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Building Long-Term Relationships with Key Clients for a Custom-Made Steel Fabricator

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Preface

Working full-time and studying for a second master's degree as an international student has been among the most difficult yet rewarding experiences of my life. Though it also enabled me to develop intellectually and personally, balancing academic obligations, professional duties, and personal life in a foreign nation tested me in many respects. This thesis has enhanced my capacity to think critically, interact with pragmatic business concerns, and apply theoretical knowledge to pertinent practical problems. I really appreciate my colleagues who have remained by my side throughout this academic path. Their cooperation, encouragement, and perceptive conversations helped me clarify my ideas and stay motivated during the most difficult periods of the thesis process. Their willingness to share information and experience greatly influenced the results of this project.

I am really grateful to my Metropolia University of Applied Sciences professors. Particularly, I would like to thank Dr. James Collins and M.A. Sonja Holappa for their intelligent recommendations, continuous support, and critical remarks. Their academic coaching greatly improved the clarity, structure, and depth of this thesis. Every Industrial Management program instructor also merits my thanks for their work in creating a dynamic and inspiring classroom.

Most especially, I wish to thank my family. To my wife, thank you for your unending patience, fortitude, and support. To my two sons, you have been my constant source of joy and drive. And to my friends near and far, your understanding and support throughout this journey meant more than words could convey. This success would not have been possible without all of you.

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Abstract

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An action plan to enhance long-term connections with important customers of a custom-made steel fabricator is presented in this thesis. Capacity planning, customer retention, and forecasting have been difficult for the company due to its reliance on short-term, project-based contracts. Addressing these challenges supports steady growth and trust-based collaboration.

A four-stage, design-oriented research method was used: current state analysis, literature review, proposal development, and validation. Data was collected through interviews, stakeholder discussions, and document analysis. Seven fundamental themes—trust, credibility, customer experience, strategic account management, innovation, data-driven engagement, and collaboration—formed the basis of the framework.

The result was a three-phase development strategy. Phase 1 focused on appointing key account managers, implementing a centralized CRM system, and improving project kickoffs. Phase 2 stressed co-engineering, tailored communication, and organized feedback. Digital tools, KPIs, and long-term contracts were stressed in Phase three.

Internal validation validated the relevance of the strategy and directed changes. The outcome is a useful road map to assist long-term wealth generation by means of strategic alliances.

Keywords: Client relationship management, Custom-made manufacturing, Strategic account management, Action plan development, Long-term partnerships, Business-to-business engagement

List of Abbreviations

BD Director: Business Development Director

CEO: Chief Executive Officer

CRM: Customer Relationship Management

KAM: Key Account Manager

KPI: Key Performance Indicator

PM: Project Manager

QA: Quality Assurance

SOP: Standard Operating Procedure

SAM: Strategic Account Management

R&D: Research and Development

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1 Introduction

In steel fabrication, especially for custom-made fabricators receiving orders from clients for their projects, it is challenging to forecast upcoming projects or receive early information from clients. This uncertainty leads to fluctuations in work volume, making it difficult to plan and allocate manpower, equipment, and facilities. That is why fabricators always aim to build long-term relationships with clients to secure a stable workflow and ensure business stability.

1.1 Business Context

In this thesis, The Case Company, the largest fabricator in Vietnam and a leading structural steel manufacturer in Southeast Asia, is discussed. This company is a significant player in the global steel fabrication industry, boasting a robust workforce of around 4,000 employees and exports extending to over 50 countries worldwide. The company's production capacity is substantial, ranging from 250,000 to 350,000 tons of steel per year. This production capacity allows the company to undertake a wide range of projects, including heavy industrial, commercial, and infrastructure projects.

1.2 Business Challenge, Objective, and Outcome

The Case company faces challenges due to inconsistent order volumes resulting from weak long-term relationships with key clients. This instability negatively impacts planning and resource management, required frequent adjustments in production and workforce. Strengthening key client relationships is crucial for securing stable, recurring orders and enhancing operational efficiency.

The objective of this study is to propose an action plan for building long-term relationships with key clients.

The outcome of this study is an action plan for building long-term relationships with key clients.

1.3 Scope and Outline of Thesis Report

The scope of this thesis will focus on the strategies for establishing and maintaining long-term relationships with key clients to achieve consistent order volumes at the company.

The scope will not focus on financial analysis, marketing strategies, or technical production processes (except for the client's requirement).

2 Project Plan

Within the first chapter, the background of the study is outlined, with a particular focus on the primary business challenges and objectives that served as the basis for the research concentration. In the second chapter, the full research framework is laid out, beginning with an explanation of the methodology that was selected and the rationale behind the decision to use that methodology. The structure of the study, as well as its stages, is later outlined with the assistance of a visual graphic. In this chapter, the technique and reasons behind the data gathering are explained in detail, and the value of the data collection in furthering the study objectives is emphasized.

2.1 Research Approach

Research methods are often categorized into qualitative, quantitative, or mixed approaches, depending on the nature and objectives of the study. Quantitative research typically focuses on numerical data and statistical analysis to measure variables objectively, making it suitable for large-scale data collection and analysis. On the other hand, qualitative research delves into understanding human behavior, experiences, and underlying reasons through methods such as interviews, observations, workshops, and practical situations, providing deeper insights into complex phenomena. (Creswell & Creswell, 2018)

This research makes use of a mixed-methods strategy, which is comprised of both qualitative and quantitative methods of investigation. The study is able to acquire a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem because of the incorporation of the benefits that both types of data offer. The integration of these methods ensures a balanced and robust analysis, addressing both the practical and theoretical dimensions of the study.

A design-based research method was used to collect both qualitative and quantitative data for this study. This is because the goal is to find a useful solution to a problem that exists in the real world. The offered solution is based on established practices and theoretical ideas that have already been written about. The reason for choosing design research was explained in this section. The next section will go into more depth about the method.

2.2 Research Design

The aim of this thesis is to develop a structured action plan to strengthen long-term relationships with key clients of a custom-made steel fabricator. The research follows a four-stage design-based research process, as shown in Figure 2.1.

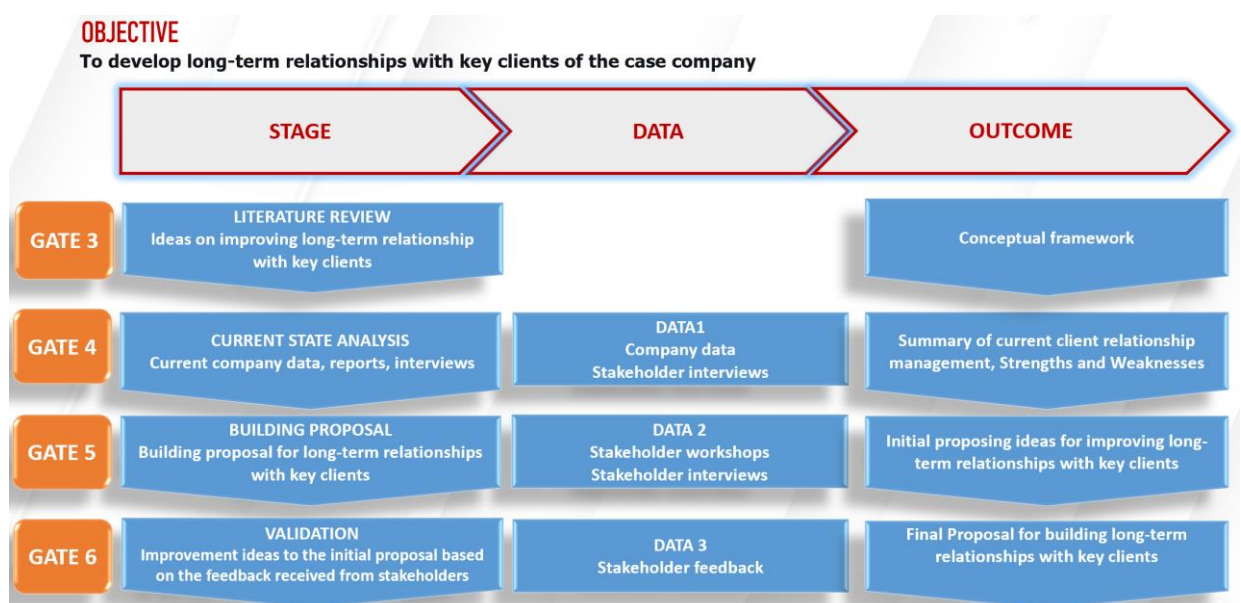


Figure 2.1 The Research Design

Each stage builds on the results of the previous one, gradually increasing the depth of understanding and refining the proposed solution.

Figure 2.1 shows the four-phase layout that was used in this study, including Literature Review, Current State Analysis, Building Initial Proposal, and Validation. Each phase helped the researchers learn more about the topic of the study and built on the insights gained in the one before it, making a steady flow of knowledge that makes sense. The process ends with the final phase, which delivers the study's desired result.

The purpose of this research study is to establish enduring relationships with the company's most significant clients. The study will focus on identifying key factors that contribute to client retention, improving communication strategies, and enhancing the overall client experience to ensure sustained business growth and project continuity. The starting stage is a literature study, aiming at collecting ideas, methods, and benchmarks from the literature as guidelines to contribute to the interviews with informants. As presented in Figure 2.1, the outcome of the literature review is the conceptual framework combined with the findings from the literature, which is the conceptual framework.

The starting stage is a literature study, aiming to collect ideas, methods, and industrial benchmarks from the literature as guidelines to contribute to the interviews with informants. As presented in Figure 2.1, the outcome of the literature review is the conceptual framework.

The second stage focuses on analyzing the current state of client relationship management within the case company. Data 1 is collected through internal documents, reports, and stakeholder interviews. This analysis identifies the existing strengths and weaknesses in current practices and highlights development needs.

In the third stage, an initial proposal is developed in accordance with the insights obtained from the conceptual framework and the current state analysis. The proposal outlines strategic actions to improve key client relationships. Additional stakeholder interviews and workshops forming the set of Data 2 are conducted to further refine the proposal collaboratively, as stated in Figure 2.1.

