

# Obtaining authorization, some techniques to help you bring a technical assistance firm on line

*Often it is clear that your company can benefit substantially from the use of a technical assistance firm. Others in the company may have their approach rooted in previous paradigms that do not accept outside expertise to bolster the companies' capabilities. There are ways to overcome hurdles you may have in your path.*

## **"Try it, you'll like it!" The incremental approach**

It very often happens that initial foes of bringing in a technical assistance firm become some of the staunchest supporters. Nevertheless you have to get by the initial resistance. One of the easiest ways is to offer a "test" of limited risk, in terms of dollars and schedule. Select an assignment that has good prospects of success and shows the process to be painless. An initial success needs building upon with more success, so select the following assignments with equal care. This is simply good management of the situation. The outside firm also wants to participate in projects with high prospects of success because they know a good relationship is what their business depends upon.

## **Inappropriate internal resources are given as a substitute**

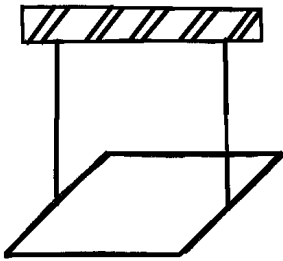
Very often the appropriate solution of bringing in a technical assistance firm is deflected with the proposed substitute of an individual or group that has not demonstrated skills in solving your particular type of problem. Sometimes this can be overcome by suggesting a little contest: the internal group can make a proposal, including; schedules, costs, and

design approach. Don't let them "low ball" it either. Then do the same for the outside firm. Be sure estimates are in man hours and calendar time not dollars and calendar time. The reason is that most people (including management) do not have an accurate perception of just what an employee costs to work on a project. As a rule of thumb you can take the salary of a person in a well-managed company and multiply it by two to obtain the actual cost to the company. Then take the man hours in the internal proposal and convert it into dollars using this formula. (Multiply by 2.5 or even 3 if the company is large and bureaucratic, get the actual number if it is available.) What you want to see, in both proposals, is the actual cost to the company; because that is what the numbers that come from the outside firm will be...only without ongoing liability! The results of this little contest, if done fairly, should close the matter.

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## Incorrect perception of technical assistance firms as Consultants\*

While technical assistance firms can usually provide short term analysis, this is a more costly option and one you will probably want to avoid. A competent technical assistance firm will have been in the business for some time and is unlikely to seek only short term relationships. Such a firm is excellent as a longer term augmentation of your own internal staff. As such, the technical assistance firm is more of a resource, much as a convenient office supply store is, for uncommon, emergency or specialty items you wouldn't keep on hand. The technical assistance firm can provide all the benefits of an experienced and capable employee, without the difficulty of hiring or keeping busy during a lull in business. Stress that the job can *make* or *save* money for the company, not consume it.



### Remove the threatening

Sometimes the barrier to obtaining technical expertise is the feeling of being threatened by an outside evaluation of the situation. This need not be the case. More often it's *help* that is being supplied. Unless the situation warrants otherwise, leave some control with internal people. If this is not possible, or desirable, then segmentation of the design effort or problem solving effort is the best way to handle it. In essence you need to draw a box around the

\* A common perception of a "Consultant" is 'Some hot-shot that waltzes in for a day or week, writes a big report, then is 'otta here, leaving a bill big enough to lower the national debt' And, truth be told, it *happens*.

part of the problem belongs to each group or individual. No one is an expert at everything and no one has the *time* to be an expert in every aspect. This is a variant of the 'divide and conquer' scheme, brought forward to the 20th century. Sometimes you may want to physically separate the effort, or separation of the responsibility for generation of intellectual property may be enough. (Ask for the newsletter on "Modular Development".) Properly executed this effort will be educational in effect. The best technical assistance firms will have individuals that enjoy teaching others new technologies and methods.

### Fear of losing control or losing trade secrets to outsiders

For some types of companies this can be a real concern. Often the market niche depends on specialized knowledge that if revealed could cost share. Security, in the form of a signed non-disclosure agreement based on the uniform trade secrets laws, is essential. A properly executed, legally correct, agreement is the sign of a reputable technical assistance firm.

### The answer is NO! (No reason given, no question accepted.)

This is a tough nut to crack, no doubt. It indicates pride in the "way it's always been done around here," and perhaps to a degree rightly so, after all you can't argue with success. But, business conditions are changing rapidly. Agility, time to market, benchmarking all are taking on new meaning. In this case you may want to outsource, that is draw up specifications and buy a "product." Technical assistance firms can provide what you need "off the shelf" by rolling the design cost into the quantity buy. In this instance you must be prepared to make a "commitment to purchase," which is often easier to do than "purchase a commitment" as is the case when you engage a technical assistance firm. The firm can work closely with you to insure your design build meets your expectations.▣