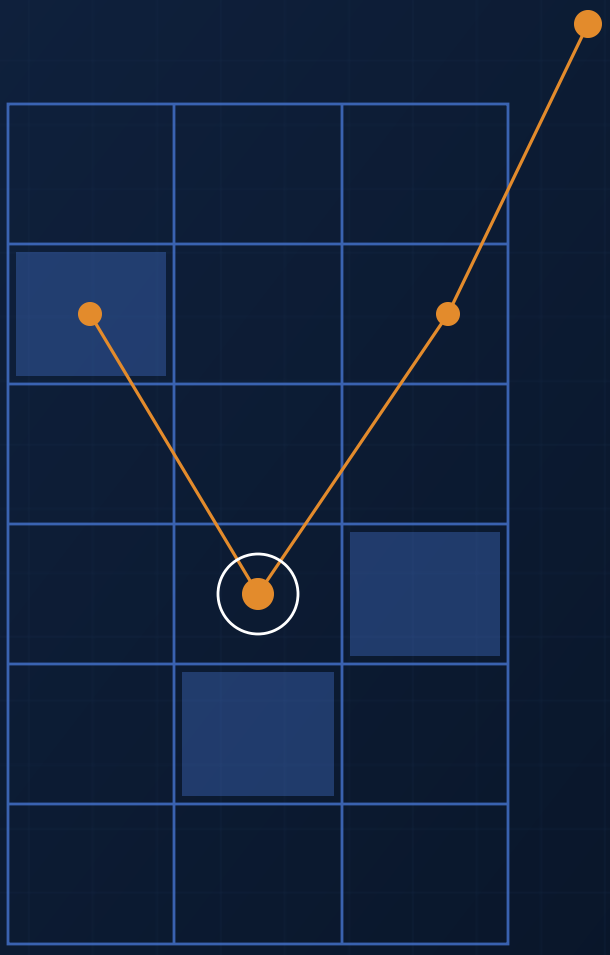
qexa.com



FOR ENTERPRISE LEADERS · OCTOBER 2026

The FDE Buyer's Guide

How enterprises choose, contract and own forward deployed engineering.

By Alex Curtis, Chief AI Architect, Qexa Technology

Edition 2.0 · October 2026 · fde.qexa.com

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Why this guide exists

Almost every FDE playbook published since 2024 was written from the inside: how a vendor should build an FDE team, or how an engineer should run a deployment. This guide is written from the other chair. It is for the enterprise that has to decide whether it needs an FDE, find the right one, sign the right contract, and make sure the value and the know-how stay inside the company when the engineers leave.

That question became urgent in 2026. In the space of a few months, AWS, Microsoft, Google Cloud, OpenAI, Anthropic, Salesforce and the largest systems integrators all launched or expanded forward deployed engineering units. Many of them offer FDE time at little or no charge. For an enterprise buyer, that is a real opportunity and a real risk, and almost nothing published so far helps you tell the difference.

Who it is for

If you are...	Start with	You will leave with
A CIO, CTO, CDO or head of AI	Chapters 2, 3 and 5, then Part III	A sourcing decision, a provider scorecard and the terms to insist on
A business sponsor funding an AI initiative	Chapters 3, 6 and 9	What you must provide, what to demand, and how to measure the result
Procurement, legal or vendor management	Chapters 7 and 8, then the Field Kit	An RFP question bank and a contract clause checklist built for FDE work
An AI center of excellence building its own FDE team	Part IV	An operating model, hiring loop and metrics for internal FDEs
An FDE or a firm that provides them	Parts III and V	What your best clients will expect from you, and how to earn their trust

The two ideas to hold onto

> Business outcome first, architecture second, technology last.

> Know whose scorecard your FDE is on. Their incentives decide who keeps the value.

The first idea makes an FDE engagement worth funding. The second decides whether your company is better off when the engagement ends, or just more dependent.

A note on sources and numbers

Market figures come from company announcements, analyst commentary and job-posting analyses dated through October 2026, attributed where they appear and listed in Sources. Several 2026 announcements gave headcounts or dollar figures without detail on timing or how the money will be spent, and we say so where it matters. Worked financial examples are illustrative. This guide is general information, not legal advice: have your counsel adapt the contract positions in Chapter 8.

CONTENTS

What's inside

THE 2026 FDE MARKET

1. What an FDE is, and what it isn't 5
2. Why every vendor now wants to send you one 6
3. Whose scorecard is your FDE on? 7
4. When your company actually needs an FDE 9

CHOOSING YOUR FDE

5. Five ways to get an FDE 11
6. Get ready before you buy 12
7. How to vet an FDE and an FDE provider 13
8. Contracting for outcomes and ownership 15

RUNNING THE ENGAGEMENT FROM THE CLIENT'S CHAIR

9. Your 120-day map 18
10. Discovery: what to give your FDE, and what to keep 19
11. Choosing the lighthouse and building the business case 21
12. Architecture and governance: your non-negotiables 22
13. The pilot and the evaluation harness you own 23
14. Production, hypercare and capability transfer 24
15. Measuring value, and measuring your FDE 25

BUILDING YOUR OWN FDE CAPABILITY

16. The internal FDE team 28
17. Hiring and developing FDEs 29
18. Buyer anti-patterns 30

FIELD KIT FOR BUYERS

19. Templates 33
20. The sponsor's first 90 days and the CFO talk track 34

Glossary 36

Sources 36

PART I

The 2026 FDE market

What a forward deployed engineer is, why every AI vendor now wants to send you one, whose interests they serve, and when your company actually needs one.

CHAPTER 1

What an FDE is, and what it isn't

A forward deployed engineer is a senior engineer who embeds with your teams, finds the problem worth solving, and ships a production system that solves it inside your environment. The role owns the outcome from discovery to adoption. It does not stop at a recommendation or a demo.

The simplest picture: a presales solutions architect who doesn't hand off after the deal closes, crossed with a startup CTO whose only customer is you. A real FDE sits with your people, works against your real data and systems, writes production code, connects systems and redesigns workflows around AI. Then they stay long enough to prove the value and leave your team able to run it.

Where the model came from

Palantir created the role for government and intelligence customers whose problems could not be solved from a vendor's office. It split the field team into two roles. **Deltas** (forward deployed software engineers) build: pipelines, integrations, applications. **Echoes** (deployment strategists) work the problem side: they learn the operation, find the use cases worth funding and own the relationship, and often come from the customer's own industry. At home, **Devs** turn what the field learns into platform features every customer gets. Palantir's own description: a Delta serves one customer with many capabilities, a Dev builds one capability for many customers.

> **WHY THE ORIGIN MATTERS TO A BUYER**
>
> The FDE model was designed so that the vendor's platform gets better with every customer. That loop is the vendor's business model, and it runs on what its engineers learn inside your company. Chapter 3 shows why you need to know this before you sign anything.

How an FDE differs from the people you already buy

Role	What they deliver	Measured on	Where they stop
Forward deployed engineer	A production system that moves your KPI	Realized value, adoption, time to production	After production, hypercare and handoff
Vendor sales engineer	Demos and technical validation	Pipeline and win rate	At signature
Solutions architect	A target design	Design quality, deal support	At design sign-off
Implementation consultant	Configuration to a specification	Billable hours, on-time delivery	At go-live against the spec
Management consultant	Diagnosis and recommendations	Engagement revenue	At the recommendation deck
Staff augmentation	Extra hands under your direction	Hours supplied	When the contract ends

Two tests that expose a relabeled role

Plenty of 2026 offerings call themselves forward deployed engineering because the label sells. Ask two questions. **Does this person ship production code inside our environment?** If not, it is presales or consulting. **Who owns the outcome after go-live?** If the answer is "you do, from day one," it is implementation. A real FDE answers yes to the first and "we do, until your team can" to the second.

What a great FDE brings

Zamir Akimbekov, who led customer-facing AI teams at C3 AI across banking, energy and manufacturing, puts the core trait well: domain knowledge is essential, but domain knowledge without a problem-solving mindset just produces a project manager who knows the jargon. Great FDEs ask why a workflow runs the way it does, what is breaking, and how to fix it, then prototype in front of you. That combination, technical depth with domain intuition and the nerve to build in the room, is rare. It is what you are paying for.

