Bridging the Communication Gap Between Schools and EdTech Companies

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My Background

- International EdTech consultant
  - Leadership consultation,
  - EdTech planning and evaluation
  - Digital Citizenship
  - Training
    http://internationaledtech.com

- Consulted with schools, MOEs, and companies on EdTech topics

- Worked as Tech Director for 15+ years

- Worked with American, IB, British, and German curricula

- Former Chair of the ISTE Board

- Led Data Systems team for new school in Saudi Arabia

- Conduct Data Audits at multiple campuses

- Blogger, Vlogger, Presenter on EdTech
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"We help all schools use technology successfully."

NEXUS

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"Schools and [companies] simply don't speak the same language when it comes to using technology to enhance teaching and learning. Even companies that are founded by former teachers find the challenge of engaging with teachers overwhelmingly complex. There are a few reasons for this."

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Let's Look Across Each Side of the Fence

Schools

- Guided by teaching and learning
- Little knowledge/experience in other sectors
- Timetable and calendar beholden
- Under developed systems evaluation and strategic experience
  - Problem or task based approaches to purchasing
  - Eye towards experimentation
- Simple budgeting and financing models
- Relational based organization

EdTech Company CEO

- Guided by strategy and goals
- Product development is constant
- Finances are modeled and evaluated regularly
- Sector knowledge is inconsistent
- View schools as clients and partners
- Sales approaches are corporate
  - Quantity, commissions, bonuses
  - Short term
- Suffer from reputational bias (and only some of them know this)

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Let's Talk Leadership

International School Head of School

- Comes from a teaching background
- Experience is key in getting her job
- Well qualified and certified
- Internally promoted
- Operational, Academic, Strategic, and Human Resources responsibilities
- Evaluation is varied, but commonly attached to student achievement, admissions, parent satisfaction
- Job is becoming Recruiter-In-Chief

EdTech Company CEO

- Comes from a technical or business background (or both)
- Is known for market performance or business acumen
- Has aspirations for growth (financially and through engagement)
- Hires Educational SMEs
- Evaluated on corporate performance, financials, reputation, and engagements
- Job is becoming Grower-In-Chief

My mini research project:

For Schools:

- As school leaders, what do you wish vendors knew about your school, your needs, education, etc.?

For Companies:

- As EdTech companies, what would you hope schools would know or understand about you, your company, the process of buying/relationships, etc.?

Key Areas of Focus

- Timing
- Communication
- Decision Making
- Approaches to Data
- Interoperability
- Pricing
- Knowledge About Education
- Partnerships
- Miscellaneous

Timing

Communication

Decision Making

Approaches to Data

Interoperability

Pricing

Knowledge About Education

Partnerships

Miscellaneous

GROUP EXERCISE:

IN GROUPS OF 2-3, READ STATEMENTS IN THE NEXT FEW SLIDES...PREPARE TO SHARE CONCLUSIONS

Timing

Educator: "Every September Apple releases huge iOS and OS updates, which is the worst possible timing for schools. If these were done in June, when most IT people are doing their work for the coming school year, we could plan better."
+4

Educator: "There is often a disconnect between when the above needs to start happening and the ability of the school to pay or even cut purchase orders. Many schools adhere to a July 1-June 30 fiscal year. They may have policies that restrict when they can order or receive purchases. Tech wants to order in May for June delivery"

Communication

Company: "Meetings. I'd bet most vendors would welcome meetings of any length to brainstorm with your team. I'm not talking demos or sales pitches. But, getting decision makers in the room to talk about their goals for a product/service. A good vendor should be able to ask questions or share thoughts that will help your admin/decision team know more before they make a decision."

Company: "What I am finding is probably common to all vendors trying to contact schools. The schools are not wanting to engage and have any sort of honest and open discussion on their needs. They constantly come back saying that they are too busy rather than telling me what they are looking for that might make them less busy."

