

Build Path Decision Worksheet

BY JETTHOUGHTS TEAM - MAY 18, 2026 - 9 MIN READ

Template companion to the [Module 4 post](#). Run after your [one-page brief](#) is signed. Print, fill in 30 minutes, write your chosen path at the top of your Notion doc.

Print one side of paper. Pen. 30 minutes alone. Walk out with a defensible build decision and the next module to read.

Why this exists

A wellness-coaching founder spent four months building a Lovable MVP, then panicked and signed a \$24K-per-month agency contract because three advisors told her “you need a real team now.” Two of the advisors had never seen her validation data. The third had not asked.

Illustrative composite based on patterns from real founder builds, not a single client story.

Run the same 5 questions on this worksheet against her situation and the matrix lands on Path 3 (Fractional CTO at \$2,400/mo, 8 hours/week), not Path 4 (the agency at \$24K/mo) – a decision already sitting in the validation data she had. The advisors had not run the worksheet. Cheaper to spend 30 minutes with this page than to spend a quarter undoing a contract somebody else’s instinct signed for you.

How to use this

Friday afternoon, alone, 30 minutes, before coffee runs out. Bring three documents: your filled-in [Validated Problem Statement](#) from Lesson 2.5, your filled-in [one-page brief](#) from Lesson 3.1, and a current bank statement showing months of runway. Pen on paper. Phone in another room.

Answer the five questions in order. Each one is factual, not aspirational. “Number of Mom Test interviews” is a count on your call log, not a vibe. “Months of runway” is cash on hand divided by monthly burn, not a guess. The matrix at the bottom routes you to Path 1, 2, 3, or 4 based on the five answers.

If you spill past 30 minutes, you are negotiating with yourself. Stop, write the verdict the data supports, take it to one peer or advisor for a 20-minute call, and move on.

Total time budget: 30 minutes alone, 20 minutes with one peer, 0 minutes second-guessing. Tomorrow you start the path the worksheet picked.

The 5 questions - check the box that matches

Founder

Date

One-page brief finalized on

Q1: Is the problem validated?

Counts as YES only if all 4 below are true:

- ☐ 10 or more Mom Test interviews complete
- ☐ Strong past-behavior signal in at least 7 of 10
- ☐ Smoke test cleared the 6%+ "Promising" band - the share of visitors who left their email on your test page (Module 1, Lesson 1.4)
- ☐ Prototype test: 4 of 5 people reached the right screen without you coaching them (from Module 2)

LinkedIn likes do not count. "They said they would buy" does not count. What people DID counts - the sign-ups on the smoke test and the prototype run, not what they said they would do. Pre-orders and paid pilots come later (Module 5); you do not need them to answer YES here.

VERDICT ☐ Yes ☐ No

If NO → stop here. Path 1 (Validate without code). Run the Airbnb test this week.

If YES → go to Q2.

Q2: How backend-heavy is the build?

Check every TRUE row:

- ☐ Live updates that appear on screen without anyone refreshing the page (like watching someone type in Google Docs or Slack)
- ☐ Heavy jobs that run in the background and keep retrying if they fail (mass emails, big uploads)
- ☐ An AI model runs every time someone uses the feature, and each run costs real money (more than a cent per use)
- ☐ Many separate companies use the same app and none can ever see another company's data
- ☐ The app connects to 5 or more outside services (payments, email, maps, calendars, and so on)
- ☐ Regulated data - health records (HIPAA), stored credit-card numbers (PCI), or enterprise security audits (SOC 2)

VERDICT

- ☐ 0-1 boxes checked = LIGHT backend
- ☐ 2-3 boxes checked = MID backend
- ☐ 4 or more checked = HEAVY backend

If HEAVY → Path 4 (Hire a team - see the hire-track supplementary reference, linked in the verdict table below). Read the SOW guide before kickoff.

If **LIGHT** or **MID** → go to Q3.

Q3: What is your runway?

Months of cash until you must show paying customers:

- ☐ Less than 4 months
- ☐ 4 to 12 months
- ☐ 12 or more months

If **LESS THAN 4** → Path 1 (Validate without code), regardless of how validated you feel. The Airbnb test is the only experiment that fits in the window.

If **4 TO 12** → Paths 2, 3 are on the table. Go to Q4.

If **12+** → Paths 2, 3, 4 are on the table. Go to Q4.

Q4: Senior engineer in your network for 1 hour of architecture review per month?

A real human you can text. Returns calls within 48 hrs. Has shipped a backend at scale in the last 5 years.

- ☐ Yes, named: _____
- ☐ No

If **YES** → Path 2 (Self-serve / Lesson 4.3 then 4.4), at any budget. Use them for the monthly architecture call + worst-route code review.

If **NO** → go to Q5.

Q5: What is your monthly engineering budget?

Money you can commit for at least 6 months:

- ☐ \$0 to \$400/wk of your own time
- ☐ \$1,600 to \$4,000/mo (Fractional CTO band)
- ☐ \$5,000 to \$30,000/mo (small team band)
- ☐ \$30,000+ /mo (multi-person team band)

If **\$0-\$400** → Path 2 (Self-serve / Lesson 4.3 then 4.4). Paste one-page brief into Lovable, and line up a senior review before you scale.

If \$1.6K-\$4K or \$5K-\$30K → Path 3 (Fractional CTO bridge - see the hire-track supplementary reference). Buy the architecture insurance commercially.

