



Working with Independent Museum Professionals

A guide to help museums find and work with IMPs

About the Authors

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1. Introduction

Independent museum professionals (IMPs)--aka consultants, freelancers, and contractors--have long provided a vital service to museums by offering their expert knowledge in a wide variety of specialties. This depth of experience greatly benefits museums; however, the process of selecting and working with an IMP can be intimidating. How do you find and recruit the right IMP for your project? What should the contract include? How should you determine a budget? What if the project doesn't go as expected? What makes for an effective, productive relationship between museum and contractor? This guide aims to demystify the process by providing museums with suggestions on good practice and useful tips for hiring and working with IMPs, from the initial inquiry to the post-project wrap-up.

This guide is a working document and we welcome questions, feedback and suggestions. Please reach out to the authors, MJ Hagan (mj@mjhcollections.com) or Avi Decter (avidecter@gmail.com).

2. Who is an Independent Museum Professional?

Museums frequently hire professionals who are not on staff to assist in research, planning, design, program development, and project management. These museum professionals may be independents or freelancers, or they may be employees or contractors working for a company or firm.

No one term is universally used to describe independent professionals who provide services to museums. In practice, terms like consultant, contractor, freelancer, and independent are used interchangeably by both individuals and institutions in the field. Moreover, many museum employees consult or contract outside their own institution on a part-time or freelance basis.

What distinguishes contractors, consultants, and others from museum staff is that they *are paid for each task that they are commissioned or contracted to complete*. In the U.S., the federal government's Internal Revenue Service makes a distinction between an employee and an independent contractor, as follows: "The general rule is that an individual is an independent contractor if the payer has the right to control or direct only the result of the work, not *what* will be done and *how* it will be done."¹ In other countries, similar agencies offer definitions of independent contracting.

Your museum might, for example, hire a subject-matter specialist for research, an illustrator or artist to produce commissioned works of art, an interpretive planner or experience designer to organize themes, or writers and editors to draft and edit exhibition labels, gallery guides, catalogues or other publications. Your museum has the right to set out the scope of work, budget, and schedule for the IMP you are contracting, but you cannot determine exactly how the work will be carried out nor what specific activities this will entail. These are the responsibility of the IMP, whether an individual or a firm.

¹ "Understanding Employee vs. Contractor Designations", IRS website, accessed January 31, 2020. <https://www.irs.gov/newsroom/understanding-employee-vs-contractor-designation>

3. What IMPs Do

In the museum economy specifically and in the cultural economy more generally, IMPs have been increasing in number and expanding their roles. Whether as individual consultants, as members of a team, or as employees of a firm, IMPs can undertake a huge variety of work with and for museums, for example:

Strategic Thinking and Long-Range Planning: Development of mission and vision statements, facilitation of strategic thinking, and drafting of long-range plans.

Leadership Development: Coaching for museum boards and executives, staff training and mentoring, and workshops for prospective leaders.

Collections Management: Registration and collections management for exhibitions, loans and the permanent collection, risk assessments, preventative conservation planning and implementation, condition reporting, digitization project planning, emergency response planning, and selection and development of databases.

Conservation: Assessments and condition reports, conservation plans, conservation work on archival materials, works of art, objects, historic structures, etc.

Marketing and Communications: Creating audience development plans, identifying marketing and communications strategies, and delivering marketing campaigns.

Exhibition Planning and Development: Research, interpretive planning, content development, graphic and exhibition design, media production, exhibition fabrication and installation, art handling and preparator services, registration services, label writing and editing.

Resource Development: Planning and development of capital and endowment campaigns, prospect research, coaching for solicitors, membership campaigns and grant proposals.

Project Management: Leadership for specific projects such as exhibitions, collection moves, building renovations and expansions, website development, digitization projects, etc.

Research and Evaluation: Content research and interviewing for programs, exhibitions, curricula, and publications; visitor studies and research on non-users; and evaluation of visitor engagement and experiences.

Writing and Editing: Drafting and editing marketing materials, exhibition scripts, curricula, publications, website content, and reports.

Program Development: Creation of interpretive plans, development of public programs and special events, digital programs, school programs and educational activities.

Arts Projects: Creative workshops and activities; illustration, photography, and original artwork; live performance and video programs.

