

Consultant of the Month – John Atkins

This month's subject is John Atkins, who has been an active member of the Society of Education Consultants for a number of years and is currently a new member of the SEC committee.

John Atkins came into education consulting in 1989. He began his career in local education authorities, where he specialised in further and higher education, before joining the Civil Service for a spell as an Inspector of youth training schemes. This advisory and consultative role suited him so well that he decided to join Coopers and Lybrand's specialist education strategic consultancy team.

There has been nothing quite like the Coopers and Lybrand team of the early 1990s before or since, John says. "We were working at the heart of government, helping to realise the ambitions of the Education Reform Act and building the framework for self-governance of schools and colleges. At the same time, we were working with the schools and colleges themselves to ensure they had the capacity to meet the new challenges." But times move on, and major consultancy firms have increasingly switched focus on to long-term change management programmes, often based around IT systems. John saw an emerging niche for independent strategic consultancy, and founded his own consultancy practice in 2000.

John freely admits to being a generalist, able to address management and strategic challenges in schools, colleges and higher education institutions. "The principles of clear strategic direction and accountability to stakeholders apply to all education institutions," he says. But effective strategy relies on efficient use of resources, so John has developed and maintained an expertise in resource allocation methodologies, both between institutions and within them. John has also developed expertise in the management of special needs provision, and is currently becoming something of an expert in autistic spectrum disorder, having just completed two major ASD projects in two years.

John tackles some projects on his own, but increasingly works with a network of colleagues in order to provide the capacity to tackle larger projects. Many of these colleagues have themselves worked for major consultancy companies in the past. "I believe we can offer a high quality – and highly cost-effective – alternative to the major consultancy houses", he says. "Moreover, our service is completely scaleable, from just one or two days up to two hundred or more days over two to three years."

Currently, John and his colleagues are carrying out major projects with DCSF and HEFCE, but he is also working with individual schools and groups on projects that only involve one day per term each. Every month's work is different – indeed, every day's – but John would not have it any other way.