

## How to prepare a Bespoke Software Brief

This article aims to help you create a detailed, well thought out and useful bespoke software brief.

You should bear in mind that preparing a detailed proposal takes considerable professional time. Consequently, it is courtesy, before approaching solution providers for a detailed response, to have:

- A carefully thought out and internally agreed project brief – it is a waste of time and effort to invite proposals without a descent brief and then decide what you really want to do - then re-brief the solution provider!
- Budget approval for the project (at least in principle) – you should not use solution providers’ proposals as a starting point for deciding whether you can afford to proceed with the project

### A Quality Brief

The quality of response you get from outside solution providers in terms of their proposal will reflect the quality of your brief. It is, therefore, important from your own point of view to spend some time in deciding what you want, preparing your brief, and getting any necessary internal approval for the project before approaching external companies for their proposals. It may be appropriate for the companies to visit your institution in the pre-proposal stage. Again, from a solution provider’s perspective, this costs money in terms of both time and direct costs, so their willingness to do this may be related to your budget and distances involved.

The document should include the following sections:

### Business Background

The solution provider needs to know something about your organisation in order to better understand your objectives. Good solution providers will do their own research and/or ask you the appropriate questions to ensure that they have a feel for your business and what it is that you are trying to achieve, before they put together their proposal.

Tell us about your business

## Objectives

Once you've decided the nature of the problem that needs resolving you need to specify your objectives. What will the software do for the business and how should this be achieved? If the project is a desktop application do you want centralised secure data storage on a network server or is local storage acceptable. If the project is a website be sure that your objectives relate to things that are achievable by the site. A statement such as 'To improve the company's presence on the web and to generate new business' isn't realistic unless you expect to employ a software solution provider that is also a marketing company. Only good content and good products can improve business for your company – neither of which can be supplied by the solution provider. Whilst it is true that a poor site will put off potential customers, the most professionally designed website in the world will do nothing for your business without good content. Only you can provide the content, after all, it is your business.

What are your objectives for your new system?

## Solution Requirements

Be as specific as possible about what it is that you want. Obviously a 30-40 page tomb may be excessive but 1 or 2 pages isn't really acceptable either unless, of course, the project is very simple/small. Remember the better the information that you provide the more useful will be the responses that you receive. Basically give the solution provider all the information that you would want if you were being asked to provide a quotation. Don't forget to include any hardware, software and network infrastructure information that may be relevant

- Does the solution have to interact with any existing applications
- What set up do you have on your network server i.e. is it running the latest version of Windows Server, does the environment have Exchange Server and/or Internet Information Server? Do you run Citrix servers? These details may mean nothing to you if your job function means that you don't normally need to know such information but it may help the solution provider to propose the correct solution for your company or to advise what additional software you may have to consider installing.
- What operating systems do the client PCs use – Windows 10, 8.1, 8, 7 or earlier; don't expect an application developed for the latest operating system to necessarily work perfectly with an earlier edition unless it was designed, developed and tested to do so.
- Will the solution be running on portable devices e.g. tablets/smart phones? If so, include details of the devices.

Make sure that your brief explains everything in a way that is easily understandable by someone that has no knowledge of your business.

What are your requirements?

## Timescale

Be realistic about your timescale. This is one of the details that is most commonly wrong or unrealistic in most briefs. It is not uncommon for companies to specify an end date for a relatively short project and then start looking for potential suppliers. You don't have to be a programmer or understand coding in order to guess how long a project will take.

- Creating your project brief – 2 – 4 weeks
- Finding a suitable supplier – this could take months. Even if you post your request on a suitable website you'll need to allow 3-4 weeks for the prospective vendors to reply. You'll then need another week to review the initial proposals and a further 1-2 weeks to arrange meetings with the short listed companies.
- Designing your application. You've specified your brief and your chosen supplier has submitted an initial proposal. Unless the project is extremely small you'll still need to have design meetings. The meetings should normally take only 2-3 days but they'll need to be scheduled to be convenient for everyone concerned so it's best to allow 1-2 weeks plus a further 1-2 weeks to allow the supplier to write up all the notes, to create a visual prototype and submit a fully documented specification. You'll then need 1-2 weeks to review the document, request any necessary amendments and to get the document signed off.
- Development of your application. This obviously depends upon the scale of the project but it is unlikely to take less than 4 weeks. A medium sized project could take 8-12 weeks.
- Testing your application. When developers finish developing an application that doesn't mean that it is tested and ready to go. The software should function correctly but that is quite different to being rigorously tested. If you opt to pay for third party testers the testing and debugging will be completed quickly and accurately in 2-3 weeks. If you do the testing yourself you'll need to allow up to 8 weeks.

If you add up the time listed above then the minimum timescale is 16 weeks. It could be as much as 37 weeks.

If everything goes well these times can be brought down but it is important to understand the effect that a 1 week delay in arranging a meeting at the start of the process or a delay responding to a question from the supplier can have on the end date for the project.

Finally even if you absolutely, positively have to have the software by a certain date don't expect the supplier to be able to work miracles and beware of those that say they can. Instead look for a supplier prepared to tell you the truth rather than one that will say anything in order to get your business.

What is your timescale?

## Budget

Don't be afraid to inform the solution provider about the budget that you have calculated that you can afford. Whilst it is of course possible that a company could inflate their prices to use your entire budget, once you have a few proposals to compare, you'll quickly see for yourself if this is the case. A good solution provider will compare your budget with your brief and determine whether your objectives are achievable within your budget – organisations often have unrealistic expectations. If your budget is reasonable they will be able to put forward a proposal. If your budget is too small they will be able to advise you of what budget is realistically required or how to reduce the scope of your project in order to realise the maximum value from it whilst meeting your budget.

What is your budget?

## Specific Instructions

If you have a specific requirements make sure that they're included in your project brief. This will include the usual things such as references and a cost breakdown but should also include statements regarding source code and intellectual property rights (IPR). Due to existing software copyright law many solution providers retain both the source code and the IPR. This means that if you want a modification to your system you will have no choice but to return to the original supplier no matter what they may charge. If you have a website and wish to have it hosted elsewhere you may have to pay to have your source code released – the supplier may be legally entitled to refuse. Look for a supplier that agrees to hand over the source code and IPR and get it in writing. Acumen always hands over the source code and IPR unless it involves a proprietary system developed by Acumen.

Do you have any specific requirements?