Retrieval-Augmented Generation for Domain-Specific Intelligent Decision Support Systems

Aapo Craig
School of Computing, Clemson University, Clemson, SC, USA.
aapo.craig937@clemson.edu

Brent Nieminen
Department of Computer Science, University of North Texas, Denton, TX, USA.
brentnieminen74@unt.edu

Dong Wu
Department of Computer Science, University of Houston, Houston, TX, USA.
wudong@uh.edu

Abstract

The integration of large language models into decision support systems has opened new possibilities for automated reasoning and natural language interaction. However, standalone generative models often suffer from hallucination, outdated knowledge, and insufficient domain specificity. Retrieval-augmented generation (RAG) addresses these limitations by coupling a neural retriever with a generative component, enabling systems to ground responses in external, updatable knowledge bases. This paper presents a comprehensive examination of RAG in the context of domain-specific intelligent decision support systems, spanning architecture, knowledge integration, robustness, fairness, governance, deployment, and sustainability. We argue that the effectiveness of RAG-based decision support depends critically on the design of the retrieval pipeline, the quality and provenance of domain corpora, and the alignment of outputs with domain-specific reasoning requirements. Through analytical discussion and illustrative case studies from medicine, law, and engineering, we highlight structural trade-offs between retrieval latency and answer faithfulness, between coverage and precision in knowledge bases, and between generative flexibility and regulatory compliance. We also consider the socio-technical implications of deploying such systems in high-stakes environments, including biases propagated through retrieved documents, the need for transparent audit trails, and the long-term sustainability of knowledge curation efforts. The paper concludes with forward-looking perspectives on multimodal RAG, interactive decision loops, and the evolving policy landscape. Our analysis aims to provide researchers and practitioners with a system-level understanding of how to design, evaluate, and govern RAG-based decision support systems that are both intelligent and trustworthy.

Keywords

retrieval-augmented generation, decision support systems, domain adaptation, knowledge integration, robustness, fairness, governance, deployment sustainability.

1. Introduction

Decision support systems have long relied on rule-based engines, statistical models, and more recently, neural networks to assist human judgment in complex domains. The advent of large language models (LLMs) such as GPT-3 and its successors brought a new paradigm: systems

that can generate fluent, context-aware explanations and recommendations from a broad pre-training corpus. Yet the promise of LLMs in decision support is tempered by their tendency to produce plausible but incorrect statements, their static knowledge cutoff, and their inability to incorporate newly updated or proprietary domain information without expensive retraining. Retrieval-augmented generation (RAG) emerged as a hybrid framework that mitigates these weaknesses by pairing a retrieval module that searches a knowledge base with a generator that synthesizes the retrieved evidence into a coherent response [1]. For domain-specific intelligent decision support, RAG offers a natural architecture: the knowledge base can be curated from authoritative sources, maintained independently of the generative model, and updated without altering the neural parameters. This paper provides a system-level analysis of RAG as it applies to decision support in specialized fields such as medicine, law, and engineering. We examine the architectural choices, the challenges of domain adaptation, the socio-technical issues of fairness and governance, and the operational concerns of deployment and sustainability. Our goal is to present a structured account that helps researchers and system architects navigate the many trade-offs inherent in building RAG-based decision support systems that are both effective and responsible.

2. Background and Related Work

The concept of augmenting language generation with retrieval was formalized in the RAG framework [6], which demonstrated significant improvements on knowledge-intensive natural language processing tasks. Subsequent work extended the idea to open-domain question answering [2], fact verification [3], and dialogue systems [4]. These efforts showed that retrieval can provide both factual grounding and a mechanism for source attribution. In the decision support literature, earlier systems used retrieval from medical databases to inform clinical decisions [5], but these systems did not leverage generative language models. The convergence of RAG with domain-specific decision support is relatively recent, with applications in clinical diagnosis [7], legal reasoning [8], and engineering troubleshooting [9]. A key distinction from general-purpose RAG is the need for domain-specific knowledge bases that are structured, curated, and often reflect evolving regulations or standards. Furthermore, decision support systems must output not just information but also recommendations, risk assessments, and explanations that adhere to professional norms. This places additional demands on the retrieval and generation components: for example, retrieved documents must be authoritative and recent, and the generator must be fine-tuned to produce outputs that match the discourse conventions of the field. The research community has also begun to address the challenges of domain adaptation in RAG, including methods for injecting domain ontologies into the retrieval process [10] and for aligning the generator with domain-specific reasoning patterns via supervised fine-tuning [11]. These developments form the backdrop for our discussion.

