



How to Choose the Right Software Development Agency

A Guide for Nonprofit Organizations



My team is ready to build a web app. Now what?

When you decide to create a web application, the first question is always going to be, “How do we build the damn thing?” For some organizations, the answer is easy. If you have a robust internal team deep with software development talent, you’ll probably have the bandwidth internally to get the job done.

However, many nonprofits have leaner IT teams and a whole lot of stakeholders with opinions on how the finished web app should appear and perform. If you don’t have the internal resources to build what you envision, it’s time to look elsewhere.

Choosing the right agency is a tall task. Google “software development agency for nonprofits” and you’ll receive a nearly endless list of what seem like serviceable options. But it’s important that you don’t just pick any agency — you need to find the *right* agency.



Define the *Right* Agency. What Should I Be Looking For?

The right agency does more than just develop a functional web app for you; they act like an extension of your own team. We believe that an excellent agency should deliver at least three things (beyond serviceable code):

1. First and foremost, they will achieve great results.

A functional web app is the end goal. Plenty of agencies will deliver a functional application. But is that your only standard? A good agency will understand your expectations and meet them. This means they guide your process, whether that's by determining a realistic scope of work that stays within your budget, or creating a detailed timeline that ensures you understand tasks, dependencies, and deliverables.

2. Second, the right agency creates a great experience.

At the end of the day, if your app functions and meets your expectations, you could consider that a win. However, it's not a short process, so wouldn't you prefer to enjoy the journey of working together on a web application?

The right agency can make the process painless by ensuring great communication and alignment on goals. Whatever your communication style is, there's an agency that can adapt and work with it. Instead of settling for a less-than-stellar work experience, find an agency that makes the process collaborative and — dare we say — enjoyable.

3. Third, the right agency hands you the keys to your project with a path in place for future success.

Even after the application is completed, the project isn't quite over. That's because your team needs to maintain the application the agency has built. Software is like a garden — it requires upkeep to thrive. In a garden, you pull weeds so they don't strangle your beautiful flowers. In your application, you fix bugs and glitches, and make sure everything stays up-to-date, otherwise it will stop being functional for your user.

It's important to think of the big picture at the beginning of your search process. Not every agency will align with your short-term and long-term goals. Make sure you have a good handle on what's essential for your team as you begin searching. This will help you identify the right agencies that do align with what you hope to accomplish during the app development and after final delivery.

Challenges to Expect in the Search Process

Sussing out which agency is the best for your unique job can feel like an insurmountable task. The search process is a challenge — and nonprofits have a unique perspective and infrastructure that

can add layers of complexity to the task. Be prepared to focus on streamlining internal communication, making realistic long-term plans, and thinking critically about your mission and end users as you encounter the following challenges during the search process:

Nonprofits often have a lot of key stakeholders, and searching for the right development agency requires buy-in from them. For a lean startup, this might be the founder and a tech lead. For nonprofits, you'll likely include leadership from multiple departments, the IT team, the program manager... and maybe even external folks. Identifying them is the first challenge. The second challenge is wrangling all of the ideas and opinions about the app itself into *something* — an elevator pitch, a list of features, a clear idea of the end goal — that can be articulated to the agencies you meet with.

We recommend you huddle up with your team, and boil your project down into a series of increasingly concise statements:

- First, draft a longer narrative that includes details about the scope, users, and end goal. The *airplane pitch* should help you give key internal stakeholders all the pertinent information they need to say yes to your project (hopefully well before you start searching for an agency).
- Then, create a brief write-up that quickly illustrates your ideas without going heavy into the details. This exercise is not only helpful for other tangential stakeholders and interested parties, but also to make sure you know your project well enough to simplify it in a coherent way.

- Finally, condense the information into a one-liner that gets the key point and ideal outcomes of the project across in one sentence or less.

This exercise will get your team aligned on the intended purpose and outcomes of your web application.

RFPs can make the search process opaque and confusing.

Many nonprofits are required to use a request-for-proposal (RFP) process, especially if they are making use of public sector funding. This makes the search process less transparent. Instead of interviewing potential partners and asking questions that are *actually important to your work process and end goals*, you'll sift through elaborate proposals based on specific, pre-defined parameters.

RFPs are common for nonprofits when hiring vendors, and there may not be any way you can avoid them. Taking pains to carefully articulate your project's goals and thoroughly detail your desired requirements in a development partner can help, but it's hard to find the right-fit partner by sifting through stacks of paper.

