

How to vet a supplier before you commit to one

[A seven stage field guide](#)

Prescouter | Hidden intelligence that changes the decision.

PRESCOUTER

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1 Introduction

Most supplier searches fail in one of two ways

They come back with the three names procurement already had, or with fifty companies that all look equally capable on their websites. The first confirms what the team already believed. The second is a spreadsheet handed over in place of an answer.

Both have the same root. The criteria that decide the outcome were never written down before the search began, and the claims filling the shortlist were never separated from the evidence behind them. By the time anyone notices, the decision is being made on who has the best website.

This guide sets out the seven stages we work through on a supplier or partner search: what each is for, how it usually goes wrong, and the question to answer before moving on. It is written to be run by your own team.

TOO NARROW



The list never widens. You confirm the three names procurement already had.

TOO WIDE



Both are visible from the shape of the list alone, before anyone reads a profile.

2

The Framework in Brief

01Write the requirements before you look at anyone

02Search past the names you already have

03Put every candidate in the same fields

04Separate what is claimed from what is proven

05Ask what a website cannot answer

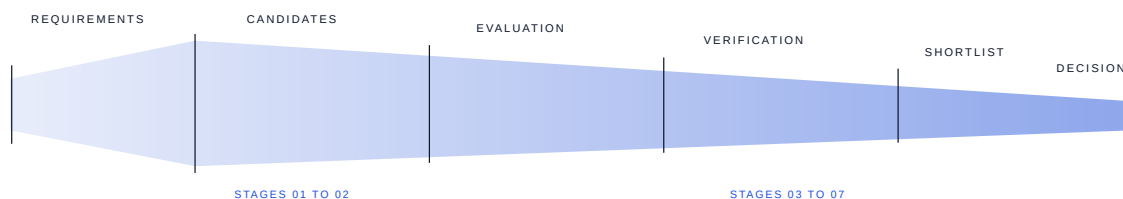
06Try to break your own shortlist

07Deliver a decision, not a longlist

REQUIREMENTS	Technical, capacity, quality, regulatory, commercial, strategic, agreed before searching
CANDIDATES	Wide enough to contain names your team did not already have
EVALUATION	One row per candidate, including the ones you expect to reject
VERIFICATION	Every must-have traced to a source, with a date on it
CONVERSATIONS	Technical staff at each shortlisted company, plus experts and customers
SHORTLIST	Single figures, each name with a contact and a next step

3 How a Search Narrows

Search narrowly and you confirm what you already believed. Search widely with nothing to cut on and you hand over a spreadsheet. The work is to widen deliberately, then narrow on evidence.



One search for polymer toll compounders ran this shape end to end: 271 profiled, 51 selected for outreach, 29 through the screening question, 15 interviewed, 7 recommended. The counts differ by category. The shape does not.

CRITERIA

Removes anyone who cannot meet a must-have

EVIDENCE

Removes claims that nothing supports

ONE QUESTION

Removes anyone who answers no

INTERVIEW

Removes anyone unwilling or full

Four cuts, in that order. Each costs more than the one before, which is why the order matters.

4 The Seven Stages

1 Write the requirements before you look at anyone

Six dimensions, agreed with quality and procurement on day one. Mark each as a **must** or a **preference**: that line is what you cut on later, and you cannot draw it honestly once you have favourites.

TECHNICAL	What must they make, from what materials, to what spec, at what stage of processing?
CAPACITY	What volume at launch and in three years, at what lead time, with what spare held back?
QUALITY	Which certifications, audit history and traceability, and at which site?
REGULATORY	Which approvals for the markets you sell in? Contact materials, labelling, export controls.
COMMERCIAL	Minimum order quantity, pricing, payment terms, tooling costs, and who owns the resulting IP.
STRATEGIC	Do you need a second source? Does tariff exposure matter? Who else do they serve?
IN PRACTICE	Two contract manufacturer searches, one for a gummy line and one for drink tablets, both opened by splitting the client's needs into must-have and nice-to-have capabilities. Everything downstream, including who was worth a phone call, ran off that split.
GOES WRONG WHEN	You start from a one-line brief. The requirements reshape themselves around whoever turned up first, and a preference reveals itself as mandatory in week eight.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

Could a colleague use your list to reject a candidate without asking you a single question?

2

Search past the names you already have

Directories and trade shows hand everyone the same list. The better option usually sits in a patent filing, in an adjacent industry running the same process, or in a language nobody searched in.

IN PRACTICE

A polymer post-processing search went to patents because websites gave no way to judge the expertise, then ran again in three further languages. A compostable film search was split by layer, film, resin and converters, and turned up 54 candidates.

GOES WRONG WHEN

The search is the product name, in English, in one country. The output looks like the market and is a mirror.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

Which candidate did nobody on your team recognise, and where did it come from?

3

Put every candidate in the same fields

Capabilities, capacity, sites, certifications, ownership, evidence of doing this exact thing. Fill them in for the candidates you expect to reject too: a comparison with holes is not a comparison. Fix the weightings before the scores appear.

IN PRACTICE

On a waste treatment plant search, five experts were interviewed for one purpose: to weight the KPI list. The KPIs were then populated for every prioritised company and scored. The ranking came out of the model rather than the room.

GOES WRONG WHEN

Each candidate gets a paragraph instead of a row. Nothing sorts, so nothing can be defended when someone senior prefers another name.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

Strip the company names off your table. Does the ranking survive?

4

Separate what is claimed from what is proven

Everything you have collected sits in one of three states. Most searches never make the distinction, which is how a capabilities page ends up quoted in a board summary as fact.

