Basin Electric Power Cooperative

Powering smarter decision-making with ultra-fast, highly flexible analytics

Overview

The need
Staff at Basin Electric wanted to base decisions about the future of their business on hard facts – but with data held in dozens of systems, spreadsheets, and people's heads, how could they get to the truth?

The solution
Over an 18-year analytics journey, Basin Electric is transforming its reporting processes with IBM® Cognos® solutions. Today, automated data gathering and report generation give users a wide range of options for analyzing operational data.

The benefit
Employees can now make smarter business decisions based on more accurate data. Automation accelerates reporting by up to 85 percent, saving time and enabling staff to focus on tasks that really add value.

In the data-driven age, the most effective businesses know that success depends on making decisions based on hard facts rather than gut instinct. But how can you be confident that you are taking the right action, if you don't fully trust the accuracy of the figures on which your decisions are based?

Faced with this conundrum, Basin Electric decided to harness the power of IBM analytics technologies – dramatically improving the accuracy and timeliness of its reporting processes. As a result, the company is able to give managers, engineers, analysts and other employees maximum insight into the way the business operates.

Recognizing the need for a single source of truth

At the start of its analytics journey, more than 18 years ago, Basin Electric recognized the classic symptoms of an organization that doesn't trust its data. In strategy meetings, staff were often unable to agree on the figures that they were meant to be analyzing. Too much time was spent trying to determine which system, spreadsheet or expert truly had the right information about a given issue – and this lack of visibility hampered the organization's ability to make smart decisions.

With many years of experience in using IBM Cognos software, Basin Electric has adopted a grassroots approach to deploying new technology. Joseph Thomas, Senior Business Systems Analyst, says: "We focus on creating useful tools for the lowest levels of the business, so that other people see them and say, 'I want one of those!'"

Solution components

Software

- IBM® Cognos® Business Intelligence 10.2
- IBM Cognos Planning

Sandy Bieber, Senior Business Intelligence Architect at Basin Electric, recalls: "We used to have multiple staff working on dozens of spreadsheets. We had no way of seeing who had made which changes, and when. It was too easy to introduce errors, and too difficult to track down the cause of inconsistencies.

"All of the spreadsheets were linked, so whenever we wanted to adjust a figure or a formula, it was hard to know where to start. Unless we were very careful, any changes we made to one sheet could potentially cause errors in another. We relied heavily on experienced staff who knew how each process was supposed to work, and could check the figures manually."

The organization recognized that its reliance on such complex manual processes represented a serious risk to the business.

Switching to a sophisticated analytics solution

Working with IBM, Basin Electric deployed IBM Cognos software to act as a centralized, controlled and consistent platform for business analytics.

The organization initially deployed IBM Cognos Business Intelligence to support its budgetary process, and subsequently extended the solution to replace spreadsheet based reporting in almost all parts of its business. Later, Basin Electric also deployed IBM Cognos Planning to further enhance the budgetary process and eliminate another large set of spreadsheets.

The Cognos solutions pull data for analysis directly from Basin Electric's core systems, ensuring that calculations are always performed on up-to-date transactional data. Standardizing on Cognos as an analytics platform has empowered Basin Electric to continue its journey towards a single version of the truth.

Basing critical decisions on hard facts

With a set of robust analytics tools and processes in place, staff at Basin Electric can now base more of their decisions on timely, accurate and relevant data.

Joseph Thomas, Senior Business Systems Analyst at Basin Electric, explains: "With our Cognos reports, there is no more arguing about where numbers came from, so we can focus on analyzing them and making the best decisions for our business.

"In fact, one of our users asked us to put the company logo on every report that Cognos generates for him. It's a mark of quality. If a report doesn't carry the logo, he doesn't trust the numbers it contains!"

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— Joseph Thomas, Senior Business Systems Analyst, Basin Electric Power Cooperative

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Now, Basin Electric no longer depends on individual staff members remembering how to navigate a labyrinthine network of spreadsheets. Even when approximately 180 of its more than 2,000 employees retired in a single year, the organization's reporting capabilities were not significantly affected: their corporate knowledge was stored in the Cognos environment, rather than in people's heads.

"The staff who recently retired had worked with our company for several decades, during which they developed an excellent gut instinct for decision-making," comments Sandy Bieber. "The new generation have not had so much time to develop those instincts, so we need to give them data to guide their choices."

Generating huge time savings

Automating the compilation of dozens of reports has unlocked enormous time-savings for employees in a huge range of roles.

"One of our engineers is tasked with generating a 150-page report every year, and creating it manually used to take her three months," adds Joseph Thomas. "Now we can do all of the necessary calculations in Cognos Business Intelligence and it only takes her two weeks to complete the rest of the report – that's an 85 percent time saving. This is the real point of Cognos: it helps our managers focus on building the business and our engineers focus on building power plants, rather than everyone building up paperwork."

Even apparently small improvements can add up to major gains in productivity. For example, instead of waiting for people to log in and check their reports every morning, Cognos now generates reports automatically overnight, and sends them out to the relevant people. This saves 100 people five minutes every day, which adds up to savings of more than 40 person-hours per week.

Flexing to support future initiatives

The solution also plays a key role in underpinning new commercial initiatives.

"We are planning to start trading some of the power we generate on the energy markets – and some of the reports supporting this new line of business will be compiled in Cognos. For example, if someone makes a change to a trade that is meant to be complete, Cognos will automatically flag it up as a potential error. The fact that Cognos can help us to get new parts of the business up and running quickly is a big advantage – it gives us the agility we need to compete as our business evolves."

About Basin Electric Power Cooperative

Basin Electric is one of the largest electric generation and transmission cooperatives in the United States. The organization is not-for-profit, and is owned by its 138 member systems, which together serve 2.8 million rural consumers spread across nine states – from North Dakota to New Mexico.

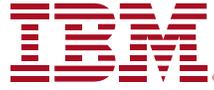To learn more about Basin Electric, please visit: www.basinelectric.com

About IBM Business Analytics

IBM Business Analytics software delivers data-driven insights that help organizations work smarter and outperform their peers. This comprehensive portfolio includes solutions for business intelligence, predictive analytics and decision management, performance management, and risk management.

Business Analytics solutions enable companies to identify and visualize trends and patterns in areas, such as customer analytics, that can have a profound effect on business performance. They can compare scenarios, anticipate potential threats and opportunities, better plan, budget and forecast resources, balance risks against expected returns and work to meet regulatory requirements. By making analytics widely available, organizations can align tactical and strategic decision-making to achieve business goals.

For more information

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