

CMCE Showcase 23rd March: How to be an Excellent Client

Nick Bush, with help from Steve Cant

When we set consultant Jim Foster off on a quest to determine the value of consulting firms, he unearthed some interesting findings that pointed to a disconnect somewhere in the procurement process. It seemed therefore that excellence in consulting delivery required excellent clients throughout the process. And through the contribution of procurement experts Network Rail's Director of Sourcing Sarah-Jayne (SJ) Aldridge and Paul Vincent, Global Head of Services Procurement at Hays, the showcase built a picture of leading-edge practice which, when applied, would help clients and consultants build much more productive, value-adding relationships. And procurement functions, often seen as a barrier by suppliers, could instead contribute to effective buying and selling.

Kicking the event off, Jim summarised the findings of CMCE's latest report [Consultant Value Add: Maximising the Value from your Management Consultant](#).

When clients engage consultants, they don't always engage them to provide the services that they consider the most value. Even though clients and consultants agreed on what these were, these weren't the services clients were most likely to engage consultants to provide. The report recommends that clients ensure that this value is taken into account when selecting a consultant and agreeing the work to be performed.

SJ built on this theme and brought her considerable procurement experience to bear on the issue – Network Rail's procurement runs to £3.5-7bn per year – not all on consultancy, it also includes specialised consulting projects. She commented that the role of procurement had grown considerably, largely due to the UK leaving the EU and the changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Procurement were not the subject matter experts of the consulting outcomes – she recognised that consulting projects were highly changeable – but they were the experts on the process that gets the best out of suppliers.

The first thing procurement could help with was defining the needs really well. It was perhaps surprising that internal clients lacked the ability to clearly articulate what they want to achieve but procurement can help people express this more clearly and using case studies of successful procurement definitely helps.

As a public body, Network Rail operates an open process. Using procurement notices is an opportunity to gauge the level of interest and extend the opportunity to small firms who, SJ observed, were often more passionate about their speciality than the larger firms.

Measuring the return on investment was also critical and it was important to ask suppliers to think about this, particularly delivery milestones and the repercussions of these not being met. It was well worth buyers spending time on this up front and making these challenging. The important thing was to get feedback on supplier performance not from the key sponsor (who was always likely to look on the upside) but from the business owners who are living and breathing the change that the consultants are implementing.

Paul Vincent then built on SJ's themes, especially on the need to answer the "So what?" value question at the outset. Paul articulated an interesting five-level model for buying consultancy:

- Level 1 - where the client does not know where they are – and needs help to find out.
- Level 2 - where the client knows where they are but does not know what to do – and needs help framing a strategy or plan.
- Level 3 - where the client knows what to do but not how to do it – and needs help in executing a strategy or plan.
- Level 4 - where the client knows how to do it but does not have the capability to do so – and needs expert bodies.
- Level 5 - where the client wants somebody else to assess the risks of doing it (and thereby provide somebody to blame when it all goes wrong).

We've produced a highlights [video](#) and will also be releasing snippets/tasters from the event on our [LinkedIn page](#) over the next few weeks. The issue of effective buying and selling of consultancy is something that's too important for a one-off event so we'll be returning to it over the coming months.