Maximizing the Power

of Your Desktop Database:

Top business advantages of moving your data online

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The desire to manage information as an asset is a common principle but is difficult to achieve.

Gartner Business Issues: "Best Practices for Managing Enterprise Information"

D. Newman, September 2008

Successful businesses have long understood that managing critical data—and transforming that data into usable information—is key to informing the business intelligence that enables productivity, agility, and competitive advantage. Many of these organizations have traditionally relied upon desktop solutions to house such data, but are growing increasingly frustrated with their lack of lack of flexibility, scalability, and security—as well as the administrative headaches and costs of supporting them. Online databases offer an attractive alternative to desktop products, combining speed of implementation and ease of use with the collaborative functions required to inform and power organizations' unique business processes and performance.

INTRODUCTION

Regardless of an organization's size, effectively executing on business processes such as sales cycle and customer relationship management, human resources and procurement tracking, supply-chain management and more, requires reliable, instant access to a broad range of corporate data—and the ability to collaborate and communicate, in real time, with internal and external stakeholders in geographically and technologically diverse locations.

Insignia Research reports that the average 1,000-employee enterprise can lose nearly $13 million a year solely as a result of being unable to communicate and collaborate with others in real time.

Computer Weekly.com, "Non-Unified Communications Can Cost Millions."

November 7, 2007

Realizing this promise, however, has proven difficult. Business and IT professionals alike are engaged in a constant struggle to identify a demonstrated solution that not only provides a single, consistent, accurate version of data—but also that supports easy access and interaction with this data from anytime, anywhere. The evolution of data—especially among rapidly growing organizations—also requires a flexible solution that can adapt to changing circumstances. And—money is unfortunately an object. Today's economy translates to plummeting IT budgets and the need to prove higher business value with fewer resources. Bridging the gap between business and IT has never been more important; both constituents must be able to access, use and to some degree, manage data—else it will languish under the pressures of higher IT priorities and lack of technical acumen.

Despite these realities, many organizations have traditionally relied upon—or are considering implementation of—desktop solutions to address their database needs. At first blush, traditional desktop databases like Microsoft® Access® or Filemaker®—or even spreadsheets being used as databases—promise a foolproof, risk-free, low-cost approach to effective data management; experience, however, has proven otherwise as business needs have evolved and these go to tools are becoming more of a hindrance than an asset.

Why desktop databases fail

Expanding upon Sir Francis Bacon's famous axiom, *The Economist* once observed that "Knowledge is power—but only if you know how to acquire it." In the case of your business, knowledge is indeed power—but only if you can access, manipulate, and leverage the data that informs it. While desktop databases perform well for certain discrete functions, they fail to address the above business challenges and imperatives—and thus fall short of meeting the demands of an evolving organization. Here's why:

"Knowledge is power—but only if you know how to acquire it."

Economist.com

May 8, 2003

They impede—rather than enable—collaboration

Imagine you're a software manufacturer. Perhaps your engineers work on Linux workstations, your product managers work on Windows-based desktops (though some of them carry iPhones), and your marcom group uses MacBooks. In order to manage the product development cycle and speed time-to-market, you'd like all three teams to tap into a common data source in order to track development timelines, schedule meetings, and plan marketing activities.

Desktop databases are most often tied to a single client interface—which presents challenges to technologically diverse organizations. True collaboration breaks down at the point where one workgroup, due to operating system limitations, can't run the client required to access common data on the corporate network. Instead of enabling streamlined team interactions, project management, and ultimately cutting the development cycle, the desktop solution creates a roadblock to productivity.

Desktop solutions further impede collaboration in the following ways:

They don't support a single, accurate, consistent version of enterprise data

Perhaps the greatest weakness of desktop solutions is their propensity to create "information silos"—corralling data for a specific use (for example, HR tracking) while isolating it from other business units that might benefit from the same data. These separate, unrelated silos lead to data inconsistencies, employee inefficiency, and growing inaccuracy over time. They also create confusion over which version of a given data set is the most current—or correct.

