Tackling Your Next Big Interoperability Project

eBook

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The Challenge

Healthcare CIOs and technical managers face a constant influx of interoperability challenges. It's been going on for years, and there's no sign of slowing down.

If you have the budget and the mandate, you've probably built an internal team to support your organization's ongoing integration needs. But how do you handle a new project that your internal resources don't have the bandwidth or the skills to take on?

This eBook will help you identify when it's time to bring in a partner to help you stay ahead of your interoperability demands, and how to choose an engagement model that best fits your short-term and long-term objectives.

Taking Stock of Your Project Pipeline

Interoperability projects come in all shapes and sizes, and can be born out of a number of tactical and strategic drivers, including:

- System migrations and upgrades
- Evolving technical standards
- Government incentives and industry reform
- New partnerships, mergers, and acquisitions

One common thread running through all of these drivers is the ongoing transition from fee-for-service to accountable care and population health management. If your organization isn't already moving down this path, chances are you soon will be.

When you look ahead to the next year, or the next three years, what do you see on your organization's interoperability roadmap? What are the critical projects you'll have to deliver to support your business goals, put better information in the hands of providers, and improve quality of care?

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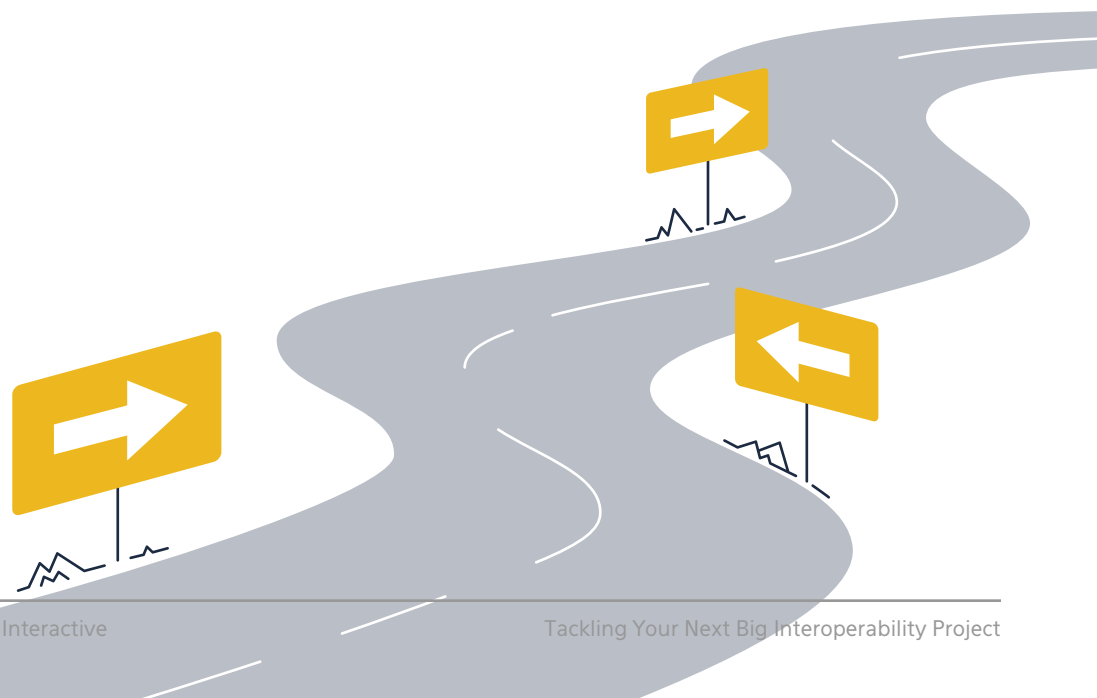
Assessing Your Internal Capability

In many organizations, the internal staff has its hands full putting out fires and keeping everything running smoothly. Depending on the size of your team, you probably have some additional capacity to take on new projects – at least, the ones you knew about during your last budgeting cycle.

But when priorities shift, even a small project can create a sudden spike in your team's workload. For large projects, all the advance notice in the world doesn't necessarily mean there's a business justification for increasing your permanent headcount.

And if you're bringing in a new technology – whether it's an EMR or a new interoperability platform – there's usually a significant knowledge gap to overcome. Success or failure can depend on knowing what you don't know.

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Project Execution

A new project with well-defined scope boundaries can be a great fit for a partner with the expertise to get the work done quickly and hand it off to your team. Giving the project to your partner is a good way to keep your internal resources focused on their own responsibilities.

The larger the project, the more important it is to keep your staff at least somewhat involved from the beginning, to make sure your partner is getting the technical, business, and clinical direction they need. You also want to position and prepare your technical team to take the completed work in-house once the project wraps up.

This is especially true when you're introducing a new technology – don't let your partner work in a silo, or you could be setting yourself up for a difficult transition when they're done.

Even if you feel you're already well-staffed to handle your next big project, give serious consideration to a partner who's willing to provide short-term help establishing a technical architecture and best practices so that your team starts on a solid footing and is set up for long-term success.

