

The Challenges with Integration

Factors to Consider When Integrating Event Technology



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Data Integration: Push, Pull or Tug-Of-War?

“...Customization is required in order to improve the conference experience, both from a planning perspective as well as for the attendees. [This] often requires integration between multiple vendors...”

The Difficulties of Integration

With over 300 registration companies in the event industry and an increasing number of other technology vendors, features and functionality are requiring a closer examination by meeting planners and show organizers in order to determine how it might suit their business needs.

Many event professionals are realizing that the elusive goal of finding one vendor to provide all event technology services isn't possible. So they must consider how event data can communicate over multiple vendors in order to achieve business goals. The challenge is a wide arrange of goals for different meetings and events. Consequently, there is not a “one-size-fits-all” solution. Therefore customization is required in order to improve the conference experience, both from a planning perspective as well as for the attendees. This customization often requires integration between multiple vendors that results in two possible scenarios:

- Collection and transfer of data that cannot be received or managed by the other vendor because it is not a process they support, or...
- Data sharing that doesn't achieve the desired outcome.

As a point of reference, our company, CadmiumCD, is an event technology vendor that specializes in the online collection and distribution of data for conferences. Our company is often asked to integrate with either registration companies or association management software in order to achieve a variety of business goals.

Here are some suggestions and guidelines to consider when working with event technology vendors to achieve your business goals.

Besides the obvious challenge of working with many different registration and association management software companies, there are a wide variety of business needs that can be requested, all under the umbrella heading of “integration”. Integrations between companies are often referenced as a “push” or a “pull” transfer – where one technology vendor is sending, or “pushing” information to another vendor's database, or the data that exists in the database is being extracted, or “pulled” by a different vendor.

The pathway that exists between the two technology vendors to exchange information is often referred to as a “bridge”. Understanding what type of integration is needed, whether it's a push, a pull or both and the frequency of that data transfer can affect the complexity and cost of the work.

The Business Case for Integration

“The variety of companies, level of expertise and complexity of the business requirements for the integration can affect the cost and difficulty of the data transfer...”

The Business Case for Integration

Integration is a generic, unspecific word that can cover a broad variety of business needs that an event organizer might work to complete. Examples of integration projects include:

Speaker/Presentation Integrations:

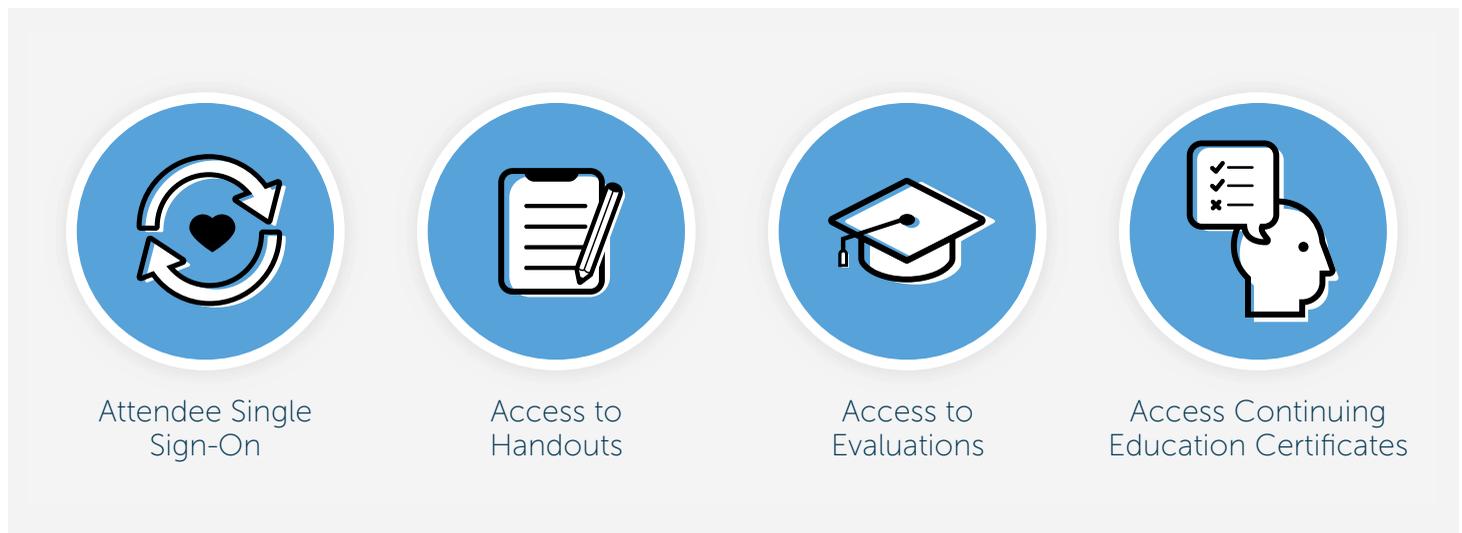
- Conference registration before a speaker can submit an abstract. Integration requires verification that the speaker has registered before an abstract can be submitted.
- Feedback mechanism to speakers on their evaluation results if the registration company is providing surveys.
- Tracking registered speakers.
- Information about session pricing, room capacities for separate ticketed events/workshops provided to the registration company.

