

HOW BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE MAKES A DIFFERENCE

A FINANCE DIRECTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Learn how business intelligence solutions from SAP can transform the way you work in finance.

This snapshot features a hypothetical finance director in a midsize company who discusses the challenges of juggling the multiple responsibilities that this role entails. From this vantage point, you'll get a picture of how business intelligence (BI) software from SAP addresses these challenges.

BI Functionality That Has Been Nothing Short of Transformational

In the course of my work, I often feel as though I have to wear several different hats. Gone are the days when the perception of the finance director's function was limited to "head bean counter." Now I'm expected to play a significant role in formulating our overarching strategy, managing its execution, monitoring the company's performance, and maintaining compliance with a plethora of regulatory demands. I even find myself getting involved in all sorts of programs and initiatives like environmental sustainability – something I never envisaged doing when I first started out my career in finance, but it keeps me on my toes.

Until recently, staying on top of all that was made significantly more challenging because our data comes from so many different sources across the company. Some of our vital systems are still on a mainframe – and none of them talked to one another!

We always got around it, because our analysts are very adept with Microsoft Excel and Access and developed a few neat little workarounds that we kept under the radar rather than pester IT for reports. But by the time we'd tried to piece together the bigger picture, the information was already out-of-date. I don't mind admitting that I've made some decisions that were based more on instinct and intuition than an informed conviction that I was doing the right thing.

The other problem was that we were taking so long chasing, aggregating, and interpreting data that it didn't leave

much time for higher-value analytical tasks, and that was making us sluggish and reactive as a department. Planning, budgeting, and forecasting was an inevitable nightmare, as was financial close – mammoth annual undertakings that we would all just about survive with a collective sigh of relief and then plunge headlong into all over again the next fiscal year. I imagine it's not that different from retailers' attitudes toward the holidays.

The turning point for me came a couple of years ago. I was going to conferences and events and rubbing shoulders with other finance directors and CFOs whose functions seemed a world apart from mine. Because they were automating business processes and using business intelligence tools, they weren't getting bogged down in the day-to-day admin; instead they were taking a much more proactive, advisory role within their organizations. It wasn't just that they were running their financial operations more smoothly – they also seemed to have real stature within their companies that I rather envied.

I'm IT literate but no expert, so I enlisted the support of our IT director to help me research the options and put together the business case for an affordable BI solution. With the economy going into meltdown, in many ways I couldn't have picked a less opportune moment to try to justify the investment. But I took the view that if our inefficiency was holding us back in the good times, it would surely impede our recovery in the tough times.



SAP® BusinessObjects™ Edge BI software was the obvious winner for us – it addresses our needs on so many levels. For a start, it's been specifically developed for the needs of midsize organizations like ours, rather than monolithic enterprises with huge budgets, and you don't need to run other SAP software to reap the benefits. In addition to the core BI functionality, we went for the data integration version to address the inefficiencies and human error associated with manually cobbling together information from disparate sources, and that's managed to wean us off our dependence on spreadsheets. But it's the reporting, analysis, and visualization BI functionality that has been nothing short of transformational for me as a decision maker.

For the first time, I have true 360-degree visibility and insight into how the business is performing, which makes it easier to spot trends and identify growth opportunities as they emerge. What that means in practice is that we've become a whole lot more agile because we can react intelligently to changing market conditions. I think that helped us negotiate the downturn better than some of our competitors who have lost share or seen their margins take a tumble.

SAP BusinessObjects Edge BI has also enabled me to establish more robust performance metrics and monitor them more closely with less effort. Great



The dashboards are perhaps my favorite function. Rather than getting one of my analysts to spend hours crunching numbers to determine the outcome of “what ifs,” I can use the sliders and gauges to explore the financial or operational impact of decisions in seconds.

features like exception alerts tell me if targets are in danger of not being met or if key performance indicators fall outside accepted ranges, which buys us valuable time to take corrective action. This has been really useful to track things like our fleet's carbon emissions. By anticipating the road ahead, so to speak, I can make minor adjustments to our steering instead of sudden drastic turns.

The dashboards are perhaps my favorite function. Rather than getting one of my analysts to spend hours crunching numbers to determine the outcome of “what ifs,” I can use the sliders and gauges to explore the financial or operational impact of decisions in seconds flat without exposing the business to the unnecessary risks of guesswork.

Most important, the colorful dashboards bring dry, dusty numbers to life and communicate the requirements of our strategy in simple terms, so our frontline staff members know exactly what they need to do or change to meet our high-level goals.

What really blows me away is that I can do all this stuff myself. I don't have to put requests in to the techies or the whizz-kid analysts, and there's no lag between formulating a question and obtaining the answer. SAP BusinessObjects Edge BI has made business intelligence a tool of the people, no longer the preserve of specialists, and I must say it feels quite empowering.

In the next three months, we'll be implementing the SAP BusinessObjects Edge Planning and Consolidation application. This will bring much-needed cohesion and accuracy to planning at every level of our business and should dramatically reduce the budget cycle and associated costs, as well as speed up statutory reporting, which is the bane of my life.

My role has expanded steadily over the last few years, but I feel my professional evolution has come on in leaps and bounds since we deployed SAP BusinessObjects solutions – and the speed and reliability of the information I'm able to give our CEO hasn't done my credibility any harm either. About the only thing that hasn't improved is my golf swing!

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