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KEEP THE PEACE WITH YOUR SMES

Best practices, tips, and insights for partnering
with outsourced vendors



Subject matter experts, or SMEs, can make or break your project.

When things are going well, your SME will fully support your project by making room for you in their busy schedules, freely sharing their knowledge, meeting all review deadlines, and generally going the extra mile to ensure the success of your project. However, when your relationship with a SME isn't working well, they can become a roadblock to the project. As unwilling participants, they can miss appointments, be less than forthcoming in the transfer of knowledge, drag their feet in reviewing materials, avoid your phone calls and e-mails; and see their SME role as nothing more than an unnecessary irritant.

So how do you cultivate positive relationships with your SMEs that will produce successful projects? For starters, you might want to find out what SMEs want from *you*.

WHAT DO SMES WANT?

SMEs are much more likely to cooperate when they respect you. This conclusion, published in an industry magazine, suggests that relationships between developers and their SMEs can be positively influenced by the developer. The study identified four general areas of concern for SMEs:

- *Technical knowledge.* Although SMEs didn't expect developers to have the same level of technical knowledge they had, most SMEs did expect developers to have basic knowledge about the subject matter. SMEs were most impatient with developers who didn't ask informed questions, and with pretending to understand things they didn't.
- *Writing and language skills.* SMEs expected developers to have superior writing and language skills. In this category, SMEs were most irritated by writing that sacrificed technical accuracy for the sake of style or grammar. They were also frustrated with developers that didn't understand the subject matter well enough to be anything more than an editor.
- *Attitude.* SMEs deeply resented working with developers who held condescending attitudes toward their writing ability, and also did not like working with developers who wanted to be engineers themselves and competed with the SME at every turn. SMEs

most enjoyed working with developers who enjoyed their roles as writers.

- *Professionalism.* Engineers preferred to work with developers who “knew their stuff,” worked well in a team setting, took personal responsibility for their work, and met deadlines. SMEs judged a developer’s credibility by the degree of their professionalism.

CULTIVATE A POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR SME

View SMEs as people. When Darryl Sink, president of Darryl L. Sink & Associates Inc., researched SME-developer relationships, he discovered that most depictions of SMEs were negative. “The basic message,” says Sink, “was that SMEs are nasty people.” However, when you put yourself in their position, you may start to understand SME’s attitudes more easily. Try to understand your SME, including the challenges and frustrations they have to contend with. “If you assume the role of a busy SME,” says Sink, “and your instructional designer isn’t asking you the right questions or is wasting your time, you tend to realize fairly quickly that SMEs often have pretty good reasons for acting difficult.”

Be professional. Be the kind of developer that SMEs want to work with by:

- *Be dependable.* Be on time. Deliver drafts when you say you will. Show up for meetings on time and prepared. Drive the project.
- *Don’t waste time.* Be prepared for meetings. Do your homework. Send out questions, documents, etc. before the meeting. Ask informed questions. Stay on track. Record SME input with a tape recorder or video camera, if possible, so that you get it right the first time.
- *Be respectful.* Get happy. A good attitude permeates the working relationship. Approach the SME as a fellow professional with complementary skill sets.

Position yourself from a place of power. Kendra Lee, president of KLA Group, says “Training professionals often put their SMEs on a pedestal above the training organization.” It is crucial that developers realize the importance of their mission and set SME perceptions accordingly. “You set the tone for how you want to be treated,” says Lee, “and a lot of SME

problems occur when the training organization doesn't feel as important or as valuable as the SMEs on whom they depend."

Sell SMEs on the project. Explain the business rationale for the project to SMEs. Your goal should be to obtain buy-in from the SME, so that they will feel the project is important and make it a priority. "Most SMEs are invested in and really care about the actual business," says Sink. If they understand that the project will contribute to the success of the business, you are likely to get their full participation.

Recognize their contribution. When SMEs contribute to the success of your project, let them know you appreciate them. Try something as simple as an email or thank you note. Or perhaps nominate the project for an award, making them a part of the project description. Or maybe even throw a party to recognize their contributions, as well as the other members of the development team. How you show your appreciation is not as important as just remembering the magic word: thank you!