

Data collection

Using business intelligence to save time and money **Interviewed by Sue Ostrowski**

Data scattered across too many locations can confine your company to a constant game of catch-up. Employees waste valuable time and resources making decisions based on their individual silos of knowledge instead of on a readily available well of inclusive data.

Companies can avoid losing money or customers as a result of decisions based on incomplete knowledge by employing Business Intelligence for Decision Support (BI-for-DS), says Wayne Walton, a business analyst at Arke Systems.

"BI-for-DS is a method for keeping your enterprise data and using software to assist you in making appropriate decisions based on the data that your enterprise collects," Walton says. "Traditionally, that data tends to be very siloed, but using a BI-for-DS approach allows you to start merging that data into a useful, whole look at your enterprise instead of just a siloed look."

Smart Business spoke with Walton about how to move away from the silos and employ BI-for-DS for a more holistic look at your company.

What is the first step to breaking down the silos and employing BI-for-DS?

You first must figure out what your ultimate goals are. Do you want to have a system that's going to be very tightly focused so that you do project-based support? Do you want something that's going to take the entire enterprise in one direction? If so, how do you get there? You need to start with the end in mind.

From there, it comes down to identifying what your silos of data are. Is it by division? Do individual managers have their own silos? Where is all the information that your organization is pulling down? Where is it held?

It takes a lot of planning to put it into a single database and move it to a central location that everyone can access.

How do you identify what and where your data are?

Generally, it comes down to simply asking people, including directors and managers. You start finding out what those people are looking at on a daily basis and how they are pulling reports. Every manager down the line is pulling



Wayne Walton
Business analyst
Arke Systems

the information they need to operate their group of people from somewhere. Find out where that information is, and you can source it out from there.

Who should be involved in the process?

The primary decision-makers for the business must be involved; you definitely need C-level support to make it happen. On top of that, you need to involve the managers and directors who use the data because they will best understand how they need it presented to them. You also must involve technical experts from your company, because they're the people who will be digging into the data and will understand best what to do with it.

In the beginning, it's best to hire outside help because getting the project put together is a specialized skill set. Once you have a process in place, it can be handled internally, but the actual build should involve external support.

How can BI-for-DS help a company financially?

It helps to contain costs by affecting project management. As projects move forward, by looking at your historical data with your business intelligence,

you can see where projects have gone over budget. You can then hold those costs down by knowing that those are the areas where you need to focus on doing things properly.

BI-for-DS can also help you improve your time to market, which is critical for a company. As you're going through product development, you can make sure you're hitting the marks where you may have historically failed. In addition, it can help improve customer service. For example, if you're trying to identify a client by gathering four pieces of information from them, by already having a record of that client on BI-for-DS, you may really only need to ask for two pieces of information. You're not only saving customer interaction time by not forcing them to divulge two extra pieces of information, you're lowering their annoyance level because no one really wants to be asked their customer number three times before they get to talk to somebody.

How long does it take to implement BI-for-DS, and what are the costs?

It depends on the size of the business and what systems you already have in place. Timewise, it's ongoing. You need to keep working on it, because you will always find more data that you didn't have before. Within six months of planning, you could have a useful implementation that you could start building on.

On the cost side, if you're a relatively small company and your silos of information basically consist of each individual employee, it might cost you all of \$10,000, plus your employees' time to contribute to it. The flip side of that is a larger company like Six Flags. It chose a Microsoft Dynamics-based implementation to consolidate its reporting data. Centralizing even that single type of data realized them a savings of \$1 million annually. That ROI is the key reason for a BI-for-DS implementation. Provided the company actually takes advantage of the newfound wealth of information, the return will always eclipse the expense of implementation. <<

WAYNE WALTON is a business analyst at Arke Systems. Reach him at (404) 812-3123 or wayne@arke.com.

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