

sma
TECHNOLOGIES

Getting Automation That's Right for You: 10 Must-Ask Questions





Table of Contents

Introduction

Finding the Right Automation Solution	3
---	---

The 10 Must-Ask Questions

1. What type of automation do I need?	4
2. Should I choose an automation solution specialized to my industry?	5
3. Do I have options for installation (e.g., on prem, cloud, or hybrid)?	6
4. How does pricing work?	7
5. What's included in the SOW?	8
6. What assurances do I have if the product isn't delivered on time or doesn't work as promised?	9
7. What are my support options?	10
8. Can you show me an active user community?	11
9. What type of training is offered?	12
10. How do you plan to manage and maintain your automation?	13

Conclusion

Finding the Right Automation Solution

Automation can be a powerful tool. When you use it to take care of your mundane, repetitive tasks, your employees can reinvest their time in exciting strategic initiatives that propel your business forward. That's why it's so important to find the automation solution that's right for you.

Every solution on the market is set up differently. They're distinguished by things like pricing model, features, support options, SOW, and more. To make sure you select the one that's aligned with your business goals, budget, and automation needs, you'll want to prepare a specific, targeted list of questions to ask every vendor you vet.

By asking the same set of targeted questions to every vendor, you'll be able to set up a balanced comparison and get all the information you need to decide which solution is right for your business.

In this guide, you'll find the top ten must-ask questions that we recommend you ask yourself and the vendors you vet and why. Depending on where you are in your search for automation, you'll undoubtedly come up with more than ten questions. This guide will give you a place to start, a defined structure for your conversations with vendors, and an understanding of why gathering this information is important.



1. What type of automation do I need?

As you start to evaluate which automation solution you need, keep in mind that there isn't a one-size-fits-all solution on the market. So, you won't be able to find a solution that'll do everything for you. Most solutions are very specialized, and it can be confusing to discern what makes each one unique and what each one has to offer.

To figure out what that unique offering is, first determine what pain point you're trying to solve. Businesses almost always start their search for an automation platform because of a persisting problem or pain point that's costing them inordinate amounts of time trying to solve. For example, an organization might have an automation tool in place, but they're finding [it's not robust enough to manage all of the processes they need or want to automate](#). So, once you've identified what that pain point or specific use case is for your organization, you can then map it to a specific type of automation solution.

At a high level, there are three main types of automation solutions: front-end automation, back-end automation, and data automation. Front-end automation includes business process automation (BPA), robotic process automation (RPA), and workflow automation. This type of low-code or no-code automation has front-end capabilities that are touched by both customers and employees. That means business experts in an organization don't have to be technical experts to use this type of automation solution in order to build forms, workflows, and processes with it. For example, a front-end automation tool could be used to update a customer's address in your core system—and any other systems where it needs to be reflected—after an employee fills out a specific form.

Back-end automation includes workload automation (WLA) and service orchestration and automation platforms (SOAP) that handle batch automation and the scheduling and orchestration of file movements, jobs, and processes that need to kick off in the right order at a specific time and work across multiple systems to do so. [OpCon](#) is an example of back-end automation.

Finally, data automation includes tools like extract/transfer/load (ETL), which moves data from transactional systems to a data warehouse, transforming and normalizing it in the process. It also includes iPaaS and API management tools.

Depending on the specific pain point you're trying to solve, you can identify which of these automation types will be the right fit for you.

The Three Types of Automation

Front-End Automation

Low-code or no-code automation used by those without technical expertise to build forms, workflows, and processes

Examples: **Business process automation (BPA)** and **robotic process automation (RPA)**

Back-End Automation

Batch automation that orchestrates file movements, jobs, and processes that need to be initiated in a specific sequence at a certain time

Examples: Workload automation (WLA) and service orchestration and automation platforms (SOAP)

Data Automation

Automation that moves data from transactional systems to a data warehouse, transforming and normalizing it in the process

Examples: Extract/transfer/load (ETL), iPaaS, and API management tools

2. Should I choose an automation solution specialized to my industry?

If possible, you should choose an automation solution that's specialized to your industry. This is important because most industries and organizations have specific or specialized solutions for their vertical. For example, banking has banking core systems and insurance companies have billing and claim systems. You want to find an automation provider that speaks your industry's unique language. You don't want to have to teach them your business or tools or translate everything to them in order for them to understand how your business operates.

