



At a glance

Organisation

Active Tree Services

Industry

Arboriculture

Location

Mona Vale, NSW

Solution

QlikView

Business Objective

Improve business decision-making by simplifying reporting across different business systems

Business Benefits

- Replacement of 60 reports with a single portal of easily accessible data has reduced reporting time
- Managers are gaining insights from previously unavailable data such as contractor and employee productivity
- Timesheets and productivity analyses are driving more efficient practices and processes

Active Tree Services cuts through the data jungle With QlikView

Active Tree Services is Australia's largest vegetation management company with more than 700 staff, offices in several states around a substantial fleet of specialist equipment and annual revenue of more than \$100 million. The company works with local, state and federal governments, energy utilities, construction companies and other organisations, providing safe, reliable and efficient vegetation management services such as site inspections, tree pruning, large tree removal, chipping, bank stabilisation and more.

A commitment to innovation

One of the things that sets Active Tree Services apart from its competitors is the company's resourceful adoption of information technologies as a means of driving efficiencies and a competitive edge.

For almost seven years it has worked closely with IT services partner, Professional Advantage, on projects ranging from deployment of a collaborative document management platform to a CRM [customer relationship management] solution and a financial system that has improved the organisation's ability to analyse management information.

Under the leadership of CIO, Justin Shepherd, Active Tree Services' IT department has also developed its own systems such as a mobile data collection application that has dramatically improved information capture and productivity for work teams while on the road.





Too many data sources

In 2013, as the quantity of data gathered by mobile teams began to accumulate, Shepherd realised the company was going to need a better reporting strategy and new reporting tools. Reporting processes now involved up to 15 different data sources. Some of the information was held in databases, some was in spreadsheets. Much of it was in silos reflecting the different client contracts in each state. For operations managers and staff, senior business executives and others, it was increasingly difficult to obtain a consistent view of activity.

Shepherd explains. "At the time we were primarily using SQL Reporting Services plus a little bit of Excel, extracting CSV files and using pivot tables. The main problems with this approach were there was no drill-through and it was very complex to build reports. It was taxing infrastructure-wise. We needed to consolidate our reporting tools and create one way of looking at all the data."

"In the past, when dealing with cost blow-outs we relied on gut feel or interpretation. Now we are seeing mathematical representations of the data and it's scary but empowering at the same time."

Justin Shepherd, Chief Information Officer, Active Tree Services

BI that's owned by the business

What Shepherd wanted was a business intelligence (BI) platform that could consolidate all of Active Tree Services data sources within a single system. It had to be scalable, easy to use and adaptable, capable of being used for other reporting and analysis projects further down the track.

"We looked at the market of BI tools," he says. "In the last few years this really has become a popular area. Professional Advantage was offering QlikView. We looked at a couple of other companies offering the Microsoft stack and all the Microsoft BI tools, and other vendors."

In the end, Shepherd selected QlikView. The solution offered the flexibility Active Tree Services needed and was able to cope with the vast amounts of data the company was generating. Whereas other BI tools relied heavily on additional technical resources, Shepherd was confident QlikView could be managed in-house.

"Most other tools required that the IT department own the BI platform. The QlikView approach is different and that was the real selling point. QlikView is owned by the business and the business is much more involved in the creation of the dashboard and reports. It empowers analysts to create documents," Shepherd states.

The idea that Professional Advantage would manage deployment was also attractive. "We had a previous relationship with Professional Advantage and they understand how we want to run our projects. We trust them and felt they were best positioned to help us," he adds.



Learning on the job

The company decided that its initial QlikView project should examine team and equipment utilisation metrics so that the company could better identify cost per activity. To achieve this, the project was divided into two phases.

The first established the groundwork. It called for development of a data warehouse to bring together operational metrics relating to personnel and plant utilisation such as cutting and productivity productivity, inspections productivity. At the same time, a new electronic timesheet system was created for mobile use. "This enabled us to get better information about what was going on out in the field and led to more accurate utilisation figures," Shepherd explains.

Work on this phase was completed in early 2014 and all new client contracts are now being reported on, and can be analysed using QlikView.

The remaining phase of the project, which will deliver cost per activity analysis, is currently under way and is expected to be completed later this year.

"When taking on a project like this, the business tries to define what it wants in advance, but as people gain access to products and finished tools, the goals inevitably change. That's the nature of BI projects. Once people can see what is possible, priorities and wish lists change. It can be a bit of a project management hurdle but it's also great because it stimulates thought and stimulates the business to look at itself a different way," Shepherd smiles.

Results

The early users of QlikView include general managers, operations managers and supervisors across a variety of functions and departments. Adoption of the system continues to steadily increase, with each new user encouraging others to explore the variety of information now available.

Managers appreciate the drill-through capabilities that provide a fast and far more detailed view of information. "Previously, drilling down to an activity was quite slow and under SQL Reporting services, there was an awful lot of data tabulated on a page. If you wanted to find one particular activity or one particular period on a certain day, you had to trawl through all the data. With QlikView you can get to the information you want with just a few clicks," Shepherd reports.

He says the system is slowly changing the way the company looks at and uses its data. "QlikView has replaced between 50 and 60 different reports with a single portal of data.

It has changed our processes and supporting processes. The implementation of electronic timesheets has led the business to look at different ways of collecting and using the information we have available. It is changing the way we do things in the field," he admits.

Less time, more insight

The most obvious benefits to the business so far are time and visibility. The easy accessibility of data has cut the time required for reporting and analysis, and more useful data has become available.

Shepherd points out, "The information means we've been able to look at trends and to identify things such as contractors who have been costing us too much time on-site. Timesheets and the productivity analysis are helping us to become more efficient and are reinforcing a culture of change and improvement."

Given the results to date, the business is eagerly awaiting the ability to analyse cost per activity. "It's something we've never done before and we're already finding some very interesting anomalies in the data," Shepherd states. "In the past, when dealing with cost blow-outs, we relied on gut feel or interpretation. Now we are seeing mathematical representations of the data and it's scary but empowering at the same time."

This ability to see actual costs and to understand the true profitability of each client contract is likely to have far-reaching ramifications and will become a key input for future tenders.

Partnership builds success

Shepherd praises the support that Professional Advantage has provided throughout the project, noting, "They know all of our line of business systems and have been very intimate with our Active Mobile system. They have a very good track record of success in bringing about change in our organisation. On top of that, they understand our approach. Active Tree Services has a very capable technology department, probably the most innovative and capable department of its type in this market. Professional Advantage has always been willing to take the role of empowering and training us so we can be self-sufficient at the end of each project, so we can continue developing the system ourselves.

Shepherd has plenty of plans to test that self-sufficiency once the current project is completed. He's already keenly examining ways to expand the use of BI, and is working on plans to include other lines of business such as human resources and finance, as well using the company's spatial data.





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Contact us



1800 126 499



www.pa.com.au



enquiries@pa.com.au