Funding can be an obstacle. Nonprofits often rely on funding from grants or donations, which comes with particularities. Funds may be designated for use on specific projects or initiatives. Some grants are one-time funds, others are ongoing or recurring. You may have no control over how you get the funds, but try to plan for how you will use them. A cyclical budget will better support your long-term needs because...

Apps require long-term maintenance beyond the initial vendor engagement. After your app is launched, you'll need to maintain

it over time. If you don't have the continued funding to do so, or your development agency isn't available for ongoing support, you'll end up with an app that doesn't serve your users or end goals well over time.

Consider this scenario: You've spent a full calendar year developing a software application, and it's launched to your users. Everything goes well for the first six months, but suddenly, a specific browser update renders an essential feature useless. To get it fixed, you could re-engage the original agency, but only if they have the availability. Otherwise, you'll be scrambling to find a developer or another agency that can assist. Avoid this scramble by planning and budgeting for long-term maintenance.

Mission alignment is critical to find the right partner. For mission-driven organizations, it's vital that you work with an agency that clearly understands and believes in what you are trying to accomplish. We aren't recommending that you immediately dismiss a serviceable vendor because they have a slightly different political affiliation, but values matter when the app they are building is designed to further your cause. Publicly available information as well as direct conversations will help you decide if the team understands and cares about your mission and can align their work accordingly.

For example: if you're a rails-to-trails nonprofit that advocates for multi-use pathways and bike-friendly commuting routes, hiring an agency that specializes in the automotive industry doesn't make a ton of sense. It's not that they can't do the job, necessarily, but their mindset might make it hard to grasp the nuances of what you're trying to accomplish.

These challenges make it easy to get stuck in a rut before you even get started. However, the search process will shed light on potential solutions as you research and interact with potential agency partners.

How to Keep the Project Moving Forward

All of these factors means your search process will include extensive research and internal discussions. It's easy to spin your wheels in the research phase without making any forward progress.

Instead of compiling an endless list of agencies, take a step back and make a few big picture decisions. These first few choices you make will narrow down your search extensively.

Choose Your Tech Stack First

Development agencies sort themselves by their tech ecosystem. Choosing your tech stack first has one obvious benefit: it narrows your search immediately. Plus, the tech stack you choose has long term implications for your team and your budget. Remember, you'll be the ones maintaining your app (unless you choose to have an agency on retainer). This means you should either plan ahead and choose a tech stack your internal team can work with, or plan to commit additional budget for hiring a full-time programmer or continuing your agency relationship for the long haul.

Yes, it's the first big decision, but it doesn't have to be a hard one. Choosing your tech stack can be quite simple. To start, audit your

internal capabilities to see if one immediately stands out.

Existing IT infrastructure, programmer experience, or other custom software that you have can point you toward a tech stack that makes sense.

Stuck on tech stack?

If you can't make up your mind, choose Laravel, an open-source PHP framework. PHP developers tend to be more affordable than those working in other tech stacks, and the ubiquity of WordPress (which is written in PHP) means there is a huge number of hobbyist-level PHP developers in just about every community. WordPress acts as a sort of "minor leagues" for Laravel, so if you can find a couple of really smart people in the WordPress world, they might be able to learn Laravel and become your development team. Most other tech stacks have no such training ground to speak of. For these reasons and more, it's easier to stand up an internal development team in Laravel than in any other tech stack.

Vet Agencies for Services Beyond App Development

Beyond building your app, learn more about the ancillary services you'll need from an agency. Design, DevOps, and ongoing maintenance are all services you should explore. If you don't ask agencies about this, you may find yourself having to hire another

vendor down the road, so it's best to make a decision now about which additional services you'll need.

Your app will certainly need some form of design, so make sure you know who is going to handle it. Some agencies provide this service, and some don't, so it's important to find out what an agency offers before you make a decision. Same goes for DevOps — some shops can handle complex infrastructure needs, and others can't. If you expect your app will receive extremely heavy traffic, experience giant spikes in load, or for any other reason require highly-customized infrastructure, you should make sure the agency you're hiring has DevOps capabilities.



Where Do I Start? How Can I Find and Evaluate Agencies?

Being aware of the challenges and making those first choices are the first steps on the path to a successful app development project. Now, it's time to begin your search process.

First, ask your coworkers and other industry peers for recommendations. If you hear the same name come up repeatedly, it's likely that the agency does good work, so add them to your list for consideration.

Next, since you've already chosen a tech stack, run specific searches for agencies who use your desired set of tools. Compare their case studies and previous projects to your project size, scope, and end goals.

These steps alone should give you a sizable list to start from.

