

Introduction to Documenting Decisions: Decision Logs and Rationale



- **Decision log:** structured record of outcome, rationale, context, alternatives, decider, and date



- Reduces bus factor, enables async handoffs, and builds durable institutional memory



- **Anti-patterns:** decisions lost in chat, scattered tools, or documented without reasoning



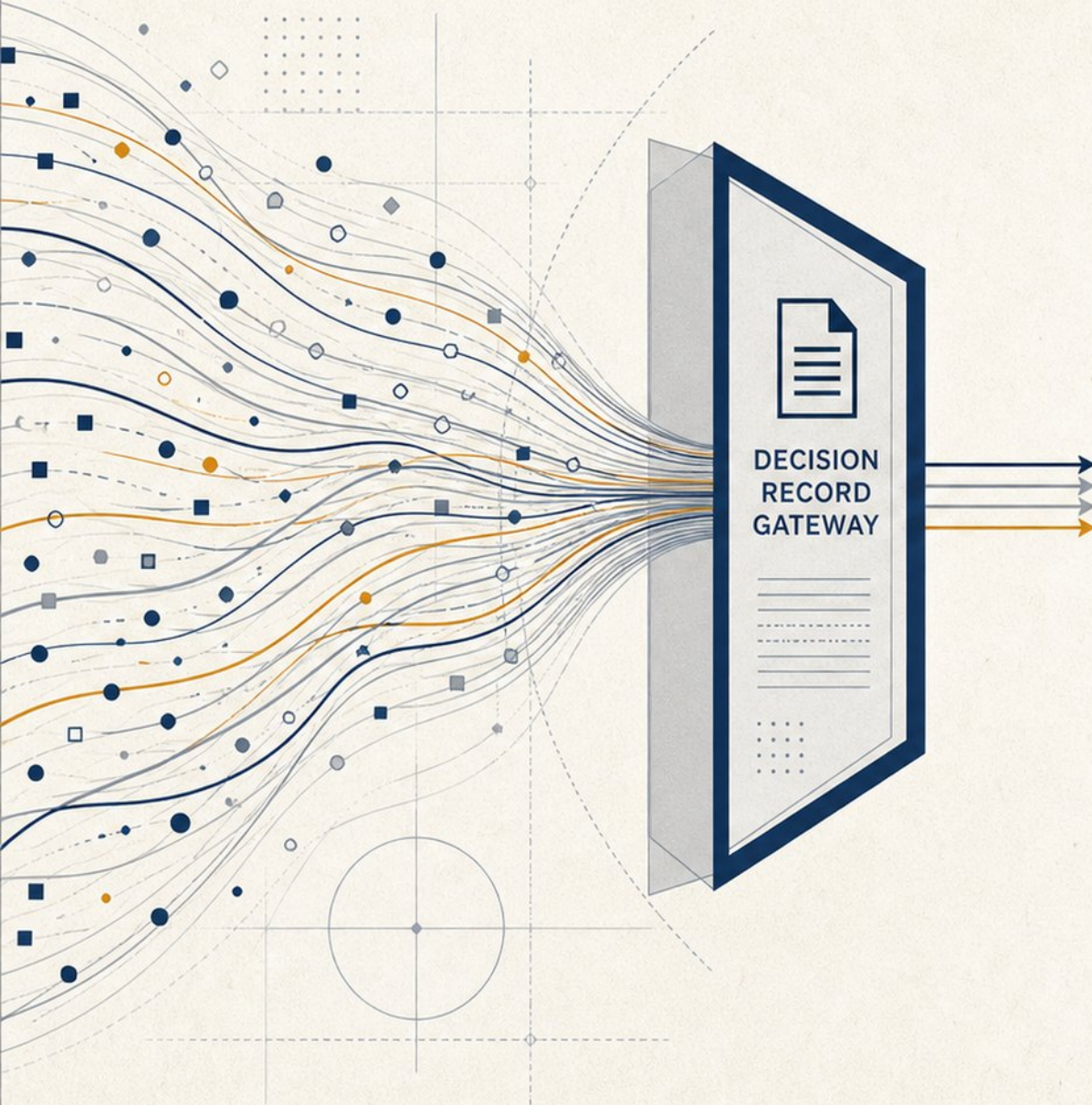
- **Poor documentation costs:** ~19% of week searching (McKinsey), onboarding slowed 30-50%



