Overview

Business challenge

At Superior Manufacturing Group, executives wanted to know more about sales, prices, costs and margins to help steer the direction of the business. The challenge was to deliver real-time information to the leadership team in a format other than spreadsheets that made visual sense, that could be relied upon for accuracy and predictive analysis, and at a budget that fit a family-owned mid-size enterprise.

Solution

Working with IBM Business Partner One Point Solutions, Superior Manufacturing Group implemented IBM® Cognos® Express and integrated it with in-house applications built on its long-established IBM Informix platform. From president to plant manager, Cognos Express provides real-time dashboards and reports showing actionable information, sourced from validated sales and performance data.

Superior Manufacturing gets set to wipe the floor with the competition

Using instant sales data to guide business decision-making

Established in 1948 by Charles J. Wood, Superior Manufacturing Group, Inc. has grown from a modest manufacturing and repair shop to a leading manufacturer of floor matting products worldwide under the NoTrax brand. With manufacturing facilities in Chicago, Georgia and Mississippi in the U.S., as well as the Netherlands and Thailand, Superior Manufacturing remains committed to customer service, quality and sales support, with a reputation for product excellence. The company is privately held by the family, and employs around 150 people.

Cutting through spreadsheet spaghetti

Superior Manufacturing runs an in-house ERP application written in the Informix 4GL-like graphical 4JS BDS, stored in IBM Informix database software. With thousands of standard and customized orders shipping every week, Informix offers a high-performance and highly stable engine to support Superior Manufacturing's business processes, trusted and relied upon for its legendary rock-solid stability by Superior since 1995.

To monitor business progress and profitability, users used to send report generation requests to the IT team. The pressure of IT's existing projects and urgent work meant that a new report might take two weeks to write, test and publish to users. Additionally, users at different locations or in different departments might request similar reports, effectively doubling the IT team's workload. In some cases, reports already written would be re-created from scratch, as the developers often used idiosyncratic naming conventions that made it hard to identify previous work. Finally, users downloaded much of the data for further manipulation into spreadsheets, which were circulated within the business for review.

Jim Wood, IT Manager and grandson of the founder, comments, "You could have two users in a meeting with figures that did not match. It could be that their requests for the data were not phrased the same way so the reports produced varying results, or that later spreadsheet changes had caused inaccuracies to creep in. Some users would run weekly or even daily downloads of data, and we used to have hundreds of these spreadsheets traveling round the company.

Business Benefits

- Generates a business-critical 'yesterday's sales' report for key employees, complete with drill-down to further analyze and act upon the underlying data.

- Enables sales, prices, costs and margins to be examined in real time to ensure that sales, marketing, and growth meet the company's objectives.

- Introduces a single source of validated information that eliminates the confusion and inaccuracy caused by hundreds of spreadsheets..

- Reduces manual report-writing workload in the IT department, saving costs equivalent to one or more full-time employee, and creating actionable information that increases profitability.

"Executives who wanted to discover, for example, the effect of a volume discount on sales and the margin achieved after costs and commissions, found it difficult to be certain that they really had the answer. Key information such as daily, weekly and monthly sales reports could not be guaranteed to be accurate, and without confidence in the data, the leadership team found it hard to direct the company successfully."

In the IT department, requests for new reports and generating current reports occupied up to 40 hours each week – the equivalent of a full-time employee. With many pressing tasks on their hands to extend the core ERP applications, the IT team looked for ways to reduce the report-writing workload.

The challenge was to deliver real-time information to the leadership team in a format that made visual sense, could be relied on for accuracy, could be delivered at a budget that fit with a family-owned mid-size enterprise, and provided an intuitive interface that allowed users at all levels – financial and otherwise – to drill into data immediately for further trend analysis.

IBM Cognos Express and Informix: ideal for a mid-size business

IBM Business Partner One Point Solutions, which enjoys a long-established relationship with Superior Manufacturing, recommended a combination of Informix and IBM Cognos Express as the best way to achieve enterprise-grade reporting at the right budget level for a mid-size corporation.

Ron Flannery of One Point Solutions comments: "By developing Cognos Express and building a strong community of specialized Business Partners like One Point, IBM has shown its commitment to bringing Business Analytics technologies to mid-market businesses. We believe that analytics can be a vital tool in helping agile, fast-growth companies get the better of much larger competitors – and Superior Manufacturing's Informix and Cognos Express solution provides a perfect example of this, all at a price-point that's easily affordable by most small- to mid-sized businesses."

Informix is known for performance, uptime, scalability, and extensive failover features, and also offers a variety of licensing options that provide easy return on investment for corporations of any size. Superior uses Informix 11.7 for its critical 24x7 ERP system, and on another server employs Informix's built-in data warehouse-ready features such as a warehouse management console and warehouse population, data movement and scheduling options.

IBM Cognos Express offers integrated business intelligence and planning designed specifically to meet the needs of companies with fewer than 1,000 employees, though it can easily be adapted to companies of all sizes. Cognos Express provides reporting, drill-down analysis, dashboards, scorecards, planning, budgeting and forecasting capabilities in a pre-configured solution that Superior Manufacturing found easy to install, easy to use, and easy to afford. Cognos Express also offers tight integration with Informix, which made it an even more attractive proposition for the company.

