Working with Softwire

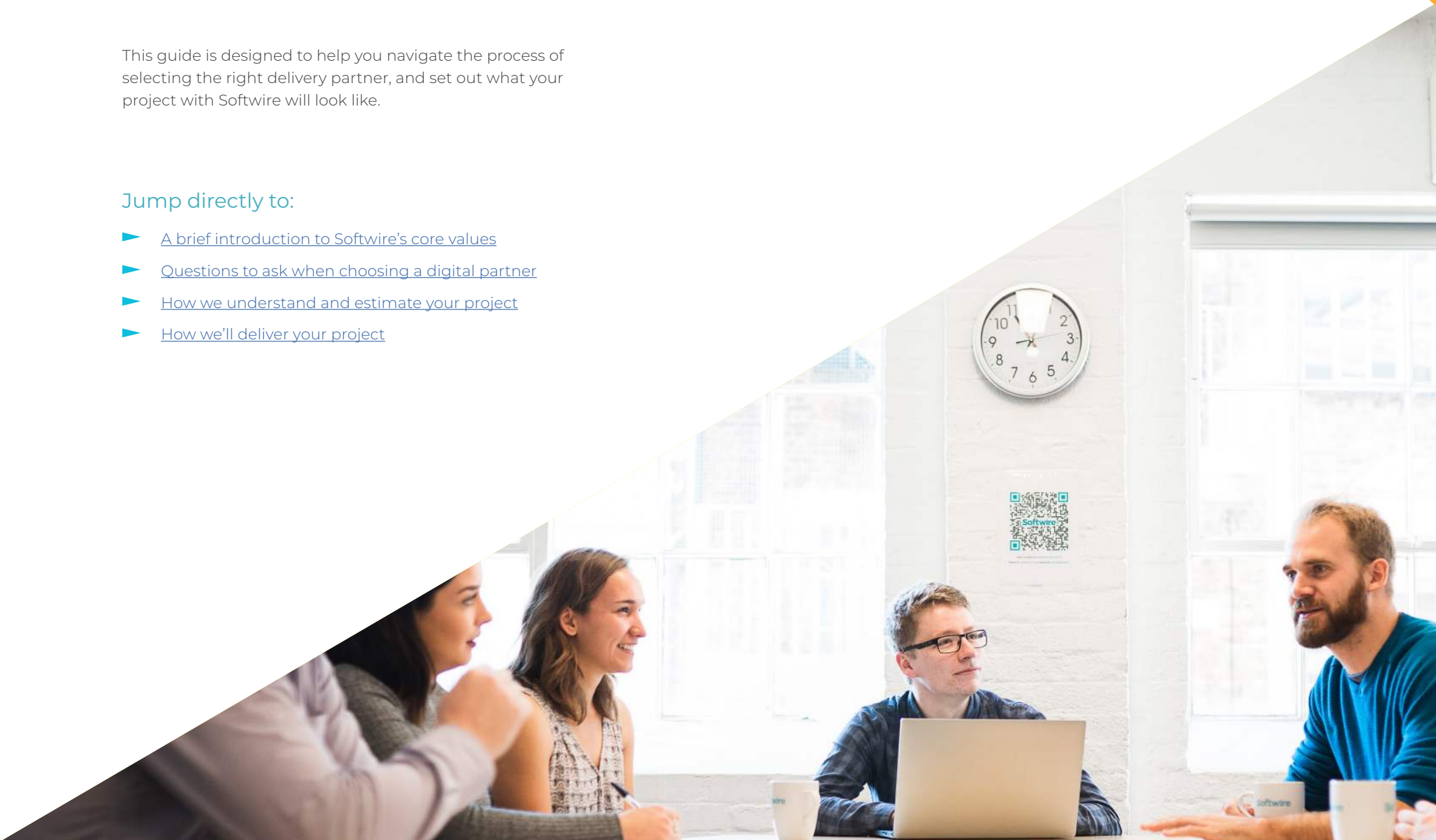
Picking your partner for a digital project is such an important decision.

