DECISION LENS

Is My Solution Enough?

When to consider alternatives to homegrown government solutions

The Current Situation

Productivity tools are extremely useful for some tasks, but prove wholly inadequate for others resulting in broken, manual processes that have eroded America's competitive advantage.

Instead of moving quickly – especially when it comes to planning and execution – organizations are spending time conducting spreadsheet Olympics, hiring PowerPoint rangers, or re-scheduling meetings because the as-of date on the data is simply too old.

Fortunately, there are initiatives across the public sector to modernize the approach to plan, execute, and fund faster, smarter, and more efficiently. Individuals looking to usher in this new era frequently have only two options: homegrown government off-the-shelf offerings (GOTS) and third-party commercial off-the-shelf solutions (COTS). These tools are meant to automate and streamline workflows to provide the efficiency most are seeking.

As individuals across the public sector strive to help their organizations meet their mission it is important to understand the benefits, use cases, and tradeoffs of each option.

If you are reading this document, then perhaps you are an influencer, a change-maker, or an advocate for transformation in your organization. By informing yourself of what is out there, you have taken the first step towards influencing change and helping your organization work better.

When a Homegrown Solution is Ideal

There are many circumstances when using a government off-the-shelf software solution is the right choice. Below are some of the most common scenarios where it may be best to use a government solution.

When your process or function is specialized to your organization

GOTS software is often designed for a specific problem on a specific team within a specific branch. It was designed for that team's workflow and processes, making it the perfect solution for that team and problem, but maybe not for an entire enterprise or even other teams or tiers of the organization.

When you need to strictly adhere to government protocols and systems

The GOTS solution was designed to meet government security requirements, which can be important when working with sensitive data. When you need a system that has been vetted and approved by the government or integrates with other already-approved-for-government-use-systems, your government solution may be ideal.

When budget and procurement is a concern

One of the major benefits of a government solution is

that you may be able to gain access to the software at little or no cost. Because the software is developed in-house, even if you need to pay for it, doing so is much easier than procuring third-party software.

Tradeoffs you will have to make

While there are several benefits of homegrown solutions, you will be making tradeoffs when you choose that option:

- Total Cost of Ownership (TCO) with custom systems can be high. It forces your organization to create its own ecosystem of process and people to keep the software running, which may be difficult to sustain. This may lead to infrequent updates with limited support from developers, implementation personnel, and other help teams.

- Software may lack the benefit of the latest and greatest algorithms and capabilities because data scientists have other problems they must work on, or it may not play well in the new ecosystem of applications and utilities in use. Updating software may be a secondary or tertiary role for someone who is already busy.

- The software may solve a specific part of your process problem, but it may lack the scalability to solve broader organizational problems.

When a Commercial Solution is Ideal

Due to these tradeoffs, there are cases when using a Commercial Solution is better than using a Government Solution.
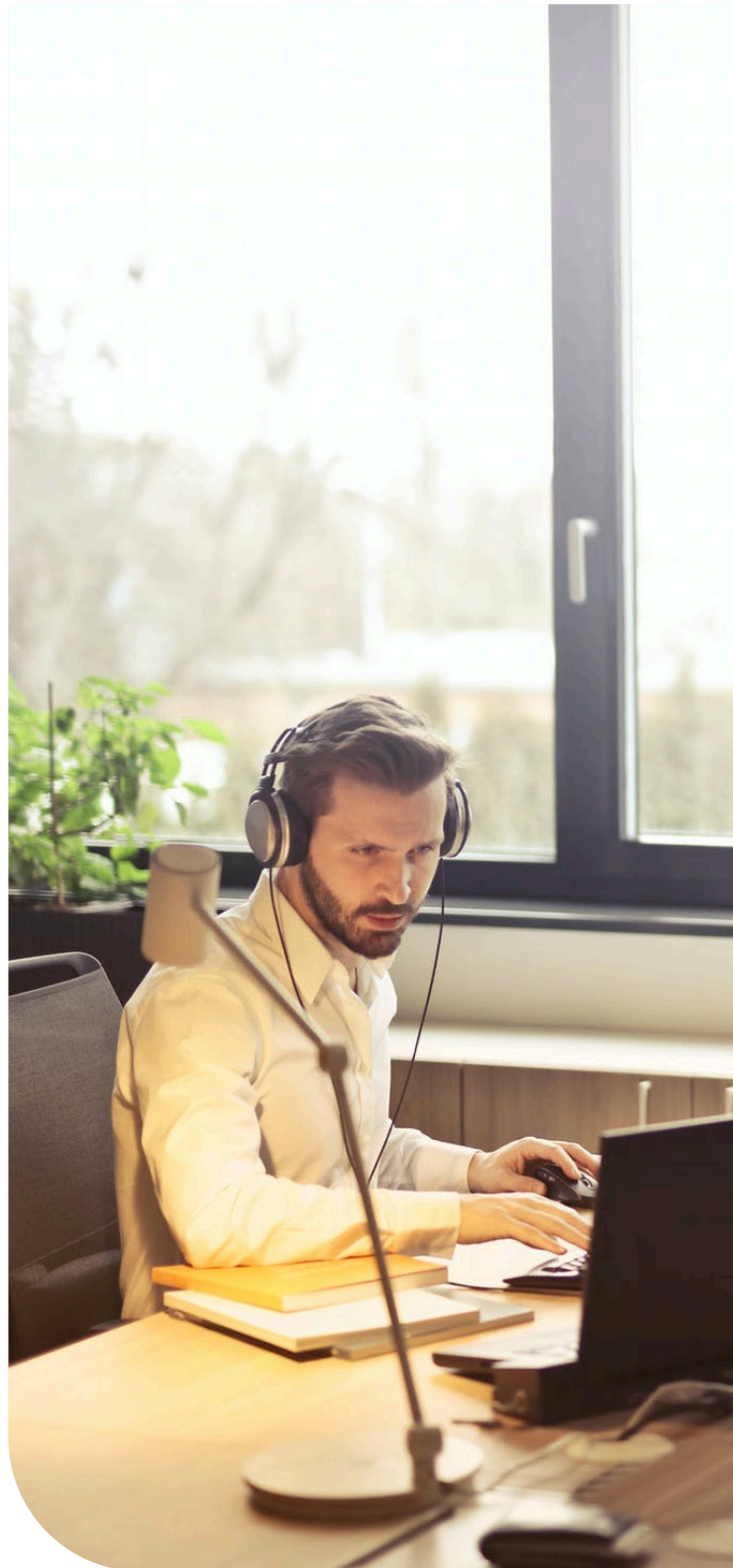
When you need software that will constantly improve

