tsf
Technical Support Facility
Eastern and Southern Africa

Delivering Technical Support

A Guide for Consultants

Acknowledgements

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ABOUT US

The Technical Support Facility Eastern and Southern Africa (TSF ESA) works in close partnership with UNAIDS to improve access to timely, high-quality, short-term technical assistance (TA) for scaling up national HIV and AIDS responses. TSF ESA provides services to 21 countries in eastern and southern Africa. We provide comprehensive support for all aspects of HIV and AIDS responses at the country and regional levels.

The TSF ESA team developed this consultant guide based on years of successful experience providing and managing technical support. The guide is designed to be an easy-to-use skills-building reference or consulting-principles refresher for individuals engaged in short-term technical assistance, particularly in the public health sector. It is our sincere hope that you, as a consultant, will find this guide to be an informative and valuable resource when preparing and executing consulting assignments.

For more information about our services, how we work, professional development opportunities, and joining our reputable consultants' database, visit our website-www.tsfesa.org.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 PURPOSE AND USE OF THIS GUIDE

This guide is written for people who are already consultants or who would like to be consultants, who would like to improve their skills in providing technical support.

The guide provides information that can help consultants along each step of the consulting process, including how to:

- Interpret the proposed work's Terms of Reference (ToR)
- Evaluate whether to respond to a particular Call for Proposals
- Submit a successful bid
- Plan for and execute a consulting assignment effectively
- Manage and maintain a good relationship with the client and stakeholders
- Close and exit a consulting assignment

QUALITIES OF A GOOD CONSULTANT:

- Good listeners.
- Flexible: easily adapting to new projects, work cultures, and colleagues.
- Know how to achieve the best results in the shortest possible time while maintaining good relations.
- Apply their experience from previous projects, including setbacks, to overcome new problems and challenges.
- Organized, and are able to independently stick to deadlines and deliverables.
- Continue to update their knowledge and skills.

1.2 WHAT IS TECHNICAL SUPPORT?

Technical support is the provision of technical expertise to contribute knowledge to or develop the capacity of the support recipient. This guide is focused on short-term technical assistance, which is a consultancy that is typically performed within a six-month period.

Organisations use consultants for a variety of reasons, which include:

- To provide expert and/or specialist advice and recommendations
- To provide specific assistance with a particular programme or project
- To diagnose large and/or complex organisational problems
- To assist with the implementation of difficult or sensitive solutions
- To form part of a team for organisational development
- To provide support through training, mentoring, or coaching interventions

1.3 WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CONSULTANT?

A consultant is an individual who is able to effectively break down and analyse problems, generate solutions, and work well with diverse groups of stakeholders. In the health sector, consultants often have in-depth knowledge and demonstrated proficiency in a particular technical area. Academic qualifications, practical work experience, and relevant training certificates are of paramount importance as a verification of expertise. In the rapidly changing health field, evidence that the consultant has remained on top of the latest developments through their experience or training is paramount. Previous experience working in geographical areas covered by the assignment is also advantageous.

Each consultancy requires specific qualifications, experience, and work methods. Consultants are expected to adapt their style and approach to the specifics of the particular context and use their high-level knowledge and interpersonal skills to help clients overcome challenges.

GETTING BUSINESS AS A CONSULTANT

2.1 FINDING OPPORTUNITIES

Many organisations, including civil society organisations, government ministries, implementing partners and coordinating bodies, seek consultants to improve their strategic and operational plans, complement staff capacity in specific areas, assess or evaluate their programs, support resource mobilization, and augment their capabilities or systems.

Once an opportunity is identified, it is important to respond to it properly in order to win the work.

Some organisations post requests for proposals on job search engines, although there are many websites to check and these postings are often not for short-term work. Consultants usually find out about work through informal professional networks, such as referrals from a former colleague, which is why networking is an important part of being a consultant. Another common way to learn about consulting opportunities is through technical support providers, like the Technical Support Facilities (TSF). Technical support providers generally host a database of pre-qualified consultants and use this to match clients' requests to consultants' skills and experience. Consultants should research technical support providers that work in their technical areas and contact them to be included in their databases. Reaching out to various organizations and learning how they staff short-term work can be another creative avenue for finding assignments.

2.2.1 Responding to solicitations

Once an opportunity is identified, it is important to respond to it properly in order to win the work.

