

8 things to remember when engaging a third party IT development partner

Choosing a third party development partner can be a difficult and challenging task. Are they reliable? Do they have the necessary skills? You will want them to see the world the way you do and be as enthusiastic about your project as you are. Here are 8 things you should never forget to help you get the best results from your third party development partner.

1 Make sure they understand your business

It's important that the partner you're considering can bring know-how and understanding to your project right from the start. If they have a proven track record in delivering the type of development you need and experience of your industry sector, then they're probably worth seriously considering.

It's also a good idea to check out recent work they have undertaken. Would you be happy if it had been done for you? Does it make you feel confident that they can successfully meet the needs of your business?

2 You need a development partner with whom you can build good relationships

Software development projects can be stressful and demanding. Good working relationships are important. You're going to need to build a strong rapport with your partner to help you overcome the challenges along the way. Pick a partner who listens to your needs, rather than one that imposes their solution on you. It's very difficult to build a good relationship when staff are constantly changing, so seek out a company that is good to work for and has good staff retention rates. So you don't get a constant changing of personnel.

3 Check them out thoroughly

By now, you've probably seen a few candidate partners and drawn up a short list of possibles. Now's the time for a bit of due diligence checking. Call them on the phone. Do they answer promptly, even before 9 and after 5.30pm? Check out their certifications, like ISO 9001. Ask for some references from other companies they have dealt with and check them out. Ideally you're looking to see if what they've told you about their sector experience and their track record in delivering similar projects actually stacks up in reality.

4 Assess the level of risk

Engaging with a new partner always carries risk. Check out the levels of risk and look to mitigate against them. Before you commit.

Establish how long the company's been trading and get an independent report on its commercial stability. Be sure that they have a robust methodology and tested processes to deliver your project in place. Together with the depth of experience to provide what you require.

They'll have access to valuable, private information about your company. Make sure they have the systems and intent to keep your data secure and confidential. If there's any doubt. Move on!

5 Set out expectations, aims and requirements

If you don't clearly set out the overall aims, expectations and requirements of the projects you are putting out to third party developers. Don't be surprised if what comes back isn't what you need!

There's a world of difference between developing against what you know you need, as opposed to what your third party developers have to assume you need, because your design specs aren't clearly thought through to meet specific, measurable and timed requirements. To avoid the expense of rework and costly delays, always take the time to 'brief' your developers formally and in writing.

7 Make sure your third party IT Development partner has a good test team

No matter how proficient your third party developers are, your new system will need to be thoroughly tested before it is deployed into your business. This is most effectively done when the developers have their own in-house test teams, working independently, to verify that the solution delivers to both the business and the technical requirements specification.

The best test teams should always follow recognised industry standards and processes and provide a clear test audit trail. An ability to support the systems integration process is also extremely desirable and should be sought where possible.

6 Establish if they are Vendor independent

Rather than being 'vendor independent', many third party developers are tied to a single licensed software provider like SAP or Oracle. This will mean that they can only offer solutions based on that one vendor's technology, which may not be the best outcome for your business. In addition, pressure to deliver on sales targets set by the vendor may lead them to make unrealistic performance claims and delivery deadlines in order to make the sale.

If your provider isn't vendor independent, be certain that the needs of your business are always first and foremost in their minds.

8 Check they provide application support

The application you are planning to deploy will of course require support during its deployment and once it is fully implemented. Aim to develop a service level agreement that the support team will work to. Identify the hours of support, which should be UK working hours as a minimum. And detail how the support will be delivered i.e. email, On-line, telephone or a combination of all three.

End user acceptance is vital to the success of any software project and accessible easy to use support is crucial if they are to embrace the new system wholeheartedly.