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WHITE PAPER

Build vs Buy is Not a Binary Choice:

The AI Stack in Professional Services

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Whilst generative AI is still in its infancy in Professional Services, firms are starting to think longer-term about what the technology stack should look like. A strategy including which vendors’ platforms to invest in, which IP to build in-house, and which firms to partner with to help build out specific use cases.

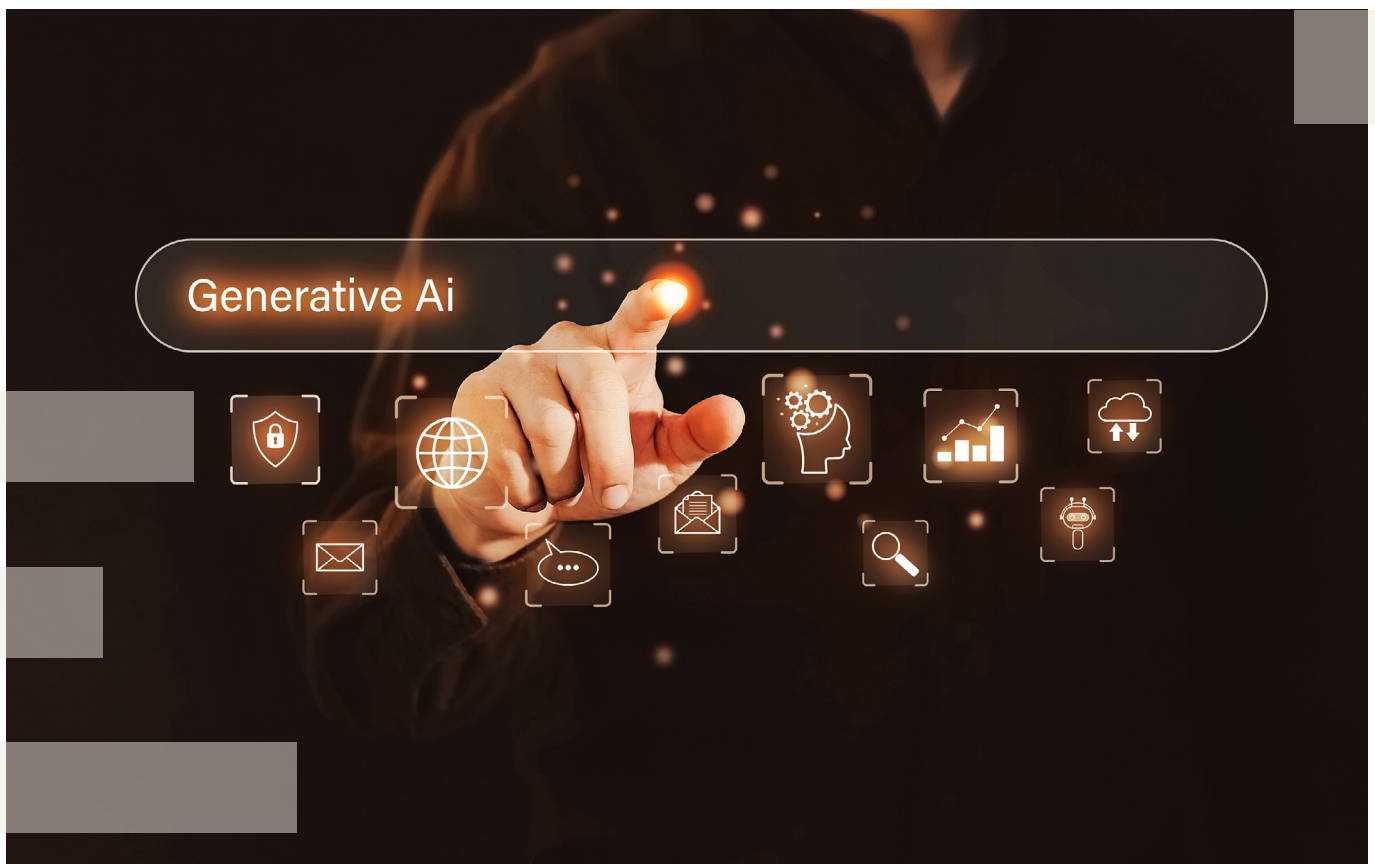
We’re seeing more clients bypassing the usual procurement cycle of lengthy requirements gathering and ROI calculations, and for many, it paid off. These firms have a much better understanding of which tasks the tech does (and doesn’t) add value to and, what the use cases are, and whether to build, buy or rent tools to achieve them.

