

How to cut days off your month-end reporting cycle

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This white paper outlines some of the problems caused by excessive month-end reporting cycles. It covers a number of techniques to reduce reporting time, improve the relevance and quality of the reports and the benefits to the organisation and its people that can result. The techniques and solutions are equally applicable to other situations where reporting has become an end in itself rather than a tool to help run the business or complete a task. All trademarks mentioned in this document are trademarks or registered trademarks of their respective owners.

Many organisations spend a lot of valuable time producing reports every month sometimes this can lead to the organisation or parts of it almost shutting down for a few days whilst they 'deal' with reporting, "we can't do that this week its month-end it'll have to wait" is a familiar refrain! This can add up to significant lost time for organisations - with the lead-up to month-end, the month-end process itself and the catching-up phase anything up to 5-10 days can be spent each and every month. If we can cut that in half it means an extra 2.5 to 5 days a month but if these principles are followed thoroughly there is no reason why month-end cannot be compressed into one day.

Would an extra 60 or 120 days per year be useful to you in the current economic climate?

This problem will often get worse if left alone, as well as an organisations own reporting requirements which will be growing, the increasing burden of government regulations mean that external reporting requirements can change frequently and often without much warning. The issues and problems that stem from lengthy reporting cycles can vary from straightforward loss of time and business opportunities to loss of motivation and political issues within an organisation.

Here are some questions you can ask and things you can do to cut time spent on reporting , some can be done right now , some will take time and some will require software or changes to software.

Are all your reports really necessary? Years ago as a systems analyst I came across a report which took a lot of computer time to produce, nobody seemed to know why or for whom the report was produced, so I did a paper trail within the company and followed the report to its destination – an empty office where its original recipient had left the company some years before! That's an extreme example but requirements change all the time and it is a worthwhile exercise to study the reports your organisation produces, ask users what they do with the reports and are they getting all the information

they need. You may find that users do their own consolidation, pulling together snippets of information from different reports - this can be an opportunity to reduce the number of reports whilst at the same time improving their focus and saving time. Be ruthless if a report isn't required get rid of it.

Do all your printed reports actually have to be printed? Printed reports are expensive to produce, distribute, file and destroy/recycle. Justifications for printed reports are many and varied ('we like to file them for future reference', 'we need them in case the system goes down' etc.) but often a printed report has as brief a period of relevance as a daily newspaper and is often used just to provide a few choice figures for a summary report produced in Excel or Word. I have seen a case where someone received a 1500 page report every week, when it arrived he flipped it over tore off the last page and dropped the rest in the recycling pile he said to me 'All I need is the totals I don't know why they send all this other stuff'. By switching reports to online formats and allowing users to print out pages locally if they want to, you will have a rapid pay-back and avoid the waste of 'print to shredder'. As an experiment try delaying some or all paper reports for a day or so and see what happens – if you have suitable alternatives in place you should hear nothing.

Our software **Contento Quest** is ideal for weaning an organisation off printed reports with easy to use point and click web reporting and unlimited drill-down facilities users can see as much or as little detail as they wish. Quest reports are interactive see a figure you don't understand click on it to get the detail. Want to see if the figures have changed ? Just hit the Refresh key.

Continuous or on-demand reporting – if you report continuously or have reports available 'on-demand' you will save a lot of time at month end. Almost by definition your reporting will be quicker and smoother and any issues will show up a lot earlier in the month where they are easier to deal with. With continuous reporting a lot of the urgency issues around month-end disappear; when you know 99% of the final figures you're in less of a rush for the final figures. It also means you can make the period close cut-off later and avoid figures having to be posted into the wrong period because they missed the cut-off.

The benefits of continuous reporting apply both inside and outside a company. To give just a couple of examples, a salesman who has access to accurate stock figures can quote delivery dates with confidence and avoid embarrassment or delays. Managers who can measure performance

Contento Quest delivers easy to use on-demand reporting anywhere on your network to web browsers, iPhones or via Web Services to Microsoft Excel or other applications. Quest can also open up your reporting to the outside world via the internet and email.

against budget throughout the month can concentrate their efforts in the appropriate areas and prevent last minute panics, they can also quickly spot errors like a sale being posted to the wrong team which could be embarrassing until sorted out. NB the importance of timely information cannot be over emphasised as the best decisions are made with complete information. On-demand reporting also opens up possibilities of opening your reporting up to customers and suppliers improving your service to them, your competitive advantage and providing savings on postage and fewer enquiries to deal with.

Devolved reporting this is really an extension of continuous or on-demand reporting and basically means allow the user of the information to retrieve the information directly themselves when they want it rather than waiting for a report to be delivered or having to phone or email someone else to get the figures. As an example a manager in a store wants to find out how they're doing against budget she also knows a particular line is selling really well and would like to push it more but will they be getting more deliveries of it? If so when? Without devolved reporting the manager would probably have to wait for a paper report to arrive with the information which might be too late or not have all the required figures. Alternatively she could ring or email head office, but if she is requesting the information outside store hours or at a weekend she may get no response until the next office day.

