

A person is shown from the side, looking at a laptop screen. The background is a dark blue gradient with a white wireframe cityscape overlay on the right side. The person's hand is near their glasses on the laptop keyboard.

Is Your Company Ready for the Beta User Experience?

By Jay Snyder

Being a beta customer is not an easy decision and shouldn't be taken lightly. Here's how to make sure your experience is a good one.

As the built environment seeks out ways to alleviate industry pressures, startup technology solutions are proliferating. These solutions are a welcoming source of options, as people and processes alone are incapable of addressing some of the more pervasive and complex issues, including the labor shortage, productivity, project complexity and schedule compression. However, many of these startup technologies are still in their beta phases. In other words, still in development, but viable enough to begin delivering value.

Startup technologies often need beta users to test their solutions in practice to help tech developers focus research and development or further refine features for a fully commercialized product. Some companies prefer to be lagging adopters, leaving beta user or test pilot status to others. Where there is risk, there is also reward for those companies that opt to deploy early-stage technology.

Because serving as a beta user requires more effort than simply adopting a fully commercialized mature technology, this investment in resources shouldn't be taken lightly. You may, for example, lose time, money, interest, reputation or trust in the process. In the event that the beta technology creates inefficiencies, a potential safety concern or a burden on employees, there is also a risk to the company's reputation and an erosion of trust in leadership.

Reasons to Be a Beta User

There are many advantages for becoming a beta customer of an emerging technology. Companies that explore startup technologies tend to have a culture of innovation and curiosity. This type of culture is inherent in a company that seeks ways to improve the business rather than accepting efficacy of age-old processes. Innovation cultures tend to be rooted in excellence—a cornerstone that creates trust and bonds among teams. The culture of innovation and curiosity certainly requires business rules for who, what, when, where, why, how opportunities should be pursued—lest it breed an environment of chaos and unaccountability.



Another benefit of being a beta user is the opportunity to create a competitive advantage for the efficiency or capability that an emerging technology could offer. While this competitive advantage may only be available until the technology is commercialized and widely available, it can help your company differentiate itself in the marketplace (i.e., via better quality, cost or schedule, or a combination of all three). These advantages can all provide new avenues for winning work and retaining clients.

Beta clients can also influence how the technology itself is developed. Their feedback allows the developers to focus on fixing bugs, adding features, adjusting capability, and refining insights around the use-case that fits their target markets. Your company represents a part of that market, so it benefits as well. While most startup companies must ensure their solution meets the needs of the majority of their target market, beta customers have a loud voice when it comes to guiding product development.

Advice for a Good Beta User Experience

In discussions with several industry influencers, we gathered noteworthy advice for a well-prepared and positive beta experience. Jim Andrews is CEO of SubHQ, a cloud-based subcontractor-focused project management platform. Jim is also the former CEO of American Ironworks and Erectors. After demo-ing and implementing several project management solutions, Jim realized that current PM solutions simply weren't designed for how subcontractors run projects, prompting him to develop an in-house solution that was a viable, resilient and deployable technology.

As a past technology buyer and current tech startup company owner, Jim brings a unique perspective to the table and offers this guidance to companies that want to be beta testers:

- Realize that the technology being piloted may have bugs or may not have all functions released.
- Have patience as the tech company builds its support team or prioritizes which bugs and features to address.
- Be willing to offer regular feedback.
- Understand that while most feedback will be addressed or will drive R&D, the technology is being developed for the market, not just one user.

Brendan Dowdall, CEO and founder of Concrete Sensors, adds these three tips:

- **Start with clear goals and expectations.** Perhaps the most important part of entering a beta trial is before it begins. We find the most success when we can sit down and outline the goals and expectations ahead of a trial. Without considering the objectives, you end up kicking the tires rather than developing a baseline to measure an ROI. At the end of the day, the opportunity to show an ROI immensely enriches the story you tell later and the value your company gets from the technology.
- **Get everyone involved.** When investing in a trial, consider the next steps. If a trial is going to be the basis of the “go” or “no-go” decision for the company, consider all the stakeholders within the company. Who else needs to be part of the decision to make adoption seamless? Construction organizations are typically flat, making a full-scale adoption difficult for most companies.
- **Develop a culture of innovation.** Beta success isn’t just about the technology. In fact, culture is the biggest obstacle to ensuring your company is staying ahead of the curve. Make new technology adoption celebrated and rewarded. Even if the outcome is not a strong fit, celebrate the process of trying new things. Doing something new means you have to try something new.

