

Independent Verification & Validation (IV&V)

Garnet River's Carl Blanchette shares five lessons learned while working more than 30 years as a contributor to child support systems

For the past 30 years, I have held child support leadership roles in both the private and public sector. As I watch the "next generation" of child support systems go full swing, a number of which I have contributed to, I can't help but think of the lessons I've learned about Independent Verification and Validation (IV&V). Here are my top five.

Lesson 1: Engage an IV&V vendor at the beginning of new system planning

Much—not all—has changed over the years. One thing that has not changed is that an IV&V vendor is generally onboarded right after the contracting of a Design, Development, and Implementation (DD&I) vendor or no later than the project's kickoff meeting. In fact, with the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) this is a regulation. This approach stems from the viewpoint that IV&V is a post-mortem look at project management. That is, it is reactive in nature and conducts project reviews semi-annually or quarterly.

Given that the true purpose of IV&V services is to verify and validate that a system will comply with its stated requirements, organizational standards, and meet expected outcomes, the time to engage an IV&V vendor is at the very beginning of the new system's planning phase. The vendor should also be brought on full time. This ensures IV&V is:

- Conducted when projects will benefit most from the input.

- Accomplished within the organization's capabilities.
- Performed respectively, with acceptance that problems are inevitable.
- Completed collaboratively, with the project team and IV&V provider solving problems together.
- Delivered with consistency, using industry standards and reliable methods and tools.
- Executed with actionable recommendations, based on clear and concise presentation of results.

This proactive approach ultimately improves the quality and success of projects, especially as they become more complex and, in the public sector, more competitive for state resources.

Lesson 2: Value the "I" in IV&V

The IV&V vendor should bring an independent perspective that is conducive to seeing things internal project teams might miss or are unable to see as clearly. Qualified vendors have years of experience constantly performing these services. In contrast, company or agency staff might execute these activities once in their career. For example, I have extensive child support systems implementation knowledge and experience. Other colleagues at Garnet River have experience in different areas. It's what I/we specialize in, and this specialized background allows for the sharing of knowledge, tools, and skills honed over many system implementation



Carl Blanchette

Senior Management Consultant
Garnet River AITG

208-661-9424

clanchette@albanyaitg.com

Carl Blanchette manages projects and contracts for health and human service programs, with an emphasis in child support enforcement. He has 30 years of experience in the industry and is recognized as a respected leader in the child support enforcement Independent Verification & Validation service market.

engagements that otherwise wouldn't be available.

This independence needs to carry forward to assessment of risks and opportunities for improvement. IV&V is not and should not be about "gotcha-auditing" or "after-the-fact observations." Neither is timely or useful. Untimely input to key project deliverables and essential artifacts can cause costly rework, as well as deflate the morale of the project team that has worked hard to meet project goals and objectives.

Proactive IV&V services promote independence by:

- Creating the ability to communicate process observations for quick feedback to project processes.

- Requiring fair and efficient quality control assessment feedback that focuses on essential management processes and positive project outcomes.

These and other quality methods and artifacts bring immediate and real-time value to the project, focusing on key project performance processes and metrics. IV&V should be a “no surprises” exercise, and by engaging a vendor early, the necessary ongoing collaboration and quality planning ensures the IV&V team fully understands the sensitive nature of the work and the goal held by project sponsors, team members, and other stakeholders. In turn, no one is surprised by the IV&V process or results.

Lesson 3: IV&V is ongoing

Through experience, I know many government agencies and private-sector organizations subscribe to a periodic IV&V approach. What this approach lacks is consistency, repeatability, and timely actions—all critical to addressing impediments to project success in real time.

The most successful IV&V engagements are ongoing, operating in small continuous improvement teams that are risk-focused with domain experience. A team that is continuously engaged and aware of project progress, activities, and challenges will provide the most expeditious and timely recommendations for improvement.

Lesson 4: Understand the regulations

Understanding regulations, especially around federal programs, provides insight into projects that rely on federal funding. During the IV&V contract term, a proactive approach provides the flexibility to quickly adapt to and navigate the complexities of changing federal guidance and standards, including new state

initiatives or timelines for system modernization. A strong IV&V partner is adept at analyzing what the changes mean for the state program and how it may impact IV&V service delivery for the project. A strong partner also has the experience and ability to “look down the road” and identify real risks—not just standard project risks that everyone encounters.

Lesson 5: IV&V must provide value

As already stated, the most important word in IV&V is “Independent.” An independent view provides an unbiased review of project activities, artifacts, and relationships. It also adds value on the behalf of all stakeholders, not just to the project director to whom all the other vendors report. This is true because IV&V vendors have no loyalty to any other vendor under contract. The sole interest is the successful execution of the project plan, which ultimately results in a cost-effective implementation of a new system. This point is the value-add. It is why IV&V should be leveraged at the outset and throughout the duration of all system modernization projects.

IV&V staff are inherently tenured in their areas of expertise, with the added benefit of being technology people. As such, an IV&V team possesses the wisdom of years of observing alternatives planned and implemented across system projects. This is beneficial because some root causes of mistakes can be traced to before other vendors come on board, and new vendors do not have the business incentive to look prior to their start to reduce the risks that derail projects. The role of the IV&V team, especially if you engage them immediately, is to identify and help avoid project-derailing landmines.

To achieve this, it is therefore a best practice to employ fulltime IV&V before the contracting of Project

Management Office (PMO), Quality Assurance (QA), and DD&I vendors. An added benefit of employing an IV&V vendor first is that the vendor has expertise in the procurement processes for procuring these services.

To conclude, project risks are reduced when care and investment is made during the planning phase of the project. Contracting an IV&V vendor at the outset ensures the independent expertise and the accountability needed to reduce project management risks and budget overruns are in place from day one.