CHAPTER 2

Why every vendor now wants to send you one

2026 was the year forward deployed engineering became the main way AI is sold to enterprises. Model access is no longer scarce. The scarce thing is engineering AI into how one specific business works, and every major vendor is now racing to put its people inside yours.

95%

of enterprise generative AI pilots showed no measurable P&L impact

MIT NANDA, The GenAI Divide, 2025

17%

of organizations had deployed AI agents; over 40% of agentic projects expected to be canceled by end of 2027

Gartner, via CIO.com, July 2026

643 → 5,330

US FDE job postings, April 2025 to April 2026

Indeed data via Business Insider

The 2026 FDE land rush

Provider	What they launched or expanded	When
Accenture and Microsoft	A joint forward deployed engineering practice to embed AI engineers in client operations	March 2026
Salesforce	An FDE Partner Network of 30+ firms (Accenture, Deloitte, PwC, Slalom, IBM Consulting among the first), with partner incentives tied to agents reaching production. In September it said it would double its UK FDE team to about 95.	April and Sept. 2026
Anthropic	An AI-native enterprise services company with Blackstone, Hellman & Friedman and Goldman Sachs, about $1.5B in commitments, which then acquired Fractional AI	May 2026
OpenAI	The OpenAI Deployment Company, more than $4B from 19 partners, and an agreement to acquire Tomoro to bring in about 150 FDEs and deployment specialists	May 2026

Provider	What they launched or expanded	When
AWS	A $1B forward deployed engineering organization of pods of five or six engineers on roughly 45-day engagements, with named clients including Southwest Airlines, Cox Automotive and the NFL	June 2026
Microsoft	Frontier Company: about 6,000 engineers embedded with customers, a $2.5B figure without disclosed timing, and a multi-model platform. Accenture, Capgemini, EY, KPMG and PwC will help scale it.	July 2026
Deloitte	First global systems integrator to staff and deliver a Salesforce FDE engagement	August 2026
Google Cloud	Plans to hire hundreds of FDEs, some placed inside integrators such as Accenture, Capgemini, Cognizant, Deloitte, HCLTech, PwC and TCS	August 2026

Sources: company announcements and coverage listed in Sources. Headcounts and dollar figures are as reported; several did not state timing or how the money will be spent.

What the land rush means for you

- **You have leverage.** When every vendor is competing to embed engineers, the buyer sets the terms. Smaller providers are also pitching model-agnostic, portable approaches, which gives you a credible alternative.
- **"Free" FDE time is a customer acquisition cost.** Analysts covering Microsoft's Frontier Company describe the free deployment as paid back through cloud consumption. That's a fair business model, but it means the engineer's success metric is not necessarily yours.
- **Agent washing is real.** Gartner estimates only about 130 vendors are genuinely agentic. Many FDE offerings are existing consulting with a new label and a higher rate.
- **The engagement cycle is shrinking.** AWS runs 45-day pods; others run 90 to 120 days. Shorter cycles are good for speed and risky for knowledge transfer, unless you plan for it.

> **THE BUYER'S OPPORTUNITY**
>
> MIT's research found that AI tools bought from specialized vendors or built through partnerships succeeded about two-thirds of the time, versus about one-third for purely internal builds. Partnering is the right instinct. The rest of this guide is about partnering on terms that leave you stronger.

CHAPTER 3

Whose scorecard is your FDE on?

Every FDE works for someone. Their employer's scorecard decides what they optimize, what they leave behind and who keeps what they learn. Before you choose a provider, understand the incentive you are buying.

Provider type	How they make money	What their FDE is rewarded for	The risk to you
AI platform or model vendor	Consumption and platform revenue	Usage growth, and turning what they learn in your company into product for every customer	Your workflow logic is encoded in their platform; leaving gets expensive

Provider type	How they make money	What their FDE is rewarded for	The risk to you
Global systems integrator	Billable delivery at scale; increasingly share-of-savings	Utilization, expansion, partner certifications	Staffing pyramids, open-ended scope, a second dependency
Specialist boutique or independent	Fees, often milestone or outcome-linked; repeat business	Delivered outcomes and referrals	Capacity, continuity and key-person risk
Your own in-house FDE	Salary from your budget	Your KPIs	Hiring time, cost, and isolation from platform know-how

The productization loop, seen from your side

Every vendor-side FDE playbook names the same master metric: ship at least one reusable capability back into the vendor's product per engagement, usually by day 90. From the vendor's chair that is good discipline. From yours, it means part of what you pay for is the vendor's R&D, and the reusable pattern built from your operation will be sold to your competitors next quarter.

The Australian advisory firm IBRS calls the extreme version of this "platform colonialism." Its argument: you may own your raw data, but if the vendor owns the enriched logic that makes the data useful, the relationships, rules and decision models, then you cannot leave without losing the capability. It cites a public dispute between the NYPD and Palantir, where the department could recover its raw records but not the analytical model it relied on.

THREE LAYERS, THREE OWNERS

Raw data is yours, and every contract says so.
Your business logic (configurations, prompts, rules, workflow designs, evaluation sets, the knowledge model of how your company works) is contested. Make it explicitly yours.
The vendor's generic platform improvements are fairly theirs. Let them keep generic patterns, under a narrow license that excludes your data and logic.

This is not a reason to avoid vendor FDEs

Vendor FDEs know their platform better than anyone, often cost little or nothing, and are frequently the fastest path to production on that platform. The point is to choose with open eyes and contract accordingly. A vendor FDE on a commodity use case with a strong exit clause can be an excellent deal. The same FDE encoding your core differentiating process into a platform you cannot leave is a strategic risk, whatever the price.

Lock-in now lives in the architecture

Analysts covering the 2026 vendor launches made the point sharply: lock-in has stopped being a licensing clause and become an architecture diagram. It accumulates through default choices the FDE makes on your behalf, such as which cloud, which agent framework, where prompts live, which proprietary connectors. Even Microsoft's commercial leadership acknowledged that tying its original Copilot exclusively to one model provider was a mistake. Portability has to be designed in, which is why Chapter 12 makes it an architecture requirement, not a legal afterthought.

CHAPTER 4

When your company actually needs an FDE

FDEs earn their cost when the problem is valuable, the requirements can't be written down in advance, and the value depends on changing how people work. If the problem is clear and the software is standard, a normal implementation is cheaper and safer.

Signal	You likely need an FDE	You likely don't
Problem clarity	You know the pain but can't specify the solution	Requirements are clear and stable
Data and systems	Messy data across several systems	One clean system, standard connectors
Value at stake	Seven figures a year or a named board goal	Nice-to-have productivity
Workflow change	Adoption depends on redesigning how work gets done	Installing software is enough
Risk and control	Regulated or operationally critical; AI must be auditable	Low-stakes internal tooling
Past attempts	A pilot already stalled	No real attempt yet; start with a smaller experiment

Where FDEs create the most value

MIT's research found the strongest returns in back-office automation: reducing outsourcing, agency spend and operational friction, rather than the sales and marketing tools that drew most budgets. Hitachi Ventures adds that the most defensible AI value sits closer to operational technology, the systems behind grids, rail, manufacturing and clinical work, where proprietary data and safety requirements make generic tools fall short. In practice the best FDE targets share three traits: high-volume work, a number someone already reports, and a process complex enough that a demo will never survive contact with it.

Four questions before you call anyone

1. **What number will move, and who already reports it?** If nobody owns the metric, nobody will own the result.
2. **Can we reach the data within two weeks?** Access delays kill more pilots than model quality.
3. **Who owns adoption?** Name the manager who will change how the work gets done.
4. **Who runs it on day 121?** Not the vendor. Not the consultant. Your team, or a team you deliberately chose to rely on.

If you can answer all four, you are ready for Part II. If you can't, Chapter 6 shows how to get ready before you spend a dollar on FDE time.

II

PART II

Choosing your FDE

Five ways to source an FDE, how to get ready before you buy, how to vet the people and the firm, and the contract terms that keep the value and the know-how with you.

