The B2B Commerce Agency Selection Framework

A Practical Buyer's Guide for Mid-Market & Enterprise B2B Leaders

Executive Summary

The Stakes

Selecting the wrong implementation agency is one of the most expensive decisions a B2B commerce leader can make.

> *"65% of B2B leaders describe their own e-commerce as 'broken'"*
>
> — Forrester/Zoovu, 2024 State of B2B E-Commerce Report

B2B digital commerce spending has grown dramatically — multiple research firms estimate the global market at **$20–$32 trillion in 2024–2025**, with projected annual growth rates of 14–18% through 2030 (Grand View Research; Mordor Intelligence; TechSci Research, 2025). Despite this investment, adoption and implementation failures remain widespread. **Sixty-five percent of B2B leaders describe their own e-commerce as 'broken'** (Forrester/Zoovu, 2024 State of B2B E-Commerce Report).

The root cause is rarely the software platform. It is almost always a **mismatch between the organization's complexity profile and the agency's actual capabilities**.

What's Inside This Framework

Complexity Scoring Model

8-dimension assessment tool to calculate your project complexity (0–21 scale)

Agency Archetype Mapping

6 agency types mapped to complexity tiers, budgets, and technical requirements

Decision Framework

Evidence-based selection criteria with cost benchmarks and red flag identification

---

📝 **Data & Methodology Notes:** B2B digital commerce market size estimates vary significantly ($9T–$32T) depending on whether EDI, marketplace GMV, and wholesale transfer pricing are included. No single figure is universally agreed upon. Readers should treat all market-size statistics as directional. Forrester Consulting / Zoovu, "2024 State of B2B E-Commerce Report", 413 respondents, companies with $200M+ e-commerce revenue.

Why Agency Selection Determines Project Success

80%
B2B Digital Sales

of B2B sales interactions between suppliers and buyers will occur in digital channels by 2025 (Gartner, 2020)

2×
Revenue Growth Differential

higher revenue growth for high digital-maturity B2B suppliers vs. low-maturity organisations (Deloitte Digital, 2026)

83%
Data Migration Failures

of data migration projects fail or significantly exceed budget and schedule (Gartner/Experian; directional — verify before external citation)

The Digital Commerce Imperative

By 2025, Gartner projected that **80% of B2B sales interactions between suppliers and buyers would occur in digital channels** — up from a small minority just five years earlier (Gartner, September 2020). Meanwhile, Deloitte Digital (2026) found that high digital-maturity B2B suppliers reported average revenue growth of **6.1% versus 2.9% for low-maturity organisations** — a 2× revenue growth differential from digital investment done well.

The pressure to build scalable B2B platforms has never been greater.

The Execution Gap

A widely-cited data point holds that **83% of data migration projects fail or significantly exceed budget and schedule** — a figure attributed to Gartner and Experian research and repeated across the industry, though readers intending to cite it externally should verify the original publication directly. The direction is well-supported: Forrester/Zoovu (2024) found separately that 83% of B2B companies struggle with incomplete, inconsistent, or inaccurate product data, which is a consistently documented cause of post-launch adoption failure.

The Cost of Platform Mismatch

The cost of platform mismatch is also frequently cited: industry practitioners estimate that **adapting a B2C platform to complex B2B workflows without purpose-built architecture can inflate total lifecycle costs by 20−35%**, though this is a practitioner estimate based on observed project patterns, not a controlled study — treat it as directional.

Why Agency Selection Determines Project Success

> 🗨️ *"B2B commerce is architecturally distinct from B2C in every meaningful dimension. A properly architected B2B platform must render customer-specific price catalogs dynamically based on contract terms, support bulk ordering across hundreds of thousands of SKUs, and facilitate payment structures including automated purchase orders, credit limits, and EDI compliance — all while functioning as the central orchestration layer between aging on-premise ERPs, PIM databases, OMS systems, and CRM software."*

🏢 **THE ARCHITECTURAL DISTINCTION**

The agency landscape serving this complexity is fragmented into six distinct archetypes, each with different capabilities, cost structures, and risk profiles. A boutique Shopify agency excelling at B2C storefronts will likely lack the middleware engineering expertise to synchronise 150,000 SKUs with a customised SAP instance. A Tier-1 SI capable of multi-national digital transformation may be too rigid and cost-prohibitive for a $50M distributor seeking a 6-month deployment. The solution is not intuition — it is a structured, repeatable framework.

Customer-Specific Pricing Dynamic price catalog rendering based on individual contract terms, negotiated rates, and tiered account agreements — not a single storefront price.	**Bulk Ordering Workflows** Support for purchasing across hundreds of thousands of SKUs simultaneously, with requisition lists, re-order logic, and volume-based validation.
Multi-Level Approval Chains Configurable approval hierarchies that mirror procurement org structures — routing orders through department heads, finance controllers, and procurement managers.	**Contract-Based Catalogs** Entitlement-gated product visibility ensuring each buyer account only sees the SKUs, pricing tiers, and payment terms defined by their commercial agreement.

Understanding Your Project Complexity
The B2B Project Complexity Scoring Model

Agency selection depends on three factors: **project complexity, budget constraints, and integration requirements**. Complexity is the primary filter. It determines which agency archetypes are technically capable of executing your project regardless of budget preferences or timeline aspirations.

The B2B Project Complexity Scoring Model evaluates eight dimensions across technical and organisational factors. Each dimension is scored on a defined scale; scores are summed to a maximum of 21 points and mapped to one of four tiers. This is a **0–21 model** — not a 1–10 model — to preserve mathematical accuracy: each dimension's maximum score reflects genuine weight differences between complexity factors.

The Three Selection Factors

Project Complexity

The primary filter — determines which archetypes are technically capable.

Budget Constraints

Defines the realistic pool of agency tiers available to you.

Integration Requirements

Dictates middleware and systems-engineering depth required.

🗒️ ⚠️ **Note:** This scoring model is a structured self-assessment tool, not a certified audit instrument. Use it to establish a baseline complexity estimate before engaging agencies. Complex projects should supplement this worksheet with a technical discovery workshop involving your IT team and at least two shortlisted agencies.
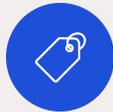
Understanding Your Project Complexity

Technical Complexity Dimensions

Catalog Architecture & SKU Volume

500 SKUs vs 250K configurable SKUs require fundamentally different search, PIM integration, and indexing strategies.

Pricing Rules & Customer Segmentation

Standard MSRP is simple. High complexity: hundreds of customer-specific price books, volume tiers, contract discounts, real-time CPQ.

System Integrations

Legacy ERP + OMS + PIM + 3PL = custom APIs, async processing, robust sync protocols. **Most underestimated cost driver.**

B2B-Specific Custom Logic

Account hierarchies, approval workflows, RFQ engines, punchout catalogs (cXML), and EDI require purpose-built development.

Multi-Architecture Constraints

Multi-currency, multi-language, multi-site across global tax jurisdictions demand modular, API-first frameworks.

