INNOVA
GROUP

Technology That Works. Innovation That Lasts.

BUYER'S GUIDE

Choosing a Technology Partner

What to ask, what a good proposal contains, and the warning signs worth taking seriously — whoever you end up choosing.

We wrote this knowing it may lead you to a different supplier, or to keeping the one you have. Some of the questions in it are ones we would not score full marks on ourselves — they are included anyway, because a guide that only flatters its author is not worth reading.

Innova Technologies Group Ltd · Hull, United Kingdom
v1.0 · July 2026
innovagroup.tech

BEFORE YOU START

Most bad appointments were predictable.

When a technology relationship goes wrong, the reasons are rarely technical. Usually the warning signs were there at the start, and nobody knew they were warning signs.

The provider was chosen on price, or on a recommendation from a business quite unlike yours. The proposal described what would be installed but not what would change. Nobody asked who would actually answer the phone, or what happened when that person was on holiday. Everyone was optimistic, and the awkward questions felt rude.

This guide is the set of awkward questions. It exists because a well-informed buyer gets better outcomes from any supplier — including, frankly, from us.

How to use it. Take it into your conversations. The questions are written to be asked out loud, and each has a short note on what a good answer sounds like and what should give you pause. You are not looking for perfect answers; you are looking for straight ones.

Judge the answering, not just the answer. A provider who says "I don't know, I'll find out" is often more reliable than one who has something confident to say about everything. Certainty about things nobody could yet know is not expertise.

> ON OUR OWN POSITION
>
> We are an IT provider, so we are not a neutral party. What we can do is be transparent: this guide includes criteria where a small, specialist firm like ours is weaker than a large one, and we have said so plainly rather than quietly leaving them out. Use it to hold us to the same standard as anyone else.

WHAT THIS GUIDE COVERS

INNOVA GROUP

THE PRINCIPLE

You are buying judgement, not products

Anyone can supply the same software. What differs is what they advise you to do with it.

Almost every provider you speak to will offer broadly the same technology. They will all sell Microsoft 365, all install laptops, all claim to take security seriously. The products are not the differentiator, and comparing them line by line will not tell you much.

What you are actually buying is judgement: what they recommend, what they talk you out of, and whether they tell you things you would rather not hear. Four things reveal that better than any feature list.

01 **Do they ask about your business first?**
A provider who leads with their product range has one answer looking for a question. The good ones spend the first meeting mostly listening.

02 **Will they tell you not to buy something?**
Ask what they would leave alone. A provider who recommends everything is selling, not advising.

03 **Can they explain it without jargon?**
Anyone who genuinely understands something can explain it plainly. Jargon is often used to avoid being questioned.

04 **Are they honest about their limits?**
Every provider has gaps. One who names theirs unprompted is far safer than one who claims to do everything equally well.

> **A FAIR WARNING ABOUT PRICE**
> The cheapest quote usually reflects a narrower scope rather than better value, and the most expensive is not automatically more capable. Compare what is actually included, then judge on the four points above.

SECTION ONE

Know What You Are Buying

Three quite different things get described as “IT support”. Being clear which you need prevents most mismatches.

Reactive support

You call when something breaks and pay for the fix, often by the hour. Cheapest on paper and appropriate for very small setups, but nobody is responsible for preventing problems, so recurring faults tend to stay.

Managed service

A monthly fee covering support plus the maintenance that happens when nothing is wrong — updates, monitoring, administration. Predictable, and the provider now has an incentive to stop problems rather than bill for them.

Project work

A defined piece of work with a start and an end: a migration, a new application, a security programme. Judge this on scope and outcome, and be clear who supports the result afterwards.

Advisory or co-sourced

You have internal IT and want expertise alongside it, not instead of it. Often the best value where someone capable already exists but is stretched. Say so early — not every provider works this way.

BE CLEAR BEFORE YOU SPEAK TO ANYONE

WHAT IS PROMPTING THIS? (A PROBLEM, A PROJECT, GROWTH, A SUPPLIER ENDING)

WHICH OF THE FOUR ABOVE YOU THINK YOU NEED

ROUGH BUDGET

SECTION TWO

Questions About The Work

Ask these in the first or second conversation. The notes describe what a straight answer sounds like.

