

# Nine questions to ask 360 system vendors

Many organizations are searching for an automated solution to support their 360 initiatives. But if you've never purchased a 360 solution before, how do you go about it? **Samer Saab**, Director of Product Management at eXplorance, offers some practical advice.

**T**he process for selecting a vendor is a lot like making a new hire. You start by interviewing the most likely candidates from a pool of prospects. You drop the least promising to create a shortlist of your top choices. Finally, through more intense scrutiny, you pick the best choice for your organization. To help in that process, here is a list of questions to ask potential 360 system vendors. Their answers will help you decide if they make it to your shortlist.

## 1. Can your system quickly integrate with our existing HRIS?

Any new 360 system must be able to leverage your existing systems to access the personnel data you've already collected. And it must link up in just a few days, without taxing your IT resources with a drawn-out integration project. With your 360 system deeply integrated, you won't need to continually ask low-level, repetitive questions such as name, title or department. Many HR professionals find that not asking these low-level questions yields a shorter questionnaire with a higher response.

## 2. Can you show me how easy-to-use your system really is?

You need a system that's simple to use, without hours of training or technical support. Everybody claims this; make them prove it. Get a guided demo and check the logic of the workflow. For instance, check the flexibility of the built-in reporting. Can the system give you everything you need in your reports – or will you be stuck exporting data to Excel to do more processing by hand? Ask for some sample reports, then ask for a few changes while you watch how it's done.

## 3. Can your system automatically e-mail invites and reminders?

Some vendors expect you to keep track of everyone's responses, and then e-mail out hundreds or thousands of individual reminders. That's a chore your system should handle for you. It should have the smarts to see who hasn't responded, then remind them that the clock is ticking.

## 4. Was your software created specifically for 360?

Some vendors push their survey software by saying: "This does everything you need for 360 at a lower price." If you accept this claim, you may be in store for some mind-numbing chores. For instance, to support 360 for 200 employees could mean publishing 200 separate surveys – instead of creating one project for 200 people, as you can with systems created especially for 360. The days you spend working around limitations like that can drive your total cost of ownership (TCO) much higher.

## 5. Do you have a library of pre-packaged questionnaires?

Careful, this is a trick question. The answer you want is: "No, we don't believe in that." Most HR professionals agree that successful 360 programs must be carefully tailored to each organization's goals and val-

ues. The same questionnaire does not fit all sorts of different companies. Don't gamble the success of all your 360 initiatives by using pre-packaged questionnaires.

## 6. Do all your forms and reports have a professional look?

You'd be surprised at the low-quality output from some 360 tools. Check for the flexibility to include your own company colors and branding. Make sure everything that comes out of the system makes your organization look good.

## 7. Does your pricing encourage us to do 360, or penalize us?

Under the pricing scheme used by most 360 vendors, every time you do another 360 review you have to pay another fee. But why should you have to worry about budgets every time you use 360? Instead, look for a vendor that enables you to invest in 360 once for each employee, and then use it as often as you like. This will give you a lower TCO.

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## 8. Can we start small, and pay as we roll out 360?

The most sensible way to get started with 360 is to run a pilot project. But most vendors want you to pay upfront for their whole system. Instead, look for one who will support your desire to start small, or run 360 in a single department, and then pay more as you roll it out. This gives you a cost-effective path to the future. It also means your vendor has an interest in helping your 360 projects succeed; they can't just take the money and run.

## 9. How much software must be installed on each PC?

The best answer here is 'none'. Most 360 vendors require you to install various plug-ins, ActiveX controls and other software on every PC involved in the project. This creates a big headache for your IT department, which is trying to keep your PCs lean and clean. And it's a hassle for users to download plug-ins or give ActiveX controls permission to run. It's far simpler to pick a system that's 100 percent web-based, one that can use any web browser your users already have installed. ■