From Contracts to Collaboration: Why Automated Fare Collection Projects Depend on Partnerships, Not Paperwork

Automated Fare Collection (AFC) projects are one of the most visible initiatives that transit agencies undertake. They are highly visible both internally and externally and carry significant reputational risk if agencies stumble. While the best AFC technology creates the potential for success, strong agency-vendor relationships are what turn that potential into reality. Poor partnerships can derail projects with excellent underlying technology, while strong collaborations have salvaged projects with technical challenges. The real determinant of a successful AFC project isn't just what technology or vendor you choose, but how well you work together to implement it.

The Limits of Contracts

Traditionally, these relationships have been defined by rigid contracts. As many agencies have learned, inflexible agreements quickly show their limits. Regulations change, rider expectations evolve, and technology advances faster than a contract can adapt. The real question becomes: how can agencies and vendors move beyond “us vs. them” dynamics and towards collaborative partnerships? The answer may be that it starts earlier than anticipated.

Getting It Right from the Start

The foundation for success typically begins long before AFC vendors enter the picture. Agencies should develop clear goals, objectives, and needs, a cross-functional team with strong internal alignment, and realistic requirements and expectations. This in-depth planning and preparation can create the conditions for a strong future partnership with a vendor, creating long-term program success. Agencies should focus on five tasks as part of this strategic planning phase:

1. Goal Setting and Needs Gathering – align internal stakeholders on project goals and needs before drafting requirements. This eliminates unclear or competing objectives that create vendor confusion.

2. Industry research – understand current market capabilities and align them to operational needs. Identify where you're willing to accept a higher risk for innovation vs. where you need service-proven, widely adopted solutions.

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Ilia Bruns is a seasoned technical subject matter expert and Project Manager with extensive experience in complex software projects . At Clevor Consulting Group (CCG), she has been instrumental in researching, designing, and implementing advanced transit technology solutions. Her expertise spans project management, business analysis, requirements gathering, schedule review, stakeholder management, and solution evaluation.

Ms. Bruns has successfully delivered tailored transit solutions to clients in various locations, including Ireland, Portland, Salt Lake City, Boston, Philadelphia, Toronto, Baltimore, Minneapolis, and Indianapolis. She is currently managing SEPTA's next-generation fare collection project for CCG. Before joining Clevor, she worked at AT&T as a software tester and lead technical project manager, and later as the lead project manager for HART's Flamingo Fares™ system in Tampa Bay.

3. **Concept of Operations (ConOps)** – Develop this high-level vision for the future system's technology and operations, including a system transition approach. The ConOps is essential for aligning internal stakeholders on the future system.

4. **Requirements Development** – Author requirements that align with agency needs and what the market can deliver. Requirements should be flexible enough to accommodate AFC vendor capabilities.

5. **Agency readiness** – ensure strong leadership and organizational participation. Clearly define roles and responsibilities to ensure agency buy-in and to avoid delayed decision-making.

Many agencies partner with AFC advisors to accelerate their preparation, provide industry insights, and reduce project risk. The key is finding technical advisors who bring vast planning and implementation experience based on lessons learned and successful implementations. Firms like Clevor Consulting Group (CCG) are industry leaders in fare collection and work with agencies to help bring stakeholders together, synthesize industry research, facilitate assessments and analyses, and draft requirements that balance flexibility with organizational goals, laying a stronger foundation for long-term success.

From Procurement to Partnerships

The most successful collaborations happen when agencies and vendors see each other as partners working towards shared goals.

Several practices can help foster this collaborative culture:

- **Establish trust early** - align on shared goals at kickoff, focusing on desired outcomes rather than just contract milestones.
- **Encourage problem-solving** - establish working groups that meet regularly to surface risks and issues early. When teams can raise concerns without fear or penalty, they can focus on co-creating solutions together.
- **Foster collaboration** - use inclusive language (e.g., "project core team" instead of "vendor" and "agency") and invest in informal relationship-building that humanizes the partnership.
- **Create joint governance** - establish joint steering committees with real decision-making authority.
- **Adopt collaborative tools** - use modern tools that promote group transparency and accountability.

A trusted partner can help maintain balance in this process. CCG has often played this role, not as a decision-maker, but as a partner - keeping communication constructive, ensuring governance structures function as intended, helping both sides stay focused on long-term success rather than short-term disputes.

“Shared ownership, not rigid contracts, is the cornerstone of lasting AFC success.”

The Future of Fare Collection Depends on Partnerships

As fare collection solutions continue to evolve, technical flexibility will remain crucial. Yet technology alone doesn’t guarantee success. The projects that endure are those rooted in collaboration, trust, and shared ownership. By embracing partnerships over paperwork, agencies will find themselves better positioned to:

- Innovate and adapt more easily to future needs and rider expectations.
- Quickly solve challenges as they arise.
- Build shared ownership of the systems and outcomes.

An experienced, trusted advisor can support this dynamic, not by taking control, but by helping agencies and vendors sustain alignment under pressure. CCG’s work across many AFC projects illustrates the value of this role: an independent voice that brings industry perspective and facilitates collaboration.

Ultimately, AFC projects succeed through shared commitment to outcomes that benefit both riders and agencies.