- **Course roadmap:** entry anatomy → formats → rationale → triggers → discoverability → maintenance → culture → compliance → action plan



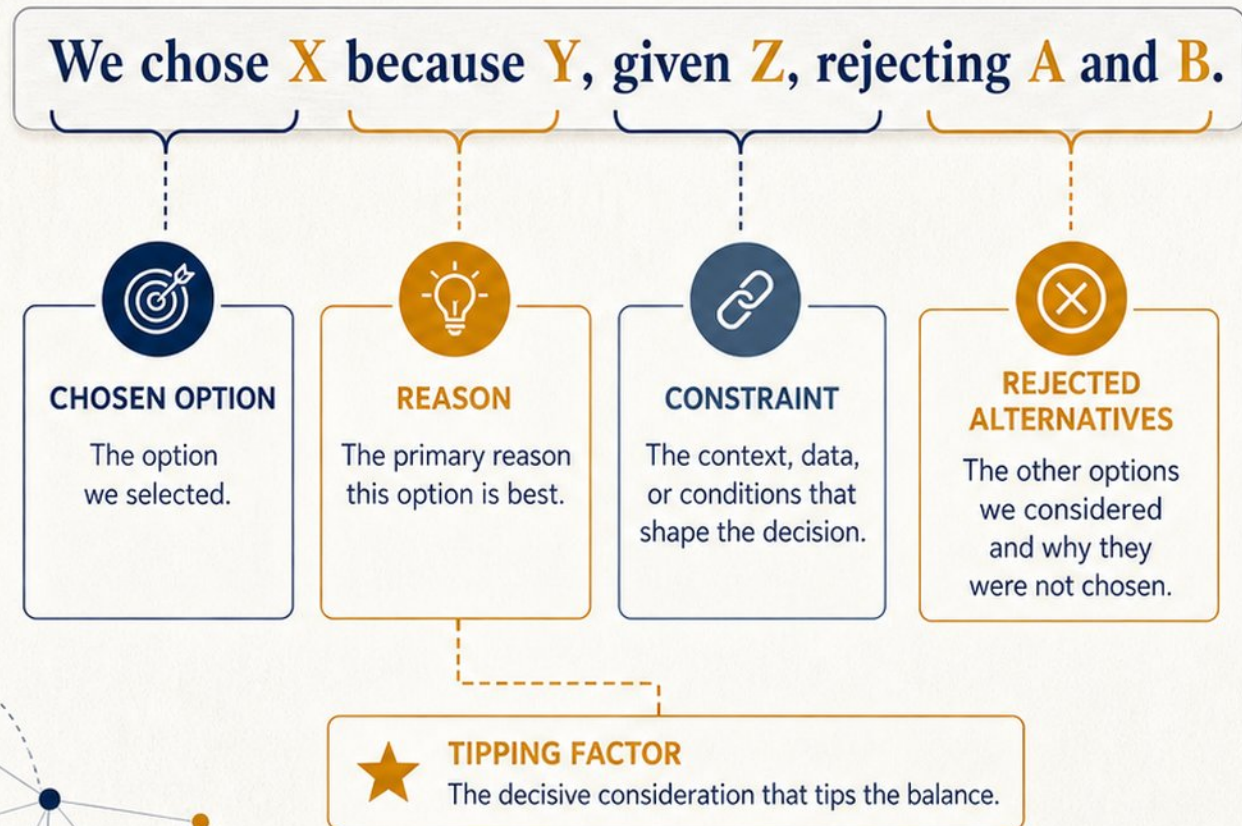
What Belongs in a Decision Log — And What Doesn't



- Core fields: ID, date, outcome-phrased title, context, options, rationale, decider, expected outcome, review date
- Log significant choices only: costly to reverse, multi-team impact, explicit trade-offs, or will matter in 6 months
- DACI framework (Driver, Approver, Contributor, Informed) — one named Approver per entry
- Use Bezos's one-way/two-way door: irreversible decisions get full fields; reversible ones get a brief note
- Limit to ≤ 12 fields; missing rationale turns entries into useless factoids

Writing Self-Contained Rationale That Others Can Act On

A RATIONALE SENTENCE ANATOMY



- **Formula:** "We chose X because Y, given Z, rejecting A and B." Make the tipping factor explicit.
- **Avoid tribal-knowledge** phrases; define acronyms; link prior decisions by ID.
- **Test:** can a new team member 2 years later grasp the reasoning without asking?
- **State what was NOT** decided to prevent scope-creep assumptions.
- **Add Confidence % and measurable Expected Outcome** to enable calibration reviews.