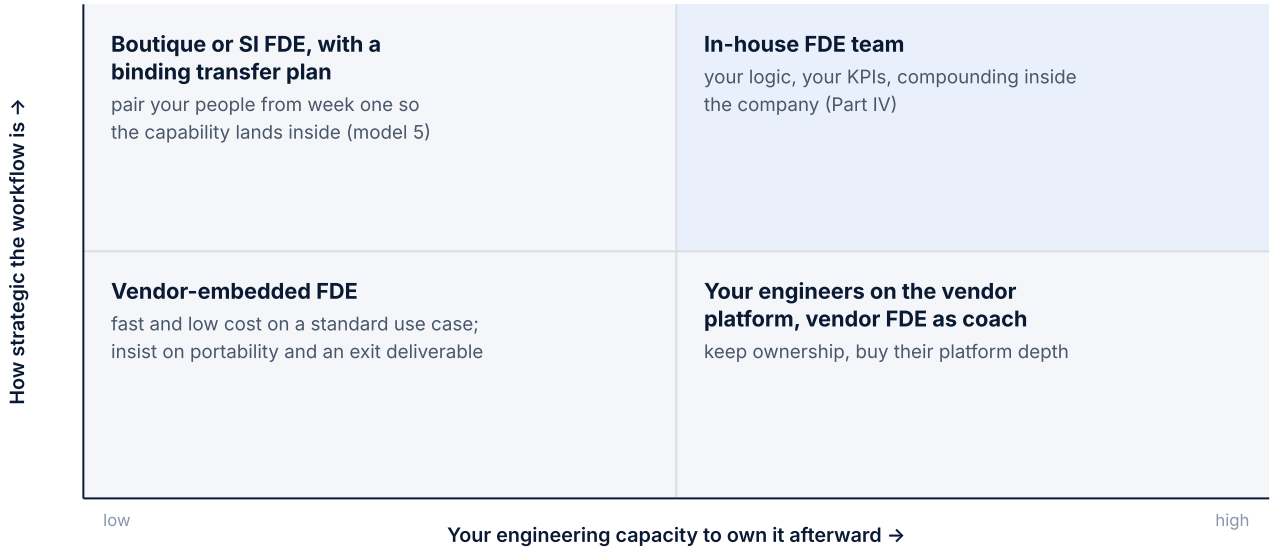
CHAPTER 5

Five ways to get an FDE

There are five sourcing models, and most enterprises will use more than one. The right choice depends on two things: how strategic the workflow is to your business, and how much engineering capacity you have to take ownership afterward.

Model	Best for	Strengths	Watch out for
1. Vendor-embedded FDE	A use case on a platform you have already chosen	Deepest platform knowledge; often low or no fee; direct line to the product team	Consumption incentives; logic encoded in their platform; your learning becomes their product
2. Systems integrator FDE practice	Multi-system, multi-unit programs that need scale	Bench depth, industry teams, certified on several platforms	Pyramid staffing, scope creep, partner incentives tied to one platform
3. Specialist boutique or independent FDE	A lighthouse use case, a rescue, or a vendor-neutral second opinion	Senior people actually doing the work; model-agnostic; flexible commercial terms	Capacity and key-person risk; check continuity plans
4. In-house FDE team	Core, differentiating workflows you will keep improving	Your KPIs, your knowledge, compounding inside your company	Months to hire; needs an operating model (Part IV)
5. Hybrid: external build, internal co-ownership	Most first deployments	Speed of an outside team, with your engineers paired in from week one	Only works if the transfer plan is contractual, not a promise

Match the sourcing model to the workflow and your capacity



The more a workflow differentiates your business, the more of its logic should end up owned and run by your own people.

Three rules of thumb

1. **Commodity workflows can live on a vendor's platform.** Password resets, standard ticket triage and document summarization are not your competitive advantage. Optimize for speed and price, and keep an exit path.
2. **Differentiating workflows must end up yours.** Underwriting judgment, network operations, pricing, clinical pathways: whoever builds it, the logic, evaluation sets and runbooks belong in your repository, run by your people.
3. **Avoid one provider controlling data, logic and execution.** IBRS's advice is worth adopting as policy. Let a vendor run the platform, but keep the logic portable and the data in your control.

CHAPTER 6

Get ready before you buy

The fastest way to waste FDE time is to bring an engineer into a company that isn't ready for them. The best FDE in the world can't fix a missing sponsor, blocked data access or a security review that takes three months. Do the readiness work first, and write a one-page FDE brief before you talk to any provider.

The enterprise readiness check

Readiness item	Ready looks like	If it's missing
Executive sponsor	A named leader who owns the outcome, clears blockers and attends readouts	Stop. Nothing else matters yet.
Success sentence	A draft: "reduce X by Y by date, measured by Z"	Run a one-week internal discovery first
Data access	Owners named; access path agreed; sample extracts possible within two weeks	Start the access request now; it is the longest lead time
Security fast track	An agreed onboarding path for external engineers and new AI tools, with a target of days, not months	Agree it with the CISO before kickoff
Internal counterpart	One of your engineers or analysts assigned at least half-time to pair with the FDE	Without this, nothing transfers
Process owner and users	A manager and a pilot group with time to work with the FDE	Adoption will fail
Budget for run costs	Inference, licenses, monitoring and support funded beyond the pilot	The pilot will succeed and then be switched off
Risk and legal input	Model risk, privacy and AI policy owners briefed and named	Expect a late veto

Score each item 0 (missing), 1 (partial) or 2 (ready). Under 10 of 16, fix the gaps before bringing anyone in. A sponsor score of 0 is a stop regardless of the total.

Write the FDE brief

One page, written by you, shared with every provider you talk to. It forces clarity inside your company and makes provider answers comparable.

```
FDE BRIEF
Business goal and sponsor (name, title):
The problem in plain words (who is affected, what it costs today):
Draft success sentence: reduce ___ by ___ by ___, measured by ___
Baseline today and its source:
Workflow and systems in scope (and explicitly out of scope):
Data: where it lives, owners, sensitivity, access timeline:
Controls: regulations, approvals, decisions that must stay human:
Our internal counterpart (name, % time):
Users and process owner for the pilot:
Platform constraints or preferences (cloud, models, existing vendors):
What we must own at the end (code, logic, evaluation sets, runbooks):
Target timeline and decision date:
Budget range for build and for 12 months of running:
```

Assign your own "Echo"

Palantir paired every engineer with a deployment strategist who understood the business. Copy the idea on your side: name an internal lead who knows the domain, owns the relationship with the FDE, chases access and decisions, and becomes the person who carries the system forward after handoff. In most failed engagements this role was nobody's job.

CHAPTER 7

How to vet an FDE and an FDE provider

You are hiring two things at once: a firm whose incentives and terms you can live with, and the specific people who will sit with your team. Vet both. The best test of either is a short, paid discovery sprint, not a slide deck or a demo.

Provider scorecard

Criterion	Weight	What strong evidence looks like
Production track record	20%	Named references at comparable companies with systems still running 6+ months later, and their human-escalation rates
The people you will get	20%	Named FDEs, their CVs and time commitment in the contract; senior people doing the work, not just selling it
Method and evaluation discipline	15%	A falsifiable success metric, an evaluation harness you keep, unhappy-path testing
Ownership and portability terms	15%	Plain-English answers on IP, business logic, data use and exit (Chapter 8)

Criterion	Weight	What strong evidence looks like
Knowledge transfer	10%	A written pairing and handoff plan with acceptance criteria
Security and governance	10%	SOC 2 at minimum; ISO/IEC 42001 or NIST AI RMF alignment; decision logs; incident response
Commercial alignment	10%	Fees tied to gates or outcomes you measure; no unlimited customization

Questions to ask the provider

1. Show us a deployment that has been in production for six months. What changed after go-live, and who runs it now?
2. What will you reuse from earlier clients, and what will you take from our engagement into your product?
3. Who owns the prompts, configurations, workflow designs and evaluation sets you build here?
4. If we leave in 18 months, what exactly do we take with us, and in what format?
5. Can we swap the model or run on another cloud without a rebuild? Show us how.
6. How are your FDEs measured and paid? What do they earn more for?
7. Which actions will agents take on their own, and how do you decide when to widen that?
8. What is the named team, and what happens if one of them leaves?

