



Seneschal Incorporated

Newsletter

Sept 2009 From Our President

Technical and Business Consulting You Can Trust

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Special Offer

Save An Extra 10% As A Rebate

As you know, we offer *the most accurate antispam service we know of, anywhere*, to businesses of all sizes, at affordable prices—with *disaster protection for your email included at no extra charge*. You have to own your domain, but you don't have to move your web hosting or email server.

We already offer a free demo and a 30 day free trial with no strings attached. You won't be asked for a credit card or bank information until the end of the trial, if you decide to continue.

If you do continue, we keep the price down so low that small businesses (say, 5 email accounts) can get it for a monthly cost equivalent to a couple of dinners at an inexpensive restaurant. We've got the capacity to handle even the biggest companies. (The largest subscriber has 40,000 email accounts.) The bigger the number of email accounts, the lower we drive our per-user fee.

We provide month to month service—you can cancel at any time with no termination fee. (Frankly, this is so much better than other antispam services, nearly everyone who takes a free trial gets spoiled to it and never wants to be without it again.)

After 2005 hurricanes Katrina and Rita, we added options for organizations that need not only disaster redundancy, but continuous access to email during disasters.

Well, that isn't good enough. We're sweetening the deal.

Sign up for a free 30 day antispam trial between now and the end of October 2009—and if you decide to subscribe at the end of the trial, after your first six months of paid service we'll rebate 10% of what you have paid so far. After your second six months, we'll rebate 10% of what you paid for the second six month period.

At the end of your first 12 months as a post-trial subscriber, you will have gotten more than one month of your fees rebated to you.

Consultant or Contractor?

Is a computer consultant just a contract programmer or software engineer who uses a fancy title and charges a higher rate?

The short answer is **no**. Each is valuable for the right type of

engagement. But putting one into an engagement where you really need the other is a mistake—and you can't always tell who is who by the titles on their business cards.

Find out what they do. That will tell you what category is the true one, and in turn will tell you what roles are appropriate to consider them for.

What Contract Technical Workers Do

Contract technical workers focus on exactly that—the technical skills in which they specialize. It's up to you to tell them what to implement. For a software designer, you say what the software has to do. For a programmer, you provide specifications for the software.

A good contractor is a self-starter with superb technical skill, and can produce excellent technical work with less need for supervision and motivation than most regular employees. When your project is done, the contractor leaves without fuss. Your employees carry on with maintenance of whatever the project built.

Here is an example of using contract technical workers wisely. Let's say that you have decided to build a new XYZ system to fit in with a radical change in business procedures. You've done the business analysis in-house and have specified exactly what you want to build. Your IT team is competent in most of the programming skills needed. However, they have not designed and built a major database before. In fact, all of their previous design and programming projects have been small. The tools and techniques needed to build and maintain a large system cost effectively are new to them.

You bring in technical specialists as the team leads for the project. They do the 'heavy lifting'—the core of the database design and construction, software design, source code control, and quality assurance tools and procedures. Your IT employees work under their guidance, being mentored by the contracted specialists along the way.

Your project is finished faster than if you used only your IT team. The design, implementation, testing and deployment avoid the types of mistakes that happen when everyone on the team is new to the tools and techniques they are using. When the specialists leave, your entire IT team's expertise has expanded and they are capable of carrying on with maintenance and enhancements.

What Computer Consultants Do

Many contract technical workers focus exclusively on the technical work. One of the best contract programmers who once worked for me said bluntly that he didn't want to have to understand what the equipment was supposed to do when our software sent commands to it. If I would just tell him what software I wanted, he would write it, but he didn't want to have to pay attention to anything else, and he certainly didn't want to have to interact with other people to find out what they wanted.

He wrote fine software, and I let him concentrate on what he did so well. That's the big difference between a contractor and a consultant.

Computer consultants usually start out as contract technical workers. The consultant has some expert technical skills (design, programming, testing) and is likely to have at least some expertise across a wide range of the skills involved in the entire birth, life and eventual death of a system. But the consultant's professional growth is not purely addition and refinement of technical skills.

Start with computer capability. Add business acumen, common sense, and 'soft skills' and the result is a computer consultant.

A formal computer related project begins with *business analysis*. A Business Analyst looks at what the business is doing (Point A), imagines what it needs to do instead (Point B), figures out what has to be done to go from Point A to Point B, and writes that down (business case, requirements, and so on).

Other tasks in the project grow from the analysis. On the technical side, these include functional specifications and detailed specifications, design, implementation, testing, source code control, training, and technical support. On the human side, changes in what people must do have to be planned, and people have to be taught their new procedures.

Each of those tasks is done by people with specific roles, titles and skills. Many of them may labor in their portion of the project without seeing the overall picture clearly. A good computer consultant sees it all—the business objectives to be met, human procedural changes, the 'big picture' Information Technology systems involved, and the crucial details necessary to make it all work. The consultant interacts with people, digs into issues involving equipment, pays attention to logistics and even such details as the height of tables or the clearance forklifts will have in a passage.

This requires a frame of mind unlike that of a contract programmer. Not everyone can do it. It's the reason a consultant gets higher rates.

Confusion in Usage of the Terms

In other fields, a consultant provides expert advice and guidance to a client. Implementing the consultant's recommendations is the client's responsibility. The line is not so clear in information technology.

Many people say they are computer consultants when their remit is primarily implementation, not guidance. That isn't consulting in the sense that the word is used elsewhere.

At the other end of the spectrum, the best 'computer consultants' provide a blend of expertise and service that goes beyond fitting computer systems to business needs—in essence, you get a blend of business consultant and IT consultant from the best.

Our firm provides services anywhere along this spectrum. But if you ask me what Seneschal does, my answer reveals the mindset of a consultant. Where computers are used to help make money instead of count it, we help our clients make more money. That's our best strength. Listen for a similar focus on improving business effectiveness, and a lack of emphasis on specific technologies, when you are looking for a top tier computer consultant.

Remember to Use Each Appropriately

As I said at the beginning, contract technical workers and computer consultants are each valuable for the right engagement. Just make sure not to use a contract programmer where you need a consultant. Also avoid wasting money by miring a consultant in programming chores that could be more cost effectively done by a programmer at a lower rate.

Attention InfoPlus.21 Users!

Seneschal has done considerable work over the years for clients who use InfoPlus.21 from Aspen Technology. Two of our clients are openly considering changing to something else for their manufacturing systems. We see signs that others may be quietly thinking about it.

We scouted an alternative platform to use for replacing those systems and have become a registered VAR for the platform provider. Software license and maintenance costs are much lower. The underlying database engine is one of the major relational databases, so people with the skills to work with it are readily available. The user interface is browser based, and interactive displays are easy to build. Lower hassle, lower maintenance cost!

If you are interested, let us know. We will be glad to arrange a free demo so you can see what this can do.