CLAIMED	Website copy, brochures, sales decks, talks. Good for building the list. Not evidence.
EVIDENCED	Patents, publications, certificates with numbers and dates, regulatory filings, equipment actually installed.
VERIFIED	Confirmed for your requirement by the supplier, an audit, a reference, or your own sample.
IN PRACTICE	A search across US university research cores collected each one's advertised capabilities, then used peer-reviewed publications to work out which were actually in use, and at what throughput. The gap between the two is the point.
GOES WRONG WHEN	A certificate is accepted without checking it is current and covers the site that would do your work, not a sister facility.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

For every must-have on your leading candidates, where does the proof sit and how old is it?

5

Ask what a website cannot answer

Available capacity this year, appetite for your volume, real lead times, pricing, and who would run the project. Open with one screening question a supplier can answer yes or no, and interview only those who pass. Ask for technical staff, and ask what they have done, not what they could do.

IN PRACTICE	A food manufacturing search landscaped 40 companies and interviewed 20. Four were both able to make the product and willing to take it on. Nothing public separated those four from the rest.
GOES WRONG WHEN	Every conversation happens with business development, who are paid to say yes. Consider keeping your identity out of early calls: a supplier answers differently once they know who is asking.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

Do you know which of your shortlisted suppliers actually wants the work?

6

Try to break your own shortlist

Write the three most likely reasons each candidate fails within a year. Check whether the list sits in one country, one parent company or one process route, because a shortlist can quietly reintroduce the single-source risk you were solving. Then run it at double the volume and half the timeline.

IN PRACTICE

A mining vendor search ended with different recommendations for two of the client's own sites, because soil and dust conditions differed, plus five condition scenarios with a matching solution for each. A single ranking would have been wrong at one site.

GOES WRONG WHEN

The open questions get dropped between the analysis and the summary slide. Risks the team knew about arrive as surprises for the people deciding.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

What single fact, if false, collapses your top recommendation, and do you know whether it is true?

7

Deliver a decision, not a longlist

A handful of named companies, each with what was verified, what is still open, and the next action with an owner and a date. Sample request, site audit, NDA, quote. Keep the rejected companies and the reasons: that record holds the decision up six months later.

IN PRACTICE

On a smart wheel systems search, the final step was arranging meetings between the client and the top three, so the suppliers presented their own proposals. The research ended in a conversation, not a document.

GOES WRONG WHEN

Twenty companies arrive at procurement with no ranking and no reasoning. The decision defaults to whoever answers the phone first.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

Is there a route from every shortlisted name to a first conversation this month?

5 Audit Your Own Search

Tick what is true of a search you are running or have commissioned. Take this page to the kickoff.

-
- ☐ The requirement list was agreed before the first search ran
-
- ☐ Must-haves and preferences are marked separately on that list
-
- ☐ Candidates were found through patents, other languages or adjacent industries
-
- ☐ Every candidate sits in the same fields, including expected rejects
-
- ☐ Each must-have on the leading candidates has a dated source
-
- ☐ Someone has spoken to technical staff at every shortlisted company
-
- ☐ The shortlist is not concentrated in one country, owner or process route
-
- ☐ Every shortlisted company has a named contact and a next step
-

0 TO 3

This produces a supplier list, not a decision. The gaps are early, and everything downstream inherits them.

4 TO 6

Serviceable. The unticked boxes are where the recommendation gets challenged.

7 TO 8

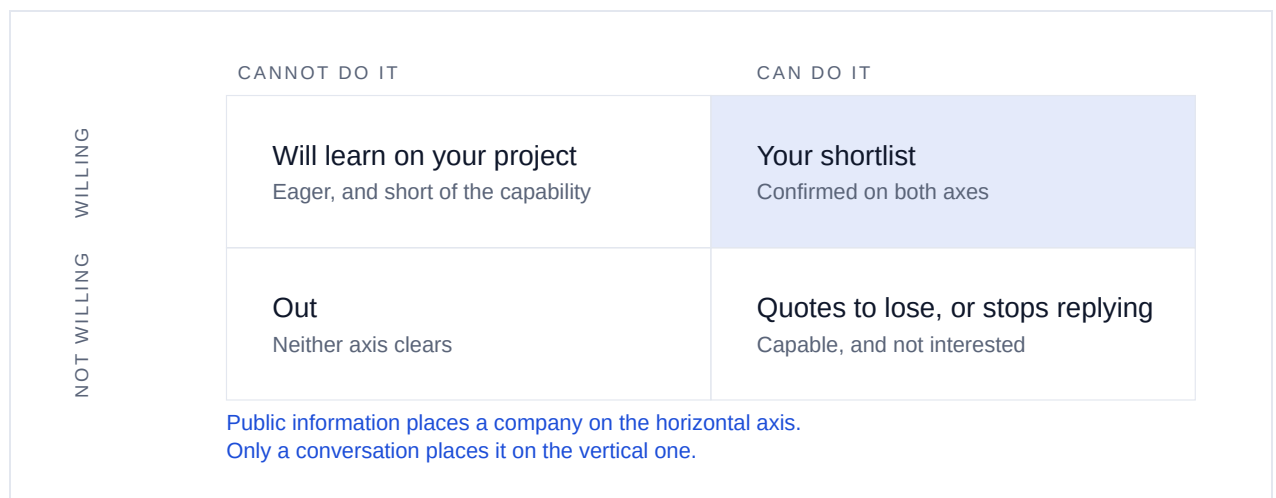
This ends in a contract conversation, and the reasoning holds when someone pushes back.

6 If You Take One Thing

Confirm it in a conversation

Public information is enough to build a list, never enough to choose from one. The difference between able and willing appears nowhere in writing, and it decides whether your project happens this year.

If you have room for two: mark the must-haves before you search. Every later cut depends on that line, and drawing it is the cheapest hour in the process.



Need a supplier shortlist you can defend internally?

[Speak to our experts →](#)