📊 **Dimensions 1–5 of 8:** These five dimensions cover technical complexity factors. The remaining three dimensions address organisational complexity — including stakeholder alignment, change management, and governance readiness.

Understanding Your Project Complexity

Organisational Complexity Dimensions

Stakeholder Count & Decision-Making

B2B teams average 3–5x more stakeholders than B2C. Requires structured governance, extended approvals, and dedicated PM overhead.

Internal Technical Capability

Mature in-house teams enable knowledge transfer and code maintenance. Teams without technical staff require long-term managed services and non-technical training.

Legacy System Constraints

Well-documented REST APIs enable clean integration. Undocumented legacy systems require expensive reverse-engineering and ongoing technical debt.

📊 **Dimensions 6–8 of 8:** These three dimensions cover organisational complexity factors — including stakeholder alignment, change management, and governance readiness. The first five dimensions address technical complexity.

Understanding Your Project Complexity

The Complexity Scoring Worksheet (0–21 points)

📋 **How to use this worksheet:** Complete each row independently. Do not attempt to constrain your scores — record the most accurate answer for your project. Sum all eight rows to get your **total complexity score (0–21).**

Dimension	Your Project Notes	Scoring Guide	Score
1. Catalog / SKU Volume		< 5K SKUs = 0 5K–50K = 1, 50K–100K = 2 > 100K = 3	__ / 3
2. Pricing Complexity		Standard MSRP = 0 Segmented / tiered = 1 Contract CPQ real-time = 3	__ / 3
3. System Integrations		0–1 native = 0 2–3 cloud = 1 4+ incl. legacy ERP = 3	__ / 3
4. B2B Custom Logic		None = 0 Approval workflows / RFQ = 1 PunchOut / EDI / CPQ = 3	__ / 3

🟢 **0 pts**
Low complexity — standard implementation

🟡 **1–2 pts**
Moderate — some custom configuration needed

🔴 **3 pts**
High — advanced development required

Understanding Your Project Complexity

The Complexity Scoring Worksheet (continued)

5. Multi-Architecture		Single region/currency = 0 2 regions = 1 Global multi-currency = 2	__ / 2
6. Stakeholders / Governance		1–2 = 0 3–5 cross-functional = 1 6+ complex org = 2	__ / 2
7. Legacy System Debt		Modern cloud = 0 Some legacy = 1 On-premise / decades old = 2	__ / 2
8. Regulatory / Compliance		Standard = 0 GDPR / SOC 2 = 1 Multi-jurisdiction critical = 3	__ / 3

🟢 **0 pts**

Low complexity — standard implementation

🟡 **1–2 pts**

Moderate — some custom configuration needed

🔴 **3 pts**

High — advanced development required

🗒️ 🧮 **Total Score: ___ / 21 points**
Add up all eight rows above to calculate your total. Once complete, proceed to the **Tier Mapping on the next page** to identify your recommended implementation approach and typical engagement profile.

Understanding Your Project Complexity

Complexity Tier Mapping

Simple (0–5)

Typical Profile: Template design, <5K SKUs, uniform pricing, 0–1 integrations, single stakeholder

Recommended Partners: Platform-native boutiques for bounded implementations

Example: Regional office supplier: basic digital catalog, standard pricing, manual order entry

Moderate (6–10)

Typical Profile: Custom UI, 10K–50K SKUs, segmented pricing, 2–3 cloud integrations

Recommended Partners: Mid-tier specialised agencies or platform boutiques with integration experience

Example: Mid-size apparel wholesaler: tiered pricing, cloud ERP, 2-country multilingual storefront

Complex (11–15)

Typical Profile: Legacy ERP sync, >100K SKUs, custom B2B logic (CPQ, RFQ, EDI), heavy data migration

Recommended Partners: Specialised B2B Commerce Partner or Tier-1 SI — middleware and B2B-specific expertise required

Example: $200M industrial equipment manufacturer: real-time SAP sync, multi-tier corporate buyers

Highly Complex (16–21)

Typical Profile: Composable architecture, real-time data streaming, multi-national compliance, global rollout

Recommended Partners: Composable architecture specialists or Tier-1 SI — though strong internal IT + focused scope may allow capable mid-tier partner

Example: Fortune 1000 chemical distributor: 40-country build, 15 regional ERPs, AI pricing, SOC 2

Rule of thumb: Projects scoring 11+ typically require either a Specialised B2B Commerce Partner or a Tier-1 SI — the integration depth and B2B-specific middleware expertise needed at this level is rarely found in platform boutiques or generalist agencies. Scores of 16–21 generally point toward composable architecture expertise or Tier-1 scale, though exceptions exist: a highly focused scope (single ERP, single country, well-documented requirements) with a strong internal IT team can sometimes be executed by a capable mid-tier specialised agency below the Tier-1 cost threshold. Scores of 0–5 are well-served by platform-native boutiques for bounded implementations. Edge cases exist at every tier: a 0–5-scoring project that has a complex data migration from a bespoke legacy system may still benefit from a more experienced integration partner despite the low overall score.

Platform vs. Custom-Coded — The Foundational Decision

> **"Will this project be built on a packaged SaaS platform or through a custom-coded or composable architecture?"**
>
> This single decision determines the entire agency skill set you need, the total cost curve, and your long-term platform dependency risk.

Before selecting an agency type, every buyer must answer one prior question: **will this project be built on a packaged SaaS platform (BigCommerce, Shopify Plus, Salesforce Commerce Cloud, Adobe Commerce) or through a custom-coded or composable architecture?**

The Platform Route: When It Works — and When It Doesn't

◯ PLATFORM ROUTE WORKS WHEN...

- **Complexity scores 0–10:** Well-chosen platforms deliver faster time-to-value and lower initial cost
- **Standard B2B features sufficient:** Account hierarchies, tiered pricing, and buyer portals are covered natively
- **Faster time-to-value needed:** Certified agency expertise on a specific platform accelerates delivery
- **Lower initial cost is a priority:** SaaS platforms reduce upfront build cost vs. custom architecture

✕ PLATFORM ROUTE FAILS WHEN...

- **Complexity score exceeds 11** and the platform wasn't designed for that level of B2B complexity
- **Patchwork of third-party plugins** is used to build core B2B logic instead of native architecture
- **Platform licensing scales unfavourably** as order volume or SKU count grows (model your plugin stack carefully)
- **Highly bespoke ERP data models** that no standard platform connector can accommodate
- **Aggressive multi-country expansion** where standard SaaS licensing economics break down at scale

Platform vs. Custom-Coded

The Custom-Code / Composable Route: When to Consider It

Custom-coded or composable architectures (commercetools, VTEX, Spryker, or fully bespoke builds) are worth serious consideration when your needs exceed what packaged platforms can natively deliver.

Platform Workarounds Required

Platform's native features cannot accommodate your B2B logic without significant workarounds or unsupported customisations.

Legacy ERP Integration

Integration requirements involve **real-time bidirectional sync** with legacy ERPs that no packaged platform handles natively.

Custom CPQ Logic

Your pricing engine requires **custom CPQ logic** outside any standard platform's capability — beyond native price rules or tiered pricing.

