copilot vs autopilot · 3 steps

The next $1 trillion company won't sell software. It will sell the work.

How to sell AI as finished work: the copilot and autopilot difference in Sequoia's own words, the first task to pick, how to price the outcome and how to check it got done.

Sell the work your buyer already pays someone else to do.

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THE PREMISE

What does it mean to sell the work instead of the software?

It means your customer stops buying a tool their team has to run and buys the finished job instead: the books closed, the shortlist sent, the NDA drafted. Sequoia partner Julien Bek calls that an autopilot. It's where the money is because, in his words, for every dollar spent on software, six are spent on services.

I've spent 16 years in tech and six of them managing AI products. Now I run my own startup, Techlerator. The question founders ask me most is which AI tool they should build. I think it's the wrong question.

Bek put the right one in a single line in **Services: The New Software**, published on 5 March 2026: **"The next $1T company will be a software company masquerading as a services firm."** His example is a company that might spend $10K a year on QuickBooks and $120K on an accountant to close the books. The tool is the small line. The work is the big one.

Copilot	**"A copilot sells the tool."** It sells to the professional. The AI makes them faster and they stay responsible for the output, the way Harvey sells to law firms.
Autopilot	**"An autopilot sells the work."** It sells to whoever needs the outcome. Crosby sells a drafted NDA to the company that needs one, so outside counsel isn't the customer.

THE TRAP

The trap is building a cleverer tool for the professional. Bek's warning is blunt: "If you sell the tool, you're in a race against the model." Each model upgrade makes your feature easier to copy. Sell the finished work and the same upgrade makes your service quicker and cheaper to deliver.

STEP 1 · PICK THE TASK

Which task should you sell as an autopilot first?

Sequoia's answer: **"start with the outsourced, intelligence-heavy task."** Bek splits work into two kinds. Intelligence has a right answer. Judgement needs taste. "Writing code is mostly intelligence. Knowing what to build next is judgement."

Outsourced matters because, as he puts it, an outsourced task tells you three things. The company has accepted the work can be done outside. There's "an existing budget line that can be substituted cleanly." The buyer is already purchasing an outcome. Replacing an outsourcing contract is a vendor swap, while replacing headcount is a reorg.

Accounting	Sequoia puts accounting and audit at **$50-80B outsourced in the US alone**. Bookkeeping's month-end close is a clean first job, because the books either close on time or they don't.
Recruiting	Recruitment and staffing is **$200B+**, the biggest market on Sequoia's list. Screening, matching and outreach are "pure intelligence". Closing a candidate is judgement, so a person keeps that part.
Legal	Crosby started with NDAs: **"a well-defined task, primarily intelligence"** that most companies already send to outside lawyers. The budget exists and the scope is clear.

1. **List the invoices.** Write down every job your target buyer pays an outside firm to do each month.
2. **Mark each one.** Is it mostly intelligence or mostly judgement? Be honest, because judgement is where AI slips.
3. **Pick the narrowest.** Choose the intelligence-heavy job with the clearest finish line and sell that one thing first.

STEP 2 · PRICE THE OUTCOME

How do you price an outcome against what the buyer pays today?

Sequoia doesn't set out a pricing formula, so this part is my method. Bek's rule behind it is simple: **"The work budget in any profession dwarfs the tool budget."** You price against the service invoice, never against the software.

1. **Find the invoice.** Ask what they pay the outside firm for this one job in a year. Count the retainer, the fees and the hours their own team spends managing the provider.
2. **Count the outcomes.** How many finished jobs does that money buy in a year? Month-end closes, hires made, NDAs returned.
3. **Work out today's price per outcome.** Divide the first number by the second. That's your benchmark.
4. **Price below it and above your cost.** Your cost is the model, the tools and the human time to review anything that needs judgement. Leave room to redo the jobs that go wrong, because with outcome pricing a failed job comes out of your margin.
5. **Charge per outcome.** Bill for each finished job, so the buyer pays for results instead of hours.

A WORKED EXAMPLE

Take Sequoia's numbers and assume, for illustration, that the $120K accountant buys twelve month-end closes. Today's price is $10K per close. Charge half that and the buyer saves $60K a year. You'd still bill six times what the same business pays QuickBooks for the whole year.

THE TRAP

The trap is pricing against the $10K tool. Do that and you've priced the work as a feature. One more snag from **Fortune**: many services firms have always billed by time and some large companies' tenders still ask for an hourly rate. Keep an hourly equivalent ready so you aren't screened out.

STEP 3 · CHECK THE RESULT

Can your buyer check the result without you?

An autopilot only works if the buyer trusts the output without redoing it. Sequoia makes the point about legal work: **"The work product is standardised enough that quality is verifiable, so the buyer can trust AI output without deep legal expertise."** Run your task through this checklist, which is mine, before you sell it.

1. Yes or no	You can say in one word whether it's done. Resolved or not. Closed or not. Booked or not.
2. Visible	The buyer can see the result without asking you: a reconciled account, a signed NDA, an interview in the diary.
3. On a clock	There's a deadline it's judged against, such as the books closed by the fifth working day.
4. Like for like	It's the same thing the current provider hands over, so the buyer can compare the two directly.
5. A named human	Someone qualified signs off the parts that need judgement and the buyer knows who that is.
6. Caught early	A wrong result shows up and gets fixed before it costs the buyer money.

HOW TO READ IT

Checks 1 and 2 are non-negotiable. If either is a no, it isn't an autopilot yet. Sell it as a copilot for now, keep a professional responsible for the output and come back when the result is something the buyer can see for themselves.

THE TAKEAWAY

Find the invoice first, then sell what's on it.

This week, pick one buyer you know well. List what they pay outside firms for, mark each job intelligence or judgement, then take the narrowest one through the pricing steps and the checklist. If it passes checks 1 and 2, you've found your first autopilot.

How I use it. At Techlerator I build Xeruit, an AI talent intelligence platform, so recruiting is the category I know best. When I'm deciding what to build next I run each idea through the three questions in this playbook. Does a company already pay an outside firm for it? Is it mostly intelligence, like screening and matching, or judgement, like closing a candidate? Can the client see it's done without me explaining it? If that last answer is fuzzy, the idea waits. I've automated most of my own startup with AI agents and I judge each one the same way: on a finished job I can check, whether that's a brief written, an inbox sorted or a draft ready for my review.

What this won't do: it won't hand you a business. Sequoia's thesis is one investor's view of where the money is going. Selling outcomes means you carry the cost of every job that goes wrong. Audit, tax and legal work have licensing rules, so a qualified person still signs off. The prices here are illustrations, not financial advice.

Stop pricing against the software. Price against the invoice.

Sources, opened 4 November 2026: Julien Bek, Sequoia Capital, **Services: The New Software** (5 March 2026); Jeremy Kahn, **Fortune, Eye on AI** (21 April 2026). The pricing method and the checklist are my own.

Building something of your own? **The Audacity to Build** is my community for people building alongside me, with the systems I actually run. It is opening soon. Join the waitlist at fadeadeniyi.com/waitlist.

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