

HOW TO USE AN HR CONSULTANT

By Sandra Beale of SJ Beale HR Consult

Bringing an HR consultant into your organisation can often be the only way to get a particular objective achieved. It may be a project that needs to be delivered such as a recruitment campaign, a compensation & benefits review or the implementation of an HR information system. Another possibility may be the need to cover a maternity leave post. Whatever the company requirement, whether it be linked to strategic or operational HR there is a consultant to fit the bill, whether they be a generalist or specialist.

The advantages to bringing in an external professional can be buying in specific expertise just as and when it's needed. Many HR consultants have many years solid practical experience before launching into the world of consultancy. They bring with them a fresh eye on the workings of your company and can often offer new problem-solving solutions to issues such as staff retention or absence. They can also offer tailored solutions, using the basics gained from experience with other companies.

They are used to “hitting the ground running”, which requires building key relationships, establishing credibility very quickly and just getting on with the job in hand whether this be as a change agent or a role caretaker.

Being an “outsider” they tend not to get involved with office politics, which can cloud many judgements of permanent members of staff. Their decisions can, therefore, be based on benefits to the organisation, not whether it will upset the opinions of certain individuals. This is particularly important in any change management and organisational design project.

Using an HR consultant can save an organisation time and money. Time is saved by, for example, outsourcing a project that existing HR professionals in an organisation can't spare from the usual day to day tasks; this can include coaching or conducting 360 degree appraisal. A consultant can also be brought in on an ad hoc basis when no HR expertise exists at all within the organisation, for example, when an investigation surrounding gross misconduct needs to be conducted.

Other cost savings can include not having a permanent member of staff on the payroll and often by not having to provide daily office space if the work can be completed at home by the consultant, as with a project.

A disadvantage of using an HR consultant can, on the other hand, be the potential expense. Depending on the level of expertise required, consultant fees can vary from £200 to £1,000 per day so companies need to consider what they can afford and negotiate over the daily rate and number of days required. To avoid escalating costs consideration should be given to estimating a set number of days to define a project, such as management training, and build this into the contract drawn up.

To cover a maternity post, many companies use a fixed term contract, which gives the added bonus to the consultant of some employment protection such as paid holidays and sick leave, but which will be another cost to the organisation.

To avoid any confusion a clear agreement or contract needs to be drawn up at the start between the company and consultant establishing clear long and short term goals with regular meetings built in to check progress. Clear responsibilities should be allocated to avoid any confusion.

Fees and expenses need to be included as well as problem resolution such as delivery failures. With a fixed term contract the latter can be solved by using the disciplinary or capability procedure. Ideally a contingency plan should be put into place together with guidance on confidentiality issues such as data protection.

Before recruiting an HR consultant the company needs to have a clear idea of what they are trying to achieve and draw up a project plan and brief for discussion.

There should also be a job description and person specification. With the latter this provides assistance to recruit the right calibre of person. As the need for an HR consultant can often be at short notice, companies need to consider the best place to advertise or find the right candidate and consider a more streamlined recruitment process.

Once recruited the consultant should be provided with a structured induction to enable them to hit the ground running. This should include as much information about the organisation as possible including meetings with key stakeholders so that they can complete the task in hand as effectively and professionally as possible.

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