

Business Process Improvement: Using Experts (Should you, if so, why, what for and how?)

Specify what you need, run a proper selection process, agree a contract and stay involved.

- A reason to consider this option right now is that economic turmoil creates unusual problems which might need extraordinary solutions.
- If this sounds like the butcher telling you to *buy more meat*, be assured that we buy and eat meat as well as selling it.
- You may think that using external experts would be new but it is hard to find a business not doing it already – it may be your accountant or lawyer, but they are still classed as an external expert. It is not as unusual or scary as you might at first think.
- Using external expertise is entirely in harmony with the modern approach to business which is all about lean & mean, virtual and outsourcing.
- Be clear what you want, specify it, get potential suppliers to bid, have a rigorous selection process and enter into a contract.
- Even though you have brought in an expert, stay involved in the project otherwise you are at risk of abdicating all responsibility to the supplier.

This is the final topic in this current series of six where we have shared some of the successful ideas that we use to tackle the key issues affecting the performance of our customers' businesses. Through the first five topics we looked at; analysing the real problem, presenting your proposition and taking it to market, your business model and in the last two we covered the joined up topics of management and leadership development, recruitment, training and development for employees at any level.

This list of topics was not intended to be exhaustive but it did tackle the most common things that we observe when working with our customers. We purposely avoided the obvious topic of the lack of available credit as neither we nor our customers can cure this problem preferring to focus on some ways for coping with the consequences of the credit crunch.

Many of our readers may consider that the topics we covered are not problems they have the time to worry about right now. While that may be true, it is equally true that had the issues been given serious attention over recent years your business might have been in better condition to avoid or at least to deal with the current situation.

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It is never too late to fix a business problem and holding back from grasping the nettle will progressively weaken a company when compared to competitors who are spending time fixing their problems. Now is the time to endure, change, build muscle and emerge stronger.

Dramatic economic turmoil typically throws up unusual problems which may well be new to many business people or it emphasises issues which have been below the surface insidiously affecting business performance. These may be once-in-a-business-lifetime issues and as such there is probably a lack of internal experience and now is not the time to try to become an expert but it might just be the time to employ one. Using appropriate experts to solve specific problems for you will not only ensure the problems is solved effectively it will leave you free to run the normal day-to-day business.

This probably sounds like the butcher telling you to buy more meat and it is true; Performative does earn its living by providing our customers with advice and guidance on a wide range of topics related to improving their business performance. But in our case, we never stop at just advice and guidance as the solutions that we design and deploy always provide practical working solutions as well. We undertake to turn the strategy that we develop into reality and if this is what you want then demand it of your suppliers.

We know that the use of external experts causes concern and everyone has a funny line such as “*you employ a consultant to tell you the time; they borrow your watch, tell you the time and then sell the watch back to you*”. The answer to this is to ensure that your reasons for using an external expert are well thought through and that you have a robust process for working with them. Below, we have outlined just such a process that will hopefully help you.

Just before looking at the process, I would like to make one further point that will hopefully de-mystify this topic. While using external experts might seem like something that other people do, it is actually difficult to find a business that does not already use external experts. The most common examples of such experts are; accountants, auditors, tax experts and lawyers. Other common examples include IT, HR and recruitment specialists and in addition there is a long list of non-professional experts such as; office

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cleaners, plant maintenance specialists and gardeners that are commonly used by businesses. Some less common examples would include, for example; M&A specialists, patent agents and intellectual property experts.

The use of external specialists is very much the way modern businesses operate where companies typically employ the necessary core of key staff while using external companies or individuals to flex around varying demand and varying needs. Other things leading businesses to use external capabilities include; outsourcing, and the current trend for smaller business to operate as almost virtual companies in the sense that they may have no fixed abode, very little infrastructure and few employees other than the founders/owners.

While the function of Performative is that of external supplier, we ourselves use external experts when we require specialist knowledge or skills for our own business. So, this butcher buys and eats meat as well as selling it.

The process:

- Be very clear what you need to do and that you do not have the skills, resources or time to do it yourself. The most common reasons for using an external solution are; to top up labour, to top up skills, to do a job that you do not want to do yourself or to do a job that you cannot do for yourself.
- Be very clear in your own mind what it is you want to achieve and ask yourself what should the end result look like and what will it do for me. When buying soft skills expertise, the question is better worded as “what will success look and feel like?”
- Ask everyone that you know within your business network for their thoughts and ideas on what you intend to do and also ask if they can recommend any good suppliers.
- Before talking to potential suppliers ask yourself; do you want advice only or do you want the end result to be a working solution for the problem?
- Talk to several suppliers about how they would achieve your objective, and the options open to you, but then sit down and reflect on what you really need and what additional value you might be prepared to pay for.

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- You should also decide the mechanism by which you will assess the suppliers and their offerings. It is important that you have a fairly clinical selection process to avoid falling for the person that you like.
- Having decided what you actually want you must share it with your potential suppliers in the form of a specification which clearly lays out your expectations of them and also what they can expect of you. Remember that you are using them for their expertise, so do not be tempted to specify the how, only the what and when. The suppliers should bid for your work against this specification.
- Do not let the specification and bidding process become a sterile exchange of paper – meet the potential suppliers and in the case of a short-list, meet them several times so that you get to know each other before committing to working together.
- Assess the proposals against your selection criteria and having thus identified which supplier is able to meet your requirements, take up references.
- Once you are happy with your choice put a contract in place. The contract must include a definition of obligations which describes what they will do for you, what you will pay them for doing it and any obligations that you might have to meet to enable them to deliver the solution to you.
- You must accept that this is about working together – you should banish any idea that you can sign the contract and sit back and wait for the result – this is abdication and it is highly likely to produce an unsatisfactory outcome.

Using well qualified external expertise should provide you with a number of important benefits; it will reduce the risk of failure, it will save you money, it will save you time, it will deliver a working solution faster and it will leave you to run your business as usual avoiding the risk of failure through diversion.

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