BYNG

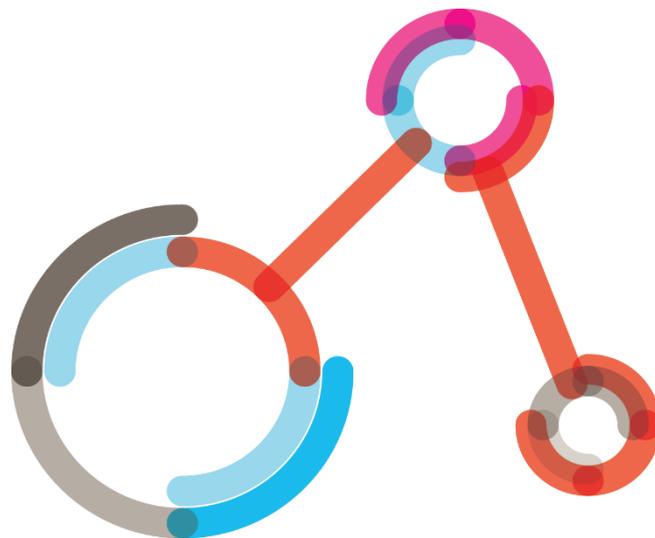# HOW TO CHOOSE A TECH PARTNER

A framework for choosing technical suppliers

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8 TIPS ON CHOOSING A TECHNOLOGY PARTNER

A strong network of technology partners has major advantages for any digital agency or technology enabled business. Firstly, it improves utilisation: as you'll be able to focus on your core team and flex against your partners resources. Secondly, it protects the bottom line: because you're focusing on your core team, you'll avoid catering for a diverse range of skill sets which need to be constantly fed with work. Finally, it allows one to be less picky on acquiring new business: as you'll be able to call on your partners' experience, whilst maintaining control over the client.

An example of this might be a client mandating .NET or Java technologies when your own engineers focus on Ruby on Rails. Or perhaps it's a client requesting Adobe Experience Manager or Pimcore (enterprise web CMS) when SiteCore is your preferred technology. Or you don't have a dev team and you just need a safe set of hands.

At Byng as a specialist in software engineering we find ourselves striking long term partnerships to take on projects with a specific requirement; new products and services, complex software problems and integrations, high performance systems or simply even large implementations of platforms (CMS, mobile apps etc).

This article presents a short framework based on our experience to help guide and reason how to choose a technology supplier.

TIP 1) WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN THE CREDS: EXPERIENCE, SKILLSET AND QUALITY

A great credentials document isn't just about showing off clients and project work (although this is crucial step in building a picture of reputation, demonstrating industry or sector knowledge and cross referencing brands) There are some other factors that are really important to explore:

Technologies and solutions strength: Is all about establishing the depth of knowledge and experience in particular technology (i.e. languages or frameworks, such as AngularJS or Symfony) and solutions (for example, a mobile build tech, such as PhoneGap). The best way of doing this is query why it's relevant to a project and where it's been used, as well as how mature it is. Building confidence is about tying all these aspects together.

Accreditations: Is a great way of cementing the credentials of a partner. These are often hard to win and cover technologies and solutions. Accreditations cover individuals and the organisation. Other examples include technical project management certifications, for example: PRINCE2, Kanban, SCRUM master. Alternatively, accreditation may come from key management or non-executive experience.

Ongoing support setup: Launching high profile web or mobile touchpoints, be it a brochure site or new digital service for an established brand, usually demands a mature helpdesk - capable of managing support and change requests through an enterprise level SLA. Some questions that may be valuable: how big is your helpdesk team, can you offer extended or out of hours support, or what is your maintenance approach?

Enterprise friendly: If big corporates is your game, it'll be important to figure out how comfortable your partner is in this environment. Are they adept at degrading the front end to suit IE8, have they ever done any pen-tests, are they setup to assist on complex stakeholder management?
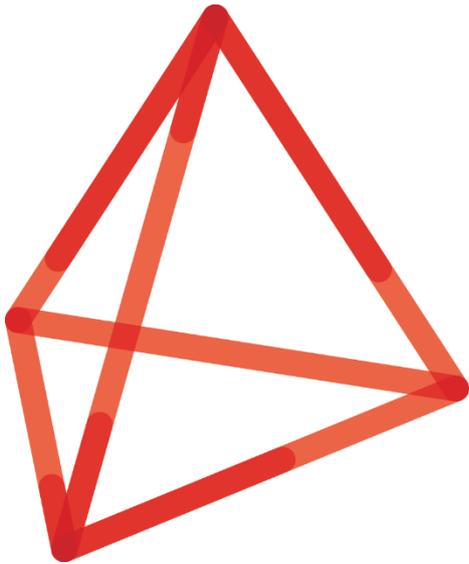
TIP 2) GETTING STRONG PRE SALES SUPPORT

A good partner will come with a wealth of knowledge and it's highly advisable that you use it, after all they're best placed to represent their approach, experience and workstream with you and your clients. The earlier this happens the better, in order to ensure that everybody is aligned and the best direction is agreed with all parties. Typically this requires quite a bit of effort on the part of the partner - given that it requires a deep dive into the project before it's agreed.

