Should You Hire a Consultant?

Implementing an effective food safety program depends on many elements including facilities, equipment, and personnel. Sanitary design of equipment and facilities can reduce the time and effort needed to implement food safety practices and improve the sanitation program. As your sanitation program is developed and refined, you may need the guidance and assistance of an experienced consultant who can bring technical knowledge and expertise to evaluate elements of sanitary design in your facility. They can assist with assessments to identify sanitation needs, equipment selection, training goals, and even design for new construction. Below we discuss how to select a consultant and how to get the most out of the relationship.

The Role of a Consultant

Understanding the consultant’s role and their responsibilities is crucial for successful project management and completion. To ensure a positive outcome, consider these actions:

Prioritize communication.
Thorough and effective communication with a consultant will ensure that relevant and accurate information, is exchanged and ensures the greatest value of their work. This can be done by scheduling routine meetings and assigning a point person in your operation to manage all aspects of the project.

Make informed decisions.
The role of a consultant is to supplement your knowledge so that you can make informed decisions. Review all final decisions with the consultant and be sure you know why decisions are being made. This can include improving sanitation effectiveness, overcoming challenges to proper cleaning, or reducing the time needed to implement practices.

Identify the best practices for your operation.
Just because a consultant says something will work, it does not necessarily mean it will work or that it is the best decision for your operation. It is ultimately your responsibility to make the best decision for your operation as you will be responsible for managing the sanitation program as it is implemented including any challenges that arise.

The benefit from receiving good guidance from a properly selected consultant can be significant, and conversely, a poorly selected consultant can be a costly burden. Commit the effort to choose wisely.
Finding a Qualified Consultant

A consultant can be an individual, partnership, or corporation that through education, certification, and experience has demonstrated expertise in sanitary design and food safety.

Ask your colleagues, trade association personnel, or other contacts for referrals. Check out industry association directories, publications, and websites for listings. Your existing professional consultants may also be able to make recommendations.

Consultant Expertise

Before you hire a consultant, you should discuss your needs and evaluate their technical qualifications. Maximize their value by ensuring that their area of expertise and experience are a good match for your project. A consultant should have a resume that lists current and past projects as well as their education, work experience, training, accreditations, and/or certifications. Considerations include:

**Education and technical training in sanitary design and food safety systems.**
Review the consultants level of education, certifications, and memberships in industry professional organizations to ensure they have expertise in your commodity area. Find someone who has technical expertise in the specific area where you need help.

**Years of experience in the implementation of sanitary design elements.**
Review the consultant’s previous experience with conducting training courses, writing sanitation programs, assessing operation needs, and designing sanitary spaces. Selecting a consultant with the exact area of expertise you need will hopefully increase their knowledge around specific regulatory requirements as well as sanitation challenges.

**Knowledge of the industry and continuing education process.**
When interviewing a consultant, ask them about their industry experience and their knowledge about relevant regulations and industry standards. Ask how they stay up-to-date on the latest industry trends, research and regulatory guidelines, as well as where they look when they have questions. Consultants should be using research, regulations, and commodity specific guidance as some of their resource materials.

**Willingness to work on-site to identify the needs of your facility.**
The consultant should be committed to spending a significant amount of time learning the daily operations in your facility to ensure a well-designed system. Ideally, there will be one consultant committed to your project so you know exactly who to follow up with for any questions or concerns.

**Willingness to provide follow-up support.**
It will be important to know how long the consultant is willing to stay engaged. Ask them if they are willing to provide follow-up support such as training, troubleshooting, and other services should you need additional help to get the system fully implemented.

Consultant References

References are an important tool when selecting a consultant to assess past performance. Ask the consultant for references where they have done similar work that aligns with the scope of your project. Ideally check two or more references to ensure an objective assessment.

**Assess their track record.**
Ask references about their degree of satisfaction with the quality of work and pricing. Did the project stay on the proposed timeline? Would they hire that consultant again? Were there any problems or unexpected situations? Were the consultant’s recommendations implemented? Did the consultant’s efforts help them comply with regulations or meet third-party audit requirements?
Check with clients not listed as references.
Consultants will list clients who will give positive references. If you are aware of others that have worked with the consultant, ask them for their thoughts and experiences with the consultant.

Preparing an Agreement
Once you select your consultant, develop a statement of work, which should include the following:
• A detailed description of consulting services, how they will be conducted, and who will complete the work.
• Who the consultant will communicate with within your operation and who will run the project.
• Project milestones and timeline for completing objectives.
• Deliverables, including routine meetings, trainings, and status reports.
• The cost of the project and options for payment, either fixed price or hourly rate.
• Confidentiality or non-disclosure agreements regarding your processes or the project scope.
• Include provisions for liability, and proper relationship (i.e., ensure that the consultant is considered an independent contractor).
• A plan for termination of services if consultant is not performing the work.

You can design your own contract and contract provisions that are tailored to your needs. Be sure you understand all aspects of the contract before entering into the contract.

Final Considerations
Plan ahead. It will take time to find a qualified consultant and they are likely to already be engaged in other projects. Completing projects will take months not weeks, so plan ahead so your project is completed on schedule. A complete understanding of expectations and the consultant’s approach will result in a successful outcome.
• Do the work it takes to hire a consultant you can trust so that their time can be committed to addressing your sanitation and sanitary design needs.
• You should understand and evaluate what the consultant has recommended and developed.
• The recommendations should be feasible, effective, and specific.
• Regulatory requirements should be met.
• There should be a plan for transferring the technical knowledge to you and your staff.
• Have a mechanism in place to validate the recommendations made by the consultant and to assess project results. This includes assessing if the recommendations were sound, if the project met objectives, and if the results were worth the investment.

Resources
• fda.gov/food/food-safety-modernization-act-fsma/fsma-final-rule-produce-safety
• instituteforfoodsafety.cornell.edu/resources/cleaning-sanitizing-and-hygienic-design/

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