

10 easy ways to better manage offshore development

Use of offshore development teams is a growing phenomenon. If you need an instantly available resource at low cost, or a new skill set which may not be available in your own teams, then going offshore can be a smart move. However, there are many challenges and when it goes wrong the crash and burn can be spectacular. Here are 10 easy ways get the best results from your offshore developers.

1 Understand the underlying culture

You are not going to be physically working side by side with your offshore team, so it makes sense to understand what goes on in their world and why they work the way they do. For example, find out about their national and religious holidays and try to plan your schedule around them.

Humour doesn't always translate and they may find your best jokes embarrassing or even offensive. Best to play it straight! Also think about the language you're going to be working in. Are you sure you'll be able to make yourself understood over the phone or on a dodgy skype connection, when there's a deadline looming?

2 Clearly define and control requirements, milestones and objectives

If you're not clear about what's expected from your offshore team, you can't expect them to be either. Always give plain, precise instructions to avoid misunderstandings and confusion about your requirements. Always establish and communicate clear project milestones and deadlines. And always insist they are kept to.

If possible provide a local manager with an in-depth knowledge of your requirements to oversee each stage of the development, right at the coalface.

3 Provide detailed system design documents

Your offshore team isn't an integral part of your company and you shouldn't expect them to have your depth of knowledge about your business. It is vital that you give them a very detailed set of business requirements including detailed user journeys and customer experience mapping. In the same way you should ensure that all design documents are very detailed with a clear single vision and consistent architecture, data and process specifications. Never assume your offshore developers will understand your business like you do.

4 Identify project leaders to oversee

Your project will run more smoothly and quickly if you identify an offshore team leader to act as a dedicated liaison between your organisation and their team. Take the effort to help this person learn how your business works and understand the critical business criteria that need to be delivered, and your investment will repay itself many times over. In the same way, you should also identify a member of your onshore team who can lead the collaboration with your offshore partners and oversee the development of the solution as it progresses.

5 Communicate closely and often

'Out of sight, out of mind' could have been coined for offshore development teams. Whether you are simply tracking project progress or engaged in demanding problem resolution, close and frequent contact is crucial to maintain visibility when dealing with remote assets. Video conferencing and Skype allow virtual face-to-face interaction to be achieved with resources that may be many thousands of miles away. Don't forget, it's always a good idea to confirm all verbal communications by email, as this will mean that incorrect assumptions cannot be made from your original conversation.

6 Be aware of time differences

If your offshore development partner is based in a different time zone, you need to put arrangements in place to ensure that you are able to contact them to resolve issues as they arise during your normal working day. It is normal to expect the occasional late night or breakfast call, but very few people can consistently make good decisions if they are having to field calls well after the end of a long working day, or before the dawn chorus!

7 Build a team ethos

Treat the offshore developers as an integral part of your operation rather than a separate unit, so you can build a collaborative working ethos across both the in-house and offshore teams.

Looking forward, future projects will be easier and run more smoothly, if resources from your current project teams are retained and available for future assignments. By insisting on this you will be able to avoid the disruption and cost of training new offshore team members, every time you initiate a fresh project.

8 Start small

If you are trying out a new offshore resource or dipping your toes in offshore waters for the first time, it is invariably best to first engage your new partner on a small, self-contained project. This will enable you to see how they work and what you need to do, with relatively little risk. If the initial engagement is good, you can incrementally increase the volume and complexity of the work given.

9 Thoroughly test the delivered solution

24 hours after fully deploying your new software is no time to find out that your offshore developers solution is not fit for the purpose it was produced. Always allow plenty of project time and resources to thoroughly test and validate the development meets your business requirements, before deploying the solution into production.

10 Always review projects upon completion

Together, you've done it. The system is fully deployed and working well. And the users seem to like it! Now is the time to review your recent experiences by undertaking a 'Lessons Learned' appraisal to identify 'What went well?' and 'What needs improvement?' These lessons will help you to develop your offshore team's performance on any future projects.

Most importantly, give recognition to your offshore team when they've done well. Celebrate success and build on the good working relationships you are developing together.