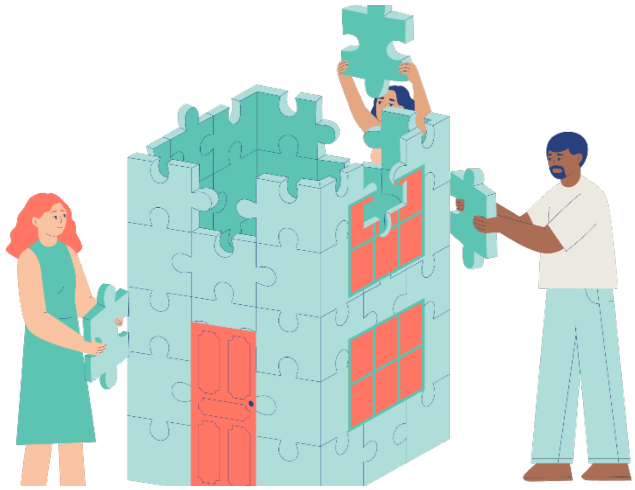
Consultant Support Guidance Document

PURPOSE

This document is intended to be a practical guide for nonprofit and social impact organizations seeking an evaluation consultant(s) to support their data-driven decision-making and reporting. This document is not intended to provide legal advice or guidance.

Use Case

- You are seeking evaluation support and need guidance on engaging an external consultant or evaluation firm.
- You are unsure what type of evaluation support you need and want to clarify your organization's readiness, scope, and priorities before reaching out.
- You are preparing to hire a consultant and want to ensure you are setting up the engagement and defining the scope to manage the work effectively.



ABOUT BSRI

BSRI was created to support informed and effective decision-making for our partners with tools, resources, and data for action. As we wind down operations, we are creating these resources for the community to continue the work. We use our guiding principles in engaging with partners and communities, putting people first through accountability and reciprocity, communicating transparently, and sharing our knowledge widely.

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

BSRI developed this guidance based on our experience supporting partners in navigating evaluation needs, building internal capacity, and engaging external consultants. We know that bringing in outside support can be rewarding and challenging. Success requires clarity, coordination, and thoughtful planning. This document is designed to help organizations approach that process with confidence by offering practical considerations, lessons learned, and clear steps to support strong, effective partnerships.

USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

Our organization utilizes artificial intelligence (AI) tools to enhance efficiency, support data analysis, and strengthen evaluation practices. We also encourage our partners and clients to thoughtfully explore AI as a means to build future-ready evaluation capacity.All AI use is governed by strict data privacy and ethical standards. We do not input any personally identifiable information (PII), protected health information (PHI), or other sensitive data into AI systems in a manner that would violate HIPAA or other applicable privacy regulations.

Additionally, we exclusively use licensed AI tools and platforms that explicitly prohibit the use of submitted data for model training or retention beyond the scope of the intended task. This ensures that all information remains confidential, secure, and protected.

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

Outsourcing evaluation work to independent consultants allows organizations to engage specialized expertise for targeted needs while maintaining flexibility and cost control. This approach enables tailored scopes of work and the ability to scale support up or down over time as needs shift. However, this model requires strong internal coordination, clear role definition, and consistent oversight to ensure quality and alignment between organizational needs and values, and consultant skills and vision.

Benefits	Considerations
‣ Lower hourly costs compared to full-time staff or full-service firms ‣ Access to specialized, topic-specific expertise ‣ Flexibility to scale work or end contracts as needed ‣ Custom scopes of work aligned to discrete projects or deliverables ‣ Greater control over priorities, timelines, and engagement structure ‣ Ability to "build a team" of consultants with complementary skills	‣ Requires strong internal clarity on goals, roles, and deliverables ‣ Increased coordination and project management burden ‣ Potential for inconsistency across consultants if not well managed ‣ Greater responsibility on the organization for integration and quality control

Organizational Self-Assessment

Before pursuing this model, organizations should assess whether they have the internal infrastructure to support it. The following checklist can serve as a green light to move ahead.

We have...

- A clear internal point of contact to manage consultants
- Capacity to coordinate multiple workstreams
- Systems for tracking deliverables, timelines, and communication
- Ability to synthesize and integrate outputs across consultants
- Internal team clarity on how consultants will be integrated and complementary
- Guidance on independent contractor vs. employee classification, including maintaining appropriate boundaries (e.g., autonomy over work, schedule, tools) to mitigate misclassification risk

If you can answer "yes" to the checklist above, the following steps can help support your organization in a strong consultant model.

1. Clarify your organization's evaluation needs

Define the type of support needed and engage your broader team to clarify the challenges/problems at hand. This will give you more insight into whether you need broad evaluation support or highly specific tasks (e.g., data analysis, survey design, reporting). Understanding workflows and where bottlenecks or skill gaps exist will also provide information about the scope of consultant work (e.g., whether plug-in support vs. full project ownership is needed).

Pro Tip
Be explicit about what success looks like before engaging anyone.

2. Establish the budget

Determine the funding source for the scope of services and whether the funding is project-specific or ongoing. If funding is short-term or limited, you may consider one of the following:

- Engaging a higher-skilled consultant for fewer hours
- Training someone from your organization to do what is needed
- Breaking the scope into smaller parts or deliverables that can be done piecemeal

Once you have your internal budget in mind, do your own research on consultant rates through asking your network and through internet searches. Your organization's reputation is at stake any time you hire a consultant, so you will want to ensure equitable, fair compensation aligned with expertise, scope, and lived experience. Cost savings should never come at the expense of quality or fairness.

