START AT ZERO · FIELD BRIEF

Going to market *is a decision,* not a diagnostic.

Three questions that settle replace-or-optimize before anyone writes an RFP. Print it. Fill it with your team. Take it to the board.

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For the CIO, CAO, or finance director about to go to market.

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An RFP will not tell you *whether you need a new system.*

It will tell you what six software companies would like to sell you. Those are different questions, and only one of them costs a year of your staff's attention to answer.

Finance is frustrated. Reporting takes too long. Someone says the words "the system can't do it." A procurement gets scoped, an RFP goes out, and eighteen months later the agency signs a contract for a platform that does roughly what the old one could have done if anyone had reconfigured it.

The problem is not that replacement is wrong. Sometimes it is exactly right. The problem is using the procurement itself as the instrument of discovery.

Going to market feels like progress. It has a calendar, a budget line, and a board resolution. Diagnostics feel like delay. There is also a supply-side reason: almost everyone an agency can call for help with this question earns more if the answer is "replace."

> *The optimize answer rarely gets a fair hearing, not because it is wrong but because nobody in the room is paid to argue it.*

Three questions that settle it.

Before a single requirement goes into an RFP. Write the answers in the space. If you cannot answer one of them honestly, you are not ready to go to market.

01 Is this a configuration problem or a platform limitation?

For each top complaint, name the technical constraint that makes it impossible. If the answer is a shrug or a vendor sales sheet, it is a configuration problem — and it will follow you into the next system.

02 What do you actually need, as distinct from what you currently have?

Requirements that describe the incumbent guarantee you buy the same thing again, at a premium. Write from the work, not the software. Test that list against both futures.

03 What is the honest cost of each path — including the one you are not excited about?

Replacement quotes usually omit staff time, parallel running, data conversion, retraining, and two years of reduced throughput. Optimization is not free. It is usually an order of magnitude smaller. Put both on the same page.

What this looks like in practice.

GoTriangle, the regional transit authority for the Research Triangle, engaged Avèro in December 2025 with exactly this question. Rather than open a procurement, the authority commissioned the assessment first: a needs assessment, a requirements matrix written from the work, and a strategic optimization plan that prices both paths — tuning what they own, or going to market — with a roadmap for each.

If the evidence supports optimization, they avoid a multi-year replacement. If it supports replacement, they enter the market with requirements already written and defensible. The diagnostic is cheap and reusable. The procurement is expensive and its output is a contract.

The uncomfortable version

The assessment often comes back saying the platform you have been complaining about for three years is fine, and the problem is how the organization uses it. That is a harder finding to carry to a board than “we need a new system.” It is also, in our experience, the more common one. An advisor with no implementation revenue and no software to resell can afford to deliver it.

NEXT STEP

A sentence is enough.

Tell us where you are — replace, modernize, or you are not sure. A senior person replies within one working day.

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