When to Log: Triggers, Cadence, and Team Rhythms



- Log one-way doors, budget shifts, cross-functional or precedent-setting choices



- Use event triggers: kickoffs, vendor picks, architecture changes, customer-facing moves



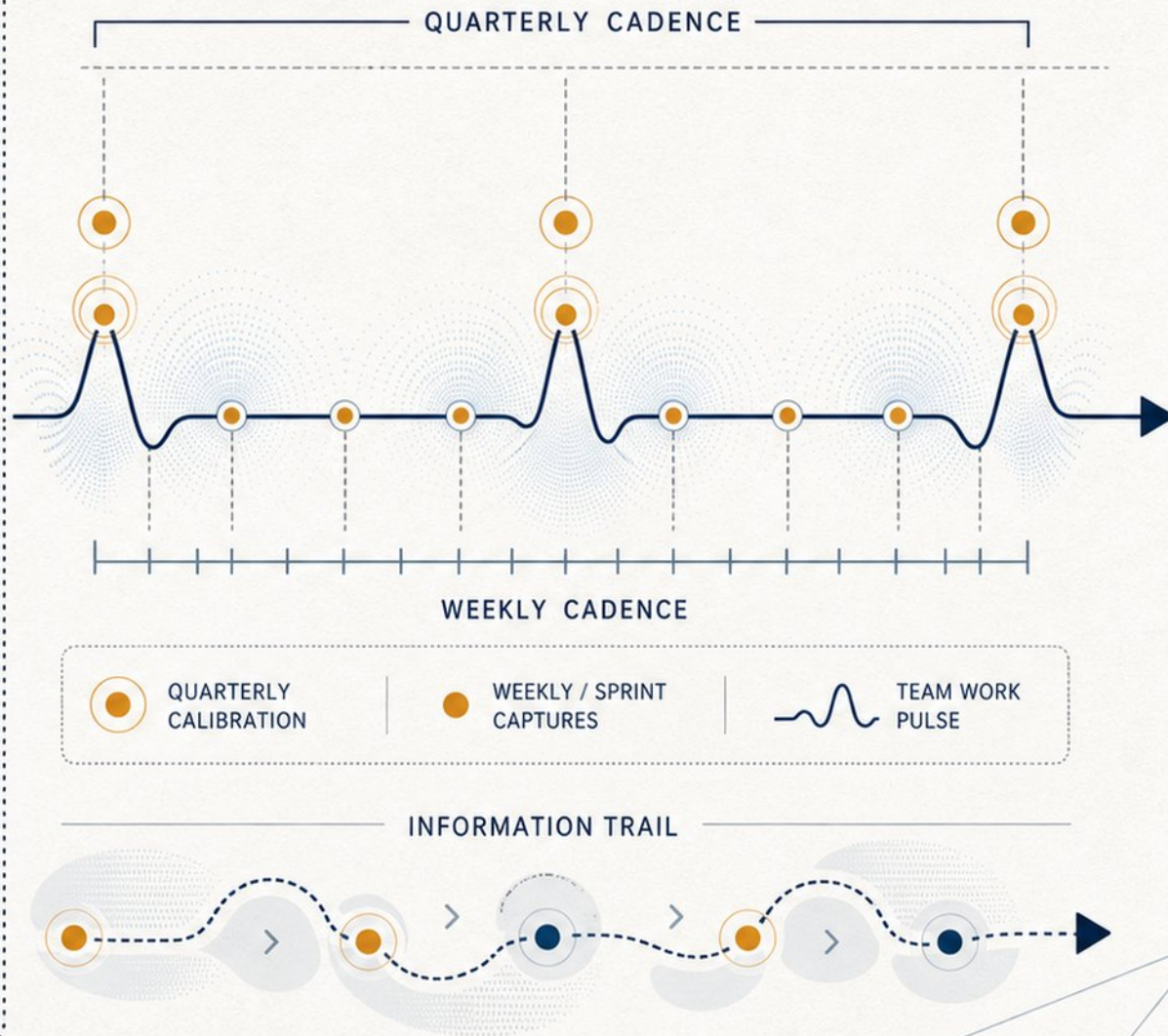
- Time triggers: weekly summaries, sprint-review captures, quarterly calibration



