

OUR GUIDE TO

Choosing a Custom Software Development Partner



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**Ambitious
Software**

Welcome to our guide on **choosing a custom software development partner. We've written this based on the experience we've gained in our twenty years in delivering custom software and hope it provides you with insightful advice to assist you in your search for the right software partner.**

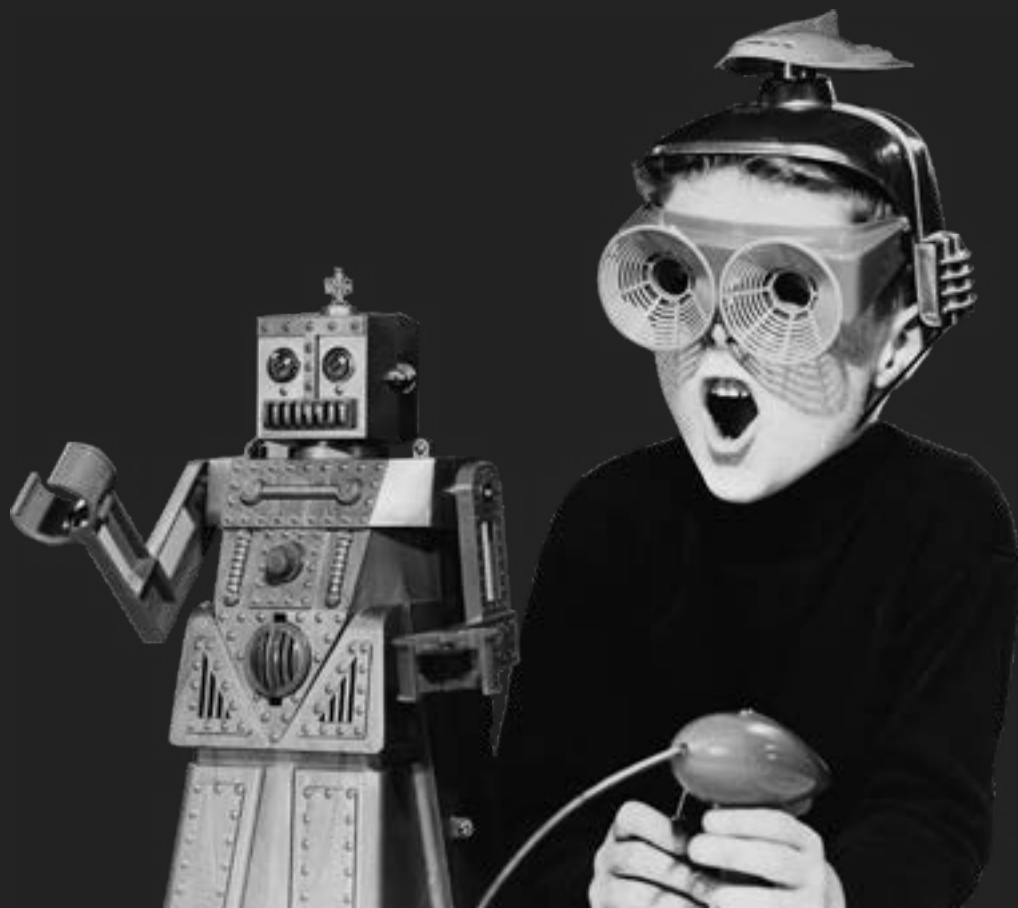
If you're reading this you may have just made the decision that your business is in need of a custom software solution, perhaps you've recognised a need for integration between existing systems, one that can't be bridged by an 'out of the box' solution. Or perhaps you've been tasked with transforming areas of your business and have identified multiple processes that could be streamlined via a bespoke software solution.

Or maybe you just need something to read in work...

Whichever scenario you are in without the right software in place, ideas of business transformation and improvements can fail, processes remain manual and time consuming, and budgets go up in smoke.

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But why custom?



