



2026

Adobe Experience Cloud Implementation Partner Selection Guide

How to Evaluate System Integrators, Boutique Partners, and Hybrid Models

5

Partner
Models

25

Evaluation
Criteria

15

Red Flag
Indicators

1

Selection
Checklist

Select figures reflect publicly reported industry data as of February 2026.

Prepared by Focus GTS | February 2026 | focusgts.com

Executive Summary

Selecting an Adobe Experience Cloud implementation partner is not simply a procurement decision — it is a **governance decision, a risk decision, and a capability alignment decision**. The partner you choose will shape your architecture, influence your long-term platform health, and determine whether your migration or implementation delivers lasting value or accumulates technical debt.

AEM Cloud Service migrations and AEP implementations are complex, high-cost, multi-month engagements that require deep platform expertise, disciplined governance, and experienced technical leadership. Most implementation failures stem from **misaligned partner capabilities** — not from technology limitations.

This guide provides a structured framework for evaluating implementation partners across five capability dimensions, identifies common red flags that warrant deeper questioning, and offers a practical selection checklist. It is designed to help technology leaders, procurement teams, and digital experience executives make informed partner decisions with confidence.

How to Use This Guide

This framework applies to any Adobe Experience Cloud engagement — whether you are evaluating a system integrator for a full AEM Cloud Service migration, selecting a boutique partner for AEP implementation, or assessing a hybrid staffing model for ongoing platform operations. Use the evaluation criteria (pages 5–7) during RFP evaluation, the red flag checklist (pages 8–9) during partner presentations, and the selection checklist (page 13) as a final validation tool before contract execution.

Methodology: This guide synthesizes evaluation criteria from publicly available Adobe partner documentation, enterprise procurement best practices, system integrator engagement patterns, and industry analysis of Adobe Experience Cloud implementations. All frameworks are directional and should be adapted to your organization's specific requirements.

Implementation Partner Models Explained

Five distinct partner models exist in the Adobe Experience Cloud ecosystem. Each has structural strengths and trade-offs. Understanding these models is the foundation for informed partner evaluation.

1. Global System Integrators (Tier 1)

Description: Large multinational consulting and technology firms with dedicated Adobe practices. Examples include firms at the Accenture, Deloitte, and IBM scale.

Strengths: Enterprise-scale delivery capacity, global presence, deep bench of certified professionals, established Adobe partnership and co-selling relationships, proven methodology frameworks.

Trade-offs: Highest cost (\$250–\$400/hr blended rates), potential for junior-heavy staffing behind senior presales teams, longer ramp-up due to internal processes, less flexibility on engagement structure.

Best fit: Enterprise-scale migrations (10K+ pages, multi-region), organizations requiring global delivery coordination, regulated industries needing established compliance frameworks.

2. Adobe Specialized Partners (Mid-Tier)

Description: Mid-size firms with Adobe as a primary or major practice area, typically holding Adobe Gold or Platinum partnership status.

Strengths: Deep Adobe-specific expertise, more senior-weighted teams, stronger architect-to-developer ratios, competitive pricing versus Tier 1 SIs, closer Adobe relationship management.

Trade-offs: Smaller bench limits parallel engagement capacity, may lack breadth in non-Adobe integration areas, regional presence may not cover all markets.

Best fit: Mid-scale migrations and implementations, organizations that value Adobe depth over breadth, engagements where architectural quality outweighs scale.

3. Boutique / Regional Partners

Description: Smaller firms (typically 10–75 people) with concentrated Adobe expertise, often founded by former SI practitioners or Adobe alumni.

Strengths: Highest architect-to-developer ratio, most hands-on senior involvement, lowest overhead costs, fastest decision-making, deepest specialization in specific Adobe products.

Trade-offs: Limited capacity for large parallel workstreams, key-person dependency risk, may lack formal methodology documentation, smaller support bench for post-go-live.

Best fit: Single-site or focused implementations, organizations needing architect-led delivery, engagements where quality and depth matter more than scale.

