



Choosing Your Transit Software Provider

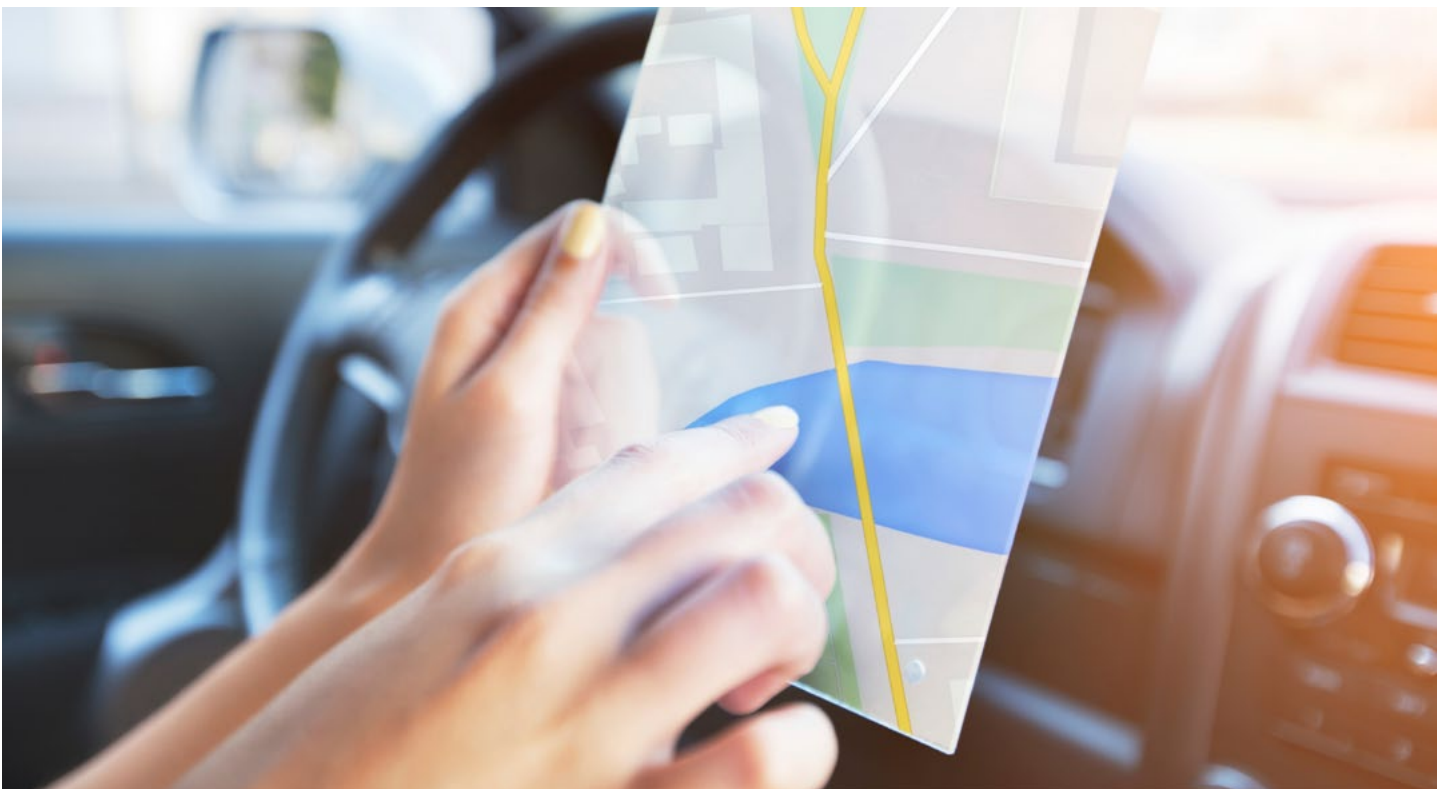
Evaluating a new transit software solution and determining which provider is the “right fit” for a transit agency can be a challenging undertaking, and is one that requires an investment of time, research, and due-diligence. There are a number of factors that need to be taken into consideration when making this decision, questions that need to be asked of a potential provider, and steps that need to be planned for in advance of reaching a final agreement.

