



A BUYER'S GUIDE • 2026

THE BUSINESS OWNER'S GUIDE TO

Hiring an AI Implementation Partner

15 questions to ask — and the **tells** to watch for — before you sign an AI contract.

15 QUESTIONS

RED FLAGS

SCORECARD

ENGINEEREDAGENTS.AI

Your translator for every sales call: the questions, the patterns, and a 60-second scorecard.

START HERE

Thousands of “AI experts” appeared overnight.

Many of them know how to prompt ChatGPT. Very few know how to improve a business. The gap between those two things can cost you tens of thousands of dollars, months of wasted time, and a team that no longer trusts the next “transformation.”

The technology isn’t the hard part anymore — the same handful of models is available to everyone. What separates a system that quietly runs your operation from one you abandon in three months is the person who designs it, connects it to your real workflows, and stays accountable when something breaks.

This guide hands you the questions, the patterns, and a scorecard to tell the difference — before you sign anything or hand over a single password.

HOW TO USE IT

If you can’t yet tell who knows what they’re doing, this guide is your translator. Use it on every call.

You're not actually buying AI.

Most owners think they're buying artificial intelligence. They're not. They're buying **outcomes** — and AI is just the tool that might deliver them:

- › Hours given back to you and your team
- › Faster, more consistent processes
- › Lower operating cost
- › A better customer experience
- › More qualified leads handled
- › Sharper, faster decisions

Keep this test in your back pocket: if a consultant talks more about the AI than about **your business outcomes, you're already talking to the wrong person.**

THE REFRAME THAT PROTECTS YOU

Who you're actually talking to

“AI implementor” means five very different things. Knowing which one is across the table tells you where their blind spots are.

The freelancer / prompt specialist

STRENGTH Fast and cheap for a single, contained task.

RISK No plan for integration, security, maintenance, or what happens when they disappear.

The dev shop that pivoted to “AI”

STRENGTH Can genuinely build and connect software.

RISK Treats AI like any other feature — may miss where models fail, drift, or need a human in the loop.

The brand-new “AI agency”

STRENGTH Hungry, current, fluent in the latest tools.

RISK Often a thin layer over someone else's product, with no track record and no answer for “what happens in six months.”

The large consultancy

STRENGTH Process, polish, and people.

RISK Priced for the enterprise, slow, and prone to selling you a strategy deck instead of a working system.

The platform / product company

STRENGTH The system already exists, is maintained, and improves over time.

RISK Only worth it if it fits how you work — make them prove it on your real process, not a demo.

None is automatically right or wrong. The 15 questions on the next pages work on all five.

15 questions — and what the answers reveal

Ask them roughly in this order. The early ones matter most, because they show whether the person leads with your problem or their product.

BEFORE THEY PITCH A SINGLE TOOL

1 “Before we talk tools — what would you look at first in my business, and why?”

STRONG Asks about your processes, where your time goes, and what’s costing you money. Understands the work before naming a tool.

WEAK Immediately names a product — “we’d build you a GPT chatbot.” Selling inventory, not solving a problem.

2 “What’s your method for finding the highest-ROI opportunities before you recommend anything?”

STRONG A repeatable diagnostic — time audit, workflow mapping, bottleneck analysis. They start with waste, not with software.

WEAK The “method” is a software demo. No method, just a product they’re hoping fits.

3 “Where would you tell me not to use AI — and what won’t it solve?”

STRONG Clear opinions: high-stakes judgment calls, human relationships, processes too messy to automate yet.

WEAK “AI can do anything.” Nobody who has actually shipped this believes that.

OUTCOMES & PROOF

4 “How will you measure success?”

STRONG “We set baseline numbers before we start and track them against a metric you choose.”

WEAK “We’ll know it’s working when the team likes it.” If success isn’t measurable, it isn’t real.

5 “Show me measurable results from past clients.”

STRONG “Cut proposal creation time by 70%.” “Removed 12 hours of weekly data entry.” Real numbers.

WEAK “We helped them become more innovative.” Innovation isn’t a KPI.

6 “How long until we see ROI?”

STRONG “Most clients see measurable gains in 30–90 days,” with what drives the timeline.

WEAK “This is a long-term transformation.” Often a translation for: they don’t know.

7 “What’s the smallest useful version we could test in 30 days?”

