



▶ Choosing Support Vendors: Considerations beyond Price

Introduction

Choosing support vendors comes with lots of considerations and concerns; however, it doesn't have to be a painful experience. A fundamental understanding of your company's DNA helps, but also knowing the right criteria with which to judge vendors can really assist with the selection process. Recently John Truitt, President of Kalleo Technologies, an IT consulting and support services firm based in Paducah, Kentucky, discussed essential considerations and techniques for choosing support vendors.

In terms of the workboat industry, Mr. Truitt offers some practical solutions for choosing new technology platforms and applications. For maritime businesses that are contemplating new technology or struggling to choose a vendor to suit their needs, his sound advice and unique perspective can help workboat operations move forward with the process of vendor selection and all the considerations such selection entails.

Though businesses contemplating a new technology purchase understand that pricing and features are important, there are other essential considerations that sometimes get overlooked.

Vendor Commitment to Your Success

Your first point of interaction with a new vendor is likely to be with the vendor's sales team. While it can be difficult to determine how invested a vendor is likely to be in your business' success for the long haul, this small window of insight regarding the sales person can often be a key to assessing the nature of that business' culture—at least in terms of their commitment to customers.

Truitt advises businesses to pay attention to the salesperson and how they try to sell their product. “If the sales person is just trying to sell me what they sell, I don’t have a high level of confidence that the company’s going to be committed to my success. On the other hand, if the salesperson invests time and effort into getting to know my business and determining whether or not their products will bring my company actual value, then I can have a much higher level of confidence that the vendor is going to be committed to my success and properly support the product I’m evaluating.”

Vendor references are equally important. Talk to other companies that use the vendor. Truitt says that it's important to ask the vendor for some specific references—one from a new client, one from a client that's been with the vendor for about a year, and one from a long-term client. Each reference will have something unique to offer the investigating business. While the vendor is naturally going to supply references that are positive, your business can still obtain important information about the life cycle stages of the technology in question.

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For business critical technology, Truitt suggests speaking with companies that are not on the vendor's reference list but that have experience with the vendor and its products. Tradeshows provide an excellent venue for this type of discovery. Leverage floor talk to other attendees about their experiences with vendors and some of the technologies your business has its eye on. Sharing experiences about technologies and vendors can lead to a wealth of information that a business can use to select a vendor. As Truitt stated, "trade shows are a great place to make those connections, and I have found in the marine transportation industry that typically companies are very willing to be open with each other about those sorts of things." Investing in the time and resources needed to attend these events can enhance the vendor selection process.

In addition to trade shows, it's also a good idea to find references through your own research. For example, look for old press releases from the vendor that include mentions of companies that have adopted their product.

Truitt warns, however, that when digging for references on your own, you need to be careful. A report of a failed implementation or business relationship isn't always the fault of the vendor. It may be that the business didn't commit or lacked optimum leadership to see an implementation through. Your business should plan to call several 'off-the-grid' references in order to develop a full picture of the vendor in question. Truitt suggests speaking to at least half a dozen of these references to get an accurate picture of the vendor and its products and services.

Implementation and Training Offerings

An essential consideration is evaluating the implementation and training platforms offered by the vendor. The more thorough the vendor's methods, the more you can trust a vendor will be committed to your needs and to your ultimate success.

If you're looking for a high-touch implementation but the vendor is content to direct you where to download software for installation, they probably aren't as concerned about your success as a company as compared to a company that sends someone out to your site to handle the installation and checks to see that all systems are ready for your new technology to launch. The same can be said about how they handle training of your people. A vendor that comes in ready to train your IT people and is willing to walk your employees through their day using the new technology is far more committed than a vendor that merely posts training videos online instead. The personal touch, even in technology—especially in technology—is the one that is going to construct the foundation your business needs for a successful implementation.

When purchasing software solutions, Truitt says companies should expect to invest as much on training and implementation as the solution itself. At the start of a new software implementation it might be tempting to engage in a single cost-effective training session a month before implementation and expect employees to apply that learning immediately with no additional training or follow-up. This is not an advisable practice for companies that want to reduce the risks associated with implementing new technologies.

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Thorough training allows employees to use the technology to its fullest. A quick training session may allow employees to learn basic functions they will use regularly, but without additional instruction, they are less likely to use all the features of the technology—features that could add additional value for the company.

Truitt explains that companies can reduce their technology risks by setting up training plans that are systematic. “Initial training sessions should focus on the skills that employees need to get up and running. Post-implementation sessions should also be scheduled, perhaps ninety days down the road when employees have a working knowledge of the basics and are ready to move into more complex territory. Another training session might take place six months down the road to address questions, concerns, or to revisit early training that may still be needed. Bringing the trainers back fosters the foundation employees need to become experts with the new technology. This thorough type of training nurtures success to a greater degree than a one-time session.”

Vendor Support

When evaluating new solutions you must take time to evaluate the vendor's support team. Evaluating support is often overlooked—merely taken for granted. Yet, inadequate support can create lots of problems for a business.

