

Custom vs. Commercial Solutions

Put yourself, for the moment, in the shoes of a software company that is producing a commercial product for a specific industry. In order to be successful, they must meet the needs of the industry in general and not the needs of a specific company; this means that the 'feature-set' that they build in must work universally. This in turn means that there will be many specific features that will not be incorporated because they would only have appeal and use to a few companies. (The cost of including those features would far outweigh the benefits (potential sales) so they will, by necessity, be excluded). The end result is a product that will meet the needs of the many, but not the few, and will 'force' the users to adopt some business practices and methodology that they don't want to. Typically speaking, the company will also be unwilling to do any custom work to change the software for a specific client and, if they are willing to do this, the fees for doing so will likely be enormous.

The second alternative is to develop the solution in-house; after all who knows your business better than you! While this can be done, and many companies do it, this is, rarely, a really good solution to the problem. There are many reasons why this is so! First, resources are generally limited and whoever is given the project will likely have other 'jobs' that they have to do, thus the development cycle will be considerably longer than a person working full time on the project. Secondly, generally most in-house programs are developed by a staff member who does not have the technical expertise to build a totally integrated scalable solution. The end result will almost never work completely satisfactorily and, because of the 'design errors' made, it will often be totally impossible to get it to work right without going back to the beginning and starting over. Finally and most importantly it takes the in-house person, and all the resources necessary to support the project, away from what they do best.

Historically, most companies that develop their own in-house solution reach the "we can't go any further!" point within a year or two and then bring in a custom development house to 'finish' it off. As mentioned above, it is almost always going to be quicker and better to start over and do the whole thing properly. So all the time, effort, agony and resources that have been expended along the way are going to be, at least partially, wasted! The custom development house or developer starts from a different viewpoint which is what you, the client, need to do in your business. The solution is built from the ground up with the client's needs being fulfilled and the 'operational changes' being minimised so that, for the most part, things are done the way you are used to doing them; the only difference being that they are far more automated and require far less time to do. The solution is also designed so that it can easily be changed as business needs change and the only limitations to those changes are the time and cost involved of doing so. Users always have wish lists; some of those 'wishes' are completely impractical. It is the developer's job to explain why this is so and to provide alternatives or compromises where appropriate and in the event that the client decides "impractical or not, we want it!", to include it.

The advantages to using a custom developer are numerous; speed of development, total integration and scalability, flexibility and a feature set that is exactly what the client needs without any compromises. The disadvantage is, quite simply, the cost! But is it really? While it may appear so at first glance, if you take into account the number of hours that you are 'wasting' each week by not having a solution that does most of the work for you; the resources that you are utilising in areas that are not generating revenue; the time taken to get information (reports) that allow management to really understand what is going on in the business and to then eliminate or correct areas that are 'problematic', then you will most likely find that a custom program is the right solution for you and more cost effective. It is also a one-time, fully tax deductible cost which will add value to your business because it will make your business more efficient and, thus, more profitable!