



The CIO's Vision for SAP: A Stable Core and Freedom to Innovate

*How support strategy can shape business agility,
investment priorities and future options*

Rimini Street[®]

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Executive summary

Many organizations have long viewed enterprise software support as an operational necessity — one tied to maintaining the systems that run critical business processes. Today, an expanding range of architectures, commercial models and support options gives enterprises greater choice in how they operate and modernize their estates.

This shift is particularly relevant to SAP customers running ECC or S/4HANA on-premises or in customer-managed cloud environments. As support milestones approach and coverage changes over time, these organizations must determine how to support their existing SAP estates while balancing cost, risk, business continuity and future investment in innovation.

Options that are available include:

- Remain on vendor support
- Opt for self-support
- Leverage independent support
- Apply a mix of approaches across systems, business units and geographies

Each option carries implications for business operations, roadmap planning, investment priorities and future agility. More importantly, support choices can influence how much people, time and money an organization can direct toward AI, automation, process improvement and other high-impact initiatives.

In practical terms, support strategy increasingly determines how much flexibility there is to fund, sequence and accelerate innovation on the organization's own timeline. This connection elevates support from an operational consideration to a strategic business decision.

This paper explores why CIOs should evaluate SAP support decisions within the broader strategic context, what options and tradeoffs they should consider and how support can be used as a lever to regain control over cost, risk, timing and innovation.



A more complex SAP landscape is raising the stakes



The SAP portfolio and broader SAP ecosystem are evolving on multiple fronts simultaneously. These changes are reshaping how organizations evaluate modernization, innovation and long-term technology strategy.

As a result, support decisions no longer exist in isolation; instead, they now intersect with how organizations access new capabilities, integrate new technologies and plan for the future.

Three developments in particular are redefining the decision environment:

- AI is increasingly tied to SAP cloud deployment and commercial models.
- SAP is frequently updating its integration requirements and restrictions.
- Several key support milestones for mature releases are approaching.

AI adoption is no longer a standalone decision

New AI capabilities in the SAP stack are being delivered primarily through cloud subscriptions and the RISE with SAP and GROW with SAP commercial frameworks — a decision the vendor reinforced at [SAP Sapphire 2026](#). Access to Joule assistants and agents in on-premises environments is available only under narrowly defined commercial conditions. Specifically, ECC and S/4HANA on-prem users must sign up for the Max Success Plan, committing to a RISE journey and redirecting more than 50% of their maintenance spend to SAP cloud services.¹

Because of this, how SAP is deployed, licensed and managed over time influences AI decisions.

Integration strategy is a priority

SAP has updated integration terms governing how external tools connect to SAP environments. Namely, the vendor has, at the time of writing, prohibited “the use of its APIs to integrate with AI systems outside its enclosed architectures.”²

For enterprises planning to combine SAP with non-SAP AI, automation or analytics platforms, integration architecture must be treated as an upfront design decision, not an afterthought. Decisions about interoperability increasingly impact broader technology strategy and future flexibility.

Support planning now extends beyond maintenance

[Mainstream maintenance for SAP ECC 6](#) ends on December 31, 2027, while extended maintenance will remain available until December 31, 2030, for customers who choose that option. SAP has stated a long-term commitment to S/4HANA through 2040, though customers must continue managing release cycles, upgrades and support eligibility throughout that period.

These milestones don’t dictate a single course of action, but they do require organizations to think more deliberately about how support, modernization and future investments align.