Communication (cont'd)

Company: "A chat on the phone is always better than email – quicker to get information across and (with language barriers!) more likely to be understood as one thing can be explained in many different ways"

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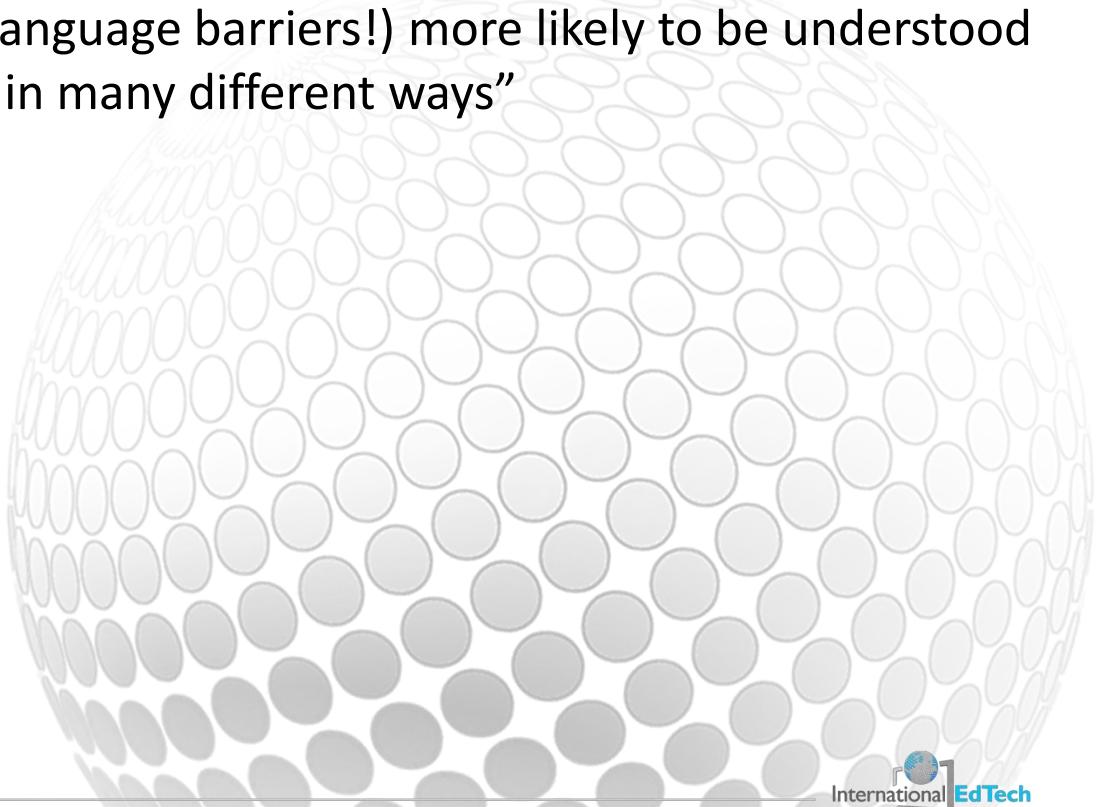
Decision Making

Company: "I wish schools understood there are many variables in a good software purchase beyond just price. Will the company meet your needs in the longer term? Will they offer consistent and valuable service? Will they still exist in 18 months time? Just because one customizes a solution doesn't mean it can continue to help you."

Company: "We are super open to feedback – if there are frustrations with our purchasing process, we are open to improving those."

Decision Making (cont'd)

Company: "Help us help you. If there are factors that will help us recommend things, be as transparent as you can. Does advancement have the deciding vote? Did the CFO say you have budget constraints this year that will improve in future years? Is the Head leaving next month? Rebranding in a few years? Again, if we know these things, we can make recommendations that are a better fit."

Decision Making

Educator: "That they grant the school a free trial/ license/demo (and without going through many hoops)."

Educator: "Many of our vendors like to 'hook' individual teachers with a free individual license and use them as a foot in the door to propose a school-wide or district-wide implementation. Unfortunately, in our district, teachers don't actually have the authority or capacity to approve a vendor at scale.

Company: "Schools will always be happy to try something "for free" and yet a free trial is almost always a bad idea for the school and the company. That's because if the school doesn't pay for it at first, then the view often is that the product is worth nothing, regardless of its utility."

Data

Educator: "Coppa Compliance? Security? Collect Data? GDPR?"

Educator: "Parents can get upset about the funniest things. Don't ever, ever mess with their child's privacy or safety."

