

## How to Choose A Systems Integrator

Probably no other factor is more important to project success than the choice of the system integrator. Whatever technical, cost, schedule or political challenges there may be, the right integrator will meet them; the wrong one will just spend your money.

But there are many system integrators out there. How does one go about finding out which indeed is best suited for the job? The big four -- IBM, Cap Gemini, Accenture, and Braxton --- employ tens of thousands of consultants. Their corporate experience is vast. Their names are well known in the industry. One has the comfort of knowing that “No one ever got fired for choosing IBM”. At the other end of the scale are the boutique integrators might have staffs of just a few. In between is a middle tier with hundreds or perhaps thousands of consultants. This Integration Tip gives you some help in making a selection --- focus on the individual, the deliverables, and the cost structure.

### Focus on the Individual

One might first be tempted to make a selection in the same way that product vendors are chosen -- perhaps making a list of criteria and then evaluating candidates against them. But there is a very fundamental difference between buying a software application and getting help with integration.

Ultimately system integration depends on the skills and experiences of the people who will be doing the actual work. You are buying individuals not a company. And it makes no real difference how big or small the company is. Unless the people actually assigned to your project have what it takes, no amount of name recognition or corporate experience is going to help. Your project lives or dies based on who is rolling up his sleeves and doing the work.

Sure the brochures will talk about similar jobs and experiences with all of the pieces to be put together. But that is corporate experience. It doesn't help you unless the person really responsible for that experience is assigned to your project.

So what do you do? Approach the selection process just as you would in hiring employees for your company. Ask each prospective integrator to give you a list of the people who would actually be assigned to the job and interview each of them.

There should not be more than about ten at the most. If the proposed number is larger than this then you are doing too big of a job in parallel. Go back to square one and restructure the entire effort.

Find out for each candidate exactly what his or her skills and experiences are. Evaluate them just as you would candidates for an internal position. Rank the candidate companies on who they really will be offering.

### Focus on the Deliverables

All systems integrations, large and small, will profess to follow a 'proven' methodology of development that reduces risk, minimizes costs and surfaces problems early. But every project is different. It is difficult to see behind all the smooth sounding words to what is really going to happen on yours.

One thing you can focus on, however, is the set of deliverables. Every methodology produces documentation along the way, weekly status reports, requirement documents, design documents, problem reports and so on. And some system integrators are very adept at producing documentation in bulk -- based on little more than the precept that if a little documentation is good and a lot has to be even better.

Regardless of the methodology, however, the deliverables are what you ultimately end up with. They represent the tangible result of the hours that you are buying. So ask each prospective integrator to let you see samples of these documents for projects similar to yours.

Look at each of these deliverables, not from the standpoint of understanding all of the detail, that would be quite time consuming and have little value.

Examine them instead from the perspective of clarity and relevance. Are the status reports clear enough that from them you can get a sense of how things are going? Are the project plans thick volumes of detailed tasks or something that is short, to the point, and clearly shows status?

If you do not see this clarity in the examples then chances are you will not understand what is going on during the execution of your own project. You will end up crossing your fingers and hoping that in the end it all works out.

Look at all of the samples in this light. Do you get the warm feeling that they will be useful to you?

### Focus on the Cost Structure

There can be a lot of unknowns in systems integration. It can be nearly impossible to accurately estimate the cost at completion for all aspects of an integration effort. Accordingly, most systems integrators prefer a times and materials type of contract. You keep paying until either the job is done or you have had enough and dismiss the contractor.

Some systems integrators will take on jobs on a firm fixed price basis but when they do so they include sufficient padding to ensure that they stand a very good chance to make a profit even if everything does not go right. Sometimes this padding can be a significant portion of the bid price. This means that when your project does go right you end up paying far more for the job than you should have.

Focus therefore on exploring creative cost alternatives. Perhaps some of the job can be performed on a time and materials basis and the rest on fixed price. For example, creating the requirements document could be time and materials. Then when it is completed the contractor could offer a fixed price for the implementation. Or perhaps high-risk elements of the program could be identified and a separate effort undertaken to resolve the uncertainties involved.

Each project is unique and there is no set formula that will work for all, but ask candidates to propose alternatives. It might result in a win-win situation for both of you.

The individuals, the deliverables, and the cost structure --- focus on these rather than size, name recognition, and corporate brochures and you will be on your way to making the right choice for your next integration project.

