Build, Buy, or Partner

THE AI CAPABILITY DECISION, IN SIX QUESTIONS

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Most build-versus-buy decisions get made backwards, starting from a vendor demo that impressed someone or an engineer who wants to build it. Answer these six questions first, before you sit through a single demo.

The question	Leans build	Leans buy	Leans partner
1. Is this a core differentiator?	Core differentiator	Commodity / table-stakes	Important, not differentiating
2. Do you have the team today?	Strong in-house team	None or minimal	Some, but stretched thin
3. How regulated is the data?	High — can't leave your walls	Low — standard handling	Moderate — needs care
4. How fast do you need value?	Strategic — 9+ months	Yesterday — under a quarter	This year — 3 to 9 months
5. Does a real vendor fit?	No real fit — bespoke	Mature vendors fit	Partial fit, heavy customization
6. What is the budget shape?	Capex — long-term asset	Opex — subscription	Mixed

How to read it. Count where your answers land. The column with the most marks is your answer. It won't be unanimous, and the split is the useful part — it tells you which risk you are accepting.

Buy the non-differentiating parts. A vendor does them better and maintains them while you sleep. Rebuilding a solved problem is the expensive choice, not the safe one.

Build the part that is your differentiation, or the part where the data cannot leave your walls. Budget the five-year maintenance tail, not just the build.

Partner when the stakes are high but the team or the timeline is not there yet — to prove a concept before you commit a hiring plan, or to bring a capability in-house on a schedule you could not hit alone. A good engagement ends with your team more capable, and the capability living with you.

Split down the middle? For regulated, enterprise-scale AI, that is normal — and usually the moment an outside read pays for itself.

Talk it through — dang.business/contact

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