

Build Versus Buy Decision Tree

Built on Martin Fowler's utility versus strategic test, published 2010 and updated 2016, and on Brandon Byars on integration, 2021. Both checked 1 August 2026.

Answer in order. Do not skip to section 4.

1. Name The Function

- ☐ Write the business function in one sentence, without naming any software.
- ☐ Name the customer facing outcome it produces.
- ☐ Name who inside the business owns it.

If you cannot write it without naming a product, you are describing a tool, not a function, and the test will not work yet.

2. The Differentiator Test

Fowler's rule: if the business process you are supporting is part of your competitive advantage, build custom software. If it is not, buy a package and adjust your business process to fit the way the package works. The distinguishing factor is whether the underlying business function is a differentiator.

- ☐ Has a customer ever chosen you because of how you do this? Write down who, and when.
- ☐ Would a competitor doing it the standard way lose anything?
- ☐ If you did it exactly as everyone else does, what breaks?

Strategic if the answers show a real difference customers notice. **Utility** if it is necessary but undifferentiating. If you cannot answer the first question with a name, treat it as utility until someone can.

3. Check The Answer Against The Risk

	UTILITY	STRATEGIC
Biggest risk	A catastrophic error	Not doing something before competitors do
What to optimise	Costs as low as possible, after preventing failure	Ability to react quickly
Cost sensitivity	High	Lower, because opportunity cost dominates

- ☐ Does the risk profile you actually face match the category you chose?
- ☐ If not, revisit section 2 rather than overriding it.

4. The Integration Line

Brandon Byars, on integration products: you cannot buy integration. When you buy an integration product, you are agreeing to build the integration itself in a commercial programming language. He also calls the lines between systems the hidden and often primary driver of organisational tech debt. He is writing about integration products specifically. The step below extends that to any purchase that must connect to your existing systems, which is our reading rather than his.

- ☐ List every system this function must exchange data with.
- ☐ For each, note direction: read, write, or both.
- ☐ For each, note who owns the other end.
- ☐ Put an integration line in **both** columns of the comparison, not only the build one.
- ☐ Confirm the buy quote states what connecting work it includes, in writing.

5. Total It Up Honestly

- ☐ Build column: development, integration, and ongoing maintenance.
- ☐ Buy column: licence, integration, configuration, and the cost of changing your process to match the software, which Fowler's rule requires you to do.
- ☐ Note anything the buy column assumes will be free.

6. The Decision

- ☐ Strategic function: build. Run the project for speed.
- ☐ Utility function: buy, and adapt the process rather than the package.
- ☐ Heavy customisation planned on a bought package? Go back to section 2. That pattern usually means the business is treating the function as strategic while procurement treats it as utility.

7. Re-Run It On What You Already Own

Fowler is explicit that this is not a static dichotomy. Strategic activities can become utilities as time passes, and less often a utility becomes strategic if a company finds a way to make it a differentiator.

- ☐ List custom systems you maintain.
- ☐ For each, re-run section 2 as of today.
- ☐ Anything that is now utility: decide whether to keep maintaining it.
- ☐ Anything bought that has quietly become a differentiator: that is the rarer case and the more valuable one.

8. Sources

1. Utility Vs Strategic Dichotomy, Martin Fowler, 2010, updated 2016
martinfowler.com/bliki
2. You Can't Buy Integration, Brandon Byars, 2021
martinfowler.com/articles

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Free Scoping Audit

The form asks for your website or store URL and a note on what is eating the time. A build or buy decision you are weighing up is a reasonable thing to put in that box. The scoping audit costs nothing.

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