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A case study with comments by
Mike Culbertson, Controller and
Michelle Gager, Project Administrator



ABB Automation

Automating Analysis and Reports with PowerOLAP



Big projects at ABB can now be examined in greater detail—and faster—thanks to PowerOLAP’s advanced analysis and reporting capabilities. The result: much more timely, informed decision-making for Project and Cost Center Managers.

Successful project management may lie in the details—provided you can get to the details. At ABB Automation, getting detailed reports, and getting them fast enough to make timely decisions, was a critical issue. Network Management Controller Mike Culbertson summed up the Before picture: “There were project reports that were so difficult to create, we would not do them. Now, with PowerOLAP, we can. And the standard reports that we used to run weekly, we can now run anytime, just by hitting F9 in the [PowerOLAP-generated] Excel reports.”

Big projects are the stock in trade of ABB, a global technology firm whose Automation segment delivers, among other products and services, sophisticated network management solutions for large utility companies. Network management projects, encompassing all aspects of hardware and software systems implementation and training, are in the multimillion-dollar range and sometimes last for years. Even for such complex, long-term projects—especially for such projects—detailed, timely reports can be the key to success.

But the reports ABB’s Project and Cost Center Managers required for timely decision-making could not always be created, much less delivered fast enough. Speaking of her department’s internal clients, Project Administrator Michelle Gager remarked, “They could not see what they needed to see. The only thing we could show them was the bottom-line figures from the Solomon accounting system. We would take these numbers, and copy and paste them into Excel for the Managers to work from.”

Recognizing their client’s need, and the potential to build on the solution they had helped implement, ABB’s Solomon provider recommended PowerOLAP as the analytical engine between Solomon and vastly enhanced Excel reports. PowerOLAP, with its dynamic connection both to underlying data sources and to shared Excel reports, gives users new ways to examine and manipulate critical records data, like project data residing in accounting systems.

So now, at ABB as soon as labor hours are posted, Managers do not have to wait a week before the payroll has been finalized and the numbers crunched to determine how many hours have been charged, and to what tasks. “It gives Managers greater control to watch their projects,” Culbertson observed. “They can see what labor is being charged on as soon as postings are made. And not just labor, but materials, what we’ve paid to vendors for hardware, what the revenue figures are so far—the critical information is available almost real-time for them to make decisions.”



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Citing PowerOLAP's capability to help create ad hoc reports, Culbertson added: "New reports that might have taken 2 people a week to do—by going off on their own, adding numbers in Excel—we can usually get in a day, after a few iterations to tailor the information to our needs. Upper management is aware of this and is requesting reports on a higher level, for strategic purposes. For example, we asked, 'Who are our top 5 suppliers to our projects over the past two years?' We determined who they were and called them to ask, 'Do you have a Business Continuation Management plan, so you can continue to supply us in case of a disaster?'"

Michelle Gager, who has had significant programming experience, appreciates how user-friendly PowerOLAP is—and how that benefits everyone in the work group: "Project Managers can see only the relevant information for their own Projects, and Cost Center Managers can see only the tasks they are responsible for across Projects. Within those parameters, PowerOLAP gives them the ability to create their own views in the Excel reports we send them, and to drill down even to the extent of determining, for example, how much time person A spent on hardware implementation and how much person B spent on training. I don't get as many questions because Project and Cost Center Managers can manipulate their own reports, which makes them happy, and I am freed up to do other project administration tasks."

Culbertson agreed that PowerOLAP has saved time and effort in his department: "Now I have a staff that isn't regularly being interrupted—they can keep their head down and do their job. So we fill the MIS role, as the name implies, to provide information to management so they can make the best decisions possible."

Looking ahead, Culbertson foresees "maturing the PowerOLAP system so we can do budgeting and forecasting." This is a natural next step, since PowerOLAP data, sourced from up-to-the-instant Actuals, can be converted to planning data via internal PowerOLAP formulas. Plus, PowerOLAP allows Managers to key in numbers—with strict security controls in place—into required cells within Excel-based Budget/Forecast templates. Because the system is dynamic, and all numbers calculate within PowerOLAP nearly instantaneously, Culbertson, the Controller, and upper management can see the aggregated results, or drill-down to reports from each contributor.

Gager sees other possibilities. Citing PowerOLAP's capability to integrate dynamically with other relational database applications—through the use of the exclusive OLAP Exchange technology—she sees a "huge potential to bring in data from the MS Project database we use, as well as from Solomon, and to update information between all our project systems via PowerOLAP."

A global technology leader like ABB succeeds by just such innovative thinking—even with their internal systems, like PowerOLAP!

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