

Tips To Choose The Right Technology Specialist

Technology is the secret weapon for your business. The importance of technology in the course of business operations can never be put aside today. Technologies can make tasks easier and done more efficiently if implemented properly. However, hiring a technology specialist can be a daunting task for many small and medium business owners, especially if they are not very familiar with technology or for those who do not have technical background.

More often when people look for technology solutions, their first thought is of a technology vendor or developer, which can be expensive and does not guarantee the best solution. Every business is unique even if they are in the same industry. What works for others might not work for you. Moreover, you want to use technology as a key differentiator or competitive advantage. Do not make the common mistake of focusing on the wrong things. You need to be objective and know how to ask the right questions. Here is a list of some of the responses I have heard to the question, "How did you go about choosing your technology solution?"

- "The vendor offered us free advice on planning technology implementation."
- "Because everybody in our industry was using it."
- "Our end users liked the user interface."
- "They told us their technology can solve everything that we required."
- "They pretty much convinced us that customized solutions were the best choice."
- "They have a large team of programmers and engineers."
- "They used a lot of technical jargons and buzzwords. Though I am not clear with them personally, but they seemed to know their stuffs well."

These reasons can range from possibly acceptable to risky and dangerous. The key to successful technology implementation lies on proper planning. This includes thorough understanding of your short and long term business goals, need, pain and problem, followed by objective evaluation of technology and its functionality that suit your business needs.

Questions To Ask Your Technology Specialist

Question to Ask	Why You Should Ask
How long have you been providing these services?	A specialist that is new to the business may not have the needed experience to assist you. This might increase your risks of a failed implementation. If in doubt, always get a second opinion from another specialist.
Who are your previous clients?	It is important to check references and the date of reference. The specialist must have good reputation. Frequent invitation to speak at local conference is a good indicator for this. Old reference dates may indicate that the specialist might not able to provide you with advice that is the most current and up to date.
What did your clients like best about your services?	This will give you a very good perspective on the approach and methodology of the specialist. It is very important that they have balanced understanding of business and technology. Successful technology implementation is less about technology and more about business. Beware of specialist who doesn't listen and then come out with a quote or proposal that doesn't resemble at all what you discussed. They should spend more time understanding your business, vision, process, and problem, instead of just selling and promoting their product features and technologies.
Do you resell products, such as hardware and software?	A specialist that only deals with one or two vendors may try to fit your business problem into their solution rather than finding the right solution for your business need. The ideal specialist should be independent and have no ties to any vendor, and able to shop for your choice of products and services.
How big is your programming team? What technologies or programming languages do they specialize in?	This will reveal that if the specialist is really a true specialist or a developer. The latter usually have a sizable programming team, which incurs high overhead costs where they will typically try to recoup from their fee. Ideally, a specialist should not have a fulltime programming team. This is to ensure maximum flexibility and cost effectiveness, as well as prevent giving opinions that are biased towards their team capabilities. A good specialist will assemble the team with the necessary expertise only after understanding your requirements.
Do you personally have any experience in programming?	To minimize implementation risk, the specialist himself must have solid experience in programming to the extent where he can roll up his sleeves and get his hands dirty to support the team when necessary. Be cautious with specialists who come from business background and claim that technical skills are not required or relevant until the later stage. The ideal specialist should have strong technical background with good business sense.
What is your fee structure?	Be extra careful with specialists who do not do planning or do it at no fee. They will probably provide solution that will not work, or just a narrow view of choices, or have hidden fees to recoup those costs later, probably during implementation. Also, make sure that they don't ask for all the money up front, advance payment of 40 to 60 percent is considered fair.
How do you guarantee your services? What type of warranty do you provide?	Most specialists will promise client satisfaction, but how do they guarantee it. Timely delivery is one of the greatest challenges when it comes to technology implementation. So make sure your specialist provides some sort of service contract that ensures their on-time implementation.