2.2.2 How to interpret the Terms of Reference

The terms of reference (ToR) document defines all aspects of how a consultant or a team will conduct an assignment. It defines the objectives and the scope of the assignment, outlines the responsibilities of the consultant or team, and provides a clear description of the resources available to complete the assignment. The specific content and format for a ToR will vary based on organisational requirements, local practices, and the type of assignment. In addition, the ToR should clearly define the background, objectives, and deliverables in accordance with the technical support planned.

The prospective consultant should consider the following questions when making a decision to pursue a consulting assignment. The answers are important because they assess the consultant's suitability for the work:

- What qualifications—educational background, language skills, and experience—are required for this assignment? Are my qualifications competitive with those of other potential consultants?
- What are the assignment's objectives, scope, deliverables, methodology, location, stakeholder involvement, and tools? Do I have the capability to meet the required standards? Will I require additional expertise to support me in areas where I am lacking or inadequate?
- What is the timing for this assignment? Do I have time available to complete it?
- Which organisation has requested technical support? Is there a good match between this organisation and my skills, experience, work methods, values, and pricing? Is it the type of organisation I want to work for?

If the ToR or request for proposal is not clear, there is typically contact information for submitting questions to the organization. It is critical to follow the official channels of communication rather than informally discussing with a friend or former colleague, in order to maintain a clean, fair, and transparent procurement process.

For more information and a quick checklist on how to interpret the ToR, visit the resources page on the TSF ESA website: www.tsfesa.org.

2.2.3 Preparing a proposal or expression of interest

After assessing the ToR and deciding to bid for the work, the next step is to craft either an expression of interest (EoI) or proposal for submission (note: in some cases, an organization may only require the submission of an updated CV). An EoI should include a statement of suitability that highlights relevant experience and a unique comparative advantage aligned to the call's requirements. The EoI should also demonstrate an understanding of the scope of work, confirm availability, and state the expected consulting rate. It would be prudent to include references from and contact information for former clients and samples of previous work that is relevant to the assignment.

In some cases, a full proposal may be requested by the client. The proposal would contain the same elements of the response but be more in-depth, particularly relating to the methodology. The client usually provides a preferred template of a proposal structure and requirements, which should be followed carefully. Variations from the requirements can lead to exclusion from the procurement process.

For both an EoI or proposal, always adhere to the stated submission deadline. Late submissions may be rejected. For this reason, the mode for submission (eg. by email, mail, or courier) should be noted early in the process, and any transport delays associated with submission must be factored into the timeline for developing the offer.

WHAT FACTORS DO CLIENTS CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING CONSULTANTS?

- Appropriate qualifications, educational background, and technical experience in the area of interest
- Contextual knowledge, including work experience in a particular country or with a particular client
- Demonstrated "soft skills", including the ability, confidence, and demeanour to manage multiple stakeholders, deal with challenges, identify solutions, and build the commitment to implement agreed actions
- Suitable proposed technical approach and methodology (if requested)
- Reasonable costs and fees
- Availability to do the work within the preferred timeframe
- Good reputation for delivering quality work, on time, and within budget

Consulting rates can vary dramatically based on the hiring organization, experience and qualifications of the consultant, past salary or daily rate charged by a consultant, or type of assignment.

2.2.4 Pricing

In some cases, a request for consultants will include information on the available budget for the assignment, but often a consultant will have to put forward a proposed cost. The budget typically includes two primary categories: expenses and consulting fees. In some cases, the contract will be issued at a fixed price, where all fees and expenses are covered in one fixed amount. In a cost-reimbursable contract, a consultant will be required to submit receipts for expenses and be reimbursed for those costs.

Reimbursable expenses include travel, accommodation, communication, and other miscellaneous costs. For assignments that involve travel to other countries, a useful source for determining per diem costs is the UN Per Diem and Stipend Rates website: *http://apps.who.int/bfi/tsy/PerDiem.aspx*

Issues are more likely to arise regarding the consulting fee rate. For new consultants, setting a reasonable daily rate that is justifiable and acceptable to the contracting organization can be the most challenging part of transitioning into consulting. If working with a technical support provider, they will be able to advise on an appropriate consulting rate.

Consultancy fees in the East and Southern Africa region tend to range between US$ 300 and US$ 800 per day for a senior consultant, with international consultants' fees at the higher end. Mid-level consultants typically charge US$ 250 to US$ 500 per day. International consultancies outside of the region may allow for higher rates, so consultants should do some research about what the client might allow. Before submitting their rate, consultants should check whether a maximum fee was indicated in the call for proposals or ToR. If the indicated maximum fee is significantly lower than the consultant's normal rate, the consultant can either accept the rate offered (if viewed as reasonable) or try to negotiate a higher rate (if viewed as not reasonable).

