



6 Steps to Choosing the Right Employee Benefits Technology Partner

Your guide to finding a best-in-class employee benefits solution

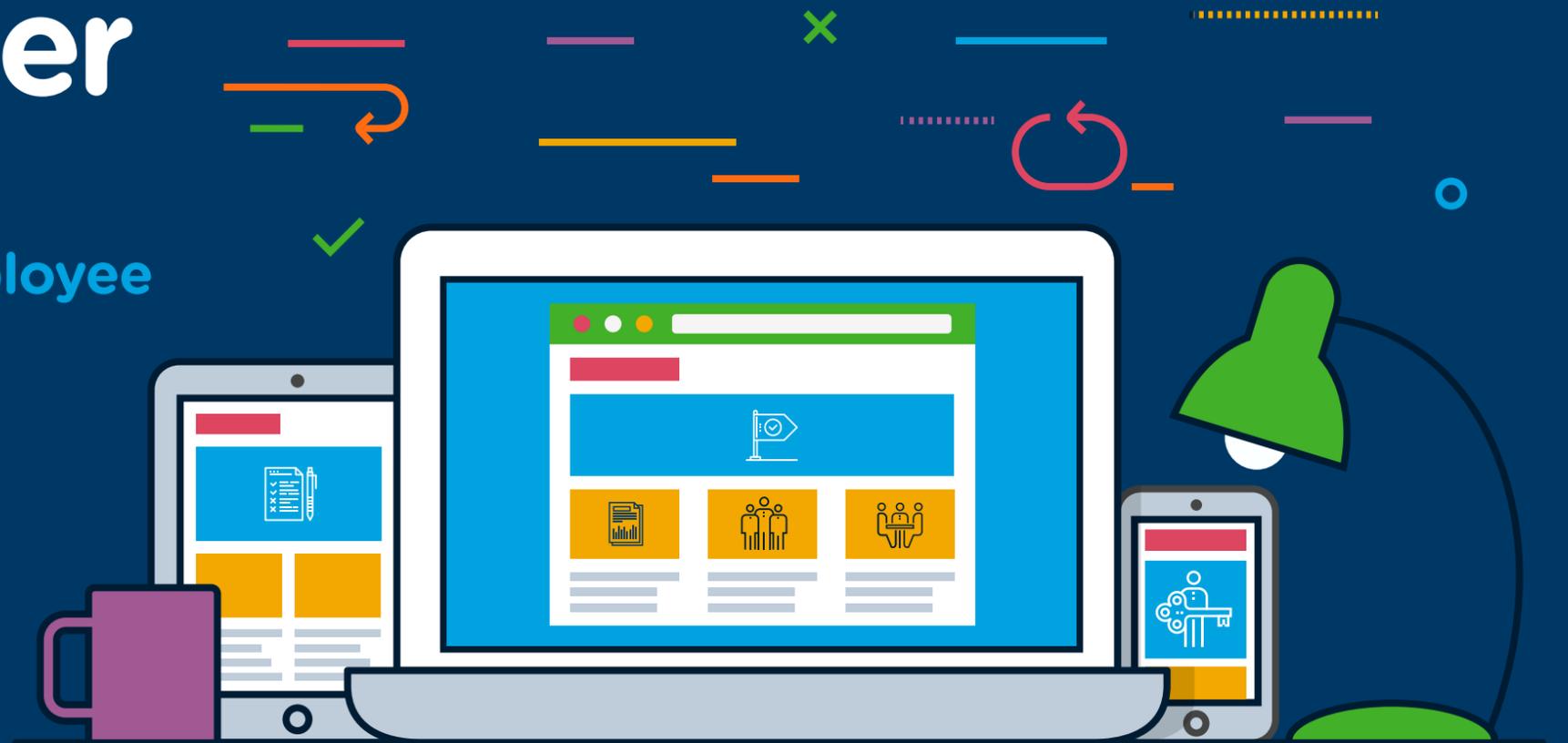


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For over 20 years I've had the pleasure and difficulty of selecting benefit technology partners when working as a rewards leader at numerous global companies. Pleasure, for when I've gotten it right, it has truly helped me, my company and my people. Difficulty, for when I've gotten it wrong, it's something I've had to pick up the pieces from as it's caused embarrassment, confusion and a whole array of other emotions and problems.

One of the most important decisions you'll make as an HR professional is selecting your benefits technology partners. In fact, it may even be more important than selecting friends and partners in your personal life.

And that's because selecting the wrong benefits technology partner and having to 'break up' with them can be even more painful than breaking up with a friend or partner. In a personal relationship it's only you and the other person, but with a benefits technology partner, it's you, the partner and your entire workforce that is impacted. That's why it's important to spend the time upfront getting it right, finding a long-term partner that can deliver what you need, when and how you need it most.