By seeking out a vendor that has experience with the specialized tools you use, you'll likely find they already have pre-built, out-of-the-box integrations, connectors, and use cases. They've likely solved the specific problem you're trying to address several times with other clients. That means you won't waste time trying to get them up to speed on your specialized solutions, and they'll bring the industry experience needed to guide you effectively as you implement your automation solution—ensuring you can start generating the ROI you're looking for as soon as possible.

The Benefits of a Specialized Vendor

- They speak your industry's unique language, so you don't have to spend time teaching them your business or its specialized tools.
- They likely have pre-built, out-of-the-box integrations, connectors, and use cases ready to go.
- Their industry expertise puts them in a position to guide you effectively as you implement your automation, so you can start generating the ROI you're looking for quickly.
- They've likely solved your specific problem before with other clients.



3. Do I have options for installation (e.g., on prem, cloud, or hybrid)?

Some automation solutions can only be installed on prem, in a private cloud, or in a SaaS-based public cloud—some can be installed in all of these environments, creating a hybrid installation option. Which installation option you choose ultimately depends on your long-term business strategy and appetite for cloud.

When it comes to moving mission-critical applications to the cloud, organizations usually fall into one of three categories:

1. Organizations that are all in and are working to move as many of their applications to the cloud as possible
2. Those that are avoiding the cloud at all costs and have no interest in it, which is usually due to a belief that the cloud is less secure than an on-prem installation or comes with too many unknown variables
3. Organizations that are thinking about moving some of their applications to the cloud and want to start this process, if they haven't already

Depending on where your organization sits on this spectrum, you'll want to analyze your long-term business strategy and determine if you'll be moving some or all of business-critical applications to the cloud at some point in the future (if you aren't already doing so). For example, if you're already outsourcing a critical system like your core, decide if it makes sense to install another critical application like an automation solution on prem. You want to choose an automation vendor that can evolve with your business strategy. If you only have an on-prem data center today, but your long-term strategy is to move it to the cloud, you don't want to buy a solution that can only be installed on prem.

If you're thinking about a hybrid installation option, consider if the variables at play in both environments are similar enough that your automation won't break if you move from one to the other. Many organizations often plan initially to use their cloud environment for the development and testing of their automation and their on-prem environment for production. Ideally, however, you want to choose an installation option that will allow you to promote code or automation easily through your environments, so your testing is accurate and reflective of what's actually happening or going to happen in your production environment.

Your Automation Installation Options

On prem

Some automation solutions can only be installed on prem. If you're considering an on-prem installation, be sure to factor in your long-term business strategy. For example, if you plan to move your data center to the cloud at some point in the future, an on-prem installation wouldn't be the best fit.

Cloud

Some organizations want nothing to do with the cloud, others are all for it, and the rest are warming to the idea of hosting their business-critical applications on the cloud. You'll want to evaluate your organization's current appetite for the cloud and future plans when considering this installation option.

Hybrid

If you use one environment for testing and another for production, just make sure the variables at play in both are similar enough, so your automation doesn't break when moving from one to the other.

4. How does pricing work?

There are a lot of different pricing models for the automation solutions on the market, including models based on licensing, enterprise licensing, subscription, charges per user, charges per server, and charges by jobs run. There isn't one pricing model that's better than the rest. To make sure you pick the one that's right for your organization and needs, you'll want to ask each vendor you vet how their pricing model works and how it would impact you long term.

You want to avoid having to go back to your finance department six months down the road after purchasing your automation solution to ask for another \$20,000 because you didn't fully understand how your vendor's pricing model works. So, find out what's included in the base price and what's considered an add-on that you'd have to pay extra for to include with your package. For example, ask if you need to pay for specific connectors or agents in order to connect to your third-party systems and whether you need to pay extra for product support or training.

You also want to consider how you'll prepare for price increases, which are standard in the software industry. Every vendor will handle these differently. For example, some may have a planned annual price increase that you can expect; others may entice you with a very low introductory rate only to drastically increase the price once you have mission-critical automation in place—making it difficult for you to switch and putting you in a position where you're stuck paying that much higher price.

Avoid those kinds of surprises by getting the full picture of each vendor's pricing model, so you know what's included and how it will evolve over time. By doing so, you can be confident that you're choosing an automation solution for the long haul that can grow with your business as it evolves.

