TARKENTON

IDEAS AT WORK

Choosing a Technology Partner for Your Business

Takeaways

- Analyze your current software before jumping into a new development project
- Put together an internal team that can help successfully guide development
- Take time to shop for the right development partner

When I first moved into the tech business, perhaps my most valuable resource was my trusted technology expert. As much as any piece of software or any machines, he helped me and our whole company by serving as the point of contact between other brilliant technology people, who were sometimes hard to understand, and our company's assets and interests.

With him on our side, we were able to identify valuable partners, build relationships in the industry, develop successful new projects, acquire new assets, and more. Any company looking to get involved in a technology project needs someone like that.

This article from one of our development leaders provides great thinking for businesses looking to build new software or update what they already have, including the need for an internal technology advocate. I hope you read the whole thing!

Choosing a Technology Partner for Your Business

Is it time to update your technology?

Businesses sometimes think of their technology or IT functions as something that's always there in the background. Some even assume that because it's worked for so long, it doesn't need to be changed. But if right now – in 2024 – you're using a tool that was built in 2000, there's probably a better, faster, and more accurate software solution that could help your business grow.

Many businesses had to face the sudden need to update systems in 2020 when everyone had to abruptly pivot to remote operations. Companies had to ramp up their remote capabilities quickly by setting up VPNs and other connectivity solutions.

If they were already connected to the cloud, the transition was easier. But companies that were tied to on-premises resources and systems had many challenges providing their employees with even passably good remote work experiences.

The process of modernizing your technology can be overwhelming, especially when you need to build or update custom applications. There are many options for tools, vendors, and development shops, and you may not be sure where to start.

Let's take a look at some steps to help determine when you should be updating a solution and how to choose a development partner that will work for you – and with you – over the long term.

Deciding How and Where to Start

Before diving straight into a new software tool or solution, consider the tool you're currently using and answer a few pertinent questions.

1. Is the software still doing what it was initially designed to do?

2. Have your needs changed since you began using that tool?

3. Was your current solution ever the solution you wanted, or did it always fall short of your needs?

The answers to these questions can help you decide if you have to completely reinvent the wheel or if you can just spruce things up a bit. For instance, maybe you can keep the same components but find a way to give users better access to data. Or you may be able to connect your solution to the cloud, but keep the basic software intact.

Conversely, if your internal tools and toolboxes are too far out of date, any new software that your IT team adds on may also be out of date – immediately. You may find that in order to have your software solution meet new goals and requirements, you have to start fresh.

Define Your Goals

Whether you need a refresh or an entire make-over, it's essential to be clear on what problems you are trying to solve – or new opportunities you are trying to seize – with a new software project.

That starts with evaluating your current solution or application. Bring in team members who use the current software so that they can thoroughly describe what's worked, what could work better, and what's never worked. You'll save considerable time and money if you identify the shortcomings of your current software before you begin the process of developing a new solution. And be sure to include all stakeholders, not just your IT team. Better decision-making about software goals and solutions occurs when your entire team is involved and communicating throughout the process.
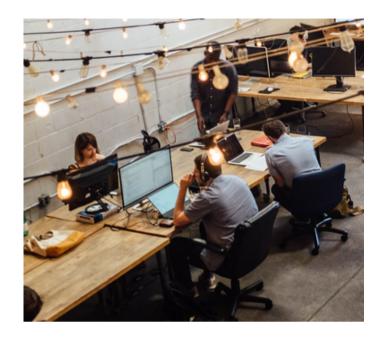
Put Together the Right Team

Once you identify needs and goals, you'll need a team of internal resources that's dedicated throughout the entire project – and continues on through updates. One key role is Project Owner or Manager – someone who can track progress and streamline communication. Ideally, the Project Manager can also assess the likely ROI from updating your software and make sure any investment is worthwhile.

Naming a Technical Liaison is the other key role for any software project. The Tech Liaison might be a member of your current internal staff or it might be an outside consultant you hire. To be clear, this individual is independent from any potential new vendor or third-party dev shop. Their role is to advocate for your business and offer a perspective from the technical side to make sure you get what you need – whether it's off-the shelf software or a custom solution from a dev shop. The Tech Liaison can also help you evaluate outside firms you're considering, because they "talk the talk."

While hiring an additional independent technical liaison adds to your upfront costs, it can save you tens, if not hundreds of thousands of dollars in the long term by making sure you get the right software solution.

Be Sure to Shop Around

Hiring an outside development shop can be a major investment. Don't go with the first firm you contact – shop around and get bids from several firms. By getting several different quotes, you can make sure they're not drastically out of line with each other. If you do receive a wide variation of quotes for your project, it might signal that not everyone fully understands what you need; it might also reveal that some dev shops are using off-the-shelf, plug-and-play solutions. Your Technical Liaison can be invaluable in sorting that out, and making sure you get the right solution, as well as the right partner.

Look for a vendor with a varied portfolio. Don't get caught up in finding a dev shop that is overly specialized, or even one that specializes in your industry. If you hire a dev team that only does one thing, you may have difficulty getting your own custom requirements complete. Look for a team that has expertise in different types of customizations, so they can adapt to your own project specs.

Manage the Hidden Costs

In any project, there will always be hidden costs – there's really no way around them. You can't eliminate them completely, but you can limit them to some extent. For starters, the better you scope out the project fully at the outset, the better you can limit "surprise" costs down the road.

If you have an application that needs to be heavily customized, your dev shop might want to charge you for a "discovery phase." Don't be penny-wise and pound-foolish: a well-executed discovery can ensure you get the solution you want. Again, your internal tech liaison will be invaluable at helping scope out the job and making sure you think through all the pieces that need to be integrated into the new solution.

Which doesn't mean you have to do everything at once. You can start with "Phase I" and save further improvements for later; just be sure you explain your long-term goals at the outset, so your dev team builds Phase I with that in mind.

Other Tips to Make Your Project Run Smoothly

Whatever framework you decide on – whether it's Microsoft, or .net, or node, or any other libraries – from day one, be sure that the framework architecture is based on the latest available version, and then plan update cycles throughout the project as each new version gets released.

Make sure that this maintenance schedule is built into the scope of each project with the dev shop. And make sure before you sign any contract that the dev shop you hire is only using the latest updated versions of software. It's not that hard to update software for each iteration. But when you've missed updates, it becomes much more difficult, especially when multiple update cycles have been missed altogether.

Also be sure that unit tests are completed every time your application is updated or deployed so that time and resources aren't wasted.

Consider a Partner for the Long Term

When you're looking for a new dev shop, it is often wise to look for a firm you can partner with for the long term. A technology partner with your best interests at heart will listen to your needs, provide the right solution, and also tell you what not to do. Building a long-term relationship with them saves you from conducting a new search every time you need a new software solution. It also puts another problem-solver in your corner.

At Tarkenton, we have an experienced development team whose mission is to help you get the software you and your team need. We would love to discuss your upcoming software development projects with you, and how to make it a successful process from start to finish!

By: Josh McCormick
Software Engineer

Josh is a software engineer for Tarkenton who is skilled at both writing code and serving as a development liaison with clients. He enables clients and their teams to do more in less time by optimizing workflows through custom software tools, and works with clients to define the appropriate scope for approaching new projects. Before joining Tarkenton in 2022, Josh was the co-owner of a custom software consulting company, and was a consultant for county government offices.

Subscribe

OurThinking@Tarkenton.com