I also spoke with Dave Burns, director of field technologies at McCarthy Building Company. Dave’s perspective in selecting and deploying technology across a large multioffice enterprise keeps risk mitigation in mind and a solid approach to measuring success. He offers this sage advice:

- **Plan a test with the end in mind.** Beta testers usually focus on newly introduced features and functions, as opposed to deliberately planning the measurement of real business or process outcomes. Users must challenge themselves to think through and document those anticipated benefits (e.g., a more efficient process, greater quality of outputs, improved business decision-making and so forth) and then track the progress of the solution against those measurements.
- **Don’t measure outcomes right away.** Most new technologies drive change, and there is typically a dip in productivity when introducing any change to users or processes. Allow some time for a user or team to get comfortable with a solution before collecting feedback and measuring that solution’s value.
- **Do your homework before moving forward with a test.** Understand what alternative solutions might exist that match (or beat) the solution in question. Reach out to people who serve in technology leadership positions (both in and outside the company) to help understand if the solution has been tested and/or compared with other solutions.

Finding Opportunities to Be a Beta User

If you’re interested in becoming a beta user, you may be wondering how to find emerging technologies that meet your interests and business objectives. The good news is that it’s not that difficult. Here are three sure-fire ways to connect with startup companies seeking early adopters:

1. **Accelerators** come in all shapes and sizes and include incubators, lighthouse program and market accelerators, to name a few. Accelerators advise startup companies and assist with such activ-

ities as R&D and go-to-market strategy. Some, like FMI's Technology Market Accelerator, also assist with matching young tech companies with willing beta user companies. Accelerators can have up to a dozen or more companies in their programs (and many more in their networks).

2. **Venture capital (VC) firms** are a great way to make introductions to tech startups. Usually this is limited to the technology companies within the VC's investment portfolio. These technologies will have the added benefit of VC funding and advising, but their founders are usually still running the company and its operations. VC relationships have the benefit of reaching many tech startup companies at once. VCs can have access to several dozen technologies within their current and past portfolios, in their deal flows or simply within their overall networks.
3. **Conferences and industry meetups** are another practical way to meet young technology companies that need beta users. Events held by organizations such as BuiltWorlds or the Society for Construction Solutions are great sources of beta user opportunity. Those organizations and other industry conferences attract early-stage technologies that are seeking market feedback on their solutions. The companies usually test their products and messaging in the market as an exhibitor or sometimes during a "demo day," where tech companies briefly explain their technology and invite critiques from an audience.

While being a beta user of an early technology isn't for everyone, it does offer exciting opportunities to move the industry forward in the development of viable technology solutions based on user feedback and industry-driven development. If the beta user experience is for you, be sure to reach out to the venture capital firm, conference organizations/association or FMI to learn more about it and mitigate some of the inherent risks associated with the experience.



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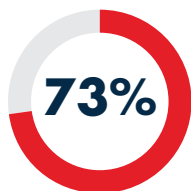
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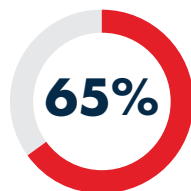
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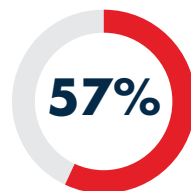
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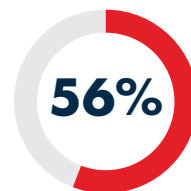
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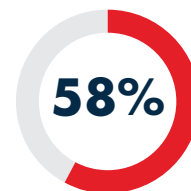
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