When negotiating, in addition to emphasizing technical prowess and suitability for the assignment, it is advisable to share at least three completed contracts of similar work with rates similar to the requested level.

2.2.5 Partnerships

In some cases, a client seeks more than one consultant to deliver an assignment. This can occur when there are heavy workloads, tight deadlines, complex assignments, or when it is unlikely to find one individual with all the requisite skills, experience, and contextual knowledge to successfully perform the work. For example, it is rare to find a consultant who has strategic planning experience coupled with procurement supply chain management and costing.

When working with a partner, a clear list of roles and responsibilities must be defined and agreed upon. It is also prudent to develop a clear work plan outlining specific time-bound tasks and outputs for each consultant, to assure an efficient, cooperative, and amicable working relationship. Partners should also understand each other's preferred way of working, including ways of communicating, to help manage each other's strengths and weaknesses.

2.3 NEGOTIATING AND FINALIZING CONTRACTS

After a proposal has been accepted, the consultant(s) and contractor may need to negotiate and clarify specific terms of the assignment, including reporting or oversight expectations. All parties need to agree on clear work plans that define their roles in the project. This is also the time to address any other issues, including proposed fees and other costs. Once these issues have been resolved, the working conditions and terms are described in a legal contract. The contract usually has three key components: the terms of reference (including deliverables and timelines), the budget, and the terms and conditions of the relationship, which governs how the client will work with the consultant.

The consultant should read the agreement carefully before signing as it protects them against unreasonable expectations by the client. If the language is unclear or if certain information is omitted, the consultant should negotiate with the client to ensure that their concerns are addressed before signing the contract. One important area to consider is the specification of the resources and support the client is expected to provide versus what the consultant is expected to provide. Once signed, the consultant is legally bound to deliver the assignment within the timelines, budget, and conditions in the contract, so it is very important to be sure that it is clear and complete. If there are any changes made to the deadlines or scope of the assignment once the contract has been signed, these changes must be included as amendments to the original contract.

The consultant can start on the assignment only after the contract is signed. For more information and a checklist of what to consider before signing a contract, check out the resources page on our website *(www.tsfesa.org)*

GETTING THE ASSIGNMENT OFF TO A GREAT START

Proper management of technical support is important for both consultant and client and is essential for the success of the assignment. After the contract or agreement has been signed, several actions can prepare the way for smooth management of an assignment.

Understanding the context is not limited to cultural practices; it includes leadership and management styles, politics, and technical savvy, among other aspects.

3.1 'KICK-OFF' MEETING

As soon as the contract is signed, the consultant needs to meet with the client in person or by phone to review the scope, methodology, reporting lines, and work plan. The consultant should use this opportunity to request additional information or documentation relevant to the assignment, for example a list of stakeholders or documents for desk review. The consultant needs to approach the initial scoping of the assignment in a structured way to identify pertinent issues. It might be helpful to have a checklist of the data and information that the consultant is looking for and matching this with key stakeholders that may be in a position to elaborate on the information, where required. Before starting the project, the consultant needs to agree with the client about which stakeholders will be involved, who will contribute input to the assignment, who is responsible for reviewing the consultant deliverables, and who is responsible for signing off on deliverables.

3.2 UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

Consultants with experience living or working in a country are more likely to understand the context in which they will perform their assignment.

Consultants should try to broaden their understanding of the environment in which they will be working by seeking the counsel of a variety of other experienced people, including the staff of technical support provider focal points (like the TSF), the client assignment manager and colleagues with local work experience. Interacting with others who have knowledge and experience in a given country will help the consultant anticipate challenges and identify important issues, key stakeholders, and influential persons. This information should be used to shape the consultant's style of work and to assist with developing solutions and contingency plans to assure the successful completion of the assignment. Some of the information can be integrated into the inception report, discussed below.

3.3 PREPARING THE INCEPTION REPORT AND WORK PLAN

An inception report is a useful tool for confirming a mutual understanding of the assignment between the consultant and the client, particularly in cases where the approach or work plan was not included in the contracting process. The report is written by the consultant to affirm their understanding of the client's needs, the methodology and approach to be used, the key stakeholders and documents to guide their work, and the work plan. Normally, the inception report is submitted by the consultant to the client within a week of the initial kick-off discussion.

The client should review the inception report as quickly as possible and provide prompt feedback to the consultant. In some instances, the consultant is expected to meet personally with the client to present the inception report. If the report is deemed acceptable, with no or minor changes required, a final inception report is re-submitted to the client. The resource page on the TSF website *(www.tsfesa.org)*, includes an inception report outline.

