

Buy vs. Build: Why Your Members Deserve More Than Off-the-Shelf

Empowering small staff associations to create custom technology solutions that truly serve their members

Transform your association from technology consumer to technology creator

W Strategies LLC

Evan Hawkins, MA, CAE

The Core Message

Your association's deep understanding of member needs, combined with accessible low- and no-code tools, creates better solutions than generic third-party platforms ever could.



Mission Alignment

"How Mission-Driven Staff Can Build Mission-Aligned Technology"



Staff Empowerment

"Your Staff Can Learn to Create Your Perfect Software Solutions"



Vibe Coding

"How Vibe Coding Turns Associations Into Creators of Member-Perfect Software Solutions"



Member Service

"Building Internal Tools That Actually Serve Your Members"

The Problem: Off-the-Shelf Platforms Fail Small Associations

Association staff face critical challenges when using generic third-party platforms:



Cost Burden

Third-party platforms charge per-seat pricing that scales poorly for small associations, consuming disproportionate amounts of operational budgets.



Customization Limitations

Generic platforms force associations to adapt their processes to the software rather than adapting software to their unique needs.



Integration Challenges

Connecting multiple third-party platforms creates data silos, requiring expensive custom integration work or manual data transfers.



Poor Member Experience

Generic interfaces designed for broad audiences fail to address the specific needs and workflows of association members.

Is Your Association Ready for the Build Approach?



Staff frustration

with existing tools and limitations



Relying on AMS

for fewer functions as needs evolve



Teams demanding

modern technology solutions



Struggling with data silos

and integrations between platforms



KEY INSIGHT

Associations showing two or more of these indicators are prime candidates for a build approach.

The Cost Reality of Multiple Platforms

Small staff associations face disproportionate cost burdens from third-party platforms due to per-seat pricing models and minimum requirements.

Core Technology Requirements

Association Management System (AMS)

Website & Member Portal

Email Marketing Platform

Event Management System

Member Database/CRM

Survey & Feedback Tools

Document Management

Legislative Monitoring



Per-seat pricing

Minimum user requirements exceed actual needs, forcing associations to pay for unused licenses.



Platform proliferation

Multiple subscriptions for different functions create redundant costs and administrative overhead.



Annual increases

Subscription costs rise faster than association budgets, creating unsustainable financial pressure.



Integration costs

Additional fees for connecting platforms add significant expenses beyond base subscription costs.

BUDGET REALITY: Each category requires separate subscriptions

Benefits of Building Custom Solutions

Custom-built solutions using no-code tools provide greater control over your technology ecosystem while reducing vendor dependency.



Data Ownership

Built solutions keep your member data in fewer places, eliminating vendor lock-in and improving compliance with privacy regulations.



Scalability Advantages

Built solutions scale incrementally with your needs, avoiding the steep pricing tiers of third-party platforms as your membership grows.



Vendor Diversification

Multiple specialized tools create resilience against vendor changes, mergers, or service discontinuations that could disrupt operations.



Mission Alignment

Custom solutions directly support your strategic goals rather than forcing your association to adapt to generic platform limitations.

The Hidden Costs of Integration Failures

The visible subscription costs of third-party platforms are just the beginning—hidden costs multiply the total impact.



Data Silos

Disconnected systems require duplicate data entry and lead to inconsistent information.



Manual Workarounds

Staff create spreadsheets and manual processes to bridge system gaps.



Staff Time Waste

Significant time spent on manual data transfers and troubleshooting.



Member Frustration

Poor experiences lead to decreased engagement and potential attrition.

KEY INSIGHT

Like an iceberg, visible platform fees represent only a small fraction of the total cost—hidden costs below the surface create the real impact.

Building a Foundation for AI Readiness

A comprehensive build approach establishes the integrated data ecosystem that enables AI to thrive.