Score 16–21 + Multi-National Needs

Project complexity score of **16–21** with multi-national, multi-architecture flexibility demands that composable MACH architecture uniquely provides.

MACH Architecture Required

Microservices, API-first, Cloud-native, Headless — required when you need modular, independently deployable commerce components at scale.

Long-Term Flexibility: Composable architectures future-proof your commerce stack — swap, upgrade, or extend individual components without rebuilding the entire platform. If proprietary workflows or unique competitive differentiation are core to your business, composable gives you the architectural freedom packaged SaaS cannot.

Platform vs. Custom-Coded

The Tradeoffs

> 📝 ⚡ **Key Insight:** Composable is **NOT** automatically the right answer because your complexity score is high. A focused 16-point project with a strong internal IT team may still be better served by a well-configured enterprise platform.

🏗️ Enterprise Platform

✅ When It Makes Sense

- Focused 16-point complexity score
- Strong internal IT team available
- Faster go-to-market priority
- Mid-market deployment profile

⚡ Key Benefits

- Lower upfront investment
- Shorter implementation timelines
- Lower long-term engineering overhead
- Managed upgrades & maintenance

⚠️ Constraints

- Native feature limitations for complex B2B logic
- Vendor-controlled roadmap
- Workarounds for edge-case requirements

🔧 Composable / Custom

✅ When It Makes Sense

- Score 16–21 + multi-national needs
- Legacy ERP real-time bidirectional sync
- Custom CPQ logic beyond platform capability
- Unique competitive differentiation is core

⚡ Key Benefits

- Full architectural freedom (MACH)
- Swap or extend individual components
- No proprietary vendor lock-in
- Future-proof commerce stack

⚠️ Constraints

- **Higher initial cost** vs. platform implementations
- **3–6 months longer** than equivalent platform builds
- **Significantly higher** long-term engineering costs

> 📝 📊 **Gartner Reference:** The Gartner Magic Quadrant for Digital Commerce (2025) positioned **commercetools as a leader in composable commerce**. However, Magic Quadrant positions change annually — verify the current edition before citing. Gartner also consistently cautions that composable architecture is **not the right fit for the majority of mid-market deployments**, regardless of complexity score.

Critical Due-Diligence Checklist for Platform Implementations

If your project is trending toward a platform implementation, apply this checklist rigorously before selecting an agency. Platform fit failures are expensive — the average B2B replatforming project runs 2–3x the original budget estimate when the initial platform choice was wrong.

Over-budget risk

Average cost overrun when initial platform choice was wrong

Verify native B2B feature parity

Does the platform natively support your required account hierarchy depth, approval workflow tiers, CPQ requirements, and punchout/EDI capabilities WITHOUT third-party plugins? Ask the agency to demonstrate each requirement using only core platform features during a technical proof-of-concept.

Confirm agency certification level and tier

Every major platform operates a tiered partner programme with named levels (e.g., entry, mid, and elite tiers). These tier names and structures change periodically, so treat any specific tier labels in this guide as illustrative — verify current tier names and requirements directly on the platform vendor's official partner directory. What matters practically: confirm the agency's current tier (certifications lapse), the number of certified individual developers on the delivery team, and whether the certification covers the specific platform version you are implementing.

Count platform-specific live B2B implementations

Request a list of B2B (not B2C) live implementations on that specific platform version within the past 24 months, with client references you can contact. An agency with 50 Magento 1 implementations and two Adobe Commerce 2.4 B2B deployments is not an Adobe Commerce B2B specialist.

Assess ERP connector maturity

Ask specifically: does your platform connector to our ERP (SAP, Oracle, Microsoft Dynamics, Infor, etc.) use a native integration, a certified iPaaS connector, or custom middleware? Who built it, and what is the SLA for connector maintenance when platform versions are updated? A connector that breaks with every platform release is a structural liability.

Critical Due-Diligence Checklist

Apply this checklist rigorously before selecting an agency. Platform fit failures are expensive — the average B2B replatforming project runs 2–3x the original budget estimate when the initial platform choice was wrong.

Model the plugin/app cost stack

Request a complete list of all third-party apps, plugins, and extensions required for your implementation and calculate the total monthly recurring cost. A high plugin count may mean the platform's native B2B feature set is insufficient, or the agency is defaulting to off-the-shelf components. Require an architectural justification for each significant third-party dependency.

Stress-test checkout edge cases

Require the agency to demonstrate how the platform handles your most complex checkout scenarios: split shipments, partial payments, blanket orders, contract pricing overrides, and multi-location tax logic. These edge cases are where platform limitations surface — test them before contract signature, not after go-live.

Validate ERP connector maturity

Ask specifically: does your platform connector to our ERP (SAP, Oracle, Microsoft Dynamics, Infor, etc.) use a native integration, a certified iPaaS connector, or custom middleware? Who built it, and what is the SLA for connector maintenance when platform versions are updated? A connector that breaks with every platform release is a structural liability.

Audit platform upgrade policies

Understand the platform's release cadence, mandatory upgrade windows, and end-of-life timelines. Ask the agency for a cost estimate on their last three major platform upgrades for comparable clients. Forced upgrades with no fixed-fee options represent hidden long-term cost and operational risk.

Benchmark performance under load

Require load testing results from comparable B2B implementations at your projected peak order volumes. B2B catalogs with large SKU counts, complex pricing matrices, and account-specific assortments create performance profiles very different from B2C. Confirm acceptable response times under realistic concurrent-user loads.

Map data migration complexity

Request a detailed data migration assessment covering customer accounts, order history, product catalog, contract pricing, and custom attributes. Migrations are consistently underscoped — ask the agency to itemize every data entity, its source format, transformation logic required, and validation method. Unscoped migration work is a primary driver of budget overruns.

Verify multi-currency/tax capabilities

Model total licensing cost at 2x and 5x your current order volume and GMV. Confirm native support for your required currency pairs, tax jurisdictions, and VAT/GST compliance requirements. Some platforms have revenue-share or GMV-based pricing that can become significant at scale — ensure the platform economics work for your growth trajectory, not just your current state.

Confirm post-launch support model

Demand a working demo of your three most complex B2B requirements in the actual platform environment before contract signature. Then clarify who owns post-launch support: the agency, the platform vendor, or a third party? Confirm SLA tiers, escalation paths, and whether the agency retains institutional knowledge of your implementation after handover.

> ⚠️ **Note:** Partner tier status and certification levels change frequently. Always verify current status directly on the platform vendor's official partner directory: Adobe (**adobe.com/commerce/partners**), Shopify (**shopify.com/plus/partners**), Salesforce (**appexchange.salesforce.com/partners**), BigCommerce (**bigcommerce.com/partners**). Do not rely on agency self-reported credentials alone.

TIER-1 GLOBAL SI

01

Tier-1 Global Systems Integrators

Overview

Enterprise-scale consulting firms with global delivery networks, deep vertical expertise, and multi-platform capabilities. These organizations provide end-to-end transformation services including strategy, implementation, change management, and long-term managed services.