Unfortunately, it is far too common to find an 'execution-only' mentality amongst tech suppliers i.e. ("*we want to be told what to do*"), rather than a proactive, exploratory and value add approach. The main reason is down to controlling pre-sales costs. However, we would argue **that to get buy-in, to get comfortable when the requirements are complex and to avoid awkward account level conversations with the client, this approach is a must**.

## TIP 3) ARE THEY GOING TO BRING YOU BUSINESS?

Being a partner means more than just a knowledge based value exchange. If you've got great partner relationships, they should be **contributing to your top-line** as well. Especially, if you complement your partners offering. As an engineering business, with a growing book of direct client relationships, we find ourselves able to provide work to our network frequently.

TIP 4) MATCHING THE SIZE OF PROJECT TO SIZE OF SUPPLIER

How big is the relevant aspect of the project compared to the partner? Roughly 1% to 20% of their turnover feels about right. Average number of account/BD team to the number of engineers - roughly a ratio of 1 person to 12 people (8.5%), seems to be the industry standard.

Too small a project and it may not get the attention you require, too big and the team may be stretched. Similarly for a project worth £180k over 6 months then they should have at least twice the 3 months working capital required for your project - so approximately £180k cash in the bank. If not then perhaps they should look at raising finance for the project.
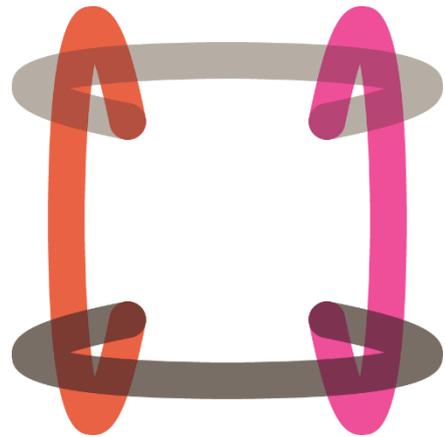
TIP 5) CAPACITY CHECK - QUICK DELIVERY ASSESSMENT

As a business engaged with all flavours of clients and projects, there's no 'one size fits all' delivery model. Each project and account has different demands and it's important that your partner is set up to work the right way (and can steer you appropriately). Without going into length on the benefits of outsourcing versus outstaffing or project management methodologies, it's important to establish whether your partner can provide you with dedicated key resources.

Ask to see a team sheet and who will be working on the project. If the partner is not able to name them and for you to meet them then they probably are under resourced. This should factor most heavily in your decision making process.

TIP 6) WHAT DOES THE COMMERCIAL FRAMEWORK LOOK LIKE

It is preferable if your technical partner has a codified set of commercial processes to cover all aspects of their service offering and resourcing in a set of documentation. We'd recommend requesting to see them at an early stage and get an explanation of the process. If there are multiple documents ensure that they all tie together tightly. **Strong documentation / process is a good indicator of account savviness.** We've found that we infrequently ended up in difficult client conversations where we've been satisfied with our partners' documentation.

TIP 7) ENGAGING - AVOID FIXED COSTS

We think any partner that provides a fixed quote during pre-sales, is misrepresenting themselves commercially, unless all parties are happy to fix requirements and not deviate. The reality is, no one knows the exact scope / requirements of a piece of complex work until they immerse themselves in the project and have enough information to lock-down estimates, so if assumptions are made they must be met. Usually this is extremely hard as demands change with time. **Typically, fixing costs too early means the finishing touches won't be completed to a high standard** (if the budget has been burnt, which is usually the case) or there's no spare room for scope creep or adding some sparkles during the delivery. We would question and qualify any supplier of ours to bottom this out during initial meetings. There are many alternatives, but we'll leave these to a future post.
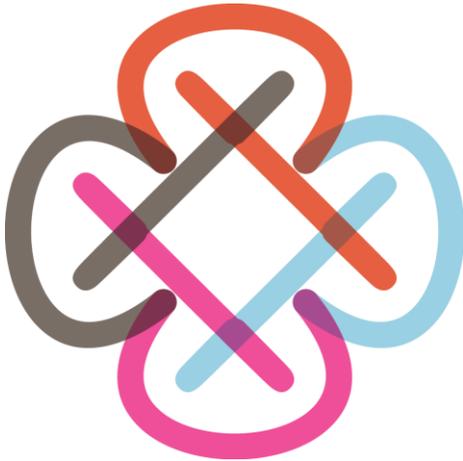
TIP 8) CHEMISTRY AND LOCATION

It's obviously key to get along! Beers, lunch or whatever takes your fancy - especially if they are 'free on the bill'. Close proximity is not just handy for having a few cool ones in the bar. It means any ambiguities can be nutted out face to face with your partner and improves comms with the key stakeholders sitting client side.

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