



Buying Software

- There is often a COTS alternative to bespoke
- Moving the business process towards the software may give higher gains
- Ensure that the Cost Benefit Analysis is realistic



Rowallan Software Services

Rowallan Software Services Ltd was established in 1994 in response to a need for realistic and practicable advice for busy IT departments and, in particular, development teams.

For further information contact us on +44 1234 345118 or visit our website at

www.rowallansoftware.com

David Williams is the IT Process Consultant at Rowallan Software Services



Make or Buy

by David Williams

I've been part of a couple of software projects in the recent past where one of the earlier decisions to be made was how to source the main software application.

Should our new application be bespoke, or should we bite the bullet and integrate one or more best-of-breed commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) applications?

My view is that there is a rapidly diminishing case for any small or medium scale enterprise to be writing its own application software from scratch. The economy of scale enjoyed by the established major software vendors gives them a compelling advantage in terms of lifetime cost, quality and a steady flow of new and improved releases.

COTS software can also improve your position in today's job market. All too often I see IT Departments trying desperately to recruit, or retain, programmers with scarce and obsolete technology skills.

Combine that with a requirement for ever-increasing sophistication in business software applications, and the small in-house software development team can no longer compete on level terms.

There are three important exceptions to an 'always buy' policy:

- The support of a specialist business process
- The provision of an important, or unique, competitive advantage
- The support of business process subject to frequent modification

The Bleeding Edge

by David Williams

Seduced by the promise of a cornucopia of new features I've just upgraded one of my web browsers.

Reality and expectation, however, are rare bedfellows. The core features work so badly that I haven't really had the time or patience to explore the new ones.

Each of these may require at least a part of your application software to be customised.

More often than not a sufficient level of customisation can be achieved by configuration changes to COTS packages; sometimes, however, it may be necessary, or even expedient, to resort to designing and coding parts of the system.

If you are facing the Make-Buy decision, I would encourage you to stand slightly back from detailed technical analyses and instead look at the bigger picture.

A blow-by-blow feature analysis of a projected in-house design versus an existing COTS application can actually impair effective decision making.

Such an analysis often assumes a 'no change' position on the business process, which not only should itself be subject to ratification as a valid business decision, but also obviously favours in-house bespoke development.

Moving the business process towards the software could prove a major cost saving compared to writing a custom application to support an aging business process. Checking this out should form an important part of your analysis.

Finally, try to inject realism into your Cost Benefit Analysis. COTS software pricing tends to be a lot more predictable than preliminary estimates for a bespoke system—even if, at first, it appears to be more expensive.

The lesson? Try to avoid being an early adopter. Let someone else (preferably the manufacturer) take the pain of removing the gremlins from new products. The IT department's resource is valuable, and we shouldn't be spending it supporting a half-tested product.

As they say, 'more haste, less speed'