

RapidDecision®

Making Business Intelligence Work Best

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Introduction

Today nearly every business is looking for new ways to control costs, conserve cash, and convince reluctant lenders to provide credit. Frequently the data needed to make the necessary decisions is trapped within the computer applications that support your business. A fully functional Business Intelligence (BI) solution can provide access to that data and then organize it in ways that help make the right decisions. Historically, implementing BI has been too expensive and far too time consuming to offer near term relief to those that do not have it. Fortunately, that is no longer the case.

RapidDecision® makes it possible to get the BI solution your business needs to navigate through difficult times very quickly, at a surprisingly low cost. This white paper will explain how that is possible. It includes an overview of what it takes to get a full function BI solution working and the roles RapidDecision plays.

No other BI solution offers as much as RapidDecision:

- Complete – everything needed is included.
- Fast – you can start making better decisions in only a few weeks.
- Timely – up to the minute information is available.
- Affordable – getting started costs far less than you might expect.
- Proven – businesses like yours are using RapidDecision to make better decisions today.
- Improving – innovative enhancements arrive every few months.
- Open – an ever-broadening range of choices are offered.

RapidDecision is the foundation for a complete, no-compromise Business Intelligence solution that can let you start to make better decisions in just a few weeks.

BI Basics

Many of the best-managed organizations in the world have proven that BI can be indispensable. They have demonstrated that as complexity increases, waste creeps into every business process in subtle ways. The best way to discover and correct these inefficiencies is through analysis of data that your organization already owns, but that has never been easy to access.

Early adopters spent a decade or more building and refining their BI environments to support decision-making. A set of best practices emerged from their efforts. It is now possible to obtain a complete BI solution that incorporates these best practices without incurring the time, expense and effort the pioneers had to invest.

The most important best practice is the concept of a Data Warehouse – a place where data copied from transaction systems and other sources is stored permanently for analysis and reporting. The pioneering enterprises that created BI discovered a simple truth: the most effective way to provide data to BI tools is through the creation of a properly designed data warehouse. Today there is no debate among experts – the path to proper business intelligence passes through a data warehouse.

Conversely, if your information analysis solution is not built on a Data Warehouse you will soon want to replace it with one that is. Many reporting solutions are offered without a pre-built Data Warehouse only because those

What is RapidDecision?

RapidDecision consists of three elements: the Data Model, Application Mappings, and BI Content. A working installation of RapidDecision also requires a BI toolset, ETL tool, and servers running a DBMS. A variety of service offerings make the process of obtaining and using RapidDecision very straightforward. Each aspect of RapidDecision will be examined in detail.

Data Model

Many of the unique advantages of RapidDecision come

that sell them do not have one.

A complete BI solution based on a Data Warehouse consists of a number of elements:

- An ETL tool (Extract, Transform and Load) –software that copies and transforms data from production applications into the Data Warehouse.
- Mappings – the programming that ETL tools need to construct the necessary Data Warehouse from production application data
- A stable data model – every data item in the warehouse must be carefully selected, named and structured around a model that does not change over time.
- A BI tool suite – software to analyze data and present the results.
- Analytic applications, dashboards and reports – pre-built output that provides immediate value when the solution is installed.
- Servers – dedicated hardware with a database management system where the Data Warehouse and BI tools run. Obtaining server capacity from an on-demand service provider is an option some choose.

Those that choose to select, create and integrate all these elements themselves can be overwhelmed by the task. Customers that choose RapidDecision do not need to be concerned. Nearly everything is done for them, usually in just a few weeks as described below.

from its advanced data model. RapidDecision data field names are clear and understandable; their structure is logical; tables make sense to non-technical users; and formatting of the data within fields is understandable. This is important because the field names, types and lengths in application packages do not remain constant across releases and can be confusing or even misleading.

One of the greatest strengths of the RapidDecision data model is the wide variety of metadata fields that are included to enhance understanding and usefulness

The data model behind RapidDecision is highly stable. It is enhanced regularly over time to meet changing needs. This is always done in a way that maintains the integrity of existing reports. This protects users of RapidDecision from having to recode reports after installing new releases of their applications. This advantage alone can justify the full cost of a RapidDecision solution.

The bottom line is that the RapidDecision data model follows best practice BI design concepts that optimize it for reporting and analysis.

Application Mappings

ETL tools must be programmed to know what fields to extract and how and where to place them in the Data Warehouse. Precise mappings are thus needed for every release of every production application that is being supported. The mappings are the mechanism used to bring the Data Model to life by using the ETL tool to build a Data Warehouse from data copied from the source applications.