"Looking at possible business analytics solutions, Cognos Express offers a robust, reliable solution that integrates well with Informix, and has the backing of IBM behind it," says Jim Wood.

Working with One Point Solutions, Superior Manufacturing implemented an Informix data warehouse on an IBM Power Systems™ server running IBM AIX®, and Cognos Express on an IBM System x® server running Microsoft® Windows®.

Superior Manufacturing has deployed the core reporting functionality, replacing the laborious spreadsheet and report-writing process with real-time insight available through Cognos Express. Using Informix's SQL Warehouse option, transactions from production systems are transferred daily to the data warehouse and deployed into traditional data

Solution Components

Software
- IBM® Cognos® Express 9.5
- IBM Informix® Dynamic Server 11.7
- 4JS® BDS® Universal Compiler

Servers
- IBM Power Systems™
- IBM System x®

IBM Business Partner
- One Point Solutions

"Cognos Express contributes directly to our efficiency and profitability… The self-service capabilities of Cognos Express have helped us release the equivalent of one full-time employee from report writing."

— Jim Wood, IT Manager, Superior Manufacturing Group

warehouse format (star schema), which managers can interrogate in almost any way they please in a dashboard that is ready for them every morning. Cognos Express includes many standard reports, and new data can be analyzed via a simple point-and-click interface and ad hoc capabilities, so there is no longer a need for business users to bother the IT team.

"Cognos Express contributes directly to our efficiency and profitability. We give users basic reports that they can then modify any way they want without referral to the IT department. The self-service capabilities of Cognos Express have helped us release the equivalent of one full-time employee from report writing," says Jim Wood.

Information delivers genuine competitive advantage

IBM Cognos Express has contributed to the positive culture throughout the business, where customer service and quality products are essential to maintaining growth in the face of challenges from low-cost manufacturers outside of the US. Many managers at the worldwide locations use real-time dashboards and reports to support the important business decisions they make every day. In particular, the critical

'yesterday's sales' report is available online each morning as soon as Informix populates the data warehouse with the latest figures.

"All our production operations in the US and overseas can use IBM Cognos Express to report on the progress of sales orders, manufacturing and deliveries. Being able to serve our customers with the right product on time, and being sure that the information we give them is accurate, are essential components of our competitive advantage," says Jim Wood.

Wood explained the business value by saying, "Users are able to look at information in a way that makes sense to them and take action right away. The result is that although the demand for information in the company has risen considerably, Cognos Express answers almost all the principal needs in a highly automated way. This means that there are fewer requests to the IT team, so we can answer users' queries more quickly.

"Cognos Express enables users to drill right down from top-level sales reports to the underlying data, using dimensions such as time and geography to identify and act upon trends. They are no longer reluctant to ask for more functionality, knowing that the interface makes reporting easy to use and simple to understand."

Ron Flannery comments: "IBM's acquisitions of the Informix and Cognos corporations have given One Point Solutions a great combination of offerings for our target mid-market customers. One Point and these customers will greatly benefit from IBM's extensive and outstanding development in Cognos Express and Informix 11.7, which I believe make these products the market leaders in these two areas."

Jim Wood concludes, "In the past, the production facilities' reports were all in their own formats, and had to be summarized monthly. With Cognos Express drawing data direct from the Informix warehouse, executives are able to compare apples with apples at the end of each day. The information transparency created by Cognos Express allows us to direct the company as a single business unit, and is a genuine source of competitive advantage."

About One Point Solutions

One Point Solutions, an IBM Premier Business Partner, focuses on data and business analytics solutions for customers across the United States and Canada. One Point Solutions offers a 'one point of contact' model for customers to

purchase, renew and implement all IBM software in the database, reporting, business intelligence, data integration, compliance, and data-related solution areas. It offers IBM database technology, licenses, renewals, training, remote administration and application development.

With deep knowledge of the IBM information management portfolio, One Point Solutions is able to integrate disparate data sources from across corporate infrastructures, transform, load and make available multiple sources of data in real-time or near-time. Additionally, One Point Solutions is able to deliver turn-key business intelligence and reporting solutions, offering the ability for any user to access the data they need, when they need it, analyze and define metrics, improve ROI and provide a competitive edge.

To learn more about One Point Solutions, please visit:
www.onepointsolutions.com
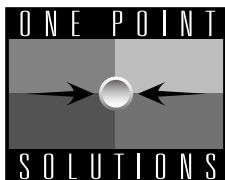
About IBM Business Analytics

IBM Business Analytics software delivers actionable insights decision-makers need to achieve better business performance. IBM offers a comprehensive, unified portfolio of business intelligence, predictive and advanced analytics, financial performance and strategy management, governance, risk and compliance and analytic applications.
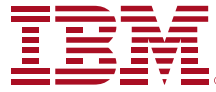
With IBM software, companies can spot trends, patterns and anomalies, compare "what if" scenarios, predict potential threats and opportunities, identify and manage key business risks and plan, budget and forecast resources. With these deep analytic capabilities our customers around the world can better understand, anticipate and shape business outcomes.

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ibm.com/business-analytics/contactus. An IBM representative will respond to your inquiry within two business days.

Business Analytics software

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