



Evaluating Your Software Provider

The advantages of using a software company staffed with experts who have prior construction experience.

It is 3 p.m. on Friday, and you need to get a critical AIA billing out before you leave for the day. But your software is not cooperating, and you need to call your provider for help. Do you think it would be more beneficial to talk to someone with a technology background or a construction company veteran who has stood in your shoes? Before you answer that question, consider this option: What if you could talk to a software support specialist who once worked for a construction company?

The most qualified providers have staff with actual construction experience. While general technology knowledge is helpful, it cannot replace the experience gained by working at an actual construction company. To understand why construction experience is so important, compare four phases of a typical client/provider software relationship.

PHASE 1: THE DEMO

A sales rep who has never worked in a construction company might begin the presentation by delivering a scripted demo of predefined features highlighting the product's main bells and whistles. This person can usually answer your questions as they relate to the software but will probably need to "get back to you" before addressing some of your more



complex, industry-specific concerns. If you ask whether the software can handle a specific task, the sales rep will likely give you a simple yes or no answer, without providing much context.

In contrast, a sales rep with construction experience will often ask questions first and present a customized software demo after he or she has a better understanding of your business needs. The rep should continue asking questions throughout the demo, constantly striving to uncover the true reason behind your problems and demonstrate various ways that their software can help.

A consultation by an experienced construction professional helps you determine whether you can trust the product to meet your needs.

***Take-Away:** A consultation managed by an experienced construction professional helps you determine whether you can trust the product to meet your needs—and whether the people behind the product can be reliable advisers after your purchase.*

PHASE 2: SOFTWARE IMPLEMENTATION

A system roll-out and software that is not set up the way your business operates is risky when your implementation team does not have construction experience. When you invest \$5,000,

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The Three-Question Experience Evaluation

Does the software provider ask intelligent questions about your business?

Those questions can give you clues about the depth and breadth of their construction industry knowledge. If you are a general contractor, for example, questions should focus on subcontract management rather than how to manage a complex labor force. Certain questions—such as, “Is it important to track X information here?” or “Would it be helpful to see notes when viewing Y report?”—will prompt and probe to ensure that you get the best possible product for your business.

Does the software provider speak your language?

A software provider should speak the language of your trade while offering multiple solutions—whether you are viewing a demo, completing training or talking to a support person on the phone.

How many of the software provider’s employees have ever worked in a construction company?

When in doubt, ask the software provider whether any of their employees have construction industry experience. Be wary of an indirect response that touts the educational credentials of the company’s leaders. While an impressive resume, a lofty title followed by a string of acronyms or years of targeted technology experience have merit, none of these qualifications can outweigh the benefit of in-the-trenches construction experience.

\$10,000, \$20,000 or more in construction software, poor implementation by an inexperienced team turns your business endeavor into a costly expense.

When the implementation team has gone through a similar process within a construction company, your experience will be more complete. The value of “been-there-done-that” leadership cannot be overstated when implementing software. Your software team’s first-hand familiarity with the general workflow

requirements of a construction business prepares them to better guide you through a phased implementation process that is designed to help you realize the full power of your purchased software.

Take-Away: *Without a solid implementation plan executed by an experienced team, even the best software in the world will not meet your expectations or deliver a return on investment.*

PHASE 3: ONGOING SUPPORT

I recently contacted the support department of my satellite TV service provider because I was having trouble with the reception. After weaving my way through an automated phone maze, I reached a person who asked me questions from a checklist. After 45 minutes, the support person could not solve my problem and referred me to a technician who had the “field experience” required to restore my TV reception.



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If you have a software problem while trying to generate a certified payroll report, nothing is more frustrating than a 45-minute Q & A session with an unqualified support person who cannot resolve your issue. While there is value in verifying certain information, such as the software version and operating system, construction experience allows the support specialist to quickly gather basic information, analyze your unique problem and determine how to fix it, or if an immediate solution is not available, recommend a temporary workaround.

Take-Away: Checklists do not solve problems. Experienced professionals do.

PHASE 4: PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

When product development is driven by software executives, practical application often takes a backseat to the latest hype with no useful business applications for the technology. Experienced software providers understand that the best product development experts will not be found in the company boardroom. Some of the best software enhancement ideas

emerge during casual conversations between the software provider and the customer—the two must consider each other as colleagues.

Take-Away: Software development should focus on your specific business needs, not the latest technological buzz. No one is better at identifying those needs than the contractors themselves.

John Meibers is the president of ComputerEase Construction Software. Meiber's 20-plus years of industry experience includes hands-on management at a large mechanical contracting firm. To learn more about ComputerEase, call 800-544-2530 or visit www.construction-software.com.

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