- Tie logging to workflow: end-of-meeting prompt, PR-style record before build



- Make it a habit, not a chore: shift-handoff notes, checkpoint gates, 60-second capture



Decision-Log Formats: From Markdown Repos to Shared Knowledge Bases



Git folder

001 Title _____

002 Status _____

003 Context _____

004 _____

005 Decision _____

Consequences _____

</>

Markdown repos (ADR): version-controlled beside code, reviewed via PR, immutable. Use 'docs/adr/NNNN-slug.md' and tools like adr-tools.



Wiki page

Title _____

Context _____

Decision _____

Links _____

Wikis (Notion, Confluence): cross-functional context with relational links; risk of drift from code if not maintained.



Dedicated app card

Decision _____

Context _____

Options _____

Decision _____

Rationale _____

DACI _____

Next steps _____

Dedicated tools (Decidly, Cloverpop): enforce DACI roles, workflow phases, and audit trails. Pay off above ~5 significant decisions/quarter.



Core requirement: the log must be searchable, linkable, and stored near where work happens—never siloed in an unopened tool.



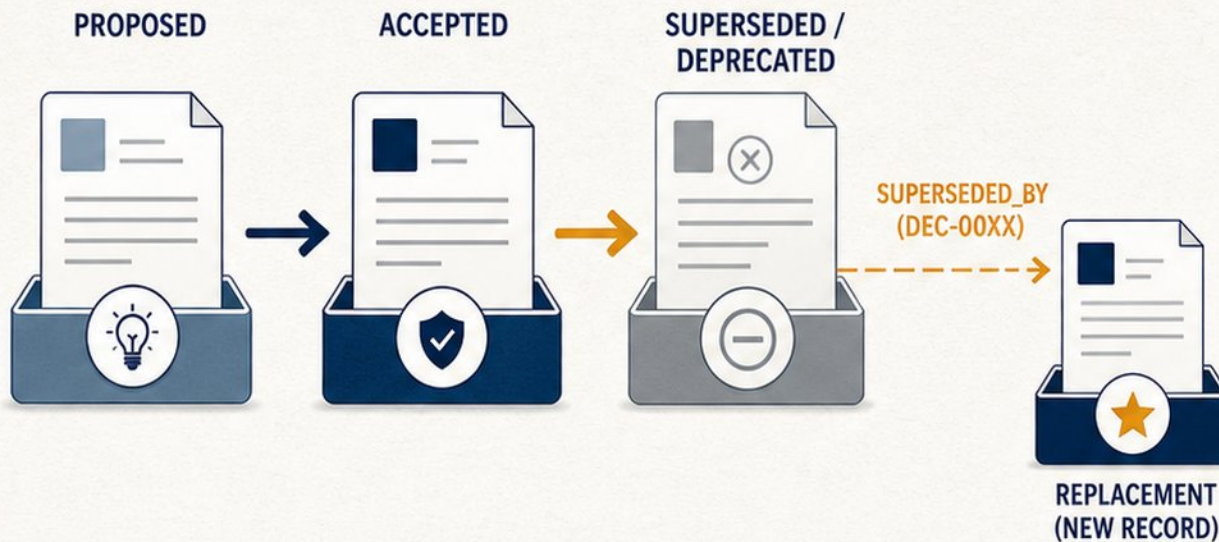
Making Past Decisions Findable: Naming, Tagging, and Linking

- Use stable, human-readable IDs (e.g., DEC-2026-042) with outcome-phrased titles; never reuse IDs.
- Tag by team, domain, type, status (Proposed/Approved/Superseded/Deprecated), and impact level.
- Prefer a faceted taxonomy (Domain > Security, Sensitivity > High) over deep single hierarchies.
- Link decisions to code, tickets, OKRs, and predecessor/successor entries for traversable memory.
- Maintain a decisions-map or timeline; require each entry to link to at least one implementation artifact.