Validating the proposal is the final stage in the planning process. To evaluate the practicability, clarity, and congruence of the suggested activities with the objectives of the organization, feedback is sought from the many stakeholders within the organization. Taking into account the feedback received, which is Data 3, the concept is transformed into a workable road map that is specifically adapted to the circumstances of the organization.

With the help of this step-by-step study strategy, the case company will be able to systematically improve its relationship with key clients. This is because the conclusion will be both theoretically grounded and practically useful.

2.3 Data Plan

The last chapter went into detail about the research design and how data from different sources is gathered at three different stages of this thesis study. By using these three data sets, the thesis research has a strong base on which more reliable research can be built. Table 2.1 shows in more detail how the data was collected at each stage.

	CONTENT	SOURCE	INFORMANT	TIMING	OUTCOME
DATA 1 Current company data, reports, interviews	The description of company data, reports, interviews	Company data Stakeholder interviews	-Business Development Director -Sales Managers -Project Managers -Production Managers -Clients	December-January 2024	Summary of current client relationships Conceptual framework
DATA 2 Stakeholder workshops Stakeholder interviews	Approaches 1 Approaches 2 Approaches 3	Stakeholder workshops Stakeholder interviews	-Business Development Director -Sales Managers -Project Managers -Production Managers -Clients	February 2025	Initial proposing ideas for improving long-term relationships with key clients
DATA 3 Stakeholder meeting	Improvement ideas to Initial proposing ideas for improving long-term relationships with key clients	Stakeholder meetings	-Business Development Director -Sales Managers -Project Managers -Production Managers -Clients	March-April 2025	Final Proposal for building long-term relationships with key clients.

Table 2.1 Data plan

Table 2.1 shows that data were collected through company documentation, internet-based interviews, and co-creation meetings, corresponding to the three data sets outlined in the research design.

The first set of data, called Data 1, was collected during the process of analyzing the current state. It has internal reports, organizational papers, and interview responses from employees who work directly with important clients. The information gave a true picture of how client relationships are handled at the moment, including problems, strengths, and areas that need improvement.

Data 2 is the second set of data that was gathered during the making of the proposal process. This was done through a number of interviews with stakeholders and a workshop where people worked together to come up with solutions. The goal was to confirm the earlier phase's results and get ideas for how to come up with strategic actions that would improve long-term client involvement.

During the confirmation stage, the third set of data (Data 3) was put together. Internal stakeholders who looked over the initial plan were asked for their thoughts. These comments were very helpful in making the plan better and more in line with what the company actually needs and can do.

Regarding the stakeholders, the Business Development Director represents the administrative and strategic department and is an expert on current organizational operations regarding this topic. The Sales Managers and Project Managers represent expertise in client care implementation and client satisfaction evaluation. The Production Managers selected for the interviews represent the stakeholders providing another point of view in the project execution and collaboration with clients and the shop floor. The Client who is providing directly feedback about the current and expectation from their side to the case company services and performance.

Using data from a variety of sources at different stages makes the research process complete and more open to everyone. It also backs up the design-based approach by combining theoretical ideas with real-world knowledge from important people who work in client relationship management.

3 Ideas on Building Long-term Relationships with Key Clients from Literature

This chapter discusses what the literature review found about how to build long-term relationships with important B2B clients. The goal is to find both practical and theoretical ways that can help the Case Company keep more customers and have more consistent order streams. The ideas from the literature review are put together into a conceptual framework. This framework is used to look at the current practices and come up with a plan on how to make them better. This methodology helps with both gathering data and coming up with useful suggestions for improving relationship management. The first part of this section

gives a quick summary of the issue and how it relates to the Case Company's business goals.

3.1 Definition of Long-Term Relationships and Key Clients

To begin, it is important to define the concepts of long-term client relationships and key clients within the context of project-based industries such as custom-made steel fabrication. While the business development literature offers various definitions and perspectives on these topics, this study focuses on interpretations most relevant to maintaining stable partnerships and recurring project opportunities in a B2B manufacturing environment. Long-term relationships in the context of client management refer to sustained and mutually beneficial connections between businesses and their clients, built on trust, reliability, and consistent value delivery. According to Maister et al. (2000), trust and credibility are fundamental in fostering long-term relationships, where the business must demonstrate competence and integrity over time to ensure clients' confidence. Mehta et al. (2016) emphasize the importance of client-centric alignment, where a deep focus on the client's goals strengthens the foundation for enduring partnerships. Additionally, the concept of delivering exceptional customer experiences, as highlighted by Hague and Hague (2018), is critical in retaining clients long-term, as it fosters loyalty and repeat business.

On the other hand, key clients contribute significantly to a company's success through their size, influence, or the strategic value of their partnerships. As Cheverton (2015) explains, strategic account management (SAM) involves managing key clients with a structured approach to deepen engagement and create long-term value. Payne and Frow (2013) further underscore the importance of data-driven relationship management, leveraging CRM systems to better understand and nurture these key relationships. In a competitive landscape, Kim and Mauborgne (2005) advocate for innovation and differentiation as essential tools to maintain relevance and stand out in the eyes of key clients, while Konrath (2006) stresses collaborative partnerships, where

businesses and clients engage in joint planning and co-development to ensure long-lasting relationships. These concepts collectively highlight the complexity and importance of nurturing long-term relationships with key clients, as they are integral to sustained business success.

However, there is no explicit truth about the right approach to building long-term relationships. Hence, in this study, the approach to defining the process or step-by-step method for developing relationships with key clients is tailored specifically to the case company as a custom-made steel fabricator. This framework also guides the interviews with invited informants to efficiently collect and analyze data in the next step of the Current Status Analysis (CSA), as described in subsection 2.2. This section is created based on seven books to reach the objective of this thesis: Propose approaches for building long-term relationships with key clients. As previously stated, building long-term relationships contains a vast range of content, and there is no single, explicit approach to developing them. The ideas are practically interdependent in many ways. Still, for clarity, in this study, they are discussed using the following themes: **1) Foundation Building, 2) Execution Strategies, and 3) Differentiation & Growth**. The logic behind the ideal process is that progress occurs step by step, developing at specific levels of the relationship.

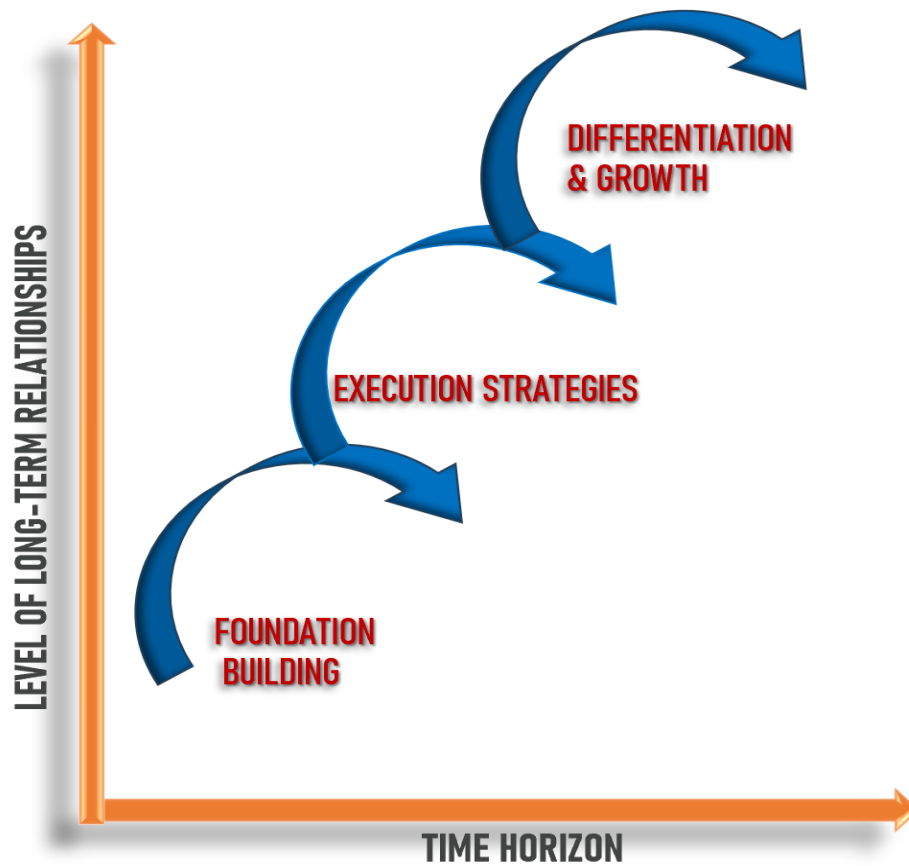


Figure 3.1 The Level of Long-term Relationships and Time Horizon

Many researchers have explored the concept of building long-term relationships, with several definitions and perspectives existing in the literature (e.g., Maister et al., 2000; Mehta et al., 2016; Cheverton, 2015). It is generally agreed that fostering long-term relationships is a gradual process that occurs at distinct levels and requires time and consistent effort.

The next subsection will discuss in detail the following approaches, which are grouped under the three mentioned levels of relationship previously introduced in Figure 3.1: **1) Foundation Building** (Trust and Credibility, Client-Centric Alignment, Exceptional Customer Experience); **2) Execution Strategies** (Strategic Account Management (SAM), Data-Driven Relationship Management);

and 3) Differentiation & Growth (Innovation and Differentiation, Collaborative Partnerships).

3.2 Foundation Building of Long-term Relationships

A strong foundation is key to developing long-term relationships with key clients. This stage centres on mutual trust, aligned interests, and consistent client experience core values recognized in the literature as crucial for client retention. The next sections explore three key components: trust and credibility, client-centric alignment, and exceptional customer experience.

3.2.1 Trust and Credibility

Maister et al. (2000) explore how trust and credibility are crucial to forming long-term, successful relationships, particularly in B2B business. The authors argue that trust is at the core of all meaningful business relationships and is built gradually through consistent, reliable actions. Trust must be gained over time by demonstrating dependability and competence; it cannot be assumed immediately. They clarify that there are two stages in which trust develops: **initial trust**, which is founded on early encounters and first impressions, and **ongoing trust**, which is developed via reliable and consistent behavior. For example, a client may initially trust a service provider based on their reputation, but over time, continued successful outcomes and reliable service are what solidify that trust.