STRONG Eagerly scopes a small, real proof on one painful process. Wants to earn the bigger project.

WEAK Insists on a long contract and a big build before you’ve seen anything work.

WHEN IT BREAKS & WHO’S ACCOUNTABLE

8 “When the AI gets something wrong — and it will — who catches it, and how?”

STRONG Describes review steps, confidence thresholds, approval gates for risky actions, logs, alerts. Designs for being wrong.

WEAK “It’s very accurate” or “it learns.” A dodge, not a safety net.

9 “What happens if your recommendations don’t work?”

STRONG “We adjust fast and own the outcome.” Has skin in the game.

WEAK “No implementation is guaranteed,” used to wave off accountability. That tells you something.

10 “What are the real risks here?”

STRONG Names them plainly — data quality, adoption, integration, workflow redesign — and how they’re managed.

WEAK Pretends there aren’t any. Confidence isn’t pretending risk doesn’t exist.

OWNERSHIP, SYSTEMS & YOUR PEOPLE

11 “When this is done, who owns the accounts, data, and system — and can we run it without you?”

STRONG You own everything; accounts in your name; data exportable; “yes, you can run it without us.” Comfortable being replaceable.

WEAK “Most clients prefer to keep us involved.” Dependency designed in is not a partnership.

12 “What documentation do we receive?”

STRONG SOPs, process maps, training guides, system docs — handed to you. Systems that survive after they leave.

WEAK “We handle all that for our clients.” Dependency is not a strategy.

13 “How will our team be trained and brought along?”

STRONG Has an adoption and training plan that exists before the build starts. Knows this is where projects die.

WEAK No plan — assumes people will just use it. Technology rarely fails; adoption does.

INTEGRATION

14 “What needs to integrate, and where are the integration risks?”

STRONG Can explain data flow, integration points, dependencies, and risks in plain language.

WEAK “We’ll figure that out later.” AI never operates in a vacuum.

THE ALL-IN PICTURE

15 “What does this cost every month after launch — and how do you stay current?”

STRONG Breaks out their fee, usage/API costs, and tools; and stays current through real testing and research.

WEAK Silent on ongoing cost; stays current by “watching YouTube.” Both will cost you later.

THE ONE QUESTION THAT SORTS THEM

If you only ask one thing

“Show me exactly how you’ll identify opportunities before you recommend a solution.”

THE QUESTION THAT SEPARATES METHOD FROM DEMO

The best partners have a repeatable method and walk you through it without hesitation. The rest have a software demo. If the answer is a screen-share of a tool instead of a diagnostic process, you have your answer.

The real thing vs. the pretender

After two or three conversations the signals stack up. Here's what to watch on both sides.

Knows what they're doing	Probably doesn't
✓ Talks about your processes — not prompts, models, or jargon	✗ Leads with ChatGPT instead of your business problem
✓ Asks more questions than they answer; diagnoses before prescribing	✗ Promises massive results with no analysis behind them
✓ Has firm opinions on where AI shouldn't go	✗ Can't explain a clear methodology or any way it could fail
✓ Designs for the AI being wrong — review, approvals, logs	✗ Never asks about your existing workflows or integration
✓ Measures everything: hours saved, cost cut, errors caught	✗ Every problem has the same one-tool answer
✓ Has a real change-management and training plan	✗ Talks about replacing employees rather than leveraging them
✓ Hands over documentation so the system survives them	✗ Keeps your accounts and data under their login; avoids accountability
✓ Challenges your assumptions instead of agreeing with everything	✗ The deliverable is mostly strategy slides, not a working system

THE PATTERN UNDER ALL OF IT

Technology rarely fails. Adoption does. The partner who plans for your people, not just your software, is the one who delivers.

What a good partner tells you up front

A good partner volunteers the uncomfortable truths. A weak one stays quiet on the things that cost you later — and the silence is the sale.

A GOOD PARTNER VOLUNTEERS

The uncomfortable truths

- › There are parts of your business where AI is the wrong tool.
- › The first version will be small and unglamorous.
- › It costs something every month to run.
- › You'll still want a human reviewing anything high-stakes.
- › It needs upkeep, because the tools it connects to keep changing.

None of that is bad news — it's the sound of someone who has actually done this.