Factors to Consider When Evaluating Prospective Providers and Their Solutions

In order to properly evaluate a provider’s solution, focus on the following core factors:

Functionality – Flexibility, Platform Requirements, Customer Service, and Reporting.

Affordability – Budget, All-Inclusive Pricing, Additional Investment, Cost Increases, and ROI.



Functionality

The first step is to look at the different features and functionality that a given solution provides. As you read about the factors, ask this basic question, “What are our functionality requirements and does this solution meet them?”

Flexibility - If an agency has specific requirements it is important to understand whether the software can be configured to meet those particular needs. Some providers have cookie-cutter software that is specifically designed

and developed as a “one-size fits all” solution. However, in practice, it is more common to see agencies needing their own unique operational requirements met; an inflexible cookie-cutter software platform can quickly become a purchasing nightmare.

Platform Requirements - Transit agencies might find themselves requiring mobile data tablets (MDT) for in-vehicle use, web-based solutions, and/or on-site, installed software (which generally isn't considered a modern solution in today's access-anywhere world). Operational requirements around on-time performance and increased productivity, as just two examples, are also considered at this stage of making purchasing decisions – which solution will help your agency achieve its strategic goals?

If an agency considers purchasing a software solution that provides the same level of functionality and features as was used in the past and also follows the same processes, is it really improving anything? If the only operational change is a shift to paperless scheduling, it's probably not going to be a solution worth implementing.



Customer Service - How about customer service and the new software's impact on an agency's customer service?

The procurement process needs to begin by understanding where things fall short, if at all. For agencies who already have a clear understanding of its goals, they know exactly what they're looking for and also understand that customer service and operational efficiency are closely connected.

This is where getting clear answers from a software provider about how their product is being used by other agencies is so critically important. For example, how many agencies have actually changed their internal workflows and processes based on the functionality of the software? The answer to this question will demonstrate whether people are using the solution in an automated fashion (preferred) or relying on archaic, manual processes. Additionally, it can provide insight into how helpful the software support team can be during the implementation process. In Ecolane's experience, the ongoing relationship between software provider and transit agency is an important factor if the goal is to improve the agency's customer service.



Reporting - Among the most important functionalities to evaluate in a transit software solution are the reporting capabilities of the platform. Comprehensive transit software solutions are typically not inexpensive line items for an agency's budget. Collecting accurate data and the subsequent reporting on that data are essential.

Agencies want as much feedback and insight surrounding its operations via the metrics it collects. Accessing and exporting system data and subsequently using the information to improve operations are key requirements. Some transit software solutions collect data but don't easily provide access to it, creating significant challenges for agencies wanting to mine their data per their operational needs. One of the most appealing benefits of a hosted transit software package (such as Ecolane DRT) is the reporting capabilities and simple access to all its raw data.



Affordability

After looking at the functionality of a provider's solution, agencies should next evaluate the affordability of the system.



BUDGET - Even if a particular software solution isn't the least expensive on the market, the entire value proposition needs to be considered. What will the relationship be like? It's not just about the upfront price, but the total cost of ownership. What are your savings over the entire life of the contract? Be sure to check for hidden costs that aren't included in the initial pricing.



ALL-INCLUSIVE PRICING - Some providers have options that include support, maintenance, and software within a single price. Other providers, however, may appear to be all-inclusive (but rarely are). On top of the software costs, agencies may be forced to pay additional fees for support calls, hosting services, connection speed, etc. The best pricing should be transparent and easy to understand.



ADDITIONAL INVESTMENT - Understanding the need for any additional investment is important. Hosted servers and/or hardware may or may not be included in the pricing structure. It's essential to determine the total investment amount; cost of the software plus the cost of the required hardware, if any. Only then can the affordability of a provider's solution be determined.