When it comes to benefit technology partners, the good news is that over the

years the number and quality of them has increased. The bad news is that with so much choice and with so many options it can be quite overwhelming, especially when you know that making the wrong decision can be detrimental to your business and people.

In this eBook I'll share with you the many lessons I've learned over the years, helping you navigate your own decision-making journey so you feel confident selecting the right benefits technology partner for you, and avoid those messy break ups.

The definition of a partner is someone engaged in the same activity with you, someone on the same side or someone who shares something with you.

Let's get started on uncovering what that means to your benefits journey.

Step 1: Define Your Objectives



As a buyer, the first thing you need to do is to define your objectives, asking yourself **why you want and need a benefits technology partner in the first place**. Think of it like buying a new car. You wouldn't step into a car showroom without first thinking about how you're going to use your new car or you could end up with something very impractical.

Trust me on this, for I once bought a lovely sports car not fully thinking through that there was absolutely no boot space to be able to carry my groceries, ouch!

For example, one objective might be that you need to find a new partner that will fulfil the needs of all your employees, as your current partner's approach and technology only engages some of them.

Another could be that you want to save money and drive higher engagement with benefits by consolidating your multiple benefit providers in one centralised place. Or, you may need a new partner because you're putting in place a new benefit to drive higher employee engagement and satisfaction with your overall benefits portfolio.

Begin by defining your objectives, and, just as important, agree on these objectives with others who are part of the decision-making process.

By kicking off with this important step, you'll ensure that your benefits technology partner can address and meet all of your needs and objectives, and provide value to your business.



Do your research

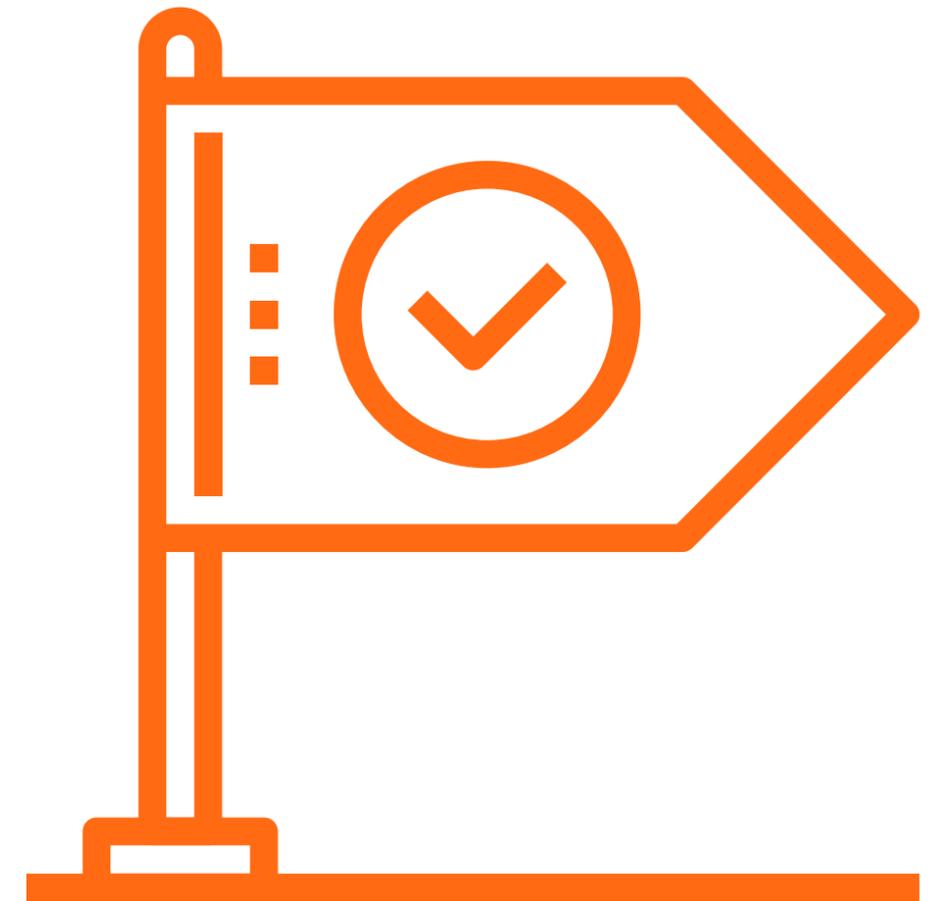
There are many ways to find a new partner. You might ask around your peer group to see who others are using (I've sourced ideas through my LinkedIn network, for example) or explore a benefits partner you've used in the past to see if they're right for your new organisation.

