Accrete

# Brownfield, Greenfield, or Bluefield:

## Choosing the Right ECC Migration Path Before the Window Closes

**ECC MIGRATION PATH · STRATEGIC DECISION**

34%
Brownfield

48%
Bluefield / SDT

18%
Greenfield

The single most consequential decision in an S/4HANA migration is not which partner to hire or which modules to prioritize. It is which migration approach to use. And in mid-2026, too many organizations are making that decision by default — choosing brownfield because it sounds conservative, or deferring the choice because the options feel overwhelming. This article gives you the framework to make it deliberately.

## Why the Choice Matters More Than Most CIOs Realize

ISG's 2026 research of 200 senior SAP decision-makers found that 60% of SAP migration projects ran over budget or over time — regardless of which approach they chose. Brownfield did not deliver better outcomes. Greenfield did not perform worse. The data is unambiguous: organizations don't fail because they picked the wrong approach. They fail because they picked without a framework.

The Silicon Partners, in their 2026 analysis of S/4HANA program performance, identified "decision compression" as the primary risk factor: when time pressure increases, the natural response is to simplify. Brownfield is chosen because it sounds conservative. Custom code is carried forward because there is no time to assess it properly. Testing cycles are compressed because go-live dates are fixed. None of these decisions feel like mistakes when they are made — they feel like pragmatism. The cost shows up later.

Making the migration path decision deliberately — with a clear framework tied to your specific business reality, risk profile, and transformation ambition — is what separates programs that deliver value from those that deliver a go-live and a stabilization crisis.

# The Three Approaches: What They Actually Mean

## BROWN

**System Conversion: SAP's formal name. Your existing ECC system is converted in-place to S/4HANA, retaining configurations, historical data, custom ABAP, and existing processes.**

What comes with you: Z-objects, existing customizations, historical transaction data, current process flows, integration configurations, and your existing organizational structure.

What the research says: 34% of organizations chose brownfield per ISG's 2026 research. It is the fastest time-to-go-live. The cost is carried-forward technical debt, a clean core deficit that limits AI adoption, and the risk that inefficient processes survive the migration intact.

## GREENFIELD

**New Implementation: SAP's formal name. S/4HANA is built from scratch. Business processes are redesigned using SAP standard functionality. Custom code is replaced, not migrated. Historical data is not carried forward (only master data and open transactions make the move).**

What comes with you: Master data (customers, vendors, materials, cost centers), open purchase orders and sales orders, and selected historical data if specifically migrated. Everything else starts fresh.

What the research says: 18% of organizations per ISG 2026. The lowest adoption rate, but potentially the highest long-term value. Twinings Ovaltine chose greenfield specifically because they wanted to accelerate innovation — asking 'if the platform does not help accelerate innovation, why do it?' The challenge: extensive change management, longer timeline, and the inability to carry regulatory-required historical data.

## BLUEFIELD

**Selective Data Transition (SDT): SAP's formal name. A hybrid approach that selectively migrates chosen data, processes, and configurations from ECC to a new S/4HANA system. Trademarked as Bluefield® by SNP Group.**

What comes with you: Whatever you choose. Business-critical processes that work well are retained via brownfield-like conversion. Processes that need redesign are rebuilt greenfield. Historical data is selectively migrated based on business and regulatory need.

What the research says: The plurality choice at approximately 48% per ISG 2026 research — and growing. Used by Airbus Commercial Aircraft to centralize five local ERP systems on a single aligned platform. The flexibility advantage is also the complexity risk: bluefield requires more planning, tighter coordination, and specialized tooling (SNP Kyano, Precisely, or equivalent) to execute well.

## The Decision Framework: Six Questions That Determine Your Path

The migration path should be determined by business reality, not by technology preference or vendor recommendation. These six questions, answered honestly, produce a defensible recommendation:

| QUESTION | Brownfield | Greenfield | Bluefield |
|---|---|---|---|
| **How mature and standardized are your current SAP processes?** | Mature, stable, well-adopted across the business | Inconsistent, outdated, or built around workarounds | Mixed: some strong, some needing redesign |
| **What is your appetite for business process change?** | Low: continuity is the priority. Users need familiar workflows. | High: this is an opportunity to standardize and optimize globally. | Selective: change is welcomed in some areas, not others. |
| **How much custom ABAP code do you carry?** | Moderate: mostly Level B/C, mostly in use | Heavy: large volume of Level D code, much of it replaceable by SAP standard | Mixed: significant code, but clear distinction between what to keep vs. retire |
| **Do you need to retain historical transaction data?** | Yes: regulatory, financial reporting, or operational requirements mandate history | No: history can be archived and accessed via a legacy system or decommissioning strategy | Partial: some entities need history, others do not |

**What is your timeline pressure?**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| High: need fastest possible go-live | Moderate to low: business case supports a longer, cleaner implementation | Moderate: willing to invest extra planning time for better selective outcomes |

