Here are some thoughts to help you decide

Digital agencies today are very different to how they looked in the past. What often started as a creative design flair has necessarily morphed into a full-service delivery offer that promises to address a lifecycle of need: from service design and user experience through to large-scale implementation, release and support. Agencies talk about providing the best of both worlds, where you get a great product or platform designed which they implement for you using their expertise in technology. The proposition seems compelling when described as a seamless end-to-end process without any handovers or gaps. And by ensuring it all gets delivered on a fixed price basis, you stay within a budget.

But, of course, things are not always as they seem.

It is true that many full-service agencies are very good at the front-end piece; product and platform concepting, service and UX design, and brand positioning and alignment. That is usually their foundational background, and something they sound genuinely passionate about. But internally there are still inevitable handovers from creative teams to technical teams and knowledge is invariably lost and confused during this phase. It is often the case that too much of the fixed price has been spent upfront on research, discovery and product envisioning at the time a handover takes place to the internal delivery team. Delivery frequently ends up with the thankless task of being asked to develop and test something more complex than they had estimated for – in less time than they had planned.

Most digital agencies still work on a project basis, so at the end of the project what ends up being delivered may look "good enough" from an external perspective, but is lumbered with technical debt to fit the demands of the deadline. This debt represents a hidden cost that will only be apparent the next time further enhancement or support work needs to take place.

Also for many full-service agencies with a technical implementation capability, the lion's share of their passion and credentials relates to challenges and missions of a more creative nature. This results in less investment, focus and expertise in the technology side of their business – often resulting in a favoured known set of technology components that get applied to every single solution, irrespective of how good a fit they are. This can result in some clunky inefficient work-arounds, and solutions that have been designed based on technologies from the past, rather than those that have a future. This becomes more relevant when planning for successful and appealing platforms that are expected to have some longevity, and a product roadmap.

Often this "favoured product" approach is only revealed at a later date, along with the technical debt, when it becomes apparent that the technologies originally used don't lend themselves to working in concert with the newer technologies at that later time.

One other frequently cited issue with full service agencies is that they rarely have had to design platforms that can scale to comfortably handle huge volumes on demand. They may be using software products that have been proven to scale, but have ended up implementing the solution in such a way that the innate scaling capabilities of those underlying products cannot work the way they were intended to. This lack of depth in solution architecture expertise can mean that a solution that works well today may struggle when the number of users increases significantly – and failure is least welcome (and most damaging) just as the usage curve is pointed upwards.

There are likely to be many platforms in use today that have been built by full service agencies that at some point in the future are going to "become a story" once the issues highlighted above are exposed. It's important to think about the total cost of ownership of a platform over its planned service life, and the certainty that it will require updating and supporting.

If you live in a world where you expect to "refresh" your business technology platforms every few years as they are no longer fit for purpose – which in reality means replacing them with something new – you are still adhering to what is now considered to be an outdated "project-based" way of doing things. In the new way of working, platforms should continuously evolve, leveraging the most appropriate best practices, UX concepts and technologies.

The panacea to the scenarios outlined above is to find a full-service provider that has both a service & UX design capability and a platform engineering background that encompasses architecture, technology, implementation, release and constant evolution. This provider should first demonstrate its ability to mitigate the risks outlined above in the products and platforms it has successfully delivered at scale, and then its approach to constantly evolving your platforms gradually over time in response to changing business and market needs. Ness Digital engineering is one such provider and uses its Ness Connected framework to ensure that the right product or platform has been designed, and then uses its accumulated engineering prowess to ensure the right foundation is implemented correctly and then evolved over time.

The next time you reach for your familiar and comfortable full-service agency, be aware of the issues described above and think about whether you need to reconsider the way that you've always done things. Challenge their methods and approach to technology implementation. If the answers you receive make you think twice then we would be delighted to hear from you to discuss the modern alternatives to give you peace of mind, speed-to-value and an ongoing world class outcome.