3. System Architecture and Design Considerations

The typical RAG architecture for decision support consists of three main components: a retriever, a generator, and a knowledge base. The retriever transforms a user query or system state into a vector representation and searches a pre-indexed corpus of documents. The generator, usually a pre-trained language model, receives the retrieved passages as context and produces an answer or recommendation. The knowledge base may include textbooks, journal articles, clinical guidelines, legal statutes, engineering manuals, or proprietary corporate data. Each component introduces design trade-offs. The choice of retrieval method, whether dense encoding or sparse term matching, affects both retrieval accuracy and latency

[12]. Dense retrieval often yields better semantic matching but requires more computational resources and may need domain-specific fine-tuning to handle specialized terminology. Sparse methods are faster and more interpretable but can miss conceptually similar content expressed in different terms. In high-stakes decision support, latency is a critical concern: a system that takes seconds to retrieve and generate a response may be unacceptable in real-time clinical or safety contexts. Conversely, overly aggressive retrieval speed optimization can compromise recall of rare but critical evidence. The generator's size also matters. Larger models generate more coherent and detailed responses but incur higher computational cost and may be harder to deploy on resource-constrained infrastructure. Domain-specific fine-tuning of the generator can improve output quality but risks catastrophic forgetting of general knowledge [13]. The knowledge base itself must be designed with consideration of document granularity, indexing strategy, and update frequency. In dynamic domains such as medicine, where guidelines and drug approvals change frequently, the knowledge base must be updated in a controlled manner to ensure that obsolete or retracted information is removed. The retrieval pipeline should also incorporate mechanisms to filter out low-quality or contradictory sources. One promising approach is to assign provenance metadata to each document, including date, source authority, and peer-review status, and to weight retrieval scores accordingly [14]. Another important architectural decision is whether to use a single-turn or multi-turn retrieval. For complex decision tasks, a single retrieved set may be insufficient; iterative retrieval or memory-augmented approaches can refine the context over multiple steps [15]. However, iterative retrieval increases latency and introduces complexity in managing the conversation state. Overall, the architectural choices must be evaluated not only on accuracy metrics but also on operational constraints, interpretability, and the ability to audit the system's reasoning chain.

4. Domain-Specific Adaptation and Knowledge Integration

Adapting a general-purpose RAG system to a specific domain requires careful integration of domain knowledge at multiple levels. First, the knowledge base must be curated from domain-specific sources that are authoritative, comprehensive, and up-to-date. In medicine, this might involve incorporating clinical practice guidelines from national bodies, drug databases, peer-reviewed trial results, and electronic health record de-identified summaries [16]. In legal reasoning, the knowledge base may include statutes, case law, regulations, and legal commentary. The process of selecting, digitizing, and indexing such documents is non-trivial and often requires domain experts to assess relevance and quality [17]. Second, the retrieval component must be adapted to the language of the domain. Off-the-shelf dense retrievers trained on general web corpora may perform poorly on specialized vocabularies. Domain-specific fine-tuning of the retriever using in-domain query-document pairs has been shown to improve recall significantly [11]. Third, the generator must be conditioned to produce outputs that align with domain-specific reasoning styles, e.g., following a differential diagnosis checklist in clinical decision support or citing legal precedent in a brief. This can be achieved through prompt engineering or through supervised fine-tuning on domain-appropriate examples [7]. A further challenge is that domain knowledge is often structured in ontologies or taxonomies (e.g., ICD-10 codes for diseases, patent classification systems). Incorporating such structured knowledge into the RAG pipeline can improve the precision of retrieval and the coherence of generated output. One method is to augment document embeddings with concept embeddings from a domain ontology [10]. Another is to use a two-stage retrieval process where an initial entity linking step maps query terms to ontological concepts, which then guide the retrieval of related documents. The integration of structured

and unstructured knowledge remains an active research area. A critical aspect of domain adaptation is ensuring that the system respects the norms of evidence hierarchy. In evidence-based medicine, for example, a randomized controlled trial should be weighted more heavily than an expert opinion. The retrieval and generation processes should therefore be sensitive to the level of evidence and to the recency of the information. Failure to do so can lead to recommendations that are outdated or based on weak evidence, potentially causing harm.