**Are you consolidating multiple ECC systems?**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| No: single-system migration | No: single new implementation | Yes: bluefield's selective approach handles multi-system consolidation more cleanly than either alternative |

**Brownfield is not the conservative choice — it is the choice that defers complexity rather than resolving it. The 'safe' label sticks until the first post-go-live upgrade cycle reveals what was carried forward.**

## The Honest Trade-offs: What Each Approach Costs You

Most decision frameworks for migration path selection present benefits and limitations. What they underplay are the second-order consequences — the costs that show up after go-live rather than before it. These are the trade-offs that CIOs who have completed a migration would have weighted differently:

| Trade-Off Dimension | Brownfield | Greenfield | Bluefield |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Initial go-live timeline** | Fastest. System conversion is technically the most defined path. | Longest. Full process redesign and data migration from scratch. | Middle. Faster than greenfield; slower than brownfield. |
| **Technical debt carried forward** | High. Legacy customizations, L-D code, and ECC process tech debt all migrate with the system. | Low. Custom code is replaced by SAP standard. Clean core by design. | Controlled. You choose what to carry and what to redesign. |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Business process improve** | Limited. You migrate the processes you have. Redesign is post-go-live scope. | Maximum. Every process is redesigned against SAP best practice. | Selective. High-value redesign where you want it; stability where you need it. |
| **AI & innovation readiness** | Lower. Joule and embedded AI require clean core. Carried-forward L-D code limits activation. | High. Greenfield delivers the clean core that SAP's AI roadmap requires by default. | High if executed well. Re-platforming L-D code to BTP achieves clean core selectively. |
| **Change management demand** | Lower initially. Familiar processes reduce user disruption at go-live. | Highest. Complete process redesign requires extensive training and adoption investment. | Moderate to high. Process changes only where redesign is chosen. |
| **Post-go-live upgrade cost** | Higher. Every quarterly S/4HANA Cloud update requires regression testing of carried-forward custom code. | Lower. Clean core absorbs updates without custom code re-testing. | Lower if BTP extensions used. Upgrade cost drops as re-platforming work completes. |
| **Multi-system consolidation** | Difficult. Brownfield is designed for single-system conversion. | Possible but complex. Requires careful data migration design. | Best fit. Selective migration naturally supports multi-system consolidation scenarios. |

## Industry and Organizational Context: When Each Approach Fits

Migration path decisions that ignore organizational and industry context consistently underperform. The following patterns reflect where each approach tends to deliver best outcomes:

**Brownfield tends to fit:**

Organizations that implemented SAP within the last five to seven years and have relatively low custom code volume. Companies in regulated industries (financial services, pharmaceuticals) where process continuity is a compliance requirement and change management capacity is constrained. Organizations whose primary objective is meeting the 2027 deadline with minimum disruption — and who have a clear post-go-live roadmap for clean core remediation.

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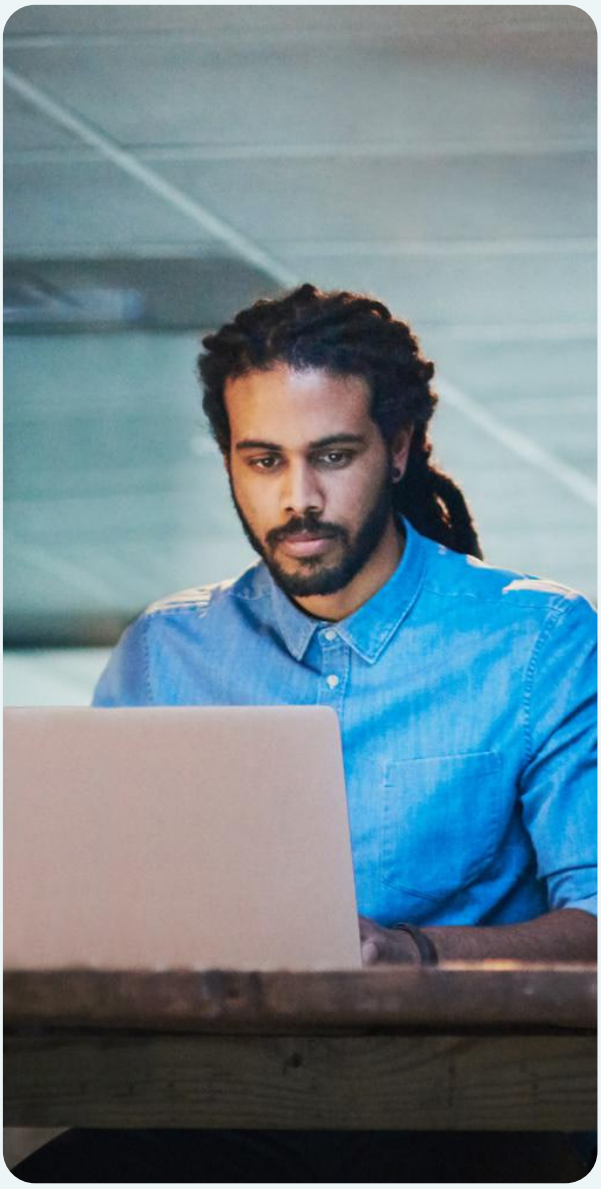
**Greenfield tends to fit:**

