

JUNE 9, 2006

Good questions to ask before moving a business

BY MATT WATSON

Moving a business or a portion of a business is always more complex than it initially appears. When companies move infrequently, typically once every five to seven years, who in your company has the experience and skill set to direct such a project?

The skill set needed includes construction management, office space planning and design, furniture acquisition and disposal, move management and voice and data cabling.

Typically, you will deal with three to five different vendors. What do you do? Frequently the answer is to turn to an outside expert or consultant to manage and coordinate these varied needs. Then the issue becomes how you qualify the individual or company to cost-effectively oversee this complex and critical operation.

Before looking at qualifications, look at the various elements of your business or office relocation. Developing your space plan will determine the needed tenant improvements. This determination will be essential to evaluating a lease opportunity.

Then, construction plans need to be developed to facilitate hiring a building contractor. The space plan can be assigned to a design firm, furniture dealer or architect. Frequently, the building contractor will be determined by the building owner.

This is just the first layer of complexity. Who is going to coordinate the communications between the designer and the builder? Who is going to approve change orders and control potential cost overruns?

Next is planning the furniture requirements. Can you use your existing furniture, or do you need to purchase new? Who is going to coordinate the furniture and construction buildout so that everything fits in the new space? The same scenario happens with the data and voice cabling.

Next is the move process itself. Who will make sure the installation of data and

voice cabling, furniture and equipment is done properly and in a timely manner? What happens when there are delays? Will the disposition of unwanted furniture and equipment be completed before the final move-out date from the prior location?

Vendors will have their own timelines, lead times and installation requirements. It will be important to have a project coordinator who understands the tempo and pace of each phase of the process. A construction project manager views a project over weeks and months. A move manager needs to make quick decisions managing a move over hours and days.

So, how best to deal with the complexity of the situation? Hiring a project coordinator may be the solution. If chosen well, this individual or team can save you time and money. Because of the relationship already established, the construction project manager is often hired. Depending on the experience of the individual, this can either be a wise or poor choice. The project manager can be very good with all aspects of construction, but may not have the experience or internal "bandwidth" to manage furniture procurement and move management.

Bringing on a project coordinator or "field service coordinator" early in the process is best. Establishing a sense of scope at the front end is valuable. Every move has unique aspects and scores of variables.

Again, ask the prospective coordinators lots of questions. What is their core competency -- construction or moving? Are they experienced in space planning, design, procurement of new and used furniture and disposition of old furniture? How do they determine their choice of subcontractors for relocation services, data cabling, installation of furniture and equipment and liquidation services? How will the bid process take place? If the project coordinator does not understand how to "scope" the project, a bid process will be ineffectual.

Look at each of these as a single entity

and then ask how these services are going to be coordinated. Ask about the planning and leadership abilities of the prospective project coordinators and their subs. What "specific" experience and manpower levels do they have? Many times vendors are chosen for low rates rather than qualifications and service value.

Ask the project coordinators to identify their last five move projects. Request contact information and check references. When checking references, ask what the response time was when issues arose. What was the level of support? Remember that the project coordinator represents you and should represent your interests when dealing with service providers.

Be sure to determine how they charge, whether by the square foot, hourly, or a percentage of total project cost. Often the services of project coordinators are available through one or more of the vendor service providers. This can be the most cost-effective route, since many vendors include this service at no additional charge.

How do you find a move project coordinator? Ask among your peer groups or trade associations. Find someone who has had a good move experience and ask for a reference. Check with other building tenants. Always ask the vendors qualifying questions to determine their skill sets.

Remember to balance out the "best deal" versus the "best value," because in the end it is your experience as the customer that determines whether you made the best choice.

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