Buy Approach

- ✗ Data trapped in vendor silos
- ✗ Limited access to raw data
- ✗ Vendor-controlled timeline
- ✗ Generic AI solutions

Build Approach

- ✓ Unified data layer
- ✓ Complete data access
- ✓ Control over timeline
- ✓ Custom AI solutions

KEY INSIGHT: Associations that build integrated data ecosystems today will be better prepared for AI implementation than those with siloed vendor platforms.

Tools to Start Building and Integrating

These examples of no-code/low-code tools provide a tech stack for building custom association solutions.

No-Code

Templates, Visual, Drag and Drop,
Integration friendly



Airtable

Database and workflow management with powerful automation capabilities



Softr

Build web applications and member portals directly from your data

Automation & Integration

Connect Data, Use AI Agents, Run Backend Tasks



Make.com

Visual automation platform for connecting apps and workflows



Zapier

Simple automation to connect your favorite apps and services

"Vibe Coding"

Full Stack, Natural Language, Extreme Customization



Replit

Collaborative coding environment for building custom applications



Loveable

AI-powered development platform for rapid application creation

Case Study: Custom Legislative Tracking

A professional membership association built a custom legislative tracking dashboard using Airtable, Make.com, and Softr with more features than a \$3,000/year commercial platform, and only needs to spend \$1,000/year.

83%

Cost Reduction

2x

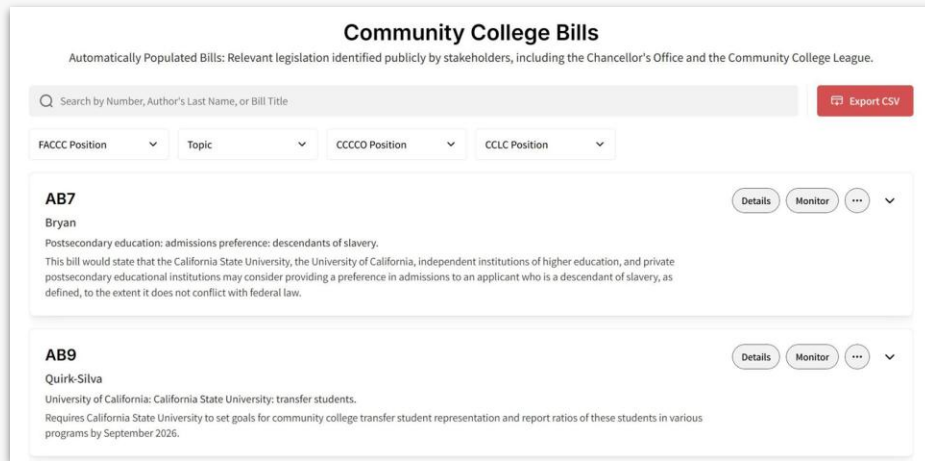
Staff Usage

4

Weeks to Build

KEY INSIGHT

The custom solution provides real-time bill tracking, automated alerts, and issue-specific filtering that wasn't possible with the off-the-shelf platform.



the-shelf Platform

Custom Solution



Case Study: Custom Feedback System

A professional membership association developed a custom legislative feedback hub to replace their generic survey tool, integrating it directly with their existing advocacy platform.

This transformation enabled members to provide more informed input on legislation where the association takes official positions, while giving the organization unified, actionable data to strengthen their advocacy efforts.