Equity Issues: Development of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) policies, wage studies and standards, hiring practices and contracting procedures, grievance processes, mediation and arbitration.

4. Benefits of Working with IMPs

- IMPs offer **flexibility**, allowing you to bring in an additional resource and expertise when and where it is needed, often at short notice.
- IMPs can provide a particular **expertise, experience or skill set** that you, your department or your organization lacks.
- IMPs can provide **supplemental help** to complete work on tight deadlines.
- IMPs can have a diverse set of experience that allows them to **bring ideas and lessons learned on other projects** to your museum.
- IMPs are often **entrepreneurial, resilient and creative thinkers**, with a range of skills honed by taking responsibility for all aspects of their businesses.
- IMPs bring an **independent perspective** from someone outside the organization.
- IMPs can provide **innovative thinking**, a fresh pair of eyes and a new take or different approach.

5. A Note on Ethical Contracting

Many of the same ethical considerations that apply to employees also apply to IMPs. However, IMPs are not employees and it is helpful to keep in mind the unique challenges facing contract workers in the 'gig economy' and consider your ethical responsibilities.

Considerations for ethical contracting include ensuring that contract opportunities:

- Follow federal, state, and local labor guidelines
- Provide fair and equal pay for equal work
- Promote diversity, equity, inclusion, and access (DEIA)
- Employ a fair and transparent procurement process
- Are appropriate for an IMP (as distinct from an employee)
- Do not request or require an IMP to complete work for free
- Treat IMPs with dignity and respect at all times

Following the suggested practices in this guide is a great way to start practicing ethical contracting. Each section outlines the responsibilities of the museum and the IMP, as well as any ethical issues that should be kept in mind.

A Special Consideration

Contract work is increasingly an entry point to the museum profession for emerging professionals and recent graduates. A lack of understanding regarding fair rates of pay for contract work, particularly for contracts aimed at emerging professionals, often results in rates that do not provide a living wage after deducting the contractor's expenses, taxes, and benefits. By understanding what a fair rate of pay is for contract work, you and your museum can provide ethical and fair opportunities for all workers.

6. Independent, Firm, or Team?

Before you commission or contract work, consider whether the task is suitable for a freelance individual, a team of professionals, or a firm (e.g., a design office or website development company), or whether you are happy to open it up to any bidders.

Advantages of IMPs

- They will be a consistent point of contact for you
- What you see is what you get – the person pitching to you will also deliver the work
- They work for themselves, so are likely to be very motivated about delivering and providing excellent results, since their reputation and your referrals are critical to them
- They are likely to have lower overheads than agencies and may have lower rates

Advantages of Companies or Firms

- They will have a team of people who can contribute a range of ideas in their work for you (just make sure you establish *who* will be delivering the work)
- They may have access to tools and resources that IMPs do not
- They should also be able to ensure responsiveness, even when key staff are ill or on leave.

Consider the scale and scope of your project, what it is you need and what aspects are most important to you. Make sure that you ask questions in the procurement process to ease any concerns you may have (e.g., how will any upcoming holidays affect your schedule, who exactly will work on your project?).

Many IMPs have networks of other freelancers they work with and can put together **teams of professionals** to work together on projects. This can give them the same scale and breadth as a company or firm. If this is something you are open to, make this clear in your initial request for qualifications, bids, or proposals.

Advantages of Professional Teams:

- The team represents skills tailored to your project's needs
- You will get the benefit of a range of expertise and input
- There won't be the overhead costs of a conventional company

But make sure you consider and establish:

- Who will sign the contract and be responsible for completion of the work
- Who will be the point of contact and project manager
- What roles will each team member play
- What insurance coverages will team members maintain
- How the team will be paid. Will the team leader invoice for all or will each team member invoice individually

Regardless of which form of agreement, commission, or contract you choose for a given project, it is your responsibility to select and engage IMPs on a fair and equitable basis, without discrimination. It is also your responsibility to pay appropriate wages for any work you contract and to pay those commissioned or contracted in full and on time.

7. Finding an IMP

There is no single comprehensive listing of IMPs in the United States so you will need to explore several avenues, depending on the type of work, in order to reach as many IMPs as possible, and to increase the quantity and diversity of IMPs who can apply.

