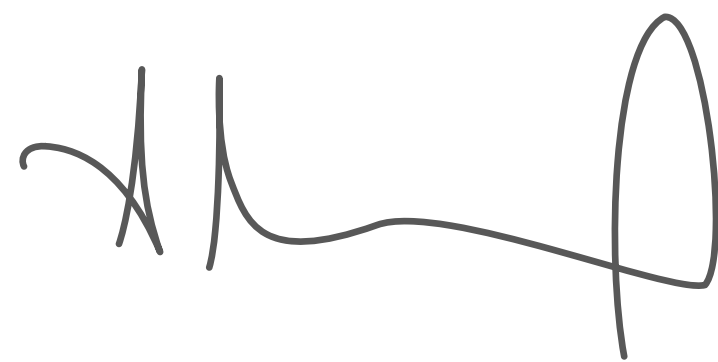


# **7 Ways** to Avoid Conflict When Outsourcing Complex Digital Projects

“

With our digital expertise spanning well over 20 years, the team at Sputnik understands the key to successful projects are ones that avoid conflict from conception to completion.



Andy Nicol, Strategy Director



Crown  
Commercial  
Service  
Supplier

Conflict can arise during the design phase, where there are as many opinions as there are stakeholders, during the development phase where comms often goes dark and clients become anxious about whether progress is being made, or the tense period as a go live date approaches.

A complex digital project is successful when a wave of relief rides over the teams, where bugs are few and far between, everyone agrees that the expectations have been met, and everything is, as if by magic, working on every device and every browser.

Imagine a project delivery where not only does everything go smoothly, but the work continues to delight as search rankings climb, conversions improve, and the infrastructure is so well thought through that scaling and feature rollouts are a breeze.

Our strategists and developers, along with feedback from a recent survey of clients past and present (and some that turned down our proposals) have put together the following document.

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# 01

## Support Written Briefs with Clarification / Chemistry Calls

Briefs often come together as the result of years of daily micro-thoughts, imagining and composing the next phase in a digital journey, followed by weeks or months of putting the ideas down into a written document.

Having been immersed in creating the vision for so long, it can feel like the hard work is done. But scheduling time to support the briefing document with clarification calls will add immeasurable value to the tendering process.

Some of the benefits are covered in more detail later in this document, such as;

- Understanding the expectation of the design phase
- Exploring user acceptance criteria
- Who is responsible for testing, and whether there is a requirement for monitoring and automated testing

These actions all help get closer to alignment on expectations, and be able to compare responses to an RFP.

As well as getting a feel for an agency's expertise in product strategy, design, engineering, security and scalability, you will also be able to gauge whether you're going to get on with their team.

Whatever the length of the engagement, mutual respect, professionalism and an approach where everyone has each other's back all makes for a pleasant experience.

More tangibly, they're important because digital projects are inherently risky, and these values are essential in predicting, avoiding, communicating and mitigating risk when things go wrong.

“

People who get on are more likely to go the extra mile for their colleagues, and if and when something does go wrong, can the team set emotions aside and get the problem resolved.

# 02

## Ensure you have realistic expectations on timescales

As one of the three factors in the Project Management Triangle, it was inevitable that timescales would make an appearance. Everything needs to start somewhere, and there's no harm in suggesting a desired Go Live date to the delivery team.

As with costs, a “finger in the air” approach can be wildly inaccurate and set unrealistic expectations. Instinctive estimates might include X days for design and Y days for build, but often fail to take into account discovery, QA, UAT, deployment. For a small project, these can double the turnaround time, and for other reasons, it's not impossible for a rough estimate of a large project to be out by a similar margin.

Unrealistic timescales can also be driven by an overly-ambitious C-suite or calendar based deadlines (“new year, new start” or end of financial year).