I recommend doing your 'homework,' so to speak to see if your potential provider has a reputable website and has made their mark on the industry with thought leadership and expert content, for that is how you will know you're partnering with a business that truly 'walks the walk.'

Here are a few examples of why companies might be looking for a new provider:

<p>Objective:</p>	<p>Increase uptake in benefit from least engaged demographic</p> <p>Client A from the hospitality industry decided to switch providers because their predominantly offline workforce was not engaging with the benefits on offer (employee discounts and Cycle to Work). Their current provider had a clunky user experience, which prevented employees from using the benefit.</p>	<p>Drive business ROI for benefits on offer</p> <p>Client B, a grocer, had an employee discounts benefit in place but the awareness was poor, with a 105,000-strong workforce only spending £120,000 monthly.</p>	<p>Introduce new benefits offerings to meet the needs of a changing workforce</p> <p>Client C, a retailer, had a combination of benefits providers in place that weren't providing support or personalisation options, and their predominantly offline workforce was not engaging with the current offerings, which they found hard to understand and irrelevant to their lives.</p>	<p>Bring benefits together under one platform</p> <p>Client D from the manufacturing industry with around 500 employees had several different locations and different benefits for each of their employee demographics, creating a fractured employee benefits experience and inconsistent brand identity.</p>
<p>Solution:</p>	<p>Find a benefits technology partner with a seamless UX so their employees would take advantage of the benefits on offer.</p>	<p>Find a new benefits technology partner that could help them drive more awareness of the discounts offered with clever and timely communications.</p>	<p>Find one benefits technology partner that could offer multiple benefits so it was easy to administer, and provide benefits that their employees would love.</p>	<p>Streamline and consolidate their benefits offerings into one place for employees to use and engage with their benefits that could be customised with their employer brand.</p>
<p>Result:</p>	<p>In the first month of launch, logins increased compared to the previous provider by 134% and an increase in spend on the discounts platform by more than 800%.</p>	<p>Within six months of switching providers, they were seeing a higher ROI on the platform with average monthly spend topping £750,000.</p>	<p>Putting in place a discounts programme, Cycle to Work and SmartTech (a technology salary sacrifice benefit), employees are now engaging more than 70% of its workforce.</p>	<p>With one centralised, branded hub, 95% of employees are engaging with the platform, topping £1 million in spend through discounts programme.</p>

Step 2: Define Your Selection Criteria



Once you decide what you're trying to achieve, the next thing to do is to decide how you're going to get there. I have had the privilege of working with some amazing procurement professionals over the years, who have taught me the importance of a rigorous and robust approach to doing this by selecting and defining criteria, which is what you will use to evaluate and judge your partners against.

If you skip this step you end up making your selections based on gut reactions, which never ends well, especially when you have a decision-making committee who end up getting into some heated and emotional discussions.

To help you define your own criteria, I've outlined some ideas that I've used over the years. I'd suggest that you discuss them with your decision-making committee, and make your choices based on which are most important at your organisation.

 Technology	 Fees	 Security	 Integrations	 Implementation
 Customisation and branding	 Launch	 Communication	 Reporting	 Support
 Innovation				

Let's take a closer look at each of these considerations:



Technology

The starting point for any buying decision should always be the product itself. Going back to the car showroom analogy, every car is going to run when you drive it out of the showroom, but they'll all run and drive differently, which ultimately impacts the overall user experience. And it's no different in the world of benefits, for technology has become a key differentiator in the products being offered by providers.

Based on the digital transformation of benefit processes and the growing sophistication of enrolment, communication and decision-making support tools, the products and the user experience vary widely from supplier to supplier.

It's this user experience that's important to understand up front, ensuring that it meets the needs of your workforce to deliver the most engaging employee experience. The last thing you want to do is leave the 'showroom' being stuck with an experience that is unpleasant and unacceptable.

Going back to my sports car, what I realised during my first rainstorm, was that the top took forever to come back up which left me not only unhappy, but very wet!

That's why it's important to spend quality time throughout the selection process on the technology and have your partner help you 'drive' the technology in different ways throughout their demo to experience what your employees would experience.

Questions to ask your potential partner:

- Can you walk me through how an employee would engage with their benefits through your platform?
- Does the technology offer a mobile app or elevated mobile experience for employees to access information from anywhere on their mobile devices?
- How do employees log onto the platform?



Fees

Another criteria which has always been at the top of my decision-making lists has been the fees being charged, since we all have a budget that we're working within. It's important to point out that it's not always as straightforward as comparing fees, as I've found that with partners structuring their fees differently, they're not always apples to apples. That's why you want to be clear on the total cost of ownership.