4. Offshore Delivery Models

Description: Partners delivering primarily through offshore development centers, typically in India, Eastern Europe, or Latin America, with cost-optimized rate structures.

Strengths: Lowest hourly rates (\$40–\$120/hr), large developer pools, 24-hour development cycles possible, effective for high-volume component development and testing.

Trade-offs: Cloud Service expertise is scarcer offshore, time zone challenges for collaborative work, quality variance requires strong onshore governance, communication overhead can offset rate savings.

Best fit: Cost-sensitive engagements with strong internal technical leadership, component-level development under architect guidance, testing and QA workstreams.

5. Hybrid Model (Internal + Partner + Specialists)

Description: Organizations retain internal project management and core development capacity, engage a partner for execution, and add independent specialists for governance and architectural oversight.

Strengths: Knowledge retained internally, cost optimized by role, independent governance reduces SI lock-in risk, flexibility to scale partner involvement by phase, organizational capability building throughout engagement.

Trade-offs: Requires strong internal coordination, more complex vendor management, internal team must have baseline Adobe competency, success depends on clear role boundaries.

Best fit: Organizations with existing Adobe teams seeking Cloud Service migration support, enterprises wanting to build long-term internal capability, engagements where reducing partner dependency is a strategic priority.

Evaluation Criteria Framework

The following framework provides 25 specific evaluation criteria across five capability dimensions. Use these during RFP evaluation, partner presentations, and reference checks to systematically assess partner capabilities.

A. Architecture Depth

Criteria	What to Look For	Why It Matters
Named Cloud Service Architect on the team	Specific individual identified by name with verifiable Cloud Service experience	Unnamed “architect TBD” often means the partner lacks one
Completed Cloud Service migrations	Number and scale of previous AEM Cloud Service migrations delivered	Cloud Service migration experience cannot be substituted with 6.5 experience
Multi-product integration experience	Demonstrated AEM + AEP + Target + Analytics integration delivery	Adobe stack integration complexity is where most architectural failures occur
Reference architecture documentation	Partner provides architecture blueprints during proposal, not after contract	Willingness to share approach pre-contract signals confidence and transparency
Architect availability throughout engagement	Architect committed beyond presales through execution and go-live	Presales-only architects leave execution teams without architectural guidance

B. Cloud Service Competency

Criteria	What to Look For	Why It Matters
Immutable repository model experience	Team understands mutable vs. immutable content separation and CI/CD-only deployment	This is the most fundamental architectural change from AEM 6.5
Cloud Manager CI/CD governance	Defined pipeline strategy, environment management, and deployment governance approach	Poor CI/CD governance leads to deployment failures and environment instability
Dispatcher SDK usage and configuration	Team uses Dispatcher SDK for local validation; understands strict naming and structure rules	Dispatcher misconfiguration is among the most common Cloud Service deployment blockers
Migration tooling fluency	Hands-on experience with BPA, CAM, CTT, Repository Modernizer, and Dispatcher Converter	Tooling fluency directly correlates with migration timeline accuracy
Edge Delivery Services familiarity	Understanding of Edge Delivery architecture, document-based authoring, and Universal Editor	Edge Delivery is Adobe’s strategic direction; partners should demonstrate awareness

C. Governance & Knowledge Transfer

Criteria	What to Look For	Why It Matters
Code ownership terms and IP provisions	Clear contract language: client owns all code, configurations, and deliverables	Ambiguous IP terms create lock-in and limit future partner flexibility
Documentation requirements and standards	Defined documentation deliverables: architecture docs, runbooks, decision logs	Undocumented implementations create expensive knowledge gaps post-engagement

Criteria	What to Look For	Why It Matters
Post-go-live transition plan	Explicit plan for transitioning operations from partner to internal team or support partner	Abrupt handoffs without transition planning cause post-go-live instability
Internal capability building approach	Partner actively trains and enables your internal team during execution	Partners who build your capability reduce long-term dependency and cost
Defined runbook and operational handoff	Operational runbook covering monitoring, incident response, deployment procedures	Without runbooks, your team cannot operate independently after go-live