Exhibitor Integrations:

- Pricing of booths and sponsorship options is often tiered based on membership levels. Providing integration between association management software and the exhibitor/ sponsorship portal is required in order for the proper pricing to display.
- Event planners seek the ability to track how many exhibitors have registered per booth. They enforce limits based on booth size and extract additional revenue based on how many extra booth personnel registrations are needed. Integration between the booth size and associated number of registrations is beneficial for the exhibitor management company and the registration company.

Attendee Integrations:

Ideally, in order to reduce attendee confusion, one ID number is used throughout the entire registration process and the subsequent verification steps in order to achieve a variety of goals includes:



The variety of companies, level of expertise and complexity of the business requirements for the integration can affect the cost and difficulty of the data transfer and the subsequent burden for attendees, speakers, and exhibitors to complete the process once the information is verified.

The Cost of Integrations

"The cost of a programmer's time can be significant, as skilled individuals with a database background are diverted from working on the company's own products."

The Difficulties of Integration

Currently there is a huge demand for integration, which can require significant time and resources. Event technology companies frequently allocate resources to work on integration projects, resulting in a direct cost as well as an lost opportunity cost for that company. With the proliferation of "free" IT services in the technology market offered by companies such as Google and DropBox, it may seem that server space and data transfer is trivial.

That is far from being the case.

The cost to operate our CadmiumCD servers is now twice the monthly expense of our physical office space that houses over forty employees. A programmer is needed to work on integration, as web services often require "mapping" the data. As an example, mapping tells the connecting databases that a "zip code" column in one database is the same data column as "postal code" in the second database. This effort is often executed on a large scale, where there can be hundreds of custom fields involved. The cost of a programmer's time can be significant, as skilled individuals with a database background are diverted from working on the company's own products.



This lost opportunity cost can delay feature additions or improvements resulting in lost business for an event technology company.

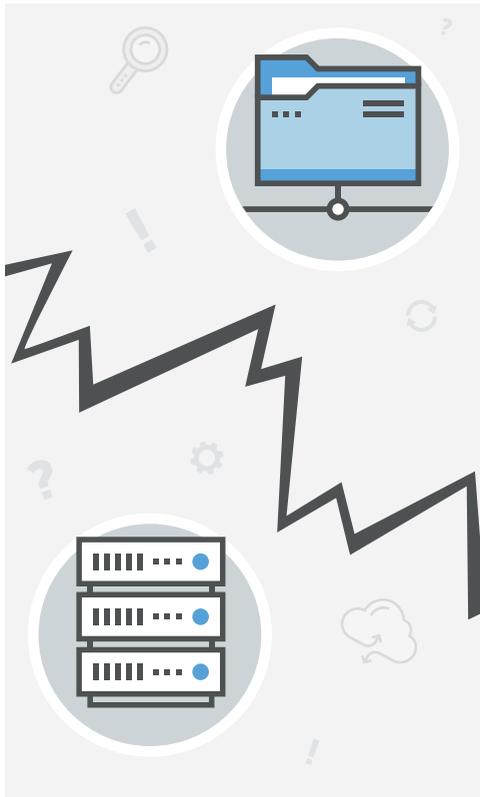
Other intangible costs that can be overlooked relates to data ownership. Membership lists and event attendee data has considerable value to the exhibitors and sponsors at an event. If that data is being shared through web services, how is it impacting the value of that data?

