

UNITED WISDOM

Deciding with incomplete information: what do you actually need to find out?

Freedom and Action

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Epigraph

> *must be defined precisely*

Rebecca Lee and Ross Shachter, *Decision Analysis with Personal Distinctions*, introduction, printed p. 2. A short fragment of the requirement concerning distinctions in a decision model. Version read.

What this article is about

Before deciding, we often want to know everything. Yet that wish has no clear endpoint: information about an object, possibilities, others' preferences and future circumstances can grow almost indefinitely. The choice concerns a particular action. Not every new fact changes its conditions, and not every personally significant distinction can be replaced by measurement. Asking whether we have enough information begins with clarification: what must be decided, what unknown could change the answer, and how could we check it?

We will consider this through an invented scene: Marta is preparing a small illustrated album as a gift and choosing how to assemble it. She does not have to find a perfect option, but she wants to understand her reasons. Lee and Shachter's paper provides a narrow basis for discussing clear personal and shared distinctions. The other questions, examples and voluntary exercise are our own reasoning, rather than an account of a proven psychological mechanism. They promise neither to remove uncertainty nor to determine an acceptable risk on another person's behalf.

I. An unknown becomes something to investigate once the decision is clear

Marta can choose a bound album or assemble separate drawings later. She likes both: the first feels whole immediately; the second allows rearranging and replacing sheets. She views photographs, reads descriptions, asks acquaintances and gathers information. Yet she still says: I do not know enough. Does she doubt the paper, struggle with composition, or want advance certainty that the recipient will enjoy the gift? These different questions easily merge in conversation.

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The first clarification concerns the action available now. Marta is not yet choosing the finished gift's drawings. She needs to select an album for the work or postpone that choice for a known period. Once these actions are named, information has an address. The fastening's strength may concern the album, while the recipient's preference concerns the gift's conception. An acquaintance's successful album may be interesting without answering Marta's open questions if their working conditions were quite different.

Clarification itself does not mean reducing the task in advance to a convenient triviality. Marta may discover that assembly and content are connected: facing pages must be read together, and separate sheets interfere with that intention. The decision then expands for an understandable reason. But the expansion needs to be named. Otherwise, she will search for information about paper while quietly expecting it to answer a question about the gift's meaning. Outwardly, the search will continue successfully; the inward question will remain unanswered because the new data concern a different decision.

Several levels can remain in view without having to resolve them all immediately. Marta separately notes the present choice of album, the later choice of drawing order and the recipient's unknown response. This separation does not devalue the last question. It shows which action actually depends on it today. If the recipient prefers rearranging sheets freely, that could change the album; if Marta merely hopes to predict their entire future experience, no single check can supply that answer. A named boundary for the search is more precise than a general promise to look into things a little further.

II. A clear question need not be expressed as a single number

In the paper read, Lee and Shachter distinguish personal from shared distinctions. The former are clear to an individual; the latter may be clear to several participants. Significant personal distinctions need not all be physically measurable. Their shoe-comfort example separates component characteristics from an assessment of the whole. This concerns decision modeling, rather than feelings' infallibility. Their imagined all-knowing observer aids clarification; it is not a real ability to know the future. Applying these ideas to an album is our own work.

Marta can measure a sheet's dimensions, but her question about the album's unity is not exhausted by length and width. She cares whether neighboring drawings are perceived as a sequence. This need not mean a mysterious intuition that cannot be discussed. She can show two possible arrangements and explain where one episode continues another. Such an explanation does not make the composition an objectively unique standard. It clarifies the personal criterion through which she compares options and helps her avoid replacing that criterion with whichever measurement is easiest to obtain.

The reverse substitution is also possible. If she does not know whether a sheet fits the selected cover, her personal sense of harmony does not answer the size question. She can value composition and still need an ordinary fit check. Precision therefore does not consist in declaring every question subjective or every question measurable. For each one, we need to understand what would count as an answer. Size is checked one way, an impression of sequence another, while the recipient's future response may remain unknown even after both checks.