D. Staffing Model Transparency

Criteria	What to Look For	Why It Matters
Named resources vs. role placeholders	SOW lists specific individuals by name with bios and relevant project history	Role placeholders allow partners to staff with whoever is available, not whoever is best
Onshore vs. offshore ratio and governance	Explicit ratio with defined governance model for offshore team management	Ungoverned offshore delivery often produces rework that exceeds rate savings
Architect-level availability and continuity	Architect committed for defined hours per week with continuity guarantee across phases	Part-time or rotating architects create architectural inconsistency
Replacement and backfill policy	Defined process and timeline for replacing departed team members	Unplanned departures without backfill guarantees stall projects for weeks
Team continuity guarantees across phases	Contract language ensuring core team members remain through project completion	High team turnover is the leading cause of knowledge loss and timeline slippage

E. Commercial Structure

Criteria	What to Look For	Why It Matters
Fixed bid vs. T&M trade-offs articulated	Partner clearly explains which model fits your engagement and why	Wrong commercial model creates misaligned incentives and budget risk
Change order policy and process	Defined process for scope changes with transparent pricing and approval workflow	Undefined change order processes lead to scope creep and budget overruns
Assumptions documented explicitly	Comprehensive assumptions section covering scope boundaries, client responsibilities, timelines	Undocumented assumptions become disputes when expectations diverge
Risk allocation and liability clarity	Clear language on who bears risk for delays, defects, and scope changes	Ambiguous risk allocation creates adversarial relationships when issues arise
Payment milestones tied to deliverables	Payments linked to specific, measurable deliverables — not calendar dates	Calendar-based payments incentivize time spent, not outcomes delivered

Indicators That Require Deeper Questioning

The following indicators do not automatically disqualify a partner — but each warrants deeper investigation and direct questioning during the evaluation process. The presence of multiple red flags in a single proposal significantly increases engagement risk.

Technical Red Flags

1. No Named Cloud Service Architect

The proposal does not identify a specific Cloud Service architect by name. An unnamed “architect role” suggests the partner may not have a qualified Cloud Service architect available for your engagement.

2. No Documented Migration Phasing Plan

The partner cannot articulate a phased migration approach at the proposal stage. Migration phasing is foundational — partners with experience can outline phases before contract execution.

3. No Content/Code Freeze Strategy

The proposal does not address content freeze windows, code freeze periods, or parallel development management. These are essential for clean migration cutover.

4. No Cloud Service Migration References

The partner cannot provide references for completed AEM Cloud Service migrations. AEM 6.5 experience does not automatically qualify a partner for Cloud Service work.

5. No Rollback or Contingency Plan

The proposal does not address rollback procedures, contingency planning, or risk mitigation strategies. Experienced partners plan for failure scenarios proactively.

Organizational Red Flags

6. Over-Reliance on Offshore Without Onshore Governance

Proposal shows a heavily offshore-weighted team without defined onshore architectural leadership and governance structure. Offshore delivery without onshore oversight frequently produces rework that exceeds rate savings.

7. Role Placeholders Instead of Named Resources

SOW uses generic role titles (“Senior Developer”) rather than identifying specific individuals. This allows the partner to staff with available resources rather than the best-fit team.

8. Architect Only Available During Presales

The senior architect who presented during the sales process is not committed to the execution phase. This is among the most common complaints in post-engagement reviews.

9. No Cloud Service Certifications on Proposed Team

None of the proposed team members hold current AEM Cloud Service certifications. While certification is not the only indicator of competence, its complete absence warrants questioning.

10. No Knowledge Transfer or Documentation Deliverables

The SOW does not include documentation requirements, knowledge transfer sessions, or operational runbook deliverables. This creates expensive knowledge gaps when the engagement ends.

Commercial Red Flags

11. Vague SOW Language Around Scope Boundaries

The SOW uses broad language like “all necessary development” without specific deliverable definitions. Vague scope language is the leading cause of change order disputes.