Software as a Service (SaaS) companies are driven by profit motive and forced to innovate to retain and win clients in a highly competitive market. The result is the software you license today will improve dramatically during your period of use.

Some of these benefits typically include a better user experience, automation driven by AI or machine learning, and an increasing number of integrations driven by the customer base. This results in a product team, data scientists, and developers working day in and day out to continue to earn your business.

When you need support

Commercial software vendors – almost without fail – have dedicated account managers and support staff to ensure your success. These experts are dedicated to training you on the product, answering questions about the software, and assisting you to integrate your people into the process. More than just providing software, a good commercial vendor will also help you transform your organization using these new capabilities.

When you have integrated processes

Commercial software is designed to scale beyond your department or problem to promote real change. Take Kanban boards. They started as a simple planning system for a single team but evolved to incorporate dependencies, burndown charts, and sharing features to bring the broader organization into the execution process. This is how commercial software develops – it solves a problem and then evolves to deliver more value for the connected organization.

Therefore, as organizations require increasingly intertwined processes, commercial solutions are often ideal. One additional benefit of this approach is that commercial software solutions are typically much cheaper for enterprise deployment when factoring in soft costs like support, maintenance, and training.

When you need AI / Machine Learning Capabilities

The fight for data science talent is real, and securing these top minds is a challenge. Commercial vendors invest enormous sums to hire data scientists to build artificial intelligence into their software in an easy-to-use manner. The result is a solution that incorporates the latest algorithms and feedback from the market to deliver increasingly automated capabilities to the user base. Because commercial software has well-developed documentation, understanding how the algorithm works is as simple as looking at the FAQs. While users need not be data scientists, the software allows them to work in that way. Thus, they can complete their work more quickly, accurately, and with a deeper level of insight.

Tradeoffs you will have to make

Though there are many benefits of Commercial Solutions that can help you make your work easier, there are some tradeoffs and investments that need to be made for it to be possible. These include:

- Budget constraints or other concerns may be keeping you from moving to a new system right away. However, showing long term savings of no longer being responsible for maintenance (high TCO) could help you make the case for a third-party commercial solution.

- Length of time to implementation may be a concern, but change doesn't have to happen all at once to see benefits. You could start by incorporating basic features into your workflow and change as you feel comfortable.

- Concerns about choosing the right vendor, and focusing on vendor viability versus focusing on the solution, could be keeping you from considering COTS, but one of the benefits of a commercial solution is that their approaches are tested on the market. Many offer standard or customized demos using a subset of your data to show you how the system can work for you before committing to a purchase. There are usually customer reviews vetting commercial solutions as well.

- The whole process may seem like a hassle from sorting through security issues, hosting issues, and contracting issues, but it is a hassle that can provide a long-term solution to your problems.

Choosing the Right Solution

To find the right solution for your needs it is important to evaluate both GOTS and COTS solutions to determine which will help you overcome your challenges not only today, but to allow your organization to continue to evolve over time.

The *right solution* should help you:

1

Save time and reduce human error

automation of certain processes reduces human error and eliminates the need to constantly be switching between systems.

2

Have better discussions with leadership

spend more time discussing strategy and less time fighting with the software or parsing out what others did and why it is setup that way.

3

Improve communication with the rest of the organization

the right solution helps you achieve faster time to value if switching roles, branches, etc. By using familiar software, your team also gains the value of having a consistent framework for leadership to evaluate their subordinates.

An ideal world
Integrating Home-Grown and Commercial Solutions

In the end it comes down to what tradeoffs you and your organization are willing to make.

Since every organization is unique and every process is different, there is no one right or wrong choice. By understanding the hidden costs and risks of each solution type, you can decide which solution is ideally suited to your needs.

There is a place for both COTS and GOTS. It is up to you as an individual that has recognized the need for change to lead an expansive evaluation process of all potentially available solutions. It often takes a mix of commercial and governmental solutions to come to the most efficient process. It is key to ensure whatever you choose is designed for interoperability.

Decision Lens Integrates with your Platforms

Decision Lens is a strategic prioritization, resource allocation, and budget planning solution for the public sector. Our software empowers decision makers to confidently overcome uncertainty to quickly make the right choices that will allow them to effectively meet their mission. Customers across the Department of Defense, intelligence community, federal civilian agencies and state and local government rely on Decision Lens software to best allocate limited resources, connect disparate processes, and overcome data gaps for better integrated planning and strategy execution.

We believe Decision Lens offers the benefits of a commercial vendor with many of the value drivers of government software. The company is focused on the public sector, resulting in extremely secure software with an array of hosting options, a variety of contracting vehicles to make purchasing straightforward, and a roadmap dedicated to solving the unique challenges of planning, budgeting, and resource allocation for the public sector.