

Max Messmer, Editor

Integrating Project Professionals into Your Team

In the past, many organizations viewed the use of temporary talent as merely a means of filling short-term staffing gaps due to employee absences. Today's accounting and finance departments, however, engage interim staff to gain specialized expertise as well as

during employee sick days or peak workloads. Project financial professionals are employed to assist with everything from helping overburdened staff with account reconciliation to providing leadership with business mergers and Sarbanes-Oxley compliance issues.

In a recent survey of CFOs commissioned by our company, the majority of respondents said their organizations are using more temporary professionals today than five years ago. Whether you are hiring interim financial talent for the first time or have relied on outside services for years, there are ways to maximize the relationship and derive the greatest value from the work they contribute.

Outline expectations in advance
Before you even place a call to find

someone to come in on a project basis, you should establish specific activities, goals, and requirements for the engagement. Consider what duties the individual will manage, the skills necessary to complete those tasks, the timeline, expected outcomes, and required management oversight. Docu-



ment these policies so there will be no misunderstanding among the staff once temporary employees are on board. Establishing a clear set of duties will also serve as the basis for finding the best match for your needs.

If project professionals will be working with financial data, what level of access do they need? Does this require a background check? If so, a staffing firm can work with you to locate companies that specialize in background checks. Don't assume temporary workers have already undergone this level of screening. Staffing firms typically evaluate an individual's skills and work history but arrange for formal background checks only at a client's request.

Give the right impression on day one

As skilled as most consultants are at adapting to new environments, no one wants to begin an engagement only to find the office isn't prepared for their arrival.

Make sure the front desk receptionist and your employees are aware of the person's anticipated start date and time.

Arrange in advance to have a workspace available that includes office supplies, a functioning phone, and a computer with all of the necessary software already installed. You'll create a welcoming environment while also ensuring the person can begin work immediately.

On the first day, give the temporary professional an orientation that provides an overview of the assignment and a tour of the facilities. Explain your preferred work style and expectations, and inform involved members of your internal staff of the individual's on- and off-site schedule and contact information.

Ease the adjustment

Finance professionals will be better able to begin contributing right away if you describe at the outset your firm's policies, practices, and reporting structures and how they apply to the assignment. Confidentiality and ethical standards should also be covered so the individual knows how and when financial data can be used and disclosed. Depending on the scope of the task, you may want to schedule a formal discussion that includes all of the project stakeholders so you can make introductions and review plans. Also, be sure to include interim professionals in relevant meetings and company events so they can get up to speed on critical issues and form working relationships within the department and organization.

Maximize the relationship

Even if project employees will be at your company for a short period of time, it's worth making the extra effort to get to know them. Find out about previous work experience, career goals, and personal interests. You may be surprised to learn that a temporary accounting clerk brought in for a Microsoft Excel data entry project is also an expert with Microsoft Access and can assist employees struggling to master the application. If you do make significant changes to the scope of the assignment, however, you may need to renegotiate the original agreement with the indi-

vidual and his or her staffing firm.

Skilled interim professionals should be able to hit the ground running as soon as they join your department, but some may require training in addition to that received at orientation regarding complex policies and proprietary systems. Mentors can be particularly useful in sharing expertise most people outside the company wouldn't possess, such as knowledge of unique business practices or customized features of a software application.

Throughout the assignment, provide project professionals with regular feedback on their performance. As with internal staff, the more information you offer, the easier it will be for them to meet expectations. As an engagement comes to a close, ask for a final update, and request that they brief appropriate full-time employees on the status of all project elements. If an interim professional performed exceptionally well, you may want to consider making an offer for a permanent position with your organization. In another recent survey by our company, 87% of executives said it's valuable to hire someone on a temporary basis as a means of evaluating him or her for a full-time position.

You'll achieve the best results with project professionals if you make advance preparation and clearly communicate your expectations to them. Implement measures that will allow them to integrate into your workforce seamlessly, and provide them with sufficient training and guidance. You will help to keep interim professionals motivated and better able to make a significant contribution at your company. ■

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*Half® Finance & Accounting, Accountemps®, and Robert Half® Management Resources. RHI is the world's first and largest specialized staffing firm placing accounting and finance professionals on a full-time, temporary, and project basis. Messmer's most recent books are *Motivating Employees For Dummies®* and *Managing Your Career For Dummies®* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.).*