Case Study

Avanade revolutionizes analytics with BI-as-a-Service

Company uses cloud-based BI for everything from customer insight to corporate scorecards—at half the cost of traditional solutions.

Most executives have more data than ever before. What they need, however, is more insight into that data—and they need those insights in real time, anytime and anywhere they happen to be. Avanade executives are no different except, perhaps, that their needs are being met by a cloud-based business intelligence service that Avanade also makes available to its clients. It replaces cumbersome slide decks and spreadsheets with highly visual and intuitive dashboards optimized for phones and tablets running on any major platform. Executives now make better data-driven decisions. The BI-as-a-Service solution is faster and cheaper to bring to market than traditional BI.

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– Rafat Naqvi, Vice President Enterprise Applications, Avanade**

Situation

It was like trying to find the stars through the wrong end of a telescope.

Adam Warby, CEO of Avanade, the global leader in Microsoft-based technology solutions, would be in a conference room with key colleagues or clients, or perhaps in a plane to or from such a meeting. He would need to access company financials, service line revenues, or data on major clients.

That information was contained in the Corporate Scorecard, a report regularly distributed to Avanade leadership. Warby carried the Scorecard with him on his phone. In the form of a slide deck.

Hence the wrong end of the telescope. Slide decks are good for a lot of things, but hunting down numbers on a phone screen isn't one of them.

The situation at Avanade wasn't much different than at other major companies, even major technology companies. Data-driven decision-making is increasingly important given the tighter margins and greater competition that most firms face. But getting the data to make those decisions—and turning it into useful intelligence—becomes tougher as enterprises become larger and more complex. The data often sits in silos, and as BI requires an increasingly sophisticated mix of internal and external data, executives like Warby need, and expect, access anytime and anywhere to real-time information.

Of course, Avanade has another need for state-of-the-art analytics: For the company to sell these solutions to its clients, it first needs to show that it's betting its own business on what it knows about data and analytics—and that it's winning that bet. Happily, it's doing both.

Solution

Avanade's solution unites its various data sources in the cloud and provides BI-as-a-Service to its business users, thereby gaining agility and cost-effectiveness that drive most companies to the cloud in the first place. Avanade BIaaS runs on Microsoft Azure and a platform of managed capabilities which Avanade developed specifically to bring cloud-based BI to both Avanade and Accenture clients.

Avanade developed an internal service called Customer Insight. The goal of the service is to help Avanade consultants better understand, anticipate and meet client needs. It provides a consistent, consolidated set of information that was formerly available across a series of disparate databases, including CRM, SAP, HR, and Cognos, as well as in spreadsheets and emails.

Previously, consultants were limited to insights they could glean from periodically issued worksheets, which included only higher-level information, and reports requested from the IT department, which could take days or weeks to be processed.

Customer Insight in Action

Using Customer Insight, Avanade consultants can now understand which Avanade services a client has used over time, and for which parts of its business—making it possible to identify otherwise untapped services that could deliver the greatest gain to the customer. Consultants can spot patterns across multiple contracts with a given client, in order to identify potential efficiencies. They can use Avanade HR and client engagement data to spotlight the consultants responsible for the most successful past engagements—and use that information to make future engagements more successful.

Consultants access Customer Insight through a series of highly visual dashboards and reports that provide a mix of pre-defined and ad hoc, self-service reporting. Consultants access the data and insights directly, without the need for intervention by the IT department.

The success of Customer Insight has led Avanade to expand its use of BIaaS to cover other functions at the company, including Delivery Insight for client projects and HR Insight. Avanade has created a governance structure to identify and manage BI priorities for what is now known generally as its Business Insight services.

Business Insight: Under the Hood

Business Insight is based on Microsoft SQL Server for data processing, analysis, and reporting. The solution extracts data from various application databases and integrates them in an enterprise data warehouse. The warehouse in turn feeds a SQL Services Analysis Services cube that power users can access in two ways: directly using Microsoft Excel analysis tools, and indirectly through SQL Server Reporting Services reports available through SharePoint dashboards.

Going Mobile

Avanade consultants and executives need anytime, anywhere access to the Business Insight service, and Avanade gives it to them on their device of choice. The company used Microsoft's acquisition of Datazen to create front-ends that support phones and tablets across all major platforms: Windows 8 and Windows Phone 8, iOS and iPad, and Android.

Because Datazen makes it easy for business users to create sophisticated, highly visual dashboards without having to know any code, Avanade consultants, like Avanade clients, can easily modify their dashboards or create entirely new ones to suit new needs.

The Corporate Scorecard for Avanade executives is one of the latest Avanade BIaaS services. The dashboard interfaces, optimized for both tablet and phone, make it easy to find and explore data—especially in comparison with the use of a slide deck on a small screen.

Using the Corporate Scorecard served through Datazen, CEO Warby and his colleagues can drill down on any of approximately 40 metrics to see historical views of performance, breakdowns by geography, service line with drill-down capabilities to a variety of details aligned to corporate objectives. With a few taps Warby can know where the business is performing, and, where it isn't.

The Corporate Scorecard app is currently used by a global executive leadership group of about 75 people. Beyond its intuitive interface, another benefit of the app, compared to decks and spreadsheets, is the ability to give users role-specific views. This is especially important for an app such as the Corporate Scorecard, which contains highly sensitive business data.   This enables IT to focus on delivering value to the whole rather than trying to serve each individual group accessing the information.

Benefits
Avanade turned to cloud-based Data and analytics for better and faster data insights at lower cost.

Drives Better Decision making Avanade executives needed better, faster access to data than they could get with monthly reports and traditional analysis tools. Now, they have it.

"With the Corporate Scorecard app, our executives have one place to go to get the data they need," says Gretchen Johnson, Director of Growth and Strategy for Avanade. "They don't have to search several databases, and they can access always up-to-date information from wherever they are. The big leap forward is that now, the data works for them, instead of their having to work for the data."

Cuts Time, Cost to Market
In an increasingly competitive environment in which IT is constantly tasked to do more with less, another benefit of Avanade's BIaaS solution is its lower cost and faster time to market, compared to traditional BI solutions.

The difference, according to Rafat Naqvi, Vice President, Enterprise Applications at Avanade, comes largely from developing for the cloud rather than for an on-premises environment.

"With BIaaS, we didn't need to acquire and deploy hardware servers, which could have taken weeks or months—we spun up instances in hours whenever we needed them," says Naqvi. "And we didn't have to worry about acquiring and managing additional software licenses. The simplicity and agility that we see with BIaaS are benefits that our clients see when we create cloud-based BI services for them, too."

Reduces Ongoing Maintenance Cost by 50%
Faster and cheaper time to market is only part of the cost savings associated with BIaaS. The project also transformed a potential capital investment into a much smaller operating expense for cloud hosting, which could be managed more nimbly.

Nor does the service require the staff that would likely have been hired to manage an on-premises solution. Naqvi says that enables IT employees to focus on business value creation.

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