However, finding an agency is also a bit like dating. There's luck, timing, and chemistry involved. And much like dating, once you find that ideal partner, you shouldn't keep looking for someone

else. Here are four important factors in choosing who to work with, and three that might seem important, but aren't:

Factors that Really Matter

1. How They Communicate

Like in any healthy relationship, good communication is key. You are looking for a development agency, not just a bunch of programmers. Good agencies know how to communicate effectively with their clients. Details like how they talk to your team, break down detailed concepts, and deliver feedback can make or break your experience and your end result.

Do they helpfully explain their processes? Or does it seem like the potentially complicated parts are glossed over? That can be a bad sign.

Trust your instincts on this one — and take an agency at face value. Not everyone is a natural-born communicator, but it *is* important to be on the same page about your communication expectations. As a nonprofit, your skill set is very different from that of a software agency. The way you explain your project might not be the same as the way they understand the same concepts.

Fundamental misunderstandings can backfire in a big way later down the road. If you feel like you aren't being listened to, or your ideas are dismissed quickly, don't hesitate to move on.

2. Process and Client Experience

To find the right fit, ensure that you fully understand the ins and outs of an agency's project management process. If you prefer

highly collaborative work, be sure to ask how they incorporate your team into the project. If you prefer to be more hands-off, find out how they will keep you updated without requiring heavy time and effort from your team.

Additionally, learn how they handle feedback. Your team conceived of the idea for a web app, but it's the agency's job to turn that into a tangible product. In between the concept and completion, there's a journey that requires you to weigh in. Learning about their process for receiving and incorporating your feedback will help you understand if *their* work style is a good fit for *your* work style.

It's normal for agencies to have some number of independent contractors mixed in with their full-time staff. However, it's important that the company isn't all temps and 1099 contractors, or merely an on-shore shell company brokering off-shore labor. You want to work with a company that is invested in its employees, so they will become invested in your project. Make sure to ask each agency you consider about the composition of their team, how many of their employees are W2 vs. 1099, and where they live.

3. Quality of Previous Work

Any agency worth their salt will have references. If you haven't already been referred by or talked with past or current customers, now is the time. You'll get first-hand information about what it's like to work together.

Learning about the quality of past work isn't just about awards and headlines. Find examples of projects they've worked on — these can tell you how enmeshed an organization is in a particular

industry or niche. This can tell you if they are a good fit, both for your project and for your mission. For instance, if you're in charge of a project for an ecological organization: an agency that does pro bono work for a local environmental group likely has a good understanding of the typical use cases for an app like yours.

4. Pricing

Last, but not least: the most obvious factor. Pricing can be a non-starter if your full budget can't cover the scope of your project. Ask every agency you consider about the price of their typical project as early as you can, to avoid wasting time.

You'll also need to understand how the agency prices its projects and bills for its work. Some agencies offer a fixed price (or a fixed range) per project, others bill *time-and-materials* (they bill you for the time they spend), and still others provide a value-based price. Make sure the agency you're considering handles pricing and billing in a way that's compatible with the way your organization functions.

Fully understanding the pricing and technical aspects of project management is important, particularly if you have restrictions like RFPs or grants with funding requirements.

Factors that Don't Matter That Much

1. Awards

Some agencies go out of their way to seek awards and tangible accolades, while others don't. What wins awards isn't always what makes clients happy, so you should give very little consideration to whether or not an agency lists awards on its website.

2. Showstopping Proposals

The same idea applies to proposals: showy, meticulously-designed proposals are a nice touch, but they aren't at all predictive of a successful engagement or a good product. Unless a proposal is the cherry-on-top of an already great fit, don't let a polished presentation deter you from asking the right questions.

3. Specific Experience in Your Vertical

You want an agency that understands your industry. And, as we've already mentioned before, there's a benefit to finding an agency that's aligned with your mission — one that shares your values.

However, in the end, the *most* important alignment is that the agency you work with has experience with projects of a similar scope and functionality. You will always be the subject matter expert for your industry, your audience, and the goals of your project. Find an agency who will help you synthesize these into an application.

These factors can help you better understand what you need from an agency. Knowing what is most important to your team is half the battle. Hiring an agency with an impressive track record, dozens of awards, and an extremely innovative team means nothing if your work styles clash horribly. With that in mind, start reaching out to agencies and get ready to make more decisions.



How Do I Get the Information I Need to *Make* a Decision?

Schedule Interviews

Once you've sourced a list of agencies and done the initial research, it's time to have a conversation. The best way to do this is by interviewing rounds of three to four agencies at a time.

Up to four agencies is manageable in a single work week — and this ensures you won't have completely forgotten about an awesome conversation with agency #1 when you finally get around to meeting with agency #4. Recency bias can make the presentation that's freshest in your mind stand out the most, so hosting interviews in fairly quick succession helps you compare more accurately.

