What to Look For in a Freelancer

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At some point you and your staff might find themselves with a project that cannot be done with the resources you have.

Perhaps the project needs a skill that you don't have. Or perhaps it's something as simple as everyone in your company already being committed to other projects and lacking the time to spare.

Hiring a freelancer can be a great way to proceed with the project. But if you've never hired one before, it can be scary.

This guide is here to help you make a better decision about hiring a freelancer. I'll be honest, the process still can be scary but my hope here is to give you enough knowledge so that you can make the best decision.

QUALITIES

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Across all industries and skills, there are specific qualities that separate great freelancers from crappy ones. These help get to the core at who the freelancer is and what they can do to help you.

Because in the end, freelancers are here to help you. Their business depends on it.

1. HAS THE TECHNICAL EXPERTISE YOU NEED

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The first quality you should look for in a great freelancer is that they have the technical expertise you need.

It makes sense, right?

If you need Ruby on Rails development, you'd hire someone who has experience with it.

If you need a mobile web designer, you'd hire someone who has done it before.

But there is a bit more to this quality.

A common problem when first hiring a freelancer is that you might want the "best in the world". If you can get them, that's great. But when someone is the best in the world, it's going to be that much harder to get to work with them.

As freelancers improve, they can become more selective with their clients. This is natural – they want the best experience for

themselves and their clients. One mechanism they use is their rate. All things considered, a more expensive freelancer will be a freelancer who is in more demand.

But you need to make sure you have the budget to hire them. Take a look at what kind of experiences and expertise you need. Not want, **need**.

You might find that you don't need the best in the world, just someone who is great.

And as you'll see in a minute, being the best in the world with a technical skill might not be the best fit for you.

2. COMPATIBILITY

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When you hire a freelancer, you're not hiring a person who you just throw work to and it magically gets done.

You're hiring a partner who is going to work with you and your company to achieve the results you need.

This work might involve going off and working independently, but it might also involve 1-on-1 discussions, team meetings, group training and other collaborative work.

> Increasingly, freelancers are being used to train and mentor regular staff so the staff can achieve better results them-selves.

Since a freelancer is going to work so closely with you, you'll want to find one who is compatible. Compatible with you, with your company, with your teams.

2. COMPATIBILITY

Compatibility will take many forms. Ask yourself these questions below to see if you can get an impression.

> Do they communicate well with you?

> ... with the management? (without going into technical jargon)

> ... with your team members?

> Does their personality fit in with your company culture?

> Are they flexible and willing to change to fit you better?

3. TRUST

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The third and perhaps hardest quality to evaluate a new free-lancer on is trustworthiness.

In a perfect world, this wouldn't be a problem because no one would do anything to break anyone's trust. Everyone would keep their word and do what they say they will.

But we both know in the real world this doesn't happen.

Try to evaluate the trustworthiness of the freelancer before you hire them or as soon as you can after hiring them. (Don't worry, I have a technique for this at the end of this guide).

This is why hiring the most technically skilled freelancer might not be the best option. One of my clients summarized this for me quite well:

3. TRUST

> We hired you to work on [project I had little technical skills with] not because you knew exactly what to do, but because we trusted you. We knew you'd deliver and work in our best interests. Learning [the technical skill] isn't as difficult as that trust.

There are a few ways to check the trustworthiness of a freelancer. In increasing order of effectiveness they are:

1. Just jump in and hope. (Not recommended)

2. Talk to the freelancer several times and build a relationship with them (this might not work for time-critical projects but it's a good long-term strategy).

3. Ask people you know or past clients about the freelancer, just like how you would check the references of a prospective employee. Be aware that due to contractual obliga-

tions and NDAs freelancers might not be able to reveal or talk about their past clients.

4. Start a trial project to test the working relationship.

TEST TRUST WITH THE TRIAL PROJECT

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I'll admit, the trial project is my favorite and preferred tech-nique for testing the working relationship between a freelancer and client. (You can be sure that the freelancer is also evaluating you as a client).

A trial project is simple and works exactly how it sounds.

Instead of giving your freelancer the main project you're hiring them for and hoping it goes well, you start with a trial project. This trial project is similar to your main project, but is different in several ways:

> **It's smaller.** This lets the project start and end quicker which gives you feedback much faster.
> **It's focused.** Instead of building everything in your main project, the trial project focuses on one part from begin-ning to end.

> **Limited financial risk.** With a smaller budget and scope, your financial risk is limited.

> **Easy out.** If you aren't a good fit, then an easy exit clause can be used to end the trial project.

When done correctly, a trial project looks like a regular project but that's been compressed. You have the discovery process at the beginning, reviewing options, implementation of an option, review of the implementation, and finishing everything up for a release at the end.

This lets you see how a freelancer works, but with limited risk to you. Worst case everything goes wrong and you only lose the week or so you spent on the trial project, instead of the months or years it might take if you brought them into your main project.

(In fact, you might enjoy the trial project so much that you can use it as the base and continue your main project in that manner. Small, focused projects are easier to manage and can build up to your main project. This is the core of many agile development processes.)

NOW GET STARTED

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I hope this gave you more knowledge about what you need to look for in a freelancer. Remember, you need a balance of the qualities to make your experience successful:

1. Technical skills to do what you need
2. Compatibility with you, your company, and your teams
3. Trustworthiness

Best of luck to you! If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me using the methods below.

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Eric Davis runs Little Stream Software, a one-man Ruby on Rails and web development consultancy. Focusing on

software and marketing companies, it has developed various software projects over the years. He has experienced a wide range of working environments from large governmental departments, to one-person startups, to teams built entirely with freelancers. For more information and advice about hiring a freelancer (or to hire him to help you), contact edavis@littlestreamsoftware.com.