Augmenting your business intelligence and data warehousing needs can inject necessary expertise across the enterprise.

by Shirley S. Savage

An ideal

PARTNERSHIP

Interest in business intelligence (BI) and data warehouse consulting is rising for a couple of reasons, says Evan Levy, partner and co-founder of Baseline Consulting. "One, in the last five years, more people have changed jobs. So companies don't necessarily have the depth of business knowledge or industry expertise that they once could rely upon," he notes. "Two, business does move more quickly because new strategic objectives and heightened awareness of competitors' activities have accelerated the sense of urgency."

As BI transitions from being a tactical to a strategic business tool, more and more companies are looking to tap into a ready source of BI and data warehousing expertise. They're finding that help in the form of professional consultants who have depth and breadth of experience.

Hiring a BI/data warehousing consultant is a quick yet thorough solution to the problem confronting your company. "People are buried. They have a lot of work on their hands," says Levy. "Companies are growing, but they're very sensitive to head count and resources. They just don't have enough people to get everything done. Augmenting resources—whether it be tactical programmers or industry-experienced resources—is a necessity."

Use of BI/data warehousing consultants cuts across all professions, although financial services, telecommunications and retailers were early adopters, Levy says. Downsizing in banking and telecommunications, for example, has led to "tremendous opportunities" for BI/data warehousing consulting, he notes. "We're seeing our clients continually request help in working through their mountains of data. While there's no question that product offerings from the data warehouse vendors are helping companies load and organize all of the digital information, the true challenge is understanding how to leverage this detail to make business decisions.

"The key is pulling together the industry, management and technology expertise to guide clients away from running their businesses through 'gut-level instinct' and toward a 'fact-based strategy,'" Levy adds.

Identify the need first

Before you decide to seek a consultant, know your requirements. Typically, consultants fill a gap by contributing missing skills or helping speed up completion of the project. "Perhaps you need to get something done and you don't have the people to throw at it," says Alex Soejarto, research director at Gartner. "Or you're doing something different or new, and your staff doesn't have the ability to lead the project right now."

Maybe it's a one-time-only project, and they might not require the extra personnel. Whether it's choosing a technology strategy or implementing it, consultants can provide the expertise that might be missing on your staff. If you choose a consultant with knowledge and a history of solving the same type of problem you are facing, the consultant may already have a data model or the relevant expertise, such as an industry specialty, that can be used as a starting point for a solution, Soejarto says.

In Levy's experience, companies seek consultants because they "need an injection of industry or technology expertise, want to talk to someone who has addressed these kinds of problems many times and want someone who can warn against potentially costly mistakes." When choosing the right consultant for the task, the client should look for someone who not only understands the solution but can work within the client's culture and manage expectations, according to Levy.

A professional consultant can guide the client to finding the best solution for them. That's because the client is purchasing expertise that isn't currently available in-

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house. "The issue is: Is the problem unique to your company, or can additional experience drive a quicker way of getting it done?" Levy asks. "Your staff may have to invent the way

while I may already have done that. Most of what we do isn't rocket science. It's that we've done it before, so it's likely that both the timeframe and the learning curve will be shorter."

Setting joint goals

Like all business decisions, hiring an outside consultant means setting clear milestones and goals up front. Make your expectations clear at the beginning of the project about the scope, price and timeframe, Soejarto suggests. "Determine how you can create the environment where it's a win-win situation for you and the consultant," he says.

If a consultant is hired to deliver the entire solution and has total responsibility for the project, all things being equal, the determining factors are time and price. If you hire a consultant to help out with a staff shortage, then the focus should be on the consultant's experience, Soejarto says.

For a full project implementation where the client is transferring responsibility, it's important to acknowledge that the consulting company is taking on some of the risk in terms of providing the solution you require, Soejarto advises. With that in mind, other factors to consider include the effectiveness and knowledge of the consulting company for products and relevant industry or process experience.

Good risk-management procedures are also important, as is good communication between client and consultant. Consultants

may be experts, but they still need to seek input from the client during the project. For instance, if a member of the consulting team leaves during the project, is there a process in place for the client to have input when the team changes? In Soejarto's experience, customers are dissatisfied when their counsel isn't sought by the consultant.

Having policies and procedures in place from the start is beneficial to both sides. "There are always unforeseen difficulties," Soejarto notes. "What happens when one of the parties can't deliver? What processes do the two parties have in place to manage the timeline? If the client can't meet its commitments, then the service provider shouldn't be penalized. If the service provider can't meet its commitments, how should they be penalized? Oftentimes, it comes down to how the they are paid. Perhaps it could be that the service provider is paid when a milestone is met."

Tailored solutions

A client should expect a customized solution to the problem, not a set solution imposed by the consultant because it worked before. "I have to come up with a solution that will work in your culture, organizational structure and IT," Levy says. "Giving you someone else's solution is the wrong approach. It's about having solved the problem before and bringing those resources and skills to bear on your particular version of it."

In helping a client, "you need to exploit the strengths of both the client and the consulting firm," Levy adds. "There's really no such thing as cookie-cutter BI from a business-process perspective." T

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ASK THE BIG QUESTIONS

When evaluating a client's BI challenges, Levy says that he uses "three magic questions" to find the right solution:

1. Can you identify the problem?
2. Who owns the problem and can make the decision to fix it?
3. Is having detailed business data going to solve the problem?