Questions to ask the individual FDE

1. Walk me through your last deployment, from the first meeting to handoff. What was the success metric?
2. Tell me about a pilot that didn't make it to production. Why, and what would you do differently?
3. How do you build an evaluation set for a new client?
4. Here is our problem in two sentences. What would you ask in your first week? (Listen for questions about the business, not the model.)
5. How do you decide what to leave behind for our team?

Red flags

- Leads with the model or the platform, not your process and your numbers
- Proof is demos and logos, not systems still in production
- "We'll figure out handoff later"
- Vague "co-creation" or "design partner" language with no IP terms
- Can't name who will do the work
- No evaluation harness, or one you won't be given
- Success defined by the provider's metric (agents deployed, tickets auto-closed) instead of yours
- Free services with no exit deliverable

> **THE METRIC-GAMING TRAP**
>
> A CIO.com contributor described a service vendor counting auto-closed tickets as resolutions while reopen rates and user complaints told a different story. Define success yourself, against a baseline you captured, using metrics you own: reopen rate, time to resolution, cost per case, error rate.

Run a paid discovery sprint

Before committing to a full engagement, buy two to three weeks of discovery at a fixed fee. Ask for three deliverables: the agreed success sentence with a validated baseline, a first working slice on your real data, and a scored use case backlog with a recommended lighthouse. You will learn more about how the provider thinks, builds and communicates in those weeks than in any procurement process, and you will own the output whichever provider you choose next.

Reference check script

```
1. What did they promise, and what did they actually deliver?
2. Is the system still running? Who runs it now?
3. What was the measured result, and who in your finance team agreed it?
4. How did they handle the first serious problem after go-live?
5. What did your team know at the end that it didn't know at the start?
6. Did anything you built end up in their product? Were you comfortable with that?
7. Would you hire the same people again? The same firm?
```

CHAPTER 8

Contracting for outcomes and ownership

FDE contracts are a new kind of agreement: part software, part services, part shared learning. The terms that matter most are not the rate card. They are who owns the logic, how success is measured, how payment follows proof, and what you take with you when you leave.

Commercial models

Model	How it works	Use it when
Bundled or "free" FDE time	Included with platform commitments; paid back through consumption	The workflow is commodity and the platform is already chosen. Cap hours and require an exit deliverable.
Paid discovery sprint	Fixed fee for 2 to 3 weeks; output is yours	Always, before a larger commitment
Milestone (gate-based)	Fees released as each phase gate is signed	Most first deployments
Hybrid labor plus performance fee	Base fee covers delivery risk; a bonus follows verified results	You have a solid baseline and finance agrees the method
Outcome-based	Fees tied to realized value, such as share of savings or price per resolved case	Mature, well-measured workflows where the provider controls enough of the result

Akimbekov describes the natural progression from the provider side: labor-based pricing first, then hybrid, then outcome-based once value is proven. In his example, a regional bank spending $5M a year on manual model validation saves $3M through automation and pays $600K to $800K, half upfront and half after a successful

audit. Antoine Buteau's analysis of forward-deployed pricing adds the buyer's caution: outcome pricing is only fair when the provider controls enough of the workflow to influence the result, and "free" implementation bundled into a subscription often hides the real cost.

Clause checklist

Area	Position to start from
Ownership of work product	Code, configurations, prompts, workflow designs, evaluation sets and documentation vest in you as they are produced, not at the end
Business logic and the knowledge model	Explicitly classed as your confidential information and IP, held in your repositories in open formats
Provider learning (feedback license)	Narrow: generic, non-identifying platform improvements only; no use of your data, logic or evaluation sets to train models or build features for others without written consent
Data use	No training on your data; residency, retention and deletion terms; subprocessor list
Portability	A documented, tested path to run named workloads on another model and, where relevant, another cloud; consider an annual portability test
Exit assistance	A defined exit deliverable and a number of assistance days at agreed rates; data and logic export in open formats within a set period
Key people	Named FDEs, minimum time commitment, approval rights over replacements
Knowledge transfer	A pairing plan, training deliverables and acceptance criteria: your engineers ship at least one change unaided before handoff
Success measurement	The baseline, method and data source agreed with your finance team before work starts
Payment	Released at signed gates; any performance fee paid only on outcomes you measure
Autonomy and accountability	Which actions agents may take alone, which need a human, and who is accountable for each
Security and audit	SOC 2 Type II at minimum; ISO/IEC 42001 or NIST AI RMF alignment; decision logs; incident notification times

Positions drawn from IBRS, CIO.com, ZURB Radar and Reworked analyses of 2026 vendor FDE programs. Have your counsel adapt them to your jurisdiction.

NEGOTIATE WHILE YOU HAVE LEVERAGE

Your leverage is highest before signature and lowest once critical operations depend on the system. With almost every major vendor launching FDE programs in 2026, and smaller providers offering portable approaches, this is a buyer's market. Treat a strategic FDE deal with the seriousness of an acquisition: CIO, procurement and legal aligned, terms written in plain English, and a credible alternative in your back pocket.



PART III

Running the engagement from the client's chair

What you must provide, decide and own in each phase, so the FDE's work becomes your capability rather than their asset.

CHAPTER 9

Your 120-day map

A typical FDE engagement runs about 120 days from kickoff to handoff, though AWS's pods aim for about 45. Whatever the length, the same phases happen, and each ends with a gate your sponsor signs. The FDE drives the work; you supply access, decisions and people, and you own every gate.

A 120-day FDE engagement: phases overlap, gates do not



Gray labels are the gate that closes each phase. Shorter vendor cycles compress the same steps, so knowledge transfer must start in week one.

What you owe the engagement, phase by phase

Phase	The FDE does	You provide and decide	You sign
0. Qualify	Confirms fit, reads your history	Sponsor, FDE brief, security fast track, internal counterpart	Go/no-go and success criteria
1. Discover	Interviews, shadowing, log analysis, process cards	Calendars, data extracts, access, honest answers about what failed before	The success sentence and validated pain register
2. Prioritize	Scores use cases, proposes a lighthouse	The choice, the out-of-scope list, named owners	Lighthouse and two follow-ons
3. Business case	Models benefit, build and run cost	Finance validation of baseline and method	Baseline and payback
4. Architect	Designs the system and controls	Security, data and risk review; portability requirements	Architecture and control register
5. Pilot	Builds on real data, evaluation harness, weekly readouts	Pilot users' time; golden set examples from your experts	KPI threshold met

Phase	The FDE does	You provide and decide	You sign
6. Deploy and hypercare	Hardens, monitors, stays embedded	Production access, on-call path, change management	Live, monitored, on-call ready
7. Hand off and measure	Documents, trains, transfers	Engineers who take over; finance sign-off on value	Acceptance and realized value

Your steering rhythm

Cadence	Who	Agenda
Weekly, 30 min	FDE, your counterpart, process owner	KPI movement, adoption, blockers, decisions needed this week
Every two weeks	Sponsor	Progress against the business case, risks, access escalations
At each gate	Sponsor, finance, risk	Evidence against the gate criteria; sign, adjust or stop
Quarterly after go-live	Executives, finance	Realized value vs. baseline; the next two use cases

CHAPTER 10

Discovery: what to give your FDE, and what to keep

Discovery is where your company's operating knowledge flows to the FDE fastest. Make it easy, because speed here predicts everything downstream. And make sure what they map stays yours, because the map of how your business works is the most valuable thing produced in the whole engagement.

