

The Perfect Match

How do you evaluate a security systems integrator?

When companies are faced with a decision to hire a systems integrator, jobs, time and money are on the line. Making the correct choice can be difficult, and selecting unwisely can create a nightmare for all parties involved. How do you determine which company will work best? What questions should you ask? What should you expect?

Mike Walsdorf, president of Advent Systems Inc., Todd Channell, CEO of Sound Inc., and Joe Liguori, founder of Access Control Technologies Inc., all run successful security systems integration companies. They offered some ideas on securing the perfect match.

Know Your Integrators

In this time of technology convergence, it is difficult to determine whether a systems integrator has all of the technical skills required to complete every element of a project. There are a few things that can make it easier.

Certifications. According to Liguori, “Now we have entered the age of certification. Ask the systems integrator how many products they represent and to see the training certification.”

Knowing the company you are dealing with, inside and out, can ensure the job will run smoothly. Walsdorf said customers need to find out who the integrator has on staff, what networks and software they are certified in, and whether they have to broker services out. “You need to know that the integrator can perform the work without having to go back to the manufacturer with all types of questions.”

Ask Tough Questions. Channell also said to ask tough questions of the integrator to determine if they have the expertise down to the network level. Ask about their annual education/training budget and their yearly investment in their support infrastructure. Convergence requires sophisticated expertise, and a reputable and successful integrator seldom needs to outsource technological sophistication.

Check References. A final area that all security professionals should evaluate is the financial strength and reputation of the integrator. Liguori claimed that financial statements can be misleading. “Engage in direct measures by talking to suppliers, customers, and other resources that work with the integrator on a regular basis.” If the integrator is a publicly traded company, it's easy to determine their current financial status, but if they are independent, assessments can be difficult. Channel said to “always

ask for a bank reference, ask demanding questions about key ratios, years at the bank, etc.”

“Most savvy end-users want to talk to three to five (references),” said Walsdorf. “Very sophisticated people will also ask you about business you've lost and why.” The quality of references is important as well. Channel says that a consultant or engineer is sometimes better than a direct customer. “Common sense will tell you the SI is only going to list customers in excellent standing. A consultant will tell you if the SI is one they often include in RFP invitations and good standing. A local ASIS chapter is a good place to get a list of security consultants and engineers.”

Another tactic in judging the integrator is to visit a prospective company's facilities on short notice. “Ask for a tour and make sure to view inventory and in-house support areas. Asking for a joint meeting with manufacturer's representatives is always a good idea as well,” said Channell.

Your Preparation Is Key

Choosing the right integrator isn't a matter only of researching your options. It's also a matter of ensuring you're prepared yourself. You won't know who you should work with unless you know exactly what you want.

The RFP. According to Ligouri, good systems integrators will identify the needs and concerns of their customers and then tailor the solution to meet those needs. The security professional can help the integrator accomplish this by having a comprehensive request for proposal (RFP) in place. “Applications that are clear, concise and represent the best interests of both parties are the starting point to build upon,” Ligouri said. Having a strong RFP will also help you determine which integrator will be right for the job.

Walsdorf agreed. “When customers specify a design with broad-based performance specifications, they're going to get all kinds of numbers and thoughts on the project,” he said. Comprehensive designs that are tightly written with numbers and drawings are much more likely to deliver what is expected in terms of price and performance. Taking shortcuts by copying information from books or using a proposal that worked last year on another project will set you up for disaster.

System Design. Often design and/or engineering is contracted separately from the systems integration. Ligouri feels that the emergence of the security consultant has played a significant role in this arena. “As the size of the projects escalates, the separation becomes more pronounced,” he said.

“It gives the customer more peace of mind and is always highly desirable to split up the elements,” added Channell. He said there are times, however, when the integrator incumbent has special inherent knowledge of an organization's existing systems and infrastructure. “In these cases, it is imperative that a systems integrator be part of the design/engineering, especially when talking about system retrofits and add-ons.” In

addition, Channel mentioned that setbacks happen when an organization doesn't want to pay the money needed to hire a consultant or engineer to put out a quality RFP. “Too many times a customer thinks they can save money by doing it themselves. There is always an ROI when having professionals develop an RFP, though often times it's not quantifiable up front.”

Ensuring that there are good, solid design and specifications also helps to protect both parties from cost overruns and time delays. According to Walsdorf, “The better the design, the easier it is on everybody.”

Bidding. You can begin to narrow your field of qualified integrators all the way back in the bidding process, to ensure you are choosing between the most appropriate providers. “Make sure the highest-quality integrators are invited to propose and the invitation is sent to the appropriate person with a return receipt requested. You'd be surprised how many times specifications and drawings land in the wrong people's hands, resulting in no proposal submitted,” said Channell.

Cultivate Trust

After you've found a partner, you must continue working to keep the relationship at a profitable level. One of the key elements of an ideal integrator-customer pairing is a long-term partnering relationship based on trust. According to Walsdorf, this should be a common goal for both sides.

Channell cited three key requirements for creating trust .

- 1) An open, honest dialogue that compares customer expectations to the integrator's actual capabilities,
- 2) Face-to-face meetings to handle any disagreements or misunderstandings that may arise, and
- 3) A continuous two-way education process in which the integrator informs the security professional about new trends and technology and the security professional keeps the integrator abreast of future projects.

Remember that issues will still come up. Sometimes delays and cost overruns are a function of a number of obstacles that aren't within the control of the integrator. When this happens, “The main ingredient is communication. Staying engaged with one another is the best way to keep abreast of what is happening and keep problems to a minimum,” stated Ligouri.

Determining the perfect SI partner is demanding, but it can be done. Security professionals who thoroughly investigate prospective companies and fully and professionally plan the design and engineering of the project come out on top. Taking the

time and avoiding shortcuts helps to avoid delays and cost overruns. Perhaps most important, it lays the groundwork for a strong relationship for years to come.

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