Practical guide

Do you need a fractional CTO?

A practical guide for owner-managed UK businesses deciding whether retained senior technology leadership would help — and when a review, a full-time hire, or staying DIY is the better call.

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If you run a growing UK business without a CTO, technology decisions still land on your desk. Suppliers disagree. Projects expand. Spreadsheets hold the truth until they do not. You are intelligent about the business — you are just short of a senior person whose job is to hold the technology thread.

That gap is real. A fractional CTO (or fractional technology adviser) is one way to fill it. It is not the only way, and it is not always the right one.

What fractional leadership actually is

It is retained senior judgement on a part-time basis: someone who understands trade-offs, can challenge suppliers, and stays accountable after the recommendation — without the cost of a full-time CTO.

It is not:

- A contractor who only burns tickets
- An agency account manager with a new title
- A developer who “also does strategy” once a fortnight
- A person you hire only to keep an agency busy

The useful test is simple. After three months, are decisions clearer, risks more visible, and delivery more honest — or do you just have another meeting in the diary?

Signs it may fit

Fractional leadership tends to earn its keep when several of these are true at once:

- Technology choices keep bouncing between suppliers with no independent voice
- Projects start, stall, or quietly expand without a written roadmap
- The business runs on spreadsheets, workarounds and knowledge held by one person
- You are about to buy or replace a core system and have nobody senior to sense-check it
- Advice and delivery are split across people who do not answer to the same outcome

- Leadership wants continuity — the same person from first conversation through implementation

In short: the problem is not "we need more developers". The problem is "we need senior judgement we can trust, regularly".

Signs it may not

Be equally clear about the reverse:

- You already have strong internal technical leadership who owns outcomes
- The need is a short, well-scoped build with a clear brief — buy delivery, not a retainer
- You only want someone to "manage the agency" with no authority to change direction
- The real issue is an overloaded ops process that needs mapping, not a technology leader
- Budget pressure means you need a one-off answer, not an ongoing relationship

In those cases a focused review package, a fixed piece of delivery, or fixing the process first usually beats a retainer.

Fractional vs full-time vs DIY

Occasional big decisions, supplier noise, no internal senior tech — a fractional retainer is often enough.

Continuous product or engineering leadership, a larger team, a heavy change programme — a full-time CTO or technology lead usually fits better.

One unclear problem — AI, legacy risk, systems fit — start with a time-boxed review, then decide.

Clear brief, known build, trusted delivery partner — buy a project, not ongoing leadership.

Stable stack, low change, strong ops discipline — staying DIY for now can be the honest call.

Full-time hire is right when the volume of decisions and people leadership justifies a permanent seat at the table. DIY is right when change is light and you are not betting the business on the next systems call. Fractional sits in the middle: enough continuity to matter, without building a technology department you do not need yet.

What good fractional work looks like

Expect boring, useful artefacts — not theatre:

- A short technology roadmap the leadership team recognises
- Clear recommendations: improve, buy, build, or wait

- Supplier conversations where your interests come first
- Priorities that survive contact with cashflow and capacity
- Honest challenge when a favourite idea is a poor fit

If the relationship produces only slide decks and no decisions, it is not leadership. It is commentary.

Questions to ask before you retain anyone

Ask these in plain English:

- What decisions will you help us make in the first 90 days?
- What will you *not* do — and who does that instead?
- How do you stay independent of preferred tools and partner kickbacks?
- What does accountability look like when a project goes wrong?
- How do we stop or reshape the retainer if the pressure changes?
- Will you work with our existing suppliers, or only replace them?

You are buying judgement and continuity. Make sure both are real.

How retainers usually work

Common shapes are one day a month, two days a month, one day a week, or a bespoke mix around a live programme. The shape should follow the pressure in the business, not a fixed product SKU.

A healthy start is often smaller than people expect: enough time to understand the operation, settle one or two urgent decisions, and prove the relationship before you scale the days.

You can clarify the need before you retain anyone

Write down the three technology decisions that are currently stuck, the suppliers involved, and what “good” would look like in six months. If that list is empty, you may not need fractional leadership yet. If it is long, messy, and keeping you awake, you probably need *some* senior help — retainer, review, or hire — and the next conversation is which shape fits.

A fractional technology adviser is Two Wrens’ retained option for owner-managed businesses in that middle ground. It is a means. The point is clearer decisions and less vendor-led drift.

Next step

Book a Discovery Call and I will help you test whether a retainer, a focused review, project delivery, or nothing at all is the honest recommendation.

Talk it through

If this guide is useful, a Discovery Call is the natural next step — no obligation, no sales script.

Book: twowrens.co.uk/contact
Email: hello@twowrens.co.uk