

Evolving the Engineering Vendor Relationship



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We covered management-level communication in our [previous article on the engineering vendor partnership model](#), but equally important is the communication to the joint team in general.

Even the most experienced vendor team will not know the specifics of a client's particular business before they begin to work with them. Therefore, plan to invest some time and internal resources into teaching vendors your business (you would have training budgets allocated for your own newly hired staff, wouldn't you?). Cooperate with the vendor to establish specialized and relevant **training programs** – they either have done similar things for other clients before and will embrace the idea immediately, or should be advised into doing this for the sake of overall engagement success. The vendor can and should invest and contribute too – a mature organization will have some internal training capabilities and resources that can be brought to bear on the desired training goals.

Update the team on a regular basis (at least quarterly) regarding how your company's business is doing. You should definitely respect your firm's confidentiality requirements, but aside from that, the more information you give, the more involved the teams feel. It is best if you can relate the overall business situation of the firm with the specific activities or projects teams are working on, so they can feel that they are actively contributing to your success. Nothing motivates people as strongly as the sense of having meaning, purpose, and relevance.

If the client and vendor firms are operating in **geographically dispersed locations** (as is the norm these days), you should make sure team members from both sides meet their immediate counterparts in person at least once a year. Ideally it makes sense to plan at least one annual visit to the client's IT managers and team leads to vendor's offices, as well as bring vendor's staff to the client's premises once every year or couple of years. Managers from both sides should consider seeing each other more often – twice a year is an acceptable rhythm. Discuss splitting the travel costs with the vendor – co-investment is in their interest as well as yours, as they too have a foot in the game, both in terms of financial impact and of the general health of the relationship. The easiest way here is to split the travel budget evenly. For larger engagements involving sizable **offshore components**, we confidently recommend assigning a full-time on-site ambassador or even several on-site vendor team members. By being co-located with the

client personnel, they will dramatically speed up the resolution of any occurring difficulties, both technical and communicational, saving tons of time and money in the long term.

Finally, while the client's business users may be very demanding and unwilling to spend their precious time on communications with some strange people hitherto unknown to them, it is generally a bad idea to completely isolate the vendor team from the client's business units. If you find yourself in a situation where the vendor is disconnected from the everyday life of business, try to restore the connection by recruiting business-side "champions" serving as advocates and representatives and bridging the communication divide.

Use the Vendor to the Fullest

There are many things a seasoned **engineering vendor** can tell you or do for you if you just ask them. They have worked with many clients previously without sacrificing confidentiality and can give useful advice based on their experience.

Whenever you have a particular technical problem, your vendor may have seasoned experts in-house whom they can provide on a short-term basis for quick consultations. Sometimes, a single, two-hour workshop may provide you with great insights that will result in great value to your business. This does not necessarily commit you though to using this vendor's services to perform the actual implementation.

Our rather obvious advice to the vendors here is that you should proactively strive to find new points of synergy with your client, even outside your current area of involvement. Make sure you, as a manager in charge of the engagement, continuously learn new things about your client, as well as about your own organization – it is a safe bet to assume you do not know everything about either. Ask your colleagues about new capabilities your firm is evolving or new trends it observes in the markets and industries, and share this knowledge with your client. Think of this not so much as a short-term upsell technique, but as a long-term priority to be helpful, as well as relevant. By the way, the need for client education is one of the key pieces of advice in David Maister's classical book "**Managing the Professional Service Firm**," which we at DataArt consider a mandatory read.

Vendors should also constantly seek to expand the range of services they provide, or at the very least take into consideration the aspects of the client firm's operations not currently within their area of responsibility. A software development team should be aware of how the system they create will be deployed and maintained, how the help desk will be organized, how the various parts of a client organization will benefit from it, and so on. Even when the vendor is not equipped to take over these various duties, it should be conscious of the technology and process choices it makes and involve other teams in its engineering and managerial decisions. Within an **ideal framework**, clients' business and operational units, as well as vendor team, all work in harmony, understand each other's goals and constraints and are able to create, deploy and operate solutions more effectively.

In Conclusion

A well-managed relationship between a client and a vendor is not completely unlike a healthy relationship between human beings. Both parties need to work on it constantly, give honest feedback, be attentive and vigilant, spot problems early and strive to decide and overcome them together. They should be bold and persistent and not give up if the problem does not go away after initial attempts to solve it have failed. Iterative and methodical approach is one thing that helps here, as well as mindfulness, vigilance and the willingness to proactively think about the future. We hope that the advice given here will help both **clients and vendors** to remember these simple yet profound things, as well as give them some practical tools and techniques that help them to achieve their goals.