Business Essentials: Data Management
Getting the most out of the alphabet soup: ODBC, ERP, and more

by Tom Dzialo

Are you frustrated with your information systems? Struggling to get a handle on whether your company is winning or losing in the daily battle of global competition? Join the club. You are not alone.

The good news is that technology is here to help, and in most cases, you already own it and have it at your fingertips. This article is designed to help you understand the capabilities of your information systems and how you can put those capabilities to work to manage your data. And don't let the "geek speak" deter you. The technical terms have been saved for the glossary as much as possible, and they are worth review and future study.

Many people and companies either fly blind, not really knowing how their business is doing, or they spend considerable time and effort running reports and putting together ad hoc spreadsheets or databases to quantify their performance.

Information Systems in general, and ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) systems in particular, are purchased and implemented to improve operations. New technology will make things better, right? Large amounts of time and money spent learning about, selecting, and implementing the technology projects ensures things will be better. So shouldn't putting the technology in place solve your problems?

Maybe it should, but unfortunately, it doesn't always. Too many companies have proven this with failed ERP implementations. Even more companies prove this when they set up and configure the systems similarly to their prior system. This only ensures that they will get similar results.

Betcha Didn't Know: Thanksgiving Fun Facts

by Jill Kennedy

For many people, Thanksgiving Day is a time for gathering with family, relaxing with football games, and of course, eating. It is estimated that 90% of the U.S. population eats turkey on Thanksgiving, and 40 million green bean casseroles are served. Cranberry sauce, rolls, mashed potatoes, and a variety of pies are other traditional favorites that grace dining room tables around the country.

While the current traditional meal lasts a few hours, the original Thanksgiving diners, the Pilgrims, had a feast and celebration that lasted three days. They also did not serve many of the dishes that we have all come to consider standard.

- Their flour had diminished since they had set foot at Plymouth, so there were no rolls or bread or pies.

- There were no mounds of creamy mashed potatoes because, at that time, potatoes were thought to be poisonous.

- They did have dried fruits and berries, but there was no sugar to prepare sweet treats like cranberry sauce.

- It is likely that they served turkey, which was plentiful, but they rounded out their feast with fish and venison.

- Besides the turkey, Pilgrims had another item on the menu that many Americans still enjoy. That's beer! They brought plenty of beer with them on their journey to the New World. ∎

Data Management, cont. from page 1

Connecting to your Data

In most cases, if you enter data into your system, you can get it back out in summary and/or detail level. Today's systems are capable of storing large amounts of data at very reasonable costs. The following options are available to access this data:

1. Canned Inquiries & Reports

2. File Exports

3. Customized Reports/Extracts

4. ODBC

Canned Inquiries & Reports

Almost every system today, from QuickBooks on up, comes with a selection of pre-defined or canned reports to meet various business requirements. The selection of reports ranges from meager to overwhelming, covering everything from finance and inventory to customer relationship management and compliance.

Knowing that every company will set up and use their software a little differently, many software companies tend to provide the minimum number of inquiries and reports necessary. This is not meant to be a knock on the software companies, as system users can be a fickle lot. Many want their data displayed to them in the way they're used to seeing it, and often they are not very accepting of even the slightest variation.

File Exports

With the advent of spreadsheet applications such as Microsoft Excel, this option has become very popular over time. The challenges with it, however, can be numerous. Depending on the host system, they can include:

1) Being just a direct export of only the data available on the canned reports.

2) True Extracts, which come in various formats such as CSV (Comma Separated Values) and require ma-

Once the data is in your favorite spreadsheet application, it can be sliced and diced however you like to create meaningful information and trends that you can display and share with your team.

nipulation in the spreadsheet to get the formatting right.

3) Unavailability of some data to export or extract.

Customized Reports/Extracts

Customization is always an option, but it typically only addresses the immediate need, and it can be time consuming and expensive. That said, sometimes you need what you need. In those cases, customization is a valid option. Sometimes it is the *only* option.

