
Clients and QA Vendors – Optimising the Relationship

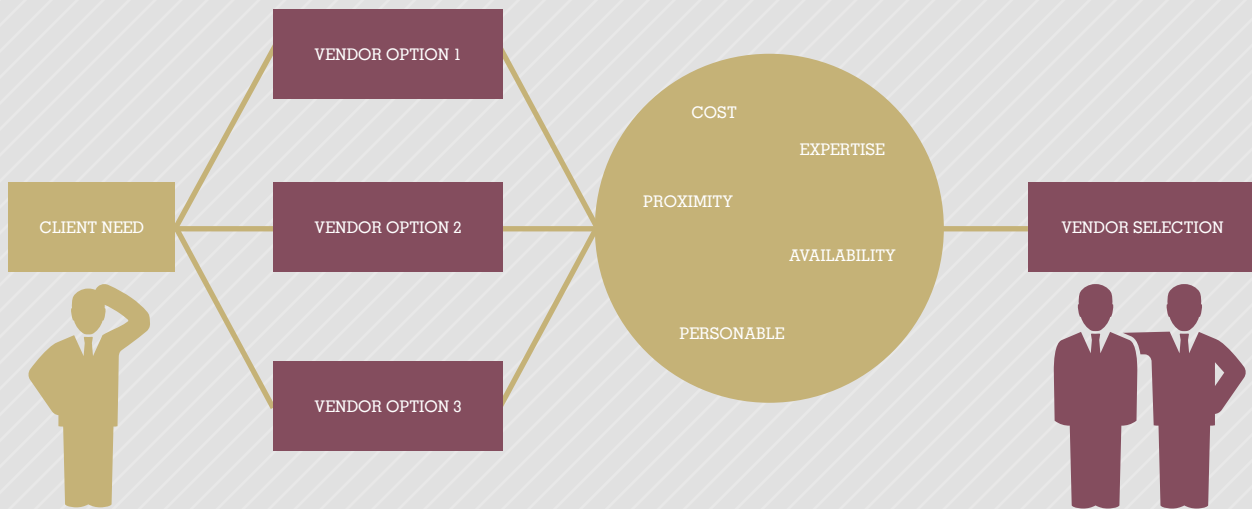
LYNSAY MCTAGGART

To produce a successful, supportive and mutually beneficial partnership, it is important to consider the perspective of all parties involved. In the case of clients and QA vendors, clarity in expectations is crucial in producing a satisfactory relationship.

The use of external vendors stems from an identified need, be it carefully planned or completely unexpected (e.g. a surprise staff departure). In evaluating a vendor relationship there are common key factors which clients will consider in their selection.



Figure 1. Top five Client considerations during Vendor selection identified from TMQA survey¹



Cost

Additional fees and hidden extras are not compatible with the budget battle. Fixed price costings help clients justify additional external resource to senior management, which vendors can produce if given accurate information from the client. Forward planning and flexibility can allow vendors to offer more options, for example differing flight prices.

For smaller companies, a vendor already known to their funding bodies as being able to provide accurate, precise costs can vastly enhance and, crucially, speed up the experience for them.

Proximity

If a client has to pick between two otherwise identical vendors, one in the science park next door to the proposed site and another hundreds of miles away, this can be a huge factor in selection. Proximity to the audit location can be a plus, for example, Japanese clients using UK vendors for audits in the UK. Location often requires a great deal of compromise and vendor willingness to utilise technology (e.g. Skype) to minimise travel expenses.

For continual support contracts, if clients are willing to share travel expenses and select mutually agreeable support dates, this can also benefit both the clients by limiting costs and the vendor by securing the business.

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Expertise

Vendor expertise can be a crucial influence when clients go through the selection process. A vendor employing a wide auditor skillset can be a valuable resource. If a client approaches a vendor who is lacking the expertise to carry out the requested work, but who is able to offer alternative solutions (e.g. recommending alternative vendors) then clients are more likely to approach them again in the future. The original vendor may also benefit from the recommended vendor reciprocating if faced with a similar situation.

