

Commissioning research and managing research consultants

Commissioning a research project can often be difficult for organisations. Unless staff have had prior experience in commissioning research, there are many decisions and unknowns to consider. There is a decision to be made about what type of organisation to select to conduct the research, what to write in the research brief and how to manage the research consultants and project once the research has started.

When looking for consultants to conduct research, it can be useful to consider the following:

- While simple data collection can be undertaken by any number of organisations in the market place, more complex or difficult research projects should only be conducted by researchers with a proven track record in more advanced research and conduct of very complex projects – in this respect, it can be useful to ask referees about the calibre of individual researchers proposed for projects and question who will be designing and managing the research.
Skills and expertise to look for can include:
 - an understanding of the strategic context and organisational context of the research
 - the ability to link research to organisational strategy and/or policy
 - skills in multivariate statistical analysis (particularly those focusing on data reduction)
 - past experience in a range of more complex projects
 - qualifications in research, methodologies, measurement and statistical disciplines (eg. behavioural sciences, psychology)
- While topic relevant research experience is not always needed to successfully conduct a research project, in the absence of topic related research experience, it is important to look for consultants demonstrating a track record in more complex research – this may signal an ability to adapt and rapidly acquire information about new research issues/topics
- While it can be tempting for organisations to ask consultants to quote a specific research methodology (eg. 500 surveys), there are often many ways to conduct any research project. In this respect, it can be quite useful to specify the outcomes targeted by the organisation and let the consultants propose the research methods. This can also allow a range of approaches to be proposed and allow organisations to tap into the knowledge and expertise of consultants at the proposal stage. In many cases, more cost-effective or even more creative approaches can also be proposed
- If you are looking to save money in research, one option to consider involves independently commissioning the data collection (ie. Separating research design/analysis/reporting from data collection). This can often save a margin which a consultant may add to the field work. However, bear in mind that this comes with cautions and caveats – managing field work can imply your organisation will carry the risk of the field research going to plan and you will also need to manage and monitor the field work very carefully. This can involve many complex decisions during the field work period and for complex projects can be extremely involved. If you choose such an approach, you may need to be involved in sampling design - including monitoring of field quotas, field work methodologies, working out methods to improve response rates and addressing many issues which often occur during field work conduct. Field providers in this respect typically look to consultants to direct how the data collection should occur.