> 🗒 Examples: Accenture Interactive, Deloitte Digital, IBM iX, Capgemini, Cognizant, Wipro Digital

✓ Best For

Enterprise revenue >$500M with multi-year digital transformation roadmaps	Multi-continent deployments requiring global compliance and localization
Complex organizational change management across 50+ stakeholders	Mission-critical systems requiring 24/7 support and SLA guarantees
Complexity score: 16–21 (highest tier only)	Board-level accountability and audit trail requirements

⛔ Avoid If

Budget below $500K — minimum engagement thresholds not met	Timeline under 6 months — enterprise governance cannot be compressed
Mid-market scope — overengineered and cost-prohibitive	Agile, iterative approach preferred — SIs optimize for waterfall governance

Typical Engagement

Timeline	Budget	Team Size	Blended Rates
12–24+ months	$500K–$5M+	15–50+ specialists	$150–$500+/hr

⚠️ Red Flags

🚩 **No vertical experience:** Proposed team has no prior experience in your specific industry vertical	🚩 **Offshore continuity gap:** Offshore delivery model with no onshore architect continuity	🚩 **Vague change-order terms:** Fixed-price contract with vague change-order terms

> 🗒 🔍 **Reference Check:** Require 3 enterprise references (>$1B revenue) with similar complexity score and post-launch performance data — before contract signature.

B2B SPECIALIST

02

Specialised B2B Commerce Partners

Overview

Technology-focused engineering agencies with deep, exclusive expertise in B2B commerce architecture — covering data modelling, API orchestration, middleware, and platform-specific certifications.

> 🗒 **Examples:** Elogic Commerce, 5874 Commerce, Vaimo, Redstage, Gorilla Group

✓ Best For

Mid-market to enterprise: manufacturers, wholesalers, distributors ($10M–$500M revenue)	Complex B2B workflows: pricing tiers, approval hierarchies, CPQ, punchout
3+ backend integrations needing custom middleware	Platform migrations with zero revenue disruption
Rescue ops for stalled implementations	Complexity score: 10–18 (0–21 model)

⚑ Avoid If

Budget below $50K	Timeline under 8 weeks
Simple B2C workflows only	No backend complexity — brand/creative work only

Typical Engagement

Timeline	Budget	Team Size
3–12 months	$25K–$500K	10–50 specialists

⚠️ Red Flags

🚩 **No certified B2B architects:** No certified B2B architects on proposed team	🚩 **B2C-only portfolio:** Portfolio shows only B2C work	🚩 **Off-the-shelf bias:** Proposes off-the-shelf when custom architecture is clearly needed

> 🗒 🔍 **Reference Check:** Require **3 B2B client references** with similar integration complexity and post-launch performance data — **before contract signature.**

B2B SPECIALIST

02

Specialised B2B Commerce Partners

Typical Engagement Details

- **Budget:** $25K–$500K | **Timeline:** 3–12 months
- **Rescue operations:** typically 4–6 months
- **Team size:** 10–50 specialists
- All rates indicative — confirm current pricing directly with each agency

Key Characteristics

- Strongest balance of technical depth and operational agility
- Current certifications across Adobe, Shopify Plus, Salesforce, BigCommerce, and composable stacks
- Prescribes the correct technology stack — not the highest-referral platform
- Primary resource for project-rescue operations at mid-market speed and cost

Specialised B2B partners deliver enterprise-quality integration at mid-market speed and cost — without the multi-million-dollar retainers of Tier-1 SIs.

📝 🔍 **Reference Check Requirement:** Request 3 B2B references on the same platform + ERP (or closest equivalent) and similar complexity score (11+), delivered in the past 24 months; validate integration error-handling and post-launch support.

03

Platform-Native Boutique Agencies

Small, highly agile teams (typically 10–50 employees) focused on mastering a single platform ecosystem, leveraging out-of-the-box features, pre-built themes, and marketplace applications for rapid deployment.

Examples: Pixel Union, Tobi Commerce (Shopify Plus specialists); MageTitans, Benjamin Media (Adobe/Magento boutiques)

✓ Best For

- Brands generating $2M–$25M in revenue entering digital commerce for the first time
- Standard B2C or simple B2B workflows requiring no legacy ERP synchronisation
- Projects where speed-to-market is the primary objective
- Complexity score: 0–10 on the 0–21 model

⬜ Avoid If

- You have 3+ backend system integrations — boutiques will exhaust their technical ceiling
- Your project complexity score exceeds 10 — plugin stacking will generate performance debt
- You anticipate scaling beyond the platform's native limits within 2 years

Typical Engagement

- **Timeline:** 2–6 months | **Budget:** $25K–$150K
- **Shopify Plus:** 4–8 weeks for standard builds
- All rates indicative — confirm current pricing directly with each agency

⚑ Red Flags

> ⚠️ **Custom code over native modules**
>
> Agency proposes custom code for features available in native platform modules

> ⚠️ **No certified developers**
>
> No certified platform developers on the proposed team roster

> ⚠️ **B2C-only portfolio**
>
> Portfolio shows only B2C implementations when you're running B2B

🗒️ 🔍 **Reference Check Requirement:** Request three client references with similar platform, revenue scale, and go-live within the past 18 months. Verify post-launch support responsiveness and platform upgrade management.

04

Full-Service Digital / Marketing Agencies

Agencies built around brand experience, full-funnel marketing, creative design, and customer experience. Commerce implementation is one service within a broader portfolio.

Examples: R/GA, Huge, VMLY&R Commerce, DEPT

✓ Best For

- Primary objective is frontend UX, rebranding, or omnichannel marketing
- Complexity score 6–10; backend systems modern with standard API connectivity
- Budget includes significant creative/brand strategy scope beyond technical build

⬛ Avoid If

- Technical architecture is the primary challenge — marketing agencies lack deep integration expertise
- You need dedicated B2B commerce specialists — generalist teams will underestimate complexity
- Budget is constrained to technical build only — creative overhead inflates project cost

Typical Engagement

- **Timeline:** 4–12 months | **Budget:** $100K–$750K
- Creative discovery and brand strategy phases add 2–4 months to technical timelines
- All rates indicative — confirm current pricing directly with each agency

🚩 Red Flags

⚠️ **Outsourced technical development**

Agency outsources all technical development to third-party contractors

⚠️ **Campaign-heavy portfolio**

Portfolio emphasizes campaign work over transactional commerce builds

⚠️ **No in-house commerce architects**

No in-house commerce architects on the proposed team

🗒️ 🔍 **Reference Check Requirement:** Request three commerce references (not campaign/brand projects) with similar technical scope and post-launch conversion data.

SECTION 05: AGENCY ARCHETYPES

05

Offshore / Nearshore Development Shops

Engineering firms providing scaled software development talent at regionally optimised rates. Eastern Europe (Poland, Ukraine, Romania) offers nearshore maturity with strong engineering standards; LATAM and India offer maximum volume at lowest cost.

