

Part Five of Learning to Manage Research Partnerships

Contributed by ValueNotes
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Part IV: Deliver the RoI: Build & Sustain - written by Arun Jethmalani.

1. Ramp up gradually

If you're planning to give out a fair quantum of regular work, don't do it all at one go. In our experience, any such relationship takes up to 3 months to stabilize. It's not just about the work being delivered, but little things like formats, presentation, communication, MIS and such like. Every individual is different, and getting to know each other's working styles is critical. It's probably best to start with a limited pilot, and then scale up.

All of us are thrilled when we get large projects. We rarely worry about the implications of failure. Some years back, we bid for a pretty big assignment, but the timelines for the pilot were extremely tight. In our desperation to get the job, we agreed. But there just wasn't enough time to train our people adequately, and the result was a disaster. Later, we were told by the client, "If you needed more time, why didn't you ask?" We ended up losing a long term opportunity, because we tried to go too fast and didn't even bother to negotiate on timelines!

2. Co-own the process

It's also about teamwork. A few years ago, we had a large project related to news tracking and analysis. The client was to provide updated process documentation, but this was inadequate and the quality of our output was sub-par. Our team blamed the client, but this did not help anybody. Eventually, we decided to invest the time in re-documenting the entire process in great detail, and sent it back to the client for review and approval. We didn't get paid for this, but thereafter, errors reduced and we still work for the client. A matter of pride for our team is that this documentation was adopted by the client at their own offices.

In another instance, we were using a freelancer to do some research for us. She came with solid recommendations and an excellent track record. However, the initial outputs were very disappointing. A couple of our team wanted to terminate the contract and do the work in house. However, the project manager had greater belief and invested considerable time in coaching her. Very soon, the quality improved and more importantly, her commitment as she felt that we cared for her and were willing to help her grow. She still works with us.

3. Invest in keeping it going

So you've got over the initial hurdles, and things are somewhat streamlined. But it's not over.

Expectations tend to change with time, and new challenges crop up. It's human nature to keep expecting things to get better and more efficient. But this does not happen automatically. It's important to keep nurturing the relationship; with periodic reviews of processes, SLAs, and evolving quality standards.

Finally, whichever side of the relationship you're in, you're dealing with people. We all need regular communication, an occasional pat on the back as well as honest feedback when we goof up. A big challenge for providers is getting quick feedback. Schedule regular calls, or reviews with all stakeholders.

I'm sure none of the above is new, or profound. You've probably read most of this before; or believe it's nothing but common sense. But it's amazing how often we forget our common sense! Building sustainable and mutually beneficial partnerships is not rocket science, but simple commonsensical things that need to be done repeatedly, and improved, over a long period of time.

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