

Potent tool for making decisions

Hands on

Peter Moon

We're seldom betwixt or between when it comes to deciding the topic for this column but this week was an exception. So we binned both options and looked for some decision-making software instead. We're pleased to report that an indigenous offering leads the way, at least if you're a visual thinker.

bCisive from Melbourne's AusThink Software is a sub-species of mind-mapping tools. Think of an organisation chart that maps out thought processes rather than management structures. An initial question might link to three or four ideas and each of those in turn to some pros and cons. Dead ends can be marked off, and firm decisions can be highlighted. Eventually the options for approaching a problem are mapped out visually and preferred directions emerge.

We came to understand the power of mind mapping when a colleague with a brain the size of a small planet showed us how she had solved an extraordinarily complex intellectual property problem using a pen, butcher's paper, scissors and Wite-Out. For her, breaking the issues down in a map involved tedious handiwork and editing whenever a new element needed to be interposed or part of the analysis to be relocated. Her life was changed when we introduced her to MindManager, the doyen of the generalist mind-mapping tools.

At once she could adjust her idea map at will and could record her thoughts at almost her thinking speed.

bCisive brings the same visual approach to situations and solutions. It's a great way to record a formal discussion like a board meeting. Instead of traditional "he said, she said and then the chairman said" notes that are slaves to the linear nature of most note-taking, opinions and contributions can rapidly be associated with the contentions they relate to. Instead of recording what director Jim said about all four options under consideration, it puts the ideas up front and attaches what each speaker thought about each one. That makes it

far easier to discern why a particular outcome makes sense, or doesn't.

This is attractive software. The left-hand panel is full of icons for ideas, questions, options, pros, cons, reasons, objections, evidence, risks and requirements. They drag and drop onto a main canvas and, unlike some visual planners, it's easy to know how each new element will link to the existing map.

But it's also rigorous. If a proposed solution runs into a blocker, you need either to conclude that the hurdle is illusory or say how it can be solved. When the reasoning process is staring back at the meeting from a large-screen television, there's no good in talking generalities for another 10 minutes and hoping all will forget about the problem from hell. The blocker just sits there, stonewalling until you do something.

If bCisive decision maps are easy to build, they're even easier to manipulate. We particularly like the way an element can be changed into another kind by dropping the new sort on it. With some mapping software, entering a pro as a con isn't easy to reverse. Here, just dropping the right icon on the wrong one fixes the problem, leaving descriptive text and other notes as they were.

Data is easily reformatted and repurposed. A decision map automatically builds a purely text-based version for those who thrive on words and not pictures. If the layout of a map doesn't appeal, it can readily be recast. The biggest deficiency we found was no obvious way to build libraries of standard problems and approaches to them.

This software doesn't tell you what to decide, or even how. It simply lays out your own thoughts in a way that can't be run away from. The scariest button in the toolbar is labelled Decide. Make your choice and bCisive will create a decision summary for it, detailing all the factors you took into account, the risks you noted, the reasons and rebuttals, and the costs and benefits that caused you to opt for that outcome. Where accountability is at a premium, bCisive is a potent tool.

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