Examples: EPAM, Luxoft, Intellectsoft; regional BigCommerce/Adobe partners in Eastern Europe or LATAM

✓ Best For

- Budget-constrained projects with clear technical specifications already defined
- Complexity score 8–15 requiring scaled engineering capacity
- Strong internal IT/engineering team capable of full architectural oversight

⬜ Avoid If

- Requirements are ambiguous or evolving — offshore teams require precise specifications
- Real-time collaboration is mission-critical — 8+ hour time zone gaps complicate coordination
- No internal technical leadership to manage vendor or oversee architecture

Typical Engagement

- **Timeline:** 4–10 months | **Budget:** $50K–$300K
- Nearshore (Eastern Europe / LATAM): $35–$85/hr
- Offshore (India / Southeast Asia): $20–$50/hr
- All rates are indicative — confirm current pricing directly with each agency

⚑ Red Flags

⚠️ **No verifiable client references**

Agency cannot provide verifiable client references in your geographic market

⚠️ **No platform experience**

Proposed team has no prior experience with your specific platform or tech stack

⚠️ **Weak contract provisions**

Contract lacks clear IP ownership and code escrow provisions

🗒️ 🔍 **Reference Check Requirement:** Request three references where the client retained full architectural control and verify post-launch code quality, documentation standards, and knowledge transfer completeness.

SECTION 06: AGENCY ARCHETYPES

06

Freelance / Contractor Networks

Platforms connecting businesses with independent developers and commerce specialists for micro-projects, specific bug fixes, or short-term staff augmentation.

Examples: Toptal, Upwork Enterprise, specialised developer Slack communities

✓ Best For

- Tactical fixes, minor feature additions, or emergency bug resolution
- Internal team needs temporary capacity for a specific skill gap
- Complexity score 0–5; well-documented codebase with clear task definition

⛔ Avoid If

- Project requires institutional knowledge or long-term architectural continuity
- You need accountability beyond individual contractor availability
- Complexity score exceeds 5 — freelancers lack the team structure for integrated builds

Typical Engagement

- **Timeline:** Days to weeks
- **Rates:** $20–$200/hr depending on market and speciality
- Confirm all rates directly with each contractor

🚩 Red Flags

⚠️ **No verifiable portfolio**

Contractor has no verifiable portfolio or client testimonials on the platform

⚠️ **No platform certifications**

Proposed contractor lacks platform certifications for your specific tech stack

⚠️ **No QA process**

No code review or QA process — all work delivered directly to production

🗒️ 🔍 **Reference Check:** Verify contractor ratings, completion rates, and client feedback on the platform. For critical work, request direct references from past clients outside the platform's rating system. Zero institutional accountability: if the freelancer leaves, all codebase knowledge disappears instantly.

Cost and Timeline Benchmarks

⚠️ **Indicative Benchmarks Only:** All cost, timeline, and rate figures in this section are indicative industry benchmarks drawn from cross-referenced agency and analyst data (Net Solutions 2025, Centarro 2025, BigCommerce partner data, Forrester Peer Community). They are not guarantees. Actual costs vary substantially by project scope, ERP complexity, data migration effort, and agency geography. Always obtain itemised fixed-price or time-and-materials proposals from at least three qualified agencies before establishing a project budget.

Implementation Cost Benchmarks by Complexity Tier

Complexity Tier	Typical Scope	Indicative Cost	Timeline	Team Size
🟢 **Simple** Score 0–5	SaaS platform, native themes, <5K SKUs, 0–1 integrations	**$15K–$50K**	2–4 months	2–4 specialists
🟡 **Moderate** Score 6–10	Custom UI, 10K–50K SKUs, segmented pricing, 2–3 cloud integrations	**$50K–$150K**	3–6 months	4–7 specialists
🟠 **Complex** Score 11–15	Custom B2B workflows, legacy ERP sync, >100K SKUs, multi-site	**$150K–$500K**	6–12 months	8–15 specialists
🔴 **Highly Complex** Score 16–21	Composable architecture, streaming data, global compliance, custom CPQ	**$500K–$2M+**	12–24+ months	15+ specialists

TCO context: Total Cost of Ownership over 36 months typically runs 2–3x the initial implementation fee. A $50K platform subscription often necessitates a $100K–$150K implementation budget. Third-party app reliance on platforms not purpose-built for B2B can add $500–$2,000+/month in recurring subscription costs and maintenance overhead.

Cost and Timeline Benchmarks

Platform Implementation Timeline Benchmarks

1 — **BigCommerce B2B Edition**

2–4 months

API-first architecture; fastest native B2B deployment. Quick Start Accelerator (2025) promises launch in 90 days from $15K for standard builds.

2 — **Shopify Plus**

3–6 months

Core deploys fast; complex wholesale logic requires customisation via Liquid or apps. Basic B2B builds can launch in 6–12 weeks.

3 — **Salesforce Commerce Cloud (B2B)**

3–9 months

Heavy ecosystem reliance; basic deployments ~12–16 weeks; complex builds ~3 quarters. Strong CPQ integration.

4 — **Adobe Commerce (Magento)**

6–12 months

Highly configurable; resource-intensive. Requires senior backend engineers. 3–8 months development phase; add discovery and QA.

⚠️ **ERP Integration Time Multiplier:** ERP integration is the single largest time multiplier. Add 2–4 months to any timeline estimate when legacy on-premise ERP integration is required. Accelerator programmes compress timelines but typically cover only foundational functionality.

Cost and Timeline Benchmarks

Agency Hourly Rate Benchmarks (2025–2026)

ONSHORE

US / Canada

$100–$250/hr

- Cultural alignment & synchronous comms
- Premium senior architects: $200–$250+/hr
- Lowest coordination overhead

NEARSHORE

Eastern Europe / LATAM

$35–$85/hr

- Strong time zone overlap
- High engineering maturity & English proficiency
- Optimal value with strong internal PM

OFFSHORE

India / Southeast Asia

$20–$50/hr

- Maximum cost efficiency & scale
- Senior developers reach $45–$55/hr
- Async workflow; rigorous PM required

ENTERPRISE

Tier-1 Global SI (blended)

$150–$500+/hr

- Blended onshore advisory + offshore delivery
- Engagement partner rates exceed $500/hr
- Best for enterprise-scale transformation