That said, don't schedule all four interviews in one day. Too many interviews, and especially back-to-back conversations, will lead you to confuse agencies with each other, or sit and stare at your screen with your eyes glazed over as you go on hour three of hearing about web development — and that's not productive for anyone.

Remain Organized and Thorough When Preparing for and Conducting Interviews

It's the agency's job to sell you on their services. It's your team's job to show up to the interview prepared to ask the right questions so you can determine whether they are the right fit.

Get started by preparing a very brief introduction that covers your organization, team, mission, and vertical. This lets the agency know what kind of information will be most relevant to your team.

It's also valuable to create an agenda, including all the questions you plan to ask. First, this ensures you remember all your detailed questions. Second, it guarantees that you'll be vetting each agency against the same criteria.

Once your agenda is set, do a bit more detailed research. Of course, visit each agency's website, browse their services page and read a case study or two. Peruse their social media accounts. Ask a few colleagues or industry peers if they've heard anything positive (or negative) about them. Any information you find can be helpful — even 15 minutes of light research can get you the relevant information you need, while raising a few questions. Perhaps you'll find a recent project with a similar end goal to ask about, or you'll notice a new technical blog post about a tool that could be helpful for your nonprofit.

That agenda you prepped earlier will be a useful tool in these interviews — rely on it to help you stay on task. However, make sure to leave a bit of time for tangential discussion. You may be spending quite a bit of time with these folks in the near future, so it's important that you get a sense of how you mesh with them interpersonally.

Questions to Ask

First, ask for their elevator pitch. This sets the tone for the interview. You can expect to learn some basics about their work style, and get a high level idea of what differentiates them from the other agencies on your list.

Next, use this list of basic questions as a guide for your conversation:

- What will you do differently to work with us as a nonprofit vs. your corporate clients?
- Can you help us think through UX/product design? We won't always know what to tell you to do.
- How do you communicate technical details that the whole team should be aware of?
- What's your project management process? How will our team be integrated in that process?
- What will you do to make sure the final product is as maintainable as possible for a non-technical team?

- Will we be able to hire anyone in your tech stack to pick up your work after you deliver it, or are we locked in with you to maintain it?
- Do you have anyone on your team who understands our specific domain?
- (If you need a mobile app) Do you have any experience building cross-platform mobile apps?

You'll also want to ask questions specific to your needs, goals, and project. These questions will shed light on how familiar an agency is with your vertical, or how they'll handle your team's idiosyncrasies. For example: if your team has a specific communication process, ask about it in the interview to make sure the agency meshes well with your workstyle

Finally, if your organization works in a niche with specific regulatory concerns (like healthcare), make sure to ask if the firm is familiar with the processes and tools necessary to support that.

Next Steps

At the conclusion of each interview, tell the firm when they should expect to hear back from you, then be sure you make good on that promise, even if it's to say your team needs more time to make the final decision. Don't leave them hanging, especially if the answer is an immediate "no."

It's especially important to follow up in a timely manner, when you realize a firm isn't the right fit. There is a lot of mutual respect in the software development industry, and an agency who doesn't win your business may be able to refer you to a vendor that's a better fit. If you leave them hanging, however they may be less willing to help you in the future.

If you need more information, clarification on a specific question, or to ask for additional details, schedule a follow-up call to chat through your concerns. It's better to wait until you have complete information than rush a decision.

If you get through a round of four agencies with no clear winner, don't feel compelled to hire someone just to move forward. You'll have a long list — schedule four more interviews and keep going.



I've Found the Right Fit. Now What?

When you find a team you love (and they have availability) it's time to seal the deal. Sometimes your gut feeling is the right one, and after the thorough research, preparation, and evaluation steps outlined above, you'll have a good idea what you're looking for. When you find the right fit, stop looking, and don't waste any more time on superfluous research or interviews.

Yes, this means canceling any other interviews you have booked (although hiring the very first person you meet with might be a little risky. You should still have that second interview just to compare).

Once you've confirmed availability, move on to paperwork. Nonprofit organizations like yours typically have specifics around procurement and vendor onboarding processes, so before you call it a day, make sure the agency you choose meets any specific requirements.

Then, it's time to review and sign contracts, book those first meetings, and get your team ready.

With the right agency, developing your web app can be a great experience. All the legwork of searching, sourcing, evaluating, and interviewing will make a massive difference: an app that doesn't just have a successful outcome, but is a creative and rewarding collaboration.

To learn more about software app development for nonprofits, [get in touch](#) with Tighten.



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