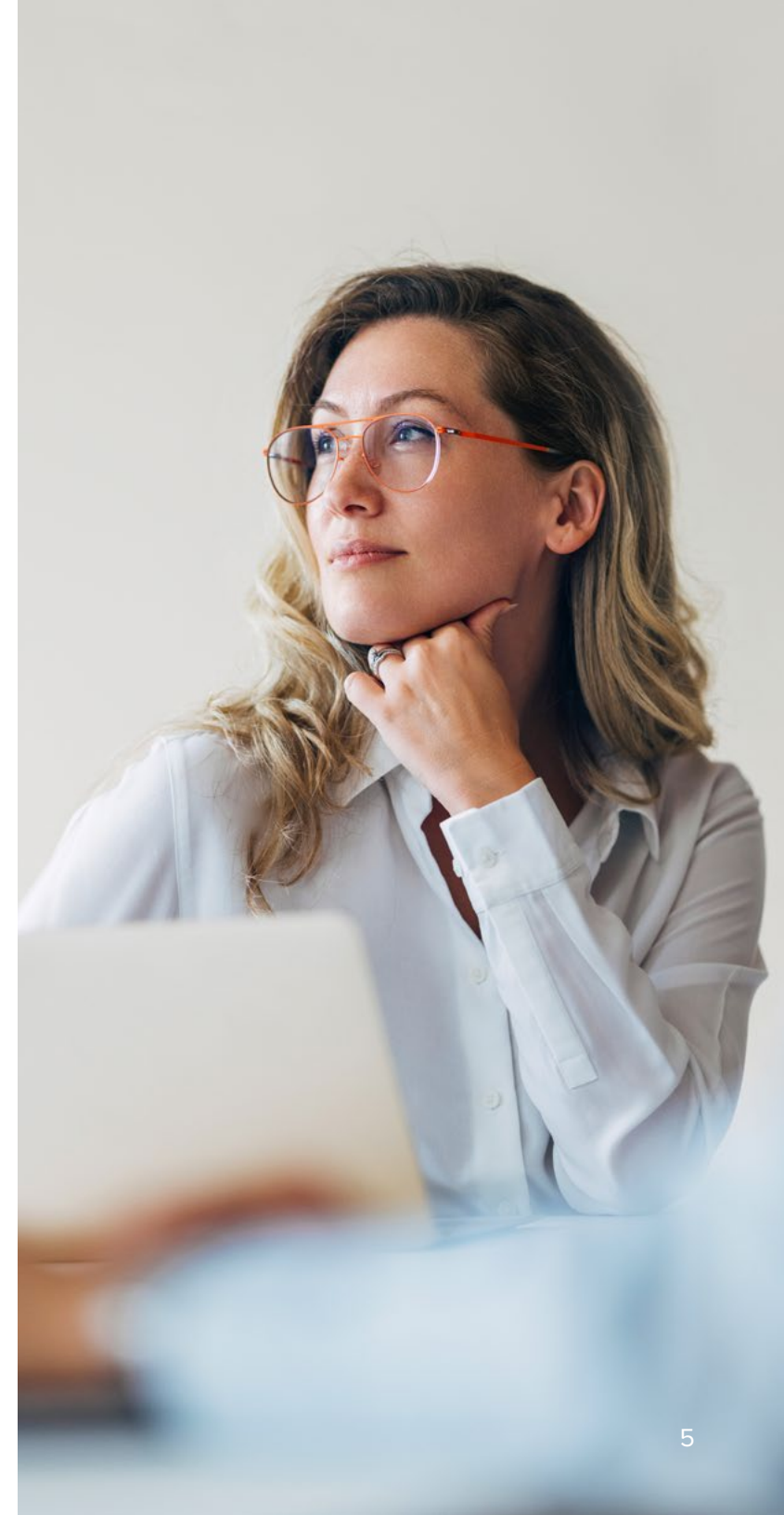
How organizations are responding

As AI, integration and support decisions become more interconnected, many organizations are taking a more deliberate approach to where they invest, how they modernize and which initiatives deliver the greatest value. The result is a widening range of strategies across the installed base.

The next chapter examines how that shift is playing out in practice.

¹ CIO Magazine: SAP’s AI offer to legacy customers comes with a catch from <https://www.cio.com/article/4170701/saps-ai-offer-to-legacy-customers-comes-with-a-catch.html>

² Lindsay Clark, “AI clause in new SAP API policy has partners worried over lock-in,” The Register, retrieved 7 August 2026 from <https://www.theregister.com/software/2026/04/29/ai-clause-in-new-sap-api-policy-provokes-lock-in-concern/5225767>



Where the installed base stands

Organizations are increasingly examining how ERP operations and innovation should intersect. As they evaluate the path forward, three realities consistently dominate the conversation. Research among the installed base reflects how organizations are responding to those realities.

1 Migration remains a significant commitment

SAP cloud migration (SAP Cloud ERP, S/4HANA private or public) is still an option that some organizations are considering, but the impact of such a move dictates if, when and how to proceed.