12. No Explicit Assumptions Section

The proposal does not document assumptions about client responsibilities, environment availability, content readiness, or third-party dependencies. Undocumented assumptions become disputes.

13. Below-Market Rates Without Explanation

Hourly rates are significantly below market benchmarks without a clear explanation of how the partner achieves cost efficiency. Unusually low rates may indicate junior-heavy staffing or offshore delivery not disclosed in the proposal.

14. No Change Order Process Defined

The proposal does not include a formal change order process for scope modifications. Without a defined process, scope changes become contentious and expensive.

15. Payment Milestones Not Tied to Deliverables

Payment schedule is based on calendar dates or time elapsed rather than specific, measurable deliverable completion. Calendar-based payments incentivize presence, not outcomes.

Total Cost of Ownership vs. Initial Bid

The lowest hourly rate does not equal the lowest total cost. Organizations that select partners based primarily on rate comparisons frequently experience higher total costs due to factors that are difficult to quantify at the proposal stage but predictable in hindsight.

Hidden Cost Factor	How It Manifests	Estimated Impact
Rework from insufficient architecture oversight	Junior teams make architectural decisions that must be reversed later	20–40% of original development cost in rework
Knowledge loss from high team turnover	Departing team members take undocumented context; replacements re-learn	2–4 weeks lost per key resource replacement
Timeline compression costs	Rushed timelines from underestimation require overtime, parallel workstreams, premium staffing	15–30% budget overrun on compressed timelines
Long-term technical debt carryover	Partner delivers working code that is poorly architected for future maintainability	Compounds annually; can exceed original project cost within 2–3 years
Post-go-live stabilization costs	Insufficient testing during delivery leads to extended defect remediation after launch	4–8 weeks of unplanned stabilization at premium rates
Extended support periods	Partner engagement extends beyond planned duration due to incomplete knowledge transfer	\$10K–\$50K+/month in unplanned retainer costs

TCO Perspective

When evaluating partner proposals, request a total cost projection that includes: initial implementation, anticipated change orders based on similar engagements, post-go-live stabilization, knowledge transfer, and 6–12 months of post-launch support. Partners who have delivered similar engagements can provide realistic total cost ranges — those who cannot may be underestimating scope. A partner whose initial bid is 20% higher but delivers with fewer change orders and cleaner handoff often costs less in total than the lowest bidder.

The Hybrid Oversight Model

An increasing number of enterprises are adopting a three-layer engagement model: the organization retains internal project management and core development capacity, engages a system integrator for execution delivery, and adds an independent Cloud Service advisor for architectural governance and risk oversight.

This model addresses a fundamental tension in traditional SI engagements: the partner delivering the work is also the partner assessing its quality. An independent governance layer provides executive-level visibility into delivery quality without creating adversarial dynamics.

Role Allocation: Hybrid Oversight Model

Function	Internal Team	SI Partner	Independent Advisor
Project governance	Executive sponsorship, budget authority, stakeholder management	Delivery management, sprint planning, status reporting	Governance framework validation, risk escalation advisory
Architecture	Requirements definition, business context	Solution design, technical architecture, implementation	Independent architectural review and validation
Development	Core developers (knowledge retention), code review participation	Primary development execution, testing, deployment	Code quality oversight, Cloud Service best practice validation
Migration planning	Content inventory, business requirements, UAT coordination	Migration execution, tooling, phasing	Migration strategy review, risk assessment, timeline validation
Quality assurance	UAT ownership, business acceptance criteria	Functional testing, performance testing, regression testing	Independent quality assessment, delivery health monitoring
Knowledge transfer	Learning and adoption, capability building	Documentation delivery, training sessions	Transfer completeness validation, gap identification

Why the Hybrid Model Works

- **Risk mitigation:** Independent architectural validation catches design flaws before they become expensive rework.
- **Executive visibility:** Leadership receives an independent assessment of delivery health, velocity, and risk — not filtered through the delivering partner.
- **Capability building:** Internal team develops Cloud Service expertise alongside the engagement rather than after it ends.
- **Vendor accountability:** Partners deliver higher quality when they know an independent advisor is reviewing architectural decisions and code quality.
- **Cost protection:** Independent scope validation reduces unnecessary change orders and identifies scope creep early.

