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FROM ACTUAL  
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# As design outsourcing matures, **CHALLENGES APPEAR**

By Ron Wilson, Executive Editor

THERE HAS BEEN MUCH ANGST about design outsourcing in recent years, most of which has come from US-based designers who have lost or who fear losing their jobs. But as the industry gets more experience with the practice, other problems also emerge. These problems impact not just designers but also the outcome of designs and, possibly, the competitiveness of the companies that outsourced the work in the first place. This situation is due to a natural evolution in the progress of outsourcing.

At a Silicon Valley conference last summer, a senior architect for a major US company was discussing the problems he has faced with outsourcing. As design teams on the other side of the Pacific get more sophisticated, the partition between the United States and the—usually—Asian team has begun to shift.

In the good old days, when we were sending only routine bench-level jobs offshore, the partition was at a functional-block or even a task level. The bulk of the design team remained rooted in the United States, with senior US people in control. Only some clearly defined blocks or well-specified tasks, such as logic verification, went to the outsourced team, and the process was tightly controlled.

But as the outsourced teams gain more experience and more senior people, that practice is shifting. The architecture team is often the only one remaining in the United States, and the implementation team resides entirely on the other side of the Pacific. This situation reflects the rapid growth in sophistication and management skill of Asian design teams. But, according to this senior architect, it creates a problem in that architects divorced from actual implementation tend to drift into Neverland. These architects tend to create idealisms that are unworkable in the

application or are simply unimplementable. Conversely, implementation management separated from architects tends to lack vital information about the intent of the design—stuff that is difficult to capture in a specification but would strongly influence the design's implementation.

The result, according to this architect, is an increasing risk that designs will come back working perfectly but not doing what the architects had in mind. Instead, the design falls into a morass of miscommunication. Architects lacking recent implementation experience and without the design team leaders sitting across the table from them create a cloudlike palace. The design team, not party to the original discussions about the design requirements, by enormous effort comes as close as it can get: a fortress on a mountaintop. Marketing, meanwhile, wanted a jumbo jet.

The risk here goes beyond mix-ups, reworks, or even failed projects. If US companies allow themselves to become architectural companies without a solid grounding in design, verification, manufacturing, and test, they will run a major risk of becoming uncompetitive as architects, as well. Innovation divorced from implementation becomes a branch of literature, not a phase of engineering. 🌐