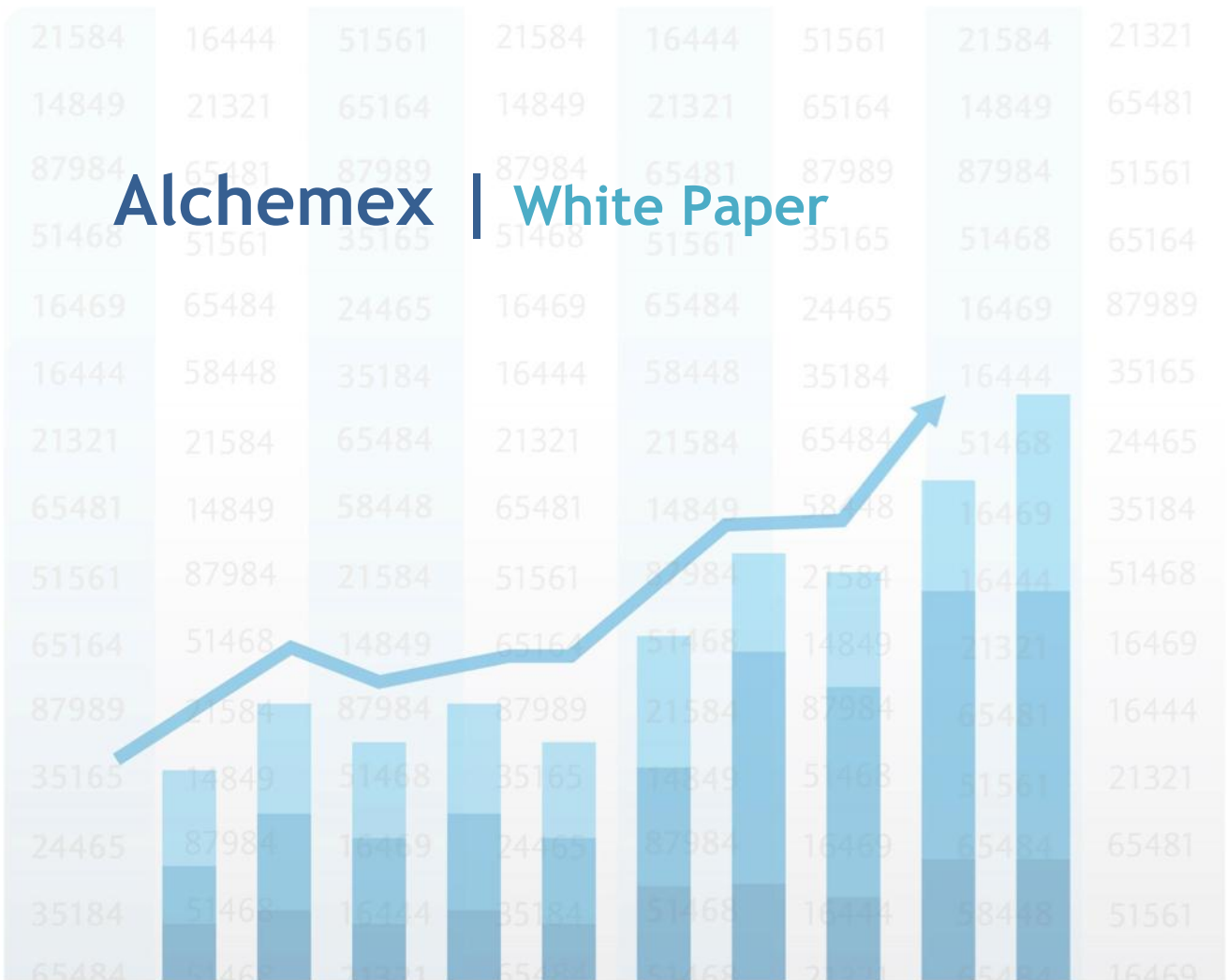


Alchemex | White Paper



Seven steps to quality business report-writing



White Paper Title

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Introduction



This white paper is written by Charles Teversham, MD of Alchemex (Pty) Ltd, industry leader in affordable Excel-based business intelligence software for small to medium enterprises. Aimed at consultants and report writers, he shares some of the tricks and traps that exist in delivering quality Business Intelligence and relevant information to the right people in SMEs.

