

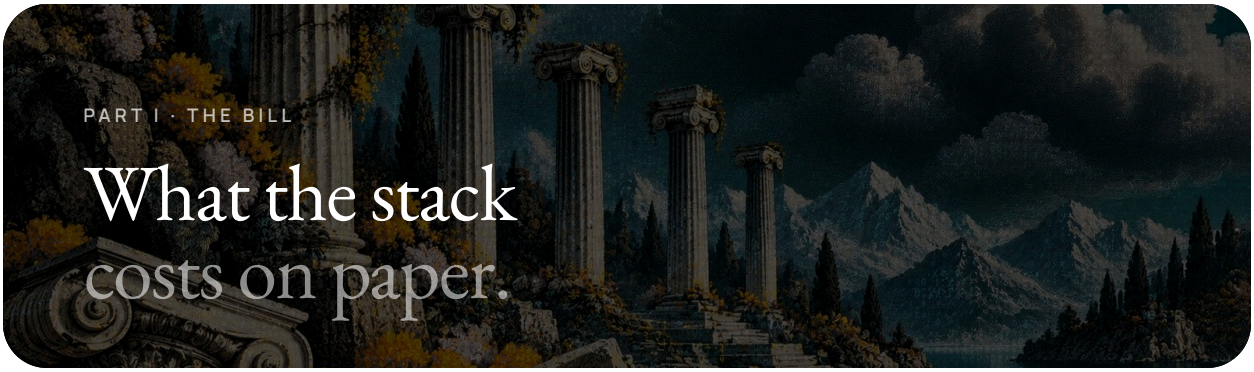
FOR INDEPENDENT RIAS · OPERATING COST

The Stack Tax.

What an independent RIA really pays for its technology, including the work between the tools, and a worksheet to measure it in two passes.

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PART I · THE BILL

What the stack costs on paper.

SECTION 01

One question, eight systems

The Morgans, the fictional couple three years from retirement who have appeared throughout this series, ask their adviser a simple question: can they afford to help their daughter with a down payment next spring?

Answering it touches eight systems. The CRM holds the family details and meeting history. Planning software holds the retirement projection. Portfolio accounting holds balances and cost basis. The custodian's website shows the cash available today. The document vault holds last year's tax return. Email holds the thread where the daughter's timeline came up. The reply goes out through the client portal, and a follow-up task lands in the task manager.

Each of those systems earned its place by solving a real problem. What none of them does is carry the question from one to the next. A person does that: opening each screen, copying the figures, checking which version is current.

This installment calls that burden **the stack tax**: the added cost of coordinating work across fragmented systems. Part of it is cash, for tools that overlap. Most of it is time, spent carrying work between them. It is not the cost of technology itself; much of a firm's software spending is productive. The stack tax is the part a better architecture could remove.

AI is what makes that architecture practical. A system that holds the whole household can prepare the work, carry it across the screens a firm uses today, and bring back the result, with a professional deciding at every step that matters. The question for each firm is how much of its week is spent doing that carrying by hand.

> The subscriptions are the visible part of the bill. The work between tools is the rest.

SECTION 02

What the research shows, and what it cannot

Adoption of the core tools is close to universal. In the 2026 T3/Inside Information Software Survey, 91 percent of respondents use a CRM and 83 percent use financial planning software. [1] The survey's 2,906 respondents span several advice business models, not only independent RIAs.

The clearest signal about fragmentation comes from Kitces' 2025 AdvisorTech research: the biggest driver of advisers' satisfaction with their technology stacks was the quality of integration between their tools. [2] A separate measure from the consultancy Ezra Group, cited in the same Kitces discussion, puts the median provider's integration score at 4.86 out of 10. [2] Kitces also found little relationship between integration and revenue per adviser.

That gap is the reason for this installment. Surveys can measure how advisers feel about their tools. They cannot see the hours a particular firm spends carrying work between them. Only the firm can measure that, and the worksheet in Part III is built to do it: first the full cost of the stack today, then the part of it a change could recover.



PART II · THE HIDDEN BILL

What the stack costs between the tools.