Advertise on Job Boards, Newsletters, and Listservs

In addition to national and regional museum organizations, many specialties within the museum field have their own job boards, listservs, and networks. University job boards and alumni networks can also be an excellent resource. For example, collections management, registration and preservation opportunities can be shared on the CSAAM listserv² which reaches thousands of professionals in the collections management fields.

Conduct Online Searches

It can also be worth using keywords to find IMPs in search engines and/or on LinkedIn. Look at the individuals' profiles to see if their experience might be a match, and contact them to see if they would like to respond.

Consult Directories

There are several sites that list IMPs and agencies which you can search through, but be aware that they are not exhaustive and those listed have often paid to be included:

- [On Contract](#), Association of Registrars and Collections Specialists (ARCS)
- [Find a Conservator](#), American Institute for Conservation (AIC)
- [Museum Marketplace](#), American Alliance of Museums (AAM)
- [MuseumExperts](#), MuseumExperts.org
- [NEMA Marketplace](#), New England Museum Association (NEMA)
- [Consultant Registry](#), Greater Hudson Heritage Network
- [Consultant Directory](#), National Council on Public History
- [Museum Consultants](#), Texas Historical Commission
- [Directory of Archival Consultants](#), Society of American Archivists (SAA)

Seek Recommendations

Ask other museums, regional museum associations, or IMPs you already know if they can recommend anyone who does the type of work you seek.

Use Procurement Portals

Museums managed by federal and state agencies or universities may have to--or can choose to--use an online procurement portal. While these help to provide a framework and may be useful for large and complex projects, many IMPs are put off by them due to the often onerous paperwork and administration requirements. If allowed by your agency, consider also advertising the opportunity through the networks mentioned above to reach a wider audience.

² <https://www.collectionsstewardship.org/listserv>. Accessed February 28, 2020.

8. Recruiting an IMP

The notes that follow are intended to call out key steps and considerations for museums preparing to contract for professional work. Much of what follows is informed by two articles: Barbara Punt, "To RFP or Not to RFP"³ and David Whitemyer, "Writing Better RFPs."⁴ An entire issue of *Exhibition* magazine was devoted to advertising and contracting for professional services and includes many sample forms and checklists.⁵

The most important point to remember is that recruiting for services is only the beginning of a relationship between a museum and its contractors. For that relationship to be smooth, productive, and enjoyable, it should be open, transparent, considered, and equitable from the start.

What to Look For

Think about what you really need, what skills or experience are *critical* and what may be *beneficial* but not essential. In some cases, relevant experience will be key, for example with regards to complex or technical projects. However, in other instances creative thinking and/or a positive can-do attitude and compatibility with the client may be equally or more important. You may feel that knowledge of and contacts within the local community will be critical and there would be a lot of on the ground work (i.e., someone local would be advisable). In other instances, geographic proximity may not be a deciding factor, and actually someone else may have valuable experience from delivering very similar projects elsewhere in the country.

A Good IMP Will:

- Listen to you, as well as provide input
- Add demonstrable value to your organization
- Provide a service tailored to you, rather than a standard one-size-fits-all approach
- Strike the right balance between being part of your team and being an impartial outsider
- Be a trusted partner, considerate to sensitive and confidential information
- Take a weight off your mind, ease your workload and/or pressure
- Provide deliverables on time, providing that you also meet your commitments
- Ultimately, provide a service of such quality that you would be happy and confident to recommend them to others

³ *Exhibition*, Spring 2019, 69-75 (<https://www.name-aam.org/exhibitionspring2019>)

⁴ Luci Creative Guide No. 20 (<https://lucicreative.com/writing-better-rfps-6-questions-potential-bidders-will-ask-about-your-project/>)

⁵ See *Exhibition* Spring 2007 (The RFP Issue) at https://www.name-aam.org/exhibition_spring2007.

9. Ways to Recruit IMPs

There are a number of distinct approaches that museums can (and do) employ in recruiting contractors. Some are informal, others are highly structured. Before beginning the recruitment process, you will want to consider if you are required to use a particular procurement process (such as Request for Proposal (RFP), are struggling with an especially tight deadline, need flexibility in your decision-making, or already have an internal consensus on which individual or firm to hire.