Many customers who commission the services of both external or internal consultants to deliver on their information requirements are disappointed by the eventual outcome. There are too many unhappy non-paying customers out there with an equal number of unhappy unpaid consultants/service providers - WHY?

Unreasonable requests from time to time can be a factor but these are far and few between. The primary reason for failure on these projects is a result of bad communication between the customer and provider.



Starting a project

Often the customer does not really know what they want - they know they need better information to run their business more efficiently, but what information? Who needs it and why? This is critical to establish at the start of the project.

The customer should be asking questions like:

1. What decisions do I need to be able to make to have a better business?
2. What information do I need to be able to make these decisions?

Answer these 2 questions up front and you are well on the way to avoiding information overload, which can be very destructive. For the customer clarity is power - if you start simply and deliver value, and if you ask the right questions up front, your roll out will continue to add value to more and more people in the organization as you follow this simple method.

Often companies try to “run before they can walk” when implementing BI and the scope of the initial project is so complex that often not even 10% of it is achieved and the budget for the lot is gone. It is the responsibility of the service provider to ensure that this does not happen, particularly when it is obvious that the customer is uncertain about what their needs are.

In the paragraphs that follow, I will share a methodology that works more often than not, resulting in happy paying customers, profitable service providers, and ultimately customers who run more profitable businesses! This methodology is proposed in the context of using tools available in the market like Alchemex reporting software, designed specifically for SMEs to deliver reports in Excel and that ships with ready-to-use reports for specific install bases, helping customers and providers get a solution quicker. For example, if the challenge is to smartly deliver sales-related information to the sales force of an organization, then a typical approach would be to first see if the standard sales templates cater for the need. If they do, they can be used to fast track the solution. If they don't, it may mean creating the solution from first principles.

For the customer, clarity is power. Start simply and deliver value.



Fortunately when Excel-based BI tools are being used, it is efficient to simulate the output of what the customer will get, because they can type it up in Excel with little effort. This forms the blueprint of what information will be delivered, and in what format it will be presented. This is an important aspect to get right, because this, right upfront, is where things can go wrong. If you do not establish this, the customer invariably has one picture in their mind of what the outcome will be and the provider has a completely different picture - which spells trouble! Signing off this outcome between the two parties means the customer knows exactly what they are going get, and have acknowledged this. The service provider also knows exactly what to deliver and is committing to doing so with an understanding of what is involved to do it.

So it is important to understand your customer's requirements exactly and sign off a physical layout of what you have agreed you will deliver, preferably designed by your customer with your guidance.

Best practice report-writing methodology

Now it's over to you to decide how, who, when and at what cost you can deliver the solution and what skills will be required to do it. Listed below are some of the key questions you need to ask and answer before you start making these decisions?

1. Does all the information required exist in the customer's source data?

Why is this important? Believe it or not, some customers do request information that just does not exist. This happens because sometimes the people who need the information are not that close to the operations where information is being captured or not captured. A good example of this is a manager who wants to see a profit and loss analysis by projects, only to find out that certain expenses/journals have not been captured against project codes - problem. Be careful to check this out.

Understand your customer's requirements exactly and sign off a physical layout of what you have agreed.



2. If not, can it be derived from the source data?

If your choice of tools allows you to create information on the fly that can be derived from other source data then you're OK. If not, you need to consider that there may be some form of manual entry/preparation which could challenge the customer's expectations, especially if total automation was agreed.

3. Does it come from more than one source?

You need to be sure that the tools you are using cater for this in a way that data integrity is preserved through automation, and that loose Excel spreadsheet use is eliminated. Generally this leads to a more complicated setup and may cost more.