5. Robustness, Fairness, and Governance

Deploying RAG-based decision support systems in real-world settings raises significant concerns about robustness, fairness, and governance. Robustness refers to the system's ability to maintain performance under distributional shifts, adversarial inputs, or noisy retrieval results. In a domain-specific context, queries may be phrased in unusual ways by users with varying expertise, and the retrieval must still return relevant documents. Adversarial examples crafted to mislead the system could have severe consequences in legal or medical settings. Recent work has shown that RAG systems can be vulnerable to document poisoning, where maliciously inserted documents in the knowledge base alter the generated output [18]. Mitigations include robust retrieval algorithms, input sanitization, and human-in-the-loop oversight. Fairness is another critical dimension. The knowledge base may reflect historical biases present in the source literature, such as underrepresentation of certain demographic groups in medical research or biased precedent in legal corpora. If the retriever and generator propagate these biases, the decision support system may produce recommendations that systematically disadvantage some groups. For instance, a clinical decision support system relying on studies that predominantly include white male participants might generate suboptimal recommendations for women or minorities. Addressing such biases requires careful auditing of the knowledge base, debiasing of embeddings, and possibly the use of fairness constraints during retrieval or generation [19]. Furthermore, the system's outputs should be explainable and attributable, so that users can trace a recommendation back to the supporting evidence. Governance frameworks need to define who is responsible for updating the knowledge base, how updates are validated, and how the system's decisions are monitored for adverse outcomes. In regulated domains such as healthcare and finance, RAG systems may be subject to regulatory oversight requiring documented validation of the retrieval and generation pipeline. This includes maintaining a log of retrieved documents for each query and the corresponding generated output, enabling post-hoc audits [20]. Another governance challenge is the handling of proprietary or sensitive data. For example, a legal decision support system might need to access confidential case records. The RAG architecture must incorporate access control, encryption, and data anonymization to comply with privacy regulations. As RAG systems become more autonomous, the question of accountability arises: if a recommendation leads to a poor outcome, is the fault with the system designer, the knowledge base curator, or the human decision-maker who implemented the recommendation? These governance issues are not yet resolved and require interdisciplinary collaboration between computer scientists, domain experts, ethicists, and legal scholars.

6. Deployment and Sustainability

Moving from prototype to production deployment of a domain-specific RAG decision support system involves significant engineering and operational challenges. The infrastructure must support low-latency retrieval and generation, often with high concurrency demands. Dense retrieval models, if used, require GPU acceleration for fast inference, while the generator typically demands substantial computational resources. Organizations may need to invest in

on-premises servers or negotiate cloud service contracts with appropriate data residency guarantees. The total cost of ownership includes not only hardware and cloud costs but also the continuous effort of maintaining the knowledge base. Domain-specific knowledge bases are not static; they require regular updates from new research, regulatory changes, and user feedback. Establishing a sustainable process for curating and validating new documents is often more expensive than the initial system development. In addition, the system must be monitored for performance degradation due to concept drift or shifts in user query patterns. A vital sustainability consideration is energy consumption. Large language models and dense retrievers consume substantial electricity, and the environmental impact of repeated inference at scale can be non-negligible. Efficiency improvements, such as model quantization, pruning, and knowledge distillation, can reduce energy per query while preserving answer quality [21]. Another approach is to use hybrid retrieval (dense plus sparse) to trade off accuracy for speed and resource usage. The system's robustness under failure conditions must also be tested: if the retriever fails to return any relevant documents, the generator should gracefully indicate uncertainty rather than hallucinate. Fallback strategies, such as defaulting to a human expert, are essential. Scalability is another challenge. As the number of users grows, the retrieval index may need to be partitioned or replicated across multiple servers. Load balancing and caching of frequent queries can reduce latency. However, caching raises freshness concerns: if a document is updated, the cache must be invalidated. A well-architected deployment will incorporate continuous integration and deployment pipelines for the knowledge base, with version control and rollback capabilities. Finally, user adoption depends on trust, which is built through transparency and consistent performance over time. Pilot studies and phased rollouts can help identify practical issues before full deployment.

