

The Choosing by Advantages Decision Making System

Jim Suhr (*Quorum Books, Westport, CT; 1999; ISBN 1-56720-217-9*) \$59.95

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For the consultant who makes it through this book, the reward can be both personal and professional. Personal, because Suhr's system of making decisions can help you make better decisions every day; professional, because for some consultants it can be a method to help clients or to choose among recommendations.¹

Basic Method of CBA

Let me use a decision from my practice, consulting to law departments of corporations, to explain some of Choosing by Advantages (CBA)'s key notions and terminology. If a law department wants to use CBA to decide among four case-management databases, the department would start by identifying the key *factors*. A factor is a component of a decision that contains criteria, attributes, and advantages—all being central to Suhr's method. In the case of the law department, factors that differentiate databases could include its reporting flexibility, online help, user base, ease of navigation, browser-orientation, vendor history, and

availability of required modules.

For each of the four vendors, on each factor its database would have some *attribute*, such as the number of current users, which could be five or fewer, six to ten, and so forth. Attributes are “a characteristic or consequence of an alternative.” One database might come with 20 reports, whereas the attribute for another choice might be only 10 canned reports.

The law department selects the attribute that is least preferred for each factor and then restates the attributes of the other vendors in terms of the difference between their attributes and the least preferred attribute—that difference is the *advantage* of the other vendors on that attribute. Thus, if the least helpful package had only 20 help messages that pop up, another package with 40 help messages would have the advantage.

Once all the factors, their attributes, and advantages resulting from them are laid out in a table, CBA shows how to put those advantages on the same relative scale. If each row of the table lists a factor, and four columns show the attributes—and thus the relative advantages of the four vendors—then simply circling the attribute of the most advantageous attribute might make the decision clear. Simply decide on the case-management system with the most advantages.

But other decisions require an additional step if the advantages have different degrees of importance to the law department.

In this step, the law department would establish a *scale of importance* for the advantages by assigning the paramount advantage an importance rating of 100 and assigning all the other advantages some lesser number on the same scale of importance. If the paramount advantage is not obvious, pair-wise comparisons of each advantage to each other will likely identify the leading advantage. For example, if ease of use turns out to be the paramount advantage, the law department might believe that the slight differences—small advantage between databases—as to available reports gives the reporting advantage only a rating of 20. In Suhr's words, repeated scores of times in the book, “decisions must be based on the importance of advantages.” Hence, once the law department rates all the non-paramount advantages, the department can simply add the ratings assigned to each vendor's attributes and choose the database with the highest total rating. In brief, summarize the *attributes* of each alternative, decide the *advantages* of each alternative, decide the *importance* of each advantage, and then choose the alternative with *the greatest total importance* of advantages.

Not every decision requires the full-blown methods of CBA. Indeed, Suhr takes pains to explain simplified methods for simpler decisions. On the other hand, he reserves a chapter or two for including differences between alternatives that involve money. Those chapters left me confused. Similarly, Suhr devotes nine mystifying pages to preference charts and curves. Yet, in all, the book was instructive.

Lessons Learned

Suhr's method makes sense and should help when facts are reasonably abundant. He emphasizes that the principle of *anchoring* is the centerpiece of the CBA system. When assigning ratings to each advantage, the person making the decision must anchor the assignments to the relevant facts. It is good for consultants to anchor their recommendations in metrics whenever possible. That said, I wonder about the tough managerial decisions, such as whether a general counsel retains outside counsel for a major lawsuit, or whether changing the number of direct reports to the general counsel will improve the law department.

Suhr stopped me short on some of my comfortable practices. For example, I help law departments bid work to outside law firms and have unthinkingly advised that the law departments should weight the factors that to them are important. Wrong. One reason is that if a factor does not differentiate among the alternatives, it is useless. Second, factors live in the rarified air of abstractions and are not grounded in data, so they cannot be objectively compared.

I have also been persuaded by Suhr to stop listing advantages and disadvantages of management choices, such as whether to centralize or decentralize the reporting of in-house lawyers to the General Counsel. As Suhr writes, "a difference between two alternatives is, simultaneously, an advantage of one and a disadvantage of the other." Now, I will stop double counting.

Criticisms

First, Suhr drumbeats an evangelical faith that his system should transform all people, because all of us make decisions. He says virtually all types of decisions call for CBA methods. Were he less of a proselytizer, readers would have less to cover, pages and pages less, and would be less likely to bridle at his grandiose vision.

Aside from its gospel tendencies, the book has pedagogical shortcomings. Suhr frequently explains how he struggled to arrive at the points he then proceeds to make; he keeps saying, "Chapter X will address this point"; and he wags his finger, berating us to pay attention and memorize this! He also makes far too much of the intellectual history of CBA, such as it is. At other times, he writes as if he were teaching instructors for CBA training courses. In sum, the book would have been stronger if an editor had tightened the structure, toned down the world-transforming rhetoric, and taken more care on the prose.

My third criticism, besides the religious intensity and the sometimes refractory style, is that Suhr uses, and uses, and uses yet again his example of choosing between two canoes. Few decisions that consultants make in their professional lives exhibit such simplicity, hard facts, and quantifiable attributes.

Even so, CBA presents consultants with a discipline for making decisions, an area in which all of us believe we are good, but have probably never stopped to think about how we could become better. *The Choosing by Advantages Decision Making System* offers a framework for improving the discipline of thought that is crucial to our success as consultants.

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