“What would you leave exactly as it is?”

Listen for specifics — something in your setup they think is fine and not worth touching. A provider who finds nothing good is either not looking or is building a bigger invoice.

“What do you think is our biggest risk right now?”

Listen for an answer grounded in what they have seen of your business, not a generic warning about cyber attacks. Vagueness here means they have not really looked.

“What are we already paying for that we’re not using?”

Listen for genuine curiosity about your licensing. Most SMEs own capability they never enabled, and a good provider looks there before proposing purchases.

“Which parts of this would you not do yet?”

Listen for sequencing and a reason. Everything being urgent is a sales position; a considered order of work is an advisory one.

“What could go wrong, and what would you do about it?”

Listen for specific risks and a rollback plan. “Nothing should go wrong” is not an answer — experienced providers have seen things go wrong and will say so.

“How will we know it worked?”

Listen for something measurable: fewer incidents, faster onboarding, hours saved, a passed audit. If success cannot be described, it cannot be assessed later.

“If we choose someone else, what would you do differently?”

Listen for a considered answer rather than defensiveness. A confident provider will describe their genuine difference in a sentence, or concede that another firm might suit you better. Irritation at the question is itself the answer.

“What have you got wrong before, and what changed?”

Listen for a real example, told without blaming the client. Anyone who has done this work for years has a story here. Having none is the answer that should worry you.

SECTION THREE

Questions About The Relationship

This is where most of the long-term experience is decided, and where buyers ask least. Several of these are harder for a small firm to answer well — ask them anyway.

"Who will I actually deal with?"

Listen for a name and how reachable they are. Also ask who else knows your environment, because a single point of contact is convenient until they are unavailable.

"What happens when that person is on holiday or ill?"

Listen for an honest description of cover. Smaller firms have thinner cover than large ones — that can be an acceptable trade for continuity and care, but you should know it rather than discover it.

"How big are you, and how long have you been going?"

Listen for a straight answer without inflation. A one-person firm and a fifty-person firm are both legitimate; a small firm describing itself as "a team" is not.

"Can I speak to two clients about my size?"

Listen for a willing yes. References from businesses much larger or smaller than yours tell you comparatively little about your likely experience.

"What does the contract say about leaving?"

Listen for notice period, what happens to your data and admin access, and whether there is an exit fee. Ask this **before** signing, not when you want to go.

"Will we own our own systems and licences?"

Listen for a clear yes. Tenancies, domains and licences bought in your name are yours; some providers hold these, which makes leaving painful by design.

"How do you charge, and what is excluded?"

Listen for clarity on what falls outside the monthly fee. "Unlimited support" always has limits; a good provider states them upfront.

"Who is ultimately responsible for security decisions?"

Listen for a clear division: they advise and implement, you own the risk. Outsourcing IT does not outsource accountability, and a provider who implies otherwise is either overselling or misunderstands where liability sits.

"When would we review how this is going?"

Listen for a scheduled, structured review rather than "call us any time". Regular review is what separates a partnership from a queue.

SECTION FOUR

What A Good Proposal Contains

Tick these off against each proposal. Missing items are not always disqualifying, but each is a question worth asking. Note too that long proposals are not better ones — much of the bulk in a large document is boilerplate about the supplier rather than content about you.

- [ ] **A restatement of your problem, in your words**
  Before any solution. If they cannot describe what you told them, they were not listening — and everything after it is guesswork.
- [ ] **What is included, and explicitly what is not**
  Scope boundaries are where disputes come from. A good proposal names the exclusions rather than leaving them to be discovered.
- [ ] **Costs separated into one-off and ongoing**
  Setup, licences and monthly fees itemised, so you can see the true cost over three years rather than just the headline.
- [ ] **A timescale with dependencies**
  What happens when, and what it relies on from you. Timelines that assume no input from your side are timelines that slip.
- [ ] **Named responsibilities on both sides**
  Who does what, including what you are expected to provide. Clarity here prevents the most common cause of delay.
- [ ] **Risks, and what happens if something fails**
  A rollback position for anything significant. Its absence usually means the work has not been thought through in detail.
- [ ] **How success will be measured**
  Something you could point at in six months and agree on. Without it, nobody can say whether the money was well spent.
- [ ] **What happens after go-live**
  Support arrangements, handover and documentation. Projects that end at go-live tend to leave the client holding something they do not understand.
- [ ] **Assumptions, written down**
  Every estimate rests on assumptions. Listing them is a sign of experience, and it tells you what would change the price.