Reliability is key to building trust. Consistently fulfilling commitments and maintaining reliability is essential for ensuring customers trust the service provider to meet their needs and uphold promises. Even highly skilled professionals may lose client confidence if they fail to demonstrate dependability. On the other hand, competence refers to the provider's ability to effectively address client requirements while showcasing expertise and capability. Maister et al. (2000) state that a company can establish a strong and reliable foundation of trust with its customers by combining competency and dependability. Businesses must always uphold high standards since even minor shortcomings

in competence or dependability can erode this trust. Along with trust, the authors stresses the importance of credibility in fostering strong relationships. Credibility is the perception that a service provider is knowledgeable, trustworthy, and capable of delivering results. Maister et al. (2000) argued that credibility helps reinforce trust because clients are more likely to continue working with professionals they perceive as credible. However, credibility is not solely about internal factors. It can also be affected by the outlook of others concerning the business. For example, providers who possess a good reputation or positive reviews will have increased credibility even if they have not worked with that client before.

However, the authors indicate that business representatives should not presume that a remarkable encounter can serve as the foundation for establishing a lasting connection. Instead, a reliable effort should be made to improve the clients' overall experience over time. Clients also need to be consistently updated and engaged, which is why effective communication and responsiveness are critical.

According to Maister et al. (2000), a misstep in reliability or competence can easily erode trust; therefore, a high standard must always be maintained. The book teaches among other things that managing a client is more than just a good service provider. Service providers are expected to actively sustain trust and deal with issues immediately they appear. This means regular checking in with clients to make sure their needs are being met and being open to feedback. The authors suggest that this proactive approach helps to avoid misunderstandings that could negatively impact the relationship.

3.2.2 Client-Centric Alignment

Client-centric alignment means adjusting how a business works to better match the specific goals and expectations of its clients. According to Mehta et al. (2016), when a company truly understands what its clients want to achieve and shows genuine interest in helping them succeed, it builds stronger and more lasting relationships.

This kind of alignment requires more than just delivering a product or service. It involves listening carefully, adapting to client needs, and being flexible with internal processes when necessary. Mehta et al. also point out that companies tend to perform better in client satisfaction and loyalty when they reflect client goals in their own performance metrics.

In B2B industries like custom-made steel fabrication, client-centric thinking can be applied by including key clients early in the planning phase. Doing this helps reduce misunderstandings and improves cooperation throughout the project execution. Instead of reacting to feedback after something goes wrong, companies that adopt this mindset aim to prevent issues by staying closely aligned with the client from the beginning.

3.2.3 Exceptional Customer Experience

According to Hague and Hague (2018), long-term client relationships depend not just on what a company delivers, but also on how the client feels throughout the experience. In their view, satisfaction alone is not enough. What matters more is making the client feel genuinely respected and cared for.

They explain that most clients remember how they were treated, not just the technical outcome. Small things, such as how quickly someone replies to a message, how clearly issues are explained, or whether the company follows through on its promises, all influence the client's overall impression. Even simple interactions can determine whether a client wants to continue the relationship or not.

In industries like custom steel fabrication, where timelines are often tight, consistent service is especially important. Clients appreciate reliability across every stage of a project. When they see that a company performs well over time, not just once, they are more likely to remain loyal.

The authors also underline the importance of collecting feedback. When companies listen carefully and act on what clients share, they show commitment to improvement. This reinforces trust and strengthens the long-term relationship.

3.2.4 Execution Strategies for Building Long-term Relationships

Once a strong foundation has been established, companies must apply practical strategies to maintain and grow long-term client relationships. This section introduces two key approaches from the literature: **Strategic Account Management (SAM)** and **Data-Driven Relationship Management**. These methods help businesses strengthen cooperation with key clients, ensure better service delivery, and create long-term value for both sides.

Strategic Account Management (SAM) emphasizes treating important customers as long-term partners instead of transactional purchasers. This approach emphasizes open communication and proactive problem-solving, thereby building trust, allocating committed account teams, and matching internal operations to client-specific objectives. In custom-made steel fabrication, SAM helps businesses to develop thorough understanding of each client's industry, project lifecycle, and technical requirements, hence enabling better specialized service and less miscommunication throughout execution.

Conversely, Data-Driven Relationship Management stresses the application of consumer data and analytics to improve engagement and forecast needs. Companies can create informed judgments that increase responsiveness, maximize resource planning, and find trends in client happiness or dissatisfaction by methodically collecting behavioral data, project performance indicators, and client input. For the case company in particular, this is very important as project-based work makes it challenging to create consistent, repeatable processes without centralized knowledge. Both strategies contribute to long-term relationship building by:

- Creating internal alignment between departments involved in client delivery.
- Supporting better planning and risk management for complex, custom-made projects.
- Enabling the company to evolve from reactive service delivery to proactive partnership development.
- Building trust and loyalty through transparency, customization, and responsiveness.

SAM and data-driven processes together provide the foundation of execution excellence, therefore guaranteeing the case firm not only efficiently completes present projects but also sets itself as a strategic partner for future possibilities.

3.2.5 Strategic Account Management (SAM)

Cheverton (2015) describes Strategic Account Management as a focused way of working with the company's most important clients. These are the ones that either bring in a large share of revenue or have long-term strategic importance. Building and maintaining a strong relationship with them is a top priority.

In SAM, the goal is not just to sell but to help the client succeed over time. This means understanding what the client's business is really about and adapting services to match their goals. Cheverton points out that when this is done well, a supplier can become something more than just a vendor. The relationship becomes one where the client sees value in the ongoing collaboration.

One key part of SAM is planning. Companies need to choose the right clients to focus on, assign account managers who stay close to those clients, and review the relationship regularly. Cheverton also highlights the benefit of involving the

client in planning. When both sides share their goals and expectations early, it becomes easier to stay aligned and maintain cooperation in the long term.

For a business like custom-made steel fabrication, this approach is practical. When the company understands the client's needs from the beginning, it reduces the risk of mistakes and delays. A strong working relationship also makes it more likely that the client will return for future projects.

3.2.6 Data-Driven Relationship Management

Payne and Frow (2013) argue that reliable customer data is one of the most useful tools in building strong client relationships. With proper data, companies can understand client needs more clearly and react in ways that are more helpful and timely.

The authors suggest that it is not just about collecting data, but about using it in ways that bring value. For example, looking at past behavior can give clues about what a client might expect in future projects. Over time, this helps companies make better choices and serve their clients more effectively.

In custom-made steel fabrication, tracking project information, feedback, and communication history can make a real difference. It helps avoid repeated issues, improves how projects are planned, and allows the team to focus on clients who are most likely to return or grow the relationship.

CRM tools can support this effort by keeping all client information in one place. When everyone involved has access to the same details, it is easier to stay consistent and avoid confusion. This also builds trust, because clients see that the company knows them and can respond with care.

3.3 Differentiation & Growth for Building Long-term Relationships

As relationships with clients develop, companies need more than just solid execution. To keep growing together, they must find ways to stay relevant and useful. This part of the study focuses on two ideas from the literature that support long-term growth: being different through innovation, and working closely with clients through collaboration.

3.3.1 Innovation and Differentiation

Kim and Mauborgne (2005) suggest that to build lasting client relationships, businesses must find ways to stand out. Instead of only competing on price or features, companies can focus on creating new value that clients did not expect but will appreciate.

This approach, often described as a "blue ocean strategy," encourages businesses to move away from crowded markets and offer something unique. In doing so, they shift from trying to beat the competition to making it less relevant. When clients see that a company is forward-thinking and brings fresh ideas, they are more likely to stay loyal.

For a custom steel fabricator, this could mean offering smarter design support, faster project adjustments, or digital tools that make communication easier. Even small innovations that reduce effort or risk for the client can make a strong impression.

According to the authors, differentiation is not about being different for its own sake. It works best when it helps solve a real client problem or creates a clear benefit. Companies that focus on value innovation often build deeper trust, because clients feel the provider understands their evolving needs.

3.3.2 Collaborative Partnerships

Konrath (2006) explains that strong business relationships are not built on one-sided effort. Instead, they grow when both the client and the provider are actively involved. A collaborative partnership means sharing ideas, working together on solutions, and keeping communication open throughout the project.

In large or long-term projects, clients often want more than just someone who delivers what was asked. They look for a partner who understands the bigger picture and can contribute beyond the basic scope of work. Konrath notes that suppliers who engage in joint planning or problem-solving often gain more trust and responsibility over time.

For companies in steel fabrication, this kind of relationship can help avoid delays and unexpected costs. When both sides work closely from the start, expectations are clearer and decisions can be made faster. It also creates space for new ideas that benefit both parties.

Collaboration builds commitment. According to Konrath, clients are more likely to keep working with companies that make them feel heard and involved. A shared approach to goals and challenges not only improves performance but also helps the relationship grow stronger with each project.

The previous sections reviewed several ideas from the literature about how to build long-term relationships with key clients. These included building a strong foundation, applying the right strategies in the execution period, and supporting growth over time. Together, these ideas form a useful reference for looking at how the case company currently manages its client relationships. The next chapter turns to that analysis, using the framework to examine current practices and highlight areas that could be improved.

4 Analysis of Current Client Relationships Management of The Case Company

This chapter examines how client relationships are currently managed at the case company. The goal is to understand what is working well and where improvements are needed. The analysis is based on internal documentation and interviews with key stakeholders. These findings form the basis for identifying strengths, weaknesses, and potential areas for development in the next stages of this study.

This chapter is based on internal documents and interviews with people directly involved in managing client relationships at the case company. Because the researcher is based in Finland and the company operates in Vietnam, all interviews were held online. The questions were developed by the researcher after reviewing the key ideas presented in Chapter 3. This helped keep the discussions focused on relevant topics while still giving space for open responses. Participants included the Business Development Director, Sales and Project Managers, Production Managers, and one representative from a main client. The researcher also took part as an internal informant, drawing on personal experience as a Project Manager. These combined perspectives helped form a clear view of how client relationships are currently handled in the company.