Many registration companies subsidize the cost of their services by selling that data back to the exhibitors, often through lead retrieval services or list rental agreements. If that data is then shared with other vendors who may be providing disruptive services such as RFID technologies or apps with lead retrieval and beacon technology, how is that approach affecting the price of the services being provided by the registration companies dependent on this revenue?

Finally, the event planner must dedicate resources to facilitate communication between vendors to ensure accurate communications of business goals to all involved vendors. This adherence and supervision places another burden on internal organizational IT services or requires another third party to work with all the different vendors. Expecting the event technology vendors to contact each other and figure out the data transfer without technical guidance from the event team could result in delays and inefficiencies.

Data vs File Transfers

There is a difference in effort and computing needs between sharing data versus sharing files. Data includes all text, such as abstracts, session details, exhibitor names, attendee information and the multitude of other data that can be collected and shared. Files are different than text and can often include speaker photos, exhibitor logos, and handouts/presentations. Files often are transferred via a weblink to a specific document or image, configured to meet the requirements of the receiving vendor, and hosted on a separate URL. Understanding who is hosting these files, and what formatting for size and data structure is needed can contribute to the success of this transfer.



Dataquakes

Integration projects are often a moving target, as clients switch to different vendors based on their size or have different language or business needs for one event but not the other. Part of the challenge that is fairly unique to the meetings industry is resistance to standardization, where something as “simple” as the role of a “presenter” can be described in hundreds of different ways, including speaker, author, presenting author, primary author, co-author, chair, discussant, and moderator to name just a few. Despite the complexity of the amount of data and the multitude of variables associated with it, once the integration is established between the vendors it is fairly trivial to maintain that bridge... until a dataquake.

A dataquake is the disruption of existing integration processes that operate between the same vendors due to new business rules, changes in the database structure or security standards which invalidate previous bridges.

Two client examples highlight the potential for “dataquakes”:

1. An existing integration was established and worked so that conference attendees could log into the mobile app and download the handouts associated with the presentations they were registered to attend. The client had three different types of registration categories: exhibition only, full conference, and one-day conference pass. The client wanted to limit attendees from downloading the full conference handouts if they had only paid for a one-day pass. They also wanted to limit the one-day pass attendees to access just the handouts for the specific day that they had registered to attend. The dataquake occurred when it was realized that the registration company had collected the registration fees under the “one day pass” restriction but neglected to capture which day. The integration was unable to work as the client envisioned.
2. Server upgrades were made due to other business needs, such as enhanced security or database software. Pre-existing integrations were affected as the server IP Addresses changed or integrations that worked previously were no longer able to communicate since upgrades are frequently incompatible with older database software. CadmiumCD recently upgraded their servers, and new IP addresses needed to be provided to clients that were using our integrations in order to provide continuity.

How to Maximize Success

Maximizing Success

So how can a meeting planner ensure that event technology vendors operate effectively together and achieve maximum business results?

1. Attempt to minimize the number of vendors sharing data. The more vendors involved, the more challenging the business rules become and the easier for problems to occur.
2. Be aware that significant time and resources are invested in making the information mapping successful. Providing clear instructions on data transfer processes and the ultimate purpose of the data transfer is critical for success.
3. Make sure that the data shared can be used by the receiving vendor to achieve business results. Realize that although one vendor may be able to collect and share information, the other vendor may not be able to receive or use it as envisioned.
4. Work with vendors who have previous experience with each other in achieving specific business goals. Ask for customer references who have used the integration bridge along with the results.
5. Allow enough time for testing before the launch of the integration. Depending on data complexity, vendor expertise, and partner compatibility, completed projects could take as long as 4-6 weeks to reach the stated business results.

About CadmiumCD



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CadmiumCD has spent the last fifteen years building technology for educational conferences and meetings. With an all-inclusive line of products and services, CadmiumCD strives to ease the conference planning and management processes for event organizers. Their fully integrated system includes abstract collection, exhibitor and speaker data management, attendee accessible websites & floor plans, mobile event applications, proceedings distribution, and A/V production.



Want More?

CadmiumCD Resources

Check out some of our awesome resources for event planners!

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