SECTION FIVE

Warning Signs

None of these is proof of a bad provider. Two or three together, however, is a pattern worth acting on.

- [ ] **They quote before understanding your business**
  A price offered in the first conversation is a price for something generic. It will change, or the scope will.
- [ ] **Everything is urgent**
  Manufactured urgency — especially around security — is a sales technique. Real risks come with an explanation and a sensible order of work.
- [ ] **They disparage your current supplier heavily**
  Some criticism may be fair. Sustained criticism tells you how they will speak about you, and often substitutes for describing their own approach.
- [ ] **You cannot get a straight answer on price**
  Complexity in pricing is sometimes genuine. Evasiveness is not, and it rarely improves after signing.
- [ ] **The contract is long and the proposal is short**
  Effort concentrated on tying you in rather than on understanding the work is a reliable signal of priorities.
- [ ] **They will not put you in touch with clients**
  Or the references offered are nothing like your business. Willing, comparable references are the easiest test any good provider passes.
- [ ] **Jargon increases when you ask questions**
  Clarity should improve under questioning, not deteriorate. Complexity used as a shield is a form of evasion.
- [ ] **They hold your licences, domain or admin access**
  Ask directly who owns them. Anything registered in the provider's name rather than yours makes leaving harder than it should be.
- [ ] **Nobody mentions backup, or leaving**
  A provider who does not raise recovery, or who becomes uncomfortable about exit terms, has not thought about your interests.

SECTION SIX

Checking & Comparing

A few checks worth doing before you decide, and a grid for comparing providers on the same terms.

- [ ] **Look them up at Companies House**
  How long trading, who the directors are, and whether accounts are filed on time. Free, quick, and occasionally revealing.
- [ ] **Ask about insurance**
  Professional indemnity and cyber liability. If they will be inside your systems, this is a reasonable question.
- [ ] **Check any certifications they claim**
  Cyber Essentials holders appear on a public register, and Microsoft partner status is verifiable. Claims are easy; listings are not.
- [ ] **Speak to references without the provider present**
  Ask what went wrong and how it was handled. Every relationship has a difficult moment; the handling is what matters.

COMPARE ON THE SAME TERMS

Provider AProvider BProvider C **Understood our business Told us what not to do Explained things plainly Named their limits Proposal quality Cover when key person away References checked out Exit terms acceptable Three-year cost Would we enjoy dealing with them monthly**

> **THE LAST ROW MATTERS**
>
> These relationships last years, not months. You will deal with this provider regularly — often when something has gone wrong and you are already frustrated. Whether you find them straightforward and pleasant to work with is a legitimate commercial criterion, not a soft one, and it is the row people most often ignore and later regret.

INNOVA
GROUP

NEXT STEPS

Ask us the same questions.

We publish this knowing it will sometimes count against us. We are a small, specialist firm: our cover is thinner than a large provider's, we focus deliberately on the Microsoft ecosystem rather than everything, and there are businesses we are not the right fit for.

We would rather you knew that from a document than discovered it six months in. If those trade-offs suit you — and for many smaller businesses they do — we would welcome the conversation.

And if this guide leads you to someone else, or to keeping who you have, it has still done its job.

INNOVA GROUP

Innova Technologies Group Ltd
Hull, United Kingdom
innovagroup.tech
hello@innovagroup.tech

ALSO IN THIS SERIES

Cyber Security Essentials Checklist
Cloud Migration Readiness
Process & Automation Opportunity Finder
IT Health Check

FOUR DISCIPLINES, ONE PARTNER

- **InnovaSystems** — Secure. Stable. Supported.
- **InnovaWorks** — Building What's Next.
- **InnovaCloud** — Cloud Without Complexity.
- **InnovaSecure** — Protect What Matters.

Technology That Works. Innovation That Lasts.