



The Discovery Phase: Your Key to a Great Solution

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How much will my database cost?

Understandably, you want to know what you are getting into before incurring the substantial costs involved in implementing a core business solution. However, most experienced developers are reluctant to give a client a firm estimate after only one consultation. This is reasonable, because the developer cannot realistically know what the client knows about the business and its needs. The best compromise is the discovery phase of the project. This is a process that gives both parties what they need; when all is said and done, the client gets an accurate cost estimate, and the developer gets a clear set of specifications from which to work. The added bonus is that the client also gets an end product that is exactly what he needs, down to the finest details.

What is the Discovery Phase?

The discovery phase consists of a series of meetings between the developer and one or more key individuals within the company. It's always a good idea to have managers and everyday users in on at least some of the process; their needs tend to be different. For example, managers are most interested in getting information out of the database in the form of reports, whereas everyday users are more interested in being able to get information into the database – quickly, easily, and efficiently. Some of the things that will be discussed in the discovery phase include information to be tracked, step-by-step business processes, reports, what the screens will look like, and existing problems that the solution will solve. As this information is being gathered, the developer will organize it into a functional specification, a detailed document outlining exactly what the finished product will accomplish, and how it will do it. A natural by-product of all of this planning is a precise, up-front estimate. This is typically accurate to plus or minus ten percent of the actual cost.

What will the Discovery Phase cost?

The Discovery Phase usually runs about 15-20% of the total cost of developing your solution. Some clients question paying for the requirements phase. After all, why shell out cash just to get an estimate? Well, first of all, you are not just getting an estimate. As I mentioned above, you are getting the solution that you want and need, by following a carefully planned course of action.

What makes this part of the process so important?

If the developer does his job right, you can hand the functional spec he gives you to any other competent developer to work from. It is a valuable, tangible commodity, well worth the time, effort and money that go into it. Some clients will find those so-called developers who do not insist on a discovery phase to be an attractive proposition. Why do all that work when someone confidently says to you, "Don't worry, we'll take care of everything, and here's exactly what it will cost." To this I can only say *caveat emptor*, let the buyer beware. Would you trust a mechanic who gave you an estimate after a quick glance under the hood of your car? A homebuilder who chose to forgo architectural plans?

Ultimately, the requirements phase is the most valuable ingredient in providing you with a quality finished product. You are paying substantially more money for a custom solution because off-the-shelf software just doesn't cut it. Spend the time and, yes, invest the money to do it right, and you will be rewarded with a sound solution that will perform well for many, many years to come.