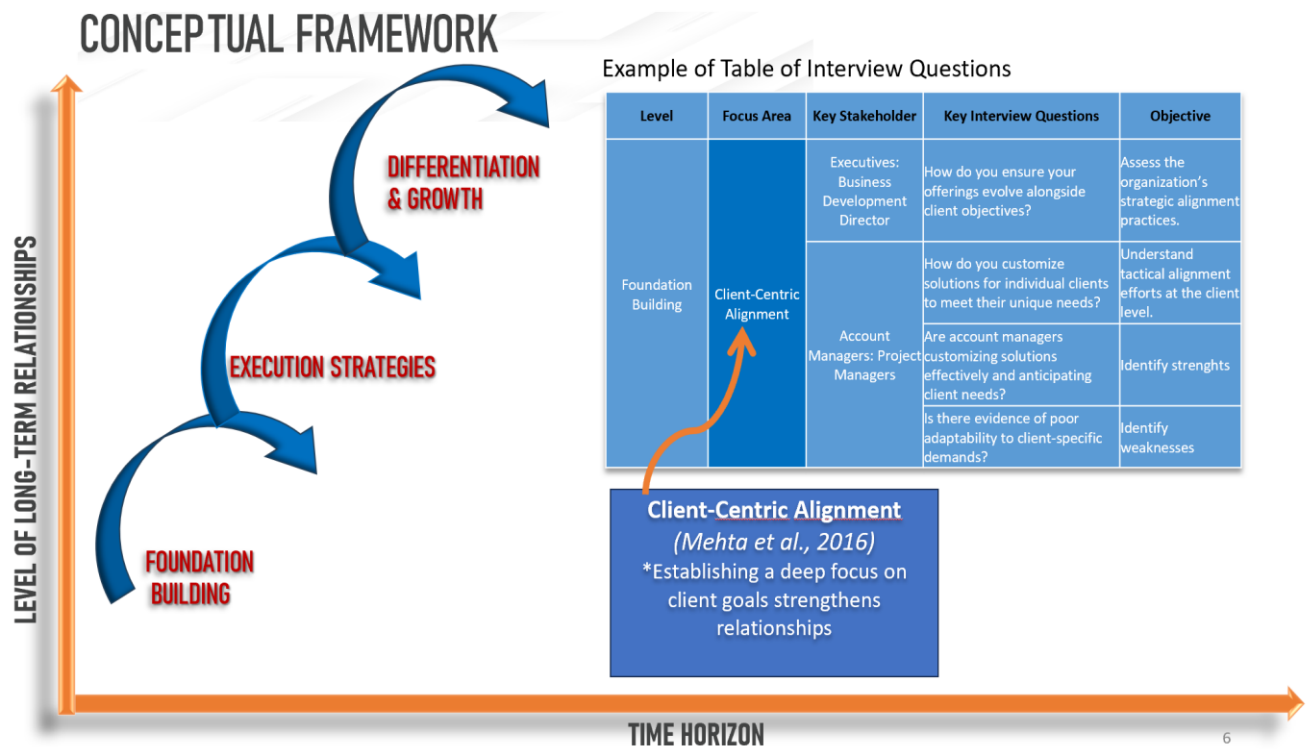


Figure 4: Conceptual framework and interview question table developed by the author.

To support the interviews, the researcher created a set of questions based on the conceptual framework described in Chapter 3. This framework outlines three stages of developing long-term client relationships: Foundation Building, Execution Strategies, and Differentiation & Growth. Each question was linked to one of these levels, and the focus areas were inspired by ideas from the literature, including client-centric alignment (Mehta et al., 2016). As shown in *Figure 4*, the table connects each question with a stakeholder group and a clear purpose. For example, the Business Development Director shared views on broader strategy, while project and account managers discussed how they respond to specific client needs. The questions were designed to reveal both strengths and areas that might need improvement. This approach helped guide the interviews in a way that stayed true to the themes explored in the earlier chapters.

4.1 Overview of Data Round 1

The first stage of data collection focused on gathering insights from people both inside the company and from one key client. Most of the information came through online interviews, supported by a few internal materials shared by the company. Since the researcher is based in Finland and the company operates in Vietnam, all interviews were held remotely. Depending on who was being interviewed, the conversations were done in either Vietnamese or English.

Six individuals took part in this round. They came from different roles, including business development, project and production management, and customer-side involvement. This variety gave a broad view of how client relationships are currently handled across the organization.

Before each interview, participants were given a short overview of the study and a list of themes to expect. The questions, **listed in Appendix 1**, were based on the conceptual framework presented earlier in the thesis. Each session began with a short introduction and stayed flexible enough to allow follow-up questions where needed.

During the interviews, the researcher took real-time notes. One person later added further thoughts via email. Altogether, the sessions added up to about seven hours and resulted in over 15 pages of notes. While not every question was covered by every participant, all the key areas of the study were addressed across the group.

In addition to the interviews, a few internal documents were reviewed. These included things like company brochures and presentation slides. They helped explain how the company presents its services and works with clients, and also supported the interpretation of the interview data.

To support the current state analysis, interviews were conducted with six stakeholders involved in client relationship management at the case company.

The participants represented different functions across business development, sales, project execution, and production, as well as one key client. The interviews were held online, in either English or Vietnamese, depending on the participant's preference. A summary of the interviewees and session details is presented in Table 4.1.

Informant	Role	Date	Language	Duration	Method	Focus Areas
Informant 1	Business Development Director	01.03.2025	Vietnamese	60 min	Online (Google Meet)	Trust & Credibility (Maister), Strategic Vision (Cheverton), Growth (Konrath)
Informant 2	Sales Manager	25.02.2025	Vietnamese	50 min	Online (Google Meet)	Client-Centric Alignment (Mehta), Segmented Sales, Communication
Informant 3	Project Manager	26.02.2025	Vietnamese	60 min	Online (Google Meet)	Flexibility, Collaboration (Konrath), Execution (Payne & Frow)
Informant 4	Production Manager	25.02.2025	Vietnamese	45 min	Online (Google Meet)	Internal Communication, Execution Gaps, Data Use (Payne & Frow)
Informant 5	Key Client Representative	25.02.2025	English	30 min	Online (Google Meet)	Customer Experience (Hague & Hague), Expectations, Loyalty
Informant 6	Researcher / Project Manager	Continuous	English	Ongoing	Internal notes	Observational input on all levels, confirming internal alignment

Table 4.1: Overview of Interviewees and Interview Sessions

A summary of each interview session, including date, role, and key themes discussed, is provided in **Appendix 2**.

4.2 Key Findings from Interviews - Foundation Building

At the foundation level, the company shows both strengths and areas where improvements could be made. One of the strengths mentioned by several team members was how quickly problems are addressed. When unexpected issues arise during a project, teams step in without delay. This quick reaction has helped build trust with clients over time, especially during technically demanding projects.

Another strong point is the visible role of senior leadership in client work. The CEO, for example, often joins meetings or visits project sites. According to one Project Manager, clients feel more secure when senior leaders are involved. This reflects the kind of dependability and personal engagement that Maister et al. (2000) highlight as important for building long-term trust.

Team collaboration with clients also stood out. Sales and project staff gave examples of involving clients early in the design phase and staying in touch throughout delivery. These interactions help ensure the company's work stays aligned with client needs. While this approach fits with Mehta et al.'s (2016) idea of client-centric alignment, it is not yet applied consistently across all teams.

One issue that came up during several interviews was the lack of a structured way to manage long-term client relationships. Even though many personal relationships are strong, there isn't a shared plan or system to support these efforts. One person explained it by saying, "We're good at keeping clients happy today, but there's no real plan for tomorrow." This kind of comment shows that without a clear strategy, it may be harder to maintain strong partnerships as the business grows.

4.3 Key Findings from Interviews - Execution Strategies

Technology and Tools

With production systems updated regularly was one of the aspects most frequently mentioned in these interviews, quite a few interviewees suggested. These updates were described as enhancing the reliability and accelerating processing speed for all of which benefited the company in maintaining consistently high standards through diverse projects.

Sales Structure by Segment

The sales organization itself also came in for praise from interviewees. "It's good," expressed one, while another explained that by categorizing teams in terms of project categories – like industrial, energy or commercial – staff would come to benefit from this split. They would have better-targeted strategies and acquire a deeper grasp of what their various client groups need technically as well as commercially.

Adapting During Projects

Interviewees often cited an aspect of project flexibility. When plans had to be changed midway through a project, the teams responded quickly and kept the client informed. This ability to adapt was seen as one of the critical factors keeping to schedule without delay.

Communication Challenges

Despite having numerous advantages, there were also concerns raised by several interviewees about co-ordination between different departments. There were holes in the communication network, especially between sales and execution stages. At times that could make for botched handovers; on occasion it even led clients' requirements not being met or delayed the delivery process.

4.4 Key Findings from Interviews - Differentiation and Growth

This part of the analysis focuses on how the company creates long-term value through innovation, leadership behavior, and client-focused strategy. The findings reveal clear strengths in mindset and engagement and a significant gap in structured planning for key accounts.

Commitment to Innovation

Several interviewees noted that the company fosters an environment where new thinking is encouraged and experimenting with different approaches is supported. Staff regularly look for ways to refine production processes or minimize waste. Even informal efforts contributed to a learning-oriented environment focused on ongoing improvement. Many believed this mindset made the company more adaptable and better able to meet varied client expectations.

Proactive CEO Engagement

The CEO's visible involvement in client work was mentioned consistently as a positive influence. Several informants explained that the CEO takes part in project meetings and client communications personally. This kind of senior-level attention was seen as reinforcing client trust and showing long-term commitment. One participant observed that this direct approach "makes clients feel prioritized," which strengthens the relationship over time.

Lack of Strategic Plan for Key Client Relationships

Although the company is recognized for its adaptability and responsiveness, many interviewees pointed out that relationship-building relies heavily on individuals. There is no shared plan or framework for guiding long-term engagement with key clients. As a result, the approach can vary by team, and successful practices are not always applied consistently. This was identified as a

potential weakness that could limit the company's ability to grow and maintain its most important partnership.