Words such as convenient, good and suitable often conceal this difference. Marta may call an album convenient when sheets are easy to replace; her acquaintance may mean that it is immediately ready to view. Both descriptions make sense, but concern different possibilities. Until the meaning is agreed, an argument about convenience need not be an argument about facts. Another photograph of the mechanism will not resolve it by itself. First, they need to clarify which action each wants to perform with the album, and only then seek information relevant to that action.

III. Facts, personal criteria and expectations about the future need different answers

Three separate questions appear in Marta's notes. Are the page dimensions confirmed? Does she want to retain the ability to replace drawings? Will the recipient use the album that way? The first concerns an accessible property, the second her present intention, and the third another person and future use. They are connected, but an answer to one does not automatically follow from an answer to another. Matching dimensions do not mean Marta prefers interchangeable sheets; her preference does not confirm the recipient's habit. This separation protects the decision from unnoticed movement between different grounds.

A personal criterion can also be unclear. Marta initially says she wants freedom, but then notices that she does not need endless rearrangement of the finished album. She wants to be able to replace one drawing before handing over the gift. This narrower wish may permit several working methods, including temporary trial sheets alongside a bound album. Clarification added no new fact about products. It changed the description of her own task, so some previous research questions became less relevant without another external confirmation.

Asking about someone else's preference has limits of appropriateness. Perhaps the recipient has already described how they store drawings, and Marta can use that statement. Perhaps the gift is intended as a surprise, and a direct question would change the plan. Then the unknown must be honestly retained, rather than Marta's wish being declared the recipient's proven need. The right to choose a gift does not include knowledge of another person's future

response. Marta may decide with that gap if it is acceptable to her, without presenting accepted uncertainty as acquired information.

Sometimes a question mixes all three levels: will this album work? To move forward, it can be unfolded into more definite conditions. Do the drawings fit, can she work in the chosen way, does it suit her intention, and what is known about the recipient? The answers need not combine into one confident yes. One may be confirmed, another still under consideration and a third remain an assumption. This uneven description is more useful than the same unknown mark beside every condition: it shows which part of the decision actually needs the next check.

IV. An important question needs an intelligible relationship to the options

Marta sees a detailed description of the cover's origins and wants to know more. This may be a separate interest or an important criterion of her own. But if her present doubt concerns replacing a sheet, the design's history does not answer it. To understand the connection, she mentally considers two different answers to one question. If sheets can indeed be removed, which option becomes possible? If they cannot, what will need to change? This check concerns her fictional task; it is no formula guaranteeing an optimal choice in every circumstance.

Suppose the answer about fastening changes the plan. With interchangeable sheets, Marta is willing to draw directly in the album; with fixed ones, she wants to assemble a trial sequence separately first. The question then concerns more than a preference for one album. It changes the order of work. Information can matter even when the person chooses the same object afterward: it clarifies use, a condition of agreement or a necessary next step. An answer's usefulness therefore cannot be judged only by whether the chosen option's name changed.

The reverse can also happen. Whatever the answer about the inner ribbon's color, Marta retains the same working method and does not consider color part of her intention. That question is then unnecessary for the present decision, although the answer itself is perfectly real. She can find out later out of curiosity. This is no ban on details or requirement to justify every interest through usefulness. The distinction is only between voluntary learning and information without which someone considers a decision impossible for now. If these merge, each new interest will postpone the choice.

This mental check has a limit: a person may not see every possible answer. Marta assumed the fastening either allowed replacement or did not, then discovered a condition: replacement was possible only before the cover was finally closed. This new distinction changes the question. The earlier work was not meaningless; it was incomplete. The relationship between information

and action is therefore worth reconsidering when a significant detail emerges. Clarifying a question is neither a commitment to retain its original form forever nor proof that every omission could have been anticipated.

V. An answer still needs to be related to its basis

Marta's acquaintance says sheets were easy to change in a similar album. That is a statement about her experience. It may suggest what to check, but does not yet confirm the mechanism of the particular album Marta selected. Marta saw another model and does not know whether their fastenings are identical. It helps to retain the words similar and this particular one, rather than erase the difference for a reassuring conclusion. The speaker's confidence and the relevance of her experience to the present question are different things. A good memory of one's own case does not make all similar objects identical.