In order to provide a realistic timescale, even an approximate one, it's always recommended to;

- Create a Gantt chart (Google has recently launched this as a feature of Google Sheets)
- Be realistic about resource availability
- At Sputnik, we normally itemise deliverables under the following headings;

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 01 Discovery  | 05 Backend / Features / Forms / Third Party Integrations |
| 02 Technical Set Up / Server Configuration                                    | 06 Automated tests                                       |
| 03 Design (List out the required page templates / stages in the user journey) | 07 End to End Testing                                    |
| 04 Front End Development (Some designs are more complicated than others)      | 08 Deployment  |



Key to avoiding conflict are;

- Start with a realistic project plan.
- Monitor key milestones along the way.
- Try not to let diligent project monitoring turn into micro-managing. If milestones are being met (to the agreed standards), give the delivery team room to breathe.
- Foster a no-blame culture so that the project team are confident they can bring anything that jeopardises the project plan to your attention.
- Keep a clear channel of communication up as well as down. If the project is deviating from the plan, keep the senior team informed on the reason why, what can be done about it, and to what extent the Go Live might be delayed.
- If final delivery is to be pushed back, give the project team time to explore the potential for a staged delivery.



# 03

## De-Risking Pricing

Despite being the most heavily weighted item in the decision matrix, price is often presented as a single line of text at the bottom of page 56.

In fact, zoom in on cost for a moment and a number of questions are revealed that are worth spending some time on.

### Recognising True Cost

It's sometimes helpful to view estimating from a Project Management perspective - what are the deliverables, and what resources will I need to deliver this project. If you then apply some per item, you get a figure.

As even the most reliable crystal balls won't predict everything, there will inevitably be requirements that come to light as the project progresses, which will, in turn, impact cost.

Unfortunately, opportunity for cost reductions are extremely rare. Nobody gets part way into a project only to find that half the work has already been done.

While no budgets are infinite, it's important to be realistic about the true cost of a project, and advisable to have some contingency set aside so any surprises can be accommodated with minimum fuss.



### Key to avoiding conflict are;

- If the cost proposed by the preferred partner is too high, have an open conversation about whether you can reduce the deliverables, or they can sharpen their pencil. Even if compromises are made, the outcome will likely be better.
- While many projects start with the brief and attempt to work out a cost, sometimes it's helpful to start with a budget and explore what can be delivered. And the best solution normally comes from oscillating between cost and deliverables a few times, after which all parties have become clear on precisely what's being delivered, and at a cost that's acceptable.
- Adopt the charging model most appropriate for the project.
- If something looks too good to be true, it usually is.

# 03

## De-Risking Pricing

### Charging Models

Most agencies will be willing to accommodate a number of options for remuneration, each with their own merits in different circumstances

- **Fixed Cost**

- Large fixed cost projects might necessitate a paid discovery and scoping phase in order to determine the cost of delivery
- Possibility for conflict if scope of work contains insufficient detail, or cultural expectations regarding quality are not aligned
- Advisable to have some form of change process should requirements deviate from the original plan

- **Retainer**

- Useful where repeated, predictable deliverables are required, such as website maintenance, monthly strategy meetings, or project management as part of a T&M project
- Commitment to ongoing fees often attracts a discount on standard rates and / or priority service
- Can be frustrating if relied on for ad-hoc changes if requirements exceed the agreed value of the retainer

### £ Charging Models

The following factors can be so influential on the success of a project that even “good value” is hard to determine even with wildly different day rates.

(The most extreme case we have experienced involved an offshore partner who was instructed on a T&M basis with a day rate 12% of the UK supplier. After a lengthy and painful process, the final cost through the offshore supplier was over 9 times the fixed cost option proposed by the UK team.)

# 03

## De-Risking Pricing

- **Time & Materials**

- Agree guidelines about how time and cost is logged and reported (eg. Weekly timesheets)
- It's easy to overspend, so where Agile doesn't demand that deliverables are completed in a Sprint, try and encourage some accountability to deliver items in a timely fashion.

