

Checklist on hiring a development firm

It's really hard to know if the a development firm is worth their hourly rate or if they will just waste your budget and run when they can't deliver on their promises.

Here is a checklist we've compiled based both on our vast experience in project rescue (which taught us what tends to be missing for a firm to succeed) and our own experiences (which taught us what a firm needs to have in order to deliver).

Company basics

- **Does the company have an actual website under their name?** It may sound trivial, but a development firm which doesn't even have a website announcing their services is a major red flag.
- **Can you call the company from your location?** It doesn't matter if the firm is local or not, what matters is can you actually reach them, if not by phone, at least by Skype.
- **Can a human being be reached easily?** Normally, you should be able to easily talk to someone during their normal business hours, not necessarily your own assigned developer, but at least someone able to help you.
- **Is the company actually incorporated?** An incorporated company is a limited liability to its owner, allowing the firm to tackle bigger projects with lower risks. When a company is a simple registration, it tends to show the lack of preparation.
- **Is the company at least 5 years old?** If it's not, it's not necessarily a bad sign, but it does require making sure the staff you will be working with has previous experience.

Company organization

- **Can the firm assign you a single contact person?** Make sure you won't have to deal with multiple employees, repeating your issues and that instead, you will have a single point of contact (either a lead developer, a project manager or an account manager) who is aware of all of the details of your project.
- **Will you get the contact details and experience level of the actual developers assigned to your project?** We've seen numerous projects fail that we had to rescue simply because a big development firm was unable to assign a fixed set of developers, leading to a confused project bouncing between multiple teams.
- **Is there at least one in-house developer?** We do a lot of outsourcing for "development" firms who outsource 100% of their development tasks, often sending their projects to the lowest bidder, and never truly understanding what's needed to be done. Outsourcing specialized tasks is fine, but if less than 80% of the development is done in-house, the project starts on shaky ground: if the project runs into overtime, the project margin of the firm you hire might not be enough to pay all of its sub-contractors.
- **Is there a clear picture of who is in charge of the project?** It's perfectly fine for either the lead developer or the project manager to be the main contact for the customer, but it has to be clear who inside the development firm takes responsibility of the project and you need to be able to at least occasionally, be in contact with that person.

- **Is the company able to deliver clear invoices so you know what you are paying for?** Accountability is essential to build trust. When you hire a development firm, you need to know exactly what you are paying for.

Project Management

- **Is there a form of project tracking process?** Without access to a tool or a document which tracks the development process, you can't know how the project is coming along.
- **Is there a formal way to submit issues?** Without one, there is bound to be problems during debugging as issues you raise are forgotten or ignored.
- **Is there a delivery approval process?** There needs to be a way for you to track which of your requirements were delivered so that you can formally approve them.
- **Do you need to make payments without clear deliverable approval?** Apart from the initial deposit, each invoice should be backed by a clear deliverable you have approved.
- **Do you have either a time or financial commitment?** It's hard to guarantee both a delivery date and a final price, but is the firm willing to guarantee at least one of them? If problems occur during development, either delivery will be late or additional fees will occur, but it shouldn't be both under normal circumstances (some experimental tasks cannot be guaranteed, but it shouldn't be the whole project)
- **If your project uses specialized terms, does the firm work with a dictionary?** A dictionary is a common tool that help clarify client specific terms so that both the developers and the client use the same term, reducing confusion.

Developer experience

- **Are you assigned a lead developer?** There needs to be a single developer in charge of making the technical decisions on your project, and you need to be able to contact that person.
- **Does your lead developer have formal training?** Despite progress in online training, it's not yet a true substitute of a college or university degree. A self-learned developer might be able to deliver a project, but will he do it following the industry standards? Did he learn the ethics of software development? Does he know how to write documentation and training material? This is all part of the standard curriculum.
- **Is your lead developer a senior developer or does he have access to one, in-house?** A senior developer is someone who has been programming full-time for at least 6 to 8 years (if he has formal training, 10 to 12 years otherwise). Without access to one, your lead developer will not have access to a wise pool of experience to help fix tricky issues.
- **Is there someone in the firm with actual testing experience?** Often, the developer is the worst person to test the code they built. A serious firm will have at least one employee with actual testing experience to ensure quality control.

Developer attitude

- **Is your lead developer able to communicate properly?** It doesn't matter if junior developers working under your lead developers do not speak your language or are unable to write coherent emails. What matters is if your lead developer is able to communicate both with the entirety of his or her team and the customer.

- **Are you able to call your lead developer easily?** Many projects we rescued failed because the previous development firm simply couldn't be bothered to return their voicemail!
- **Is the lead developer able to tell you no, or at least, not now?** When you approach a firm with your exciting complex product, did the development firm accept your project without asking any questions? Without raising any objections? Granted, it might be simple for them, but ask yourself if they are not simply saying yes knowing that at best, they'll do a partial delivery.
- **Is the lead developer unable to explain the deliverables?** If the lead developer is not able to either train you to use what was delivered or to find someone to explain it in his place, it means that the lead developer doesn't have a good grasp on the project itself.
- **Is the lead developer willing to innovate for your own benefit?** If the lead developer is not willing to go further than their current experience, or worse, if they are only willing to do tasks they haven't done yet, the firm you hired is not doing the project for your own sake but they are either doing it for a quick pay or a way to widen their experience.

Conclusion

It's not easy to see in advance if a development firm is reliable or not, especially since many good development firms have to sign non-disclosure agreements on some contracts preventing them from citing some of their clients in their case studies.

But with these 25 questions, you should be able to get an idea of whether the firm you want to hire is reliable or not.

Granted, we freely admit that this list is subjective: it is after all our own checklist to make sure we are doing right by our clients. Some firms have great success communicating just by email.

But this list came from experience. We've struggled like anyone else in the beginning with customers complaining our invoices were not clear enough or we were not clear enough when explaining our deliverables.

We had to train our project manager to effectively test our projects. We had to setup a phone system to let customers easily reach our lead developer.

And yet, we grew from those growing pains and now feel confident to approach almost any project.

This is why we successfully delivered thousands of websites, using over 1800 TYPO3 extensions, in over 33 countries in the last 16 years.

Because getting better at development means setting clear professionalism goals and working hard toward those goals every day you come into the office.



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