Independent research covering 200 senior decision-makers at large global enterprises found that nearly 60% of S/4HANA migrations run over budget or behind schedule. Cost, business-process redesign, retained customizations and organizational readiness were cited as the biggest constraints.³

Migration timelines and overall costs can be substantial. Technical conversions often take one to three years, while full transformation programs commonly extend to five to seven years once planning, data remediation, change management and stabilization are included. Costs vary significantly depending on the chosen approach (i.e., brownfield conversion, bluefield transformation or greenfield reimplementation) and the complexity of the environment, ranging from several million dollars for individual system conversions to tens of millions for large, highly customized enterprises.⁴

2 The business case isn't always clear

Organizations are also scrutinizing the value proposition behind large-scale migration programs pushed by SAP.

In many cases, existing systems such as ECC and S/4HANA on-prem continue to support the required business processes and outcomes. As a result, organizations may struggle to justify migration on a like-for-like basis, particularly when costs, disruption and long implementation timelines are factored into the equation.

Budget pressures reinforce this challenge. Recent user-group research identified budget constraints as the top challenge facing SAP customers, with migration costs and worries about future operating expenses among the most frequently cited contributors.⁵

³ Lindsay Clark, "Most SAP migrations bust budgets and project timelines, research finds," The Register, retrieved 7 August 2026 from <https://www.theregister.com/software/2026/02/05/most-sap-migrations-bust-budgets-and-deadlines-study-finds/4536059>

⁴ James A. Wondrasek, "The Real Cost of Migrating to SAP S/4HANA and How to Build a Business Case That Holds," SoftwareSeni, retrieved 7 August 2026 from <https://www.softwareseni.com/the-real-cost-of-migrating-to-sap-s4hana-and-how-to-build-a-business-case-that-holds/>

3 Innovation is moving on a different timeline

The most significant pattern emerging from the installed base may be that innovation is increasingly progressing independently of ERP transformation.

AI adoption remains at an early stage across SAP environments. ASUG research revealed that 10% of surveyed enterprises report AI deployments at production scale, while 24% are in active deployment. Just 18% reported using formal ROI frameworks to govern AI investments.⁵

At the same time, organizations are readily seeking innovation outside of SAP. Research from DACH markets indicated that 77% of organizations with implemented AI use cases run them in production using non-SAP solutions, while only 3% leverage SAP solutions.⁶

Different paths vs. a one-size-fits-all approach

The installed base is therefore moving in several directions at once:

- Some enterprises are accelerating cloud adoption.
- Some are remaining on S/4HANA on-prem for operational, regulatory or economic reasons.
- Some are extending the life of their existing ECC system.
- Most are adopting a hybrid approach consisting of a mix of stable systems with targeted modernization initiatives.

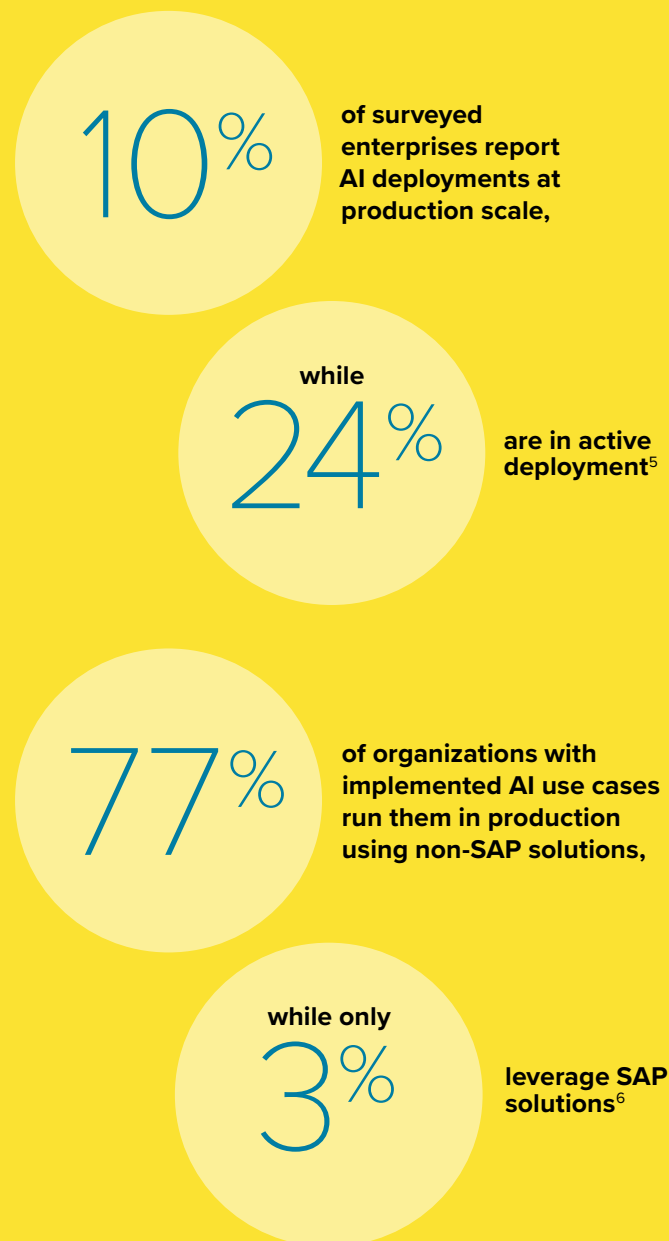
At first glance, the spread may suggest hesitation or delay. In reality, organizations are choosing different paths because they face their own unique constraints, priorities and opportunities.