A description also has a time and conditions. Information may concern an earlier version, a sample with a different number of sheets or use before final fastening. This does not mean every description should be regarded suspiciously. We need to understand what it actually establishes. For Marta's small task, checking the particular mechanism on an accessible sample may suffice. Another task could require a different level of confirmation. This article sets no universal standard of evidence; it suggests keeping an answer within the bounds of what it concerns.

Several agreeing statements do not necessarily add several independent grounds. If acquaintances repeat the same description, Marta has received repetition rather than three separate checks. This can be noticed without accusing people of unreliability. Every statement has a path of origin. Sometimes it is enough to ask whether the speakers saw the relevant mechanism themselves or are passing on something they read. Their answer clarifies the information's boundary; it does not require demanding a detailed report from everyone who simply shared an opinion in an ordinary conversation.

A missing answer receives no ready-made meaning either. If the question gets no response, Marta cannot automatically conclude that replacement is impossible, the description is false or another approach should be chosen. Confirmation is absent for now. She can seek another available way to check the mechanism or decide while retaining this gap. A negative answer differs significantly from an answer not received: the first states a condition, the second describes a state of knowledge. Only Marta can decide whether acting in that state suits this small situation.

VI. A trial answers its own question, rather than the entire future experience

Marta has access to one sample of the fastening. She can check how to remove and return a sheet without damaging someone else's property or violating its conditions of use. This trial is closer to her question than several more general impressions. Yet she still needs to name beforehand what is being checked. Successfully replacing one blank sheet confirms a particular action with that sample. It does not show how the entire finished album will behave after long storage, nor say whether the recipient will enjoy the gift.

If conditions differ, the result retains limited meaning. Marta tried a thin sheet, while she intends to draw on another kind. Or the sample remained open, whereas final assembly involves fastening it shut. This does not make the trial useless. It can show the mechanism's movement and reveal a new question. But missing experience cannot quietly be added to the observation. I could replace a sheet under these conditions is more precise than everything will be easy later. This precision preserves practical usefulness by describing its actual extent.

Checking her own impression works differently. Marta lays the drawings out in two orders and looks at which lets her read the intended transition. She can repeat the viewing later or ask an acquaintance to describe the sequence they see. Their response may reveal a mismatch, without automatically canceling her artistic intention. Shared work would need agreement about meaning; for a personal gift, she may retain her own choice. The trial is not a vote on someone's right to have a preference. It helps distinguish intention, perception and a condition of execution.

Sometimes no safe or accessible trial exists. A suggestion to check cannot then become a demand to obtain experience at any cost. Marta can choose a working method with a fallback, postpone selecting an album or change her intention. She can also accept limited uncertainty if she considers that appropriate. None of these paths follows automatically from the absence of a trial. What matters is not recording an imagined check as completed or treating a forecast as evidence that only real experience could provide.

VII. Searching takes time, which also enters the decision

While Marta compares albums, less time remains for drawing. Her original question has not disappeared, but another now appears beside it: what does she lose by continuing to investigate? In the fictional scene, this is no abstract price per minute. She can name a particular part of the work she will not have time to do calmly if another evening goes into descriptions. This clarification does not prove the search should stop. It adds the consequences of waiting, which had previously remained outside her attention.

An additional check may justify waiting if it concerns a condition on which the work genuinely depends. But the promise of another useful answer still needs to be related to availability. If the necessary sample cannot be found and nobody knows when it will appear, waiting for it is a separate choice under uncertainty, rather than an already-started reliable check. Marta may wait; she needs to understand what she is waiting for and which actions remain possible meanwhile. Sometimes she can continue drawings on separate trial sheets, leaving the album decision open.