3. Identify and vet consultants

Evaluation skill sets are broad and encompass a wide range of fields and expertise (e.g., federal grant experience, statistical analysis, data infrastructure). If you have clarity on the scope (step 1) and the budget (step 2), you can begin searching for the individual(s) most likely to fulfill these needs. Some websites, such as the American Evaluation Association, have evaluator directories by State. You can also put the word out through your social media/LinkedIn, or other professional networking sites. If these options do not seem realistic or you are not identifying any potential "fits", you may opt to issue a Request for Proposals or a Request for Qualifications that individuals or consultant groups can respond to. This is a time-consuming endeavor (drafting the RFP/RFQ, managing the submission process, reviewing and scoring the proposals), but it may be better at aggregating a larger number of potential candidates and may be required for some government funding.

Once you have selected an individual or a group of individuals as possible candidates, review past work samples and relevant experience to ascertain concrete skills. Check references and have conversations with former clients to gain a deeper understanding of their communication styles, values, and cultural fit with your organization. You will need to weigh the consultant's approach, values and community/working style against your own organization's needs and priorities. You may even need to train or "orient" the consultant to your approach to internal and external working relationships to seamlessly maintain psychologically safe environments for all staff.

Pro Tip

Prioritize consultants who can work collaboratively within a broader team.

4. Develop the scope of work

An explicit and clear scope of work is a necessary requirement for a successful consultant engagement. At a minimum, you should:

- Clearly define deliverables (report, presentation, portal submission)
- Clearly list the milestones (e.g., outline, report draft, final report) and timelines
- Establish the payment and tracking structure (e.g., hourly vs. fixed deliverables) and if hourly, how time will be tracked
- Set a regular check-in cadence (e.g., weekly or biweekly check-ins). It is often helpful to meet more frequently at the beginning of the engagement (e.g., biweekly) while trust is being built.

Ensure both parties have a shared understanding of scope, quality, and timelines before finalizing agreements. This may include explicit discussions about content ownership of deliverables and who has the "rights" to use deliverables.

Pro Tip
Be specific about editing/revision to deliverables and how this time will be billed/accounted for. Don't forget to consider the time spent in meetings as part of the scope hours.

5. Formalize onboarding

Once the scope of work is finalized, execute the formal contract. Keep in mind that the scope of work language is often separate from your organization's standard contract language, although there may be some overlap (e.g., confidentiality or data security). Contract clauses often include more legal specifications. Discuss these as needed with the consultant. Other onboarding tasks include:

- Provide access to relevant data, systems, and materials
- Clarify confidentiality requirements, including within the use of Artificial Intelligence and Large Language Models, if needed
- Set communication norms, protocols, pathways for bi-directional feedback, and response time expectations (e.g., email, text, office phone)
- Clarify decision-making structures within the organization as they relate to the consultant's work and tasks, including who has a "final approval"
- Establish a plan for addressing performance concerns or misalignment during the engagement. This should also translate to language included in the signed contract that allows your organization OR the consultant to discontinue services if expectations aer not being met.
- Introduce the consultant to the project team or any clients they will be working with. Use this time to convey organizational context and goals, and how the specific project or needs fit into the bigger picture.

6. Manage the work

Effectively managing a consultant requires some degree of project management infrastructure that supports both parties in tracking/documenting progress towards milestones as established in the scope of work, without feeling burdensome. Clear folder structures and shared document protocols support this, as do time-tracking systems, communication channels, and structures. Having a designated point person to oversee consultant progress through a project-based lens (e.g., not solely on time/budget) is essential, as regular reviews of outputs support quality control and provide feedback loops for ongoing course correction. Additionally, the use of AI tools (if allowed) and how ownership and attribution of AI-assisted work will be handled will also need to be overseen. If multiple consultants are working across a scope or scopes, a point of contact may also need to coordinate on a larger deliverable or milestone.

Contracting a consultant means saving money on payroll fees and any fringe benefits you may offer at your company. But this also means that paying them is no longer an automated process and requires manual review of hours and/or milestones, as well as issuing payment.

Pro Tip

We recommend paying your consultants on the same day as payroll for your full-time employees. This will prevent any potential delays or confusion down the line. Use an electronic payment platform (e.g., Zelle, Venmo, PayPal, etc.) that fits your organization's needs, and be aware that some may charge you or the consultant a fee for use. The platform also needs to provide a record of payments issued and any notes added.

7. Closeout and offboarding

Closing out an engagement with a consultant should ideally be congenial and leave both parties feeling like they accomplished a goal together. In general, the steps to close out include the final review and approval of deliverables, and final payment/invoice approval and processing. Additional considerations may include removing access to confidential documents or systems (e.g., SharePoint or Google Drive folders), documentation and training, and reiterating or clarifying whether work products created under the scope of work can be used as samples for the consultant in the future. Having a brief closeout conversation to capture lessons learned from the consultant and organizational team perspectives can also support your organization in future successful consulting engagements.

8. Re-engagement and continuity

Maintain relationships with high-performing consultants. Once trust is established, they can also refer individuals to your organization and can access their network for any additional needs you may have. Work with your staff to document lessons learned for future engagements, and consider clarity of scope, communication, skill fit, budget, time management, workflows, and other areas for improvement. Consider how future scopes or rates may differ based on what you learned. Re-engage consultants as new needs arise with these learnings in focus.

Final Considerations

Outsourcing to multiple consultants can be an effective and strategic approach when managed well. Success depends less on the consultants themselves and more on the organization's ability to:

- Clearly define needs
- Structure work effectively
- Coordinate across contributors
- Maintain consistent quality