BUT WHY CUSTOM?

Every business is unique so a one size fits all approach isn't always the best method, particularly if you have complex systems or processes already ingrained. When it comes to software and deciding whether 'off-the-shelf' or a custom solution is the right way to go, it's important to consider what each offers.



Generally, although it can be cheaper overall, off-the-shelf solutions have high implementation costs, feature overload, poor user experience and a lack of customisation. Off-the-shelf means compromise. For organisations with complex workflows, processes and additional software to consider, off-the-shelf is rarely the answer.

Instead a custom software solution is ideal for **ambitious companies** who are aiming to differentiate and compete to the ever-changing technological landscape. Custom means tailored to specific business requirements, it's quick to react, flexible and will grow with the organisation.

If you've been tasked with implementing a business transformation project, a custom software solution will get you on the right path by streamlining processes, improving workflows with reduced errors and increasing cost efficiencies.

The idea of a custom build might seem daunting but it only means something that has been built with your specific business needs in mind. Rather than adjust to a software solution it adjusts to you.

Let's get started and take a look at the five areas worth considering as you begin your journey to finding the ultimate custom software partner.

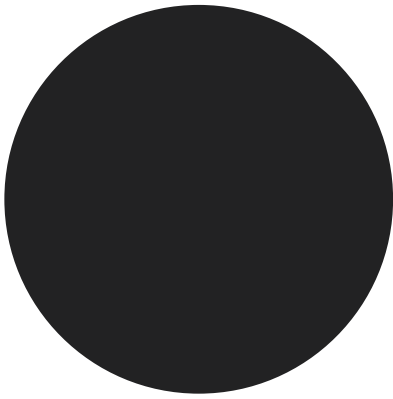
1

Know What Your Requirements Are

Most businesses are aware of what their **objectives** and **goals** are, for kickstarting a custom software project that same level of understanding is needed.

1. What problem are you trying to solve?
2. What is the end goal?

With these in mind **a software provider should help you** define this and gather further details which will provide a solid foundation for launching the project. However, if you're not sure what software solution you need, only know that there is something missing, then **consider seeking for a software consultation** with the chosen providers. These consultations will help you talk out the issues, identify areas of concern and propose a solution that really works on all levels.



Sprints

Look at those who use Sprints to set out regular clear goals at each development stage, this gives you the flexibility at each step to prioritise certain features or development stages and take into consideration unexpected challenges.

Proof of Concept

It can also be beneficial to consider undertaking a proof of concept session to ensure that what is being proposed is going to work in your business setting. Here at GCD, we run **Design Sprints** with our clients to answer those core questions. The step-by-step process aims to identify and understand the problems your business is facing and highlight possible solutions before testing and validating.

Budget

Once you've identified the requirements and 'must haves' the next step is to look at the budget and set one. As you know, budgets are important, they set clear boundaries and help to establish the scope of the solution that is possible. It might highlight that a custom solution isn't feasible for you right now, or it might help you prioritise certain elements. A good software provider will discuss the budget with you and let you know if the ultimate solution is possible and explain exactly where the budget goes. **Transparency is key.**



Internal Requirements

Not only should you identify what exactly you would like the software solution to do, you need to also identify what the internal requirements will be on the business and staff.

Never underestimate the effect a new project can have. Ask yourself:

- Do we have the internal infrastructure in place to manage this?
- Are staff informed and on board?
- Do they require additional training?
- Will this create a new role?

Reflecting on how this project will change your business will allow you to prepare for impact and ensure that staff are informed and on board before the project is kicked off. It's an ideal opportunity for any concerns to be aired and for the team to be involved in the process.

Reviewing requirements both internally and for the project itself will ensure that all involved have as much clarity as possible from the outset.

2

Involve the right people

When should you take this step? **Immediately**. Involving the right people from the very beginning is important in ensuring that the project specification is as comprehensive as possible and that ultimately **maximum value** is gained from the custom software.