The cost of searching also includes other people's involvement. Repeating a question to an acquaintance every evening differs from rereading an available description. The other person may lack an answer or a wish to continue discussing it. Their refusal should not be declared an obstacle they are obliged to remove. Marta can refine her question and ask once about a particular experience, but she does not control someone else's time for the sake of her complete certainty. Information seeking remains an action among people, with conditions beyond persistence.

Not all waiting concerns information. Marta may already know enough about the mechanism but postpone deciding because giving up the other option feels regrettable. Another review will not necessarily resolve that difficulty. A question about preference and an accepted loss has arisen, a subject addressed by other articles. Naming it is neither a diagnosis nor a reproach for indecision. It offers a way to stop demanding from external data an answer about one's own relationship to two acceptable paths. Some factual questions may still genuinely remain open alongside it.

VIII. A shared task needs a shared meaning for the question

Suppose Marta is making the album with her brother. He suggests finding out whether it will be convenient to view. Marta thinks about changing the drawing order; her brother means keeping the album open on a table. Their joint question appears agreed only at the level of one word. If they receive the answer that it is convenient, each may hear confirmation of their own condition. For a joint decision, it helps to name both actions first. They can then see whether one sample supports two checks or whether they are discussing different properties and different grounds for preference.

Clarifying meaning does not require complete agreement in taste. Marta values sequence; her brother values easily viewing an individual drawing. They can understand each other and still assess the options differently. This disagreement is not in itself an information shortage. A new photograph may establish a shared fact about fastening without determining the shared weight of their artistic wishes. After agreeing on language, they may therefore need to agree on participation: who decides the album, what each is willing to do and which joint intention they actually confirm.

Another person's experience can be considered without appropriating it. Her brother finds holding a heavy cover awkward; Marta does not. His statement concerns him and matters if they want to take his viewing ability into account. It does not become the universal property awkward for everyone. Nor does Marta's lack of that feeling refute his experience. Joint work may require preserving several perspectives, without turning one into the sole source of facts about every person or declaring all differences beyond investigation.

Sometimes an agreed meaning requires returning to the question. They decided to test opening on a table, then learned that the album would mainly be viewed in someone's hands. This need not be anyone's error or breach of a promise. The expected use changed. The earlier check now answers a narrower task than the present one. Its result can be retained while a new question is added, without restarting the entire search. Such economy is possible precisely because the original answer's meaning and the condition that changed later are known.

IX. Enough information means enough for a particular step

Marta decides to begin drawing on separate sheets and choose the album after a trial arrangement. This is no final answer about the whole gift. It is the present step, whose available conditions she understands. Some unknowns remain, but not all prevent this action. In another situation, drawing might require selecting the binding immediately, and the same sequence would not work. Enough information therefore cannot be expressed through one number of questions or a mandatory count of opinions read: it relates to a particular decision and an accepted boundary of uncertainty.

A deadline also needs a basis. In Marta's scene, it may relate to the gift's delivery date, rather than a demand to decide faster to prove decisiveness. If the date can change, another option appears. If it cannot, waiting has consequences. This article does not turn every deadline someone sets into a legitimate necessity. A person may check its origin, discuss postponement or abandon part of an intention. Outside pressure does not become information establishing that every necessary condition has already been clarified.

A conditional decision can preserve an open question: Marta selects the album if the sample confirms the necessary replacement, and works separately if there is no confirmation. The condition needs to be genuinely actionable and intelligible. A choice cannot be called conditional if it has already removed the ability to change the album, while a future answer is awaited as though the transition remained free. Alongside the condition, the sequence is therefore checked: which action closes the possibility of revision, and when must the information be available? This concerns working order, rather than complete future control.

Even a clear record creates no guarantee. Marta may sensibly clarify what matters and still be disappointed by the result. She may retain an unknown and produce a successful gift. These outcomes do not prove the grounds were equivalent. Limited work with information makes visible what was confirmed, what was assumed and under which condition a step was taken. That visibility makes the decision intelligible later, without requiring every possibility of regret to be removed in advance or turning an ordinary gift into an examination in living correctly.

