By Jerry Loza

As companies try to get the most for their information technology dollar, it seems the conversation inevitably leads to the merits of offshore services. It should be no surprise that there are both advantages and disadvantages to using offshore resources for some, or all, of your IT needs. A brief treatment of the factors involved is not likely to influence whether your company outsources to offshore. But acquainting yourself with the various aspects of offshoring will prepare you for what to expect and help you be more effective in your interactions.

Note: "Offshore" is broad in its implications and can cover many cultures and types of relationships. For simplicity, we will consider the situation of a United States-based company offshoring the programming portion of its project to India.

1 The time difference is good

When you are sleeping, work can continue on the other side of the world. At 9:30 PM Eastern Standard Time on the east coast, your colleagues in Bangalore will be arriving to work at 8:00 AM their time. The design problems you have been mulling over during your workday can be bundled up and shipped off for the offshore team. They can continue their development work, while you get a good night's sleep.

For this to work, of course, there must be good coordination and processes. In fact, it will require more coordination than you might realize. However, if you come up with a process that works effectively, you can leverage the time differential for an operation that runs day and night.

2 The time difference is not good

Different parts of a project's life cycle require different levels of communication. With a relatively narrow window during which the workdays of India and the United States overlap, it can be difficult getting the answers you need when you need them. When that happens, a question that can be answered in five minutes by a colleague in the next cubicle might take until the next day. In fact, a one-day turnaround might be optimistic. If your problem or question is not understood, the back and forth can result in days passing before a problem is resolved -- a disastrous situation for a project-critical issue.

Fortunately, the problems associated with an offshore time difference can be mitigated to some degree. The work schedules off shore can be shifted later, and/or the work in the States can be pushed up to increase the time for interactions. A 7:00 AM meeting may not be the way you would like to start the day, but your offshore counterpart may not be especially thrilled about staying late, either. The good news is that you really need to do this only when the need arises and not throughout the entire project.

3 Cultural communication differences can create confusion

This probably is not true of everyone in India, but there does seem to be a tendency to avoid giving negative responses. And if you're dealing with junior individuals, they may not speak up on an issue without permission by a supervisor.

"Yes" is a word you are likely hear quite a bit. If you ask your offshore counterparts if they can have a task completed by the end of business tomorrow, and they say "Yes," you may not have received the response you think. While you think you heard "Yes, it will be done," they are more likely saying "Yes, I understand" or "Yes, I'll do my best." Understand this subtly of communication, and things will go much smoother.

4   They have a life too

I have, unfortunately, witnessed an attitude in the United States in which offshore resources were viewed as slave labor. I don't think that those situations were the result of conscious thought or mal-intent. But being out of sight and somewhat out of mind, offshore can start to become a faceless dumping ground for as much as you can throw at them. That is just plain wrong on many levels.

Your colleagues offshore have families, lives, and bills to pay just like you do. Treat them like you would a team member in the next room. Do this, and you will have the foundation for a healthy, effective team. Besides being the right thing to do, it makes for better collaboration and is simply good business.

5   High turnover is a problem

The India IT job market is plagued with high turnover. I have seen figures ranging from 20 to 50 percent. You need to be aware that the person you are working with today may not be the person you will be working with tomorrow. Further, your current team may not have been there very long.

This represents a huge potential for knowledge loss and an overall low level of expertise with your system. Be prepared for it and manage it as best you can.

6   Different life/business experiences mean different assumptions

You know how your users respond to situations and what their work environment is like. Your offshore team probably does not. Whether it's how an input screen is designed or the way your users utilize reports, you will probably need to be painfully specific in your design because your assumptions will likely be different from those made offshore. Those workers are not inexperienced; they have just had *different* experiences.

7   Things may get lost in translation

A number of offshore team members I have worked with spoke better English than some of their American counterparts. That said, you will probably find that there are differences in the more British English they are using in India as compared to American English. Even everyday expressions may come off sounding very strange when heard by a foreign ear.

This does not mean you have to worry about what you say or choose your words extra carefully. What it does mean is that you should not assume everything you are saying is being immediately understood. Just as you might wait until after a conversation to look up a word you didn't understand, your offshore team may be doing the same with parts of your speech.

8   Good in one thing does not mean good in all

Like any other IT shop -- or any other business, for that matter -- skills and expertise may be specialized. Just because the offshore group is well known for its programming prowess doesn't mean that it's capable of creating a test script you would dare show your quality control person.

First, make an honest assessment of the team's capabilities. Then capitalize on the strengths and compensate for the weaknesses, just like you would for anyone else.

9	## Remote communication is the norm

When you're on opposite sides of the globe, face-to-face meetings just are not going to happen, at least not very often. This is something you will just need to get used to. Sure, you have been on conference calls and have had your share of meetings via e-mail, but when working with offshore, be prepared for nearly all of your contact being done by remote means.

I would be remiss if I did not share that the most successful offshore projects I have been on have had some degree of onshore presence. Even having a single person who can be your point of contact can make all the difference in the world. Frankly, I believe there is no substitute for some face-to-face contact. With so much of our understanding coming from nonverbal communication, any effort spent to have some face-to-face contact will not be wasted.

10	## Hidden costs are likely

In spite of the distances between the parties, communication still must happen. That will mean telephone calls, telephone conferences, Web-based meetings, and possibly video conferences. All of this is an additional cost to your project. And if you follow the advice above by having someone onsite as a point of contact, the costs will skyrocket. Make sure everyone understands that these costs will be there. Note, however, that these costs are small compared to the costs to the project of not being well connected.

Summary

Every project has its challenges. Having part of your team on the other side of the world only amplifies them. But if you heed the factors described above, there is no reason the experience can't be an interesting and positive one for everyone on the project.

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