



Should you hire an outside partner to support your archives projects?

Hiring an archives consultant for a project is not always an easy choice. But understanding the benefits and risks can help you weigh the options and present a business case to proceed, thus accomplishing your work and serving your constituents.

As archives consultants, we are frequently asked why an organization should partner with an archives service provider. Our years of experience have demonstrated the pros and cons of such a partnership, and we've learned what works best directly from our clients. Of course there are risks as well. Let's explore the benefits and risks of partnering to accomplish archival projects.

BENEFITS

Specialized help

When you have specific projects that are not routine to your staff, bringing on an outside contractor is often the best solution. Consultants who are well versed in the project at hand can help you make better decisions and save you the time and effort of trying to learn from scratch. For example, if you need to find a new archives management system, you want to get it right the first time, even if you've never done a software selection project before.

Third-party confirmation

Many of our clients are applying for grant funding or need to make a business case to senior management for a particular need. An impartial third-party expert can provide an unbiased assessment of that need. This is particularly helpful when you need to confirm the current state of a collection, or need an honest assessment of a current program.

Flexible staffing

You might just need extra help to complete a project. Many of our clients need help tackling a backlog of unprocessed collections. An outside partner in the industry can quickly assemble the qualified team necessary to get a project completed. This alleviates the burden on you to hire, train, and retain staff when the workload ebbs and flows.

"The advice, expertise, and workflow that History Associates staff provided has enabled us to more confidently process born digital materials according to developing best practices. As a result of their work we are now in a much better position going forward to manage our digital holdings."

Marc Levitt, Former Director of Archives, Robert C. Byrd Center for Legislative Studies

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Cost savings

Depending on the need, you can make a very compelling business case for bringing in an outside partner – even if the task at hand is something your in-house team could handle. Consultants require very little ramp-up time and they won't be on your payroll. Often, when you calculate the “opportunity cost” of diverting your own staff to a project, it works out to be more efficient and less expensive to partner.

POTENTIAL RISKS

Unrealized outcomes

Before you hire an outside partner, it is essential that all your internal stakeholders have a clear understanding, agree on what is needed, and what an ideal outcome will be. Have a formalized Scope of Work on hand that confirms the objectives of the engagement and what a successful outcome looks like, including timeframes, benchmarks, and specific metrics for measuring success. A clear road map will help you avoid getting mired in conflicting directions or derailed by changes in scope.

Lack of oversight

One advantage of bringing in subject matter experts is that they can operate independently and won't require day-to-day management. The flip side of this is that they do need to be managed like any other resource. Require status reports and keep track of their progress. This ensures that you are both in alignment on what needs to happen and when, preventing misunderstandings that could lead to slipped deadlines and cost overruns.

Internal resistance

To be successful, your team and the outside partner need to be able to work together. At HAI we prefer to work collaboratively with members of your team. However, there is always a risk of personality clashes that can have an impact on productivity. Bringing in an outsider can sometimes feel like a threat to existing staff members, who might push back on the expert's recommendations. These risks can be addressed by selecting a trusted consultant and by building in a risk mitigation plan as part of your scope of work.

Still need help? If you need to make a business case to hire a consultant or if you need help to develop a project plan that will deliver the results you need, we would be happy to talk through it with you. Please do contact us if there's any way we can help!

CONTACT US

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“The Vitter collection arrived at Tulane fully processed and described. Without the help of History Associates, it might have taken years – rather than weeks – to make these papers available to the public.”

Leon Miller, head of the Louisiana Research Collection (LaRC) at Tulane University