The process of creating these mappings sounds simple. Conceptually it is. In practice, however, building and maintaining mappings is a highly time consuming process that must be done with great precision and understanding. Customers that try it themselves usually greatly underestimate how much work will be involved both to get started and over time. In addition, all that work can be wasted if the design of the data model is less than ideal. Creating mappings takes relatively modest skills but designing a data model that works is something that very few people know how to do.

RapidDecision currently offers mappings for JD Edwards, PeopleSoft, Oracle E-Business Suite and Lawson. Mappings to other applications can be custom built as needed. Other applications are constantly being added. All of them map to the same exceptionally well-designed RapidDecision Data Model.

BI Content

RapidDecision starts to provide value as soon as it is installed because of all the content that is included. A suite of pre-built subject-specific reports and queries are the starting point. In addition, a full suite of Analytic Applications is being developed by a panel of subject **RapidDecision®**

matter experts. The first to be completed is Sales Analytics from the Sales and Accounts Receivable data marts. Additional applications will be released every few months. All the RapidDecision reports and Analytical Applications use conformed dimensions to provide a true picture an individual's job function.

BI Tools

Excellent Business Intelligence tools are available from many sources including SAP Business Objects, IBM Cognos, Microsoft, MicroStrategy and Oracle BI. RapidDecision can be used by any of these BI tools making it the most open alternative available. Each one of these tools is excellent and offer advantages and features. None of them, however, work effectively without a well-designed data warehouse.

Countless organizations have bought a BI toolset only to have it become shelf ware because there was no good way to feed it the data needed to be useful. RapidDecision has been brought in after this has happened many times to save the day. If you own underutilized BI software, RapidDecision may be the answer you are looking for.

ETL (Extract, Transform and Load)

RapidDecision is based on SAP Business Objects Data Services, one of the industry leading tools. It can be purchased along with RapidDecision. Support for other ETL tools will become available over time.

One of the unique characteristics of RapidDecision is the way it uses the ETL tool to obtain data. It is a common practice for data warehouses to be completely reloaded periodically, sometimes daily. Doing so puts a huge strain on the servers that host the applications, the data Warehouse servers and the network connecting them.

RapidDecision takes the more elegant approach of loading the data warehouse once and then capturing changes a few seconds after they occur. This is accomplished by monitoring the log files within the database that applications update each time a transaction completes. This approach offers numerous advantages:

- The data warehouse is constantly in synch with the production systems.

- Impact on the application servers is minimized.
- The burden on the network connecting the warehouse with production applications is limited.
- Access to data is always available since BI tools do not need to be shutdown during the process of reloading data.

Servers

RapidDecision buyers have a wide variety of choices when deciding how to meet its server needs:

- Almost any popular server can host RapidDecision.
- The operating system can be Windows, Unix, or Linux.
- The DBMS can be Oracle or Microsoft SQL Server.
- Data can be extracted from almost any source.
- There is no practical upper limit on the size of the data warehouse created.

Assistance can be provided in selecting, installing, tuning and even monitoring performance of the servers used. Buyers can handle any of these functions themselves or ask for help.

RapidDecision Service Offerings

One of the great strengths of RapidDecision is its ability to adapt to the unique needs of each customer. A team of experts is available to provide the assistance needed to make each installation successful. Generally, the customers that get the most value from RapidDecision are the ones that take full advantage of the full range of services that are offered.

It has been proven that BI can have a profound positive impact on businesses. Unfortunately, it is possible to put an outstanding BI infrastructure in place and then see almost no benefit. Like any other tool, the value of a BI solution depends on the effectiveness of those that use it. BI solutions don't make decisions; they enable better decisions to be made. This only happens when BI is used skillfully.

The pioneering organizations whose experience has shaped the evolution of BI not only discovered how to create effective BI solutions, they also learned what is required to turn the potential of BI into beneficial results. The RapidDecision service offerings use that experience to arm customers with the knowledge needed to benefit fully from the investment. Each of these offerings is described below.

Initial installation

Assistance is always provided for the initial installation of RapidDecision. Installation is done at a fixed price and generally can be accomplished in just a few weeks. Typical RapidDecision installations take 5 calendar days or less. Installation begins after customers have

obtained the necessary servers and includes setup of the ETL tool and database; loading, testing and integration of the RapidDecision marts. When complete, customers can immediately begin to take advantage of their new BI environment which includes metadata and content for many of the industry leading Business Intelligence tools.

User Training

Business Intelligence has the potential to dramatically improve reporting and analysis capability when built around a RapidDecision solution. Gaining the full benefit of that capability requires a detailed understanding of how to use the tools, reports and analytics provided. On site user training is therefore offered and strongly recommended each time RapidDecision is installed. Training for each individual end-user usually takes just a few days.