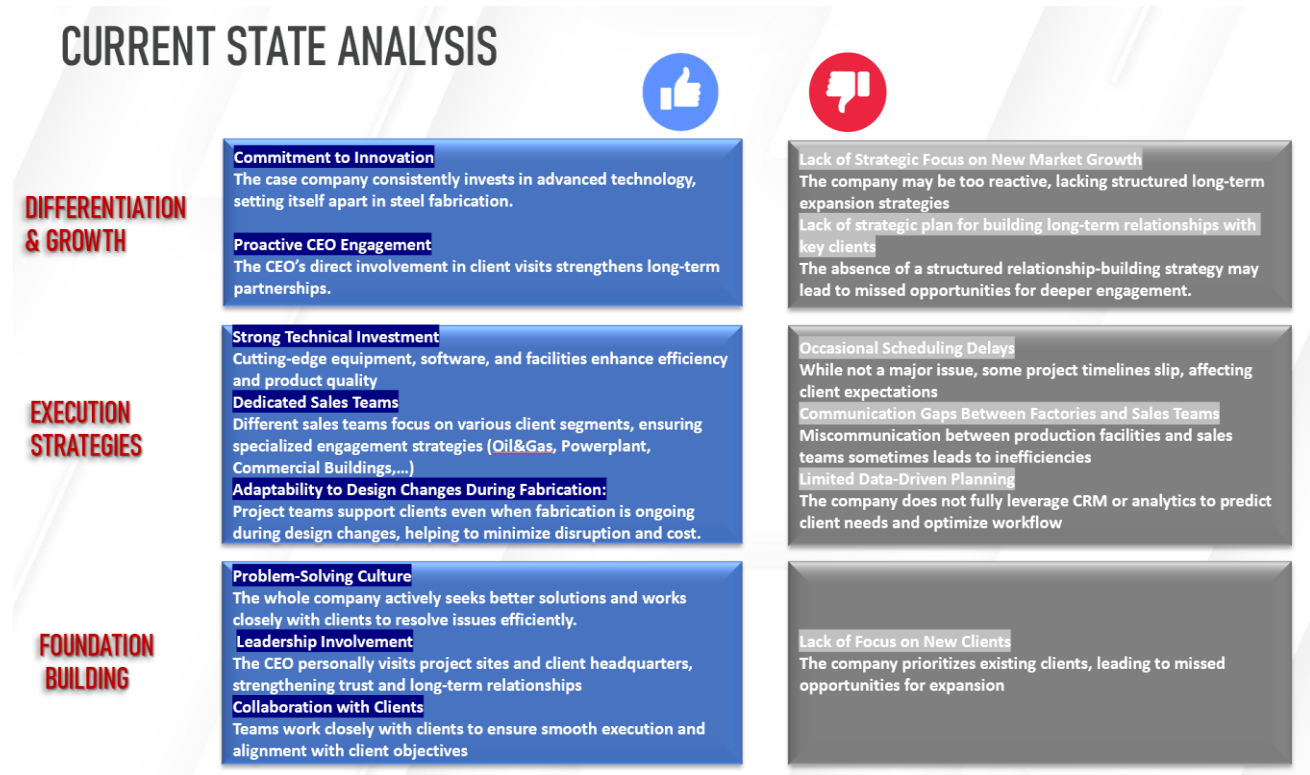


Figure 4.4: Summary of Relationship Management Strengths and Development Areas Based

Figure 4.4 summarizes the key findings from the first round of data collection, organized according to the three levels of the conceptual framework: Foundation Building, Execution Strategies, and Differentiation & Growth. The figure categorizes both strengths (left) and development needs (right) identified through interviews and internal documentation. Strengths such as problem-solving culture, CEO involvement, and technical investment demonstrate how the company builds and maintains client relationships. In contrast, the figure also highlights areas requiring attention, including gaps in coordination, limited use of data-driven planning, and the lack of a structured strategy for managing long-term client partnerships. This visual provides a clear and balanced overview of the company's current relationship management practices.

In the previous chapter, the analysis highlighted both the company's strengths and areas for growth in coordinating long-term client relationships. On one side, the company demonstrates technical strength, adaptability, and strong engagement from leadership. On one hand, it doesn't have formal tools and structured approaches to facilitate sustainable client development. This chapter serves as the basis for the next, which presents a development proposal aimed to fill the identified gaps. This allows the proposal to present a phased approach to enhancing relationship management in a manner that is more systematic and scalable.

5 Developing Approaches

In this chapter, we have set out a clear framework to improve how the organization manages its most significant client relationships. The proposed action plan targets these components, leveraging strengths in areas such as marquee clients, technical responsiveness, and direct engagement from leadership while filling the gap that was the lack of formal structures. It is intended to be implemented as a set of key steps that can in time become a part of any organization, starting with short-term adjustments to begin the journey, followed by changes in direction and innovation that are now widely recognized. The end goal is having a relationship management model that is adaptive and scalable based on the operational reality of the company and its long-term growth strategy.

5.1 Overview of This Data Stage

To fit the specific needs and direction of the case company, a second series of data collection called data 2 was carried out in the course of laying the foundation. It aimed to foster methods of approach that met real operational problems from a high starting point successively step by logical steps. This phase concentrated on verifying results from the current state analysis and team generating practical ideas in-house. A key part of this stage featured a co-creation session with

informants from the first phase of interviews. Their continued participation gave process depth and continuity.

The informants represented key functions for managing client relations, including Business Development, Sales, Project Management and Production. They drew on not just the lessons of day-to-day practice but also a shared experience with past efforts to reach out and engage clients. The co-creation session revisited findings from Gate 4 and then as in the third stage these results were openly discussed. At this meeting participants reconfirmed that the most important features of the company were its technical capability, flexible project execution and active leadership involvement. They also emphasized these characteristics as core strengths for constructing strong client relationships.

At the same time, the discussion threw up common worries on the absence of formal structures. It was noted that roles related to relationship management needed clearer definitions and still lacking were systems supporting strategic client development. As part of the workshop, the group collectively shaped the direction the proposal should take. Their ideas were clustered into three main development phases: laying the foundation; strengthening strategic focus; building for continuous improvement. This is a proposal in which practical points based on personal experience add to and assist with senses of reality of the war. The subsequent sections present these phases in detail, creating a structured plan that is not only action-able but also in line with company long-term goals.

5.2 Phase 1 - Laying the Foundation

This first phase focuses on getting the basics right inside the company. It addresses the practical challenges raised during interviews and co-creation sessions—things like unclear responsibilities and scattered client information—and puts in place small but meaningful changes that make coordination smoother and relationships more consistent.

Clarifying Roles Across Departments

One recurring issue was that people weren't always sure who was in charge of the client relationship at different stages of a project. This often led to confusion, especially when projects moved from sales to production. To improve this, the company should set clearer roles for each department. When everyone knows their part, collaboration becomes easier and client communication more reliable.

Creating Simple Client Overviews

Another helpful step is to organize what's already known about key clients into a shared internal file. At present, this info does indeed exist; it is scattered and often resides in a form as yet undefined. By gathering crucial details--say, past projects, key people, and what's pressing now--into one place, everyone follows the same. It doesn't even have to be much more than low-level internal guide.

Internal Kick-Off Discussions

Before starting new projects with important clients, it makes sense to gather everyone involved—salespeople, project managers, production leads, and leadership—for a short discussion. These meetings are about more than just project goals; they're a chance to talk about what matters to the client, how communication should flow, and what challenges might come up. This kind of alignment at the start can make a big difference in delivery.

Why This Phase Is Important

Getting these foundational pieces in place helps reduce misunderstandings and builds consistency in how the company works with its most important clients. These are low-effort, high-impact actions that make it easier to move forward with more strategic improvements later. They also build a culture of shared responsibility—something that benefits both the company and its clients over time.

5.3 Phase 2 – Strategic Strengthening

Now that the important foundation has been laid, the company can advance to the next stage, fortifying critical processes, and adding formalized structures that drive consistency in service delivery for its clients. A large part of current client engagement relies on individual initiative. This is about establishing joint process, collaborative view, all functions feel they are contributing to lasting relationships with important clients.

Introducing Client Relationship Principles

Here is where you start to introduce some of the Client Relationship Principles. At this stage, the business needs to go from informal habits to solid principles. One can internalize external relationship standards that specify how key accounts will be managed. They do not have to be overly complex, but they should include tips on how frequently one should check in with clients, where and to whom inquiries about services or products should be directed, and what success metrics might look like. Having a standard practice means that everyone on the team has somewhere to refer back to and the experience for the client is more consistent between teams together with all the positives that consistency provides.

Structuring Feedback in Teams

Another area to improve is how feedback is collected and used. Currently, most client feedback is handled informally or on a case-by-case basis. A structured feedback loop, such as short project reviews or quarterly check-ins, can help address this issue. Following this approach, the company begins to function more as a cohesive unit. This allows insights from clients to be shared and addressed from a company-wide perspective.

Developing Interdepartmental Coordination Practices

Effective client care practices hinge not just on direct service, but also on robust internal coordination. While sales teams can be strong advocates for their clients, working in close partnership with project teams can require a concerted effort in larger organizations. To that end, the company should think about implementing coordination measures. This can encompass regular meetings between departments, internal client review sessions, shared data updates and recurring discussions between people working across functions. When this collaboration becomes a regularity, it busts silos and makes the workflow smoother.

The Importance of This Phase

Phase I began the transformation of the company from reactionary solutions to identifying the key gaps. Phase II takes this momentum a step further by bringing the structure into relationship management. At this stage, the company starts to transition from a reactive system to a proactive one. These efforts lead not only to greater client retention, but also to scaleable growth. This investment today in coordination practices and shared routines—such as planning protocols and regular discussions across departments—will enable the company to manage its expanding client base with apleness in the future.

5.4 Phase 3 - Growth and Long-Term Development

The third phase of the proposal focuses on the long-term growth and more strategic tools and processes for managing key client relationships. Once the groundwork has been laid and the practice has been integrated within the organization, focus can then move towards establishing regimented practices that align with scale, strategy and improvement through time.