SECTION 03

Four costs that never appear on an invoice

COST	WHAT IT IS	WHO CARRIES IT	HOW TO MEASURE IT
Coordination	Re-keying facts and reconciling systems that disagree	Operations and advisers	Hours per week, by role
Oversight	Reviewing and monitoring each vendor that holds client information	The CCO	Hours per vendor per year
Training	Teaching each tool, and the workarounds between them, to each new hire	The new hire and whoever trains them	Hours per hire, for both
Blind spots	Decisions made on a partial view of the household	Clients, eventually	Issues found late that were visible earlier in another system

The oversight cost has grown. Amended Regulation S-P requires a firm's service-provider oversight to be reasonably designed to ensure that each provider notifies the firm as soon as possible, and no later than 72 hours after becoming aware of a breach resulting in unauthorized access to a customer information system it maintains. [3] Every tool that holds client data is a vendor the CCO must diligence, monitor, and document. No. 02 covered that work in detail.

SECTION 04

An illustrative firm

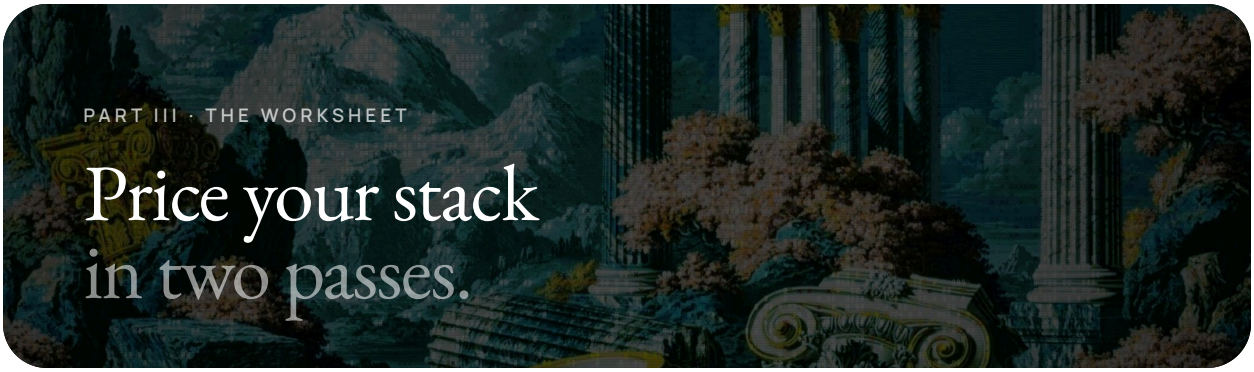
The figures below are **illustrative assumptions, not benchmarks.** They show the method; the worksheet in Part III replaces them with a firm's own numbers.

Consider a boutique firm: three advisers, two staff, 200 households, $180 million under management, and about $1.8 million in revenue at a 1 percent fee.

LINE	TYPE	ASSUMPTION	HOURS A YEAR	ANNUAL COST
Subscriptions	Cash	Eight core tools for five users		$45,000
Coordination	Staff capacity	Eight hours a week, combined across the team, for 50 working weeks, at a $45 loaded hourly cost	400	$18,000
Vendor oversight	Staff capacity	Eight vendors, six hours each, at a $100 loaded hourly cost	48	$4,800
Training	Staff capacity	Scenario: one new hire this year; 40 hours for the hire and 10 for the trainer, at $45	50	$2,250
Current annual cost of the stack			**498**	**$70,050**

Two cautions keep the numbers honest. Recovered hours do not automatically reduce payroll; they become capacity, which a firm can spend on more households, faster responses, or lighter workloads. And the table leaves out the cost of blind spots, which is potentially consequential and difficult to quantify.

The current annual cost of the stack is about 4 percent of revenue: 2.5 percent in cash and 1.4 percent in staff capacity, nearly 500 hours a year. Across reasonable assumptions for a firm like this one, from six to twelve hours of coordination a week and $40,000 to $55,000 in subscriptions, it lands between roughly 3 and 5 percent of revenue. The stack tax is the part of it that fragmentation causes: here, at least the $18,000 of coordination labor, plus whatever share of the subscriptions, oversight, and training exists only because the tools do not share a record.



SECTION 05

How to use it

Pass 1: an estimate, in one sitting. Fill in each step from memory and invoices. Most firms can finish in about an hour.

Pass 2: a measurement, over two weeks. Ask each person to log time spent copying, checking, or reconciling data between systems. Add the two weeks together, divide by two, and replace the Step 2 weekly estimates. Two weeks gives a measured starting point; adjust for seasonal work such as tax season or year-end.

Steps 1 to 4 establish the current cost of the stack:

> Current annual cost = subscriptions + coordination labor + vendor oversight labor + technology training labor

Step 5 and “Test one change” then find the stack tax inside it: the cost and hours a change could recover.