Please bear in mind that IMPs may spend several hours or days on developing proposals and responses to briefs. **If you have already identified someone you wish to work with and do not intend to consider others seriously for the role, please do not ask IMPs to apply for the work, as it is unfair to ask them to waste their (unpaid) time.**

Informal, Flexible Ways to Recruit

Less formal approaches take less time, less preparation, and impose fewer demands on prospective bidders. Here are a number of possible approaches to consider:

Do a Trial Run

Invite one or more prospective contractors to conduct a small-scale project to find out what it is like to work together. This can be a stand-alone event like a charrette, workshop or planning exercise, that leads into the larger project you have in mind. Please note that a fee should be budgeted so you are not asking individuals and firms to work for free.

Focus on Pre-Qualified Bidders

By doing some research and consulting with colleagues, you can quickly develop a short list of qualified IMPs that have done work comparable to what you have in mind. Focusing on a small number of pre-selected bidders can save time, rather than looking at a large pool of applicants.

Issue a Request for Qualifications (RFQ)

Putting out an RFQ offers your museum a way to advertise the capabilities you're seeking without spending a lot of time and effort. Conversely, if you keep your RFQ simple (information about the bidder, the skills they bring to the project, and a short list of comparable projects), you are likely to receive relevant information from a substantial number of prospective bidders. The RFQ process may well help your museum to short-cut a longer and more formal process; at the very least, it may help you to focus on a small pool of qualified applicants. But please note: asking for qualifications should not be used as a way to disadvantage underrepresented consultants and contractors in violation of diversity, equity, and inclusion policies.

Formal, Structured Ways to Recruit

For many museums, formal, structured processes are appropriate. Projects funded by government agencies or foundations may come with specific requirements governing bidding. Some museums have formal policies in place to ensure transparency and equity in bidding. And projects that are very large in scale or especially complicated may require a comparably complex bidding process. There are two common approaches:

Issue a Bid Sheet or Request for Quote

If your museum has done a thorough job of preparing for an exhibition, media presentation, publication, program, or event, and the only remaining question is what it will cost to get the project done, you may prefer to send out a bid sheet (also known as a price sheet or Request for Quote) to a select list of qualified bidders. The bid sheet you send out should be the same to all prospective bidders, to ensure clear comparisons, and it should include all the essential components of the project so that you do not incur extra charges or pay for change orders later on.

Issue a Request for Proposal

In some cases, your museum will be required to issue a competitive Request for Proposal (RFP) in order to ensure equity, transparency, and accountability in the award and administration of a contract. While an RFP process entails relatively high costs in terms of staff (and contractor) time, the process of creating it can help your museum to establish a budget, scope of work, and schedule, and to reach an informed decision in a systematic, structured way. By providing a level playing field, your RFP evidences your commitment to transparency and fairness.

An effective RFP will include:

- Scope of work
- Project schedule
- Project budget
- Point of contact
- Deliverables
- Sample contract
- Criteria for evaluation
- Mandatory contractor qualifications
- Questions to answer or specific elements to be addressed in the bid

Some IMPs will be happy to work with you to help shape and develop an RFP or RFQ and their help identifying what support you need can be very beneficial. However, any expectations around this needs to be clear: the IMP needs to know upfront whether the RFP will then be circulated widely and you need to compensate the IMP for their time. This can be a very worthwhile investment as you should end up with a better RFP. If your project is big, technical, or about something in which your museum has less experience, you should consider paying an IMP to help you with the entire RFP process, including writing the RFP, creating a shortlist of candidates or conducting interviews. It is also important to note that in some cases, an IMP who participates in writing an RFP may then be ineligible to bid for the work.

Generally, you should narrow the field of bidders to between four and six; a pool of bidders greater than six will often discourage prospective contractors from investing time and money in preparing a detailed proposal in a wide-open competition. You may also elect to share with bidders the names of all those competing for a contract. And under all circumstances, your museum should allow sufficient time (usually a month or even more) for prospective contractors to respond to your museum's RFP.