Depending on the size of your organisation the 'right people' might look different, but they will understand the business's current technical infrastructure and can ask the right questions. You may have a **Chief Technical Office (CTO)** or an IT manager, together they and other relevant people, perhaps the CEO or Project Manager, will ensure the core and vital requirements of the project are conveyed to any potential software partner.



Project Management

Having someone who leads the project, a Project Manager for example, at the beginning is important. Imagine if months down the line you try to hand over the reins to a new person, it would be difficult to catch up on the project journey and really own it. Instead that person should have had input from the beginning and be well informed.

Once you've put in place the Project Manager (PM), there is one important fact to remember, as [Gartner explains, governance is "the assignment of decision rights"](#). That person must be able and allowed to make decisions on the project, otherwise a layer of unnecessary complexity is added which will only derail things and result in low staff morale.

The PM will be the person liaising with your chosen software partner, keeping the lines of communication clear, relaying information back and forth and in general retaining focus. As well as performing as the main point of contact throughout the project, they will ensure the internal and external stakeholders are informed throughout the process.

As the project begins, the PM will be responsible for ensuring **clear processes** are followed, a common tactic is to create a clear document management system so that information throughout the project can be easily found, added and updated.

Finally, you may have decided to dedicate your own team if you have in-house development capabilities, in that case it's even more important to have a Project Manager and Team Lead to take ownership and drive the project through to completion.



3

Consider your options

This stage can be the lengthiest as you consider any number of custom software partners and traverse through the proposals, the presentations and various proof of concepts. Finding the right software partners to shortlist is the first step, consider the following methods:

- Ask other businesses for references
- Online search
- Events / exhibitions
- Digital awards
- Clutch and other listing sites
- Issue a request for tender



Review Your Shortlist

From your research you'll be able to compile a shortlist of potential software partners, to these you can reach out and **evaluate their services** based on a number of criteria.

- What experience do they have in your sector?
- Have they worked on similar projects or developed similar solutions?
- Review their customer case studies and the value their customers have realised.
- How long have they been in the business?
- What is their development process? How do they work?
- Is all development completed in-house?
- What Quality Assurance process is there?
- What support services are there available?

Asking these questions will help to minimise risk and give you a much clearer understanding of who you would like to work alongside.

Testing the Solution

Finally, it's important to know what testing they have in place. Everyone wants a custom software project to go off without a hitch but it's only with rigorous testing that this is possible, testing ensures the product meets the initial requirements set out. It gives the customer confidence that the solution will do the job it has been tasked with.

Keep an eye out for providers who utilise automation testing, which allows testers to focus on more complex issues. Other types of tests include functional and non-functional (security and performance). Functional testing should cover Blackbox Testing, System Testing and Acceptance Testing, together these answer whether the input and the output do what is supposed to.

Okay enough technical talk for now...

Together you can explore the idea of your business's specific requirements, integrations with existing systems and possible solutions. By the end you should have a good idea of which software specialists can truly deliver a custom solution that will drive value for your business.

Establishing what can and can not be done, knowing non-deliverables in advance is much better than finding out somewhere down the line - it sets realistic expectations before the project kicks off.

Explore what pricing options there are, it may just be a simple payment on a project basis but there may be on-going support and hosting costs, take a look at all these, you don't want any unknown extras popping up down the line.

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The Customer Experience

If you're following this guide step by step by now you should have reviewed and discussed a range of software providers, you will probably have discovered that it isn't an easy decision. Custom software provides a tailored fit that provides business opportunity, accelerates growth and unlocks new markets, making the final decision is an important one.

When deciding on a custom software partner, there is another area to consider that and that is customer experience. You and your chosen software partner will be spending a lot of time together, not just on this project but as the software is supported but also for potential future software projects. Balancing customer experience and technical ability will help ensure the project goes as smoothly as possible.



What is Customer Experience?