The eight layers your FDE will map

Layer	What they need from you	Who to put them in front of
Strategy and goals	The three numbers you report to the board; budget owners	Sponsor, CFO
Value streams	How demand becomes revenue and service, end to end	Business unit leaders
Processes	Owners, volumes, cycle times, handoffs	Process owners
Tasks and decisions	How work really gets done, including workarounds	Frontline staff, by shadowing
Data	Systems of record, quality, access rights	Data owners
Systems	APIs, integration methods, release cycles	Enterprise architects
People and change	Roles, skills, labor considerations, change history	HR, line managers
Controls and risk	What AI may not touch, and what must be auditable	Risk, compliance, legal, security

Day-one data request: start these on signature

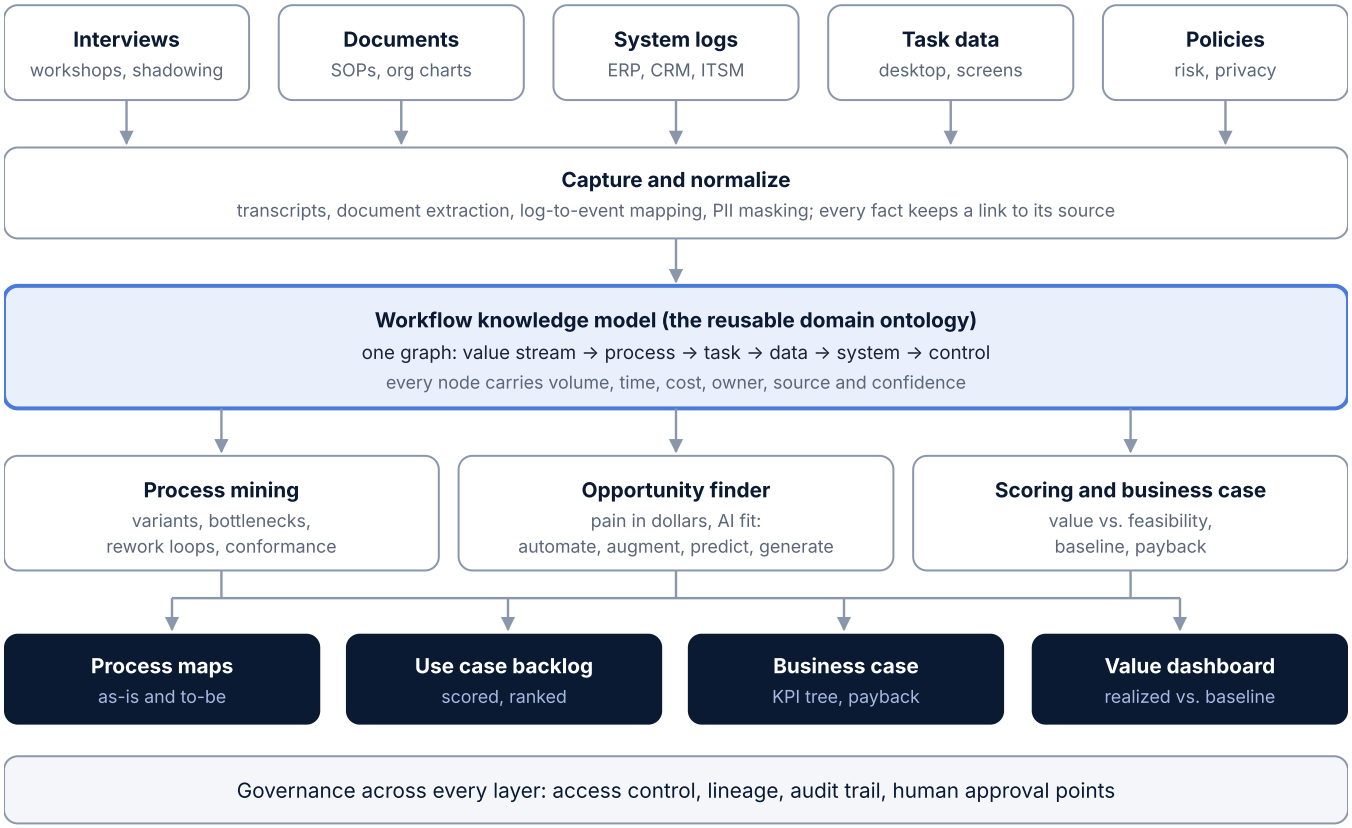
- [ ] Org chart for in-scope units, headcount by role
- [ ] Loaded cost per role; cost per transaction if known

- [ ] SOPs and process documentation
- [ ] System inventory and integration diagram
- [ ] 3 to 6 months of event logs or ticket exports
- [ ] Current KPIs and operating reports
- [ ] Data classification, privacy and AI policies
- [ ] Security onboarding steps for new tools
- [ ] Prior automation and AI projects, with outcomes
- [ ] Named approvers for each data source

How the information comes together

Good FDEs pull interviews, documents, system logs and policies into one workflow knowledge model that every output traces back to. It is effectively a domain ontology of your business.

Every source feeds one model; every output traces back to it



Insist that the knowledge model, the process maps and the use case backlog live in your repositories, in open formats, from week one.

THE ASSET MOST BUYERS FORGET TO CLAIM

Hitachi Ventures argues that the FDE model pays off for providers when field work lands in a reusable domain ontology. That ontology is built from your operation. Claim it in the contract, keep it in your systems, and you can hand it to the next provider, or your own team, instead of paying to rebuild it.

Keep discovery honest

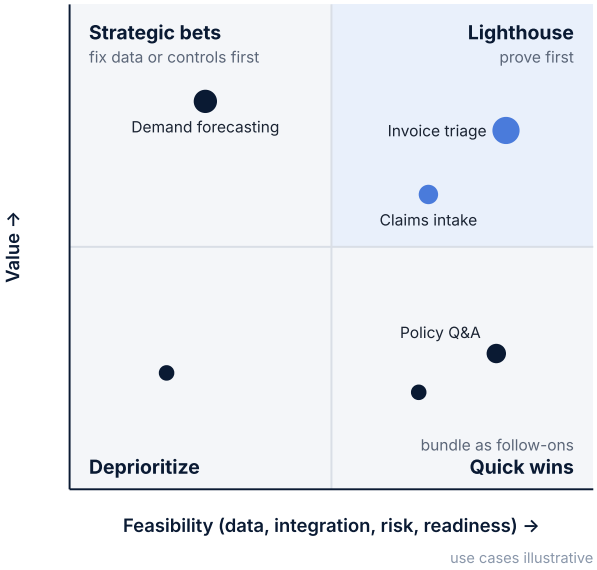
The most useful insight in discovery is usually the gap between what people say the process is and what the system logs show. Ask your FDE to show you both and explain the difference. Discovery ends when your sponsor agrees one falsifiable sentence: this system succeeds if it reduces X by Y by a date, measured by Z.

CHAPTER 11

Choosing the lighthouse and building the business case

Your FDE will propose use cases; you choose. Pick the highest-value one that can show a measured KPI move inside the pilot window, and make finance co-own the math before anyone builds.

Criterion	Weight	1 / 5 means
Financial impact	30%	Under $100K / over $2M a year
Strategic fit	10%	Nice to have / board priority
Volume and frequency	10%	Monthly, low / daily, high
Data readiness	20%	Inaccessible / clean, accessible
Integration complexity	10%	Many legacy systems / one modern API
Risk and control burden	10%	Regulated, high harm / internal, human in loop
Owner and user readiness	10%	No owner / users asking for it



The lighthouse test

1. Value score in the top third of the backlog.
2. Data readiness of 3 or higher.
3. A KPI that moves inside the pilot window, against a baseline you already hold.
4. A named business owner who will present the result.
5. Visible to the sponsor, so a win funds the next two use cases.

The business case finance will trust

Annual benefit = Volume × Change in touch time × Loaded cost per hour × Adoption rate

Payback (months) = Build cost ÷ ((Annual benefit − Annual run cost) ÷ 12)

Illustrative example	Value
Invoices per month; touch time before and after	20,000; 12 to 4 minutes

Illustrative example	Value
Loaded cost per hour; adoption	$45; 70%
Annual benefit	About $1.0M
Build cost; annual run cost (inference, licenses, support)	$300K; $250K
Payback at target; at 50% of target benefit	About 5 months; about 14 months

Show both cases. The conservative one earns the CFO's trust. Always show adoption explicitly, include run costs, and if the provider's fee is "free," still model what it would cost you to replace their work at exit.