Softwire

Introduction

This guide is designed to help you navigate the process of selecting the right delivery partner, and set out what your project with Softwire will look like.

Jump directly to:

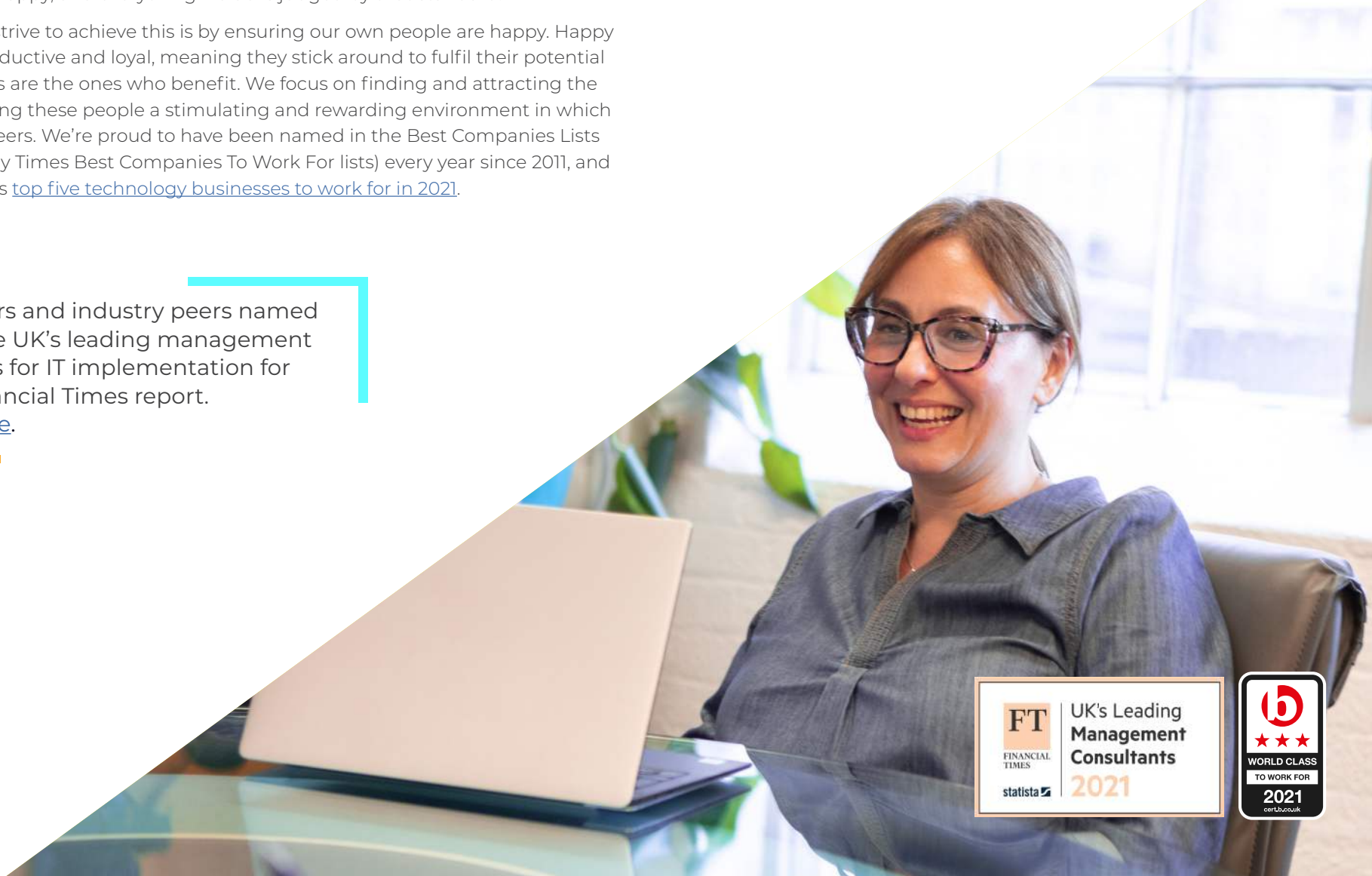


A brief introduction to Softwire's core values

We want you to be happy, and everything we do is judged by that standard.

