

## How to Find and Hire a Network Consultant

### Advantages of Using a Network Consultant

In some cases, it may be cheaper to hire a networking consultant rather than try to do the networking yourself. But where do you start? Below are some suggestions on how to go about finding a network consultant. If you have further questions about how to enter into an agreement with the consultant or expense the cost of a consultant, you should always contact your own legal or financial advisor.

### Finding a Network Consultant

- Yellow pages – Look under “Computers - Networking” There are usually a large number of companies listed in the yellow pages, or you can search for companies in the online yellow pages at [www.dexonline.com](http://www.dexonline.com).
- Word of mouth – Seek out the opinion of someone you trust. Talk to other business owners and people who have hired consultants.
- Search the Web – Consultants have Web sites that may give you information, there are Web pages that have lists of consultants.
- Vendors – Ask the person who sold you your computer equipment. Sometimes they have dealt with the consultants in the area, and have a feel for the quality of the products and services each one can offer you.
- Industry organizations – Some industry organizations can provide referrals to consultants specializing in your type of business. Contact your trade or industry association to see if they can offer assistance.

### Interviewing Consultants

- You should interview consultants just as carefully as you would a prospective employee.
- Check the references the consultant provides. Check with the Better Business Bureau to ensure he or she is in good standing. Confirm that he or she is licensed to do business in your state.
- Ask for at least three references for jobs similar to the job you need done.
- Ask if the manufacturer of the networking equipment you will use does annual customer satisfaction surveys, and if so, what score did he or she receive.

### Length of time in business

- Look at factors including length of experience, necessary knowledge, successful in pleasing customers, pricing and service guarantees.
- Once you find out how long the firm has been in business, do not stop there. Ask how long they have been doing networking, how long they have been doing Internet related work, and similar questions. A company may have been selling computers for a long time but may not have been doing networking for the entire period.

### Relationships with Manufacturers

A consultant who maintains a direct relationship with equipment manufacturers is often the better consultant. That is to say a consultant, who is an authorized dealer of a specific manufacturer's equipment, has usually proven that his or her level of service matches the quality of the brand. Also, look for authorized dealers and technicians who support or install the manufacturer's equipment.

### Certifications

Network software manufacturers offer certification programs for their products. To certify, the technician has to pass tests demonstrating their knowledge of the particular manufacturer's products. Check the networking software manufacturer's Web site to see what certifications the technicians should have. Then ask if the technicians have those certifications.

### **Service and Support**

How you engage a network consultant for service and support depends on who you would likely call for help. Would you call the network consultant, or could you rely on the manufacturer's help desk first? Based on the expertise of your staff you can decide whether you should call the manufacturer or a consultant. Either way you will want to know how much the consultant charges and how the manufacturer will charge for calls to its help desk.

### **Training**

Having properly trained staff can ensure your network will work the way you want it to. Also, find out if they will train your staff. Then your staff can take over the responsibility for some aspects of the network. As with other services, find out if they will charge additional fees for the training.

### **Comprehensive Coverage**

The consultant should be familiar with servers, workstations, networking software and hardware, Internet and e-mail to provide you with comprehensive knowledge. Because of the integrated nature of networks, it may be preferable to have one consultant who can handle all your needs, rather multiple companies that provide only one or two services for you.

### **Service Details**

Get answers to the following questions from the network consultants you are considering before hiring one to work for you.

- Once you call a consultant for help, how quickly will he or she respond? Establish with them if penalties or discounts will apply if/when they do not meet response times and delivery dates.
- Are you a priority customer? Where would you rate on their list of important customers? Will they push you off to work on other, perhaps bigger customers' problems?
- How many technicians do they have? How many technicians will be dedicated to your problems?
- Will they assign a single technician to assume primary responsibility for your business? If not, how will the firm ensure technicians who provide service have a cohesive understanding of your specific situation and knowledge of your LAN?

### **Written Agreement**

- You should always have a written proposal for an agreement or contract reviewed by your legal advisors before signing them.
- Make sure you understand your obligations, as well as those commitments of the consultant. Can the contract be terminated, and if so, how? If the tech makes a mistake, what happens? Will the consultant cover the cost of repairs if their technician makes a mistake?
- Are there discounts for paying up front? Can you pay them a retainer and then settle-up at the end of the year?
- What about confidentiality; how do you ensure your data is not compromised? Confidentiality agreements are usually included in a consultant agreement.
- Will they provide documentation of all work performed? If you switch to another network-consulting firm, documentation will be necessary for the new company to understand your network. The only way to do that is to have documentation from the current network consultant outlining all the steps they have taken.