Pricing Considerations

- There are a variety of pricing models on the market, and one isn't better than the rest.
- Ask each vendor you vet how their pricing model works and how it'll impact you long term.
- Find out what features and services are included in the base price and what's considered an add-on, particularly ongoing product support and training.

5. What's included in the SOW?

When you sign a license or subscription agreement for your automation software, you want to know that you're establishing a partnership with a vendor that will help you install your software and build out and configure your initial use case—in other words, the problem or pain point that drove you to seek out the solution in the first place. To make sure this happens, you'll want it written into your SOW. Specifically, make sure you have installation and configuration included if it's not already. That way, you can have the automation experts set up your environment with best practices, so you know your automation is built on a solid foundation.

If you'll need to migrate from an existing automation tool—like a job scheduler you have in place—make sure your existing jobs and the scripts you've written are successfully migrated to your new automation platform by writing this into your SOW. That way, you're able to move to your new system from your old one seamlessly without any processes falling through the cracks or becoming roadblocks that keep you from making the most of your automation solution once it goes live.

Ask vendors if they've helped clients migrate from your old system to their software, if they have a migration framework, and what kind of success they've had with these migrations in the past. Don't be afraid to ask tough questions like these, so you can ensure any needed migration is reflected in your SOW and handled with expertise and confidence when the time comes.



SOW Must-Haves

- The vendor's commitment to help you install the software and build out and configure your initial use case (i.e., installation and configuration)
- A migration plan for any existing automation tools, if applicable
- A contract for managed automation services, if available and selected

6. What assurances do I have if the product isn't delivered on time or doesn't work as promised?

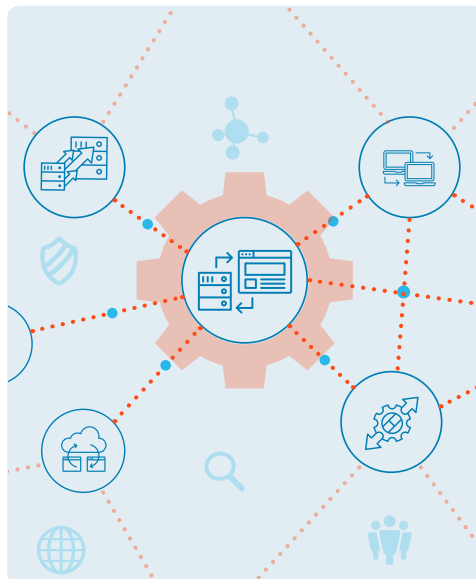
To avoid a situation in which your automation solution isn't delivered on time or doesn't work as promised and outlined in your SOW, be sure to do your due diligence. Ask the right questions at the outset before you enter into a contractual agreement with your vendor. Make sure they're a trusted, well-regarded player in their specific automation space. You can determine if that's the case by finding out if they're financially solvent, if they're growing, and whether or not they're continually investing in their product. These are all major indicators of a vendor's quality.

Some vendors do offer product and implementation guarantees, so be sure to ask each vendor you talk with if they do. Specifically, find out if they guarantee that they can solve the use case(s) you're bringing to them. Few people make any major purchases these days without reading the reviews first, and your automation solution shouldn't be an exception. So, check out peer review sites like Peer Spot, G2, and Gartner Peer Insights, which are all free and feature reviews that weren't paid for or solicited by vendors, to find out what types of experiences clients are having with each vendor you're considering.

Additionally, make a point to ask vendors for references. Find out if they're able to give you the names of clients who use similar systems as yours for whom they've solved a similar problem. If a vendor can provide those references, call them, and ask tough questions, like, "Did they solve your specific problem? Did they deliver on time as promised? How would you recommend them from a support perspective?" Asking these kinds of questions will help you mitigate risk significantly, particularly with vendors that don't offer a guarantee.

Protect Your Investment

- Make sure the vendor you choose is a trusted, well-regarded player in their specific automation space.
- Ask vendors if they offer any product or implementation guarantees.
- Consult peer reviews sites like Peer Spot, G2, and Gartner Peer Insights for free, unsolicited client reviews.
- Ask vendors if they can provide the names of clients for whom they've solved a similar problem, and ask those references for their honest review of the vendor.



7. What are my support options?

No matter how sophisticated your infrastructure or automation is, it will inevitably encounter a snag at some point. That could be due to an external variable that has nothing to do with the automation solution. For example, a supplier might forget to put a file in a specific place for you where it's expected or they change the naming for that file, causing one of your automated workflows to fail.