Part of the way we strive to achieve this is by ensuring our own people are happy. Happy teams are more productive and loyal, meaning they stick around to fulfil their potential – and our customers are the ones who benefit. We focus on finding and attracting the best talent, and giving these people a stimulating and rewarding environment in which to develop their careers. We're proud to have been named in the Best Companies Lists (formerly the Sunday Times Best Companies To Work For lists) every year since 2011, and to be one of the UK's top five technology businesses to work for in 2021.

Our customers and industry peers named us among the UK's leading management consultancies for IT implementation for 2021, in a Financial Times report. Discover more.



Questions to ask when choosing a digital partner

Picking a partner for your digital project is an important decision. Getting it right maximises your chances of success, and subsequently the value you'll get from the product or service being built.

At the other end of the spectrum, we're often asked to rescue customer projects that are failing with other suppliers. We see recurring themes when we do. To help you guard against these common problems, here are some important questions to ask during procurement.

Are the estimates realistic?

We often pick up projects where the supplier has bid low to win the work, and subsequently been unable to deliver. This will generally be because it didn't fully understand the client's requirements at the start, failed to identify the risks, or didn't include appropriate contingencies. Is your prospective supplier being inquisitive during the sales process? Have its people discussed the risky elements with you, and allowed for these in the estimates?

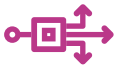
Has the supplier demonstrated a real understanding of why I need the product or service?

Another problem we see in projects we rescue is where the customer has realised the product being built won't actually address the challenge it needs to solve. This can happen where a supplier doesn't first explore why the product is required, and think critically about the best way to meet this need. Good suppliers will work with you during the sales process to understand your underlying needs and how best to address them. Has your prospective supplier done this?

Could I get locked in with the delivery supplier?

Some companies will attempt to lock you into long-term dependence on them. This can lead to higher costs and reduced flexibility, so should be avoided. There are various ways this lock-in can happen. It could be that the supplier:

- Uses its own proprietary programming languages and/or technologies, which no one else is familiar with
- Fails to document the code, thereby making it difficult for anyone else to pick up or maintain
- Stores the code in its own repositories, where you can't freely access it, meaning it's difficult or impossible to move away at a later date, should you wish to
- Maintains ownership or control over the infrastructure



Is the proposed technology the best for the job?

Certain suppliers specialise in particular technologies, and will default to these for every project, without necessarily considering potentially superior alternatives. This can mean you're forced to compromise on functionality, maintainability and/or cost. Ask suppliers why they're proposing a specific technology, and what alternatives they've considered.

Will the software be straightforward to maintain and extend?

Virtually all digital products need to be maintained, patched, updated or enhanced during their lifespan. Good software is designed and built with maintainability and evolution in mind. Will your supplier use industry-standard programming languages and frameworks? Will the code go through appropriate quality assurance to ensure it's documented and easy to understand by other developers? Will it include an appropriate set of tests? Will you control the code repositories and infrastructure?

Is there a feedback mechanism, and is the supplier genuinely receptive to my views?

Does the supplier provide ways for you to influence the product and the project? Can you change your mind about things as new learnings come to light? Is the supplier open to constructive feedback, and does it sound like people are listening?

Am I confident the supplier can create something fit for purpose?

If your product will have strict requirements around security, regulatory compliance, uptime or performance, will the supplier be capable of delivering on the resulting functional and non-functional requirements? Can it demonstrate success in similar projects?

How will I be kept up-to-date during delivery?

It's essential your supplier keeps you updated on progress during the project – including when things aren't going to plan. This is essential if you're to avoid nasty surprises at the end. Find out when and how you'll be kept in the loop, and ask for examples of the reports you'll receive. Will you get enough information to feel confident about how well the project is progressing?