Regional Rate Comparison

Hourly rate ranges across delivery models — color-coded by engagement type. Each bar represents the **maximum blended rate** for that delivery model; floor rates begin at $20/hr (Offshore) and $150/hr (Tier-1 SI).
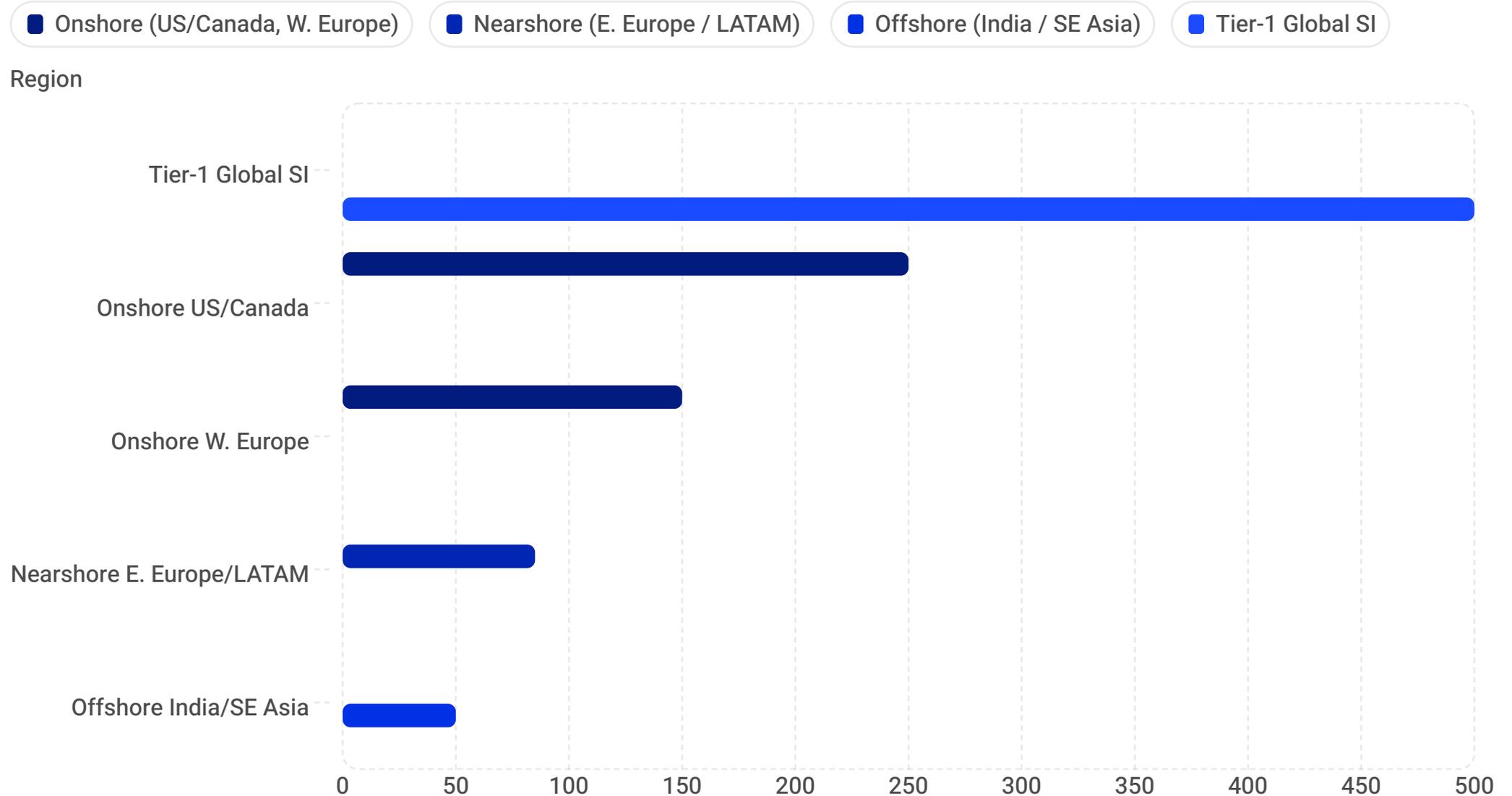
- Onshore (US/Canada, W. Europe)
- Nearshore (E. Europe / LATAM)
- Offshore (India / SE Asia)
- Tier-1 Global SI

Region

Onshore	Nearshore	Offshore	Tier-1 Global SI
US / Canada W. Europe $100−$250/hr	E. Europe / LATAM $35−$85/hr	India / SE Asia $20−$50/hr	Blended Model $150−$500+/hr

How to read this chart: Bars show the **upper bound** of blended hourly rates per delivery model. Tier-1 Global SIs carry the widest span ($150−$500+/hr) due to blended onshore advisory and offshore delivery. Offshore models offer the most cost-efficient floor at $20/hr, ideal for high-volume, async workstreams.

The Hidden Cost Equation

Overruns are systemic, not exceptional — the same failure points surface across every replatforming engagement.

70%	**83%**	**40–60%**
of projects exceed budget	**of data migrations miss targets**	**more change orders**
Overruns are systemic, not exceptional — driven by the same recurring failure points	Scope, budget, or timeline — most projects fail on at least one dimension	When discovery phases are skipped or abbreviated

---

⚠ RISK ASSESSMENT: FOUR PRIMARY COST DRIVERS

Where Budgets Break Down

⚠ HIGH SEVERITY

Data Migration Failures

83% of migrations miss scope, budget, or timeline *(Gartner/Experian)*

- Legacy ERP → cloud-native platforms: data models differ significantly
- Data quality issues compound during extraction & transformation

⚠ HIGH SEVERITY

Integration Architecture Debt

Point-to-point integrations inflate costs by **20–35%** over lifecycle

- Maintenance & upgrade burden grows with each connected system
- iPaaS (MuleSoft, Boomi, Celigo) prevents long-term debt accumulation

● MED SEVERITY

Third-Party App Sprawl

Average mid-market Shopify Plus merchant runs **35–60 apps**

- Each app adds licensing costs, performance risk & integration complexity
- Rationalize the ecosystem during migration — not after launch

● MED SEVERITY

Scope Creep from Poor Discovery
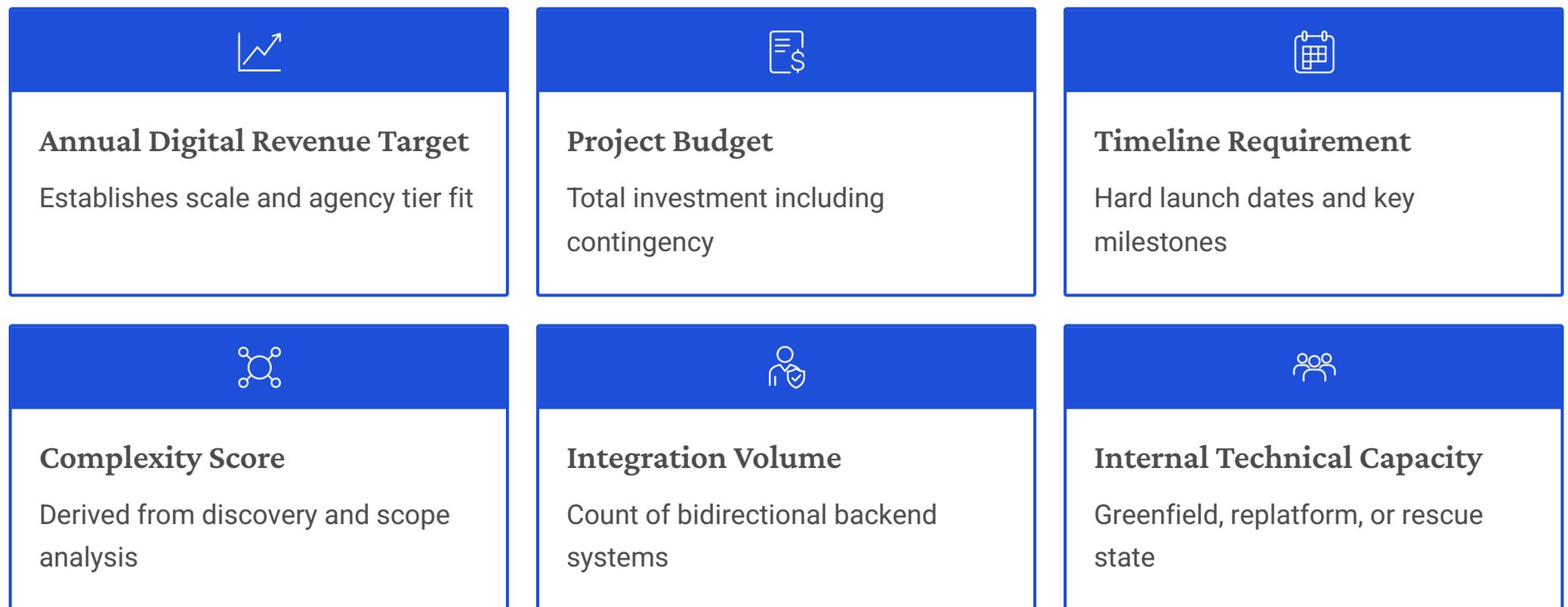
Skipped discovery = **40–60% more change orders**

