

CONSULTANTS IN GOLF COURSE MANAGEMENT: GETTING THE BEST FROM YOUR CONSULTANT AGRONOMIST

By Stewart Brown

The use of independent consultants or agronomists has become an established management practice in contemporary golf course management and there are many practising professional consultants who offer a range of services. Independent consultants can bring a range of benefits to their employers as they can:

- Provide technical, agronomic and managerial advice and information
- Manage or supervise projects such as new constructions
- Manage change within the organisation such as staff recruitment
- Prepare feasibility studies and planning documentation
- Act as expert witnesses in legal and mitigation cases
- Develop learning capacity through training programmes and seminars



The use of consultants has grown in recent years as the management of turf and golf courses has become increasingly technical and more science-based, but also because consultants:

- Bring objectivity to the organisation concerned – an independent or fresh view
- Are usually low-risk management as they mitigate the chances of works or projects failing
- Bring with them a wealth of experience and knowledge that will benefit the employing organisation

GOLF COURSE CONSULTANCY FEES

Fees are usually set or calculated in one of three ways -

Percentage Fees

This is typically used in construction works and major projects where the consultant's fees are calculated as a percentage of the construction costs of the project. Generally speaking the percentage figure used to calculate the design fee is inversely proportional to the construction cost. The higher the construction cost of the project the smaller the fee percentage.

Fixed Price Fees

Many consultants will negotiate a fixed sum based on the predefined and agreed service requirements. Many consultants offer a subscription service where a fee is agreed to cover a set amount of works, for example a set number of visits and agronomic reports each year. Fixed price fees are generally applied for many types of consultancy work, particularly for golf course appraisals, feasibility studies and technical reports. Fixed price fees are frequently preferred by private developers, commercial operators and members' clubs. There is the obvious advantage for the developer as fees are capped.

Time Rates

Time rates may be billed by the hour (for design office work) or by the day (for site visits). Consultants may be asked to visit golf courses in order to give advice, to attend meetings which have not been included in other fees, or to carry out additional work that has not been specifically included in the original contract. This can be an expensive option unless the amount or time can be effectively capped to a final amount; often this may not be feasible. This method is the one least favoured by employers in golf course management.

FINDING THE RIGHT CONSULTANT

The choice of a consultant is undoubtedly critical for a successful outcome for a project and will often be crucial, affecting the final quality and cost of any golf course project. When sourcing a consultant for your golf course, whether for constructional, agronomic, managerial or other requirement, follow a few simple guidelines and procedures to get the best consultant for your golf course and situation:

1. Seek recommendations. Ask colleagues and contacts who have appropriate experience for names of recommended consultants. Follow up on work that has impressed you and find out who was involved, scan the trade and technical press for projects and names in the same way. Approach professional bodies for the names and addresses of members in your area.
2. Contact several of these consultants or companies asking for details of the range and type of services offered; staff (qualifications and experience) and resources; fees and methods of charging and a client list. Ask that they give the names and contact details of clients willing to act as referees.
3. From the replies draw up a short-list. Prepare a brief so that you are able to tell potential consultants exactly what you will expect from them. If you have, a set or limited budget, make this clear. Ask them to submit a specimen report and check it against your brief.
4. Check the qualifications and experience of the individuals with whom you will be working. Qualifications vary enormously but of most importance is their golf course or sports turf content. Experience within the golf course or sports turf industry is also essential.
5. Membership of professional bodies is a pointer to professionalism and in many cases membership means that members have to abide by codes of practice and professional ethics. Check carefully with the bodies concerned for any bogus claims. An important organisation recently formed for such professional consultants is the Register of Independent Turfgrass Consultant Agronomists.
6. Make sure that the consultant is completely independent and not attached to another company. For instance, a materials or product supplier may retain a consultant.
7. Before you appoint anyone, meet him or her in person to see if you can actually work together. Make sure that the people you meet will be those that you will actually be working with.
8. If necessary and appropriate, visit their offices to ensure that they have the staff or resources needed for the job. This will only be a factor



Count on it.

for large contracts. Most independent turfgrass agronomists are self-employed and will work from home.

9. Check that the consultant has the necessary level of professional indemnity and third-party insurance.

10. Discuss contract terms. It may be inadvisable to appoint new consultants on a long-term contract, but unfair to put them on a very short contract, as they have to put in a lot of work at the beginning of any contract. The best option may be a renewal-type contract after a trial period of six months. Take legal advice before signing any unfamiliar agreement.

MANAGING THE CONSULTANCY

Once you have appointed your consultant, communicate with them. Identify who will be responsible for managing the consultant. It is always worth deciding at the beginning of the process what you will do with any products of the consultancy. If there is to be a report, to whom will the report belong? Do you want the consultant to be involved in discussing and even implementing the report? It is always useful to have mechanisms for interim reporting and reviewing. These ensure that the work stays on track and frequently these are tied to payments.

Using consultants effectively demands a commitment of time as well as money by clients. Remember that you must keep in touch with the progress of the consultancy work if you are to get the most from it. Consultants are likely to be most cost-effective when working to an agreed programme and timescale. Make sure there are regular progress meetings and that the consultant keeps you fully briefed on progress against the programme. To implement the recommendations it is often most cost effective to involve the consultant(s) together with your management. If you and your staff need to provide input, make sure that you do it within the agreed timescale. Consultancy requires an investment not only in fees but also in client time.

The consultant's report is often their most tangible 'deliverable'; but it must be in a format which is beneficial to you. If necessary, ask the consultant to produce a draft report so that you can discuss findings and recommendations with some of your colleagues before the final report is produced. Make sure the report is written in a way you and your staff can understand and use. Tell the consultant if you are not happy with it. Ask the consultant to make a presentation to you and your colleagues, if this will help discussion on its conclusions. Implement the recommendations and involve your management as well as the consultant.



A recently renovated bunker



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Following the above procedure should ensure that things run smoothly and that no problems occur. If you have cause for complaint, you must notify the consultant immediately, preferably with a face-to-face meeting to discuss your issue. It is highly unlikely that you will need recourse to law to solve disputes as most reputable consultants and consultancy practices value their good name and integrity extremely highly. With good management and careful control, an external consultant can inject new impetus and thinking into your golf course. Finally, if you do not have confidence in the advice or information given to you by a particular consultant look elsewhere for another.

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