

what's the best choice?

"It's often tempting for a company to develop their own software application when they need a tool to help them out. After all, why settle for something generalized when it is possible to develop something specific to that particular business?" says Hank Luhring, Issuetrak CEO.

This argument isn't new.

In fact, TechRepublic calls it ["the eternal debate."](#) It may not even be the first time you've experienced it in your company. You need a software solution, and the debate across the company is whether you should buy an off-the-shelf solution or develop your own customized program. Management wants it done as quickly and as cost-effectively as possible. You want to make sure you only have to do it once.

When asked further about the build it or buy it dilemma, Luhring says, "It turns out developing a software application is more difficult than it appears at first, especially nowadays. First of all, it probably needs to be a web application. Otherwise, you get into the problem of having it run on various versions of Windows and Mac that need to be deployed onto the desktop. If a change is made, it needs to be deployed again. Most new business applications today are web apps."

While there are pros and cons to each option, there are five major areas you need to consider when making your decision.

Timing

Developing custom software takes time. Perhaps too much time. Unless you are a large company with a big pool of programmers or want to engage a software development company, make sure to consider not only development time, but testing and revisions that need to occur - all before the final implementation. Consider also your business needs. The more detailed the requirements, the longer the development cycle.

An off-the-shelf solution is faster to deploy because the actual development and testing has already been completed. Solution providers also often have professional services teams that can assist you in your implementation to make the process as streamlined as possible. This is often a better solution for small businesses, those with an urgent need, or those without access to a large programming team. The majority of time is normally spent researching solutions that best match your requirements.



Talent

What skills does it take to develop a web app? Someone needs to know how to code in HTML, CSS, and Javascript. These are not trivial. Someone else (usually a different person) has to come up with an adequate look and design. What colors should be used, what fonts? You need to know what action is taken when every button or link is clicked. Someone else needs to know about the backend database where the data will be stored. Then you get into who handles backups and restores the system if something goes wrong. There needs to be coding standards, and good unit tests written. There needs to be quality assurance (QA). Good developers don't always make good QA people.

There also has to be a long-range commitment to the project. There will be changes and improvements required as the business needs evolve. Programmers come and go. Who will be maintaining the application two years down the road? Five years? Ten years? The cost to initially develop an application pales in comparison to the lifetime costs.

Features

You have a specific set of requirements to solve your business need. Is the software solution going to give you a competitive advantage over your competitors? Do you have only a small set of requirements, or the need to adapt constantly to your changing business landscape? You also have the option to start with the bare minimum necessary and then add additional functionality later. Depending on the extensiveness of your needs, creating your own program might be in your best interest.

Maybe you have a generalized idea of the problem you need to solve, but aren't sure of the best way to accomplish it. Or perhaps your needs are more vast. Are you looking for something that other companies also need? In these cases, off-the-shelf software may be the best solution. You can leverage the best practices that other companies have created and taken advantage of. You get a full suite of features that solve your problem, possibly even giving you more than you realized you needed.

Support

If you build it yourself, you'll be controlling the environment it's hosted in and be doing any troubleshooting that may come up. This may involve adding additional IT staff to manage servers or keeping a development resource available to handle any code-based issues that arise. If you have your solution built by an external service provider, then you would need to re-engage them each time you needed an update or bug fix.

One of Issuetrak's enterprise clients experienced a major setback after outsourcing the development of a call center application. Some time after implementing the new system in relevant departments across the organization, the company decided some changes needed to be made. When the internal development team accessed the codebase, they found that the entire application had been written in a foreign language. The company was left unable to independently make any changes to their own proprietary



software without leaning on further engagements with the company they had originally outsourced the project to. How frustrating!

Most off-the-shelf solutions have built-in maintenance costs. Optimally, this would include all technical support and bug fixes as well as upgrades to the solution itself. If the solution is hosted in the cloud, maintenance and support may be included in the standard fees. If you host a solution yourself, you may be given the option of a renewable maintenance agreement. You may even find that the solution provider encourages their customers to give feedback on future enhancements.

Cost

An Australian software engineer and Ph.D. in artificial intelligence, Dr John Flackett of the software development firm koolth, estimated that the [average cost of building a software package](#) to be between \$100,000-\$250,000. He gave the lowest range, with no bells and whistles as \$10,000 - \$25,000. That was in late 2015--costs have risen since then. Even if you have the team to build your software in-house, by the time you consider the salary of your staff, along with these other factors, it's expensive.

With the number of off-the-shelf solutions, costs can range from free on up. Finding a solution that meets your needs also means finding one within your budget. Oftentimes the cost of a solution is going to be dependant on the number of users in the program. For small businesses, or groups within a larger company, it may be more cost-effective to look at licensing only your team members, rather than spending money on an enterprise-level solution.

The eternal build versus buy debate will rage on--that's the nature of software. Which option you choose depends on the scenario that drives your need for software. If you think an off-the-shelf solution will work for you, [Issuetrak](#) can provide excellent support with over twenty years experience helping companies just like yours. [Talk to one of our product experts](#) today!