- Undefined checkout edge cases & undocumented pricing rules surface mid-project
- Unscoped integrations discovered late drive costly rework & delays

🗩 **Risk Mitigation:** High-severity drivers (Data Migration & Integration Debt) are the leading causes of budget overrun. Address these in discovery — not during build. Medium-severity items compound over time and should be rationalized pre-launch.
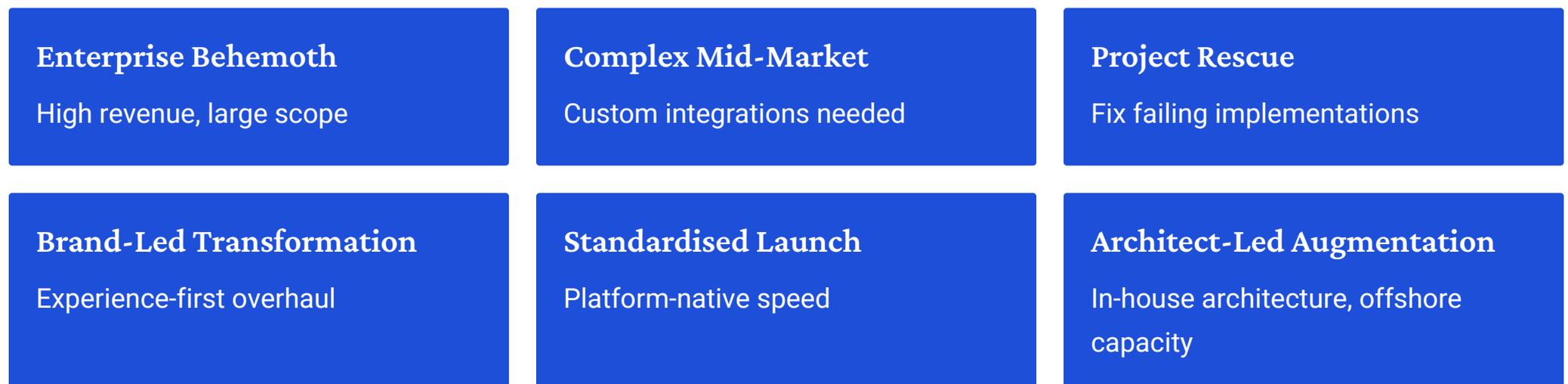
The Decision Framework

The Budget-Complexity Matrix: Six Decision Paths

Define these six parameters before engaging agencies:

Annual Digital Revenue Target

Establishes scale and agency tier fit

Project Budget

Total investment including contingency

Timeline Requirement

Hard launch dates and key milestones

Complexity Score

Derived from discovery and scope analysis

Integration Volume

Count of bidirectional backend systems

Internal Technical Capacity

Greenfield, replatform, or rescue state

Each combination of these parameters maps to one of six paths — from **Enterprise Behemoth** to **Architect-Led Augmentation** — each pointing toward a specific agency archetype.

Enterprise Behemoth

High revenue, large scope

Complex Mid-Market

Custom integrations needed

Project Rescue

Fix failing implementations

Brand-Led Transformation

Experience-first overhaul

Standardised Launch

Platform-native speed

Architect-Led Augmentation

In-house architecture, offshore capacity

The Decision Framework

Six Decision Paths: Match Your Profile to the Right Agency Archetype

01 — The Enterprise Behemoth

Typical indicators: Revenue >$1B; budget >$2M; complexity score 16–21; multi-continent regulatory and human capital transformation in scope.

Agency type: Tier-1 System Integrator

Key consideration: Organisations with massive global footprints, deep legal and procurement teams, and established enterprise software partnerships are typically best positioned to absorb the governance overhead of multi-year, multi-national deployment.

02 — The Mid-Market Specialist

Typical indicators: Revenue $10M–$500M; budget $50K–$500K; complexity score 11–21; heavy legacy ERP/PIM integrations in scope.

Agency type: Specialised B2B Commerce Partner

Key consideration: These partners possess the middleware, API orchestration, and data synchronisation expertise that boutiques lack — without the multi-million-dollar retainers of Tier-1 SIs. Particularly strong fit if the project involves complex account hierarchies, dynamic CPQ, punchout, or hybrid B2B/B2C architectures.

03 — The Rapid Deployment

Typical indicators: Revenue $1M–$50M; budget $20K–$150K; complexity score 1–10; standard catalogue, minimal integrations, aggressive go-live timeline.

Agency type: Platform-Certified Boutique

Key consideration: Speed-to-market is the primary KPI. Boutique agencies with deep platform-native expertise (Shopify, BigCommerce, etc.) can execute accelerated launches using pre-built component libraries, reducing custom development overhead and compressing timelines to 6–12 weeks.

04 — The Brand-Led Transformation

Typical indicators: Revenue $5M–$250M; budget $100K–$1M; complexity score 8–15; experience and brand differentiation are the primary success metrics.

Agency type: Experience-Led Digital Agency

Key consideration: When brand equity and customer experience are the primary drivers of competitive advantage, agencies with deep UX research, creative strategy, and conversion optimisation capabilities outperform pure-play technical integrators. Commerce capability should be secondary to experience expertise.
(Continues on next page)

05 — The Budget-Constrained Build

Typical indicators: Revenue $500K–$10M; budget <$50K; complexity score 1–8; founder-led or lean team with limited internal technical resource.

Agency type: Offshore or Nearshore Development Team

Key consideration: Budget constraints eliminate most Western boutiques. Offshore teams with strong platform specialisation can deliver acceptable outcomes at significantly reduced day rates — provided scope is tightly controlled and an internal stakeholder has sufficient technical literacy to manage delivery risk.
(Continues on next page)

06 — The Tactical Fix

Typical indicators: Project severely over budget or off timeline; current agency lacks technical depth; ERP integration or system performance failing.