For business applications, ‘Buy’ has been the by far the most popular choice for the past 10 years. Organisations who chose to roll-their-own apps in the 2000’s have mostly migrated back to Commercial Off-The-Shelf (COTS)

platforms due to increasing maintenance costs, growing feature gaps, and changes in IT leadership.

For AI, “Build vs Buy” is no longer a right framing. With SaaS subscriptions now the default, it’s more accurate to say ‘Rent’, not ‘Buy’. And it’s not a binary choice. An effective AI strategy looks more like spreading your bets across the roulette table than stacking them all on red or black. Newer, faster, and cheaper models are emerging so quickly that committing to a single vendor or building on one foundation makes less and less sense.

Morae’s **MorAI** platform is designed to help law firms navigate the complexities of AI adoption.





When “Rent” Makes Sense

Buying off-the-shelf SaaS tools is often the fastest, simplest solution for many firms. There may be functionality gaps, but it’s often worth the trade-off.

- **Time to value:** In today’s world, this is the most important metric, purchased tools can be implemented quickly, making them ideal for firms with urgent needs.
- **Lower Upfront Costs:** Buying involves a predictable subscription model, and doesn’t need as much human capital to deliver.
- **Proven Functionality:** Commercial tools are tested, refined, and (mostly) proven in the market. Vendors continually improve these products, ensuring they remain competitive.
- **Vendor Support:** Off-the-shelf tools come with technical support, training, and regular updates, reducing your team’s workload.

The issue is that COTS offerings can be inflexible, requiring firms to adapt workflows to the software’s capabilities.

Customisation options can be limited, or require lengthy prompts, which can take some getting used to. Users tend to benchmark them against consumer tools like ChatGPT, Claude and Google’s Gemini.

At the pace major AI players are shipping new features to consumers, legal assistants can feel outdated the moment they launch. It’s not a fair comparison - B2B tools have stricter privacy, security, and integration demands - but users still make it. That mismatch can dampen adoption, and make it harder for legal teams to get excited.

Building an AI tool internally offers complete control and customisation and is the only route that offers true differentiation in the market.

When “Build” Creates Value

‘Buy’ has been by far the most common route chosen over the past ten years. “We’re not software developers, we’re a law firm” is an oft-used maxim. The combination of that philosophy and the relatively narrow choices of software, (“No-one ever got fired for putting in x”), means that most technology stacks look very, very similar.

Almost no-one is creating an LLM from scratch, as it requires significant time, money, and expertise. Instead, “Build” for AI refers to developing solutions using platforms like OpenAI, Google, Anthropic, or open source options such as Meta, Mistral, and Deepseek. There are many choices based on portability, compute/storage costs, privacy, and model capabilities. In addition, the near-constant model improvements and upgrades cascade down to the subscribers, which helps to remain continuously relevant.

Building an AI tool internally offers complete control and customisation and is the only route that offers true differentiation in the market. However, COTS offerings are quick to catch up, so the viability of these custom build apps should be continually assessed - beware the sunk cost fallacy here. A key consideration is how well your AI tools can integrate with other enterprise tools, who themselves may be driving strong GenAI product strategies as well. Connecting these opportunities together will have a long term value implication.

What drives firms to build:

- **Experimentation** - It’s crucial for firms to explore AI possibilities, rather than just understanding individual products. Having an experimentation playground within your own tenant helps law firms test AI use cases without committing to long-term subscriptions. Setting up a simple UI quickly allows secure experimentation with firm documents, helps understand costs of different models, and avoids public chatbots often restricted by Outside Counsel Guidelines and corporate policy.
- **Cost** - simpler tasks like summarisation rarely need to use a model with such a massive general knowledge like the big three’s general use models. Open source,

small language models will often do the job at a fraction of the cost. Other tasks like classification don’t need LLMs at all.