A WEAK ONE STAYS QUIET ON

The things that cost you later

- › The recurring usage bill that wasn't in the build quote.
- › That "fully autonomous" means "makes mistakes nobody is watching."
- › That your accounts and data are locked inside their tooling.
- › That the dazzling demo was rehearsed and the real thing is rougher.
- › That once it's built, keeping it alive becomes your problem.

Silence on these isn't an oversight — it's the sale.

What to share — and what to hold back

You get better partners, and better pricing, when you share the right things and hold back the rest.

TELL THEM

Be generous here

- › Your real frustrations, in your own words — the work that eats your week.
- › Where your time actually goes, and what it's costing you.
- › What you've already tried and why it didn't stick.
- › Your honest budget range, timeline, and growth goals.
- › The messy truth about your data and processes — don't tidy it up.
- › The tools you already use and don't want to give up.
- › Who on your team can actually be involved.

DON'T LEAD WITH

Hold these back

- › Don't open with "we want AI." Say "we want to cut proposal time" and let them decide whether AI is even the answer.
- › Don't prescribe the solution. Describe the problem and watch how responsibly they prescribe.
- › Don't hand over passwords or admin access before a signed agreement and a clear scope.
- › Don't pretend your data is clean. A plan built on a fantasy breaks on contact with reality.
- › Don't signal desperation or that you'll "buy anything." It anchors the price up and the rigor down.

The questions a good implementor asks you

This is the fastest read in the whole process. A partner who knows what they're doing interviews you as hard as you interview them. If they don't ask some version of these, walk.

IF THEY'RE GOOD, THEY'LL ASK...

- ? What does a normal week actually look like?
- ? Where do things fall through the cracks today?
- ? How much of this is duplicate entry, spreadsheets, copy-paste, repeat messages?
- ? If this works, what does it free you up to do?
- ? What would make you trust an automated system — and what would make you switch it off?

An implementor who only talks about their technology, and never gets curious about your operation, will build something that fits their toolkit instead of your company.

The scorecard

After your conversations, rate each one from 1 (not at all) to 5 (absolutely). The gut feeling you're tempted to ignore is usually right.

Did they...	1 – 5
Lead with your problem before their product?	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Have a repeatable method for finding the highest-ROI opportunities?	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Have clear opinions on where not to use AI?	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Explain what happens when the AI is wrong?	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Own the outcome if it underperforms?	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Confirm you own the accounts, data, and system?	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Hand over documentation and a training plan?	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Give you the all-in monthly cost without flinching?	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Tie success to a number you actually care about?	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Ask sharp questions about your business?	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

READING YOUR SCORE

40–50: a serious partner — move forward. **30–39:** promising — press on the low scores before signing.

Under 30: keep looking. You'll pay for the gaps later.

IF YOU REMEMBER ONE THING

The mistake that sinks most AI projects

Buying a tool when the real problem is a broken process.

AI is an amplifier. Point it at a clean, well-understood process and it multiplies your output. Point it at a messy, undefined one and it just makes the mess happen faster — with less visibility into why. The best partners know this, which is why they ask about your work before they reach for the technology. They don't start with software. They start with waste.

Your business is a connected system — **leadership, finance, marketing, sales, operations, people, and technology** all feed each other. Good AI respects that whole picture and strengthens it. A bolted-on gadget that ignores it tends to break something quietly somewhere else. Choose the partner who sees the whole business, not just the part they want to sell you.

They don't start with software. They start with waste.

THE ONE LINE TO REMEMBER

FROM ENGINEERED AGENTS AI

We wrote this guide to be used against us, too.

Run every question on these pages on any implementor you talk to — including us. If we can't answer them straight, we haven't earned your business. We build AI agent systems that take real work off your plate across the whole operation, and we'd rather you choose us with your eyes open than on a polished promise.

Nic Davirro

Founder, Engineered Agents AI

Your next step: a free AI Opportunity Assessment

We'll look at your operation and identify:

- › Your biggest switching costs and tool sprawl
- › Hidden productivity losses across the team
- › The highest-ROI automation opportunities
- › Potential time savings, department by department

No jargon. No software demo. Just measurable business opportunities.

WEB

engineeredagents.ai

EMAIL

nic@engineeredagents.ai

PHONE

614-602-6555