ODBC

ODBC (Open DataBase Connectivity) has been under development since the early 90s, and it is now a viable (though not often used) option for most companies and systems. Data access is its goal; that is, it enables access to any set of data from any application, regardless of the database used to create or manage the source data. Microsoft has been an active proponent of ODBC, making it available in most of its applications.

To be fair, developing an ODBC solution is not practical for a one-off

project requirement or for the uninitiated. But in the hands of a power user, or when applied to processes that are used repeatedly, ODBC can be a very quick and powerful option to convert data into useful information in spreadsheets, reports, or better yet, charts.

Commercial "Business Intelligence" or "Executive Information System" applications are available, but many have been acquired by ERP software companies. Like the well known Crystal Reports (acquired by SAP in 2007), they offer a user friendly GUI (Graphical User Interface) and bells and whistles that appeal to end users.

Microsoft's Access and Excel applications can be used alone and come with their Data Connection Wizard and ODBC drivers to connect to remote data sources such as Oracle, Microsoft SQL Server, OLAP Services, and many other OLE DB providers. The ODBC drivers or OLE DB providers from other manufacturers can be used to get information from sources other than Microsoft data sources,

FOR YOUR THANKSGIVING TABLE
by Jill Kennedy

As we found out on page 1, the following recipe is one that the Pilgrims would not have had the ingredients to make — but it is considered a 'must' in our family. Although the name sounds like a dessert, it is served with the main meal. Enjoy!!

Corn Pudding
- 4 eggs
- ½ cup sugar (scant)
- 1 cup melted butter or margarine
- 1 cup Ritz cracker crumbs (plus additional for topping)
- ¼ tsp. salt
- 2 cans creamed corn

Beat eggs and sugar together. Add butter and 1 cup cracker crumbs and mix. Add salt and corn, and pour into lightly buttered 7" x 11" casserole dish. Sprinkle the top with additional cracker crumbs.
Do not cover. Bake for one hour at 350 degrees. Happy Thanksgiving!

The goal of Sixth Floor Consulting Group is to create best-in-class processes, allowing each of our clients to take their businesses to a higher level of quality, profitability, and Lean operation.

Contact us today to put us to work on your team.

including other types of OLAP databases.

These tools make the days of printing out reports and then keying the data into another database or spreadsheet application a thing of the past.
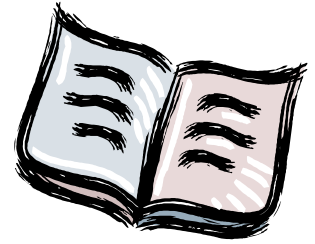
The power of the ODBC solution is that once the data is in your favorite spreadsheet application, it can be sliced and diced however you like to create meaningful information and trends that you can display and share with your team for all to support or challenge. It takes the data out of the "black box," empowering the business to see if it is winning or losing, and helping employees to make adjustments if they are not on track to the plan.

While developing ODBC queries and reports may seem convoluted to the uninitiated, assistance from your power users and Information Technology staff can get you started.

Now is the time to start making plans for 2009 to be the year you make your ERP system work for you. Fred Heintz, one of our senior consultants, will touch on the subject during his ERP workshop next week. Please let us know if we can assist you. ∎

glos'-sa-ry

API: Application Programming Interface

CSV: Comma Separated Value

DB: DataBase

DBMS: DataBase Management System.

EIS: Executive Information System

ERP: Enterprise Resource Planning

FTP: File Transfer Protocol

GUI: Graphical User Interface

ODBC: Open DataBase Connectivity

OLAP: On-Line Analytical Processing

OLE: Object Linking and Embedding

RDBMS: Relational DataBase Management System

SQL: Structured Query Language

VBA: Visual Basic Applications

Sixth Floor Consulting Group, Inc.

41 Arnoldale Road

West Hartford, CT 06119

(860) 233-7411

www.sixthfloorconsulting.com