Loaded hourly rate. For each role, add salary, payroll taxes, and benefits, and divide by about 2,000 paid hours a year. Use the rate for the person who actually does the work.

Count each hour once. Time spent on a vendor review belongs in Step 3, not Step 2. Time spent training a hire belongs in Step 4.

Fill it in on screen or on paper. The worksheet pages that follow are fillable in the PDF edition, and a separate fillable worksheet with its own instructions is available to download. Totals are calculated by hand.

Print the worksheet

Download the separate fillable worksheet

The print button works in Adobe Acrobat and Reader.

SECTION 06

Step 1: tools and subscriptions (cash)

Include features inside other tools, AI assistants, and anything a team member pays for personally and uses for client work. The last group is the one most often missed, and the one No. 01 warned about.

TOOL	CATEGORY	ANNUAL COST	USERS	HOLDS CLIENT DATA?	OVERLAPS WITH

SECTION 07

Step 2: coordination labor, by role

ROLE	COMBINED HOURS A WEEK, EVERYONE IN THE ROLE	WORKING WEEKS	LOADED RATE	ANNUAL COST
Advisers		50		
Operations		50		
Other staff		50		

Count only time spent moving, copying, checking, or reconciling data between systems. Annual cost = weekly hours × working weeks × loaded rate.

SECTION 08

Step 3: vendor oversight labor

NUMBER OF DISTINCT VENDORS HOLDING CLIENT DATA	AVERAGE ANNUAL REVIEW HOURS PER VENDOR	CCO LOADED RATE	ANNUAL COST

SECTION 09

Step 4: technology training labor

HIRES THIS YEAR	NEW-HIRE HOURS	NEW-HIRE RATE	TRAINER HOURS	TRAINER RATE	ANNUAL COST

Annual cost = hires × [(new-hire hours × new-hire rate) + (trainer hours × trainer rate)].

SECTION 10

The result: current cost of the stack

FIRM INPUT	AMOUNT
Annual revenue	

	HOURS A YEAR	ANNUAL COST	SHARE OF REVENUE
Cash (Step 1)	N/A		
Staff capacity (Steps 2 to 4)			
Current annual cost			

SECTION 11

Step 5: find where the hours come from

The total establishes your current cost baseline. This step helps identify which coordination work might be reduced. Pick five facts about one real household and trace each copy of them; when a fact lives in several places, use one row per copy. For how a copy updates, write sync, manual, or never.

FACT	SYSTEM HOLDING THIS COPY	AUTHORITATIVE SOURCE	UPDATES BY	WHO RESOLVES DISAGREEMENTS	CURRENT OR HISTORICAL
Example: account balances	*CRM*	*Custodian feed*	*Manual*	*Operations*	*Current*

More than one copy is not a problem when the copies synchronize reliably. The rows marked **manual** are where the hours in Step 2 come from, and the rows with no one assigned to resolve disagreements are where blind spots start. Historical documents, such as last year's statement or return, are expected to differ from current data; mark them historical rather than as disagreements.

SECTION 12

When the stack is worth keeping

A lower number is not automatically a better one. Best-of-breed tools offer depth, and a firm with a stable stack, a modest book, and no pressure on capacity may reasonably keep it. Consolidation has costs of its own: data conversion, retraining, a period of running two systems, and more dependence on a single vendor's reliability and exit terms. The worksheet is meant to make the trade-off visible, not to decide it.

SECTION 13

Test one change

The worksheet is most useful when it leads to one decision, and this is where the stack tax becomes a number. Choose one expensive workflow, such as answering a client's planning question, preparing for a review meeting, or onboarding a household, and evaluate one change against it.

	TODAY	WITH THE CHANGE
Occurrences per year		
Active staff hours per occurrence		
Annual staff hours (occurrences × hours)		
Recurring subscriptions ended		
Recurring costs added		
Elapsed time, question to approved answer		
Errors and follow-ups missed		

RESULT
Net annual subscription change (cash)
Annual staff hours recovered (capacity)
One-time transition cost: conversion, training, running both

Keep the cash line and the capacity line separate: recovered hours are real value, but they reduce payroll only if the firm chooses to. Active staff time is the work itself; elapsed time also includes waiting on clients, custodians, and reviewers, and it is what the client feels. Then run the Morgans' question through both versions, from the moment the email arrives to the moment the approved answer goes back.



The hours the stack gives back belong to the client.