Will my data be safe?

Failing to look after customer data correctly can be financially and reputationally catastrophic. You as an organisation need to be able to demonstrate you're looking after your data diligently. How will your supplier ensure data the software handles is kept safe? Ask to see its data-handling policies, and find out how it ensures these are followed.

How we understand and estimate your project

We want to build a strong relationship with you. For us to gain and maintain your trust, we understand the importance of accuracy in our estimates.

The aim of our presales process is to gather the information we need to be able to present you with a proposal, estimates and timeline that:

- Will result in a digital product that genuinely meets your needs
- You're comfortable agreeing to
- We're confident we can deliver on

Step 1: Establishing a shared understanding of your requirements

Once you make contact with Softwire, we'll start learning about your vision and establishing a shared understanding of where you are on your overall journey towards it.

You'll probably have an idea of the product or service you want us to help create. This could be anything from a high-level concept to detailed requirements. You may already have software we'll be enhancing or replacing.

Wherever you are on the journey, we'll draw on our 20+ years of experience in building digital products that address organisations' needs, to explore:

- Your requirements
- The assumptions these are based on
- Your existing codebase (if applicable)

This will enable us to establish:

- How the scope of the product has been determined, and whether there may be further requirements or use cases to consider
- When you need each piece of functionality: are some elements more time-critical than others?
- How we can best help you achieve what you need. If we think there's a better or more cost-effective way to get you the desired result, we'll suggest it. Where necessary, we'll work with you to develop and refine your requirements

Step 2: Understanding risk and removing uncertainty

To provide an accurate estimate, we need to understand what might lead to the project failing to deliver on its aims, running late or going over-budget.

This means we'll ensure we:

- Understand any dependencies
- Establish factors on the critical path: events that, if they occur (or don't), would prevent you from achieving your aims

High levels of uncertainty or risk can make a project difficult to estimate accurately. In these situations, we recommend a short scoping phase, or 'discovery', to add certainty or de-risk these areas.

What is a discovery / scoping phase?

A scoping phase, or discovery, is a short exploratory exercise, aimed at minimising one or more risks or uncertainties around your project. It enables us to estimate and plan with greater confidence and accuracy. This in turn helps you make a more-informed decision on whether and how to proceed with development.

If you already have a detailed specification, you may not need a scoping phase.

However, if your requirements are not yet defined in detail, and you'd also like us to provide tight estimates or a fixed-price quote, we would recommend a short discovery before you commit to a full development project.

Step 3: Choosing the right technologies

Once we understand your requirements, we'll advise on the best technologies for the job. We can align with your existing stack, or select the most appropriate tech to meet your short- and long-term needs.

This means:

- We base our technology choices on your requirements, and we don't use our own proprietary tech or programming languages. We can align with technology you're already using, or recommend suitable industry-standard tooling and technology
- We recommend you control access to the infrastructure, code repositories and project-tracking tools, for maximum transparency and independence
- If your aim is to operate your new digital product in-house, we'll provide training and upskill your teams, as well as supplying all the documentation they need to run it

> We want you to work with us because you like working with us. That's why we'll never tie you in.

Step 4: Selecting the delivery approach

Every project we deliver is unique, and will follow a slightly different approach, based on the customer's requirements. Given a choice, or when we're managing our own internal projects, we use agile delivery, and recommend the DSDM Agile Project Framework.

Whichever approach we adopt, we'll ensure it integrates with your ways of working, expectations and resource availability. By establishing this common understanding during presales, we're able to get the delivery phase started more quickly and efficiently.

Find out how we typically run our projects:
See Softwire's delivery process.

Step 5: Defining timelines and resourcing

Next, we'll put together a phased delivery plan that prioritises:

- The most important features and functionality – so that key capabilities can be tested with users early, and your product can be launched quickly
- Aspects of the project that present a high risk to the overall delivery plan, or the viability of the product – to de-risk the project

The delivery plan will be accompanied by an appropriate resourcing plan.

