Niel Nickolaisen
CIO, O.C. Tanner Company

2016 Computerworld
Premier 100 CIOs

2016 Golden Bridge Award

2015 Prop IT award

He writes an enterprise CIO
column for SearchCIO

Author of "The Agile Culture"
(2014, Addison Wesley)

Tech Talk: CIO to CIO

Six things to ask before implementing a recognition program

You know tech as well as I do. But when it comes to the recognition arena, there are some nuances to keep in mind. Recognition programs are all about inspiring people to greatness. But if the technology behind the program isn't all that inspiring, engagement could be low. And your credibility could be on the line.

Here are six questions you should ask, and get answered, before purchasing a new recognition solution. Because no matter how much HR loves it, if it goes down, or requires a lot of support, it's not a solution anyone wants.

1. Is this a proven vendor?

You want a recognition company whose solutions have a history of running smoothly in thousands of companies around the world. One that has proven itself in the most demanding of organizations—from government, to finance, to pharmaceuticals. Find out how long the company has been in business, and what kind of installations they've done. Ask who their clients are and how long they've been with them.

It's also good to know what influenced the development of the solution. Is it what companies have been requesting? Is it rooted in research, advanced technologies, and best practices? Those kinds of solutions are the most innovative. And trouble-free.

2. Will it require a lot of my resources?

No matter how great the solution looks to HR, steer clear of any that will be a burden on your team and resources. Great recognition programs should have the features you need, without requiring your attention. Ideally, your recognition vendor will provide a team of experts who will help you to "set up and forget."

However, you want to ensure your vendor is continually innovating its products and technologies with things like machine learning and data visualization.

Also, choose a SaaS solution—from a provider that uses proven, modern software development methodologies, such as agile, dev ops and test automation. This provides frequent updates and innovation without effort on your part.

3. How secure it is?

No recognition program is worth the risk of a data breach. So start by ensuring that the solution is supported by modern infrastructure tools and technologies that will keep your data safe and secure.

Only choose a solution that is validated by the necessary information security certifications and proof points. It should be SOC2 or ISO2701 certified and meet SSAE16 standards.

You should also look for PCI and Privacy Shield certifications. These will ensure that the right security practices and technologies are in place, such as:
- Access controls
- Data segregation
- Data loss prevention
- Segregation duties
- Vulnerability and penetration testing
- Code scanning
- Employee training

4. How will it work with our existing technology?

Industry research indicates that one-third of all organizations have ten or more HR systems in place. While it sounds good for a recognition company to have an alliance with one or two of the major HRIS providers, that's simply not enough. What about the other eight or more HRIS systems? You need a solution that will connect to any and all platforms you're using now, or plan to use.

Furthermore, look for solutions that are built on enterprise-class, standards-based technology platforms. But that doesn't mean you have to settle for a one-size fits all program. Your recognition solution should meet your needs, fit into your culture and work the way you need it to work.

5. Is it configurable?

While an off-the-shelf or one-size-fits-all solution sounds easy, it won't have the flexibility to match your company culture. Nor will it be consistent with your values, or have them embedded in the program.

The ideal solution has the right balance of high configurability and low effort. You don't want to build one from the ground up—just look for a vendor that provides a wide range of recognition experiences. A simple gift card program might not be enough in some cultures, and extensive awards catalogs might be too much in others.

6. Does it deliver the data you need?

The best solutions are data-driven, because rich data leads to important insights about your program and your people. Look for advanced analytics and easy-to-use reporting that reveal what's working and what isn't, and the impact of recognition on individuals and your culture. To improve service levels and keep you out of the reporting business, the solution should provide slice and dice, drill down, and self-service capabilities.

Lastly, consider a vendor with a research group who can do a pre-launch engagement or recognition study to establish your baseline, and then provide the expertise to help your entire organization move the culture and engagement needle. Ideally your provider has the market depth and breadth to provide you benchmark data for your industry.

O.C. Tanner can help.

Your choice for a recognition partner is an important decision. And O.C. Tanner can help. We've been doing this for a long time and have earned a reputation for innovative firsts, 99% service uptime, and providing secure and unique recognition moments for 19 million people across the globe each year.

We'd love to chat more with you as you ponder these six questions—and probably ask a few of your own. I invite you to give us a call.