

The AI Vendor Checklist

What to ask before you buy, so the project doesn't die in month three.

Most AI projects don't fail because the technology doesn't work. They fail because nobody answered these questions before the contract got signed. Print this, or keep it open in the demo.

BEFORE THE DEMO

- ☐ **What process does this replace, exactly?**
Not "what can it do." Which specific process, done by which person, how many hours a week. If the vendor's answer is a capability and not a number, that's a problem before you've spent a dollar.
- ☐ **What does that process cost today?**
Hours times loaded cost, not just salary. You need this number to know if the tool is worth what they're charging.
- ☐ **How wrong will it be in week one?**
Every new AI system makes mistakes early. Ask them to tell you the error rate they see in a typical first month, not the error rate after a year of tuning. If they can't give you a number, they haven't shipped this to anyone your size.

BEFORE YOU SIGN

- ☐ **Who reviews the mistakes, and for how long?**
Someone has to catch and correct the wrong answers for the first month or so. That's four or five hours a week, and it has to be someone who already knows the process. Name that person before you sign. If the answer is "we'll figure it out," you won't.
- ☐ **What error rate is acceptable for this specific task?**
Wrong 5% of the time is fine for ticket tags. It's a disaster for invoices. Decide which one you have, in writing, before launch. This is the one thing the vendor will never bring up, because it makes their tool sound less finished than the demo did.
- ☐ **Who owns this after it launches?**
One person, whose week actually gets better if this works. If the champion is doing this as a favor or a side project, it dies when they get pulled onto something else. That happens by month four, every time.

AFTER IT'S LIVE

- ☐ **Is there a sheet?**
Ask whoever's closest to the tool this exact question. If a spreadsheet or a side doc has quietly grown up around it, tracking mistakes, double-checking outputs, doing the task the old way "just to be safe," the project isn't struggling. It's already dead. You're just still paying for it.
- ☐ **What changed on the number from question two?**
Go back to the hours and cost you wrote down before the demo. Did that number actually move? If nobody can answer this three months in, nobody was tracking it, which means nobody will notice when the renewal bill hits and the tool hasn't been touched in a quarter.

THE RED FLAGS

- The vendor's demo shows what the tool *can* do, not what your specific process needs it to do
 - Nobody on your side can name the process being replaced, in one sentence
 - No error budget was agreed before launch
 - The person driving adoption is doing it in addition to their real job, not as their job
 - "AI-powered" is doing a lot of work in the pitch and nobody can explain what's actually happening under it
- If you're hearing more than two of these in a sales call, slow down.**