Evaluate these things: How easy is it for a customer to contact vendor support? Is the number for the vendor and its support department featured prominently on the vendor's website or buried and difficult to find? Does the vendor offer multiple ways to contact them (such as phone, email, and chat)? These small elements can tell a business quite a bit about a potential vendor. You want to know ahead of time how you can expect your critical problems to be handled. Should you encounter a mission-critical outage at midnight on Friday night, you don't want to find out after the fact that the vendor's support team will not work to resolve your problem until after 8 a.m. the following Monday.

Most vendors often promote their support and use their support platform as a selling tool, but businesses should really evaluate the true nature of that support for themselves. For instance, if a vendor states they have on-call support, then call them on weekends and see what happens. Call support at different times ensuring that you work with different support engineers. Call with multiple questions and see what responses you get. In order to evaluate support, you should test the support staff in this way before signing on with the vendor.

It's also a good idea for to ask vendors if they can produce a published process for support that your business can review. Many vendors provide a white paper or blueprint that can explain how they provide support. Just as you review the functionality of the vendor's technology, take time to review their support model.

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Truitt encourages businesses to investigate a vendor's process for escalation of issues that have gone unresolved. This is often something that businesses overlook until they're in the thick of a problem. In Truitt's business, a customer can contact the company to create an initial ticket. That support ticket is then evaluated by a dispatcher or technician that will assign the ticket to an appropriate resource. At that point, the resource works on the ticket to resolve the problem. If the problem is not quickly resolved, a formalized process of escalation moves the ticket to a higher level of support to ensure prompt resolution. "This is critical to our clients," explains Truitt, "because businesses simply don't have time to wait for their problems to be addressed in a less effective manner."

Setting Expectations for Custom Solutions

Custom software solutions are common in today's complex business environments. Businesses may also wish to evaluate vendors based on how well they delineate what a customer is expected to maintain on their own versus what the vendor is expected to assist with.

Customers need clarity about where the line is regarding this aspect of support. You need to know who is going to perform what functions of the initial customization, who's going to maintain it, and how it's paid for. Businesses should clarify this information up front before it can cause confusion and issues between the client and vendor.

Truitt offered this scenario regarding custom solutions: "What happens if six months down the road you have a new customization that has to be made: who's responsible for that and how does that work? If you have to have the vendor do it, do they charge for it or is there an allowance for those sorts of changes as part of your support agreement?" It is important for businesses to get clear information about what is included in support for customized products and what measures will cost extra. Vendors will commonly offer various packages so that their customers can customize their support package to meet their specific needs. Again, the importance of knowing your business and knowing your technology needs comes into play. Knowing your needs and objectives ahead of time can save money in the long term as you make these types of decisions

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Selecting Vendors Based on Industry Expertise

Many businesses may wonder how important it is for a vendor to have experience in their industry—in this case the workboat industry. Truitt stated, “That’s a question based on the technology you’re implementing. If, for instance, the technology isn’t unique to your industry, then it’s generally not essential for the vendor to be industry based. If the technology is unique to your industry, however, it is absolutely vital for the vendor to have experience working within your industry—the more the better, in fact.”

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Bringing People into the Process

According to Truitt, involving employees in the evaluation process is important for minimizing the risks associated with new technology adoption.

“When you’re going to impact an employee with new technology they need to be part of the evaluation process,” he suggests. “A decision made at the management level that doesn’t take into consideration the employees who will be using the technology is often asking for problems. First, it’s important for management to understand what their employees do with technology, which, again, comes back to knowing oneself. When a business knows how its employees use technology, it can then begin to seek new technology solutions that are either simpler or more efficient.” In other words, seek to find solutions that will help employees do a better job and add value to the business.

Leadership is equally important. Leaders must help employees understand what is at stake with the new technology and how it can add value to the company. Employees may have a better mindset going forward once they are acknowledged as a valuable part of the process. Leadership is vital for getting employees on board and eager to embrace a new technology platform along with the inevitable growing pains associated with training and implementation. The process, therefore, involves both leadership and employees. Each has a personal stake in the new technology and each must be involved for the adoption to be successful.

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Conclusion

Choosing a vendor, especially a technology vendor, is chock full of important considerations. Yet with careful evaluation, businesses can employ a process that covers the ins and outs of all they need to know regarding a vendor. Naturally, the more critical the technology, the more critical the selection and evaluation process must be.

Truitt advised companies to take substantial measures of themselves before entering into the selection process. Each business may arrive at its own methods for obtaining this self-awareness, but the awareness must be generated one way or another for a selection to maximize success of an implementation project. Without this self-knowledge, there is a considerable level of risk going into the adoption of any new technology.

For the marine industry, technology upgrades can transform the way individual workboat companies run. Technology can enhance the way the company does business and improve its value. However choosing a technology that is a poor match can be a costly error that can set companies back and diminish their value. In the end, technology should always pay for itself, and it should always be something that you can look at from a financial standpoint and say, “this is a win.”

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