The inception report enables the client to determine whether:

- The consultant has understood the assignment, including what is involved to execute it;
- The terms of reference are realistic and represent the client's expectations;
- Any additional resources or logistics support is required; and,
- The consultant has the capacity to undertake the assignment.

A consultant must be able to work with the client if they have differing expectations about how to do the work or what needs to be done. In some cases, the client may not be aware of what they don't know, and the consultant will need to use their experience to guide the client toward a place of mutual understanding. The consultant should analyse both the situation very carefully and not be afraid to talk with the client about modifying the consultancy to allow for the best possible outcome.

3.4 ADMINISTRATION AND LOGISTICS

To avoid unnecessary time delays, it is important to ensure that the necessary workspace and travel arrangements have been made. If the consultant needs a workspace and infrastructure (e.g. printers, internet access), this should be communicated to the assignment manager in the contract negotiation phase and be discussed in the inception call.

If the assignment is based in a different country from that of the consultant, additional logistical arrangements are necessary for consultant travel. Consultants must enquire about visa regulations and ascertain whether documentation required to enter and work in a country is up to date. Health and safety issues are also important. The consultant should keep abreast of the situation in the country where he or she will be working through news outlets, security services, their local embassy in the country, or by requesting information from the client or technical support provider (if used). The consultant should visit a health practitioner or travel clinic for advice on immunisations and medical precautions to take in the area where they are traveling. Accommodations, requests for per diem, and travel arrangements should be made well in advance of the trip. In some cases, travel insurance may be required.

Technical support providers can ease some of the logistical challenges for short-term consultants, by supporting travel arrangements and administrative requirements.

4.

DELIVERING THE WORK

Consultants can only provide high-quality technical support with the involvement and assistance of others. In addition to having technical expertise, a consultant must have good interpersonal skills. They need to be flexible and adaptable, a good communicator–with facilitation, negotiation, and mediation skills–and a team player. During the active stage of providing support, the consultant has to manage client and stakeholder relations and expectations, monitor progress according to the work plan, and facilitate buy-in for the product being developed.

Working with a technical support provider:

During an assignment managed through the TSF ESA, a member of the TSF quality assurance team works with the consultant and the client to keep track of assignment progress according to the work plan. Such monitoring results in the optimum use of the client's and consultant's time and delivery of a quality output.

4.1 MANAGING STAKEHOLDERS AND BUILDING TRUST

The relationship between the consultant and the client and stakeholders should be based on mutual respect and trust. The way to solidify trust and respect is to honour the agreed terms of engagement (based on the client-accepted inception report and work plan) and to maintain regular communication. A regular debriefing (for example, weekly, or at the end of site visits) with clients is useful for ensuring that expectations are aligned. These communications can also be an opportunity for the consultant to gain additional knowledge of the context of the assignment, identify solutions to bottlenecks or unexpected challenges, and further tailor their approach to the client's needs. The most successful consultants are skilled facilitators and good listeners. Clients weigh interpersonal and communication skills very highly when choosing consultants.

4.2 MONITORING THE ASSIGNMENT

The consultant should use the work plan to monitor progress and note any divergence from the initial plan. The consultant should have contingency plans to deal with problems or delays and must communicate any changes to the client. Assignment managers from the client can help with this aspect of monitoring by offering consultants active support, making sure that they get the necessary information and co-operation to do their work effectively and efficiently. As mentioned, a schedule of regular assignment update meetings with the assignment manager and client will help ensure that all parties concerned are kept abreast of any assignment issues.

4.3 MANAGING 'SCOPE CREEP'

It is also important to manage the assignment to avoid "scope creep". Scope creep occurs when the consultant is asked to work on issues and activities not originally included in the ToR. Where scope creep is unavoidable, the reasons for additional work must be discussed with the client and necessary changes to the assignment work plan must be negotiated and approved. This usually requires review and amendment of the contract, including the budget.

4.4 ASSURING QUALITY OF DELIVERABLES OR OUTPUTS

Assuring high-quality deliverables or outputs is an important aspect of providing technical support. By ensuring quality, consultants not only honour the original agreement but also enhance their resumes and reputation. They become attractive candidates for additional assignments with the same or other clients. To produce high-quality outputs, the consultant should consider feedback and inputs from the client, technical working groups, the assignment manager and other stakeholders, as well as from other technical professionals. Outputs should also be informed by best practices, international standards (where applicable), and peer-reviewed literature, when relevant. Where comments, suggestions, and other inputs are not understood, the consultant should seek clarification from these reviewers before producing and submitting the final output. Generally the client is responsible for granting final approval of the output.