The Paper Trail: Relationship Development Plans

This phase starts with pushing teams to take a more strategic view of key client relationships. In contrast to simply addressing projects in the short term, relationship development plans can be established and sustained. These plans

may establish medium- and long-term objectives for each account, key client priorities, and opportunities for co-development or collaboration. By internally defining these goals, the company creates alignment in expectations around shared objectives and breaks away from one-off project delivery.

Involvement of Leadership In Regular Strategic Check-ins

It works on the bases of Senior Level Connections — with a select number of key clients. For what it is, step 3: scheduling regular strategic conversations between the client and the company's executives. They discuss everything from projects and partnerships to individual value beyond the immediate business goals. They serve as a signal to the company's long-term commitment and create opportunities to adjust services as client needs change.

Monitoring Relationship Performance Over Time

Relationship development is important to track in order to support improvement. This may comprise both quantitative and qualitative metrics — like client satisfaction trends, volume of repeat engagements, comments from strategic discussions, or issues solved. A low-touch reporting structure enables teams to track progress without adding extra layers of complexity. This information can also be leveraged over time to discover common patterns and best practices across multiple accounts.

Why This Phase Matters

This phase completes the transition from delivering the project to maintaining the long-term relationship. It brings a strategic element to being client facing and provides the agency with tools to grow alongside its clients. With foresight, senior-level engagement, and performance tracking, the company can better focus on bolstering loyalty, repeat business, and expansion opportunities, with its most valuable customers.

The phased action plan outlined in the previous sections is summarized in Figure 5.4. Each phase includes a series of targeted actions designed to strengthen client relationships over time. The table also highlights the expected outcomes, relevant conceptual frameworks drawn from the literature, and the suggested implementation timeline. This structured roadmap translates insights from both interviews and the current state analysis into an actionable strategy.

BUILDING PROPOSAL

Objective: To propose approaches for building long-term relationships with key clients.

STRATEGIC PLAN FOR BUILDING LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIP WITH KEY CLIENTS				
Phase	Action	Expected Impact	Conceptual Framework	Timeline
Phase 1: Foundation Setup	Step 1: Assign Key Account Managers (KAMs)	Faster issue resolution	Trust & Credibility (Maister et al., 2000)	0-6 Months
	Step 2: Implement CRM & AI-Driven Data Tracking	30% faster response time	Strategic Account Management (Cheverton, 2015)	
	Step 3: CEO-Client Strategic Meetings	Builds trust and long-term commitment	Data-Driven Relationship Management (Payne & Frow, 2013)	
Phase 2: Strengthen & Differentiate	Step 4: Develop Client-Specific Engagement Plans	Improves client satisfaction and client satisfaction	Client-Centric Alignment (Mehta et al., 2016)	6-12 Months
	Step 5: Introduce Co-Engineering Solutions	Reduces project delays, improves alignment	Innovation & Differentiation (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005)	
	Step 6: Secure First Long-Term Contracts	50% of key clients committed to structured long-term plans	Collaborative Partnerships (Konrath, 2006)	
Phase 3: Scale & Optimize	Step 7: Expand Multi-Year Contracts to 75% of Key Clients	Stable revenue, 75% of key clients on long-term agreements	Exceptional Customer Experience (Hague & Hague, 2018) Innovation & Differentiation (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005) Collaborative Partnerships (Konrath, 2006)	12-24 Months
	Step 8: Launch Client Loyalty & After-Sales Support	Increases client retention, higher satisfaction & referrals		
	Step 9: Leverage AI & Automation for Efficiency	Increases efficiency, reduced production delays, 20-30% more predictable order flow		

Figure 5.4: Strategic Plan for Building Long-Term Relationships with Key Clients

5.5 Implementation Strategy and Dedicated Team Structure

A team structure is suggested for a successful execution of the development plan. The figure below summarizes this with an implementation logic that begins with team formation and continues through three phases of action. It also specifies the proposed roles and responsibilities needed to support all stages. This facilitates internal ownership, continuity, and a more systematic approach to long-term relationship development.

BUILDING PROPOSAL HOW TO IMPLEMENT?

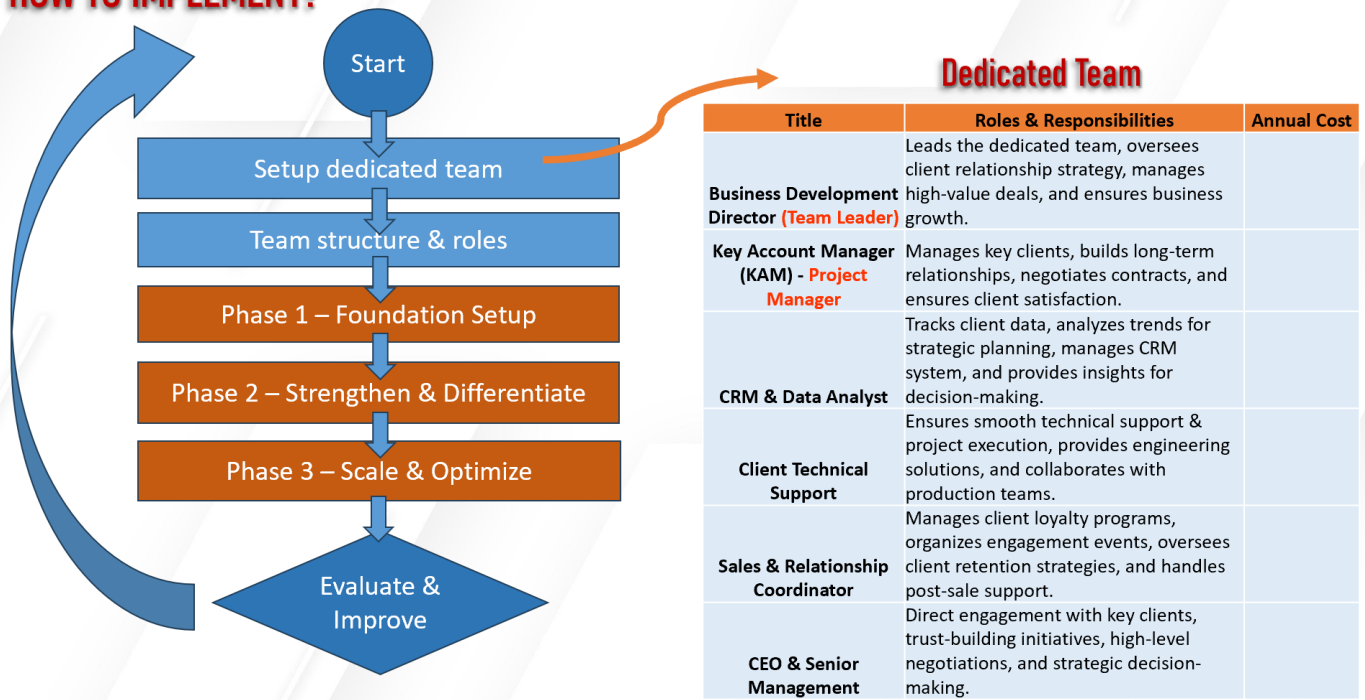


Figure 5.5: Implementation Process and Proposed Dedicated Team for Client Relationship Development

This team is tasked with overseeing and executing the strategic relationship-building proposal outlined in this chapter. By assigning defined roles and responsibilities, the company enhances its ability to align efforts across departments, monitor progress, and continuously improve client engagement practices.

5.6 Continuous Evaluation and Improvement

In addition to execution, the success of the implementation strategy is conditioned on learning and adapting the plan as situations evolve. The company should also focus on ensuring the continuous evaluation of their client relationship management practices to ensure the sustainability and longevity of that initiative.

Among the key activities in this phase are:

Monitor KPIs: Identify client KPIs such as satisfaction rate, contract renewal rate, frequency of engagement, and CRM adoption usage, and use those as benchmarks to judge the stage of your success.

Routine review cycles: Conduct structured evaluations every three months to reflect on what was achieved, where the gaps remain, and how practices should evolve.

Gathering feedback: Establish ways for both clients and in-house staff to provide feedback on the relationship, including quality of interaction, challenges and suggestions.

Data utilization to adjust: Use CRM data, Project Dashboard performance, and lessons learned to inform and improve upon strategies/keep them relevant and aligned with longer term objectives.

This step helps to keep relationship management proactive and flexible, enabling the organisation to respond as client expectations and market environments evolve. More critically, it helps institutionalize a culture of continuous learning and improvement intrinsic to successful strategic client engagement.

To conclude, the development proposal presented in the previous chapter was shaped directly by the specific needs of The Case Company and aligned with the company's day-to-day operations. It offers a phased, practical roadmap aimed at gradually strengthening long-term relationships with key clients. The plan emphasizes clear responsibilities, structured coordination, and a commitment to ongoing improvement positioning the company to engage more effectively with its most strategic and recurring clients.

The following section, Chapter 6, presents how this proposal was validated through stakeholder feedback and assesses its feasibility for implementation within the organization.

6 Validation of The Proposal

This chapter emphasizes confirming the relevance and viability of the development proposal offered in Chapter 5 inside the case company. The goal is to evaluate whether the suggested action plan for enhancing long-term relationships with important clients is relevant in reality and consistent with the operational reality at the case company.

Development-oriented research depends much on validation since it guarantees that theoretical suggestions are anchored in the context of execution. Key stakeholders in Sales, Project Management, Business Development, Production departments, and Client representative those who would finally be involved implementing the proposal were given it. Their feedback helped me highlight, adjust and tuning to finalize and package the proposal.

The chapter advances by first presenting the data collecting technique and participants (Section 6.1), then thoroughly analyzing stakeholder comments on the proposal phase and stage (Section 6.2). Section 6.3 then outlines the revised version of the proposal with changes guided by the validation process.

6.1 Overview of This Data Stage

This chapter emphasizes confirming the first development plan given in Chapter 5. Collecting internal stakeholder input helped to evaluate its viability and fit with the company's operational environment. This phase is essential in validating if the suggested three-phase roadmap: Foundation Setup, Strengthen & Differentiate, and Scale & Optimize, is both relevant and appropriate within the organizational structure and cultural context of the case company.

