

Generalist or Specialist

Which do I consult?

Fred Nickols

© Fred Nickols 2003
All rights reserved



www.nickols.us
fred@nickols.us

This is an edited, updated version of a brief article that originally appeared in the October 1981 issue of the *NSPI Journal*.

Integration, Not Addition

It is not the case that a consultant who is a generalist is simply someone who has mastered more than one specialty and practices each as occasion demands. Instead, a generalist is a person who has not only mastered but also integrated more than one specialty. A generalist's practice is an expanded one by virtue of synthesis or integration, not mere addition.

A consultant who has mastered more than one specialty, but who has not yet integrated them is a specialist still – a set of solutions instead of a single solution, but still in search of corresponding problems.

Generalists can be found within specialty fields and ranging across them. There are people, for example, who are generalists in the field of training, that is, they are capable of developing classroom instruction or programmed instruction, of developing media, of constructing tests, and of actually delivering the training. There are also people who specialize in each of these areas. And there are people who are capable in several areas of training and in other areas as well (e.g., organization development, management development, performance technology, and classic management consulting).

The Nature of A Generalist's Practice

If a generalist's practice is not simply the practice of more than one specialty, what is its nature?

The practice of a generalist is the practice of a general problem solver. The mastery and integration of more than one specialty yield a more generalized ability to solve problems. This means a generalist can take on problems that are ordinarily of larger scope, scale, and complexity than those addressed by specialists. This is not to say that specialists are not problem solvers, too, because they are. It is to say that the scope, scale, and complexity of the problems specialists attempt to solve are bounded by their specialties. If not, they are out of their field – and perhaps out of their league.

To integrate areas of specialization, the generalist must tamper with them. This is because the basic nature of a specialty is to set itself apart, literally, to be special. Tampering with specialties so as to integrate them is how a specialist becomes a generalist. But generalists are also members of at least one specialty area and, as such, generalists run the risk of castigation by their colleagues for deviation from accepted practice. This is because generalists continually seek to advance a practice or specialty area, not simply adhere to the current view of accepted practice. Generalists are looking for the ways in which things fit together – they have already mastered the various arts of taking them apart.

Generalists and specialists both seek out problems. Both also seek to solve them. A major difference between the two lies in the kinds of problems sought. A generalist will knowingly tackle problems that will or could involve specialties beyond those which the generalist has already mastered. A specialist who is content to remain a specialist will not.

The goal of a generalist is to solve the problem at hand, to engineer a fitting solution. The goal of the specialist is to find problems that fit the solutions at hand. (This is a fine distinction being drawn here but it is an exceedingly important one.)

Telling the One from the Other

How, then, does a prospective client distinguish a generalist from a specialist? Perhaps the simplest way is to ask prospective consultants to identify themselves as one or the other. A claim to be a specialist is easily verified. A claim to be a generalist requires a little more effort. You might have to inquire as to the specialties they have mastered and the conceptual framework used to integrate them. If the consultant is inclined to publish, you can survey the consultant's publications. By reviewing what the consultant has written, you can get a feel for the extent to which one or more specialties have been integrated. Examine the consultant's track record. The range of projects carried out and problems tackled will tell you a great deal about the breadth of the consultant's practice.

Picking the Right Kind

When considering a consultant for an engagement, here are a few generalist-specialist factors to consider.

- ***Do you want help in solving a problem or in implementing a solution?***

In the first case, you might want a generalist, although not necessarily.

In the second, you almost certainly want a specialist.

- ***Is your problem one that is known or thought to be solvable by the application of some particular specialty (e.g., training, reengineering or public relations)?***

If not, then you probably require the services of a good generalist.

If so, then you might use either a specialist or a generalist who is master of that particular specialty and who is willing to confine the effort to the application of that specialty. (It is difficult, however, to keep generalists out of related areas, so be certain they are willing to function as specialists – unless you're also willing to live with the expansion of the project.)

- ***Are your needs for control high or low?***

If they are high, you might want a generalist; they are better equipped to adapt their practice to your requirements.

If your needs for control are low, you might want a specialist; they are more inclined to ply their trade the way they see it.

In either case, you had better check the consultant's need for control because that varies among generalists and specialists alike. What you want, of course, is a good match between your need for control and the consultant's tolerance for it.

Summary

When considering the use of a consultant, it is important to know if you require the services of a generalist or a specialist. You might require both. Generalists are usually better at helping you define the problem. Specialists tend to frame the problem to fit their solutions. Either can be of help once the problem has been defined. Neither will be of much help if their need for control is at odds with yours. Choose your consultant with care, and give thought to the difference between a generalist and a specialist.

Contact the Author

Fred Nickols can be reached by e-mail at fred@nickols.us. Other articles of his can be found on his web site at: www.skullworks.com.