: What is the distilled "wisdom" about decision support?

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Wisdom is a virtue. Decision support has a short history, but we have learned much about helping people make better decisions with the support of information technology. For many years, a feature called DSS Wisdom was included in my newsletter, DSS News aka Decision Support News. The feature was initiated October 22, 2000 with issue No. 13. The feature stopped after 50 issues, but researchers continue to develop new insights while investigating decision support capabilities and challenges. Innovations in hardware and software continue to expand the reach and range of what is possible and make this field exciting and of continuing relevance. Technology advances have made possible a variety of new tools to assist decision making. Now seems an appropriate time to reflect on the "wisdom" of decision support.

The initial snippet of "wisdom" in DSS News was a quotation form Herbert Simon. In 1960, Simon wrote in the **The New Science of Management Decision**, "If I am right in my optimistic prediction that we are rapidly dissolving the mysteries that surround nonprogrammed decision making, then the question of how far that decision making shall be automated ceases to be a technological question and becomes an economic question.
(p. 90)"

The sequence or order of "wisdom" is often not important. The reading of the whole corpus of what we have learned is also often more important than focusing solely on one quotation or snippet of insight. The following quotations are in the order originally included in my newsletter. Some were identified from recollection, some from serendipity in reviewing the books on my shelf and articles from the literature. Conceivably some "wisdom" is not included. Email me and I will attempt to correct that oversight. The 50 Decision Support Systems Wisdom pages at DSSResources.com are dedicated to Herbert Simon. The index is at http://www.dssresources.com/dsswisdom/index.html.

Wisdom snippet number 2 was published November 5, 2000. Michael S. Scott Morton was one of the first academic researchers to systematically study how information technology could support managerial decision making. He began studying the "nonprogrammed" decisions referred to by Simon. Scott Morton wrote in 1971 "Properly designed for appropriate problems, these [management decision]
systems can have a significant impact on the decision process. This is
of importance because most of management's decisions, the unstructured
decisions, have not been well supported by analysis and information in
the past. There is still a great deal to be learned, but no major
company can afford not to have some active program in this area. The
technology is available and becoming less expensive, the major concepts
and issues are clear; what is lacking is management's understanding of

these concepts and their willingness to become involved. (pp. 152-53)"

I encourage you to explore the 50 quotations in the Decision Support Systems Wisdom resource at DSSResources.com. The last quotation that I will showcase in this column was the third one published in DSS News, in issue number 15 on November 19, 2000.

Shull, Delbecq, and Cummings wrote in 1970 "Finally, decision acts, while not devoid of environmental impingements, are human events. Various types of hardware, such as various types of
automatic data-processing equipment, may be employed to aid the
decision-making process. Such mechanical devices enhance the speed,
capacity, and accuracy of evaluations, and they may replace certain
personnel who perform specific acts contributing to administrative
decisions. Nonetheless, even the best of the hardware must be
programmed by man and the forthcoming computations must be assessed by
the responsible person. (pp. 30-31)"

I extend many thanks to Professor Simon for his intellectual contributions to the field of computerized decision support. Professor Herbert A. Simon, Carnegie Mellon University, won the 1978 Nobel Prize in Economics and many prestigious international scientific awards for his work in cognitive psychology and computer science. He died on my birthday February 9, 2001 at the age of 84.

All of the pioneering researchers in the field of decision support deserve our thanks, but let me remember and extend many thanks to two of my professors in the doctoral program in the College of Business at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Andre L. Delbecq and Larry L. Cummings. Thanks Andre and Larry.

We need to continue to share wisdom from one generation to the next.

References

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