The following chart suggests some typical parameters:

Sample schedule for recruitment of IMPs	
RFQ/RFP or bid sheet available	Minimum 3 weeks before submission deadline, ideally 4-6 weeks before
Deadline for questions	Minimum 2 weeks before submission deadline (if you plan to send out answers to all who have registered, if not, allow questions up to the deadline)
Submission deadline	Date X minus 2-6 weeks, depending on if you are running interviews or not
Notification of interviews if conducting	ASAP – preferably 2 or more weeks before interviews
Interviews conducted if applicable	Date X minus 2-4 weeks
References contacted if applicable	Date X minus 2-3 weeks
Successful candidate notified	Date X minus 1-2 weeks
Unsuccessful candidates notified	Date X minus 1-2 weeks
Contract and terms to be agreed and signed	Date X minus 1 week
Work to commence	Date X

Additional Suggestions for Your Recruitment Process

The recruitment processes described above entail a mutual assessment: while your museum is evaluating prospective contractors, they are evaluating you. As Barbara Punt advises, the "selection process is fraught with anxiety on both sides of the table. Did I hire the right firm? (*Was I right in accepting this contract?*) Did I get a good rate? (*Did I charge enough in fees to cover the unpredictable?*) Is this firm a good fit? (*Will they be a good client?*)"

Effective collaboration requires trust in the working relationship. Your process of recruitment needs to be thoughtful, equitable, and transparent from start to finish. Here are some specific tips from David Whitemyer and Barbara Punt:

- Organize a recruitment process that is fair and transparent and is **appropriate for the size and scope of the project** (e.g., a very cumbersome RFP process and set of interviews for a one-day role is unlikely to be worth an IMP's investment in time – or that of your organization either).
- When sending out an RFQ, RFP, or bid sheet, you should **provide an opportunity for prospective bidders to submit written questions** and for your museum to respond in writing to all firms. This will ensure that all responses will be based on the same information and comply with all the submittal requirements.

- **Be very clear about your project schedule**, especially the kick-off and completion dates. Large, complicated projects with short timelines are likely to be expensive; even simple projects with lengthy timelines are probably going to be expensive also, since a long schedule invites second-guesses and changes.
- **Be specific** about what is to be delivered in each phase of work, including specifics on required meetings, number of copies of the work product, etc.
- **Tell your prospective bidders who the stakeholders in the project are** - who is on the internal (staff) project team, who are the decision-makers, and who else will be involved in the process (e.g., community leaders, government officials, donors, educators, et al.) and what kinds of collaboration you expect.
- Be fair in what you ask. It is fine to ask about who will do the work, how they manage their projects, and how they will approach the work at hand. However, **refrain from asking a prospective bidder to provide solutions for which you have not paid.**
- **Be realistic in setting a response time.** Sending out an RFQ, RFP, or bid sheet without reasonable time for a considered response will suggest that you are likely to be a difficult client. This will discourage some highly qualified bidders. Instead, set a schedule that is reasonable.
- **Notify successful and unsuccessful applicants as soon as possible**, since whether or not they work with you will affect how much time they have for other work (or how much work they need to find).

Whether to Specify a Budget or Not

Specifying a Budget

It is generally best to specify a budget or provide at least a ballpark budget or a budget range up front so that you get appropriate responses that are feasible for the project, and less time is wasted. You might otherwise find that all bidders quote above your budget and you have to start again, or that you don't get as many IMPs applying.

- **Advantages:** You will get responses that are relevant and appropriate to your budget and project, and you can see how each applicant would break down the budget. It can also help you see the difference between the applicants more clearly as they are competing based on value and/or quality or service rather than price.
- **Disadvantage:** Price will not be a criterion, because all responses will be similar in price.

Whether you set a budget ceiling or provide a range, be sure to ask candidates to break down how they propose to use this budget. For example: What can they deliver for this, and how? How many days work at what day rate would this equate to? What would each phase of the project cost? What expenses would be incurred?

Ask IMPs to Price the Project

Ask candidates to propose a budget for undertaking the work you have requested. Only do this if you have a very clear scope of work, deliverables and expectations, so that IMPs have a good understanding of exactly what the work would entail and can price accordingly.

- **Advantages:** You are more likely to have a range of price points in the applications to choose from. The budgets should reflect what the IMPs feel the project would cost.
- **Disadvantages:** Some proposals may be higher than your actual or feasible budget, which wastes time (yours and the IMP's); and unless the brief and deliverables are very clear, IMPs may interpret these differently, so it may be harder to compare applicants.