Organizations moving to SAP from a non-SAP ERP platform (Oracle, Microsoft Dynamics, Infor) who have no existing SAP customizations to preserve. Companies undertaking major strategic transformations — shared services implementations, global process harmonization, post-merger integration — where the migration is the vehicle for organizational redesign. Organizations with high process maturity in specific functions (finance, procurement) who want to adopt SAP best practice globally rather than migrating regional variants.

The Twinings Ovaltine case illustrates the greenfield mindset at its best: the company chose an out-of-the-box implementation of SAP RISE, deliberately limiting customizations, and asked throughout the design phase: ‘If the platform does not help accelerate innovation, why are we doing this?’



**Bluefield tends to fit:**

Organizations with complex, multi-system SAP landscapes: multiple ECC clients, regional variants, or post-acquisition systems that need consolidation. Companies with a mixed picture — some functions running efficient, well-designed processes that should be preserved, others running on workarounds and custom code that should be redesigned. Organizations with data retention requirements that prevent full greenfield but who want the benefits of selective process redesign.

The Airbus Commercial Aircraft bluefield migration exemplifies this: five local ERP systems consolidated into a single aligned platform using SNP's bluefield approach, allowing Airbus to retain function-specific strengths while achieving global finance standardization.

**THE 2026 DEADLINE EFFECT ON PATH SELECTION**

Time pressure in 2026 is creating a brownfield default that is not always the right choice. When organizations delay the path decision until the deadline forces a rapid selection, brownfield wins by default because it appears fastest. The research from Silicon Partners is explicit: brownfield chosen under pressure rather than by design consistently carries forward technical debt, process inefficiencies, and clean core deficits that become expensive to remediate post-go-live. The time to make this decision deliberately is now — before deadline pressure removes the greenfield and bluefield options from consideration.

## Making the Decision: What a Proper Path Assessment Involves

A migration path decision made without the following inputs is a guess, not a decision. Organizations that go through this assessment before committing to a path consistently report higher confidence in their delivery outcomes:

### Custom code volume and complexity analysis

How many custom objects do you carry? What is the usage frequency of each? What is the A–D classification distribution? Organizations that run SAP's Custom Code Analyzer before making a path decision avoid the most common brownfield trap: discovering mid-conversion that the custom code volume makes the system conversion technically unmanageable.

### Process maturity assessment by function

Which business processes are genuinely well-designed and should be preserved? Which are operational workarounds that survive through inertia? This assessment, conducted with process owners rather than IT, determines whether the value of redesign justifies the change management investment. The answer is almost never uniform across all functions.

### Data retention requirements by entity

Which historical data must be retained in the production system for regulatory, audit, or operational reasons? Which can be archived in a legacy system or decommissioned environment? The answer to this question often determines whether greenfield is a viable option at all.

### Change management capacity assessment

How much organizational change can the business absorb during the migration period? Is there executive sponsorship for significant process redesign? Is the HR and training infrastructure capable of supporting a full greenfield change program? Unrealistic assessment of change capacity is how greenfield programs become go-live crises.

### System landscape analysis

How many ECC systems are in scope? Are there active M&A integration requirements? Are there regional systems with significant variation that need harmonization? The more complex the system landscape, the stronger the case for bluefield over brownfield.

**The migration path is not a technical decision. It is a business strategy decision that happens to have significant technical execution implications. It should be owned by business leadership and IT leadership jointly — not delegated to the implementation partner.**

## The Window That Is Actually Closing

The 2027 deadline creates urgency for migration. But the window that closes faster than most organizations realize is not the migration window — it is the decision quality window.

When time pressure forces a rapid path selection, brownfield wins by default because it appears to be the path of least resistance. That default is not always wrong — for the right organization, brownfield is the right answer. But for organizations with significant custom code, outdated processes, or multi-system landscapes, defaulting to brownfield under time pressure is a decision that will cost them significantly in the years after go-live.

The organizations that make this decision well in 2026 are the ones that commit 4–6 weeks to a structured assessment now — before the talent market tightens, before partner rates spike, and before deadline anxiety makes deliberate decision-making impossible. That assessment, done with the right framework and the right data, produces a path selection that the organization can execute with confidence rather than one it spends the next three years second-guessing.

## Make Your Migration Path Decision With Confidence

Accrete's Migration Path Assessment gives your leadership team a data-driven recommendation — brownfield, greenfield, or bluefield — based on your actual landscape, not a vendor playbook.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