We can contrast this with the **devolved reporting** scenario here the manager just logs onto her computer, web browser or wireless device any time and accesses the information she wants then and there if the information she gets prompts more questions she can explore further. The key points are she got the information when she wanted it without having to ring anyone or wait for someone to email her back; also she was able to respond to the information in an interactive way looking at what was of interest initially and then enquiring further into anything new or unusual on the report. You may be able to introduce devolved reporting by allowing users access to your systems and providing any necessary training. However in some cases the software isn't appropriate for general use (Too complex to train everyone, requires expensive licenses or perhaps it's a legacy system that needs special emulation software) you will then need to look at developing or purchasing alternatives but whichever way you do it devolved reporting is a liberating experience for an organisation will pay for itself quickly.

Is your reporting cycle fully automated? We're looking here at all aspects of report production and its intermediate steps not just the actual request and running of the final reports. The reporting process is often an assembly line type operation made up of a number of different stages some of which can be surprisingly manual in nature particularly where multiple systems are

involved. We operate in a world of varied systems some new and some old but all serving a purpose (I could have said Heterogeneous systems, but I'm trying to be clear!) and the new motto is work with what we've got, add and enhance rather than the rip out and replace of the 80's and 90's. If your reporting has to pull in information from multiple sources, look at all the stages of report production and ask yourself where the bottlenecks are? What's a pain to do? are there opportunities for errors? This gives you the information to prioritise which bits you fix, your IT department might be itching to write an email delivery system for

By streamlining the reporting cycle **Contento Quest** has saved 3 days a month with a large financial services company, simultaneously interrogating multiple data sources and producing consolidated reports across 40 or 50 operational entities in a matter of seconds rather than having to run multiple slow queries.

reports but that could be a poor use of resources if someone has to cut and paste information from one screen to another as part of the process or run dozens of queries to generate the report.

Investment in reporting automation can have a very rapid pay-back in time saved and delivers extra benefits like being able to audit the process.

Have you considered All Clear Reporting ? Some types of report like balance sheets will always have to be produced and studied but others only need to be looked at if there is a variance from what was expected the issue is someone has to read the reports to see if action is required. Exception reporting has been used for some time now whereby a report or part of a report is only produced if the figures are outside pre-set boundaries however this can be counter-productive people can simply think the report is missing and spend time chasing it or if a particular entry is missing the user has no information about it and it can be forgotten about. A good alternative is what we call **All Clear Reporting** which is reporting designed to help the recipient by clearly reporting all items but doing some pre-analysis to determine which items require action e.g. These items are all above target well done .. , these are on budget ..., the following items are below target and printed in detail for your attention. As a printed report this becomes an action list if the information is presented as a clear web page with links to drill into the detail then it becomes a real help.

Are you making life easy for Excel users? Microsoft Excel is incredibly widely used in organisations and is often a fundamental part of reporting providing an easy way of checking figures, its own impressive report manipulation features and of course great printing abilities. The big issues Excel users face when reporting are how to get data into Excel and how to verify they have all the data they require i.e. can we audit the process? Typically data is brought into Excel via the import facility or occasionally via

Microsoft Query or an add-in which allows Excel to talk to a specific database. These methods tend not to be automated and rely on a user manually running a series of steps.

Another issue is in varying the data coming in is it possible to select different data? Or add another type of data? Does any of this involve someone having to write or modify a program or a stored procedure?

Are all your reports really necessary? Yes I know I started with this one but if you take one action point from this paper this is the one it will provide savings on its own but more importantly it will provide the information you need to analyse your reporting requirements and start the process to where reporting is just strength of the organisation and not a pain or a bottleneck.

Sometimes an objective perspective is a great help in speeding up and streamlining the reporting cycle, Contenlo can help you analyse your current position with consultancy and also deliver a tailored solution to your reporting issues.

Contenlo Quest has an Excel wizard that uses Web Services to allow any Quest report to be run against multiple data sources directly populating the spreadsheet. Report criteria can be modified directly from the wizard without having to leave Excel and without having to know SQL. Never again will your Excel users dread that last minute deal which means everything has to be re-run!

For more information or to arrange a reporting review please contact Richard Downey on 01423 340125 (or outside the UK +44 1423 340125) or via email on rdowney@contentlo.com.

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Contentlo Consulting Ltd is a specialist Reporting Independent Software Vendor and Consultancy. Over the years we have worked with many large organisations (including Arcadia group, British Waterways, Mazda Cars and Siemens) to streamline and improve their reporting.

Contentlo Quest 4 is an Enterprise Reporting and Application Integration system. Some of the key features of Quest are;

- Dynamically generated reports – no cubes
- Reports on almost any JDBC or ODBC data source
- Consolidates multiple data sources onto one web page or spreadsheet
- Web services reporting
- Full Microsoft Excel integration
- Cross-platform server support
- PDF and mobile reports available (including iPhone)
- Automatic hyper-link generation for unlimited drill-downs

For more detailed information on Quest please contact Contentlo on 01423 340125 (+44 1423 340125), sales@contentlo.com or our website at www.contentlo.com

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