About Navigator by Focus GTS

Navigator is Focus GTS's Adobe Experience Cloud execution practice.

Navigator can operate alongside your selected implementation partner to provide independent architectural validation, migration oversight, and execution reinforcement. Navigator embeds senior Adobe Experience Cloud expertise directly into your organization through a flexible subscription model — aligning architects, developers, and specialists with your internal team and your chosen SI.

Navigator does not replace your SI.

Navigator strengthens your position alongside them.

Navigator Supports

- Independent Cloud Service architectural validation
- Migration governance and risk oversight
- Capability-aligned team reinforcement
- Executive-level visibility into velocity and platform health
- Ongoing execution support across the Adobe stack
- Knowledge transfer and internal capability building
- Partner evaluation and selection advisory

Already Selected a System Integrator?

Many enterprises have already engaged a global SI or Adobe partner for implementation. Navigator can operate alongside your selected partner as an **independent Cloud Service advisory and governance layer**.

We help organizations:

- Validate architectural decisions before they are finalized
- Review migration phasing and wave strategy
- Ensure Cloud Service best practices are consistently followed
- Identify unnecessary scope expansion or technical over-engineering
- Provide executive-level visibility into delivery quality and risk

For organizations investing \$500K–\$10M+ in Adobe implementation, having embedded Cloud Service expertise aligned directly with your internal leadership can materially reduce execution risk and protect long-term platform integrity.

Start with a 30-day, fixed-fee Navigator pilot.

Scope the pilot around your priorities. No long-term commitment during the pilot.

focusgts.com/navigator

Partner Selection Checklist

Use this checklist as a final validation tool before executing a partner contract. If more than five items are unchecked across any single category, consider requesting additional information from the partner before proceeding.

Architecture Depth

- Named Cloud Service architect identified in proposal with verifiable experience
- Partner has completed multiple AEM Cloud Service migrations at comparable scale
- Multi-product integration experience demonstrated (AEM + AEP + Target etc.)
- Reference architecture documentation provided during evaluation process
- Architect committed through execution and go-live, not just presales

Cloud Service Competency

- Team demonstrates understanding of immutable repository model and CI/CD-only deployment
- Cloud Manager CI/CD governance approach clearly defined
- Dispatcher SDK usage and configuration expertise verified
- Migration tooling fluency confirmed (BPA, CAM, CTT, Repository Modernizer)
- Edge Delivery Services awareness demonstrated

Governance & Knowledge Transfer

- Code ownership and IP terms clearly stated — client owns all deliverables
- Documentation requirements and standards defined in SOW
- Post-go-live transition plan included with defined handoff milestones
- Internal capability building approach articulated
- Operational runbook and handoff deliverables specified

Staffing Model Transparency

- Named resources with bios and relevant project history provided
- Onshore vs. offshore ratio explicitly stated with governance model
- Architect-level availability and continuity guaranteed in contract
- Replacement and backfill policy defined with timeline commitments
- Team continuity guarantees across project phases

Commercial Structure

- Fixed bid vs. T&M rationale clearly articulated for this engagement
- Change order policy and approval process defined
- Comprehensive assumptions section documented in proposal
- Risk allocation and liability terms clearly defined
- Payment milestones tied to specific, measurable deliverables

Disclaimer: This guide does not endorse or criticize any specific implementation partner or system integrator. All evaluation criteria, red flag indicators, and frameworks are provided for informational and planning purposes only. Market data and pricing estimates are directional, based on publicly available sources and industry analysis as of February 2026. Organizations should verify all partner claims through direct reference checks and validate pricing with their Adobe account team. Focus GTS does not guarantee the accuracy of third-party data cited herein.

© 2026 Focus GTS. All rights reserved. Adobe, AEM, Experience Manager, AEP, and related marks are trademarks of Adobe Inc. Navigator™ is a trademark of Focus GTS.