



New Insights on Property Investment Decisions for Chartwell Land

A solution based on Oracle, Business Objects, Hyperion Essbase, Microsoft Excel and Visual Basic

Background

Part of the Kingfisher group, Chartwell Land is a leading property investment company, aiming to create added value through specialist knowledge and expertise in the retail property market, a proactive management style and working closely with the group's retail companies on their expansion programmes. Their portfolio includes Woolworths, B&Q and Superdrug, together with a range of retail parks and shopping centre developments across the country.

At Chartwell Land, Management Information is provided daily by Lawson and Skyline systems. Both of these systems are underpinned by Oracle relational databases. However, the native reporting facilities of these packages is inherently limited, and some time ago, Chartwell Land adopted Business Objects in support of more flexible financial reporting against the two operational systems.

For some time, this strategy overcame some of the reporting shortfalls of the operational systems. However, the Business Objects reporting universes were becoming increasingly complex, with growing concerns over data integrity, maintainability and report flexibility. In addition, the ability to integrate information from the operational systems was critically limited. Managing a successful property portfolio depends on both tight control and the ability to generate powerful insights into patterns of costs and profitability across the group. Decisions concerning investment strategy, which properties to buy and sell, crucially depend on these insights.

Chartwell Land recognised that relational query tools alone could not provide all of these insights. At this point, Thorogood Associates was engaged by Chartwell Land to provide a new solution to the problems surrounding their current situation. Our paper describes the main elements of this major IT project.

Issues

Our aim was to provide a new system that truly reflects the way users want to view the business, rather than how data is stored at source. As such, the new system had to be simple to use, since a critical success factor would be the increased levels of system usage across the business. The system needed to provide all of the main information requirements to the business. The users of this system are wide ranging, both in terms of their profession, role and level of IT expertise. They include Accountants, Surveyors, the Finance Director, and the Managing Director.

The system design had to allow standard reporting requirements to be met more efficiently than in the past as well as supporting new, powerful ad-hoc analysis, directly addressing issues relating to property investment strategy for the first time.

At the start of this project, Thorogood recognised that no single software package would accommodate all of the information needs. As independent business intelligence specialists, we were able to recommend and implement a combination of technologies, all of which are tightly integrated through a simple to use interface, a major challenge in itself. In addition, the solution had to integrate data from the two operational systems quickly and seamlessly, and provide financial reporting facilities way beyond those currently available.

Solution

The main elements of the new system include: -

- A common Windows interface for all standard reporting requirements
- A Browser interface supporting flexible, integrated Lawson/Skyline reporting for high level users
- Multi-dimensional analysis of Lawson financial data using Hyperion's Essbase, for power users
- Improved Business Objects reporting against a new, rationalised and documented universe
- A common relational scheme underpinning integrated reporting

Thorogood input

The development process included the provision of a full range of services for Chartwell Land: -

- Workshops to capture the requirement
- Full Functional Specification and Design documentation
- Project development management
- Essbase, Business Objects, Oracle and Visual Basic system implementation skills
- Integration expertise
- System documentation
- Formal training for all system users

We believe that Thorogood's unique combination of design, implementation and integration skills made us exceptionally placed to implement this project on behalf of Chartwell Land.

Technologies

The technologies involved included: -

- Essbase, for multi-dimensional analysis of Lawson data, SQL drill-through to transactions and rent forecasting
- Microsoft Excel for selecting and reporting Essbase information
- Business Objects for standard reports including arrears, service charge, lease renewals & reviews and IPD reports
- Visual Basic for the ad-hoc Browser and common interface
- Oracle including the Lawson and Skyline databases

Benefits to the client

We understand that just one good investment decision arising from an insight generated by the new system will easily justify the cost of this development.

In addition a number of other benefits have already been achieved to date: -

- Answers to questions concerning which types of properties are profitable and why
- Increased levels of usage across all user communities and increased return on Business Objects investment
- Meets standard reporting requirements more efficiently than in the past
- Meets newly defined, integrated reporting requirements
- Large reduction in time required to prepare reports and elimination of need for re-keying data into spreadsheets

In today's technological age there is no shortage of information, but how do you access the facts you want, when you want them and in the best possible format? To help you, Thorogood makes sense of data. We combine our skills in IT and numerate analysis with business understanding to provide you with solutions to help you get ahead in today's marketplace. Independent since 1987, our focus is to find exactly the right system to match your needs.

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