4.5 POSITIONING FOR THE WAY FORWARD

One of the biggest challenges for consultants is to assure that their assignment outputs are embraced and used for the purpose(s) for which they are intended. Throughout the assignment, an astute consultant should find opportunities to encourage the client and other stakeholders to plan for the use of the output into long-term work. The consultant should share suggestions for immediate next steps for taking the output forward after the consultancy ends.

If a consultant is working through a technical support provider, recommendations for longer term technical support can be shared with the provider as part of the assignment feedback process.

CLOSING THE ASSIGNMENT

5.1 SEEKING FEEDBACK AND PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK

At the end of every assignment, a consultant should request a debriefing session with the client. This debriefing session is an important opportunity for both parties to reflect on performance, what worked well, and what might be improved in the future. This is also the time for the consultant to reinforce next steps on how the client can take forward the deliverables.

In many cases—particularly if the work is managed by a technical support provider—client feedback is requested as part of formally closing out a contract or assignment. This feedback can be collected in person, by phone or video, or through email exchanges. Feedback is generally undertaken to assess the consultant's performance and the assignment management processes.

Once the consultant has received the feedback it is important to compare it with their own assessment of their performance, considering other assignment issues, to determine where the consultant should focus any professional development activities.

5.2 BILLING AND ADMINISTRATION

While billing typically occurs throughout the assignment (or as agreed upon in the contract), the final invoice is critical. This should be submitted in a timely manner as soon as the final deliverables have been accepted by the client, and should reflect all of the information required for payment by the client. Timely and complete submission of the final invoice prevents delays or even non-payment by the client. If the client requires supporting documentation to issue payment, copies of any original documentation should also be kept for the consultant's records.

A good consultant will file all relevant documentation for the assignment, including the initial request for services, contract, invoices, deliverables, and supporting documentation. It is also a best practice to keep a running file for key lessons learned, areas for improvement, or notable achievements from each consulting assignment, which can be useful for future work and for developing new business.

Independent consultants are responsible for managing their tax obligations. These vary by country so consultants should consult their relevant tax authority for information on these requirements.

6. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

6.1 ADDRESSING AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Each consulting assignment offers an opportunity for a consultant to examine his or her strengths and weaknesses. These could be in technical areas; working style; or in “soft” skills, like communication or cross-cultural interaction. For future work, it is useful to focus on taking on assignments that naturally use more of the consultant’s strengths. However, it is also good for consultants to continue to challenge themselves to grow in areas where they need to development further. There are also numerous resources available (including free online courses) that can be used to improve skills in weaker areas. In some cases, it can be useful to focus on practicing skills outside of the professional environment where there is less performance pressure. For example, if a client did not feel that a consultant listened to their needs, it may be useful for the consultant to practice active listening on a daily basis with their family and friends so that they can then apply those skills with the next client. It can take a long time to learn new skills or ways of working, so consultants should be patient but persistent in developing themselves.

6.2 SUPPORTING ONGOING RELATIONSHIPS

The consultant needs to be savvy about using the assignment close-out meeting as a platform for asking the client about future plans and potential work. The consultant can offer recommendations about what support the client may need in the future based on the organisation’s long-term goals. The consultant should stay in contact with the client and key stakeholders and periodically check on technical support developments. The opportunities may not be with the same client, but staying in touch may lead to opportunities for other work that matches the consultant’s skill set.

6.3 STAYING ON TOP OF EMERGING TRENDS AND DEVELOPING NEW EXPERTISE

The public health sector is very dynamic. New priorities, policies, technologies, and approaches are constantly being introduced and adopted. A consultant working in the public health arena needs to be aware of new ideas, knowledge, and techniques in the field. To keep abreast of emerging trends, consultants must read widely, join professional networks, attend conferences, and take relevant courses. Consultants can also keep in communication with technical support providers to learn of capacity development opportunities.

By engaging in professional development, nurturing professional relationships, and seeking new contacts, individuals can remain competitive for consulting assignments in the health field.

7. SUMMARY

Consultants provide valuable technical support for health programmes: they can contribute new expertise or specialized local knowledge or provide additional support to clients when and where it is needed.

To be successful and competitive, consultants need to continually hone their skills and invest in their professional development. They also need the tools to evaluate, execute, and manage potential assignments, as detailed above.

By following this guide, consultants should have the basic tools to find and successfully deliver technical support assignments, enabling them to showcase their expertise and contribute to improved global health.

Contact Us

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