goes beyond fitting computer systems to business needs--in essence, you get a blend of business consultant and IT consultant from the best.

At the highest end of the spectrum, the IT consultant goes beyond the advisory role filled by consultants in other fields. The elite IT consultant interacts with people, digs into issues involving equipment, and pays attention to logistics--even such details as

the height of tables or the clearance forklifts will have in a passage. You can engage an IT consultant for expert advice. However, unlike consultants in other fields, a top level IT consultant can be also engaged to make sure the project comes through, 'from soup to nuts.'

Our firm provides services anywhere along this spectrum. But if you ask me what we do, my answer reveals the mindset of a consultant. Where computers are used to help make money instead of count it, we help our clients make more money. That's our best offering. Listen for a similar focus on improving business effectiveness, and a lack of emphasis on specific technologies, when you are looking for a top tier IT consultant.

Remember to Use Each Appropriately

As I said at the beginning, contract technical workers and IT consultants are each valuable for the right engagement. Make sure not to use a contract programmer where you need a consultant, because the contractor is oriented to a narrower focus. Also avoid wasting money by miring a consultant in programming chores that could be done by a programmer at a lower rate. Use each for their respective strengths to move your business forward faster, better and more cost effectively.

About the author: Bonnie D. Huval has been a consultant since 1992 helping companies make more money, especially with their automation and transaction systems. Projects by her USA and UK firms include cutting time to ship product from two days to two hours, and cutting downtime for product introduction by 40%. Her company also provides affordable world class antispam filtering with disaster redundancy for firms of any size, encrypted remote backup, and high availability website hosting. Go to http://www.seneschal.biz for her consulting or IT services. Go to http://www.makesureyougetpaid.com for her materials to help small businesses be more successful. Copyright 2009. This article may be reprinted only in its entirety, with full attribution.

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