

Human Infrastructure 84: Contractors As Tools, Not Scapegoats



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Contractors As Tools, Not Scapegoats

By Ethan Banks

If you've hired IT contractors for a project, you may be tempted to hand off as much work as possible to them. After all, they're there because you lack time, expertise, or both. Doesn't it make sense to unload as much as you can on them?

No. A contractor is temporary help that doesn't understand your business like you do. They'll do their best, but their job is to bring a project to life--not define the project.

Your Project Requires Your Attention

When you hire a contractor to build infrastructure or create an application, that contractor needs to know what the business requires. Information technology is fussy, so the details have to be right.

When details are wrong, the product might not work. Even working products might not function as you'd like if you assume the details will take care of themselves. A contractor doesn't think like you do and won't make the same practical or aesthetic decisions you would.

You abdicate your responsibility if you let the contractor you brought in "go for it". When the project is done, you're the one who will support whatever you've ended up with. You've got to stay on top of the project.

Be Specific--Details Matter

When working with a contractor on the nitty-gritty of a project, provide reasonably specific guidelines. I'm not suggesting that you tell the contractor how to do their job. You'll incur additional costs if you micromanage a contractor because your over-involvement will result in more hours for them to get their work done.

So rather than define a process for the contractor to follow, define in detail what the result should look like. This gives the contractor a clear target to aim for. It also gives you something to point back to if the result is not what you expected.

Ask For Second Opinions

IT contractors are rightfully viewed as experts, especially if they are highly certified and bill a big hourly rate. To make the most of having the smart, pricey contractor around, ask them questions.

Which firewall? Which NMS? Heard about any problems with this model of phone? Kinda hate my ISP, any thoughts? The contractor might offer their insights and recommendations.

However, contractor recommendations are not action items. Instead, use the information as data to help you make a decision. Don't just assume that "they must know" and impulsively act on a contractor's advice. You must also understand your contractor's alliances; they might get extra dollars for selling one solution over another.

Second opinions are helpful. Gather as many of them as you can. Use your Google-fu.

Understand Who You're Getting Handed Off To

When you first meet with a firm you might outsource to, they'll send the brightest smiles, quickest minds, and broadest experience. The first impression will be fantastic. These folks will understand your problem and put together a proposal that makes sense.

However, once the project kicks off, you might not see any of those people again. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but you do need to understand who you're getting handed off to.

Let's say you're managing an application project. What if the coding is handed off to a dev on the other side of the globe who is rarely available in your timezone and doesn't speak your native language very well? Is that okay? It might be, but it might not be. You need to set those expectations ahead of time.

Tools, Not Scapegoats

As a younger man, I repaired my cars. Completing a repair often required special tools--the difference between success and failure. For example, I once broke off a spark plug in a cylinder head, requiring a special reverse threaded tapping tool to extract the broken bit of metal from the engine.

The right way to view a contractor is as a tool--the right tool to get a job done. Too often, contractors are seen as scapegoats if a project goes sideways. That's wrong.

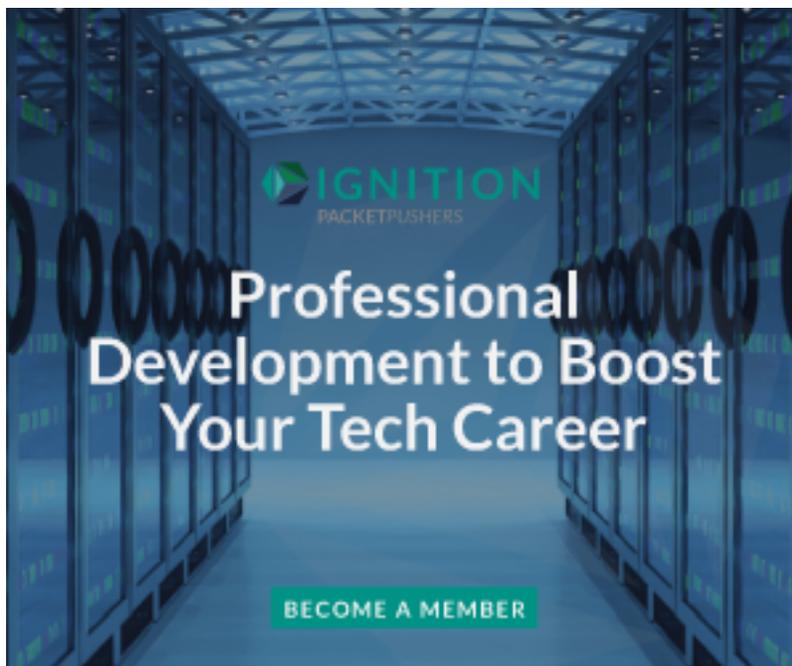
Contractors should never be someone to blame because you didn't keep up with the project. You must wield tools properly to get the job done.

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Internets Of Interest

All sorts of Internet flotsam and jetsam washes up on our shores. Here's a few that caught our attention.

AT&T promised lower prices after Time Warner merger—it's raising them instead - Ars Technica

How about that? Despite claiming to a federal judge that its Time Warner acquisition would allow AT&T to lower TV prices, the company recently announced it was raising the price of DirectTV by \$5 per month, according to a piece in Ars Technica. The price increase comes just weeks after a federal judge ruled against the U.S. Department of Justice, which sought to block AT&T's acquisition of Time Warner. The Justice Department sought to block the acquisition because it would harm consumers by reducing competition and raising prices.

[LINK](#)

3Com: Creators, Choices, and Chaos

A new book on the history of networking company 3Com is wending its way through the publishing machine. If you're interested in the history of networking, Silicon Valley startups, and how tech businesses rise and fall, you may want to check this out. The book isn't available yet, but a Web site has details and a sign-up form.

[LINK](#)

Product News

We get briefed on new products and other tech news. Sometimes they're worth writing about.

Open Daylight Update – Observations

Project is maturing to focus on those components that are used and actively developed.

[LINK](#)

Juniper To The Enterprise: We're Serious About Campus Networking

Juniper Networks wants to assure the enterprise that the company is serious about the campus. The company's [most recent product announcements](#) are meant to signal its commitment to campus networking, and hint at its longer-term strategy.

However, if Juniper really wants to be successful here, the company has to make up ground in wireless and SD-WAN.

[LINK](#)

Aruba Networks Joins The SD-WAN Crowd With SD-Branch Release

Aruba Networks has announced [SD-Branch](#), a platform that offers SD-WAN capabilities plus the ability to manage branch switches and APs—presuming you have the right gear.

However, to get the platform's full capability, you need to be all-in on Aruba products, including ClearPass, Aruba Central, Aruba APs, Aruba switches (depending on branch size), and the branch and headend SD-WAN boxes.

[LINK](#)

The End Bit

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