Buy the Machine. Build the Jig.

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When a business process starts to break down, the instinct is often the same: look for new software.

For years, that made sense. Buying software was typically faster, more affordable, and less risky than building something custom. So companies found tools that came close to what they needed, adapted their workflows, and moved forward.

But that reflex deserves a second look.

Instead of asking, “What software can we buy?” the better question may be, “What do we already know about our business that no off-the-shelf tool can?”

Your Competitive Advantage Is Often Hiding in Plain Sight

For many mid-market companies, the most valuable operational knowledge is not found in a software feature list. It lives in the judgment of the people who run the business every day.

It is how your team prices a rush order. How you decide which customers need flexibility. How you forecast demand during a strange season. How your warehouse, finance team, sales team, or operations group navigates the exceptions that never quite fit inside a standard system.

That institutional knowledge is often what makes the business different. But too often, it gets squeezed into software that was designed for the broadest possible market, not for the specific way your company creates value.

There is nothing wrong with standard software for standard work. Payroll, accounts payable, email, and other foundational systems should be reliable, proven, and efficient. In those areas, buying is usually the right answer.

The problem begins when a company tries to force its differentiating work into a tool built for everyone.

Buy What Makes You Similar. Build What Makes You Different.

The traditional sourcing rule still applies: buy what makes you similar, build what makes you different.

What has changed is the math.

Custom tools are no longer reserved only for enterprise-scale organizations with massive technology budgets. AI-assisted development, modern integration tools, and more flexible software architecture have lowered the cost of testing whether a purpose-built solution can work. A company no longer has to bet the entire budget to learn whether building is the better path.

That does not mean every workflow should become a custom software project. It means the decision deserves more discipline.

If a process is common, mature, and not central to how you compete, buy the tool and move on.

If a process reflects your unique judgment, your customer promise, or your operating model, it may be time to build something around the system you already have.

Think Like a Manufacturer

Manufacturers understand this concept well.

A factory does not build its own lathe. It buys the machine because the machine is standard, proven, and serviceable. But the fixtures and jigs attached to that machine are often custom. They are shaped around the company's specific parts, tolerances, workflows, and expertise.

The machine is standard. The jig is where the company's knowledge shows up.

Your ERP is the machine. Keep it. It should remain the system of record for the financial, operational, and transactional data it handles well.

But the tools built around the ERP can become your jigs. A forecasting model tuned to your seasonality. A pricing tool that reflects years of quoting judgment. A workflow that supports the way your team actually makes decisions.

That is where institutional knowledge can become operational capability.

The Economics Are Different

Buying software often feels easier at the start. The subscription begins, the team gets access, and the organization hopes the fit improves over time.

But subscriptions do not automatically create capability. If the tool never fully matches the way the business works, the organization continues paying for access while workarounds multiply in spreadsheets, email threads, and manual reviews.

Building, when done with discipline, works differently. The first custom tool forces clarity around the process, the data, the decision, and the owner. The next tool can build on that foundation. Over time, the company is not just adding technology. It is building capability.

That said, building is not free and it is not magic. Maintenance, security, ownership, and governance matter. A custom tool without a clear business owner can become another stranded asset. A build project without scope discipline can become expensive quickly.

The point is not to build for the sake of building. The point is to build when the workflow is important enough, unique enough, and measurable enough to justify it.

When Buying Still Wins

There are many places where buying remains the best decision.

Buy the foundational core. Buy mature platforms for standard needs. Buy when the process does not differentiate your business. Buy when the vendor's best practice is better than your internal workaround.

But pay close attention to the moment a purchased tool requires heavy customization to fit the way your company works.

That pressure is a signal.

If you have to bend the software too far, you may be looking at a process that should not be forced into someone else’s model. Heavy customization can leave you with the worst of both worlds: vendor dependency plus ongoing maintenance burden.

In those cases, what you may need is not a more customized version of someone else’s tool. You may need your own jig.

How to Start Small

The best first build is not a transformation program. It is one painful workflow.

Look for the process your ERP handles poorly. The one your team works around with spreadsheets. The one that creates rework, delays, pricing inconsistency, missed handoffs, or customer friction.

Then define what better looks like. Not in vague terms, but in measurable business outcomes. Faster turnaround. Fewer manual steps. Better accuracy. More consistent decisions. Less time spent reconciling information.

From there, keep the rules simple:

- Bring the process owner in from the beginning.
- Start with the decision the tool needs to improve.
- Keep the ERP as the system of record.
- Set a measurable target before building.
- Assign an owner and maintenance budget before launch.
- Validate the data where it enters the process.
- Treat heavy customization pressure as a sign that the process may deserve its own solution.

The First Jig Is Waiting

You do not need to rebuild your business or replace the systems that already work.

Start by identifying one workflow where your people know there is a better way, but your current systems make it harder than it should be. That is where the opportunity begins.

Buy the machine. Keep the core systems that work. But when a process reflects what makes your business different, consider building the jig around it.

Small. Disciplined. Measurable. Built for your business.

Where is your first jig?

Our team can help you identify the processes where a custom solution could make the biggest impact and determine where it makes sense to build rather than buy.

[Contact us to start the conversation.]