

Software Consultants to Avoid

Software solutions are important assets in your business and it is important that you invest wisely into assets that will have a long and useful life with a firm that will be there to meet your needs as your business grows and changes. Beware of the following traits in software consulting firms. The "Proprietary Software Platform" This can be the most dangerous of all warning signs in software consulting. Picture the following very real world scenario: You engage with a firm because of their "unique software platform" which gives them an "edge" over the competition, because they've "already built most of the application into the platform." You find that their proposal does, in fact, include 30-40% fewer hours during the implementation phase. Your project is implemented, but you find that you are encouraged away from certain enhancement requests for reasons that are not really business drivers, or with technical jargon that is over your head as a client. You might also find that deadlines slip, or deliverables are not exactly what you asked for, especially when a feature you requested was "already part of the platform." One day, you decide to seek other options, and you present this to your current vendor. This is when you find out that the Vendor actually owns the platform. And you don't have rights to use it if you're not their customer, so they're happy to give you your source code, but it won't be much good without "the platform." Even if you do negotiate for a copy of the platform, you're likely to be restricted to developing new features on it or enhancing it in any way, as it is not licensed to you to use in any way you see fit. This is similar to if you were building a house and your builder of choice were to say "Hey, I've got some land in a great location and it's already got a foundation poured and a frame up - all we need to do is build out your custom features!" Well, as you try to fit your house onto the builder's pre-poured slab, you don't like the way it's shaping up, and decide to bring in a new builder only to find out you don't own the foundation, so if you're going to build your house with someone else, you better find a new location. Many firms use this "proprietary platform" as the proverbial sharp end of the stick for customer retention. Do not let your company be caught by this seemingly advantageous hook. Good firms will help you buy components where they can be bought and customized for your needs instead of offering their own "secret sauce". Remember that good software consulting firms offer unbiased opinions. The "Jacks of All Trade" Chances are, if the firm excels at a particular skillset, they are profitably doing business as specialists and will not need to overly diversify their technology offering. However, some firms offer a full range of services at varying levels of diversity. Consider the following scenario: You go to visit your knee doctor. It comes up during your exam that you're looking to update your will. "Did you know that we're now writing wills here too? Yep, we're really looking to be a provider of all your 'getting old' needs." After inquiring what other services the doctor's company offered, you find out that she would also build your house, plan your retirement, and book your cruise. Specialists are highly trained in their area of specialty and do not need to stray from their primary focus to be successful or provide a high value to their clients. Jacks of all trade are masters of none. IT + Software Firms One such "Jack of all Trade" in software consulting is the IT firm that also offers computer programming services. The danger here is that most firms with a dual focus are primarily IT shops with one or two programmers on staff. The challenge can be that the salespeople, used to selling IT solutions, do not understand software and are not qualified software project managers. This can result in "oversold" software projects and questionable code quality. In addition, turnover is a very high risk because software developers do not have career growth opportunities at a company that does not specialize in software. Design + Software Firms Again here the danger is that the firm is primarily a design firm, with less of a focus on software application development. Firms that lack a specific talent in software are not going to be able to offer the best advice to a customer on technical matters. Most design firms subcontract to independent software developers, often working with different resources on different projects, due to continuity problems. For this reason, the design firm may introduce the resource as "their software guy" or say something like, "Jack handles our database work." Do not be afraid to inquire as to whether "Jack" is an employee, or as to how many projects like yours "Jack" and the firm have completed successfully together. IT + Software + Design + SEM/SEO Firms A firm with 20 employees claims to have 5-6 core competencies. That means there are 2-3 specialists per competency, considering several project managers and administrative staff needed to support a typical midsized firm. The danger here is that it is extremely difficult, if not nearly impossible, for an individual to master and stay current on more than one of these skillsets, as they are each broad, incorporating diverse knowledge and experience bases, many of which are constantly evolving.

About the Author

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