Setting a Budget

If you are unsure of what sort of budget to allocate, consider contacting a few IMPs and asking for their advice – many will be happy to give you a ballpark idea for a particular project, not as a formal quote, but to give you a realistic idea for you to use for your RFP. Just be upfront about your intentions should you be planning on going out to a competitive bidding process. Make sure this is permissible within any procurement rules that you are bound by.

You can also contact other organizations that have run similar projects to ask them about their costs, which will help inform your budget. Checking with professional networks and listservs may also be helpful in establishing benchmark rates.

10. Contracting an IMP

Contracts

It is important that you and your contractor agree and sign a contract that sets out the scope of work, the deliverables, payment terms, and process for what to do in the event that something goes wrong.

If you need an IMP to complete supplier forms or your museum has to create a purchase order, arrange for this as soon as possible so it does not delay the start of the work or payment.

The contract can be supplied by either the client or the IMP. The content of the contract will be specific to each museum and contractor, but might contain:

- Introduction and background
- The start and end date of the contract
- A clear statement that the contractor is self-employed and fully responsible for their own taxes and benefits
- The name of the day-to-day contacts on each side
- The main outputs and deliverables for the work and a timeline for their delivery if applicable
- Fees and expenses to be paid
- Invoice procedure and schedule of payments
- Reporting, monitoring and evaluation
- Confidentiality, intellectual property rights, data protection, publicity rights

- Indemnities, insurance minimum requirements, and workers compensation
- Conflicts of interest
- Subcontracting work (you may wish to specify that the IMP may not subcontract work unless agreed to by you)
- Details of what to do if the contract needs to be amended
- Termination of the contract (circumstances when this may happen and rights for either side if it does)
- Dispute resolution (what the process is should a dispute occur)

You can find examples of contracts online as a starting point, but it is prudent to seek professional legal advice in preparing a contract or other form of agreement.

Three Special Considerations

Among the many matters your museum will need to consider in preparing or negotiating a contract are three special considerations:

Insurance

Consider what types and levels of insurance you require. Up to \$1 million is quite common for IMPs to have for public liability and for professional indemnity insurance. Only ask for insurance that is actually needed and only ask for insurance levels that are appropriate or proportionate to the work.

A good idea would be to make clear the insurance levels you need during recruitment and specify that the successful IMP could modify their coverage if needed after being selected, rather than expecting all applying IMPs to have higher levels of coverage at the application stage. The insurance should be in place before the contract is signed however, and it is good practice to request a certificate of insurance naming the museum as an additional insured to ensure the IMP has the agreed upon levels of coverage. You may, however, waive an insurance requirement depending on the type of work contracted.

Cybersecurity and Data Protection

Consider what sort of Personal Identifiable Information (PII) protection you require of IMPs you work with, depending on what sort of personal data (if any) they will be accessing, processing or storing, as part of the project. Naomi Korn, principal of Naomi Korn Associates (a management consultancy specializing in copyright, licensing, and data protection), recommends that museums should consider and check:

- How, why, and where IMPs store personal data
- How IMPs would seek consent (where relevant) for personal data collection, processing, and storage
- Whether IMPs encrypt their computers and mobile devices
- How long IMPs keep personal data
- What IMPs would do in the event of a data breach containing personal data, particularly in terms of notifying the museum within 24 hours

This is likely to be of particular importance for some IMPs, such as those involved in audience research, development activities, collections management/registration, and event bookings.

Ownership of Copyrights

State clearly in the contract who retains ownership of the copyright for any materials produced. There are two common options:

Work for Hire

Copyright for all materials created for the contract are retained by the Client. In some cases, such as work for federal clients, it may be required that contributions are considered work for hire. Many states also consider work completed by a contractor to be work for hire.

With the client's permission, it is possible for the IMP to retain non-exclusive rights to use work for hire for promotional and/or training purposes as long as they credit the client or project.

Non-exclusive License

Copyright for all materials created by the contractor for the purpose of the contract are retained by the contractor. The Client is granted a non-exclusive license, either in perpetuity or for an agreed term, allowing them to use, repurpose, and edit the contributions without restrictions.

