Product Assessment / Selection

Product assessment and selection are performed during the Solution Analysis phase. The ultimate purpose of the Solution Analysis Phase is to provide the university with a solution recommendation that will address the current and future needs of students, faculty, and staff. A solution can be a software application, software as a service (SaaS), a custom-built solution, consulting services, hardware components, or a combination of these. The approach outlined in this document provides an overview of the steps and procedures used to determine which solution set will best meet the needs of the university and will comply with state procurement guidelines. The outcome of this process documents a solution recommendation. This methodology is not intended to provide detailed guidance for each step; it is intended to give the user an overview of the process and its steps. The methodology is accompanied by templates that teams can tailor to document their findings and criteria.

Assessment Approach

The product assessment approach involves the following actions:

**Identify Business Need**

This step documents the purpose and goals for the assessment, often to replace the current solution or to create a new solution. The Assessment team defines the business need by gathering information from customers, staff, governance groups, and other stakeholders. The business need can be documented in the **Project Charter** and is used to describe the overall purpose and goals of the project.

**Determine Requirements**

Document requirements for the solution and consider functional and technical requirements; security and accessibility policies; integration with other systems, including identity management; implementation; support models; and other needs as defined by the business need. Requirements should be prioritized and categorized and should identify “show-stoppers,” which are requirements that must be met for the solution to be successfully implemented; see the Requirements and Traceability template. Once requirements have been solicited, defined, and documented, they need to be approved by the appropriate authority, such as a customer steering committee or project sponsor.

**Identify Solution Options**

Complete benchmarking with other universities (including Educause data, surveys, and/or interviews), industry analysis (for example, Forrester, Gartner, IDC), identification of solutions in use on campus, and other research as needed. Using the results of this research, identify potential solutions that may meet the requirements. For vendor products, it is necessary to identify any additional assessment criteria, such as vendor business models, licensing, vendor SLAs, maintenance contracts, and timeline for solution implementation. In addition, consider other campus services that need to be involved in assessing the solution, such as the Information Security Office (ISO) for security and ITS for accessibility, identity and access management, infrastructure, and user support. In situations with a wide range or large number of potential solutions, use show-stoppers and high-priority requirements to narrow the options. At times, multiple products may need to be integrated for the overall solution. Assess the solutions and determine which are potential matches using functional, technical, and business model information. This information can be documented in the Research Summary.

Discussions and/or demonstrations with vendors to learn and understand their offerings, business model, and cost structures may be necessary. While general estimates of cost scales are acceptable, specific price quotes from vendors must be requested by Purchasing.

**Review Purchasing Options**

If the solution includes the use of vendor products, ITS staff will need to initiate discussions with ITS Administration to inform them of the potential solution options. ITS Administration works closely with Business and Financial Services (BFS) to ensure that purchasing policy is followed in the most efficient way. (BFS is made up of the Procurement and Payment organizations.) The purchasing process will vary depending upon product cost, type, and source. Please review the following as soon as it is determined that a purchase needs to be made, and direct any questions to ITS Administration (ITSadmin@austin.utexas.edu) to ensure timeliness and policy compliance.

If this is new software, then:

- End user creates a PURCHASE request using the REQ form system.
- End user assigns to Director for approval.
- Director assigns to ITS Admin for tracking.
- ITS Admin assigns to BFS for P.O. creation.

If this is for software maintenance or renewal, then:
End-user creates a PAYMENT request using the REQ form system OR submits a request to ITSAdmin@austin.utexas.edu with the following:
- Copy of invoice
- Account number to be charged
- Date goods/services received
- Maintenance, operations, & equipment (MO&E) line item for service plan spreadsheet

End-user assigns to Director for approval.
Director assigns to ITS Admin for tracking.
ITS Admin uploads payment documents for processing.

Else (not software at all):
End-user creates a PURCHASE request using the REQ form system.
End-user assigns to Director for approval.
Director assigns to ITS Admin for tracking.
ITS Admin assigns to BFS for P.O. creation.

If recently procured using an Exclusive Acquisition Justification (EAJ), copy, update and sign the EAJ. Work with ITS Admin on processing the EAJ. If procured through a competitive bid, work with ITS Admin and BFS on correct process. May want to pull in Business Contracts.

Submit EAJ or go through competitive bid process. Work with BFS for compliance to policy. Note that 3 bids are required for amounts between $15K and $50K; formal bids are required for >$50K.

Work with BFS and have a grand time with your Request for Proposal (RFP). Please let ITS Admin know this is going on.

Selection Approach

At this point, there should be an understanding of the solution options and the associated purchasing option for each potential solution. With that understanding, an evaluation of potential solutions should be documented using the Solution Evaluation Summary template. In the case of a competitive bid via DIR/DBITS, or a Request for Information (RFI), Proposal (RFP), or Quote (RFQ), the team should also define the evaluation process, including a core evaluation team, mandatory requirements, and scoring criteria. Scoring criteria should consider quality of response, cost, references, support options, and other components that distinguish alternatives and solutions.

Document the evaluation methodology or approach

The Solution Evaluation Summary template gives detailed guidance on steps to take and what to consider. The team will determine and document the best approach to determine the correct solution for this particular business problem.

Perform and document a detailed comparative analysis of solutions

To evaluate options, use product demonstrations, vendor responses, solicited user input, product documentation, product trial versions, and industry reviews. Analyze solutions against requirements in conjunction with purchasing procedures to determine which meet the requirements. Requirements evaluation may include consultation with other campus groups that can provide expertise in specific areas, such as security, accessibility, authentication, infrastructure, and user support.

Compare the total costs of implementation and of ownership

Consider the overall cost. Some products may have a low upfront cost but high maintenance or user training costs, while others may have a higher initial cost but lower maintenance and user support costs. The estimates should include:

1. Application costs such as build and/or configuration, customization, conversion, interface implementation, and on-going maintenance. This should include an evaluation of the skills required for these efforts and the associated training or hiring costs for staff;
2. Integration costs for changes and/or upgrades that would be required to on-campus systems that need to integrate with the proposed solution;
3. Licensing, including initial and on-going maintenance / subscription / support costs; It is recommended to consider at least 3 years;
4. Hardware and operating system or hosting costs;
5. User support, help desk, sustainment, and documentation; and/or
6. Training estimates for the product users, help desk, and support staff.

Decide
Using the evaluation criteria, determine the best solution for the university. Describe the technical and cost evaluation of the solutions, and also document the final recommendation. Review recommendation, and obtain approval by the appropriate authority, such as a customer steering committee or project sponsor.

**Procuring Solution**

Based on the purchasing options as detailed above, start the appropriate procurement process. In the case of a competitive bid via DIR/DBITS, or an RFI, RFP, or RFQ, work with the Purchasing team and the Business Contracts team to notify the chosen vendor that it has been selected and negotiate the contract. Initiate the definition of the vendor relationship management process that the team will have with the chosen vendor.

**Need more information?**

Contact the Methodology team at apps-methodology@utlists.utexas.edu in ITS Applications.