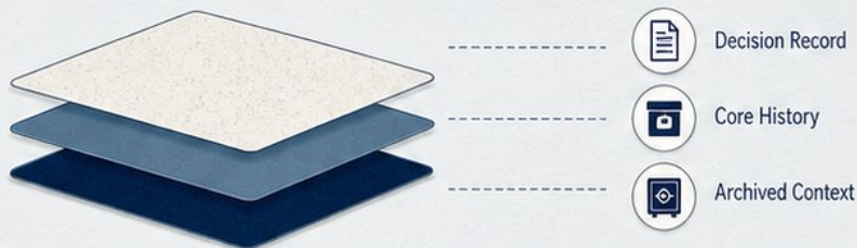


Keeping Logs Alive: Updating, Superseding, and Deprecating Decisions

• DECISION LIFECYCLE •



• ARCHIVE LAYER •



- Immutable once accepted: never edit history—write a new entry, mark old as 'Superseded by DEC-00XX'



- Lifecycle stages: Proposed → Accepted → Superseded / Deprecated



- Link forward: use 'superseded_by' field to preserve audit trail and evolution of thinking



- Update triggers: new context, post-outcome review, reversed decisions (fill 'Actual Outcome' field)



- Prevent log rot: quarterly sweeps mark stale entries, flag thin-context records for enrichment

Getting the Whole Team to Log Decisions: Culture and Adoption

- Log decisions to build an async teammate that remembers so humans don't have to
- Managers and leads log their own decisions first, citing the log in reviews
- Use ≤ 5 -minute templates and bot prompts in Slack to embed logging into flow
- Highlight log-wins in retros: prevented re-litigation or accelerated onboarding
- Connect to rituals: post-mortems, sprint retros, and project closures



Decision Logs in Onboarding, Handoffs, and Async Work

- New hires read last 3 months of decisions to skip tribal-knowledge interviews
- Async handoffs: incoming owner has context without hours of meetings
- 60-second self-serve answers replace “why did we do this?” interruptions
- Post-mortems & RCAs use logs to judge decisions on evidence at the time, not outcome
- Decisions-map timeline accelerates executive read-in and strategic alignment