This option is mutually beneficial to both the contractor and the client. The contractor may continue to use standard materials they have developed and the client is able to use the materials for any purpose.

In either scenario, it is best practice to credit the creator of the work, the IMP, whenever possible.

Whenever possible, be generous in allowing an IMP to use materials and images of the project for their online portfolio, marketing, and social media. These are essential tools for an IMP to advertise their skills and prior experience to clients.

11. Working with an IMP

Starting the project

At the start of a project, make sure you agree upon realistic expectations, schedule, roles, and responsibilities. On complex and lengthy projects, it is especially important to establish clear methods of communication and feedback to monitor progress as you go along.

Most projects will need some input from you, even if they are outsourced. Ensure you allocate time within your organization to support the project. You will get the best out of an IMP if you are available for questions and responsive with feedback. Asking a contractor to do the job doesn't mean that the museum can avoid spending time reviewing work products and managing the contract.

During the Project

Both parties should invest some time in developing their relationship, understanding how the other works, and building mutual trust. Remember that you are both working towards the same goals. In effect, treat IMPs as valued employees rather than disposable resources.

Communicate clearly, promptly and honestly. Consider tools for sharing documents (if organizational rules allow), for example:

- DropBox for sharing files with each other
- WeTransfer for sending large files to each other
- Trello or Slack for project management
- Google products like Drive and Sheets to allow you to access, edit, and save files.
- Microsoft Online and Microsoft Teams

On bigger and longer projects, weekly or monthly meetings can be a good idea (in person or by phone / video call), or you may want to ask the consultant to send monthly or bi-weekly progress reports.

Avoid Scope Creep

Scope creep occurs when your requirements for the work expand, without a corresponding increase in the budget. When things do change (e.g., public consultation indicates that a planned course of action is not appropriate and should be changed), be upfront and clear with the contractor and discuss the best way forward. For example:

- Can the project timetable be pushed back to accommodate this?
- Can some of the initial work be dropped or deferred to accommodate the new work?
- Can you increase the budget to pay the contractor for the additional work?

Give the IMP as much notice of change as possible. It is common for IMPs to turn work away as their calendar shows they are fully booked certain weeks or months. If sizeable amounts of contracted work get pushed back, contractors will lose out on income from the work they turned away but could have taken on, and may now need to turn away additional work in order to accommodate the slippage in timing.

After the Project

It's useful to have some kind of 'wrap-up' discussion after a project, whether it's a formal meeting, or simply a quick phone conversation for both sides to provide feedback to each other. A simple thank you to the contractor for their contributions also means a lot!

Some IMPs will ask for a testimonial they can use in their marketing and/or a reference for their future proposals. The IMP may also want to reference their work product as part of their professional portfolio. If you are satisfied with their work, then agreeing to these is of real value to independent contractors.

If Issues Occur

Total breakdowns in relationships with IMPs are not that common, but when they do occur, it is often due to a lack of clear and agreed upon objectives between the client and the contractor. This usually happens near project completion, when the contractor has in all likelihood used up their allocated time on the project, but you, as the client, feel some elements are not complete or adequate.

To minimize the risk of this happening, ensure that the scope of work and deliverables, objectives, schedules, and expectations are clear and that you pay promptly as agreed. Neither side should make assumptions about the other side's knowledge or approach, and, if in doubt, be sure to clarify. For larger projects, it can also be useful to sit down together and identify potential risks in the project and ways to avoid them.

12. Paying an IMP

Remember that when hiring an IMP, you are paying for a service, not a commodity, so price should only be one of several factors that influence your decision about whom to hire. Consider value for money: does someone charging you a higher rate offer you additional value, and are you prepared to pay for that?

You might also want to include a contingency budget which could be set aside for work that is not initially identified within the earmarked budget, but that might emerge as important as the project progresses.

If you have a very small budget, consider asking an IMP how you can make the most of this. For example, the budget may not be enough for an IMP to deliver your project fully, but perhaps they could deliver training to your staff and/or volunteers so that they in turn could then deliver the project (maybe with some ongoing mentoring from the IMP). Regardless, the IMP should always be paid for their contribution.