Custom reports, analysis and analytics

RapidDecision comes with a set of pre-built reports. Any of them can easily be changed using the advanced tools that come with each of the BI platforms. In some cases RapidDecision customers need help with this process. A team of experienced experts is available to quickly and efficiently build whatever is needed. This can include anything from simple printed reports to advanced real-time analytic applications built around dashboards.

Information needs assessment

Organizations that are new to Business Intelligence are usually not exactly sure what they want or how to take

advantage of an unfamiliar new technology. In these cases it helps to have advice from experts with senior management experience. A great first step for new BI customers is to conduct a RapidDecision assessment of their exact needs.

Coaching

Even with great tools and pre-built analytics and reports, data cannot evaluate itself. Fortunately, the skills needed to find and assess critical information can be learned. In addition to formal classes it can be invaluable to have access to a highly experienced person who can coach those with limited experience in how to make the best possible use of Business Intelligence. The RapidDecision support team has an outstanding reputation for its skill at helping turn new users into highly effective seasoned veterans.

Ongoing Maintenance and Support

RapidDecision is a fully supported software product that is continuously being enhanced and improved. Periodic upgrades are created to support additional modules and new releases of applications. New metrics and metadata fields are regularly added as are whole new dashboards and analytic applications. Support for additional ERP and Business Intelligence applications is another part of the process of continuous improvement. RapidDecision experts are available on-line and by phone to answer questions and help solve problems.

How RapidDecision Makes Data More Usable

A Business Intelligence solution based on RapidDecision can be a vital first step towards managing your business more effectively. Once it is operational, a new world of information access, insight and analysis begins to open up.

Reports

The first visible benefit from a RapidDecision BI solution is new reports. They can be printed if needed, but most often they are viewed on-line.

Monitoring

The RapidDecision data warehouse is continuously being updated with additions, changes and deletes from the production applications. Some customers prefer to have this ongoing process monitored for them either during the first few months of operation or even over the life of the system

The RapidDecision daily operational monitoring service detects and responds when updates to the data warehouse fail to meet pre-set criteria. Operational problems are thus identified and fixed as they occur. Those that choose this valuable service can be confident that the RapidDecision data warehouse is always closely synchronized with source applications.

Building operational BI applications

A rapidly growing trend among more sophisticated users of Business Intelligence is to go beyond reporting and analysis by using the data generated by the BI system to make immediate decisions. This is often done with the aid of a body of custom software developed for that purpose. Such systems are referred to as operational BI applications. RapidDecision experts are available to explore and aid in the creation of this exciting capability.

Financing

Many businesses want and need RapidDecision but do not have the cash available to get started. Financing of part or all of the cost in these cases can usually be arranged.

A number of pre-built reports come with RapidDecision that many organizations find immediately useful. These reports can easily be customized to meet unique needs.

All of the BI tools that RapidDecision works with include outstanding, easy to use report writers so the effort to create unique, new reports tends to be modest. The RapidDecision implementation team can help as much or as little as needed to create exactly what is needed.

Analytic applications

Good managers develop metrics over time to measure many different aspects of their business. Examples include measurements such as Day Sales Outstanding, Training Penetration Rate, Recruitment Source Ratio, Human Economic Value Added, Inventory Turns, or Work Center Utilization. The best managed businesses keep refining and improving their metrics and regularly discover new ones. Analytic applications take the experience of many well-managed businesses and create pre-built dashboards and reports around a proven set of metrics.

Drill down capability

The real power of RapidDecision begins to show itself when business people examine these reports. When something on a report just does not look right it is immediately possible to find out exactly why. If, for example, product sales in a region show a sudden increase or decrease, it is easy to examine the data in as much detail as required to take advantage of the increase or mitigate the decrease.

Ad hoc analysis

End users can finally have immediate access to

information that once required an IT project to obtain. Each one of the BI tools RapidDecision supports includes easy to use query, analysis, report writing and other tools that end users can employ on their own to examine and make sense of all available data.

Dashboards

Long, detailed reports often contain essential information but getting to it can be very time consuming. Dashboards have evolved as a powerful way to summarize a great deal of detailed data in a way that visually highlights problems instantly. They have become one of the strongest justifications for BI since a well-designed dashboard can trigger action that might otherwise be delayed or not taken at all.

Clarity and consistency

Nothing is more wasteful than to gather ten people in a conference room to solve a problem and then waste the available time arguing over whose numbers are correct. One of the greatest benefits of RapidDecision is its ability to quickly get beyond debates over data sources and accuracy. A key reason for this is that when Rapid Decision consolidates data from different sources it ends up in one place with a common, understandable name and a clear, consistent, precise definition.

