Environmental Science and Technology
Briefs for Citizens

by Barbara Johnson

Steps in Choosing an Environmental Consultant

Skills, experience, and track records of consultants vary widely. Hiring an appropriate and qualified environmental consultant is crucial in developing solutions that are protective of human health and the environment, in compliance with environmental regulations, and cost-effective. Benefits include the following:

• saving time and money
• completing projects satisfactorily the first time
• maintaining good relationships with regulatory agencies
• submitting deliverables in a timely fashion
• satisfying all parties involved with the final outcome
• minimizing unexpected contingencies

The following steps are intended to help you choose the right consultant for your projects.

STEP 1: Determine scope of work. Providing as much information as possible will enable prospective firms to give you more accurate estimates (cost and time) to complete the project. Compile all the information you can about the property including current and historical operations at and bordering the site, potential sources of contamination, existing maps, and company records on where and how hazardous substances have been used and/or stored. The environmental consultant can research these items, too; however, it will add to the cost of the project and make it more difficult to make estimates about project costs and completion times.

STEP 2: Compile a list of possible firms. Make a list of potential consulting firms that have conducted similar investigations, cleanups, or have experience with other consulting needs you have. Check professional societies or directories, trade organizations, and state regulatory agencies (often states maintain a consultants list but will not endorse any firm); interview attorneys; and contact other companies in your industry or other municipalities.

Check the Internet or contact firms to obtain general information on the company, staff, experience, and services provided. If your list is long, use the general information to narrow your search.

STEP 3: Request proposals. Send a request for proposals (RFP) to interested consultants that appear qualified. The RFP should include the following information:

• description of the site, including maps and diagrams if available
• discussion of the scope of the project and expected deliverables

What is the work that needs to be done by an environmental professional? Develop a scope of work. Having a good understanding of the situation and what needs to be done will assist in determining the best consultant for the project. Keep in mind that environmental investigations often encounter unexpected situations and new information that may change the scope of work.
• preferences or requirements regarding assessment approaches, data quality, and reporting requirements
• time constraints for completing the work
• directions for access to relevant records (such as previous environmental work) and to the site for bidders
• request for qualifications of the consulting firm and staff resumes
• request for references
• request for unit rates and cost estimates
• directions for submitting proposals/project contact(s)
• criteria that will be used for review and selection of proposals

STEP 4: Review proposals. When reviewing proposals, keep in mind the following:
• Has the firm worked on projects similar to yours?
• How much work does the company subcontract, and who are the subcontractors?
• Is the consultant knowledgeable about federal, state, and local environmental laws and policies?
• How well does the consultant communicate in writing?
• Beware of bids that are significantly lower than those of competing firms and overly optimistic time schedules. Be wary of “hard sell” approaches, conflicts of interest, or anything that makes you feel uneasy.

STEP 5: Contact references. If you are not familiar with the reputation of the consulting firm, checking references can be one of the most important parts of the selection process. The following are some questions you may want to ask references:
• Were you satisfied with the consultant’s work?
• Did you have any concerns about the firm’s performance or fees?
• What specific staff members were on your project team?
• Was the project completed on time and within budget?
• Were you kept informed as the project progressed?
• Did you encounter unexpected delays or staff turnover? Were these or any other problems resolved to your satisfaction?
• Did the consultant work effectively with regulatory staff, local officials, and you?

STEP 6: Prepare a short list and conduct interviews. Once you have identified the most qualified consulting firms, arrange for interviews. The interviews may be used to clarify any unclear items in the consultant’s proposal and evaluate the consultant’s qualifications in more depth. Some example questions to ask during the interview may include the following:
• Who will be assigned to the project? Are any of these people at the interview? What is the training and experience of project team members?
• What is the project team members’ knowledge of federal, state, and local environmental regulations and policies?
• What procedures will be subcontracted and to whom? What is the subcontractor’s experience with similar projects? How will subcontracted service be charged?
• Does the consultant have an established field protocol and chain-of-custody SOP for sampling?
• What is the consultant’s current workload?

STEP 7: Make the selection. The knowledge you have collected through the consulting firm’s submitted proposal, the reference checks, and the interview should provide enough information to select a consultant. By researching a firm, you will get a sense for its honesty, technical competence, and ability to save time, money, and stress.

Information from the following references was used to develop this citizen’s brief.


Choosing an Environmental Consultant, brochure, Kansas Department of Health and Environment.

Hiring an Environmental Consultant, Web page-updated April 2003, Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management.

AUTHOR INFORMATION
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