

Model-driven DSS: Who are the major vendors of Excel add-in programs for building model-driven DSS?

In an attempt to provide a comprehensive answer to this question, I visited the web sites of vendors listed on the Spreadsheet-based DSS vendor page at DSSResources.COM, did some searches on "add-ins" with Google and conducted an email interview with Charles Von Thun, CEO of Decisioneering, Inc. (<http://www.crystalball.com>). This Ask Dan! column reports my findings.

First, what is an Excel add-in program? An add-in program enhances the basic functionality of a spreadsheet program like Microsoft Excel. There are two types of add-in programs: those that provide optional commands and features and that are packaged with the spreadsheet application and are selected when the spreadsheet is installed, and commercial add-in programs available from independent vendors at an additional cost.

Second, who are the major vendors? At least 12 companies have Excel add-in programs that can be used to increase the sophistication of a specific spreadsheet-based, model-driven DSS. The purpose and design of a DSS determines whether the proposed DSS requires the purchase of an add-in program. My search identified three major vendors of commercial add-in programs that are useful in building model-driven DSS: Decisioneering, Frontline Systems, and Palisade Software.

Third, what did Mr. Charles Von Thun have to say? In an email interview received Thursday, May 16, 2002, Mr. Von Thun, CEO of Decisioneering wrote: "Many companies use enterprise scale systems to collect and organize transactional and financial information. But what these systems offer in size and power they lack in flexibility and robustness. Even the largest companies push a snapshot of data to a spreadsheet model where they ultimately make their most important decisions. The add-ins are the tools that enhance this process."

From a technical perspective Von Thun cautioned "It is important to distinguish between the applications that access Excel for data interchange and the true plug-ins. These external applications are usually not modeling centric, which we think is a huge minus."

Further Mr. Von Thun notes, "We have seen continuous evolution and improvement of spreadsheet add-ins. Excel used to support only .xla add-ins (VBA macros), but evolved to supporting .xll (library add-ins in 1997. Microsoft recently added macro security using certificates and code signing, and with the move to Office XP and .NET capabilities, we now have a whole new way to manipulate and build within Excel."

Von Thun also indicated "the most exciting trend we are seeing is the increased attention we are getting from the mainstream business users. Risk modeling and simulation are no longer the domain of power users, and with this trend we expect the demand for easy-to-use, high-quality add-ins to increase."

Fourth, so what do the commercial add-in packages do? Are they interchangeable and competing products or do they serve different modeling functions? In the next few paragraphs, I'll provide a few highlights, but you'll need to check them out and see how each might meet your needs.

The major product of Decisioneering, Inc. is Crystal Ball 2000 Professional Edition. It is a suite of Excel-based risk analysis, optimization and forecasting tools. You can visit Decisioneering at either <http://www.decisioneering.com> or at <http://www.crystalball.com>.

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Frontline Systems (<http://www.solver.com> and <http://frontsys.com>) provides the optimization add-in or "Solver" that is packaged with Excel, but they also sell Premium Solver Platform Version 3.5. It is a more powerful program and comes with example spreadsheet models and a user guide.

Palisade Software (<http://www.palisade.com>) markets the well-known @RISK add-in. @RISK 4.5 is available in three editions: Standard, Professional, and Industrial. The Palisade DecisionTools Suite includes five products: @RISK, PrecisionTree®, TopRank®, BestFit®, and RISKview™.

Other optimization add-ins include GeneHunter (<http://www.wardsystems.com>), Evolver (<http://www.palisade.com>), What'sBest (<http://www.lindo.com>) and XPRESS (<http://www.dash.co.uk>).

Decision Support Services has a product called Decision ToolPak (<http://www.decisiontoolpak.com>). It consists of three decision modeling add-ins for Microsoft Excel: TreePlan, SensIt and RiskSim. XLSIM (<http://www.analycorp.com>) is a Monte Carlo Simulation add-in for Excel. Simtools.xla (<http://home.uchicago.edu/~rmyerson/addins.htm>) adds statistical functions and procedures for doing Monte Carlo simulation and risk analysis in spreadsheets.

Some add-ins can also help with building data-driven DSS. Analyse-it! (<http://www.analyse-it.com>) and XLSTAT (<http://www.xlstat.com>) are statistical software add-ins. The XLSTAT add-in offers over 40 different functions to enhance data analysis.

Finally, what can we conclude about spreadsheet add-in programs? DSS developers need to learn when it is appropriate to use add-ins to build more powerful model-driven DSS and managers need to understand the purpose of spreadsheet add-ins.

In my email interview, Charles Von Thun (CEO at Decisioneering) took a broad perspective on spreadsheet add-in products. Let me end this Ask Dan! with another quote from him. Von Thun noted "Every business we talk to uses spreadsheets to model decisions. Some users are more sophisticated, some barely scratch the surface of the power of modeling, but there is no doubt that spreadsheets (more specifically Excel spreadsheets) are the standard for decision modeling." I agree with you, Charles! We have just begun to understand how spreadsheets and add-ins can be used to build more powerful model-driven DSS.

If you're interested in learning more about Excel add-ins to enhance model-driven DSS, you should follow the vendor links.

Many thanks to Charles Von Thun, CEO of Decisioneering, Inc., and Jennifer Mogck, Marketing Communications Manager at Decisioneering, Inc. You can contact Jennifer at jmogck@decisioneering.com.

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Author: Daniel Power

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