- **Pot of Hours**

- Regular payment, similar to retainer, but triggered when time booked is used up instead of fixed time periods
- Useful for ad-hoc work, especially lots of small requirements, removing the admin tasks of formal estimates and raising purchase orders.
- Maintain a backlog of tickets (possibly with T-shirt sizing)

- **Comparing Day Rates**

It's only possible to make a like for like comparison if all other considerations are the same. In relation to digital projects, these include;

- Productivity of the team
- Experience and expertise
- Attention to detail / getting things right first time
- Approach to ensuring code is secure, scalable and reliable
- Diligence in delivering a project in such a way that it's lifespan is extended

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# 03

## De-Risking Pricing

- **A La Carte Pricing**

There are a number of reasons why a cost breakdown is beneficial to everyone involved;

- Transparency – allowing the buyer to recognise how the cost has been calculated, and therefore reduce distrust that the supplier is overcharging
- Ensuring the requirements are being resourced adequately – as well as having visibility that all of the requirements factor in the estimate, there is also an opportunity to review the resources allocated for each deliverable allowing for an open discussion as to whether the agreed standards are being met.
- Managing change requests – the table of costs is a useful reference throughout the project to resolve queries about what was in scope, whether resources can be swapped from a requirement being descoped etc

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# 04

## Give the design phase enough time

If a project goes live with a design that's significantly ... sub-optimal ... and there are murmurs of a "re-skin", it might mean throwing away a lot more than the Figma files.

The concept of "re-skinning" often under-estimates the effort involved in implementing a new design.

The HTML / CSS is unique to the previous design, and will need to be re-coded, and the new templates will need to be implemented into the Content Management System.

With luck, you might not need to reconfigure / migrate the content in the CMS, although if the new designs use new modular components, even the content might need re-architecting.

Depending on the maturity of the business, design assets may not be available. It might be assumed that "designing a website" means laying out existing assets, but if images, illustrations, icons and videos don't exist, the designer is left with no jigsaw pieces to complete the puzzle.

Reliance on UI kits, icon packs and stock illustrations such as Humaaans can result in "me too" looking designs.

The most impacting and memorable designs will include bespoke icons, illustrations, hero banner campaigns and explainer videos, as well as expert guidance on UX and UI.



### Key to avoiding conflict are;

- Designs are the architect's plans for a digital project. Whatever is drawn gets built.
- Accept if there is more to be done than originally hoped. Be honest about the need to create new design assets and the number of complexity of page templates.
- Provide enough budget in the project plan to ensure the design phase can be adequately resourced.
- Design around real content, not Lorem Ipsum and placeholders.
- Deliverables should include a minimum of desktop (sometimes "large desktop" and "small desktop") and mobile for each template - don't expect to leave developers to make design decisions.
- First impressions count, but so does usability. "Lean forward" and critique the detail when feeding back on concepts, as well as "lean back" and consider the overall design for its aesthetics.
- Give time in the project plan for ideas to marinate. Designs often improve if designers and product owners have days or weeks to allow inspiration to flourish.
- Getting design right in the design phase can save huge rebuild costs later.

Clarification calls with an expert product team are a perfect time to run through the points above and illustrates why comparing quotes for a "website with x pages" is so open to interpretation.

# 05

## Understand the importance of strong technical delivery

With so much else to focus on, the technical elements of a digital project often suffer from being “out of sight, out of mind”.

Although conflict can arise from the UI designs, these are relatively easy to avoid given sufficient time and expertise around brand, UX and Accessibility. These are easy issues to spot early, and can be assessed as resolved with a high degree of confidence.

In practice, a lack of consideration for, or investment in the technical aspects are responsible for most of, and the most serious of things that beset a project.

In this context, technical delivery doesn't simply refer to “technical seo” such as semantic HTML, it refers to scalable infrastructure, including devops, CDNs, message queues, automated testing, static site generators.

This is the domain of the highly experienced developer, and requires a truly multi-disciplined team, rarely offered by a full service agency.

In terms of tangible ROI, case studies from Sputnik have demonstrated search rankings for entire keyword portfolios lifted by as many as 15 places, and conversion improved by 20% directly due to work done under the bonnet to improve the technical performance of applications.

Conflict about poor technical performance can be avoided by ensuring it's on the agenda right from the start, and sufficient checks are in place during and after delivery to ensure the acceptance criteria are met.