More about RapidDecision

Building your BI solution around RapidDecision offers numerous advantages:

- Ease of understanding and use.
- Fast installation and a short time to value.
- Access to up-to-the-minute data.
- Industry-standard business intelligence best practices.
- Widely used by highly satisfied customers.
- Designed, installed, and supported by real BI experts.

Any reporting solution that does not include RapidDecision will have one or more of these fatal flaws:

- Extraction of data directly from production application files – no data warehouse.
- An unstable, ineffective data model.
- Long implementation time and expensive customizations.
- Dependence on software components from marginal vendors.
- Based on out-dated information.
- Limited support for older modules and releases.
- Few successful installations.

All this makes RapidDecision the safest and most cost-effective choice and an investment that never stops paying off.

Why Direct Connection Just Doesn't Work

History has shown that any approach that attempts to create reports directly from production databases is doomed to fail for a variety of well documented reasons:

- The design of the database is different for each release, making it necessary to rewrite and test reports as a part of every upgrade.
- Data is organized to optimize data entry and performance, making it hard to use for analysis.
- The data needed for analysis must be obtained from many sources, often including numerous ERP instances or external systems.
- Creating reports that summarize data which originated within more than one release is difficult.
- Field names can be hard to decipher, and the data in them is often in odd formats.
- Information useful for analysis is purged from the database when no longer needed for transaction processing.
- There is no good way to add worthwhile data from other sources.

The concept of data warehousing emerged in reaction to the failures that resulted from doing reporting and

analysis on transaction system databases. Can your organization afford to try an approach that frequently fails? Investing in a data warehouse-based BI solution using RapidDecision is the only way to insure lasting success.

Some BI tool vendors and their advocates will argue that a pre-built data warehouse such as RapidDecision is not necessary. They create the impression that it is easy to throw together a primitive data warehouse by just copying the data field by field into a separate database. Those that have bought BI tools this way have largely ended up with shelf ware.

Others do recognize the need for a properly designed data warehouse but underestimate the challenge of creating one. The few that do succeed tend to spend years and millions of dollars getting a data warehouse with limited capability working. Maintaining it then costs a great deal, for as long as it is operational. As a result, many of the most successful implementations of RapidDecision have been replacements of failed attempts to design, build and maintain data warehouses internally.

Comparing RapidDecision with other alternatives

Buyers that do their homework end up choosing RapidDecision. Make sure you ask every solution provider all the tough questions:

- Will it be necessary to rewrite reports if changes occur in the applications?
- Is the proposed solution based on a data warehouse?
- Was it built on a proven, highly stable data model?
- How much work are you expected to do to obtain the necessary data?
- Can you see the system working with your data before deciding to buy?
- Can you start to create new reports in a week or less?
- Can up-to-the-minute data be obtained?
- Will custom data marts or cubes need to be created (and at what expense)?
- Are the front-end tool and its report writer industry leaders?
- Will it be easy to drill down and get the details?
- Will your IT staff need to learn new skills?
- Will people with deep application skills be constantly available to support you?
- Is remote hosting available from a highly trusted source?

Summary

Your organization should consider a BI solution based on RapidDecision if any of these conditions are present:

- Business conditions are making it vitally important to make better decisions.
- Valuable information within your applications is not easy to access.
- Getting the reports you need is difficult.
- When something does not look right it is not easy to get to the underlying details.
- Complying with reporting regulations is a challenge.
- Management wants to monitor performance as it is happening.
- Consolidating results from divergent systems is awkward and difficult.

- You have struggled to get a business intelligence solution to work.
- There are three alternatives to RapidDecision – all of them unattractive:
 - Continue without a true BI solution.
 - Make do with an inferior alternative.
 - Attempt to build your own data warehouse.

RapidDecision removes the risk. You know what you are going to get, how long it will take, and what it will cost before starting. RapidDecision makes Business Intelligence work best.

Organizations everywhere are turning to Business Intelligence (BI) tools to provide improved reporting and analysis. SAP Business Objects, Oracle BI, Microsoft, IBM Cognos, MicroStrategy and others provide excellent tools to help turn raw data into useful information. The value that these BI tools deliver is highly dependent on the way in which the data is made available to them.

RapidDecision® provides BI tools with the data needed to unlock their full potential. This essential ingredient in the creation of an effective business intelligence capability is affordable, easy to install, and follows well-established best practices.

Learn why **RapidDecision®** is the path towards true business intelligence for your organization.

Listen to a regularly scheduled **RapidDecision®** webinar, sign up here <http://www.rapiddecision.net/events/events.html>, if you can't join us simply contact us to request a recorded copy of any of our presentations.

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Ask questions via email at info@rapiddecision.net

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