PART IV · THE EXAMPLE

What changes on Helmsted.

SECTION 14

Built to replace the stack

Helmsted is an AI-native operating system for independent RIAs, built around a single record for each household: its people, accounts, goals, tasks, documents, and conversations. It is designed to replace tools rather than add one more, and the claim can be tested line by line against the worksheet.

Tools a firm can retire today. Helmsted covers meeting notes and follow-up tasks, planning analyses and client materials built as interactive reports, PDFs, and Word documents on the firm's letterhead, and a client portal with chat, document sharing, and scheduling. Once a firm has moved those workflows over and settled its record-retention needs for the old tool, a separate notetaker, client portal, or tools for planning visuals and client documents can come off the Step 1 list.

Coordination Helmsted removes inside tools the firm keeps. Custodial data from the firm's custodian attaches to the household without re-keying; custodial connections are added regularly, and Helmsted works with each firm to connect its own. Calendar, email, and online meetings file into the same record. **Rolling out now,** browser control lets Helmsted carry out work in any web screen a firm uses, with approval. That removes manual steps from Step 2 today, even where the underlying system stays.

Where it goes. The work a firm does across a computer screen today, in every system it signs in to, is work professionals will decide and Helmsted will execute. Advisers and their clients set the direction and approve the steps; Helmsted prepares the work, carries it out across those systems, and records the result on the household's record. Over time, Helmsted is being built to become the firm's entire stack, including the CRM, with direct connections replacing the browser as they mature and optional modules for work such as investment management and trading.

Oversight. Consolidating tools reduces the number of direct vendor relationships a CCO manages, though every platform still relies on subprocessors in its data path. Helmsted lists its subprocessors publicly, its data processing agreement prohibits training AI models on client data, and Sensiba LLP

issued a clean SOC 2 Type I report covering Security and Confidentiality, available under NDA.

What to measure. For each line in Step 1, mark whether Helmsted replaces it, reduces the work around it, or leaves it unchanged. Run “Test one change” with Helmsted as the change. The result is the firm’s own estimate of its stack tax, and of what an AI-native stack is worth to it.

IN CLOSING

Measure the stack. Then decide.

A fragmented stack

People carry the work

Many vendors to oversee

Facts that drift apart

One household record

Professionals decide

Helmsted executes

One current view

Every firm pays the stack tax. Few have added it up. An hour gives a first estimate, and two weeks of logging gives a measured starting point. The result is useful whatever a firm decides: a clear view of what it pays, where the hours go, and which work could be decided by its professionals and carried out by software instead.

Price your stack. Then decide what it should be.

See which lines Helmsted takes off your worksheet.

A walkthrough of the platform, and your security questions.

Book a demo · helmsted.ai/demo

Sources and further reading

Research checked September 27, 2026. Bracketed numbers in the text refer to the sources below.

1. **T3/Inside Information, 2026 Advisor Software Survey (March 2026).** 2,906 respondents across several advice business models; adoption figures may include modules within other software. Self-selected respondents. Read the summary.
2. **Kitces, "The Latest in Financial #AdvisorTech (August 2025)."** Discusses the 2025 Kitces Research on Advisor Technology (integration quality as the biggest driver of satisfaction with the tech stack; little relationship between integration and revenue per adviser) and cites Ezra Group's integration score, with a median provider score of 4.86 out of 10. Read the article.
3. **SEC, Regulation S-P amendments, Release 34-100155 (2024).** Service-provider oversight and notification as soon as possible, and no later than 72 hours after becoming aware of a breach resulting in unauthorized access to a customer information system the provider maintains. Read the release.

Also in The RIA's Chartbook. No. 01, *Client Data and the Law*: what Reg S-P expects as AI enters the workflow. No. 02, *Every Vendor Is Part of Your Safeguards*: evaluating the technology that holds client information. No. 03, *Faster Check-ins, or Better Health?*: the harness behind proactive, AI-enabled advice. No. 05, *Supervising AI That Acts*: compliance for AI that does the work. No. 06, *The Stack Tax*: what a firm really pays for its technology.

Educational information, not legal, compliance, or accounting advice. The illustrative firm and its figures are assumptions, not benchmarks or results. Helmsted capabilities are described as of September 2026; items described as rolling out, in development, planned, or on the roadmap are not yet generally available. The Morgans are fictional.

Helmsted

One secure, AI-native platform for the independent RIA. Learn more at helmsted.ai, or write to hello@helmsted.ai.