If \$30K+ → Path 4 (Hire a team - see the hire-track supplementary reference, linked in the verdict table below).

The 4-path verdict table

Path	Choose when	First action this week	Cost
1. Validate without code	Q1 = No, OR Q3 = less than 4 months	Ship Carrd page + Stripe checkout + Notion FAQ. Send to your 30-name outreach list.	\$0 - \$300 in tools + optional \$100-200 in paid ads
2. Self-serve build (Lesson 4.3 then 4.4)	Q1 yes, Q2 light or mid, and a senior engineer in your network (Q4 yes) at any budget - or Q5 = \$0-\$400/wk of your own time	Paste one-page brief into Lovable. Hook Supabase + Stripe + Resend.	\$200 - \$1,200 / month
3. Fractional CTO bridge (hire-track reference)	Q1 yes, Q2 light or mid, no senior engineer (Q4 no), and Q5 = \$1.6K-\$4K or \$5K-\$30K/mo	Hire 5-10 hrs/wk Fractional CTO. Use for architecture, PR review, hiring, cost watch.	\$1,600 - \$4,000 / month
4. Hire a team (hire-track reference)	Q2 heavy (any budget), or Q5 = \$30K+/mo	Read draft SOW clause-by-clause. Confirm GitHub/AWS/domain ownership before kickoff.	\$30K - \$80K / month

Failure mode to watch for each path ->

- Path 1 -> 0 of 30 click. Pivot the pitch or the problem.
- Path 2 -> Hits architectural ceiling at ~5K users. Route to the [hire-track reference](#) for the next layer.
- Path 3 -> CTO drifts into coder. 90-day review on hour allocation.
- Path 4 -> Spaceship for the wrong moon. Friday demo + Org Chart audit catch it in week 3.

What good looks like vs what bad looks like

Q1 - Problem validated

Bad: *"I posted on LinkedIn and got 47 likes and 12 comments. People love the idea."*

Good: *"I ran 12 Mom Test calls (May 2026 sample). 9 of 12 described the exact problem in past-tense with a number attached (hours per week, dollars per month). My smoke-test page converted 8% of visitors to email sign-ups, above the 6% 'Promising' bar. 4 of 5 prototype testers reached the sign-up screen without me coaching them."*

The good answer is countable: 12 calls, 9 strong signals, an 8% smoke-test sign-up rate, 4 of 5 testers through the prototype. The bad answer is a vibe metric (likes) and a hypothetical (love the idea). Likes are not behavior. The matrix routes the bad answer to Path 1 regardless of how confident the founder feels, because the data is not there.

Q4 - Senior engineer in your network

Bad: *"Yes, my college roommate is a software engineer at Google."*

Good: *"Yes - Maya Chen, ex-Stripe payments backend, currently fractional. Returns texts within a few hours. She agreed to a 1-hour architecture call on the first Monday of every month at \$300/hr. First call booked for Sept 7."*

The good answer names the person, the relevant experience (Stripe payments backend, not Google ads), the cadence (first Monday), the price (\$300/hr), and the next call (Sept 7). Bad answer names a person without the cadence or the agreement. "My roommate is an engineer" is not a check-in. The matrix counts only the named, scheduled, paid arrangement.

Q5 - Monthly engineering budget

Bad: *"We have \$400K in the bank and we will spend whatever it takes to ship."*

Good: *"\$420K in the bank. Burn is \$28K/month (founder salary + tools + ads). 15 months of runway. I can commit \$4K/month to engineering for the next 6 months without dipping into the marketing budget I need to test the channel."*

The good answer ties budget to runway and to the marketing test that proves the channel. Bad answer commits the bank without a denominator. The matrix routes the bad answer to Path 4 (hire a team) on the founder's confidence, which is the path that runs them out of money. The good answer routes to Path 3 (Fractional CTO at \$4K/mo) which fits inside 15 months of runway with the marketing budget intact.

What to do after

- **Write your verdict at the top of a fresh Notion doc.** One line: *"Path X (name). Started: [date]. Next: [Lesson 4.3 self-serve / hire-track reference / back to Module 2 to re-validate]."* Pin the doc. Re-read the line every Monday for 4 weeks.
- **Share the worksheet result with one peer or advisor in a 20-minute call.** Not three. One. Ask them: *"If the matrix said Path X, what would change your mind?"* Their first answer is the assumption you should pressure-test next. If they cannot name one, the matrix verdict holds.
- **Schedule the first action for tomorrow morning.** Path 1: ship the Carrd page. Path 2: paste one-page brief into Lovable. Path 3: 3 LinkedIn outreach messages to Fractional CTOs in your industry. Path 4: read the SOW clause-by-clause with a printed pen, not in Google Docs. Calendar the action with a hard start time. The worksheet routes the decision; the calendar invite routes the work.

Skip this worksheet and route on advisor instinct and you're the founder who, six weeks later, signs a contract the data did not support and posts a [salvage or rebuild question](#) when the build runs over budget. The matrix is cheaper than the contract it prevents.

If you want the doctrine in long form, the [Module 4 post](#) walks through the Airbnb test, the Rob Walling shed-vs-skyscraper warning, and the worked example for each of the four paths.

Built by [JetThoughts](#) as part of the [From Idea to First Paying Customer](#) curriculum.