Educator: "if an app has a social media component, please make sure that the child's data is kept private and the default profile option is private."
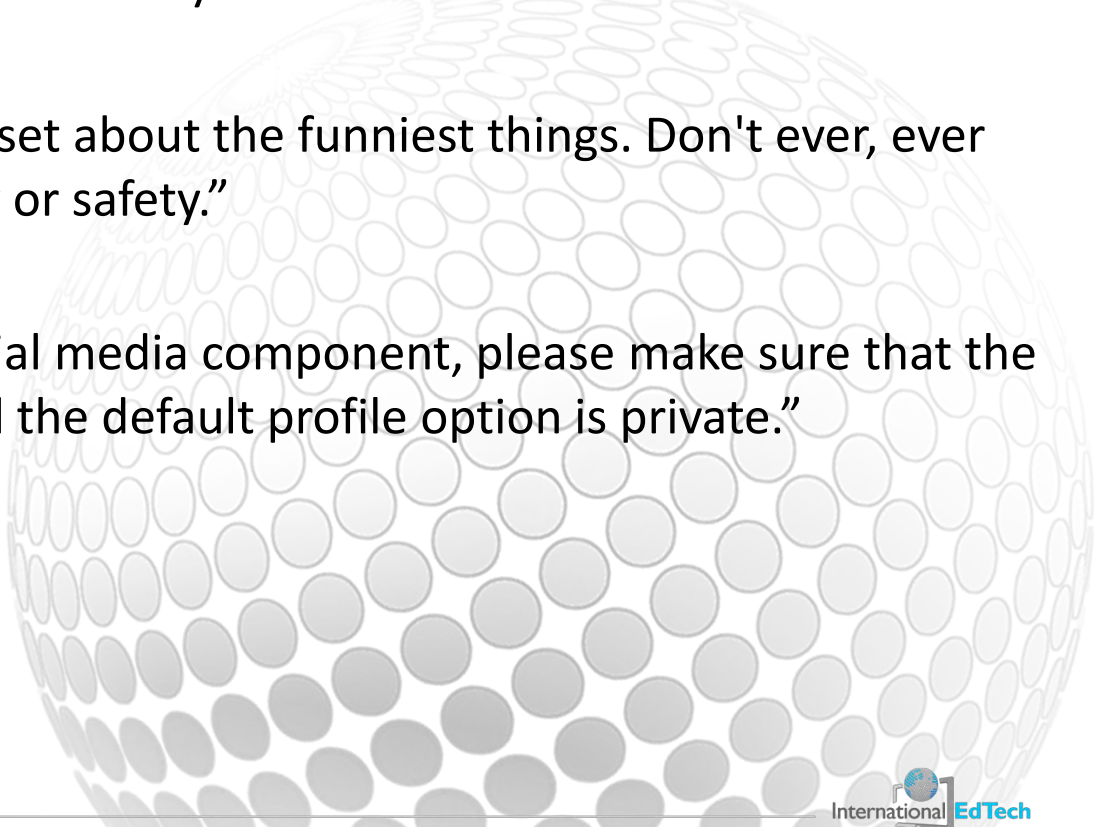
Interoperability

Educator: "have your app "talk" to as many other apps as possible. an app that works in isolation isn't too appealing to most teachers if content creation and submission is involved."

Educator: "DATA INTEROPERABILITY. On the classroom side, teachers don't have time to synthesize info from all the different apps, and districts are forced to hire programmers, manually move data, or share student information that really shouldn't be shared. It's inefficient and unsafe."

Pricing

Educator: "Some companies like to low-ball startup costs with the idea of collecting additional dollars in fees down the line. The razors and blades approach. We hate that. We need a predictable, steady cost structure."

Company: "We can be flexible on pricing and we HATE being asked for an indicative quotation due to the nature of our solution, we aim to fit to a school's budget. Tell us your budget early on, it's not to rip you off, it's to ensure we can fit to this budget and, if needed, get the best pricing possible from higher up."

Pricing

Educator: "Tech Directors are always talking with each other and expect pricing to be the same for equivalent size orders. Knowing a competitor school got better pricing only pisses us off."