A qualitative feedback session involving Sales, Project Management, Business Development, and Production department personnel helped to guarantee relevance. These units were chosen because they directly engage with clients and are in charge of developing and sustaining long-term connections. The nine

suggested action steps throughout the three phases were presented to the participants, who then requested open-ended comments on clarity, practicality, priority, and implementation issues. Their answers were recorded and examined to modify and improve the idea correspondingly.

Managing change also required this data stage: it provided key departments with early involvement, hence fostering internal alignment and raising ownership prior to real implementation. The researcher's insider position at the case company guaranteed comments collected reflected real everyday operational issues and helped to smooth this session's facilitation.

6.2 Feedback Received and Corrections to Initial Approaches

The internal validation session yielded significant insights from stakeholder viewpoints. The response affirmed the fundamental significance of the idea while presenting multiple concrete recommendations to enhance its practicality during implementation. The following is a systematic overview of the comments from department representatives, categorized by the three suggested stages and their respective action steps:

Phase	Action	Stakeholder Feedback
Phase 1: Foundation Setup	Step 1: Assign Key Account Managers (KAMs)	<i>Sales Manager: We need clear ownership of client relationships across stages.</i>
	Step 2: Implement CRM & AI-Driven Data Tracking	<i>Production Manager: Client history and feedback are stored across Excel files, emails, and messages. We need one shared tool.</i>
	Step 3: CEO-Client Strategic Meetings	<i>Project Manager: It gives a sense of commitment.</i>
Phase 2: Strengthen & Differentiate	Step 4: Develop Client-Specific Engagement Plans	<i>BD Director: Some clients expect frequent updates, while others prefer hands-off updates. A one-size-fits-all model doesn't work for us.</i>
	Step 5: Introduce Co-Engineering Solutions	<i>Client Representative: Involving clients early in design helped us avoid last-minute changes on two major projects last year.</i>
	Step 6: Secure First Long-Term Contracts	<i>Sales Manager: Lack of framework to offer.</i>
Phase 3: Scale & Optimize	Step 7: Expand Multi-Year Contracts to 75% of Key Clients	<i>BD Director: When we have a stable forecast, we can negotiate better raw material prices. Long-term contracts make this possible.</i>
	Step 8: Launch Client Loyalty & After-Sales Support	<i>Project Manager: After the project ends, there's no system to check if clients are satisfied unless they complain.</i>
	Step 9: Leverage AI & Automation for Efficiency	<i>Production Manager: We have applied the SPM software to automate reporting and generate actionable insights</i>

Table 6.2: Summary of Stakeholder Highlight Feedback

The validation session helped refine assumptions made in the original proposal and addressed concerns about accountability, system readiness, and execution complexity. Several stakeholders also emphasized the importance of starting with a focused pilot before a company-wide implementation.

6.3 Summary of “Final” Proposal

The validation method strongly supported the three-phase structure of the development proposal. Although the strategic level of the plan stayed same, it was changed to enhance operational viability, define roles, and give some tasks priority depending on organizational readiness.

The most important changes to the initial proposal are:

Clarification of responsibility and ownership: Assigning department-specific duties to guarantee that every action step has a defined point of contact. For instance, Sales will handle contract development while the Business Development department will supervise customer engagement strategy.

Including digital technologies and centralized CRM: Feedback underlined that a common platform is necessary for implementation to succeed. CRM usage and automatic tracking through SPM software were thus included into several stages.

Including internal processes: To guarantee internal alignment, steps like internal start meetings for each client and ongoing performance reviews were included.

Pilot-first strategy: A staggered implementation starting with a limited number of important clients was suggested instead of using all actions at once. This lets the case business test, learn, and improve before more general distribution.

In summary, the last version of the development plan is now more anchored in the operational setting of the case company. Both academic frameworks and actual practitioner feedback enhance their practicality and probability of

acceptance. The next chapter offers more suggestions for its execution and next step recommendations.

7 Analysis of Current Client Relationships Management of The Case Company

This chapter brings together the key outcomes of the research and provides a broader reflection on the final proposal developed for the case company. Building upon the findings from the current state analysis, literature review, development proposal, and stakeholder validation, it offers a consolidated perspective on how long-term client relationships can be strengthened in the custom-made steel fabrication industry.

This chapter's structure is logically flowing: Section 7.1 links the last conclusions to the first study goals and summarizes them. While Section 7.3 considers the credibility and constraints of the study process by means of a systematic self-evaluation, Section 7.2 describes feasible next actions for execution.

7.1 Executive Summary

This thesis aimed to develop a reasonable and practical road plan for strengthening long-term connections with important clients at the case company. The study started by finding important problems in the current client relationship management procedures using both internal information and theoretical insights. Among these were scattered client ownership, no single CRM system, and no follow-up following project delivery.

A planned three-phase proposal was created by means of a design-based research approach and then confirmed with internal stakeholders. Their comments supported the fundamental concept and provided ideas for pragmatic enhancements.

Specific, focused actions in the last proposal handle the initial challenges:

- A transparent, step-by-step road map encouraging progressive adoption within the company.
- Customizable engagement strategies fit for various customer requirements.
- Recommendations for improving collaboration and internal alignment.
- Systems and tools for better client tracking and data consistency.

Implementing this plan would help the case company to move from project-based, short-term contacts to longer-term, value-driven connections. This strategic shift improves operational efficiency and planning stability as well as customer retention and satisfaction.

7.2 Practical Next Step Recommendations

Key suggestions in this part help the case firm to transform the validated proposal into actual changes in client relationship management. These activities are meant to allow systematic, quantifiable, and sustainable execution:

Create a Committed Client Relationship Team:

- Designate project management, production, and sales cross-functional team members.
- Designate this group as the executor and owner of every major account strategy.

Give Pilot Implementation Top Priority:

- Choose 2–3 strategic customers for a six-month trial.
- Use the whole three-phase system and gather input both during and after.

Create and Include CRM Systems:

- Combine customer information onto one single system.
- Make sure there is departmental access and connect CRM with reporting tools.

Establish Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs):

- Record post-project reviews, check-ins, and account launch activities.
- Establish obvious duty and regularity for client involvement.

Include Relationship KPIs:

- Monitor indicators including complaint resolution time, satisfaction ratings, and client retention.
- Monthly reviews by senior management should be done using dashboard reporting.

Create Feedback Loops:

- Create debrief meetings following delivery and feedback forms.

- Apply knowledge to change procedures and predict customer demands.

Match Executive Assistance:

- Involve senior executives in strategic conferences with important customers.
- Strengthen company-wide dedication to long-term partnership objectives.

Acting on these next stages will help the case company to transition from validation to execution with more confidence and organization. These actions also lay the groundwork for ongoing model iterative improvement and long-term assessment throughout time.

7.3 Self-evaluation of Thesis Project Credibility

This part offers a reflective evaluation of the general validity, constraints, and worth of the thesis project. The goal was to create a development plan to assist the case company enhance long-term relationship management with important clients. The subsequent assessment describes the methodological advantages and pragmatic limitations experienced throughout the research procedure.

Advantages:

The study included a mix of internal interviews, document analysis, and validation meetings with stakeholders. By including ideas from several departments, this multi-source strategy strengthened the validity of results.

The researcher's participation inside the case company provided direct access to internal processes, historical project data, and interdepartmental communication.

This insider perspective helped to better grasp operational issues and made the suggested solution more feasible.

Key sales, production, project management, and business development officials first examined the suggested concept. Their approval made the proposal more pertinent and practical in actual use.

The concept is based on academic research, including theories on trust, strategic account management, customer involvement, and distinction. This theoretical basis guarantees that the suggestion is not only feasible but also backed by proven studies.

Drawbacks:

The study was mostly on internal viewpoints; just one outside client was interviewed because of confidentiality and time limits. The suggestion might be strengthened even more by a more extensive client-side validation.

Some internal interviews were held online, which would have constrained the depth of conversation and lowered non-verbal communication signals that could offer more information.

Though the plan is strategically structured, some implementation aspects—such as budget needs, KPIs, and task owners—stay high-level and will need more specificity during execution.

Trustworthiness and Involvement

Notwithstanding these constraints, the initiative follows the tenets of legitimate business research. It obviously states the study goal, uses a methodical and open approach, and produces results that are pertinent and useful. Stakeholders helped to co-create the idea, which was then validated by means of real-time input, so enhancing its preparedness for pilot deployment.

Ultimately, the thesis offers a fair combination of academic knowledge and practical reality. It gives the instance company a reasonable basis to strengthen customer interactions and increase long-term commercial sustainability.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Notes from Current State Analysis

A methodical overview of interview questions from the present state analysis stage is provided in this appendix. Organized around major emphasis areas established from the conceptual framework, the questions were meant to gather internal and external stakeholder insights on the client relationship practices of the example organization.

Layer	Focus Area	Interview Question	Stakeholder	Objective	Answer 1	Follow-up Question	Answer 2	Case Studies	Notes
Foundation	Problem-Solving Culture	How do you respond to unexpected client issues? Bạn phản ứng thế nào khi khách hàng gặp sự cố bất ngờ?	Project Manager	To assess how problems are solved in real time. Đánh giá khả năng xử lý thực tế.	We involve both engineering and sales teams. Phối hợp kỹ sư và kinh doanh để xử lý nhanh.	How do you prioritize under pressure? Khi bị áp lực thời gian thì sao?	Based on impact to delivery. Dựa vào thời hạn và mức độ nghiêm trọng.	Fixed design error in 2 days. Xử lý lỗi thiết kế not trong 2 ngày.	Quick response, but not systematic.
Foundation	Leadership Involvement	What role does senior leadership play in client relationships? CEO tham gia thế nào vào chăm sóc khách hàng?	Client	Evaluate trust-building and executive presence. Đánh giá độ tin cậy và hiện diện.	CEO visits in key phases build trust. CEO gặp khách đúng lúc tạo lòng tin.	Should they be more involved? Có nên tham gia nhiều hơn không?	Yes, especially during change. Nên, đặc biệt khi thay đổi phạm vi.	CEO helped renegotiate scope. CEO từng thương lượng lại phạm vi.	Positive effect on client loyalty.
Foundation	Collaboration with Clients	How do you align internal resources to meet client needs?	Project Manager	Assess resource planning and adaptability.	Assign leads per project with support roles. Phân vai theo dự án.	What happens when there's a delay? Nếu trễ tiến độ thì sao?	Reallocate and inform clients early.	Project adjusted mid-phase with client aligned.	Effective under tight timelines.