Step 6: Providing an accurate estimate

Having laid these strong foundations, we'll be ready to provide an accurate estimate to deliver a product or service that will genuinely address your needs.

Here's how we strive to ensure we give you a realistic estimate:

- Two experienced engineers scope and estimate your project independently, verify each other's estimates, and agree a realistic costing
- We factor in the risks and uncertainties we've identified
  We always include an allowance for omissions: features that emerge during delivery and are critical to the project's success. The more uncertainty there is in the project, the greater the omissions allowance will be

High levels of uncertainty or risk can make a project difficult to estimate accurately. In these situations, we recommend a short discovery/scoping phase, to add certainty or de-risk these areas.

> "Softwire's people have been really helpful in challenging our assumptions and honing our requirements. Rather than simply doing as they're told, they work in genuine partnership with us."

Senior IT Development Manager,
Train leasing company

Commercial models

Time-and-materials (T&M)

This offers the greatest flexibility, and is usually also the cheapest. It enables us to learn and adapt during the development phase, and typically results in higher overall client happiness. Moreover, we develop the most important functionality first, delivering you an increasingly valuable product over the course of the project. As a result, even if the scope grows beyond what can be achieved within your original budget and you choose not to extend the project, you'll still have a working system that meets your key goals.

Fixed-price

This approach offers you peace of mind, as it provides a guarantee of what we'll deliver and what you'll pay. However, it necessarily carries a premium to cover unknowns – and the more uncertainty there is, the larger this will be. Fixed-price also requires fixed scope. Adding to or changing the scope mid-way through the project as new learnings and/or requirements emerge can require new statements of work, and may impact costs.

How we'll deliver your project

Step 1: Project kick-off/sprint zero

Most projects will see the senior team members land first. Working with your key stakeholders, we'll put in place everything we need to get the project started. This phase is known as 'sprint zero'.

We'll agree and document:

- A detailed project plan, designed to deliver the most important and/or riskiest elements first
- Risks and mitigation plans
- The meeting schedule and agile ceremonies, such as standups and product demonstrations
- Our respective roles and responsibilities
- How we'll work with your existing teams and/or suppliers, or how we'll transition the project from them
- Technology choices
- Data management and security processes
- Feedback processes and mechanisms for you to guide and manage the overall project

We'll ensure:

- The stories are written for the designers and/or engineers to start work on in sprint one
- The necessary tooling, development environments, test automation platforms, infrastructure and code repositories are in place. We're happy to use your existing tools and technologies, or will recommend suitable choices
- The project-planning and tracking systems are in place. We'll use whatever you already have in place, or can recommend Atlassian Jira

During virtually every digital project, circumstances will evolve, or new information and requirements come to light that require a change to what's being built. We work in a way that welcomes these learnings, and that can accommodate change in a controlled manner.

Step 2: Delivery sprints

The precise way we work can be adapted to align with your project needs and resource availability.

We typically work in two-week sprints, where every sprint has a clear set of goals and delivers something of value at the end. Each sprint leads us towards your overall vision, and provides an opportunity to refine the overall direction of your project.

During each sprint, we hold the following meetings or 'ceremonies':

- Sprint planning: Setting out what the team will be working on
- Daily standups: Regular check-in between team members
- Demo: Showcasing work done to your key stakeholders
- Retrospective: Identifying ways to improve how the project is run

We welcome you to take as active an involvement in the process as you can, since this generally results in higher overall satisfaction.

What you get at the end of each sprint

You'll get something of value at the end of each sprint. Once development is fully underway, this will typically be working, deployable software, with subsequent sprints adding more features and functionality. More generally, especially earlier in the project, this end-of-sprint value could include:

- Insights to shape subsequent work
- Proofs of concept
- Prototypes

You'll also get a detailed progress report (see Governance and reporting).

How we'll resource your project

Requirements can evolve during a project, which may alter the resourcing needs. We'll strive to ensure you always have the right resource profile, and can generally flex the team accordingly.