Key Custom Platform Benefits



Higher member engagement and participation



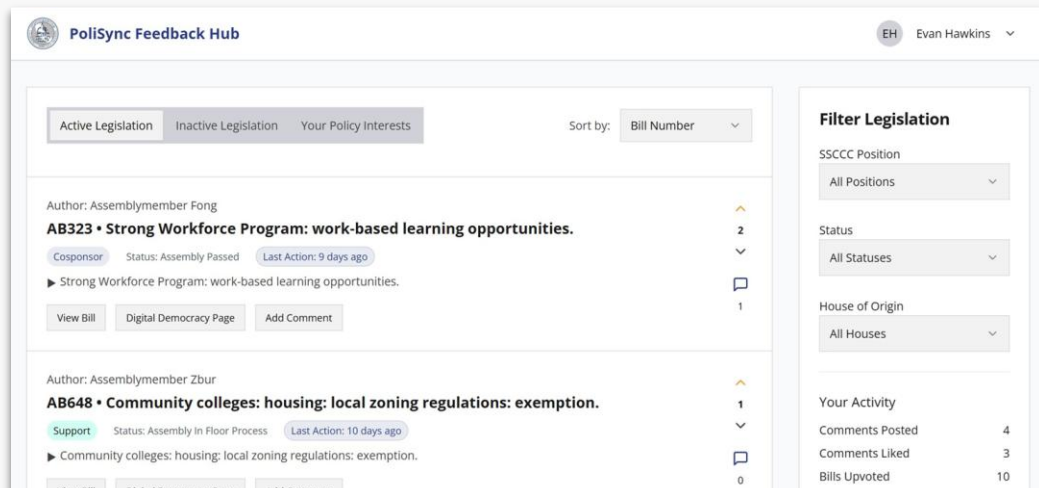
Integrated data collection and analysis



Automated workflow processing



Improved member satisfaction



Post-Launch: Continuous Improvement Cycle

1

Evaluate & Measure

Review goals and metrics against actual performance. Collect quantitative data on usage patterns, engagement rates, and operational efficiency.

2

Gather Feedback

Collect input from members and staff to guide refinements. Conduct surveys, interviews, and focus groups to identify pain points and opportunities.

3

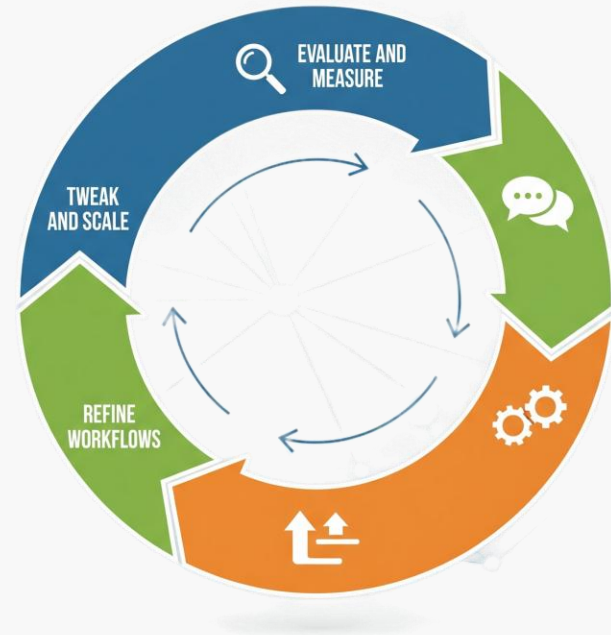
Refine Workflows

Optimize processes based on real-world usage patterns. Streamline user journeys and eliminate friction points identified through feedback.

4

Automate & Scale

Identify repetitive tasks for automation and prepare for growth. Build templates and reusable components to accelerate future development.



KEY INSIGHT

The build approach creates a data flywheel where improvements compound over time—each enhancement generates better decisions and further improvements.

Start Your Mission-Aligned Technology Journey

Begin your journey from off-the-shelf limitations to custom-built solutions that directly support your association's strategic goals.

1

Align with Strategy

Identify how technology can directly enable your mission and strategic objectives.

2

Start Small

Begin with a focused project that delivers immediate value to members.

3

Build Modularly

Create components that can be reused and integrated across your ecosystem.

4

Measure Impact

Track how your custom solutions enhance member experience and mission delivery.

Ready to transform your association's technology?

Schedule a no-obligation consultation to discuss your specific needs and explore how a build approach can benefit your association.

W Strategies LLC

Evan Hawkins, MA, CAE

evan@wstrategiesllc.com



Connect on LinkedIn