



Overview

The need

DFS realised that the insights it provides to its sales, operations and finance teams need to be of the same high quality as the sofas it sells to customers. How could it create a culture of data-driven decision-making?

The solution

Working with Assimil8, DFS built an enterprise analytics platform based on IBM® Cognos® Business Intelligence, deployed in the cloud with SoftLayer®. The solution unlocks the value of vast quantities of transactional data from DFS's legacy core retail systems.

The benefit

Cloud-based analytics accelerates reporting from hours to minutes; store-level comparisons and historical trends can be analysed in seconds; key daily sales figures are sent automatically to decision-makers every morning.

DFS

Moving from data to insight to action with a new culture of analytics, delivered in the cloud

Despite turbulent times for the retail sector in recent years, DFS has maintained its position as the UK's leading sofa retailer. Nevertheless, the company is not content to put its feet up and wait for the competition to gain ground. It is investing in new store roll-outs, growing its online channels, and developing new products.

A key part of its strategy is to gain a better understanding of its sales, finances and operations, identify areas where it can make improvements or seize new opportunities, and encourage faster, more evidence-driven decision-making. To achieve these goals, DFS realised that it needed a better way to manage and analyse its data.

Putting data to work

Hollie Haeney, Head of Financial Planning & Analysis at DFS, explains: "Our core retail system and product catalogue have always been valuable sources of operational data, but we wanted to put that data to more effective use. Just getting the data out of those systems could take hours, and then our analysts had to manipulate and reformat it in spreadsheets to turn it into something useful. We were spending too much time on basic data-gathering, which left us with little opportunity to analyse, understand and act on the resulting insights."

"We are already seeing a huge cultural shift in the business. Instead of just taking whatever data they can get, our decision-makers have started thinking about what questions they really need to ask. Once you show them how to answer those questions, the appetite for analytics increases exponentially – and that's where the scalability of a cloud delivery model can be really valuable," says Steve Johnson, BI Manager at DFS.



Solution components

Software

- IBM® Cognos® Business Intelligence 10.2
- IBM Cognos Data Manager

Services

- SoftLayer®

IBM Business Partner

- Assimil8
-

As the business embarked on a planned expansion programme, the demand for timely, accurate reporting grew even further – and it became increasingly clear that manual, spreadsheet-based reporting processes would not be sustainable in the long term.

Finding a solution

DFS evaluated its business processes and data requirements, and began looking for a new enterprise-wide analytics platform.

Hollie Haeney comments: “We wanted an all-round solution that could grow and evolve as business demand increased and our capabilities developed. IBM Cognos Business Intelligence seemed like the right option: we had confidence in the IBM brand, and had some experience of the software from a previous project.”

Making the business case was straightforward: the CFO and board were quickly convinced that the solution would pay for itself simply by streamlining the reporting processes and giving people better information for decision-making. The company set up a dedicated financial planning and analysis team, which would own the solution, and put them in charge of leading the implementation.

Choosing the right partner

Hollie Haeney comments: “We needed a partner to help our in-house team design and deploy the solution, and Assimil8 was the obvious choice. We had worked with their lead consultant before, and we were very impressed with their collaborative approach and quick understanding of what we wanted to achieve. During the project, they fully repaid our confidence, giving us the advice and the technical skills to get the solution up and running quickly and smoothly.”

Steve Johnson, BI Manager, adds: “If we’ve had any problems since the solution went live, even over a weekend, the Assimil8 team have gone out of their way to support us. If you don’t have a big in-house analytics team, having a dedicated partner like Assimil8 is hugely valuable.”

Moving into the cloud

To accelerate the implementation, DFS decided to deploy the IBM Cognos solution in the SoftLayer® cloud.

Hosted in data centres in London and Amsterdam which include failover capabilities, IBM hosts DFS’s cloud environment on a combination of bare-metal and virtual servers. These all support the company’s Terabyte data warehouse, IBM Cognos Business Intelligence and IBM Cognos Data Manager.

The highly flexible cloud architecture enables DFS to support hundreds of users currently, with the ability to increase capacity instantly as the user-base grows.

*“Cognos helps us home
in on information in a
way that we could only
dream about with our old
system.”*

— Hollie Haeney, Head of Financial Planning &
Analysis, DFS

Equally, when the company wants to launch new analytics applications, SoftLayer shortcuts the provisioning process, which means a new deployment can be up and running in days, rather than months.

“The cloud approach with SoftLayer is ideal for us because it means we’re not burdening our own IT team with yet another system to support,” says Steve Johnson. “It also means we didn’t have to worry about up-front infrastructure costs, and as we grow our analytics environment and add more users, reports and applications, SoftLayer can easily expand to absorb the extra demand.”

Dean Darby, Head of IT at DFS, adds: “The biggest benefit is to be able to flex the infrastructure depending on our reporting demands at the time.”

Rich insight drives cultural change

With the solution up and running, DFS can now use IBM Cognos Data Manager to integrate transactional data from its core retail system with data from its product catalogue, and IBM Cognos Business Intelligence to create rich, detailed reports in a matter of minutes.

Hollie Haeney comments: “Previously, if I wanted to compare the product sales performance of 50 stores, I would have to generate 50 different individual store reports and then manually collate them. Each report might take a couple of hours to run, so it could literally take days to get an answer. Now it’s a simple matter of selecting what you want and getting the results in a matter of minutes.”

Steve Johnson adds: “People used to rely on whatever data they could get hold of easily – which wasn’t necessarily the data that they really wanted. Now, we’re seeing a cultural shift because users know that they just need to ask the right questions, and Cognos will get them the answers they need. That’s a huge change in the whole philosophy of how we use data to support decisions.”

Automated reporting increases productivity

DFS also appreciates the ability of Cognos to automate the creation and distribution of reports.

“We have a daily sales report that Cognos automatically generates overnight and delivers to our managers’ inboxes at 7am every morning – so they don’t need to go looking for information, it’s right there when they log in,” says Steve Johnson.

“Cognos has had a real impact on the way morning sales meetings work,” adds Hollie Haeney. “With a single, trusted source of information, nobody needs to worry about whose figures are correct or whether everything is up to date – they can quickly identify priorities and get on with targeting their effort in the right areas.”

Looking to the future

DFS is still at a relatively early stage in its analytics journey, but the success of these initial reports has enabled the financial planning and analysis team to build up momentum and gain support for a roadmap of further projects.

Hollie Haeney concludes: “We’re planning to bring in data from other sources, including things like footfall in our stores and supplier SLAs. The potential of analytics to transform our business is huge – we have only just started on what we want to achieve.”

About DFS

DFS is one of the UK’s best-known furniture retailers, and sells the biggest range of sofas in the country. It operates three factories and over 100 stores nationwide, and employs more than 3,500 people. Formerly owned by the Advent International group, the company was listed on the London Stock Exchange in March 2015.

To learn more about DFS, please visit www.dfscorporate.co.uk

About Assimil8

Assimil8 is a market leader in business analytics, financial reporting, planning and forecasting, and data warehousing. Using world-class IBM Cognos software as a base, and following an ethos of client collaboration and empowerment, Assimil8 is driving forward innovative and ground-breaking techniques such as geo-spatial business analysis and cloud-based systems.

To learn more about products, services and solutions from Assimil8, visit: www.assimil8.com



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PO Box 41
North Harbour
Portsmouth
Hampshire
PO6 3AU

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