We have robust internal processes to ensure project knowledge is documented and shared. This includes the creation of our project-specific 'zero-to-hero' guide, designed to get new team members up to speed quickly. Sharing knowledge protects against single points of failure or key-person dependencies.

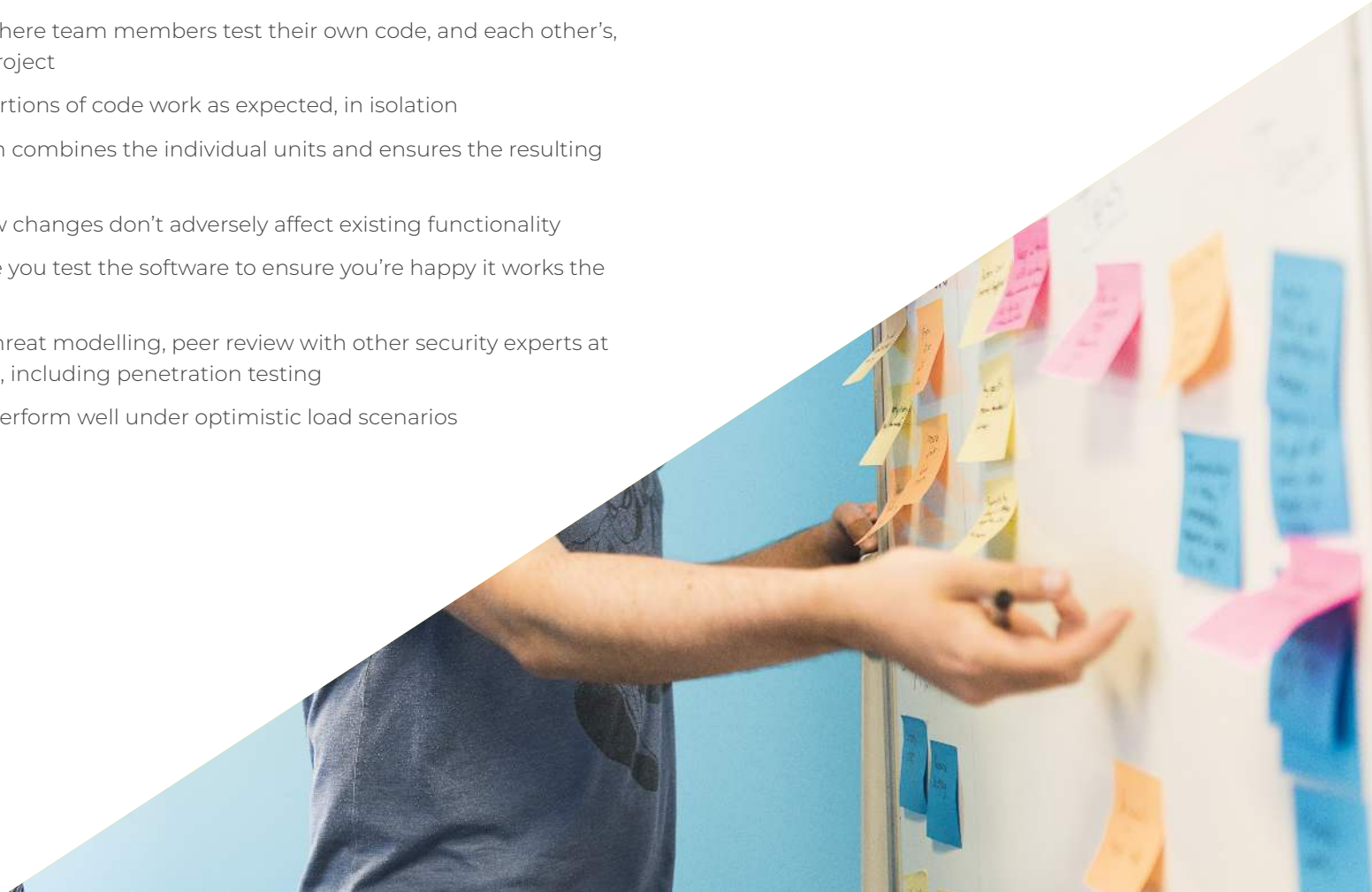
On long-term engagements, we encourage gradual team member rotations throughout the lifetime of the project. This means you benefit from a greater diversity of ideas and expertise, and builds in further resilience against key-person dependencies, because more of our people are familiar with your project and codebase.

