BUSINESS MANAGERS MANAGEMENT

Saying "yes" to a consultant who wishes to leave a project is not a business failure

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Accepting a request to leave a project does not mean giving in, but rather regaining control over an existing risk. For the Business Manager, the challenge is to organize a managed transition that protects the client, the consultant, and the business.

Refusing an assignment exit sometimes gives the impression of protecting the numbers, the client, and the contract. However, keeping a consultant against their will doesn't eliminate the risk: it just postpones it until the company loses control.

THE STARTING POINT

Accepting an exit request doesn't mean yielding. It means transforming an individual intention into a managed decision, with a timeline, conditions, and a clear plan.

The first reflex: protecting what exists

When a consultant announces they want to leave their assignment, the reaction is often immediate: it’s impossible now. The contract is ongoing, the client counts on the team, billing is planned, and no replacement is ready. All these reasons are valid.

For the Business Manager, the risk seems very concrete. Saying yes may mean losing several weeks of revenue, triggering a delicate discussion with the client, and putting someone in between assignments. Refusal seems to be the most reasonable decision.

However, this decision sometimes relies less on analysis and more on habit. We refuse because the organization has always refused. We wait since no voluntary exit process has been planned. We hope the consultant will change their mind, due to the lack of other options being built.

Commercial prudence eventually conflates with immobility. Short-term protection of the assignment becomes more important than understanding what already threatens its continuity.

The exit request is not yet the problem

A consultant asking to leave a project is sending a signal. This signal may reveal an assignment that has become too repetitive, a disagreement with client management, a gap between the sold position and the actual work, travel difficulties, or the desire to progress towards another technical environment.

Take the example of a consultant hired for design work but has been doing corrective support for several months. If they request to exit, responding solely by referencing the contract ignores the core issue. Even if they agree to stay three more months, their engagement and service quality risk degrading.

The first responsibility of the Business Manager is neither to accept nor to refuse immediately. It is to qualify the request: what is truly motivating the exit? How long has the situation been ongoing? What has already been attempted? Is there a condition that would make the assignment acceptable again, or has the decision become irreversible?

A SIGNAL TO QUALIFY
A request expressed early still leaves several options. An ignored request often eventually becomes a departure, a health leave, a drop in quality, or a direct break announced to the client.

Refusing only shifts the risk

Refusal might secure a few weeks of billing. It neither recreates the desire, nor the trust, nor the engagement quality that existed before. The problem continues circulating within the assignment.

It can appear in performance: less initiative, more errors, minimal communication. It can affect the client relationship, who sees a demobilized consultant without understanding why the ESN doesn’t act. It can also impact the employer brand when the consultant tells others they were kept on a project despite multiple alerts.

The most costly scenario occurs when the company buys time...then loses it all at once. The consultant resigns, the client learns of their departure late, and the Business Manager must urgently find a replacement. The revenue once thought protected becomes more fragile than at the time of the first request.

Saying yes without a framework would also be risky

Conversely, immediately accepting every exit request would create another difficulty. An assignment cannot become revocable at the first frustration. The company has commitments to the client and must be able to organize service continuity.

Imagine a consultant wishing to leave their project the following week because a more attractive assignment has opened up. Agreeing without thorough discussion or a timeline would put the client in front of a fait accompli. The commercial relationship would be weakened, and the Business Manager would seem no longer to manage their system.

The right answer is not automatic yes. It is conditional yes, built around a shared diagnosis and realistic transition. In some cases, this work will indeed lead to keeping the consultant on the assignment because a scope evolution, clarification with the client, or agreed exit date will have restored an acceptable balance.

THE DIFFERENCE
Yielding means letting the request dictate the schedule. Managing means acknowledging the request while organizing how it can become sustainable for the consultant, the client, and the company.

Transforming the request into a transition scenario

A controlled exit begins with a frank discussion with the consultant. The Business Manager must verify the solidity of their decision, identify the negotiation margins, and agree on what can be shared with the client. They must also explain the commercial constraints without using them as a definitive refusal.

Suppose the request is firm, but the consultant agrees to a six-week transition. This timeframe allows for preparing a successor, organizing knowledge transfer, and choosing with the client the least disruptive moment. The consultant is no longer confined to an indefinite period, and the company regains a capacity for action.

The plan must then be concrete: a target date, the skills required for replacement, the responsible people for the search, the milestone meetings with the consultant, and the chosen moment for informing the client. Without these elements, the yes remains an intention, and the timeline risks stretching to recreate the initial frustration.

Talk to the client before the issue becomes a crisis

The fear of the client's reaction explains much of the refusals. Yet, a client often accepts a prepared transition better than an abrupt departure. The way to present the situation makes all the difference.

The Business Manager doesn’t just announce that a consultant wants to leave. They present a finding, identified risks, and a continuity proposal. For example: the consultant wishes to move on after eighteen months on assignment; they will stay until an agreed date; a replacement profile will be presented within two weeks; a gradual transfer will be organized in the last month.

This posture protects the commercial relationship more than silence. It shows that the ESN monitors its consultants, anticipates movements, and assumes service continuity. The client may not welcome the news enthusiastically, but they retain visibility and an influence margin over the proposed plan.

REGAINING CONTROL
Announcing a transition with a solution is not admitting a weakness. It’s showing the client that the company can handle a human movement before it becomes an operational incident.

A decision that can also protect the business

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A well-organized exit can prevent a resignation and retain the consultant in the company. It can also initiate a broader discussion with the client about succession, evolving needs, or forming a team. What seemed like a net loss can become a commercial transition.

For example, replacing a senior consultant at the end of their mission with a confirmed profile, then repositioning the senior on a more complex project, helps preserve the client relationship while meeting a development expectation. Nothing guarantees this scenario is always possible. But an immediate refusal prevents even exploring it.

The business rationale involves comparing several risks: losing a mission, losing a consultant, degrading the client relationship, or weakening team trust. The best arbitration rarely eliminates all risks; it’s the one that still allows managing them.

The Business Manager must not avoid the decision

The role of the Business Manager is not to promise the consultant they can exit at their chosen date. Nor is it to deny them as long as the problem isn’t visible in the indicators.

Their role is to bring about an explicit decision. They qualify the request, assess the consequences, build scenarios, solicit necessary arbitrations, and set the next steps. They also indicate what is possible, what isn’t yet, and under what conditions the situation can evolve.

This clarity profoundly changes the relationship. Even when the exit takes time, the consultant sees a process exists. The client understands continuity is organized. And management can arbitrate on facts rather than discover an already entrenched urgency.

THE MANAGEMENT QUESTION

When a consultant asks to exit an assignment, the question isn't just: "How to keep the billing?" It is: "How to maintain enough flexibility to simultaneously protect the mission, the relationship, and the consultant?"

Saying yes can be a mastery decision

Accepting the principle of an exit doesn’t mean giving up the business. It means recognizing that an assignment remains solid only if human and operational conditions still allow it to be properly sustained.

Refusal sometimes gives an immediate impression of control. But if motivation degrades, if the client learns of the situation late, or if the consultant ultimately resigns, this control will have been only a parenthesis.

Saying yes with a framework instead allows choosing the moment, the conditions, and the manner of communication. The topic remains difficult, but it remains a decision. And for a Business Manager, preserving this decision-making capacity is often worth more than a few weeks of apparent peace.

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