Make sure you have the right support in place to handle these situations, so your mission-critical operations aren't compromised or impacted for very long, particularly your critical end-of-month, end-of-quarter, and end-of-year processes that need to be completed on time in the right order. Ask the vendors you evaluate what type of support is included with their standard agreement.

Specifically, is the support they offer 24/7? Is it only available via email, or do they also offer phone support? Will you be able to get a hold of a person in the middle of the night if you find something's gone awry with your automation? Vendors will often charge more for premium support options, and, in some cases, this is the factor that distinguishes two otherwise seemingly identical solutions.

Ask These Support-Related Questions

- Is your support offered 24/7?
- Will I be able to speak with someone on the phone when I need support, or is it only available via email?
- Will I be able to get a hold of someone in the middle of the night if something goes wrong with my automation?



8. Can you show me an active user community?

When comparing vendors, you also want to find out what kind of user community they're cultivating—in other words, how they're engaging with their clients. There's so much you can do with your automation solution after you've solved your initial problem or pain point, and a user community is where you'll find new ideas for how to maximize the value of your solution over time.

Ask if the vendor has an idea portal where you can share ideas that they'll actually read and consider when developing their product roadmap. Find out if they offer continued learning opportunities and webinars geared towards their clients. Do they provide their clients with tips and best practices on a regular basis or a shared code repository where clients can share what they've built with each other? These are important things to look for because being connected to a strong user community will help your team identify new automation opportunities, so you can learn more and keep boosting the ROI for your automation solution.

Indicators of a Thriving User Community

- A dedicated portal where users can share product ideas that are read and considered when the vendor develops their roadmap
- Continued learning opportunities and webinars geared towards clients
- A place where the vendor shares tips and best practices on a regular basis
- A shared code repository where clients can share what they've built with each other



9. What type of training is offered?

It's imperative that you also find out what type of training each vendor offers. Ask them what their training entails, whether it's virtual or onsite, and if there's a certification process. When the time comes for your vendor to build out your initial use case, make sure your team will be able to watch and follow along. You can even ask the vendors you talk with if your team can code it in while a platform expert instructs them on how it's done.

Once you have the basics, ask vendors if they provide advanced training that allows you to take your knowledge of the solution to the next level. If your primary automation administrator or operator were to leave the company, find out if they have ongoing training opportunities in place to support you. That way, if there's turnover on your team, you don't experience institutional knowledge loss or gaps in administration of your solution that impact your mission-critical operations.

Ask These Training-Related Questions

- What does your training entail?
- Will training be virtual or on site?
- Do you offer a certification process?
- If requested, would a platform expert be able to coach me through the process of building out our initial use case?
- Do you have ongoing training opportunities in place in the event that our automation administrator leaves the organization?



10. How do you plan to manage and maintain your automation?

Finally, find out if the vendors you're considering offer any managed automation services for their platform. While you might have the right training, staff, and skill sets to support your automation now, that might not always be the case. You'll want to make your sure automation vendor can support you long term if your headcount or skill sets on staff change over time.

If you know at the outset that you don't have the bandwidth or resources to maintain your automation on your own, managed automation services can ensure there's always someone monitoring your jobs and maintaining your platform. So, if something goes wrong, this support team will be alerted to follow up on and resolve it for you.

Managed automation services can also help you identify automation opportunities you hadn't considered. Determine if the staff set to manage your automation will be able connect with folks outside of IT to find out what other manual processes other departments are still running, so they can propose ideas for how to automate them. This requires a unique skill set, so as you're searching for the right vendor, look for a company with a curious nature that can help you identify those new opportunities.

Consider the Benefits of Managed Automation Services

- You'll always have someone maintaining your automation, even if your headcount or skill sets on staff change over time.
- If something goes wrong, there's a dedicated support team in place that'll be alerted to resolve the issue for you.
- Your vendor's platform experts can help you identify automation opportunities you hadn't even considered.





Conclusion

You deserve to find the workload automation solution that's right for your business. So, as you compare and chat with vendors, be sure to have one set of questions that serves as the foundation for all of your conversations. This will allow you to gather the information you need to make a balanced comparison of your options, so you can select an automation solution with confidence.

To schedule a demo of the powerful OpCon workload automation solution and start collecting answers to your must-ask questions, [contact the financial services automation experts at SMA](#).