They restrict database size and the number of concurrent user connections

Many desktop databases encounter problems as the user base grows; too many concurrent connections ("readers" or "writers" to a given database) causes overload that locks users out and often crashes the application. Data storage limitations can also create issues, especially for large or growing organizations. This can often be a source of frustration for teams seeking simultaneous access to the same database, or for organizations of any size that wish to store, access, and report on a broad variety of information.

They don't provide 24/7 access

For many organizations, it's financially impractical to extend sophisticated VPNs (and their associated required firewalls) to the entire user base. Even users who *do* have remote access via VPN often experience painfully slow connectivity. Since desktop databases have been set up to reside on the corporate network, both situations effectively limit the productivity of mobile workforces and geographically diverse organizations.

They're inflexible—and don't support evolving business needs

In addition to running on a single operating system, most desktop solutions include a predetermined set of templates with narrow customization options—which limits their adaptability for your unique business needs. Additionally, while many claim otherwise, desktop databases are not truly designed as a server application; they work best in single-user mode on an individual PC. Response time degrades as the number of users increases, which not only frustrates employees but thwarts the very intent of having a database in the first place. Further, most desktop databases require a certain level of coding and

The computerized spreadsheet was invented 30 years ago, and it just hasn't kept up with the demands of today's business user. In the Anywhere Enterprise, where work groups are seldom in the same location, the need for up-to-the-minute status updates and better communication all beg for a more technologically advanced solution.

Josh Holbrook, director of enterprise research, The Yankee Group

technical expertise, which can truly slow the creation and rollout of specific database applications. Business users need a quicker solution that can perform and evolve at the rate of today's business.

They cost too much

The license fees, hardware acquisition, maintenance subscriptions and ongoing database and server management costs required by desktop solutions can easily translate to a prohibitive cost of ownership. And, while some databases (spreadsheets, for example) are pre-bundled with other essential business applications, therefore appearing "cheap," they still require regular upgrades—and the associated IT staff time to roll them out. Ultimately, each of these realities—both individually and combined—adversely impact your organization's productivity and can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars in avoidable costs.

This is where online databases shine.

Why bringing your data online is better for your business

Moving your business data online enables your teams to begin sharing, tracking, and leveraging data in minutes—regardless of their technical expertise. Additionally, moving to an online solution supports your business objectives in the following ways:

It facilitates communication, collaboration and productivity

Unlike desktop alternatives, many online databases are built to be widely shared with internal and external teams. Any user with access to a web browser can interact with the data—regardless of operating system—and application programming interfaces (APIs) enable you to share and integrate information with vendors, strategic partners, and other third-party stakeholders.

Additionally, a wide variety of included templates enables fast, efficient implementation of best-practice project management and other business processes—saving you months of development and customization time.

Online databases further support collaboration through:

Providing a single version of the truth

Many online databases offer true "data virtualization," which allows you to host your data in a centralized workspace in which teams can save, share and modify documents, processes, and other information—ultimately delivering one version of the truth. As individuals interact with an online database, their work is immediately integrated—significantly reducing questions of data accuracy, recency and reconciliation. And, this centralized solution minimizes data inconsistencies—allowing different teams to access data from a single source, and leverage it for their own unique business initiatives.

Larger data storage capabilities and unlimited user connections

Online database vendors invest heavily in storage and bandwidth capabilities, and extend those capabilities to you according to your unique needs. Unlike desktop solutions, online models don't limit your data or file storage options—meaning you can begin small and increase storage as your business requirements evolve (or vice-versa). And, because users interact with the database via the Web, concurrent connections are limited only by the number of individuals you license.

I estimate that well over 50 hours of work per month are saved in our staff meetings, plus an additional savings of four hours per month in walking around "sneakernet" time!

Ed Metz, vice president and director of technical services, Robert Berning Productions, Inc.

Enabling 24/7 access, anytime, anywhere

Hosted via the Web, online databases are accessible to your workforce, business partners, and anyone else who needs it whenever and wherever they work.

It provides scalability and flexibility

Online database solutions generally allow you to select from a variety of ready-made, best-practice applications—or enable you to build your own, without assistance from IT, to suit your team's unique requirements. Unlike desktop alternatives, you can also easily customize forms, fields, categories and reports—up-front or on-the-fly, as your needs change—to match your specific business processes or naming conventions. As your business and data needs evolve, an online database easily evolves with it. You can start off small, with no financial risk, and expand usage as your users and needs change.