7. Case Studies and Cross-Domain Comparisons

To illustrate the architectural and operational considerations discussed above, we briefly examine three domain-specific RAG decision support systems that have been proposed or implemented: one in clinical decision support, one in legal reasoning, and one in engineering troubleshooting. In the clinical domain, systems such as those based on the MedQA benchmark have incorporated retrieval from PubMed abstracts and clinical guidelines to answer medical board exam questions with high accuracy [7]. These systems employ dense retrievers fine-tuned on medical corpora and generators fine-tuned on clinical notes. A notable trade-off is between specificity and generality: a system that retrieves only high-evidence-level sources may miss less common conditions, while a broader retrieval set may include low-quality literature. Practitioners have addressed this by weighting documents based on evidence hierarchies and incorporating human verification for borderline cases. In the legal domain, RAG has been applied to tasks such as legal question answering and case outcome prediction [8]. Legal knowledge bases consist of statutes, case law, and legal commentaries, often with complex cross-referencing. The retrieval process must handle legal citations and recognize precedential relationships. One challenge is that legal texts vary dramatically in authority: a Supreme Court ruling carries more weight than a lower court decision. Systems have used citation graphs to adjust retrieval scores. In addition, legal reasoning often requires multi-step logical deduction, which is difficult for a single-turn RAG. Researchers have experimented with chain-of-thought prompting combined with iterative retrieval to produce reasoned arguments [22]. In the engineering domain, decision support systems for troubleshooting complex equipment (e.g., aircraft engines, industrial robots) use RAG to retrieve technical manuals, maintenance logs, and sensor data [9]. These systems require real-time retrieval and often operate in resource-constrained edge environments. The

knowledge base may include schematics and tabular data, which challenge text-based retrieval. Multimodal RAG, where images are retrieved alongside text, is an emerging direction. A cross-domain comparison reveals patterns. First, the quality and authority of the knowledge base are paramount in all domains, but the mechanisms for ensuring quality differ: clinical medicine relies on peer review and evidence hierarchies, law relies on precedential weight and jurisdiction, and engineering relies on verified specifications and testing. Second, the need for latency varies: clinical diagnosis can tolerate seconds of delay, while real-time engineering troubleshooting may require sub-second response. Third, the governance models differ: medical systems are heavily regulated by bodies like the FDA, legal systems require attorney oversight, and engineering systems often follow industry standards such as ISO. These differences highlight that a one-size-fits-all RAG architecture is not viable; domain-specific customization is essential.

8. Future Directions

Several research frontiers promise to enhance the capability and trustworthiness of RAG-based decision support systems. Multimodal RAG, which integrates images, audio, and tabular data alongside text, will be crucial for domains like radiology, where images are primary, and engineering, where diagrams and charts are common [23]. Another important direction is interactive RAG, where the system can ask clarifying questions to refine the retrieval or generation process, mimicking the dialogic nature of expert consultation. This introduces challenges in managing dialogue state and maintaining coherence. Explainability in RAG is also advancing: methods such as attribution analysis and saliency maps for retrieved documents can help users understand why a particular recommendation was made [24]. Policy and regulatory frameworks are evolving. The European Union's AI Act and similar initiatives may classify high-risk decision support systems and impose requirements for transparency, documentation, and human oversight. RAG systems are well-positioned to meet such requirements because they naturally provide traceability to sources, but they must be designed to generate explanations that are understandable to domain experts and laypersons alike. Finally, the sustainability of knowledge curation remains a challenge; future research should explore automated methods for detecting out-of-date or contradictory information, possibly using large language models themselves as critics, while ensuring that such automated processes are reliable.

9. Conclusion

Retrieval-augmented generation offers a powerful paradigm for building domain-specific intelligent decision support systems that combine the flexibility of large language models with the authority and updatability of curated knowledge bases. This paper has provided a system-level analysis covering architectural trade-offs, domain adaptation strategies, robustness and fairness concerns, governance requirements, deployment challenges, and sustainability considerations. The success of such systems hinges not only on advances in neural retrieval and generation but also on careful system design that accounts for the peculiarities of the target domain, the operational context, and the socio-technical environment in which decisions are made. As the technology matures, interdisciplinary collaboration will be essential to ensure that RAG-based decision support systems are accurate, fair, transparent, and sustainable. Future research should continue to explore multimodal interaction, interactive retrieval, and regulatory alignment to unlock the full potential of RAG in high-stakes decision making.

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