

Practical Tips for Choosing an EMS Consultant

by Gabriele Crognale, P.E.

Keep in perspective that not all consultants can be all things to all people.

In our last episode, we provided you some insight into what to look for in choosing an ISO 14001 registrar. When we last checked the RAB Web site (www.rabnet.com), there were more than 30 accredited registrars, give or take a few, and a handful of applicants hoping to become accredited registrars.

However, such listings do not exist for those consultants who usually provide the consulting support to the industrial clients of these registrars. The closest "list" in the environmental consulting world comes courtesy of certain trade pubs that list environmental consultants by category in special editions, labeled "the consultant guide," or a similar catch phrase.

Using that information as a guide, there are at least several hundred environmental compliance and management system consultants in the United States, from the large multi-national "conglomerates" to the smaller "mom-and-pop" or boutique consultant practices that may employ one or several individuals.

The former are the larger firms with household names that are primarily engineering firms that also double as environmental management system (EMS) service providers, while the latter are usually individuals contracted out to assist registrars, RAB-accredited course providers, or provide EMS-specific services to smaller clients that cannot afford the larger firms or are too small for them. As with the lists the RAB provides on its Web site for registrars, audi-

tors and course providers, the end user is ultimately responsible for doing the homework to select the right firm.

Even with a list, in the absence of a Gomez.com-type rating service, finding the appropriate EMS service provider may require some old-fashioned gumshoe tactics. Imagine, for example, that you are the plant or general manager of a small manufacturing firm or a local or other type of municipal government. While you may be familiar with some consultants with whom you have worked with in the past or currently retain for other work, they may not be right to help the EMS development or training phase as you prepare your facility for the registrar's audit. There's nothing wrong with keeping your current consultant for other regulatory needs, but you should also be willing to consider other, perhaps more seasoned, EMS practitioners.

Keep in perspective that not all consultants can be all things to all people. Case in point: While some may specialize in regulatory compliance, they may not be as familiar in management system issues, and hence, not be of added value to you in getting your EMS in tip-top shape. Sometimes, all that it takes is a fresh set of eyes and perspective to help, the plant manager to take the quantum leap from regulatory compliance to ISO 14001 implementation. That requires a special skill set and management-style mindset that builds upon ISO 14001 considerations to help make your objectives an ISO-reality.

The EMS-skilled consultant: a special blend

In the world of scientists, engineers and consultants, there are primarily two camps of specialized service providers: those firms that provide heavy engineering support, such as the design and building of structures and water use projects, to the cleanup of heavily contaminated sites that can also require special remediation designs to help cleanup the underlying soil and groundwater at many of the Superfund sites across the country; and those firms that can be classified as environmental consultants that usually provide the sampling and regulatory support of these larger firms at various sites. Such work can include soil, water and air sampling of construction sites or at cleanup sites. In addition, either type of firm can also provide the soft skills that relate to regulatory compliance, such as specialized environmental compliance auditing, HAZWOPER or other regulatory required training; compliance auditing assistance, or other needs as required by the client.

With the advent of the ISO 14000 series of international standards, beginning with the passage of ISO 14001 in 1996, many of these firms have slowly dipped their feet into the ISO waters and have begun to gain ground, competing with the entrenched ISO 9000 and 14000 practitioners. One good thing that has come from this proliferation of services is that the cost of services has come down and can be negotiated. But, you may ask,

where does that leave me? In addition to the previously identified sources, there are also a number of Web sites devoted to ISO/EMS services—a quick search can easily reveal dozens of them. The most useful site I have come across is www.trst.com.

Here is a quick primer to help you in your quest to choose the EMS consultant that can address specific needs:

1. Check your referrals: What did they like about the firm they chose and would they use them again? What are their strong points, weak points? Did they provide the client added value?
2. Do the consultants have the requisite skills to perform the tasks you need executed? What is their level of understanding of ISO 14001 elements and how these interact with other business considerations, in addition to the obvious environmental, health and safety considerations?
3. What additional information can be gleaned from their previous EMS projects? Are they willing to provide you such detailed information, or do they seem reluctant to share that information as if it were proprietary or confidential?
4. Is the consultant able to take his consultant's hat off once in a while and be perfectly adept at providing some facilitating or coaching in other areas that may pop up that may have an impact on the facility's overall function?
5. How are their training skills? Do they have any training experience?
6. What else can they bring to the table that may be perceived as value-added?

You may have your own list of questions to add to this list as you refine your search. For additional perspective, let me share with you my discussion with a fellow ISO 14001 practitioner and colleague, Ms. Carolyn Palmer, who shared her insight into choosing an EMS consultant.

One practitioner's perspective

I asked Carolyn what she considers important in choosing an EMS consultant. These include:

- **Do your homework** – Namely, she begins by scouring various trade pubs for ads that feature EMS consultants and begins her interview campaign, or she contacts some of her colleagues in industry and asks them who they used in this category and whether they provided added value.
- **The “subtle” factor** - Whether the consultant is chosen may come down to their phone etiquette and how they come across. For example, she refers to several instances where she has made a phone call to a consultant's office asking for more information, and she judges them on their response, the timeliness of the information provided and the “chemistry” the consultant radiates. In her estimate, if she is looking for a consultant to help in a paper mill, that person should have the requisite skills to address various environmentally sensitive issues, as opposed to, say, a small machine shop. There is an economy of scale here.

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- **What past and present clients have to say** Some of the best referrals come from previous satisfied clients and from various lessons learned from the EMS community. Where EMS consultants can provide value to their clients is the wealth of previous experience they bring to the table to each new client.
- **Some hard and fast questions** – Some of the questions you may want to pose to prospective EMS consultants in your quest may include the following:
 1. What is the main purpose of calling in an outside EMS expert?
 2. Are the company requirements process or system focused?
 3. Who will be involved in working with the EMS expert and why?

4. What is the company timeline for the EMS project, process or activity?
 5. How does management plan to integrate EMS expertise with current activities?
 6. Are there any specific areas in the company where an EMS consultant can assist with improving current EMS related activities?
 7. How can a company plan to integrate both the current EMS expertise and also plan to continue obtaining expertise from the consultant on an as-needed basis?
 8. Is the consultant at liberty to provide recommendations for improvement, provided it doesn't sound like a sales pitch?
- **Details, details, details** - Once a consultant can answer some or all of these questions, your own company and compliance requirements may be identified to an extent that the process of selecting the right EMS consultant for your firm can become much easier. Viewed from a company perspective, it is important to define the expected results you seek during the identification of EMS needs to ensure satisfaction with the consultant you ultimately choose and with anticipated organizational results.

An EMS consultant should not only be available to provide the client whatever it takes (borrowing a phrase from the now-defunct Digital Equipment Corporation) to get the job done, but also be there for you for other issues that may pop up—even if it means responding to the challenge off the clock, and providing some pro bono services.

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