

COTTON COMPANY DELIVERS REAL-TIME BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE TO U.S. COTTON GROWERS

Anderson Clayton Corporation (ACCO) is a diversified agricultural company, specializing in cotton. ACCO knew it needed to resolve a common problem in the ginning industry: getting vital information into the hands of its customers fast. The current solution, in the form of a Microsoft SQL Server data warehouse and arcplan's business intelligence platform dynaSight™, has come as the company phases out its legacy systems. "Internal and external reports that once took hours to complete are now done in minutes, and easily accessed via the Web," says Eric Vollmer, MIS director at ACCO.

THE CHALLENGE

ACCO's old company Website was static, offering only low-level information. Obtaining business-critical data was another matter entirely. Growers had to request bale or ginning data at the gin office and ACCO's main office in Fresno, CA, for financial data or account balances. According to Eric Vollmer, "Drawbacks of the old system were numerous. If the office was closed or if people were out, access to information was unavailable. Often by the time they received this information, it would be out of date."

Prior to the Web-based reporting, ACCO could access this information only from individual software programs. For the cotton gins, located remotely from ACCO's main office, this meant the ginning software provided the only information to which there was immediate access. Grower ledger reports and cotton invoicing information had to be requested from ACCO's central office. If the grower was in different locations or grew different types of cotton, he would get his cotton ginned at numerous gins. With the old system, the grower could only access information at each individual gin where the cotton was processed, or wait two to three days for that information to get back to his home gin.



THE SOLUTION

Beacon Analytics Inc. (BAI), a data warehousing and business intelligence consultancy, was asked to review ACCO's architecture and put together a solution that would meet current and future infrastructure demands and provide their growers with fast and timely reporting. BAI recommended that ACCO move forward with Microsoft SQL Server and Analysis Services. This would allow ACCO to collect the data from numerous data stores and maintain it in one location.

arcplan's dynaSight is used as a reporting interface to company and industry data stored in the Microsoft SQL Servers and data warehouses. "With its seamless link to Analysis Services, Beacon was able to easily snap arcplan's dynaSight on top and deliver state-of-the-art reporting to ACCO's user base," said BAI's vice president, Western Region Sales/Consulting, Gerry Villamil.

A mouse click provides real-time access to all relevant data, thus eliminating the need for complex end-user tools or training. ACCO's senior software engineer, Paul Tift, said, "With SQL Server, we collect data into one common area from three different subsystems. We can now track bales from ginning to warehousing and marketing with one reporting system."



SOLUTION OVERVIEW

Industry

Diversified Cotton Services

Software

- arcplan's dynaSight
- Microsoft SQL Server
- Microsoft Analysis Services

Business Situation

Lack of detail in data reporting, productivity drains on IT, data aging.

Solution

Web-based deployment of a dynaSight analytic application.

Benefits

- Improved decision support
- 24x7 data access
- Reduced IT administrative burdens
- Improved grower relations

THE BENEFITS

Internally, the conversion to the new system created dramatic productivity increases at ACCO. With dynaSight, ACCO developers can easily create unlimited analytic reporting applications without additional programming. To conquer the challenges of centralizing information, dynaSight enables the seamless integration and presentation of multiple data sources on the front end, ensuring standardization and integrity of information.

ACCO's managers use the new system to access and benchmark key performance indicators for the company, such as ginning data needed to track production of their 18 gins. Now, ACCO not only has many preconfigured reports, but should a user request a special report, "It's effortless for staff to create an application," Vollmer says. "It's helped us to become more responsive to our internal and external customer needs," says Penny Tang-Minura, ACCO's application developer. The information contained in these reports can have a critical effect on growers' operations and pricing strategies.

More than 80 growers, representing 170+ farms with over 400 ginning entities, tap into ACCO's Web repository for real-time market information.

Brad Craven, ACCO's northern operations manager for five cotton gins in the San Joaquin and Sacramento Valleys, describes the use of the Web-based system. "On a daily basis, we use the Web reporting for each of the reports provided so far. The software is intuitive; the only assistance our growers have required is for logging into our site. Once there, database terms like relational, OLAP, filtering, and drill down become transparent to the customer. They simply request the information they need from drop down selections."

Mike Pitman, southern operations manager, who manages four gins, says, "ACCO's set as my Internet homepage and I use it to check market quotes and read different market reports daily. The office administrators are checking account balances daily on the website."

The availability of information directly to the grower is the single most important benefit of the system. Many growers would visit the gin daily to obtain new hard copy reports on module weights and ginning results, but now they can access up-to-date information anytime directly from their home or office. Today, a grower can be working in the field and notice environmental factors such as pests or soil conditions that may impact the price of the cotton. They can go back to their field office – or in many cases, even check their laptop in the field if they have wireless access – and make adjustments to their operations right on the spot.

How have growers responded to the service? "They really like it, and we are attracting additional growers. The reports are provided at no extra charge, and the growers can get the reports whenever they want. Not many companies offer that service. We see this service as a way to improve communication with the growers and thus, retain growers. Once you lose a grower, it can take three to five years to win them back. This information delivery service enables ACCO to be a more effective – and innovative – strategic partner."

Pitman adds, "Information available 24/7 – what more can I say? I can be two states away and still conduct business just as if I am down the street in my office. I do believe, though, that as more reports come online, and they will, it definitely will be a selling tool for me and give me a competitive advantage."

LOOKING AHEAD

ACCO's Craven says, "The reports we began providing last year have already been reviewed and improved, and these modifications seem to be very simple and effective. This indicates that any new reporting we may request from our IT staff can be added quickly and easily. New reports may include cotton invoicing summaries or any number of other analytic reports. The next logical step is to develop the ability for the grower to request automatic periodic reporting by fax or e-mail."

Access to information has become much more important to the cotton grower, and ACCO is in a position to provide the customer with just about anything they might request. "Providing good service to the grower is one of the best ways to keep our customers satisfied and returning," says Vollmer.

About arcplan, Inc.

For companies in dynamic industries where information changes rapidly, dynaSight from arcplan enables IT and business professionals to deliver tailored, Web-based business intelligence applications that require no programming to build and no IT intervention to use. Because dynaSight increases user acceptance and usability within the business community, it improves decision support and, ultimately, the profitability and competitiveness of the enterprise. arcplan is a globally successful software company with more than 1800 customers. For more information, please visit www.arcplan.com.



©Copyright October 2002 arcplan, Inc. arcplan and dynaSight are trademarks of arcplan, Inc.

Headquarters: Philadelphia West Valley Business Center 900 West Valley Road, Suite 204 Wayne, PA 19087 Phone: 610.902.0688	Dallas 12830 Hillcrest Road, Suite 111 Dallas, TX 75230 Phone: 972.364.9007	San Francisco Concourse Gateway 1 1850 Gateway Boulevard, Suite 260 Concord, CA 94520 Phone: 925.825.6125
---	---	--