X. New experience clarifies a decision, rather than rewriting past knowledge

After receiving the album, the recipient says they would like to rearrange two drawings. Marta now has a new statement. It may help the next project without proving she previously knew that future need. If the recipient mentioned rearrangement beforehand, the available earlier statement needs recognition. If they did not, a later answer does not automatically become a missed fact. Distinguishing when knowledge was available permits clarification without inventing certainty that every important condition could have been obtained before deciding through just one additional question.

The criterion itself can also be revised. Marta thought a finished sequence mattered most, then discovered pleasure in a free selection of separate sheets while working. This new relationship need not mean the earlier preference was false or imposed. It could have been genuine and changed through experience. The next choice will then rest on different grounds. A change of criterion differs from correcting a factual error: in one case, the desired thing's significance changes; in the other, information changes about a condition the person believed was confirmed.

If the fastening description turns out to concern another album, Marta can reconstruct the substitution: which statement she used, and where the difference between a similar sample and the selected one disappeared. This inquiry is narrower than a conclusion about her inability to decide. It is also more precise than promising to check absolutely everything from now on. The next useful adjustment may concern one action: specify the model when checking the mechanism. That supplies no general protection from mistakes and does not turn every small choice into endless research.

A decision with incomplete information remains one even after good preparation. The question can be clarified, a relevant answer obtained and the remaining gap named. We can understand when a new fact changes an action and when it merely adds another detail. We can stop searching on a stated ground and return when a condition changes. None of these steps promises a perfect outcome. Together, they support a more honest relationship with knowledge: choose on intelligible grounds while retaining the unknown as unknown.

What this means in practice

If it suits you, take one small, safe choice without medical, legal or other serious consequences. You might consider the order of your own drawings or how to store ordinary notes. Participation is voluntary; you can use an imaginary example or decline without explaining. You do not need to make a decision that is not yet required, or seek someone else's personal information to complete the exercise.

Name the available actions and one open question. Separately note whether it concerns a checkable property, your personal criterion or another person's unknown attitude. Imagine different possible answers: what would each change in the action, its conditions or timing? Then choose one available, appropriate means of clarification. If no answer is available, retain the absence of confirmation as such. You can stop here: the exercise requires no move from notes to a purchase, promise, message or shared agreement.

The narrow intended result is a clearer question and a boundary around what an answer actually establishes. If you continue, also name what remains unknown and what you lose by waiting longer. This is no scale of acceptable risk or guarantee of a correct choice. Stop if pressure, unwanted personal disclosure or significant consequences arise; continuation and explanations for declining are optional. Other people's agreement and specialist information cannot be replaced by this exercise.

Key quotation

> *what the decision maker wants*

Rebecca Lee and Ross Shachter, *Decision Analysis with Personal Distinctions*, §4.5, printed p. 12. A short fragment explaining preferences. It identifies what is desired, rather than promising advance knowledge of an outcome. Version read.

Connections between traditions

A limited connection between formal decision analysis and everyday reasoning is appropriate here. Lee and Shachter's author manuscript discusses which clear distinctions can enter a model. Our example asks which answer a particular action needs and where searching replaces clarification of personal intention. These are different levels: a model does not become a spiritual practice, and an exercise receives no status as a proven procedure through proximity to research. Other traditions and the complete theory of decision analysis are not generalized here.

Sources

• Rebecca Lee and Ross Shachter. Decision Analysis with Personal Distinctions. Stanford author manuscript, February 23, 1998, marked as submitted to *Management Science*. The title, abstract, introduction, §§2–4, the opening of §5.2, selected exposed contexts of §§5–6 and conclusion were actually read, including quotation contexts. The entire 30 pages, all diagrams and mathematical proofs were not read; later publication status was not established. A source concerning modeled distinctions, rather than an empirical study of our exercise.

Tags

decision, information, uncertainty, knowledge, question, distinction, criterion, preference, checking, personal experience, conditions, grounds, waiting, time, choice, search, trial, knowledge limits, confirmation, assumption, unknown, revision, joint work, understanding, agreement, consequences, Lee, Shachter, decision analysis, independence

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