Support experience can also factor into those choices. Beyond timelines and cost, organizations are weighing whether their current support model provides the responsiveness, expertise and confidence needed to keep business-critical SAP environments stable while innovation progresses elsewhere.

For CIOs, the question is shifting from “When do we migrate?” to “How do we continue to support and operate the estate we have — in the most cost-effective and least disruptive way — while accelerating innovation and AI adoption?” As ERP operations and innovation decouple even further, organizations are placing greater emphasis on support decisions that preserve the flexibility to direct resources, pursue new opportunities and adapt their roadmap according to business needs.

⁵ Stephanie Overby, “SAP customers say migration is eating their budgets—and AI is next in line,” CIO, retrieved 7 August 2026 from <https://www.cio.com/article/4170434/sap-customers-say-migration-is-eating-their-budgets-and-ai-is-next-in-line.html>

⁶ Deutschsprachige SAP-Anwendergruppe e. V. (DSAG), “DSAG Investment Report 2026: Companies Are Investing More Selectively – AI Is Becoming Established, Cloud Computing Is Being Put to the Test,” Impulsant, retrieved 7 August 2026 from <https://impulsant.dsag.de/formate/pressemedung/dsag-investment-report-2026-companies-are-investing-more-selectively-ai-is-becoming-established-cloud-computing-is-being-put-to-the-test/>



The support decisions facing SAP customers

Every SAP customer running on a perpetual license follows a defined support lifecycle. However, none are limited to progressing from one vendor support stage to the next. Today, organizations can choose from vendor support, independent support or a combination of both across different parts of the estate. Understanding what each provides is the foundation of any support decision.



An overview of support options

Option	What it enables	Key tradeoff
Mainstream maintenance	Full vendor support and updates	Ongoing dependency on SAP's roadmap and release cycles
Extended maintenance	More time on existing releases with SAP support	Higher cost and finite timeline
Customer-specific maintenance	Continued use of existing SAP software after end-of-support deadlines	Significantly reduced coverage, typically without a reduction in cost
Independent support	Greater flexibility around upgrade timing, support strategy and cost allocation	Requires evaluation of third-party support providers

The SAP support lifecycle for ECC and S/4HANA on-prem

For SAP ECC 6 customers, the vendor support path follows a defined progression:

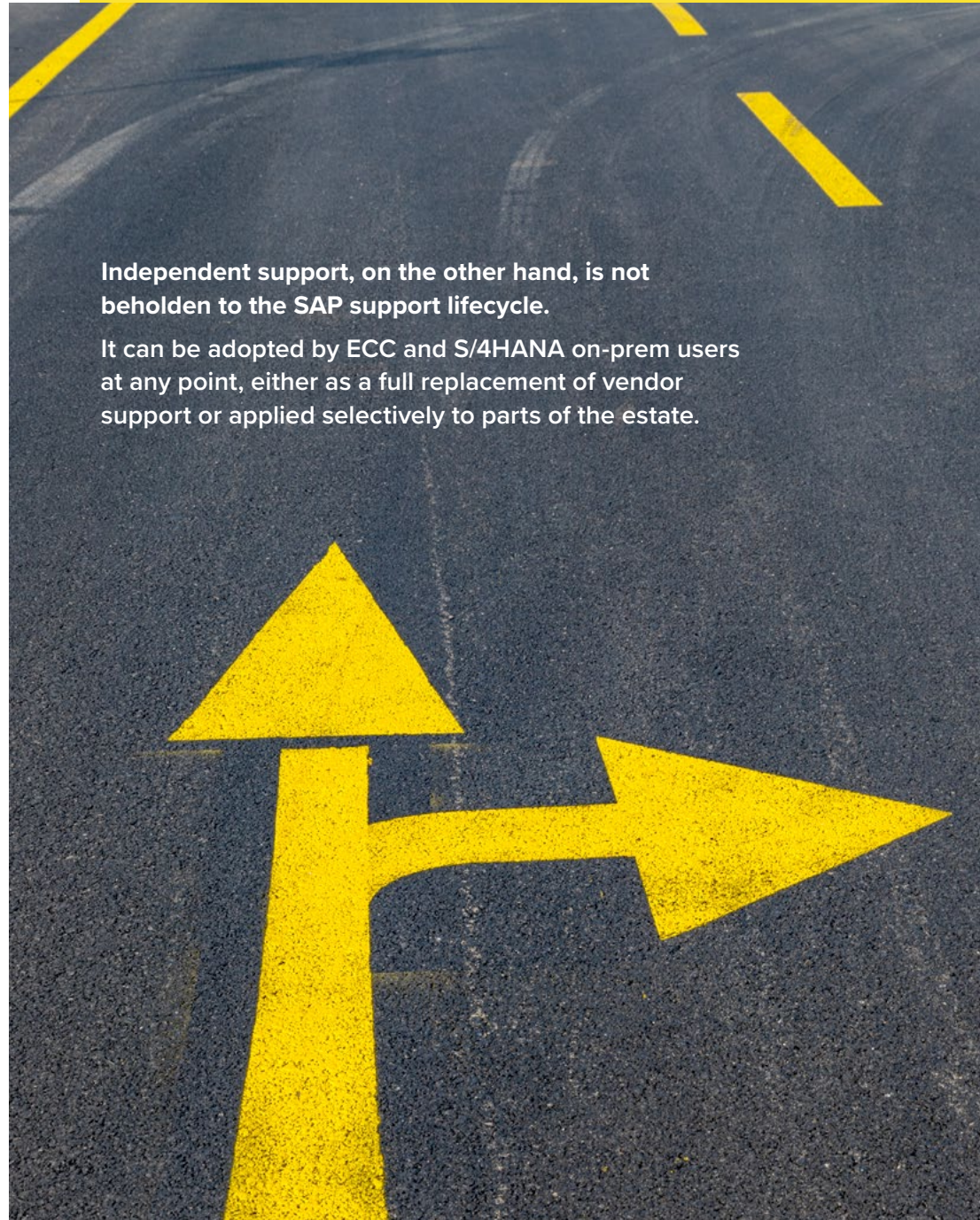
1. Mainstream maintenance through December 31, 2027
2. Optional extended maintenance through December 31, 2030, at an additional cost
3. Customer-specific maintenance thereafter, with a [significantly reduced support scope](#)

S/4HANA on-premises customers face a different lifecycle.

Support is tied to the specific release in use, requiring ongoing upgrades to remain within SAP-supported maintenance windows, while SAP's broader maintenance commitment extends through 2040. A transition option covers the 2031–2033 window under specific conditions, including a move to HANA and SAP Cloud ERP (private edition) by 2030. That said, the transition also moves customers from a perpetual-license model to a subscription-based one, combining software access, support and cloud services into an ongoing contractual relationship.

Independent support, on the other hand, is not beholden to the SAP support lifecycle.

It can be adopted by ECC and S/4HANA on-prem users at any point, either as a full replacement of vendor support or applied selectively to parts of the estate.