4. Is the information related/structured or unrelated/unstructured?

If the information is related there is good chance that you can use standard query language to create the relationships and extract the information in one process which is quicker and easier. If this is not the case, you may have to build more than one process to extract the data and then consolidate it using a union process which will mean a more complex structure.

5. Has the data been consistently captured over the time frame required for output?

This is important and ties back to the first step of the process where the customer's expectations are defined. A good example of this is when a company changes its processes over a period of time. For example, if the requirements are to track sales trends by rep over a period of 5 years and the way in which sales were processed changed after 3 years, then you may have to consider how your solution will handle the two types of data. Another example is if a company has run a debtors book using the balance forward method, and they then switch to an open item method where invoices are matched against payments, you will have 2 scenarios to cater for which may cause complications. In light of this, be sure to check the completeness of data before committing to timeframes and solution delivery.

6. Depending on what tools you are using, are there any relevant solution sets/templates that can help fast track the solution?

If your choice of tools comes with pre-formatted templates that cater for the ERP/accounting/Payroll system that you are getting the data from, be sure to see if any of these can help you fast track the solution delivery as it may save you from reinventing the wheel and assist you to build a customized library of solutions for your customer. If you are in contact with other consultants be sure to check if any of them have ever created a report similar to what you need to develop. Opportunity may exist to negotiate an arrangement that works for all parties. Have a look at the BI Community for access to videos, forums and groups of like-minded business people.

7. Who needs to get the information, how often, and how are they connected/located?

Creating the solution is one thing, but delivering it to the areas of the business that need it closes the loop on driving value to the customer's organization. What is the use of having excellent information in a business if it is not delivered to the right people, or if they don't have access to it? Always identify who needs what, where they are located and the potential security implications of this information. Again, depending on what tools you have, your options should cater for challenges relating to bandwidth constraints, frequency and real-time access to data, delivery to desktops, or access via WEB protocol. One of the ultimate goals of a good Business Intelligence platform is that people in the organization can "help themselves" to relevant information that they can trust. It is critical to free up resources that have historically spent most of their time preparing and sending out ad-hoc unstructured information to the rest of the business, normally the financial and IT departments. So be sure that the tools you choose cater for this.

Conclusion

The temptation is always there to impress your customer quickly, but compliment this attitude with a sound and thought-through methodology, and your customer will respect and trust your services as you build a relationship to add massive value to their organization. There are many ways to skin a proverbial cat, but this is a method that works well. Taking short cuts will unfortunately result in failed projects.



About the Author

“With more than 20 years of experience as a Business Analyst my ultimate goal is to create and deploy appropriate technology to help small and medium size businesses owners see the wood from the trees and to help them make better decisions and be more profitable, ultimately creating a better life for themselves and all the people in their employ.” Charles Teversham, MD, Alchemex (Pty) Ltd.

About Alchemex

ALCHEMEX is a leading developer, enabler and support provider of affordable Excel-based Business Intelligence software for small to mid-market enterprises.

For nearly 20000 registered users in Africa, Europe, Australasia and North America, ALCHEMEX’s reporting software delivers automated financial, payroll and other decision-support reports in Microsoft Excel ‘at the click of a button’, directly from a company’s accounting or payroll system.

ALCHEMEX integrates with leading accounting and payroll packages, pulling real-time data directly from the database, thereby eliminating manual report preparation and repetitive data extracts. ALCHEMEX provides complete automation of pre-formatted Excel reports for MYOB Exonet, Pastel Evolution (BIC), Pastel Partner (BIC), Pastel Payroll (BIC), Pastel Xpress (BIC), Sage50, Sage ACCPAC ERP (SAI), Sage MAS ERP 90/200 (SMI), Sage MAS ERP 200 (SMI), SAP Business One, Simply Accounting by Sage, Sybiz Vision (BIC), SYSPRO and VIP Payroll (BIM).

ALCHEMEX is a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner.

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