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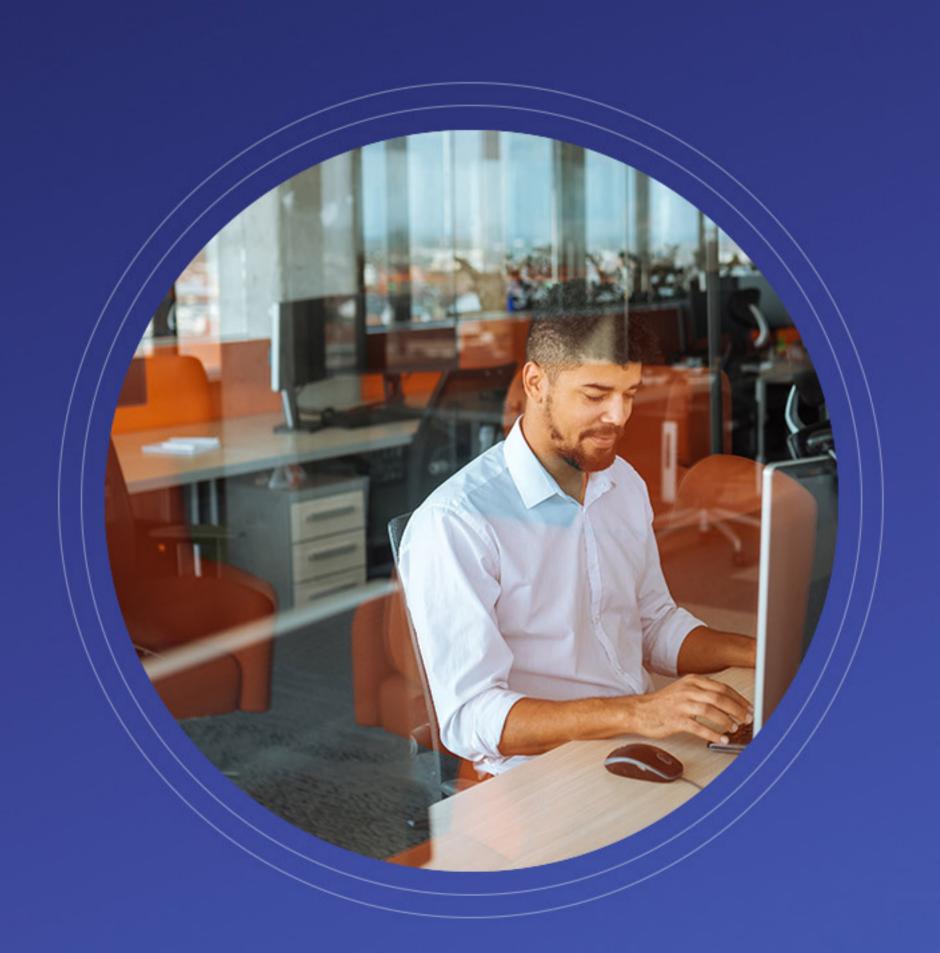
10 Signs of a Qualified Design & Development Partner

A Handy Checklist for Product Owners

Reality Check: New Product Development is a Risky Business without the Right Safety Nets

Whether you're building a consumer-facing mobile app, creating a custom user portal or overhauling your company's internal operating system, successfully launching a new digital product from conception to market is a sophisticated endeavor.

In 2008, IAG Consulting reported that 68% of software projects fail. In 2013 and 2016 reports demonstrated similarly negative findings with almost half of all projects ending in failure. While 2017 success rates improved, the reality remains the same: digital product development is a risky endeavor. Any business embarking on a development project for the first time should know exactly what they are getting into before committing to see it through.

Here are just a few of the assets at stake when you commit to development:

Money, time and human resources.
Custom software companies charge anywhere from $10,000 to

$500,000--sometimes more, sometimes less, depending on the project. In addition to the development price tag, you'll need to factor in the amount of time you and other leaders from your business will need to devote to oversight and working with the development company.

If your project involves updating your company's digital infrastructure, be aware that day-to-day operations may slow down during development before they can speed up with the finished product, so you'll also need to anticipate the need for resources dedicated to keeping your business running during development.

Development projects can take months to years to complete. This is absolutely worth it for software that will make or save you money--the key is preparing and knowing ahead of time what you're getting into.

Potential discouragement from trying again if you fail once.
Because of the high cost and effort required to create a digital product, you'll want to get it right the first time. Failure can take a toll on your drive and even your bottom line. You may not have the resources or energy to try again if unsuccessful.

The morale of your company and other stakeholders in the product's success.
Everyone involved in the project has something at stake, whether it's your employees who have to adjust to a new set of technology or investors taking a chance on your new product idea.

Be confident of success before you commit. The negative results of a failed project can have far-reaching effects on your business.

Clearly, digital product development is not a slight matter.

It's critical to think through the size of your investment, what qualifies as a worthwhile return and who you can trust to get you through to the other side.

Building a new digital product or modernizing an existing system is a huge endeavor--only healthy teams of seasoned experts can properly manage the job with success and be trusted to help you shoulder ownership of the outcome.