How the support models compare

Consideration	Mainstream maintenance	Extended maintenance	Customer-specific maintenance	Independent support
Legal, tax, regulatory updates	Included	Included	Excluded	Included
Support packages	Included	Included	Excluded	Included
Kernel updates for new DB or OS	Included	Included	Excluded	Included
Security patches for newly discovered vulnerabilities	Included	Included	Excluded	Alternative protection typically included or offered
Customization coverage	Not covered	Not covered	Not covered	Included at no additional cost
P1 response service level	Standard	Standard	Not clearly defined	Typically faster than vendor standard
Annual cost trajectory	+CPI, capped 5%	+2 pp uplift	Base fee continues	Up to 50% lower
Upgrades and migrations	Required to stay on supported releases	Required when extended period ends	No path back to full scope without other action	Not required for support eligibility

Three practical points are worth highlighting:

1

The scope of customer-specific maintenance is materially different from that of mainstream and extended maintenance.

Enterprises planning to run past 2030 on the vendor path alone will not receive new legal updates, new support packages or standard SLAs for that period. This is often the point at which organizations reassess their support model.

2

Customization coverage is a significant differentiator. SAP treats custom code as outside the standard scope across all stages of the support lifecycle. For heavily customized ECC or S/4HANA on-premises estates, this can represent a significant part of the total support economics.

3

Cost trajectories diverge over the lifecycle. Vendor fees rise at or near the Consumer Price Index (CPI) cap, with an additional uplift for extended. Independent support fees run below the vendor base. Over a 10-year horizon, the compounded difference is substantial for most enterprises.

As these factors can affect budget, flexibility and risk, CIOs should give them considerable weight when evaluating support models for their SAP estates. The support strategy chosen today can shape how much time, funds and organizational focus remain available for future innovation initiatives.

Support doesn't have to be a single decision

One of the most important changes in SAP support strategy is that enterprises don't need to apply one support model across the entire SAP environment.

Historically, support decisions were often treated as an all-or-nothing choice across the enterprise. Today, different systems, business units and geographies can operate under different support approaches at the same time.

For example:

- A core ECC system can run under independent support while SAP Cloud ERP remains under mainstream maintenance with SAP.
- An on-premises S/4HANA system can remain under vendor support while a separate ECC instance, regional system or acquired business runs under independent support.
- A perpetual ECC or S/4HANA system can run in a customer-managed BYOC environment under independent support while a separate on-premises SAP system remains under vendor support.

This flexibility allows the support decision to align with operational needs, risk tolerance and budget rather than force a single approach. It also reduces the perceived weight of any individual decision, as a mixed model can be adjusted over time as the estate and business priorities change.

Industry perspective

Gartner® takes a deep dive into several strategic roles that third-party support can play within enterprise modernization programs.



[Access the report here.](#)



How organizations can use independent support to their advantage

Independent support isn't a single strategy or destination. Organizations can use it in different ways depending on their business objectives, technology roadmap and operational requirements.

Independent support can serve different strategic purposes depending on an organization's SAP estate, business priorities and planning horizon. In some cases, it becomes a long-term operating model. In others, it creates a bridge to a future migration, supports part of a mixed environment or preserves optionality while longer-term roadmap decisions are still being resolved. The table below outlines common ways independent support can be used and the enterprise situations where each role may apply.

Function	When it fits	Objective	How independent support can help	Primary business benefit	Typical duration
Destination	Cost-focused organization with a stable SAP estate	Maintain stable operations	Extend the useful life of existing SAP systems without requiring disruptive upgrades or migrations	Predictability, structural savings, custom code preservation	5 to 15+ years
Bridge	Cost-cautious organization with an active or planned migration	Migrate on the organization's timeline	Eliminate pressure associated with end-of-support deadlines and create room for strategic planning	Deadline pressure removal, risk mitigation, migration funding	2 to 5 years
Parallel	Risk-cautious organization managing mixed environments, critical windows or different/regional system needs	Support mixed environments	Enable different systems, business units or geographies to receive the most suitable support for their needs	Operational alignment, guaranteed service level during exposure	1 to 3 years
Provision	Organization seeking to preserve optionality while timing, investment priorities, or roadmap decisions are unsettled	Preserve roadmap flexibility	Retain greater control over timing, investment and technology decisions	Optionality at low cost, freedom to adapt as priorities change	As needed

These roles are not mutually exclusive, and they do not always map to a single enterprise archetype. An organization may begin with independent support as a bridge, use it in parallel across selected systems or adopt it as a longer-term destination for stable SAP environments.