For example, a low, upfront setup fee might look enticing at first, but beware of what additional costs you might incur. Ideally you only want to ask for your budget just once, so finding a partner that doesn't have hidden fees or change costs dependent on technology improvements or company size can help you get your initiatives moving faster.

Questions to ask your potential partner:

- What is your one-time setup fee, and what does this include and not include?
- What are your ongoing costs?
- What fees are fixed, and are there additional fees that we'll be charged for?
- Will the fees change if/when my employee headcount numbers change?
- Will your annual fee change?
- Does my cost increase as the technology changes?



Security

With over 3.7 billion people around the world using the internet, it makes sense to use technology to improve efficiency and visibility both in our personal and professional lives. But with the advantages come risks, and it is critical to choose a partner that is committed to keeping your employee data safe and secure.

You want, rather you *need*, a company that has security as a top priority, protecting your employee data as much as they would their own.

Questions to ask your potential partner:

- What is your approach to security?
- Are you ISO27001 certified, and if so, since when?
- How do you protect and keep company and employee data safe?





Integrations

Speaking of a seamless user experience, as part of your decision-making process it's important to understand how the new technology will work and talk to the rest of your existing tech stack. You don't want to add to the long list of administrative tasks already on your plate, so choosing a platform that automates the administration for you is going to be a big bonus, keeping the wheels on your people-centric bus moving.

Questions to ask your potential partner:

- How will data from your system talk to/share information with my payroll and HR systems?
- How will your system manage new starters and leavers?
- What is the process for updating employee data?
- Will my employees have to remember a variety of logins, or can the system do it for them, safely and securely?
- Are there extra fees or a limit to how many integrations the platform can have?





Implementation

Selecting your benefit technology partner is only part of your journey – next, you’ll have to work with your partner to actually launch and maintain the technology. From my experience, this is where the relationship can start unravelling or falling apart, with them not delivering on what they promised during the selection process.

For this reason, it’s important to make sure that you address and explore exactly how the implementation process will take place and who will manage it from their side before you select your partner and the i’s are dotted and the t’s are crossed.



My preferred approach to implementation is to have a dedicated implementation project manager, someone who is responsible for building and putting in place my unique and tailored solution. This person oversees all of the details from kickoff to launch to get my programme up and running, taking the pressure off of my team and I, who most likely would not have experience with such processes.

Questions to ask your potential partner:

- How will the implementation process be run? Do you have a sample timeline or project plan you can show me?
- What is required from me to get the benefit up and running?
- Do you have designated people at your company who focus on and manage implementations?
- Who will be responsible for what (e.g. what will they do versus relying on you to do)?
- What is their NPS score when it comes to implementation?
- Is there a formal escalation process and what does it look like?



Customisation and branding

Over the years I've come to realise that branding is not just a technique used by marketing, but for HR professionals as well. By customising and branding our benefit technology and programmes, we can create an environment that enhances the employer brand that our employees are already used to, which helps them feel confident and comfortable with technology. That's why I like to understand the provider's abilities (or lack of abilities) when it comes to customisation and branding.



I love it when a potential provider mocks up their solution to reflect my company's brand and culture, showing me what they can do to tick this box of customisation and branding.

Questions to ask your potential partner:

- Do you have designated people at your company who focus on design?
- How will the benefits pages look and feel?
- How will you work with our internal marketing and communications teams?
- Are there any extra fees related to design?



Launch

Given all of the hard work that goes into getting approval for and designing a new benefits platform, the last thing you want is low adoption from your employees. In the selection process, dig into how the partner will assist you in designing and launching the new home for your benefits. Will they provide support during and beyond the initial launch, or will you have to figure out your pre- and post-launch strategies yourself?

Questions to ask your potential partner:

- How do you build awareness of new benefits that are added to the platform?
- Who will be responsible for what (e.g. what will they do versus relying on you to do)?
- Can you share examples of previous launches and the impact that they had?





Communication

Launching new benefits technology is only the start of the journey to engage your workforce with your employee benefits. It will take ongoing communication to remind your employees how the benefit works and why it's important to them.