Agency type: Specialised B2B Commerce Partner

Key consideration: When generalist agencies or offshore teams stall during ERP integration, specialised partners deploy a structured rescue methodology: forensic technical audit → environment stabilisation → integration architecture rebuild → controlled relaunch, typically within 4–6 months for contained scope.
(Continues on next page)

Vetting Your Shortlist

Once the framework identifies your agency archetype, interrogate shortlisted vendors across four critical dimensions.

> ⚡ **MANDATORY, NOT OPTIONAL:** Client references from comparable projects are **MANDATORY**, not optional. No exceptions.

Operational Realities

How does the agency actually run projects? Probe delivery processes, escalation paths, and what happens when things go wrong.

Technical Depth

Is their B2B expertise genuine or surface-level? Verify platform, ERP, and integration experience against your specific stack.

Cultural Alignment

Will their communication style, decision-making pace, and working norms mesh with your internal team over a multi-month engagement?

Post-Launch Support

What does the agency relationship look like after go-live? Confirm SLA commitments, team continuity, and ongoing development capacity.

References as a Mandatory Decision Criterion

The most reliable predictor of agency performance is how previous clients describe the experience — especially when things went wrong. Sales decks, case study PDFs, and award entries are marketing materials. References are evidence.

✓ **Require a minimum of three references**

From B2B implementations (not B2C) on the same platform and ERP combination as your project, completed within the past 24 months. If the agency cannot produce three such references, the shortlist position should be reconsidered.

✓ **Contact all references directly**

By phone or video — not email. Written responses are filtered; spoken conversation is not.

✓ **Ask the five critical questions**

(1) Did the agency deliver on the promised timeline, and if not, why? (2) Did the final cost match the original proposal, and what drove any variance? (3) How did the agency communicate when a critical integration failed or a milestone was missed? (4) Was the agency's B2B expertise genuine, or did gaps emerge mid-project? (5) Would you hire this agency again for a project of similar complexity?

Vetting Your Shortlist

Apply this structured checklist to every agency on your shortlist before making a final selection decision.

Request Verifiable NPS Scores

Request the agency's overall NPS score and platform-specific CSAT rating, verifiable through Clutch.co or the platform vendor's partner programme data. Top-tier specialised B2B partners maintain NPS of 70+ on Clutch.co.

Demand Live Reference Calls

Contact all references directly by phone or video — not email. Written responses are filtered; spoken conversation is not. Require a minimum of three references from comparable B2B implementations completed within the past 24 months.

Audit the Proposed Team Roster

Confirm the names, roles, and availability of every individual who will work on your project. Verify that senior staff presented during the pitch will remain assigned throughout delivery — not just for the sales process.

Verify Platform Certifications

Request current platform certification documentation for the specific version you are implementing. Validate ERP integration capability by asking for a reference from a client using the same or similar ERP (SAP, Oracle, Dynamics, Infor).

Review Post-Launch Support Terms

Confirm SLA commitments, team continuity guarantees, and ongoing development capacity in writing. Understand exactly what the agency relationship looks like after go-live before signing any agreement.

Assess Cultural and Operational Fit

Evaluate whether the agency's communication style, decision-making pace, and working norms will mesh with your internal team over a multi-month engagement. Process misalignment is a leading cause of project failure.

Red Flags That Eliminate Candidates Immediately

Guaranteed exact timelines and fixed-price budgets issued before a comprehensive technical data discovery audit has been completed

Inability to produce current platform certification documentation for the specific version you are implementing

No verifiable B2B references on the specific platform — only B2C case studies

Consistent promotion of proprietary, undocumented solutions over standard industry architectures

Inability to describe a specific ERP integration error-handling architecture in technical terms

Vague answers to B2B scenarios: 'we can handle any custom ERP' without architectural specifics

Change-order processes or MSA language that creates financial thresholds preventing scope corrections

Making Your Decision

> "The selection of a B2B digital commerce agency is not a vendor procurement exercise — it is the establishment of a foundational operational partnership that will shape your revenue trajectory for years."

Your Decision Framework

B2B Project Complexity Scoring

Objectively diagnose your technical requirements in under 30 minutes using the 0–21 scoring model

Budget-Complexity Matrix

Map your complexity score to the right investment tier and narrow the fragmented agency market

Agency Archetype Mapping

Align your project profile to the Six-Type Agency Classification System to identify your ideal partner category

Due-Diligence Checklist

Apply the platform checklist to prevent the most expensive architecture mistake in B2B commerce: platform misfit

Making Your Decision

Your Immediate Next Steps

1

Assemble Your Buying Committee

Convene cross-functional stakeholders from IT, marketing, finance, and sales. Align on must-have requirements, budget authority, and decision criteria before engaging any agency. A unified committee prevents misaligned expectations and accelerates consensus.

2

Issue Your Complexity-Matched RFP

Use the vetting criteria from Section 5 to build a targeted RFP calibrated to your complexity score and budget tier. Generic RFPs attract generic agencies — a structured brief filters for the right archetype from the start.

3

Conduct Reference Verification

Require three verifiable B2B references for every shortlisted agency. Apply the Section 1B platform checklist, confirm agency certifications, and speak directly with past clients about delivery quality, communication, and post-launch support.

4

Execute Proof-of-Concept (if applicable)

For high-complexity or high-investment engagements, request a scoped proof-of-concept or technical discovery sprint. This surfaces integration risks, team competency, and cultural fit before full contract commitment.

5

Negotiate Contract Terms

Secure milestone-based payment schedules, SLA commitments, IP ownership clauses, and escalation protocols. Ensure the contract reflects the full scope of your complexity score — not just the initial build phase.

Trust the framework. Agencies that cannot satisfy its criteria are not the right partner — regardless of price, pitch quality, or perceived brand recognition.

Making Your Decision

> The framework does the work — your job is to trust verified evidence over sales presentations.

◯ WHAT MATTERS

✓ Verified Evidence

Demand three verifiable B2B references — not case study PDFs

✓ Complexity Alignment

Match your 0–21 score to the right agency archetype

✓ Technical Depth

Proven ERP integration and platform certification in your domain

✓ Cultural Fit

A partner who understands B2B operations, not just storefronts

✕ WHAT DOESN'T

~~Cheapest Hourly Rate~~

Low cost signals low capability for complex B2B requirements

~~Impressive Portfolio~~

B2C wins don't translate to B2B complexity or integration depth

~~Sales Pitch Quality~~

Polished decks hide platform misfit — the costliest mistake in commerce

~~Brand Recognition~~

Tier-1 SIs charge millions; boutiques hit technical ceilings fast

65%

B2B Leaders

describe their e-commerce as **broken**

20–35%

Lifecycle Cost Inflation

caused by platform mismatch

> ⬜ **These failures are preventable — apply this framework, demand verifiable references, and select by complexity match, not sales charm.**