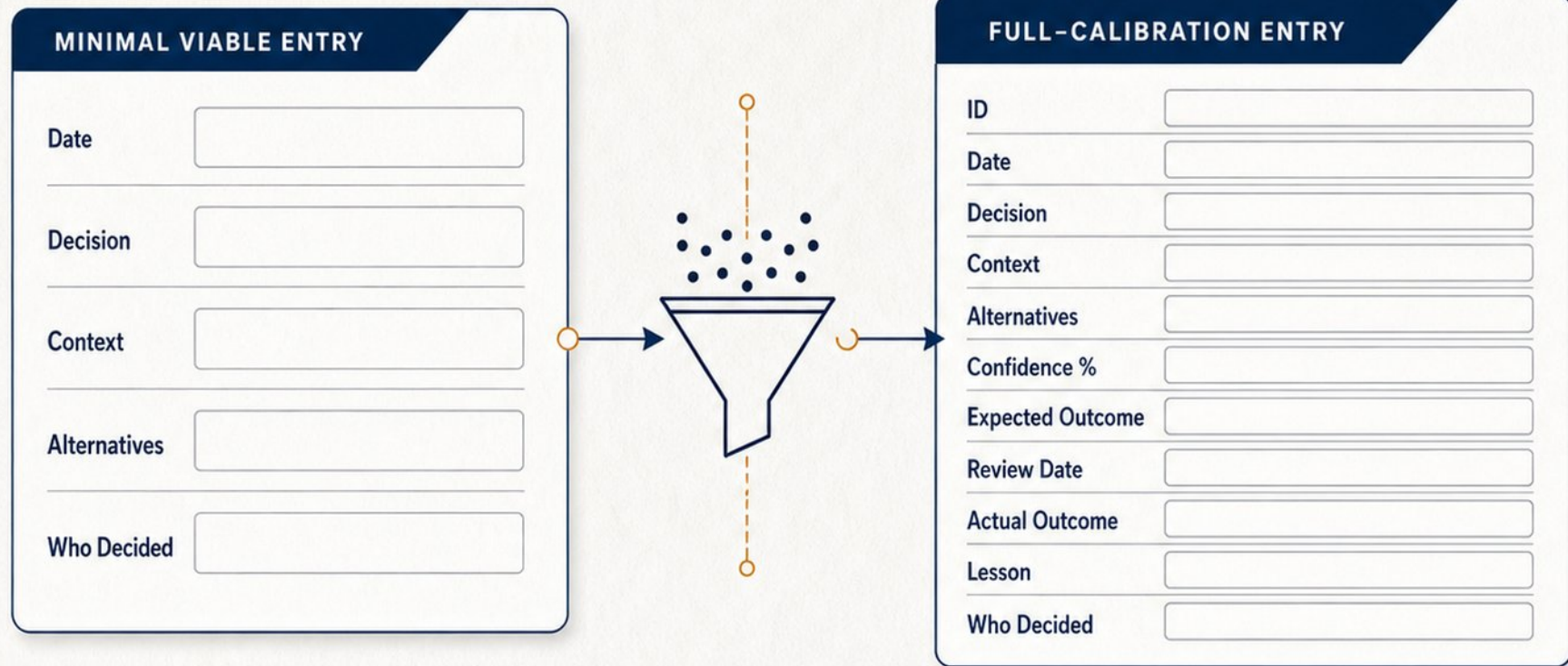


Decision Logs as an Audit and Compliance Asset

- SOC 2, ISO 27001, and GDPR demand proof of consistent, explainable decisions — not just after-the-fact configuration snapshots.
- Compliance platforms (Vanta, Drata) collect evidence of configuration; decision logs capture the why at the moment of the decision.
- Deterministic logs with reproducible rationale, compliance references, and identical outputs let auditors verify, not just trust.
- Append-only, hash-chained entries with clear immutability create a trustworthy chain of custody for legal and audit purposes.



Lightweight Templates and Checklists for Decision Entries



Revisit Conditions field:
pre-committed trigger to reopen
without arbitrary re-litigation.



Role-based formats:
engineering (ADR/Nygard),
business ops (DACI),
product (hypothesis).



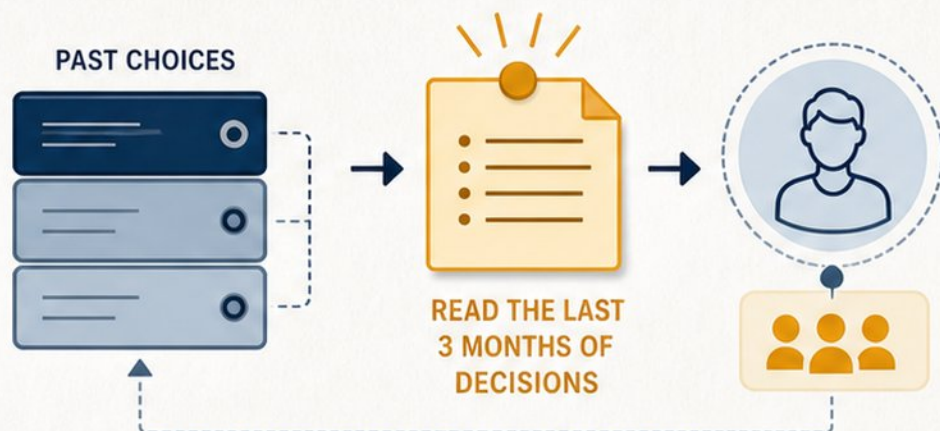
Quarterly calibration checklist:
fill outcomes, score verdicts,
surface overconfidence
patterns.



Action Plan: Starting Your Team's First Decision Log Today



- ✓ Pick a format and log one live decision today
- ✓ Retroactively log the most re-explained decision
- ✓ Embed logging in sprint reviews and check-in prompts
- ✓ Target 5–10 entries per quarter and track re-litigation saved
- ✓ Onboard new hires by reading the last 3 months of decisions



PersonWise.

PersonWise • AI digital-human course platform



Scan the code or click anywhere to watch this course live, with voice Q&A

personwise.ai/t/ecbd8a44/public