One of my favourite authors says (and I agree with her!):

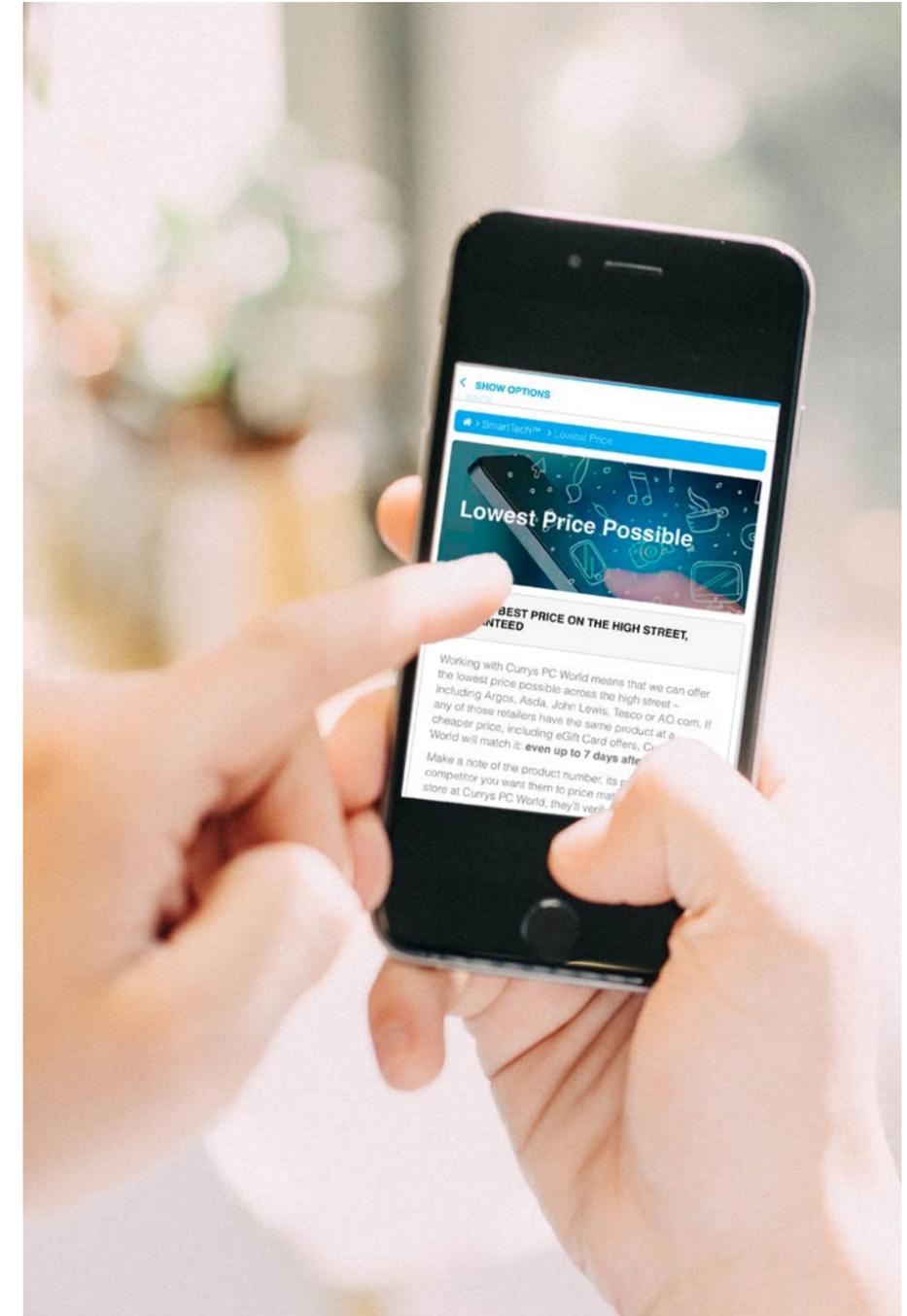


Good communication is just as stimulating as black coffee, and just as hard to sleep after.

Find a partner that will assist you throughout your communication and engagement journey, sharing communication tips, tools and best practices to ensure optimal awareness and usage.

Questions to ask your potential partner:

- What communication tools and techniques do you use with your clients to drive awareness and usage?
- Do you provide support in creating ongoing communication materials (e.g. posters, flyers, direct mailers or launch videos)? If so, are there any additional fees?





Reporting

As the expression goes, ‘actions speak louder than words,’ which means that in order to truly understand how your employees are engaging with your new benefits programme, it’s important to review their actions through data. However, it’s critical that the data and the reports provided by your benefits technology partner give you what you need to be able to understand and drive engagement.

I’ve learned this lesson the hard way by not requesting sample data reports as part of the selection process, and then ending up stuck with reports that leave me less than satisfied. For this reason, I recommend requesting sample reports and find out how much customisation of reports can happen in the future should you decide you need something specific to your needs.

Additionally, you’ll want to make sure those reports can show the ROI of your programmes, for instance, the amount your employees

are saving through a discounts programme equating to the cost of that programme, or showing higher engagement with a particular benefit than what you had seen with previous providers.