CHAPTER 12

Architecture and governance: your non-negotiables

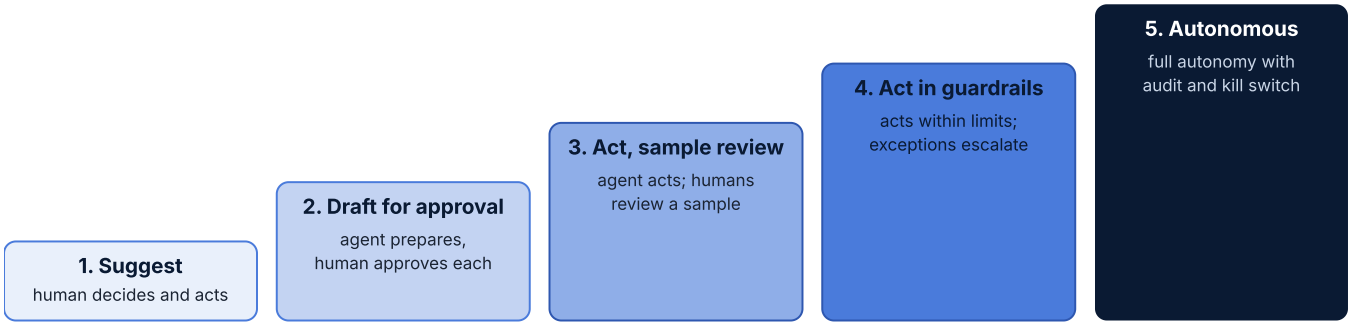
The architecture your FDE chooses decides how much control you keep. Agree the non-negotiables before design starts: where the system runs, who can swap the model, what agents may do on their own, and what gets logged.

Seven non-negotiables

Requirement	What it means in practice
Your repositories	Code, prompts, configurations, workflow definitions and evaluation sets live in your source control from day one
Model portability	A model abstraction layer, with a tested swap to at least one alternative model before go-live
Your cloud and identity	Runs in your tenant where feasible; agents act through scoped service identities you control, never shared admin accounts
Open standards for tools	Integrations through documented APIs and open protocols such as MCP, not proprietary connectors only one vendor can maintain
Human checkpoints	Named approval points for money, customer communication, legal and safety decisions
Full audit trail	Every prompt, retrieval, tool call and action logged, attributable and retained to your policy
Monitoring you own	Quality, drift, cost per task and escalation rate on a dashboard in your environment

The autonomy ladder

Autonomy is earned, one rung at a time



Most enterprise pilots should start at rung 2. Your risk owner, not the provider, decides each promotion, against criteria agreed in advance.

Map controls to recognized frameworks

Ask for the control register to map to the frameworks your auditors already use: the NIST AI Risk Management Framework, ISO/IEC 42001 for AI management systems, the OWASP guidance on large language model risks, and the EU AI Act where it applies. A provider who can't produce this mapping hasn't run AI in a regulated environment.

> **OPTIMIZE THE SYSTEM, NOT JUST THE MODEL**
>
> Atlassian's FDE team, after more than 100 enterprise engagements, put it simply: reuse context, match compute to the task, and measure AI against the work it replaces. Require cost per completed task on the dashboard next to quality. An agent that is accurate but costs more than the work it replaces is not a production system.

CHAPTER 13

The pilot and the evaluation harness you own

The pilot proves one KPI with real users on real data. Its most important by-product is the evaluation harness: the test cases that define what "correct" means for your business. Your experts should help build it, and you should keep it, because it is how you will judge every future model, vendor and change.

Pilot plan (8-week example)

Week	Focus	What you check
1	Access, baseline confirmed, golden set drafted with your experts	Baseline signed by the process owner
2 to 3	First working slice on real data	Pilot users doing real work in it

Week	Focus	What you check
4 to 5	Accuracy, exceptions, user experience	Error and exception rates trending to target
6	Governance review: eval scores, unhappy paths, audit trail	Risk and security sign off
7	Measure the KPI over a full work cycle	Threshold met, or the gap explained
8	Executive readout	Go, adjust or stop, recorded

What the harness must contain

Component	Contents	Owner
Golden set	50 to 200 real examples from your own work, each with the right answer or action	Your experts, with the FDE
Grading rubric	Scored criteria for judgment calls: accuracy, completeness, policy, tone	Your process owner
Edge and adversarial cases	Bad formats, missing fields, out-of-scope requests, prompt injection	FDE and your security team
Release gate	Minimum scores before any change ships	Your sponsor
Failure triage	How live failures are logged, fixed and added back	FDE, then your operations team

Unhappy paths to test before go-live

- [ ] Retries with backoff when a system is down
- [ ] Timeouts with fallback to a human or a queue
- [ ] Duplicate handling, so nothing is paid or sent twice
- [ ] Partial failures with safe rollback
- [ ] Low-confidence outputs routed to people
- [ ] Expired credentials and permission changes
- [ ] Rate limits and inference cost spikes
- [ ] Logging of every agent action

> **WHY OWNING THE HARNESS MATTERS**
>
> When a vendor upgrades its model, when you consider switching providers, or when a regulator asks how you know the system works, the evaluation harness is your evidence. If it lives only in the provider's tooling, you are trusting their word.

CHAPTER 14

Production, hypercare and capability transfer

Go-live is the start of the riskiest phase, and the handoff is where most enterprise value is quietly lost. Plan both from day one: keep the FDE close through the first weeks of real use, and make sure your own people can run, fix and extend the system before they leave.

Hypercare: the first two to three weeks

Real usage exposes edge cases the golden set missed, and users decide whether to trust the system. Require the FDE to stay embedded, watch the dashboards daily and fix problems within hours. Monitoring and alerting must be live before go-live, so problems are found by the team, not by customers. One bad first week makes your operations team scrutinize every later release, however fast the fix was.

The capability transfer ladder

Stage	Your counterpart	Evidence
Weeks 1 to 4: shadow	Attends discovery, reads every design decision	Can explain the architecture and the success sentence
Weeks 4 to 8: pair	Builds alongside the FDE; owns part of the evaluation harness	Has merged changes reviewed by the FDE
Weeks 8 to 12: lead	Leads changes with the FDE reviewing	Ships a change and fixes a production issue unaided
Handoff	Owns operations, on-call and the backlog	Acceptance signed; exit rehearsal passed

Handoff acceptance checklist

- [ ] All code, prompts, configurations, workflow definitions and evaluation sets in your repositories
- [ ] Runbooks for the top failure modes, written and tested by your team
- [ ] Your engineers have shipped at least one change and fixed one incident unaided
- [ ] On-call and escalation moved to your team or a support contract you chose
- [ ] Value dashboard live, with an owner for each KPI
- [ ] An exit rehearsal: you have run the system for two weeks without the provider
- [ ] Acceptance signed by the sponsor, with finance sign-off on measured value

THE EXIT REHEARSAL

Before final payment, run the system for two weeks with the provider's people off the call. Whatever breaks is what you haven't been taught yet. IBRS recommends periodic exit rehearsals for any strategic platform; doing one at handoff is the cheapest moment to find the gaps.

CHAPTER 15

Measuring value, and measuring your FDE

Measure the engagement on what your business got, not on what the provider shipped. Then score the provider, so the next sourcing decision is based on evidence.

The client-side scorecard

Metric	What it measures	Healthy signal
Realized value	KPI movement vs. baseline, signed by your finance team	Meets or beats the conservative case
Adoption	Share of in-scope work flowing through the new system	Rising month over month
Time to first value	Kickoff to a working slice in users' hands	Weeks, not months
Quality in production	Eval scores, error and escalation rates	Stable or improving after go-live
Cost per task	Run cost divided by completed work	Below the cost of the work it replaces
Capability transferred	Changes and fixes your team ships unaided	Increasing; the provider is no longer needed for routine work
Portability	Can you swap the model or provider for a named workload?	Tested at least once a year
Expansion	Follow-on use cases funded from realized value	Two in the pipeline at each quarterly review

Score the provider after every engagement

```
PROVIDER REVIEW · [provider] · [engagement] · [date]
Outcome delivered vs. success sentence ........ 0-5
Quality of the people (named FDEs) ............ 0-5
Evaluation discipline and transparency ........ 0-5
Knowledge transfer achieved ................... 0-5
Respect for our ownership and data terms ...... 0-5
Commercial fairness ........................... 0-5
What did we learn that we now own? ............
What did they take into their product? ........
Would we hire the same people again? Same firm?
```

Report value like an operator

Quarterly readouts lead with business numbers (dollars, hours, cycle time, customer outcomes) and put model metrics in the appendix. They end with the next two use cases, because the value report is the business case for the next phase, whether the next phase is run by the same provider, a new one, or your own team.

