Case Study:
Aggreko Generators

Aggreko Generators Ltd used Decision Explorer®, formerly known as Graphics COPE, to develop a five year strategy plan and a sales training course. Six months later, all the indicators showed that the exercise had been effective, with a direct and measurable commercial benefit to the company.

"Taking some time out to think and develop some cohesive arguments about what we should be doing next and setting the agenda in a particular way by using Decision Explorer® has got bottom line impact."

Aggreko is a world-wide leader in generator, temperature control and moisture control equipment hire, operating in the UK, Europe, Singapore, Australia, the Middle East and the USA. Aggreko is Scottish based and is a subsidiary of Christian Salvensen plc. Aggreko's business covers a diverse range of equipment, supplying anything from small generators to power a fête for the weekend, to generators large enough to power sport-stadiums, oil rigs, and even whole towns. Aggreko's equipment has been used in sites including Bosnia, the Channel Tunnel, and controlling temperature in the Space Shuttle high-bay.

Kevin Page at Aggreko

Around spring 1994 the UK management team felt that the company should have a clearer idea of where it would be going over the next few years as the business environment was changing rapidly. Closely involved in the development of this strategic thinking and planning was Kevin Page, Aggreko UK's Business Development Manager, based in Dumbarton, Scotland. He realised that it was time for a different approach to strategy, which had always been a wholly emergent process largely based on digesting financial data. A temporary slow down in the company's profits growth gave a timely warning that it was time for a rethink and a different tack if Aggreko was to remain market leader in an increasingly challenging environment.

After some reflection, Kevin Page felt that the key lay in involving as many as possible of the people who would be affected by the strategy and expected to implement it. He remembered the software called Decision Explorer® (to which he had a brief introduction during his MBA course at Strathclyde Graduate Business School) and after investigating its suitability found that it was frequently used by major companies for the task he had in mind. He first used the package in a small way to prepare for some scenario workshops. These went well. The next step was then to fully exploit Decision Explorer® for the strategy exercise.

In strategy development, Decision Explorer® is often used with a methodology called Strategic Options Development and Analysis (SODA) and this was the method adopted by Aggreko with some variations to meet its specific needs. In the traditional SODA style, Kevin conducted in-depth interviews with the management team to capture their "world taken for granted" which could be converted into Decision Explorer® models. These were then used to develop an aggregate group model which was the focus for further workshops with the management team. To include as many people as possible and so gain as rich a view of the world as possible in the time available, questionnaires were posted out - in total three questionnaires, fifty people and 700 opinions. The data was collected, processed, fed-back and a model built using Decision Explorer®. With this amount of data Kevin felt there was no other way to manage it except with the software. The involvement generated by this process enabled a new "world view" to be negotiated by the management team using the group model but informed by the results of the postal exercise. At a sales conference in May a 'Post-it'® exercise (involving participants using Post-its and Decision Explorer®) was held to gather further information to add to the strategy model. The thoughts, concerns and feelings of those involved were then used to generate

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an agenda for customised training sessions on negotiating contracts and improving the pricing processes in the company. Six months after the training, all the indicators showed the training had been effective, with contracts well negotiated and priced more accurately - a direct commercial benefit to the company. The use of Decision Explorer® as a group tool to think about what was really required, and to think around the issues, had a direct impact where it most mattered.

The first workshop with the managers at Aggreko, which went very successfully, took place only two weeks after Kevin Page started in effect from scratch with Decision Explorer®. Kevin had done some thorough preparation during this time, studying the software hard and referring to the manuals and video, supplemented with reading some of the well researched literature on the approach. To speed himself up he used the command line facility as well as the menus. He also had to learn a technique for modelling and here Decision Explorer®'s flexibility came in as it allows any technique to be used, not just a prescribed one. He puts a simple test on his own modelling technique: "Have we made more money, do we have a better and clearer idea of where we want to go? Are we doing things differently from how we were twelve months ago - for reasons that are traceable to the strategising process? If the answer to that is yes, then there is probably a reasonable strategic process in place and the modelling has been successful." He also felt that it was not only the content of the software or the technique that were important but also its help in interaction with people - it is very much a people tool.

The strategies developed from these workshops have given the managers a sense of purpose and mission in what they are doing. As the strategy model progressed and actions were agreed, a simple coding technique was developed by Aggreko to indicate who had responsibility for what action. This was done by adding the initials of the people to the relevant concept and then producing a list of actions per person (using the 'Find' facility). These actions were produced in a 'report' which included a strategy sentence and, as people gained familiarity with

Using Decision Explorer as meeting focus

Decision Explorer®, the related map from the model. The maps added context information to the action list by showing the reasons why someone should be taking an action. For instance, "identify, evaluate and control distribution equipment" could be done for many reasons, but if the manager knows that the goal is "to establish higher standards of equipment going out" then it is likely that the task will be done in a more appropriate way. The reports are now frequently referred to and there is a tendency for people to repeat key phrases in their normal work. Using Decision Explorer®, Aggreko is now actively thinking as a company about its products and how to get the most from them.

The success of this operation means Aggreko is currently looking into applying it company-wide.

For further information about Decision Explorer® and how it can help your business, please contact:

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