Questions to ask your potential partner:

- Will we have easy access to analytics, or will you have to do this for us?
- What are the generic reports the partner can provide?
- What report customisation do you offer, and can this be done in-house or do you need to do this for us?
- What support and guidance do you provide in reviewing reports to ensure optimal usage of the benefit?
- How will I be able to prove the ROI of my programme?



Support

A key part of any relationship or partnership is how you support one another. When it comes to benefits technology partners, this is critically important, since your employees will see them as an extension of your HR team and expect (and deserve!) the same level of support. An added benefit is that employees have a different team to go to with any questions around the benefits platform – such as trouble logging in – and it won't be your team!

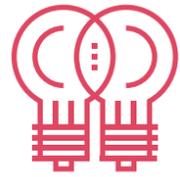
I find this so important as HR's time should be focussed on strategy and planning, rather than constant firefighting. Depending on your workforce, there will always be some

employees who won't be comfortable with technology and will need a bit more hand holding and support at all hours of the day. Finding a 24/7 employee support team is all the more important if you have employees in multiple time zones, too.

Take the time to understand upfront how your partner will (or won't) support your employees when they have questions or troubles using the new system, and what customer support standards they have in place to measure success to ensure that your employees are treated as you would treat them.

Questions to ask your potential partner:

- How do you handle employee queries relating to the benefit and the technology?
- What hours does your employee support services operate?
- What do you do with feedback received from employees?
- What does the company do with customer feedback or feature requests?



Innovation

The final criteria, and one that is often overlooked, is the benefit technology partner's approach to innovation. Great partners have plans for developing and scaling their technology and their business, which I find critically important because you want a company that will grow with you as the needs of your business and workforce change.



All providers should have a clear vision for short- and long-term product roadmaps. Are they thought leaders and trend setters, or do they follow the crowd? How does this fit into your needs and your short and long-term strategies and objectives?

See how innovation fits into their business, e.g. how much focus they put on product development and how they develop their product roadmap. Is it based on customer input, or just their own internal knowledge? You may even want to look for industry technology awards that your potential

partner has won. By asking these questions upfront, you minimise the risks of finding out a year or so down the road that they can no longer meet your needs, leaving you with no choice but to 'break up' with them.

Questions to ask your potential partner:

- Where does innovation and product development sit within your company?
- What is your approach to getting client input on your product roadmaps?
- How and when do you share information with clients on your product roadmaps? (Is it a weekly list of releases, or is there another area clients can go to for information on the product features?)
- How does your company mission and purpose align with your product road map?

Step 3: Create Your Request for Proposal (RFP)



The next step in the process is to fine tune your criteria list, turning it into something that will ultimately help you evaluate and select the right partner for your company and be the basis for your Request for Proposal (RFP), if you choose to use this method in your selection process. This is the document that you'll send to all potential partners, and use as a way to evaluate them against your criteria.

Keep in mind that this step should be done each time you go through a selection process, as your criteria and the weighting may change based on the individual programme, the timing of the selection or changes in your business or workforce.

Depending on how large or complex your business is, you may want to keep things simple and reach out directly to companies you've researched to start looking at potential partners, but regardless of whether or not you want to do an RFP, the concepts I discuss in this section is helpful to prepare you for the next steps.



Select your criteria

In the previous step I shared with you the 11 criteria that I have most often used in the selection process. I'm not saying that you should automatically use them all as you need to decide which are right for you and your company based on what factors you believe are most important for your review.

So by all means, start with my list, but then add and delete to it so that it meets your needs and only focus on the most important criteria that's right for your business.

Weight your criteria

The next thing to do with your criteria is to weight them, which is where you assign them heavier or lighter importance within your group of criteria. For example, customisation and branding may be extremely important to you (and your in-house Marketing

Team!) so you may weight this heavier. Or, communication may be less important as you have your own internal communication team that is responsible for developing communication materials, so you won't need to rely on a partner very much.



Bottom line, don't assume that they are all weighted the same, but take the time to discuss and determine their measures of importance.

Keep in mind that all criteria should add up to 100% at the end of the weighting exercise. One thing to keep in mind is that if a criteria is weighted less than around 5%, I would question whether it is important

enough to even be on your list. Whilst you may want to ask for information on it, it might not make sense to base your selection on this criteria so be sure to narrow your list to what's most important.



Prepare your RFP

Once you've selected your criteria and have agreed the weightings, this is what you can use to build your RFP.

Since this document can be key to the decision-making process, it's important to get it right.

