



# IMPORTANT QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE SELECTING A MATERIAL HANDLING INTEGRATOR

**Integrators come in all shapes and sizes, with a wide variance in ability, cost, and quality. When considering an Integrator for distribution center design, concepting/engineering to optimize throughput, storage solutions, or automation implementation/integration, it is critical to select the right partner. Start by asking the following questions:**

**What is your vision for the project?** Whether an Integrator is needed to work on a new design or to execute an existing design, it is critical that they understand the goals and objectives. How will the components work together, what processes will be supported, and what are the end expectations for the project and the post-project operation? A strong Integrator will offer input and suggestions while acting as a second set of eyes to identify potential gaps or issues early on in the process.

**What is the experience level of the Integrator partner?** Have they worked in your industry? Have they completed projects similar in size and scope? Do they understand the different approaches for greenfield projects versus retrofits? Can they keep you operational during a retrofit? Are they experienced with the processes, equipment, and technology involved, such as:

- Pick-to-Light/Voice
- Goods to Person
- AS/RS
- AVG/GV
- Conveyor
- Sortation
- Rack
- Shelving/Storage
- Carousels
- Packing & Automation
- Print & Apply

Ask prospective Integrators for multiple examples of their work that is similar in size and scope. These are the key clients to speak with regarding the Integrator's quality of work.

**Does your prospective Integrator have a client list with repeat engagements?** An Integrator that delivers value and a cost-effective ROI will be called back for multiple projects. This is a strong indicator of quality of work, reliability, and accountability. Ask the Integrator for examples of clients where they have been involved in multiple projects.

During reference checks, ask what prompted the Integrator re-engagement. If an Integrator is unable to provide a list of repeat clients, consider this a red flag.

**Do they represent multiple manufacturers?** An Integrator that has exclusive arrangements with equipment manufacturers will typically build solutions around the manufacturer's product lines and equipment regardless of what is best for the customer. This creates a conflict of interest and may not result in the best solution.

An Integrator who can source, procure, and install a broad range of equipment provides customers

with access to more design options and multiple lead time options, resulting in design and delivery of the most cost-effective and timely solution for your operation.

**Do they provide turnkey project management?** On a complex project, look for a single source with full responsibility for managing all project details including but not limited to:

- Procurement
- Delivery/Installation
- Subcontractors
- Import Duties/Tariffs Documents
- Permitting
- Electrical/Air
- Technical Integration
- Physical Integration

**Is the Integrator able to be flexible and adjust when needed?** Even the simplest material handling, automation, and storage solution projects are complex engagements with many moving parts. The Integrator can do their part perfectly and things can still go wrong. It is inevitable that some level of adjustment will be needed during the process. What happens next is what makes or breaks the relationship.

Does the Integrator have a formal process for issue tracking and resolution? Will they be there when something goes wrong? Can they focus on resolving the problem without pointing fingers? During reference checks, specifically ask about problems and issue resolution.

**Does the Integrator have the fiscal capacity for your project?** Material handling projects often involve a significant investment. An Integrator that is not fiscally responsible can create all kinds of issues, from limiting the list of vendors/subcontractors who will work with them, to post-project nightmares such as mechanic's liens on buildings or equipment. The impact can be tremendous. Ask for financial references. Run a credit report. Ask to see company financials. How do they pay vendors/subcontractors? Will they maintain project funds in a separate bucket versus commingling with other projects? Do they carry sufficient insurance coverage for your project? It is imperative to screen each potential Integrator in advance.

**Do they understand your financial needs?** Whether a fixed bid or an open-book partnership, building in incentives or penalties based on a timeline or budget, or a commitment to the return on investment or throughput of a specific system, the Integrator should be willing and able to build the proposal and pricing around what is most important to the client.

The right Integrator will listen carefully, ask for input prior to structuring the proposal, and should deliver a proposal reflecting what is most important to you. The proposal should incentivize all parties to meet the requirements and factors that will result in the success of the project. Final payment should only be due once the punch list is completed and all issues resolved.

**Does the company culture of the Integrator align with your company culture?** How formal or informal are they? Is there access to their senior leadership if/when necessary? At the end of the day, it is important to feel good about the working relationship and the team involved in your project.

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