Decisions, Decisions ...

Mark Norton, chief technology officer of Idiom Ltd, outlines the benefits automated decisioning can bring to an organisation and offers some tips on how a decisioning solution can be implemented effectively...

About The Author
> Mark Norton, Idiom's chief technology officer, has spent 28 years in enterprise level software development across many sectors including banking, insurance, health, logistics and government. Norton established Idiom Ltd in 2001 and leads the development of the IDIOM products.

An essential ingredient of business success is the ability to make the right decisions at the right time.

How you make a series of routine, critical decisions is the key to differentiating your business in the market – and to achieving the outcomes that you need to thrive as an organisation. Your business, whether it is a commercial, government, or other enterprise, is really driven by a series of time-critical decisions. Decisions govern every aspect of your corporate processes. By way of example, decisions governing a sales process might include:

- What products/services can/will I offer?
- Will I do this business with this client?
- At what price or cost?
- Under what terms and conditions?
- And, what do I need to do next?

To operate effectively, what you know as an organisation needs to be strongly reflected in your decision-making behaviour.

The Power Of Decisioning

Smart organisations are increasingly using decisioning to help model their corporate decision making knowledge in a form that allows access by both the business and its electronic systems.

Decisioning can be defined as: 'acquiring and leveraging proprietary knowledge through the systematic discovery, classification, specification and automation of the decisions that drive your business'.

And in this context, a decision is: 'the application of proprietary knowledge to interpret and evaluate situational data to achieve the purpose of the enterprise'.

Decisioning allows the organisation to extend and control its business processes by inserting plug-and-play software components directly into the processes, thereby implementing fast, reliable, automated decision-making.

Decisioning is the business user's "remote-control", guiding and directing the computerised processes as they go about their business, quickly and accurately.

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Let's envisage a scene where you are confronted with a market change that requires your organisation to respond differently – in other words, new decisions are required.

In a decision-centric system, you simply use the power of the decisioning layer to implement timely, efficient decision logic changes. Being able to develop, model, test, and deploy your decision-making in "market-time" is the key to business agility.

The weight of the time-draining 'system development life cycle' is only required when you need to add new structural capabilities to the infrastructure. Decisions are the most dynamic of the systems components – new decision models can be created as fast as the business can learn. But our traditional systems methodologies are highly resistant to dynamic requirements. By segregating out responsibility for decisioning, we remove a burden from the old juggernaut development process, reserving its costly and resource intensive SDLC for development of core infrastructure and capability.

Furthermore, compliance with decision making guidelines in such critical areas as the assessment and acceptance of clients, products, prices and terms, is usually a corporate, if not a legal, imperative. Many organizations invest heavily in training, processes and systems to ensure that line decisions comply with these declared guidelines. Decisioning is an approach that compliments this by ensuring that relevant guidelines are applied automatically "at the point of sale" to ensure provable, auditable compliance at all times.

Five Keys To Implementing Effective Decisioning

Having set out above the compelling reasons organisations have for embracing decisioning, how do you go about achieving an effective decisioning environment? Here are five things to consider.

Firstly, focus on decisions. If you are going to succeed at automating decisions, then you need to make decision-making the critical design focus - not processes, not business rules, not even data. Your business will succeed because of high quality, consistent and timely decision-making. The rest, as they say, is history!

Secondly, get the right people. Decisioning is a new dis-cipline, and should be led by one or more business analysts who work hand-in-hand with domain experts to capture, refine, and test the decision models that will drive your business in a continuous cycle of improvement. The role of the domain experts is to learn from the market and to create new corporate behaviour that complies with governance requirements; the business analysts consolidate this new behaviour into practical, complete, and verified decision models - if you are lucky, these skills will be found in one person, making the process even more efficient.

Thirdly, re-target your IT development. The purpose of your core systems, and therefore of your IT supplier, must be re-targeted towards providing a platform for the deployment and execution of automated decisions. In support of this they will need to acquire, store and supply data as they have always done. And they will still need to implement the capabilities that respond to the decisions made. But in a sea-change of significant dimensions, both of these development requirements are now "decision driven".

Fourthly, understand that your approach to the development of your business systems will change. First and foremost, within your business you will build models of your decision-making. These are the core specifications for systems development – if your systems don't support your critical decision-making, what are you automating?

From the decision models you will determine the data that the decisions require, and the processes that will supply it. And for each decision made, you will determine the appropriate system response. The decision model is the core specification - all other data, processes and features exist to serve that purpose either directly or indirectly.

And when the system is built and implemented, you will continue to develop and evolve the decision models to reflect new learning. This may periodically require upgrades to the system infrastructure, and so the cycle continues. But this time, the most dynamic, business critical component is at the heart of the system design, under the watchful eye of business experts, easily adapted, always changing.

And finally, get some decisioning tools to help define and manage your portfolio of decision making know-how, and having done so, to keep it accessible but safe – it is your critical IP, the knowledge that defines your corporate essence. *i*