Top Tips to Prepare your RFP

 <p>Make sure that all those involved in the selection process have reviewed and signed off on the RFP before it is sent out.</p>	 <p>Outline your selection criteria, making the point that information needs to be provided for all or they will not be considered.</p>
 <p>Clearly define the aims and objectives of the project, explaining how they link to the wider company and people strategies.</p>	 <p>Share information on your timelines and stress the importance of keeping to them.</p>
 <p>Share information on your company and your workforce.</p>	 <p>Ask for their accreditations, e.g. ISO or other security measures.</p>
 <p>Include guidance notes to ensure providers clearly understand your expectations, making it easier for them to complete the RFP, and for you during the selection process.</p>	 <p>Ask for references, clients of theirs that you will be able to speak with that are of a similar size to you, or in the same industry so that you can do peer research.</p>
 <p>Provide clear instructions on how the RFP should be submitted, e.g. which format, through email or another method.</p>	 <p>Ask for a sample contract so that you'll see exactly what you're buying into. Although your contract will most likely be bespoke to a certain extent, you can still get a good gauge of a provider based on their generic contract.</p>
 <p>Offer providers the opportunity to ask questions about the RFP, sharing answers with all providers to ensure they all are treated fairly and consistently.</p>	

Step 4: Select Your Finalists



Next up is selecting your finalists by creating a shortlist, which I recommend doing through scoring. Sometimes this can be quite straightforward, with reviewers consistently scoring them the same, and other times it can be quite challenging as scores will vary.

The key to gaining consistency is to ensure that all reviewers are clear beforehand on the expectations and requirements for each criteria, and are clear on the difference between the scores you select for your scoring system.

There are lots of different scoring systems, here is a five-point system that I often use:

5 points: Meets **all** of your requirements

4 points: Meets **almost all** of your requirements

3 points: Meets **many** of your requirements, but requires some compromises

2 points: Meets **some** of your requirements

1 point: Does **not** meet your requirements

My other tip to you regarding the selection process is to keep the focus on your criteria and remove the emotion. You have criteria to direct you, so don't let emotion take over.

The result of this step is to have a list of around three finalists, those that you will invite to the next step in the process to see a demonstration of their technology in action. Please note that you can have more than three finalists, but make sure that it is a manageable number as you will have to meet with them all, **and** make sure that it's only providers that you feel that they have what it takes should you select them. It's not fair to you or them to invite them to a selection meeting if you're not serious about them.

Step 5: Hold Meetings with Finalists



An important part of the selection process is when your internal project team gets together with your potential partners. This is where the technology and the partner should put their best foot forward to show you what they really can and cannot do.

I've done my fair share of these meetings, so let me share with you five tips to help you.



Agenda - Develop the agenda before the meeting and share it with the finalists so that they are prepared, and the meeting meets your needs. The most frustrating meetings are those where you get to the end, and you realise that you haven't covered what you need to make your decision.



Roles - It's important to go into the meeting with clarity on the roles of each member of your selection team. If not, the meeting can get a

bit out of hand and go over on time. I suggest having different members of my selection team lead the different parts of the discussion based on their expertise or their interests.



Provider attendees - If you really want a true picture of the provider, it's important that they invite the right people to the project team meeting. For example, the person who would be your account manager, the person managing implementation, and possibly someone responsible for design and communication so you can meet the people who you will be working with.