IV

PART IV

Building your own FDE capability

When renting FDEs stops making sense, how to stand up an internal team, hire for the role, and avoid the mistakes buyers keep repeating.

CHAPTER 16

The internal FDE team

Vendors build FDE teams because every deployment teaches them something they can reuse across customers. An enterprise with many business units has the same opportunity internally. A small central team that deploys engineers into business units, and turns each deployment into reusable assets, gives you the FDE model's speed with the learning loop pointed at you.

Signals that it is time to build

Signal	Why it matters
Three or more AI workflows live or funded	The reusable layer (integrations, evals, guardrails) now pays for itself
Annual spend on external FDE or AI services above roughly the cost of a small team	Four to six internal engineers often cost less than one year of rented capacity
Workflows touch your core differentiation	That knowledge should compound inside your company
Several platforms in play (Microsoft, Salesforce, AWS, a lab)	A neutral internal team can integrate across vendors no single vendor FDE will
Business units asking for help faster than the central team can say no	Demand exists; the question is whether to meet it with structure

The operating model

Element	How it works
Home	A small center of excellence under the CIO, CTO or chief AI officer, funded centrally for the first year
Pods	One engineer-type FDE paired with one domain-and-delivery lead (the Delta and Echo pairing), deployed into a business unit for 8 to 16 weeks
Intake	Business units submit an FDE brief (Chapter 19); the CoE scores and sequences them using the Chapter 11 criteria
Funding	Central funding for the first engagement; business units co-fund follow-ons from realized value
Platform	A shared layer for identity, model access, evaluation, logging and integration connectors
Asset library	Every engagement contributes something reusable: a connector, an eval set, a prompt pattern, a runbook
Partners	Vendor and lab FDEs are brought in for depth on their own platform, working alongside the internal pod, never alone

Run your own productization loop

Track the internal version of the vendor metric: how much of each engagement is reused in the next. Akimbekov's rule for providers applies just as well to you: every deployment should make the next one easier, with fewer people, faster go-live and less maintenance. If the fifth internal deployment costs as much as the first, the team is acting as an internal consultancy, not a platform.

Four preconditions

Hitachi Ventures sets four preconditions for an FDE model to make economic sense for a vendor. Reframed for an enterprise:

Precondition	Enterprise test
Repeatable problems	Do several units share workflows (claims, invoices, onboarding, service) where one solution can be adapted?
A real platform	Is there a shared AI platform for reuse, or would each pod start from scratch?
Value worth capturing	Is the value per deployment large enough to fund an embedded engineer for a quarter?
A learning loop	Is someone accountable for harvesting assets from each engagement?

CHAPTER 17

Hiring and developing FDEs

You are competing with every frontier lab, hyperscaler and consultancy for the same scarce people. You will rarely win on pay. You can win on problems that matter, ownership of outcomes and a path to leadership, and on growing the role from people who already know your business.

What the market pays (2026)

Source	Figure
Bloomberry analysis of postings	Median base about $174K
Recruiting from Scratch (924 FDE postings)	Average base about $195K
Paraform	Midpoint about $183K; staff level up to about $288K base
Perspective AI (1,200 FDEs)	Mid-level total compensation at frontier labs about $385K

Ranges vary widely by level, location and equity. Use them to calibrate, not to set offers.

Three profiles to recruit from

Profile	Strength	What to add
Your own senior engineers with business exposure	Already trusted, already know the systems and politics	Customer discovery, AI evaluation, executive communication
Solutions engineers and solution architects	Customer fluency, demos, fast prototyping	Production engineering, ownership after go-live
Domain operators who code	Deep process knowledge (finance, claims, supply chain)	Software engineering rigor; pair with an engineer

Interview loop

Stage	What it tests
Discovery role-play	A business leader describes a vague problem; can the candidate find the real one and a measurable outcome?
Build exercise	Two to three hours on messy real-ish data; a working slice with tests and an evaluation approach
Production deep dive	Something they shipped: failure modes, monitoring, what broke, what they'd change
Executive readout	Explain the build exercise result to a CFO in five minutes
Values and judgment	When did they tell a customer no? When did they stop a project?

Keep them

The role burns people out: travel, context switching and constant pressure to deliver. Rotate engineers between deployments and platform work, cap concurrent engagements at one or two, give them public credit for business outcomes, and offer two paths up, toward architecture leadership or toward business leadership.

CHAPTER 18

Buyer anti-patterns

Most FDE engagements that disappoint fail for reasons on the client side of the table. These are the patterns to watch for in your own organization.

Anti-pattern	What happens	Do this instead
The free FDE	A bundled engineer builds on the vendor's terms; you pay later in lock-in	Apply the same ownership clauses as a paid engagement
Absent sponsor	Decisions stall, access waits weeks, the FDE drifts to the easy work	No sponsor, no engagement; gates need a signature
No internal counterpart	Nobody can run the system after the FDE leaves	Name the counterpart before signing; budget their time
Security as an afterthought	Weeks lost to access reviews after kickoff	Pre-approve the data and access path during contracting
Pilot without a baseline	A demo succeeds, nobody can prove value, funding stops	Agree baseline and success sentence before building
Boiling the ocean	Ten use cases, none in production	One lighthouse, two follow-ons
Provider-owned evals	You can't verify quality or compare alternatives	Your experts build the golden set; it lives in your repo
Letting the FDE become a permanent employee	Dependency grows; the provider's rate becomes your run cost	Fixed transfer milestones and an exit rehearsal
Ignoring change management	The system works; nobody uses it	Adoption is a KPI; frontline users in the pilot from week two

Anti-pattern	What happens	Do this instead
One vendor for everything	Every problem gets solved with that vendor's product	Neutral architecture review for any cross-platform workflow

THE TEST THAT CATCHES MOST OF THESE

Ask, at every gate: if this provider disappeared tomorrow, what would we still have, and could we run it? If the answer gets better each phase, the engagement is working for you.

V

PART V

Field kit for buyers

An RFP question bank, status and readout templates, an evaluation rubric, a 90-day plan for the sponsor, and the talk track for your CFO.

CHAPTER 19

Templates

The FDE brief (Chapter 6), the provider scorecard (Chapter 7) and the clause checklist (Chapter 8) are the core of your buying process. These templates cover the rest: the RFP, the weekly rhythm, quality and the executive readout.

RFP question bank

Area	Ask the provider
People	Name the FDEs proposed. Share their last two deployments, in production, with references we can call.
Incentives	How are your FDEs measured and paid? Is any part tied to our consumption, licenses or renewals?
Method	Walk us through your discovery method and the artifacts it produces. Show a redacted example.
Evaluation	How do you build the golden set and release gate? Who owns it at the end?
Architecture	Which components are your proprietary platform? What would it take to run this on another model or cloud?
Data	Will any of our data, prompts, outputs or feedback train or improve your products? Where is that in writing?
Productization	Which parts of what you build for us could become generic features of your product? How do we share in that?
Transfer	Describe your capability transfer plan and how we prove it worked before final payment.
Commercials	Price a paid discovery sprint, a milestone build, and a hybrid with a value-linked component.
Exit	What does a clean exit look like? What would you hand over, in what formats, within how many days?