Educator: "Clearly explained along with any peripheral costs that are not included."
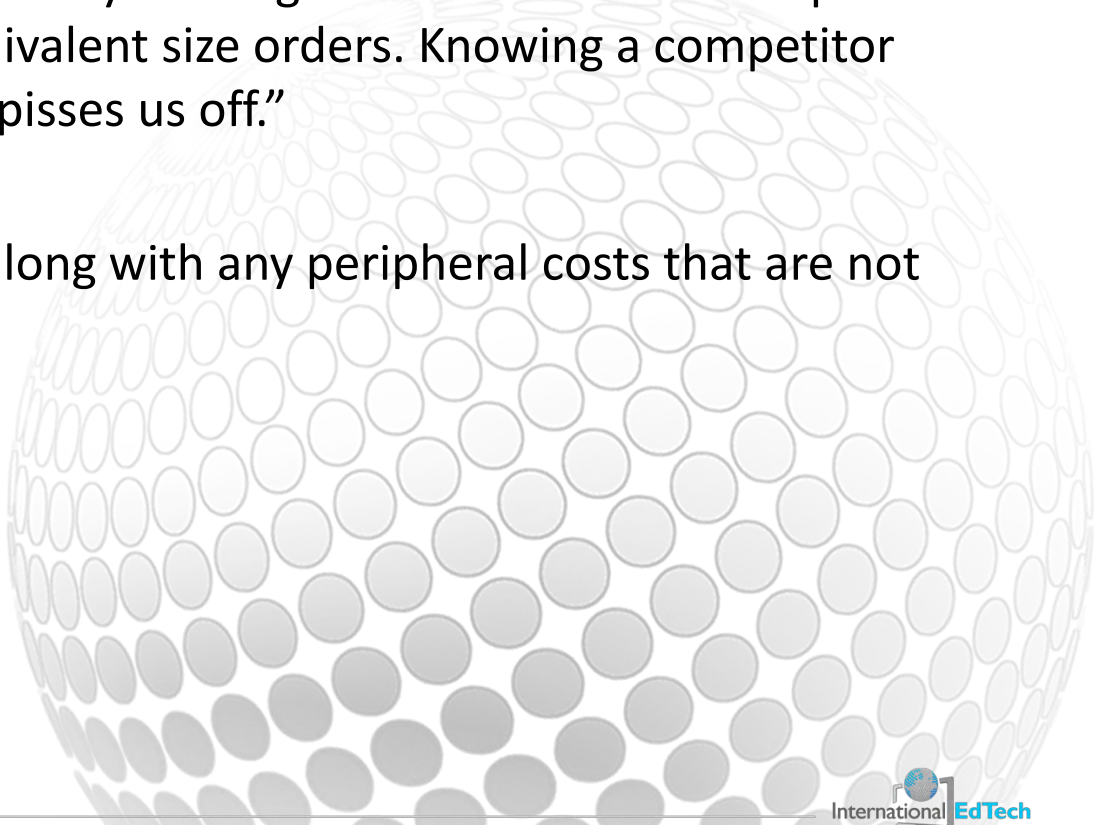
Knowledge about Education

Educator: "I wished that that vendors spent more time in classroom observing classroom teaching, so they can see how teachers and students are using their products, platforms and software."

Company: "[Our company] employs a huge number of teachers, school leaders, education academics to work across their product, programs and marketing teams. [Our company]has been investing and working in this space for decades and has education staff- not just sales staff in almost every country."

Partnerships

Company: "We would hope that schools know that we are genuinely interested in working alongside them to solve problems that they are tackling – whether it's student engagement, literacy, social emotional, digital citizenship, etc. Yes, we sustain our business through sales, but we really to try to function as partners who help solve challenges."

Company: "I'd hope schools would better understand how they (and we) can and should connect our/their work to their mission and vision in ways that help serve as a quality control lever using inquiry as a lens."

Partnerships (cont'd)

Company: "For many of us, we don't want to oversell you. Meaning, we want to help you find the tools/software/services that your school needs and not sell the ones you will not use. Buying more than you need may be a short-term win for the vendor but it's a long term loss as you the school will not be happy with the partnership. So, know that we are here to help."

Miscellaneous

Educator: "Reality of high % of home ownership/BYOD and how many software and even hardware inventors fail to adequately account for nonschool owned devices."

Company: "Software audits. I love it when a school has done an audit of all their software in a flow chart usually. I can then review it and offer ideas on how to avoid redundancy with what's already in contract or ways to improve the flow of data btwn another system and ours."

Miscellaneous (cont'd)

Educator: "For the most part, implementation should be seamless. I worked with a vendor that didn't appreciate how busy teachers are - he was actually dismissive about it."

Educator: "The biggest bug-bear for me is with vendors who claim to be "education focused" but their only experience is actually in the University/tertiary space. They do not/have not bothered to understand the differences between tertiary and K-12 educational institutions."

Key Takeaways

For Schools

- Companies are looking for partnerships
- Long term relationships are always better
- Know where the product or service will fit within the ecosystem of the school
- Learn about value add as a better indicator than budget
- Be honest and communicate needs/worries/etc. ASAP

For Companies

- Understand the time, budget, and relational needs of the school
- Overcome the reputational bias, especially when it comes to sales
- User experience trumps features every time
- Reliable support is the biggest indicator of trust
- Relationships, relationships, relationships

WHAT'S HAPPENING AT YOUR SCHOOL OR COMPANY?

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