

: *What is decision support planning?*

by Dan Power

Editor, DSSResources.com

Decision support planning is an anticipatory decision-making process that involves critical thinking about an organization's need for computerized systems to help decision-makers. There are many frameworks like traditional strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis or gap analysis that might help find decision support opportunities. An organization's information systems planning process should provide a systematic method of searching for and evaluating IS/IT opportunities including decision support. What is an appropriate process?

In general, IS/IT planning must be linked to business-level strategic planning and the process should be ongoing and open-ended. Planning should identify goals and objectives for decision support. Managers need to collect competitive intelligence; fund DSS research and development projects; conduct regular brainstorming sessions; and, in some cases, follow hunches and intuition about using technology to improve or speed-up decision-making. Companies should have a written decision support plan.

A good technology planning process should examine the technology infrastructure to determine what is currently possible and examine enhancements that would facilitate or enable new decision support capabilities. Decision support planning should involve broad consultation and both problem-oriented and opportunistic search. Decision support systems do not always solve specific problems; rather decision support systems may create new capabilities for customers, suppliers or even members of the board of directors of a company. A good description of the new capability and a scenario explaining the use of the DSS can help in understanding the benefits. In some situations, an opportunity analysis recommends a buy decision because industry-specific decision support packages are available. This type of off-the-shelf DSS may be appropriate, but the resulting DSS will not be innovative and it probably will not provide a competitive advantage.

One approach for finding innovative decision support opportunities is to monitor technology trends and identify decision support system innovations in other industries or in consumer markets. Another approach is to identify the tactical and strategic decisions that make a major difference in the success of the business. Then managers should conduct a decision process review and monitor the effectiveness of those decisions. Sometimes a close examination of how a decision is made creates insight and an "ah ha" experience that leads to decision support innovation.

Additionally, asking employees for suggestions about ways to improve decision-making may highlight opportunities. Employees who observe the results of decisions, suffer from poor processes or hear the "wrath of customers" may have insights that lead to decision support innovation.

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Finally, do talk to vendor salespeople. This is useful, but managers need to keep in mind their inquiry is initiating a selling process. The vendor representative shares what he or she knows about “best practices” to help identify the manager’s needs for decision support. The salesperson will be trying to identify a major need and “gap” in current decision support. Once you identify the “gap” between existing and desired decision support, a good salesperson will try to identify solutions his/her company has that can fill all or part of the “gap.” At some point, a vendor representative will explain how the manager can solve the decision support “gap.” Remember the vendor salesperson’s goal is selling software and services and having a satisfied customer. The best customer for computerized decision support is a knowledgeable manager who asks good questions.

Decision support technology is changing and evolving very rapidly. Information Systems managers, business managers and academics face a difficult challenge trying to stay abreast of those changes and to make good, informed decisions about building and maintaining decision support systems for organizations.

Managers must determine who a proposed decision support system (DSS) will support and whether they will use the proposed DSS. Equally important, the champion of a proposed project must know the desired result from using an innovative DSS. The bottom line is that an innovative decision support system must create value. Decision support planning should become more sophisticated and realistic as managers experience success with using information technology to support decision-making.

References

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Author: Daniel Power

Last update: 2009-06-23 09:40