

with Jackie

Reporting and Analysis



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In the last issue I wrote an article about creating an information database for your end users to access. Today I would like to talk about the various types of tools available to your users. Diverse reporting requirements drive the need for a variety of tools. Within one company you will see a need for detail operational reports as well as summarized management and executive reports.



Operation Reporting

Operational reports are the most common type of report. Users will either view IT created reports or use a PC query tool to create or modify their own. These reports usually cover detail information that a user needs in their day-to-day job. Reports such as inventory lists, customer lists or purchase order details can be created using the many ODBC tools available today. PC tools in common use include Lotus and Microsoft spreadsheets, ShowCase Query, BrioQuery, Cognos Impromptu and many more.

Management Reporting

Management reporting usually consists of a more summarized view of a company's data. Management and business analysts are interested in trends and changes over time. They are interested in measuring their critical success factors (CSF) or key performance indicators (KPI). In the past management reporting was often executed using relational data. This worked fine when IT ran the reports at night. Today we see business analysts and management wanting to do

more and more themselves. This leads to the use of the newer, faster multidimensional or online analytical processing (OLAP) tools. These tools summarize the data ahead of time based on key dimensions that have been identified to the database. Dimensions could cover subject areas such as products, time periods, customers, and sales offices. Using OLAP technology a manager can look at how specific products are selling across the country and then drill down into a region that appears to be in trouble. The speed of this technology removes the annoying variability of relational query response times and the tools are much easier for a non-IT person to use. There are a variety of OLAP tools on the marketplace for the iSeries. One excellent tool for business analysis is IBM's DB2 OLAP Server for iSeries.




Executive Reporting

Executive reporting allows an individual to see quickly and easily see how their business is doing. As a rule of thumb, the higher the executive in a company, the more that IT has to develop all the screens and reports the decision-maker might want to see. These systems are often called executive information systems (EIS). In a recent column I covered "Executive Dashboards". These are often charts, graphs, pinboards or

dashboards that depict high-level views of the company's current status or progress. Because this is summarized information, OLAP technology is often used. OLAP or multidimensional databases allow users to query the data, then ask to see a specific slice of the data or drill down to a more detailed view of the data, all at the "speed of thought".



Summary

It is extremely common to see a company utilizing both a relational query tool for detail reporting and an OLAP tool for summarized management analysis. Tool vendors will often tell you that their tool does both, and to some extent that is true. The reality is that to get the ease of use and productivity for the end user you normally want a tool that is specifically designed for either detailed relational access or summarized multidimensional access. One of the most common reasons that reporting systems fail is because the users don't use the tools that IT has provided. Above everything else you need user "buy-in". Ideally your users are demanding access to their data. IT must provide a tool that can be executed quickly and easily by people who are not trained IT professionals and have no desire to be. 

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