- **Pipelines and Integration** - pulling data and content from other repositories often requires a custom build, either building specialized pipelines from scratch, or utilising pre-built connectors within the power platform.
- **Data Privacy** - many businesses are unable to channel their data or their customers’ data to any third-party data centres. They prefer to host, treat and process data in their own DC, and can’t make calls to OpenAI, Gemini, Anthropic endpoints. Open-source models such as Mistral, Llama and Deepseek can be self-hosted, and optimised by firms for techniques such as Retrieval Augmented Generation (RAG) and finetuning. Some firms have invested in GPU chips for to provide the right level of performance/compute.



A Legal AI Stack

Here's what an emerging legal AI stack looks like:



1. AI Assistants (Buy)

This is the biggest category of generative AI products that have come to market and include from firm-wide general legal chatbots, drafting assistants to practice / task specific platforms. This is very often a 3rd Party tool - MS Copilot as an entry level, going up to legal-specific assistant such as MorAI Legal Companion.

DMS vendors' legal assistants such as AskiManage have a big advantage here. They process in place, always respecting complex ethical walls and standard ACLs and there's no need to copy data between platforms, and all the associated InfoGov headaches that come with it.

If you have invested in Microsoft Copilot licenses, you should be asking your DMS vendor what their roadmap is to allow secure, native integration that respects source security. This will allow Copilot agents to use the DMS as a knowledge source, unlocking a lot of use cases.

2. Research Tools (Buy)

Provided by legal content vendors (Thomson Reuters, LexisNexis, vLex etc.), these tools offer access to case law, legislation, commentary, and regulatory content, and include generative AI assistants to support research and drafting.

3. Custom Agents & Workflows (Build)

Platforms provided by the big cloud providers are feature rich allowing firms to get to Minimum Viable Product (MVP) a lot quicker than has been possible until relatively recently. Agent workflows are most commonly built with Copilot Studio and/or Power Automate (other agent frameworks are available) for practice- or firm-specific use cases.

It's still very early days, but production examples include:

- Bringing together key firm information from multiple systems into a single view

- Drafting internal or client-facing communications based on current matter data
- Summarising documents, emails, or policies for faster review
- Supporting compliance workflows by identifying issues or triggering alerts
- Assisting with legal analysis by retrieving

relevant information from firm knowledge sources

4. Client-Facing Applications (Build)

Ground up development of client facing apps is becoming more common particularly in M&A, Investment funds and Banking practice areas.



MorAI: Balancing Build and Buy

Morae’s **MorAI** platform is designed to help law firms navigate the complexities of AI adoption.

Whether you’re looking for pre-built tools or a tailored solution, MorAI delivers:

- **Scalable Solutions:** Address both routine and specialised legal tasks.
- **Customisation:** Tailor features to fit your firm’s unique needs.
- **Expert Support:** Work with Morae’s team to ensure seamless implementation and ongoing success.
- **Future-Proofing:** Stay ahead with AI technology that evolves with your firm.

With MorAI, you get the flexibility to start with a pre-built tool and expand into bespoke solutions as your needs grow, creating a strategic mix that works for your firm.



The Bottom Line

The cost of doing nothing is high. The decision on which use cases to build and which to buy is a strategic one that depends on your firm's goals, budget, and timeline.

Buying is often the best choice for firms seeking immediate, reliable solutions. Building makes sense for firms with unique needs and the resources to invest in long-term innovation.

In many cases, the right approach is a combination of both. With Morae's MorAI platform, your firm can access ready-made solutions and develop tailored AI tools to meet your specific requirements.



Ready to take the next step?

Contact Morae to discover how MorAI can transform your firm's approach to AI.

About the author



David Malkinson

David leads Morae's digital transformation function which helps clients leverage technology to improve productivity, reduce risk and retain a competitive advantage.

David has worked in tech enablement for professional services firms for more than 20 years. He was instrumental in establishing the global consultancy arm of Phoenix from a small four person consultancy team to the 100+ team it was when he joined Morae in 2019.

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