Weekly status (what you should receive)

```
WEEKLY STATUS · [Use case] · Week [n] of [n]
Success sentence: [reduce X by Y by date, measured by Z]
Phase / gate: [phase] · gate status: on track / at risk / met

KPI vs. baseline:     baseline [..]   this week [..]   target [..]
Adoption:             [..]% of in-scope volume through new flow
Eval scores:          [..] vs. release gate [..]
Cost per task:        [..]
Capability transfer:  counterpart stage shadow / pair / lead

Shipped this week:    1. ..  2. ..
Risks and blockers:   [risk] · owner · date needed
Decisions needed from us: [decision] · by when
Committed to our repos this week: [code, prompts, evals, docs]
```

Evaluation rubric (example: invoice exception triage)

Criterion	Pass (2)	Partial (1)	Fail (0)
Classification	Correct exception type	Right family, wrong subtype	Wrong type
Routing	Correct queue and owner	Correct queue, wrong owner	Wrong queue
Evidence	Cites the PO, receipt and invoice lines used	Cites some sources	No sources or invented ones
Policy	Follows approval thresholds	Minor deviation flagged	Violates a threshold
Action safety	Never posts or pays without approval	n/a	Any unapproved write

Release gate example: average of 1.8 or higher across the golden set, zero fails on action safety, no category below 1.5.

Executive readout (one page)

```
1. The answer: [KPI] moved from [baseline] to [result] on [x]% of volume.
2. What it's worth: $[..] annualized; finance-validated: yes / pending.
3. What we now own: code, evals, knowledge model, trained people.
4. Risks and how they're controlled: autonomy rung, checkpoints, audit.
5. Decision needed today: go / adjust / stop, and the budget it unlocks.
6. What's next: the next two use cases, and who should run them.
```

CHAPTER 20

The sponsor's first 90 days and the CFO talk track

Most of this guide is for the people running the engagement. This chapter is for the executive who has to sponsor it: what to do in the first 90 days, and how to explain the decision to finance.

The sponsor's first 90 days

Window	What you do	Done when
Days 1 to 15	Run the readiness check. Write the FDE brief. Name your internal counterpart and pre-clear security for one data path.	Readiness 10 of 16 or better; brief signed
Days 16 to 30	Shortlist two or three providers from different sourcing models. Score them. Interview the named FDEs.	Scorecard complete; references called
Days 31 to 45	Run a paid discovery sprint with the leading provider. Negotiate ownership, data and exit terms while you still have leverage.	Validated pain register; contract signed with the clause checklist met
Days 46 to 90	Chair the weekly rhythm. Sign the lighthouse, business case and architecture gates. Unblock access within days, not weeks.	Pilot live with real users; baseline and KPI on the dashboard

The CFO talk track

Finance asks	You answer
"Why pay for an FDE when the vendor offers one free?"	"The free one works toward the vendor's targets. We pay for a scoped sprint, own what's built, and keep the option to switch."
"How do we know it worked?"	"A baseline you signed, a KPI on a dashboard you can see, and a conservative case we've already beaten or not."
"What does it really cost?"	"Build, run, inference and our own people's time. Payback at target and at half the benefit."
"What's our exposure if the provider leaves?"	"We rehearsed it. Code, evals and the knowledge model are in our repos, and our engineers ran it for two weeks without them."
"Why not just hire?"	"We will, once we have three workflows that justify a team. This engagement trains the first two people."

Five questions to ask at every steering meeting

1. Did the KPI move against the baseline this period, and on what share of volume?
2. What did our people do this period that only the provider could do last period?
3. What was committed to our repositories, and what is still only in theirs?
4. What decision is waiting on us, and who will make it this week?
5. If we stopped today, what would we keep?

REFERENCE

Glossary

Adoption rate	Share of in-scope work actually flowing through the new system; the most overlooked variable in AI business cases.
Autonomy ladder	Staged levels of agent independence, from suggesting to acting on its own, each unlocked by evidence.
Baseline	The measured "before" value of a KPI, agreed with finance, against which value is proven.
Capability transfer	The planned move of knowledge and ownership from the FDE to your team, from shadow to pair to lead.
Delta / Echo	Palantir's names for the forward deployed software engineer and the deployment strategist; the pairing most FDE teams copy.
Evaluation harness	The golden set, rubric, edge cases, triage process and release gate that define "correct" for a deployment.
Exit rehearsal	Running the system without the provider for a set period to prove you can.
FDE brief	The buyer's one-page statement of problem, outcome, constraints and ownership terms, written before talking to providers.
Golden set	Real, labeled examples from your own work used to test AI quality.
Hypercare	The two to three weeks after go-live when the FDE stays embedded and fixes issues within hours.
Lighthouse use case	The first use case, chosen to prove value fast and fund the next ones.
Paid discovery sprint	A short, fixed-fee engagement to validate the problem and the provider before a larger commitment.
Productization loop	A provider turning what it learns in client deployments into features of its own product.
Success sentence	"This succeeds if it reduces X by Y by a date, measured by Z." The definition of done for discovery.
Workflow knowledge model	The map linking value streams, processes, tasks, data, systems and controls; the asset you should own.

Sources

Market figures and quotations are paraphrased and attributed in the text. Accessed October 2026. Announcement figures are as reported at the time and may have changed.

1. Perspective AI, The Forward Deployed Engineer Playbook: How to Structure, Run, and Scale an FDE Function in 2026; 2026 compensation report.
2. Z. Akimbekov, The Forward Deployed Engineer Playbook, LinkedIn, November 4, 2025.
3. Rupantar, Forward Deployed Engineering services overview, 2026.
4. IBRS analysis of AI vendor FDE programs, summarized in AI Vendor FDEs: Key Considerations and Concerns, 2026.
5. CIO.com, The Forward-Deployed Engineer: Why Talent, Not Technology, Is the True Bottleneck for Enterprise AI, July 2026, including Gartner estimates.
6. ZURB Radar and Reworked analyses of vendor FDE programs, July 2026; A. Buteau on forward-deployed pricing, May 2026.
7. Microsoft Frontier Company: GeekWire, July 2026.
8. AWS forward deployed engineering unit: The State of AI and AI Weekly, June 2026.

9. Google Cloud: Google Cloud Is Hiring an Army of AI Deployment Engineers, August 2026.
10. Salesforce, Salesforce launches Forward Deployed Engineer Partner Network, April 2026; ITPro, Salesforce doubles down on FDEs in UK Agentforce push, September 2026.
11. Deloitte, Deloitte Becomes First GSI to Deliver a Salesforce FDE Engagement, August 2026.
12. Accenture Newsroom, Accenture Launches Microsoft Forward Deployed Engineering Practice, March 2026.
13. OpenAI, OpenAI launches the Deployment Company, May 2026; SiliconANGLE, Anthropic and OpenAI establish joint ventures on Wall Street, May 2026.
14. Hitachi Ventures (G. Sagan, T. Graf, P. Malhotra), AINomics Part 4: The FDE Playbook, Medium, June 2026.
15. Atlassian, Atlassian's Forward Deployed Engineering Playbook, 2026.
16. FDE Academy, The Forward Deployed Engineer Playbook, 2026; Umbrex, The Forward Deployed Engineer Playbook, 2026.
17. Fortune, MIT report: 95% of generative AI pilots at companies are failing, August 2025.
18. Scaler, Forward Deployed Engineer Jobs Grew 1,165%, citing Bloomberry; Paraform, How to hire a forward deployed engineer in 2026; Recruiting from Scratch, FDE Salary in 2026.
19. Palantir, Who Wants to be a Delta?

qexa.com

ABOUT QEXA TECHNOLOGY

AI that ships, on terms you own.

Qexa Technology helps organizations move AI from idea to production: private, on-premise AI infrastructure, AI workforce agents for the front office, and hands-on automation built inside the business. We work vendor-neutral, build in your environment, and hand over what we build.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex Curtis is Chief AI Architect at Qexa Technology. He brings more than two decades at some of the world's largest telecom companies in mobile device management, cybersecurity and AI automation, and works as both a hands-on builder and a trusted advisor to executives.

VISIT
qexa.com

BOOK TIME
alex.qexa.com

CODE
github.com/qexa

© 2026 Qexa Technology. Third-party names and trademarks belong to their owners and are cited for reference only. This guide is general information, not legal, financial or investment advice.