It's low-risk and cost effective

With no software to install, maintain or upgrade, online databases demonstrate an immediate cost savings over traditional desktop databases. Additionally, the pay-as-you-go model offers a risk-free proposition for any organization. You're never locked into a pricey maintenance contract, and you only pay for the number of users and storage you need. Finally, online databases also reduce hidden IT costs; many include easily customizable applications, reports and pre-built templates that don't require technical expertise to build or manage.

CONCLUSION

Customer relationship and sales cycle management; project management and procurement; human resources and supply-chain tracking; inventory analysis and more—these are the data-driven initiatives that only reach their full potential when powered by true information. Choosing the right database solution to meet your unique organizational needs can elevate company performance to a new level, enabling disparate and far-flung teams to tap into, and transform, your data into the kind of business intelligence that breeds productivity, agility and competitive advantage.

Within this context, desktop databases present a series of limitations: They lack true collaborative functionality—forcing users to create "work-arounds" such as emailed spreadsheets. They require IT intervention in the form of installation, support, and maintenance—which often translates to project delays and unexpected expense. And, they're inflexible—forcing users to conform to features and processes dictated by the software, rather than project or team requirements.

Online databases, on the other hand, offer a faster, easier way to track and manage enterprise data at a fraction of the cost of desktop alternatives. They allow business users to quickly begin addressing their strategic mandates, without additional IT burden. Built-in flexibility supports on-the-fly customization, even for non-technical users. Perhaps most important, in today's economic climate, online databases truly bridge the gap between business and IT. As technology budgets shrink and organizational demands rise, business expectations for IT may soon outpace IT's ability to deliver. Shifting to an online database makes a minor dent in your budget but a major impact on your organization's strategic goals—enabling you to upgrade your existing capabilities without capital cost, and ultimately empowering your business users to take action on their information.

What about security?

Hosting your enterprise data online—rather than on corporate servers—begs an important question: How can I be sure my data is safe?

It's a common misperception that online databases are intrinsically vulnerable to security breaches and loss—when in fact, vendors are so committed to the security of their clients' data that many offer far heftier security measures than their clients themselves could provide. Also worthy of note: Because desktop databases generally only support a simple password protection scheme, online databases prove to be a more secure option for many organizations.

Any decision to host your enterprise data should—first and foremost—include a thorough evaluation of the vendor's security plan. Issues to consider include:

[ ] **Controlled access**. Can you require users to register with a valid email address and strong password?

[ ] **Role-based permissions**. Can you restrict access (including who can view, modify or add information) to particular data sets according to an individual's role in the organization or team?

[ ] **Internet security**. Does the vendor employ high encryption SSL protocol to protect the transfer of data over the Internet?

[ ] **Security of stored data**. Will your data be encrypted when stored on disk?

[ ] **Integrity of the data center, including:**

- [ ] Virtual security measures—such as state-of-the-art intrusion detection and firewall technologies—to prevent unauthorized access and other suspicious activity
- [ ] Physical security measures—such as 24/7 building surveillance and alarm systems—to prevent facility breaches
- [ ] Contingency plan—such as automatic data backups, multiple generators, and separate, redundant data centers—to protect against data loss and maintain business continuity in the event of a power outage, fire or other disaster

[ ] **The vendor.** How long have they been in business? Have they offered other hosted products with proven security? Are they a trusted company in the online space?

About Intuit QuickBase

Intuit QuickBase, from the maker of TurboTax and QuickBooks, is the award-winning online database used to gather, track and share business information. QuickBase can be used for some or all of your information-driven software needs, such as managing projects, sales contacts, providing customer support and tracking inventory. QuickBase applications improve productivity and efficiency because they are tailored by the user to match the exact process, terminology and unique needs of the team – something complex software or generic spreadsheets simply can't match. Used by thousands of small businesses and over 50 of the Fortune 100, QuickBase applications give you and your team access to information over the Web, whenever and wherever you want. **Learn more at http://quickbase.intuit.com.**