### Symptoms of poor technical delivery include;

- Noticeable alignment issues in the browser
- Slow page load times
- Drop in SEO rankings a few weeks after launch
- Data breach / malicious attack / / failure of penetration test
- Website goes offline / crashes
- Permanent or intermittent drop in user conversion

Some bad practices have become commonplace, such as the inappropriate use of pre-coded templates, CSS frameworks such as Bootstrap or Tailwind, reliance on poorly coded CMS plugins, bloating of Google Tag Manager with excessive scripts, or poorly implemented A/B testing are just the tip of the iceberg.



# 06

## Understand how you will communicate with your external team

Disagreements happen when objective and expectations are misaligned, or when large changes happen unexpectedly.

Both of these can be avoided by having a defined, professional and respectful approach to managing communications.

The obvious place to start is to make sure costs, deliverables (including quality) and timescales (with milestones) are realistic, agreed and documented. The realistic bit is important if a project has any chance of going smoothly.

Whatever percentage the experts think it is these days, enough of a message happens inside the recipient's head for it to be important. The message stands a better chance of being both sent and received as intended if attitudes are optimistic, helpful, professional and respectful.

It's better to deal with problems while they're still small, so plan for regular standups. These can vary from once a day to once a week, depending on the nature of the project. They are an opportunity to share any concerns and address them early.

Having these regular check-ins also helps establish a culture of accountability. Knowing they're in the diary encourages the teams to keep an eye on the project plan, and come to the meetings prepared.

Confirm everything in writing with as much detail as necessary, whether that's in a ticket or just a short email, to confirm the requirements and impact.

It's also important to manage any change in requirements diligently. Gather any change requests in sufficient detail, estimate the impact on time and cost, and document it in the backlog. This will provide decision makers with the information they need to decide whether it is important enough to be prioritised in the current work stream, or to be bundled with other elements into a future phase of delivery.

Some agencies ask that all communication goes through the account / project manager to make sure the risk of time and cost overruns are managed.

At Sputnik, we're more relaxed about clients dealing directly with designers and developers. This can increase the cadence of a project, but there is a risk that developer time is cannibalised by meetings, ad hoc changes impact the delivery time (a few small changes of a day each quickly add up to a week, and before long, an argument) and frustration if the rest of the team are still working to the original plan. Keep others in the loop via email, and add any clarification to the backlog.

- Ask small awkward questions. It helps set an expectation of professionalism and accountability, and ultimately prevents the need to ask large awkward questions.
- Who are you dealing with? Devs? PMS?
- Always confirm things in writing.
- Clear, open and defined channels
- Natural, not forced (arduous)

# 07

## Deciding on Quality vs Quantity

The fundamental principle is that with a fixed budget or ambitious timescales, there comes a decision to either try and deliver an extensive scope with corners cut, or a reduced scope of a high standard.

For most projects, the greatest benefit is achieved by setting a high bar in terms of quality.

As mentioned earlier, design and technical are critical factors in the long term success of a digital project.

We come across ideas that contradict this advice, such as building out hundreds of content pages for SEO purposes, and for the budget to allow for this, it is necessary to compromise the effort put into design and code.

The impact of this approach is that the poor code quality reduces the search engines' likelihood to rank the content highly, immediately contradicting the very objective. Additionally, the poor design means even if you did see an increase in organic traffic, conversion would be low.

In this example, it would still be better to have a delightful design, coded to high standards, and roll that template out to a lower number of higher priority content pages.

This would likely see a better ROI even with a lower number of content pages, and you would be in a strong position to confidently roll out future content with relative ease.

“

Generally speaking, it's better to be uncompromising in design (both UI and creation of memorable and motivating campaign artwork), code and hosting infrastructure, which lay the foundations for secure, reliable and scalable future. Whether you go for quality or quantity, it's important to agree the approach from the outset.



# Want to avoid these mistakes?

Book a call with one of our team to learn about how to outsource a complex web development project.

- ✔ Preparing a supplier friendly briefing document that gets results.
- ✔ How to avoid unrealistic timescales and budgets.
- ✔ How to choose on value.
- ✔ Where and when to cut corners on design.
- ✔ How to make sure people you like can also deliver
- ✔ Manage risk and sleep better through respectful working relationships

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