Provision is a strategic lever that provides CIOs the flexibility and room to preserve optionality while business priorities, migration timing and investment plans continue to evolve.

Support strategies can also evolve over time. The common objective isn't avoiding change but maintaining control over when and how change occurs.

For business leaders, the key consideration is how independent support fits into the broader technology strategy. Depending on the function it performs, independent support can help reduce immediate IT costs, lower the risk of business disruption, avoid unnecessary migration pressure and maximize the value of existing software investments. More importantly, it can create the flexibility to reallocate resources toward AI, automation and other initiatives while maintaining a stable operational core.

Questions to resolve before finalizing support decisions

As support becomes a strategic business decision, it's important for CIOs to ensure crucial questions are thoroughly evaluated and answered.

The strongest support strategies are built on evidence, not assumptions. Whether an organization stays with vendor support, adopts independent support or uses a mixed model, CIOs should feel confident in how the chosen approach aligns with business priorities, risk tolerance and long-term technology plans.

How will security outcomes be maintained?

Strengthening your security posture without reliance on vendor patches is a proven, effective method that thousands of organizations have adopted. IT and security leaders should evaluate how vulnerabilities are identified, prioritized and addressed; whether compensating controls and virtual patching are available; and how security operations integrate with the broader enterprise environment.

How will the organization manage licensing, audits and future interactions with the vendor?

Organizations should have a clear plan for managing licensing, audit readiness and future vendor interactions as part of any support strategy. For perpetual-license customers, maintenance choices do not typically change underlying license rights, but CIOs should understand how licensing expertise, audit preparation and vendor engagement will be supported.

How will the strategy affect innovation and AI objectives?

Support strategy should be evaluated in terms of how well it enables innovation, AI adoption and modernization on the organization's own timeline. Many organizations are pursuing AI, automation and modernization initiatives independently of ERP transformation programs.⁶ Access to SAP's AI roadmap is increasingly governed by deployment and commercial decisions, while many enterprises are also adopting AI through SAP and non-SAP technologies.

How easy is it to change course in the future?

CIOs should also assess how much flexibility they retain if business priorities or vendor strategy change in the future. SAP has made commitments to the European Commission that provide customers with greater flexibility if they decide to return. These commitments address reinstatement fees, cap certain back-maintenance payments and clarify that different commercial installations can use different support providers, or no support provider at all, without automatically triggering broader commercial changes.⁷

This doesn't mean reversing course is automatic or that commercial considerations disappear. It means organizations now can evaluate independent support as a reversible business decision rather than a permanent one.

How will the choice affect skills and talent retention?

Talent strategy should be considered separately from the ERP migration timeline. Organizations can continue developing skills in AI, automation, integration, cloud operations, data platforms and modern application architectures while existing SAP environments continue to operate.

The more important consideration is whether the organization's technology roadmap provides meaningful opportunities for skill development and career growth independent of a specific ERP migration timeline.

⁷ Lindsay Clark, "SAP makes it easier for customers to shop for legacy product support, ending EU antitrust probe," The Register, retrieved 7 August 2026 from <https://www.theregister.com/software/2026/07/09/sap-makes-it-easier-for-customers-to-shop-for-legacy-product-support-ending-eu-antitrust-probe/5269437> ;

What support-enabled innovation makes possible

Support is the foundation of the SAP estate — not the ceiling. A support strategy does more than keep the SAP estate running. When designed deliberately, it can help create the financial flexibility, operational stability and roadmap control that organizations need to innovate around the core – without waiting for a full ERP transformation. The opportunities below show how support-enabled capacity can translate into practical modernization, optimization and innovation initiatives.



Interoperability: Modern browsers, operating systems, Java versions and email servers evolve on their own timelines. Interoperability solutions insulate the SAP application from those changes, extending the useful life of the existing estate without forcing an upgrade to ensure full support. This is particularly relevant for enterprises running heavily customized on-premises ECC or S/4HANA deployments, where an upgrade would disrupt business processes.



