

Custom vs. Off-the-Shelf Software

If you're considering custom field service software, there's lots to think about. At the forefront, you want a piece of software that has been specifically designed for your business, however, there are many other factors you will need to consider before making your decision. These include:

- Customisation
- Investment
- Customer support
- Growth
- Industry knowledge
- Security

Ultimately, the most important question you will ask yourself is **whether or not custom software is worth it**. After all, there are significant trade-offs when compared to off-the-shelf field service software. Over the next few pages we'll compare and weigh up the two contenders, considering the outlined key factors.

What is custom software?

Custom field service software is designed and built for you from the ground up by a software developer or company. You will need to assist considerably with planning and designing the software to meet your business's needs. Whilst the software will be bespoke, there are trade-offs in other key areas.



What is off-the-shelf software?

Off-the-shelf software is software that has been created by specialist software developers and is already in use by field service businesses. There is no planning or designing required and your business can get started quickly. Whilst the software will not be bespoke, there are benefits in other key areas.



Customisation

Is it designed for your business?

Custom software

- Completely designed for you
- Need to know what you want
- Experienced developer required



Off the shelf

- Designed for businesses like yours
- Different packages available
- Customisation may be possible

It's in the name - custom software is custom - and has been designed for you. Whilst your business may have some unique needs, the majority of your software requirements will be the same as other field service businesses. This gives off-the-shelf software an advantage as it has been developed for businesses very similar to yours and likely solves many of your business's challenges.

Although off-the-shelf software is not custom in nature, it shouldn't be assumed that the software cannot be customised to some extent. At a basic level, many off-the-shelf software providers will offer multiple plans or packages for different sizes and types of company, so you can select the option that best suits your business. Additionally, they may be able to modify their software specifically for you (for a cost).

Investment

How much does it cost?

Custom software

- High investment - £££
- You pay all development costs
- Time cost - months to years



Off the shelf

- Low investment - £
- Subscription payment options
- Time cost - none, ready now

Custom software has a very high development cost. There is a large amount of risk associated with this investment too - should your business needs (or the economy) change unpredictably, you could be left with very expensive software that won't be used as planned. In addition, time is a critical factor to consider. The different stages of planning, software development, and implementation will all likely take several months each, if not longer.

Off-the-shelf software offers a very cost-effective and low risk option. The software has already been developed and the provider's operational costs are split between many clients. You can expect subscription models, likely with per user/per month pricing (all be it with a contract), which will work out many times cheaper than custom. From a time perspective, off-the-shelf software has almost no turn-around time.

Customer Support

Will there be support?

Custom software

- Likely no full-time support
- If any support at all
- Learn and train yourself



Off the shelf

- Dedicated support team
- Rely on them to solve issues
- Assistance & training available

Customer support can often be overlooked when considering custom software - the logic being if you have designed it yourself, why would you need support? Whilst you may have good knowledge of the software from being involved since day one, this does not guarantee you will be able to handle future bugs and issues or all training and support needs for your staff. Most importantly, what support guarantees (if any) do you have in place? Should there be a system failure, how long will it take or cost before it's fixed?

Off-the-shelf software providers may offer varying levels of customer support, however, most will have a dedicated support team to fix bugs, assist your team, and answer any questions. With proper customer support, you will have a team to rely on instead of wasting your time trying to rectify issues or train your staff yourself.

Growth

Can the software grow?

Custom software

- Doesn't evolve with your business
- Further costs for new features
- If original team still available



Off the shelf

- Continually tweaked & improved
- Grows with your business
- New features & tools added

Custom software will usually be designed for your current requirements - but will it continue to provide what you need in the future, as your business grows? Of course, you can pay again to develop new custom features as needed, but this comes with yet further high costs. It's worth considering that you may also not be able to guarantee that the original developer/ development team will be available in the future.

Many off-the-shelf products are regularly being improved and developed - and this is something you should look for - which means you continue to get further value out of your investment as time passes (and not less!). Off-the-shelf software may also offer tiered plans or packages, so if you were starting at a lower tier, there would be a host of more advanced features for you to grow into (for a higher subscription cost).

Industry Knowledge

Do developers have experience?

Custom software

- General software expertise
- Less field service knowledge
- Likely not made similar software



Off the shelf

- Relevant software expertise
- Field service industry knowledge
- Job management speciality

Building software is not simple - and job management software is especially complex. If you're considering custom software, make sure you choose a developer that can handle the task. Most developers will have general software expertise, but will most likely have zero field service knowledge. This means all industry-specific knowledge will need to come from you.

It's worth pointing out that marrying up your industry knowledge with the developer's expertise could be challenging.

Most off-the-shelf field service software is built by companies who specialise in exactly that - building field service software. Depending on which providers you are considering, they may have a decade or more of experience in this niche topic. Not only that, but they will have worked with countless businesses like yours.

Security

Is the software secure and reliable?

Custom software

- Security features for a cost
- Is data safe and compliant?
- Reliability is unproven



Off the shelf

- Industry-standard security
- Compliant data processing
- Proven reliability

Security and reliability is arguably one of the most important factors in this list - certainly it has the highest element of risk. Custom software is inherently unproven, so there are no guarantees as to how reliable or secure it is until it is complete. You must consider where and how your data is stored - who are you reliant on for your critical business data? Plus, is it compliant with various data protection and legal obligations? Remember, if those regulations should change, it will be your responsibility to stay compliant.

Off-the-shelf software providers should be able to demonstrate a reliable service history.

They will monitor the relevant security regulations for you and have the resources and infrastructure to provide safe data storage and backups, compliant processing of customer and payment details, and industry-standard practices.

The Winner



Off-the-shelf software presents many benefits when compared to custom software. It's significantly more affordable, lower risk, and requires less commitment. You'll have access to customer and technical support from a team that not only understand software, but also work with hundreds of other field service businesses every day.

Not just that, but off-the-shelf software will continue to be improved and updated, ensuring you have the tools you need as your business grows. Finally, you'll be able to rely on expert security practices and guarantee compliance with data laws and regulations as standard.

But what about customisation? Of course, custom-software wins when it comes to customisation. However, is that worth the cost and loss of these various off-the-shelf benefits? It's essential to really evaluate your custom requirements and whether they justify the investment - as well as whether those needs could be met by simply adapting your processes with an off-the-shelf solution. A 'best of both worlds' option does exist - by paying for custom modifications to an off-the-shelf software. This will ultimately be lower cost, give you the perks of off-the-shelf software, and still allow you to customise parts of the system.



A Solution

You can access all the benefits we've talked about by leveraging Commusoft's award-winning field service software in your business. At Commusoft, we know that sometimes businesses need to accommodate unique requirements too, so we have a team dedicated to customising our system for those companies.



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