How we test your software

Testing lies at the heart of good modern software development practices. We have deep experience of building software for use in all environments, including highly regulated markets such as financial services, healthcare and central government, where exceptional quality levels are a must. As a result of our experience in these and other areas, we'll work with you to agree an appropriate testing strategy that helps ensure the software meets your functional and non-functional requirements.

The strategy will cover a range of methods, focused around the needs of your project, to ensure testing is effective and efficient. These methods frequently include:

- Developer testing and peer review, where team members test their own code, and each other's, before it's submitted into the main project
- Automated unit testing, to ensure portions of code work as expected, in isolation
- Automated integration testing, which combines the individual units and ensures the resulting product performs as it should
- Manual release testing, to ensure new changes don't adversely affect existing functionality
- User acceptance testing (UAT), where you test the software to ensure you're happy it works the way you expect
- Security review, which may include threat modelling, peer review with other security experts at Softwire, or independent assessment, including penetration testing
- Load testing, to ensure the services perform well under optimistic load scenarios

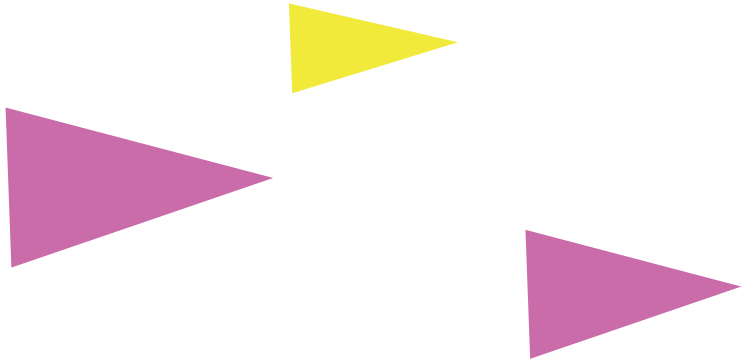


Governance and reporting

Key people

- Day-to-day, your project will be overseen by your Project Manager. This is your main point of contact for any delivery queries
- Every project is also assigned to a senior Delivery Principal, who provides an escalation point, if required
- Separate from the project delivery team, you'll have an Account Manager, who looks after the commercial relationship, and offers an additional route for you to feed back if we're not achieving perfection. Your Account Manager will typically be the same person who leads your pre-sales journey

You'll meet your Project Manager and Delivery Principal before your project starts.



Documentation

We produce an appropriate set of documentation for every project. This typically includes:

- Our zero-to-hero guide for Softwire team members, designed to enable them to hit the ground running when they join the project, either at the start or part-way through
- Architecture diagrams
- Test plans
- An operational runbook, detailing how to run the software once its live. This empowers you to maintain the application yourself, if you wish to
- Any other documentation required, such as user guides

Reporting

We want to ensure you're always up to speed on all aspects of the project. There are several ways we'll do this.