Having a strategy, design and development partner that knows what they're doing technically is obviously non-negotiable. You also want to make sure the service partner has practical, yet flexible methodologies in place to ensure best practice across research, design and development.

But to really make sure your investment won't end in failure, finding a partner who can demonstrate competency in project management, big-picture thinking, out-of-the-box problem solving and interpersonal skills is equally critical.

Take a look at the culture and processes of the candidates you're vetting and look for these ten signs of a qualified design and development partner:

PROCESSES

1. They have a plan in place for making sure they fully understand the goals of your product. (Look for an emphasis on user research and interactive prototyping.)

All too often, product teams fail to understand, design and build for the

two factors most important to the success of a product:

- What the end user wants
- What would bring the most financial return for the client

Not only do you want to be confident that your development partner understands conceptually what would make the product succeed for your business and the end user, you also want to know that they can create it.

The only companies who can guarantee (within reason) that a product will work for end users and your business are those who invest in user research early on and build a working prototype before starting development.

Not all software companies do this. Make sure you find one that does.

PROCESSES

2. They have parameters in place to manage "Work in Process."

In the software context, "Work in Process" refers to the number of tasks being juggled by a single developer or designer. Find a partner who manages "Work in Process" within their company so that no developer has to drop the tasks for one client in order to serve another client.

Additionally, look for companies whose developers work in teams for each client. This ensures that if one developer leaves, your project won't be at risk.

PROCESSES

3. They rely on automatic deployment from development to production.

Automatic deployment is crucial to cost-effectively launching new software for a digital product instantaneously and without failure.

Automatic deployment also allows you and your end users to have access to use the product in its current working state at any stage of the project before it's completely done. In most cases, relying on manual deployment is a definite weakness.

CULTURE

4. They demonstrate active listening to your input and a readiness to align with your business objectives.

A humble attitude and posture of learning is critical, especially during initial product discovery and roadmap building.

Some product creators immediately assume they know what needs to happen next in order to build the designs or software that will solve a client's problem.

Working with a company who glosses over the work of learning from you, your users and stakeholders due to an "expert mindset" is a huge mistake. It can lead to costly errors or worse--a waste of a product that fails to work for users or generate return.

CULTURE

5. They are confident and experienced enough to push back on your ideas when necessary for the good of the project.

It's important to find a product development partner who takes the time to truly understand what you're after. That also means finding a partner who is able to help you come to a better understanding of what will be successful based on their experience in design and product development.

The best partners will push back on your assumptions and keep the project focused on the desired outcome, even when that means bringing your attention back to what you agree is important.

CULTURE

6. They have a track record of reliability—delivering past projects on time and on budget.

Learn as much as you can about projects they have done in the past. Talk to former clients.

Across the industry, 68% of software projects fail to deliver a product that is on time, on budget and succeeds in its intended role in the long term. Find out how well a candidate's digital products have performed since release.

PROCESSES

7. They establish a pattern of frequently checking in with you.

Check-ins should be regular meetings in which your product development partner updates you on progress, budget timeline and new developments while receiving feedback and updates from your end on any changes to project objectives.

This level of intentional communication is crucial to staying on the same page from beginning to end of the project.

For seamless communication, it's sometimes best for a single point person from each side—your company and the product development partner—to handle communication and prioritization throughout the project lifecycle. This can be especially important as the size of the project increases.

Your company's point person works to keep stakeholders in the loop and communicate needs to the point person on the development side. That person, in turn, works to keep the teams of developers and designers on the same page with the client.

CULTURE

8. Flexibility is built into their design and development processes.

Flexibility means they can smoothly adapt to the changing demands of your business. Companies who exhibit this quality are also the ones who conduct frequent check-ins, demonstrate active listening and take the time to make sure their plans will deliver exactly what's needed.

Find out what software development methodologies your product development partner employs. Agile development allows more room for flexibility than waterfall.

What about design? They should routinely design new features at least three sprints ahead of development.

CULTURE

9. They are willing to educate you or your stakeholders on technical aspects of the project when necessary.

For some product creators, it can feel counterproductive to slow down, understand where you are coming from, and then keep you in the loop on project progress—especially when it means explaining complex technical scenarios. They're being held to a deadline, so their main focus is delivering on time and on budget.

That being said, there will be times when your product development partner needs to bring you up to speed on technical aspects of the project in order to preserve alignment. You'll need to find a partner who has the patience and willingness to do this when needed.

CULTURE

10. Teams built on trust.

Many projects involve dozens of people all contributing code and design to a single product. It's critical that these teams of people understand and trust each other if they are to successfully weather the storms of months-to-years–long product development.

Thoroughly interview your product development partner to find out if they have a solid foundation of internal trust and good communication. If trust and communication are present in their teams, it will show in their pattern of operating with clients as well.

One telling clue to the level of trust that exists at a company is their communication with you and each other. A group of people who are candid with each other even from day one at the interview stage are far more likely to have trusting relationships.

So, find out what kinds of questions the company asks when they interview people and what other practices they implement to preserve trust and vulnerable communication internally and with their clients.

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