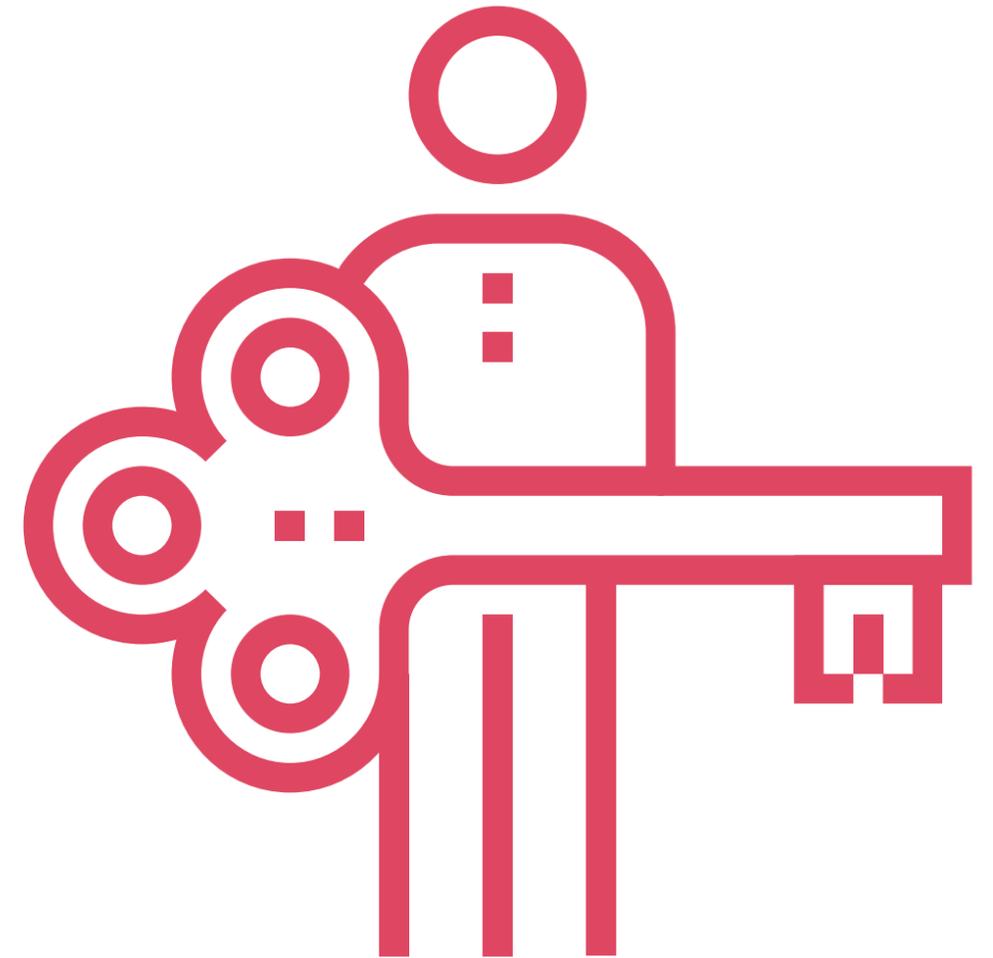
Demonstrations - A key part of the selection meeting is the demo, where each provider shows you exactly how their technology works. Give

them specific details as to what you are going to want to see, and then spend quality time on them during the meeting so that you don't have surprises later should you select them as a partner.



Ask the tough questions - And finally, make sure you ask what I call the 'tough questions,' the ones you hate asking, but you really need to. Things like, explain what happens when the system crashes, how do you handle an irate employee, why did you lose your last client? Put this list together, and then ask each provider these questions so that they all are put on the important 'hot seat.'

Step 6: Select Your Partner



Once you've completed the selection meetings, it's almost time to select that long-term partner. But I suggest a couple more small steps to get it right:



Take a peek behind the curtain: Remember the scene from the 'Wizard of Oz' when they peek behind the curtain and for the first time meet the real wizard? This is exactly what you may want to do with your potential partner, take a peek behind 'the curtain,' and take the time to go and visit them in their office. Here you'll be able to meet the people who will be serving your employees, and get a good feel for the business outside of their sales teams.



Contact references: And finally, it's important if you haven't done so already, to contact the references that were included in the RFP response. Have an honest conversation with them, drawing out both the good and bad so that you have a real-life example of this provider in action. And going back to a tip mentioned earlier, don't be afraid to ask them the tough questions, better to ask now than to have surprises later.



Giving the 'No'

When selecting your partner, remember that they 'won' over several others. It's good to respect the time that all providers have put into the selection process, and one way to show your respect for them is to go back to each of the providers you haven't chosen and give them feedback on what made you choose a different partner.

Conclusion

Let me end by saying that I know from experience that choosing a benefits technology partner can be a daunting and lengthy process, which is not always easy. But if you invest the time in it upfront you'll save time and money in the long run, especially since this is a decision that will affect your employees and their experience at work over and over again.

Keep in mind that you're not picking 'just a provider,' but rather a partner who will be there with you every step of the way, finding new opportunities to support and engage with your people and drive your business.

The best working relationships and partnerships are founded on mutual trust and a clear understanding of what to expect from both parties, so once

you select your partner make sure that you're both set up for success by laying a foundation for growth from the start.

I hope this eBook has taken some of the pain out of the selection process by mapping out key steps and key considerations to help you make this important decision.

If you have any questions on what to look for, or how Reward Gateway can help you with their benefits technology, then I encourage you to get in touch with them.



Debra Corey

Bestselling-author and founder of DebCo HR LTD.



Reward Gateway's engagement products in employee benefits, wellbeing, reward and recognition, communications and surveys and more are powered by a centralised hub tailored to your organisation, giving your employees better access to the engagement tools of the future.

If you're interested in learning more about any of Reward Gateway's engagement products to help connect, recognise and support your people, we'd love to help you get started.

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DebCo HR is committed to helping companies open the door to possibilities, exploring new and innovative ways to drive employee engagement to meet the needs of their workforce and their people.

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