COST INCREASES - Carefully review what the provider has done in the past with regards to other customer contracts. Agencies should understand if and how maintenance/support pricing increases over time, if at all. Additionally, it's important to find out what happens at the end of a contract term.



ROI - Agencies should know as much about their current operations and the metrics supporting operations as possible when meeting with a potential provider. Knowing that information will inevitably give agencies a better understanding of what a provider can offer in terms of affordability and, most importantly, return on investment. If a software provider can demonstrate a cost savings and is willing to collaborate with an agency on its goals, it's a good indication of a fruitful relationship.

Questions to Ask a Potential Software Provider

Now, with a better understanding of what to look for in a software solution during evaluation, it's also important to know what questions to ask to effectively evaluate a potential provider. These are very much partnerships, after all. These partnerships require close collaboration, flexibility, and planning between agency and provider.

If certain key questions are answered during the evaluation process, selecting a software provider becomes a much easier task and agency decision-makers will feel more confident in their choice.



Any top-tier, software provider should have clear answers to the following questions:

What is your timeframe for implementation?

What to look for in their answer:

Is a realistic timetable provided and can they/will they actually deliver on that timetable? The focus should be less on the calendar date and more about whether a realistic process is followed. Be wary of a provider that promises short timeframes. Chances are they are just trying to get a contract signed. Building implementation timetables take research, thought, and explanation, and they also vary based on an agency's specific needs. Customizing software to meet an agency's operational requirements can heavily impact schedules and planning. Typically, a great deal of configuration is required during the implementation process to set parameters, input data, and understand internal agency processes. If this isn't properly done, agencies can be left with operational nightmares once the implementation phase is over.

What does the project process look like and what is your team structure?

Why you should ask this:

It's invaluable for an agency to get a clear sense of how schedules and activities are organized on a software implementation team as well as understand which individuals will be tasked on the project. Agencies should understand the time and attention they'll receive during this phase. It also sets clear expectations going into the project while also ensuring that the software provider has a clear and proven process for these types of implementations.

Can you propose a payment schedule?

What to look for in their answer:

Are they dodging the question? If so, it's a red flag and a warning sign that should not be ignored. Typically, in the industry, three milestone payments can be expected. Having realistic expectations on what a provider would be willing to negotiate is worthwhile at this point. It's best to wait until closer to the contract signing phase of the evaluation process to dive into this question.

Can I see a sample contract?

Why it should be asked:

While this sample might differ from the final contract, it can be amended per an agency's specific needs. It can also provide a good idea of what the terms of a standard contract look like and what other agencies have used. If nothing else, it will provide a good baseline for further questions and discussion.

Can I see references?

Why it should be asked:

Typically, a provider isn't going to highlight anything negative about themselves or any less-than-flattering comments that their customers might feel about their product. By asking for references and then actually going through the process of checking them, honest feedback should be expected. References tend to be the most un-biased and valuable resources that can be used in the decision-making process. Don't skip this part.

In Conclusion...

If the right questions are asked when evaluating software solutions, agencies should feel more comfortable making a decision and the likelihood of selecting the wrong partner can be minimized.

Could Ecolane be the right transit software provider? Put us to the test and evaluate our approach.

[The first step is to set up a demo to see Ecolane software in action.](#)



INCLUDED IS A SEPARATE CHECKLIST
OF MUST-HAVE QUESTIONS FOR YOUR REFERENCE

Asking the Right Questions

THE GO-TO LIST FOR THOSE INTERESTED IN A TRANSIT SOFTWARE PROVIDER

The next time you're evaluating a transit software provider, print out this checklist and use it to ensure you're asking these critical questions

- Does the solution fit within my budget range?

- Is there an all-inclusive pricing option?

- Does my agency need to make additional capital investments to take advantage of the software?

- Do maintenance and support costs increase over the life of a contract?

- What's my ROI?

- What is the timeframe for implementation?

- What does the project look like and what is the team structure?

- Can the provider propose a payment schedule?

- Can I see a sample contract?

- Can I see references?