Proactive security: Leading third-party security solutions deliver virtual patching, application-layer protection and vulnerability response independent of the vendor's patch schedule. This matters across the support lifecycle, particularly for releases that have moved into customer-specific maintenance where new patches for non-ABAP components are no longer delivered.



Managed services and observability: Managed services take on day-to-day operational responsibility for the SAP environment, freeing internal teams for higher-value work. Observability solutions provide continuous monitoring of performance and system health, catching issues before they escalate into business-impacting events.



Agentic AI at the edges: AI, automation and process orchestration can be layered on top of the existing SAP core through integration patterns that comply with the updated API terms. The core remains stable and customized to the business. The intelligence sits at the edges, where it can be adopted, adjusted and replaced without touching the underlying SAP system.



Composable architectures: Modern enterprises increasingly extend SAP through specialized cloud applications, tools and services rather than relying exclusively on a single vendor stack. A composable approach allows organizations to adopt new capabilities where business value is highest while preserving the stability of the existing ERP core. Innovation can therefore progress incrementally based on business priorities and measurable outcomes.



License optimization and advisory: Independent licensing advisory work identifies overspend, compliance risk and negotiation opportunities across the SAP contract portfolio. This is particularly relevant during a strategic decision cycle when the enterprise is evaluating multiple paths forward.

These capabilities aren't exclusive to any particular support model. They can be adopted alongside vendor support, independent support or as part of a mixed model. But they illustrate a broader point: Support decisions can influence how much flexibility organizations have to extend the useful life and business value of existing SAP investments while longer-term roadmap decisions are worked through at a speed and sequence the business can sustain.

The evaluation and decision framework

Before deciding whether to remain on vendor support, move to independent support or pursue a mixed strategy, it's important to establish a structured evaluation process. Doing so helps organizations compare options objectively, understand the tradeoffs involved and make decisions based on business priorities rather than support deadlines.

START EARLY

Begin evaluating independent support providers at least six months before the vendor renewal deadline.

Earlier engagement preserves the option to negotiate with the vendor, allows time for technical due diligence and reduces the risk of rushed decisions. As all organizations running SAP have a September 30 support cancellation deadline, this means starting the evaluation at least 6 months in advance is advised.

ASSESS FIT

Rather than focusing on a single factor such as cost, organizations should evaluate providers according to a series of capabilities.

Criteria to consider include:

- Service levels and responsiveness
- Customization coverage
- Security capability
- Tax, legal regulatory updates
- Database and platform support
- Global service delivery across all required countries and jurisdictions
- Enterprise-scale references
- Financial stability
- Long-term SAP expertise
- Managed services and professional services capabilities

Not every criterion will carry the same importance. Organizations should weigh them according to their business objectives, risk tolerance and long-term technology plans.

PLAN TRANSITION

Once a preferred direction has been decided upon, the focus shifts to execution.

Days 1-30

Complete technical and commercial diligence

Days 31-60

Confirm support requirements, service levels and transition readiness

Days 61-90

Finalize agreements and align go-live with renewal timelines

The evaluation itself has value even if the enterprise ultimately continues with vendor support. A structured assessment of the available options helps organizations better understand the cost, risk, support and innovation implications of each path.

Conclusion

For SAP customers running on perpetual licenses, support is no longer just a maintenance decision; it's one of several strategic decisions that influence how organizations balance operational stability, modernization, innovation and future flexibility. Evaluating support strategy now — before approaching deadlines narrow the choices available — gives CIOs the best opportunity to preserve flexibility and align support with their desired business outcomes.

As the SAP landscape continues to evolve, organizations are decoupling innovation from ERP transformation. Rather than viewing support, modernization and AI adoption as parts of a single journey, many are evaluating each according to its business value, timing and organizational readiness.

There's no one-size-fits-all approach or path for every organization. Independent support may cover the broadest range of objectives, but vendor support and mixed models each have a defensible role in a specific enterprise situation. The common objective isn't to follow a predetermined roadmap, but to preserve the ability to make technology and investment decisions based on business priorities.

Ultimately, support strategy should be viewed as an enabler — one that gives organizations the freedom to innovate on their own terms and timeline.



About Rimini Street

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