Tracking Your Fasteners

by:

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Awash in Data—But No Information?

Everyone is Talking About Data

These days, everyone in business is talking about data. Big data, small data, data security, using data. We are awash in data about everything, everywhere. The trouble today is not capturing data, it is figuring out how to use it to help things run better.

There's no shortage of data. In fact, its vast amount seems to create more problems than it solves. There are constant concerns about data security. Database sizes are increasing at an exponential rate. There are entire companies offering services to help you mine the data in your own computer systems and beyond.

Small Data is Important Too

For typical fastener distributors, their own data is plenty for them to get their arms around. The difficult part is taking all that data and making it actionable information. Many ERP systems have plenty of data, yet getting information out of them is like pulling teeth. This is especially true of legacy systems that have the information locked up inside with very few ways to get it out.

Even Modern Systems Have Issues

Many systems have spartan reporting of the information that is in them. The reporting consists of lists of file contents or transaction history. There is just too much information to be able to easily take action on it. The systems frequently have an SQL Query Language that can be used to cut through the information and select just the things that are important to the user. This works very well in big data processing operations, because highly trained specialists can whip out important reports quickly.

Fastener Companies—Not So Much

In a typical small-to-medium-sized fastener company, there are no specialists to produce those unique reports that answer questions and give management the information that they need now. So what happens? A senior member of the management team, the Controller, VP of Finance, General Manager or even the President gets to handle those requests. I have spoken to many senior people in the fastener industry that complain that they are a bottleneck to the information flow. Worse yet, they are using their valuable time to perform a task that is taking them away from their "real" jobs.

The query language itself is a programming language and while it is not difficult to learn, that is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to creating the needed reports. In order to do a proper job, the query user must know the one-to-many, many-to-many and many-to-one relationships of the files. This has to be inferred from file names in the data dictionary that may or may not be clearly defined and explained.

Reports Can Be Wrong

Based on the skill of the programmer and his or her understanding of the files, using this method can produce extremely valuable results. If everything isn't done just right though, it can produce reports that are wrong. The worst case is when the report looks right, but a flaw in the logic is reporting inaccurate information.

An Easier Way

I think that a better way is to provide the data to everyone in the company (that has permission). Each person that needs the information in various ways to do their jobs can simply access it. This means that management people don't become programmers and no one in the company cares about the arcane issues of the database structure.

Information Instead of Data

In The Business Edge, we have created a series of report menus that lead the user to the needed information. There are a host of reports that already take care of all the query steps. Once a subject matter is chosen, the user has the option of printing, sending the information to a PDF, e-Mailing it or showing it on the screen. If the screen is chosen, three things happen:

• Users can select from a vast number of fields related to that type of transaction and click a box to select or deselect each field.

• Users can sequence the fields in any order so the report comes out according to their requirements. The fields are just dragged and dropped into place.

• Users can export the resulting report to Excel with the click of a button.

This means that each salesperson, accounting man-

ager, warehouse manager, etc., has access to information that has been chosen by them all the way down to the field, sequence and date range. This all happens in seconds or a couple of minutes, and there is absolutely no chance that any of the file relationship issues will ever come up. The information is then in Excel and can be easily manipulated, sent to customers, management or other interested parties.

Example of the Process

Users would choose the type of information that they were looking for, select a range of data, date range and sequence.

The fields that would show are the ones that they chose last. The system remembers each user's preferences. At any time, the user could decide to add to or delete

from the fields chosen. For example, the report that they were going to send to the customer would not normally include gross profit.

In order to put this information into Excel, they would simply click the Excel button.

Beginning Date		Wednesday, January 01, 2014					
Ending Date		Wednesday, December 31, 2014					
Branch		ALL BRANCHES					
(H)ighest or (L)owest		Highest					
Number to Rank	10						
Skip Zeros?		Yes					
Percentage Column Options		% of Report Sales					
Rank	Cust I.D.	Customer Name	Slsp	Net Sales	% Rprt Sales	Gross Profit	% Profit
1	407691	Black Burn	DRC	760,245.40	28.753	90,365.52	11.886
2	407692	Kahle & Verhoff Construction	DRC	752,779.83	28.47	186,134.59	24.726
3	407742	Moeller MFG Brentwood	DRC	489,990.96	18.532	454,529.60	92.763
4	407693	Noll-Fisher, Inc	DRC	325,996.09	12.329	53,321.92	16.357
5	407743	Moeller Precision Tool	DRC	148,682.64	5.623	82,854.82	55.726
6	1000	AA Manufacturing Co.	DRC	81,135.25	3.069	38,778.64	47.795
7	407747	Blue Sky Industries	DRC	37,718.50	1.427	8,995.96	23.85
8	407746	Quest Aircraft Company	DRC	24,247.48	0.917	5,971.33	24.627
9	407698	OCV Control Valves	DRC	14,268.29	0.54	6,767.61	47.431
10	407695	Victor Industries, Inc	DRC	9,022.73	0.341	2,458.02	27.243

All this means accurate information, when you want it, in the form that you want it, with no nonsense and with no computer technical expertise.

I believe that this is the way that all systems should be in the future.

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Dennis, R. Cowhey, COB – Started **Computer Insights** in 1981. He served for many years on the **Illinois CPA Society Computer Information Systems Committee**. He is a frequent author of articles for industry trade magazines. Before starting Computer Insights, he served as Central District Manager for a division of **Litton Industries** (now part of **Rockwell**), that offered inventory control systems to retailers. Prior to that, he was a Credit and Financial Analyst for National Credit Office division of **Dun & Bradstreet, Inc**. Cowhey received his education at **Chicago City College** and **DePaul University**.

Computer Insights provides The Business Edge software for efficient tracking of fasteners.

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