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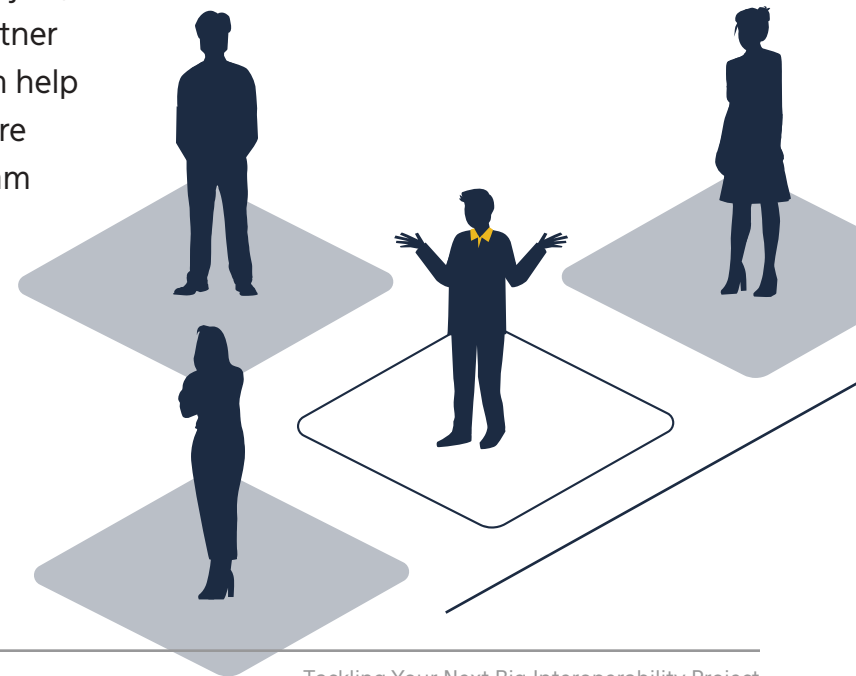
Staff Augmentation

Often the most expedient way to handle an increase in your team's workload is to bring on one or more resources in a staff augmentation capacity. This option becomes even more attractive if your attempts to hire permanent staff are being slowed down by organizational red tape or difficulty finding the right skills match.

While independent contractors can fill a specific short-term need, they often lack the flexibility to take on projects outside their sweet spot – and you don't want to be paying a contractor to learn on the job. It's a similar problem with staffing firms that simply present candidates from their contractor database, without offering any lasting value for the fees they charge.

That's why you're better off with a partner who truly understands the business of healthcare IT, and whose resources are full-time employees backed by an entire team that specializes in the work you're trying to accomplish. A firm that goes beyond the traditional "body shop" model can provide you with continuity, peace of mind, and the ability to flex up, down, or sideways as your resource needs and skill requirements evolve over time.

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Building Internal Expertise

If you want your internal team to achieve true mastery of a new technology, sending them to vendor training probably won't be enough. Take advantage of the opportunity to instill best practices and gain hands-on expertise in the context of your own environment by choosing a partner who's committed to passing on their knowledge.

The right partner is going to do more than just document their work – they'll take the time to provide detailed build scripts, code walkthroughs, and hands-on mentoring for your internal staff.

As your team gains confidence, expect your partner to hand off responsibility in three successive stages of increasing complexity:

- System and database administration
- Interface development
- Functional enhancements / custom application development

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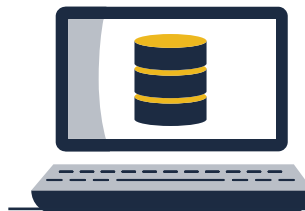
Database Administration   Interface Development   Application Development

Ongoing Support

When your project is done, you'll need to make sure the completed work is well supported. Some projects will dovetail neatly into your existing support plan, while others are going to need a plan of their own.

If your internal team has the bandwidth and skills to take on the additional support burden, it's often the best approach to bring the responsibility in-house. That way, if you still need outside help, the money you spend will go toward new development and other challenging projects where the expense is justified.

But in some cases, the most cost-effective approach might be to let your partner manage the environments, functional components, and interfaces they've built for you. Look for a plan that keeps your monthly maintenance costs at a predictable level while also factoring in the need for occasional spikes in activity, like upgrades.

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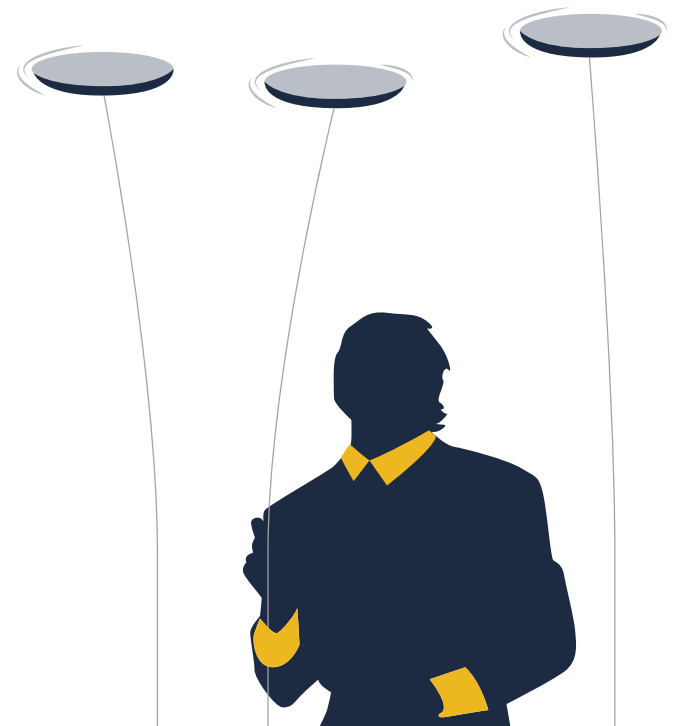
Conclusion

When the demands on your team exceed your existing capacity, your ability to meet your organization's critical business goals is going to depend on finding a partner who can not only address the short-term resource crunch but, more importantly, set you up for long-term success. That means:

- Instilling a solid architecture and best practices from the start
- Building the skills and self-sufficiency of your internal team
- Supporting the completed solution over the long haul
- Helping you focus your outside spending where the cost is truly justified

For your next interoperability project, make sure you choose a partner who's committed not only to getting your current project done right, but leaving you and your team that much better prepared to take on the next one.

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