Layer	Focus Area	Interview Question	Stakeholder	Objective	Answer 1	Follow-up Question	Answer 2	Case Studies	Notes
		Bạn điều phối nguồn lực thế nào để đáp ứng khách hàng?		Đánh giá điều phối và thích nghi.			Sắp xếp lại và thông báo sớm.	Dự án được điều chỉnh kịp thời.	
Foundation	Client Understanding	How do you gather and use client feedback? Bạn thu thập và sử dụng phản hồi khách hàng như thế nào?	Sales	Understand feedback loops. Hiểu quy trình phản hồi.	Through post-project reviews. Họp đánh giá sau dự án.	Do clients give honest feedback? Khách hàng có góp ý thật lòng không?	Only regular clients, others hesitate. Khách thân thì có, khách mới thì ít.	Client added suggestions to next phase. Góp ý được đưa vào giai đoạn sau.	Feedback informal and irregular.
Foundation	Client Onboarding	How is a new client introduced to your process? Khách hàng mới được tiếp cận thế nào?	Project Manager	Evaluate onboarding clarity. Đánh giá rõ ràng của quy trình khởi động.	Through email and kick-off meeting. Gửi mail và họp khởi động.	Is it standardized? Có quy chuẩn không?	No formal template yet. Chưa có mẫu chuẩn.	One client misunderstood scope. Khách hiểu sai phạm vi.	Weak onboarding leads to confusion.
Execution	Communication Gaps	What challenges exist between sales and production? Giao tiếp giữa	Production Manager	Identify internal bottlenecks.	Sales overlook tech risks.	How to improve communication?	Shared tools, weekly sync.	Late drawing update caused rework.	Critical internal issue.

Layer	Focus Area	Interview Question	Stakeholder	Objective	Answer 1	Follow-up Question	Answer 2	Case Studies	Notes
		kinh doanh và sản xuất có khó khăn gì?		Xác định điểm nghẽn giao tiếp.	Kinh doanh không rõ kỹ thuật.	Cải thiện giao tiếp bằng cách nào?	Dùng công cụ chung và họp định kỳ.	Bản vẽ cập nhật trễ gây làm lại.	
Execution	Strong Technical Investment	What makes clients happy with engineers? Điều gì khiến khách hàng hài lòng với kỹ sư?	Clients	Understand technical strength. Hiểu giá trị kỹ thuật.	Fast reply, expert knowledge. Phản hồi nhanh, chuyên môn tốt.	What should be improved? Cần cải thiện gì?	Document clarity and follow-up. Tài liệu và theo dõi chưa đồng bộ.	Finished project early due to engineers. Hoàn thành sớm nhờ kỹ sư.	Well-received by clients.
Execution	Account Ownership	Who is responsible for long-term client care? Ai phụ trách chăm sóc khách hàng lâu dài?	Business Development	Clarify roles in account management. Làm rõ vai trò quản lý khách hàng.	Shared between sales and PMs. Chia sẻ giữa sales và quản lý dự án.	Should we have dedicated KAMs? Có nên có người phụ trách chính không?	Yes, improves consistency. Có, sẽ đồng bộ hơn.	Long-term client confused with multiple contacts. Khách bối rối vì nhiều người liên hệ.	Ownership unclear leads to delays.
Execution	Internal Collaboration	How do departments coordinate during client delivery? Các phòng ban phối hợp thế nào khi	Production Manager	Review cross-department collaboration. Xem xét phối hợp nội bộ.	Mostly through weekly meetings. Họp định kỳ hàng tuần.	Are these meetings effective? Các cuộc họp có hiệu quả không?	Depends on chair and agenda. Tùy người chủ trì và nội dung.	Case of late procurement flagged at meeting.	Meetings not always followed up.

Layer	Focus Area	Interview Question	Stakeholder	Objective	Answer 1	Follow-up Question	Answer 2	Case Studies	Notes
		triển khai cho khách?						Mua hàng trễ được phát hiện kịp thời.	
Execution	Service Consistency	How do you ensure consistent service quality? Làm sao để đảm bảo chất lượng phục vụ đồng đều?	Client	Examine delivery consistency. Đánh giá mức ổn định khi phục vụ.	Rely on experienced project leads. Dựa vào người phụ trách giàu kinh nghiệm.	Is that enough for scalability? Như vậy có mở rộng được không?	No, needs systems too. Không, cần thêm hệ thống.	Feedback varies by team lead. Phản hồi khác nhau theo người quản lý.	Too person-dependent.
Execution	Feedback Integration	How do you improve based on past project lessons? Rút kinh nghiệm từ dự án trước thế nào?	Quality Manager	Understand learning loops. Hiểu cách cải thiện từ thực tế.	Internal review but rarely shared. Đánh giá nội bộ, ít khi chia sẻ.	Should we involve clients too? Có nên hỏi ý kiến khách hàng không?	Yes, for joint improvement. Có, để cùng cải thiện.	Missed root causes without client input. Không có góp ý nên bỏ sót nguyên nhân.	Improvement stays internal.
Growth	Strategic Planning	Are there long-term plans for key clients? Có kế hoạch dài hạn cho khách	Business Development	Check strategic roadmap. Kiểm tra kế	No clear roadmap yet. Chưa có kế hoạch cụ thể.	Where to begin planning? Bắt đầu từ đâu?	Group clients by type, assign roles. Phân nhóm	No long-term roadmap on file. Chưa có tài	Major gap vs. competitors.

Layer	Focus Area	Interview Question	Stakeholder	Objective	Answer 1	Follow-up Question	Answer 2	Case Studies	Notes
		hàng trọng yếu không?		hoạch chiến lược.			khách và phân vai.	liệu chiến lược chính thức.	
Growth	Client Segmentation	Do you group clients based on potential? Có phân nhóm khách theo tiềm năng không?	Marketing	Evaluate market targeting. Đánh giá phân khúc khách hàng.	Only by industry at the moment. Hiện chỉ chia theo ngành.	Would value-based grouping help? Nhóm theo giá trị có giúp ích không?	Yes, can focus efforts better. Có, sẽ tập trung hơn.	Missed follow-up with mid-value clients. Bỏ sót khách tầm trung.	Strategy not aligned to growth.
Growth	CRM Analytics	What data do you track about clients? & Bạn theo dõi thông tin gì về khách hàng?	Sales	Understand CRM and analytics. Hiểu công cụ theo dõi và phân tích.	Mainly contact history and deals. Chủ yếu là liên hệ và đơn hàng.	Do we use this for planning? Dùng dữ liệu để lập kế hoạch không?	No, more for reporting. Không, chỉ để báo cáo.	CRM underused for strategy. CRM chưa hỗ trợ chiến lược.	Potential underutilized.
Growth	Long-Term Value Creation	How do we add value beyond price? Ngoài giá cả, ta mang lại giá trị gì cho khách?	Client	Assess non-price value delivery. Đánh giá giá trị ngoài giá cả.	Speed, customization, transparency. Nhanh, linh hoạt, minh bạch.	Is this clearly communicated? Điều này có được truyền đạt rõ không?	Not always. Không phải lúc nào cũng rõ.	A client chose us over cheaper offer. Khách chọn ta dù giá cao hơn.	Need better value proposition clarity.

Appendix 2: Co-Creation Development Meetings Summary

This appendix summarizes the key takeaways from individual meetings to co-create the potential solutions:

Discussion Topic	Stakeholder(s)	Key Takeaways	Incorporated Adjustments
Internal role clarity	Sales Manager, BD Director	“Concern over unclear client ownership”	The proposal now includes assignment of dedicated KAMs by client type.
CRM and engagement tracking	Production Manager, Sales Manager	“Current tracking is fragmented and need shared tool.”	CRM system integrated to unify data and automate engagement tracking.
Client-specific engagement styles	Project Managers, BD Director	“Varying expectations from clients”	Action plan includes customizable communication frequency per client.
Design-phase collaboration	Project Manager, Engineering	“Late design changes cause delays.”	Added a step for co-engineering sessions during early project stages.
Strategic involvement	BD Director	“Direct leadership presence boosts client confidence.”	CEO-client meetings are formalized at kickoff and major review milestones.
Long-term contracting	Sales, Finance	“Lack of structure for long-term offers.”	Introduced long-term contract templates with incentives.
Post-project follow-up	Project Manager, Client Support	“After-sales touchpoints were unclear.”	Loyalty checks and post-delivery feedback now embedded in process.

Appendix 3: Stakeholder Feedback and Validation Notes

Summarized in this appendix is the input gathered from stakeholders during the validation phase of the proposed client relationship development strategy (Gate 6). Due to scheduling constraints that precluded workshop facilitation, a series of organized one-on-one encounters held online and in person generated the comments. Participants came from five main stakeholder groups inside the Case Company and the Client Representative:

1. Business Development Director:

- Agreed on the urgent need for a formal strategy; highlighted lack of long-term vision and overlap in client responsibility.
- Strongly supported the phased roadmap, especially the CRM and segmentation strategies.
- Prioritize piloting the plan with existing loyal clients.

2. Sales Managers:

- Acknowledged inconsistency in communication practices and lack of dedicated account ownership.
- Supported appointing KAMs and establishing engagement plans.
- Provide training for account managers to standardize approach.

3. Project Managers:

- Agreed that technical collaboration with clients exists but is informal.
- Approved co-engineering ideas and feedback loops.
- Create templates for technical reviews with clients.

4. Production Managers:

- Emphasized communication gaps between production and sales, leading to rework.
- Supported CRM usage and regular cross-functional meetings.
- Include production reps in early-stage planning with clients.

5. Key Clients (1 Interview):

- Appreciated quick problem-solving but found service experience inconsistent.
- Confirmed interest in closer collaboration and communication.
- Assign a clear single point of contact and regular update routines.