

Flexible staffing lets managers get things done while staying lean

Minneapolis/St. Paul Business Journal
Karen Melby, February 20, 2004

Considering the terrific highs and lows the economy has experienced over the past few years, it's difficult to tell when new projects and human capital needs will arise and when they will fall off again. In fact, volatility seems to have become a permanent fixture of our economy rather than a passing trend, and staffing must remain lean and flexible to adjust to this reality.

Compounded by new accounting pressures and ever-changing advances in information technology, the need to contain costs in this tough economy has forced strapped businesses—particularly small businesses aiming to grow—to look for creative staffing solutions. These firms often do not have the required expertise or specialized skill sets to cope with today's business challenges and need to look for alternative solutions to satisfy their individual needs.

Project professionals bring as-needed experience to companies and act as internal consultants to solve problems or complete critical projects. The experience is only there when the company needs it and is not a fixed cost. The dollars expended are much more efficient and the client pays only for the experience and work performed. Companies also have much greater control over the resources being used than with those from a traditional consulting firm.

A quick and reliable way for a company to obtain needed project professional services is through referrals from trusted business advisers (accounting firms, legal counsel, and other affiliated companies and relationships). Companies that consider hiring professionals outside of the work force should conduct a comprehensive analysis before initiating an engagement. This includes identifying the parameters of a specific assignment: the cost benefits involved and projected ROI. Additionally, a business owner should be prepared to ask specific questions to a prospective provider about its services to determine if this is a viable option for the company:

- What is the background/credentials of the professional?
- What relevant project experience does the professional have?
- Will the professional work directly with the management team or independently to complete the project?
- What are the anticipated results the professional plans to deliver?

For the project's duration, it is a good idea for companies to implement a structured reporting process to maximize communication between hired professionals and the internal team

➤ **Stay Lean**

Instead of hiring employees with specific skills outside your company's core competency, consider hiring project professionals who have the specific skill set you require. For example, rather than hiring full-time Information Technology managers to manage a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) deployment, hire talented project professionals who have deep expertise in CRM to augment your current Information Technology staff.

➤ **Contain Costs**

While expertise is critical to project success, companies are stretched thin as they try to cut costs and grow their bottom line. Project professionals offer the most effective alternative to companies looking to keep costs down while remaining focused and highly efficient. It is a “virtual skilled work force” available as and when needed.

Project professionals have handled similar challenges before and can provide a historical perspective to the assignment that may not be available internally.

➤ **Stay Flexible**

Flexibility allows managers to assign components of a project to internal staff or project professionals who work directly for or along with your current personnel. In either case, ownership of the project remains with you—ensuring the knowledge doesn't walk out the door when the project is completed. Also, internal employees can deflect political issues and allow project specialists to focus on completing the project and producing desired results. This “just in time” access to high-quality interim or project resources allows your company to remain agile while moving ahead on important projects—projects that might have been put on the backburner due to budget and/or staffing restraints.

Overall, project professionals can help you make sound business decisions—something that can be hard to do when you are busy putting out fires and managing day-to-day operations. By utilizing smart, experienced professionals to help you gather necessary information, you can manage change more effectively, achieve results and strategically move forward with your business.