IMP Rates

The prices that IMPs charge can vary enormously, and may depend on a range of factors such as experience, value provided, locality, costs associated with the project (equipment, travel expenses, materials and so on), the 'going rate,' competition and demand for services, the length of the project, the complexity of the project and the project risk.

In general, regardless of whether an IMP employs an hourly rate, a day rate, or a flat fee, an IMP *should* be paid more than an employee. **It is neither fair nor appropriate to take a comparable employee's annual salary and split it by the number of working days to give you an indication of an IMP's day rate**, as this does not take into account:

- The additional costs that IMPs incur (e.g., business insurance, self-employment taxes, retirement contributions, professional services such as accounting, IT equipment, subscription services and tools, office space, training, marketing)
- That IMPs cannot spend every working day on billable work as they need to spend time on new business development, marketing, accounting, training and self-development, office administration, etc
- That IMPs do not have any paid annual leave or paid sick leave

When reviewing IMP rates, it can be helpful to keep all these expenses and factors in mind. After expenses, taxes, and benefits, the 'take home' pay of an IMP is considerably less than their rate. When negotiating rates with an IMP you should be respectful of their right to determine the value of their own labor.

Payment Schedules

Payment terms and schedules will depend on your museum's terms and preferences, the IMP's terms and preferences, and those of the project funder(s), where relevant.

On larger or longer projects, consider agreeing that the IMP will invoice in installments. This will minimize the risk for the IMP and help budgeting on both sides.

For example:

- 25% upon contract signing, 25% after milestone 1, 25% after milestone 2 and 25% on completion
- 50% upfront and 50% on completion
- Monthly, for the work undertaken each month, based on the hourly rate

Asking an IMP to invoice 100% on project completion will mean they have to wait to be paid for work they may have done several months previously, which (especially on larger projects) can cause serious cash-flow issues for an IMP. This is neither fair nor equitable. Whatever the agreed payment schedule, pay promptly in accordance with the payment terms agreed up front.

Never Ask an IMP to Work for Free

Expecting IMPs to work for free is not only discouraged, but also listed by many professional organizations as against their policies and would therefore subject potential clients to sanctions. Generally, asking for free work is unacceptable, whether it is:

- Expecting IMPs who submit proposals for work to have developed extensive plans before being appointed.
- Asking IMPs to work for free as there is no budget but saying it will be good for their portfolio.
- Asking IMPs to work for free but promising payment further down the line.
- Gradually expanding the scope of work once the IMP has been appointed, without a corresponding increase in budget (i.e., scope creep).

Museums frequently invite an IMP to perform work contingent on funding, e.g., to help with a grant proposal with a promise to hire the IMP if the grant is secured. But be aware of applicable professional guidelines that prohibit practitioners from working for free.

Many IMPs are passionate about museums and may consider taking on some work in a *pro bono* capacity – for example, to give something back to the sector or their community, to broaden their experience, or as part of their professional development. They might advise on a grant application, become a trustee, or run a social media account for example. This is at the discretion of the IMP and expectations on each side should always be clear from the outset.

13. In Conclusion

IMPs have long been key players in the museum field. Learning how best to recruit and work with independents will, therefore, be a needed and valued skill in museums, large and small.

Partnering with consultants and other contractors requires close attention and special care. The keys to an effective relationship are mutual respect and trust. From initial inquiry to completed project, both IMPs and your museum will benefit from an open, transparent, and equitable relationship. While there is no formula to accomplish this, here are some key practices that will enhance the museum-IMP relationship:

- Make sure the proposed work is appropriate for an IMP (as distinct from an employee)
- Develop a clear, concrete scope of work with specific objectives and deliverables

- Employ a transparent, equitable procurement process
- Have a clear process for communication, feedback, and sign-offs
- Allocate sufficient and appropriate budget and other resources
- Plan for realistic schedules and deadlines
- Be prepared to invest your time in the project and the relationship
- Treat your contractors with consideration and respect at all times

Your museum's close attention to establishing a fair, harmonious relationship will go a long way toward ensuring the success of your project and your satisfaction in working with independent professionals.

Review and Approval

This document was reviewed and approved by the steering committee of the American Association of Museums' Independent Museum Professionals Network and the board of directors of the Association of Registrars and Collections Specialists in March of 2021.

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