

Atlas Van Lines Integrates CenterView™ with SAP BW for a Complete Look at Company Information

Like many companies, Atlas Van Lines (Atlas®) uses SAP BW for business intelligence, but they had a difficult time taking advantage of all the data available in their different application systems. They found that CenterView™ helped present this information to internal senior management quickly and visually, as well as incorporated additional information from Excel® spreadsheets and other databases. According to Bob Sonntag, senior developer at Atlas, this integration gives “a classier look” to their internal product than SAP BW’s native dashboard tools.

Background

Atlas Van Lines, the flagship of Atlas World Group, is the second-largest interstate motor carrier in the United States. Atlas transports household goods between states and between the United States and Canada. They also transport special products and commodities such as exhibits, fine art, store fixtures, electronics, and other high-value goods. With a strong commitment to excellence, they have achieved extraordinary growth in the past few years.

Top BW priorities were to get shipment and financial information into the SAP system. Atlas uses TMW® System’s PowerSuite™ for shipment information and Microsoft® Great Plains® for financials.



Challenge

Although it was a corporate goal to use SAP BW, and it was working well for information from TMW and Great Plains, report development remained slower than Atlas hoped. Through processes learned before the SAP BW implementation, end users were already creating, maintaining, and using Excel spreadsheets to display the specific values they needed to see. Because Atlas couldn’t automatically pull the information directly from the spreadsheets into SAP BW, incorporating this information into their reports was difficult and time consuming.

Solution

With CenterView, Atlas developers didn’t need to enter the information from the Excel spreadsheets into SAP BW before they could see the data in relation to other data. According to Sonntag, the best thing about CenterView is that Atlas “can access data wherever we have data. We don’t have to expend the effort to take data from our existing systems and set it up in BW before we can use it in a report. With CenterView, we can start immediately working with the data where it already exists.”

While the Atlas information technology (IT) team was not well-versed in XMLA and chose not to use the SAP BW connector that is included with CenterView, they were proficient in SQL. They devised a routine that uses the SAP debugging tool to capture the SQL generated by BW. They then tweaked and reused the captured SQL queries to have CenterView pull data from the SAP BW database directly. Thanks to CenterView’s ready compatibility with nearly any data source, Atlas was able to pull information in a way that capitalized on the expertise of their in-house team.

CenterView provided the kind of advanced visualization Atlas was looking for, and the many choices of visualization methods helped them address another issue. They created some great dashboards for viewing on the desktop, but they also wanted to be able to display information on a monitor in a large department work area. The elements they’d chosen to use on the desktop became difficult to read from 30 or more feet away.

Fortunately, CenterView has a ready means to display data in different formats of graphs, gauges, or maps, and it can retrieve data from any source from Excel spreadsheets to SQL databases. The graphics on the right show how Atlas was able to readily pull the same data into different formats. The top view shows the data as displayed on their desktop dashboards. The view at the bottom shows the same data pulled into a chart that was easier to read from a distance.

Another benefit for Atlas was CenterView's professional tools for creating visually appealing dashboards. Sonntag says it makes him look like an artist because it is so easy to figure out how to develop new dashboards. He is able to quickly design a dashboard, get feedback from his end users, and refine the dashboard from there.



What's Next?

Atlas has only recently introduced their solution to internal senior management, and while the solution is still just a small set of dashboards and users, the users have caught on quickly and had no trouble learning how to use and understand the data presented. In the future, they plan to share more departmental key performance indicators (KPIs) with other areas of the company. As their audience learns what they can do with CenterView, Sonntag anticipates their solution will evolve to meet specific requests and needs.

Conclusion

CenterView was able to pull data from multiple sources to complement Atlas's existing SAP BW environment, let them create reports more quickly, and provide more effective visualization of data in various environments.