[Hubspot](#) explain it well: "The best way to define customer experience is as the impression you leave with your customer, resulting in how they think of your brand, across every stage of the customer journey. Multiple touchpoints factor into the customer experience, and these touchpoints occur on a cross-functional basis."

Essentially, with your chosen software partner every stage of the journey should be focused on you, the customer and providing you with the best support and custom software solution for your business needs. A solution that will help achieve your business goals and improve how you work.

There should be a positive rapport, the ability to have an open and honest conversation. It shouldn't be a dictatorship on either side, instead the two teams should come together to work through ideas and problems in a clear and efficient manner. With this two way conversation there will be clear communication and for any project that means an easier time for everyone.

Not only should your chosen software supplier have a good rapport with your PM or CTO, but also with the wider team. When you are in need of support, you want to know that you'll be looked after and have access to training if you need it. Excellent customer experience plays a big part in forming a long lasting business relationship, without that things won't go far. You are not alone in looking for this B2C style customer experience, [according to Lumoa](#), at least 80% of B2B buyers are not only looking for but expect a buying experience like that of a B2C customer.

You should also consider the online experience:

- Is their website easy to use?
- Is their product and service offering comprehensive and clear?

What about self service features? This may or may not be important to your project, but having access to product collateral, updates, FAQs will all help towards a positive customer experience.

So take note of the little things, how you are greeted, the level of service, if you can express your opinions without causing offence etc.

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What happens after?

As we approach the end, let's recap. You've:

- Set your project requirements.
- Involved the right people from the beginning and set a project leader.
- Considered your options, asked the difficult questions and explored the software providers on your shortlist.
- Finally, you've looked at the customer service you've already experienced and what it will look like during the project and beyond.

But a project doesn't end with Go Live, there are tweaks and adjustments that only become obvious once the software solution has been rolled out and is in use. So before you make that final choice there are a few more things to consider.



We All Need Support

Depending on your resources in house you may need various levels of support, if you've followed tip two above, you will have assessed internal resources, if not...well you need to assess what you have and need before choosing your software partner. Support may be a **monthly rolling contract** or on a **pay as you go** basis, either way preparing allows you to allocate sufficient budget and ensures that your solution is protected in the future.

It's important to understand what their deployment strategy is, so you can prepare your staff, develop a great marketing strategy and inform your customers of any changes that may affect them.

When considering the specifications of the software solution it is important to look at a few key areas:

- Is it durable?
- Will it require updates? (in most cases, yes).
- Is there a support plan included or at an additional cost?
- As hardware and your general infrastructure changes will the software solution be able to stand the test of time?

If the answer is no to any of these you can expect headaches down the line as integration or general support problems pop up, requiring additional project time, down time for your business and ultimately a patchy product that becomes **difficult to support**. A worst case scenario is that in only a few short years you find yourself with a legacy system that no longer supports the business but hinders it.

For custom software solutions a lot of its success rests on user adoption, which comes from both an intuitive user experience developed and implemented from the beginning of the build and also training and documentation. Establish whether training is offered as a standard and if this takes place in person or online.



Conclusion

There you have it - our five step guide to help you in your search for a custom software provider. Each step will ensure that you choose a company who can provide value to your business in a confident and competent way and ultimately, deliver the right custom software solution that works for your business.

By establishing the project specification, involving the right people from the beginning and asking the detailed questions during the consideration stage, you can kickstart a project on the best terms possible. And if you've followed the final two tips you'll hopefully have a software solution that will stand the test of time and be used by your entire workforce every day.

By choosing the right custom software partner you will also have a strategic partner to continue to support your solution into the future and provide your business with true value. That may be ROI for your business or perhaps it's time savings on business processes.

Custom software does what out of the box solutions can not. It provides businesses with the opportunity to grow, accelerate entry into new markets and differentiate. It's an important decision, one that will provide tangible benefits and we hope this guide has made that choice a little bit easier.





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