Maintaining up to date expertise is important, conducting a computer systems validation audit in 2001 does not necessarily mean a vendor has expertise to conduct one in 2016. Relevant experience and current regulatory awareness are critical to the success of the relationship.

Objectivity also falls under the expertise category, with many clients actively seeking learning opportunities for their own staff during the course of an external audit. External auditors are often more able to probe areas an internal auditor may feel constricted in challenging.

Availability

Forward planning and communication are key to securing a vendor's availability. Good vendors are often booked up in advance – opening lines of communication early, even when not ready to commit can ease the process of securing support. Keeping an eye on continual support contracts, confidentiality agreements, etc. can prevent delays at the sharp end of the process.

Vendors are more likely to go the extra mile to accommodate clients that they have had positive experiences with on previous occasions, respect their work and provide as much up-front information as possible. Equally clients may re-book vendors who communicate well throughout the audit process and give constructive feedback.

Personable

A vendor displaying an impressive skillset can still fail to secure work if a client has concerns over the vendor team member's ability to engage effectively with their own staff.

Clients often ask for consultants by name if they have had a good experience working with them, but securing them can be problematic if timescales are tight or they have other commitments. Building a relationship between a vendor team and the client allows greater flexibility and responsiveness as provision of support does not depend on one individual's availability.

The importance of audit communication

Communication, or more specifically a lack of it, is one of the root causes of problems in any relationship. Effective communication can prevent all kinds of issues snowballing into catastrophes.

Good proposals > good reports

Pricing and writing an audit proposal relies on communication for information and to provide clarity on expectations and assumptions. Realistic proposals prevent conflict and timeline slippage further down the line. Expectations and timelines change if the audit scope expands, but timeous communication can be of huge benefit in producing a reliable, accurate report.

The best auditor in the world cannot hit agreed targets to a suitable depth if the auditee is not properly prepared. No auditor should be faced with turning up at a remote investigator site to conduct a routine GCP audit expecting ten enrolled subjects, only to find that recruitment has well exceeded that indicated via prior communication with the client, there is no electronic record access and no one is available to interview.

Vendors can also feel pressure to vindicate the quality and content of audits through their reports. The report-finding count may not be a reflection on the thoroughness of an audit, nor is it the most effective way of assessing performance. Committing to audit and report criteria upfront is a productive way to ensure adequate audit depth and prevent limitless areas of focus becoming a distraction. However, if a good auditor finds something worth shifting the focus for – even the best laid plans can go out of the window.

Responsibility falls on all involved in the client/vendor relationship to ensure effective, timeous information sharing (often within our own companies) and to provide constructive, targeted feedback.

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Tips & tricks

- Build a good contact and knowledge base. Nurturing good relationships with colleagues, vendors and even competitors can expand the knowledge and resource base for everyone
- Match the right client with the right vendor, robustly assess expertise before finalising proposals
- Ensure expectations are clear for all parties on audit depth and reporting requirements
- Ensure effective communication of information throughout, highlight concerns promptly
- Feedback timeously to the right people and put it to good use; regularly assess internal and external audit procedures to ensure they clearly indicate expectations and responsibilities.

REFERENCE

1. TMQA (www.TMQA.co.uk) November 2015 Report 'The Benefits and Pitfalls of Using a QA Vendor'

Biography



Lynsay started out in BioReliance's Stirling QA in 2005 before becoming a stability analyst at Charles River in 2006. In 2008 Lynsay moved to Formulation Analysis as a Study Director at Aptuit, followed by a move into scale inhibitor development in 2011 at Scaled Solutions. After a short secondment covering a QA maternity at Scaled Solutions, she returned permanently to QA at BioReliance Pentlands in 2013 before joining TMQA as a Senior QA Associate in 2015.

LYNSAY MCTAGGART