Status reports

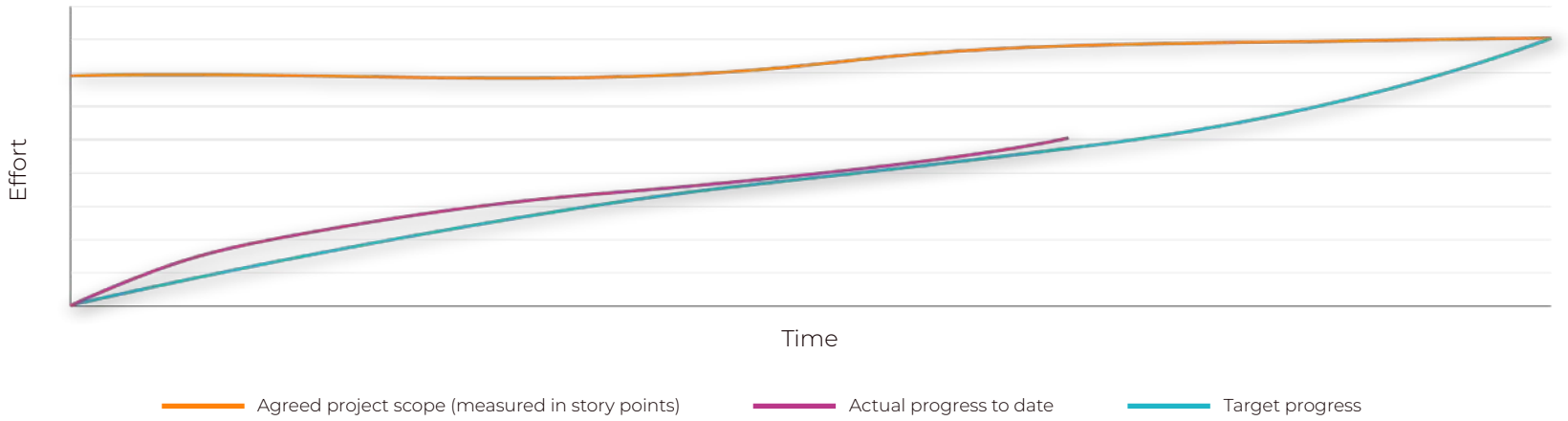
At the end of each delivery sprint, your Softwire Project Manager will send you a project status report. This gives an at-a-glance overview of progress, including:

- What we set out to achieve in that sprint, and what we actually achieved
- Progress towards overall project goals, and how this compares to our interim targets (typically shown in a burn-up chart, such as the one below)
- Scope changes, and how these affect overall progress
- Risks and challenges, and how these are being addressed
- Budget overview (on T&M projects)

Sprint demo

We'll demonstrate the outputs from each sprint to you as part of the end-of-sprint demo. In addition, we can separately hold a periodic project status call with your key stakeholders. And where appropriate, your people are welcome to attend the daily standups and sprint retrospectives.

Example burn-up chart



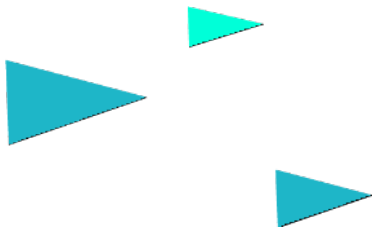
Once your project is delivered

Once your initial project completes, there are various routes you can choose.

- Take it in-house: We'll make sure you have everything you need to run and maintain it, including the skills and documentation
- Softwire support: If you'd like us to maintain and enhance your new software for you, engineers who helped develop it can transfer to our support team. This gives you continuity of knowledge and relationships. As part of our support arrangement, we'll agree a prioritised 'product backlog' of feature requests and enhancements. Any support time not used for system maintenance will be used for these improvements
- Continue building out new features: It may be that the initial delivery is a minimum viable product (MVP) or minimum lovable product (MLP) that you want to build out further – and do so more quickly than you'd be able to under a support retainer. We'll work with you to plan and deliver the next steps on your journey

Your next steps: Starting today

By laying the right foundations, from the first time you interact with a potential supplier, you maximise the likelihood of achieving your goals. The estimation and delivery processes we've outlined in this guide have formed the foundation of hundreds of successful digital projects, and are one of the reasons so many of our clients return for repeat business.



Let's start exploring your digital project requirements.
Please contact us today, to begin what we hope will be a long and fruitful relationship.

Get in touch to get started today.

+44 (0)20 7485 7500
info@softwire.com

110 Highgate Studios
53-79 Highgate Road
London
NW5 1TL