Can 'Moneyball on Steroids' Help With the Big Decisions?

Decision Lens, a company started by the two sons of a famous mathematician, is scoring contracts with big governmental players by promising clarity in the procurement process.

BY **JOHN SEPULVADO** / JANUARY 27, 2014

This still from the motion picture Moneyball shows Brad Pitt as Billy Beane and Jonah Hill as Peter Brand. According to some clients (reached independently of the company), Decision Lens captured their business in part because of the "Moneyball on steroids" branding, which stuck in their heads as they searched for software. VIA ACESHOWBIZ.COM

At first glance, it almost seems like John Saaty's dad is trying to ruin his son's business.

Saaty is the founder and chief marketing officer of the Virginia based software company, Decision Lens. At its core, Decision Lens is designed to help organizations make procurement, staffing and other decisions by using an algorithm developed by the company -- and a growing number of government agencies are signing on as clients.

"Think of it as Moneyball on steroids," Saaty said. "My father was a mathematician, and Decision Lens is based on a decision process he invented."

His father would be Thomas Saaty, a celebrated and accomplished mathematician. The Distinguished Professor at the University of Pittsburgh's Katz Business School, the elder Saaty also helps governments make decisions using formulas he created, including the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP).

When the Apartheid-era South African Government needed to game out all the possible outcomes of setting political prisoner Nelson Mandela free or keeping him locked up, they called the elder Saaty.

When the government of Poland needed to know the pros and cons of adopting the Euro currency, the Iraqi-born mathematician guided the government through the process.

Both countries ended up making decisions that were endorsed by the elder Saaty. In fact, he's so good at what he does there's an award named after him.

Yet, while Decision Lens is a fee-for-usage software company, the elder Saaty has also offered up decision-making software based on his work. But Thomas Saaty is offering that software for free.

So is dad trying to ruin his son's business?

"No, that's not the case at all," John Saaty said, laughing. "If most people got ahold of my father's software…it'd be like if someone was working using an Excel spreadsheet and you asked them to start coding in C++. Their heads would blow up."

GUIDED DECISION MAKING

To help keep its clients' heads intact, Decision Lens guides organizations through a process, which in many ways sounds like a sort of super-focus group. John Saaty said the company, launched more than 10 years ago, uses these customer meetings to help determine what tangibles (and intangibles) the decision-makers actually value.

Those factors are plugged into the software, which then crunches the outcomes, values and priorities, giving clients a ranking of investment options, vendors, candidates or other desired outcomes.

While the process strives to take politics and personal feelings out of the process, it's still up to the decision makers to ultimately make the final call.

"It's a strategic tool that analyzes quantitative and qualitative structures," Saaty explained. "We don't make the decisions for them."

Not that there aren't similar software services claiming to do the same thing: a host of firms from the U.S. and Canada offer help with RFPs, personnel and policy decisions.

According to some clients (reached independently of the company), Decision Lens captured their business in part because of the "Moneyball on steroids" branding, which stuck in their heads as they searched for software. For decision-makers and data-geeks, it's clearly a clever marketing strategy from Saaty, who previously worked as a brand manager for Intel and chief marketing officer for Weatherbug.

Yet, according to the same clients, the software is still too new to evaluate whether it'll be a winner like the Oakland A's teams staffed by Moneyball creator Billy Beane were.

Other clients, like the city of Houston, chose Decision Lens because it was the only software "that focused primarily, if not almost exclusively, on the task of prioritizing needs that are greater than funding capacity," said city Communications Director Janice Evans.

BIG ENTHUSIASM FOR A NEW (AND SOMEWHAT UNTESTED) PRODUCT

Along with Houston, a host of other organizations have hired Decision Lens to aid with procurement, personnel and projects, including The Kansas City Chiefs football team, Amtrak, the Department of Defense, Kraft Foods, the Tennessee Department of Transportation and the California Department of Technology.

California's technology department is using Decision Lens to evaluate procurement contracts worth $1 million or more. A spokesman for the agency said while there is great hope for the product, it's still too new to evaluate whether it's been successful.

Houston is utilizing Decision Lens to help turn $850 million worth of requests into a $423 million operating budget for 2014-18. Evans said the city wanted to prioritize the projects, "which by their nature have a larger unquantifiable component and greater difficulty comparing one project type to another," she said.

"While the first time through using Decision Lens was certainly not perfect, and improvements to the process are being made this year, overall I consider the exercise to have been very successful," Evans said.

At least one admirer, a noted mathematician in her own right, described the company as "lifting the level" of decision making software.

She would know: Rosemary Saaty oversees her husband Thomas' decision-making software platform. She described her son's decision-making software as an evolution of her husband's ground breaking work.

"[My husband and I] are proving math theorems with our software," she said. "They're offering a platform. It's really the invention of an idea, and I admire them for that."

John Sepulvado

John Sepulvado is from Southern California. He enjoys writing, reading and wants to take up fishing. He wrote for *Government Technology* for a short time in 2014.

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